



"Woman is Born Free but Everywhere in Chains"

by Farida Huq

The Muslim Family Laws Ordinance 1961 (MFLO) was meant to discourage rather than delegitimise polygamy. Recently Farida Rahman MP's Private Member's Bill to amend the procedure for polygamy under clause 6 in the MFLO is not much likely to help the wife from refraining her husband from taking another wife. Whether the permission is to be obtained from an Arbitration Council or from the Assistant Judge it would not be much difficult for the husband to achieve his desired wish. Women's struggle for rights will be realised only by abolishing polygamy and not by making concessions. Many Muslim countries like Turkey, Tunisia and Iraq has banned polygamy and Bangladesh in order to guarantee equality should not hesitate to follow suit.

GOD created man and God has also created woman. This the genesis of this earth. It is said that God created Man (all human beings) in his own image and in the eyes of God both men and women are equal. They are partners — they are supplementary and complementary to each other. Yet we have this discrimination between men and women. The majority of the women of the world do not enjoy equal rights with men. Women have been deprived of their legitimate rights. Women are often treated as inferior species and not as human beings. It is a male dominated society and male chauvinism that we are at loggerheads with. Isn't it a bit outlandish that at this fag end of the twentieth century when the world has reached the pinnacle of technological advancements, women should cry for justice — for rights — for equality? Why is this perennial grievance? Where is the impediment? Why can't we achieve our goals? These are the questions often asked but have remained unanswered.

In every country of this world, in every sphere of life whether it is the first world or the third world, women have been discriminated against. The difference between the western women and ours is that their sufferings get voiced and our women suffer mute. They have legislations and the enforcement of the rule of law, their media come to their help, over and above all they are spared the pangs of social blindness. After a traumatic experience they can rise again because they are economically solvent among other things. But the helpless, miserable women of our society face total extinction. In the third world countries specially in this subcontinent women are subject to torture, abuse and violence. Women are mere chattels in the hands of

men. Age old customs, ignorance, poverty have made women remain subservient to the pervert sadist and selfish motives of men. The male dominated society has ensnared the women in such a way that it is difficult to break the shackles of this bondage. The great philosopher Rousseau has said, "man is born free but everywhere in chains". But it applies more appropriately to the women of our society. "Woman is born free but everywhere in chains." A recent TV documentary broadcast by BBC Asia will vouch for this saying. It is some

tales through the veils. It is followed by interviews with the religious leaders some of whom express ignorance of the practice. The destiny of these unfortunate girls is not much far off from the 'Nurjehans' of Bangladesh who are either stoned or burned to death by the village elders. It is an irony that these stories are not culled from the pages of the medieval past but take place everyday in modern day history. Self seekers practice polygamy in the name of Islam. The Muslim Family Laws Ordinance 1961 (MFLO) was

and Bangladesh in order to guarantee equality should not hesitate to follow suit. The Holy Quran says:

Marry women of your choice. Two or three or four. But if ye fear that ye shall not be able to deal justly (with them) Then only one or a (captive) That will be more suitable. To prevent you from doing injustice. — Sura Nisaa

Thus God ordains a man can marry up to four wives, provided he can treat them with perfect equality, in material things as well as in affection and immaterial things. As this condition is most difficult to fulfill, it is understood the recommendation to be towards monogamy. The vast majority of the poor and illiterate women of our country have neither knowledge of the true interpretations of the Holy Quran nor any idea about the existence of the MFLO. They have no access to law. So they become victims of desertions by their husbands who go on marrying one wife after another. From a very early age these deserted wives saddled with a few children have to carve a future for themselves. A woman's right is once again violated when her husband abandons her by the pronouncements of three "Talaks". This is also a wrong practice and doesn't have much religious basis.

It has to be borne in mind that when the question is "Rights" it does not come easy. It is not offered on a platter for women to enjoy. You have to fight for it. To fight for it you have to be equipped with education and economic solvency are your most effective tools. The writer, who teaches English at a govt college, is the Secy-General of Bangladesh Federation of Business and Professional Women.



Still fighting for their freedom —Photo: Rashid Talukder

thing which is too weird and bizarre to be true. In the Sind province of Pakistan there still prevails this system of "Quarant marriage". According to this practice girls are given away in marriage to the Holy Quran with a dowry of clothes and jewellery just as she would be married to any man. With the marriage the fate of the girl is sealed and she has to devote the rest of her life to the teachings of the Quran. It is mostly practised among feudal families to safeguard property falling into hands of the bridegrooms from outside the family. A viewer is moved to see some of those girls being interviewed, who narrate their harrowing

meant to discourage rather than delegitimise polygamy. Recently Farida Rahman MP's Private Member's Bill to amend the procedure for polygamy under clause 6 in the MFLO is not much likely to help the wife from refraining her husband from taking another wife. Whether the permission is to be obtained from an Arbitration Council or from the Assistant Judge it would not be much difficult for the husband to achieve his desired wish. Women's struggle for rights will be realised only by abolishing polygamy and not by making concessions. Many Muslim countries like Turkey, Tunisia and Iraq has banned polygamy

Sex Bias in Conventional Approaches

By Chhanda Islam

CONVENTIONAL approaches to development not only fail to accomplish the goal, but by ignoring the obstacles faced by women, they actually formalize and reinforce sex bias in several devastating ways. This is more true so far as the landless peasants are concerned. First, current development strategies do not benefit men and women equally in Bangladesh. Although women are the main producers and procurers of household food supplies in the subsistence economies of Bangladesh, as in many other third world countries, conventional agricultural development has actually shifted resources away from female farmers.

Sex bias also prevents the women partners to take active role and decisive measure in birth control as they are being used instrumentally by the males for their own sexual satisfaction. This is one of the main reasons for which birth control programme in Bangladesh is failing to make a satisfactory headway. Since the males are the decisive factors, the women play a passive role. Unless women are correctly motivated, the birth control programme in Bangladesh will not succeed. Gender bias is thus single most important cause of rapid population growth. Where women have little access to productive resources, and little control over family income, they depend, as mentioned earlier, on children for social status and economic security. A necessary step in reducing births voluntarily, then, is to increase women's productivity and their control over resources, in addition to the motivation they need.

Second, women rarely are involved designing or carrying out development programmes. Consequently these do not address their real needs or utilize the great fund of practical knowledge they have to offer. For example, in rural Bangladesh, 60 to 80 per cent of all domestic fuel supplies are either made at home from cowdung and are gathered from forests or nearby places by women and girls. Yet, countless programmes to reverse deforestation have failed because their planner did not think to consult village women who are the primary managers and harvesters of forest product in their

The perpetuation of poverty through sex discrimination is itself a problem in Bangladesh. The conventional economic policy in Bangladesh often directly plays a role to increase the poverty within subsistence economy which in turn adds to the relative burden on women, specially of the landless Farmer community. Some time the agricultural development in some areas of Bangladesh also affects the landless Farmers community by denying the labour of both male and female on land.

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The eroding status of low-income women in developing countries is a baseline indicator of human progress: ignorance of this issue is not only morally untenable, it is in the long run self-defeating. Until gender bias is confronted, there can be no sustainable development. Bangladesh provides one of the best examples of such vicious circles. Since the social struc-



Despite policy discrimination, women are marching ahead

the agricultural development in some areas of Bangladesh also affects the landless farmers community by denying the labour of both male and female on land. In some areas the replacement of human labour by tractors increased competition for and lowered the wages of the much smaller number of jobs available to landless farmers. In such areas the women of the landless community are forced to work longer for less remuneration. The ultimate effect of such condition favours the stimulation of the growth of population indirectly by forcing greater competition for fewer resources among the growing numbers of landless farmers through an encouragement for most children in order to strengthen manpower and earn more by employing them at work.

ture in Bangladesh is basically traditional, sex discrimination is a fundamental characteristic of this society. The women are considered as not only the weaker part, but also are denied the equal rights and privileges as enjoyed by the men. Equality is a far-to-dream-of fact in this society. But it is also true that through some economic hardship, this society is gradually trying to understand the harsh truth that necessity knows no law. As for example, the male could not even think of that their women would ever go out for work in order to earn for their livelihood and share the economic responsibility of the family when they had enough land and money to depend on. But when they turned landless through an inevitable economic process, they could realize the reality and they allowed their

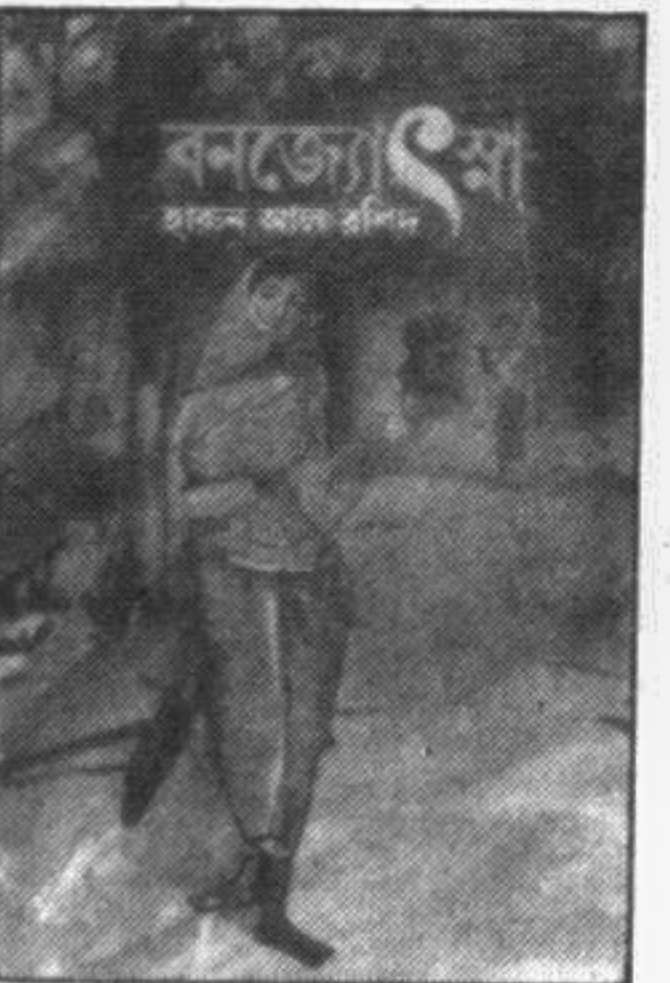
wives and daughters to go out either to work on land or to a house as maid-servants. Apathy grows from the feeling of frustration caused by an inability to do something positive to prevent rot from seeping in and trickling down to enter all the various strata of life where traditional standards of ethics and morality are partly or totally destroyed. Those culminate as they must, in a nation where the role of men and women is not helpful to each other. We must keep it in mind that Bangladesh is primarily and mainly dependent on agriculture. The society is almost agro-based. Industrial production in Bangladesh may be considered to be at a nascent stage. The process of industrialization in this country remains not only slow but also disappointing. Despite the high demand for expansion of job opportunities in a labour-surplus economy, one would like to have more units to come up and more products made in the industrial sector for increasing the share of industry in the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). It cannot be so, largely because of the paucity of investible service in the agrarian society. Even the inflow of capital remains slower than the rate at which one would expect it to be forthcoming. Above all, the local sponsors of industries have yet to develop the culture that would enable them to obtain licensing or joint-venture agreements with foreign collaborators and multi-lateral agencies. We receive a gloomy picture when we find that 56 per cent of the farmer community is landless and the agricultural lands in Bangladesh are almost unable to bear the burden of this excess labour-force. Hence rapid industrial development is the only answer for the solution of this national problem. The landless farmer must be provided with job opportunities, both for male and women in the industrial sector in order to save them from ruination. Along with these steps, the gender bias has to be shunned and the ways and means must be found out for the equal opportunities for the women of the whole country, specially of the landless farmers. The writer, a Bangladeshi-American is Educational Advisor of the Head Start, State Department of Health and Human Services, USA.

Breaking the Holy Wedlock is Not so Easy.

BOOK REVIEW

Banojostna

Written by: Harun-Al-Rashid
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Reviewed by: Lutfur Rahman Belayet



husband's presence resulted in destruction of her conjugal life, her happiness and everything. One evening she was waiting and as the evening passed into night she fell asleep with the kerosene lamp on. Only God knows how, the house caught

fire and all the six houses of Tara burnt to ashes. Tara returns on the following day and to his full anger forgets his love for Moyna for moments when he came to know that she was responsible for the destruction and pronounces the word 'divorce' three times and got senseless. He regains sense and immediately realises what he has done.

A new period starts in the life of Tara Mia. He goes from door to door of every elderly man and Moulavi to ask only one question if Moyna had really been divorced. These people do not have proper knowledge about the legal aspects of divorce and belief in the popular saying that only pronouncing the word 'divorce' thrice is enough for divorce, clearly say that divorce has been effective. Tara is the prey of this ignorance judgement and a naive, though not as passive as Opu of

Rabindranath Tagore's Hoimonty, can't take any step since he himself is also ignorant of the exact procedure of divorce. Mad for Moyna, he goes to her in secret. He can't marry for the second time despite family pressure and even after Moyna did so.

Probably Tara would have to pass the rest of his life without Moyna unless the senior Moulavi of the Ganj told him that uttering the word 'divorce' three times were not enough to divorce wife. It must have witness and husband must do that in sound mind, not angrily. Moreover if the wife is pregnant and if husband does not pronounce the names of his wife and her father there will be no divorce.

Harun-al-Rashid has depicted the true rural picture of Bangladesh. Rural people are mostly illiterate and prejudicial and this destroys the happiness of a large number of people including themselves. Ignorance is at the base of all these prejudices. Harun has struck this very vital issue of our society. The story is based on a village and the language, the characters use is totally native. While depicting the childhood of Moyna he has also used some rhymes that the children of the rural areas use to play game. But the author has often come to the narration of different situations in his own difficult commentative language. This types of sudden break and commentary is not seen in modern times. Sometimes this seems to be boring though do not kill the eagerness of the readers.

Harun-al-Rashid, a graphic designer of BTV has been writing since his student life. His other books — "Roudramoyee", "Dhal Fashal", "Kotipoy Issaya", "Biborno Nadi", "Krittinashar Soto", "Dhal Prohorer Ghan" have already established him as a prospective litterateur of Bengali literature. Banojostna will help the readers realise the legal aspects of divorce which everyone should know.

The Business of Marriage

A boy and girl, who appeared to be younger than the official age of consent, sought legal advice regarding marriage and its registration. The lawyer suspecting them to be underage, advised them that the legal age of consent was 18 years for a girl and 21 years for a boy.

Three days later they filed an affidavit stating that since they were 25 and 18 years old respectively, and had developed a liking for each other, they had agreed: "to marry and to maintain marital relations according to the laws of the Shariah, and would like to receive social recognition as husband and wife."

An affidavit generally provides legal confirmation of a contractual agreement. But it is used fairly irresponsibly to sanction an otherwise unauthorised act. In this case, for instance, the affidavit was obtained to provide official con-

firmation of marriage, and in full awareness by the parties that they had not stated their correct ages.

Two days after their marriage, the husband left his wife. In the meantime his parents started making financial demands from the daughter in law; she or her family was asked to give Tk 3000.0 as dowry, 2 bhuris of gold and to feed 100 guests. Her parents were not opposed to the dowry demand but were not able to afford the terms of exchange. As such the girl had to go back to stay with her father. She came back to the lawyer to seek their help in restoring her marital relationship with her husband. The lawyers were unable to help her because she did not have her registered kabnama.

Did the ardent young man, having persuaded the girl into marriage, turn cold when he realised there was no financial advantage for him.

— AIN O SALISH KENDRA

Women's Participation in Income Generation and Fertility Change

by M Kabir

OVER the last decades much concerns have been shown about the need to empower women so that they can make their own decisions about child bearing and about other areas of their lives. Lack of power over their own decision-making has long been recognized as a barrier to improving women's sexual and reproductive health. Many NGOs have been demonstrating the link between women's development and successful family planning programmes and were responsible for introducing innovative women's programmes in the 1980s. The 1980s saw a number of schemes that tried to combine income generation or literacy or some other aspects of improving women's status with family planning, in order to give women more control over their lives.

Women's status as reflected in their legal rights, age at marriage, education, employment are low in Bangladesh. The women here do not have equal access to resources within the household and that their direct role in the process of reproduction gives them some influence over its outcome.

By age of 15-19 years nearly half of the females in Bangladesh are married indicating a low age at marriage for females. Information on age at marriage suggests that virtually there is no difference in the age at marriage between the two areas (the average is about 15 years).

Fertility in Bangladesh is still high. The 1989 BFS data show that total fertility is 4.5 per woman. The estimates of total fertility are 3.8 and 4.9 per woman in programme and control areas respectively. In Bangladesh, cultural values make motherhood and fertility important sources of status for women. Other things being equal, women with many children may demonstrate more decision-making power in marriage than women with no children. Poor economic conditions and the consequent value of male children also have important implications for women's

position in the family. Current use of contraception is almost 15 percentage points higher in the programme area than in the control area (52 per cent as against 37.1 per cent). The high contraceptive use in the programme area is attributed to the fact that women enjoy more freedom in choosing the methods. Besides, family as well as community opposition to use family planning is considerably lower in the programme area; husband and wife communication is stronger in the programme area.

Fertility preferences as measured by desire for more children show that only about 20 per cent currently married women desire for more children in the programme area as against 35 per cent in the control area. The mean number additional children is lower in the programme area than in the control area (1.7 as against 1.9 per woman).

Women's employment in wage work is usually function of their poverty. The majority of them are from landless households and their contribution to the household budget is critical to its survival. It is worth noting, however, that once a traditional boundary in the division of labour is crossed, the women are willing to take advantage of any new opportunities.

The mechanisms through which a wife's work influences fertility control are many and varied. Participation of women in income generation activities lowers their fertility because employed women are found to prefer a smaller family size as well as to increase use of contraception. Many studies conducted elsewhere suggest that women's work stimulates increased communication between the husband and the wife, as it enhances women's self-confidence and communication skills.

Policy Implications

Bangladesh is characterized by low literacy, low income and low standard of living. This situation has resulted in high fertility associated with high maternal and infant mortality, poor

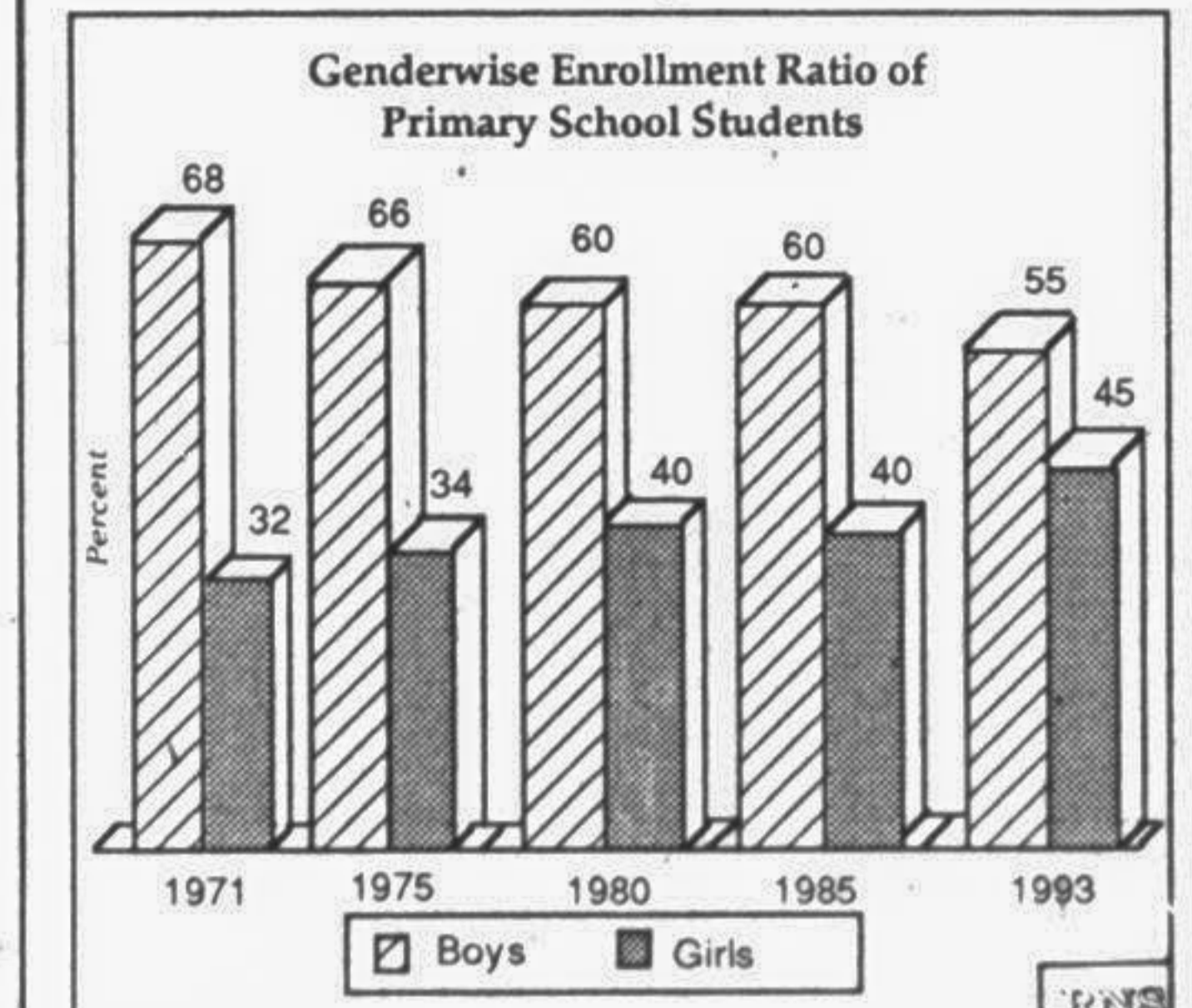
health and malnutrition. Sexual inequality in the household, employment, income, education, political participation, health and nutrition are also some of the consequences of the poverty. The policy implications discussed here are based on the basis of the present study.

While the major focus of the policy should be to help increase the income of the poor rural women, it should also aim at to reduce sexual inequality in crucial areas of life such as education, employment, income and health care. The policy implications of the women in development projects and their participation on women's posi-

tion is straightforward. The gain accrued from the participation need to be protected and expanded. To make the women's projects viable, marketing strategies for selling women's products needs prior consideration.

It is evident from the findings that participation in income generation projects significantly affects decision regarding family size preferences. The positive effects of women's work on decision-making can not be exaggerated. Thus, more employment for women in the formal and informal sectors will definitely accrue a number of socially desirable effects. The writer is Professor, Deptt. of Statistics, Jahangirnagar University, Savar, Dhaka.

Fewer Girls than Boys Attend School



GIRLS enroll at a slightly lower rate and drop out faster than boys. However, their enrollment is steadily increasing and the boy-girl ratio in primary schools is currently 56:44. Nevertheless, only 22 per cent of adult women are literate compared to 43 per cent of men. (18) The lack of educational attainment of women has serious implications for the welfare of the family since it restricts their opportunities for work and reduces their effectiveness as mothers. It leads to poor health, nutrition and sanitation practices and limited social and economic prospects, which, in turn, has a negative effect on infant and maternal mortality. Source: Situation Analysis of Children and Women in Bangladesh, 1993, UNICEF