



Their Strength is in Their Numbers

by Schrezad Joya Monami Latif

"Our voices are many but we sing a common song. Our words are different, our tunes diverse, but our music is the same."

— Shaidullah Kaiser



Discovering their strength through solidarity.

— Photo credit Keiko Nishino - UNICEF

"Now, he thinks twice before laying a hand on me and he cares for me more because I make my own money," says Sakina Begum, the tall, lean mother of two, a member of a group of sixteen, a part of the NGO Proshika in Kaulipaara, a tiny village in Faridpur district. After an initial timidity at the sight of my obviously city-bred clothes and mannerisms, she talks rapidly of how through the NGO, literacy and income generating schemes (funded by Proshika) changed her family life from one of hell and abuse to one of harmonious cooperation and even, love. Next to her sits her twenty-year-old sister who has come to visit from another district. Upon further questioning it is apparent that Sakina's sister, Mala, isn't here for a visit but was cast aside by her husband, thrown out of the house so to speak. She starts crying, her tears immediately washing her gaunt face, telling about the two little boys she left behind with her witch of a mother-in-law.

"I was still breastfeeding my youngest" she wails, wiping her face with the edge of her faded and dirty saree. Women such as Mala are a common sight in Bangladesh. Too many men, unable to handle poverty desperately in need of scapegoats use their wives, casting them aside to marry again in exchange for the dowry which they think will better their economic situation and help them make a fresh start. The price of women after all, is cheap in our country of 118 million people (1994 statistics) where dowry wasn't a local custom such as in neighbouring India until economic hardships made it into a convenient rite of marriage.

Sakina Begum though, is a rarity. From being an illiterate abused mother and wife she is today the proud owner of two dozen hens and two milk cows. Together with her husband, she has put a solid tin roof over her house which is in her name, and can read and write up to the third grade standard. Her husband, formerly an unemployed brick layer, through his wife's association with the NGO, now works for Proshika, building sanitary toilet seats that are provided to members. They were both illiterate until they attended night classes for adult illiterates — in six months they were reading and writing rudimentary Bengali. The classes and loan giving offices are run by Proshika workers, trained grassroots professionals.

In the classes men and women (separate classes) were taught not only how to read and write but how they could better their lot through innovative schemes to make money, avoid water borne-diseases by boiling water and practicing healthy sanitary methods, build sanitary toilets in their outhouses with the material resources and know-how given by Proshika and educate their children equitably.

A Violation Against Humanity

EXPERIENCE of violence in women's lives are all too personal a reality. The emotional and psychological scars remain deep and need to be understood and reconciled within the socio-political dimensions of violence.

• Two of the young and pretty girls were taken to the front of the boat and raped. Everyone heard everything, all

long ago. They ransacked the house. Most of them behaved like barbarians as they pushed me and my mother around. We were told not to scream as we would be shot dead on the spot. There were five of them — heavily armed. After the search they dragged me and mother separately away and raped us. They threatened to come back again if we reported the incident to the authorities.

Experiences of the Reality of Violence

Voices of the Silent

— Voice of a Sri Lankan woman

• These are not isolated voices speaking about coincidental experiences. VAW (Violence Against Women) stems from a collective reality that is based on the systematic manifestation of a patriarchal power structure. Too often legal systems are seen as neutral and gender biases inherent in these systems are not dealt with at a structural level.

It is important to recognise that the specificity of VAW involves an analysis of gender relations and its centrality to the family which reproduces gender inequalities. In the ongoing struggle against violence, we have to also recognise that the state is one of the main sources of violence and stands behind violence committed by men against women in the family, the workplace and community.

— Voice of an Indian woman

• I was told that I'll be employed as a clerk. They brought me to a house and forced me to sleep with the white man who was there. When I refused I was told that they gave my parents 3000 Bahts to settle their debts, and I have to repay that. My life has been this way since then.

— Voice of a Thai woman

• The soldiers came and asked for my brother. We told them that he had left home

So, What is a Fatwa?

THE recent spate of acts of violence against women in several parts of rural Bangladesh are justified by the perpetrators of these crimes on the basis of fatwas given by a local imam or a maulvi or maulana. It has been rightly pointed out that violence against women is a crime that cannot be justified on this basis. In addition, and again rightly, it is pointed out that these self-appointed givers of fatwas have no authority for their proclamations. What these statements how-

ever fail to clarify is a fundamental misconception about fatwas themselves.

A fatwa was/is the formal opinion of a jurisconsult upon the legal issues involved in a factual situation. As one textbook elaborates "a fatwa is an opinion on a point of law rendered by a mufti in response to a question submitted to him by a private individual or a qadi." That the mufti/jurisconsult had/s to be a "competent legal scholar" should go without saying. And

that the gentlemen who have been arrogating to themselves the privilege of pronouncing fatwas are not scholars in any field at all let alone competent or not is also clear. But what escapes most of us is that even were the fatwa-givers scholars and jurists and capable any pronouncement made by them would not have the force of law that is to say it could not be executed. Thus "the function of a mufti was essentially private and consultative and so a fatwa was not legally binding (unless it was) utilised by a qadi and incorporated into his decision". Since this is the traditional position it is hard to understand why the law enforcement authorities appear to be so loath to enforce the law of the land, or the political parties to condemn the unlawful behaviour of the fatwa-baazies. Can it possibly be that even the concerned ministry is equally ignorant on this issue?

Whilst on the subject of fatwas one has oneself a clarification or two to request from "concerned quarters". Why is the Government not utilising its powers under the Special Powers Act section 16 or the Anti-Terrorist Act section 3 against the givers of illegal fatwas? Despite the public perception of these laws as black laws, these Acts continue to be retained (or newly promulgated) and used and justified on the grounds of State necessity. So it is a little surprising that in a situation which demonstrably calls for swift and uncompromising action the Government chooses to be so passive.

"Our initial benefactors are women but through them their families which necessarily includes men, thrive." Qualifies Babul, a young man of no more than 30 who is clearly dedicated to his work. "We have to show these women that they have a say in what happens in their lives, that they are human and equal to men". His words seemed unusual for a village based grassroots professional who was brought up in this same village among the women he helps. But, as he later tells me over a glass of sweet lime juice and fresh papaya from his tree behind his tin roofed house, more and more men are realising the strength in their wives work and education. This explained the relatively high enrollment of girls in the local Kazi Walliullah High School, the only school serving a number of villages in the area. Also remarkable were the number of girls clad in starched white shawls kameezes, their hair tied in two tightly oiled braids, including Babul's sister, who walked the 10 mile distance to attend the Kazi Mahabubullah College in Bhanga, the nearest town.

Men who are members of Proshika also form groups through which they keep up with their loans and talk collectively of solving problems the group or individuals might be facing. As I scribbled away furiously on my notepad, Kubat Matuoar, a member of Proshika since 1981, and General Secretary of Green Samiti, a small co-op of 18 members, told me how he used to be a landless labourer who earned 20 taka per day for over eight hours of strenuous work tilling someone else's field. By joining Proshika, he received a power tiller on loan, one he has since paid back fully, and also tilled the land Proshika attained in collaboration with the landowners.

The women were friendly and full of questions. Once started, each had a lot to say and ask. How could I write so quickly with my left hand ("the wrong hand")? Why was I taking notes on everything in what seemed to them scribbles? When told I was writing for a newspaper, they were hopeful, their big eyes filled with happiness.

"Tell them, apa", one of them said, "how well we are doing, we are women but we have worked to make our lives better, we are earning members of our families, just like our husbands. We know now that we are strongest, together."

Waving from my perch on the "rickshaw van", (which looks like a bicycle with a rectangular board to sit on attached to the back) ambling down the narrow and dusty village paths, I thought of the inspiring women I'd just spent the day with. Then it hit me. They had discovered the chief ingredient in the recipe for development, solidarity.

She was not alone. Some 30 per cent of FMLN guerrillas who demobilised under the peace accords were women. In defiance of their traditional role as mothers and wives, many Salvadoran women like Ayala took up arms to become combatants, radio operators, nurses and cooks during the civil war.

FMLN snipers were often women and many urban commandos were led by women, who aroused less suspicion and were more easily disguised than men.

"No-one was worth any more or any less than anyone else," says 28-year-old Ayala, who as a nurse performed amputations with a Swiss army knife and carried rucksack with 25 kilograms of medicine on her back.

From 1988, she was one of a handful of women members of the "Special Forces," a crack brigade of the rebels responsible for intelligence work. Her job was to identify areas of land which had been mined and to infiltrate military barracks to report on the number of soldiers and location of arms.

Many of the operations were high risk missions from which she thought she would not return. "They were suicide missions," she says. "It's a miracle that I'm still alive."

— Ain O Shishir Kendra

Empowering Rural Women

by A M Ahmed

WHAT does it mean to empower women in Bangladesh? The jargon of development professionals is often confusing, hiding the reality behind grand-sounding but meaningless words.

Poor rural women, themselves, may possess no understanding of the concept of empowerment but they know what it means in practice. Empowerment is freedom. Not unlimited freedom which can appear inconceivable, but relative freedom — from hunger, from ill-health, from homelessness. When these women start receiving education, they also begin to prize freedom from ignorance, from certain constraining social and family pressures, from forced choices.

NGOs throughout Bangladesh are increasingly working towards the empowerment of poor women. They do this not only because women are the most disadvantaged among the poor but primarily because releasing them from captivity will do more to free their families from poverty, ill-health and ignorance. This work is opposed only by those who have a vested interest in continuing their captivity and the oppression of the poor. While some ways can be argued as more effective than others, few people of goodwill disagree on the goals.

To understand the reality of empowerment, visit any rural group and listen to their own stories. Nobia Khatun as 35

Nowadays, Nobia's life is transformed. She and her family not only liberate themselves from the grinding poverty of their past but are increasingly able to act as more enlightened citizens able to assert their legal and democratic rights. Empowerment becomes reality.

Nobia herself is now more or less literate and acts as cashier not only for her group but for the self-managed Union Federation which RDRS promotes to assist other landless groups to combine and help support themselves. For someone who was once without knowledge and respect, she is now well regarded, and her advice to the members of a recently formed women's group in the village is well received.

Nobia is perhaps the most successful member of her group but all the women have similar stories of personal progress. The strength of the group is a mechanism for enabling empowerment of the individual woman members. As the women themselves become more capable and confident, their own scope widens.

Multiply this progress for thousands of women's groups across rural Bangladesh and you can sense a real power in action. The women and their families not only liberate themselves from the grinding poverty of their past but are increasingly able to act as more enlightened citizens able to assert their legal and democratic rights. Empowerment becomes reality.

Nobia Khatun (left) engaging in small trade selling biscuits in her village of Sattar Uttarpara



The abuse of women is a common syndrome all over the world.

husband would've agreed but I stopped him because she is too young and I want her to get an education and stand on her feet before she goes into another man's home."

Literacy is all pervasive. It is a tool to express one's self and relate it with others. Hence, an exercise in direct control over one's communication. Only literacy could have brought about enlightenment such as Zulekha Begum's.

Women like Zulekha and Sakina realise that they are an

year old whose husband abandoned her three years ago and was never heard from again. She joined Proshika after hearing about it from her neighbour, Babul who is a Proshika worker.

Proshika is not new to the NGO sphere. Mainly funded by the Canadian government, they've been in the country since its birth in 1971 and have 56 areas where they operate in Bangladesh. Proshika only works with the poorest of the poor.

T HE warm face and wide smile of Ana Ayala must have fooled many soldiers during El Salvador's 12-year civil war.

Ayala does not fit the stereotype of the macho Latin American guerrilla fighter. But from age 17, until the 1992 peace accords between the Salvadoran Government and rebels of the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) brought an end to conflict, 11 years of her life were dedicated to armed struggle.

She was not alone. Some

30 per cent of FMLN guerrillas who demobilised under the peace accords were women. In defiance of their traditional role as mothers and wives, many Salvadoran women like Ayala took up arms to become combatants, radio operators, nurses and cooks during the civil war.

Ayala now spends her days cooking and taking care of her eight-month-old baby and two-year-old daughter in the tiny two-room house which she shares with her husband in the village of San Jose Las Flores in northern El Salvador.

The metamorphosis from combatant to housewife has been painful for Ayala, who feels insecure without her M16 and unhappy with her new role in life.

"I'm bored with living in the same place all the time without being with lots of people," she says. "I feel isolated. I'm bored with doing the same thing every day, of cooking and looking after children."

She complains that her husband, who used to wash his own clothes and cook, now leaves all domestic chores for her.

"I do not want to be a housewife," Ayala says.

Various training programmes are available for demobilised troops, but few women want to become farmers, and the sewing and cooking courses offered have little appeal for the likes of Ayala.

Many of the operations were high risk missions from which she thought she would not return. "They were suicide missions," she says. "It's a miracle that I'm still alive."

Former women combatants are being politically annihilated," says veteran fighter Rebecca Palacios, 38, who spent 21 years in the FMLN.

and now runs the Melida Anaya Womens Movement, which deals with the plight of former women fighters.

One of the few women who rose to become a military commander, Palacios led 1,400 troops from 1981 to 1985, winning fame for introducing new ambushing techniques and disguising land mines inside the body of dead dogs. She learnt the tactics from reading about the Vietnam war.

Palacios' reintegration into civilian life has been helped by the positive attitude of her family who were delighted to welcome her back from the mountains. But some former combatants have been rejected by their families or have found that their families were killed in the war.

Ayala says that peace has brought long hours to reflect upon the friends and family she lost and the sacrifices she made.

Her family was murdered by members of the Salvadorean armed forces in a 1982 massacre. Her first husband, with whom she joined the guerrillas, was killed in combat in 1984.

Her only rest from battle was three months maternity leave after the birth of her first child in 1983. She fought until she was eight months pregnant and did not see her daughter for six years.

"I feel nostalgia because I lost all my family," Ayala says. "In civilian life you need to have family around. I think about all the people I will never see again, although you accept this because they were the ones who sacrificed their lives to get where we are now."

For Ayala and many other Salvadorean women ex-fighters, the killings may have stopped but the sacrifices continue. — GEMINI NEWS



Protesting 'fatwas' that perpetrate violence against women.