ATIMA Mernissi, a soc-

iologist and author of

the classic work called

Beyond the Vell; Male-Female

Dynamics in a Modern Muslim

Society has only recently

recounted stories of the

women belonging to her native

Morocco. They were women

who had to live within the

dark confines of harems, and

suffer as slaves and wives. The

harem is no metaphor here.

but was a real space signifying

a power structure, "a system in

which oppression and violence

work together in the lives of

women to turn their daily life

into a prison universe. It is the

reflection of and mirror of the

vice of colonialism which held

the master of the harem in

into the urban bourgeoisie of

Safi," should have aspired to

become a woman of the harem

like her mother, like all the

young ladies of good family of

colonial Morocco. It was the

obligation of her class". But,

then, the nationalist struggle

against colonialism, which

achieved only little success at

least opened the harem of her

consciousness into certain re-

Rabiya, a teacher by profes-

employed by the Ministry of

family, there were as many as

fifteen brothers and sisters.

mother. Rabiya herself spoke

of her father, a musical and

specting Moroccan man. A

new bride from a different sec-

tion of the town", Rabiya men-

than her, and that she was the

last child. Rabeva's father died

when she was only four or five

years old, and Jawaad became

not only her guardian, but the

head of the family after their

father's death. Rabiya told cat-

egorically, "I have too many

bad memories of his violence"

Yes, Jawaad used to beat Rabiya

for any slight omission or

commission: "with his hand.

good hard spankings and lots

of slappings ...", as Rabiya her-

an atmosphere tellingly char-

acterised by male domination

and violence mostly smacking

of a feudal and colonial culture.

she did not have the time to

think about her marriage. She

As Rabiva was growing up in

self put it.

alizations and articulations.

Yes. Rabi'a, born in 1940

grip," as Mernissi puts it.

# Bangladesh Paper on WID: Some Contradictions

ANGLADESH is preparing for the World Conference on Women in 1995 at Beijing, China. The draft "Bangladesh Country Paper on Women in Development: Equality in Development and Empowerment" has been published. The Beijing Conference is a follow-up of the World Conference to Review and Appraise the United Nations Decade for Women: Equality Development Peace, in Nairobi. Kenya in July 1985. The Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women was later endorsed by the United Nations General Assembly in December 1985.

The strategies adopted at the Nairobi Conference called for equality, women's autonomy and power, recognition of unpaid work, advance in women's paid work, health service and family planning. better opportunities, and promotion peace.

The country paper on the situation of women in Bangladesh describes the status and role of women in development and reviews the national policies and strategies. machineries for the advancement of women as well as major ratification of the resolutions of the Nairobi conference. The draft paper claims to have provided comprehensive information about the situation of women in Bangladesh with specific reference to discrimination and inequality gender and poverty, health, education employment, political participation and decision making national machineries for development of women, through NGOs and violence against women.

Reading the draft paper, it seems that the committee responsible for drafting the country paper has failed to project the situation of women in Bangladesh. The paper does not reflect the positive dimensions of the rural women. Several parameters of the women in development and empowerment are missing. possibly for ignorance.

## Poverty

The country paper does not mention the survival strategies and managerial capabilities of the rural women. It does not have a word of the rural women protesting development bias, environmental damages and displacement caused by "development" projects. These are indisputable examples of empowerment.

Reading between the lines. one finds an elitist perception of the situation of women. Contrary to the prevailing wisdom. Bangladesh is neither naturally nor inevitably poor Dr Atiur Rahman, a Bangladeshi development economist, observes that poverty is the number one disaster in Bangladesh. One can see devastation caused by floods and evelones; but one can hardly see the casualties of the

APE is no doubt the ultimate violation of a woman. The victims of rape not only have to endure the trauma of the physical assault uself but face another kind of torture after the act of violence is over This is the inclusioness insensitivity and ham!!ation imposed upon her by her tamily, legal system and society in general. In South Asian cours for where male dem is at its peak, the ide. that rape is one of the most beingus of crimes that stands of par with murder, has not reached the national psythe in societie "there power and influence is above every thing, and basic homan rights accounting for so little wettims of rape have no other aption but to suite: in siletter Social sugma is of course the bigged, incentive for women not to say anything. It is as if, somehow it is she who is to blame for her rape and so must

pay the price for it. This may amount to further harassment, ostracism and abuse, ultimately leading her to the inevitable escape-suicide. Often, the legal system actually works against the victim rather than for her. in Pakistan, according to the Hodud Ordinance a rape victim has required two women or one man as witnesses in order for a rapist to be convicted. Such preposterous and blatantly sexist conditions can only lead to great suffering for the victims and give greater scope to rapists to rape and get away with it.

In this context, WAR or War Against Rape, a voluntary NGO in Pakistan has devoted itself in trying to make a society that is reluctant to even use the word 'rape', to recognise its existence and damagby Saleem Samad

Reading the draft paper, it seems that the committee responsible for drafting the country paper has failed to project the situation of women in Bangladesh. The paper does not reflect the positive dimensions of the rural women. Several parameters of the women in development and empowerment are missing, possibly for ignorance.



Silent revolution of the silent majority goes on

invisible disaster called poverty. Perhaps the most useful indicator of rural poverty is the number of landless households, since there is a strong correlation between land ownership, health, nutritional intake and educational participa-

### **Political Participation**

The Agenda 21 endorsed at . the Earth Summit in 1992 at Brazil calls for involvement of every citizen in the creation of a sustainable future. The rural women are presently outside public policy debate on development agenda. Bangladeshi women categorized as "invisible population", have been deliberately kept out of broad public participation in decision-making process for achieving sustainable future. There is no reference in the country paper for a plausible need of the women to develop a mechanism to voice their agenda in development initia-

The chapter on "Political participation and participation in administration" does not argue why are the women protesting. The opinions of the women are disrespected at all tiers of consultation. From the grass-roots to the highest level, whether it is a family decision or a resolution adopted by the society, women are always kept out of popular discussions. The women are ac-

cused for being ignorant and inarticulate. The practice of "people's participation" is male dominated and the custom is feudal. The present concept of rural development or more specifically empowerment of the women is elitist and urban biased, therefore, anti-poor, anti-women.

#### Health

Women are shy in reporting health problems. Especially when it comes to pregnancy. Superstition and inadequacy of primary health care delivery system have been largely blamed. The life-expectancy if female population is largely effected by low intake of nutritional foods. This can be understood from high girl-child mortality rate.

## Girl child

The situation of girl-child needs to be given special attention. Although the issue of girl-child has been referred to in bits and pieces in some pages, it has not been adequately addressed.

## Women in Development

Most development specialists maintain that 'silent revolution of the silent majority has begun in the villages of Bangladesh. However, serious efforts are needed by the government and Private Voluntary Development Organizations (PVDOs) in Bangladesh to evoke citizens' response to de-

velopment agenda. Both the PVDOs and the government have promised better future of the citizens.

What is missing is the concept of who is listening to development messages and implementing development options. Media communicators have discovered that women and not men are receptive to development messages Whether it is child immunization or vaccines for pregnant women, use of safe water or protection from diarrhoeal diseases, health, hygiene or child education, wage discrimination or social taboos, it is the women who react positively. Use of oral saline (ORS) access to Expanded Programme on Immunization (EPI) and safe water from tubewells have listed Bangladesh on the global top.

The perspective of the society for the womenfolk is dif ferent from that of men. She can closely observe the society as she has to gather fuel for cooking, collect potable water and vegetables from the backvard, look after poultry and cattle, preserve seeds, raise children and of course keep her family going. In return, she gets neglect from the society.

#### Credibility

The country paper will be presented at an international forum, where Prime Minister Khaleda Zia is likely to attend the Beijing conference. Therefore is should not be justified by mentioning that the "emancipation and development of women in Bangladesh started zero from virtually in 1976 under the dynamic leadership of the late President Ziaur Rahman". Who is appeasing whom? The constitutional guarantee for the rights of the women enacted during the government of Sheikh Mujib. most of the legal reforms to reduce discrimination and inequality were made during the regime of General Ershad Such statements therefore undermines the credibility of the document.

### Conclusion

Lastly the country paper on

the situation of women in Bangladesh concludes by stating that government realizes that there is a long way to go to ensure women's equality in development and empowerment. National strategies are under consideration to find achievable solutions to the pressing problems. To realize the broad objectives relating to development and empowerment of women, necessary measures are being taken to increase the institutional strength of the government machineries. The document reiterates Bangladesh's commitment to the women in development and considers this as top priority.

The writer a development journalist is an Ashoka Fellow specializing in sustainable development.

and the legal process of filing a has so many obstactes and takes so long that poor people ing. "We want to educate the pressure group; we have some of our own lawyers who do volgree of success, the conviction sentence is only from 2 to 3

In the wake of growing religious fundamentalism, Pakisdyslexics, are gradually chan-

In Bangladesh rape is probably the least talked about issue. Yet every day newspapers have stories of women and children being victims of this horrible crime. There are many reports of rape within the family by relatives but family honour and social stigma stand in the way of justice. Rape is a cold reality in this country whether it is a village girl being raped by a male relative or a garment worker being assaulted and raped on her way home from work. Such cases increase in number with the apathy and ignorance of our society. Organisations such as WAR therefore are examples of what can be done in terms of at last paving the way for a

a crime. Rape is still not con-

more aware next generation.

## of the moment, of the milieu

## of Haremwrecks by Azfar Hussain



said. Marriage was imposed on me with my first husband. did not think about it; they (He family) thought about it for me". In other words, the woman in Rabiya, with all her aspirations and passions and even free sexual fantasies could not grow, and find space for movement and articulation, even at the fantastic, imaginative level. While talking about her marriage. Rabiya told that it came like a bolt from the blue. She actually could not imagine her husband as 'her husband', and they had diametrically opposite characters. Yet, they had to live together. and had soon a baby Kenza. Their second child called Aziza was drowned only at the age of

It so happened that after the death of Aziza, Rabeya's husband began to drink a little; in fact, he found a 'real reason' to drown himself in alcohol. But, he did not drink alone, but drank with others. But, when Rabiya voiced her objection to their drinking in the house, "he began to go to bars, to drink secretly." What also bothered her husband was the nagging sickness of their first child Kenza, and he used to put the blame on Rabiya' by saving: "it runs in your family: your sister has a sick child". In fact, her husband began to develop all sorts of idiosyncrasies and ill-habits; did whatever he

liked to, at the expense of the

happiness of the family. Rabtya sincerely tried to do everything she could to help her husband get out of the mess he was in. Rabiya said, "I dragged along with him like that for some years."

Rabiya, however, began to realize that her husband was that very kind of haremwalla who would not agree to a divorce and that she was condemned to stay in this rather unlivable state for the rest of her life. "I adopted a resigned attitude. I tried to organise my life around my work and my children in such a way that I crashed him from my life." In fact, thus, under the

pressure of the will-to-living itself, the very process of organising her conscience and consciousness set in. The struggle against her own classdeterminism began, and what actually provided her with the timely strength was her education that she managed to obtain despite the male domination at her father's - rather brother's - house, and also her ability to work, ability to think and act. The 'woman' in her, of course, could not grow for a guite long period of time, but the being in her was not at all dead; it was her life-wish, in more than the Freudian sense of the term, which made her stand against the characteristic death-signal provided by the haremwalla. She realised that she was capable of taking responsibility for herself and the children. She decided to move for freedom, for herself as well as her children. Indeed, it was all throughout a massive struggle involving a continuous cycle of gnosis and praxis, reflection and action. on howsoever a micro-economic scale " might be. In other words, the move that Rabiya made was not a dramatic or rash one. The process of breaking the harem started both within and without: "I wanted to come out, not to break a family, but to keep a family alive", asserted Rabiya, with conviction.

What needs noticing here is not the erasure of her husband from Rabeya's life as such, but Rabeya's commitment to life in the form of making a timely decision, for Rabeya needed to take better care of her child. This case alone, however, does not suffice to show the breakage of haremwallah's minicolony which is, in fact, a phenemonan nourished by the culture of colonialism and feudalism themselves. What is needed is a continuous, united struggle against them. To move is to make sense.

## Sexes Battle it out in the Hills of Hong Kong ers lost their lives fighting the

Frances Kelly writes from Hong Kong

clash between modern values and ancient trad-**1** Itions has erupted into a vicious battle of the sexes in the rugged green hills of Hong Kong's New Territories.

Thousands of farmers have taken to the streets in bitter protest, government officials have been attacked and there have been threats to "rape and bury" the legislative councillor who set off the fight by demanding that rural women be given the same rights as men.

At the heart of the feud is an archaic law that prohibits women from inheriting land in the 740 villages that dot the countryside throughout the rural part of Hong Kong known as the New Territories.

In a throwback to the days of the Quing Dynasty, when men wore pigtails and women's feet were bound, only men - no matter how distantly related - can lay claim to family land.

The practice has been denounced by women's rights activists as the "most outrageous and overt discrimination against women in our legal system."

But it is a privilege many rural men have vowed never to give up.

"We will battle to the very end to protect our villages, our clans, our way of life," declared the Heung Yee Kuk, an organisation that represents the 700,000 residents of the New Territories.

Added its chairman Lau Wong-fat: "It's not a matter of equality. It's a case of our tradition being destroyed. Our land will slip out of our clans if this change is made." Just an hour away from the

gleaming skyscrapers and bustling streets of central Hong Kong, the New territories are still a century apart when it comes to women's rights. Local custom still prevents married women from sweeping their ancestors' graves or joining in the springtime Ching Ming feasts. And when a baby girl is born, there is little celebration compared to the ritual lantern lighting to hail the birth of a

Hong Kong legislative councillor Christine Loh has

Women in parliament



been fighting to change the antiquated inheritance law that has seen some women thrown out on to the streets by male relatives who have laid claim to their homes.

"There really ought to be nothing very controversial about trying to reform the New Territories land succession law," Loh argued when she first proposed an amendment to the legislation.

But Loh's move hit a raw nerve. Thousands of farmers, male and female, staged demonstrations vowing to oust the "pigs and dogs" in government who dared threaten their ancient traditions. Brawls broke out between rival groups of women protestors who punched, pulled hair and spat at each other.

A legislator was kicked to the ground by an angry mob. And when Loh and other legislators went to the New Territories recently to gauge local opinion on the proposed changes to the law, they had to be accompanied by a phalanx of several hundred police officers.

The political brouhaha has even spilled over the border

into China. Ironically, the Heung Yee Kuk has sought Beijing's backing in its fight to retain male privilege - even though China's Communist party eliminated such feudal traditions on the mainland when it came to

power in 1949.

But so poor are relations between China and Britain that Beijing has come out in fuli support of the rural villagers. An official statement from China's Hong Kong and Macau' Affairs Office warned Hong Kong not to interfere with the traditional rights of indigenous villagers.

Chinese officials claim that tampering with the inheritance laws is an infringement of the Basic Law and the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration, which sets out the rules for Hong Kong's return to China in 1997. They have also warned that should the laws be changed China will revert to the old male - only system after the handover.

"We only have to be patient for three years and the Heung Yee Kuk will win," said its vicepresident Liu Ching Leung.

They point out that their traditions are steeped in history and should not be tinkered with by outsiders. The land inheritance custom was set up to preserve the identity of rural family clans. based on male surnames. When a woman marries, she joined her husband's clan. The Kuk argue that if she still retained right's to her parents' property, that land would fall under the control of another clan once her parents died.

More than a hundred farm-

British occupation after the New Territories was leased out by the Quing Dynasty at the turn of the century. Once the revolt was put down, Britain attempted to pacify the villagers by allowing them to retain their traditional customs. But in Hong Kong's red-hot

real estate market, some question whether today's dispute is motivated more by greed than by tradition. In some villages visited by

legislators studying the issue. much of the land had already been sold to developers at hefty prices. Others are reported to have sold their names to developers to turn a profit.

Whatever the motivation, there is a human face to the fractious feud.

Tang Mui. 56, is one victim of the antiquated law. She was kicked out of a home she helped buy through construction jobs in Hong Kong after her three male cousins applied to transfer the family's land to their name.

"It was my money that paid for most of it," she said. "And now they've stolen it from me. They don't even live here. They live in Britain."

Her story is not unique. Tang Ying, 50, was evicted when her parents died. The family's only daughter. Tang had no legal claim on her father's three houses. The property was automatically trans-

ferred to her two male cousins. "Even if it fails to help me. | hope the next generation will benefit," said Tang, who has joined the fight to change the

inheritance law. Cheng Lai Sheung, a traditional healer and karate instructor, cannot claim any of the five parcels of land her father left when he died. The land has been divided between

Cheng's three brothers. "Now that my father is dead, I have nothing," Cheng said. "They're not fighting for their traditions. They just want to preserve their privileges."

- Gemini News

The writer is a Canadian

freelance journalist based in Hong Kong.

# War Against Rape

by Aasha Mehreen Amin



ing consequences on its vic tims. Shaheena Alvi, an active member of WAR, on a recent visit to Dhaka, talks about how Pakistan deals with rape and what WAR is doing to help victims and to create greater awareness among people. Based in Karachi, WAR

founded in 1991, consists of 10-11 members, some of them men and all working on a voluntary basis. WAR members trace rape cases through newspapers, word of mouth, or through CPLC-Citizen police Liaison Centre, an organisation that acts as a mediator between the citizen and police when a citizen has not been successful in registering an FIR/Firs Information Report). In recent months, says Alvi, lawlessness has increased in Pakistan with higher numbers of dacoities where women have been raped. "We are now collecting data from these reports with the help of human rights groups, lawyers journalists etc." Getting information, admits Alvi, is extremely difficult. especially from areas where people are so tight-

taking revenge on the farmer by attacking the women of the farmers' family who represent the izzat. of the village". lipped on the subject and where most rapes go unreported. In order to get data WAR sends some of its mem-

Alvi comments that

(in Pakistan) most

rapes are committed

for political revenge.

"It's the landbord

from remote areas like Sind. bers to these places to get as much information as possible. Recently WAR has opened a chapter in Lahore to cover cases in Panjab. Alvi comments that in Pakistan most rapes are committed for political revenge. "It's the landbord taking revenge on the farmer by at-

tacking the women of the farmers' family who, represent the izzat of the village". This may take the form of members of political parties raping members or their relatives of another political party. Alvi gives the example of Kurshid Begum a member of the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) who was raped by members of the Central Intelligence Police.

For WAR, the task is not just to provide counselling to rape victims and their families which it does, but also to influence a legal system that is still quite apathetic towards rape as

sidered a crime as serious as, say murder, comments Alvi case and going through with it find it very tiring and frustratjudges, the lawyers, act as a untary work," Alvi adds. So far WAR has had a moderate deof two rapists, although their

tan still has a long way to go in terms of liberating its women and recognizing violent acts like rape as a crime punishable for being the greatest violation of a woman's human rights. But attitudes, says Alvi, who is also a remedial teacher for ging with more people. especially women, standing up to religious bigotry and sexim.