



# WOMEN ON THE MOVE

Violence Against Women

## Not Only a Phenomenon of Poverty

by Shaheen Anam

Poverty is not the only reason behind Violence Against Women we have to understand and deal with it in that light. Whether a man is poor or not, whether a family is poor or not, it does not give them any right to abuse, violate or degrade women. It is high time we admitted to this fact and try to come out of this escapist mentality.

lence of violence against women has not gone down and has in fact increased in many places. In Bangladesh death of women due to unnatural causes has registered a sharp increase. I do not know if readers have noticed, but whenever one reads about death occurring in various parts of the country the death due to unnatural causes are always women and those due to road or other accidents are men.

Coming back to the question of poverty and violence, as I said before, there is a correlation yet it is not fair to blame it all on poverty and sit back. Our country is poor, that is a fact of life, it will probably remain poor for a very long time. So what should we do? We cannot allow this violation of human rights to continue and wait till we become one of the developed countries of the world. Many among us say that our inheritance law is responsible for much of the negative attitude against women. There is again much truth in it, and we all support changing all the discriminating laws. But till that time what should be our

position and role?

The basic question here is about SOCIETAL ATTITUDE. There has to be a movement to change it, no matter what.

Whether a girl is born in a poor or rich family, whether she is a Muslim, Hindu or Christian, she is above all a person and should be treated with the same dignity, respect and must have the same rights as anyone else in society. I of course have no answer as to how this should be done. But if every member, and I mean every member irrespective of male or female of the civil.

Society pledged to bring about this change in attitude than perhaps this would be possible. Here I would like to point out that our so called elites (of which I am a member also) has let us down very badly. One hears the most negative comments about women from them and they in a way perpetuate the negative attitude against women which somehow trickles down to the poorer section of the society.

On hears comments from so called educated women which

has not changed over the years. These comments are "a girl has to be beautiful to get a good husband" or "so and so's mother is a divorcee so how can she get a suitable husband" "girls should only get into respectable professions such as school teacher other wise the family name will be dishonored." Whenever I have protested, the answer has been "What can we do, this is our society." To them I say, who is society? We are the society and the change has to start from you and me.

In many ways, just as middle class women have been the beneficiary of the progress and development in our society they are also the worse victim of its backwardness, social taboos and values. Be it rural or urban Bangladesh, the situation is the same. The rich farmers wife will never complain if her husband beats her, but her maid servant is at liberty to rave and rant and shout abuse at her husband. The rich business mans wife will never tell a soul of the verbal and physical abuse she endures. She will continue to put

up a farce perhaps for ever.

Lawyers who work on divorce cases report that more and more women middle class women are coming forward to report domestic violence and cite it as one of the main reason for seeking divorce. Yet they beg the lawyer not to tell anyone or reveal their names. They also report that out of women who complain of being assaulted, 20 per cent come from very rich families.

The social taboo against divorce is still so strong that women and their family members will go to any length to prevent a break up of the family.

I know of a most horrible story probably an extreme case of social pressure to keep the marriage together and would like to share it with my readers.

Salma (fictitious name) was educated, good looking and came from a not very rich but reasonably well off family. Her marriage was arranged by her parents to a wealthy, smart young man who also came from a good middle class family. In less than a year the couple started quarreling and the husband became abusive. The fights were about his infidelity, finance, etc. When he started becoming violent Salma protested and threatened to leave him. Her family did not support her and sent her back every time she ran away from her abusive husband. Meanwhile she gave birth to a daughter, which was another reason she could not take a divorce. One day in desperation Salma tried to kill herself. She poured kerosene over her body and lit a light. Alas! Salma did not die.

She became disfigured forever. Her husband promptly divorced her as a disfigured wife was of no use to him. This happened 10 years ago. Salma lives with her sister, dependent, useless and in seclusion.

So much for middle-class values of keeping the family together.

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## Bargaining with a Child's Life

INTERVENTION by the High Court became necessary to ensure that a breast fed child, detained illegally by the father, be restored to his mother's custody. The parents had separated a year after their marriage, because the husband refused to look after his wife and child, and answered her requests for maintenance with violence. Earlier he had forcibly taken the child when he was only a month old to his parent's village, and only brought him back in response to his wife's entreaties.

Last July, when the wife approached her husband at his workplace for financial support, he again kidnapped the child who was breast fed by the mother. In despair she filed a GD and Complaint Case on 29 July, in response to which the CMM issued a search warrant for the child. The police reported on 28 October, that the child was not with the father in Dhaka, and the wife found out that he was not with the grandparents in the village. Suspecting that he may have been given away or sold, the wife filed a writ petition with the High Court on 14 November, 1993 on grounds of violation of the fundamental rights of the

child and his physical survival as guaranteed by art 32 of the constitution and Art. 6 & 9 of the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights.

Fearing an adverse judgement by the High Court on 1 February, the husband, just prior to the hearing, brought his child to Court and after mediation by lawyers on both sides agreed to hand over the child to the mother. She obtained custody over her one and a half year old child six months after contacting her lawyers. The case has raised the issue of custody and guardianship in the context of the right of the child: Should the father be entrusted with the child's guardianship after the age of seven or can it not be argued that mother is the natural guardian? It has also brought up the practical and social problems faced by women: would the wife feel physically threatened again? Or would she be able to work freely in order to look after her son? More significantly how can the husband be made responsible for his child's maintenance without gaining custody?

— Ain O Salish Kendra

## Women are Managers of Villages

by Saleem Samad

do not have the answer, nor can many of the development NGOs explain. Do the development economists have any answer? Few researchers who have done some exercise on this issue, did not look into the women's survival strategies, instead depended on the men's issues. There is the missing link.

The woman who is wife of a landless farmer understands when his husband is unemployed. She knows that when her husband returns and walks into their thatched dwelling, in the late afternoon, he would be empty handed. Her husband will expect a meal before going

to sleep. Even if she has not cooked for her husband, she must have for the children. She has to collect water for drinking and cooking, collect fuel for cooking and collect green leaves and vegetables or fishes from around.

She has been raised in poverty and has learnt from her parents the survival mechanism. When she was at the age of six she was trained to scare birds and poultry from eating paddy drying under the sun; at seven, she had to take care of her young brother or sister. At the age of ten she was asked to collect fuel for cooking and at the age of

twelve she was asked to collect water from water sheds. She was even trained to raise poultry, manage kitchen garden and maintain mud floor or the thatched roof of the house. She has been trained to be a manager for survival of the fittest, when she is married to a poverty-stricken young man.

She begins a new chapter in life. The story of other wives is a repetition. It is the women folk who have successfully kept their families going and surviving through all odds. In fact, collectively, they manage the villages of Bangladesh.

If you take a typical day in the life of a rural woman and have a close look at her activities, you will understand what a rural woman does (see Table 1). If the policy-planners and politicians fail to recognize the productive activities of the village woman, rural development will not be materialized.

One major aspect of the daily saga of survival is that rural poor die in thousands of contagious diseases like diarrhoea and from malnutrition. There exists a high incidence of chronic and stunted malnutrition which leads to night blindness.

During environmental degradation, it is the woman who suffers most. She is however, trained to survive in an eco-system where she has natural resources to fall back on. With the environmental degradation, her family or her village will plunge into severe stress, increasing poverty, diseases and displacement.

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## Women Demand More Political Power

Michael Lanchin writes from San Salvador

MERCEDES González used to spend her days comforting the mother of death squad victims during the worst moments of the civil war. These days, however, she goes from house to house talking to women about a new issue in El Salvador: Winning a place for women on the electoral agenda.

González, 47, is one of team of promoters of Women's rights, working freely for the first time since the signing of a peace treaty in January 1991, which brought an end to 12 years of civil war.

She belongs to a broad-based umbrella organisation, called simply, Mujeres: 94, or Women: 94. It was formed in late 1991 with an eye on the general elections scheduled for March 1994, in which at least four left-wing political parties will participate for the first time with candidates on a local, national and presidential level.

After months of preparation, Women: 94 organised a series of weekly forums in the capital, San Salvador, bringing together dozens of women to discuss issues such as women's legal rights, political participation, access to education, health and female sexuality. At the same time, promoters like González organised meetings around the country with women from different walks of life.

These forums and discussions will form the basis of a political programme — a Women's Charter — which Women: 94 will present to leaders of the country's opposition political parties. The idea is that the charter will form a central part of the opposition's electoral programme for 1994.

However, the newly formed Women's movement faces an uphill struggle. Marchismo is deeply embedded in Salvadorean society and women's rights have never been on the political agenda.

Even the former Marxist guerrillas, whose political party will most likely head the broad-

left electoral coalition in 1994, have yet to formulate a clear policy which takes into account the specific demands of the female population.

Lorena Peña, one of the most forward-thinking women in the ranks of ex-guerrillas, admits that her organisation has a radical approach to most other national issues, except the women's issue. She, however, is confident that things will change. A party congress recently approved amendments to the internal regulations which should allow a greater participation of women in top party positions.

González, whose patch covers the traditionally conservative western regions of the

country, says she is greeted with suspicion in many of the communities she visits. Her work is hampered by a mixture of fear left over from the war years and the strong influence exerted by local priests unsympathetic to the women's cause.

She sees it as an achievement getting 15 women together in a particular community to discuss their rights, often in the face of open hostility from the husbands.

Due to the impact of the war, many Salvadorean peasant householders are female, while in the cities women have come to dominate the informal sector (market sellers). But this has

not given them any greater economic independence.

Both the peasant women and the market sellers, traditionally well-organised and outspoken sectors of society, have a strong representation in Women: 94 and hope to see things change with the Women's Charter.

Women: 94 also draws on sizeable following of female ex-guerrilla combatants, many of whom assumed traditionally male tasks during the civil war and are now not prepared to return to the past.

Ana Maria, 32, an ex-guerrilla fighter and mother of a young child, says that survival was the priority during the war years; but in the post-war period, it is time to talk seriously about the rights of women.

Undoubtedly, the strong point of Women: 94 is that it draws on a very wide spectrum of experiences. This bodes well at the time of presenting a platform to the opposition political parties, whose main interest is counting the votes. But, as Sonia Cancino, sociologist on the organising committee, recognises, the Women's Charter will leave many women unaccounted for.

The right-wing parties, headed by the incumbent Nationalist Republican Alliance, ARENA, count on a sizeable following among middle class housewives and other non-organised women; the new women's movement has been unable to venture into these sectors.

However, Women: 94 is trying to be more than an electoral instrument. And González is convinced that even with a new government in El Salvador, she will continue going her rounds fighting prejudices and fears and promoting the rights of 52 per cent of the population.

MICHAEL LANCHIN is a news editor on a local radio station in San Salvador.

— Gemini News



She manages it both ways

FEW months ago, a development specialist was presenting his argument. It centred on the question: who was the manager in a village? He was arguing who could be the manager, whether it is the man or the woman.

Driving his point he said it was the woman who should be the manager, of a family and, of course, the village. Women are best managers in rural Bangladesh.

To understand the debate we need an example. In Bangladesh on an average 60 per cent of the villagers are landless. During the five months of monsoon each year, the landless farmers are not hired as agricultural labourers.

If the crops are bad, again they are not hired for jobs. The obvious question is, what are the survival strategies of the landless peasants? How are their families doing? The politicians

A DAY IN LIFE OF A BANGLADESH VILLAGE WOMAN	
5:00 am	-Wake up -Wash, say prayers -Clean dishes in pond -Make breakfast -Feed husband and children, then herself
6:00 am	-Carry water from pond, tubewell -Clean house and kitchen -Take out goat, cattle to graze -Clean courtyard, stables -Milk cows
9:00 am	-Boll paddy, lay paddy out to dry -Husk paddy -Grind spices -Husk rice before cooking
11:00 am	-Prepare meal -Cook meal -Wash clothes in pond -Bathe -Lunch, if three meals a day -Wash dishes -Make nets, sew
4:00 pm	-Bring cattle back, feed and secure them
7:00 pm	-Cook evening meal -Feed everyone
10:00 pm 11:00 pm	-Retire

\*Time devoted to child care not included

Source: Adapted from The Life of a Village Woman, Bangladesh, UNICEF, 1989.