

# FOCUS

I had gone to the W.V.A. Residential Center to do a story on disabled children and ran into Rahima by chance. In my protected cocooned world, I'd never encountered victims like the eighteen year old woman whose left leg, right ear and right arm were missing, chopped off with a butcher's knife. She sat in one of the center's dorm rooms, quiet, dry-eyed and reflective. Stories of women being burnt in the kitchen, at the stake and brutally murdered are in the papers, everywhere, all the time, especially in our part of

## Living with Brutality

by Sohrezad Joya Monami Latif

### "My Husband Hacked off My Limbs"

the world. But till that rainy day in early June, for me, they had simply been stories on paper. My encounter with Rahima made me realize that in Bangladesh brutal crimes against women are not freak occurrences but unpalatable realities that most of us

choose to ignore. Rahima's story starts the same way ninety percent of torture tales in Bangladesh do, with marriage. What was done to Rahima however, does not happen as often and unlike most real life horror stories here, her story ends in a somewhat more positive note, or so I keep telling myself.

Rahima was about 16, she's not sure how old, when her impoverished father married her off to a man in Chittagong. She claims that he did not know that this man already had two wives and drank and gambled heavily. Rahima lived with this man and his two wives for two years. Both his wives and her husband during this time would abuse her both physically and verbally on a daily basis. As the days wore on, her husband started coming home, drunk and demanding that she entertain his friends. She would refuse and then he would beat her black and blue.

One day she really could take it no more and went to the police with her marriage certificate and told them what was being done to her. They assured her that they would see what they could do, and in the meantime she was not to return home. Rahima stayed at a neighbors home. After two days she went to collect her clothes and belongings. That one mistake will cost her the rest of her life.

She was discovered and taken to hospital where her case received much publicity. Rahima received treatment which included an artificial wooden leg. Her husband and his friend have been put in jail but that has no guarantee, whatsoever. Small punishment for a heinous crime. A female lawyer is actively fighting Rahima's case which has been dragging on for quite some time. In the meantime, the W.V.A. center has given her shelter and food.

Her husband's sister and his second wife were sitting outside on the patio when she got there. They told her to go inside and collect her things. Her husband and a friend were sitting in the room when she entered. He asked her if she had been to see the police. Rahima denied everything but he was furious. His friend grabbed her two hands and held them down behind her. Her husband took a dao (butcher's knife) and cut off her ear and hit her a few times with it on her head, the scars of which have healed but left ugly, scarlet welts on her scalp.

Rahima does not remember anything that happened after that. Her face remained impassive as she told me in a monotone, "when I woke up I could not remember anything, not even my name. All I knew was that I was in tremendous pain and parts of my body had been hacked off." After slicing off her ear, her arm, her entire leg and part of her other foot, her husband had left her next to the railway tracks to die.

I did not want to ask Rahima too many questions which would dredge up painful memories. She reassured me that it did not matter. "I've told this story so many times, you see, and to so many strangers".

And what about her future? W.V.A. is trying to rehabilitate her into one of their women's projects and Rahima herself is actually quite positive about her life now. "I do not want to live off people's kindness forever." She is very grateful. "Apa, at least attention was brought to my case and I am being helped, I am not begging on the streets and I wasn't left to die on the railroad tracks."

True. She could have been one of the hundreds of casualties that occur each day but her life was saved. And yet...

I was consumed by rage that day, and went home to tell my grandfather about my day. It was lunchtime and all the household help were standing around the table. They listened to Rahima's story and tut tutted and the women got quite upset. But they all felt that I was getting too worked up. "Apa, I can bring you a dozen of such cases just from the neighbourhood if you'd like to write about more of these," the cook told me, cases like this happen all the time, according to him. "why, the next door bua's sister's husband burned all her limbs with hot iron then hung her from the fan! That poor girl died and although her husband was caught and put into jail, he got out again, very shortly and now has a new wife." I was horrified with the cook's account and quickly got up to leave, the table but my grandmother's old bua caught up with me at the front door. "Apa, there's no justice for poor people in this country, no justice at all. You come from abroad, see a few cases and you get all upset, but you don't have to live with this, you don't have to bear any of the pain. Are you going to write about this in your newspaper? How much good will that do?"

Her question will haunt me, always.



Courtesy: Sheikhad Noorani, DRK

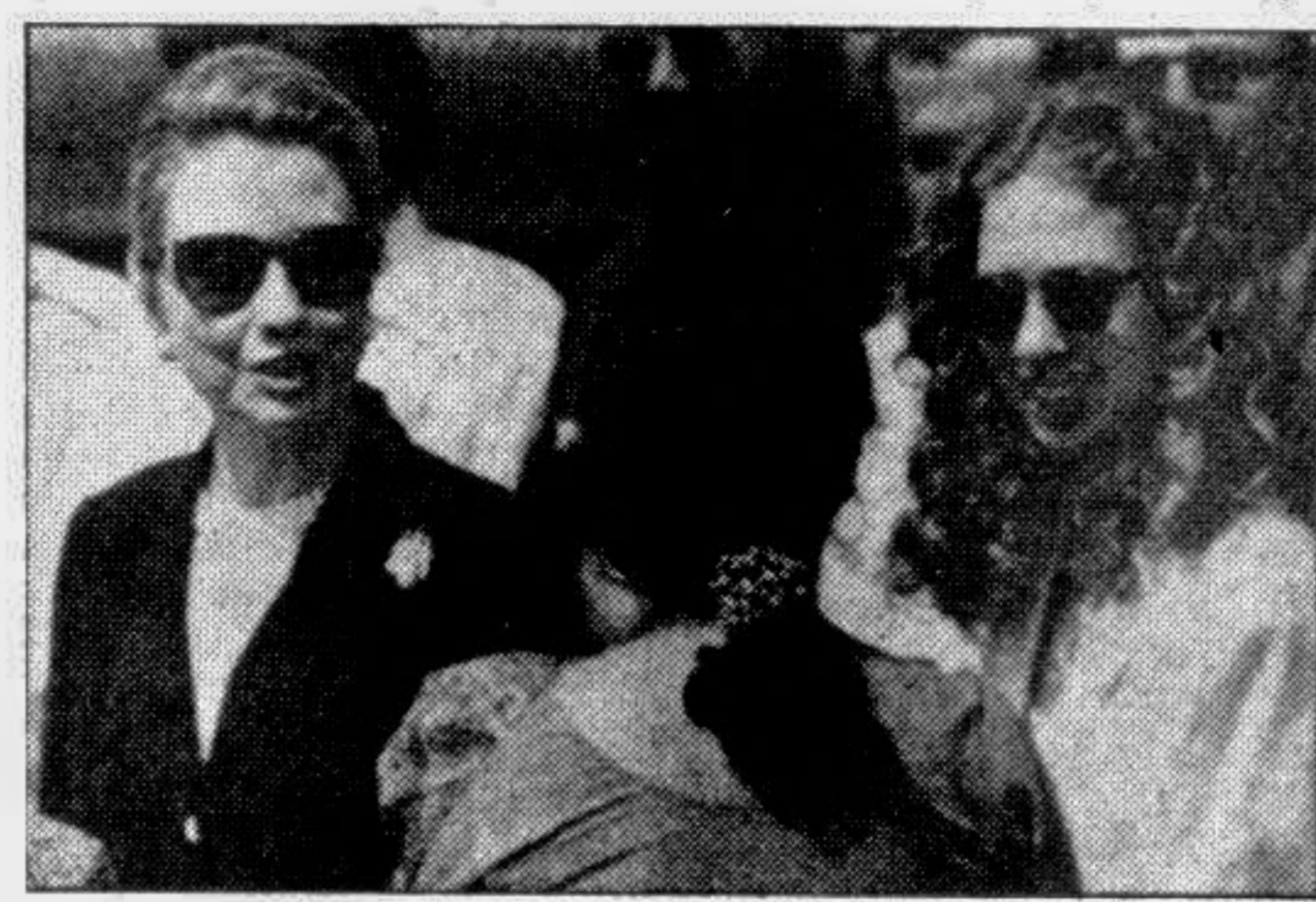
# Women on the Move

## Hillary Has No Cow and No Income of Her Own!

by Farida Akhter

- Apa, do you have cows?
- No I don't.
- Do you have your own income?
- I have started earning since I was 13. Sometimes my income exceeded the income of my husband. I have stopped earning since moving to the White House when my husband became the President.
- Do you wish to have more children?
- I wish I could have one or two more children, but we were so happy with our daughter that we thought of taking no more children. We are proud of Chelsea. (Bangladesh Observer and Bhorer Kagaz April 3, 1995)

This was the open discussion between the US First Lady Mrs Hillary Rodham Clinton and a few village women during her visit to the village Maishahati of Jhenidah in Bangladesh. The members of Grameen Bank asked these questions to the first lady. Because the indicators for the affirmative answers were not met, I am not sure whether they were satisfied with her answers. Hillary does not have a cow and she does not have her own income. On the other hand, the Grameen Bank members narrated their condition to Mrs Clinton as follows:



Star photo

"Before becoming a Grameen Bank member I was a pauper. Today I have a house, a few heads of cattle and poultry birds. I also send my children to school...." The enhancement of the condition of the village women is depicted by their own income, cattle and poultry and by the fact that they now send their children to school. The First Lady of the United States was found to be short of two basic indicators of enhancement of one's economic condition.

I enjoyed this piece of news which was published in the daily newspapers after the 5 hour visit to the village Maishahati in Jhenidah 20 miles from Jessore. But it does indicate a lot of things to me. It is my experience also, that village women ask very straight forward intelligent questions to visitors. They have some indicative questions from which they get to know outsiders. Among the indicators, the economic indicators are the most important ones. I have never heard the question, "how much education do you have" or "what is your educational level". It is immaterial to them. They take it for granted that these visitors must be highly educated. They do not care whether

simple question like do you have a cow cannot be answered in the affirmative by the most powerful women of the world. And then, what do the village women derive from this negative answer?

The question of having a cow in the family is very much linked to the nature of the economy one is in. Of course, if Hillary Clinton belonged to a US farm household, she would have thousands of cattle head. She could then perhaps satisfy

the visitor's education is graduate level or masters level. But "do you have your own income" and "do you have a cow" are the most important questions to them. There are very few visitors who can satisfy the village women with the answer to the second question.

Similarly, the visitors ask the poor village women, "do you have your own income" and "do you have any decision-making power in your family". This has become a theory in women's development, that once poor women have their own income, they earn the decision making power in family matters, especially with regard to the number of children to have. There are thousands of examples to prove this theory. On this basis, many income generating projects have developed over the years which have made certain population control programmes successful! Contraceptive distribution programmes failed to ensure that women have less children. So, income earning has been, in many cases, the best contraceptive. For the development experts with a motive to reduce population, these were important issues. But for a village woman a

their narrow perception, then western women are equally guilty of having one particular perception about all the women in third world countries. They often fail to recognize the differences in the social and economic context of women in Bangladesh and ask generalized question with very preconceived ideas about the so-called backwardness of women in these countries. I simply want to raise this issue and connect it with Hillary Clinton's visit with the village women. Since Hillary did not have affirmative answers to questions asked by village women, the village women will not have a general sense of understanding about the empowerment of the first lady of the United States of America.

So, let's think in different ways and broaden our perspectives. Instead of making fun of the encounter between the village women and Hillary Clinton we can learn a lot from it.

## FROM NAIROBI TO BEIJING

### Another Decade for Women

Ten years ago the United Nations held a women's conference in Nairobi. This September another conference will be held in Beijing. Do these conferences make a difference? Have women's lives improved over the past ten years? ANNE THEROUX, who made a series about women for BBC World Service ten years ago, has been gathering material for a new series to be broadcast in the weeks leading up to the Beijing conference.

W HAT has changed for women in the past ten years? Sometimes it seems, not much. The other day the BBC listeners' correspondence programme, Write On, received (and broadcast) a letter complaining about female sports commentators. "Get back to your knitting, girls!" was the parting thrust. "Clearly some men are having problems with women's changing role. So argue some women!"

I sometimes envy my mother and grandmother, one woman admitted after describing how hard it was to run a home and a career. "Their lives were more limited, but at least they knew what was expected of them." And many other women I talked to agreed that trying to be Superwoman was exhausting.

burden. However most women I talked to felt that the opportunity to earn their own living was a big step forward. Having a wider choice of jobs was important too. The writer Joan Smith believes that women have higher expectations today about what kind of work they can do.

Because being a liberated woman is tiring, it is tempting to romanticise "the good old days" when there was time to knit, bake and play with the children, while the man took responsibility for bringing home the money. However it was never quite like that. In many parts of the world "women's work" was hard, heavy agricultural labour. To this day women produce most of the food consumed in Africa.

One or two pioneer women set out and say 'why can't a woman do this?' and they become travellers or teachers or lawyers, and other women see it's possible."



How much will the Beijing Conference help them?—Star Photo

Education is the launch pad for career opportunities and in Britain boys and girls now enter schools and universities in fairly equal numbers. However, many women in the Third World are still held back by a lack of schooling.

The woman presiding over the UN conference in Beijing, Gertrude Mongella, was one of the lucky ones. She grew up in a village in Tanzania and was fortunate to have a father who believed that girls deserved an education as much as boys did. "If I had been a girl who didn't have the opportunity to go to school, I would not now be Secretary General of the World Conference. The decision of my parents to take me to school opened opportunities in my life. That's why I've been a Minister, a high Commissioner and now Secretary

General of the Women's Conference."

The number of women who, like Mrs Mongella, reach the top is still very small. Britain's record is particularly poor, with less than ten per cent of the seats in the House of Commons occupied by women. Baroness Shirley Williams, a former Minister and currently an advisor to the Beijing Women's Conference, believes that some kind of positive action is needed to help more women get into government.

And there are growing numbers of women who support families without a male partner: at least a third of the world's households are female-headed. These women must earn money.

## Who is the Fairest of Them All?

by Farah Ghuznavi

all over the world, women in Bangladesh suffer because of the standards of a society that judges women by the way that they look. However, in Bangladesh, this is hugely aggravated by the obsession that most people in this country have about skin colour.

out with statements like, "Oh, it's going to be hard to find a husband for so and so. She is so dark." Apart from the fact that I don't honestly see why brown skin should be considered ugly (presumably this is the way that the Almighty meant us to look, judging from how many of us are this colour!), most people don't even bother to look beyond skin colour to consider a woman's features when they pass judgement on her looks!

## The Rhythm of Sewing Machine is My Pulsation

Rahima Begum (31) of Manikgonj narrates her story of struggle



Y ES, like all others I also have some memories of time and trials of my own. We, three brothers and sisters, were living with our parents at Dashara of Manikgonj. My father Tufan Ali was a share-cropper. He had a negligible cultivable land. So, our days were passing on in a state of stringency.

our locality come to me. In that way one year passed. I could repay my brother's loan and weekly instalments. To have a clear idea about my business I always maintained a daily note book. After income and expenditure of the first year, at the end I had a capital of Tk 1,538/-.

Gradually, my world began to change. Another hand was needed to deliver the order goods in time. I had to iron the clothes before delivering. For that also a considerable amount was spent. So, when, in the next year, I received Tk 2,000/- as the second term loan, I bought an iron with Tk 500/- and also a second hand machine with Tk 1,500/- I also employed an assistant to help me. After repaying the second term credit it was clear to me that the family was moving toward a solvency.

By that time, I already bought a ceiling fan with Tk 500/-. I also purchased a cow jointly with my brother. For that I had to spend Tk 5,000/-. Now we get four litres of milk every day. The family also had been facilitated with a water sealed latrine and a tubewell. My capital was also increasing gradually and it became Tk 3,000/- then.

At the end of the year, Tk 4,000/- came to me as the third term loan which I spent for buying clothes. The instalments were repaid in due course. The present capital in my business is nearly Tk 6,000/-.

When I was only 15 years old, a student of class three, my father settled my marriage with a neighbour named Tota Mian. Within a few days, I went to my in-law's house. My father-in-law did not choose me, although he saw me before. He was pressing hard my husband either to collect dowry or get married for the second time. But Tota did not agree. Confronting over that issue, only two years after the marriage, Tota committed suicide.

—An ASA case study