

WOMEN ON THE MOVE



What can they look forward to?

What Really Changes?

by Farah Ghuznavi

Another year passes, and another International Women's Day comes and goes. What really changes? The other day, I heard a joke that I didn't find very funny. It's a very old joke, often repeated, and I have yet to see the humour in it. It went along the lines of 'Why do women always go on about women's rights? It seems to me that men are always bullied by their wives, yet nobody seems to be concerned about men's rights!' Comments of this sort are usually made by men, yet one must also concede that there are any number of women who smile along with such 'pleasantries', tacitly lending legitimacy to these remarks.

No matter whom such comments originate from, I find them deeply offensive. In a society like ours, where the oppression of women is pervasive at every level, whether in a subtle or somewhat less than subtle form, it is wrong to trivialise the real issues with this type of 'humour'.

Over the last year, among others, we have heard of the cases of the two Nurjhans — one stoned and choosing suicide over the humiliation in Sylhet, the other burned at the stake in Faridpur. It is commendable that the media have done an effective job of publicising these two cases; many people seem to be aware of, and appalled by, the barbarity involved in these incidents. But let us be honest, for every Nurjhan, how many cases like this take place in Bangladesh every day that we have no idea about?

What about the case of Jyotsna Rani in Faridpur, whose in-laws handed her over to maastraas, in order to 'shame' her parents for being unwilling to meet their endless demands for dowry? She eventually managed to escape from her captors by swimming across the Chandana river. What kind of desperation must have given her strength to swim that distance after her ordeal? What about Momtaz Begum of

Demra, who had acid poured on her private parts by her husband, and was then stabbed through the neck? What about all the women who are raped and then denied justice and cast out from society? How can we justify a society which further victimises a survivor of rape, instead of punishing the guilty? If the newspapers spent all of their time covering the incidence of this kind of violence against women, there would be no room for any other news stories!

Not are such stories limited to the poor women of Bangladesh, who have no recourse to the laws of the land, or a support structure to assist them in their search for justice. In the so-called 'best' families, among the wealthiest and most privileged people in our country, the oppression of women continues; only, it is behind closed doors, so that people can pretend it is not happening. The women from middle-class and upper middle-class who are victims of domestic violence also have their mouths gagged: 'What will people say?' is the main concern here. Our attitude is not 'how can this be happening?', or 'how can we condone this?', but 'You must put up with whatever is handed out, because you are a woman, and it will lead to disgrace if anyone finds out.' The ultimate horror is that the behaviour will become public knowledge, not the obscenity of these acts being carried out. We are not worried about 'Men's rights'? Especially for those educated and privileged people who should know better! But then, education and awareness are not the same thing are they? For those who think women's rights and the struggle against injustice are a laughing matter, I have this to say — take a good look around at the brutal reality that makes up the lives of the majority of women in this country before you trivialise a situation of which you have no experience whatsoever.

UNEQUAL SHARES

LOSS OF LAND

In a Rwanda village women's agricultural and domestic work take up nearly 3 times as much time as work done by men.

Many women — especially in Africa — have lost their traditional rights to the land they work because colonial laws and development policies have tended to allocate land only to men.



DESPITE development efforts, it is still a man's world in Bangladesh. The world of women is often confined to the walls of her house or the borders of her village. Obstacles facing the development of Bangladeshi women are not only traditional or religious attitudes. Among the poor, social norms for women are dictated by the necessities of survival, and not so much by Purdah. Poor women will explain their greatest problems relate to marriage: early marriage, dowry, divorce and remarriage. For most rural women marriage is the only 'institution' and source of security and economic support. However, marriage in general no longer is a secure shelter for women. In fact, 17 per cent of the women are separated or widowed before the age of forty. Being single women, they have the full responsibility for feeding, clothing and educating their children. Women often have little or no status within the rural communities, and divorcees and widows often end up as the poorest of the poor. Many rural women therefore live in constant fear of illness, infertility, dowry conflict, a second marriage and other problems which might cause their husbands to abandon them.

Tough Job

Jornia, a divorcee, Shaher Zon, a widow and Jodina and Jora, the wives of poor day-labourers, have found a way out of abandonment and poverty! They started their business making concrete latrine rings and slabs in February 1993, with the help of RDRS training and credit support. The women take care of the production — a tough job which involves working with iron, sand, stones and concrete — and manage of purchase of raw materials, marketing and all financial affairs. The Asa workshop is situated in Kurigram town, opposite the RDRS office. The women initially faced considerable opposition. After the first week we wanted to give

A SIGN OF HOPE

Women in a Men's World

by Lucia De Vries

For one week they had to think it over. Then the four women from Kurigram decided to start what is probably one of the toughest jobs for women in Bangladesh: to run a business making and selling concrete sanitary materials, openly in the bazaar. Deciding the name was easy: 'Asa Sanitary House'. 'Asa' means hope, and to many poor women in Kurigram District that is exactly what their busy workshop represents: a sign of hope.

up. We work along the roadside and felt as if the whole of Kurigram was looking at us, says Jornia. The women however didn't have much of a choice: their families were short of food and clothes.

Almost a year after this modest start, the women feel more comfortable in their position as labourers and business-women. The women earn 300 to 600 Taka (USD 8-15) per month as a salary, and have now saved 14,000 Taka (USD 350) in their bank account. Their activities include jobs 'on the spot', like

making rooftop water tanks. Many customers ask us: 'Where are the men?' They refuse to believe there are no men here, Jornia says, laughing. Like the other women, Jornia, a divorcee, faced rough behaviour from customers. They come here to propose marriage, only to harass us. Others bargain about the price of our products without buying anything, just to show off, she complains. Despite these difficulties the women are determined to continue the business. 'We treat our customers in a



Jornia



Women receive awareness training

good way and we are not afraid. We now receive more and more compliments, both from women and men, says elderly Shaher Zon.

Gaining Security

RDRS helps women gain security in several ways. Women in the working area are united in groups, which makes them feel strong and gives them a sense of solidarity. The group members receive awareness training in which they are taught about their position and their legal rights. Income generation activities not only provide much-needed economic security, they also enhance the status of the women as equally productive members of the family and the community. RDRS gives priority to unmarried girls and destitute women, who are employed as tree caretakers, or are involved in skills training and income generation projects. The impact of these development activities is encouraging. Once women develop themselves, religious and cultural traditions prove to be less rigid than expected. They assert themselves as sericulture farmers, poultry and cattle rearers, rice huskers, tree caretakers or even business women. CP women group members send their daughters to school if there is one, they object against early marriage and dowry, and they choose to have small families. Since 1993, some 750 women act as elected committee members of Union Federations and play an important role in the development of their communities.

Men say that women are too weak to do this type of work, says Jodina. But actually they say this because they don't want their wives to go out to work. We believe, if Begum Khaleda Zia can run a country, we can run a business like this.

The writer is associated with RDRS.

Women Protest Embankment

by Saleem Samad

pilot project at Tangail is a structural solution to flood problems. The critics however argue that the experimental project will displace millions of rural poor from their ancestral homes and trades. The FAP promises adequate compensation but not resettlement. From previous water management projects, delays in realizing compensation money have caused immense hardship shouldered by women.

Presently, the women refuse to allow the FAP wallahs to visit some villages in Tangail. This has created an impasse in acquisition of land and construction of FAP-20.

Beel Dakatia

Once the rice bowl of southwest Bangladesh has literally turned into a vast sheet of water. Trapped inside the embankment that promised to protect the floodplain from saline tidal inundation, Beel Dakatia is a new name for the water logging for last 12 years.

The water logging effected more than 300,000 thousand people populated by Hindus. Since then the political leaders gave repeated assurance that a solution is in at the anvil, nothing happened. The men decided to migrate to neighbouring India, but the determined womenfolk said no. They stayed home to suffer the miseries.

Today nothing grows and the arable land and grazing ground for livestock are submerged under dirty water. The protest rally turned violent. The police opened fire killing one and injured scores. The women broke through the police cordon and in the melee the embankment was cut open. Villagers thought the breach may allow to drain out the water into the river. But the rise of the river bed restricted the flow and choked the reverse discharge.

Despite a failed attempt, the women have not given up their hope for survival. Till today, they take a dingy to collect water from raised which they have handpumps. They dive to the bottom of the beel to collect muddy pit coal, which they dry under the sun to burn as fuel.

The writer runs Development Features.



Thousands of women staged a demonstration to protest construction of an embankment project in Tangail.

'Doctor Cynthia' makes a Difference

Daniel Girard writes from Mae Sot, Thailand

Physician Cynthia Muang yearns for an end to the fighting in her homeland, Myanmar, from which she fled five years ago. She has even called her son Peace. But, reports Gemini News Service, she refuses to discuss politics in the medical and community centre she has set up near the Thai border, concentrating instead on the health and welfare of refugees and illegal workers.

with malaria and malnutrition from nearby refugee camps. Soon she was joined by other medical staff who had also fled Burma.

Today, a permanent staff of nearly two dozen treat an average of 30 patients a day in the enlarged house-cum-hospital. In a newly-acquired building next door, Karen are schooled in midwifery and child care for about two months, skills they can take back to their villages.

"All of us want to go back to a peaceful, free, democratic, Burma but right now we can't, so we have to keep up the struggle," she says. "We just try to do as much as we can."

For 35-year-old Muang, or Dr Cynthia as everyone knows her, doing what she can has led others to refer to her as the 'Mother Teresa' of her people's struggle.

A member of the Karen ethnic group, considered the fiercest opponents of the military junta, Muang nurses the sick and educates others to do the same from a two-story compound on the outskirts of Mae Sot, about four kilometres inside the Thai border from Myanmar.

Muang, who graduated from Rangoon University medical school in 1985, opened the clinic in 1989 after she and many others fled Burma following a military coup and pro-democracy crackdown that left up to 8,000 dead.

In a small, old house with a leaky roof and broken lavatory, she started treating people

various international aid agencies. Muang has helped operate a pair of jungle health clinics for minorities in her homeland, although she admits, "all the time we have to worry about shortages of medicine."

A small, soft-spoken woman, Muang wears a T-shirt featuring the picture of imprisoned Burmese opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi emblazoned with the 1991 Nobel Peace prize-winner's words: "Fear is a habit... I'm not afraid."

She certainly has many thoughts on Burmese politics but that is the only comment she will make on the subject, which she brushes aside as "too complicated."

A relief worker operating on both sides of the Burmese-Thai border says that rising above the tangled political situation inside Burma has been the key to Muang's success.

"She just looks at herself as a Burmese-trained doctor and she's willing to help and train anybody regardless of their allegiance," says the man, who refuses to allow his name or organisation to be published because of the Thai government's recent crackdown on relief groups working across the border. In addition to its medical importance, Muang's two-building complex plays a social role, acting as community centre and hostel for Burmese refugees and illegal immigrants working in the area.

Dr Cynthia Muang: 'We can only do a little'

In the newest building, where Muang, her husband and baby share the three rooms upstairs with two other families, the ground floor houses a kitchen which acts as a meeting place for staff, students, recovering patients and even the occasional cat, dog or turkey trying to beat the mid-afternoon heat and maybe pick up a scrap of food.

In the afternoons, the classroom switches from medical instruction to English lessons, featuring the mimicking of high-volume recordings of the Beatles' hits Yellow Submarine and Yesterday. "We have to keep busy or else we get depressed," Muang says. "Life in our homeland is very bad."

From her home's cement from step, where all are warmly welcomed and asked to leave their shoes, Muang can see the sun melt behind the mountains of her native country at the end of another busy day.

Asked if she feels like the hero so many make her out to be, she quickly shakes her head. "We can only do a little," she insists. "We might be able to help 10,000 or maybe even 40,000 people but there are more than 40 million suffering in Burma and we can't save them."

The writer is a Canadian reporter with The Toronto Star currently on a one year internship with Gemini News Service sponsored by the International Development Research Centre in Ottawa.

