



Women, Poverty and the Environment

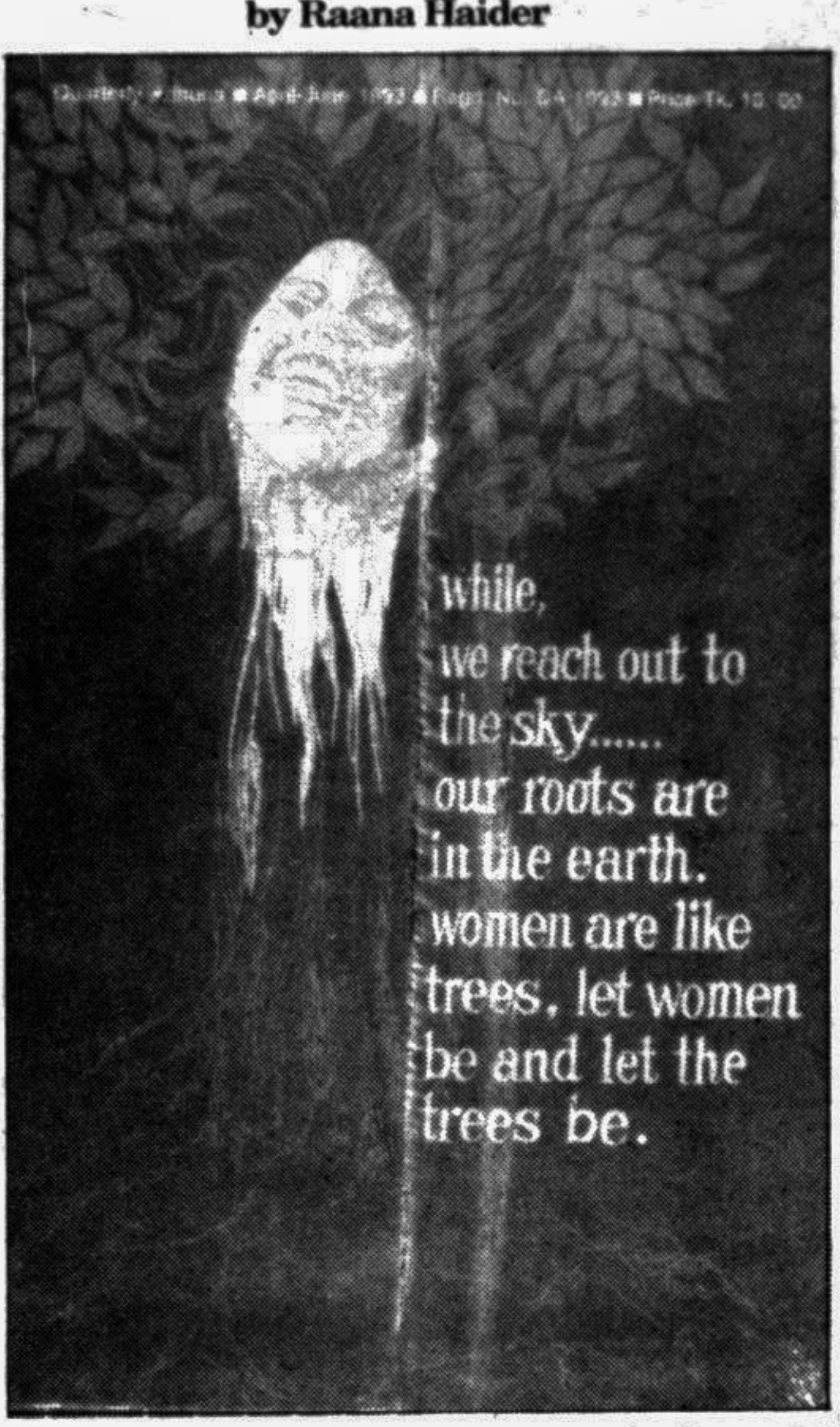
When resources are stretched thin, it is women, the most marginalised in the first place, who suffer first and most. Women have the smallest share of the resources pie of the world; when the pie shrinks, women's losses are greatest.

Hunger and poverty are more women issues. Women experience hunger and poverty in much more intense ways than that experienced by men. Women have to stay at home and manage the family with virtually nothing to manage with. When there is nothing to eat, husbands prefer to stay away from home to avoid facing the immediate crisis. Mother cannot avoid facing it. She practically looks for ways to feed the children. It is she who has to invent the last survival manoeuvre.

As we approach the year 2000, rural Bangladesh, which contains 85 per cent of Bangladesh's 113 million people, is undergoing a process of increasing pauperisation plus polarisation compounded by an increasing feminisation of the resulting poor. Not only are more people becoming poor but the rich are becoming richer and the poor poorer. In this process, there is reason to believe that poverty, too, has a gender bias — in that, it is the women of Bangladesh who are becoming poorer. They are caught up in a situation of varying degrees of dependency, powerlessness, vulnerability and inequality. The condition is a result of the physical, socio-cultural and economic environment influencing the existence and development of women.

Foraging for Fuel
In the past, access to common property renewable resources had provided the rural population with sustenance from life-support systems in the form of open water-bodies for fishing and fish consumption, a vital source of animal protein and common lands for cattle grazing, cultivation, fodder and forestry. A wide range of vital resources had been freely available to people. According to a study by Singh, 1985, in India, commonly available wood, shrubs and cow dung had been utilized for cooking and heating; mud, bamboo and palm leaves for housing, wild grass and shrubs for animal fodder and a variety of fruits and vegetables as food. Such an environment was the survival base for rural India and the domain of productivity of women. The situation was not dissimilar in Bangladesh.

Water Carriers
Rapid population growth, increased consumption of water and climatic factors have placed pressure on existing water sources. There is some indication of a lowering of the water table, due to indiscriminate use of ground water in Bangladesh. Shortages of water in the river systems during the dry season are thought to be causing the saline belt to move northwards. Although some 80 per cent of the population is within 150 metres of a tube-well, its use is largely limited to drinking purposes. However, this coverage is also being increasingly threatened by the lowering of the underground water level during the 2-3 months of the dry season. As some sources of water



by Raana Haider

while we reach out to the sky..... our roots are in the earth. women are like trees, let women be and let the trees be.

Courtesy: Quarterly Adhuna, ADAB

cent being met by fuelwood. The utilisation of animal dung as fuel deprives the soil of vital nutrients and compounds the cycle of need, consumption and ecological instability. Deforestation and forest degradation, through water and soil erosion, turns both the land and the forests into unproductive and desiccated wastelands.

In order to convert food into an edible form, some form of fuel is required. The task of fuel collection falls to women and for them, it is a strategy in survival. Supply of crop residues and animal dung is scarce for marginalised women, both rural and urban. They have to rely on fuel mass: leaves, twigs and branches, travelling further and further away in search of it, an exercise demanding more and more time and further damaging to their health.

dry up, other waters are polluted by faeces, industries and agro-chemicals. As a result, water-borne diseases account for the majority of illnesses and deaths in Bangladesh. Typhoid, paratyphoid, shigellosis, streptococcal infections, diphtheria, hepatitis and amoebiasis are some of the most common forms of diseases whose micro-organisms are found in polluted water. Many communities depend on such water sources for meeting their daily requirements, including drinking water. The situation further deteriorates during the post-flood and monsoon periods. Consumption of diseased fish is also frequently reported in the print media as a cause of deaths.

Increased salinity in the river waters of the southern region of Bangladesh, attributed to the construction of the Farakka Barrage in India, has been found to affect the health of expectant mothers in the region. Accumulation of water in the womb, resulting in respiratory ailments and debilitating effects were reported by some 50 per cent of pregnant women in the area. Known as the 'Farakka Syndrome' in extreme cases, it is suspected that the mother's kidneys may be permanently impaired and the foetus may be severely damaged.

Human portage is the most common means of transporting water in rural areas and for the vast majority of urban slum dwellers, it is an activity which is time-consuming, arduous, can be injurious to health and is almost exclusively, the domain of mothers and daughters. Distance to

source, terrain to be crossed, queuing time, number of consumers in the household and number of females available in the household to transport the water are aspects women have to face.

If poverty is defined as the material experience which is a result of dispossession, deprivation and denial of basic needs, (Shiva 1988), then the past review and analysis of the situation of women in Bangladesh corroborates the view that poverty has a gender bias; in that, it is the women of Bangladesh who are, disproportionately, victims of the environment of poverty.

Poverty is both a cause and a consequence of environmental degradation. Poor people have few options. For self-sustaining reasons, they tend to have large families. With growing numbers and no way out of their situation of poverty, they are driven to use resources faster than that which can be replenished. Population pressure and its greater absorption of the natural resources of land, forests, water and its dependent life support system, flora and fauna, animals and fisheries mean that survival itself becomes an issue. And for the poor, there is little scope for adaptation.

Excessive human interference resulting in the erosion of the human resource base has had more of a negative impact on women than men. The downward and upward spirals of poverty and environmental degradation further reinforce the inequitable access of women to means of livelihood, land, employment opportunities, education and credit facilities, while conditions of economic duress force women into the wage labour market. Increases in the price of basic commodities, particularly, food and fuel have resulted in a decrease in real income. Reduced household spending has had serious implications for the nutrition and health condition of women. Her physical state is undermined by her eating last and least and the negligible attention paid to her health. In the event of natural disasters, the vulnerability of women is only accentuated.

Ironically, widely lauded as principal resource managers, women have to manage with a minimum of resources; both in terms of economic and non-economic resources. The combined environment of pressure and poverty and the inherent gender bias results in women becoming the 'poorest of the poor' under-fed, in poor health, illiterate, over-worked, deprived and victim of the triple burden.

It is rare to find a case in which environmental destruction does not go hand in hand with social injustice, almost like two sides of the same coin. — Anil Agarwal, Centre for Science and the Environment, Delhi, India.

The author is a *Caro-based Bangladeshi sociologist-demographer interested in population, development and environmental linkages and gender issues. The above article is extracted from the book 'Environment and Development in Bangladesh'. Reprinted with the permission of publisher.*

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New Governments, New Challenges

ZANELE Mbeki, Executive Director of Women's Development Banking programme in Johannesburg and the wife of South Africa's new Vice President, explains the change in status of women in her country following the end of apartheid. With the issue of being a non-white in a racist country being an over-arching one Mbeki points out that the question of women's oppression was not at the forefront. "Because of South Africa's patriarchal society, all women have suffered under discrimination against women; under apartheid it was like a triple oppression," says Mbeki "but you cannot remove oppression of women without removing oppression of all people." The struggle for women's equal rights in South Africa however, intensified as far back as 1975 — when the Women's decade was declared. So when the window of opportunity came we realized we had to take it.

Between 1990 and 1991, the South Africa Women's Coalition was formed with 84 women members amongst a membership of four hundred; there are two women cabinet ministers and three women deputy ministers; and the UNDP list of rankings according to the structure of women in government, has placed South Africa as number 10 a big jump from its previous position of 124. "The challenge today," says Mbeki, "is whether we can retain this

position or lose it just as others have in other countries." Her visit to Bangladesh which is not her first, Mbeki says, has been fruitful especially in terms of being involved in the Grameen International Dialogue. "I spent a full week in one of the Grameen Bank offices in Tangail" she says "and was very impressed by the work going on there." There were women whose assets have grown from practically zero to 192,000 taka; as the husband of one of the members said — "Grameen is no longer a poor people's bank, it is a bank for former poor people." Mbeki adds that

in terms of socio-economic conditions and political scenario Kyrgyzstan, a newly independent country of former Soviet Union and the new apartheid-free South Africa could not be more different. Yet both countries are going through a dramatic transition period with teething troubles of similar intensity as they come out of the euphoria of freedom. The role of women is especially crucial both in terms of development and politics. Zanele Mbeki from South Africa and Rakhat Atchylova from Kyrgyzstan in exclusive interviews with Aasha Mehreen Amin of the Daily Star, while attending an International Dialogue at Grameen Bank in Dhaka, discuss the various hurdles and triumphs that women face as their countries step into a new era of political freedom and economic restructuring.

Rakhat Atchylova and Zanele Mbeki in 9th International Dialogue Programme, jointly organised by Grameen Bank and Grameen Trust.



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impacts as the country adjusts from a controlled economy to a market economy Rakhat Atchylova, a professor of sociology and philosophy, says that women have been the worst victims of this restructuring process. First of all, she points out with the disintegration of Soviet Union, states like Kyrgyzstan that shared close economic relations with each other now find themselves cut off from the favourable economic position that they enjoyed under the socialist system. The transition period is also characterized by the breakdown of social welfare systems in the areas of health, educa-

tion and employment with especially painful effects on women. "Women had problems before," says Atchylova, "but they are much worse off now." The economic crises in the country, she explains has caused widespread unemployment among women. "Before, in rural areas for example; there were many schools and cultural centres that were staffed mainly by women, now they are all closing." State owned collective farms, she continues have become privatised but women are left out of the ownership "Salaries are postponed and there is no cash in the banks."

Rural women, with no land, livestock or work and with unemployed husbands and children to feed, are the poorest. This is quite surprising given the fact that there is 100 per cent literacy among women with 70 per cent of working age women with high level education. Atchylova explains that it is the transition from a socialist system of consciousness to a market system that has made it very difficult for women most of whom are professionals trained under the old system, to adjust. Many of their skills are now practically redundant in a market economy she adds, making it essential for these women to be retrained under the new system.

In the political arena, too, women have lost out under the new system. "Under the socialist system, women had traditional places in the government," says Atchylova, "for example, before there was 30 percent women representation in the parliament, now there is only five percent. There were women at all levels of government, now we have only one woman minister and most of the places (for women) are lost."

Yet the overriding handicap that women in Kyrgyzstan face today is economic hardship Atchylova, who is the Director of an NGO called IDS (Independent Research Centre) for Women in Development, believes that the only way out of this financial gloom is for NGOs like hers and others to help women get training in management and entrepreneurial skills. In this regard Atchylova thinks that her exposure to Grameen Bank activities has been especially useful. The staff and members are so dedicated and highly motivated; Grameen is actually dragging upwards the poor from the lowest socio-economic level," she says adding "although poverty in Kyrgyzstan is not the same as in Bangladesh, I think we should try to use the Grameen system since it may help us to adapt more easily to the market economy."

Licensed to Marry

MEN have a license to marry more than once and to divorce their wives at will, but have they also acquired a license to kill? A villager decided to marry a young woman after his divorce. A year or so later he met his first wife, and felt tempted to renew his marital relationship. He decided to get rid of his second wife, even though she was pregnant. He raised high dowry demands as a con-

dition for their living together. When approached by the man, the second wife's brother frankly admitted that he could not pay the dowry. Some days later the brother-in-law came to the brother's village, to ask about his sister who had left her husband's home a day earlier. The brother claimed to have no knowledge of her whereabouts. Later in the day the fa-

ther-in-law and uncle-in-law came in search of their daughter-in-law. Finally the husband came to make enquiries about his wife's whereabouts. Their behaviour appeared very alarming, and his suspicions were confirmed when early the next morning someone brought news that her body was found hanging from a tree in the woods. The police were summoned

to the spot, but they did not investigate the circumstances leading to her death. They have yet to submit their report, even four months after the incident. The postmortem report delivered after almost 1 month suggested suicide, which seems improbable considering the circumstantial evidence. What is the chance for justice? — Ain O Salish Kendra

IN the old South Africa, the lack of women's rights was buried under the fight against apartheid. Most married women had a similar legal status to children — unable to sign contracts without their husband's consent — and black women were permanently under the "guardianship" of their fathers or spouses.

Yet few protested against this dismal situation. Activists invariably were persuaded to battle racial rather than sexual discrimination, pushing the fight for gender equality to the background. In the post-apartheid South Africa of President Nelson Mandela, however, this has changed. For the first time, women's rights are firmly on the political agenda.

Women, particularly black women, are emerging in high-profile political and social roles. Almost a quarter of the 400 parliamentarians in the new National Assembly are women — a higher proportion than in Britain or the United States — and the influential position of Speaker of the House is held by imposing Dr Frene Ginwala.

Bill of Rights. More significantly, the constitution contains an unusual provision for a special gender advisory commission to improve the lot of women in a society which still treats them as second class citizens. Establishment of this commission is expected later this year, an equal opportunities commission is on the cards and the last nine months have seen the removal of the harshest legal discrimination against women.

The new consciousness also is reflected in daily political rhetoric. Politicians from Mandela down routinely stress the need for "gender sensitivity" and every promise to end racism includes a pledge of non-sexism as well. "Women have achieved a lot with the drawing up of the interim constitution," said Rhoda Kadalle, head of the Gender Equity Unit at the University of the Western Cape.

"And the ANC's (Mandela's African National Congress) Bill of Rights is the most progressive rights declaration in the world on questions such as family law." Naledi Pandor, an ANC parliamentarian and member of its women's caucus, also believes women have made significant progress.

'Men's Club' Parliament out with Apartheid

The election of Frene Ginwala as Speaker was a great victory," she said in an interview. "There was nothing taken about it at all."

Other signs of the emerging power of women are evident as a new order is created from the debris of apartheid. A black woman has replaced a white Afrikaner man as

chairman of the board of the South African Broadcasting Corporation — a state-run concern with a national monopoly on television news — and another black woman is co-chair of the Independent Broadcasting Authority, charged with restructuring the country's radio network.

A Women's Directory just published by local magazine Femina also reflects the gains made by women in fields such as medicine and business. Of the more than 500 names listed, many are returned exiles whose high-level qualifications from some of the world's top universities will make them impossible to ignore in a skills-starved society.

In Parliament, the influx of women is leaving its own imprint. A special committee is planning a child-care centre for members' children and the catering committee is lobbying for lighter meals to be included among the traditional starchy fare. "The whole idea of Parliament as a men's club is beginning to disintegrate," said Sheila Camerer, the former Deputy Minister of Justice and now a member of Parliament

for F W de Klerk's National Party. "And high time too. I remember when a gym was built for MPs. Not only were the women (eight out of 308 members at the time) not told about it, but it was designed so that you could only gain access by walking past the men's urinals. That won't happen now with so many women to keep an eye on things."

Even where changes have been made, public servants and private sector officials often fail to apply them. Until last September, for example, certain categories of women — most blacks and those whites who married before 1984 without signing a pre-nuptial contract — were subject to the "marital power" entitling a husband to control all their legal affairs. The final abolition of this power by the de Klerk government nine months ago went largely unnoticed in the drama of the country's political transformation and married women are still routinely asked for their husband's signature when applying for loans or opening accounts. "Officials are not being told that people now have certain rights," said Kadalle. "At the University of the

Western Cape, for example, we have made major advances regarding women's rights. Men are no longer automatically defined as the breadwinners, which means married women staff finally can apply for housing loans. But I'm dealing with a case now where a woman was incorrectly told by a personnel officer that she wasn't eligible."

Kadalle believes the real challenge for women is to consolidate their gains and make sure they entrench themselves on the government's overcrowded agenda while it is still fluid. Although Pandor described Mandela as being "very open" to approaches by the women's caucus, centuries of patriarchal tradition and affirmative action programmes which could benefit black men at the expense of women mean a tough battle lies ahead.

"It's easy to lobby and picket," said Kadalle. "But it's going to be much more difficult to redraft the laws which still discriminate against women." — Gemini News
The writer is a South African journalist.

