island.

N association of women

has . brought about

changes in the

thinking, lifestyle, economic

conditions and social norms of

a small village of Monpura

and brothers care for us and

we have a position in our fami-

lies." newly married young

Momtaz Begum said "And this

less present can identify her

problems and what has

changed for the better in her

life. Momtaz feels and hopes.

There are a number of new

possibilities of what she can do

neighbours have formed an as-

sociation - Kazal Rekha Mohila

Samity - in their village Char-

gaon in Hazirhat union of

Monpora, a thana of Bhola dis-

mouth of the north-eastern

part of the Bay of Bengal, has

traditionally had a very conser

vative society. Women could

not go out of their homes

without wearing borkhas. They

use umbrellas in all seasons

when walking the village-paths

to keep themselves in purdah.

veiled from the outsider's eye.

They pull up the rickshaw's

hood and use two umbrellas

when travelling. One or two

decades back, women working

outside their homes were rare.

Monpura are looking for jobs

They have formed groups or

cooperatives where every

month each member deposits

TK 10 in the group savings

fund. They use the fund to

create small businesses on

their own. "This income helps

feed our families," says 45 year

old Halima Bibi who is also a

member of the group, but does

not have a family since the ti-

dal wave of 1970 washed them

her sixteen neighbours formed

the Kazal Rekha Mohila Samity

with the support of CARITAS.

non government organisation

two years ago. To date they

have become involved in in-

come generating activities

such as plantation of fruit-bear-

ing trees, small scale rice

the association have received

training on different earning

activities from CARITAS as

well as literacy classes that

take into account women's

health and reproductive rights.

"Now we know that females

can play important roles in the

improvement of their lives and

education is a key factor in

that," said Nurun Nehar

younger sister of Momtaz, who

Almost all the group mem-

bers now send their children

to schools. A tool they realize

is vital to their development and the next generation's sur-

T is an undeniable fact

erty. In reality, the status of

women has been maintained in

varied degrees depending on

the type of societies and na-

tions. In almost every country

in the world women have ad-

mitted secondary status in all

major areas of life - family.

education work, employment,

health. sovernment. This gap

is profound in the least devel-

oped countries of the world

and more so in rural areas

where women are subjected to

exploitation. They are deprived

of their rights and opportuni-

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 situ

ation the position of women is

all the worse compared to

their male counterparts be-

cause of age-old socio-eco-

nomic and cultural backward-

ness. Consequently female lit-

eracy 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 de-

veloping countries like

Bangladesh, India and China is

already enormous. Especially

since the boom in the gar-

ments sector in Bangladesh.

the women of the country have

made a significant contribu-

ties in all spheres of life.

is also a member of the group.

In addition, the members of

husking business and poultry.

Momtaz. Halima Bibi and

But now the women in

Monpura, an island in the

Momtaz and her sixteen

Momtaz, daughter of a land-

is my satisfaction."

with her life.

"Now our husbands, fathers

The Problem of What to Wear

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

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

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". Obvious advantages of passing for a man aside. I got the point and started to grow my hair. I've got my gender back, and even village people with their strict ideas now believe that I am both female and Bangladeshi.

'Being' a Bengali woman is inextricably linked to how you look. "Bangla nari" the rhyme goes, "chul aar hsari". And yes, it is meant to be prescriptive.

Have you ever noticed at weddings that at one side of the shamiana there are women in wonderful colourful saris, masses of jewellery (and hair). looking, above all, traditional, while at the other end there are men in drab grey and navy blue suits, traditional to nothing but the stockbrokers' firm? I once asked a male colleague why men religiously do not wear traditional clothes to work, whereas women religiously do. He explained that kurta-paijama are simply not considered formal enough for the workplace. This in an office where men regularly wear jeans, T-shirts, sneakers and even baseball caps to work!

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. So it happened that the cool, comfortable, and eminently practical. traditional garb of the Bengali male was replaced by hot and impractical suits, shoes and socks, and the much-favoured polyester trousers.

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

T UALA LUMPUR Filip-

spent recently three

days in a Singapore hospital for severe injuries that included

broken ribs and bruises on her

Hock, 42, has since been serv-

ing a nine-month jail sentence

for what government prosecu-

tor 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

60,000, top the list of foreign-

ers working as househelp in

Singapore. In Malaysia, they

are outnumbered by the In-

donesians who total about

40,000, but are not too far be-

housemaids in both Singapore

and Malaysia come from Sri

Lanka, Bangladesh and Thai-

A smaller number of

These "Imports" from the

Philippines are one aspect of

"the economic devastation

wrenken by two decades of

Ferdinand Marcos' crony capi-

talism", 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, send-

ing home at least US\$10 bil-

lion a year in wage remit-

This flow has helped payoff

Cheerful and hardworking

debts, feed families, acquire

land and educate children or

by nature, and armed with a

come-what-may attitude, Fil-

ipino women who work in

Malaysia and Singapore as

househelp often end up virtual

other countries, the women

are bullied and expected to

perform like well-oiled intelli-

gent robots at a floor pay of

US\$ 80 a month. The main

complaint is overwork, but

rape is not uncommon, nor is

Like their sisters from

siblings.

Filipinos, numbering

Her employer Choo Thiam

face, arms and thighs.

housemaid Lolita.

hind with 15,000.

ina Lolita Purok, 41.

by Naomi Hossain

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

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

lance. 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 prag-

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, bedause it is not, and



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 surveilis 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) important 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



Photo by Vasua Arli

The fifteen out of seventeen members of the association are daughters, sisters or wives of Jundless 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

most of them are unemployed and at the mercy of natural disasters. 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 is-

fand. They are less affected by

fate than anything else since

what the village elders have to 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 essentid: that females must contribute to the development

process.



Wo are walk wreter umbrellas to stuck themselves from saungers eyes and not min or smishine - Photo by Masud Arif



A woman mays and sells at her own store

Sought After Yet Abused

by Joe Fernandez

underpayment or nonpayment

of salaries.

One social worker said less than 10 per cent of foreign housemaids are treated well by their employers.

Each day an average of eight to 12 Filipino househelp visit their embassy in Kuala Lumpur complaining of mistreatment. Another eight to 12 phone calls and an average of five letters voicing problems are received daily.

"In the Philippines, a wellto-do family will often hire three separate maids for the cooking, cleaning and gardening, said an embassy official. "In Malaysia one maid is ex-

emotionally." According to Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia's psychiatry department. the number of foreign malds admitted to psychiatric wards in Kuala Lumpur now averages ten a year. "Lack of social contact and recreation, work problems and missing their families are common factors causing psychiatric illness."

university. One peculiar problem involving Filipino domestics is that they may be "over-qualified for their jobs," which leads to feelings of frustration and lack of fulfilment. A recent random sampling by the Fil-

said one report released by the

employment agency to ensure that these debts are fully paid. But housemaids from In-

donesia, less articulate than

their Filipino sisters, may have

it even worse. Women's Aid Organization (WAO) chair Ivy Josiah says Indonesians may be the worst

treated among the ranks of domestic help. One Indonesian woman. driven to a nervous breakdown, was immediately returned by her employer to the local agency, which in turn promptly sent the woman home. "He (the employer) had

no qualms about abandoning

someone who had taken care

Cheerful and hardworking by nature. Filipino women who work in Malaysia and Singapore as household help often end up virtual slaves.

pected to do everything." Except among the expatriates or really rich local households, most families in Malaysia and Singapore hire a maid because both spouses work outside the home. The maid is paid a mere fraction of

With a maid around, household members learn not to lift a finger. "If the children ask me to do something, I am expected to do it. If they want me to get something, i must go," said Mercy during her

what the woman employer

weekly Sunday off for church. "I not only have to do the housework but must be at the beck and call of everyone."

For Stella, another Filipina, the day begins at 5 am and only ends toward midnight. Her employer, complains

Susan, not only keeps screaming at her throughout the day. She also has to bear with the children calling her "stupid", "useless" and "a bloody fool".

Having few outlets for their grievances, foreign housemaids "live in distress and suffer

ipino Service Secretariat found that 57 per cent of Filipinos serving Malaysian households had attended high school and 40 per cent had pursued college education, with a number graduating in agriculture. commerce, economics, education, engineering and phar-

Under the contract between the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) and Malaysia's Foreign Ministry, Filipinos can work as housemaids in the country for two years and up to a third

optional year, then leave.

Even with the low minimum pay of US\$180 a month, contract substitution is still rampant. Monthly pay deductions are made to cover the P15.000 to over P20,000 'n placement fees charged by the recruitment agency in the Philippines — as well as the US\$ 800 forked out by the employer to the local agency in placement charges and air

tickets. Meanwhile, the worker's passport is kept by the local

of his housekeeping," said Ms

However, Malaysian Human Resources Minister Lim Ah Lek insists that his country's laws "protect foreign workers

He said allegations of mistreatment of foreign maids were discussed with his Indonesian and Philippine counterparts at an ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) meeting in Singapore recently.

The demand for foreign maids is not likely to ease up. Deputy Human Resources Minister M Mahalingam estimates "18,000 maids are "rgently required to mind about 100,000 children attending child care centres in the plantation sector."

In the 1970s local maids, usually school dropouts from the rural areas, were easily available. Now these women prefer to work in factories which not only provide attractive fringe benefits but also an environment where they can socialize. - Depthnews 1. sta

that women have been why is not there many women in the top bracket of a typical working as partners of men in all spheres of life since organization. In reality the time immeniorial. Women's skills of women remain left to contribution towards the be nurtured and in the future establishment of the civithis vast untapped resource lization is yet another truth should be utilized. The thought that can hardly be called into that women can work in the question. But recent estimates same vein as men is still not show that half the world's accepted to many. The biased population is women and they attitude towards women gives receive only one tenths of the birth to inequalities between world's income and own less the sexes. than 1% of the world's prop-

The gender bias: What are the reasons?

opment process.

tion. But a question does arise. 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

rooted in traditional roles for No real progress of humanity is possible without the involvement and the participation of women in the mainstream of devel-

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

* The poor rural women living in absolute poverty in subhuman condition are not considered credit worthy by

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 lit-

banks (in exception of

eracy 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 fémale em ployees. According to BRAC,

women. Based on our research we put forward the following observations to improve the present situation

poor access to education,

health and employment oppor-

tunities and by discrimination

- Broadbased training for women must be initiated to offset the effects of sex division of the labour market.

- All levels of education for women and their attitude to productive work and socially useful activities should im-

 To reduce the level of discrimination in organiza tions, individuals should be hired according to their characteristics, experience and

credibility. We can also conclude that Jemale administrators are best equipped to support and encourage the career development of other women, and also reduce treatment discrim

ination in organizations. - Credit facilities should be expanded for women to enable them to take up self-employ ment, accommodation facili ties for jobseeking or working

by Mahenoor Yusuf, Shezad Pervez & Zarmeen Moin women and dayeare 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 stereoupes.

women in Bangladesh are dependent on men in their carly 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 existent 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.