



Environment, Human Rights and Women

by Saira Rahman

THE link between human rights and the environment was first elucidated in the 1981 African Charter of Human and People Rights, which stated that 'all peoples shall have the right to a general satisfactory environment favourable to their development.' Apart from the African Charter, two other international human rights instruments, namely the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the 1969 American Convention on Human Rights identify a link between human rights and the Environment. The 1969 American Convention provides that 'every one shall have the right to live in a healthy environment', and that the state parties shall promote the protection, preservation and improvement of the environment.

Furthermore, the very first principle of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, 1992, specifies: 'Human beings are at the centre of concerns for sustainable development. They are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature.' Thus, in order to develop, survive and keep future generations on the right track, a lot depends on how we treat our environment today.

Many states have so far adopted clauses in their constitutions which link the rights of their citizens to the environment, building up a nation of environmentally conscious human beings. The constitutions of Germany, Greece, Panama, Mexico, Netherland, Philippines, Thailand, United Arab Emirates and more than forty other countries expressly recognise the right to a clean environment. Some stipulate the State's responsibility to preserve the environment for the state and its citizens; thus the individual has a substantive right in relation to the environment. Provisions also impress on the collective duty of citizens to safeguard the environment.

Thus, we see that there is a distinctive and necessary link between an individual and his/her environment, but apart from constitutional provisions and conventions which are

while we reach out to the sky.... our roots are in the earth. women are like trees, let women be and let the trees be.

Courtesy: Quarterly Adhyana

concerned with the environment and people, irrespective of sex, how do women relate to environmental issues and how do they specifically fit in?

Women in developing nations control most activities in the informal home economy, which therefore brings them

closer to the environment than men. About 50 per cent of the world's food, for example, is grown by women; 80 per cent of it in African nations. Women also attend to such household activities as waste disposal, family sanitation, animal grazing, the gathering of fuel, wa-

ter, fodder and animal wastes for fertilizer and washing clothes. In all these household chores, women have to make choices linked to conservation: for example, how and when to begin cultivation of land subject to erosion, what kind of fuel to use while cooking, whether to use today's manure as fertilizer or dry it to use as fuel, where to dry the next garbage pit etc.

In developing countries the work done by women for the domestic economy, exposes them to the effects of environmental degradation. As trees in Africa disappear due to drought, erosion and deforestation, and as services dry up, women have to travel further and further afield to gather fuel or water and to do their laundry. Due to the building of the Narmada Dam in India, there has been a shortage of twigs and wood for fuel and fodder for the animals.

Basic human rights of health, well-being and safe working conditions are part of women's rights, which have been recognised as being human rights as well. Thus if these rights are to be safe guarded by improving the state of our environment, we see a fine link between women of human rights and the environment, and can safely say that environmental degradation could, in principle, result in a violation of women's rights to health, well-being and safe working conditions. Women in different countries have become aware of their link to the environment around them, specially women in developing countries who live close to the land, so to speak, in comparison to their sisters from developed nations.

Many grass-roots environmental groups in developing countries, where poverty is fought alongside pollution, have been formed by women. The Chipko movement in India is especially notable. It saw a significant struggle 15 years ago of villagers, a majority of them women, who organised themselves to fight against logging by clinging to the trees.

The writers is a member of Ain O Salish Kendra.

Despite the hardship, Anwara continued to work there for two years after which she lost the job because of her master's moving to another district. Anwara returned to her mother who snatched away all the money she had saved and drove her away from home. 'She told me I was old enough to earn my own living and stamped the door closed,' remembers Anwara.

For the first few days Anwara was happy on the street surviving on begging or whatever odd jobs she could find such as street sweeping or cleaning an office compound.

IT will need much skill to change from being an outspoken journalist to master the subtleties of diplomacy. This is precisely what Pakistan's most famous woman journalist Malieha Lodhi will be doing in Washington.

By nominating her to the crucial post of ambassador to the United States, Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto is signalling that her government intends to bring a much-needed dose of pragmatism to Pakistan's foreign relations.

The Government of Bangladesh has prepared a country report which it will be submitted to the Asia and Pacific Regional Meeting to be held in Jakarta this June. As in other countries the government should share their plans with as large a cross section of women as possible to ensure representation and consensus.

But as citizens and as women we need to make our concerns known to our own government, so that it is made aware of the voice of the women's movement. We need to analyse the social, legal, political and economic factors which act as constraints on women's development; we need to formulate strategies and policies which will bring about progressive equality, as we need to identify mechanisms to be used by government, non-government agencies as well as the community through which we can implement these strategies. In doing so we need to isolate the forces which work against the interest of women. We can do this by engaging in an exchange amongst ourselves, by writing in the media so that our ideas are taken note of. We need to interact at every stage of formulation of policies and plans, of strategising to make sure that the country report is not merely a paper document to be preserved in UN archives, and that we are directly involved in planning for our future.

Lodhi was Pakistan's first woman editor of a national daily and later of the country's largest circulation English language newspaper, *The News*. She is a blend of modernism and Islamic values.

A PhD in politics from the London School of Economics, she is a progressive woman. She is well-versed in the Western ideas and values, having lived in the West for almost a decade. She is on first name terms with Bhutto and a believer in Islamic values.

An NGO Preparatory Committee for Beijing '95 is currently working through consultations with women from all over the country to draw upon their experiences to formulate a plan of action.

—Ain O Salish Kendra

By clearing her appointment

A Victim of the Flesh Trade

by Bernard Gomes

She had no regular income, which meant she often starved or remained half-fed. Chances of her getting a job as a house maid were nil because of lack of contacts or credibility. 'Still I was happy with the freedom. Nobody loved me on the street, but nobody beat me or scolded me either,' said Anwara who, however, learnt soon after there were other kinds of exploitation on the street.

Meanwhile a woman befriended her and gave her all the best she could give to the street girl — food, clothes, shelter and cosmetics. She even took her to movies which Anwara enjoyed very much. She dreamed she was a movie star clad in beautiful dresses and loved by all. But then the woman gradually began to pressurise her to encourage the company of men who made sexual advances to her. 'I objected to this at the beginning

and complained to the woman I was staying with but she forced me to go with them and have sex with them for which they paid me,' said Anwara. But as a matter of fact the pimp would take away all the money Anwara would earn and give her only food and clothes instead. 'I clearly understood I was being prostituted for her own benefit. So I decided to run away from her,' said Anwara who realized by this time there was hardly any way she could survive without selling her body.

Anwara began now 13, operates independently as an 'itinerant prostitute joining many other street girl prostitutes in Bangladesh's capital city of Dhaka, home of six million people. An estimate shows the number of registered prostitutes in Dhaka is about 15-20,000, of whom many are child prostitutes — either brothel based or floating.

With her short hair and plump cheeks, Anwara is adept at alluring her clients by her inviting smile and infatuating look. She earns Tk 80-100 (US \$1.50-2.50) a day working mostly from evening to late night. She spends a considerable amount of money in buying cosmetics which she puts heavily on her face, normal for a girl of her profession.

Anwara does not have a permanent shelter. She sleeps on the footpath, or in other public places such as railway station and bus terminals. She pays a regular toll to police or gate keepers of parks to avoid harassment.

Anwara, however, faces sexual harassment from *Mustans* (muslemen) on the street. A few months ago Anwara was gang raped by mustans who not only inflicted terrible physical injury but also ruined her friendship with a young boy who wanted to marry her. 'Jasim came to my lift as a deliverer wanting to give me a new life. But he misunderstood me and left me after this incident,' said Anwara sadly to a World Vision researcher who had helped Anwara to get some medical treatment following the incident.

World Vision, an NGO has recently conducted a study on Dhaka's street girl children who, according to a UNICEF estimate, number 100,000. Among the street children, many earn their living as child prostitutes like Anwara. The study analysed the situation of street girl children for whom World Vision, an international NGO, is presently considering launching a special rehabilitation programme. 'We are planning a rehabilitation center where street girls including street prostitutes would come and spend time together learning literacy and job skills.' 'We will also provide them medical services when needed,' says Sylvester Costa, the coordinator of the study and manager of the Child Survival Project.

Anwara is happy that she is linked with World Vision where she recently gathered with other street child prostitutes for a focus group discussion necessary for the study. 'World Vision people are nice and caring and I trust them,' says Anwara. 'If I get a shelter and an employment at a garments factory, I would definitely leave this profession of indignity and insecurity,' she adds.

The writer is a Communications Manager of World Vision, Bangladesh.



The Picture says it all

A Woman Journalist Masters the Subtleties of Diplomacy

Javed A Malik writes from Islamabad

in the shortest time on record, the army, the real power in Pakistan, has shown how keen it is to portray a different image of Pakistan to the US administration.

Lodhi is well-known to the Western media through her in-depth analyses of political and strategic issues in South Asia. She will allow Pakistan to put forward a united front in Washington for the first time in many years. In the past, Pakistan's army has been seen to have its own agenda with the US, often opposed to the civilian governments.

These 'adjustments' will be most important in relations with the Clinton administration. Though relations between the US and the world's second most populous Muslim country have improved a little in recent months, they are still far from those in the Cold War days when Pakistan was one of Washington's closest allies.

Bhutto, in office for the second time since the October elections, seems determined to restore relations to their previous closeness without giving up Pakistan's nuclear programme. By nominating Lodhi to the world's most important capital at this critical time, she has put trust in a long-standing confidante.

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Lodhi's nomination sends the signal that Pakistan is not the religious hardline state many in the US administration believe but a modern nation believing in the pragmatic interpretation of Islam.

—Ain O Salish Kendra

As with her previous assignments, Lodhi will not find the task easy. Although the US has not put Pakistan on the list of countries sponsoring terrorism, as once threatened, it still faces 'international isolationism' in the words of Bhutto.

On the vexed unclear issue, the US now wants to treat India and Pakistan on equal levels. For Islamabad it will obviously not be easy to get an 'equal' status with a neighbour seven times its size.

The US recognises the nuclear race between India and Pakistan is linked to their dis-

pute over the Himalayan state of Kashmir. That dispute started in 1947 when the sub-continent was divided into India and Pakistan by Britain, the colonial power. Islamabad maintains that Kashmir, India's only Muslim-majority province, should be part of Pakistan. India rejects that claim, saying Kashmir is its integral part.

Any concessions on Kashmir, Lodhi knows, will antagonise the opposition critics back home and could jeopardise her job. Sentiments are so high over Kashmir that no government could keep power after soft pedalling on the issue.

The government, facing an economic crunch, realises it must ease tensions with India because at the present level Pakistan's defence bill — nearing six per cent of GDP — is unsustainable.

The US cut off economic and military help in 1990, alleging Pakistan was developing nuclear weapons. It was then Pakistan's largest donor, a place since taken over by Japan. While Pakistan has survived this cut, its US-dependent air force has been badly affected.

Lodhi's first priority will be to get a significant portion of this aid restored — a tricky situation because the US insists on 'rolling back' nuclear programme in exchange for aid restoration. Pakistan says it would reconsider its programme if India does the same.

Pakistan's second woman ambassador in its 46-year history is taking up a job that can make her a part of history if while in office progress is made to resolve the Kashmir dispute. For the first time in her life, Lodhi will be helping formulate and implement foreign policy as well as interpreting it.



MALEEHAD LODHI

Editor-turned-diplomat

