

# So What did We Achieve in Beijing? Eve Fights Back

It is not at all easy to recapitulate the magic of those 10 days of the NGO Forum. The energy, enthusiasm and commitment of the 25,000 or more women who participated was something one can only witness and experience firsthand. Said Irene Santiago, the Executive Director of the NGO Forum, "This is an NGO Forum like no other, not just because of its size and location, but because of its content and approach." The reason to participate in the NGO Forum was the decision of women that the world at the close of the 20th century needed transformation and that women wanted to play an active and leading role in that transformation.

Seventeen months ago the vision for the Forum was drafted in New York "to bring together women and men to challenge, create and transform global structures and processes at all levels through the empowerment and celebration of women." Although the word celebration has been publicized as one big party with women dancing, singing and hugging each other, but women did not come just to celebrate. They came in the thousands because they are concerned with the condition of the human community with its persistent poverty, conflicts among nations, environmental degradation, all of which have negative impact on their lives. They also came because they are no longer willing to accept gender discrimination. Women want to be active agents of change and take part in decisions that affect them, both in their private as well as public lives.

When trying to explain what was so special about this Conference, what comes to mind was the solidarity, the friendship and most importantly, the willingness to hear each other speak. There was the desire to learn, understand, experience and express support with the constraints, obstacles and hindrances women all over the world face in their struggle for a discrimination free society.

The NGO Forum was organized around three objectives: agenda setting, networking and influencing the Platform for Action. More than 5000 activities and events were divided into 12 themes or issues reflected in Draft Platform for Action. Under these themes there were workshops, seminars, exhibits, videos, cultural events organized in an area

covering 41 hectares of land. The Programme of Plenaries, organized at the Hualou Convention Centre from the 30th to 8th September provided an opportunity for NGOs to go through a strategic planning process. It started with an overview and analysis of the Global Forces affecting the quality of life of the human community and the challenges they pose for women. This was the plenary at which Aung San Suu Kyi was designated as the key note speaker. She could not come herself but sent a video tape of her speech. Her speech, simple and straight forward

by Shaheen Anam

workshops were organized with atleast few hundreds going on at the same time. Most of the issues being discussed were so important and close to the reality of women's lives that it was common to see women rush from one to the other sometimes leaving before one ended to catch the end of the next one. In fact almost everyone I met expressed regret that they could not attend some important workshop because it overlapped with this or the other. The regional process came out

end conflicts between countries in the region and also within countries between ethnic communities. Leading activists in the region have appealed that these conflicts always have a negative impact on women further victimising them. Women are almost never included in the decision to start the conflict yet pay a heavy price. They have further gone on to demand that women should play a leading and active role in the peace process as architects of peace. They are not willing to accept the role of passive beneficiaries nor that of victims.

Another very important

in which they expressed their opinions was most impressive. It further strengthened the belief that the poor, the deprived and the vulnerable can speak for themselves much better than others can on their behalf. To my mind the workshop organized by the Indian NGO Delegation at which just the grassroots participants from the region spoke were among the strongest that I have attended.

So what did we achieve? This is the perennial question being asked in different forums, meetings and briefings. To my mind what happened was the discovery that in spite of difference and divide women did find some common trends that bind them together. One such trend was the issue of Violence Against Women and the Economic Marginalization of Women. In Africa and the Middle East so far 85 million women have been genitally mutilated. In India, cases of dowry death has increased as police report thousands of such deaths every year. From Bangladesh 200,000 women have been trafficked, since the last 10 years and according to a survey about 58% of Japanese women reported physical abuse by a partner. In the US where women have attained so much of gender equality one third of all women murdered die in the hands of a spouse or boy friend. Another common theme was the economic situation of women. The 388 billionaires in the world who are all men together possess greater wealth than 2.5 billion people who are mostly women.

As I sit here today, I remember all the thousands of women I met. How we all rejoiced in the fact that we were women, bound together in a common global perception that we are somehow not equal to men, yet determined to move forward, to overcome and to change that perception. And for the future, as Gertrude Mongella, Secretary General of the Conference in her speech at the opening of the NGO Forum said, "millions of women, not here today have placed their trust on us, we cannot let them down". Yes, only if we bring Beijing home and translate it into something which will change the lives of those millions of women. Only then we will be able to boast about the celebration of women which the NGO Forum on Women truly was.



Bound together in a common global perception.

inspired the audience as she spoke on equality, justice and women's role.

The second part of the plenaries highlighted the initiatives taken by women to bring about change. It touched on topics such as governance, political participation, rise of conservatism, media culture etc. Powerful speakers, activists, well known personalities from the third world such as Kamla Bhasin, Kiran Bedi, Ruffat Hasan etc. were invited as speakers. Rounaq Jahan from Bangladesh also moderated some of the plenary sessions. The last part of the Plenaries focussed on commitment to the future. Hillary Clinton and women directors of UN Agencies among others shared their visions and plans for the future. NGOs also shared their Regional Action Plans.

Besides the plenaries there were of course the workshops. Altogether 5000

very strong at the Forum. Irene Santiago in an interview said that the key contribution of Beijing '95 is the regional foundation. She said any Global organization has to have its roots in the regions. This is the first time that NGO Forums have been held alongside regional preparatory conferences resulting in very strong regional participation and action plans.

I attended a number of regional workshops especially those organized by South Asian women. There was a commonality of interest region wise which will only be further strengthened through continued dialogues and action. Besides the overriding issue of feminization of poverty, topics such as trafficking of women in the region, rise of fundamentalism and communalism, regional conflicts and structural adjustment policies were intensely debated. What came out very strong was a call to

process that took place at the NGO Forum was the participation of Grassroot women from the regions. These women represented their localities and communities and made a very impressive contribution to the Forum. The difference between Grassroot participation vis-a-vis urban elite is that these women represent and can speak on behalf of deprived communities of which they are a part of while the urban elite women can only talk on their behalf from a distance. Through the "Send a Sister to Beijing Project," and other funding sources, a large number of grassroots participants from India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal and Sri Lanka representing various credit, small enterprise, farmers, home based workers etc. participated at the NGO Forum. Their involvement, interaction in spite of language barrier (which we all had problems with) and the manner

AS we all know, women walking down the street (or being seen in any public place) frequently attract all kinds of comment. This kind of behaviour is known as "eve-teasing". Such occurrences may take place more frequently in countries like Bangladesh (and even this is debatable), but it is far from unheard of in western, supposedly "progressive" countries as well. This kind of behaviour intimidates many women so much that they avoid going out except when they have to, because of it. Most of us have, at one time or another, heard stories of the kinds of harassment that women face in such situations, but I was happy to note recently that some women are actually fighting back rather than being intimidated by those men who are ill-mannered (or obnoxious) enough to

by Farah Ghuznavi

behave in this fashion. Take, for example, my friend's sister, who lives in New York. When she was out grocery shopping recently, she noticed a man ogling her quite unashamedly. Judging from his appearance, she thought it was likely that he was a Bangali. To test out her theory, she said to him, "Apni ki Bangali (Are you Bangali)?" Seeing her query as encouragement, he happily replied in the affirmative! "Taholey orokom korey taktiye achhen keno? Mevey dekhon nai konodin? (Then why are you staring at me like that? Haven't you ever seen a woman before?)" she snarled. Addressing him in Bangla worked; he was so embarrassed that he turned and walked hurriedly away! Meanwhile, a Bangali



## Women Under Coercion

by Salma Ali

BANESA is the second wife of Eman. She has two young children. Her husband, Eman, is a fisherman who used to live at the house of a man named Sanu in Uttara, Dhaka. He brought Banesa to this house, where she began working as a maid. One day, Eman left Banesa and went off to live with his first wife. Banesa did not know Sanu well at all but continued to work at his house in order to support herself and her children. Soon after Eman had left Banesa, Sanu tried to persuade Banesa to sleep with him and despite Banesa's refusal, Sanu continued his efforts. Banesa reported this to Sanu's father

(Bangladesh National Women Lawyers Association) contests Banesa's case on her behalf. Banesa is receiving vocational training under the organization's guidance and her elder child is attending school. Sanu has not been arrested yet.

Polygamy should be banned. It is true that the Qur'an permits it but only on specific conditions, and under certain circumstances. Since contemporary Bangladeshi society and the attitude of the average Bangladeshi male towards women do not meet these conditions, polygamy should

abuse and threats of divorce. Banning polygamy would make it difficult for Bangladeshi men to abandon their wives.

Of course, such a law will have real meaning only when buttressed by a law which decrees that for any divorce which does not take place through mutual agreement, must be settled through the court. Although the Qur'an gives men the privilege of initiating divorce at will, the Qur'an makes it very clear that divorce is two of the permitted acts that are to be religiously shunned until there is absolutely no other alternative. Yet, Bangladeshi men particularly those who belong to the lower middle class and especially village dwellers, threaten to divorce their wives and many actually go ahead with it for trivial and purely selfish reasons, in clear contradiction of Qur'anic injunctions. Thus, till means can be found to effectively combat the exploitation of this Qur'anic privilege, this privilege itself must be removed, as it otherwise becomes a male weapon for victimizing innocent women. Hence, instead of serving as a boon for couples who are fully aware of the Qur'an's immense distaste for divorce and yet find it utterly impossible to live together anymore, divorce has become a curse for the greater part of the female population of Bangladesh.

Yet another factor must be considered with regard to banning polygamy and easy male access to divorce. Laws prohibiting dowry must be strictly enforced. A special task force should be created within the law enforcement zone, which will seek out those who engage in dowry transactions throughout Bangladesh and bring culprits to the attention of the law; encourage women suffering from dowry-related abuse to speak up; and file cases on these women's behalf. Harsher punishment must be set up for violators of the dowry law.

The three factors above accompanied by social campaigns to raise public consciousness regarding polygamy, divorce and dowry will contribute significantly towards the realization of women's rights in Bangladesh.

On July 1995 The Parliament of Bangladesh passed a bill Cell (The Women and Child Repression special provision Bill, 1995) providing for life term or death sentence for killing, raping, murdering for dowry and women and child trafficking. If this law is enforced properly it will help in elimination of all form of exploitation of women in Bangladesh.



Courtesy Narigrontho Probertana

and brother but they did not take any action. One day when Banesa went outside the house to relieve herself by a pond-side quite far from the house, Sanu stuffed Banesa's mouth with a piece of cloth and raped her. As soon as Sanu freed Banesa following the act, Banesa started to scream and a crowd gathered. One of the witnesses, named Haroon, filed a case on Banesa's behalf, but afterwards, refused to serve as a witness in the case. In the meantime, Sanu continued to threaten to kill Banesa if she did not withdraw the case. Intimidated, Banesa nearly complied.

When the magistrate started questioning Banesa following her expressed desire to withdraw the case, the truth was revealed. The court then placed Banesa under Judicial custody as a safe custody prisoner. BNWLA released Banesa through court and brought her to the organization's shelter home, along with her two children. While BNWLA

be rendered illegal. While the Qur'an permitted polygamy following the battle of Uhud, in which most of the able men were killed off, to preserve women's prestige and rights and provide them with maintenance and support, polygamy is now mostly used to exploit and abuse women. The circumstances that emerged in the Hejaz following the disastrous battle of Uhud, simply do not exist in current Bangladeshi society, where the number of women is equal to the number of men, or possibly lower. Also, many men now-a-days tend to regard marriage as a means to satiate lust, instead of a sacred and practical bond involving serious responsibilities and mutual respect (alongside meeting physical needs). They also conveniently fail to obtain the permission of the first wife prior to marrying a second time, which is a prerequisite under The Muslim Family Laws Ordinance 1961. Some who do inform their first wives, often coerce them into agreeing through physical

## What Economic Future for Women?

by Fayza Haq

OF the 35 million women in Bangladesh, only 1.75 live in the city, and of these city women a mere 32 per cent are literate and only 1.27 per cent adopt modern professions. The great majority of Bengalee women live in the villages, the rate of urbanisation being roughly five per cent of the population.

A woman in Bangladesh is considered of little importance. "She is little more than a free servant and a child bearing machine". There is no "Azan" or call for prayer, when a daughter is born.

Some people are under the wrong conception that there should be no prayer or celebration at the birth of a girl. From their early childhood, girls are made fully aware that unlike their brothers, they are liabilities for their families.

If the family can afford good education, food and clothing, it is the boys who get the preference rather than the girls. The question of the girls being more deserving does not arise.

From childhood, a girl is trained to be a wife and mother, the only socially acceptable roles. In the rural areas few girls are regularly sent to school. Bengali society does not place a high value on female education.

In most rural communities families intent in educating their daughters remain very much the exception than the rule. Even in the urban areas the majority of the girls drop out of school in the fifth grade.

Marriage is the ultimate aim of both the rural and urban woman. Marriages are arranged for the urban middle class women as much for the village woman.

An overwhelming majority of urban, educated women still prefer arranged marriages because there is little opportunity for them to meet members of the opposite sex.

A small per cent of the women do adopt careers. In a society observing "Purdah" teaching and medicine are

considered the two most respectable occupations for women. Nursing and secretarial work along with such occupations as that of air hostesses are regarded as "non-respectable". A woman's career is also determined by her family.

There are few women in the lower and middle classes who go out to work in the urban areas. These working women are sometimes the bread winners of the family. At times they earn to add to their family income.

At others, they work to

while 4 per cent say they wish to assert their individuality and freedom, in pursuing a career in the city. The jobs taken up are the stereotyped ones of college and secondary school teachers, nurses, doctors, research assistants, receptionists, telephone operators, secretaries and clerks.

According to a recent census there are 916 female doctors, 1149 registered nurses, 30 lawyers, three judges and 11,272 school teachers.

The same survey shows

with their jobs quite often. Sixty-six per cent of women who take up a career complain of low pay, ten per cent say the job is not entirely to their liking, 13 per cent complain that there are low chances of promotion, and 3 per cent lament that there is unhealthy atmosphere.

The paper goes on to report that the reasons for women giving up work is that 48 per cent of the women interviewed feel that it is harmful in the husband-wife relationship, while four per cent say that they cannot get the approval of the families.

Seven per cent are under the impression that going out to work is against Islamic principles.

The reason why Bangladeshi women have today come out to work is due to the changing attitude in the late sixties and seventies as well as naturally the eighties, and because of the expansion of female education as well as due to the employment opportunities.

Working women often originate from rural background and often have large families. These women have more influence on family decision-making than non-working women.

Sex-discrimination is expressed only among some of the occupational group.

Roughly ten per cent of women are in the labour force, and of them, only one per cent adopt a modern occupation. Out of 2,553,212 females in the civilian force 214,715 belong to non-agricultural labour force.

Too often, urban women are employed in low paid jobs as factory labour or street cleaning and construction work. Middle class women usually take up "women's" occupation such as nursing or sales work.

The proportion of women in the labour force in the rural area is described as "unpaid family labour". These women remain at home, observe "Purdah", and assist



Courtesy Quayyum Chowdhury

use their spare time or do so to "make use of their education", to be self independent or even avoid boredom and frustration at home.

According to a survey 55 per cent of the working women in the urban areas are the principal bread winners of the family. Twenty per cent work to add to their family income.

Six per cent wish to use their spare time by their work and 12 per cent want to make use of their educa-

that women are afraid to take up careers because of various reasons. Twenty-seven per cent are afraid of ignoring the upbringing of their children.

Sixty-two per cent have fear of ruining the family reputation. Two per cent are worried about adverse relationship with the husband. Some put aside career opportunities for the sake of personal health too.

Of those who do go out to work many are dissatisfied