

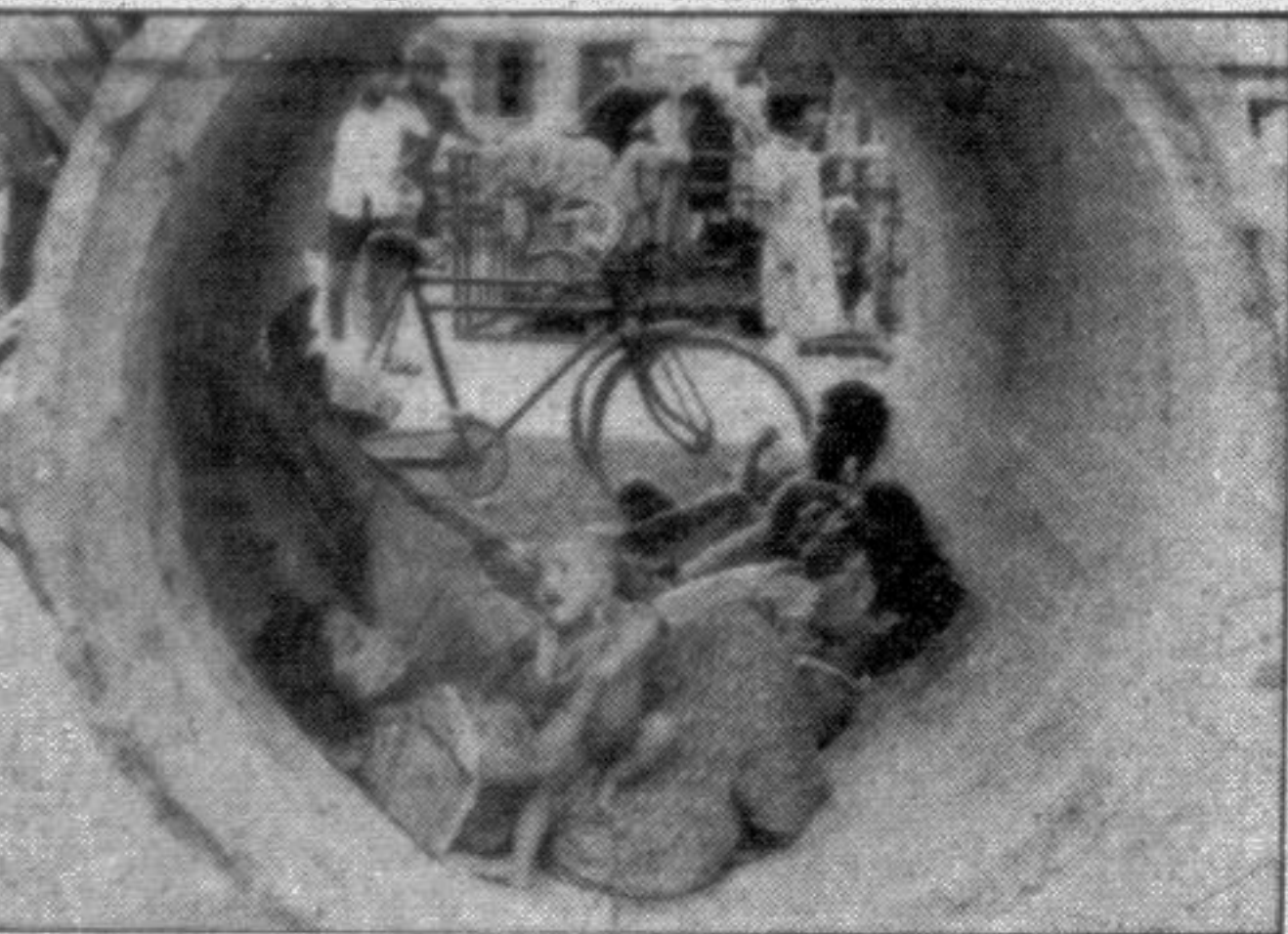


The Violence of Absences and Silences

by Azfar Hussain

HER name was Tahera. Nineteen, she had dark, deep eyes full of midnights. In her village, Tahera was praised for her attractive complexion; for her delicate, calm gait, and for her soft-spokenness. Her father was a landless farmer whose life was a hard struggle on other's farmland, in the acid sunlight of the summer, in the downpour of the Shrawan, in the biting chill of the winter. Sikander was his name. He was then 42. One of his greatest problems was his daughter, for she was blossoming for marriage. However, Sikander soon managed to get rid of her daughter, Salamat, known for land and power and prestige in the village, wanted to marry Tahera, and eventually won the consent of her father. The bridegroom, however, was a telling case of incompatibility: he was older than the bride by 25 years. There was almost a two-inch scar on his left cheek; his eyes were squinted and small; his hair was fast greying, though reluctantly, and his forehead was wrinkled like a walnut. There was a brownish, almost spheroid blob beneath his left eye. He was arrogant, cantankerous, intolerant. Though an owner of 30 acres of land, his greed for money and land was incurably immense. The mysticism and magic of money captured his passion, his diurnal routine, his prayers. Indeed, in such a world of Salamat, manners, morals, marriage — all were simply made subservient to money.

It was an October twilight falling silently at the feet of dew-drops. Tahera was sick. As she was sick, she was unable to work. Thus, she was questioned for her sickness which was treated as a crime. But, the worst incident was yet to take place. Salamat began to bat



Living in a circle of homelessness and despair.

Star photo by AKM Mohsin

around the idea of exploring the enormous possibilities of Tahera's body.

His greed for money prompted him to sell Tahera's body on a regular basis to anyone who could satisfy the rate he had fixed. — Taka 500 per night. Tahera initially protested, but it was a futile battle, on unfamiliar grounds, with no godfather backing her.

One night when Tahera declined to give her body to a person who had duly paid her husband, she was beaten even more atrociously than before. Next morning she herself spelled a finish to the drama by seeking the ultimate path to her shelter — suicide.

A close reading of the story would certainly reveal that Tahera's shelterlessness climaxed in her final self-sacrifice indicates that women cannot decide to do anything but to commit suicide. Suicide, of course, demands decision of which Tahera is capable, as shown in the story. But the situation in which women — particularly the rural ones living in an agrarian, feudal society in Bangladesh — are caught and trapped is far worse. To say that women cry and die in Bangladesh is to understate the incident and the experience. One should rather say that women are ceaselessly dying. And dying, of course, is more painful than death.

Given the context of Bangladesh, to speak of women's shelterlessness is to put one's finger, rather assuringly, on the irresistible incidence of poverty. And what is poverty, after all, but socio-economic, political and cultural consequences of discriminations ceaselessly produced and reproduced by the very feudal mode of production somewhat jazzed up by capitalism which characterizes Bangladesh society? Therefore, the shelterlessness of women is an unambiguously loaded issue which foregrounds the whole matrix of social, cultural and political questions. To put it

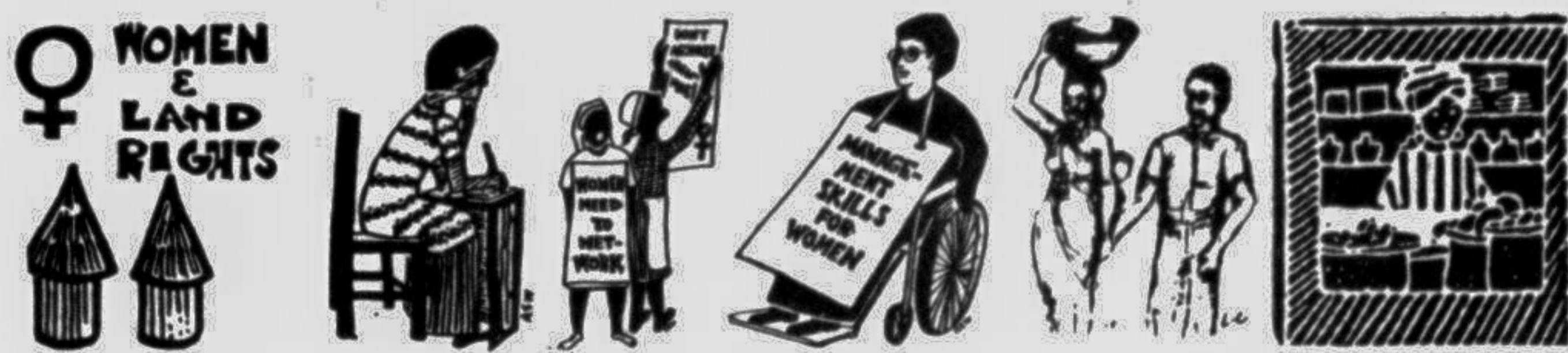
Tahera illustrates, what I would like to call, the violence of absences perpetrated upon her. Indeed, women's shelterlessness may be interpreted in terms of such absences.

Women certainly lack economic and social shelters which mean that women are not allowed to work outside home and directly participate in the labour market. The trick of the visible-invisible pull must be taken into account here. It is usually said that women do not earn, as they do not participate in economic activities. This is only a male-dominated strategy predicated on the feudal-capitalistic optics in that women's contributions to household management, which certainly yield returns in economic terms, are not usually recognised; women's contributions are never brought to a presence or a sight. In other words, a presence is turned into an absence, as women's voices and languages are turned into silences, much in the same fashion whereby the workers' voices and languages are turned into absences and silences. Friedrich Engels was right when he indicated that women are exploited in the way the workers are exploited. Therefore, mere sex-based struggle cannot ensure the liberation of women as such, for simply men alone are not women's enemies and opponents. The deadliest enemy lies elsewhere — it is the mode of production which accommodates space for, and produces and reproduces endlessly, absences and silences (signifiers of shelterlessness) to which women like the working class are always subjected.

Yes, to fight for women's shelter is to fight for a new mode of production, thereby inviting an uncompromising cultural and ideological struggle in favour of the exploited.

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Women and Shelter



At the beginning of the United Nations decade for women in 1975, it was noted that women continued to constitute 50 per cent of the world's population but owned only 1 per cent of its property. Even when women have legal rights to land and property, customs often prevent them from exercising those rights.

Human settlement decision-and-policy-makers have made three erroneous assumptions regarding women and shelter: first, that the household consists of a nuclear family of husband, wife, and two or three children; secondly, that within the family there is a clear division of labour in which the man of the family, as the "breadwinner," is involved in productive world outside home, while the woman takes overall responsibility for reproductive and domestic work; thirdly, that there is equal control over resources and power of decision-making within the household between the man and the woman in matters affecting the household's livelihood, these misconceptions have led to the formulation of shelter policies that have failed to take into account women's specific needs. This problem is recognised in the Global Strategy for Shelter to the Year 2000, and it is high time that human settlement planners and decision-makers took these facts into consideration in formulating policies.

Therefore, the theme for the 1993 World Habitat Day, "Women and Shelter Development," to be observed on Monday, 4 October 1993, was announced by the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (HABITAT), saying 'without the full mobilisation and participation of women, and the removal of obstacles to their full participation — the goal of the Global Strategy of providing shelter for all cannot and will not be met.' Considering the importance of improving the status of women, enabling women to take a more active part in human settlements process as a whole, The Daily Star brings out a special feature on "Women and Shelter" to join in this endeavour.

Housing that Meets the Need of All

HOUSING can be simply described as a place to live in peace, safety and dignity; as such it is recognized as a human right. This definition implies security, privacy, access to a means of making a livelihood and a base from which to develop. Safety also implies a clean and healthy environment. To many, housing represents an investment, a source of income and a symbol of permanence and security.

However, many do not have access to this right and even among those who do many have no say in how their housing is developed. This is especially true of the poor in developing countries, and more so for women who are the majority of the poor.

How should women participate?

In many traditional societies women participate in the construction and maintenance of their homes. In urban areas in developing countries, up to 70 per cent of the housing is built by "informal" or unpaid labour, a great proportion of which is women's labour. Women may plaster walls, lay bricks, pack down mud floors or help repair a roof. In some instances, women are solely responsible for constructing homes. Yet, because this occurs in the "informal" sector where little or no money is exchanged, women's contribution and experience go unrecognized. On the other hand, women are let out of the modern, formal construction sector.

There are many good reasons why women should participate in housing development. One of them is that they have as much right to participate in projects which

profoundly affect their lives as men. Women are the primary users of housing. They are therefore the most affected by housing and settlement projects. This is especially true given the amount of time they spend in the house: women often have to combine employment with household and child-rearing roles, and therefore have to work in and around the home.

In rural areas, and in unplanned urban settlements,

What is needed is the participation of women and men in the planning and design of settlements — houses, neighbourhoods and cities.

Negative effects of relocation, and non-participatory upgrading

Non-participatory relocation and upgrading schemes have also tended to disrupt women's lives and economic activities. As a result, women often lose their mutual support networks thro-

ugh which they arrange employment, credit and child care, among other things. Similarly when upgrading changes single-story housing to high-rise apartments, women forced to move to upper storeys lose considerably in the value of the house as a place from which to make a living, a street-level dwelling being more convenient as a place for business, especially if it involves vending.

Some specific problems of the poorest women-headed households

A group that is not given due attention is the increasing number of women heads of household who have exceptionally low incomes and can hardly participate in many conventional housing projects. For example, in a site-and-service project in Quito, Ecuador, female heads of households formed 30 per cent of the total applicants, but 46 per cent of them did not qualify for access to the scheme because their incomes were too low. In Dandora, Kenya some women household heads could not afford to construct their houses according to specified standards and were forced to resell their plots. In Dodoma, United Republic of Tanzania, a programme of the Low Cost Housing Unit for supporting employment-based housing co-operatives left out a large percentage of women who did not have the minimum financial resources required.

— UNCHS



With a makeshift home of rags and left over paper, life still goes on.

Star photo by AKM Mohsin

women are also the main providers of services. For example, a large proportion of women's self-help projects are concerned with water and day care. Official housing projects with self-help components have tended to depend a lot on women's labour.

This kind of participation, which in many cases has been a big burden, has been imposed on women by circumstances, and by official insensitivity to women's needs and circumstances.

Under-employment in the construction sector

Another obstacle faced by

Not Fiction, but Facts

SOME 2.4 billion people, representing 48 per cent of the world's population, live in urban areas. In 1990 it was estimated that 37 per cent of the developing world's population lived in urban areas. About one third of this group lived in formal settlements with poor housing and inadequate or no services. Their number continues to grow.

It is estimated that at least 600 million people living in urban areas of developing countries live in what might be termed life-and-health-threatening homes and neighbourhoods. Women and children are the most severely affected by this situation, since they spend the most time at home. For example, an estimated 70 million women and children world-wide suffer from severe indoor pollution from cooking fires, giving rise to respiratory and other health problems.

The World Health Organization estimates that if all housing could be brought to a minimum acceptable standard, there would be five million fewer deaths and two million fewer permanent disabilities annually on a global basis.

After food, housing is the largest item of poor families' expenditure. Many such families

(33 per cent globally, 45 to 50 per cent in some African and Latin American countries) are headed by women. When incomes decline, their food and health budgets suffer, leading to malnutrition, early childhood deaths and reduced productivity.

Every day some 50,000 people, mostly women and children, die as a result of poor shelter, polluted water and inadequate sanitation. It is esti-

mated that one in four of the world's population does not have access to clean drinking water and that in many developing countries, about 50 per cent of the urban population has no water within 200 metres of their dwelling.

Water and Services: the Woman's Burden

32 per cent of the population of developing countries lacks easy access to safe drink-

ing water. In the least developed countries, this figure goes up to 53 per cent and in sub-Saharan Africa, it is as high as 59 per cent. In some countries as much as 80 per cent of the population lacks ready access to safe water.

The poor very often pay more for water than the rich, through informal and often unsafe supplies. For example in Nairobi, Kenya, residents of informal settlements pay water

vendors 5 to 10 times more per unit than other residents pay to the city authorities. This is a common pattern in many cities in developing countries.

The Socio-economic Status of the Invisible Majority

It is estimated that worldwide 33 per cent of all households are headed by women. Death of a husband, divorce, war, large-scale displacement, labour migration as well as single motherhood result in women-headed households. For example, it is estimated that 70 to 80 per cent of refugees worldwide are women and children. In some southern African countries, as many as 50 per cent of rural households are headed by women as a result of men moving to towns in search of jobs, often not sending enough money home.

Women a majority of the world's population, receive only a small share of developmental opportunities. Even though women comprise more than 50 per cent of the world's population, they own only 1 per cent of the world's wealth. They are often excluded from education, from the better jobs, and from political systems.

However, one can argue that the recommendations are merely a 'show piece one' in the wake of gender chaos, instead of involving the women in the decision making process of human settlements development.

In the last decade, much has been said and written about people's participation and lofty ways and means to reduce gender discrimination. However, for a long time women often participated only in project execution, and rarely at the planning or design stages, which has worsened the situation. The most obvious ill effects of planning without consideration for, and the participation of women are easily visible.

So, the urgency of gender-conscious planning is increasingly becoming dominant, fighting against the bottlenecks of a male-dominated society.

Gender-conscious planning and management means taking into account the needs and situations of all members of any given society: men, women, boys and girls. It does also mean the effective participation of all or at least the fair representation of all in the process.

But, the conventional wisdom and present approaches in Bangladesh are often criticised of being top-down. It is recognised in different literatures, but the question is perhaps whether this is unenviable or not.

Where a place to rest is so precarious and impermanent.

Star photo by Enam Hossain

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Living under the sky with suqater and disease.

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