



INTERVIEW WITH ADAB DIRECTOR

NGOs are yet to Come to Terms with Women's Issues

by Rashed Mahmud Titumir

BOTH the national government and international community are putting increased emphasis on the role of the NGOs, either as an independent agent or in partnership with the government, to carry out development activities.

The Daily Star talked to Rasheda K Chowdhury, Director of ADAB, the apex body of NGOs in Bangladesh to know how they are viewing and addressing the women's issues.

The excerpts of the interview follow:

DS: Which women issues the NGOs are now addressing?

Rasheda K Chowdhury (RKC): Most of the NGOs have women's programme as a component. Actually, most of the NGOs are targeting women. But the issue, if we look at how they have taken off in the last 20 years, there has been a gradual shift — both in terms of emphasis and in terms of area identification. As in the past years NGOs are emphasising on women's development as a matter of development only, now they are looking more at the issue of empowerment. There has been a definite change or shift in policy.

DS: What is the focal point?

RKC: Actually the prime concern at the moment should have been the issue of empowerment. But the thing is that in most of the mainstream NGOs, leadership is with men. So, there has been a little bit of attitudinal aspect towards the issue of empowerment. Most of the women activist groups feel that it should be one of the major agenda of the mainstream NGOs. But consciously — no. Most of the NGOs see it as a matter of component, not as a matter of deliberate policy. They targeted poorest of the poor. So, women automatically became their target.

DS: Don't you consider it as rhetoric?

RKC: That's what people think it is in terms of rhetoric. But I think at the moment there is a definite visible change in the attitude of most of the NGOs. I am not talking about mainstream women movement groups, because they are always talking about empowerment. Empowerment means — you are empowered to take decision on your own, you have everything. If you talk about human rights, you are regarded as a human being. Your voice is heard, you have access to information. You have access to resources, everything. It is an issue of human rights. There is difficulty in recognising women's rights as human rights. That's why this empowerment issue is thought to be rhetoric. But at the implementation level, I don't think most of the NGOs are looking at the indicators of empowerment.

DS: Would you please be more specific on 'woman rights as human rights'?

RKC: Let us take the example of the credit programme. A woman is now earning. She did not earn before. She could not earn before, that door has been opened to her through the credit programme. She is bringing in income into the family. But her income is being spent by the family without taking into consideration her own concern, like her health needs, literacy needs, or any other needs she may have. Because nobody is giving a thought to the fact that she is a human being too. Nobody is taking care of her special needs. These

things are happening. This is happening because of our traditional attitude towards women. Women have a subordinate position in our society and our people are conditioned by the social norms and cultural practices to think of women as subordinate human beings.



Just providing income opportunity for women, or providing a little bit of status in the family — does not mean empowerment or attainment of human rights. Human rights are something else, which mean women have to be taken as a complete member of the family or the society. Her voice has to be heard, and her right over her body, over her income over any resources should be recognised.

DS: In your view, what rights women in Bangladesh are deprived of?

RKC: Well, most of the fundamental rights that are guaranteed by our constitution and by the human rights charter, whether women in Bangladesh are enjoying is doubtful. I would like to add one important aspect, as I am personally an activist of women movement, right to security, a secured life is what is conspicuous by its absence in

matrilineal (either a mother or a daughter or a wife). But I can guarantee you, 99 per cent of people will never consider them as complete human beings. That's the attitude we have in our society. We will always think of women as a stereotyped mother, wife, or a daughter; not as a human being. That's deep-rooted in our society. Even a girl is conditioned from her very childhood of thinking that she is subordinate to the male.

DS: Do you consider that economic inequality and the nature of the State polity have a major share in it?

RKC: Of course, the State, in terms of lack of interventionist principles. But if we think of social norms and economic inequality — who has created that economic inequality? Is it the patriarchal society? Who is having the power? Who is having the capital? There comes the question, who has access to these? Women don't have any type of power to actually own property in Bangladesh. So who has created the economic inequality? — men. They are holding the resources in their hands.

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being discriminated against, deprived of her right to be treated as a human being because her weakness was kept a secret. But face to face with a revelation she felt threatened. That nervous mother delivered a baby daughter who was not welcome to the family. No body knew, infant wanted to know, the mother's feelings about her daughter. And, another contemptible life began for the new-born, in this world unseen and unknown for her. The little baby had no choice of her birth place and she will have to fight for her rights to be treated as a human being. The maternal grandmother worried too much about the reactions of her

Bangladesh. The way they are being subjected to all types of violence, is a complete denial of the basic fundamental rights — right to education, right to health, right to minimal living conditions.

DS: What is the root cause of not having these rights?

RKC: This is actually ingrained in our social system. We are used to looking at women as a secondary human being, as a second class citizen. And that's why it is in our psyche. If you ask a man, what does he think of a woman, the immediate answer will be *bodhu* —

There is still lack of leadership at all levels. There are leaderships at some levels but not at all levels. If you want to achieve anything, you have to achieve it at the lower level — grassroots level. That's not happening. I think the NGOs have a definite role to play at the grassroots level. And they are not playing it properly.

Resources are accumulated by them. So economic inequality is the product of the social system. Of course the State can intervene here. It is possible to reduce economic inequality through state intervention.

DS: How do you view the Muslim Family Law Ordinance, 1960 and Bangladesh's reservation on CEDAW?

RKC: I think it is a matter of political commitment. It is possible to change the law. There are people who could really help. Not only women, there are people who are conversant with Islamic law, Shariah and the alternatives. Even without creating turmoil within the social system, this is possible. There are people who are eager to provide their expertise. But because of the lack of political commitment, it is not happening.

DS: Do you think the existing social relations are conducive to women's empowerment?

RKC: It is possible. But we need to have alliances within different groups. I am talking about women's movement. They are going ahead with their demands — women rights as human rights. But the question is — are we building alliances with our people. We have not been able to do it yet. It is not a fault on our part. It lies in the other parties too, like men, our partners, government machineries, state mechanisms. At the moment we have no other alternative other than recognising women not only as a development partner but, as the jargon goes, as real human beings in our society. If you really recognise women as human beings, guarantee their rights, the frustration will go.

DS: Last question. What are the actions being planned by women activists to secure this right, looking forward to the Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing 95?

RKC: There is a lack of coordination among the women movement groups. Even many of the women activists or organisation don't know what they're demanding. Many of them, I should say most of them, have no clear-cut strategies to secure the rights. Achieving women's rights as human rights has not gone beyond the slogan. They have not yet been able to mobilise public opinion in support of their demands. This is because, they don't have clear-cut strategies.

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The writer, a physician, works for AVSC, an NGO.

FATWA

Taking the Law in their Own Hands

by Raffat Binte Rashid

A man is innocent until proven guilty. Then what about a woman, is she guilty until proven innocent?

Looking at the case of Nur Jahan from Chhatrakchhara, Sylhet, this undoubtedly is the thought that crosses the mind of every woman. It is never the Nura of any village or town, who are stoned to death for polygamy or adultery but always the Nur Jahans.

For a woman, the *Salishes* of village headmen *Panchayats* or *Fatwas* of *Imams* are enough. Their sermons are rarely questioned, until they go out of proportion, as has happened in Nur Jahan's case.

Law, when it concerns women, takes different shapes and forms and this is a historical fact.

"The rights of a Muslim woman are regulated by Muslim personal law which originated in most cases from customary law, prevalent in any disorganised society before the reforms made by religious laws. Thus the male dominance prevails and inequality of rights exists between, sexes in the area of personal law for historical reasons rather than economic and social considerations," as described by Shafique Ahmed, Barrister-at-law, Principal City Law College, Dhaka.

Masjids are taboo for women in Bangladesh except may be *Baitul Mukarram*, says Advocate Sigma Huda, Secretary General of Bangladesh Manobadhikar Bastabayan Sangstha. But the religious decree or *fatwas* are for all, in some cases more for women.

Under Article 41 of the Constitution man has right to religion, talk about and preach it. Promoting and propagating Islam or preaching Islam is what the *Imams*, *khatibs* are supposed to do, not forcing their decrees on people," she says.

In *salish* which is basically a conciliation board or village *panchayat* which is an informal court at the grassroots level, solutions are attempted to be arrived at and to be given. These solutions cannot become obligatory or mandatory force of law and be imposed on people who were not given a proper trial. These sermons or *fatwas* in some cases work parallel to

our existing criminal or penal law. An accused person can only be tried and sentenced by our existing laws at the courts not by any other law," explains Sigma Huda. "I don't know the legality of these pronounced *fatwas* but *Imams* are not authorized to pass verdicts on any person."

Salish and *Panchayat* were set up because in the past courts were far away and cases always involved huge amounts of money. It was therefore easier to go to headmen or vil-

Khan, Director, Islamic Foundation also clarifies these religious verdicts: "Islamic law is for marriage, divorce, *namaz*, *roza* (fasting) and other religious activity not for any serious legal action. "Until the government agrees or gives them special powers the *Imams* cannot execute any sentence."

"*Fatwa* cannot say that this woman deserves 100 lashes or be stoned to death. It is an illegal practice, unless government agrees," he says.

Fatwa is actually a Masters Degree under government *Madrasa* board.

Islamic Laws are different and not totally practised here. "Islamic Penal Law or *Hudud* Law — cutting off hands or stoning, is not practised in Bangladesh," emphasises Sigma Huda.

But these *fatwas* in the name of law and religion are randomly at use in village *Salishes* or *Panchayats* which are basically only conciliatory councils to provide mediation. "*Salish* which is supposed to give mediation contradicts *fatwa* or religious decree which becomes a must for the accused to accept," explains Sigma Huda.

In these courts the women are always the victim and bear the consequences alone, their accomplices are generally proven innocent. A woman, if accused of a crime, is to be tried in the criminal court or the penal court. There are laws for her but not in these biased courts, Sigma Huda points out.

Admittedly this area of the law imposed in the country needs major reforms but the attention, or the authority has not been focused in this direction. Reforms of personal law always pose a serious problem, for any government particularly if religion plays a part and therefore only a few legislative measures have been passed during past few hundred years in this part of the world," says Shafique Ahmed.

Our constitution says that men and women are all equal. Article 28 clearly states that 'there is no discrimination between religion, sex, gender, caste or race, but in spite of all these, inequality persists in the areas of inheritance and divorce to simple crimes. Sigma Huda points out.

Moulana Mofazzel Hossain



The Unending Woes of a Girl Child

by Nahid Jamal Rianon

SHE was waving her hands with a very anxious and fearful look inside the cabin of the busy clinic where I used to work. I just ran into the cabin and asked the patient holding her hands if anything was wrong with her. The moment she told me the reason of calling me, I was shocked like I had never been before. I had never heard of nor could I even think of any story, like the problem that the lady explained to me unfolded itself that day. I was appalled! It made feel very sad.

Women are treated as lesser human beings — one of my friends uttered this sentence expressing the attitude of some people have about females in the society. Though my friend was in favour of the females, still I reacted to the insulting words about women. It seems that many do not want to recognize the woman as a human being. The problem stated by the patient is an obvious proof of this fact.

The patient was pregnant with a full-term baby. Her expected date of delivery was over but there was no labour pain. The foetus was in distress, so she was going to have a caesarian section to relieve the distress of the foetus. When the anaesthetist told her that she should remove her denture (artificial teeth) before she enters the operation theatre she was afraid. No body will find any reason for this fear to leave denture out of her mouth prior to anaesthesia. I don't also, it is a routine procedure for anaesthesia.

The real reason for her fear lay some where else — it had to do with her own life. The saddest part of the story is that her husband did not know about her denture. She had lost her teeth of the front part of both her upper and lower gums in an accident before marriage. She got married, and spent at least more than one year with her husband living in her in-law's house. She was able to keep it a secret that she did not have any teeth.

Now she was requesting me to hide this denture and give it back after she comes round in the post-operative room. Both the mother and the daughter were afraid that she would be

divorced if her in-laws came to know about it.

After her arranged wedlock parents were satisfied and relieved of their duties, the lady herself thought she was safe, her goal was reached and she would have a status in the society. Even with all these hopes, she was leading such a miserable life inside her with a fear of divorce stalking her every day as she managed to tuck away her denture while her husband was asleep.

This was a story of a doctor — poor patient encounter. She did not even feel that she was



'A son is future, a daughter is nothing' — Photo: Unicef

now she has to worry for her daughter's fate. Since the daughter did not have a son, she might not have any place for living in her old age. Her in-laws will have all her husband's property, so the daughter's life will also become a floating one. The grandmother could not think of her grand daughter's future life, which might be a repeat of their own who knows! The sufferings of her brought before her mind's eye some ominous possibilities. But if this little child could be brought up with an idea of independence that she would live on her own, she could think for and support others, rather than depending on them like

son-in-law and other relatives on his side to the birth of a daughter child.

The old lady started expressing her sorrow for her daughter by telling her own story. She has her only son staying abroad. Her husband is dead, she does not have any place to live in. Her luck had let her study upto class three only. She is not able to live on her own. She terms her life as a 'floating' one. Sometimes she stays at her brother's house and sometimes in her daughter's. She does not have freedom even for her every day activities. And



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weeds, as is the usual social picture it would be such a liberating thing she thought aloud. No body wanted to look into the matter deeply. The neglected mother without any fault of her own and the innocent daughter without understanding the gender implications — were both blamed for the guilt of this birth.

A girl can't support a family. Her duty is to serve her husband and fulfill his wish by delivering a male child. This is a common belief in the society, specially more among the uneducated part of it. So a girl child is not sent to school for a long time. Parents feel insecure until her daughter gets married to an economically and socially established man. To them this is their daughter's settlement in life. Her educational career is of negligible importance in most cases. Rather delivering a male child is more important to everyone in the family. Many a time we see a man marrying more than once and living a life with two or more wives at a time only to have a son.

The lady with a wish to have a son come to a lady obstetrician for her antenatal checkup and delivery.

Education enables men to work in different places, and different social circumstances. Economic freedom helps people to be more strong in their individual thinking. Work gives financial support and exposure. Education, exposure and financial support together teach a man to become a proper human being with a strong personality. Women are less educated and thus a less exposed part of the population in our country. Any sort of development needs the whole participation of a nation. The inner eye of consciousness will invite people to get involved in the developmental work for their own country. Until women are educated, the dark thinking will persist that giving birth to a male child is the only mark of success for a woman in her life. Most interesting fact here is that a female only can give birth to a child but not a male.

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WOMEN IN THE NORTHERN HEMISPHERE ARE THE WORLD'S BIGGEST CONSUMERS OF CHOCOLATE

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ECOFEMINISM The Bitter Story of the Sweets Industry

by Cat Cox



women who work on it.

Women make up most of the workers on the cocoa plantations of Malaysia, which has expanded to become the fourth largest cocoa producer in the world. Much of the cocoa here is grown on plantations where working conditions have progressed very little since the first crop plantations were established 116 years ago. With simple accommodations and minimal wages to cover basic necessities, there is little respite from poverty and attendant ill health in this job — where a day spent cutting the pods from

the cocoa trees and scooping out the beans will earn the workers about \$5.

Chocolate is a luxury that few of those who grow cocoa will ever be able to afford. Yet for those whose job it is to spray pesticides, the price is far dearer than money. Pesticides are a prerequisite on the plantations, where trees are grown row upon row across a uniform landscape and where agrochemical-intensive methods of agriculture predominate. Promoted in favour of traditional labour intensive cultivation methods, mass-scale agrochemical pro-

duction, perceived to be the most cost-effective means of intensive crop production, have been encouraged by governments, industry, and global economic institutions worldwide. In Malaysia, it is primarily women who work as the ill-equipped and poorly paid pesticide sprayers, covering cocoa regularly with an array of deadly pesticides, many of which have been banned elsewhere on health and environmental grounds.

A recent survey by the Pesticide Action Network in Penang has documented the health effects of such pesticide use. Since only one in three women are provided with even a pair of gloves for protection, skin rashes are a common occurrence, together with an array of other symptoms of acute pesticide poisoning. While many women recognize that long-term spraying is dangerous to their health, they have come to accept nosebleeds, coughing, and vomiting as aspects of life to endure, ignoring the significance or threat of such symptoms. Chronic effects incurred as a result of pesticide spraying may not show up for months or years, but World Health Organization evidence suggests that 37,000 cases of cancer occur annually as a result of pesticide exposure worldwide. With pesticide use in the South expected to double over the next decade, it is unlikely that these figures will fall. The environmental effects of such intensive agrochemical use on the land in these regions remain as yet unknown.

It is easy to take for granted the endless availability of chocolate and its unassuming price. Sold to us with the aid of expensive advertising campaigns, chocolate is presented as a symbol of benign indulgence, yet the circumstances of its production indicate otherwise. Pesticide residues found in chocolate serve to remind the consumer of the polluting circumstances under which much of the cocoa is grown and its attendant health risks to the women who are involved in its production. And as we continue to eat without consciousness, our consumption serves to facilitate the continued abuse of women and the earth.

Cat Cox is a researcher and writer based in the United Kingdom. She has worked with the Women's Environmental Network since 1990.