

## FOCUS

## Women, Poverty and the Environment

by Raana Haider

As we approach the year 2000, rural Bangladesh, which contains 85 per cent of Bangladesh's 113 million people, is undergoing a process of increasing pauperization plus polarization compounded by an increasing feminization of the resulting poor. Not only are more people becoming poor but the rich are becoming richer and the poor poorer. In this process, there is a tendency to believe that poverty, too, has a gender bias — in that, it is the women of Bangladesh who are becoming poorer. The are caught up in a situation of varying degrees of dependency, powerlessness, vulnerability and inequality. The condition is a result of the physical, socio-cultural and economic environment influencing the existence and development of women.

## Foraging for Fuel

In the past, access to common property renewable resources had provided the rural population with sustenance from life-support systems in the form of open water-bodies for fishing and fish consumption, a vital source of animal protein and common lands for cattle grazing, cultivation, fodder and forestry. A wide range of vital resources had been freely available to people. According to (Singh 1985), in India,

**"Hunger and poverty are more women issues. Women experience hunger and poverty in much more intense ways than that experienced by men. Women have to stay at 'home' and manage the family with virtually nothing to manage with. When there is nothing to eat, husbands prefer to stay away from 'home' to avoid facing the immediate crisis. Mother cannot avoid facing it. She practically looks for ways to feed the children. It is she who has to invent the last survival manoeuvre."**

Mohammad Yunus,  
Grameen Bank, Bangladesh.

commonly available wood, shrubs and cow dung had been utilized for cooking and heating; mud, bamboo and palm leaves for housing; wild grass and shrubs for animal fodder and a variety of fruits and vegetables as food. Such an environment was the survival base for rural India and the domain of productivity of woman (Shiva 1988). The situation was not dissimilar in Bangladesh.

Forests are a natural resource rapidly being depleted by over-use, at times for survival. Commercial felling for timber and other uses, together with encroachments for agriculture and settlements have substantially reduced the forest areas and increased water and soil instability. Total Reserve Forest Area has been reduced by 50 per cent during the last 20 years. Fuelwood stocks have been reduced to the point, where over 84 per cent of the total domestic energy requirements have to be met by crop residues and animal dung, with only 16 per cent being met by fuelwood (Rahman



Then, learn to tackle things themselves.

AA 1991). The utilization of animal dung as fuel deprives the soil of vital nutrients and compounds the cycle of need, consumption and ecological instability. Deforestation and forest degradation, through water and soil erosion, turns both the land and the forests into unproductive and desertified wastelands (Shiva 1988).

In order to convert food into an edible form, some form of fuel is required. The task of fuel collection falls to women and for them, it is a strategy in survival. Supply of crop residues and animal dung is scarce for marginalized women, both rural and urban. They have to rely on fuel mass; leaves, twigs and branches, travelling further and further away in search of it, an exercise demanding more and more time and further damaging to their health.

## Water Carriers

Rapid population growth, increased consumption of water and climatic factors have placed pressure on existing water sources. There is some indication of a lowering of the water table, due to indiscriminate use of ground water in Bangladesh. Shortages of water in the river systems during the dry season are thought to be causing the saline belt to move northwards (Rahman A A 1991). Although some 80 per cent of the population is within 150 metres of a tubewell, its use is largely limited to drinking purposes. However, this coverage is also being increasingly threatened by the lowering of the underground water level during the 2-3 months of the dry season (Haider 1991a).

As some sources of water dry up, other waters are polluted by faeces, industries and agro-chemicals (Rahman 1991). As a result, water-borne diseases account for the majority of illnesses and deaths in Bangladesh. Typhoid, paratyphoid, shigellosis, strepto-

coecal infections, diphtheria, hepatitis and amoebiasis are some of the most common forms of diseases whose micro-organisms are found in polluted water. Many communities depend on such water sources for meeting their daily requirements, including drinking water. The situation further deteriorates during the post-flood and monsoon periods (Rahman N 1991). Consumption of diseased fish is also frequently reported in the print media as a cause of deaths.

Increased salinity in the river waters of the southern region of Bangladesh, attributed to the construction of the Farakka Barrage in India, has been found to affect the health of expectant mothers in the region. Accumulation of water in the womb,

**"When resources are stretched thin, it is women, the most marginalized in the first place, who suffer first and most. Women have the smallest share of the resources pie of the world; when the pie shrinks, women's losses are greatest."**

Women in the World (Seager and Olson 1986).

resulting in respiratory ailments and debilitating effects were reported by some 50 per cent of pregnant women in the area. Known as the 'Farakka Syndrome' in extreme cases, it is suspected that the mother's kidneys may be permanently impaired and the foetus may be severely damaged (Ahsan 1991).

Human portage is the most common means of transporting water in rural areas and for the vast majority of urban slum dwellers. It is an activity which is time-consuming, arduous, can be injurious to health and is almost exclusively, the domain of mothers and daughters. Distance to source,

terrain to be crossed, queuing time, number of consumers in the household and number of females available in the household to transport the water are aspects women have to face.

If poverty is defined as the material experience which is a result of dispossession, deprivation and a denial of basic needs, (Shiva 1988), then the past review and analysis of the situation of women in Bangladesh corroborates the view that poverty has a gender bias; in that, it is the women of Bangladesh who are, disproportionately, victims of the environment of poverty.

Poverty is both a cause and a consequence of environmental degradation. Poor people have few options. For self-sustaining reasons, they tend to have large families. With growing numbers and no way out of their situation of poverty, they are driven to

**"It is rare to find a case in which environmental destruction does not go hand in hand with social injustice, almost like two sides of the same coin."**

Anil Agarwal,  
Centre for Science and the Environment,  
Delhi, India.

use resources faster than that which can be replenished. Population pressure and its greater absorption of the natural resources of land, forests, water and its dependent life support system, flora and fauna, animals and fisheries, mean that survival itself becomes an issue. And for the poor, there is little scope for adaptation.

Excessive human interference resulting in the erosion of the human resource base has had more of a negative impact on women than men. The downward and upward spirals of poverty and environmental degradation further reinforce the inequitable access of women to means of livelihood-land, employment opportunities, education and credit facilities, while conditions of economic duress force women into the wage labour market. Increases in the price of basic commodities, particularly, food and fuel have resulted in a decrease in real income. Reduced household spending has had serious implications for the nutrition and health condition of women. Her physical state is undermined by her eating last and least and the negligible attention paid to her health. In the event of natural disasters, the vulnerability of women is only accentuated.

Ironically, widely lauded as principal resource managers, women have to manage with a minimum of resources; both in terms of economic and non-economic resources. The combined environment of pressure and poverty and the inherent gender bias results in women becoming the 'poorest of the poor' under-fed, in poor health, illiterate, over-worked, deprived and a victim of the triple burden.

Raana Haider is sociologist-demographer with research interest in population, development and environment linkages and gender issues.

Six of the 12 members in her focus group discussion had been victimized by family members. Prescy reveals. Over half of the 150-200 cases of rape WCC has assisted were incestuous while at the women's shelters operated by the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD), one of every three of 120 cases handled involves incestuous abuse.

Prescy advocates ways to "effectively break the silence and tear down the walls society has erected around the crime of incest" — support the women's movement, sustain the commitment of support groups to victim-survivors, and facilitate empowerment "through the feminist participatory process".

A major recommendation is a massive education-information campaign, including school courses on women's rights and their indivisibility from human rights. Launched

Incest Survivors  
Victims No More

by Perla Aragon-Choudhury

STARTING from age three until I was eight, my elder brothers raped me," said Prescilla Tulipat, a worker with a non-government organization (NGO). Prescy is one of 18 incest survivors who have decided to disclose their experience. Journalists invited to a press conference for the purpose were carefully selected, for fear that the women's coming out in public would be met with a backlash if the issues were improperly presented.

Two years ago, Prescy joined the incest survivors' support group of the Women's Crisis Centre (WCC), an NGO which conducts information campaigns on violence against women, operates a hotline, provides victims temporary shelter, counsels them and refers them to legal, medical and livelihood services.

Prescy's group had sessions that, for the first time in the Philippines, used groupwork with a feminist approach to study systematically the nature of incest, its dynamics and impact.

This approach was described by Raquel Edralin-Tiglaio, WCC executive director and psychology graduate who trained abroad on feminist counselling: "The intervention

**Incest destroys families, renders the home unsafe, generates self-hatred in the victim and institutionalizes women's inferiority**

aims to make an incest victim realize that she can do something about her crisis. It facilitates that discovery. It's a very political process where we talk about her rights and the societal factors that block these rights."

According to Aster Delgado, coordinator of Prescy's group, the counsellor's task is to help victims understand what happened "in a way that is not harmful to them and will instead make them more productive and focused."

Incestuous abusers include family members, godfathers, child minders and babysitters. To feminists it is this abuse of power, more than penile penetration, that makes incest most destructive. "Play" which progresses into abuse destroys families, renders the home unsafe, generates self-hatred in the abused, and institutionalizes women's inferiority in society.

Ms Tiglaio says, "People and the community at large still do not accept the reality of incest because family honour must be maintained at all costs even at the expense of individual rights."

She adds that mothers become secondary victims because of their financial dependency on the husband-abuser.

But the issue refuses to go away since incestuous abuse has very palpable consequences. One of Prescy's peers attributes a tumour and frequent attacks of high blood pressure to incest. Another, who appears quite normal, suffers badly in her sexual relationships.

Survivors have to cope with the memories (or, sometimes, the loss of memory), unexplained phobias, the feeling of entombment, the desire to kill their abuser, even anger at the mother who disbelieves their story or advise them to forgive the erring family member.

Other disorders are the obsession to be in control or in perpetual chaos, compulsive eating, addictions, quitting a job when an intimate relationship threatens to develop, and promiscuity or remaining uncommitted to heterosexual relationships.

Coping mechanisms include immersion in religious activities, rationalization and workaholicism. Ms Tiglaio says: "I can only marvel at their strength as I see how these women turn crises into breakthroughs and prove that the Chinese ideogram for crisis also stands for opportunity."

Prescy, now 29, has to some degree healed herself after undergoing the WCC group sessions of processing her emotions, understanding her experiences and learning about empowerment. She was able to confront her elder brother and send him to the National Penitentiary for drug abuse.



Let their smiles last to enlighten others.

Of the healing process Ms Tiglaio says, "It starts with disclosure. It takes time and ends only when a victim has integrated the experience into her life. Sometimes we may have to counsel other family members, too."

Time and again at the press conference, WCC volunteer Lea Espallardo compared healing to biblical Peter walking on water — one has to believe firmly that she can do it, because at the slightest doubt one can start sinking.

And in a dramatic monologue after the press conference, a survivor described the healing process as acknowledging the past in a loving confrontation — not just escaping from it — then moving on.

Prescy was felt empowered enough to come out occasionally on radio, and to transform her group's findings and experiences into a masteral thesis entitled "Samangamang Pag-aaral sa Pagbabuo ng Sarili (An Exploratory Study on Incest Using the Feminist Participatory Approach: a Contribution to the Study of Violence Against Women)."

She notes that "unlike child abuse and violence against women such as rape, prostitution and wife-beating, incest has never been brought out as a public issue in our country."

at the gathering was a comic book written in the vernacular by radio programme anchor Gloria Melencio and illustrated by award-winning writer Chit Balmaceda.

The team strongly advises children to "learn to shout 'No!' and to say 'I don't like what you're doing to my body'."

Prescy also recommends a refuge centre for incest-abused women (only five nationwide at the moment), incest-prevention activities and legal reforms to make incest a crime against the person as well as a human rights violation.

At present, incest falls under the crime of qualified abduction punishable by six months to eight years in jail. But women can take heart at a Quezon City court decision last May 11 sentencing to death a father who had abused three of his daughters.

This triumph clearly dovetails with the intent of Prescy and her peers who had pointed out: "We took the risk of coming out so that incest will not happen to any more children."

"We would also like to ask you, our audience, to rethink on a deeper level women, the meaning of incest, its distinctiveness as a form of sexual abuse and the need for the personal to become political." — *Depthnews Asia*

## Women on the Move

## Gender in Danger!

by Farida Akhter

IN the last preparatory meeting of the Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW) held in March '95 gender was heavily bracketed all over the document of the "Platform of Action" prepared by UN. This document is very important because it is supposed to provide a guide for national and international programs and priorities in different countries of the world during the next decade.

During the PrepCom, with lots of confrontations among the delegates, more than one third of the document was bracketed mostly where gender was used in different forms. Finally due to controversies over the brackets, the word 'gender' was remanded to a Contact Group for definition. Last week the controversy was settled in a way. The Contact Group on Gender reaffirmed "that the word 'gender' as used in the Platform is intended to be interpreted and understood as it is in ordinary, generally accepted usage". According to some regional networks, "this is an attempt to quiet for the moment those who claim that gender is a radical feminist notion lacking in cross-cultural relevance. The effect of this is that 'gender' will appear un-footnoted in the Platform and the Contact Group Statement will become part of the final report of the conference."

Those who were concerned over the use of the word 'gender' suspected that there was a hidden agenda behind the use of gender to accept the non-heterosexual identities and orientations or that the role of women was taking too far. That is, it is mostly the anti-women patriarchal forces who were in suspicion. In this limited space, I will not go much deeper into analyzing the conceptual problems and differences among feminists over the use of the word 'gender'. At this moment, the most important question is that gender is bracketed by those who feel uncomfortable with progress of women and how feminists are responding to these controls.

It is useful also to know how the conference leadership defined 'gender' in the first place: Gender refers to the relationship between women and men based on socially-defined roles that are assigned to one sex or the other. According to this definition, the simple meaning is gender meant male and female. Feminists, however, extend the definition to say that women and men's roles are socially constructed, there-

fore, are subject to change. But the text of the Platform of Action does not bear the same meaning of the term in the entire text. In some places, it is used to mean male and female, in other places gender appeared to be a substitute for 'women', while in some places it did not express any clear meaning. It should also be mentioned here that the word is used in its English meaning. But there are other languages in the world. In the UN the other official languages are Spanish and French. No equivalent word is used in these languages in the Spanish and French language. In Spanish, they used the word 'sexo' (sex) or 'hombres y mujeres' (men and women). So anyway, there is little scope to have a common understanding on gender which is a newly constructed word by the English speaking feminists to even communicate to the people with other languages. In Bengali, also gender does not have an equivalent word; it has to be written as a phrase like "nari-purush samparka". And in many cases, the word 'gender' is simply spelt in corresponding Bengali alphabets for phonetics.

I do not want to raise much suspicions over here about the fate of gender in the bracketed document of the UN. But I do feel that it is in great danger. The compromise to leave it an acceptable definition is actually side tracking the problem for the time being. It will reappear afterwards in much worse form. Because, so far the use of the term was mostly for "convenience" rather than commitment to the cause of women. The international agencies such as World Bank were much happier with gender than with women. The ICPD document used the word 'gender' extensively without much controversy. At the time, they meant gender as "women". There was no problem to that. But in the World Conference on Women, gender is posing "danger" to some groups who do not want that women should have "too much liberty". So they need to be in brackets; it is unfortunate that in the preparatory committee meetings of the World Conference on Women, a basic term used by women had to be bracketed. Let's see, how the square brackets affect us. However, it is also the time to really sit down and settle down the meaning of gender "conceptually" in different languages and different contexts in which women are living. And in all these processes, we should not forget WOMEN.

## Abortion Laws

In 173 of the world's 190 countries, abortion is permitted to save the life of a woman. It is permitted in 119 countries to preserve a woman's physical health, and in 95 to preserve mental health. Eighty-one countries permit abortion in cases of rape or incest, and 78 in cases of foetal impairment. Abortion is available for economic or social reasons in 56 countries and on request in 41 countries.

Most Eastern and Central European countries liberalized their abortion laws in the 1950s; most other industrialized countries and several developing countries — notably China and India — did so in the 1960s and 1970s. By 1986, abortions for health reasons were legal in all North American and European countries except Belgium and Ireland.

Other factors are often more important than laws in determining the availability of abortions. In countries where women have a legal right to abortion, many find it difficult to exercise this right due to strict medical requirements, inaccessibility or underfunding of services, a lack of information or referral networks, a shortage of trained providers, or local failure to enforce national laws.

On the other hand, where laws are interpreted flexibly or not strictly enforced, safe abortion services may be available despite legal constraints. Although abortion is restricted in Bangladesh, for example, Clinics perform menstrual

regulation (the use of an effective agent or procedure to induce menstruation) up to 10 or 12 weeks after a missed period. These are also performed in some areas of Indonesia and Malaysia — where abortion is only permitted legally to save a woman's life or preserve her health, and in case of foetal impairment, respectively.

The prevalence of abortion is not determined by its availability. The Netherlands, with Europe's most liberal abortion law, has an annual abortion rate of five for every 1,000 women, compared to the Western European average of 14. The United States in 1991 had 26 abortions per 1,000 women. In Latin America, where abortion is largely illegal, the rate is between 30 and 60 per 1,000 women.

More women resort to abortion where family planning services and sex education are not easily available or of poor quality. Restrictive laws do not prevent abortion but result in women seeking unsafe, "back-alley" abortions which account for a significant proportion of maternal deaths.

Sources: United Nations, 1994. World Abortion Policies 1994. New York: Department for Economic and Social Information and Policy Analysis, Population Division, United Nations; Henshaw, Stanley K 1990. "Induced Abortion: A World Review, 1990." Family Planning Perspective 22 (2): 76-89; UNFPA, 1993. "Reducing Abortion." Population 20 (7).