



## What Price Hippocrates?

A mother of 6 children who had already had several miscarriages, was taken for the delivery of her seventh child to a rural health centre. The attendants gave her primary health care, and the doctor advised that because of complications the family should take her to the district medical hospital, the nearest one being three and a half miles away. In spite of her having reached full term, the

health centre offered her no transport facility. The pregnant woman was taken at 9.30 at night by van, and when she reached the hospital at 7.45 the next morning, the doctor found her in a sweaty and dirty state. She asked the staff to sponge and clean the patient. When the doctor came back two and a half hours later she found the patient dead! No explanations were given for her death. The woman may

— *Ain O Salish Kendra*

## "The Trees are like Our Children"

by A M Ahmed



"THE trees are like our children," a caretaker in Panchagarh says. "We help them to grow up, and then they will help us in return, by giving fruits and firewood." In the 1993-94 season, RDRS facilitated the planting of 4,000,000 trees both through direct plantation and encouraging its group members to run nurseries and plant in their homestead.

Tree planting is a major component of RDRS programme activities. RDRS Panchagarh Project introduced a relatively new concept in tree planting, which is turning out to be highly successful. Group

or Federations of poor people (often landless people), take lease of roadside and public land and assume responsibility for planting. Annual rent is paid to the local authority, but most of the income from fruits and timber is used for development activities. For once, poor people directly benefit from the tree plantation. In this way 277 kilometres of road were leased in Panchagarh in 1993; the survival rate of the trees is 99 per cent.

RDRS encourages households, groups and federations to plant trees on both homestead land, as well as roadsides and public land leased from local government. The large

plantation schemes on roadsides, schoolgrounds and embankments are carried out by landless labourers employed and supervised by RDRS. The tree plantation programme supports some 1,240 destitute women who are appointed as caretakers. The women, often widows or divorcees, are paid with wheat supplied by the WFP through the Government's Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation.

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DEVELOPMENT NGOs are opening up significant employment opportunities for women in rural Bangladesh. This is driven both by the sheer survival need for women to earn a cash income and by explicit attempts on the part of NGOs to hire more women. The number of women employed as development field workers in Bangladesh exceeds 100,000 and NGO are responsible for an increasing share of that number; BRAC alone hires over 19,000 teachers to run its non-formal rural primary schools.

A study on women NGO workers in Bangladesh, carried out three years ago, indicated that most of these women viewed their job as a job and not a crusade. For them, working life was a part of life which they maintained in constant struggle with their responsibilities as daughters, wives and mothers. It is no surprise therefore that women in such organisations are concerned with the nuts and bolts of organisational life — salary levels, leave, benefits, and work-family balance. Organizations question their dedication to the cause and compare them to their male counterparts who have none of the familial baggage to contend with. This however, is rarely weighed into the equation and instead, women face glass walls around them. Their formal upward social mobility is thwarted and their lateral movement into informal decision-making circles is circumscribed.

What happens when we encounter exceptions to the rule? There are many such pioneers — those who made it, those who defied the odds — whom women reasonably hold up for adulation and emulation. While publicly men acquiesce in the admiration, to many, such women are frightening because they challenge the enduring bastion of male privilege embodied in norms of acceptable social behavior, actions and ambitions. The story of Shobha Rani Mondal is instructive both because it challenges traditional beliefs about what women can and cannot do in this society but also because it painfully demonstrates the enduring obstinacy of male privilege and power. This serves as a bitter reality check on our collection of successful "women and development"

great glass skyscraper opposite the United Nations headquarters; but every year she goes back to her island in Lake Victoria, fetching water and firewood, cooking and tilling the fields.

"I am a rural woman in an artificial setting," she says. "My mother cannot believe that I live so high in the sky. This is the unreal world, here in New York, it is the real world that I go back to in Ukerewe Island."

When development experts talk about women having to carry water, that is something that I experience. When people talk about women being weak, I think of my mother. She is 72 years old and still works more than 16 hours a day. She brought me and made me live. How can I describe her as weak? She is strong; she is a hero."

Most of the development experts never talk to the women," says Mrs Mongella. They talk to the people of authority in the villages — the men — who just go "blah-blah". Who talks to my mother?

Women remain the pillars and sustainers of the economic systems of many developing countries — so there is no way that sustainable development can be achieved without placing them in the mainstream of economic planning."

### The Benefits of Recognition

Women's economic contribution must be recognized, she says. The must be able to own land and have access to credit — both largely denied to them. There needs to be more emphasis on women's education, and more teaching of equality to both boys and girls. And they need more power to make decisions, in the family, in the community, in government — and in the United Nations.

Giving a proper priority to women would increase food production (since they are the farmers), safeguard the environment (because they are its main champions), benefit families (as they devote more of their income to children) and slow population growth (since improving the welfare of women is the most effective birth control).

Gertrude Mongella hopes that next year's conference will mark a step away from discussing 'women's issues' in isolation — and therefore marginalizing them — to recognizing that nothing can be achieved unless women's potential is realized. — *Our Planet*

one billion illiterates are women. Two-thirds of the children in developing countries who either never start school or drop out early are girls. And this is only the beginning. Women also lose out in nutrition and health care — Amartya Sen, the Harvard economist, estimates that there are some 100 million women missing from the developing world, women who have died early because of such discrimination.

The consequences of inequity may be harshest in

the poorest countries, but Gertrude Mongella says that it is merely a matter of degree. "No country is developed for women," she says. The Human Development Report for The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) confirms that women receive less education and income than men in both rich and poor countries.

### An Artificial World

Mrs Mongella herself lives in both rich and poor worlds. For most of her time she is based on the twelfth storey of a

## One Step Forward and Two Steps Back

by Aruna Rao

stories as we move toward the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995.

"We were very poor," she said recalling her childhood years. "Often, we didn't have enough to eat. Whatever we had, my mother always gave more to my brothers. I always felt this was an injustice." When Shobha's family wanted her to quit school because her increased qualifications computed into a higher dowry to be paid out by her family for a groom whom they felt would have to be better qualified (and what use was it anyway?), she vowed never to ask anyone for money. And she never has.

Nothing about her childhood is extraordinary for a poor family in rural Bangladesh. Shobha Rani, grew up in Nagarpur thana in Tangail, the youngest of four children. Initially, kept from going to school because it was seen as a waste of time and precious resources, she was allowed the luxury when her brother made it a precondition for his attendance. When her father died, she was eleven and was forced to take up part-time work as a domestic servant to earn her keep. She completed her education in stages, first till Class VIII and then after a gap of 7-8 years, she passed her Senior School Certificate examination. Her elder sister was married off at the age of fourteen to a poor carpenter who did not earn enough to support his family of four girls.

At the age of eighteen, she joined a nation-wide loan and rural development programme. After training in credit management, she took up work in the loan programme. She earned one taka as commission for every five hundred loans. She walked between 10-20 miles every day visiting the 24 village groups that fell within her jurisdiction. Because of her leadership qualities, she rose quickly to the post of Bhadra union committee president and then presi-

dent of Nagarpur thana in the programme.

To the morols' (rich and powerful members in the community), she was a "lost" woman and they did not hesitate to demand sexual favours from her. When she refused, shallshishes were organized in which she was accused of setting a bad moral example by going out of the home and disobeying her elders. Each time, when doubt was cast on her integrity, she defended herself and the poor group members exposed the false accusations for what they were. Support from the union parishad chairman who knew her work also helped establish her reputation. Still, the morols demanded that she be accountable to them for her actions. "I'll stop all my work if you will give my mother one thousand taka every month (the amount she earned and used to support her family)," Shobha told them. "Till then, I'll continue working."

In 1982, after three years with this programme, she came in contact with another national rural development NGO. The field worker for that NGO based at the Nagarpur area development office knew of her reputation and wanted her to join as a volunteer. Shobha, disillusioned by what

she saw as corruption within the management of the programme she was involved in, agreed to observe a human development training course for group members offered by the other NGO. She liked what she saw. Still, she was reluctant to join because it would mean starting at the bottom and because they could not pay her a salary. "How much do you need?" asked the field worker? "Three hundred would be enough," she replied.

With this new job, opposition against her escalated. Her family members were furious that she accepted a much lower salary than what she previously earned and did not understand her work. At the time, this NGO had no credit programme and much of Shobha's work involved organising mainly male groups in the evenings and leading these groups in protest actions including gheraoing the Union Parishad chairman for corruption on Food for Work programs. Her life was threatened by local thugs of the powerful political parties for questioning and complicating business as usual practices and organizing workers. Every time, the group members came to Shobha's defense.

Over a period of twelve years Shobha has risen from a volunteer field organizer to manager of an area. Currently, she is one of only six women in her position. While Shobha's story shines bright with the success of her crusades, it belies a dark underbelly of an organisational culture that undervalues women's experience and women's voices. Women are grossly outnumbered at decision making levels and women who have pulled themselves up by their bootstraps are bypassed in a growing managerial culture that values a university education. At the field level, men steeped in traditional cultural norms and trappings of patriarchy are in positions of power over women. There is little organi-

sational experience of men and women working together and these social norms are yet to be forged. Strong and articulate women are perceived as threats and inventive ways are created to undercut their efficiency and reputation in a system that relies on line command in decision making and in a culture where rumors quickly become fact.

"I tell it like it is," says Shobha. "That's my fault." That is a characteristic not easily accepted by her male colleagues and supervisors. Now, she is dead-ended and harassed in a professional situation she finds increasingly difficult to continue. None of these problems are unique to any one organization nor to Bangladesh as a whole. They reflect the inevitable struggles that surface in a process of cultural change. To deal with them requires acknowledging and dislodging patriarchal values that are accepted as the norm and that pervade all forms of organization. Perhaps they are the most difficult to deal with because they touch individuals where it hurts the most: at the core of one's personal values beliefs and behaviors. While the nature of the struggle will change as more and more women enter organizational life, equity is not an automatic outcome.

"Today, I am established in society and I am doing a lot of good work," says Shobha. "I stayed honest all through my life. No one can question my integrity." But what a price to pay and continuing paying! Today, Shobha is thirty-three years old but has borne the burdens of a life twice that long. Do we hold her up for emulation and adulation? Yes, certainly. But what else does her story tell us? Why does she find herself in a glass cage with the walls closing in?

The author is a Consultant to BRAC. Formerly she worked with the Population Council, based in Bangkok, Thailand.

**Corrigendum**  
There was a misspelling in line 7 of the third paragraph of the article 'Intervening Marriage and Hila' published on June 9, 1994. The word printed as 'ahsan' within the parentheses should read 'hasan'. The line, therefore, starts 'The hasan form of talaq required the husband to make a single pronouncement over a period of three months...').

## Stories of Struggle to Rise above Constrained Circumstances

### BOOK REVIEW

**Infinite Variety : Women in Society and Literature**

Edited by  
Firdaus Azim and  
Niaz Zaman

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Reviewed by  
Nancy Wong



the account of how women journalists manage to carve a niche for themselves in an area secured by men in a male dominated society. Women in this sphere of activity are twice disadvantaged by their gender. There is a paper by a young woman journalist who gave personal encounters of the obstacles in her path in "contemporary" society. There are many and some quite formidable. The tale told by Noorjahan Murshid is all the more striking, for this brave pioneer started a journal, "Edesh-Ekal" some decades ago where women's career opportunities were more or less restricted to the cloistered walls of schools or universities. "My Experiences as an Editor of a Bangla Magazine" is the sad and poignant "confessions" of a woman editor who despite great odds, struggled to keep her journalistic venture afloat. One of the aims of "Edesh-Ekal" was to promote equality among women and men as well as to highlight the exploitation of women (especially among the poor) in order to improve their lot in life. Set in the post-liberation period, this personal account is laced with gentle humour and a unique ability to laugh at her business blunders arising out of inexplicable twists.

Another jewel of a piece is

are well educated from middle and upper middle classes in this part of the world (justly) bemoan their constricted lifestyle and narrow mindedness of a male dominated society, articles from their Western sisters show that only a century ago their status was no different.

Shireen Huq's article on "Rights of the Women's Movement" gives useful glimpses of women's battle for their causes in England and America. It is interesting to note that "The Vindication of the Rights of Women" was published three years after the French Revolution, the aftermath of which revealed that property, voting and citizenship rights of women who had fought side by side with men during the upheaval; had yet to be realized.

Apart from contributions from faraway Scotland detailing the dynamic Scottish experience in asserting its own unique Gaelic language and culture against a backdrop of strong English "cultural imperialism", Sri Lanka and India, the bulk of articles concentrates on the rich Bengal heritage of women authors espousing their causes in chapters such as "Images of Women in Women's Fiction in Bangla" by Humayun Azad. Readers will find it an eye

opener to the oppression and bullying which goes on beneath a veneer of benign paternalism. There are other articles detailing a wide range of Bengali fiction written by women over a long period of time, some depicting the concept of the ideal woman as being obedient wife, loving mother and subservient daughter; with others showing the central female figure as struggling against all odds in a male dominated society to assert her own identity.

An analysis of Eliza Fay's "Original Letters from India" by Fakrul Alam is an enlightening, incisive and comprehensive work on the social milieu of the British in Calcutta during the 18th century. Fay was not an outstanding figure of her times nor were her achievements of an extraordinary nature as to earn her a place in the annals of feminist literature; but through Alam's critique, readers appreciate her indomitable spirit in "going it alone" after a failed marriage with a barrister who succumbed to the trappings of a privileged colonial society and grew dissatisfied with that kind of lifestyle. By her example of bouncing back time and again after unsuccessful commercial ventures, personal misfortune, and returning to Calcutta to try her luck, Fay encouraged women of her days that they too can survive and even prosper on their own if they have the guts and perseverance.

This enthusiastic letter writer left behind a legacy of sharp observations of prevailing mores of English society in colonial Calcutta of the 18th century, riveting accounts of her adventurous travels through various parts of India laced with humour in the face of unorthodox modes of transport and unexpected obstacles. Although bereft of a tertiary education, Fay was highly rated as a writer by no less an author than E M Forster, of "Passage to India" fame.

"Infinite Variety" is a series of learned and well researched articles on women's lowly status in an oppressive society and their struggles to rise above their constrained circumstances. Some are highly illuminating and presented in a palatable manner while there are others which tend to be turgid and over scholarly. It appeals to a wide cross section of readers.

### Interview with Gertrude Mongella

## Who Talks to my Mother?

by Geoffrey Lean



The secret of women is that the status quo does not have much to offer us. So when we decide to fight for our rights and the environment, we have nothing to lose.'

What Mrs Mongella — who is the Tanzanian cabinet — now wants to do is to help her father's philosophy, extremely rare in her teens, triumph over her uncle's, which remains prevalent even now. She is to be Secretary General of next year's Fourth World Conference on Women, in Beijing.

Women Lose out

Even today, as she points out, two-thirds of the world's