



VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

# Responsibility of Parents

by Shaheen Anam

*It is high time that we discussed such issues as parents responsibilities towards their female children. Many a tragic situation could have been averted if parents had taken action on time. The social taboo against divorce or separation for women is still so great that many parents send their daughters back to abusive husbands just to maintain a social facade. Most parents are also of course too poor to take back a daughter who will be an extra mouth to feed.*

YET another murder was reported in the press on 30 November. This time a young woman named Paveen Akhter 23, was strangled by her husband who is now absconding. The father when filing charges claimed that his daughter was regularly tortured by her husband. The question which comes to mind is, if she was tortured regularly and in full knowledge of the family, than why was she not rescued from the situation? Who than is responsible for her death?

It is high time that we discussed such issues as parents responsibilities towards their female children. Many a tragic situation could have been averted if parents had taken action on time. The social taboo against divorce or separation for women is still so great that many parents send their daughters back to abusive husbands just to maintain a social facade. Most parents are also of course too poor to take back a daughter who will be an extra mouth to feed.

Stories of women forced into marriage resulting in tragic consequences are very common. Because of pressure from society parents feel obliged to marry off their daughters to almost anybody who will take them. Young girls as young as 18 or 19 are married off to men old enough to be their father. Marriages to men who already have more than one wife is also common. The domestic problems which ensue is not surprising at all, often leading to tragic consequences. The all too familiar cases of dowry deaths is known to us all now. These deaths are not inevitable, we have to understand and acknowledge that these deaths are avoidable.

The much publicized Rima murder case is an example. If Rima's appeals and complaints against her husband had been taken seriously than she prob-



The perpetuation of a cycle of 'more burden, less care' for female starts as early as the birth of a child.

ably, would have been alive today. The notion that women once they are married should try to adjust, no matter what the provocation is, is at the root of the problem. Sayings such as, you enter your husband's house wearing red (the bridal dress) and leave wearing white (coffin clothes) perpetuates the belief that marriage should be for ever and ever. Women, who have known to suffer in their husbands house and have still not left are praised and glorified. They are cited as examples for others to follow. Only in extreme cases when death occurs

the family is shocked into realization that all was after all, not well.

As long as society perceives women as being somehow inferior, a liability, always needing protection, dependent and a cause of economic depletion to the family, this kind of tragedy is bound to recur. The facility with which men of any age, vocation, character and habits finds a woman to marry is indicative of how cheap and in abundant supply women are.

Though parents or guardians are themselves victims of societal norms and pressures, yet

they will have to take a stand and provide the support and protection that could avert such tragedies. They could, as a force turn the tide against the oppression and exploitation of their daughters by refusing to succumb to pressures that ultimately leads to their untimely death.

It is not poverty alone that forces parents to turn their daughters away, it is also the social taboo, and religious dictates specially among the middle class which refuses sanctuary to the abused, violated and humiliated daughter.

I have no intention on being overly harsh on parents and fully realize their helplessness and vulnerability. But they are a strong force and will have to use this strength to stop violence against their daughters and daughter-in-laws. Here I should add that women will have to be more supportive of their daughters and daughter-in-laws. It is often seen that they end up being a party to their abuse and sometimes even death.

Time and again we are confronted with the question, what can be done? To parents, I would say, change your attitude towards the girl child at home first. Treat them with the respect, dignity and care that all children need, whether a girl or a boy. Educate and provide them with all the opportunities and options you possibly can. Resist all kinds of pressures, social or religious that prevents you from providing sanctuary or protection to your daughter when she needs it. Most of all give a clear message that your daughter is precious, important and valuable in every way. That she is in no way inferior to your son and is not to be mistreated. Remember, you are a strong force. Use this force to break down barriers that obstructs the normal growth and potential of your daughters.

HUMAN RIGHTS DAY

# Translating Words into Reality Proves Difficult

by Rashed Mahmud Titumir

FOR much too long, according to women's rights groups, both national and international communities have not given to women's rights the attention they deserve.

Existing UN conventions, however, are very clear: all women have the right to education, adequate health care and equality with men in the legal and political spheres. They also have the right to protection against violence, forced prostitution and discrimination.

But translating those words into reality has proven difficult. Perhaps, it is true in the case of Bangladesh, when we are sermonising on the international human rights day, December 10.

"Many violations of women's human rights are distinctly connected to being female... that is, women are discriminated against and abused on the basis of gender", observes Charlotte Bunch, Director of the

Centre for Women's Global Leadership at Rutgers University in the United States.

Consequently, say women's rights experts, certain human rights questions need to be considered from a gender perspective.

According to a position paper for the world Conference on Human Rights, 1993 by the National Preparatory Committee, Bangladesh, women's rights in Bangladesh continue to be "flagrantly violated".

The report observes that the rise of religious extremism and its manifestation in both state policies and individual action, has 'brutally impacted on the lives of women'.

In recent incidents, several women have been stoned to death at the behest of local religious leaders, says an Amnesty International report.

Some women activist groups alleges, women, suffer gross

human rights violations through assaults on their sexual autonomy.

A glaring example of discrimination, as viewed by the women organisations, is the continued existence of personal laws based on religious law, which 'deny women's equal rights' within the family, to marriage, divorce, guardianship and custody of children and inheritance.

They argue that rights to citizenship are discriminatory, being conferred at birth through the paternal line, and at marriage through the husband.

According to an 'Alternative Report on Implementation of UN CEDAW in Bangladesh', the Muslim Family Laws Ordinance (1961) regulates certain aspects of discrimination.

It also says that the Family Courts Ordinance (1985) confirms unequal procedures for

divorce by women and men. However, changes are gradually taking place because of the ongoing activities of the women groups and there is still a mountain to climb up.

The observance of purdah is on the decline, as economic pressure is forcing women to work outdoor for survival. The magnitude and dynamics of poverty have pushed them onto a precipice from where she has but to wage a war, against some devils.

Perhaps, the key is the introduction of stronger political system coupled with the right intention to implement. A good number of conventions were adopted, but discrimination has remained. We have to remember that human rights issues are so interwoven that no advance can be made in one area without reference to another. Otherwise, the single tracked objectives, as we are currently practising, will not get us too far in achieving equality of sexes.

## THE SINGLE WOMAN

Divorce, separation, widowhood and migration are major reasons for the worldwide increase in the number and percentage of female-headed households. Such households are among the poorest in the world.

### MIGRATION

In developing countries migration is the main cause of the rise in female-headed households.



AFRICA  
Sudan 22%  
Kenya 30%  
Ghana 27%  
Malawi 29%



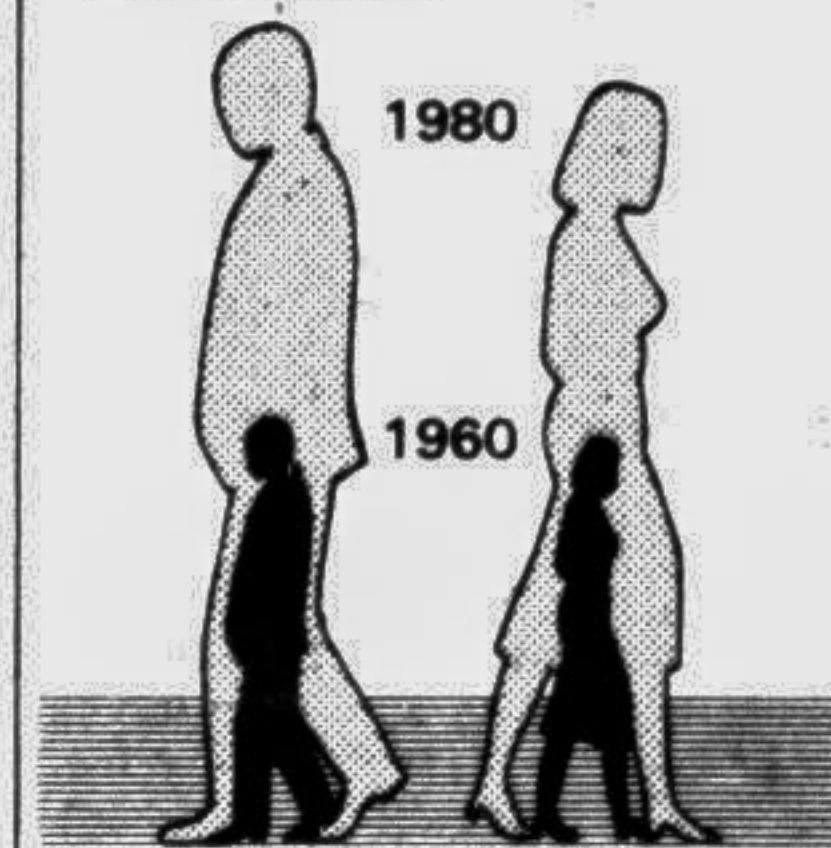
LATIN AMERICA AND CARIBBEAN  
Jamaica 34%  
Peru 23%  
Honduras 22%  
Venezuela 20%

% of households headed by women

Source: US Bureau of the Census

### DIVORCE

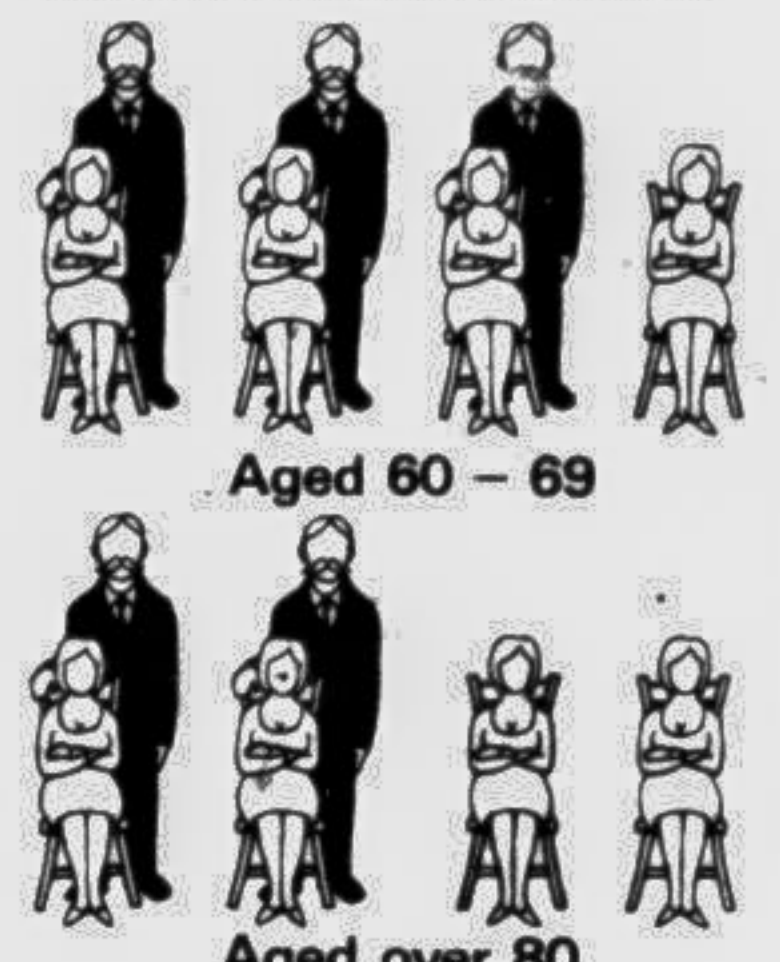
In many countries - developed and developing - divorce rates are rising and fewer couples are getting married.



Since 1960 the divorce rate has more than doubled in every European country. Source: EEC

### WIDOWS

Because women live longer than men and tend to marry men older than themselves, more women are widowed than men.



Figures for industrialized countries. Source: UN World Assembly on Aging

EARLY MARRIAGE

# How to Address the Issue?

by Jowshan A Rahman

THE constitution apparently ensures the gender equality including protecting women by the civil laws relating to marriage, divorce, child custody, maternity benefits, dowry but in certain cases men have greater rights than women. Dowry Prohibition Act 1980, Child Marriage Restraint Ordinance 1984, Cruelty to Women (Deterrent Punishment) Ordinance 1983, have been positive steps but not

enacted in 1984 raising the girls age of marriage from 16 to 18 years. This early marriage is punishable under law. But a BRAC study findings indicate that some families falsified their daughter's age in order to comply with the law. Therefore statistics on age of marriage should be treated with caution. Becoming pregnant before the age of 18, increases the

Women's status must be enhanced to help them to speak up. Following actions can be initiated:

- i. Intensive media campaign to bring societal awareness about the special issues relating to girl child's marriage.
- ii. Give related education to parents through existing government and NGO structures. Develop pressure group in every village/para to protect the girl children from early marriage.
- iii. Organised adolescent girls for self-reliance and skill training through girls education.
- iv. Enforcement and implementation of existing laws particularly relating to age of marriage and dowry.

v. Raise the mean age at first marriage at least by two years by turn of the century.

vi. Postpone the first pregnancy till after the age of 20, thereby contribute to reduction in the rates of population growth as well as infant and maternal mortality.

It is important to influence the public policy makers and planners to give full recognition to the situation of women as the most sensitive human development index. Community awareness and actions supported by effective enforcement of regulatory measures should be given equal weightage to achieve the goal.

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effectively enforced mainly because of the ineffective regulatory measures, societal unawareness, and women's subordinate status.

Available data indicate that the mean age at first marriage for women increased gradually from 12 years in 1931 to 16 years in 1974 and to 18 years in the mid 1980s. Though the legal age of marriage is 18 years, half of all girls continue to be married before the legal age.

A fifth of women have their first child by 15 years, 66 per cent by 18 and 80 per cent before the age of 20 years. Child Marriage Restraint (Amendment) Ordinance was

health risk for both mother and the child. In Bangladesh 40 per cent of all births are in the high risk age group i.e. less than 18 years. These young girls are pushed prematurely into motherhood at the expense of their personal growth and development permeating the cycle of high rates of infant mortality, low under-5 survival, high maternal mortality, high malnutrition leading to low status of women.

Various study findings indicate that the traditional values, societal attitudes and poverty are basically responsible for early marriage. Verbatims of some of the parents are quoted below.

## Rupantar's Tribute to Rokeya and Lila Nag

A programme with a difference was organised by Rupantar - Nari o Samaj, a small women's group who publish the occasional women's journal 'Rupantar' from Dhaka, on the 18th of December '93 at TSC. The programme titled 'Rokeya O Lila Nag - Dui Shikha Brati,' was the second in their series of depiction of women who struggled for social transformation in the past. The first in the series 'Mone Rekho Amra Eshchhelam' (Remember we came) focussed on Pritilata Waddar.

This year the theme was the secular and feminist message in the career and work of two women in Bengal - the legendary Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain and the less well-known and less celebrated Lila Nag. The programme comprised of a discussion on the two women in the form of a question answer session, which was followed by readings from Lila Nag's journal and the last chapters from Rokeya's novel Padmarag.

Many critical and vital issues surfaced in the discussion where Maleka Begum, Syed Manzoorul Islam, Anu

Muhammad, Akhteruzzaman Ilyas, Rangol Sen, Suraiya Begum and M Shaiful Hasan took part. The discussion initiators (questioners) from Rupantar were Shameem Akhter, Sonia Amin, Lila Rashid, Shaheen Akhter, and Moushumi Qader. Communalism, fundamentalism, the birth of Pakistan, Rokeya as a feminist and/or humanist, her 'subversive texts', the oblivion that Lila Nag has been flung into - these were the issues

that came up. Unfortunately these issues could only be scratched on the surface in a three hours discussion, where perhaps a day should have been allotted. Sultana Kamal who presided over the discussion did the summing up.

As the programme was a tribute to Rokeya and Lila Nag on the occasion of Rokeya's death anniversary, Mita Huq rendered two songs in their remembrance.

Siddika, the spirited

heroine of Rokeya's 'Padmarag,' (designated by some as a 'feminist' novel) came alive in Neema Rahman's exquisite rendition of her in the reading session. This was perhaps the first time that 'Padmarag' or a section thereof has been presented on the stage in Bangladesh. Tareq Anam read the part of Latif Almas, with Bipasha Hayat, Sharmishtha Rahman, and Mona Lisa in other roles. The audience was led for a few brief minutes into the world of 'Tarmi Bhaban' (the ultimate feminist utopia, where women from all castes, creeds and classes have congregated to live in work, dignity and sisterhood - where the oppression of gender, creed and class, are laid to rest. For a few brief moments the viewers stepped into this imaginary and utopian world, where Hindu, Muslim, Christian, man and woman, high and low - are all welded into one magnified and ennobled human entity. And this perhaps was the achievement of this informal women group - they helped to recreate for an evening the wonderfully rich, secular message of our forebears.



Speakers participating in a discussion organised by Rupantar.

NORPLANT

# Contraceptive Freedom or Coercion

IT took 24 years to develop, test and approve the implantable contraceptive Norplant. It took less than two weeks for Norplant to be billed as a new method of coercion. Within days of licensing in the USA, a Philadelphia newspaper published a racist editorial recommending Norplant in the fight against black poverty; a judge in California included compulsory use of Norplant in the sentence of a woman found guilty of child abuse; and the state legislature in Kansas held hearings on a bill to encourage mothers receiving state welfare benefits to get the implant.

This new contraceptive consists of six silicone rods filled with the hormone levonorgestrel which are inserted

under the skin of a woman's upper arm. Norplant has one of the longest periods of effectiveness for any contraceptive, five years. Specialised minor surgery is needed for insertion and removal.

A disturbing feature of Norplant's design in that women cannot stop using it when they wish, says Health Action International's (HAI) latest publication, Problem Drugs. They need to find a specially trained health worker who agrees to remove the implants. This is not always easy. "Women are sometimes pressured into continuing to use the method when they don't want to," says Problem Drugs author Andrew Chetley.

In Thailand, women are routinely told that Norplant will not be removed for minor

side effects. Reports from the Dominican Republic, Egypt, and Indonesia also found that "removal on demand" did not occur to the satisfaction of the users.

Norplant has been approved for use in at least 26 countries and more than 1.5 million women have used it. The developers believe that - despite its high cost - more than 30 million women could be using it by the end of the decade, most of them in developing countries.

Another concern is that if pregnancy does occur while the method is used, there is a 20 to 30% chance that it will be ectopic. Ectopic pregnancies - when the fertilised egg begins to develop in the Fallopian tube rather than in the uterus - can be fatal for the mother if they are not terminated quickly. At least

Indonesia was the first country to use Norplant on a large scale, with more than 886,000 women having received the implants between 1987 and 1990. Problems arose when Norplant was included in the so-called "safari" programme - a programme where health workers visit a village for a day to recruit as many women as possible to use contraception. Individual counselling and information about side effects "tended to be minimal".

Implants were inserted improperly by poorly trained health workers, using equipment that was not properly sterilised, leading to infections and later difficulties with removal. Some women had Norplant inserted when they were already pregnant, but did not yet know it.

HAI recommends against promoting implants as "first

We have taken a Five Year Insurance Plan...



three to four out of every hundred Norplant users become pregnant during the five-year period of use.

Five years is a long time to follow women up to notify them to have the implants removed. "This is expensive and time-consuming," says Yvonne Bogaarts, coordinator of Women's Health Action Foundation. "Most health services in developing countries simply aren't equipped for it."

Like other long-acting, highly effective contraceptive methods, Norplant has been developed to be used in family planning programmes in developing countries which aim to reduce population growth.

choice" contraceptives and says that they should only be used where they can be provided safely and respectfully and with a woman's fully informed consent. HAI is calling for research efforts to be directed at improving the availability and convenience of existing user-controlled methods of contraception.

Overall, women need to have a greater voice in setting the policies and practices that will determine not only how contraceptives - but all drugs - are researched, developed, produced, marketed, used and provided.

Health Action International