



The Problem of What to Wear

by Naomi Hossain

I realised that things had gone too far when waiters started telling me how to dress.

I was in a Bangladeshi-run restaurant in England with several white friends, when a waiter (who knew I was Bengali) approached our table and shook his head at me disapprovingly.

"Apa," he said in Bangla, so as not to offend his white customers. "Apa, it's alright for them (disparagingly indicating my white friends) — but our girls just don't do that!"

My crime? I had cut off my hair.

The staff at the prince of Bengal Tandoori were right, of course: 'our girls' don't do that. So rarely, in fact do they do that, that I was once informed by a rickshaw wallah in rural Jamalpur that "if I wore a shirt and pants, nobody would even know I was a woman".

Historically, men have been the ones to have contact with the outside world. Women have tended to be in contact with this outside world only through their husbands or fathers. So men worked outside the home, and were influenced by other, outside, and in this context, Western ideas, views, and yes, fashions.

Women on the other hand, were charged with guarding Bengali cultural heritage. The

responsibility for retaining our traditions and not giving into Western cultural impositions is a female responsibility. Or at least, it is considered important that women remain untainted by Western influences, particularly when it comes to outward appearance. In fact, only the other day was Pahela Falgun, when women everywhere dress in yellow and red to celebrate spring and men, well it doesn't really matter what men wear, does it?

Some claim that it is a matter of modesty, that women in Bangladesh are re-

luctant. Yet for women in a society in which it is next to impossible for them to inherit land, very often the only security they have is their jewellery. Clinging to traditional roles and appearances is thus a hair-breadth away from pragmatism.

Why focus on this particular aspect of Bangladeshi women's lives, particularly when it is not one which women themselves are vocal about or indeed, against? Certainly not because wearing traditional clothes is or should be a problem, because it is not, and should not become one. What

thought that "it was inappropriate for a Bengali girl to dress in that way". What it is, is a matter of convention, a means of restriction and yet another source of authority over women. Others decide, whether or not you can be a proper, good female, whether you can possibly be a Bengali woman. Women in Bangladesh are assigned their overemphatically traditional role, with appearance as one of its determinants, and it is not a role that necessarily fits well with the trend towards working and having a career.



stricted to traditional clothing because 'society' demands that we are well covered. There are shroud-like Western clothes just as there are 'ethnic' clothes which are extremely revealing, such as the sari. No, it is not a matter of modesty, as one friend of mine found out. Believing she was adequately dressed in long loose trousers, a long loose shirt and a huge shawl which reached to her knees and was carefully wrapped around her, she was amazed to find that colleagues

It is not that women object, exactly, to this role of guardian of tradition and culture. There has always been scope for subversion of these roles in practice: the still extremely popular practice of weighing down newly-wed brides with jewellery was traditionally linked to making it harder for them to run back to their parents' home; just as nupur of ankle bracelets were intended to signal the wearer's whereabouts so that her movements could be kept under surveil-

lance being highlighted here is the overemphasis placed on women's appearance; what is shown is that Bengali womanhood is still constructed heavily on the way we look. It is symptomatic of a society which places more (and not simply different) importance on a woman's decorative qualities than on her abilities. The use of women's appearance to judge, categorise, and limit their behaviour is by no means restricted to Bangladesh. It is simply more blatant here.

An Island Comes out of the Dark

by Masud Arif



The fifteen out of seventeen members of the association are daughters, sisters or wives of landless peasants of Chargaon

village. Around 80 per cent of the total inhabitants of the island are landless. The people of the area depend more on

fate than anything else since most of them are unemployed and at the mercy of natural disasters.



Women walk under umbrellas to shield themselves from strangers' eyes and not rain or sunshine.

However, this changing trend of the women working outside the home has influenced the younger generations of girls, mostly teenagers. Like Fatema or Nargis many of the young girls are now interested in education. A number of them who have passed SSC or HSC are involved in teaching in primary schools on the island. They are less affected by what the village elders have to say.

Like Momtaz's group, a number of females of Monpura have formed associations in villages all around the island. They want to break from the dictates of traditional society. They have realized the essential: that females must contribute to the development process.



A woman buys and sells at her own store

Sought After Yet Abused

by Joe Fernandez

KUALA LUMPUR: Filipina Lolita Purok, 41, spent recently three days in a Singapore hospital for severe injuries that included broken ribs and bruises on her face, arms and thighs.

Her employer Choo Thiam Hock, 42, has since been serving a nine-month jail sentence for what government prosecutor Jennifer Marie described as "horrendous abuse".

Mr Choo's wife and their 18-year-old son were both fined US\$ 680 each for joining in the punch-and-kick attack on housemaid Lolita.

Filipinos, numbering 60,000, top the list of foreigners working as househelp in Singapore. In Malaysia, they are outnumbered by the Indonesians who total about 40,000, but are not too far behind with 15,000.

A smaller number of housemaids in both Singapore and Malaysia come from Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Thailand. These "Imports" from the Philippines are one aspect of the economic devastation wreaked by two decades of Ferdinand Marcos' crony capitalism, as critics of the late Filipino dictator have put it. Some 1.5 million Filipinos are estimated to have left their country to work abroad, sending home at least US\$10 billion a year in wage remittances.

This flow has helped pay off debts, feed families, acquire land and educate children or siblings.

Cheerful and hardworking by nature, and armed with a come-what-may attitude, Filipino women who work in Malaysia and Singapore as househelp often end up virtual slaves.

Like their sisters from other countries, the women are bullied and expected to perform like well-oiled intelligent robots at a floor pay of US\$ 80 a month. The main complaint is overwork, but rape is not uncommon, nor is

Discrimination: Is there a way out of this tangled web?

by Mahenoor Yusuf, Shezad Pervez & Zameen Moin

IT is an undeniable fact that women have been working as partners of men in all spheres of life since time immemorial. Women's contribution towards the establishment of the civilization is yet another truth that can hardly be called into question. But recent estimates show that half the world's population is women and they receive only one-tenth of the world's income and own less than 1% of the world's property. In reality, the status of women has been maintained in varied degrees depending on the type of societies and nations. In almost every country in the world women have admitted secondary status in all major areas of life — family, education, work, employment, health, government. This gap is profound in the least developed countries of the world and more so in rural areas where women are subjected to exploitation. They are deprived of their rights and opportunities in all spheres of life.

Bangladesh is one of the poorest countries of the world. Here more than three-fourths of its population living below the poverty line. In such a situation the position of women is all the worse compared to their male counterparts because of age-old socio-economic and cultural backwardness. Consequently female literacy in Bangladesh (14.3%) has lagged behind that of males (32.9%) and their pace of improvement is slower than that of males. The economic contribution of women in developing countries like Bangladesh, India and China is already enormous. Especially since the boom in the garments sector in Bangladesh, the women of the country have made a significant contribu-

tion. But a question does arise, why is not there many women in the top bracket of a typical organization. In reality the skills of women remain left to be nurtured and in the future this vast untapped resource should be utilized. The thought that women can work in the same vein as men is still not accepted to many. The biased attitude towards women gives birth to inequalities between the sexes.

The gender bias: What are the reasons?

No real progress of humanity is possible without the involvement and participation of women in the mainstream of development process.

The poor rural women living in absolute poverty in subhuman condition are not considered credit worthy by banks (in exception of Grameen Bank).

Although primary education has been made compulsory for women, the social barriers as well as the lack of education opportunities and the environment has not been conducive enough to decrease the large gap in the field of literacy and skill training.

A survey done by Association of Development Agencies in Bangladesh (ADAB) in the year 1993 revealed that among the 187 central member organizations only 25 of them (13%) were directed by female, and likewise among the 254 chapter member organizations only 33 of them had female employees (13%) at the top management. But among the NGOs, BRAC is different. The policy of BRAC is to give more openings to female employees. According to BRAC,

more than 90% in the top management of the organization consists of female employees. There are also other organizations like Proshika, BPHC who give preference to female employees.

Women as well as men must combine forces if they are to be effective. The economic contribution of women in our country is already enormous. But it is critically hampered by poor access to education, health and employment opportunities and by discrimination rooted in traditional roles for

women and daycare centre services for children of working mothers should also be developed.

A general approach may be taken by giving special emphasis on girl child and creating a gender responsive development, awareness in general and positive self image of women in particular.

The treatment of discrimination will decrease as more women enter traditionally masculine occupations. Men who have the experience of working with competent females may learn to reduce their reliance on stereotypes.

Women in Bangladesh are dependent on men in their early lives as docile daughters, in their mid career as compliant wives and in late career as dependant mothers. It is a belief, almost universally shared by the men that women are inferior by nature and they should remain busy with their motherhood and housekeeping jobs. But no real progress of humanity is possible without the involvement and the participation of women in the mainstream of development process.

When we had finished our report we pondered about the existing discriminatory environment. In the organizations, and if indeed there is any way for us to get a reprieve. One thing that we must accept is that a pro-male bias exists in our society which have been formed through our culture and perception. But there is no need to be discouraged. Now the time has come for women to revive. The success of women will lie not on how much has been done for women but how much they have achieved, acquired and assured.

— We can also conclude that female administrators are best equipped to support and encourage the career development of other women, and also reduce treatment discrimination in organizations.

— Credit facilities should be expanded for women to enable them to take up self-employment, accommodation facilities for jobseeking or working