

Women on the Move

From Beijing with Hope

by Najma Siddiqi

The problems girls and women face can be really understood and resolved by taking lessons from their experiences and by understanding their perspectives

THE long-awaited and well-publicised Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW) and NGO Forum 95 are over. We went, participated and came back with full of new ideas, experiences and hopes. A sizeable number of Bangladeshis, mostly women along with some 35000 women from other countries went to the Conference. It was the biggest multi-cultural and multi-cultural and multi-dimensional meeting of women that the world has ever seen. Women from all over the world with different cultural orientations lectured, debated and exchanged ideas with a view to formulating strategies the implementation of which will enable them to have effective control in determining their roles in social, economic and political decision — making through appropriate empowerment in different cultural and economic settings.

The deliberations in the Conference made it abundantly clear that the absence of rights of women was a major stumbling block to overall human development. The Conference eventually came out with the general consensus for the Platform for Action to promote equality, development and peace embodied, as emphasised by Hilary Clinton, in human rights. It also emphasised the need for respecting each other and seeking common ground while reserving differences.

This writer was fortunate enough to be able to attend both the Third World Conference held in Nairobi in 1985 as well. Many of the world leaders of women's movement whom I met at Nairobi were present at Beijing and Huairou and actively participated at Beijing Conference and NGO Forum. I experienced big differences between the Nairobi and Beijing Conferences. I found the stalwarts of women's movement more enthused and vocal in upholding women's causes updating the focus at Beijing and Huairou. The hugeness of the Beijing conference was simply overwhelming. Many more delegates and participants thronged together to uphold their demand in Beijing and Huairou than in Mexico City,

Copenhagen or Nairobi. More women actively participated at Beijing Conference and NGO Forum than did at Nairobi. There were many more shades and opinions expressed. During debates differences were tolerated and attempts were made to look for common grounds. Opportunities created for the participants and exposures they were given to at Huairou and Beijing were highly conducive to broadening the scope for understanding and cooperation among women.

From the management point of view, it was really a display of superb managerial capability of the Chinese hosts. With almost 40 thousand people from different cultures having language barriers, the Chinese people played the roles of great hosts. I have attended quite a number of seminars and activities, mismanagement was not conspicuous or did not have more than its due shares. I realise certain media will not agree with me. There has been much criticism, particularly in the Western media, about the inefficiency of the Chinese in managing the services provided for the delegates.

Irene Santiago, the mistress of the opening ceremony and Executive Director, NGO Forum on Women '95 in her welcoming address stressed that the success of the conference depended on "building on the past, looking to the future", and that equality, development and peace were all interrelated. Gertude Mongella, the Secretary General of the FWCW noted that this huge gathering was a milestone in all women's struggles for rights and empowerment. She also pointed out that without the contributions of NGOs, women would not have been able to reach what she called this "historical moment".

The slogan of NGO Forum '95 was "Look at the World through Women's Eyes" which contains highly significant implications for women's movement. The problems girls and women face can be really understood and resolved by taking lessons from their experiences and by understanding their perspectives. This lesson was highly focused in

various activities of the NGO Forum at Huairou. The Forum arranged for more than 5,000 activities consisting of workshops, seminars, panel discussions, congresses, tribunals, cultural programs etc., on 12 broad themes.

The themes covered the broadest possible spectrum of activities that affect women's lives. They were: Economy, Governance and Politics, Human/Legal Rights, Peace and Human Security,

and participants of these workshops, seminars, conferences, etc., explained different forms of violence against women which demonstrate glaring gender discrimination. The violence against women, although they take different forms in different cultures, are prevalent equally strongly both in the North (rich industrialised countries) or the South (poor developing countries). The special workshops on violence

can seek the protection of well administered legal system, but in a country like Bangladesh, for illiterate and economically disadvantaged women this opportunity is hardly available. The Platform for Action will hopefully provide a mechanism to improve this deplorable status of women in Bangladesh and in other countries grouped as the South.

Another common violence against women discussed ex-

Most recently Bosnian women have experienced it. Fortunately women's vulnerability to rape has been repeatedly discussed in Beijing Conference, and it has recommended that use of rape as war weapon be declared as war crime.

The Geneva based International Federation of University Women, which has its affiliates all over the world including Bangladesh, conducted several workshops on the girl-child. These workshops explained how gender discrimination begins at birth, sometimes even before birth due to the discriminatory treatment the expectant mother receives from male-dominated family. The different workshops exposed the status and the real situation the girl child has to face, although the actual forms vary across cultures/countries.

While some of the problems associated with poverty are generalisable, there were some specific issues that affect girls in only certain parts of the world. One such culture-specific physical violence that is inflicted upon the young girls is the genital mutilation practiced in some African countries. With many African delegates came a number 9-13 year old girls to voice the agony and the tortuous experiences they are subjected to in the name local culture and tradition. Other forms of violence were also discussed. It was mentioned that in some countries boys are economic assets and girls economic and social liability. Therefore boys are preferred to girls. When through some medical tests it is determined that the expectant mother is sure to give birth a girl baby, she is forced to go for abortion.

On a less dramatic note, it was heartening to see that some women's organisations raised the issue of women's unpaid work in the household, which remains unaccounted for in GNP of a country. They petitioned their respective governments to include it in their national

statistics. However, there was much discussion over whether or not paying women for housework would be the way to establish equality between men and women.

It was also encouraging to see the diversity of backgrounds and beliefs from which the participants came. There were numerous groups representing different religions with their own vision of how to establish women's rights in their society. The Federation of Muslim Women's Association in Nigeria, for instance, reiterated that Islam offers basic equality in society but it is men who block women's progress. Women who were deeply religious were trying to redefine male dominated aspects of religions without giving up their faith. The executive director of the Coordinating Centre for Women, United Church of Christ stated that people of all religious faiths were absolutely sure that God loves women, therefore, there was no reason to treat them as some thing lower than men.

The Forum For African Women Educationalists, UNICEF, and Population Council pointed out that "there are many interventions that could help improve the status of women but education remains to be the single most important intervention."

One interesting feature of the workshops on Women's Studies as an academic discipline was that most of them were organised by women from the countries of the North. While I admit that there are perhaps more "immediate" tasks facing women from low-income countries, even then I strongly feel that it is very important for us to establish women's studies as a serious and legitimate field of study; otherwise it will be very hard to bring about the changes in social attitudes that are so important to ensure desirable social transformation in gender relations.

It is noticeable that not only the problems were discussed and debated many strategies to resolve those problems were also suggested. However, one of the big questions that surfaced clearly was how to effectively

implement those strategies. I would like to mention here that the resource persons who conducted workshops on CEDAW reiterated that the participants should persuade their respective governments to ratify all the provisions of CEDAW. If this is done, the strategies formulated in the FWCW will be implemented properly.

For Bangladesh raising the issue of inheritance and reproductive rights of women and reaching a consensus of such vital issues were of great significance. Besides, by bringing so many women with such diverse backgrounds and agenda in one place, the conference made great contribution toward forging solidarity and unity of women of the world. Solidarity is perhaps too easy a word for what I felt being there. Diversity, dialogue and mutual respect were the key aspects of the conference.

The big difference between Nairobi and Beijing was that the political split between the feminists from the North and South, and the political agendas of the Cold-War era were not the main points of disputes. Not only were many more points of view from the South represented in China, there was a greater desire to listen to other voices. North American and European voices were no longer dominant.

However, for Bangladesh, resolving the issue of inheritance, etc is understandably a critical step. We will succeed eventually to overcome the hurdles. But I must admit I came out with the feeling that there was still much to be done for women although it is true that we have come a long way. But hopes the Beijing Conference has imbued us with will push us forward to improve the status of women in Bangladesh.

I believe that we are not alone in our struggle we are now an integral part of global sisterhood. I conclude quoting a statement from Gertrude Mongella: "The world will never be the same again after Beijing, because women's issues are now permanently on the international agenda."

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Participants at the Beijing conference: Look forward with hope

Education, Health, Environment, Spirituality and Religion, Science and Technology, Media, Arts and Culture and Race and Ethnicity.

While attending the first plenary session I felt proud to be a part of this important conference on and for women. Since there were hundreds of workshops going at the same time, it was obviously difficult to choose which ones to go to, since going to one meant missing other equally interesting ones.

There were a number of workshops and other activities that tried to focus on various forms of physical violence against girls and women. The resource per-

son against women pointed out that it was the family or the home that was the most dangerous place for most women.

This is true not only for highly developed countries like the United States, but also true for the developing countries like India,

Bangladesh and others. There were many cases of battered women in the US which were not basically different from the cases of wives tortured or killed by husbands or by in-laws for dowries. However, there exists a significant difference between cultures for battered women in having access to remedies. In a country like the USA, the vic-

tensively in the Forum was rape, including marital rape. Rape can take several forms, primarily it happens in situations when women are weaker and defenseless. Unfortunately, it happens also in the developed countries like the US. In countries like Bangladesh, India and Pakistan where marriage of underaged girls still continues, rape becomes a socially recognised activity. In such cases, husbands often force the underaged wives to have sex against their will, therefore it becomes a form of violence and illegal act. Rape is common in war and in fact it is used as a weapon of war. Bangladesh experienced this during its war of liberation.

The Myth of 'Tin Talaqs'

by Aasha Mehreen Amin

EVERY now and then BTV airs an ad where a horrified village housewife played by actress Dolly Zahur, listens with disbelief as her husband utters the three dreaded words: *Talaq, Talaq, Talaq*, all because the rice hadn't been cooked on time. This is followed by a brief narration that says that such verbal utterances in no way constitute a talaq (divorce) and that the woman is legally still his wife. The ad is actually a gist of what happens to most helpless women in our country who have no means to support themselves, no one to turn to and basically nowhere to go. This state of acute emotional and financial insecurity is the reason why most rural women and poor or middle class women in urban areas, endure even the most tortuous of marriages. Divorce to these women is a fate even worse than death. Thus we have to read cases like that of 20 year old Beauty who hanged herself from the ceiling just because her husband had threatened to divorce her.

Unfortunately the low status of women and lack of education has resulted in thousands of women being victimised by verbal divorces (*tin talaq*) which have no legal basis whatsoever and so are totally invalid. Women, especially in the villages have no clue of the laws regarding marriage and divorce and also have no access to the legal system even if they were aware of them.

A study by Bangladesh Development Partnership Centre (BDPC) has attempted to gather statistics on the number of divorces in Bangladesh that in legal terms would be invalid.

The study, presented at a seminar on October 21st at ADAB auditorium consisted of interviews with 359 women from 11 districts who were each given a questionnaire of 20 questions.

As one might have expected, the number of verbal divorces was quite high — 33 per cent with another 5 per cent verbal *talaqs* through a third person. Fifty one per cent were in writing though most of them were without prior notice. Only 10 per cent were decided by court.

As pointed out by Md Mahfuzullah (creator of BTV's Manobodhikar programme) who was a guest speaker at the seminar, the 51 per cent divorces in writing reveals an interesting element; that in half of the number of divorces studied, the husband actually acknowledged the marriage.

ers who claimed that such a reunion was not acceptable.

In fact as pointed out by the study, many times a reunion could not take place because social or religious leaders insisted a HILA marriage as the only way a

were not legally acceptable and 22 per cent knew that no divorce could be valid without proper notification. The reasons for not taking legal action even after knowing this included the husband's second marriage before the divorced wife could decide to take legal action; objections from religious or social leaders; the public shame envisioned by the women in taking such action; financial insolvency; bitter memories of cruelty; husband's refusal to provide for the family; lack of confidence in the legal system; absence of husband after the divorce.

Sharif Kafi, representing BDPC, discussed the recommendations of the study to

reduce the number of illegal divorces and protect women's rights. Informing women about the laws especially family law and making the legal system accessible summarises most of the solutions offered by the study. Rural women, for example need to be in contact with the Department of Women's Affairs and other human rights organisations. They should know about the advantages that could be availed from the Family Court, Thana Nari Nirjaton Protirodh Committee and the special funds that they could gain access to if needed. In this regard, the study points there should be offices of the Department of Women's Affairs

at the thana level so that the services provided are easily available to rural women for whom travelling long distances may be difficult. More than anything, women must challenge invalid or illegal divorces and resist those who try to impose them, whether they are family members of the husband or bigwigs of their society.

The numerous percentages crunched out by this study, certainly illustrates the extent of the problem of invalid marriages. Taking interviews of a cross section of people (rural middle class, rural poor, urban upper, middle and poor classes) the report shows that invalid or illegal divorces are common

in all classes of society. While poorer women unnecessarily suffer the most from such divorces, the study reveals that even educated middle class women are victims of illegal divorces because they are not aware of the laws regarding divorce and the steps they can take through the legal system. Counselling services, as the report points out, are therefore essential to help women to know about existing laws and how they can be used to avoid such illegal divorces.

One of the criticisms that can be made of the study is that it seems to promote the idea that all divorces must be avoided at all costs. It seems rather unrealistic to assume that in the event when a husband decides to divorce his

wife even by just uttering *talaq* three times and the wife decides to take legal action to challenge it, the marriage will last. Marriage after all is based on an emotional tie, which once broken is very difficult to restore. Also, the study does not deal with how it is possible for a man to divorce his wife verbally or illegally and get away with it.

This seems to be the root of the problem. For it is the unjustly superior status male members of our society attain from birth and the low esteem accorded to women that gives men the license to abuse women whether it is through physical violence, mental torture or by throwing their wives into the street by uttering three formidable words.



Courtesy: Ain-O-Shalish Kendra

The report also emphasizes on hasty divorces which took place in the heat of the moment. Out of 321 divorce cases as much as 30 per cent husbands regretted their actions and wanted to continue their marriage.

This opens up another important issue: the difficulties in continuing the marriage even after both the husband and wife have agreed. In 20 cases (21 per cent), the wife's family objected to the reunion while in 33 per cent of cases it was the husband's family who created obstacles including the claim of an unpaid dowry as a condition for reunion. In other cases it was the social and religious lead-

divorced couple (even though verbal or not legal) could be reunited. It may be mentioned that the outdated and extremely sexist system of HILA marriage stated that a wife divorced by a husband would have to marry another man, live with him for a certain amount of time and then with the permission of the second husband, could go back to her first spouse. Although, thankfully this rule has been recognized as invalid, it is still imposed in many parts of Bangladesh.

Interestingly, one of the findings of the study revealed that out of the 359 respondents 31 per cent were aware that their divorces

I am passing rather smooth days now. The days of affliction seem to be over. My family consists of seven members. All of them now get the required food and clothing. Their other basic needs are also fulfilled. Last year one room of the dwelling was repaired, another would be repaired in the coming year. The pallid panorama of my family is turning to be sunny.

Seven years ago those were the days of gloominess. We stayed jointly, my husband's father, mother, two sisters. After two years, our first child (a boy) came and after that a girl. We became eight in number. Niranjan Chandra, my husband was the only bread earner dealing in betel-nut. An additional income came from '4-ganda' land of pine-apple. But all submerged under the level of growing need. The plight of our living went bad to worse. The days became more perilous after the marriage ceremony of my elder sister-in-law commenced. The occasion wiped away money and paternal assets what the family possessed. It occurs, no matter you are poor or rich, My father-in-law died for want of proper diet and medical care. The situation simply made me afraid. And a belief became cemented in me that my children were growing up to an uncertainty I myself thought of improving the situation. Preparing dried rice was a

From Hapless Gloom to Glow of Hope

practice with my mother-in-law. Shortfall of fund ceased that. Sometimes I thought of starting the work. Expectation diminished as fund constraint reminded me of the reality. In such hardship I heard and perhaps saw a gleam of hope. It seemed to

me as an appearance of benevolence and disappearance of malevolence. A message from the furthest jubilant world came: One of my neighbours informed me of a samity to be consisted of landless women of the locality. She said that in the samity the village women are brought to read, write, sign name themselves and are offered credit if one maintained regularities. In the evening I discussed with my husband and mother-in-law and sought opinion. Following my neighbours, I joined the meeting. There I found a man (afterwards acquainted as C.O) speaking on various issues — why we need samity, what we will do, why the women will join, etc. All the words made me very much interested to join the samity.

Basanti Rani of Barabha Landless Women's ASA Group, Kapasia, Joydebpur narrates her story of overcoming the odds.

The time of receiving credit came. I selected the

social uplift etc. was imported in the group for three months. My mother-in-law and sister-in-law helped me a lot. They took care of my children and of the family while I remained engaged in the group meeting.

scheme of dried rice, as it was a previous practice with the house and other members could help. I got Tk 1,000/- (one thousand) as first credit. The scheme began. But to begin the work I had to borrow Tk 500/- to get necessary preparations done. Yet at the end of the credit year I was capable to have a good amount, repaying the instalments and bor-

rowed money. In the second term I got Tk 3,000/-. The samity increased my amount of credit as it found me well in the business. I invested previous fund in the same business repaying the instalments from the same scheme. Partial amount Tk 2,000/- in-

cluding my husband's Tk. 1000/- was spent on a room repairing. And the rest Tk. 1000/- was invested in my husband's business. The scheme of dried rice also paid off a sound amount as fund was better.

In the third term another credit amount of Tk 4,000/- came to me. Adding more Tk. 2,000/- I purchased a milch cow at Tk 6,000/-. After two months it started to benefit me by giving milk.

Now, I can think of a better future for the family, also the group discussion and education widened my view, thoughts and mode of living. I myself feel that I am in a good position in the family. My husband discusses all the household issues with me. In the coming days my children will continue their schooling. I have learnt a lot of good lessons that are fruitful for them. Also I became aware of planned family. I accepted family planning after the birth of my third child (a boy). In a world, my involvement in the samity has changed our trend of living. My family expenditure increases as our income increases. I think that after five years I myself would make a savings of Tk 15,000/- to Tk. 20,000/- approx including the group savings if no misfortune befall.

At present I am also determined enough to run with the group till achieving a considerable improved socio-economic condition.