



What Men have Made of Women

by Zaheda Ahmad

IN Bangladesh, as in many other countries of the world, family is the primary unit around which the social edifice grew up and acquired through centuries of evolution its present shape. A patriarchal society is made up of a large number of such families of various sizes consisting of the husband, his wife, children, his parents, perhaps even his siblings. In our context the tradition of family, its bonds, its interdependence, its passionate loyalty to one another are held in high esteem, no matter whether they are real or not.

It is the male — i.e., husband and father — who is held to be the fountainhead of authority maintained and upheld by antiquity, traditions and ideology most of which stemmed from patriarchy or male attitudes to and perceptions of female capabilities and roles. This father figure is supposed to earn the livelihood for the entire family; the women and children would in turn strive to take care of each other and the rest. This then is the stereotype of what is usually described as the sociological family as distinct from the economic family. Institutions with elaborate rules and procedures — customary, formal and non-formal — provided the foundation on which a family began to grow up.

allocation, codes of conduct and the like not infrequently raise impossible and impassable barriers to equality between the sexes — shall we be far from the truth?

Let us take a closer look at the institution of marriage in Bangladesh. Family laws and practices governing marriages, their dissolution, maintenance, inheritance, children's custody had been shaped and sanctioned by three forces — religion, society and the state. Since all man-made laws invariably were designed to protect and promote male hegemony of the ruling classes laws were never gender neutral.

more is needed of the unequal and subordinate status of the wife. Similarly, two female witnesses to a marriage are taken to be equal to one male witness.

Again, Muslim family law nowhere forbids polygamy although the Muslim Family Law Ordinance of 1961 requires the husband seeking a second wife to secure the consent of his first wife. Instead of an outright ban what the Ordinance did was to make second marriage a little more difficult only. A staunchly patriarchal society like ours with its deeply entrenched ideal of male chauvinism makes the practice of polygamy an acceptable social institution. In such a

divorce permissible under the Hindu Marriage Act of 1955 but prejudices, especially in a poor, backward society, die hard. In any case, Bangladesh is yet to enact such a law for its Hindu women.

To a Hindu woman, in theory at least, the husband is still the lord of her universe, the preservation of whose lineage is the sacred goal of her life.

It is quite a common phenomenon all over the world and across history that as women begin to feel the urge to assert their distinct identity, to demand a modicum of freedom to fulfil that individuality — the first institution that comes under stress is the family shaped



Entering a sacred union or slavery?

When necessary in their interest these laws are changed but only in form but not in character.

Under Muslim family laws a husband is bound to pay the whole of the *mohar* immediately on demand from the wife. But this rarely happens in a 'successful' marriage while in case of a breakup this is observed more in breach than in practice — more so among the poorer classes. As for maintenance a wife is entitled to it as long as she is faithful and obedient. But in case of a minor wife she cannot claim it until her marriage has been consummated. These conditions biased in favour of the husband, are proof enough if any

society even the right to free consent in marriage, so legitimately accorded to a woman, turns almost into a dead letter in case of majority of the marriages.

Unlike a Muslim marriage, a Hindu marriage is supposed to be a lifelong bond which by virtue of its indissoluble character may turn into a bondage if and when things go sour between the two partners. The suffering that it entails had been recorded vividly by most of our novelists and playwrights — great and not so great — of the nineteenth and the better part of this century. After independence the States in India has endeavoured to come to the aid of distressed women by making

and fashioned by long-cherished ideals and traditions. It is only natural that these days women, no matter whether they belong to the developed or developing societies, often find the family as one of bastions of their oppression. So the concept of this tyrannical family is an ideal that needs to be challenged and changed if we want to step into the twenty-first century with citizens — male and female — equal and happy, not just in theory but in practice too.

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Looking at the World a Little Differently

by Aasha Mehreen Amin

THE women of America have come a long way since the time they had to smoke cigarettes and burn under garments to make a point yet the fight for equal opportunities continues even today.

For women reporters, progress has been a steady upward trend although in the electronic media, this is not so apparent. Carol Niethammer, an American freelance journalist at a recent seminar in Dhaka, talked about the history of women journalists in America and their present status in the media world.

The magazine that launched women as serious reporters who were interested in more than just recipes and fashion was Ms magazine in the early 70s. Run owned and written by women, it was the first magazine that addressed the real and complex issues faced by women. Topics included things like how couples should share household responsibilities, how to be successful at work, how to balance the home and career etc. For the first time the title of the stories were not the usual 'how to be a good wife' but as revolutionary as 'I need a wife'.

Other women's magazines soon followed such as 'Shape' — a health magazine, 'Working Woman' and 'Working Mother'.

In later years Ms Magazine continued to be more and more radical gradually adopting a tougher, more serious image. At that time scientists announced that smoking caused lung cancer and Ms wanted to have a big spread on the subject. The magazine's biggest advertisers included major tobacco companies who promptly withdrew their advertisements. Ms stopped publishing for one year and came back, this time without any advertising. As a result, the glossy covers and pages were replaced by cheaper paper and colours were kept to a minimum. Ms now had the image of being more of a serious, no nonsense magazine that dealt with the pressing issues of the time.

As more women entered the journalism field it was apparent that women reporters looked at the world differently than their male counterparts. They often had a more sensitive approach. One big difference was how they reported health issues. In this context, Niethammer a long time health reporter, recalled the time when

major federally funded research programmes were being done on the benefits of aspirin in reducing heart attacks. Women journalists reporting the issue found out that of all the people tested for the research, none were women. It was because of women reporters that the public came to know that heart attacks were the leading cause of death in post menopausal women.

In the mid eighties the US was swamped with big publicity campaigns on AIDS while the issue of breast cancer which came a long time before AIDS and caused more deaths, was left relatively ignored. Niethammer pointed out that it

in basically every section of the newspaper — politics, business, health, even sports. This success, however, is not something that has just come to them, she pointed out, but a result of continuous efforts individually and in groups. About 10 years ago, related Niethammer, women reporters sued the New York Times for not giving women equal access to promotion, jobs etc. As a consequence, most major newspapers in the US now are very careful about maintaining the balance between the number of men and women employees. Niethammer, who has written for many prestigious papers such as the Los Angeles Times and San

Francisco Examiner, commented that women have become very powerful in the American newspaper industry, holding editorial and other senior positions.

In the electronic media, however, admitted Niethammer, sexism is quite obvious the number of senior anchor women and reporters are very low compared to their male counterparts. There are also more older men than older women in TV news. The reason for this Niethammer said was because even today, a woman is judged by her physical appearance. "A woman has to be young and pretty to be eligible for TV news," she said.

For her own part, Niethammer has not had to face



Carol Niethammer along with local newswomen participating in an informal discussion programme on 'Women in Journalism' at USIS.

women reporters who publicised an important finding that scientists did not think important enough for the public to know. This was that a change to a low fat diet of 20 per cent significantly reduced the incidence of breast cancer. Why had this not been written about before? Because men reporters did not think it important enough explained Niethammer. This was another example of women reporters finding information to empower women.

But what about now, how much opportunity do women reporters get in America, to show their worth? "Over the last 30 years" said Niethammer, "women have made real strides and now there is very little discrimination; women can be seen

years Niethammer has been working as a public relations person for a health resort in Arizona where she writes for and is the editor of a health journal. She is now moving to Uganda with her husband, a Fulbright scholar and longtime journalist, where she hopes to write about Asians who had been kicked out from Uganda by Idi Amin and now have been invited back.

As a promoter of empowering women which she clearly is, her definition of feminism is simply, "equal opportunities for women." She reminded the Bangladeshi women journalists present at the seminar, of their enormous responsibility and ability to move things in the direction of such equality.

place. The working conditions which will make this possible include: paid maternity leave of sufficient length, flexible working hours, creche facilities, nursing breaks and employment protection. If employers are to be persuaded to improve the working conditions of their female employees, the Government will need to bear or share the cost of providing the additional benefits. In addition, the Code on the marketing of breastmilk substitutes will have to be rigorously enforced to ensure that working women are not dissuaded from breastfeeding.

The CPPBF will need time to refine further its recommendations for action to improve the situation of working women and will need to generate tremendous support for its efforts if significant achievements are to be made.

UNICEF supports the work of the Campaign for the Promotion and Protection of Breastfeeding (CPPBF) through the Institute of Public Health Nutrition. One important area of concern for the CPPBF is the situation of working women who wish to breastfeed their infants. Earlier this year a new subcommittee of the CPPBF was formed to deal exclusively with this issue. A consultant has however, been engaged to study the subject in depth with the ultimate aim of producing a situation analysis and a set of recommendations for action required to facilitate breastfeeding by working mothers.

Although a comprehensive analysis of the present situation is not possible at this stage, a partial picture can nevertheless be given.

The working conditions of pregnant and nursing mothers

Working Women and Breastfeeding in Bangladesh

by Rachel Kabir

are governed by a number of statutes and their related rules. The key statutes are:

- Maternity Benefit Act 1939
- Maternity Benefit (Tea Estates) Act 1950
- Tea Plantations Labour Ordinance 1962
- Factories Act 1965
- Bangladesh Service Rules.

Both the Maternity Benefit Acts provide for a maximum of 12 weeks' maternity leave, on full pay, six weeks of which must be taken after the birth and the other six weeks (or any shorter period) before the birth. The 1950 Act additionally provides for ante- and postnatal medical care, which is, in fact, a precondition for the payment of

maternity benefit. Both Acts protect women against dismissal during the period of maternity leave. These rights accrue to women who have been employed for 9 months before the birth, in the case of the 1930 Act, and for approximately 5 months, in the case of the 1950 Act. The Bangladesh Service Rules also entitle female government employees to up to 12 weeks' paid maternity leave, but this is given only twice during the women's period of service.

The provision of creche facilities is dealt with in the Factories Act 1965, Factories Rules 1979 and the Tea Plantations Labour Ordinance 1962. The Factories Act imposes on the employer the obligation to provide facilities in the workplace for the care of children under 6 of female employees, where more than 50 women are employed. The accommodation provided must meet minimum standards in terms of light, ventilation and cleanliness and must be in the charge of an experienced child carer. The Factories Rules set out more detailed requirements for the nature of the creche facilities, including easy access for mothers, a clean and quiet location, type of construction, dimensions, ventilation, furniture and equipment plus the provision of milk and other refreshments for the children and a wash room. As far as the tea gardens are concerned, the Tea Plantations Labour Ordinance merely gives the Government the power to make rules requiring creche facilities for children under 6 to be provided where more than 40 women are employed.

tion to provide creches. Alternatively, employers may simply decide not to employ women to avoid the obligations altogether. There are reasons why this legislation may not be enforced very strictly against

garment factories; they are a source of valuable foreign exchange and they have contributed to the growth of the female workforce, both of which the Government welcomes. As far as the public sector is con-

cerned, a study published by the local ILO office in 1990 revealed that none of the industrial units visited provided creche facilities. No firm conclusions can, however, be reached on this matter until comprehensive, reliable data is available.

One area in which steps are being taken to improve the ability of working mothers to breastfeed is in the tea gardens. Funds are being provided under the EEC Complex Scheme for a Bangladesh Tea Board Project to provide creche facilities in 90 tea gardens (approximately two-thirds of the total number in Bangladesh). As part of the project a detailed study was carried out in 1991 on infant and child care requirements within the tea industry.

From the limited picture created by the above information, it will be obvious that much remains to be done to make workplaces in Bangladesh mother- and baby-friendly. First of all though, as has already been stated, the picture of the actual conditions in the workplace needs to become much clearer.

As far as relevant legislation is concerned, the 1990 Innocenti Declaration urges all governments by 1995 to "enact imaginative legislation protecting the breastfeeding rights of working women" and to "establish means for its enforcement". Minimum standards for the protection of working women are laid down in various ILO Conventions and Recommendations, in particular, the Convention concerning Maternity Protection (No 103 of 1952). This provides for maternity leave, maternity benefits and employment protection during the period of maternity leave and nursing breaks. Maternity leave should be for a minimum of 12 weeks, of which 6 must be taken after the birth. Maternity benefits comprise a cash benefit and medical care. Cash benefits must be paid at a minimum of two-thirds of the woman's previous earnings. Medical benefits include antenatal, confinement and postnatal care and hospi-

talization. The basic rights set out in Convention 103 are extended by a Recommendation made in 1952.

The question of law reform is one which can be addressed only after careful consideration of various matters, including the need for reform or better enforcement of existing laws and the need for new laws to fill existing gaps.

There are other areas in which action is required. A massive awareness creation campaign targeted at employers, unions and workers (especially female) is needed to inform these groups of the importance and benefits of breastfeeding and the ways it can be facilitated in the work-

Working women can and do breastfeed!

MOTHERS everywhere struggle to balance child-care and their work responsibilities. Some workplaces make this integration easier.

- In Uruguay, the public sector allows women to work half-time in order to breastfeed during the baby's first six months. Mothers receive 100 per cent of their salary.
- Groups such as 'Maria Liberacion' in Central Mexico support domestic workers to negotiate better arrangements during and after pregnancy, so that they can also breastfeed.
- In Mozambique, women from a cashew nut processing plant work near to a creche where they can breastfeed their babies twice a day. They work in pairs to offer mutual support. Their babies have been found to be far healthier than bottle-fed babies.
- Large corporations sometimes provide generous maternity benefits to women executives in order to retain these highly trained and valued employees. The Los Angeles Department of Power and Water, for instance, provides a breastfeeding support and consultation service for employees.
- Some construction sites in India and Thailand provide mobile creches for women working at the sites.
- In the Philippines, an alternative child-care service called 'Arugaan' organised by and for working women provides wet nursing. Breastfeeding mothers manage the child-care centre and breastfeed their own babies as well as other babies.
- Siriraj Hospital in Bangkok has a creche for infants up to 1 1/2 years old so that nursing staff and other employees can breastfeed their baby at their place of work.

Every mother is a working woman. It is a particular challenge to assist women to practise optimal breastfeeding.

Women, work and breastfeeding: Everybody benefits!

successfully combining work and breastfeeding

- Take as much leave as possible after birth.
- Take extra food and drink to maintain your health. Your diet should be well-balanced and include lots of locally available fruits, vegetables, carbohydrates, and fluids.
- Make sure breastfeeding is well established before returning to work.
- If you are away from your baby for several hours, express breastmilk several times a day, and have your infant care giver feed it to the baby with a cup. The use of bottles or pacifiers discourages babies from breastfeeding.
- Make sure the person who cares for your baby understands and supports breastfeeding.
- Practise expressing breastmilk before returning to work. Expressing breastmilk by hand is easy with practice and convenient for most women. Expressed breastmilk keeps well at room temperature for 10 or more hours even in tropical countries. Cooling liquids makes longer storage possible.
- Have family members and friends provide extra help while you are breastfeeding.
- Breastfeed in a comfortable chair or while lying down so that you can rest at the same time.
- If you are separated from your baby for long hours during the day, breastfeed more at night. It will be easier if your baby sleeps with you.
- If you have flexible work hours, going an hour late, extending your lunch break, or leaving an hour early can be helpful.
- Form a support group with other working women who breastfeed, or attend a mother support group in your community.
- Consider cooperative strategies such as sharing child-care.
- Delay your next pregnancy until you are ready to breastfeed another child.