



Women on the Move Stop Traffic!

by Schrezed Joya Monami Latif

My girlfriend and I were driving down Bangla Motor the other evening on our way to a friends house for after dinner coffee and some serious adda. Although my friend was clad in a sleeveless blouse and saree, most of her arms were covered by the saree's achal and I was in a shalwar kameez, minus the urna which I had put on my lap and would have put on the minute I left the sanctuary of the car. My sleeveless friend was at the driving wheel and I sat next to her, happily adjusting the volume on the tape recorder and the high/low button on the air-conditioner. You know, how it is always either too hot or too cold once you turn on the car AC.

Women drivers are not an uncommon sight in Dhaka. In fact, the last couple of years has seen the advent of quite a few females behind the wheels, albeit mostly in the daytime. Yet, traffic almost stopped at the sight of my friend at the wheel. We had babytaxi passengers, families in cars, men in rickshaws staring and pointing at us, throughout our ride. At first we thought that one of our doors hadn't been closed properly or that perhaps parts of our clothing were sticking out of the car or even, that one of us had grown a huge wart at the end of our nose but no, none of that. We had simply been two relatively young women, dressed for an evening at a friend's house, who had the gall to drive at night, in Dhaka.

One lady poked her husband who was dozing in the front seat to have a look at us. I thought perhaps it was a couple we knew but it wasn't. We were at a stop sign and both the man and woman kept gawking openly. Neither my friend nor I wished to be as equally rude, so we waved at them, promptly after which they turned away.

On our way to the friend's place, we stopped in Gulshan, circle one to buy some "Spout", a popular Japanese brand of chewing gum. My friend sat at the wheel while I quickly dashed out to the store. I returned not more than three minutes later, chewing with much enthusiasm on my gum to find that a smallish crowd had formed next to the drivers' window. The first layer of the crowd was the expected number of



beggars who are regulars and would stop in front of any car regardless of whether the driver was a male or female. The second layer was of various men in clad in lungis and some in jeans and tee shirts, loafers, clearly who had nothing to do with their time. While the beggars droned on in their much practiced monotone with their palms outstretched, one of the men had apparently leaned near my friend's window which was rolled up all the way and said something which my friend was sure, judging from the expression on his face, was lewd. Before she could recover and lean over to roll up my window which I had stupidly, rolled half way down when I'd gotten off, he ran over to the other side and said to my friend in heavily accented English, "Hey, Miss, want me to help you drive?"

My friend pointedly ignored him, rolled up my window and sat out the last two minutes before I arrived, in stoic silence. We zoomed out of the scene very quickly, needless to say. What was needless and outrageous, however, was the amount of harassment we'd had to put up with on our way to a harmless evening of socialising. Later, when we had recounted our trauma, a lot of people misunderstood our complaints. A male friend, who since then shall remain merrily an acquaintance, laughed and said that we were just two attractive girls and people were interested. As for that guy who had asked my friend if she needed driving tips, apparently my friend should have been flattered by his interest. Really? Flattered? There should be a survey done on how many women in Dhaka enjoy being harassed in the streets and look at it as flattering attention from much "sought after males". Each time one of us is on a rickshaw or walking from one destination to another which is rare given the amount of tension that would cause on Dhaka streets, we are stared at, made comments about and stripped by male eyes. We do not find it flattering nor do we find it amusing. Many may be immune to it because it happens so often and many still, are intimidated by it. This is a form of sexual harassment and one that we should not have to put up with, at any time.

Many would say, "oh! it's those rickshaw tickshaw wallahs" who do this kind of thing. That is, nine out of ten times not the case, rickshaw wallahs and vendors are too busy earning a living, i.e. surviving, to be bothered about who is on the wheels of a car. The men who harass women "on the move" are usually those, who have some degree of education and should know better. Perhaps they are the ones who should also be targeted in gender awareness programmes. After all most of them have mothers/sisters/daughters at home a little "gender awareness" can go a long way.



Investing in Sisterhood

by Hillary Rodham Clinton

THE Women's Bank is a one-room building in Ahmedabad, a textile center in western India. The teller's counter is an old kitchen table covered with cloth. Bank clerks record all transactions by hand, on yellowed sheets bound in volumes that resemble worn-out telephone books. When I visited, I saw poor women who had walked 12 to 15 hours from their villages to take out loans — some as small as \$1 — to invest in dairy cows, plows or goods that could be sold at market.

The bank is the brainchild of Gandhi disciple Ela Bhatt and was founded by the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA). Many of the women in this trade organization rank among the poorest, least educated and most ostracized in India. Today, the bank has more than 40,000 members and assets of more than \$2 million. Women run the bank, and only women are allowed to make deposits and borrow money. The result is impressive: Against enormous political, social and economic odds, Indian women are transforming their lives.

This is one of many images that stayed with me after my trip last month through South Asia — a trip made all the more meaningful because I shared it with my 15-year-old daughter. Although we traveled in special circumstances, as officials visitors, we were both struck by the interest an American mother and daughter can generate in places where women are not always accorded the same respect as men. For me, the trip also prompted a rethinking of many issues that concern women — and men — in every nation.

In each country we visited — Pakistan, India, Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka — we saw women struggling to overcome poverty, illiteracy, inadequate health care and deeply rooted cultural barriers by joining together to increase their earning power and improve their circumstances. SEWA is but one example of how women have organized around their capacity as borrowers, lenders and savers to achieve greater economic independence for themselves and greater prosperity for their families and communities.

For the rest of the world, the South Asian experience offers a simple lesson: that investing in people — especially women and girls — is as essential to the prosperity of the entire global family as investing in the development of open markets and trade. South Asia reminds us that social development and economic development go hand-in-hand. It reminds us too that women represent the soundest investment any nation can make in the effort to jump-start development.

Women comprise more than half of the world's population. They care for most of the world's children. And they do more than their share of the world's work. Investing in their education and health, and assuring their full political, economic and social participation in society ought to be the bottom line in any development equation.

I realize that issues such as education and health care are still regarded in many quarters as "soft" or marginal to economic growth. Often they are reflexively dismissed as "traditional women's issues" that do not rank high among the problems we will face in the 21st century. A growing body of research from the World Bank and elsewhere suggests otherwise: questions surrounding social development, especially of women, are at the centre of our political and economic challenges.

In country after country, women have demonstrated that, when given the tools of opportunity — education, health care, access to credit, political participation and legal rights — they are better able to make the right choices in their lives. They can lift themselves out of poverty and, even more important, they can lift their families, communities and nations as well.

The Grameen Bank in Bangladesh is a case study: In one Grameen village, women pooled savings reaped from their investments to build a communal well. A woman in another Grameen village told me that she had taken out two loans to buy dairy cows; the third loan was used to buy a

rickshaw to provide her husband a livelihood. Education also plants seeds of prosperity for women around the world. During my trip, I saw examples of the way schools in South Asia are reshaping the social and economic landscape.

The Prayas School in India is a volunteer effort, founded by wives of professors at the Indian Institute of Technology. The school serves the poorest women and girls in the neighborhood because of its glorious setting in the Himalayas, Nepal is in fact a cruel health environment for indigenous women. A disproportionate number of Nepalese women die during their child-bearing years, the result of early and frequent pregnancies, inadequate health care and poor nutrition. Women are usually the last to eat in their families and as many as 80 per cent are reported to be anemic. A re-

they leverage support from local governments and other sources.

Throughout South Asia, one can see the results of American investment in governments and NGOs. The "Safe Home Delivery Kit," for example, was funded jointly by USAID, Save the Children, the Nepalese government and a small, local women-owned business. The United States has supported family planning services in Bangladesh, where population growth rates have fallen from 3 per cent to 2.2 per cent since the early 1970s.

In Sri Lanka, I visited a remarkable facility built with financial assistance from USAID. A programme run by a former theology professor, Sister Bernice, offers shelter, schooling and financial counseling to women and girls who are homeless or victims of violence.

Like Bangladesh, Pakistan is also development rural schools. At the Lahore University of Management Sciences, a centre of higher learning in Pakistan built with USAID support, I saw dozens of young women who are training along with their male counterparts to become leaders of their nation's growing business and investment sectors.

These projects are proof that American aid — both financial and technical — has provided the tools of opportunity to people and nations who have shown a courageous commitment to democracy and a market economy. Today, that American aid remains critical. Having watched in the last 10 years as democracy has flourished and markets have opened around the globe, we cannot turn our backs on nations struggling to uphold our ideals.

As debates over foreign aid take place in the coming months, I hope that members of Congress and the American public will remember that such assistance accounts for less than 1 per cent of our annual budget.

Still, at a time of economic anxiety in our own country, I'm sure many Americans wonder why we should be concerned with the conditions facing women and girls living in dusty villages and urban slums around the world. The reasons go beyond humanitarian concerns. As Treasury Secretary Robert Rubin said after a recent trip to India, "Development works. It improves lives in developing countries, and as those lives improve, it will have a direct impact on our economy, on the jobs and living standards of Americans." On every continent, we have seen how the development of skills and earning power of women leads to more prosperous regional and national economies. It also leads to better educated and more prosperous consumers of American goods and services. And it is fundamentally important to building a more peaceful world. As long as economies remain underdeveloped and spirits undernourished, conflict that endangers our own security are less likely to be resolved.

Finally, investing in opportunities for women is critical to expanding social justice. Denying women education, health care, economic security, political freedom and legal protections is a violation of basic human rights.

Given recent objections voiced in this country about a day devoted to bringing girls to work, it probably bears mentioning that an emphasis on girls and women is not meant to exclude or diminish the rights or interests of men. Men everywhere face challenges and obstacles as they seek to fulfill themselves and their responsibilities to their families.

But around the world, including in our own country, women represent a disproportionate number of the poor and vulnerable. Investing in women strengthens families and communities, which helps everyone in society. And investing in women brings us closer to a world in which distinctions between men and women are viewed, ultimately, as complementary parts to a greater whole.

As an American, I was proud to learn that many of these grass-roots enterprises were succeeding because of direct assistance from the United States to governments, nongovernmental organizations, or US-supported international organizations such as the World Bank. Nongovernmental organizations have been particularly effective because they are close to the people, accountable to the people, and often are good advocates for the poor. Not only do the partnerships between governments and NGOs help funnel aid directly to programmes,

cent report by a group of Nepalese women estimates 515 maternal deaths for every 100,000 live births.

At the health clinic I visited, midwives and others preparing to deliver a baby will soon be given a "Safe Home Delivery Kit" — a package containing a plastic sheet, bar of soap, piece of twine, wax and a razor blade. This is a cost-effective, low-tech approach that will help improve conditions for childbirth and lower the mortality rate among Nepalese women.

A government-run school I visited in Bangladesh offers material incentives to parents to send their children — especially girls — to attend. This is particularly significant among the very poor, who often view school as a diversion from their children's income-producing work. As part of the Food for Education programme, families receive a weekly food allotment if their children go to class. Another government programme pays parents to keep girls in secondary school.

Along with access to credit and education, health care is an equally important ingredient in the recipe for development. Here too South Asia offers instructive examples of low-tech, low-cost strategies, many of which can be applied elsewhere, including the West.

In Bangladesh, I visited the International Centre for Diarrheal Disease Control, and was surprised to see a doctor from Louisiana making rounds. The center is a pioneer in the use of oral rehydration therapy, a method of treating potentially fatal cases of diarrhea through ingestion of a solution of salt, sugar and water. Thousands of lives have been saved through this inexpensive treatment. The doctor from Louisiana was there to learn how the technique might be used in the United States, where 20 million children under age 5 suffer from diarrhea each year and an estimated 300,000 are hospitalized because of resulting dehydration. Intravenous rehydration treatments, which must be given in the hospital, cost on average about \$800 per day; commercial solutions cost about \$7 per day and can be administered at home, a potentially cheap and effective alternative to hospitalization.

I was also struck by the common-sense approach to health care at a clinic started by American women in Nepal. Often romanticized by West-

This op-ed article by the US First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton was first published in the Washington Post on May 14.

The Nineties Woman

Here's Looking at You, Kid!

by Rashida Ahmad

Apparently (so the saying goes) "If you aren't a Marxist in your twenties, you have no heart. And if you aren't a Capitalist in your forties, you have no brain." Good for a quick laugh, that one, isn't it? Well it would be if it weren't so close to the bone. Whoever coined that phrase put his finger right bang on the pulse of irony and sickness of present-day society, didn't he? God help us.

There's another one, it goes something like, "If I feed one starving person, you call me a saint, but if I want to feed the starving millions of the world, you call me a communist." Heartbreaking.

You would think people would get less selfish as they mature and grow up, wouldn't you? Self-centred egotism, you would suppose wouldn't you, is a natural condition of the undeveloped minds of children? But no, apparently not, that is, if you've actually got a brain. If you want to get ahead (or is that a head?), Society will ensure that such behaviour prevails in adults by rewarding any amount of blind, unadulterated ambition. The 'Me, Me, Me', I want, mentality.

Look around you, those who have no regard for others, who consider no one else's interests except their own, who are they? They're the ones who have 'made it', supremely and unconditionally successful, lauded and praised and idolised.

And those that pay the slightest passing consideration to others? They're weak, pathetic souls, doormats, aren't they, letting people walk all over them? And those that actually wish to devote their lives and careers to helping others? Nurses and doctors (I mean real doctors, not plastic surgeons in Beverly Hills), teachers, lecturers and educators, social workers, spiritual/religious leaders (not TV evangelists, please, or New Age nineties with crystals and \$300 hair extensions), counsellors, writers, scientists, freedom-fighters idealists, believers? Well, basically, they're a bunch of losers (unless they're making lots of money, are they?).

Of course, there are a few exceptions, we all admire Mother Theresa (God bless her great big soul), don't we? And of course there's that Nelson Mandela, what a guy. But do we actually want to be them? No, no, no. No fear. We want to be pop-stars, supermodels and actors (if only we all could be, God, frightening thought), come on admit it, or big-shot corporate business people, billionaire tycoons and entrepreneurs. We want to be Madonna, Richard Branson, Anita Roddick, Claudia Schiffer, Daniel Day-Lewis, and Donald Trump, all at once. We want to be world-leaders with 'The Power in our palms'.

Maybe things haven't really changed. Maybe humans have always been this way. But there is a difference these days — instead of admitting what it is we really want, we must partake of the hypocrisy of pretending to want to save the world first.

Then, we convince ourselves (once we've indulged in our fair share of rebellion, of raging against the status quo, of drugs and individualism, of belly-piercing and vegetarianism) that we can only really attempt to change things from the inside; that we are powerless from the outside.

You see, as a more popular/successful/commercial actor/singer/dress designer, I will reach a wider audience with my message (what message? Oh yeah, you're into the environment and animals, that's right). And, of course, if you want to change the way business people do business, you have to be a business person, take over daddy's company and radically alter its whole working ethos. So we swap our funky platforms and Doc Martens for a sober pair of patent leather lace-ups, put on our power suits and join the system. We are still going to change the world, we tell ourselves, but first we must obtain a position of power within the established order of things. Then we can really make a difference. And then...?

And then, well look about you. You start to say things like "you know, if you aren't a Marxist when you're twenty..." But you say it with a straight face this time.

If you ask me, friend, you didn't have a heart in the first place. You just joined the herd, flocked with the sheep — first in your twenties and then in your forties. What else could you do? You didn't have a brain either.

A Change of Life

Written and photographed by: K R Zakhmi

Sakina doesn't remember from where she hails: who were her parents. She was a street urchin. One day, when she was about 12 years old, someone engaged her as housemaid and since then she lived like a slave.

Only two years ago, she was washing sarees, pettycoats, lungis, blouses etc of her master's house, in a big ditch like pond, with the vast area of the proposed Khulna University when she spied a young man coming towards her. At that time there was no blouse of her body and she was washing half the portion of her saree — half portion of which was wrapped on her body. She dreaded the man coming towards her and left as if a bolt from the blue was impending on her.

The man came to her and after some hesitation he started questioning about her life very gently and expressed his respect for her by his gestures. Finally he advised her to gather a few more housemaids and work as day labourers under him.

That night Sakina couldn't sleep. Next day she again met that man when she went to the 'pond' for her usual washing chores.

After a few days she collected five young housemaids and met the man. From the next day they all started working as unskilled labourers: Their jobs were digging and carrying earth and bricks etc within the University complex. She discovered her self: worked honestly and guided the other former housemaids. Initially she earned between Tk. 40/- to Tk 50/- daily. Just after six months of hard, devoted labour, she was also made a kind of supervisor of about a dozen workers, mostly women. She also lured her husband to work as simple mason, who had been a casual rickshaw driver.

Now she is lovingly called 'Lady Contractor' not only by all the workers, but even by all the people, men, women, young and old. And certainly she is leading a far better and peaceful life than two years back.

"O, Sakina work apace, apace. Honest labour bears a lovely face." May God bless the man who led Sakina to a new life.



Sakina and her group of Women