



Abolish not Alleviate

by Zaheda Ahmad

YES, we say this in response to the Muslim family law ordinance, 1961, Amendment Bill as proposed by Mrs Farida Rahman MP in her capacity as a private member. It may be recalled that under Section 6 of the Ordinance of 1961, Muslim husbands seeking to marry a second time or thereafter are required to obtain the permission of the chairman of the local Union Parishad, Municipal ward or the mayor of the Municipal Corporation to the effect that the previous wife approves of the later marriage. Also in case of a divorce, the Ordinance provided for arbitration by the same local body chief mentioned above.

In 1982, the ordinance was amended to raise the amount of fine payable for violation of the law but neither, the original nor the amended version could make the later marriage legally void.

The present Bill seeks, according to its promoter, to re-allocate a number of specific objectives. By making the assistant judge rather than the local body chief the sole authority for granting permission for remarriage, this bill, the honourable member thinks, is going to bring our society more into line with the practice and spirit of the modern age. How, the not so clever readers may feel tempted to ask. Since under the proposed bill the court would be the sole authority responsible for permission of the helpless wife, in the opinion of the MP, would be spared the wrath of her husband and in-laws. In this way she would be less vulnerable to violence in their hands. Then again, by making the practice of polygamy more difficult the MP feels that the goal of gender equality would be brought nearer which in turn would exercise a modernising influence upon our tradition bound society.

It is said that an Assistant Judge's court would be much more impervious to the machinations of corrupt people on behalf of the husband.

These in short, are going to be the long term benefits of the proposed Bill, claims Farida Rahman. But is that so simple? Let us take up her points one by one. Apparently she is labouring under the misleading impression that the presence of

She is labouring under the misleading impression that the presence of a few ineffective legal provisions by themselves would not only usher our society into the modern age but would also be an effective deterrent to gender violence on that count. We are not sure what precisely her ideas about a modern society are but of course a modern society has to guarantee equal rights to all its members irrespective of class, creed or gender.

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to be progressive enough to guarantee equal rights to all its members irrespective of class, creed or gender.

Does polygamy in any form promote equal rights for all? Emphatically not. If anything it is a vile, obnoxious and obscene institution invented, sustained and legitimised by the lesser

animal instincts inherent in the members of Homo Sapiens species. With the progress of civilisation many societies did away with this feudal relic of barbarous social behaviour. A polygamous society is rather like the animal world where each male head lives in, moves with and lords it over a group of females — it cannot be an ideal or an example for the rational animals that we claim to be.

This is why the practice of polygamy is looked down upon by the really educated members of our society. So in the fading years of the present century an MP who still tires to allow and gloss over, in the name of the proposed amendment, the existence of polygamy here

cannot really be either a friend of modernism or of women. Modernism lies in challenging rather than accepting objectionable dogma and institution.

As for the prospect of minimising gender violence by bringing the court rather than the local body chief into the picture, the point can hardly be

supported by hard evidence on the ground. Causes of gender violence are many and varied but almost all of them stem from the weak socio-economic position of our women. Even when a wife gives her consent to her husband's remarriage, she always does so under duress and never of her own free will. This so-called "free consent" is a cruel hoax that has long been played upon our helpless women folk under the MFLO. They are the doubly exploited section in our society and as a result suffer disproportionately.

We all know that polygamy by its very nature, is based on the concept of gross gender inequality. It is the male, in all intent and purpose, is the much superior "partner", the lord of the universe upon whom attends all his female "companions." So mere tinkering here and there will not do. The whole system with its centuries old ideas and ideals, customs and conventions, rules and role allocation, shaped and designed to perpetuate a grossly unequal social structure requires thorough overhauling. For a long time enlightened citizens have been demanding a uniform, secular, civil family code suitable for all the citizens irrespective of sex and creed. Such a law should bring under its cover all our citizens, Muslim and non-Muslims alike. Let Farida Rahman come up with such an all comprehensive Bill — a bill that would be a fitting vehicle for our womenfolk for entry into the next century. Opposition, we know, would be fierce and unrelenting. Assorted male chauvinist groups, led by the powerful Mullahs, would be up in arms against any such move but let the battle be joined, at least.

The writer, who teaches history at the University of Dhaka, is the editor of the views weekly "Shaptahik Somoy".

Another Journalism in Rural Bangladesh

by Aasha Mehreen Amin

WHAT could be more innovative than a group of village women bringing out their own magazine? Bikalpa Patrika (alternative magazine) is a dream come true for many village women. This quarterly magazine, a brain wave of journalist Saleem Samad, is owned, written, edited and even marketed by rural women.

Although not very sophisticated Bikalpa Patrika, represents the voice of these women in its unadorned, uninfused, original form.

The reasons behind the publishing of this 'alternative magazine' which has an estimated circulation of 20,000 is given in brief at the beginning of the journal and goes something like this: 'Women have different opinions about society that are very different from men. They see society very closely and intimately. Whether it is poverty or any other adverse circumstance that affects the household, it is the women who bear the brunt of it. Women are kept away from the limelight. They are not given equal opportunities to participate in development activities and not given the power to make decisions. Many people are doing research by getting information from village people. Yet they do not see the need to inform these people about the findings of the research. This is why an alternative magazine is needed.'

It all started as part of Saleem Samad's project as an Ashoka fellow of starting rural journalism in Bangladesh. Originally,

The writers of this magazine write from 8 areas all over Bangladesh — Chittagong, Sylhet, Tangail, Dinajpur, Jessore, Barisal, Khulna and Comilla. All of them are involved in adult literacy programmes and belong to some samity or the other.

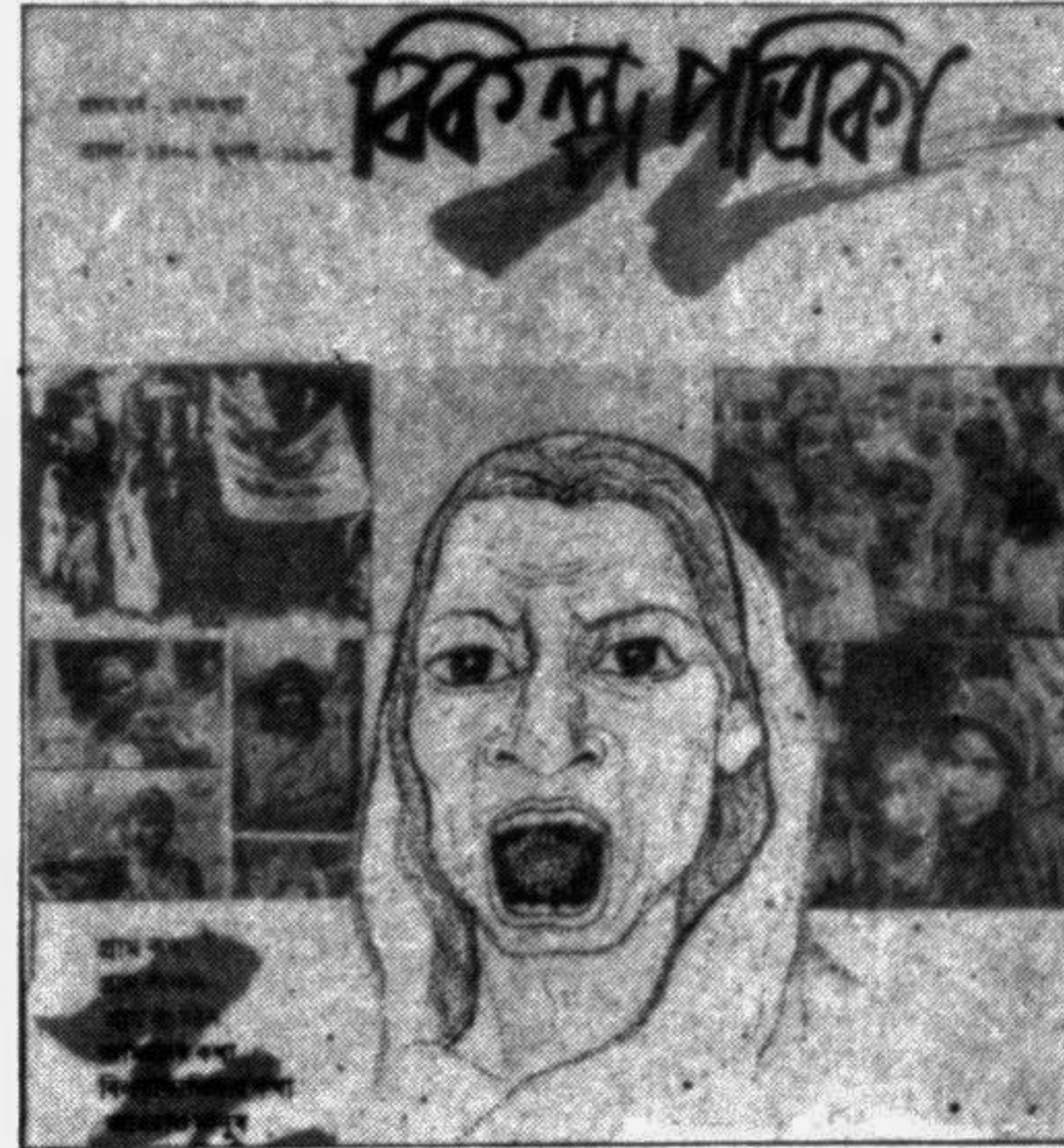
Like any other journal, there is an editorial board — or 'patrika committee' in each area. The main qualification to be eligible to be a committee member is to be able to write a letter. Every month, the committee meets to decide on a particular theme for the next issue. This could be dowry, divorce, samity activities, even environment. Every three months articles from all eight areas are

sent to one area where they are consolidated into one magazine. So what do these women write about? Anything that is relevant to a village women can be the subject of writing. This could be women rights in marriage, increasing literacy of women and their children, how to be self reliant, personal or

dam built) criticises a FAP project to build a dam in a particular area. It lists all the adverse effects of the dam: fish will no longer thrive there so fishermen will suffer and people will not have fish to eat; many people will be homeless; big boats will no longer be able to sail bringing important goods; there will not be enough water to wash the jute fibre; the river will be polluted; crops will be destroyed and many trees will have to be cut down to build the dam. The article cynically adds that the only beneficiaries will be the ones building the dam; others will die of hunger.

One thing that is rather puzzling is that for a magazine that is owned, written and edited exclusively by women — the word woman (nari or ramoni or mahila in Bengali) is not there in the name of the journal. Samad says this is entirely intentional. 'When I asked why, they bluntly told me: if the word woman is there then men won't read it; we want the people in the town (i.e. men) to know what we do, the problems we face and what we have accomplished; they think that only the men do everything.'

The writings of this magazine are of women who are strong and resilient, who can read and write and who now have more say in family matters. They are women who are very aware of what is going on in their male dominated society of the injustices they suffer, of their own need for education and basic human rights. These women know about oral saline, sanitation and immunization and write about issues that concern not just themselves but their entire community. Their approach is confident, pragmatic and ever so slightly cynical of their men folk. Part of this cynicism can be detected in the pricing of the magazine: six taka for men and one taka for women.



how she saved herself by wounding her attacker with a knife hidden under the pillow after which he fled. A case was filed against him although he could not be caught.

Some show a good deal of environmental consciousness. An article titled 'Bandh Hote Debo Na' ('we will not let

Victims of Community Salish



Courtesy UBINIG

NURJEHAN had to suffer a medieval punishment in Chattokchora Village, Maulvi Bazar because of the remoteness and ignorance of the villagers. But still it goes on.

A year ago a young woman left her husband's home in Tongbari, Dhaka, because she was no longer able to tolerate violence perpetrated by her parent-in-law's to realise the promised dowry of Tk 50 thousands. She lived in Beri Band slum with her father and worked in a rickshawpuller's home, because his wife, the mother of two children (aged 15 and 12 years), was pregnant and could not carry on her house work. Suspecting her of an intimate relationship with her husband, the first wife called a salish of 7 men in the neighbourhood. The salish members, aged 28 to 50 years, (including 4 rickshawpullers, 1 scooter and 1 car driver, 1 fish monger) accused the couple of adultery and ordered a public beating, with each one being subjected to 25 strikes with a shoe. Subsequently they were married off in a "huzoor's" presence, even though the woman claimed that she had not obtained a divorce from her first husband.

While the first wife conceded to the decision, friction soon developed and the second wife was subjected to violence by both the husband and the first wife. The man has refused to agree to a divorce which would enable the second wife to obtain her dowry money. Instead cohabitation has led to open violence with the husband backing one wife or the other.

Although the first wife and 6 salish members belong to the same savings group, the sponsoring NGO has taken no steps to stop the violence or censure the polygamous relationship. Nor is there any evidence of law enforcement as members of the local salish feel free to pronounce punitive decisions which obviously violate human rights and the law of the land.

Ain O Salish Kendra

Grown-up Daughters An Albatross on the Neck?

by Farida Haq

IT is said that marriages are made in Heaven. Then why do parents in our society worry so much about their daughter's marriage from the very day they are born? This is common among all parents specially mothers and it is endemic not only in our country but throughout the subcontinent. But is it not a fact that all girls — rich or poor, fair or dark, tall or short, educated or uneducated, heavy or swivel, smart or sloppy — do get married eventually. Of course there are exceptions, some girls remain spinsters but their percentage is so negligible that this should not give mothers any reasons to feel distressed.

Some mothers may argue that it is not exactly girls' marriage, they are worried about what is stored for their daughters, in future. But it comes to the same because in our country a girl's future is considered only in the context of marriage. The moment there is a coveted marriage proposal, parents succumb to its lure and a marriage is settled. Nothing else is taken into consideration. The girl may not have reached the right age or she may not be emotionally and mentally ready to get married. It has been observed that on account of marriage more often than not, the girl's studies may hamper or may even face termination. In these days of limited number of seats in the educational institutions, specially in the arena of higher education to get a girl married to the detriment of her studies is a great offence. Because deserting the much coveted seat halfway by the girl amounts to have deprived another candidate of his or her prospects of studies. Few parents have any regrets for this. For most parents marriage of their daughter gets priority over every thing else. Hardly do they realise that early marriage seals the fate of many a girl and

leads to many complications. Her chances of education is in the doldrums because education only can add a new vista to her life.

Let me focus on the society around me to reflect on girls as far as their marriage is concerned. A niece of mine is a doc-



tor but that does not deter her mother from worrying about her marriage. One of my friend's daughters is studying medicine in the states. My friend is only concerned about her daughters marriage. She seems to have lost sight of the fact that her daughter is going to be an MD and for a Bangladeshi it is no small honour. I know of a girl who is about to get her doctorate degree. But her mother

thinks that it would be difficult for her to get a husband after her Ph.D. I know of a highly placed lady whose daughter is doing her Masters. She suffers from a mortal fear that her social status will be in jeopardy if her daughter is not married before the year is out. And when

we look at the poor and underprivileged people around us we find that their tale is even horrendous. Girls are rushed into marriage and are soon burdened with a couple of ill-nourished children in their teens. Most of these children do not see their childhood because we know that Bangladesh has the highest child mortality rate. In our country most mothers feel that a grown up daughter is

like an albatross round the neck. And the unmarried girl is also forced to suffer the stigma of being a burden to the family. This negative attitude of parents and others make the girls think of themselves social pariahs. All this has given rise to the abominable dowry system which is the root of so many evils. In the Arab world, we find that the situation is just the contrary to it. The bridegroom pays a heavy dowry to marry a girl. In this respect the girls enjoy a much higher status.

Educated the enlightened parents should allow their daughters to pursue their studies unhindered. They should encourage others specially the rural and less privileged people also to follow suit. Our democratic government is also attaching utmost importance to girl's education in order to bring them in the mainstream of development. Without education there cannot be total integration of women in national development. Our aim should be to educate the female population so that they can be economically solvent and have the confidence in their abilities to face the challenges of life. An educated girl will find a husband for herself or whoever is destined to be her husband will find her and the parents will be spared of much pain and unnecessary tension. Arranged marriage or love affair whichever way it is destined marriage will take place. So mothers do not bother so much about your daughter's marriage, it may come sooner or later but she will get married in the long run. Because history is not replete with stories of daughters who did not get married and because marriages are made in heaven!

The writer, who teaches English in a Government College, is the Secretary General of Bangladesh Federation of Business and Professional Women.

WOMEN The Worst Victims of Flood



Victims of the recent flood at Alpara, Netrakona. —Star photo

WHEN disaster strikes it is the women who struggle to hold on to their children and belongings. Burdened with too many children and too few resources every day is a challenge trying to feed the family; Depleted, undernourished and over-worked and with the lowest status in society, they are the worst victims of natural disaster and poverty.

The impact of the floods of 1987-88 and the cyclone of 1991 was most severe on children and women of the rural poor population of Bangladesh. In such environments, the child bears the brunt of suffering.

During normal times, infants, young children and pregnant and lactating mothers within the landless rural population constitute the high risk group. The official relief camp population in 1988 was over 3.8 million, of whom more than one million were children.

In 1988, the mass movement of people put pressure on scarce food and water resources. Unhygienic practices caused an increase in the prevalence of diarrhoea but surprisingly, little change in the reported death rate. The presence of some medical facilities at the emergency relief camps, providing on-the-spot medical attention, may have been a factor in preventing deaths from diarrhoea.

Dislocation, over-crowding, pollution, lack of safe drinking water and sanitary facilities and lack of food and shelter contributed to the susceptibility of vulnerable children to life-threatening diseases.

The devastating cyclone and tidal bore of April 1991 took an estimated 138,000 lives in the first few hours, the majority being women children.

Region	Female adult literacy rate (percent)		Annual reduction in female illiteracy (percent)		Gross primary female enrolment (percentage of age group)		Gross secondary female enrolment (percentage of age group)	
	1970	1985	1970-1985	1970-1985	1965	1988	1965	1988
Asia	29	48	1.2	82	95	12	32	
Asia (excluding China and India)	40	56	2.7	57	81	12	30	
Sub-Saharan Africa	14	37	2.4	26	64	2	13	
Near East and North Africa	22	44	2.8	59	86	11	41	
Latin America and the Caribbean	70	82	4.1	97	106	18	52	
Total 114 developing countries	33	51	1.7	76	91	12	33	
Least developed countries	16	32	2.0	28	49	3	10	

Source: The State of World Rural Poverty