

It is a Dire Situation

by Salma Sobhan

WE have been, in Bangladesh, so exercised by Senator Harkin's proposed bill on Child Labour that a point of great significance has been overlooked by all of us. The fact that we actually got to hear of it, so many months ago. The draft bill seeks to ban exports into the US which are even partly the result of child labour as in the export oriented garments industry in Bangladesh. Organisations working on issues of children's rights have for different reasons been concerned about the impact of this bill. Memoranda have been prepared, US Embassy officials have been lobbied, activists have been mobilised in the US in fact all concerned parties have been active. But this activity has only been possible because we got to hear of the proposed bill in the first place. And that we did owe not a little to the policy of transparency which requires that bills be discussed and debated not only in the Congress but in public as well. The procedure also recognises the

rights of those likely to be affected to be heard. The contrast here with the bill proposed by MP Ms Farida Rahman is quite striking.

Let us forget that though the 'Harkin's bill' will have significant impact on us in Bangladesh, the bill is not specifically aimed at us. Yet our views have been given space. The amendment to the Muslim Family Laws Ordinance 1961 is something that is highly pertinent to women yet it was introduced totally without dialogue or consultation. At that time initiatives taken by the women's movement aired the issue and there was some discussion. It was referred to a special committee. After that silence, a few days ago the Bill was tabled. At that juncture the Law Minister was reported as saying he had not yet got round to looking through it! That in itself is a fairly dire situation. But the question we want to raise is more fundamental.

Why is it that we never get to hear of any proposed legislative changes until these are being approved. Why is it not considered essential for the public to be involved in a rational debate? Take the 'NGO' draft act — a draft was gazetted by a committee of four for discussion. But for a fortunate leak, no one would have been aware of the drastic curtailment of freedom of association which this was likely to cause.

Following an outcry if provisions were withdrawn and once again the government preferred to put the blame on a few individuals rather than examine the non-transparent way in which such an Act was likely to be introduced. There is of course no guarantee that the draft act will not surface again. At another time the establishment will undoubtedly be able to give it surreptitious blessing.

However this is not all. A group of persons are seeking an amendment to the Penal

Code. One gathers that a bill spelling this out has placed in the House some time ago. The representatives of this group have been apparently biding their time for an appropriate moment when having whipped up public hysteria they could force a passage of the bill. This attempt to pervert the democratic process by demagoguery needs to be exposed. And our members of parliament need to learn that their duties as parliamentarians do not end with their successful return to office. Nor is their mandate fulfilled by the voting of goodies to their constituents. Their duty is to safeguard the democratic process and to engage in a consultation with their constituency to gather consensus on any changes of concern to the citizens of Bangladesh. Dhaka Muslim was reputed to be so transparent as to be invisible. This is not something that one sees as desirable for the legislative process.

The writer is executive director, ASK, a human rights and legal aid centre.

Women in the Telangana Struggle

by Azfar Hussain

of the moment, of the milieu

This column, introduced today and now scheduled to appear fortnightly, is intended to bring to the fore women's issues, initiatives and insights envisaged and demonstrated in various parts of the world including Bangladesh. How women have fought and struggled for their own rights and independence, how they have achieved successes or faced failures, how they have envisioned their future — all these, *inter alia*, will be related from time to time with an accompanying account of necessary insights and lessons. We welcome our readers and writers to contribute to this column.



the struggle was carried out in 4000 villages with the consequence that the administrative machinery of the Nizam was replaced by the newly formed Gram Rajyas. In Penikonda in

the Hujurnagar Taluk, as many as 200 women, armed with whatever punitive instruments they could grab, chased the police out of the village. In Appajipet in Nalgonda, the entire womenfolk of the village encircled the police van carrying away the three Andhra Maha Sabha workers, attacked the police with wooden pestles and pots of chilli powder and finally forced them to release the leaders. The Andhra Mahila Sangam entered the fight against Section 144 and for its right to exist and function as the democratic organisation of Andhra women. Women's indirect participation in the struggle was in the form of extending material and moral support to the armed peasantry.

It was observed that with the participation of, and assistance from, women, the struggle was gaining such a momentum which otherwise would not have been possible. Had it only been a male-dominated struggle, much of its strategic importance would have been lost; for, the landlords were befuddled and they experienced a strategic *peripetia* at the organised energy of the womenfolk ready to be unleashed. However, the movement could not finally openly accommodate space for women. With its success achieved only partially, women were asked to go back into their families. While the struggle went on, to an extent, the social barriers between men and women, it is also true that women were viewed as mainly responsible for its problems. Swarajyam who is a legend of the movement maintains: 'Our pain was not so much because of the difficulties we had to face but because of the scandals. When husbands were in jail and women were in forests after retreat from the plain areas, some used our mistakes. We had to bear the brunt'.

Indeed, the Telangana struggle illustrated that the potentials and power of women, if organised even for guerrilla warfare, can achieve a force and fire which otherwise would not have been possible. But, then, it appears that mere warfare cannot yield positive changes in the life of women who are, despite their contributions, misunderstood, misrepresented, and even turned into blank spaces in the male-dominated narratives. What is needed is a continuous cultural fight, from within, against the male centrism.

Girlhood: A perilous path

PREBIRTH
Tests that tell the gender of the foetus may be used to de-select girls and abort them.

BIRTH
An unwanted girl baby may be killed at birth in parts of Asia, or allowed to die when she falls ill.

INFANCY
Girls are more resilient than boys, but shorter breast-feeding and less nurture reduce their chances.

EARLY CHILDHOOD (AGE 1-5)
Less food and fewer visits to the health clinic make a girl more susceptible to sickness and stunted growth.

CHILDHOOD (AGE 6-12)
A heavy load of domestic duties — sibling care, cleaning, cooking, water-carrying, minding the house — robs girls of childhood and education.

ADOLESCENCE
Girls who are unschooled and an economic burden are married off at an early age, by arrangement and sometimes for cash.

TEENAGE MOTHERHOOD
Babies born to girls under 18 are often born too early and are too small. A quarter of the 500,000 women who die annually from maternity are teenage girls.

Earth Mothers

by Lesa Griffith

cus on the "second sex."

Feminism in the Himalayas?

In 1985, WWF, the Nepalese government, and the King Mahendra Trust for Nature Conservation started the Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP) in the Himalayas.

This saves an estimated 1,600 kilograms of wood a day. Other plans include training in carpentry, electric wiring, poultry farming, and lodge management.

"People are really learning from the project," says WWF International project administrator Jennifer Roberts.

More and more conservationists see that women hold the key to successful community conservation

More than 80,000 people live in and around the Annapurna area. Villagers are closely involved in the project, sitting on local forest management committees, running forest nurseries and tree plantations — ACAP plants 50,000 seedlings every year. Kerosene depots have been built — visiting trekkers must now use kerosene for their campfires.

"Women are key to the project success," says Mingma Sherpa, WWF's Nepal country representative. "So in 1989 we launched the Women in Conservation and Development Programme in the village of Ghandruk." The programme now works with dozens of women's groups in the ACAP area.

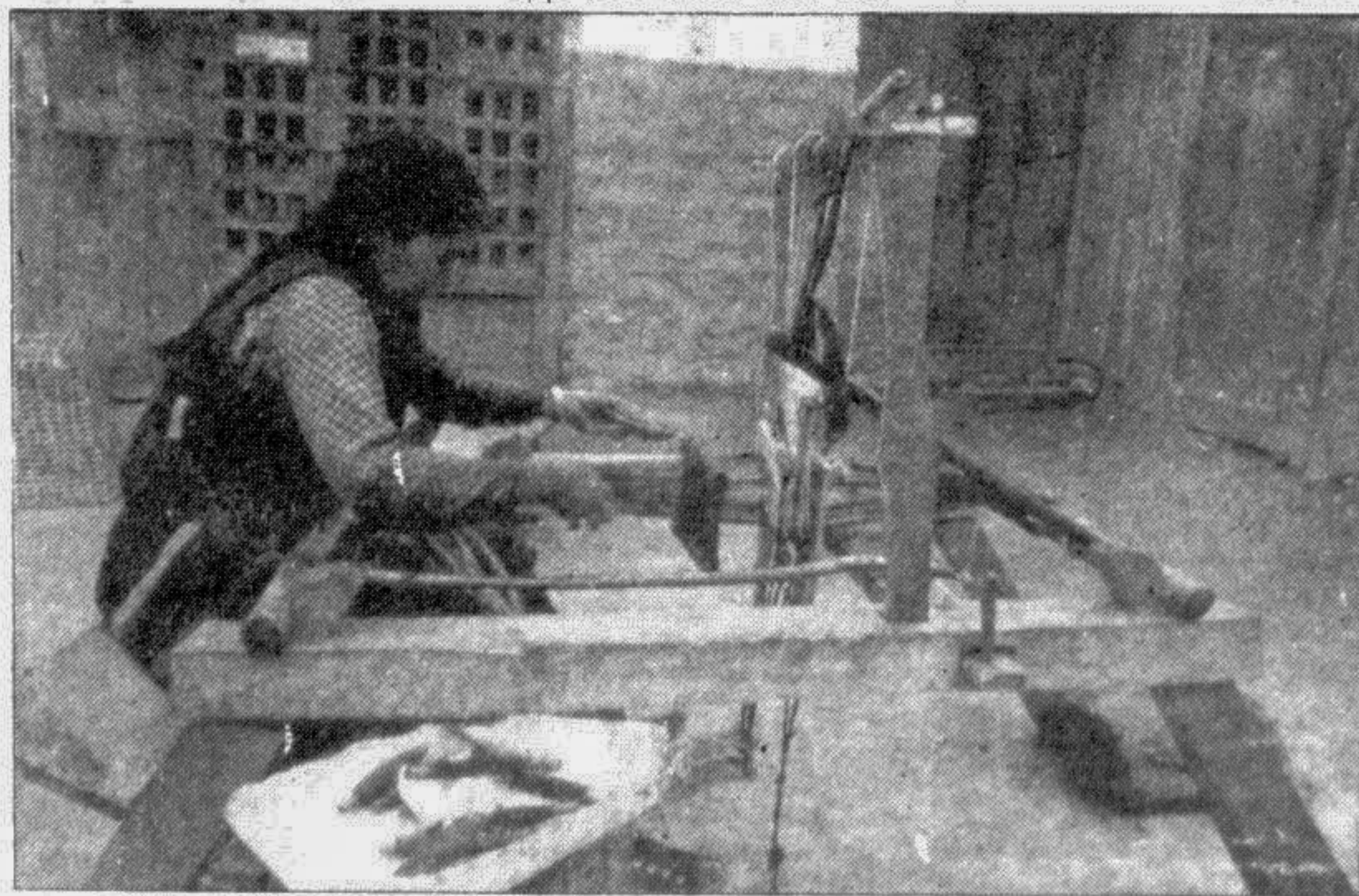
Last year more than 500

women attended adult education classes to learn how to read and write Nepali. ACAP held workshops on wool knitting, rabbit farming, and carpet cutting. Girls aged 13 to 17 received scholarships to high schools in Ghandruk and Phokhara. Small group seminars promoted health, sanitation, and nutrition.

The programme also helps women obtain loans from the National Agricultural Development Bank, and market their handmade sweaters, blankets, and rugs at the annual Handicraft Trade Fair in Kathmandu, 250 kilometres away. Now many women cook their dhal bhat — a dish of rice and lentils — on energy-efficient wood stoves. Their acceptance of alternative energy influences their villages.

"The women's programme will be continued for at least another five years," says Mingma. "They are indispensable to building community involvement in the project."

—WWF News



Women with care: A woman in Annapurna's Manang District works her loom.

Wife Battery: The Silent Scream

by Amne Ali

SELINA is a 20 year old young woman with two children. Her pretty, girlish face and gold earrings say little of the torment that lives inside her. For Selina is, like thousands of other women, a battered wife. A closer look reveals the tell tale signs — swollen eyes and lips camouflaged by make up, scars on the ears and a tendency to burst into tears every few minutes.

Her story is familiar enough in a country where wife battery is either ignored or condoned. Selina met her husband Kalam through a relative whose house she was staying in. Kalam, smitten by Selina's delicate beauty declared 'love' and soon married her.

The first few months went by peacefully enough. Kalam being the son of a former chairman and a sort of *mas-taan* in his area had enough influence and power to be relatively well off. Soon after her marriage, however, Selina began to hear all sorts of stories about her husband, some of them, quite horrifying. There were rumours of Kalam raping several young women, one of them as young as 11 years old. Being a rather naive sort, Selina refused to believe any of this and continued her life in her in laws' house with her two children.

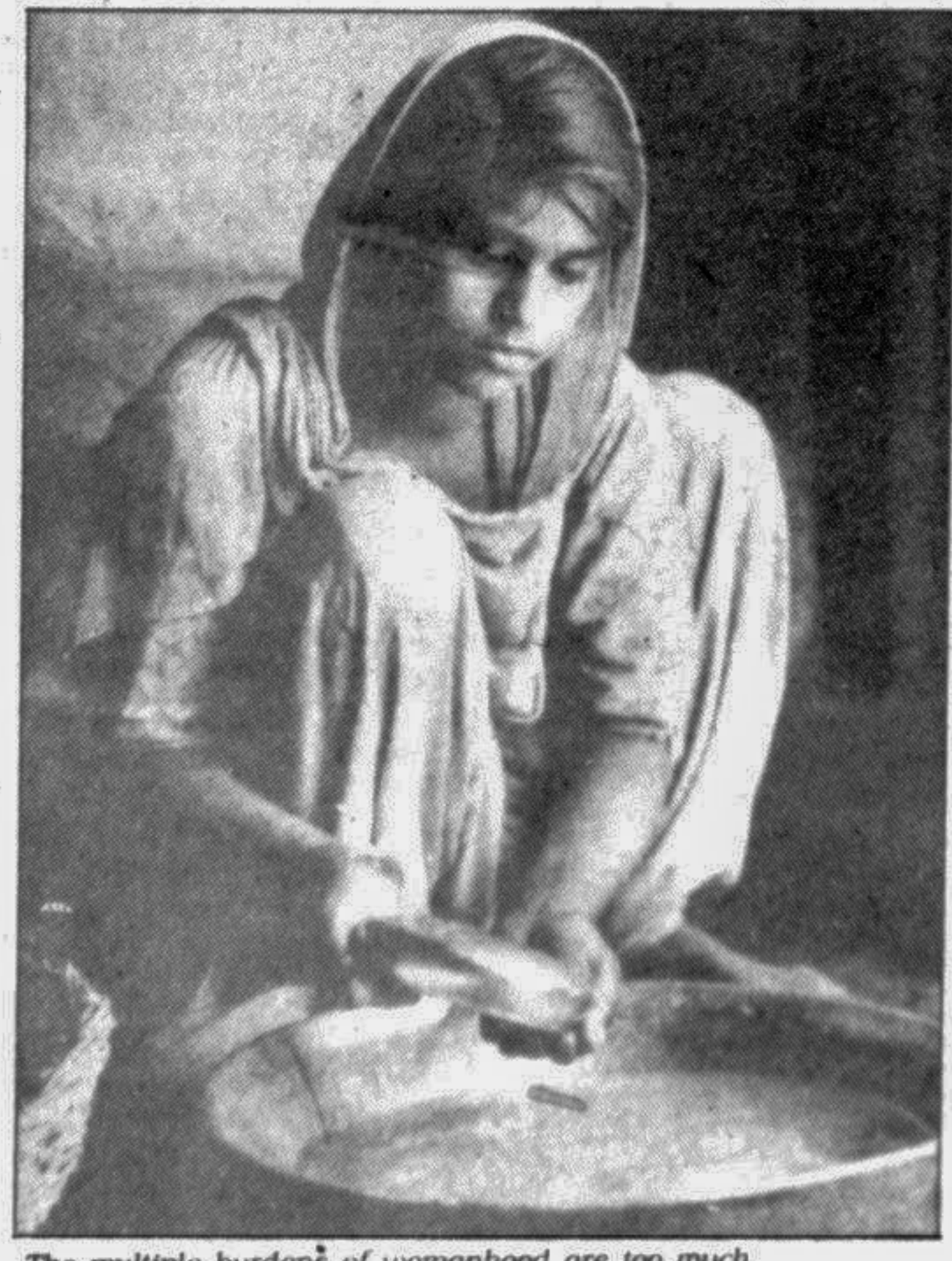
Then one day, a neighbour informed her that Kalam had married again, keeping his 'other wife' in a house a few miles away. Selina later confirmed this when she went to the house and found Kalam there.

When Selina confronted her husband later that night, instead of being apologetic, Kalam began to abuse her. Thus began a series of cruel beatings whenever Kalam came home. Sometimes he would slap her or punch her, sometimes he would use the bed stands or anything else at

hand. Once, when Selina demanded why he had married again, an incensed Kalam began to throttle Selina saying "If you ask me this again, I'll kill you!" It was by sheer luck that Kalam's brother and a few other relatives were at home, who held back Kalam and perhaps prevented Selina's death.

Selina, as evidence, has numerous bruises and lacerations all over her body. A severe blow on her face has caused her right eye to have blurry vision. Selina has no

parents, no relatives or friends she can rely on. It she leaves her husband's house she has nowhere to go. Without much of an education (she says she has studied up to grade three) and any skills that would help her, the possibility of getting a job is also quite bleak especially since she has two small children to look after. The only thing she can do is live in her in laws house in constant fear of divorce, (which her husband has threatened several times), and more beatings that may



The multiple burdens of womanhood are too much

— photo: Facts for Life

even cause her death.

Selina's case is far from being unique. It is merely a blue print for the plight of so many poor women being abused by their husbands or in laws, every day. Sometimes it is for dowry, sometimes for not being able to bear male children and sometimes for no reason at all, they are beaten, tortured or even killed. In many cases, as in Selina's marriages are not registered so there is no real proof that the wedding ever took place. Moreover, the husbands relatives will very rarely support the wife even though they may be witness to the battery. Legally, therefore, it is very difficult for a battered woman to take action against her husband. Even if this were possible, without the means to support herself and social backing, the prospect of standing up to the abusive spouse is too daunting a prospect to try.

This may seem like a no-win scenario. Yet there are ways to safeguard the interest of the victim. Educating parents and young women of the existing laws regarding marriage, divorce, dowry and abuse can be of great help. Registered marriages are a must and women or their parents must have possession of the marriage certificate or *nikka nama*. Acquiring skills and basic education should also be part of the precautionary measures against abuse. This may not actually prevent the abuse but it certainly will give the woman the choice to live by herself. Most of all, what is needed especially amongst the poor, is a networking amongst women so that they can help each other and creating an awareness that wife battery is morally wrong, illegal and should be unconditionally condemned. Only then can women like Selina survive.

The names in the case study have been changed on request of anonymity.