

## Back from Beijing

The largest ever international conference of women in Beijing will be a landmark in history for breaking the barriers of language, religion, race or nationality to create a unique sisterhood of the women of the world united in their struggle for equality and survival. As the delegates return to their respective countries they bring with them new hope and expectations of change in the status of women in their societies. In order to get a glimpse of the accomplishments, shortcomings, of the conference, The Daily Star has interviewed a few of the Bangladeshi delegates to Beijing. Here they share with us some of their impressions, disappointments and achievements from their Beijing experience.



Members of the Bangladesh delegation at Beijing Conference



NGO activists rallying outside Friendship tent in Hualou

### What Was New about the Beijing Conference?

Lamis Hossain talks to Sigma Huda

SIGMA Huda's reasons for going to Beijing were simple. She wanted to exchange ideas and ask herself the following question: "Were these the same ideas as those in 1985 (Nairobi Conference on Women) or something new?" As she was very involved with the 1985 conference, she wanted to know what had been achieved in the last ten years.

"I also felt that it was a conference that I should go to, especially in view that there is a backlash. While there is a higher visibility of women today, there is also an eclipse by ghetto issues," Huda said.

Huda, a lawyer and proponent of human rights, went to Beijing as a member of the NGO steering committee. She is currently the acting-chairperson, in the absence of Najma Choudhury. The prominent advocate of women's rights also went to the NGO Forum with organisations she is closely linked to, such as the Bangladesh Women Lawyers Association (BNWLA), Institute of Law and Development and the Bangladesh Society for the Enforcement of Human Rights. She took nine lawyers from these organisations with her.

Once in Beijing, Huda became part of the whirlwind of activities taking place. The BNWLA for example held workshops to explain its work and showed a video of interviews with grassroots women and how greater awareness of legal rights can have a positive impact. The lawyer was encouraged by the reaction to the workshops: "People were very happy. They didn't know so many things were going on here. Even Bangladeshis learnt something new."

Other Bangladeshi organisations such as Women for Women, BRAC and Grameen Bank also held their own workshops. Grameen, according to Huda, was the talk of the town.

The lawyer also participated in the programmes organised by the NGO committee. "Bangladesh was visible," she said. "We held a specific Bangladesh rally." Huda liked the high profile rally of banners, slogans, and fist raising to protest increased violence against women.

The Beijing NGO forum was not only an arena to air grievances but also an opportunity for cultural exchange. The Asia-Pacific friendship tent, for example, had two days allotted for South Asian cultural programmes. Huda was delighted by the response to the video of a Bengali song aired on the big TV screen. "Baby Nazneen came out as a real beauty on screen. She looked sultry and sexy and therefore drew attention. The catchy tune and theme of the song made a great impact. We felt proud to say she was a Bangladeshi."

Huda did notice certain differences between the 1995 meeting compared to the 1985 one. Although many of the ideas circulating were the same, this time grassroots women, indigenous women and Muslim women were more visible. "I didn't find lesbians odd this time," Huda revealed. "Before I wasn't too comfortable about it. It was a new issue in the 80's and was something to be talked about."

"There was a very strong presence of Islamic women groups for the first time. This was lacking in both Nairobi and Vienna," Huda observed. "There were at least 30-40 groups on Muslim thinking and series of big workshops everyday on women under Islam." The main aim of these groups, according to Huda, was to show that Islam gave equality to women. Although these groups distanced themselves from fundamentalist points of view, they were also very orthodox and adamant. They were there to counter the more progressive thinking groups or the feminist

Muslim women, according to Huda.

The lawyer attended the workshops held by the Muslim women--she found that though the speakers were very well-versed, confident and eloquent, they were not going beyond the male interpretation of the Quran. They also seemed to be more prepared for questions from Westerners than from other Muslim women with more specific queries.

The large turnout at the Beijing conference was also a drawback to some extent. "There were too many participants," Huda thought. "Although it showed that women's groups were more assertive, there were also too many agendas." To her the women's gathering seemed more an exercise in sharing experiences rather than an opportunity to build a consensus.

Huda also regretted that Bangladesh could not make more of a great impact in terms of leadership. India, it seemed ended up taking the role of spokesperson at all the meetings.

"We worked for two years for this meeting. We could have taken a wider and better representation of women (from Bangladesh). There were very few groups from outside Dhaka," Huda regretted. Certain organisations also took a large number of their members whereas others did not have the chance to go to Beijing.

In spite of these negative aspects, did the NGO Forum manage to have any influence on the official Fourth World Conference on Women? Huda's views on this were pessimistic at first. The government side she thought was nonchalant about working together with the NGO members. They were told that they could do any lobbying as long as it did not touch tradition, culture and religion. This proviso together with Huda's need to attend to her legal career, made her decide not to attend the con-

ference as an observer.

But Huda was pleasantly surprised by the ultimate outcome of the conference. "The Platform of Action was a great step. It went through without any reservations from the Bangladesh government. Hats off to Sarwari Rahman."

What impact did she think the non-binding document would have on women's legal rights and Bangladesh's stand on CEDAW? Huda pointed out that the Platform of Action incorporated a commitment to accept CEDAW without reservations. "We may presume that that she (Sarwari Rahman) is committed to removing the reservations to CEDAW."

But the advocate points out that the law is not enough without implementation, sincerity and belief in the law. She finds little improvement in the human rights situation of women in the last ten years. The case of the Filipina woman sentenced to death for repeatedly stabbing her employer to resist rape is one example. "The court could have acquitted her," Huda commented. "This will have a very bad effect on other migrant women if human rights groups are not successful in reducing the sentence."

The follow up programme to Beijing has not been decided yet and will be discussed in the first week of October. In the meanwhile, Sigma Huda has embarked on a mission of her own. She is planning action to obtain an unconditional apology from the Pakistani government to the rape victims of 1971. The issue was actually first raised by a Pakistani woman Huda met in Beijing, and the lawyer picked up the cue from there. This is an issue the lawyer feels cannot be ignored especially as there are now discussions on the war crimes in Bosnia.

"We now have to change our thinking from 'Toward Beijing' to 'From Beijing'," Huda summed up.

### International Bodies must be Held Accountable

Aasha Mehreen Ameen talks to Meghna Guhathakurta

ONE of the most primary themes discussed at the Conference was violence against women especially during armed conflicts. It was at the Global Tribunal on Accountability for Women's Human Rights (a part of the conference) that Meghna Guhathakurta spoke representing Projonmo '71 — an organisation of children whose parents were killed during the Liberation War by the Pakistani junta. Meghna gave the audience at the Tribunal a brief account of the genocide of '71, torture, mass rape of women and ethnic cleansing committed by the collaborators of the then Pakistani military regime. She has especially emphasized on the role of religious fundamentalists, many of whom were collaborators of the war, in oppressing and persecuting women. "Women have always been one of the first groups to be victimised by state violence," says Meghna in her speech, "as victims of war or as pawns in the hands of established politics." Speaking for Projonmo '71, Meghna adds that her group believes that the collaborators should be charged with war crimes and crimes against humanity.

At the tribunal Meghna introduced Sultana Kamal who spoke mainly on the effect of fundamentalist forces in Bangladesh. "She talked

mainly about *fatwas* and Noorjahan's case," says Meghna, "and how those *fatwas* were being used to persecute writers, poets and activists and innocent women so that they cannot vote, work or exercise any of their rights." In her speech Kamal demanded the trial of the violators of fundamental rights be included in the Constitution, an apology and reparation for atrocities committed in '71 by Pakistan, trial of the killers and collaborators of the Liberation War; and a ban on politics of religion that increases fascist tendencies and provides the basis for legitimising discrimination, regimentation and colonisation of one country by another.

After the testimonies had been heard, continues Meghna, the judge of the tribunal, a member of Amnesty International declared that the existence of *fatwas* were a result of the government's failure to govern. The testimonies of the various countries will be documented, flashed in the media and will eventually reach the government in question in the form of a public appeal. What was most moving about the tribunal, says Meghna, was the similarity in the experiences of the women from the different countries: "Algerian women, for example, came

up to me and said that the same thing was happening in their country and that they didn't know before that such things had happened in Bangladesh in 1971."

Meghna also attended a follow-up session of the tribunal where legal strategies were developed to help protect the rights of women in wars and armed conflict situations. Cases were heard from Rwanda, Kashmir, Bangladesh, Philippines and former Yugoslavia.

Being a member of the Human Rights Education Institute which organised workshops at the NGO Forum, Meghna has also been involved in presenting a human rights education manual suited to the audience at the Conference. Representing Nagorik Uddyog — a civic rights organisation, Meghna discussed the way the organisation was trying to educate semi-literate and illiterate women about their rights. "This includes their right to vote, whether their concerns are represented by public figures when they ask for their vote, other problems women face and how to overcome them. Women from other countries also spoke: Black American women spoke on racial discrimination, women of former Yugoslavia spoke on refugee women and there was an attempt at a dialogue between

Israeli and Palestinian women.

The issue of human rights education, however, Meghna feels, was a little marginalised at the NGO Forum. "There was more emphasis on the sensational aspects of violation of human rights rather than the day to day violation of human rights and how education affects people's value system."

The overall experience, Meghna admits, was very rewarding especially in terms of learning about the work being done in other countries. "Our horizons were broadened and a lot of networking was possible. The solidarity of women was demonstrated in a ceremony where all the women were black and lighted candles condemning violence against women."

The success of the Conference, in terms of future results, says Meghna, "depends on how much we do the ongoing work. Whatever happens in the international forum, unless we adopt them at our own cultural specificity we cannot accomplish much."

"One of the things we learned from the Conference was that other countries are much more advanced in terms of the women's movement which means that we have a lot of 'home work' to do," Meghna concludes.

### Violence against Women Brought to Attention

Raffat Binte Rashid talks to Ayesha Khanam

THE developed, the developing or the under developed, be it the rich or the poor, all the countries of this human world discriminate their female population.

"There is not a single land on this earth where womenfolk are not victimised by violence of some sort. Violence against women is a common phenomenon and this very fact was again brought to everybody's attention," says Ayesha Khanam General Secretary, Bangladesh Mahila Parishad.

Working for the helpless women of Bangladesh for the last 25 years, Khanam came back, a very spirited activist. "All these years the things that we fought for, stood against have finally changed into a global issue," she says.

This change of women's issue into a worldwide propaganda has at least made the NGO and government activists, who met in Beijing and Hualou for the parallel NGO Forum, come to a consensus and make a commitment.

"This summit from my

point of view was very successful for many reasons, but mainly because in order to prepare a national plan of action we worked for 18 long months on women's issues," Khanam expresses, explaining further, that giving this plan a national and global priority was a very big chance for the women.

There were many workshops: national, regional, from government and non-government levels which opened up many doors. The workers shared their views and opinions, got time to locate the real problems and rectify them. They could do some concrete planning. This planning has left the Bangladeshi women more conscious about their stand. Sending a girl-child to school is not a privilege that parents give her, it is simply her basic right as a child as well as a human-being.

Working for the background materials for the world summit to reach a consensus on women's issues has actually made the women's organisations and their activists more determined and

in our inheritance law," she points out. "Our government didn't do their home-work properly and was not properly prepared, according to Khanam's observation. "In our region, we have three women leaders and their views are important because they are at the policy-making levels. That's why how they look into this matter is very important," Khanam feels. Because a change in their policy-making can throw light on these issues.

"We did make contacts with our government delegation there and held very fruitful discussions, which I believe, will help the beyond-Beijing actions."

This massive summit has actually made the women more strong and organised and definitely more conscious of their challenges and barriers. Women's rights are human rights and giving them the opportunity to utilise their rights is not a privilege rather it is solely theirs as human-beings, Ayesha Khanam feels.

### The Conference of Commitment

Ekram Kabir talks to Maleka Begum

THE Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW) was a conference of commitment," said Maleka Begum who attended both the gatherings -- FWCW and NGO Forum -- while expressing her post-summit responsibilities. "Now it depends on all of us, not only the government, to keep all the promises we made in China," she said.

Maleka Begum -- who is associated with the Gana Shahajya Sangstha (GSS) was at the two parallel meets as one of the NGO Forum steering-committee members as well as a member of the media subcommittee of the Forum.

As she wanted to attend both the gatherings, Maleka Begum obtained a media accreditation from The Bhorer Kagaj and became one of seven Bangladeshi NGO representatives which numbered more than 4,000 among 200 around the world observing the final UN plenary sessions and reporting from there.

She seemed quite content about the participation of the Bangladesh government at the biggest-ever UN summit that for the first time in its history clearly spelt out women's sexual rights. "We really did convince our national delegation by repeatedly saying that Bangladesh isn't run by any Sharia Law; we have our Constitution to follow and can translate its language into reality while establishing women's equal rights in the country."

And that is how, Maleka Begum said, it was possible to delete Bangladesh's name from the group of 30 countries who had reservations on several adopted future actions. "You will not see Bangladesh's name in the list of 'Reservationists' when the final UN document comes out," she said.

whether the Chinese security personnel were blocking the activities of the NGO workers, she said it was not true, adding: "Only when a section of the gathering raised the Tibetan human-rights issue in general, they told it was being diverted from the main agenda because they were going out of women's issues for which the summit was meant."

Speaking on US First Lady Hillary Clinton's speech Maleka Begum said, "I heard all her speeches, and my understanding is that Hillary was truly concerned about the world's women, specially of the economically backward countries of Asia and Africa."

According to Maleka Begum: the American First Lady's main concerns were the women's access to credit and their physical well-being. "And while talking about the micro-credit activities all over the world, Mrs. Clinton's high profile example of the Grameen Bank model was really a matter of pride on the part of Bangladesh," she said.

An issue of much debate at the conference was the role of fundamentalists who are trying to put a fullstop in the process of empowering the country's women. "It is the culture of our forefathers, the educated middle-class, that is responsible for it. You see, if we fail to conceive the essence of education -- which is essentially humanistic -- then we are heading for the wrong way, blaming the clerics for what 'we' allow even after fully fathoming the practicabilities of present-day society," regretted Maleka Begum.

Though she is very optimistic about implementing the Platform for Action adopted in the Chinese capital, she expressed her scepticism by citing the current political stalemate in the country. "If the political

leaders fail to come to any consensus on the most important national interest, it is really very difficult to think that changes in the lives of women are likely to be geared up from the political pit."

Maleka Begum is with high hopes about the reproductive rights of women in Bangladesh. She remembered the emphatic arguments of Dr. Nafis Sadik that the language of the FWCW document would have to be exactly as the ICPD document on such rights.

"And this in Beijing has proved to be so," she said, adding: "Initially, Bangladesh may face some problems regarding this in the name of its culture, but in due course of time, well-being of the female population of the country will be taken care of."

Most of the recommendations were positive in the

sense that no government was asked to act globally; every country has its own backdrop would implement the strategies at the individual national level. "And in Bangladesh's perspective, everybody will have to act staying in their respective places; we all are equally committed to the cause, and moreover it has to be remembered that the government alone cannot do what is now necessary," said the reporter-cum-NGO worker.

She praised the positive role of the media, except some of the Western ones which obviously vested interests. "And the impacts of the reports published, transmitted and broadcast were remarkable, if not massive. Despite my reports printed in the *Bhorer Kagaj*, I was asked to say more about mostly the successes of the FWCW," said Maleka.



Protesting violence against women at Beijing Conference