

Fashion Vs Style : Women's Struggle

by Azfar Hussain

Women's sufferings certainly vary in degree and intensity, in shape and shade, from class to class. Indeed, one can unequivocally maintain that it is the women belonging to the rural proletariat and peasant classes who constitute the most acutely suffering section of our society. True, the lower the class, the more one's suffering.



on; but, then, it is disquieting to note that some reactionary forces are also at work in the name of development and women's liberation. Now, for the sake of a genuine democratic struggle aiming at the emancipation of women, these reactionary forces, mostly determined by their exploitative class-interests, need to be identified squarely.

True, any struggle in favour of women is now bound to be a struggle against fundamentalism whose immediate target of attack is none but women. But while identifying this deadliest enemy of women and progress, one needs to be cautious about other enemies who only look like friends. The role of the conventional bourgeois politics has meanwhile been clear to us, in terms of its activism and ideological gravitation which do not altogether exclude fundamentalism, and this role, no doubt, poses potential threats to the development of women.

Then, certain non-governmental efforts, though extremely limited in terms of spatial and programmatic coverages, tend to serve women's interests in a methodology which, on the one hand, enhances one's increasing reliance on the donor's doles and dictates, and, on the other hand, encourages a dependence-domi-

nance relationship between the so-called 'catalysts' of development and the beneficiaries. To speak of women's empowerment is no doubt a crucial political and cultural agenda for the progressive; but, it becomes only rhetorical and fashionable when one speaks of it from within the colonial pockets of the foreign donors. In fact, any form of dependence on donors means lack of power, and how can one, devoid of power (in this special sense), thus, viably speak of the empowerment of women who are automatically subtly implicated in the very colonial process of exploitation? The whole concept of empowerment, if viewed thus, becomes ideologically and operationally self-contradictory.

In fact, the empowerment of women can never be achieved through the colonial dictates of the donors including the World Bank and the IMF, but can be accomplished only through a continuous, comprehensive, broad-based, democratic anti-fundamentalist struggle, addressing both gender and class issues as the most politically prioritised and urgent agenda at the moment. Here, the revolutionary unity does not mean any artificially quantitative construct as such, but it means a qualitative text

comprised of a creative interplay between progressive forces who would discriminately exclude the reactionary ones.

It is indeed heartening to note that some women's organisations and feminists, today, have been actively involved in addressing women's issues and concerns. In their attempt to carry forward the on-going anti-fundamentalist, democratic struggle in the country, though a truly gender-and-class-based feminism still lies in its embryonic form. But, then, it is equally disheartening to see that some 'fashionable' feminists, being engaged and stimulated by the neo-colonial forces and ideologies, and representing the upper-class bourgeois values and outlooks, are also involved in women's development. These 'feminists' only rhetorically speak of the lower-class oppressed women in that they (feminists) speak from within an epistemological vacuum, as they do not know the very language of the oppressed they target. Moreover, these 'feminists' ape and apply 'feminist' models borrowed from the West, and hence, alien to, and divorced from, the inscape and instructure of the very feminist realities existing here. The consequence is a classic practice of self-limiting, self-justifying, counter-productive bourgeois alienation in women's development. Such a brand of 'feminism', resting on the aid and ideology of the foreign donors, understandably paradoxically, tends to put women into a colonial trap of exploitation in addition to those continuous fundamentalist attacks our women have been subject to.

Indeed, to liberate women is to liberate them from a dense, gripping intertext of oppressive relations, namely, patriarchy, fundamentalism, feudalism, and colonialism — which always come together to act in unison against women. It is absolutely no use fighting against one form of oppression and exploitation, while equally encouraging them in other forms.

Why should one go for a strategy which facilitates a step forward only in exchange of two steps backward? Indeed, in the interest of women's emancipation and, by extension, social progress, our democratic struggle must be directed, on the basis of a truly ideologically reconcilable unity, against fundamentalism of all manifestations at all levels — at the levels of gender and class, at the cultural and political levels. Yes, the struggle must be from both within and without, both diachronic and synchronic.

The writer teaches English at Jahangirnagar University. The views expressed in this article are of his own.

Housing for Garment Workers

by Aasha Mehreen Amin

As dusk falls on this over-crowded city the streets are filled with a familiar scene: hundreds of young women, some even in their teens, walking home with their little tiffin carriers, looking straight ahead, determined, almost stoical in their attitude. Yet a closer look reveals the thinness of their bodies, the pallor of their faces and most of all, the sheer terror in their eyes as the night deepens. The biggest hurdle for these women who comprise about 85% of the one million garment workers of this country and who work from 10 to 15 hours a day, is reaching home every day in one piece. With homes that are at least one to five miles (or more) away, a woman garment worker faces all kinds of threats. She may be knocked off from the over-crowded bus, she may be run over by a truck or even worse, be at the mercy of lecherous men who may do more than just pass lewd comments? Many of these women have been picked up at night by passing trucks, raped and then left on the streets. Unfortunately, most of these cases go unreported, with the culprits unpunished and the victims scarred for life.

One of the main factors that lead to such insecurity is the lack of proper accommodation for these women. According to estimates, about 75 per cent of female garment workers have come from the villages with about 62 per cent who are single. With no relatives to stay with and limited incomes the only 'low cost housing' they can afford are the dingy slums scattered all over the city. Unhygienic and congested, these slums do not even provide the basic security these young women need and they are at the mercy of unscrupulous landlords and *mastans* who often sexually abuse them. Moreover, since almost all of the garment factories are located in the centre of the city, miles away from their slum homes, these women most of whom do not use public transport have to walk very long distances. Thus proper housing near their place of work seems to be the primary need for these women.

Mashuda Khatun Shefali, a young public entrepreneur has been a sort of crusader for the cause of the garment women's condition. Through her organisation, Nari Uddh Kendra she has attempted to solve the

problem of security by setting up two hostels for women garment workers in Mohakhali and Mohammadpur, both of which are located near the garment factories where the boarders work.

The Mohakhali hostel, the older of the two started in 1991, accommodates about a 100 women garment workers. It has two floors as dormitories with bunk beds, bathrooms and several shavers, a dining area which is turned into a recreation area at other times, kitchen, resident manager's room, an office room and a small common room for evening classes. The hostel is far from being luxurious but certainly satisfies the basic needs of the women — food and a safe place to stay. The all

ing, a hot meal is always waiting. "Before", she continues, "I had to travel a long distance, sometimes taking the bus or tempo, often getting stuck in a traffic jam and being late for work for which my pay would be cut."

In fact for most of these women, these two advantages — safe living and accommodation close to work, are what makes it worth sacrificing such a large portion of their monthly salary. Juthi a pleasant faced girl who works in a nearby factory used to live in a slum in Natin Bazar. "Men would constantly bother me, follow me and harass me," she says "and even the landlord turned out to be a leech, at least I don't have to worry about things like that anymore."

"People have this impression that garment workers are 'loose women' and so are reluctant to rent out their houses to them," Mashuda says, adding, "they don't realise that after 10 to 18 hours of exhausting work these poor women are too tired to think of anything except sleep."



Mashuda Khatun Shefali

women staff includes two cooks, a manager, a teacher and a security guard who acts like a sort of matron and wards off any unwanted visitors or trouble makers. The hostel provides the residents with basic items such as bed clothes, blankets, plates, books, glasses and cooking utensils. Food includes fish and meat four days a week with vegetable, lentils (7 days a week) with the three rice meals every day. All this costs each girl taka 650 a month, 300 taka for food and 350 for board. This no doubt, takes a substantial chunk out of their income which averages between 1000 taka to 1500 taka a month, but the girls think it's worth it. Baby, a young girl working for a Mahakhali garment factory has been living in this hostel for 2 1/2 years. For her, living here is far more convenient than living with relatives in near old airport road: "It's safe and after a whole day's work you don't have to worry about cooking and clean-

Besides providing room and board, the hostel has other facilities. A basic educational programme for illiterate workers based on Non-formal Primary Education System is provided. Religious teaching and counselling sessions help the young women to cope with stress and give them a sense of belonging. Regular group discussions take place where the boarders are taught things like basic health care and their legal rights. "We try to make them aware of what is sexual harassment and how to deal with it," says Shefali, the creator of this project. "We try to give them confidence support and make sure they can get legal advice or medical treatment if they need them." Shefali adds that NUK has had a few instances of young girls who have come after being raped a common plight for garment women: "We have helped them get medical treatment and provided emotional support and psychological counselling."

As a respite from the hard lives they lead, the hostel also provides modest recreation facilities such as a television set, radio, a carom board and a harmonium. Although they have very little free time, the girls often hold cultural functions and get-togethers on special occasions like Eid.

There are of course problems in running a hostel for women workers. Shefali has had to cross many hurdles to come this far. Finding a landlord who will agree to rent out his building for a hostel has been one of the biggest challenges Shefali has had to face. "People have this impression that garment workers are 'loose women' and so are reluctant to rent out their houses to them," she says, adding, "they don't realise that after 10 to 18 hours of exhausting work these poor girls are too tired to think of anything except sleep!" This kind of social hostility is always there, making this project a thankless job. There are always people who make mean comments about me and about the girls, but usually don't have the guts to do anything since they know that the hostel is backed by an organisation.

But for Shefali who is also an Ashoka Fellow, opening two hostels for about 250 women is far from being enough. "This is only a fraction of the total number of women who need safe, clean accommodation. We cannot do this alone." The idea behind NUK's project has been to create a model that can be replicated by others in order to meet the demand. Shefali, has proposed, in workshops and conferences, the idea of making the garment factories provide housing for their workers. "This would eliminate at least 75 per cent of these women's insecurity," says the Executive Director of NUK,

moreover, it would induce the women to stay longer so the owners do not have to lose money training new workers every few months."

For the young women living in NUK's Mohakhali hostel, life is far from easy. It involves working from dawn into the late hours of the night, earning a pittance for such hard work. Yet the hostel and NUK's support has given them a meaning in life. It has given them security and confidence in themselves. Most of all, it has given them a place they can call home.

Arab Feminist Says:

I'm Afraid of Almost Nothing

Neil Moorhouse writes from Cairo

EGYPTIAN novelist Nawal el-Saadawi once boasted: "I write about things people don't dare speak about." In her fifth floor apartment, overlooking Cairo's busy Giza area, Nawal lives with her third husband, Sharif Hetta, also a novelist.

Sitting crossed-legged on her sofa, she says: "Since a child my dream has been to change this system. This is a very inhuman system. Everything depends on discrimination and inequality between people — according to class, race, colour, sex, nationality and power."

Since starting writing in the early 1970s, Nawal el-Saadawi has been primarily concerned about the cause of women and what she sees as their sexual exploitation by men.

In her latest book, *The Innocence of the Devil*, published early this year, Nawal explores the deepest fears that lurk in the depths of our subconscious. She says women in the Arab world are frightened because of popular morality concerning a woman's chastity.

"One of the deepest fear of every young Arab woman is losing her virginity," she says. "Women have nightmares about it, fearing evil spirits or that they, too, might have a visitation like the Virgin Mary."

El-Saadawi has also fervently opposed the circumcision of women, which according to recent reports, affects up to 95 per cent of Egyptian women.

In her struggle, as she calls it, to change the inequalities in society, Nawal is realistic: "Some people ask how do you think you are going to change this system; this has been working for thousands of years. But things can change, slowly but surely."

Nawal el-Saadawi qualified as a doctor in 1955, became

Egypt's Director for Public Health, and then began to write. She came from a happy home and says her warm family relations "are what helped me see the flaws in the freedom of others."

In 1972 her first work of non-fiction, *Women and Sex*, which challenged the political and theological authorities, led to her dismissal from the Ministry of Health.

In 1981, she was jailed by the late President Anwar Sadat after writing an article which said his government was not a true representation of democracy. Within a month, Sadat was assassinated. President Hosni Mubarak released her within two months.

Later, religious authorities in Egypt sentenced her to death, infuriated by her novel *The Fall of the Imam*. In it she depicted the wickedness of a fictional Islamic state.

Threats from Islamic fundamentalists and political forces have failed to sap El-Saadawi's determination. Not only does she continue to challenge such controversial issues as sex, religion and politics but she joins the battle with enthusiasm.

In a show of respect the government put security guards in front of her house in 1987. She says: "I am afraid of almost nothing, I am immune to the daily fears from the government and fundamentalists."



NAWAL EL-SAADAWI

"I write about things people don't dare speak about"

Why do I need guards?" Nawal is now involved in a legal suit against the government following the dissolution in June last year of the Arab Women's Solidarity Association (AWSA), which she heads.

She says: "They banned us because we opposed the government's policy in the Gulf war. We travelled to Baghdad to urge a peace initiative."

El-Saadawi says meetings outside Egypt will continue. The group will meet in Beirut in October to discuss "Women, Democracy and Creativity." The meeting had been scheduled to be held in Algeria in March but because of the uncertain political situation there the venue was moved.

On the recent trip to Zurich, El-Saadawi met development workers and intellectuals to discuss the so-called 'new world order' following the Gulf war.

"For the Arab world, the Gulf war was a defeat," she says. "The truth is that America colonised Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. America now sees itself as the leader. Everywhere, Europe, Africa, Asia, we must oppose America with its power, domination and strength."

She sees the United States as representative of a power structure which can only enslave men and women alike.

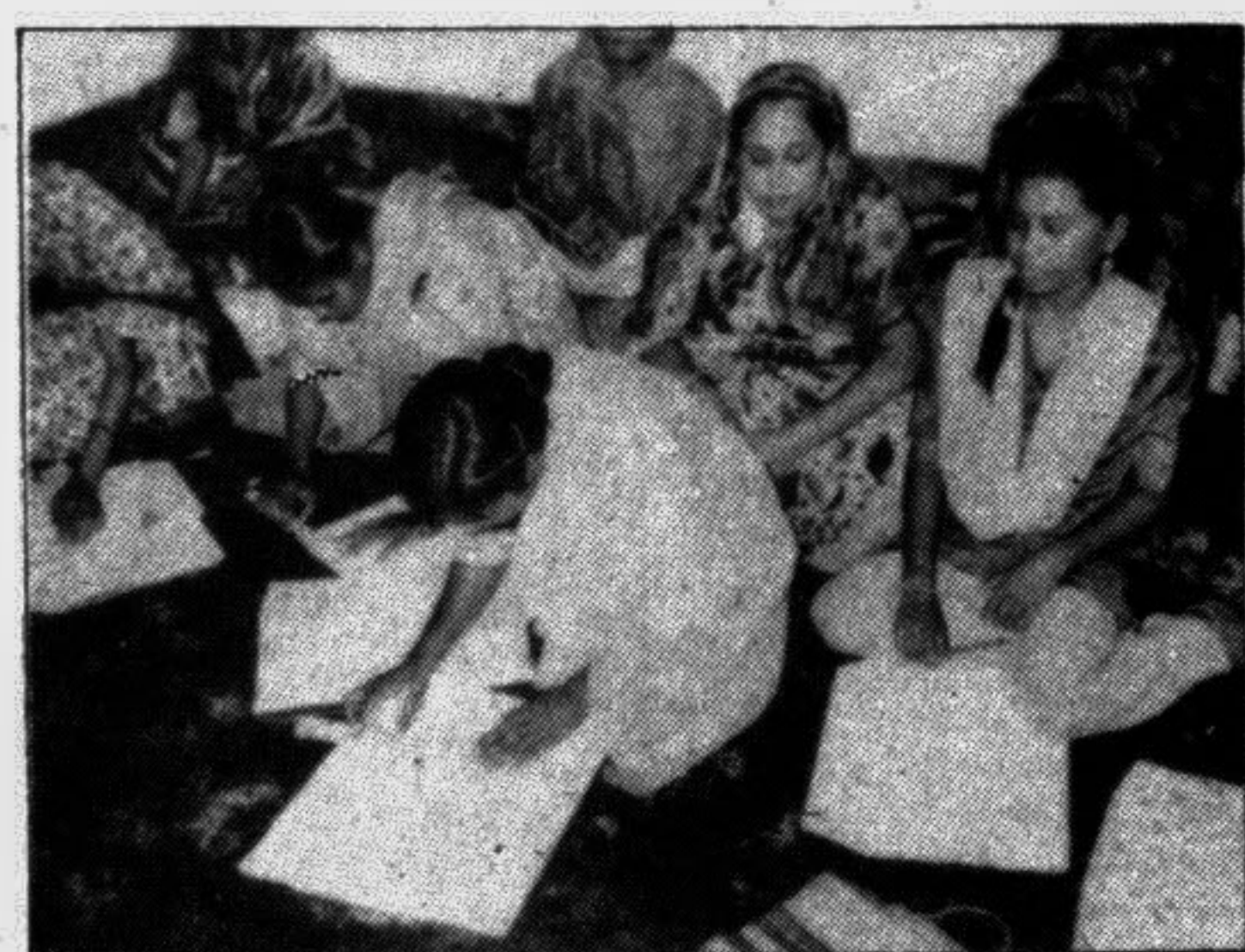
At 61, Nawal has a remarkable amount of energy. With grey, almost white hair, she is grandmotherly as she speaks and much less formidable than her reputation suggests.

But her capacity to arouse the wrath of political and religious forces in the Muslim world is renowned. Her books are still prohibited in Saudi Arabia and the Arabic edition of her sociological study of Arab women, *The Hidden Face of Eve*, is still not available in Egypt.

The writer is a British journalist now based in Cairo.

Learning the Way of Life

by Shafiqul Islam



Learning how to sew in a workshop

etc. Each group remains responsible for repayment of the loan taken by that group and group pressure works for that purpose. Secondly, loans are issued keeping in view of the occupational bias of the members. Members are quite comfortable with the loan they take and so far repayment has never been a problem.

Training is another aspect through which members are prepared for utilisation of loans. Training includes, sewing, tailoring, embroidery, jute works, poultry care, nursery, leadership and health education, and so on.

Access to revolving fund and training have made the

members confident of their capacities to earn and live a decent family life. Interviews with a few members revealed that after becoming members they have been able to save money, earn livelihood and care for their children's education. Love and respect within the families and in the community have increased.

Other aspects of the project were to collaborate with the local Government Dept, UNICEF for providing immunisation services and promotion of sanitation and basic education. It is worth mentioning that the project is working for creating awareness for immunisation of under ones, and enrolment of all 6-year old chil-

dren to primary school. Three functional literacy centers have been established which run 6-month courses for the project beneficiaries. So far 140 women have attended the course and acquired practical skills.

The project is run by a project manager and three women workers. The project implementation committee headed by the sitting president of the R C of Khulna North is responsible for supervision and implementation of the project.

The Rotary International has committed a fund of \$56,530.00 out of which \$35,000.00 have been received so far. Moreover, South Rotary club has provided \$3000.00 and Rotarians from District 3350 provided \$1000.00 as co-sponsor fund to this project.

In December 1994 the project period will be over. By that time the project will have an accumulation of about Tk 15,00,000.00 as revolving loan fund. Utilisation of this fund will make the project viable.

In this project at least 1000 women who had so long been deprived of leading meaningful lives, have been able to demonstrate that they can earn and contribute to family peace and become respectable members in their own communities.

The writer is a past president of Rotary Club of Khulna North, Khulna.

THE Women Development Project under 3.11 Grant of Rotary International was initiated by the Rotary Club of Khulna North in Deana village in July 1992. The purpose of the project was to empower the poor women of the village to make them self-reliant by providing them with a revolving fund as starter capital and training facilities for improving their skills to take up small enterprises.

In two years time the project has been able to organise 29 women groups having a total membership of 1074. All these members have accumulated a total amount of Tk 2,77,403.00 as saving. The basic units of the members are groups where they discuss about their problems and make strategic plans and on the basis of this they take loans from the project.

The project has so far issued a revolving fund of Tk 10,15,200.00 to 741 members. The range of loan is Tk 500.00 to Tk 3000.00 for each member and the period of loan is one year, though the upper loan limit is Tk 7000.00, no member has ever asked for more than Tk 3000.00. The reasons being they are extremely conscious of their paying capacity. The members have repaid Tk 5,25,295.00 within the scheduled time.

Usually members take loan for small trading, purchase of cows, chickens, ducks, sewing machines, treadle pumps, fish culture, establishing nurseries