



Advancing Women's Status in Family

by Najma Siddiqi

FAMILY is the basic unit of a society. It has been the social institution which provide the fundamental 'apprenticeship for life' to its members. In all ages, family has been a self contained unit which acted as a growth centre for its members. It is at the core of socialization process through which the members learn various social skills. The structure and size may have differed across various cultures but its function has been universally similar. Briefly speaking, the family has met the biological, emotional, economic, social and other needs of its members.

Women have always played the most important role in the family. Women not only rear and bear the children, they also actively participate in many economic activities without which a family or for that matter the society cannot survive. But unfortunately her central role and contributions to the smooth functioning in the family has hardly been recognized.

1994 has been declared by the UN as the International Year of the Family. Even today, at the turn of the 21st century, in many developing countries including Bangladesh women have yet to enjoy an equal status with men in the family. In the households of Bangladesh which are mainly patriarchal, women's position is far inferior to that of men. As a wife, a daughter and/or mother her status is much lower within the household. Family frequently tends to be a site of abuse, violence and violation of women's human rights.

Majority of the families are male dominated and women have been denied equal opportunity in almost every sphere of life. Her status is as good as a second class citizen. Women are being discriminated against in the family in most aspects. The discrimination starts right from the birth of a girl child. In traditional Bangladeshi family sons are always preferred to girls. The discrimination is pronounced in following broad areas, viz. food intake (nutrition), access to education, freedom to choose employment, choice of marriage/divorce, reproductive right, freedom of movement and right to inheritance. This gender bias relegates women to subordinate status in the society. As women have very little decision making power, family has become the site of violence, polygamy, desertion, coercion etc. This makes women's position vulnerable in the family. Women have been denied equal opportunity in almost every sphere

of life although without women's contribution harmonious family relation and sustainable development of the society is not possible. Rightly, therefore, the need for empowering women is felt not only in Bangladesh, it is so all over the world. The integration of women into development process is essential. However, women have to go a long way to enjoy equal status in all spheres of private and public life.

women to have access to outside employment.

7) Sense of physical insecurity and lack of safety discourage women to reach out to improve their status in the family.

Impact of International Laws on Family

The International Women's Year, the World Conference held at Nairobi, and the United Nations Decade for Women - Equality, Development and

Bangladesh government have also ratified most of the Conventions of the above-mentioned international bodies. As a result, GOB is formulating new laws and amending existing laws that will have favourable impact on the status of women. The international initiatives have expedited the process of integrating women in development in line with the New International Economic Order. However, it is to be noted that Bangladesh has not

status of women within the family and communities must be achieved throughout the society.

2. A body should be set up by the government to monitor and coordinate the women-targeted welfare works of various ministries and departments of the government, e.g., health, education, family planning, etc. for overall welfare of the family.

3. Programmes and projects need to be implemented to bring women into mainstream of politics and economic activities and they should originate at the grass root levels and have their latter's initiative, approval and support.

4. The girls should have to have easy access to schools and its educational programmes. For this the number of schools earmarked for girls should be increased. The government and NGOs should work in collaboration towards this end. Opportunities must be expanded for the advanced education of girls. Measures should be taken for drop-outs to return to schools. Gender issues should be integrated into instructional materials used in both formal and non-formal education.

5. Early marriage for girls and dowry system should be prohibited.

6. Introduction of labour saving technology in household works should be introduced in order to make women more productive in the family. At the same time men should be motivated to share domestic work load equally with women.

7. To reduce the burden of the working mothers more and properly equipped day-care centres should be established.

8. Legal support for women in the family must be ensured by enactment and implementation of uniform family code and through the ratification of the UNCEDAW. Discriminatory laws relating to marriage, divorce, child-custody, inheritance, adultery, etc. should be repealed/replaced.

9. Ministerial interpretation and wrong application of religious laws and tradition should be dealt with by the proper authority.

10. Government and NGOs women's groups should be in consultative process in formulating national policies relating to family matters to prevent disadvantages to women. In short empowerment of women in its real sense is key to enhancing the status of women in the society.

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Girls and boys, men and women: More equality empower all. Photo: Sean Sprague

Reasons for gender inequality in the family:

1) Patriarchy is the dominant made in Bangladesh. Most families are male headed and male dominated. Even in female headed households a male relative is considered as the official guardian of the family.

2) Cultural barriers, prejudices, misinterpretation of religious injunctions, etc. make women 'themselves accept the subjugated status in the family. This makes women live at the mercy of male member of the family.

3) The society permits women to play a very limited role in social decision making process.

4) Lack of economic power is an important impediment to improving the status of women.

5) Continuation of polygamy and dowry weaken women's position in the family.

6) Family assigns lower priority to women's education which eventually prevents

Peace contributed greatly to the process of eliminating obstacles to the improvement of the status of women at the national, regional and international levels. The UN sponsored Women's Conference held in 1985 made several recommendations to improve the status of women. It has proposed forward looking strategies for the advancement of women for the period 1986 to the year 2000. The Charter of United Nations, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, the Declaration of Women in Promoting International Peace and Cooperation, etc. have provided a renewed commitment by the international community to the advancement of women and the elimination of gender-biased discrimination.

Like most of the countries, ratified all the Articles of CEDAW which especially weaken women's status in the family. For example, it has not ratified the following articles of CEDAW:

— Article 2 which calls for reforming existing laws to remove all forms of discrimination between men and women, and to enact new laws/measures to ensure equality of sexes.

— Article 13A which asks to ensure equal family benefits.

— Most of the clauses of Article 13A which relates to marriage and family relation and particularly, which ensure equality of men and women in marriage, divorce and child custody.

Recommendations

1. Unfavourable social attitude must be changed to allow women to play positive and more productive roles in decision making in the family. Basic changes in attitudes towards the value of girls and

Success against Overwhelming Odds

by Shahabuddin Mahtab

IN the history of mankind, many great men, had remarkable mothers. There is an old adage that says, the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world! However we would like to depict here the courage and the strength of four remarkable middle class ladies, who had to face tough life though their marriages had promised a fairly comfortable life. Destiny had snatched their loving husbands and they had to battle single handedly, in their journey towards life. Of the four cases, one of them I learnt from my parents, and of the three other cases, I had known the families when tragedies struck them suddenly, and immobilized them. In the beginning they were simply stunned with young children in their hands.

Mrs Azam lost her husband in the early thirties, and had five children to look after. All of them were school going. Of her wealth and property she had the GPF money which was taken ten thousand only and the small family's pension. Her husband had also inherited about 30 acres of land and a homestead in the village. Her husband received little from the land, as he was considered to be a rich officer by his brothers. Mrs Azam left Calcutta, and rented a small house in Dhaka, for educating all her five children. Mrs Azam's brothers-in-law did not demur when she started to manage her late husband's property. Although she had a schooling of only eight years, her indomitable courage, frugality and a set purpose in life helped her to wade through many difficulties. Two of her sons rose to be senior public servants, the third one rose to be a University Professor; the two daughters who were graduates were married well. 'Khala Amma' as we used to call her was widely respected. She passed away in the forties.

Mrs Erfan lost her husband in their prime of life in the mid-seventies. She was left with four little girls to face the vicissitudes of life. On the assets side she had the life insurance, government's group insurance, the GPF money and the benevolent fund money. Mr Erfan also left a modest residential plot. The life insurance money and the group insurance payment helped her to cushion the initial shock. Fortunately for her, she was a honours graduate, and was determined to prepare herself for an academic career which she did. A brother was a protecting arm, only for a few years. But very soon Mrs Erfan



Marching forward photo: Jorgen Schjette

was on her own. All the four girls had brilliant results all the way. The struggle was a long one, but it proved to be a worthy one.

Mrs Nilufar Alam lost her thirty year old husband when she was in her early twenties, and was the mother of two small boys. At the initial stage she was helped by her parents. But Nilufar was determined to stand on her own, and relieve her old parents from the financial burden. Nilufar completed her MSS in the shortest possible time and is now working with a voluntary organisation, which pays her well. Her two sons are now in College. A decade and a half has passed her by.

Mrs Zeenat Ara lost her highly polished husband when she was in her mid-thirties. She was an MA, but had never worked for a day in her life. There was hardly any savings with the family, and the whole world came down crushing. The educational expenses of the two college going sons and

the daughter's school were high. The car had to be sold out and Mrs Zeenat Ara moved to a two roomed flat. After the initial shock she found work as a Secretary in one of the multinational companies. The transition of Mrs Ara was a hard one, but she faced life with great courage and dignity.

All events not only enrich our experience, but also at times give us a moral and a direction.

For our middle class families marital situation of the fifties and sixties, are quite different now in the nineties. A new generation has come up with a new set of ideas where marriage is not always for keeps with higher expectations from marriage a girl would not like to be a door mat. She wants to be empowered with education and employment, and these gives her security and dignity.

In this article pseudo names have been used for the privacy of the persons.

Radical Rose with a Passion for Politics

Tony Samphier writes from Rio de Janeiro

ROSE Marie Muraro has always been ahead of her time. And her time has never been wasted.

The author of the intriguingly titled *The Six Months in Which I Was a Man*, published in 1990 and now in its fifth edition, Muraro is an avant-garde writer. Her challenging books are state of the art in the market of ideas. She is internationally known as a radical theorist.

Political struggle has always come first for the person dubbed one of 'the women of the century.' On October 3, Muraro will fight for a parliamentary seat on a Workers Party (PT) ticket — the party represented by Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva in the presidential contest.

Her campaign slogan — 'Nothing of importance is achieved without passion' — is a quote from German philosopher Georg Hegel and personifies her deep-felt humanism which puts her on the side of Brazil's poor.

Muraro is a comparative latecomer to the PT. She had always been sympathetic to the cause but was put off by the PT's ultra-left wing. In 1986, she left the Democratic Labour Party to take a hand in shaping the political personality of what was still a young party, only formed in 1978 as a product of Brazil's pro-democracy movement.

Today, the PT adopts a moderate 'Eurocommunist' model. 'I think the PT's ideas originated there,' says Muraro. She explains: 'The revolution of the 1970s — the revolution of ideas — was the most important revolution of this century. It complimented the discovery of classes in the 19th Century which gave birth to Marxism.'

Although she cites Rosa Luxembourg as her idol, Muraro jokes that, 'I am not a real Marxist.' In the sixties, dissatisfied with the 'mechanistic framework' of

Marxism, she went in search of new ideas, discovering Norman Brown, the American theologian who talked about society and the body. 'I read his work and became a feminist,' recalls Muraro.

Liberation theologian, Leonardo Boff, credits Muraro with being the first to link the 'liberation of women with the liberation of the poor and oppressed,' Muraro views feminism as a 'women's union' and

argues that Western 'ethical feminists' are wrong to ignore class struggle. 'I came to Marxism through feminism and joined the two,' she says, 'it is a happy marriage in me.'

After leaving university early Rose Marie became Mrs Muraro, the housewife. She describes this as a frustrating and solitary period. Her only escape was poetry.

Before finding feminism, Muraro found progressive

Catholicism. She had always been involved with Christian youth militancy, so it was a natural step to join the leftist Catholic Action which helped to shape liberation theology.

'We made the practice in order that the theory could be born,' she contends.

This was both an exciting and dangerous time in Brazil. 'The first statement we made was that Christ was poor. If we are not with the poor, we are greater than Christ and so we are not Christians any more,' explains Muraro.

The student movement and elements of the labour movement coalesced with the progressive church. 'It was so dangerous that the military organised the 1964 coup against us, not against the traditional leftist parties,' says Muraro. At the time of the coup, 70 per cent of those imprisoned were Christians.

By the early 1970s, Muraro was an established writer with three books under her belt. The dictatorship was at its most repressive. She remembers having to make new friends because 'all my old friends were either exiled or dead.'

Luckily, she was invited to lecture at the Institute Villacobos, an arts school which promoted 'an alternative path' to traditional university education. 'I had more than 1,000 students and I was in the midst of something new and important,' she says.

Muraro's public discourse on sexuality and the body alarmed the military regime. Her books were seized by the police in 1975 and two of them were banned as 'pornographic.' Depressed and scared, she spent some time teaching in the United States.

In 1979, the military began to liberalise, legalising the PT. And so, according to Muraro, 'was born the polemic of deciding which struggle was

most important,' the general class struggle or the specific feminist one?

In the post-communist world, that debate is now old hat. 'The Marxists are now all feminists,' she observes, although she also acknowledges that 'women don't like political parties because they are obsolete institutions.'

Says Muraro: 'Marx didn't make the women's revolution — the mentality of revolution. In Brazil, the PT is making the mentality of revolution through the class revolution. It is a global trend, starting in the Third World.'

This rhetoric is radically different from traditional Third World Marxism. It is 'revolution based on consensus from the bottom upwards,' argues Muraro. Her view is that the electoral process is just one part of a broader agenda where 'civil society takes control of the state, not vice versa.'

If Lula, whom she describes as her friend, is defeated in the election, Muraro is adamant that 'the work will continue. We are not interested in taking power unless we have society behind us,' she says.

Passion for the 'women's revolution' drives Muraro's election campaign. The new Constitution makes provision for equal pay, but Muraro is aware that the fight for equality in the workplace is not over because women still receive only half what is paid to men. She wants to make such rights a reality through practical government action. Asked if she would look for cross-party support from other women, she replied: 'Men bond. Women network.'

Most women's movements shun hierarchy. But Rose Marie Muraro is Brazil's exception to the rule. According to one prominent Brazilian feminist, she is 'the first amongst us.'

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Whose Rights Should we Safeguard?

FOLLOWING their divorce, the erstwhile married couple divided the custody of their daughters between them. The older one stayed with her father, the younger one with the mother. Both parents have remarried, each twice. The older girl ran away from her father's home and has gone to live with her mother. She claims that her step-mother illtreats her. The accusation is denied by the father who says that his former wife is a woman of loose morals who will have a bad influence on the girl. The fact of her many marriages in held against the mother though not it seems against the father on account of his several marriages.

One of the criteria laid down in the Guardian and Wards Act 1890 for deciding which parent should have custody is that of the best interest of the child. The question is who should be the final arbiter of this interest. The courts are seen as neutral and they have to base their decision not on which parent has the greater right but to take into account not only the welfare of the child but also its wishes. It is clear that there cannot be any serious worry about the mother's influence on the older girl as she has the younger child with her who would presumably also be at risk.

While there may be good reasons why a parent may not be granted custody of his/her child, parents should realise that their children are not consumer durables. The child has 'voted with her feet'. The father should be advised to accept this with good grace.

— Ain O Salish Kendra



Seichelles and Sweden — two of only six parliaments where a quarter of members are women

Only one politician in ten is a woman

Women's share of seats in the world's parliaments has fallen from 13% to 10% since the worldwide situation was last assessed in 1991, according to the Inter-Parliamentary Union.

Top 10 % women MPs 1993		Zero rated No women MPs	
Seichelles	46	Anguilla/Barbuda	3
Finland	39	Belize	3
Norway	36	Bhutan	4
Sweden	33	Djibouti	4
Denmark	33	Jordan	4
Netherlands	29	Kiribati	4
Iceland	24	Kuwait	4
Cuba	23	Mauritania	4
Austria	21	Papua N. Guinea	4
China	21	Saint Lucia	4
		U. Arab Emirates	4

Where parliaments are 95% male % women MPs 1993		Going forwards Countries where the proportion of women in parliament has risen by 5 percentage points or more since 1987	
Fiji	1	Albania	29
Korea Rep.	1	Mongolia	25
Morocco	1	Hungary	21
Pakistan	1	Cuba	34
Yemen	1	Poland	20
Azerbaijan	2	Bulgaria	21
Egypt	2	Pakistan	9
Japan	2	Cape Verde	15
Lebanon	2	Gabon	13
Lesotho	2	Angola	15
Mali	2	Italy	13
Moldova	2		
Nigeria	2		
Turkey	2		
Tunisia	2		
Iran	3		
Kenya	3		
Marshall Islands	3		
Myanmar	3		
Nepal	3		
Paraguay	3		
South Africa	3		

Going backwards Countries where the proportion of women in parliament has fallen since 1987

% women MPs 1987		% pt. fall	
Seichelles	24	46	22
Spain	12	16	4
Netherlands	21	21	0
Algeria	2	10	8
Dominican Rep.	5	12	7
Finland	32	39	7
Honduras	5	12	7
Suriname	6	13	7
United States	5	11	6
Uruguay	0	6	6
Venezuela	4	10	6
El Salvador	3	8	5
Sweden	29	34	5

Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union. Distribution of seats between men and women in the 77 national parliaments existing as at 30 June 1993. (1993) (see Distribution of seats between men and women in national parliaments, statistical data from 1945 to 30 June 1993). Figures and comments are as of 1991. For two-member parliaments, women: only the lower house is counted.