



BANGLADESH is experiencing rapid socio-economic change marked by increasing rates of landlessness, unemployment and impoverishment. Among the poor, the plight of rural women is harder. Women are subject to different types and degrees of social and patriarchal control and exploitation. The rigid division of labour by sex has resulted in a highly segregated labour market. The special risks for those destitute women, who seek work in such a segregated labour market structure, are that women's wages are lower than men's, and more critically, the demand for female labour is lower than the demand for male labour. In such a condition in rural economy, self-employment for women is a way out from the persisting problem of unemployment and underpayment, an approach that has recently gathered momentum among the non-government organisations (NGOs) in Bangladesh.

Tailoring Training

Rangpur and Dinajpur regions, the Rangpur Dinajpur Rural Service (RDRS) working area, manifest the features of the most impoverished condition both spatially and otherwise. Spatial inequality coupled with class disparity in income, concentration of land (three quarters of the households are functionally landless), mass illiteracy (80 per cent), problem of access to government services, poor infrastructure, unemployment and the problem of women's empowerment have aggravated the rural living conditions in the region. Faced with this rural reality, RDRS felt long ago that self-reliance among the poor is a pre-condition for a sustainable development in the region and indeed in Bangladesh. With this development view, where women's empowerment is the central issue, RDRS offered tailoring training to 80 destitute women in two of its Comprehensive Project Units (CPU) — Lalmonirhat and Pirganj. Starting in October 1993, the Tailoring Training Project (TTP) continued until September 1994.

A study was conducted in September 1994 in two selected project areas of RDRS with a view to measuring the impact of the project on employment opportunities, in-

Income Generation through Training

by Dr Mohammad Habibur Rahman



RDRS offering tailoring training

come generation and other socio-psychological development of the clients. The project operated with 80 destitute women participants who come from 23 unions in 8 thanas under 2 RDRS CPUs. As the women are living in their respective villages, it was not feasible to interview all 80 participants of the project. The study therefore selected 16 participants applying stratified sampling technique.

An impressionistic view from the field survey data shows that the TTP is a remarkable success in terms of skill development, employment opportunity, income improvement, empowerment and socio-psychological development of the target population. It also made some success in motivating other destitute women/adolescent girls of the localities and transferring to them some degree of tailoring skill. It was seen in both CPU

areas of the project that the trained tailors were working very efficiently both at home and in the market place. Out of 16 trainees, 12 are running their business from their homes and 4 have rented shops in the market place in Lalmonirhat and Bochaganj.

A Happy Face of the Rural Society

There are evidences from the two study areas that the destitute women-turned trained tailors have made a breakthrough in generating income. It does not matter how slowly the women tailors will come to the limelight of 'development', but the fact of the matter is they are beginning to change the pace of rural economy. This dynamism will explicitly determine the course of many informal sectors in the rural economy and thereby influence the socio-

cultural change in the society. The projected benefits of the TTP are systematically taking place as the beneficiaries themselves are realising that it very well serves their economic and socio-psychological interests. Although the project has yet to yield long lasting and definitive results, but given the improvements that took place, there can be little doubt that in the long run the target population will benefit from this. In the short term though, the indications are very promising.

Some tailors have purchased some amount of agricultural land. It was not realistically possible for them to even think about it before they joined the training project. Similarly, 7 of the same group of women have paid lease money (in between Taka 1000-3000) to mortgage in farming land. Three of the women have even given money on credit.

Six women have recently spent from their own earnings an average Taka 200 each to replace their traditional latrine with a hygienic latrine. Another group of 5 women have contributed an average Taka 700 to improve housing conditions, i.e. tin roof/new thatch.

Some were able to purchase furniture/radio/utensils for their homes. Others have increased the number of cows, goats and poultry. Thirteen women are now able to provide their household members better and nutritious food. A total of 5 women have also successfully sent their 'out-of-school' or 'dropout of school' children back to their schools. It was checked with other 11 interviewed women and found that their children/brothers/sisters were going to schools regularly. Another group of 10 women are able to provide better clothing, shoes and school supplies to their school-going children. All 6 show a picture of improvement in the health care of their household members.

Empowerment seem to have increased among these women. Their level of social awareness has also improved hand in hand. Some of them replied that their awareness development is leading to establish their rights and power both at home and in the society, thus enabling them to play an essential role in their household matters including children's education and so forth. However, there still remains the problem of harassment and social acceptance. In certain cases, the problem has been so excruciating that the unmarried girls like Rebeka and Sabina from Dhantala (Bochaganj thana) and Matijpur (Bochaganj thana) village respectively had to cease their business in the village market and return back to their homes. The problem was not created by the elderly members of the community but by the local unemployed youths. These boys taunted and teased the young girls during their business hours. NGOs in Bangladesh should make some efforts to mobilise these idle young men to do something better.

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APWIP Regional Workshop

by Farah Kabir

THE Asia Pacific Women in Politics Network, an informal network that was launched in April this year, organised a regional workshop in Bangkok, Thailand. About fifty women representing over twenty countries including Bangladesh assembled together, to develop strategies for strengthening existing efforts at national and local levels to put gender issues on the policy agenda.

The workshop entitled "Putting Gender Issues on the Policy Agenda: Strategies and Action from Asia and Pacific" held September 25 to 29, succeeded to bring together women from different areas — representative from the UN, members of parliaments, high government women officials, educationists, professionals, NGOs and grassroot workers at the Women Education Training Centre, Gender Development Research Institute, Bangkok. The Asia Foundation (TAF) provided the financial support and the field offices of TAF in respective countries facilitated the contact and coordination with different individuals who attended the workshop.

The participants felt that social, economic and political structures and institutions require reorientation and restructuring to ensure gender equality in all dimensions.

Globally women hold a secondary position and have been marginalised for far too long. Therefore, equity could be achieved only through improving the status of women and providing them with better opportunities. Enhancing the powers of women and increasing their participation in decision making was considered the path to equity.

During the deliberations certain impediments were identified. It was observed that they were rooted in the cultural, political, economic and social arenas and they were mutually constitutive, each creating itself and the others at the same time.

To help change the present situation targets or actors crucial to the issues were short-listed. These were: political leadership, bureaucracy, legislators, party workers, religious leaders, electorates, interest groups, minorities, individuals in the education systems, pressure groups, civic organisations, NGOs, business groups, and media. Both men and women belonging to these groups required to be conscientised and sensitised in women and gender concerns.

The participants unanimously emphasised on research, analyses, accurate interpretation of data and statistics, and dissemination of in-

formation to facilitate change and develop alternative models, choices and options leading to equity in society.

It was also felt that education was essential to develop understanding of the structure, gender compositions, power relations and opportunities of equality available to a democratic polity.

Mobilisation of women in particular and the poor in general were also agreed upon. Such mobilisation would help the formation of support groups, such as coalition or caucus for social or financial support. It would help in articulating and making women's cause visible.

To support national efforts a common regional platform was what the workshop aimed at. The workshop agreed upon certain actions that may be encapsulated into three broad categories: research, analysis and dissemination of information; enforcement of existing laws specially related to women; and advocacy and marketing of gender concerns.

The APWIP regional workshop hoped to foster solidarity among similar organisations. Individuals and efforts and strengthen networking. The move for equity gathers strength through such a meet.



Participants in APWIP regional workshop

Encouraging Self-reliance among Women

ASHIA Khatun, a mother of four, credits the Association for Social Advancement (ASA) for helping her achieve self-sufficiency. "My husband lacks the ability to work as he is crippled. My daughters take care of him and do the domestic work in my absence. Meeting the expenses of a family of six became possible only because I got credit from ASA." She used a loan from ASA to finance a small wholesale and retail fish operation which now supports her family.

Khatun is one of thousands of women ASA, a long time partner of the Coady Institute, Canada, has helped take control of their lives since it started working with the poor in 1978.

At that time, a group of development workers from different non-government agencies formed ASA with one vision in mind — the establishment of a just society. To achieve this goal, ASA staff developed plans to empower the poor, ensure people's participation in their own development and to facilitate access to local resources.

The Coady Institute has been helping ASA achieve its objectives by providing training and consultancy services. The Institute's partnership with the association began in 1989. Since then a number of staff members have participated in the Institute's courses in Canada, many more have joined in workshops in Bangladesh.

In recent years, ASA has developed a "self-reliant approach" to people's development. The main characteristic of the approach involves encouraging self-reliance by making small investments within a short span of time.

According to the association's chief executive officer, Shafiqul Chowdhury, since ASA began its comprehensive credit programmes in 1989, there has been a positive impact on the lives and incomes of many a landless grassroots people.

ASA distributed Tk. 570 million (\$ 17 million CDN) until June 1993 as credit to 162,214 members in 9,816 groups," reports Chowdhury. "The rate of repayment was 99.99 per cent."

To improve self-sufficiency and access to technologies, ASA provides education and

training. Members also meet regularly to discuss savings strategies. These meetings provide an opportunity to build group discipline, group cohesiveness and group strength. A door-to-door programme used to motivate prospective target members to join.

The advancement of women is another principal objective of ASA. Almost 100 per cent of its group members are women. They regularly participate in

to contribute to their community."

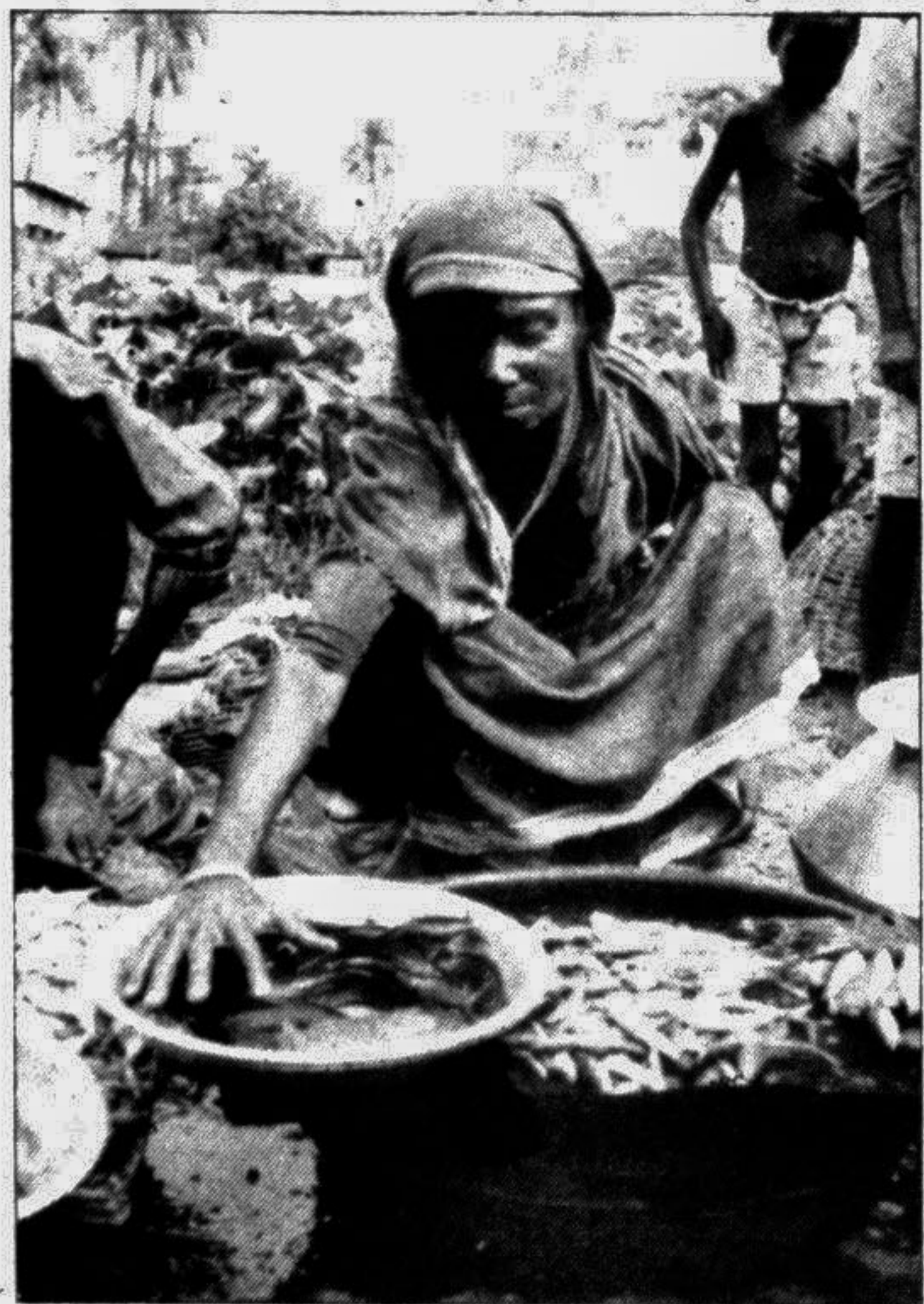
According to ASA's associated coordinator Nelson Rema, "ASA is a grown up organization with a proven and tested development model."

ASA's self-reliant development model has been designed to provide the poor with easy terms and easy access to credit. Its collateral free credit programme with weekly repayment and savings schedules

Meanwhile, in Bangladesh, the impact of ASA programmes is changing the lives of people such as Ashia Khatun.

"Now I am free from all debts," she says. "I do not need to go door to door in search of money. As profits have increased, my children have resumed schooling and I can now afford to buy warm clothes during the winter for them. I am satisfied, ASA's credit programme helped me attain economic emancipation, which is a great achievement for me."

— A Correspondent



Ashia Khatun's small wholesale and retail fish operation enables her to provide for her family's needs.

Development Education classes which directly help them increase their awareness, says Chowdhury.

"When women earn their own income it reduces their economic dependence on money lenders and male partners. The self-reliant approach has enabled women to engage in homestead production, mini trading, and poultry, fish and dairy production. This type of economic involvement socializes women and allows them

builds up institutions at the grassroots level. These then become the stepping stones for self-reliance and the sustainable development of the poor.

Already a great success in Bangladesh, the model was recently initiated in Cambodia with the help of donor agency HEKS-Switzerland. There is also the possibility of programme replication in places such as the Philippines and Indonesia.

Assistance can Change One's Future

Momena Begum

Group: Pragati, Deana

No woman is a fool or an idler. All she wants is a cozy home which she will build in her way. Momena dreams to build not only a home, but to educate her children too, although she herself is an illiterate.

Momena's father-in-law was once a middle class farmer of Faridpur. He sold out all his property gradually to educate his youngest son who, after obtaining a Master's degree abandoned all relatives, leaving his parents and brothers penniless. Momena's husband Aulad Hussain, a muster roll labour in PDB, settled in Deana and brought his parents down here. She has two sons and two daughters.

Momena aspires to turn the wheel of luck in her favour. Knowing the saving procedure and loan facilities of WDP she took up membership in July 1992. After three months she borrowed Tk 1000.00 from the project and opened a little grocery in a wooden box. Continuous sitting in the shop was not possible for her. So she engaged her youngest son who was a school student. She sought help of her ailing father-in-law also and herself remained at the helm of affairs. The eldest son passed SSC and got himself admitted into college.

The shop started to do quite well. Paying back the initial loan she received Tk 2000.00 from the project and placed it as capital. She was very careful to keep apart profits and make regular loan payments. The day came when she paid back Tk 2000.00 with service charge and borrowed Tk 3,000.00 again.

Momena says, "The project is fulfilling my dream to stand in the society with dignity." Her own group savings is Tk 416.00. The business is flourishing. She says more money is required to expand the shop further. Now she pays Tk 150.00 for the box shop as rent per month. She has hired two such boxes. She wants to make the boxes her own and hopes to do it soon — even bigger in size. Her present capital is about Tk 18000.00.

She is diligent, clear and keeps her home and children tidy. She has taken training in health education, leadership and poultry. She possesses 20 hens which lay 12 eggs daily. She lives on two decimals land only. Therefore, the desire to build a bigger farm is always there. Momena is very happy being a member of the project and says when her elder son gets the Degree, she will put him into the business.

— Rotary Club, Khulna

A Bloodied Skirt Helps Break a Taboo

by Roula El-Rifai writes from Jerusalem

ASMA Ibrahim stood before the microphone and pulled a bloodied skirt out of a plastic bag and held it up.

At a conference here on women's rights, the Palestinian woman recounted publicly, for the first time, how her skirt came to be covered in blood when her father-in-law pulled her by the hair and dragged her along the ground.

Her crime: marriage to the man's son had not produced a child.

Ibrahim wears a veil, but told the women and sprinkling of men in the audience that

she was willing to show anyone who wanted to see the bald spot left on her head where her husband had pulled her hair out.

"I never had children and he blamed me, even though several doctors told me I was fertile. I led a miserable life. He beat me. He burned my clothes, insulted me and sometimes wouldn't allow me to leave the house."

"It's just such a relief to talk about it, and to have people listen and support me," said Ibrahim, now 21, who was married at 13.

As gripping as her story was, what was even more remarkable was that it was being told at all, at a public meeting before hundreds of people. One of the great taboos of Palestinian society — public discussion of domestic violence — is finally being broken.

More and more women's group are now turning from the political issues that dominated the struggle against 27 years of Israeli occupation to focus on social issues that simply were not discussed before, particularly outside academic circles.

Ibrahim was speaking before a mock tribunal, staged at a conference convened in late September by Al-Haq, a Jerusalem-based human rights group and entitled "Women, Justice and Law: Towards the Empowerment of Palestinian Women."

The four-day conference was the culmination of a year-long campaign to hold workshops and seminars on women's rights and the law, an effort partly financed by the Canadian government.

Another speaker, Nadia

Zidan, stood proudly in front of the crowd to tell of her 10-year legal struggle to win a divorce and escape a dead marriage that had never been consummated.

But the Greek Orthodox Christian courts have stalled the case. During those 10 years she has been required to take a number of medical tests to prove that she is a virgin and has had to go to court fighting injunctions ordering her to live with her husband for short periods to see if things would work out.

Zidan and Ibrahim are not unique. Their stories are like those of many others in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, a traditional society riddled with the problems caused by early marriage, domestic violence, sexual abuse and gross inequality.

"We propose to present real stories of women whose rights have been violated for legal or social reasons to try to break the barrier of fear and make people talk openly," said Randa Siniora, one of the conference organisers.

"This conference represents a courageous attempt to

and Gaza is based in Jerusalem and still only functions part time. It has received 110 calls from women suffering from abuse by their husbands or sexual abuse by relatives.

One 20-year-old woman called the hotline to tell how she had been raped since 15 by her widowed father but was unable to leave the home since she was the oldest child and had brothers and sisters to care for.

For the first time, she has someone to talk to. The presence of a large number of Palestinian women who live in Israel, where there are 800,000 Israeli Arabs, added another dimension.

Aida Teuma Sleiman, director of the Women Against Violence programme in Nasareth, said the issue of domestic violence has received more attention in Israel, where state bodies and a more well-established feminist movement are supportive.

There are six shelters and hotlines in Israel for women and Sleiman's organisation was created in 1992 and has opened the first two shelters in Israel meant especially for Palestinian women.

The debate over gender is



put on the table and discuss difficult issues like domestic violence and even incest," added Eileen Kuttab, a lecturer in sociology at Birzeit University in Ramallah, the West Bank.

The workshops dealt with women's rights in health, education, social welfare, political involvement; protection against violence and the need for emergency hotlines and shelters; and reproductive rights.

The one telephone hotline for women in the West Bank

sues in the West Bank and Gaza is complicated by the divergence of views between secular women and those who adhere closely to traditional Islam, and by an awareness that Western notions of how society should function cannot simply be transplanted.

The writer is a freelance journalist whose research on Palestinian women's groups has been partly funded by the Canadian International Development Agency's media collaboration programme.