

# Freeing the Woman's Body: Central to Equality

CURRENTLY an animated discussion is going on all over the world on the subject of sex and feminism. Taslima Nasreen of Bangladesh has made a definite contribution in this field. Her forthright pronouncements regarding open and veiled discrimination against women have attracted wide international attention, especially because of the deliberately aggressive manner in which they have been made.

The feminist movement arose from the realization that woman was neglected, deprived, oppressed and harassed because of her sex. Women throughout the world are becoming increasingly aware of this fact. They are trying to assert their rights individually as well as collectively. They have clearly identified the body of the woman as of primary importance in this matter, without neglecting or belittling the importance of her mind.

Taslima Nasreen has spoken with feeling and logic about the need of the freedom of the woman's body. Naomi Wolf, a much discussed feminist writer of the west, is a vigorous supporter of the freedom of the woman's body. Explaining her stand she stated — equivocally, I think the sexual liberation is woman being able to say: this is my desire, and for men to know that they do not want sex to happen if they are not clear that her desire is happening too. Real liberation to me is a state in which if a woman does not want it then it is not going to happen.

Why is the question of the woman's bodily freedom so important? For one thing, in spite of the lyricism with which the woman's figure is generally invested she does exert a great influence on the thoughts, ideas and consciousness of the male in their totality. The woman's body has

some inexplicable charm and it is the body of the woman that preserves the continuity of the human race.

In spite of the differences in colour, nationality, caste or religious faiths the above is universally true. The irresistible attraction of the male for the female is partly due to natural and physical causes and partly due to traditional factors. Modern medical science has shown that the hormone difference between the male and the female exerts an influence or the characteristic features of both. The male hormones are by nature disquiet and restless. The female hormones, by contrast, are quieter and calmer. The ever increasing ambition of the male intensifies the restlessness of his hormones. A recent research study in the USA has come up with the finding that the sex urge or the libido of the ambitious male is particularly strong. The nature-induced restlessness of the male produces a definite impact on his conduct and behavioral pattern.

The male is capable of taking quick and firm decisions. He is also capable of revoking them as quickly and as definitively. But the female cannot do so. The woman takes a decision slowly, carefully, after considering the various angles of a particular issue. Her decision is arrived at by degrees, following a clear order and graded steps. The male takes instantaneous decisions. The difference in the decision making pattern of the male and the female often gives rise to imbalance in the field of day to day practical living. But, paradoxically, it also leads to a certain harmony and balance. If it were not so, the continuance of creation would have

been endangered. However, it is generally agreed that the male plays a crucial role when a quick decision is to be taken on some major issue, while the woman plays a vital role in arriving at a decision where a whole gamut of issues is involved, leading to far-reaching consequences.

Let us now take a look at the historical traditional factors. In the onward march of civilization with male, by virtue of leaps and bounds. But, quite interestingly, the same traditional factors that make the male declare that faithfulness is an ornament of the woman also make him a captive of the physical charms of the woman. There is only one way for man to come out of this situation. He cannot do so by merely showering on the woman kindness, sympathy or affection.

A proper and enlightened system of education can considerably help foster this attitude. We should, perhaps, draw attention to another point at this stage. The prevailing unwholesome attitude of the male toward the woman is a product of the erosion of his moral values. If it is not the result, we think, of any conscious aggressive and domineering tendency on his part. For, knowing full well that the

Anyway, it is quite clear that the issue of the independence and sovereignty of the woman's body is central to the feminist movement. We may, at this stage, draw attention to another significant development in the modern world. Along with the increase in crimes connected with money and riches, crimes connected with the rape and abuse of women have increased phenomenally, making a mockery of the various laws enacted by today's male-dominated society. The feminists are constantly drawing attention of all concerned to this deplorable state of affairs. However, at a time when the concept that any sexual union disliked or disapproved of by the woman is to be considered as rape was gaining ground the publication of Katie Roiphe's book *The Morning After* came as a shock and threat to the feminist movement.

By and large the male-dominated society of today sees in the feminist movement a desire to promote sexual promiscuity. The male still clings to the age-old traditional views and insists on the purity of the woman, blandly overlooking sexual lapses, even of the grossest kind, on his own part. He finds nothing wrong in the application of the double standard. In such a situation Katie Roiphe observed that she found the furore raised over the issue of rape in the course of dating exaggerated and not justified. She said that the facts and reports gathered by her pointed out that the charges were mostly silly rumours and the incidents were more in the nature of stupid and unpleasant sexual experience rather than rape. Her observation made the feminists furious. Hundreds of

girl students including her own classmates at Princeton embarked on a signature campaign protesting against her statement. Katie received many letters harshly criticizing her for what she said. Some even wished that she herself would be raped and find out to her cost what was what.

There is no denying the fact that the woman is neglected and oppressed and deprived of her legitimate rights. There may be certain weaknesses in the militant pronouncements made by some feminists but the main tenor of what they say is time and unassailable. Here it will be appropriate to refer to what a reputed British — said about Naomi Wolf's book *Fire with Fire*. He said, her book is not perfect. It is repetitive, not all her arguments are convincing. But *Fire with Fire*, is an energetic, intelligent work, full of good sense and straight talk. We think many in Bangladesh, feminists or not, feel the same way about Taslima's writings.

For a time Katie Roiphe's book seemed to have weakened the feminist movement but it soon blew over. Naomi Wolf said, 'That was really great because it showed that women could disagree and still be on the same side ... with togetherness.'

We would like to conclude this brief write-up on sex and feminism by expressing our agreement with Erica Jong, another well-known feminist writer, when she says the new movement can be a mass movement. Let us hope that a new society will shortly emerge where the woman will enjoy all the rights that a male enjoys on an equal standing, both physical and intellectual, not as a matter of grace or concession but as her legitimate prerogative.



**Taslima Nasreen:** Bangladeshi poet and columnist, a fearless champion of women's liberation in the broadest sense. She has incurred the particular wrath of religious fanatics and male chauvinists because of her exposure of the wily ways by which they try to keep the women in chains and under their domination. She is equally admired and reviled for her writings. Many, however, like her poems better than her columns.



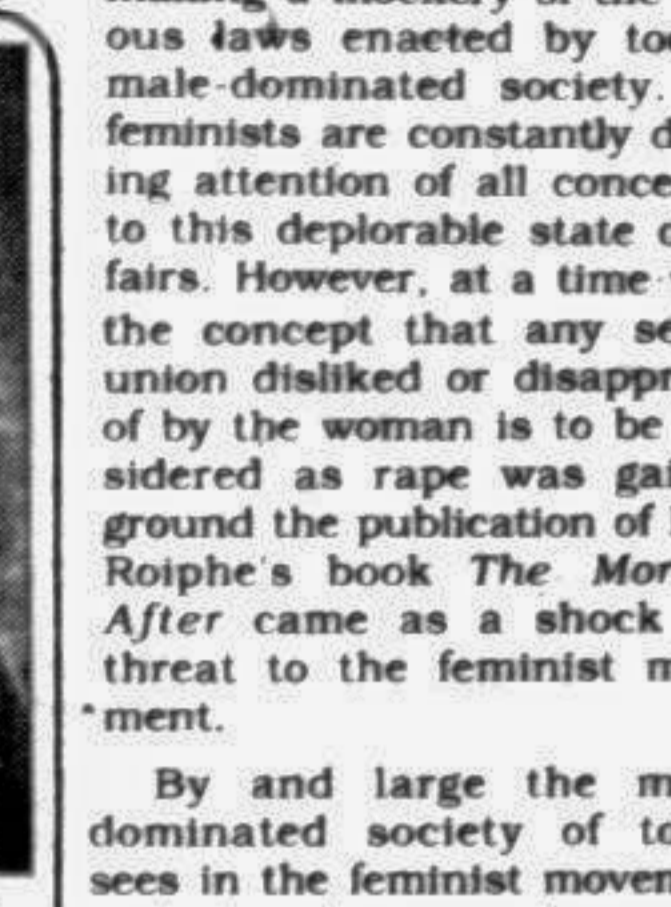
**Katie Roiphe:** who studied at Princeton created a stormy controversy when she published her book *The Morning After*: sex, fear and feminism on campus where she underplayed the subject of date rape. Her book has been commented on as 'a thin book with thinner argument, but written by youth and youth is attractive.'



**Erica Jong:** Well-known feminist writer, author of the famous book *Fear of Flying*. For the past twenty years she has found herself attacked as a pornographer, lambasted as a bad feminist for taking the common-sense view that women are brain and women are also body.



**Naomi Wolf:** a strong proponent of the freedom of the woman's body. She writes forcefully and without any inhibition on sex and feminism. While speaking of the man-woman physical relationship she says with complete candour, 'Male's sexual attention is the sun in which I bloom. Her books' Beauty Myth and *Fire with Fire* have been highly acclaimed by feminists all over the world.



woman is an indispensable partner of his in the process of creation, how could he sensibly do anything that might lead to her destruction? His liberation did not lie that way. On the contrary, it would spell his ruin.

All photographs: Soltkat Chowdhury

## Laws that Permit Inequality

by Nazmun Ara Sultana

BANGLADESH is a developing country where half of the population is woman. Though in the constitution of this country in articles 10, 19, 28 and 29 the equality of both the male and female in all spheres of life has been guaranteed and many special laws have been enacted to safeguard the interest of women. In practice, the womenfolk of Bangladesh face great discrimination in all spheres of life. Some of the inequalities between the sexes which the laws of our country themselves permit may be mentioned.

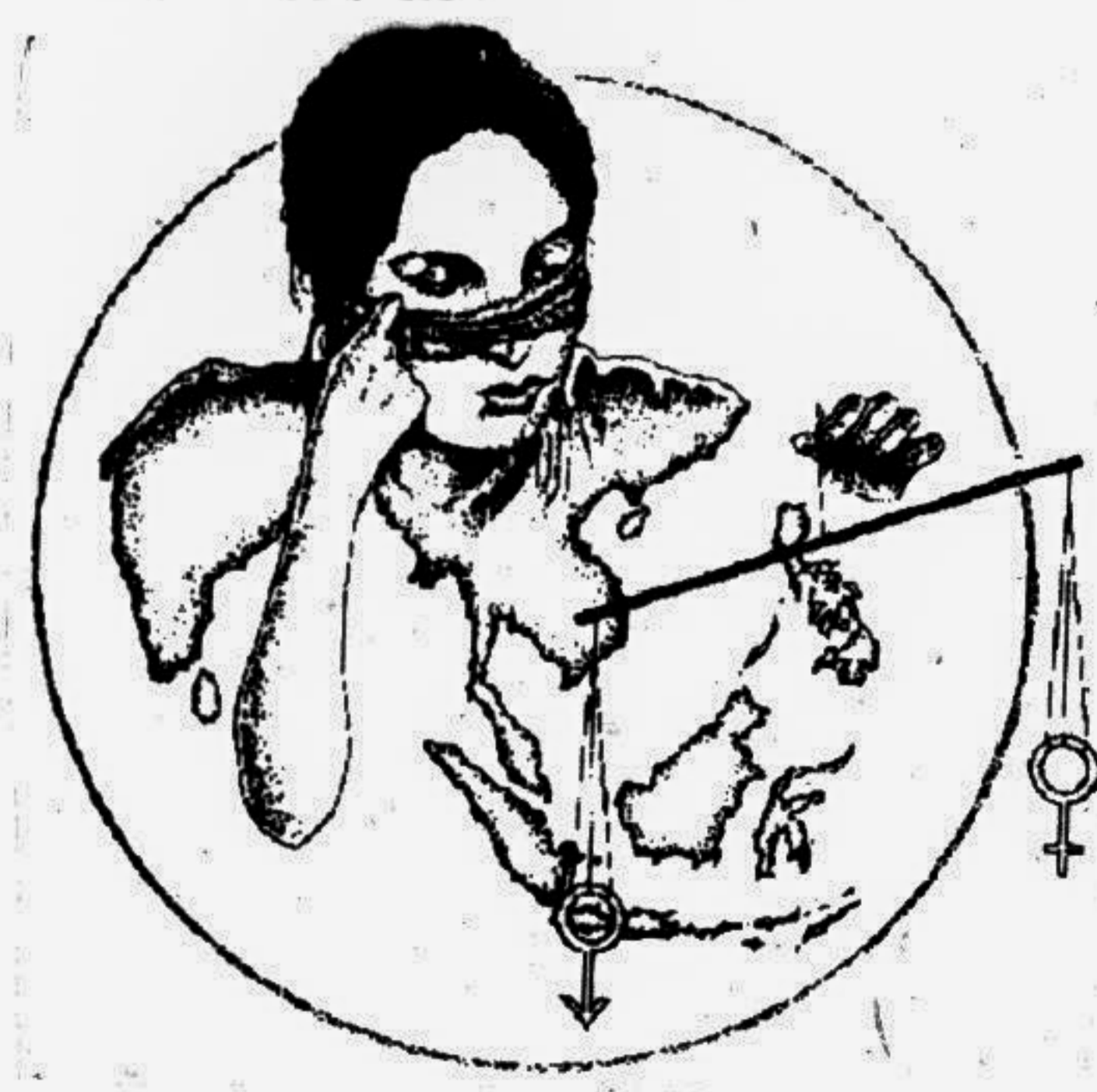
The law of inheritance, which is now prevailing in our country allows much discrimination between male and female. According to our Muslim law of inheritance the female gets 1/2 of the share of the male of her status. At the death of father and mother the daughter gets 1/2 of the share of the son. At the death of husband the wife gets 1/4 the share of the property left by her husband while at the death of the wife the husband gets 1/2 the share of the property left by his wife. If a man dies leaving son or sons only the son or sons get the entire property left by their parents. But if a man dies leaving daughters only the daughters, if more than one in number, together get only 1/3rd share of the property left by their parents and where the number of daughter is one only she gets only 1/2 of the property left by her parents.

The remaining share of the property of the parents of these daughters go to the other distant relations of the parents according to our Muslim law of inheritance. In the case of Hindu law of inheritance, the situation is much worse. The Hindu daughters do not get any share of the property of their parents at their death.

In our country the law permits the husband to divorce his wife at any time at his sweet will without any reason and without intervention of the court. But a battered or otherwise tortured wife cannot divorce her cruel husband even when it becomes a must without intervention of the court, if she was not delegated with that power by her husband at the time of marriage or afterwards.

In our country, at present also, the law permits polygamy for a man. A man can keep several wives at a time. Though by a recent enactment the subsequent marriage by a husband during the subsistence of his previous marriage without the permission of Arbitration

Council has been made punishable with two years imprisonment only, these subsequent marriages of the husbands have not been made illegal and void by any law. A female, however, in no case is permitted to marry a second husband during the subsistence of her previous marriage. If she does so she not only becomes liable to 7 years imprisonment, but her subsequent marriage also is treated as illegal and void. We, the womenfolk of Bangladesh do not say that the women also should be permitted to keep more than one husband at a time, but we certainly say that the laws of Bangladesh should be amended so that in no case the male can divorce his wife without the intervention of the court and shall also not be



Where the law allows an imbalance in justice photo: APWLD (The Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development)

capable and willing to be the guardian and custodian of her minor children, the law does not permit her to be the guardian of her minor children and to remain their custodian after the above mentioned age limit.

Apart from these inequalities between male and female of our country guaranteed by laws there are many other inequalities between the sexes recognized and established by our social customs, traditions, superstitions etc.

Women are also targets of increased violence. This violence is multifaceted: physical, sexual, familial, social and psychological. Every year, in Bangladesh, thousands of women are being murdered

victims of rape. But these victims, for no fault of their own, are not accepted by our society normally. In this context it should also be mentioned that in the present socio-economic condition of the country and also in the present procedural laws of the country it is very hard for a victim of rape to prove her case before a court of law and to get the offender adequately punished.

Several women organisations of our country viz, 'Bangladesh Mahila Parishad', 'Jatiya Mahila Sangstha', 'Mohila Aynjibay Federation' etc are organising seminars, conferences, workshops etc, on gender equality and other related subjects. In this context it should be mentioned here that the Bangladesh government, by this time, has promulgated some special laws to safeguard the interest of woman. These are: The Muslim Family Laws Ordinance, 1961; The Dowry Prohibition Act 1980; The Child Marriage Restraint Act; The Cruelty to Women (Deterrent Punishment) Ordinance 1983; The Family Court Ordinance 1984.

These laws, no doubt, were enacted to benefit the womenfolk of the country. But in reality women in this country are getting very little benefit of these special laws in their favour. A vast portion of the womenfolk of Bangladesh have even remained ignorant of these special laws in their favour. Different women organisations and also some other voluntary organisations like Human-rights Society etc have been, of course, taking various measures to make these laws more accessible to ignorant and illiterate women. In this connection I like to suggest that these voluntary NGOs may come forward together to undertake a massive programme of educating the ignorant women of Bangladesh in their legal rights along with the programmes of changing the above mentioned unjust laws and social system and traditions. Legal education, no doubt, is an important strategy in the improvement of women, for it creates awareness in them relating to their rights. In the present socio-economic condition of our country one of the important tasks of these women and voluntary organisation should be to raise women's consciousness so that they can wave their hands and protect all violence against them and also can help remove all inequalities between male and female.

Nazmun Ara Sultana is a District and Session Judge and President of Bangladesh Women Judges Association.

## Is Education an Impediment to Employment?

by Mallika Wanigasundara

IN Sri Lanka this seems to be how it is turning out for low-income people, especially women.

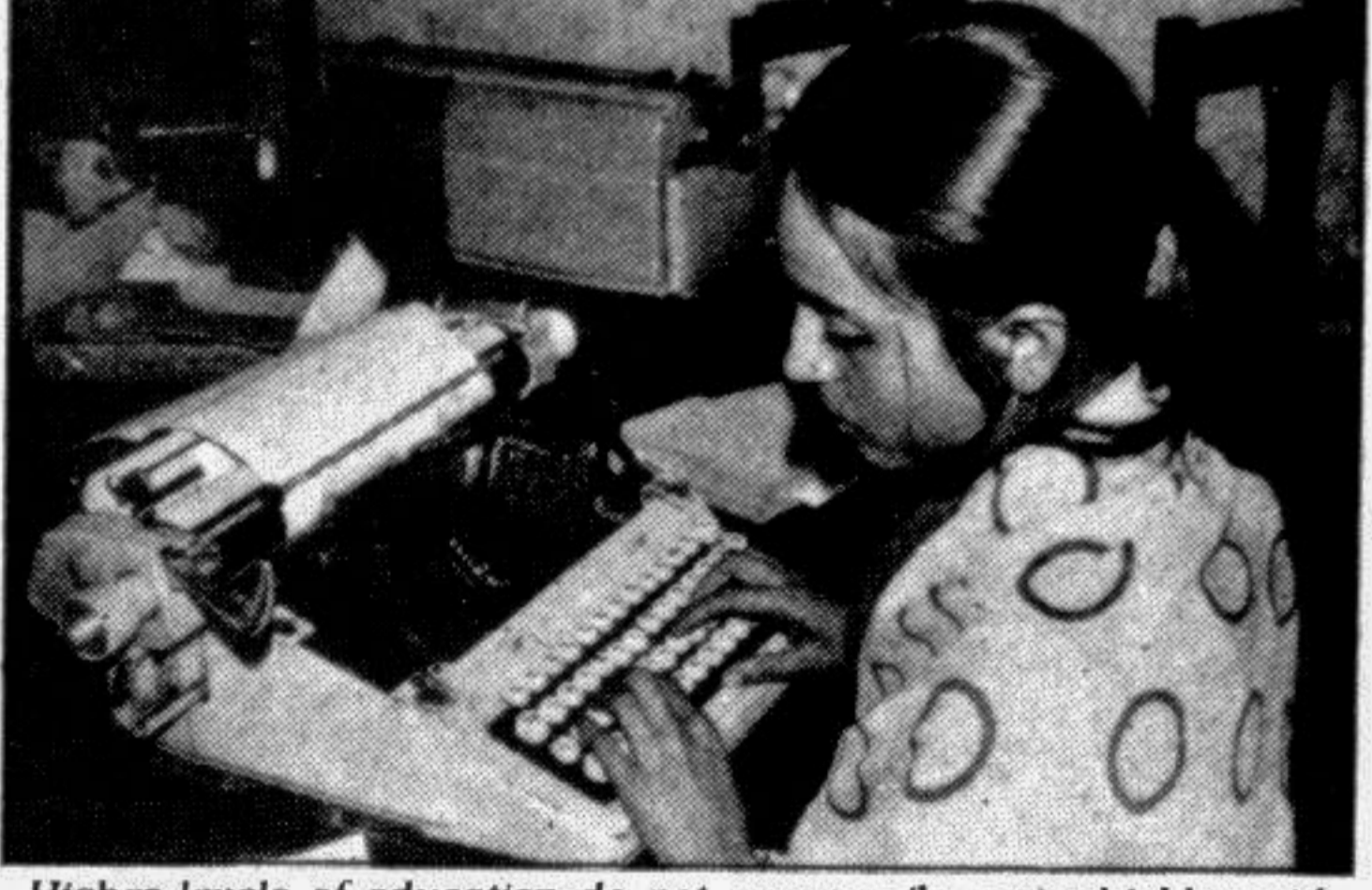
Dr. Swarna Jayaweera, one of the country's foremost researchers on women, called attention to this perturbing trend at the Fourth National Convention of Women's Studies held recently by the Centre for Women's Research (CENWOR).

She pointed out that Sri Lanka offers state-paid education, giving the poor access to the schooling which they hope will give them entree to jobs and a better life.

Gender disparity in enrolment rates has also been virtually eliminated since the 1960s, with women making up around 58 per cent of senior secondary school enrolment and 40 per cent of university enrolment.

Curiously, however, unemployment rates have risen to a high 23.4 per cent for women in 1990, or more than double the men's 9.1 per cent.

Most vulnerable to unemployment were women with secondary — education 35.6 per cent of women with GCE O levels and 44.9 per cent of those with GCE A levels were unemployed while the figures



Higher levels of education do not necessarily mean highly paid jobs for women from lower income groups photo: Moncef Bouhafa — Unicef

women and employed or unemployed men.

She explained that the women aspire to a higher level of jobs but do not get them. They are finally compelled to take casual, semi-skilled assembly, line or other marginalized jobs, but many continue to remain in the labour reserve.

On the other hand, women from affluent and middle-class families and those who are able to take economically rewarding university courses are able to move upward to higher socio-economic strata.

Another speaker at the CENWOR convention was Kumud Sharma, director of the Centre for Women's Development Studies in New Delhi, who spoke on the triangular relationship between the state, the labour market and women.

She said that in pursuing a liberalized export market-led model of development, the state seems to have abdicated its role as provider of social support and welfare. This has been especially detrimental to marginalized groups, foremost of whom are women.

Even if equality of the sexes is legislated, serious implementation of the law has been wanting, said Ms. Sharma.

She deplored the fact that there are attempts in India to dilute whatever benefits exist at present. For instance, there was a proposal to withhold benefits from parents with more than two children, such as making them ineligible to stand for Parliament.

Women vigorously and successfully opposed this proposal, only to face other anti-women schemes in the pipeline, said Ms. Sharma.

However, there are also encouraging developments. One is the provision under the local government system that one-third of representatives of vil-

lage-level assemblies should be women.

For Noeleen Heyzer, socio-economic development in general and raising women's status in particular can be achieved by empowering women.

This means giving women equal access as the men to the job market, equal wages and proper working conditions and equal social benefits such as health care, education, credit, training and opportunities to enrich one's life. It also means that the men should share household responsibilities.

With better health care and education and a greater sense of fulfillment, women will be better equipped to deal with the problems of family survival, she said.

Ms. Heyzer is director of the Women's Programme, Asia-Pacific Development Centre in Kuala Lumpur. She is extensively involved in preparations for the Fourth World Conference on Women to be held in Beijing in 1995, as one of two focal persons for non-government organizations (NGOs) in the Asia-Pacific region.

Going by the four capitalist models of growth in the region, she analyzed how women fared differently in these economies — high economic growth models like Japan and South Korea, fluctuating economies like the Southeast Asian countries, low-growth economies like Sri Lanka but with high investment in social welfare, and low-growth economies like Bangladesh with correspondingly low investment in social development.

She described what happens when cutbacks are made in social expenditure under what has come to be called structural adjustment. When family incomes are squeezed with the removal of subsidies, resulting in higher food and fuel prices, it is the women who have to find food for the family, and money for the medicines that are no longer available in state health care systems, she said.

In such a situation, children suffer from malnutrition and fall sick more often, imposing a greater burden on mothers who have to look after old people as well. And since most women the world over are in the low-paid informal sector, they lose out on wages as they have to stay away from work.

Ms. Heyzer recommended formulating alternative models of development to be focused on human development within the framework of sustainable economic growth.

No matter what you think your faults are, no matter what they say you have done wrong, it does not give another person the right or the justification to assault you, or use mental cruelty. There is no excuse for it. Full stop.

Things will only begin to change if there is more awareness of domestic violence. Women have to be believed and protected by law. Men who would be forced to do something about it.

Why aren't people wondering what causes men to be violent instead of looking for what it is in women that provokes the violence?

**It is not our fault**

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