



# Interview with a Zontian

by Schrezad Joya Monami Latif

THE word "Zonta" is Sioux, it means "honest and trustworthy". The Native American tribe have little in common with the functions of the Zonta International Club except perhaps, its birthplace. Both the Sioux and Zonta International originate in the North American Continent. The club was established in 1919 in Buffalo, New York with the main aim being the advancement of the legal, political, economic, educational and professional women in the community. To a lot of people familiar with Zonta activities in Dhaka, Zonta may have seemed clearly a Bangladeshi thing, when in reality it has its sister organizations in over 44 countries.

Mano Muthu Krishna Candappa, the District Governor of Zonta for the South Asian Region was in Dhaka last week to preside over the opening of Zonta IV Bangladesh and to visit her Zonta sisters who she says are her close friends and "support group", even across the Indian Ocean. Mano, as she is called by her friends and colleagues started Zonta in her native Colombo back in 1966 and since then has been President, Secretary and Vice-President to the club. Elegant in a beautiful black and white Baluchuri sari, she sat in a resplendent living room of one of the Zonta members in Dhaka, and spoke to the Daily Star. The following is an excerpt.

**DS: Tell us a little about yourself, what do you do professionally?**

**Mano:** I was actually a freelance journalist for a long time. It was funny the way I started out. A journalist and friend



Speaking to her Zonta sisters on her recent trip.



Looking at the Zonta III literacy center.

suggested I start writing because he was tired of me asking him to follow up on this story and that, and so finally one day I did. I became a freelancer and handled feature pages while still holding my "real job".

My father started the first employment oriented Polytechnic in Sri Lanka in 1912, where vocational training and

secretarial training was offered. This was at a time when this type of education was not well known or popular. I took over as administrative director after he retired and today my daughter is the executive director. I'm very proud of the way something my father started is now being carried on by generations of women in the family.

**DS: Why would a woman join Zonta? What are the qualities which you think would be appealing to the working woman?**

**Mano:** I think there's a lot Zonta can offer a woman. If you have a commitment to do something for society, then Zonta is a good organization to be a part of. Sure you can do things privately to help society but as an organized group you can make more of a difference. Plus we are sort of a woman's network group as well as support group. I recently had a tragedy in my

family and I found a special link with Zonta. I had all these wonderful support from my Zonta sisters who made me feel that I had special friends. On the other hand, Zonta is also a network between countries at the Regional level and at the International level.

**DS: According to official Zonta publications, Zonta is a "classified organization of executives in business and professions, who are leaders in their communities..." how would these women relate to those in need? How do you dispel the stereotype that you are just another elite women's charity organization?**

**Mano:** We've never been just a charity organization. We do work for poverty alleviation, work that has long term effects, and we give each other support. We network amongst each other, say within Sri Lanka as well as the sub-continent.

**DS: Yes, but don't you feel that somehow you are very distant from those you are helping?**

**Mano:** It is difficult in Asian countries, we have such disparities. I don't think we face much of a problem in Sri Lanka, we have such a broad middle class there you see, who are struggling to keep up their standard of living. We have to lift up those less privileged than us, of course it won't happen overnight, but it can happen.

**DS: How do you think women's rights are best promoted?**

**Mano:** I think a woman must be able to work with men in today's world. More and more women must be put in positions of decision making, this would definitely improve the human rights situation. Education, employment of course are essential. It has to be a give and take situation.

**DS: What to you is the ideal woman of the Nineties?**

**Mano:** That's a difficult question! I think a woman of the nineties should be understanding, passionate, the strong, self-reliant and patient. And she must be full of hope. She mustn't be intimidated by men or feel in anyway that she's less than a man, have her own inner personality and strength.



The Zonta Symbol for Beijing



# Before and Beyond Beijing

by Abdul Hamman

**The Beijing Conference will be measured for its efficacy by the extent to which it has made the journey from the womb to the tomb.**

ONE of the best ways to prepare for this year's United Nations Conference for Women in Beijing is to look back over women's past experiences of development. While we may do this as a historical exercise, a more fundamental approach would be to read the experience at the level of paradigm. We may then be forewarned of the likely outcomes of 'Beijing' more realistically.

The United Nations Decade for Women (1975-1985) was highly influential insofar as it helped to heighten political awareness of gender issues in development. However, it resulted in few concrete improvements. During and since that decade, the absolute number of women falling under the deprivations of the dominant development paradigm has increased.

The UN Decade for Women and the more focused occasions of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED, 1992) the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD, 1994) and the World Summit for Social

sources, who bear the brunt of the suffering.

Modern science-based development does not simply exploit rural women. In the cities, women as home-makers are often even more pre-determined by the icons of science-based development. Houses are designed and appliances manufactured by psychologically alienated technologists who are largely ignorant of the actual needs and interests of women. In this territory of modern production-oriented development, it is production value and consumption value, as opposed to use value, that guides. Even then, consumption value of, say, household appliances is not actual but constructed through advertising. Envy and insecurity comprise conditioning elements in this strategy.

This last point is even more

pervades every aspect of women's lives though, while it is a characteristic feature, it has yet to become the defining principle. But tell that to the women who find that the waves of this dominant development approach have not just engulfed their social and economic lives, but their biological lives also. As guinea pigs, women in Bangladesh have been injected with the contraceptives Depo Provera and Norplant without being in formed of its ill effects. Women's bodies seen to have become acceptable testing grounds for medical experts the high priests of scientific development and technocratic power. The specious agenda of population control (now euphemistically called 'family planning') provides the refuted screen for this biological domination of women. The result is further and deeper dehumanization.

Modern food technology has had the impact of deproteinizing breast feeding and infant nutrition through their substitution by infant formulae and artificial weaning foods which are both costly and hazardous. The stream of lies and misconception that is channelled through the filter of mass communications, advertising and the movie industry has advanced the debasement of women to unprecedented levels. Whether as objects of sex or violence women have been subordinated by the



The women Beijing hopeful addresses

Development (WSSD, 1995) all underlined, rather than undermined, the mystique of the dominant, catch up, science-based development paradigm. This paradigm is founded on masculinist, technocratic and instrumentalist assumptions which marginalize women at the epistemological level. While an increasing number of grass roots, non-government and intellectual groups challenge this paradigm, it nevertheless maintains its defining momentum. This forces me to look forward to Beijing with hope, but a hope tempered with caution.

Science-based development perpetually reconstitutes unequal relations between men and women. These relations give white, Western middle class men the critical quotient of political and economic power. While the manifestation of the dominant paradigm is a male, scientific and technological *ubermensch*, it is propped up by a concealed network of women: household maids, garments workers, agricultural processors, domestic producers and reproducers and so on. To these monetized and semi-monetized material contributors we may add the (as yet) non-monetized emotional support provided by women which facilitates the science-based development paradigm that fashions all our lives.

Owing to the sexual division of labour within this paradigm, women have little say in decision-making. As this marginalization has increased, so too has the control exerted by the male-dominated institutions that propagate the domination of women's lives. For rural women in Bangladesh, this can involve having to cope with the latest 'scientific' agricultural processing machine which challenges her labour, or a new 'scientific' agroforestry model which, while increasing production and tree cover, also increases her unpaid labour and therefore exploitation.

Science-based development is dependent on technological innovation to such an extent that it may be described as a creed of our time. It forces women from their land or sucks them into urban factories. Coterminously, this dominant form of development design has led us into a gradually unfolding nightmare of environmental degradation. The two experiences, fallouts of modern development, are linked. Modern science-based development cuts away at the subsistence requirements of women by polluting water, denuding forest and topsoil. It displaces them as social actors by replacing women's ecologically sensitive knowledge systems with standardized technological and cognitive monoculture. While ultimately we all suffer, it is rural women, due to their more immediate association with natural re-



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in effects. Claims to strike 'alternative' poses to this paradigm that do not explicitly and attack its masculinist and instrumentalist assumptions, will not be alternatives at all. Such 'alternative development' approaches will simply result in the reproduction of women's subordination in novel forms, leaving the conventional framework undisturbed.

What matters is that women, and by implication men too, are released from the shackles of science-based development and its destructive trajectories. The Beijing Conference will be measured for its efficacy by the extent to which it has made the journey from the womb to the tomb, a more humane one for at least one half of humankind.



# Agreement! Beijing Forum site

by Shaheen Anam

Irene Santiago, Executive Director, NGO Forum on Women has announced that major concessions have been made by the China Organizing Committee on the issues surrounding the site for the NGO Forum on Women. A meeting held between Ismail Kittani, UN Under Secretary General and Special advisor to the UN Secretary General and officials of the China Organizing Committee was concluded on 8 June. It is believed that the terms and agreement will enable the holding of a substantive and meaningful Forum for Women after all.

Since April last, a major furor had arisen over the issue of venue for the NGO Forum for Women, the parallel meeting to the UN Conference on Women scheduled for September 4 to 15 in Beijing. It had been reported that the site selected by the China Organizing Committee was totally unsuitable to host the 36,000 participants who have registered for the NGO Forum. The selected site was considered to be inadequate both in terms of accommodation, lobbying and activities facilities. An extensive campaign was undertaken worldwide including the threat of boycott to put pressure on the authorities to

change to a more suitable site. It has been reported that agreement has been reached in the following areas:

1) NGO Forum Site and NGO Satellite site in Beijing. The Forum will be held in one contiguous area. An additional satellite site will enable both accredited and non-accredited NGOs, to be close to the UN site for meetings with government delegates. This is in addition to the Beijing Recreation Centre which will be the base for accredited NGOs to lobby the World Conference.

2) Acceptance of all Registered Participants: All participants registered as of April 30, 1995 a total of 36,000 will be able to participate in the Forum.

3) Visas: all registered participants will be granted visas.

4) Facilities for activities: the China Organizing Committee will work together to ensure that all 5000 requests for activities are accommodated.

We in Bangladesh are indeed heartened to learn of the agreement because now women worldwide will be able to do this issue behind them and start preparing for the Conference in earnest again.

