workshop on Gender

A Issues in Export-Based Industrialisation in

Bangladesh, jointly organised

Ali Mian, Treasurer, BGMEA,

Khaled Shams, Managing Di-

rector, Grameen Udyog.

Khushi Kabir, Nijera Kori,

Abdul Hussain, President

Garments Sramik Federation,

Shahra Razavi of UNRISD and

other well-known persons

drawn from the garments in-

dustry, the government, in-

ternational organisations,

Women on the Move.

EMPLOYMENT OF WOMEN

Identifying the Impediments

by Our Staff Correspondent

by Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) and United Nations Research Institute for Social University and Research Fel-Development (UNRISD) in Geneva, was held at a local low, CPD, discussions centered around four broad ishotel on October 27 and 28. 1995. Professor Rehman sues namely, the dynamics of Sobhan, the Executive Direwomen's employment, women's employment and ctor of CPD of the country implications for women's presided over the two-day long workshop. Participants lives, issues of gender disincluded Abu Hena, Member, crimination and gender sub-Planning Commission, Shah ordination, as well as the pol-Mohammed Farid, Secretary, icy environment and inter-Ministry of Planning, Harunur ventions needed to support Rasheed, Secretary Labour, women's participation in the Saadat Husain, Secretary, labour market. Women's Affairs, David Merril The workshop discussed the US Ambassador, Paul Bajley, Director, ILO, Laila Kabir, President Bangladesh Employer's Association, Jinnat

the features of the domestic labour market, particularly, the impact of rural-urban migration and labour market segmentation which were seen as important in understanding the patterns of women's employment as well as the terms and conditions of such employment in the way of wages, working conditions gender segregation by task and occupation. The issue of the increas-

NGOs, the research commu- ing participation of women in nity, lawyers, and trade the workforce in exportbased industries in Based on the background Bangladesh was discussed. It was pointed out by some parpaper prepared by Dr Nasreen Khundker, of the Ecoticipants that the growing nomics Department, Dhaka tendency to employ women

in the garment industry in particular was not just due to their greater 'docility' and willingness to accept lower wages but also due to the greater adaptability of women in learning skills and their patience at doing repetitive work. It was also observed that the male-female "wage gap" was lower in the exportbased industries compared to other sectors of the economy.

The employers, too, mentioned that remuneration was not gender-specific but skillspecific. Some contrary propositions brought out in the discussion suggested that it was the greater vulnerability of women in Bangladesh, faced with limited options for wage work, which compelled them to be docile and accept lower wages. This in turn made them employable in export-based industries where the compulsion to be wage-competitive in the present international economy was particularly important.

The discussants emphasised the need for improvement in the working conditions of women, better labour-management relations and efficiency in management for enhancing productivity in the garments sector, the country's leading export sector. They felt that the labour laws were rarely obeyed or monitored, and in some cases were outdated and inadequate. It was however argued, supported by evidence from the experience of some RMG industries, that improved conditions of work for women were not only desirable as an end in itself but also made business sense because it motivated the workers to be more productive.

It was pointed out that inherited traditions of male domination in many households with wage-earning women still persisted. However, capacity to earn an independent income has given working women greater influence over household expenditure patterns.

The workshop discussed the implications the Harkin's Bill. It was argued by participants that the bill had led to a rapid move by the RMG sector to disemploy young girls, below the age of 15.

This has led to serious economic problems for the disemployed girls. This loss of earnings by the girls cannot be compensated by the educational provisions of the MOU signed by the BGMEA and could thus lead to social problems not anticipated by the authors of the Harkin's Bill. It was also pointed out that the retrenchment of child labour was only confined to the garments sector leaving poor young girls working in even more adverse conditions elsewhere in the economy, particularly in domestic service and within their own households. The Harkin's Bill was thus viewed by many in Bangladesh as being motivated by commercial interest in the US, as much as by humanitarian concerns for all

The workshop argued that the growing importance of women's work both in the economy and in contributing their empowerment should be recognised by our policymakers, who should make provision for enhanced security for working women, provide facilities to upgrade

children.

as well as diversify their skills, improve their working conditions, as well as their housing facilities. The importance of creating awareness about the plight and rights of working women was emphasised, since these women were no less important to the process of increasing Bangladesh's export earnings as their employers.

The participants further stressed the need for the Government of Bangladesh to make their policies gender sensitive both in terms of enhancing employment opportunities for women in the government sector and for improving the working environment for women to encourage them to seek such employment. In this regard, the sensitisation of law enforcing agencies on gender issues was particularly emphasised. It was suggested that healthy trade unionism should be practiced and participation of the women in the unions ensured so the issues that are of special interest to working women can be addressed by the unions.

The workshop concluded by reiterating the need for identifying the impediments in enhancing women's employment and targeting sectors which had immense potentialities for absorbing women in their workforce.

Because I am a Woman

by Meher Akhter

XX EAK, and i vulnerable and fragile; timid, cowardly and petrifled; retarded, paralysed and

time in the hands of the waiting beast lurking in the dark ready to attack you, rip you apart and throw you back to han-dicapped against the the abyss because coming



shackle of social and moral customs. Born captive, raised subm-issive and destined to die a slave, the definition of my life, my identity hinges on

my ruler, I am of womankind. Dependence which costs you your freedom, sovereignty and integrity, every passing moment the conviction eats you up like cancer. The psychosomatic pain debilitates your senses, its vicious grip kills your emotions slowly. All that is left of you is a hollow artificial facade which is on the prevarication of carrying the social and moral duties very honorably worshipped by the Lords themselves as mother.

daughter and wife. The golden cage becomes suffocative, which chokes you down through your soul threatening your very existence, and then a faint flicker of light salvages you from the darkness of hell and you succumb to the reality of the materialistic world and emerge to find refuge in your own self. The taste of the secret of freedom is beautiful, you enjoy the depth, breadth and height of your liberty, you fly from pole to pole, feel the pleasure of golden fields. steep mountains, flowing river, green valleys with white lilies, golden daffodils and red roses with their ugly

The glaring light of freedom mesmerizes you, you are lost in your new found world where you believe that the heavens have become generous and you will live your life the way you have longed for. The illusion which blinded you from reality that your security is still in danger, that your freedom may be lost any

into terms with the powerless is a guarantee of being overpowered. Absolute power over-

whelms and corrupts your character, perverts your judgment and distort your senses if inherited naturally from the inveterate tyrannical social system. You end up as an oppressor, abuse your authority and resort to cruelty in the fear of losing it. If you fail to retain your dominance, you spare no chance to restore your possession. Leaving behind the baneful

dark prison, I am wandering through the rigid barbed ways of my life afraid to be caught in the booby traps laid by the social monsters. But still I can not yield for I wrested my freedom not to fail. I will have to go forward casting away stones to pave the way for my posterity. I know the dream I have nurtured for so long to live in the world, where no one is powerful but human beings, will never come true in my life time. Maybe one day when I am not here the world will have changed its course, no women will be tortured, crucified, abused and cheated, everybody will be equal and tranquility will prevail in the whole Uni-

I have paid a high price. which has taken a toll of my values, shredded my self esteem and tormented my individuality. The anguish of inferiority has seared my emotions, in the throes of agony I stand helpless. Shedding tears in silence, I have suffered a lot, and I know I will have to suffer to no end striving to keep my freedom, because I am a woman.

Traditional Practices that Act as Barriers to Empowerment

OVERTY is everywhere in Bangladesh. It is endemic in the economy and equally evident in socio-political and cultural arena. To alleviate economic poverty, it is necessary to keep eyes on social, political, cultural and on other factors which are directly or indirectly interlinked and responsible for economic poverty. When people discuss the poverty in rural Bangladesh, they invariably refer to the growing number of landless households. But few people discuss poverty in terms of women's status in the rural society of Bangladesh although they are the worst victims of the poverty situation.

In a developing country like Bangladesh, the majority of the people, more than 70 per cent, live in the villages. Of them, women constitute about 48 per cent. Islam, the main religion of Bangladesh and its teachings have profound influence on the role

by Farhana Azim

spheres of activity, a scheme of functional division in accordance with their respective natural dispositions and inherent physical and physiological qualities. For women. these are patience, tolerance. caring and physical weakness. Islam is explicit about the sexual division of labour and in effect recognizes male dominance and restricts women's movement in many aspects of social life.

According to the tradi-

tional practice of Islam, after

puberty - a girl should means that she should not expose herself in front of men. It refers to the system of isolation of Muslim women from outsiders and the imposition of high standards of female modesty. It is a complex institution that entails much more restriction on women's physical mobility. How and when the idea of their purdah originated cannot be clearly ascertained. but it is consistent with some

sanction and legitimize the separate and unequal status of women. Purdah system prohibits women from direct participation in productive activities, particularly those who work outside the homestead. So women's dependency on men is closely related to 'purdah'.

Women's work is complementary or auxiliary to that of men. But women's work and labour do not have direct access to the marketplace. At every step, it comes up against boundaries beyond maintain 'purdah' which which male intermediaries are necessary if it is to find market or social value. Bangladesh is mainly a patriarchal society where male dominance over women in every aspect of life is wide spread. Men are said to exert power and authority over women because they control property, income and women's labour. Under this analysis, purdah is seen as one instrument of patriarchal control. So, the main obstacle and status of women. Men traditional beliefs. The ideol- to women development is the and women have their own ogy of 'purdah' serves to segregation of rural women



Tradition frowns upon men and women waking together.

and their exclusion from economic activities. Thus, women have become more vulnerable to poverty in the rural areas while urban situation is changing slowly due to their access in informal job sector, particularly in garments.

Superpositions prevalent in rural society restrict women's mobility and as a result, they cannot participate in activities outside the threshold of their homestead.

Women's participation in farm based economic activities is restricted and limited. So, society in general, does not get input from the better half of it. Women folk of Bangladesh are indirectly contributing to agricultural and economic productivity of the country but it has been largely unrecognized and their role is predetermined and static. Women's activities in rural areas remain "bari"

domain is her home and therefore housekeeping is completely a woman's work. This results in the segregated roles of men and women and this has been due to the unequal and inferior position of women determined by religious practice and time-old social values. So, religious beliefs, su-

> some rituals acting as barriers to women's participation in economic activities are to be removed. Economic progress of a society depends on full participation of both male and female in income generating activities. So, if we can remove the above mentioned barriers then it would be possible to alleviate poverty from the societies and achieve the goal of women's advancement and social development.

perstitions, myths along with



Shommilito Nari Samaj Faridpur rally protesting rape and murder of Yasmin

While the Shommilito Nari Samaj held its Dhaka rally on October 30, to protest the rape and murder of Yasmin a child domestic worker, in Dinajpur, they received a letter of solidarity from the Asian Women's Rights Council (AWHRC), Philippines, who on the same day (October 30) held a vigil in Manila to demand the acquittal and release of Sarah Balabagan, another child domestic worker who killed her employer in self-defence when he raped her and was then tried for murder by a court in the United Arab Emirates. The AWHRC letter is reproduced below:

A Statement of Support for the Protest Action Concerning the Case of Yasmin, a Rape-Murder Victim

We join you today as you protest the rape-murder of Yasmin May the blood that she was forced to shed serve as a bond that will unite all of us in our common quest for justice.

Today, we also join you in spirit as we gather in front of the Embassy of the United Arab Emirates in the Philippines and other parts of the world to demand the acquittal of Sarah Balabagan, a 16year old Filipina domestic worker who sought retribu-

tion for her rape by killing her violator.

Yasmin and Sarah may not have known each other, but the experiences each went through is the experience of countless domestic workers who endure gross assaults on their persons and dignity. Their life situations represent an ugly picture of many women. Their stories represent a dismal facet of how governments have failed to address the sad plight of women, and how govern-

ments have aggravated women's situation with the abuses and misjudgments their functionaries have imposed on woman As we remember these

two women today, we wish that all women will resolve to continue the fight for women's human rights! May we find always pre-

sent in us the commitment to fight all forms of injustice and rectify the grave mistakes against all women!

'War is What Happens Afterwards

shooting, the moments shown on TV - "war is what happens afterwards, the years of suffering hopelessly with a disabled husband and no money, or struggling to rebuild when all your property has been destroyed."

The voice is that of Marie, a 47-year-old Lebanese woman whose father was kidnapped and killed early in the civil war and who now lives in West Beirut. Her voice is one of scores in a new book, Arms to Fight, Arms to Protect: Women speak out about conflict.

It is this most damaging aspect of war - the way the economic and social costs can last for generations which comes across so powerfully through the personal testimonies of women in 12 countries.

A few of the women have experience of war for women

been combatants, but in that they take on new reterms of exposure to fire the distinction between combatants and civilians is of little significance today — the UN Children's Fund estimates are that about 80 per cent of those killed in war civilians. compared with only 10-15 per cent at the turn of the century.

If the displaced and wounded are added to the figure for deaths, the proportion of war casualties who are civilians may be 90 per cent.

Though women are often on the front-line - and usually in the firing line — they have generally been underrepresented or misrepresented in stories of war. The interviews in the book help put that right and show how participation in conflict, whether willing or not, often changes women's roles.

It is an almost universal

Victims of insurgency: Khagracchari

sponsibilities, most notably economic provision for their families, but also new forms of management, decisionmaking and administrative tasks, such as dealing with officials and governments.

"We [women] are going to speak out for our rights," says Shirley, leader of a women's group among Liberian refugees in a camp in Nigeria. "Before we could sit at home and [the men] would do everything. Even if you had a master's degree, sometimes your husband would tell you not to work. But I am sure that tomorrow women are going to sit in some of the ministries, heading the min-

istries." Her optimism is echoed by Rose, general-secretary of Liberia's National Women's Commission in Monrovia: "In the refugee camps outside Liberia, the women are their own homes. Just imagine that woman coming home. She can open her own masonry firm. Right now, women are bus drivers. drivers for international agencies. You could not find that before. They had to have

a secretarial or office job." In northern Uganda, women carved new food plots out of the bush; in Somali land, many took up petty trading for the first time. They seemed adaptable and more prepared than men to take up tiny opportunities. "The men want substantial work, not all these little chances that the women are willing to put up with," comments Amina from Somali land.

Says 43-year-old Kokila, a Sri Lankan Tamil who runs a school for displaced children: "Before the struggle started our society was very conservative and rigid. Women had no place among men.

They would not walk with their head up. Who thought that they would take up arms? But in the last 10 years there has been a tremendous change. We see young women in the battlefield fighting equally with the men. Our women, she adds, "Have proved that they can do anything."

In northern Uganda, for example, many women now earn and care for their families single-handed. "Experience shows," says Rose, most men have become hopeless while the women are very responsible and supportive to their families."

Society often works hard to keep women's expectations low. A number of the Sri Lankan women interviewed seemed hesitant to equate their shouldering of the burdens of war with personal abilities: "We have survived - God was good to me"

during anti-Sikh violence in India after Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's assassination became bread-winners and transformed their economic status. But sons and in-laws were unable to accept the new reality. Religious authorities also often viewed the widows' independence with suspicion. And as in Sri Lanka, gossip and the threat of a damaged reputation was a powerful way of constrain-

ing the women's ambitions. Competing demands can force women to make painful decisions: the family may need her support and attention, while she feels impelled by events to be active outside the home — demonstrating for peace, participating in the struggle, organising welfare services.

"There were two different thoughts in my mind," recalls 83-year-old Lanh from Vietnam. "One was love for my children. They were the dearest things I had and it was very hard to leave them. The other thought was the desire to participate in the revolution.

Many women say it was only the children who kept them going. One Bosnian refugee said of her son: "Without his support, I don't know if I would be alive today. He is the meaning of my life, the only bright spot in it. I have to fight for this happiness in the future." In these situations men, whose peacetime role outside the home may have been rendered totally impossible by war, are much more adrift. This is one explanation for the common observation that women cope better than men with life in refugee camps.

Although they were victims of war in many ways, the women are not helpless, but active and resourceful. PANOS

centered or home-based. Her is a typical comment. learning masonry and car-Many widows of Sikhs pentry and about building