

FOCUS

Empowering Women through the Media

by Raffat Binte Rashid

ARTICLE 27 of the Constitution has stated that all citizens are equal before the law and are entitled to equal protection of law. In article 28(1), it is stated that the State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth.

The endorsement of the 1985 Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women (NFLS) and the 1994 Jakarta Declaration for the advancement of women in Asia and the Pacific by Bangladesh show the country's pro-women attitude and strong involvement and active participation in changing the status of its female population. Regarding such women's issues both the GOB and the women's movement in Bangladesh, are preparing for the fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW) in Beijing, September, 1995 and also the parallel NGO Forum.

"Information is power and women should have access to that source of power. In Bangladesh we have a mass media which is very sensitive to gender concerns and it should play a proactive role in the empowerment of women because they have the power to mould public opinion."

While recognizing the fast growing participation of women in vital sectors of the economy such as in agriculture, rural development and manufacturing, the urgency was felt for greater public awareness concerning support and hindrance to this increased participation.

Organised by the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs a workshop on "The Role of Media in Empowering Women" was held at the Osmani Memorial Auditorium in the city recently, in relation to the conference.



Low-paid garment workers agitating for higher wages

The purpose of the workshop was to highlight the broader issues in relation to women's rights and for narrowing gaps between men and women in the media campaign, and the need for larger involvement and participation of the community in the preparations. The participants in the workshop, who were mostly from different media organisations both print and electronic, were separated in three different groups. The role of media in the prevention of violence against women, portrayal of positive roles of women in the mass media, and creating development awareness in the media, were the three issues on which the three groups discussed and gave a few recommendations.

The total outlook of the society regarding women should change and

media should help in creating such awareness. Whenever violence against a woman is committed, the probable accused or the one committing the crime rather than the victim should be brought in the news and widely given coverage in the newspapers. The punishment and of course the act of the crime itself should also be brought in the forefront.

Moreover, follow-ups of all stories, positive or negative, should be carried out. Alongside these, the legal aspects of any violent act against women should be printed in the media which would help educate as well as make people aware of the consequences following the deed. Besides all these the positive role of women, and reports on prevention of violence should be highlighted in poems, short

stories, novels, dramas and cinemas.

However, the much important economic solvency of women should be given more emphasis. All kinds of work, even household work, should be evaluated in terms of finance. The literacy rate should improve, rate of dependence should also decrease. Women should play more dominant roles in policy and decision making strategies and be properly trained in these areas.

Bangladesh in terms of global statistics is often presented as one of the least developed countries when comparing the status of women in terms of health, education, employment, food and nutrition intake etc. These statistics, although correct does not reflect the changes and other aspects of women's develop-

ment taking place and the increased effort of GOB.

Speaking at the inaugural session of the workshop President Abdur Rahman Biswas said, the age-old belief that women are less intelligent, less efficient and less creative than men no longer stands any chance. Under proper circumstances and scope they prove the opposite. "The realistic picture of moral values, the rights of women and their success stories which would create awareness among the people in general and the women in particular should be portrayed by national media."

"Information is power and women should have access to that source of power. In Bangladesh we have a mass media which is very sensitive to gender concerns and it should play a proactive role in the empowerment of women because they have the power to mould public opinion," UNDP Representative Eimi Watanabe pointed out while speaking at the workshop.

From the days after independence till today, women of Bangladesh were the worst victims of discrimination, of violence, of exploitation, regardless of actions taken, ratification made. Though important and significant changes are taking place among today's conscious women, both rural and urban, they are yet to see that 'golden sunrise', the day when they won't have to fight for equality or rights anymore.

Taking these into account the Fourth Five-Year Plan (1990-95) integrated women's development into the macro-framework for multi-sectoral thrust to bring women into the mainstream of development with the following objectives: to increase women's participation in education, health, agriculture, industry, trade, service and other sectors; increase female literacy rate from 15 to 30 per cent; increase women's access to medical services; expand credit and self-employment facilities for women; alleviate poverty; create gender responsive awareness.

Bangladesh has prepared a national policy and plan of action in line with Jakarta Declaration and NFLS for the advancement of women in the country and is steadily working towards equality, development and peace which is this conference's theme.

tries to focus their development policies on the acquisition of foreign currency through production of export commodities and increase in tourism. Local people and ecosystems are either not taken into account, or they are "sacrificed" to a higher god. If the current international economic systems is responsible in part for desertification, I argue, then the people who suffer are entitled to compensation and if the global community is serious about combating desertification the system has to be changed.

A change in behaviour by each individual, each institution and each state is the only basis from which acceptable future can emerge from the constraints of this grave environmental crisis. Let us hope that the change can take place without being provoked by major ecological catastrophe.

The writer is a deputy director in the Department of Environment.

Naidoo Refuses to Throw Money at the Gaps

The South African government will stand or fall on its ability to meet the basic needs of the country's majority, neglected by years of white rule. But given the Administration's determination not to attempt to solve problems by throwing money at them, reports Gemini News Service, expectations are running ahead of supply.

by John Perlman

SOUTH Africa's ambitious Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) was a key plank in the African National Congress' election platform. Now, more than a year later, everyone agrees that bridging the country's huge gaps in wealth and opportunity is going to be tough.

While academics, financial analysts and political adversaries wrangle over whether the RDP's promises of a million houses, piped water and free schooling could be met by the country's creaking economy, the mass of voters saw simpler message: housing, clinics, a better life.

Jay Naidoo, the minister in charge of the programme, plays down expectations and tries to put across a more sober perspective.

His message is: The RDP cannot simply be measured in buildings completed. Its real goal is to restructure government and the economy to meet needs in a sustainable way.

Ironically, this brings flak from opponents who during the election argued that the RDP would prove financially ruinous.

RDP projects," says Dr Azar Jammine, a leading economist.

It has also been applauded by many developers.

"One of the worst things that could happen is for huge amounts of money to be thrown so that spending becomes the sole living force," says a town planner. "Then you don't have time for community participation."

This view is given weight by the growing recognition that another Presidential project, a massive school feeding scheme, may not be hitting the mark.

"This programme is simply not sustainable — you need to pilot, monitor and then expand on a systematic basis," comments a relief worker. "This has not been planned, piloted or monitored. It is a very, very expensive gesture."

But while slow and steady may please accountants and analysts, it does not win many friends in the streets and squatter camps. And there is growing concern in government and business that some of the delays in delivery are unnecessary and avoidable.

of the government's R 153.3 billion budget is available for capital projects and infrastructure. The rest goes on salaries, recurring welfare expenditure like pensions, and debt servicing.

On the ground, even in places like the showpiece Port Elizabeth township of Ibhayi — one of 22 Presidential Lead Projects instituted last year to "kick-start" the RDP — that means that what seems like a lot of money for neglected communities does not buy much.

"All your basic services are underground," says Morgan Munsamy, project manager for Port Elizabeth city council's informal development division, as he steps carefully over a mud-filled trench. "Development is not a very glamorous thing," he says.

"It's muddy and messy. Big trenches are gouged into the ground and people complain about mud getting into their houses. When you hear that an area is being developed, you expect to see houses painted and gardens blooming, but it isn't quite like that."

"Some people come to us and say: 'You have spent R 2 million here and there is nothing to show for it.'"

The R 38 million allocated for service provision in Ibhayi, for instance, is the largest single injection of capital into the township for years. Yet by the time it has been spent, just 3,000 serviced sites will have been created in a township which has shacks everywhere you look and 20,000 homes dependent on a bucket toilet system.

Faced with these daunting numbers, the RDP office constantly stresses the need for a three-way partnership between itself, communities and business.

Non-government organisations (NGOs), a key conduit of community involvement, go off to a bumpy start with the RDP.

"At first there was a very centralising message from government," says Kate Phillip, who coordinates a national network of development centres for entrenched miners.

"Funding of NGOs would be through the RDP. Many donors suspended their normal funding processes, while the RDP sorted out how it should work, which took longer than expected."

Many NGOs were forced to close as a result. "The process did nothing to sort out the good ones from the bad ones," says one development worker.

Even community participation, the most common phrase in any RDP document, is not that simple.

Naidoo concedes that development can be divisive. "In Alexandra township (near Johannesburg) you have displaced people living in churches, you have people in squatter camps and you have people in hostels. As you begin to deliver houses you must decide who has first access. It could be a point of conflict."

For most people, houses represent what the RDP should be doing. The government's best offer so far has been to promise a R 15,000 subsidy to low-income families. Eastern Cape development worker Jaap Geldof puts that into sobering perspective:

"If you can get R 5,000 out of the subsidy after meeting land and service costs, you are doing a bloody good job," he says. "That will get you a toilet, five by six metre slab, four columns and a roof."

That is a modest start, he says, but a start nonetheless. "In development policy the key word is incremental and the key issue is capacity-building."

"We have to give that community the capacity in terms of skills and resources to build on what they have got," he adds. "To take things further themselves. That, at the end, is what matters and not just physical construction." — GEMINI NEWS.

About the Author: John Perlman is on the staff of The Star in Johannesburg.



South African Development Minister Jay Naidoo: 'Not just buildings'

"It's funny how the people who said we were going to throw money around for political gain now say we are not spending enough," says Naidoo, commenting on a parliamentary question as to why only R1.1 billion of RDP money had been spent when more than twice that was available.

"The RDP is not a set of ad hoc projects, no matter how commendable they are," he says. "People's expectations are legitimate, but we are correct not to just throw money at the problem when there is a lack of capacity. We will not be forced into popular spending just because people demand it."

"It doesn't make sense to us to build a hospital in a place, because there's a desperate need, without first restructuring the health budget to ensure that we can pay for the medicines and the nurses. The delivery of the RDP must transform government," he adds.

This approach has won praise from businessmen and financial analysts.

"The government has not gone and poured money down the drain in

Naidoo cites several reasons for this.

The point of delivery is local government and we don't have legitimate local government in place," he says. Local authorities, the final leg of South Africa's new democratic structure, are not yet in place and October's local government elections may be postponed because of delays in voter registration.

But even in central and regional government, whose representatives were chosen in last year's general election, delivery of development projects has been stalled and stifled. South Africa, says Naidoo, "has a major weakness in terms of managerial capacity to accelerate delivery."

In early June, RDP deputy-director Bernie Fanaroff told parliament that the provinces had been allocated millions in development money "but they do not have the administrative capacity to spend it."

So more than R 1.7 billion had gone unspent in 1994 and would be rolled over to the next financial year.

Even when these bottlenecks ease, the country still faces some hard economic truths. Only nine per cent

CREEPING DESERTIFICATION Is Bangladesh Prepared for It?

by Mohammad Reazuddin

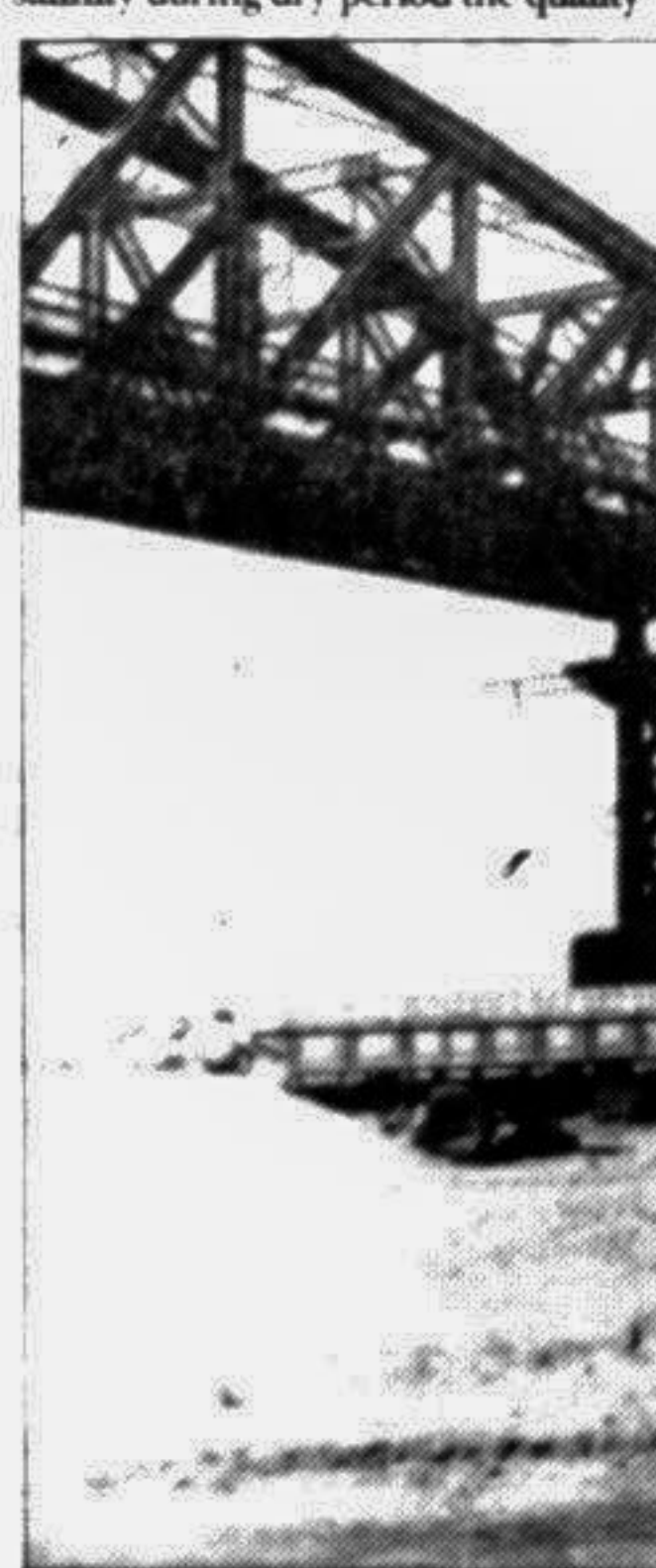
The country is facing a serious problem of desertification in its north western and south western regions comprising an area of about 29,000 square miles (74, 200 km²), which is little over 50 per cent of the total area of the country.

THE size of present day Bangladesh's population is overburdening the carrying capacity of the land. It is already hard pressed to supply even the minimum food needs of its populations. The problem has been further accentuated by recurrent environmental hazards like floods, droughts, coastal salinity and loss of soil productivity. Since the country is located downstream of three major rivers, it is naturally vulnerable to environmental phenomena and man made intervention in the upper riparian countries. The diversion of Ganges water by the Farakka barrage in India has contributed to the reduction of surface water availability and aggravated the desertification process in the western part of the country so much so that thirty per cent of the surface area of the country is apparently leading towards a slow process of desertification. The extreme climatic conditions which Bangladesh now is experiencing are quite indicative of this process.

According to Agenda 21 (Chapter 12) "Desertification" means land degradation in arid, semi-arid and dry subhumid areas resulting from various factors, including climate variations and human activities. Desertification is inter-related with development of desert-like conditions, such as changes in climate, soil properties, water table and other ecological and social conditions. A number of deserts in Asia and Africa are located within the north latitudes between 22° and 26°. Bangladesh being situated within these limits is vulnerable to the process of the desertification.

Bangladesh is divided into four hydrological regions, namely, north western, south western, central and eastern regions. The country is facing a serious problem of desertification in its north western and south western regions comprising an area of about 29,000 square miles (74, 200 km²), which is little over 50 per cent of the total area of the country. It receives normal rainfall from 260 inches in the north east region to 49 inches in the north west region. Highest fluctuation of rainfall is found in the north west and south west regions of the country. This wide fluctuation of rainfall generally leads to the development of aridity and recurrent drought in these regions. According to a recent SPAARSO study it is revealed that our north east region experiences 4 arid months and north west regions 6 arid months in a year. As a whole in the country the flow and availability of water itself is locked in a race against time with rivers drying up, wetlands drained and ground water depleted without sufficient recharge. The ground water level has gone much below the surface and many tube wells have become dry. This has created critical stress on soil moisture. The salinity level due to withdrawal of the Ganges water has

gradually increased. The critical soil salinity has caused reduction in crop yield. The gradual decrease of surface and ground water as also of soil moisture combined with increase of soil and water salinity over large areas has already affected heavy losses of crop production in the country. It has also been observed that due to increased salinity during dry period the quality



Hardinge Bridge. The Padma no more flows under it

of mangrove forest in the Sunderbans is being adversely affected.

Global Context and Efforts

Globally desertification affects about sixth of the world's population, 70 per cent of all dry lands, amounting to 3.6 billion hectares, and one quarter of the total land area of the world. Owing to its global threat, the United Nations General Assembly passed a resolution to form an inter-governmental committee (INC) to study and recommend to the General Assembly for appropriate actions.

Later in the Rio Earth Summit nations agreed for negotiating a convention on desertification based on the findings of the INC. In October 1994, the nations finalized the convention which calls for strengthening the knowledge base and developing information and monitoring systems for regions prone to desertification and drought, including the economic and social aspects of the ecosystem and for combating land degradation through, *inter alia*, intensified soil conservation, afforestation and reforestation activities. Bangladesh along with many other countries has signed the convention. Once the convention has been ratified by the

required number of countries, the first Conference of the Parties (COP) to the desertification convention will take place.

The precise ways in which climate and desertification are inter-related, and more pointedly, who is to blame, are very complex questions. No one doubts that climate change is one of the causes of desertification. But

As desertification encroaching upon almost all the continents has become a global issue of concern, there is a moral obligation for the better off to help those adversely affected. Furthermore, there is no denying the fact the inter-connected factors of international debt, inequitable trade and structural adjustment require developing coun-

tries to focus their development policies on the acquisition of foreign currency through production of export commodities and increase in tourism. Local people and ecosystems are either not taken into account, or they are "sacrificed" to a higher god. If the current international economic systems is responsible in part for desertification, I argue, then the people who suffer are entitled to compensation and if the global community is serious about combating desertification the system has to be changed.

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what causes climate change? To what extent are current changes natural or human made phenomena? To what extent does local mismanagement that deforest and degrade the land cause local climate changes, which in turn enhance desertification? To what extent does desertification cause global warming? These are still debatable but whatever be the scientific answers to these questions, the political stakes are high and as such if climate change is held largely to blame for desertification, Third World countries should have a stronger case for financial compensation for a problem they suffer from but not caused. Bangladesh therefore should better prepare herself for the first COP to plead her case for establishing entitlement to aid or compensation under the convention. The key issues under the country programme *inter alia* may include assessment and mapping and adoption of scientific measures to combat the process. On the other hand, in order to prevent aggravation of the water crisis problem in the country, efforts should be intensified to reach a practical solution with the neighbouring countries following norms and principles, internationally agreed upon, on the management of shared rivers.

The Ghost of the Iron Lady Still Haunts No 10

by John Booth writes from London

WHILE the morale of Britain's Conservative party lower than at any time since Margaret Thatcher inaugurated their long period of political dominance in 1979, there are many reasons why her successor's gamble of resigning as leader of the party and re-standing may fail to ensure his survival.

The first doubt arises from the fate of Thatcher herself five years ago when Conservative fortunes were also at a low ebb.

For all the talk of loyalty and the great debt of gratitude the Tory party owed her for winning three successive elections, when it came to the possibility of electoral defeat, Thatcher was removed by her peers with ruthless alacrity.

Her successor, John Major, has little of the charismatic Thatcher buoyancy to keep him afloat in troubled times. So even if re-elected as party leader, his longer-term future is not assured unless he reclaims disappointed former Tory voters.

Thatcher haunts Major in other ways, too.

When British Prime Minister John Major metaphorically held a pistol to his own head and told the critics within his own party to "put up or shut up," he was hoping to silence his Cabinet rivals. But as well as looking forward, reports Gemini News Service, he was also looking over his shoulder, to the troublesome ghost of his famous predecessor.

The last round of criticism before his extraordinary resignation stemmed directly from the launch of the second volume of her memoirs a few days earlier. The repeated message of the Lost Leader as she energetically promoted her book was that her successor was not Conservative enough — a theme taken up by many Tories nostalgic for her old certainties and finding her grey-haired heir lacking the Iron Lady's solid convictions.

That yearning finds a powerful focus on the vexed future of Britain in Europe, the subject preoccupying many of Major's critics, from his former Chancellor (Finance Minister) Norman Lamont to the 42-year-old

Employment secretary Michael Portillo.

The former apparently remains bitter with the man he helped put into 10 Downing Street in 1990: Lamont resents being forced to take the rap for Britain's undignified departure from the European Exchange Rate Mechanism two years later.

The way he articulates anxieties about closer integration into the European Union echoes those of Baroness Thatcher and the openly ambitious Portillo, but with the sharp personal edge against the Prime Minister honed by his enforced sojourn in the political wilderness.

Though the object of Lamont's hatred — a single European currency

— has now been postponed until 1999, the European Union's next major inter-governmental conference — an occasion viewed with intense suspicion by Tory Eurosceptics — is scheduled for 1996. A groggy Major would be vulnerable to pressure at that time unless he has won a fresh mandate to lead that his re-election bid aims to provide.

But if the Europe question is as crucial to Britain's future as his critics believe, it seems unlikely that they will stay silent after his re-election, however "overwhelming" that victory.

The prospect of the Westminster Parliament losing yet more power to Brussels has become a defining issue for many Tories, who sense the coun-

try is sliding down the mountain of greatness, particularly now Baroness Thatcher is no longer around to hand-bag her European colleagues into submission.

But there is more to Major's predicament than symbolic contrast with his predecessor. The electorate, still mired in an economy in which many are without jobs and those with them often feel insecure, has essentially had enough of a government too long in power.

The Major years have been dogged by revelations of scandal, with an apparently endless succession of ministers and MPs involved in sleazy sexual and financial affairs, and government officials found in court judgments.

Many of these scandals, in addition to the uncompleted inquiry into arms sales to Iraq — the damaging provisional findings of which are leaking regularly into public view — began in the get-rich-quick Thatcher years. But the chickens are coming home to roost long after her departure from 10 Downing Street.