



Death, Birth and Women

# The Life of Gender in the UN

by Afsan Chowdhury

*Do we examine the status of our policy and programme positioning vis-a-vis the state, given the nature of our organisations? Are we aware that we are a bureaucracy/our essential role in countries are to support the interventionist/bureaucratic policies of the Governments — our counterparts — which have chosen to speak and act on behalf of the state? Perhaps, understanding the traditional role of the national bureaucracy and the link between the national and the international variety is fundamental towards our effective functioning in our increasingly gender sensitive world.*

**G**ENDER is a loaded word because it brings with it, the memory of all the inclement weather that has travelled with it in the long haul of planting sensitivity to it, however tentatively, in the South Asian mind. Today, we are in a situation where we can apply gender sensitivity tests to project components to analyse its discriminatory elements and suggest corrections of the construction of that project. Today we can demand affirmative action.

more communicative. They adorned our statistics with blood and tears. They found strength in local traditions, even in the wrong ones. I asked myself and still ask — if we were seeking development in introducing the concept of the Girl Child element in our programmes, what were they trying to do? Is it possible to say that if we were playing the custodians of development, they were acting as the guardians of our social morality? Worth thinking.

quote him because he has been involved in policy planning as well as public action, is familiar with the UN system and is an academic who has admitted being conscientised on the gender issue by his wife and his friends, all supremely articulate women of Bangladesh.

ingly gender sensitive world. Basically we — the UN — are a conglomerate of countries represented by their governments and working primarily with governments in the field. But is there a mechanism to dissect what constitutes the state and what are its elements? How far do we see it, being beyond the anointed domain of purely government departments? Are there other elements beyond the government in the construction of the concept of the state? Can we see it and interact if we wish to with those elements? Are we allowed? Do we fully recognise the meaning of civil society and its role in the construct of the state? All these are questions because I am looking for answers for them just like so many others.

### Girl Child Decade

Yet even a scarce half decade away, the official document to observe the year of the Girl Child was turned down by the concerned Senior official of the Ministry and only very high level advocacy of another Ministry salvaged the part relating to official collaboration. I remember the lethal attacks in certain sections of the media accusing the UN in general and Unicef in particular for raising an issue which didn't exist, creating a cause where none was. Today the same group of people would be embarrassed to raise objections on the topic because sensitivity to the cause of the Girl Child is now a settled fact among the cognoscenti. With the Government it is a policy. That many years ago, it almost seemed impossible.

Apart from those who thought it was another gimmick dreamed up by the UN, there were some principled opposition to the cause as well. One group did feel that empowerment of women was something which would be socially upsetting. This lobby was powerful. But the opposition mobilised by this section of society was neutralized by the massive support which was lent by the creative people and cultural activists of Bangladesh. They mounted, what was at that time was unique: The Festival of the Girl Child. Hundreds of such activists as individuals and groups, celebrated the Girl Child in all her worth. They also, through public performances depicted the agony and the infliction of social repression on the Girl Child, knowingly or otherwise by us.

I empathised more with the attitude of the cultural activists. For they spoke not of gender repression but of human repression on a gender. It seemed to me that while we were trying to relate it to programmatic aspects and by definition narrowing it, — our job really — they were widening it and giving it a perspective which made the issue, less vulnerable to attack.

### Well Intentioned Confusion

When we discuss gender based programming in UN, it is essentially about interventions based on scientifically tested proof that such interventions do improve the life of women.

These signify change and perhaps something more. Perhaps its transition or something akin to that in process. But there are still many resistance points, within and outside the fences of the development world. I have felt that, one problem, despite good intention is the strong possibility that we don't yet fully comprehend the "gender revolution", if you will, in terms of its history and in the context of Third World development. I myself feel that I don't understand it fully enough, because understanding involves a process which our nature of work prevents us from participating in. I am therefore sometimes unprepared to accommodate it. And because I don't fully understand, is it possible that despite my overt commitment to the cause I fight it unknowingly?

### State and the Gender

There are more quotations which may help to clarify. They run as follows:  
1. "The problem in most societies arise from the unwillingness or inability of the state operating within its parameters, to deploy at the margin, the resources and opportunities at their disposal, to transform the condition of women in society."  
2. The extent to which a state chooses to intervene in public life derives in part from its social philosophy.  
3. Social philosophy influences the priorities of state policies, the commitment of the state to the concern of women.  
4. Where state directly allocates resources, the interventions must be seen to reflect the gender bias of the state.  
These words are from Prof Rehman Sobhan's book, "Planning and Public Action for Asian Women". I have chosen to

# Can Women Voice Development Agenda?

by Saleem Samad

**A**GENDA 21 endorsed at the Earth Summit calls for involvement of every citizen in the creation of a sustainable future. Serious efforts are needed by the government and PVDOs in Bangladesh to evoke citizens response to development agenda. Both the PVDOs and the government have promised better future of the citizens.

### Participatory methodology

It is a depressing prospect for women. Amazingly, the challenge has produced in them strong resolve to find means of articulating in their own way their feelings about issues and problems that affect their lives. They are determined to make their voice heard by those who matter in society.

A will has a way. Many grassroots women have some measure of non-formal education. They have conceived the idea of putting in print by themselves their sorrows and sufferings, their views on issues and matters. Already several geographical areas in the country bear testimony to this phenomenon.

A woman at the meeting volunteered to write her ideas on the blackboard hung on the wall. She wanted other women at the meeting to think about issues that affect their lives. Her ideas ran like this:

- Make a list of problems the women think pressing.
- Describe how the women are tackling these problems.
- State what strategies were adopted for social change.
- Describe how you would

draw the attention of society leader, clergy and elite to the problems women face.

Taking their part in the VIPP programme, the other women gave their ideas on the questions of the volunteer. These ideas were written on the board.

Especially, one idea on how to communicate their views and opinions to the people who matter in society was illuminating. They picked the idea of doing it themselves in their own newsletters!

They rejected ideas like a) writing letters to people to communicate their views, b) putting up posters, and c) sending news to newspapers. The women leaders would not let others beat their drums for fear of damaging the drums. They would beat their own drums.

### Editorial Committee

The women spontaneously formed "rural media committees" (editorial boards) from among themselves to identify thematic issues. The boards popularly known as committees are spread in eight regions in Bangladesh countryside. Each of them comprises six to ten villages. The committee assigns the core group of writers, and edit and publish a quarterly magazine with technical support from Development Features in the form of printing.

### Production & distribution

To boost their confidence, they were trained on easy-to-operate manual duplicating machines. Each editorial board has been given a locally made duplicating machine, ink and other materials needed for the production of the newsletters. Even photocopier was used to duplicate copies. After the first issues were distributed, all the leaders of each editorial committee sat in a workshop to determine future plan of action.

The workshop reviewed the problems and progress of the first phase of the Alternative Newsletter project and discussed plan to strengthen coordination among the eight editorial committees. A plan of action was adopted and according the project began its critical phase.

Bikalpa Patrika (media-alternative), as the newsletter is named, is distributed among the grassroots and development workers, village leaders and clerics, parliament members and policy planners, researchers and academicians, development journalists and specialists, PVDO/NGO leaders and political activists.

Impact of media alternative: An editorial board member reads aloud the content of the newsletter in their regular village meetings for those unable to read. Nearly 40,000 women hear about their ideas and their feelings and their demands which have been set in type in the newsletter. The members walk miles in fair or foul

weather to reach people they think would read their newsletter.

Articles on gender issue, women's rights, early marriage, polygamy, dowry-related violence, marriage without registration, drinking water and sanitation, women's purdah (veil), social taboos, wage discrimination, child protection and development, social justice, health care, poverty, trade exploitation, ownership of property, education and even environmental degradation find place in the Alternative Newsletter. These articles focus on problems and also on successes, if there is any.

Media-Alternative is an experimental project intended to develop a communication tool for the rural women, who are beneficiaries of development initiatives, to initiate a dialogue with society managers.

The monopoly of the professional development communicators and media journalists for the poor seems to have been broken by the rural women in their modest attempt to reach the people who matter in society.

### Conclusion

Without change in the political and policy context, the needs of the poor will remain peripheral to the key development strategy for achieving sustainable future. There is no alternative to empowering women with information.

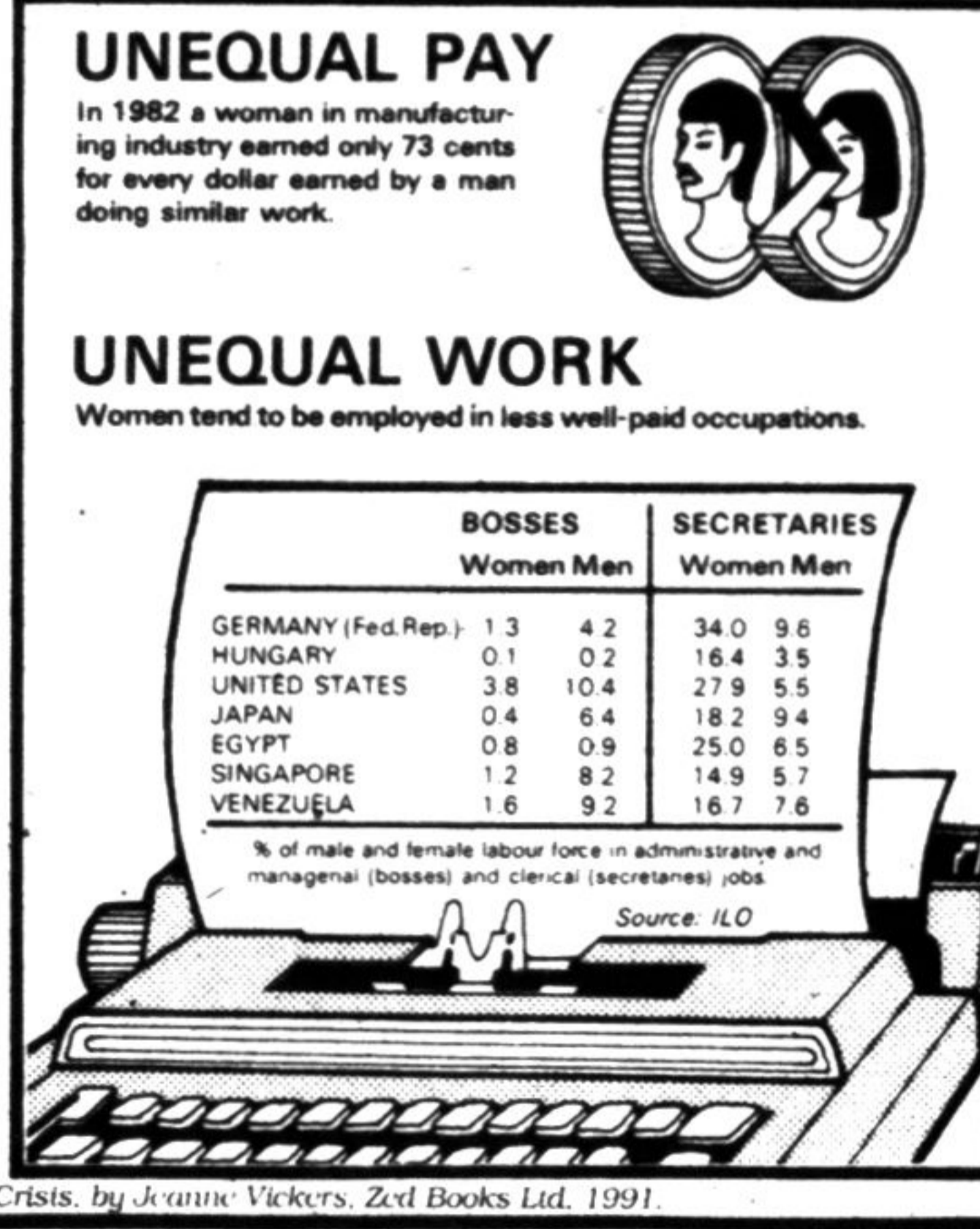
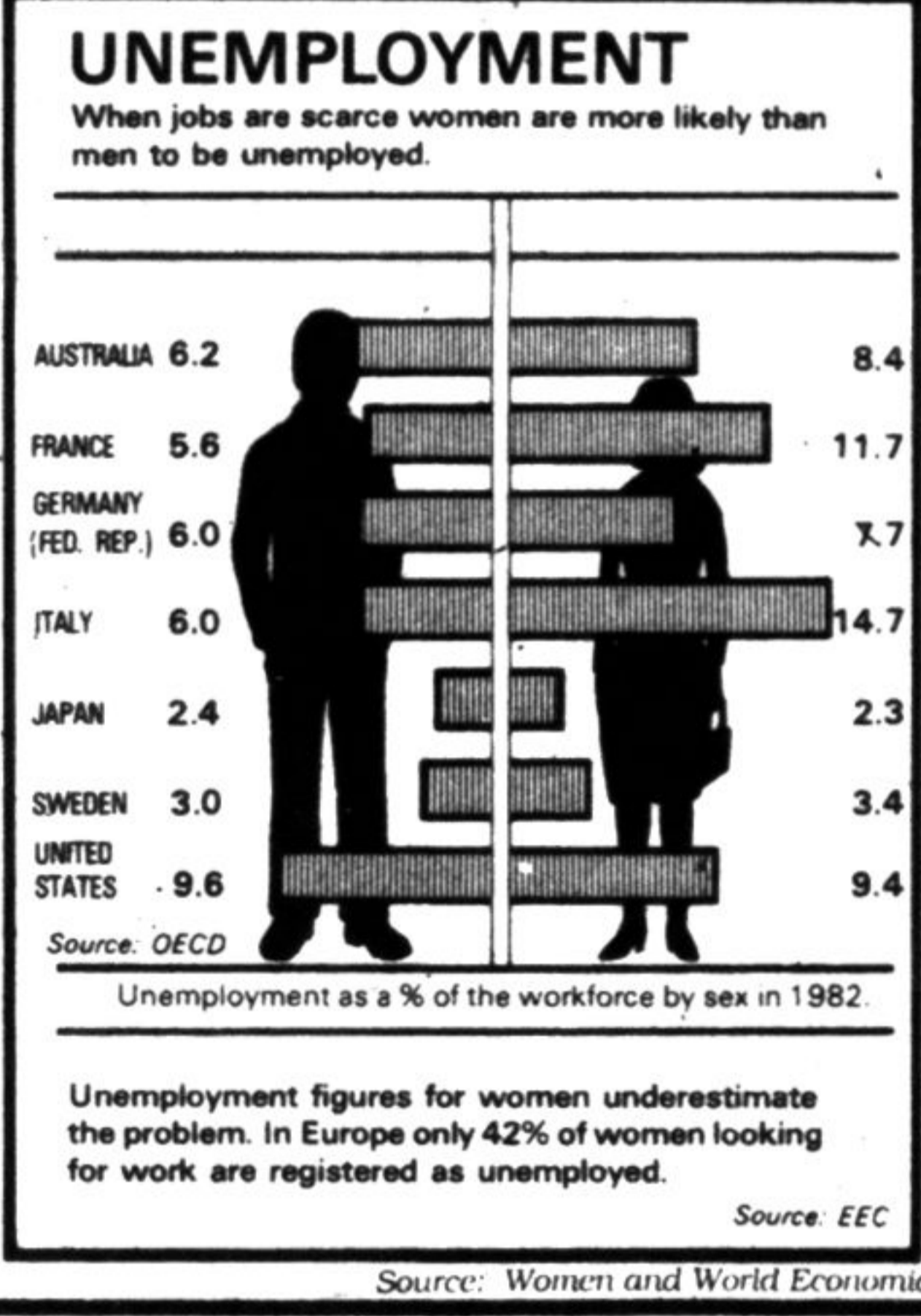
To bring about a change at the national political and policy level women could play a significant role. Though the voice of the grassroots women is not heard for cultural reasons, the NGOs/PVDOs could help develop a mechanism to relay their printed voice to the policy planners with a view to influencing policy change.

The rural women of Bangladesh in the first phase have proved that they can write articles on issues and problems which need public policy decision for the development agenda. In the second phase, it is important that the articles are published according to their selection procedure, and the third phase is for them to reach consensus on effective marketing system.

Media-Alternative could be a vehicle to ventilate women's feelings, ideas and opinions on issues which have long gone unheard. Such a communication tool will allow the village leaders including clerics to understand the invisible contribution of women in the rural society. The bottomline of development paradigm, as enunciated by Mahatma Gandhi: "If you educate a man, you educate an individual. If you educate a woman, you educate the whole family."

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## EMPLOYMENT "Women are one-third of the world's labour force but they tend to be employed in lower-paid occupations than men. Just as society undervalues the work women do in the home, so their skills are undervalued when applied to work outside in the world of employment." THE STATE OF THE WORLD'S WOMEN REPORT



Source: Women and World Economic Crisis, by Jeanne Vickers, Zed Books Ltd, 1991.

## Women Choose Army for Safety, not Glamour

Nina Bachkatov writes from Moscow

**I**N what looks like a bid to outdo the United States in public relations, the Russian army has just appointed 12 women generals.

Their promotion, to head recruiting offices in the Leningrad Military District, according to the ITAR-Tass news agency, is a sophisticated advance on the Cold War propaganda picture of worker-soldiers shouldering their Kalashnikovs to defend the motherland alongside their men.

The real situation is more prosaic than either. For most of the 100,000 women in uniform the army is simply another job, not very glamorous but with important advantages by way of security and welfare. The most striking thing about the Russian women soldier is the amount of social legislation for her benefit.

Women have been part of the Russian army for a long time. In the late 18th Century Catherine the Great's general, Prince Grigori Potemkin, formed an "amazon battalion" from the wives of officers in the Crimea.

It was not until World War Two that women became an established part of the Soviet armed services — among them Valentina Grizodubov, commander of a squadron of long-range night bombers. Though peace caused women to be demobilised, women's service was revived in the mid-1970s due to a shortage of men for call-up.

In Western armies the woman soldier is usually pictured as an adventurous fun-loving bachelor. Her Russian counterpart is more likely to be a single mother, with generous



and seniority levels approximately level to that of sergeant. The one professionally glamorous figure was the first major-general cosmonaut Valentina Tereshkova.

Many giving family reasons were the wives of officers serving in places where women find it hard to get employment. Some had more particular reasons, like Svetlana Aleshchenko, head of an air defence signals exchange: "Believe it or not, I joined for the sake of my son. I wanted to get into an army kindergarten."

The women have three complaints. The first is about promotion. Engineer liaison officer Valentina Stakhnova told a military journalist that a commanding officer can have great influence on a soldier's future: "As a woman, your career depends on your CO. You may get a commendation for dedication to the job, but it doesn't necessarily advance your career."

At the same time, men complain about the unfairness of service women's privileges. Witness Major Vladimir Shlykov, who claims that 20 per cent of his unit's women are permanently on maternity leave caring for children under three. He says they do 25 per cent less duty.

This has led to an argument in the army as to whether women soldiers can be considered cost effective — in short, can the army, short of almost everything from funds to housing, continue to afford maternity and other privileges?

— Gemint News

The writer is a leading Belgian journalist and writer on the former Soviet Union.

## The Lady who Saw with Her Inner Eye

by Parvez Babul

**T**HE world reputed blind lady Helen Keller, as a physically sound and healthy child, was born on 27th June, 1880 in Tuscumbia, Alabama; USA. Her father, Captain Arthur Keller, a retired Army Captain, was the editor of a newspaper named North Albanian.

Helen, at the age of one and a half years, was attacked with brain fever. As a result, Helen became absolutely deaf, blind and mute. After that she passed a very painful solitary life for a number of years.

Her real life began in March, 1887 when she was about seven. She herself called that day as the most remarkable and memorial day in her life as Anne Sullivan came to Tuscumbia that day and embraced Helen as her student.

How Miss Sullivan undertook relentless efforts to turn blind and deaf Helen into a responsible human is widely spread most notably through both William Gibson's play and film, *The Miracle Worker* and Helen's self-written biography — *The Story of My Life*.

In 1890, when she was ten, she expressed her desire to learn the ability to deliver lectures. She was aware that a blind and deaf Norwegian girl could deliver lectures. Miss Sarah Fuller of the Horace Mann School was her first speech teacher. Helen occasionally used to say, "Someday I shall go to college". Her dream turned into reality. In 1898, she entered the Cambridge School for Young Ladies for the preparation to enter to Radcliffe College. In 1900, she entered the



Helen Keller in her childhood

Radcliffe College and received her B A degree in 1904.

The educational life of Helen ended ceremonially with obtaining her B A degree. But she continued her studies throughout the life. In addition, she enriched herself about the contemporary world and modern people. For her fathomless knowledge and creative activities, she was conferred with honorary doctorate degree by the various universities.

As in one hand, Helen was highly awarded by various agencies and organizations, the other hand she had acquaintance and friendship with most of the leading personalities of her time. Among them, Woodrow Cleveland to Charles Chaplin, Jawaharlal Nehru, John F Kennedy et al.

Katharine Cornell, Van Wyck Brooks, Alexander Graham Bell, Jo Davidson were among many others with whom she had friendship. Two were very close friends of Helen Keller since her very childhood. One was Mark Twain and the other was William James, who expressed beautifully about Helen Keller. Mark Twain said, "The two most interesting characters of the 19th century are Napoleon and Helen Keller." William James wrote, "But whatever you were or are, what a blessing!"

Wherever she was, Helen Keller always concentrated herself with the upliftment activities for the fellow sightless and the deaf-blind. From her youth, she was always willing to help them by appearing before legislatures, giving lectures, writing articles, and above all, by her own example of what a severely handicapped person could accomplish.

At her own initiative Helen Keller International was established in 1915.

In every moment just before retirement from the public life she was tireless and restless. In 1946 after becoming the national and international advisor of Helen Keller International she started her activities to raise fund for the Organization in different countries of the world.

When Senator Lister Hill was requested to comment on the death of Helen Keller, he expressed the feelings of the whole world when he said, "She will live on, one of the few, the immortal names not born to die. Her spirit will endure as long as man can read and stories can be told of the woman who showed the world there are no boundaries to courage and faith."

The writer is associated with Helen Keller Int'l, Bangladesh.