



## Waging War with Sewing Machines

by A M Akbar

**T**HE traditional sewing machine may seem an unlikely weapon. The ones you find in Bangladesh are old-fashioned mechanical gadgets — a solid black painted machine solidly placed on a polished wooden table, standing on four metal legs and operated by a foot pedal. A museum piece, a useful if outdated household object but a weapon? Surely not.

In rural northern Bangladesh, however, the sewing machine is a weapon in the war against poverty and a different struggle, for women's rights. For poor women, the humble sewing

machine is a vital instrument in their fight for liberation. It means they can, often for the first time, begin to earn a modest livelihood.

In the last few years, the development programme of one non-governmental organisation Rangpur Dinajpur Rural Service (RDRS) has enabled many more poor women to join this war throughout northern Bangladesh. Visit any of their local centres and you find groups of between ten to fifteen young women enthusiastically learning this vital skill. Many are divorced or abandoned women who struggle daily to provide enough food for themselves and their children.

Training normally takes 15 weeks, six days a week and six hours a day. It is a hard and demanding course but the women's determination is so great, they seldom drop out. To teach them all the basic skills, RDRS engage a skilled local tailor — usually a man. Their course goes through all the stages of clothes-making from measuring to cutting and stitching. To begin with, the trainees practise with brown paper since they cannot afford to damage proper material until they are able. They find out how to operate and to look after their machine.

At the start of their training, the women are provided with credit to buy their sewing machines. They have to pay back the full amount, normally from their earnings as dressmakers within 6 months. Their 'weapons' are their own and they take great care with them when they finally leave and set up business on their own.

Tailoring is liberating in other ways. Local women, who are reluctant to visit male tailoring shops in town, can happily visit a woman neighbour herself, get measured for a item of clothing and make her own choice of clothes and fabrics rather than rely on a male family member to make the arrangements. The same local women also show more trust in their neighbours rather than factory handwork. They can also order clothes on credit, since neighbours can trust each other.

Although Bangladesh has a growing number of garment factories producing cheap clothes in large quantities, there is still a great demand for tailored clothes in rural areas. Even as they are training, the women work on individual orders from their village neighbours to make children's clothes, school uniforms, women's saris, pillow cases and mosquito nets. Each completed order and each satisfied customer is another battle in their fight for self-reliance.

The writer is associated with RDRS.



Tailoring training in Nilphamari district.

— photo: RDRS

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**P**REPARATION for the Beijing Conference on Women is going on in full swing. The NGO Preparatory Committee, two months after its formation continues to keep up the enthusiasm of its members by convening regular meetings, discussions etc. Given the broad based nature of the Committee it is hoped that it would truly represent the majority of the women of Bangladesh.

The Committee has been very busy since the last few weeks in preparing for the celebration of the forthcoming International Day of Women on 8th March. Various sub-committees have been formed delegating responsibilities to different sections and groups in order to ensure that the day is celebrated in a festive, disciplined and meaningful manner. The days programme includes a rally, statements declaring Women's Rights as Human Rights to be followed by a cultural programme.

With regard to the actual

## Fourth World Conference on Women

Beijing, China - 4-15 September 1995

### CONFERENCE UPDATE

by Shaheen Anam

objective of the committee, things are slowly falling into place and there is a general feeling of solidarity and cohesion in the group. The issue based working groups are convening regular meetings and grappling with serious concerns such as violence against women, their political and economic empowerment, legal rights etc. Obviously some groups are getting more work done than others for various reasons. However, it is hoped that by the next regional Preparatory Conference in June 1994 to be held in Jakarta, the Committee will be

able to produce a draft document which will to a large extent reflect the concerns of the majority of the women of Bangladesh.

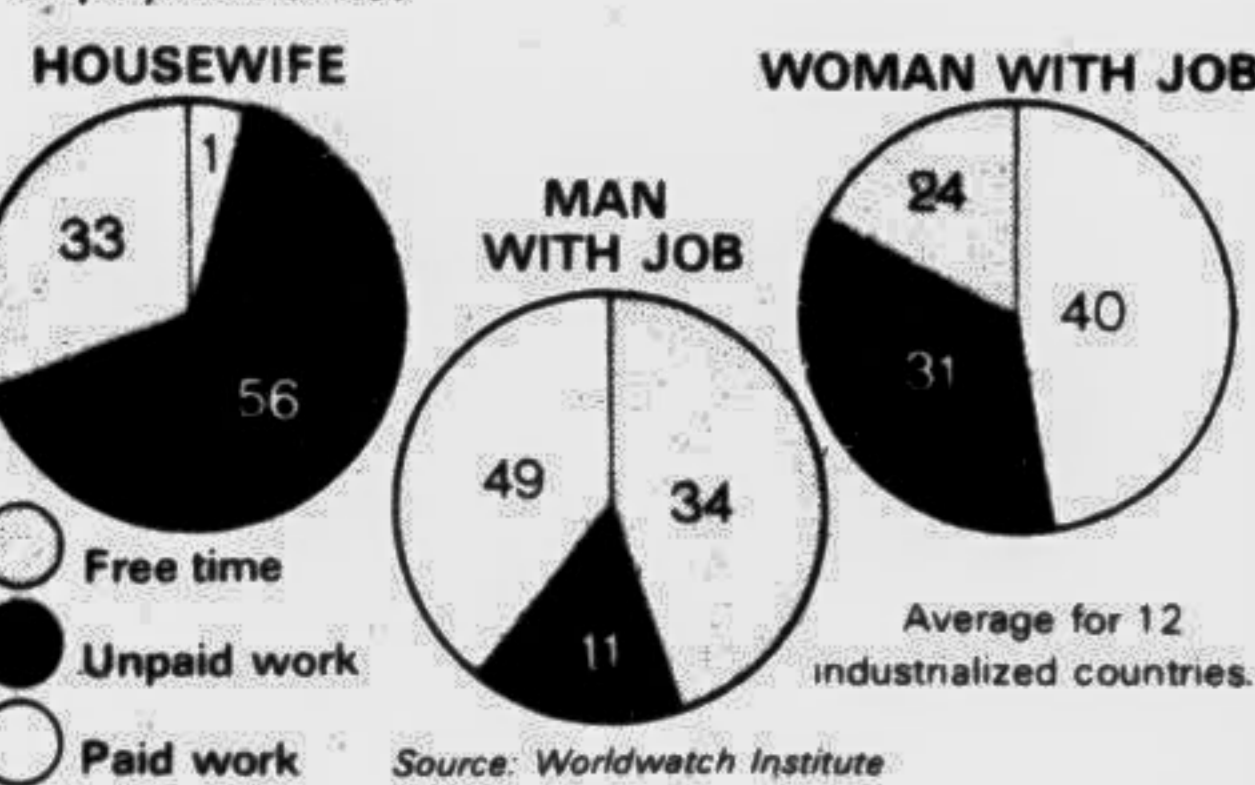
The important events planned for in the immediate future is the holding of national regional workshops in five district such as Rajshahi, Dinajpur, Bogura, Comilla and Mymensingh. This is truly an important initiative and its success will depend on how extensively the Committee will be able to ensure the participation of women's and other grassroots organizations. We must always remember that

the majority of women live outside of Dhaka and no document or report will be complete or meaningful unless their concerns are taken into consideration.

On the International arena, the NGO Consultation Workshop will convene on 3-4 March 1994. NGOs from all over the world will meet at the time of the 37th session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) (7-18 March, 1994) to further prepare for the Beijing conference and the NGO Forum 1995. The consultation will update NGOs on plans for the 1995 Conference including regional activities. NGOs will have the opportunities to work together on strategies, programmes and actions for 1995. The Chairperson of the Preparatory Committee, Ms Najma Chowdhury is attending the workshop. In her absence, Ms Mahmuda Islam, a member of the Steering Committee will act as the chairperson.

## THE HOUSEWIFE

Domestic work is "woman's work" whether she is in paid employment or not.



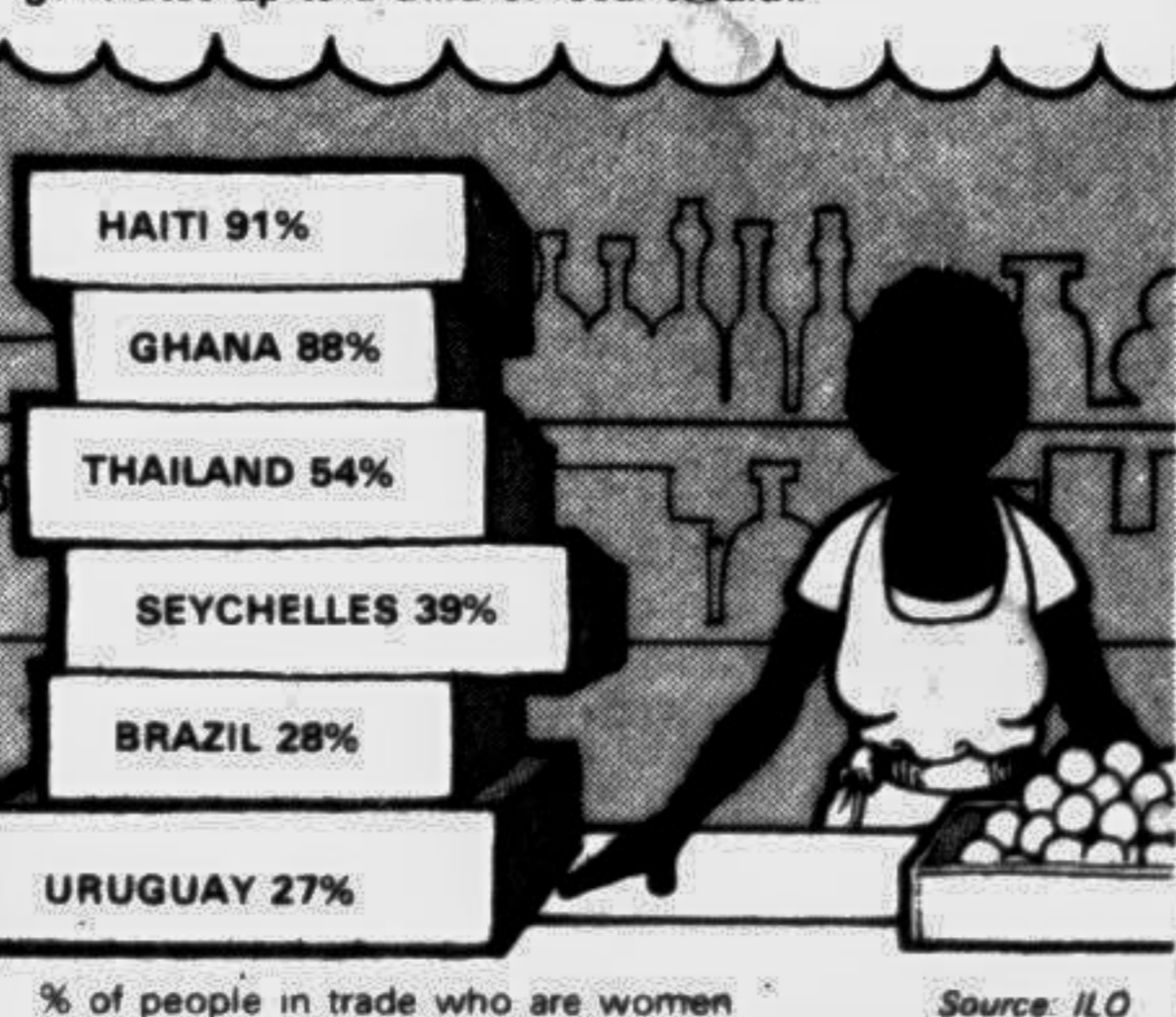
If the value of housework is calculated as equivalent to those services performed by cooks, cleaners and nurses, it contributes up to half the gross national product in many countries.

Source: ILO

## THE ENTREPRENEUR

In many countries it is women who dominate the informal sector — the small-scale trade in goods and services not usually counted in national economic statistics.

In many Third World cities the informal sector generates up to a third of local wealth.



Source: ILO

## Who Will the Women Commissioners Represent?

by Hameeda Hossain

**T**HE announcement for election of women commissioners to the city corporations by 15 March (Bhorer Kagoj 24.2.1994, Daily Star 27.2.1994) is not likely to win a cheer for democracy! The Ministry of Local Government is reported to have framed rules whereby women commissioners will be selected for 17 zones, 10 in Dhaka, 3 in Chittagong, 2 each in Khulna and Rajshahi. This can hardly be interpreted as an affirmative action for women's representation. There can be little dispute with the need to enable women to participate in the process of decision making in electoral institutions. But the low numerical quota is likely to bring about no more than a token presence. 17 women representatives out of a total of 192 commissioners does not reflect the current sex ratio in urban population.

Nor does it represent the male/female ratio of 59.33 per cent men and 40.66 per cent women amongst 28,69,040 registered voters.

Seven women contested in the Dhaka City Corporation elections last January. That none of them won, could not have come as a surprise. The election culture, which now a days encourages the use of arms, muscle and money no doubt contributed to their defeat and may discourage further participation of women; since political parties are not yet prepared to widen their doors for women's political participation, there will be little change in the gender bias in nominations for electoral candidates, unless favourable circumstances are created to make women's representation possible.

The proposed mode for selection of women as city ward commissioners, through indirect elections, will not, however, empower them to speak and work on behalf of women. This is similar to the case of the 30 women in Parliament, elected indirectly by the sitting members of the House, who are supposed to represent women's concerns, but remain unaccountable to a women's constituency. In the city corporation the franchise for women's representatives has been shrunk to the elected city commissioners and the mayors only. It is obvious that their dependence upon the support of a small number of male members of Parliament or city corporation commissioners who are instrumental in electing them is not likely to make them respond to the needs of the women's con-

stituency. Reservations for women's seats were introduced in the 1972 Constitution to ensure a minimum political participation. This was considered necessary to induce them into electoral office and to broaden the environment for their political participation. 15 seats in a House of 300 members were reserved for women for the first 15 years only, during which time it was expected that the political process, which alienated women, would become more open. This quota was later revised to 30 women in Parliament and one third in union parishads.

Even in 1972, women's organisations argued strongly for direct franchise in stipulated constituencies, while conceding the need for reserved

seats in electoral institutions. The perpetuation of an indirect system of election since 1972 is far out of date and needs to be revised in the interest of democratisation. Women's groups have demanded a review of the system of indirect elections for women, to make their participation meaningful both for the women elected to office as well as to the voters. During the movement for democracy which led to the fall of General Ershad, the women's movement made a strong and active contribution. A major demand of the *Oikkya Baddho Nar Samaj*, submitted to the all parties liaison committee in 1989 and 1990, was for direct election of women — one to represent each district — to the reserved seats.

In both the 1991 national elections and the city corporation elections, women have not been silent. Their visibility in the city corporation elections has been noted in most media reports on the elections; as voters, they waited in long lines inside and outside the voting centres. From a breakdown of at least 14 women's polling centres in Dhaka city, it was found that women cast over 50 per cent of the votes had been cast. This is a reasonably high turnout particularly given the demands on a woman's time.

And it certainly reflects a strong expression of women's interest. In the run up to the elections, women were active in support of candidates and to uphold free and fair participation: they campaigned from house to house, bring out street processions and help public meetings. The Bangladesh Mahila Parishad held meeting in Mirpur: not in support of any particular candidate but to voice women's demands for direct representation in electoral institutions, for a justified use of votes to ensure that candidates elected to the local government do not represent regressive forces which are anti women.

Neither of the leading parties has so far been willing

to democratise the process for electing women. This is because they see the reserved seats merely as a means of increasing their party strength. As a result a non democratic system for women's representation is perpetuated. In other words the majority party either on its own strength or through negotiations is able to use this quota to increase its own party strength. In this system, women will thus remain pawns in the game for political power. They cannot hope to engage effectively in constituency politics.

To ensure meaningful participation and representation by women require a change in the electoral system. Administrative difficulties or lack of precedent can no longer be a justification for perpetuating moribund rules. In the 1954 elections in Bangladesh, women contested for reserved seats in municipal areas on the principle of one person two votes, so that each voter exercised his/her franchise for the general seat as well as for the women's seat. Women's right's activists have argued that political parties be obliged to give a minimum of 5 per cent of their nominations to women. This system was proposed in Nepal at the last elections because it was felt that political parties needed to be

persuaded towards such a decision. A second suggestion is that without detriment to their candidature for the general seats, for one third of seats in local elections women candidates should contest under direct franchise. In India, a constitutional amendment (Seventy Second Amendment Bill 1991) has ensured that elections to the local *Panchayats* and *gram sabhas* are held on the basis of adult franchise; the bill further specifies that "not less than one third of the total number of seats to be filled by direct election in every *Panchayat* shall be reserved for women and allotted by rotation to different constituencies in a *Panchayat*."

The presence of large number of women in the bastions

of local power in the Indian states is more than cosmetic. The women elected to local governments have successfully campaigned for social benefits for the community, and have ignored the image building projects usually supported by men. Thus in Kerala women have campaigned against the licensing of alcohol shops which had contributed to an increase in violence against women; in contrast the men supported measures for increased revenues from such shops without addressing the social problem. In West Bengal women members of the *Panchayat* have contributed to the phenomenal increase in education. Even as South Africa emerges from long years of apartheid and violence, both blacks and whites have concurred to include women's rights in the country's new constitution. A coalition of 55 women's groups have drafted a national charter of women's rights to be submitted to the New Constituent Assembly which will be elected this April.

It is time for Bangladesh to move out of a Victorian cast for women's roles. Changes in women's electorates initiated in countries such as India and Nepal, are useful precedents for Bangladesh. Administrative sloth or traditional prejudice should not be used as an excuse to perpetuate outdated systems for political participation. Seeing a few women's faces in the House or in the city corporations is not the way to achieve gender equality in the political process. Nor will it make the most effective use of their talents. If women are being induced into public offices to represent women, they should at least try to win the voters of this constituency rather than enter from the back door.

The political parties, who claim to be committed to gender equality, need to act upon this commitment by pressing for an effective participation of women in electoral institutions. Parties which claim to be progressive have sufficient number of women within their own parties to make this possible; if not there are many women who have spent their lives working for their communities, and this work needs to be recognised and put to more effective use.

Apart from an increase in numbers, an important argument for making women accountable to their constituencies is to ensure that women's concerns and problems are placed on the political agenda. Their struggle against violence in the streets and in the home needs to be brought into the mainstream of politics. The problems they face in the public and private sphere are symptomatic of the social and political malaise. This is not recognised by male ward representatives. Specific needs in housing, transport or other community needs, procedures for marriage registration are more likely to be pressed by women's representatives.

Commissioners will be more likely to address these social problems if they are made accountable to their constituents, and not if they remain tokens of male voting power. It is through an electoral process that they can begin to respond to the social, political and economic problems of the cities in particular to women's concerns. In doing so they may in fact change the language of politics; from an aggressive bid for power to a concern for people. Are the government and political parties ready to accept a change in the form of women's participation? Will the women be able to represent the voters or their colleagues in the city corporation?

The writer is associated with *Ain O Salish Kendra*, a legal aid and human rights centre.

## Benazir Tries to Help the Other Half

Javed A Malik writes from Islamabad

### Women on top



The idea is not new: the 1973 constitution reserved 20 seats for women for 10 years, on the assumption that after a decade women would have acquired enough political clout to be elected in straight contests.

In the 1988 election after Zia's death all political parties promised to reserve seats for women. Bhutto won, but did little to improve the lot of women. Nawaz Sharif's subsequent right-wing government also failed to fulfil its promise to amend the constitution.

Only four out of 217 National Assembly members

are women — and they include Benazir Bhutto and her mother Nusrat, both elected in an area considered a family stronghold.

A third, Tehmina Daultana, also has a seat considered to be in her family's pocket. Critics of the reserved seats concept argue that they failed in their function, as they tended to be allocated to women from influential political families, sometimes in place of men who for various reasons could not get themselves elected. Supporters say that the presence of women MPs, however they obtain their

seats, is symbolically important.

A second move by Bhutto to improve her credentials with women is her promise to establish women-only police stations throughout the country. The first, in Rawalpindi, was recently inaugurated.

In a country where "every three hours a woman is raped," according to the pressure group War Against Rape, the need is enormous. The idea is to encourage women to register cases with the police without being threatened or intimidated. Women are reluctant to visit police stations for fear of sexual assault.

Press cartoons after the inauguration of the Rawalpindi station gave an indication of the dismissive attitudes towards women: they showed women officers putting on make-up and criminals voluntarily giving themselves up.

Yet appalling crimes are committed against women. In the feudal countryside, women can be gang-raped as revenge against tenants who refuse to obey landlords. They are also held hostage in order to extract work from their husbands.

The law itself is against them. An ordinance imposed under Martial Law stipulates that if a woman alleging rape fails to produce four witnesses she may herself face a charge of adultery for her "admission" of having sex.

Bhutto has not been able to revoke the law, since repeal requires a two-thirds vote.

She also wants to appoint women to all levels of the judiciary so that women are able to approach the courts with more confidence. But the Law Ministry says there are not enough qualified women lawyers to be appointed to high judicial posts.

— Gemini News  
The writer is on the staff of *The News in Islamabad*.