



International Women's Day

The International Women's Day is observed worldwide today in accordance with a resolution adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1977. The date March 8, was chosen to commemorate the historic strike on March 8 in 1857 by a group of New York garment workers protesting their working conditions. Half a century later, on the same day in 1908, a march was held in New York to commemorate that demonstration. Two years later in 1910, the Socialist Women's conference in Copenhagen, at the proposal of Clara Zetkin, proclaimed March 8 as International Women's Day.

The Daily Star, ever since it was founded, has been working for the advancement of equal rights for women and therefore, brings out this special feature marking the observance of the day.

Where do We Go from Here?

by Shaheen Anam

TODAY is the 8th of March. The International Day of Women. Eighty three years ago, a group of young working women in Chicago embarked on this journey to fight for legitimate wages for their labour. This journey ultimately led them towards their demand for the right to the vote and later led women towards their struggle for social and political rights.

It is a day when women all over the world declare solidarity with one another and resolve to stand by each other, in building a discrimination free society. It is a day to celebrate our sisterhood, to renew our bond and to make a fresh vow to continue our struggle till we attain our goal for the total emancipation of all women everywhere.

The women's movement in Bangladesh has not lagged behind in their struggle to achieve equal rights and to establish a discrimination free society. We must today remember with deep respect and humility the struggle of our pioneering women folks throughout the ages who have brought us this far. Our struggle has basically been in the area of legal, political, social and economic rights. It has been a long and hard struggle and is still very far from being over. There is lot to rejoice about and yet much remains to be done. At a certain level a certain class of women have succeeded in realising their potential and rights, yet a vast majority of our women folk remain tragically behind in every index of Human development.

It is with a sense of shame and humiliation that we have to admit that women are still discriminated upon and this discrimination starts from birth for the girl child. Women are still the poorest of the poor, their literacy rate is lower than that of the average male, their life expectancy is lower, the rate of maternal mortality is at unacceptable levels and socially they are still considered a burden rather than an asset. We also know that violence against women is on the rise. The recent activities of village *salish* is public knowledge and defies all norms of civilised society.

But, then there has been a ray of hope in this darkness. On the 23rd of February, newspapers reported that 9 persons involved with the death of Nurjahan were sentenced to 7 years jail imprisonment. This news is heartening indeed for all civic society

whose sensibility has been hurt by the gross violation of human rights. Since the last one year, our women folk have been victims of one atrocity after another. They have been lashed, burned, stoned and murdered all in the name of religion. The women's movement have risen as one to protest and seek justice. It is the effort of the women community and pressure groups which finally succeeded in bringing at least one group of offenders to books.

group of people are small in number and if the majority of our people unite against them, their activities can be neutralized.

The press has unflinchingly reported many sad incidents, some receive much publicity while others remain just another news item. On 24 Feb the Jonokontho reported that a TB patient Hamida, was given medicine from BRAC. The mullahs promptly declared that Hamida was taking 'haram' medicine. She was caned and prevented from taking the medicine. No one knows what her condition is now. In another incident Laili Begum's house was set on fire just because she is a health worker. Families of Grameen Bank borrowers are prevented from getting a decent Muslim burial. It has been publicly announced in certain places that those women who work for NGOs will get divorced from their husbands automatically.

That is not all, thousands of Mulberry trees have been de-

stroyed just because NGOs have had them planted and they provide income for women. In a country where the literacy rate is 33 per cent, BRAC schools have been burnt, about 70 of them. All this, just to prevent our womenfolk from coming out of their homes to a life of dignity and self worth. But as I said before, there is always light in the darkness. A group of women protested the destruction of trees and promptly marched to the local authorities to have all the trees replanted. Given their militant attitude, the authorities had no alternative but to comply.

So, where do we go from here? The truth is, from where we stand now, there is no looking back, we have to go ahead. The women's movement has two important significance. At one level it is the struggle to attain our rights, legal, political and social. It is matter of survival for us, almost a matter of life and death. At another level it is at the core of the development challenge. It leads into a whole range of issues that can only make our society more humane, more livable and more just. After all no society in the world has progressed without taking their womenfolk along. The women's movement should no longer be seen as just women's fight to seek emancipation, it is now the movement of the whole society in their quest to march forward.

Through the activities of thousands of individuals and groups we now know what miracle has been achieved in raising the living standard of our poverty stricken masses. These efforts have brought dignity and self worth into their lives. Both men and women have benefited and thereby the society and nation as a whole has benefited. Wherever women have been targeted for any programme, be it credit, basic literacy, investment, etc. they have just grabbed the opportunity and soared to new heights to reach the goal. We cannot let anything or any one stop their climb. We must all, men, women, the civic society must together continue this struggle and must somehow and someday 'overcome'. A new friend said these lines to me which I would like to quote. "All the darkness in the world cannot extinguish the light of a single candle". We in Bangladesh, both men and women must continue to light as many candles as we can.



What are We Celebrating?

by Farida Akhter

LAST year, the international Women's Day was filled with sadness because just a month ago Noorjahan of Sylhet was stoned by Fatwabaz mullahs. Noorjahan killed herself out of humiliation. This year, the verdict against the Fatwabaz mullahs were announced. The women's movement has seen the success of constant monitoring and acting as vigilante against these acts. But yet, we cannot still be happy. Because the names of the victims of Fatwa is increasing, and spreading like an epidemic from one area to the other. Women are continuously becoming the victims. However, due to the awareness of the media in this respect and sensibility of the administration to this question have saved some lives who were threatened by the Fatwas.

Why Fatwa has become an effective means of oppression against women? I asked this question to Jahanara Imam, who is a strong fighter against the communal forces. Her analyses was more acceptable to me. According to her, we are not being careful about the regular misinterpretations of religion given in the so-called *waaz-mahfil* by reactionary people. They always talk against women in their religious speeches and thereby give an impression that it is acceptable in the religion to punish women, because they are sinners. Such practice is going on in many mosques even on Friday prayers.

Noorjahan, Firoza, Dulali and Rokeya—all belong to poor families. Noorjahan and Firoza died, Dulali could not save her child

and Rokeya is still under the threat of the rich influential class. We do not know how much the administration can save her from the oppression by her rich neighbours? Women's groups have to continuously act upon such incidents and must develop a proper analyses of the situation so that they can influence change.

The international women's day is a day of celebration, no doubt. The women of the world want to celebrate the achievements of their struggles. They want to show solidarity to each other and strengthen each other. But these celebrations must have a meaning, too. What are we celebrating about? Are the conditions better for women now? I know the answers would not be positive. Our celebrations must keep the spirit of the struggle. I am sorry that sometimes, women's groups, specially those which are dominated by middle class, forget the struggle and celebrate with fanfare. They are not on the street to protest against the killings of Noorjahans; but they celebrate on 8th March.

On the other hand, women in villages are still fighting against so many different forms of aggression on their lives. I can cite few of them. For example, they have identified use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides as being harmful to the land and to their own health; they have identified that seeds are no more being preserved at home. It is bought and sold in the market. Women have no control over seeds any more. Women feel a sense of loss of power.

They face the aggression by the implementation of projects such as Flood Action Plan. Women are resisting against the constructions of dams, embankments. They feel the so called protection from flood water is actually going to destroy the natural process by which fertility of land increases with regular visits of flood water.

Women are protesting against new cantonments being built. Women raise the question: why do we need more cantonments by acquiring the homestead land of people?

Women are protesting against the shrimp culture projects which destroys environment and displaces people.

Women also protest against racist and anti-poor population control policies. They protest against the invasion in their bodies by harmful contraceptives. They demand for safe contraceptives, which they do not get.

The garment workers are locked in the factories because the management does not trust them. They bring in millions of dollars as foreign exchange earning for the country but the management have to lock them up! And when there is any fire incident, these girls have to die inside, because the gate is locked.

So, we have to keep on the struggle to overcome the injustices. Time is not yet to dance!

The writer is Executive Director, UBING



An Unfair Share—of Burdens and Bounties

by Zaheda Ahmad

EVERY year we, as a member of the world community, celebrate the International Women's Day with many programmes and much fanfare.

The worldwide celebrations are intended to achieve similar goals. Over the last few decades women's movement, with the commitment to set women free from their centuries old socio-economic bondages, has spread from one corner of the globe to another. These bondages, to be sure, are phenomenon in the creation, preservation and perpetuation of which women had almost no role. They were, so to say, not even onlookers by virtue of being condemned to lead their lives beyond the centre stage and thus to remain hidden also from the pages of history written, again, by men.

Their lot had been, and still in most cases is, a grim and pathetic one, more so in the poor, developing countries around the world. From Mexico to Mozambique to Mongolia women do carry an unfair share of the burdens of keeping the wheels of society moving. Women grow at least half the world's food, as much as 80 per cent in parts of Africa. If housework is included, ideally it should be so—most women work longer hours than men. Not coincidentally, the pattern of gender inequality is more or less similar in both developed and developing countries. According to one UN estimate the male-female ratio of working hours per week is 50:49 in North America and Australia; 55:57 in Japan; 44:49 in Western Europe; 63:70 in Eastern Europe; 55:60 in Latin America; 54:57 in Africa and 49:62 in Asia. What is more, these poor women do paid work for 40 per cent less pay and two-thirds of them are employed in farming only where pay is traditionally quite low. Things will not change for the better until and unless they are guaranteed access to land, healthcare, education and a voice in the running of the government. As long as this does not happen, all their economic participation will take them only so far and not beyond.

The greatest challenge, then, is to ensure equality with men in respect of rights and opportunities. Economic empowerment, would, no doubt, go a long way, in redressing the balance in the right direction. But economic freedom alone will not solve the many and varied problems encountered by poor women around the world. Gender bias which traditionally relegates women to subordinate status in society is as much economic as it is cultural.

This is why it is so firmly entrenched with roots penetrating deep down into the social psyche. Because of this, boys in these societies are valued much more, receive far greater parental care and affection, more of them are immunised than females and in illnesses and emergencies girls are taken to hospitals in far worse condition than boys. Even technological development, supposedly at the service of humanity, does not spare them either, witness the horrific practice of abortion of the female fetuses, in India for example, once the high-tech development in fetal sex detection made it possible to know the sex of the unborn child. Also attendance rates are substantially lower for girls than for boys in elementary schools and the gap be-

comes wider as they grow older.

Then again women are, more often than not, the hardest hit victims of disasters—natural and man-made. In both cases, forces beyond their control wreck havoc with their lives. Natural disasters like floods, famines, droughts, cyclones, earthquakes and pestilences affect a disproportionate number of women everywhere in Asia, Africa and Latin America. Similarly, civil strife and wars in these parts of the world—man-made of course— even now are subjecting women to intolerable miseries and hardships.

In spite of all these, there are women, courageous beyond belief, who feel the urge to challenge the system. In countries with a legacy of religious fundamentalism women are forming associations to counter the forces of darkness and evil. The Mullahs in Muslim societies object to the unrestricted participation of women in most political and socio-economic activities. Enormously powerful as these reactionary, obscurist elements are, women are gradually but determinedly getting organised to face them squarely. The struggle, no doubt, would get harder and fiercer as the remaining years of this century fade into the next but the challenge is being taken up.

In this unfolding scenario, where does Bangladesh fit in? Being at the bottom in the league of the poorest nations, the lot of the majority of our women folk is very grim indeed. Low in social, status, economic and political power our women are doubly discriminated for their poverty and for their gender.

Consequently their share of political, economic, educational, administrative and health benefits is far below that of their male counterparts. Getting them into the mainstream is going to be an uphill task which should keep us occupied for very many years to come.

And as we go about the task, we should bear in mind the fact that, it is not men as such who are our enemies. It is the system and the institutions, attitudes, biases and prejudices that it generates which are responsible for the miserable existence of our womenfolk. To be sure, countless men as well as women are trapped in perpetual slavery by this oppressive system. Dispossessed men are no less a victim than women under this unequal social structure. So liberation has to be total and for all members of the society—no more or less. We cannot just liberate one section by keeping another in chains.

In this connection it is heartening to note that all is not engulfed in darkness. The grey horizon holds a few rays of hope, the dark cloud contain one or two silver timings too. The purveyors of *fatwas*, who lately found such a congenial stalking ground across our rural landscape, have at last succeeded in awakening our conscious but rather easy going women folk against the dangers posed by these practitioners of evil masquerading as saviours of religion and society. Such women are getting organised to fight them to mobilise public opinion against them and to arrange help for their victims. In this way alone we can avenge the deaths of Noorjahan and the others who suffered a similar fate.

The writer, who teaches history at Dhaka University, is editor of "Saptakhik Samay," a views weekly.

WOMEN'S RIGHTS ARE HUMAN RIGHTS

নারীর অধিকার



মাতৃ অধিকার

বাংলাদেশ মহিলা পরিষদ BANGLADESH MAHILA PARISHAD

Interview with UNDP Representative

Not Altogether Bleak

by Rashed Mahmud Titumir

BANGLADESH has a unique record to its credit in that the incumbent prime minister and the leader of the opposition, in a Westminster's parliamentary type of democracy, are both women. As if to keep pace, the UN has also assigned a woman with the responsibility to lead one of its more prestigious agencies—the UNDP in the country.

Graduated from London School of Economics in Sociology, Eimi Watanabe joined UNICEF and later became the organization's Chief in India.

Dr Watanabe, a citizen of Japan, took up her assignment as the first woman Resident Representative of UNDP in Bangladesh.

The Daily Star talked to Watanabe on the eve of International Women's Day.

The excerpts of the interview follow:

The Daily Star (DS): In the observance of various international days, rhetorics most of the time cloud the actual progress made or works done. The International Women's Day is no exception. But an objective assessment of the real situation—successes and failures can be of help. Please comment.

Eimi Watanabe (EW): I do agree with you that there are many many International Days and sometimes there is a lot of rhetorics around it.

I believe the significance of International Days is what we make of it at the country level. It is important that it provides an occasion to really take stock of the situations of where we are. Have we made progress for women in Bangladesh? Let us look at the situation of Bangladesh firstly. I think that we should not be too negative about the situation. Yes there are many many challenges ahead but a considerable amount of progress has been made. We in UNDP, have been working and preparing report on women issues.

There is a lot of changes. The numbers are still small but the number of women's participation in politics is no doubt considerable.

I have been very much impressed to see how vocal village women are. They came up

to me and they discussed issues like family planning which are quite sensitive personal issues. Though they are very shy, I think these are all very good indications. Plus, I feel one of the most positive indications of change is what is



happening to primary school enrollment of girls.

DS: Coming from an oriental background, you surely are aware of the conflicts between the concept of a modern free woman and the traditional values: How do you resolve the forces of conflict and tension?

EW: Yes, I think, there are a lot of social, cultural constraints. But again I feel that we should not exaggerate these constraints. For instance, in the CIRDAP study

they also surveyed village women and asked them what they thought are the major constraints for them to seeking employment and the majority of women replied that it was lack of opportunities. They did not say it was social constraints.

The number one reason was given as the lack of opportunities. The lack of opportunities kept them out of employment and not the social barriers. I regard this as very very encouraging. So what makes too much of the social barrier is that, yes, they are there. It is already in Bangladesh. I have met a lot of women breaking the traditional mores and playing a very significant role.

DS: It may be a coincidence that the first assertion of women rights came from a garment factory in USA, today after 83 years women and girls have been facing a similar abject situation in garment factories in Bangladesh. The other

connection between the two countries is also striking: as an exporter and an importer of the goods of garment factories respectively. Does it expose the inherent weakness of the market economy or if not, how do you think the exploitation of women workers can be brought to an end?

EW: Yes, I think it is a very very interesting coincidence that the origin of Women's Day has to do with garment industry. I think it is not an inherent weakness of the market economy, it is in a way characteristic of the market economy. I feel a dilemma about the situation in Bangladesh, in the garment industry. You can say that they are being exploited because their wages are not as of man. On the other hand, we also know that if the employers are required to pay the same as it was paid to their male counterparts, they will employ male workers.

So it is a very anomalous situation in a way. That it is because of wage differential that so many opportunities are opening for the women folk in the garment factory. This is not to say, the situation will remain like this. I think gradually the situation must improve.

DS: Educate your girl child with the money you plan to spend on her jewellery and doury at the time of her marriage

—BEGUM ROKEYA

সবাই সম্বরে বল
মামরা মানুষ
বাকস