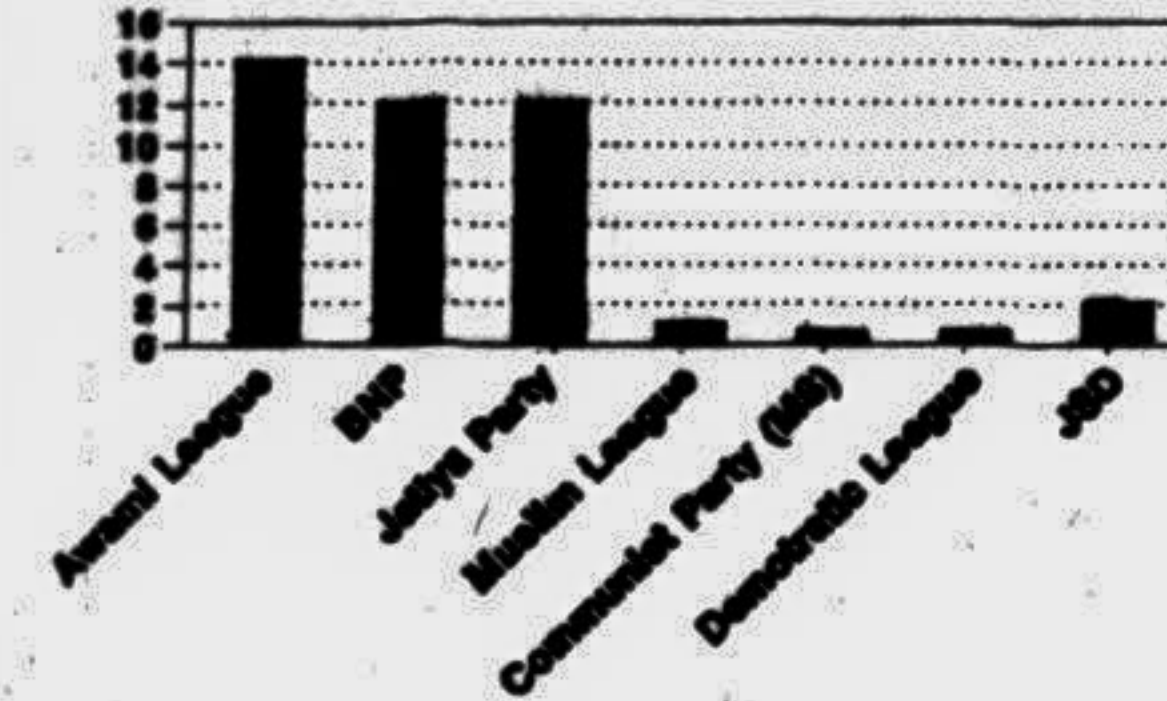




## Concerns for Human Development

### Women in Political Party Hierarchy

Women as % of total numbers of leaders



Source: Najma Choudhury, (1991) and personal interviews 1994.

## Political Participation

**E**LECTORAL reform is necessary. The nomination or indirect election of women nationally and locally, is biased and selection lacks objectivity. It also limits the involvement and power base of qualified women leaders. Direct election of women is likely to establish a link between women and the community. Through elections, women themselves are duly recognized as leaders and are accountable for their actions to the constituents they represent. Elected directly by the voters and equipped with an insight into women's issues and experience in the operations of women's development programmes, the women leaders will be in a better position to actively participate in the decision-making process.

Literacy in legal rights and politics should be provided in all formal and non-formal schools, to bring about attitudinal changes for both women and men. They should be given proper training and exposure to the issues which hinder integration of women with the mainstream of socio-economic and political life.

Both men and women leaders at the grassroots and national levels must be sensitized to women's issues, and form pressure and advocacy groups for the realization of gender equity.

Women should be made aware of their potential political power and their contribution to political process as voters. Women who are already in the political arena should creatively develop their own strengths and strategies and act as role models for aspiring politicians.

There should be reserved seats for women in all elected bodies who would be directly elected by both male and female voters. For the local government the number of reserved seats would be according to the population size and preferably one from each Zila for the National Parliament.

An amendment (Regulation Order 1972) to the effect that all political parties must ensure a certain percentage (10-20 per cent) of representation by women in the nomination for election of the existing 300 seats under Article (2) of the constitution. Political constituencies for the seats should be delimited in a feasible manner to have the same number of votes or cover the geographical areas as those constituencies marked for election under Article 65 (2). The clear aim would be to ensure that at least 10 per cent of the elected MPs are women. This should be monitored and regulations changed as appropriate to achieve this objective.

Political parties can demonstrate their commitment to the promotion of skilled women by providing opportunities for them within the party structure. Party manifestoes and constitutions should include gender equity as one of their goals and have a plan of action for its achievement.

Networking between the women's organizations and women politicians, in particular, is necessary to facilitate the inclusion of women's issues in the public agenda.

At the local level, planning and decision making committees should comprise at least 50 percent women. Social programmes should be introduced to encourage women's effective participation in such form.

Successful action to address the above concerns will make further demands on women's time, adding to the double work-burden which she already carries in the home as well as in the economy and quite part from her community role.

— UNDP report on human development, Bangladesh, 1994.

## Women in the Family

**B**ASIC changes in attitude towards the value of girls and the status of women within the family and communities must be achieved throughout society. This will take enormous efforts, but the means already exist. For example, more positive images of women can emerge through advocacy, and formal and non-formal education, especially in the design of curricula. There is a marked absence of strong women role models in society. The image of women in the media tends to reinforce the stereotype and to sustain traditional roles.

It is difficult for women who have to carry the role of mother and wife to engage in productive activity without childcare and other support systems. However, as women get older they become free to engage in outside work. Thus policy interventions should be sensitive to and designed for women in terms of their life-cycle and age. For example, rural works programmes would do well to assume that their most likely recruits would be older women beyond the reproductive age. Another age range to target is the adolescent group before they enter marriage and child bearing.

Although there is strong cultural resistance to delayed marriage, it has a payoff in terms of women's labour, population planning and realization of women's rights. There is a strong demographic rationale for developing labour market policies that encourage young women to defer marriage and engage in employment.

Introduction of labour saving technology in housework, such as efficient stoves, laundry methods etc and advocacy for sharing the housework between male and female members of the household would reduce the drudgery of housework for women.

Much stronger efforts must be made to reach adolescent girls. They have not yet been provided with strong female role models or the tools to encourage and enable them to provide a better life for themselves. Government, NGOs and families have roles to play if adolescent girls are to grow into strong and capable adult women with the ability to make choices about their futures, to contribute more to Bangladesh's future and, most importantly, add to their own human development.

Much work is needed to address the issue of women's status and roles within their own families. In order for women to achieve their maximum potential, they will have to receive the support of their husbands, parents, in-laws and community influencers. Traditionally, family roles and structures have presented barriers to women trying to achieve economic and social equality.

Legal support for the women in the family must be provided by the enactment and implementation of the Uniform Family Code and through the full ratification of the UNCEDAW. Legal reforms should be undertaken to provide divorced women rights over jointly owned properties, information, education and communication about the dowry prohibition act and the various legal rights of the married women should target husbands, wives and in-laws. This should also deter incidences of violence against women.

Discriminatory laws relating to marriage, divorce, child custody, maintenance inheritance, adultery and citizenship should be repealed or replaced. Existing laws which aim to protect women should be more fully implemented.

— UNDP report on human development, Bangladesh, 1994.

The Daily Star

# Empowerment of Women

Special Feature

April 21, 1994

We, in The Daily Star, consider the task of women's development to be not only a concern of the women, but of the nation as whole. We commend the UNDP for this timely initiative, and for deciding to devote its annual Human Development Report on Employment of Women in Bangladesh. We urge all concern, especially the political leader, policy maker and government officials to carefully read the findings and recommendations of this report and give serious considerations in incorporating them in planning and implementing future national development strategies.

## An Important Step in Identifying Home Truth

by Aasha Mehreen Amin

**A**T a stage when gender bias is the most acute of problems hampering the nation's economic and social health, the UNDP report on human development in Bangladesh could not be more timely. The focus of the report is on empowerment of women and recognizes the fact that unless women are given equal status in society and the opportunities to develop their skills there is little hope for the nation to move out of the poverty hole.

The report discusses the issue of gender bias and its removal with insight and in great detail. It touches upon all relevant quarters that have kept the evil of gender disparities alive and well. It shows that women are discriminated against in the family, in social circles, at work, in politics and so on. They are deprived of health, education, social status and economic independence at all stages of their lives.

It is not that these issues have not been brought to the forefront before. But it is certainly the first time that they have been analyzed with such depth and clarity and compiled in such a comprehensive manner. With numerous graphs, charts and case studies each chapter of the report gives a clear picture of the various kinds of gender disparities and how they can be addressed. In addition the report recognizes the positive steps towards progress to show that given the chance, women have proved to be very enterprising.

The origins of gender bias are in the family where attitudes towards women and the roles they are made to play, all work towards giving them a

subordinate status. This is one of the first things the report focusses upon and makes several recommendations.

Discrimination in the work place is also an obstacle in the empowerment process for women. Women often are confined to gender stereotyped occupations and invariably paid lower wages than men for the same work. To rectify this the report makes several suggestions such as the formation of effective trade unions for women, more active roles played by organisations in taking up issues of wages, working conditions and availability of on-the-job training for women. Women should have greater access to credit facilities, education and training in accounting, marketing and vocational skills.

The need for active organisations for women is stressed in this report which also out-

lines the major challenges that have to be met. These include: being more vigilant to ensure proper law enforcement to stop violence against women; changing perceptions, social practices and policies; devising appropriate strategies to face and undermine the influence of militant political parties whose patriarchal ideology only lead to greater inequality and injustice against women; developing a better relationship between NGOs and the government.

Finally, the report points out the importance of political participation of women which enhance their role in the decision making process. At present women only hold positions in the women's branch of the main party, very few of them are in the central or executive committee. Women politicians are selected by and are accountable to men rather

than being elected by the people. There are very few female chairpersons at the Union Parishad level. Moreover, the report finds that female representatives lacked political awareness and training and do not play very active roles.

To make women more active and effective in the political arena, several recommendations have been made including direct election of women; literacy in legal rights and politics through formal and non-formal schools; sensitizing both men and women leaders at all levels to women's issues; creating greater awareness amongst women of their potential political power; reserved seats for women in all elected bodies who would be directly elected by male and female voters; compulsory nomination of 20 per cent women for direct election by each political party.

The UNDP report, with its bold no-nonsense approach, points out the gross gender disparities in the country at the social, political and economic level. Its thoroughness can be attributed to the diverse pool of national consultants who worked on the report, including researchers, academicians and activists. The report, with its indepth analysis of the main areas of gender disparity and concrete recommendations to remove gender bias, is in itself an important step in the empowerment process. It can be used by the government, NGOs, and women activist groups as a valuable source of information and of strategies for effective action.



Women's rights are human rights — a mass mobilisation on International Women's Day — photo : Nahar Ahmed, UNDP

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### Towards a Strategy for Empowerment

#### Actions in Advocacy

(a) political commitment for the achievement of gender equality and women's empowerment in all spheres of life by the year 2010. This should be reflected in the constitutions and manifestos of major political parties and by a Government statement of intent.

(b) gender sensitization for the Members of Parliament, local politicians and civil servants, incorporated through the Parliamentary Training Process and the BPATC curricula and other means.

(c) mass multi-media campaigns of information, education and communication to reconstruct gender stereotypes and socio-cultural practices.

(d) advocacy for sharing housework between male and female members of the family and to change the attitudes of husbands, parents, in-laws and community.

(e) a national apex union or alliance to be formed in order to take forward more quickly a mass women's movement.

#### Actions for Government

(a) assessment of capacity, impact and cost-effectiveness of MWS and WID focal points in Line Ministries.

(b) electoral reforms to ensure women's direct election to the national parliament and at all levels of local government.

(c) compulsory nomination of 20 per cent women for direct election by each political party at each level of government.

(d) enactment of a 'Uniform Family Code'.

(e) full ratification and implementation of UNCEDAW by GOB soonest.

(f) legal reforms to give wives rights over joint property during marriage.

(g) specific programmes to give land title to single landless women.

(h) implementation of the ILO conventions on labour laws for the protection of female industrial workers.

(i) sector-wide collection and monitoring of gender-disaggregated data to input into the national planning and development programming.

#### Actions for Other Organizations

(a) inclusion of gender issues in the party manifestos.

(b) providing different role models of women in re-

(c) the government is already giving commendable attention to the education of girls. This should be continued and further re-inforced. Education is critical to empowering women in all aspects of their lives. It also helps to reduce fertility and infant mortality and improve family well-being. Higher educational levels among women correspond to greater use of family planning lower fertility rates and smaller families. .... Better educated mothers are more likely to receive antenatal care and their children are less likely to be malnourished.

(d) increase bank or cooperative credit facilities through NGOs for poor women.

(e) promote affirmative actions by banks through the allocation of a mandatory minimum proportion of bank loans for women.

(f) greater support for women's marketing, cooperatives and access to market in-



Giving women equal access to innovations and resources is an important aspect of empowerment — photo : Drik, UNDP

(g) facilitating access to low cost housing for single women workers especially in urban areas.

(h) a review of existing laws as they relate to women to be undertaken by a team including NGOs and women's organizations under the chairpersonship of a justice of the high court to recommend changes to make them either gender neutral or to reflect the need for affirmative action in favour of women.

(i) training Union Parishad members on gender issues.

(j) local level planning and decision-making committees should comprise at least fifty per cent women and social programme should be introduced to encourage women effective participation in such form.

#### Actions for All Organizations in Development

All organizations active in development in Bangladesh could and should be doing a lot more in the way of affirmative action for women. For example, we (UNDP included) should practice what we preach by doing in the following:

(a) evaluate, from the gender perspective, whether our roles, our advocacy, our programmes, our projects, our policies are making a lasting difference for women.

(b) review our own policies and practices with respect to staff recruitment, placement and promotion. Bangladesh needs women Ambassadors, just as it needs women Secretaries and Judges etc. Our advertisements and practices should set good examples to follow by those who don't yet see the light. Let's set ourselves annual numeric targets to up current baselines (invariably too low) until gender equity is achieved.

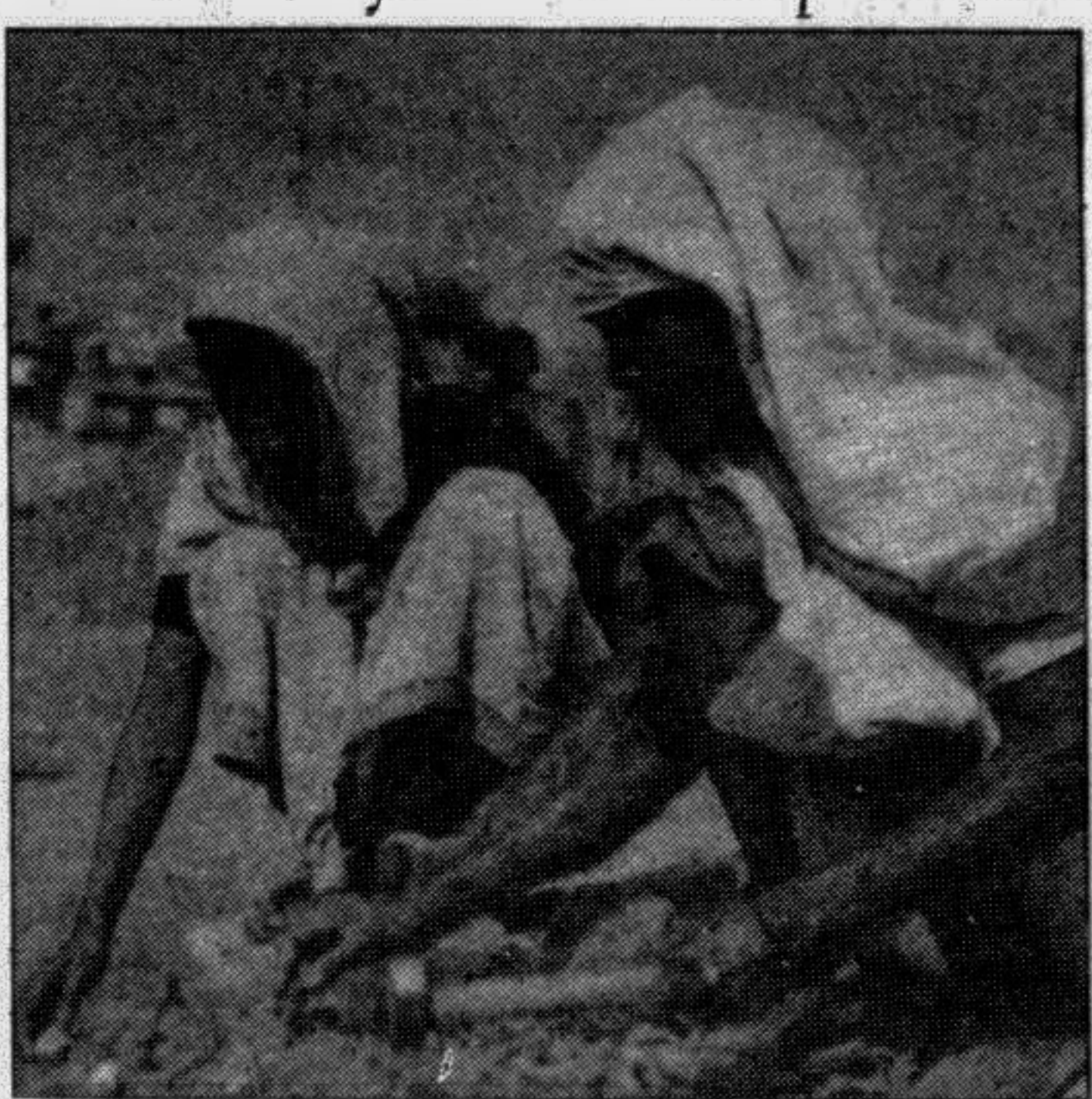
(c) special effort should be made to make the women in our respective organizations particularly visible, so that they can become role models — chairing task forces, media briefings, representing as in high level meetings, etc.

(d) increasing proportions of our efforts in training, fellowships, study tours, etc. should be allocated to women. Again present baselines (again invariably too low) should be used to set annual numeric increases towards women.

(e) and lots, lots more... let's think and exchange our thoughts through dialogue to prepare for more affirmative actions in the form of a strategy for the empowerment of women of Bangladesh.

UNDP Report on human development, Bangladesh, 1994.

## Concerns for Human Development



The black-breaking work of women brick crushers — photo : Nahar Ahmed, UNDP.

## Women in the Economy

**D**ESPITE the greater labour force participation of women, they are often employed in specific occupations, which are gender stereotyped. This reflects attitudinal biases in society which have traditionally restricted mobility and denied women equal opportunity in terms of education and training and access to inputs such a credit.

It is clear that as women are becoming an increasingly significant part of the labour force, in both formal and informal sector, trade unions should become much more effective channel for voicing women's demands and needs in employment. This also calls for a greater role for women's organizations to take up issues governing wages and working conditions as well as to sensitize trade unions in the need to address women as important labour force participants. One of their first priorities should be to advocate for more widely available on-the-job training for women.

Much wider intervention is needed from civic authorities to facilitate access for single women workers to low-cost housing, low-cost health care, and provide adequate security. This is another area for trade union action.

Greater attention should also be given to promote entrepreneurship among women through education. Universal primary education for women is not enough. The curricula at the primary level must include arithmetic, reading and other subjects to provide girls with an education that empowers them. Higher educational institutions and non-formal education programmes should be sensitive to the demands of the labour market and empower women with managerial, accounting and vocational skills.

Women are engaged in low return activities. They require access to credit to allow them to expand their ventures. Credit facilities at market interest rates for poor women should be made available through Government and non government institutions based on the Grameen Bank approach.

Some female entrepreneurs depend on simple technologies to compete with sophisticated urban industries and foreign businesses. The poorest women should be given preferential access to improved technology through training and provision of services in addition to credit. Areas such as marketing should be covered.

Information and marketing skills are prerequisites to modern business. Therefore, training should be provided to women entrepreneurs to enhance these skills.

The shortcomings of the existing strategies of self-employment lie in their exclusive focus on the landless and poor women. Among the marginal landowners there may be poor women who have unutilized time and could be involved in self-employment. Therefore, entrepreneurial activities focused on women from marginal land-owner families should be initiated.

Since the lack of decision-making is associated with lack of control over productive assets and within the traditional laws and social attitude, the alternatives on this front are difficult to choose. Some short run innovative measures could involve provision of agricultural credit, including for livestock to female members of farms families, provision of extension services through female extension workers and to let both male and female members of households be the recipients of extension services. Long term strategies on this front will involve improvement of the level of education and creating scope for formal sector jobs for women.

— UNDP report on human development, Bangladesh, 1994.

## Organisation for Women

**D**ESPITE the considerable success and strength attained by organizations in progressing towards their goals, there remain major challenges ahead.

A majority of the organizations have to focus on the multifarious survival needs of the beneficiaries. The ideological (removal of traditional patriarchal attitude and norms) and political (mobilization, advocacy for social transformation) issues for empowering women often get less priority. Women will be impacted more by changing perceptions, social practices and policies than by projects.

Changing the embedded gender-ideology while it is buttressed by norms, traditions, values and mechanisms to perpetuate gender inequality, is a long-term project. The recent resurgence of militant political parties with revivalist social vision and patriarchal ideology exacerbates the situation. Devising appropriate strategies to face and undermine their influence both at local and national levels is a major and urgent concern.

The basis for forging alliances needs to be worked out, keeping in mind that women do not form a homogenous group. Issues which provide a rallying point and help over-ride the barriers caused by primordial allegiance to class, ideology, race, ethnicity, religion etc. need to be identified and alliances forged around them. Perhaps the time is now ripe for a national apex union to spearhead a mass women's movement in Bangladesh.

The rather delicate and sometimes distant relationships between GOs and NGOs generally remain ambiguous. NGOs need to acknowledge that their limited capacity would never permit them to be the only substitute or alternative channel for development. Government, on the other hand, need to recognize that NGOs (including women's organizations) have certain strength, e.g. innovation, flexibility and close contact with the grassroots people through participatory process, which are necessary for success in achieving development objectives.

There should be an assessment of the capacity of the Ministry of Women's Affairs to carry out its mandate of advocacy, with appropriate recommendations for its strengthening. Concurrently, the Planning Commission may consider establishing a WID Unit, to monitor and coordinate sectoral WID issues.

Chapter 3 of this report has already called for Trade Unions and other organizations concerned with workers to much more actively address women's concerns and issues in work and employment.

The next chapter will, amongst other things, make recommendations for the participation and coverage of women in and by political organizations.

— UNDP report on human development, Bangladesh, 1994.