



Samia Khatun of Lalmonirhat working with her sewing machine — photo RDRS

Tailoring one Poor Family's Future

by A M Akbar

IN Bangladesh, the harsh constraints of conservative rural society actively discourage women from involvement in many opportunities to earn income. Dressmaking is one which is increasingly accepted.

Rangpur Dinajpur Rural Service (RDRS) is one of many NGOs promoting women's tailoring enterprise through 6-month courses throughout its working area aimed at developing economic skills among disadvantaged women and providing them with the practical means to support themselves and the families in future.

Forty-year-old Samia Khatun of Dalapara village in Lalmonirhat District in northern Bangladesh, is one example of how poor and destitute women struggle successfully to earn a living for themselves and their family through tailoring.

Abandoned by her husband, Samia lives with 4 children aged 16, 7, 5 and 2 respectively. The youngest one is from her husband's second wife who also left the house leaving behind her own daughter. Her troubles didn't end there; her husband visits Samia occasionally and tries to grab whatever money Samia earns through her own hard work.

A couple of years back, Samia joined a women's group organised by nongovernmental development agency Rangpur Dinajpur Rural Service (RDRS) and began receiving the motivation, education and training which have

ACROSS America, scores of advertisements by educational institutions seeking candidates for appointments to teaching and administrative posts appear every day in the local and national print media. Many of them routinely carry, at the bottom and in small print, one line to the effect that the institutions concerned are equal opportunities places meaning that there is no discrimination in recruitment on the basis of colour or gender. Unfortunately, in spite of some efforts by a number of these institutions, available evidence suggests that gender bias is quite still deeprooted in American education.

One report, published two years ago by the American Association of University Women, asserted that sexism may be the most widespread and damaging form of bias not just in the case of staff recruitment and promotion but what is even more pernicious, in the treatment of students by teachers and authorities alike.

The report presents a pattern of downward intellectual mobility for girls so much so that girls who enter the first grade of a secondary school with the same or better skills and ambitions as boys all too often end up behind boys in almost every subject. According to the report this happens primarily because girls receive considerably less attention from classroom teachers than boys do. Such gender bias undermines girls' self-confidence and often discourages them from taking mathematics and science courses. Even among teachers who consciously try to avoid sexist attitudes, bias was found to assume subtler forms as was borne out by videotapes taken of their classes.

To be sure, the process starts much earlier — right at the elementary schools where teachers were found to call on and encourage boys much more often. As boys frequently require help with reading, many schools regularly arrange for remedial reading classes for them. But girls, who just as often need help with their maths, are rarely provided with similar extra care. While boys get credit for intellectual quality of their work girls are more likely to be praised instead for neatness. For similar offences girls are reprimanded but boys are ignored. Research shows that girls in schools

FAILING AT FAIRNESS

Gender Bias in an Affluent Society

by Zaheda Ahmad

One report, published two years ago by the American Association of University Women, asserted that sexism may be the most widespread and damaging form of bias not just in the case of staff recruitment and promotion but what is even more pernicious, in the treatment of students by teachers and authorities alike.

perform better in co-operative atmosphere, where students work together but a competitive setting is more congenial for boys. And yet a majority of the schools had been established on a competitive model. Another finding of the report — no less disturbing — was that schools had become, over the years, more tolerant of boys sexually harassing girls.

These problems notwithstanding, girls secure higher grades and are more likely to go on to college. But even these successful girls, according to the report, find themselves handicapped by a lack of confidence in their abilities. Consequently they have higher expectations of failure, are more modest in their aspirations and less likely to realise their full potential the boys.

This gender gap shows up in the most acute form in science subjects. Thus one finds that between 1978 and 1980 the national science achievement test scores of 9 and 13 year old boys and girls had widened to the disadvantage of the girls. Although boys and girls take more or less the same number of science courses, girls tend more to take advanced biology and boys go more for physics and chemistry. According to another study 64 per cent of the boys taking physics and calculus courses went to major in science or engineering compared with just 18.6 per cent of the girls who took the same courses.

As for the attitude of teachers, two-thirds of whom are females, the evidence of another report is quite striking but nonetheless common also. Here gender stereotypes are familiar — the students they



Dr Elena Aprile

students do not live a life apart from male students in other colleges, particularly in the night — bourgeois areas. Graduates of women's colleges are more than twice as likely as graduates of coed institutions to receive doctorate degrees. And 24 percent of all Congresswomen are graduates of these colleges, a much higher proportion than their share of the total female college graduates.

But the real fight for parity can not end here since the vast number of female students do graduate from coeducational institutions. Here gender bias in the case of recruitment and promotion of staff is still deeply entrenched. Women are more commonly found in the humanities than in the sciences although even in the former they lag far behind their male colleagues. In 1989, women constituted around 30 per cent of the teaching staff in the humanities and only 18 per cent in the science and engineering departments.

But irrespective of academic field, they are less likely to get tenure than their male colleagues and on the average are paid less. According to one source, it takes women two to three years more than men to get tenure when they become eligible and two to six years longer than men to become eligible.

In science subjects, especially in physics, the bias is very glaring. Of the 20 developed nations studied by the National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences, America tied with South Korea for the smallest number of women in the physics faculties. The same study also found that American women physicists consistently earn less than their male colleagues. Reasons for this range from the physiological to the social.

Because of such heavy disadvantages that women science academics in America suffer from, Elena Aprile, an associate professor of physics at Columbia University calls it a "miracle" when she was finally recommended for a tenure. She is the only woman in her faculty. And she hopes that this unanimous recommendation in her favour would be accepted.

The writer, who teaches history at Dhaka University and edits 'Saptahik Samoy', recently visited USA.

Use of Norplant is Unethical

by Farida Akhter

THE Directorate of Family Planning and Bangladesh Institute of Research for Promotion of Essential and Reproductive Health and Technologies (BIRPERHT) organised a Norplant day on 29 January, 1994. The objective was to popularise the method among the users. It was a meeting of the providers. There were speakers to speak about the five-year experience of Norplant, but only from the providers' point of view. There was no user of Norplant to speak on her experience.

One important information which came out in the meeting was that the expiry date of Norplant is going to be over in 1995. So it is very urgent, according to the organisers, that they dispose of the existing Norplants which are lying in the store. Obviously, these are going to be introduced in the bodies of women!

UBINIG organised a press conference at the national press club on the same day in the afternoon to protest the promotion of Norplant.

The question of expiry dates of Norplant is a very serious one. UBINIG has urged the government not to use the Norplant any more on the bodies of women. It should be immediately destroyed. Any further insertion of Norplant is therefore questionable. It wants to ensure the security of women from this attack.

The organisation has repeatedly urged the government not to use Norplant on the following grounds:

a. Norplant is not acceptable to women for the very basic reason that it is provider-controlled. It takes away control from women about their reproductive functions. Women have to depend on the provider both for insertion and removal. This concern is expressed not only by women in Bangladesh but world-wide. The international women's health organisations have refused to accept it as one of the "choices" for contraceptives as it simply violates the freedom of their decision.

b. The trials conducted in Bangladesh and other third world countries are pre-mar-

do not support implementation of removal. The policy guidelines suggest retention of Norplant for a complete period. To quote from the report on the Quality of Norplant Services in Bangladesh, "while no one would deny that service providers should work with clients to retain Norplant if the side effects are experiencing are temporary and not harmful to the client, no acceptor should ever feel that she is compelled to retain the implants". It is very clear that the decision of removal depends on the judgements of the providers. This is unacceptable.

c. The users have experienced serious side-effects including bleeding for months, stop of menstruation, itching, growth of hair and a series of other side-effects. Many women have lost weight and have become permanently sick. Most women have mentioned about "too much bleeding" long and irregular menstrual cycles "Amnorrhoea", "excess serous side-effects including bleeding for months, stop of menstruation, itching, growth of hair and a series of other side-effects. Many women have lost weight and have become permanently sick. Most women have mentioned about "too much bleeding" long and irregular menstrual cycles "Amnorrhoea",

d. Norplant is given as a semi-permanent method. It is a long acting method effective as a contraceptive for five years. Many women who do not want to go for sterilisation become an easy target for Norplant with the hope that they may become pregnant when they want to. But the return of fertility is not scientifically established, nor being properly studied upon.

e. Norplant provided under population control programme takes a coercive character and often becomes a substitute for sterilisation. While removal option is provided in principle, the programme guidelines



When Family Planning Meets Population Control

Barbara Akakpo writes from Accra

MEMBERS of a recent Ghanaian women's delegation to Britain to raise money for medical equipment privately expressed opposition to population control policies but felt unable to voice their concerns for fear that their request for funds would be turned down.

Their dilemma illustrates the pressures for birth control measures felt to be coming from Western governments and international financial institutions.

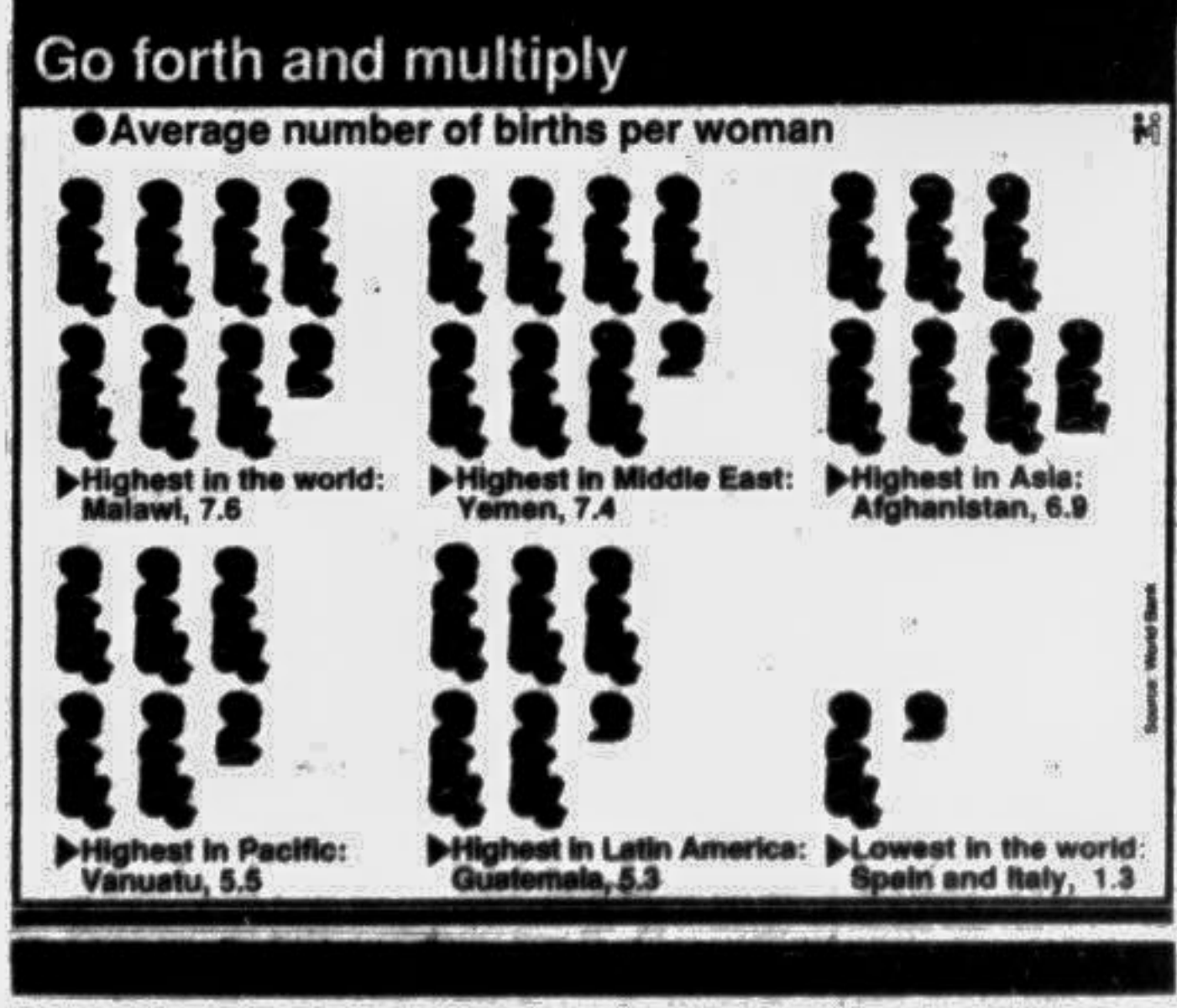
In part, the feeling arises from a blurring of the difference between population control — defined by the research group Committee on Population and the Economy as "the decision taken by governments or other agencies that couples should have no more than a certain number of children, followed by methods to enforce this" — and family planning — "the decision taken by couples in the light of their own beliefs and circumstances, as to the number and spacing of their own children."

Britain's aid minister Lynda Chalker, for example, pushes family planning at every opportunity but backs it as a component of women's health and women's rights not as a population control measure.

But advice and help on contraception for individual women easily slips into pressure when packaged in expensive, large-scale family planning programmes from which officials want results. And results are measured not in quality advice and care but in "take up" among "respondents" in "the target group" — in other words, women adopting contraception.

Incentives and disincentives, like the 1984 World Bank proposal that female Tanzanian civil servants should be allowed paid maternity leave only once every three years, are less about provision of care to individuals than about shaping policy to achieve a national goal — fewer children.

Government officials, for example, prefer permanent methods because they need no follow-up or monitoring. So it is no coincidence that female sterilisation is the most



disadvantages of different methods. They always have preferred methods, and till their recommendations accordingly.

In addition, their preference is heavily influenced by the limits of their knowledge. A survey of clinics in Ghana showed that most of their doctors did not know of the full range of family planning service in existence, such as the "morning after pill" or even IUDs (intra-uterine devices). But all were aware of, and quick to recommend, sterilisation and abortion.

In 1988, abortion was virtually unthinkable as an official family planning practice in Nigeria. As recently as 1990 the Planned Parenthood Federation of Nigeria was forced to defend itself against allegations that it promoted the sale and use of "contraceptives" that were abortifacient in nature. A year later — and two months after approval of a \$ 78 million World Bank population loan — the government announced proposals for allowing abortion under certain conditions.

Healthcare is invariably given as a justification for family and population programmes. For example, the London-based family planning charity, Marie Stopes International, says it provides "a wide range of innovative and caring projects in the maternal health and family planning field."

For Dr Nafis Sadiq, head of the UN Population Fund, the heart of the proposals to be discussed at the forthcoming UN conference on population and development, of which she is secretary general, "is the recognition that the low status women is a root cause of inadequate reproductive health care."

Such comments suggest that population control activists have ridden into Third World countries on the back of feminist rhetoric.

The writer works for West Africa magazine.