



Bangladesh Paper on WID: Some Contradictions

by Saleem Samad

BANGLADESH 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, advancement 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 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 Ataur Rahman, a Bangladeshi development economist, observes that poverty is the number one disaster in Bangladesh. One can see devastation caused by floods and cyclones; but one can hardly see the casualties of the

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. — Photo: RDRS

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 participation.

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 initiatives.

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-

War Against Rape

by Aasha Mehreen Amin



Shaheena Alvi

ing consequences on its victims. 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 (First 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-

cluded 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 affected 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.

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

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

WOMEN ON THE MOVE

THE...

FATIMA Mernissi, a sociologist and author of the classic work called *Beyond the Veil: 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 grip," as Mernissi puts it.

Yes, Rabiya, born in 1940 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 realizations and articulations.

Rabiya, a teacher by profession, taught at lycee, being employed by the Ministry of National Education. In her family, there were as many as fifteen brothers and sisters, though they were not from one mother. Rabiya herself spoke of her father, a musical and polygynous father, who had more than one wife, who loved women, like every self-respecting Moroccan man. A musician as he was he used to get married every month. "He would quite regularly choose a new bride from a different section of the town", Rabiya mentioned. Rabiya also told that her oldest brother, Jawaad, was twenty five years older than her, and that she was the last child. Rabiya'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 her father's death. Rabiya told categorically, "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 herself put it.

As Rabiya was growing up in an atmosphere tellingly characterized 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

said, "Marriage was imposed on me with my first husband. I did not think about it; they (the 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

two.

It so happened that after the death of Aziza, Rabiya'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 their nagging sickness of their first child Kenza, and he used to put the blame on Rabiya by saying: "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. Rabiya 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."

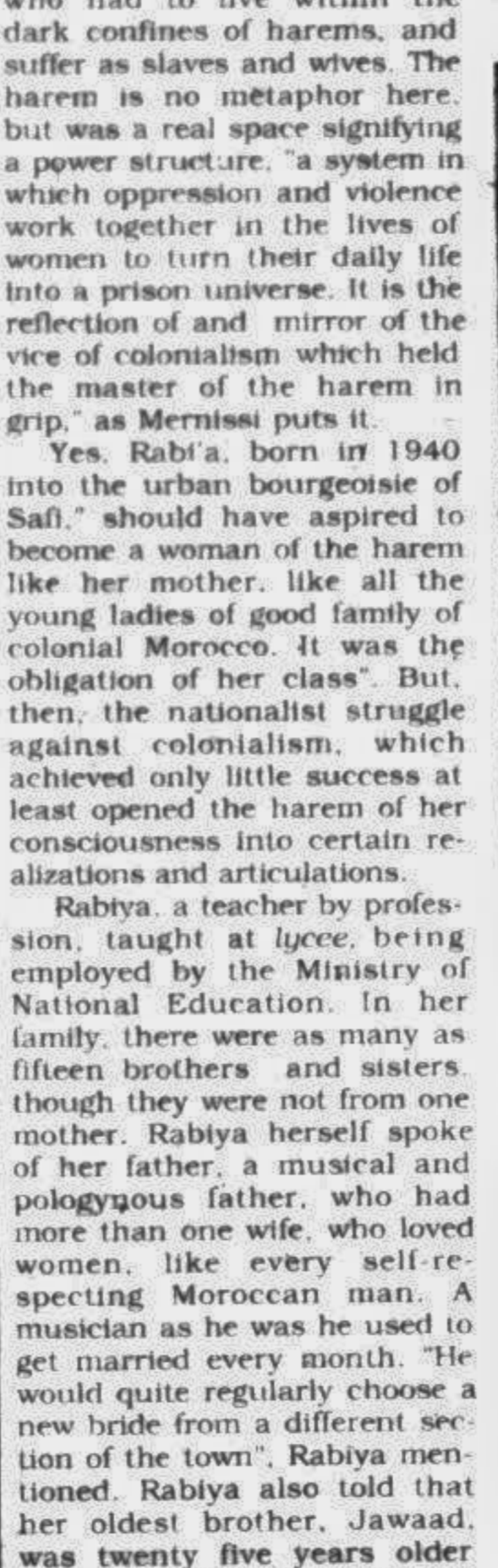
Rabiya, however, began to realize that her husband was that very kind of haremwallah who would not agree to a divorce and that she was condemned to stay in this rather unlivable state for the rest of her life. "I adopted a resigned attitude. I tried to organise my life around my work and my children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

In fact, thus, under the pressure of the will-to-live itself, the very process of organising her conscience and consciousness set in. The struggle against her own class-determinism 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 quite 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 haremwallah. 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.

of the moment, of the milieu

Signs of Harem wrecks

by Azfar Hussain



Doing Daily Battle

Doing Daily Battle

Doing Daily Battle

Doing Daily Battle

Doing Daily Battle

Doing Daily Battle

Sexes Battle it out in the Hills of Hong Kong

Frances Kelly writes from Hong Kong

A clash between modern values and ancient traditions 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 Qing Dynasty, when men wore pig tails 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 boy.

Hong Kong legislative councillor Christine Loh has



ers lost their lives fighting the British occupation after the New Territories was leased out by the Qing 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 transferred to her two male cousins.

"Even if it falls to help me, I 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."

— Gemiri News

The writer is a Canadian freelance journalist based in Hong Kong.