



A Look at the Top Priorities for Women in 1995

by Schrezad Joya Monami Latif

"Repression against women must be stopped." Begum Rokeya Rahman Kabir, founder of Saptagram Nari Swanirvar Parishad felt that was her top priority for the year. Whether it be physical or from social forces such as the fundamen-



Rokeya Rahman Kabir: Repression against women must be stopped.

talists, women in Bangladesh have faced exploitation and physical abuse from all forces in society.

Razia Khan Amin, a professor of English Department of Dhaka University, pointed out the current trend of exploitation and abandonment that women were facing and the

essentially in raising awareness in these women. Hundreds of women are abandoned by their husbands and children every day, only to be left alone with no one to turn to and nothing to call home. Often these same women are ones who have earnings of their own. But the earnings are often confiscated by the men in their lives — brothers, husbands, and sons.

Simply having one's own income is not enough. Begum Rokeya Kabir stressed that enough emphasis must be given to empowerment education for women. Education



Razia Khan: Attitudinal change in family needed.

that not only shows women their human rights and their capabilities but is also relevant to their lives. There is no relevance in teaching a destitute urban woman about weaving



Ayesha Khanom: Punish the fatwabaz.

baskets. Women must be able to be self-sufficient and confident in charge of their own lives.

Empowerment is all-encompassing. Education that works is education that shows women political, economic and social independence and helps

them take charge of their lives. The fact that our politics is dominated by two women and that three out of seven South Asian Region countries are headed by women has sadly meant little to women's increased overall participation in politics. Bringing in women's participation at all levels of the political sphere is intrinsic to women's empowerment.

According to Khushi Kabir, "We must work and learn how to bring in women's participation at all levels. Instead of just from a quota system." Kabir, Chairperson of ADAB, felt that



Khushi Kabir: Equal rights and opportunities in the work force should be ensured.

if women are indeed men's equals in this country as the constitution suggests, then they should be allowed to compete and participate equally in all spheres instead of being subjects of special representation.



Rasheda Chowdhury: We must go beyond the Beijing Conference.

Equal rights and opportunities in the work force should be a priority for women according to all the women we spoke to. Khushi Kabir defined the entire premise of women and development when she made a distinction between women and gender. "When we speak of gender, we mean patriarchy." Patriarchy, thou-

sands of years of it, is what we are fighting in the work force, in businesses, and in our courts. She put that fighting patriarchy is not the fight of women alone. Men must be sensitized to the gender question, made aware that a woman's rights politically and economically being manifested in society is for the good of the entire nation, for men and women alike. Women's fight isn't necessarily against men, it's together with them that we should be pushing the status quo as we have it today.

Bangladesh has ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) only in part. The questions raised by the government have been on the topic of women's personal rights, a direct contradiction to our Constitution's Clause 28 which clearly states the equality of the sexes in our Sonar Bangla. Getting our government to ratify CEDAW in full and implement the true meaning behind such a convention will be a top priority for this year.

Generating income to the poorest of the poor is also a priority in the work of Niljira Kori's Khushi Kabir. Part of what the Beijing Conference will do is that it will bring into

focus women's role in the economic structure of the world. Women have always fully participated in the work force, often doing the most strenuous of jobs, from brick laying to paddy husking. There needs to be recognition of women's work and its worth. The Beijing Conference will bring all these issues up to the forefront for women from all over the world.

A direct dialogue such as in Beijing is a key step between governments and NGOs to implement equality in the work force, awareness programmes among men and women that sensitize them and make them aware of the importance of women's participation at all levels, of the essential need in women's political, economic, and social empowerment. Our only fervent hope is that all the resolutions that come out of Beijing become top priority for Bangladeshi women, by Bangladeshi women and especially by the Bangladeshi government.

As Rasheda Chowdhury, Director of ADAB, said, "We must not simply attend the Beijing Conference, we must go beyond it and lobby for CEDAW's ratification. 1995 will be a great challenge in the realm of equality between the sexes but I am optimistic." So are we. Here's to a year where priorities stay at the forefront, challenges are successfully met and heaps of optimism.

None can deny that 1995 is going to be a challenging year for women. Especially if one takes into account all that went on in 1994 in the burning of schools and the roused revivalist passions of the fundamentalists, the increased repression and violence against women. This year as women march, argue, and consolidate their way to Beijing for the Fourth World Conference on Women, The Daily Star asked a few prominent individuals in Bangladesh what they felt were their priorities for the year.

Ayesha Khanom of Mohila Parishad showed distress at the increased number of victims of fatwa. "If there isn't an overall change in society's attitude towards women, in our laws of inheritance and divorce, there can never be an improvement in women's status in this country. Then the women who have suffered in the hands of the fatwabaz will remain simply stories in the press." She gave top priority to putting a stop to the revivalism that swept Bangladesh last year and was exacerbated by the whole Taslima Nasreen issue. Fatwabazs and the eradication of their form of terrorism should be a phenomenon that we no longer have to be victims to this year. Severe punishment to fatwabazs would be a positive action towards this end.

SOCIAL justice rather than simple save-the-trees environmentalism is the way to save the Amazon, believes Marina Silva, one of a new crop of eco-conscious politicians in Brazil's youthful democracy.

"When I fly over the Amazon by plane, I love to look at the green carpet of forest, crisscrossed by rivers," says Silva, who takes her seat in the Senate (Upper House) in January. "I feel a great sense of pain when I then see an area of deforestation."

She fears destructive development will cause the Amazonia region to "end up with the same devastation as Europe and the United States."

Unlike many environmentalists, however, she is not interested in saving the forest for preservation's sake, but because from an early age she learned its value: people depend on it for food, work and pleasure.

So her prescription relies as much on economic growth from the extraction of resources such as rubber as on preservation.

A reference of her favourite meal underlines the point: "I hope the ecologists will forgive me," she says, "but in the rubber tapper settlement where I lived as a child, game was very important. I still haven't forgotten the flavour of a good *farofa de pacca*, (a large forest rodent, roasted with cassava)."

Her victory in the October general election suggests many people in the southern Amazon state of Acre agree with her approach.

She describes her success as a "vote of conscience". Her victory took many by surprise, not least the pollsters who had not noticed her growing popularity in Acre, where she cut her political teeth.

It also reflects the way environmental and social activists of her generation have chosen to fight within the PT

Silva's Favourite Meal Points to a Different Approach

Tony Sampier writes from Rio

(Workers Party), bent on radical reform, rather than flocking to Brazil's small Green Party. The Greens deal with parks and flowers, while the Workers Party grapples with the socio-environmental crisis.

As a student, Silva flirted with an ultra-leftist Marxist group along with her close friend, Jose Genoio, now an important Workers Party figure.

"I identify with people who

want a party of proposals, of dialogue with other parties and with civil society," says Silva — a coded message that she has moved away from the far left of the political spectrum.

"The PT was the logical option," she adds. When rubber tappers union president Chico Mendes helped found the party and "decided to be a candidate in Acre, I joined the PT to help him, and ended up being a candidate myself."

The 1988 assassination of Mendes, who had become a famous ecologist and land reform advocate, shocked the world. For Silva, it was a personal tragedy. She was his right-hand woman in the trade union movement and together they had set up a trade unions congress in Acre.

"We had many years of companionship which cannot be easily summarised," says Silva. "But what I have cleared in my mind is Chico himself — his way of being, his style of leadership. He knew how to listen and let everyone else speak, and only later would he make up his own mind. This is a very important lesson he left me."

For both of them, the biggest test came with the "empates" — the human barrier campaigns against tree-felling — which saved thousands of hectares of forest. "I remember them with great emotion," says Silva, "especially those organised by Chico Mendes in the Cachoifra rubber tapper settlement."

Though trade unionists and environmentalists are increasingly the target of intimidation and violence, non-violence is an important part of Silva's political armour: "I have a great admiration for who struggle in the way (Mahatma) Gandhi did: both activist and pacifist."

Determination is one of her hallmarks. As a local councillor in Rio Branco, the capital of Acre, she had to fight tooth and nail to get local conservatives to declare an official day of remembrance for Mendes. In the end, she won.

"They say I am a fighter," she says. "I agree, but I think

that, in myself, the fight comes after the dress."

The daily *Jornal do Brasil* described Silva's election result as a "victory of the dream over circumstance." Whereas many political careers are the product of wealth and privilege, Silva's rise to political prominence stems from a life-long struggle for life itself.

"My mother had 11 children, but three died when they were young," she explains. "Of the eight survivors, I was the second eldest. So from a young age I helped to look after my six sisters and one brother."

There was no school in the rubber plantation where Silva's family lives, but the children were not idle: "I worked in agriculture and rubber extraction, until I was 16."

Although the whole family was hard at work, they only scraped by. Silva suffered hunger, sometimes going without food for 24 hours at a time.

At 14, she was still illiterate. A year later her mother died. "I had to acquire some knowledge to help my father," she says. "Simple mathematics, at first, in order to calculate the weight of rubber."

"I was unable to do the heavy rubber tapping work," explains Silva. "I asked my father if I could move to the city because I wanted to study."

The teenaged Silva did not waste time. In just three years she had completed and passed all the necessary exams in enter university.

Today, already described as an "Amazon legend" by the Brazilian press, there is no doubt that Silva is a force in the battle for the life and soul of the Amazon — the slash and burn developers and big landowners versus those who need the forest for their basic survival. — Gemini News

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Marina Silva: Amazon Legend

Working Women's Rights in Workplace

by Ayesha Arshad

I joined Aristocrat Garments Dhaka in 1990 as a training operator. About 50 men and 300 other women were also employed there. The men earned a monthly wage of Tk 1200 (US\$30), while women doing exactly the same work earned 2/3 of the men's wage, a sum of Tk 800 (US\$20). Management was more repressive toward women; men were given leave and wage raises if they demanded them, but any woman who raised her voice faced the threat, too often carried into action, of dismissal.

I want to share a personal experience with you. This happened a few days after I started working. Another woman worker, in the same job as me, was earning a quarter of my wages, Tk 150 (US\$4). There was no way of protesting this kind of injustice. We just had to tolerate it and continue, or we risked losing our jobs.

Suddenly, one morning, this woman fell unconscious on the floor. The doctor could not find anything wrong with her. Later, when she regained consciousness, we heard the reason for her falling ill. Her husband was dead and she had a baby son. She had no source of financial support. Her house was almost three miles from the factory, and every day she had to walk all the way, work from 8:00 am to 8:00 pm, and then walk back again. On many occasions, she couldn't afford to eat all day and had to spend whatever money she had to buy food and milk for her son. In the last six months she had sold her blood on three occasions in order to buy milk for him. This is why she fainted.

Other women arranged to take her home, and gave donations for her treatment, we also raised the issue with the management and tried to persuade them to raise her wages. They refused to listen to us, because we were only workers. We were unorganized and we had no bargaining power.

Soon after this incident, it was May 1, International Solidarity Day for all workers and a national holiday. Management told the women workers that we would lose our jobs unless we worked on May Day. Men workers were given a holiday. Women were not given a holiday. We were told that women do not need to take part in meetings and processions, and so we didn't need a holiday. I couldn't square this with my conscience, and felt that I couldn't tolerate this kind of violation of our rights. Some women workers met with the senior operators to inform them that we refused to work on May Day. But the management refused to accept our demand. I then raised the case of the woman who fell unconscious, and told them that they never acknowledged our problems, they totally subordinated our interests, and treated us like animals. The day after we refused to work, we were blocked from entering the factory. But united pressure from the workers ensured that we could enter.

But again two days later, when we were working inside, I suddenly felt suffocated, and in front of my eyes, ten to fifteen women slipped unconscious to the floor from their machines. I rushed to the gate, but found it locked. Several of us kept screaming for the gate to be opened, but no one came.

We carried the women down and took them to the emergency ward. The doctor's report said they had been af-

fectured by some kind of gas. Management insisted we had fainted due to the heat. Our protest began.

Stories appeared in the daily newspaper. The main issue around which our struggle was held was "Repression of Workers and the May Day Incident". On that issue, I called all workers, women and men, together to discuss what action could be taken to resolve the dispute. We marched to the Press Club and we met trade union leaders. With their assistance, we decided to form a trade union. With a lot of difficulties, we collected the necessary forms and deposited them with the Labour Directorate. The management began a policy of repression against all the workers and particularly targeted me. They used both the police and mastans (thugs) to harass us. Everyone on my committee had their employment terminated. When we were told of the termination, the management's mastans were present. I left in fear of my life. After this, another nine workers were dismissed.

The Joint Labour Directorate informed us that they had been threatened that if they registered us as a trade union, they would all lose their jobs. They advised us to seek legal protection.

I sought legal help, and after nine months the court gave judgement recognizing us as a trade union. We formed a new committee and I worked with them on organizing the union.

The present article is a testimony of Ain O Salish Kendra representative, Ayesha Arshad, at the Global Tribunal on Violation of Women's Human Rights at the UN Conference on Human Rights at Vienna.

ENDING hunger is one of the most critical challenges that humanity faces today: by the year 2000, there will be nearly one billion more mouths to be fed.

Poverty as the root cause of hunger is a global reality. It is spreading within countries as well as between them. Most of the world's malnourished have neither enough land to grow food nor the financial resources to purchase available, locally grown foodstuffs. Therefore in order to achieve food security it is necessary to increase not only the availability of food at national and regional levels, but also to ensure that families have access to income to purchase it.

The irony we face is that hunger often continues even when economic growth increases and family income rises. As the World Food Council noted in its Cairo Declaration, "When economic activity slows down, the poor suffer most, but when the level of economic activity increases, they often benefit the least."

We have to look beyond annual income to understand how and why poverty and hunger are related to issues ranging from the global economy to the allocation of resources within the smallest household unit. In this paper we examine some of these issues and societal trends that have not yet been considered

fully in plans to overcome hunger.

Today, one out of three households in the world has a woman as its sole breadwinner. In some countries the figure is one out of every two households. Single-parent households everywhere have a high ratio of dependants to working adults and they are known to be liable to slip into poverty.

Today, for every woman living in poverty, there are four hungry children. The size of a mother's income has a direct bearing on the nutritional health of her children. The higher her income, the less likely her children are to suffer from hunger and malnutrition.

The number of illiterate people is increasing: two-thirds of the illiterate population are women. This crippling imbalance has been allowed to persist even though it has been shown that the level of a woman's education is the single most important influence on the survival rate of her children.

The changing global economy has forced many men to leave home in search of wages. But whether a working man is present or not, be it in the North or in the South, much of the responsibility for the well-being of the family has been shifting to women. At the same time, any opportunity for them

Women's Role in Ending Hunger

by Gopal Sen Gupta

to earn an adequate income is severely constrained. This initial, broad-based information leads to a seldom articulated dilemma: We are shifting more and more responsibility for the physical and intellectual growth of boys and girls on to their mothers — creating mother-centered families — without giving them access to a commensurate amount resources to enable them to provide for the family. A consequence of this is increasing poverty and hunger.

That strategies to end hunger and alleviate poverty, if they are to be successful, must include the women who are increasingly responsible for food security. Almost everyone on earth they are a principal, if not the sole, economic support of themselves and their children.

Hunger is a global reality, with certain common characteristics and causes that can lead to widely applicable solutions. In the words of the World Food Council: "Hunger is a man-made phenomenon; human error or neglect creates it, human complacency perpetuates it and human resolve can eradicate it."

The regional distribution shows that the majority of them live in Asia. The ques-

tions posed below should give us new insights into the issues of hunger and poverty: Who is the small-scale food farmer? Who is the bread winner in today's world? Does the bread winner have access to cash income and appropriate support

services? Who is responsible for household security? What is the impact of global economy on family food security? With these questions, we can build existing knowledge and examine some of the societal changes that have occurred,

both positive and negative. Answers to these questions will enable us to formulate successful strategies to interrupt the cycle of poverty and hunger and to design a different, more hopeful future.

It is no exaggeration to say that women in developing countries are the backbone of



Sharing the work to ensure food security — photo: Subhash Chandra Sarker

the rural food system. They cultivate food crops by themselves or together with men. They also work on cash crops with their husbands. They care for animals—chickens, sheep, goats and sometimes cows and oxen. They are the key workers in the food chain: they produce, process and store food, or they purchase it when income is adequate.

In Bangladesh, the present Government has an intention to involve the women forces in the best possible sectors to utilize their capacities in production. The Dhal-Bhat policy for the SAARC countries have also been introduced by the Government of the Peoples Republic of Bangladesh — in which women forces are thought to provide a great contribution.

The importance of women in food production differs by region. The United Nations estimates that women's share in family food production is: 80 per cent in Africa; 60 per cent in Asia and the Pacific; and 40 per cent in Latin America. Patterns of production show regional differences as well: In Africa, women are often farmers in their own right or labourers on the family farm. Women do most of the food processing and marketing of surplus produce. The move away from the cultivation of food crops to cash crops while continuing to cultivate food

crops. The Asian pattern is different — joint cultivation by spouses is more typical. Farm management decisions are usually made by men. In Bangladesh, women have responsibility for the post harvest work including processing rice. Besides, they tend the livestock and cultivate fruits and vegetables.

Group actions through informal mutual support systems or non governmental organizations, at times with the help of governmental women's bureaus, is directed at improving food security, particularly during the difficult times of inflation or recession.

Household food supply can be enhanced when food processing technologies are available. Other desired technologies are those to process, package, dry and store fish, fruits, vegetables and root crops, and to extract oil. Such technologies are sought by villages across Bangladesh. Their acquisition is a top priority for women's savings group, as in Bangladesh, and for organizations like Save the Children (USA). "Now we have food and some left to sell" — is a typical comment of savings group members.

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