



# Development Dogma and its Impact on Women's Lives

by Schrezad Joya Monami Latif

This is exactly what BRAC is doing in Matlab Thana in Chandpur, known to many in the development world as probably one of the most researched areas in Bangladesh, and to many others as the place where the *tambur* movement took place. BRAC has never really been known for its research. With its recent joint collaboration project with the International Center for Diarrhoeal Disease Research

(ICDDRDB) in Matlab this could well change and if successful, be yet another milestone under its belt. NGOs have made significant contributions to the well being of their target group but often public sentiment is negative

Program activities range from loans and livestock to savings and sericulture. The real challenge will be to work out which of the inputs which the organizations deliver is really most significant in altering people's lives.

Is it the much lauded Grameen style credit delivery system or is it the training and educational skills imparted by an NGO such as BRAC? Or is it in fact, the social mobilization efforts which really affect the well being of the rural poor? The BRAC-ICDDRDB research findings aim to supply some answers to the extent, if any, of this improved welfare and the pathways which lead to this change. The novel feature of the collaboration between the two quite distinctive institutions is that the joint import of socioeconomic interventions by BRAC and health inputs provided by ICDDRDB will be tested. The one hitch is that the research will be done in Matlab again! One can only wonder what the consensus is among jaded Matlab natives who have had to bear with the ICDDRDB's demographic data collecting system for the past 30 years. Now they will be subject to yet a fresh round of extensive data collecting and survey taking. This time by BRAC researchers, studying economic conditions, control over fertility, lower mortality, health seeking patterns, nutritional status, and the general improvement in women's lives.

This will be done with a mix of questionnaire techniques and participatory anthropological methods. Local women have been recruited in the massive survey taking venture of over 4,000 families.

One example of the dimensions of the project is the study of single mother headed households, an alarmingly increasing trend in Bangladesh. One such case is that of Shahida who's only daughter ran away from home "because hunger drove her out." She has three sons, all under seven, to feed. Her husband, a small trader, one fine day went off and married another woman from the next village. Now Shahida works in other people's homes and basically does whichever job comes her way. She is victim to gossip and talk from her community because she lives alone and works outside her home. And yet, the depressing fact is that there is at least one Shahida in almost every village in Bangladesh today.

Another aspect of the survey asked elite women of a village how their lot was after the advent of BRAC and they seemed to feel that things were worse for them. "Now the poor women wear our sandals and work at their own income schemes, we have trouble recruiting workers for our homes to help with paddy husking." This particular side of BRAC's work is really not a bad thing at all.

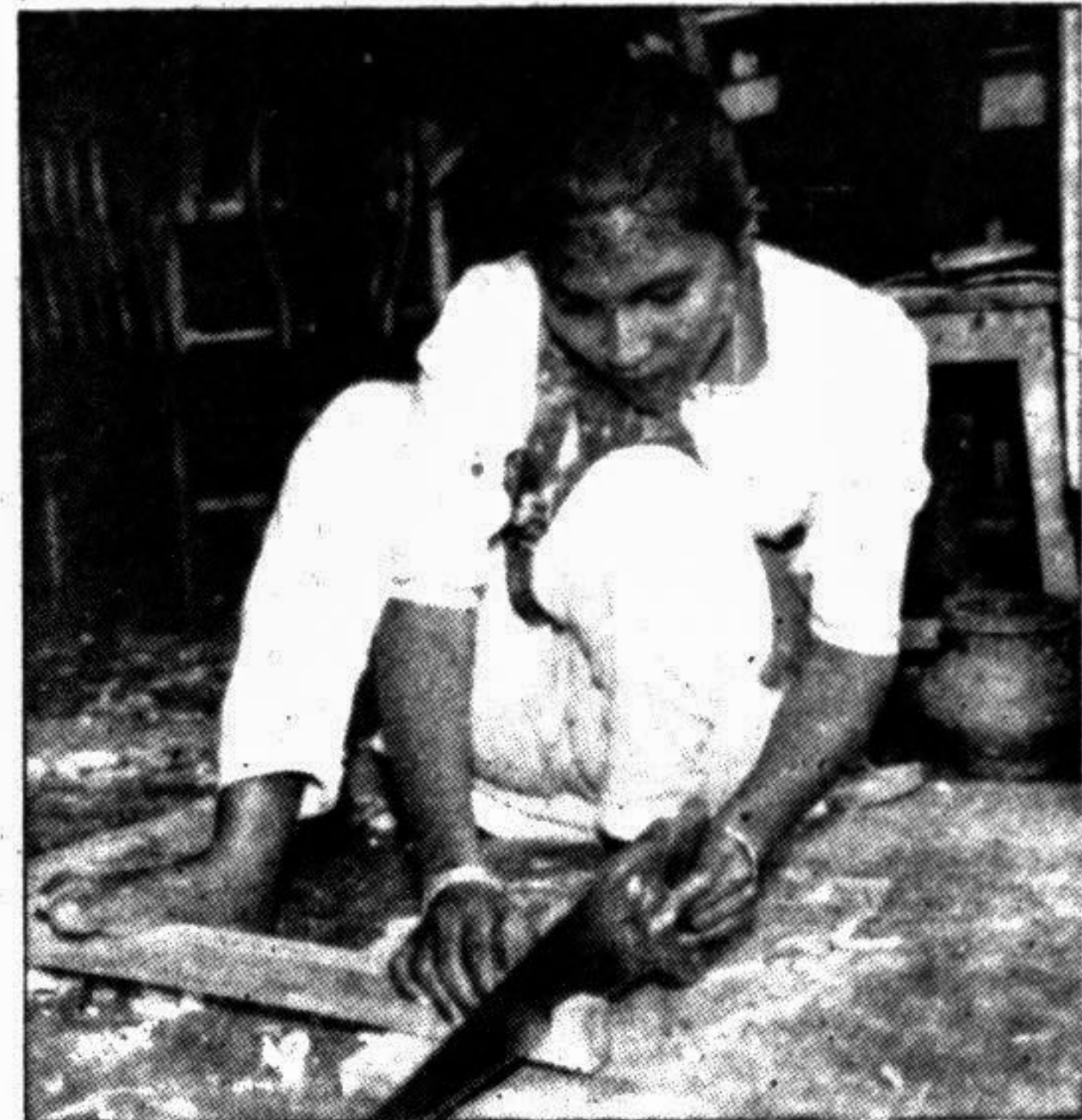
If Grameen Bank is known for its credit schemes, BRAC is internationally known for its Non Formal Primary Education (NFPE) Program. The women involved in BRAC's self income schemes (there are over 30 in Matlab alone) however, are for the large part illiterate. They can write their names but that is all. A woman's self income can only be sustainable in the long run, through education. But BRAC seems to feel that in the past decade of the women

lapsed back into illiteracy and therefore is now concentrating on reaching the target group of primary school age children and young adults. It is through the mother that children learn social and cultural skills therefore, one would think that a literate mother is essential in reaching universal primary education. Specifically because she understands the importance in sending both her son and daughter to school.

The project is a very ambi-

ous one, especially questionable because its venue is yet again Matlab thana. However, the multi disciplinary research team has impressive credentials on paper and are being further assisted by an external academic team of reviewers.

This project, if successful, will tell us whether a household name like BRAC really is achieving its much publicized goal of poverty alleviation and empowerment of the rural poor. One can only wait for the outcome and hope that the answer to the question turns out to be in the affirmative.



Sawing wood for making furniture, traditionally a man's job.

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toward NGO work, mainly due to the lack of knowledge as to what their impact is. According to Hassan Zaman, Senior Staff Economist at BRAC, "BRAC's Rural Development



In Shepur, a husband and wife work together in their plot of land.

## The Women Who Broke the Rules

by Afroja Nazneen

Looking at the women operating welding guns, running errands on bicycle and making field trips on motor bikes, one feels that women's equality is as good as achieved.

barrier, and become a bus-driver. Jamila Khatun (32) who was operating a huge machine in the antibiotic division of the Kendro is the first woman boiler operator of the country. The story of her life is full of vicissitudes. She was first married at the age of 10, to a man aged 70. He already had two wives. He used to beat Jamila and did not provide for her upkeep. After a few years she

them. Her monthly pay packet of Tk 1900 (US\$50) should be viewed, she says, not only in terms of money but also in terms of the prestige and importance it has given her in her relations with her family and surroundings. Jamila takes much pride in being the country's first woman boiler operator and says that since a woman can perform this kind of physically demanding task, she is fit for

commutes between her home in village Gaotie to the sub-centre at Debai a few kilometres away on bicycle, she can administer immunisation and I V saline. She has 15 assistants serving under her at the sub-centre. With 15 years service and promotions she has become chief of the sub-centre.

In 15 years Amena has come a long way from the days when she had to put up with taunts, rebukes and even social boycott for daring to defy the elders of society who opposed women working outside their homes. Today she is not only tolerated but respected in her village and now stands at Taka 1500 (US\$39) with which she has purchased a piece of land.

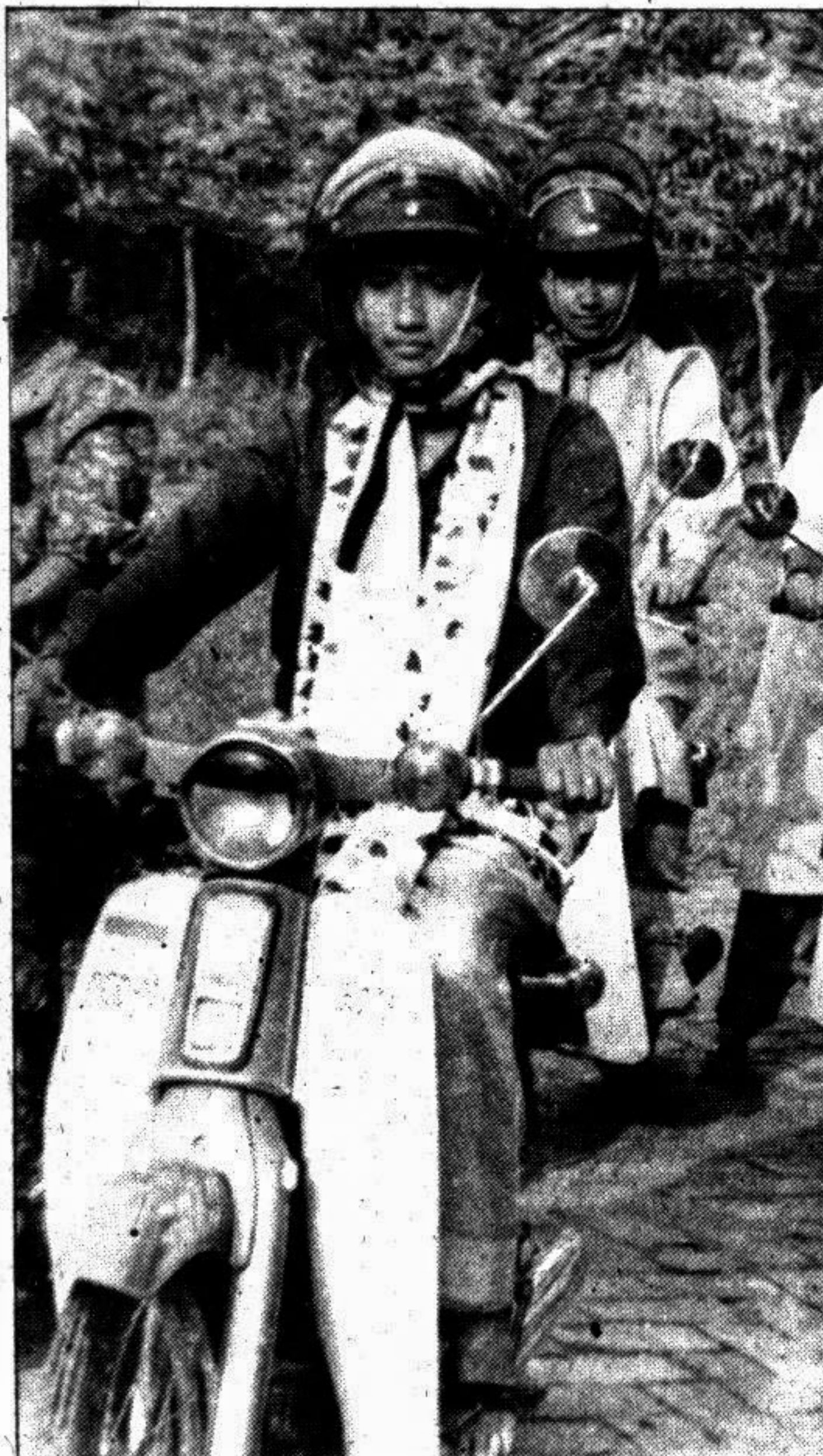
She was married early to Mannaf, a jobless gambler. Burdened with four daughters and one son (another son was born later), Amena was forced to take up a job at the Kendro. But the going was tough for her. Even her husband joined the village elders in censuring her actions. Mannaf later left her. She had to appear before an assembly of village arbitration where the headman of the village told her that she had committed a grave offense against social propriety and she was to give up her job and make amends for her conduct. At this she asked, drawing her strength from the she knew not where that if she couldn't work how would she feed herself and whether the headman could ensure her livelihood. This of course the headman was unable to ensure and the assembly broke up. In the mean time, wife of the headman took her side and persuaded her husband to view the case sympathetically. Some other village elders also relented and decided to leave her alone.

Her husband, finding her somewhat rehabilitated and earning, came and rejoined her. Gradually she won for herself a position of influence and respect. Even after that, it took some time for the village people to accept her riding a bicycle. Today, Amena says, much respect is accorded to her — or more specifically to her purse, perhaps. Her opinion is heeded in all affairs of the village and she is the central figure in all gatherings of village women. "They invite me at wedding parties because I can give costly presents" she says.

Like Jamila, Maleka and Amena, many other once destitute women in Gono Shastho Kendro are earning a fair livelihood. In a country where the per capita income is 210 US dollars to 80 US dollars, the Kendro has given women a prestigious footing in the social system.

— Development Features

Afroja Nazneen is a journalist with Dainik Banglar Bani.



came back to her fathers house where she learnt that women were being recruited at the Kendro, a few miles away. Jamila joined the Kendro's industry division from where she was later transferred to antibiotic division. Here she married her colleague Mohammed Borhan (35). But the marriage was not a happy one and Borhan left her and took a second wife. Jamila who is childless, now lives with her ageing parents and looks after

any other job. She recalls that before she joined work there she used to have a veil drawn low over her head. How fast everything is changing, she ruminates. Amena Begum, chief of a sub-centre of the Kendro came to the headquarters on a bicycle. How old is she? Around thirty she replied but in the next moment corrected herself — I have no 'exact idea'. She too had to learn bicycling at the centre. Everyday she

## Change for the Last and the Least

by Gertrude Mongella

My grandfather was a man of considerable prestige, much sought after for his services and advice. The source of this prestige was not wealth; it was the fact that he had ten children, that all of them survived, and that eight of them were boys.

In that sense, little has changed in the decades which have seen so much change in other spheres. In Africa, as in many parts of the world, a woman who gives birth to three boys will be considered herself fortunate, and be much admired, while her neighbour who has three daughters will be an object of pity. If the two meet, both are shy and embarrassed at the great contrast in their fortunes. If the same circumstance arose in those many parts of Asia in which the dowry system still prevails, then the consequences would be even more severe; a family with three girl children might well face financial ruin.

The challenge we face is the challenge of moving to the point at which these all-important differences are of no importance. It is an immensely long road to travel. The Fourth World Conference on Women, to be held in Beijing in 1995, will be both a milestone and a signpost.

### The Lever of Education

The challenge is essentially one of finding practical levers to bring about change in the years immediately ahead. And I think there can be little doubt that the most powerful of those levers is education. An educated woman almost always has more value and status in the eyes of her husband, her family, and her community. She is likely to have more awareness, more opportunities, more choice, and more confidence. Even if all else remains unchanged, and even if the educated woman still has no opportunities outside the home, her position is still likely to be transformed: she is more likely, for example, to share in family decisions about how many children to have, how to bring them up, how to spend money, how to organize domestic life, and how to care for her own and her family's health. Her husband will also treat her in a different, less dictatorial way, and she will be less susceptible to bullying and intimidation by her in-laws. All of this inevitably, if slowly, raises the woman's status, and makes it more likely that the gender conditioning of the next generation will be less severely discriminatory.

### Family Planning

The second great force for transforming the lives of women in the developing world is the spread of family planning services. The number

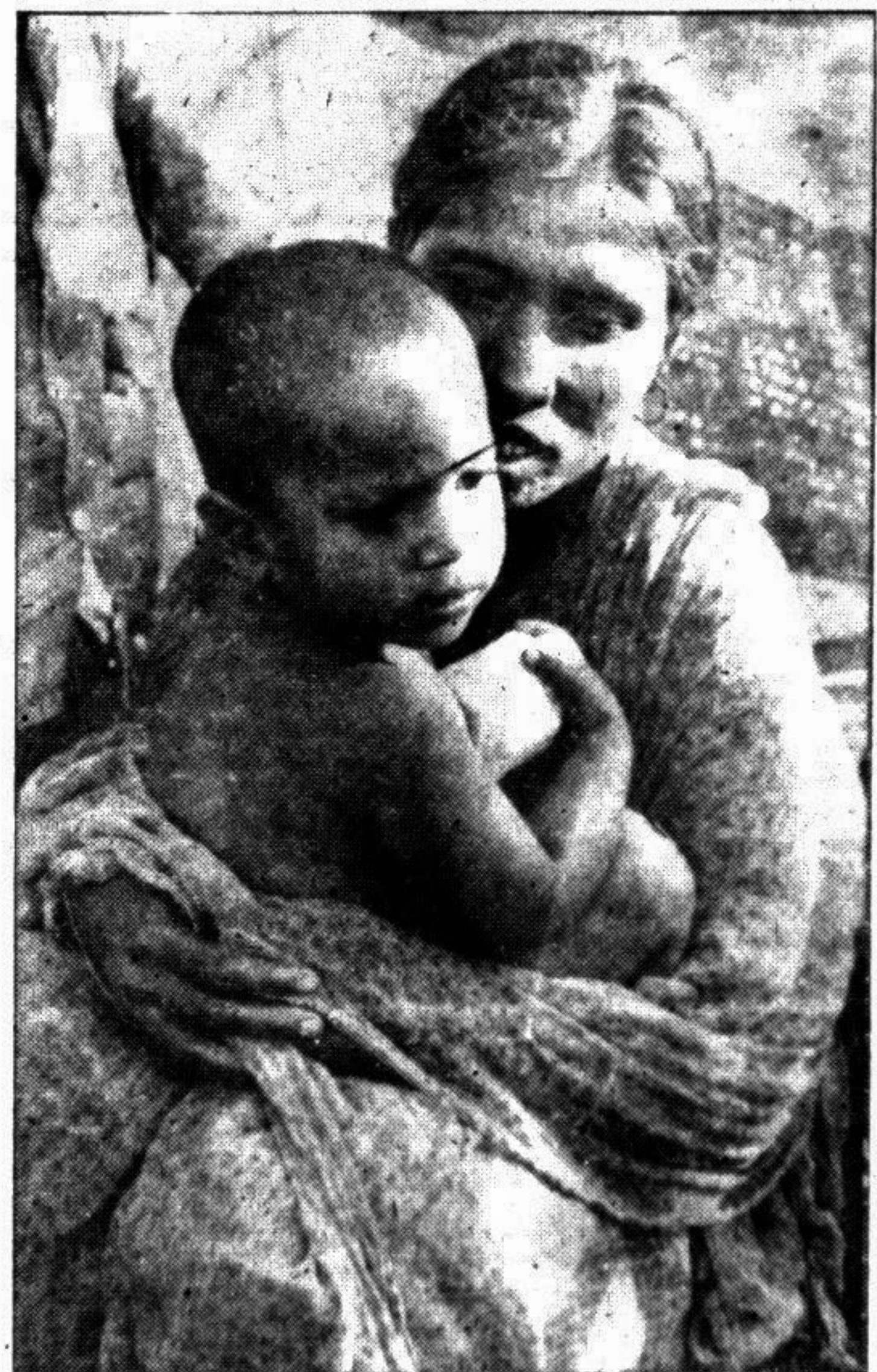
of children born to a woman has a fundamental impact on her health, on her time and energies, on her freedom and opportunities, and on the chances of her children growing up healthy and educated.

This topic is also discussed by Margaret Catley-Carlson. I will only add that even the surveys which reveal so much unmet demand for family planning probably underestimate the real requirements. Women know the real cost of having too many children too close together; they know what it means for their health and their lives and their opportunities. And many women also know that every time they become pregnant, they are putting themselves in danger.

any woman in her right mind wants eight children.

### Women's Health

A third lever is direct action to improve the health of women and girls. Too often, females eat last and least; and if they want to be well thought of and well treated, then they are taught that they must, in all circumstances, consider the needs of others first. When it comes to health, they are expected to simply put up with problems which, in males, would be complained about and acted upon. A girl or a woman is expected to work even if she is quite seriously ill; a boy with a headache will be told to lie down. A woman is expected to bear pain and suffering with fortitude. She is



The number of children born to a woman has fundamental impact on her health.

a girl growing up in Africa today faces an appalling 1-in-20 risk of dying during pregnancy or childbirth. Society may tell her that she should have seven or eight children. Her husband and his parents may tell her the same.

Her status may well depend upon it. And she may well declare this same wish to conform to prevailing social values. But without such pressures, I do not believe that

Women's Technology

A fourth powerful lever is the kind of technology that lightens the burden on women in the developing world rather than increasing it. These technologies are not usually expensive. Standpipes and handpumps, small ploughs and tools to help with the weeding and harvesting, powered grain-grinding mills, and cooking stoves that mean that only half as much firewood needs to be collected — these are the technologies that could save millions of women hours of drudgery every day, improving health and releasing time and energy for more productive purposes.

By and large, the technology already exists. But there is too big a gap between those who create it and those who need it, and there is too much bureaucracy in the attempt to make technology available to poor and often illiterate women.

The result is a plethora of appropriate-technology exhibitions and demonstration centres in capital cities — while millions of women expend their time, their health, and their energies in fetching and carrying and pounding.

### Synergisms

It is this powerful set of practical, affordable, and mutually reinforcing changes — in education, family planning, health, and women's technologies — that could do most to bring about the beginnings of a transformation for many millions of women in the developing world.

Gertrude Mongella is the Secretary General of the Fourth World Conference on Women to be held in Beijing in September 1995. After holding several ministerial posts in the government of Tanzania, she served as her country's High Commissioner to India before taking up her present appointment.