

Women on the Move

Lessons From Beijing

Where Do We Go from Here?

by Raana Haider

THE Fourth World Women's Conference held in Beijing in 1995 is a milestone along the long road from the First World Women's Conference in Mexico in 1975, to the Second World Women's Conference in Copenhagen in 1980, to the Third World Women's Conference in Nairobi in 1985. The Beijing Conference held at the close of the 20th century was an international event marking crosswords in the Women's Movement. Where do we go from here?

The international women's movement crystallized in the World Women's Conferences held in the past 20 years, also has to be seen in a larger perspective. The decade of the 1990s has seen an overriding concern with the State of the Planet and the goal of Sustainable Development. 1992 saw the first global gathering on environmental issues — the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro. 1993 saw the holding of the International Conference on Human Rights in Vienna. 1994 was the year of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo. 1995 has seen both the Summit on Social Development in Copenhagen and the World Women's Conference in Beijing. 1996 will see the Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat) in Istanbul.

Thus, the 1990s alone has seen a great concentration of issues pertaining to the survival, development and protection of humanity. In each of the prevailing themes of the international gatherings in the 1990s — whether environment, human rights, population, social development, the status of women or housing — at the risk of stating the obvious — the Old Truth reestablishes itself, the astonishing extent to which everything is tied to everything else.

'Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose'. The French aphorism which states that 'the more it changes, the more it is the same thing' is a fitting summary of the current situation of women. While the 20th century has seen rapid sociocultural, structural and technological changes, those changes have had differential impacts of different sectors of the population. If development — meaning change in a positive context, change for the better — has benefitted mankind, then there is ample evidence to show that development has served mankind better than woman-kind. In the development crisis of today, women form the largest and most critical segment of victims of such crises, the 'feminization of poverty'.

The combined forces of Patriarchy and Poverty have created a situation for women, where no matter what she does, she cannot win — the Double Bind. Women continue to face a host of constraints which demand that they remain in 'traditional and fixed' roles outwardly, while around them, the wheels of change create situations which demand that women also change and in the process survive or prosper.

In an overview assessment of the global situation of women — the World Bank in a 1994 report finds that 'women make up 40 per cent of the world's work force in agriculture, a quarter in industry, and a third in services. Women farmers in the devel-

oping countries grow at least 50 per cent of the world's food — as much as 80 per cent in some African countries. In addition to income-generating activities (in cash and kind), women's household activities include caring for the sick, house maintenance, and such vital work as caring for the children, preparing food and fetching firewood and water."

With all these investments in time and labour by women, why are the returns then so poor?

- 0 Women continue to face high levels of maternal mortality.
- 0 Women despite a biological advantage have shorter longevity in some countries.
- 0 Women are often anaemic despite additional reproductive related nutritional requirements.
- 0 Women have less access to health care.
- 0 Few girls attend school.
- 0 Fewer girls complete schooling.
- 0 Women start work at an earlier age.
- 0 Women work longer hours.
- 0 Women work for less.
- 0 Women work for nothing.
- 0 Women face the 'double shift' of reproductive and productive responsibilities.
- 0 Women encounter increasing responsibilities and demands without commensurate resources and benefits.

Neither women nor men are biological species only; which is why the Beijing Women's Conference had in its agenda and focus areas — women in social and cultural environments. In such a context, looking back from the Beijing Conference, women do feature in unique roles or find themselves addressing specific situations in the particular theme of an international forum.

- 0 World Conference on Women — reproductive rights, violence against women.
- 0 Summit on Social Development — feminization of poverty, female-headed households.
- 0 International Conference on Population and Development — child-bearing, family planning, maternal mortality, reproductive health.
- 0 International Conference on Human Rights — family laws, personal status laws, civil rights.
- 0 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development — natural resource managers, agents for survival, primary providers of household food, fuel and water.

It is critical to see women in the larger social context and in a setting of gender relations. Gender relations describe the social meaning of female and male and thus what is considered appropriate behaviour or activity for women and men. The focus of gender is on social roles and interactions of women and men rather than their biological characteristics which is sex. Whereas sex is related to actual biological differences between males and females, gender is a matter of cultural definition as to what is considered to be masculine and

feminine. According to one social analyst, Rae Blumberg: "women's fate owes little to biology, much to socialization and even more to social relations of production".

In order to relate the concept of gender relations with the real world, I shall touch on the issue of women's life expectancy to illustrate how social relations and attitudes between the sexes and social policies affect the lives of women.

Looking at longevity, women have a 'natural' biological advantage over men, whereby women generally tend to outlive men. According to the United Nations World's Women 1970-1990 Trends and Statistics Report; in development countries, the average life expectancy was 77 for women and 70 for men in the late 1980s. The corresponding figure for developing countries, including China was 61 for women and 59 for men. In developed regions, female life expectancy is nearly 7 years longer than males. However, in Africa, Asia and Latin America, women outlive men by 3 to 5 years on average. This is evidence of the woman's genetically-based greater potential longevity.

However, the greater difference in favour of women in the industrial countries has been interpreted as women having a 'natural' biological advantage, according to Gordon Wilson in a discussion on the diseases of poverty. He further argues that if this is the case, the smaller difference in Third World countries suggests that women have acquired some 'nurtured' disadvantage. This may be due to unequal distribution of food and access to medical care between men and women in a household; to the amount and nature of work women do; or because they experience more pregnancies than do Western women with higher associated risks.

The 'natural' biological advantage of female longevity gives way to 'nurtured' socio-cultural biases whereby girls contribute much to the family's wellbeing, working from an early age and working long hours. Early marriage, early and rapid pregnancies add to debilitating health conditions. Such a background combined with a tendency for girls and women to consume less food or food of less nutritional value; in time, diminishes the longer life expectancy of baby girls at birth compared to baby boys.

On a long-term basis, a life-time experience of girls/women eating least and last, complying with the 'culture of silence and endurance' which discourages complaints and disagreements and encourages acceptance of the 'natural order of things' translates itself into a cycle of denial and deprivation and in its extreme form early death.

Since 'suffering in silence' is a culturally-ascribed feminine attribute — so too is its spin-off effect on health. Women often do not get the opportunity to seek health care unless it is related to their socially-defined roles of wife and mother and frequently not even then. Since, doctors exist to treat sick people and pregnancy is not a sickness, usage of health services is deemed unwarranted. Women report illnesses which affect the head of household more often than their own. Men report their wives illness when the household is affected in

economic terms or household work and its management is disrupted. More boys than girls are admitted to hospitals. Such a pattern translates into higher Under 5 infant mortality and high incidences of Maternal Mortality. Some 50 million women suffer serious illness or injury related to the complications of pregnancy, childbirth and unsafe abortion every year. Every minute worldwide, one of these women dies.

Returning to China, a recent news item in the international media has given widespread coverage to the report that 'by the 21st century, China will be awash with 100 million bachelors unable to find wives because parents are aborting female foetuses to ensure that their state-sanctioned only child, is a boy. By the next century, 18 out of every 100 males, or 100 million men will not be able to find wives. The traditional importance of male inheritance is clashing seriously with the interests of society' warns the official media. Describing the situation as a "catastrophe" the paper, Shanghai's Wen Hui Bao says it had been caused by "old concepts about the next generation" and "amounts to a great threat to our society."

This is gender discrimination in its most blatant form — female infanticide. Modern advances in medical technology offers amniocentesis to detect foetal abnormalities. Today, it is being used to detect the 'abnormal' presence of a girl child. The prima facie evidence of anti-female bias is to be found in the 'Missing Millions' of women worldwide remarked the noted Indian economist, Amartya Sen.

The global impact of this extreme form of gender discrimination is just emerging. What will happen to the family? Will the nuclear family evolve into a joint family of husband, wives and children? Will polygamy reemerge? Will women be portrayed even more than today as sex objects? Will there not be further reinforcement of the role of women as child-bearing agents? There is every likelihood of the increased subordination of women. Could there be increased migration of men in search of wives?

In this particular context, a state-sanctioned population policy of one child only has raised the spectre of a science-fiction reality. In the interests of development, girls have paid and continue to pay the price. And as we are now seeing, the ultimate cost is borne by all — the men, the family, the community, the state, the region and the world. Yet wouldn't investments in women and the benefits accruing to women, yield returns to be shared by all — a surer path to Sustainable Development.

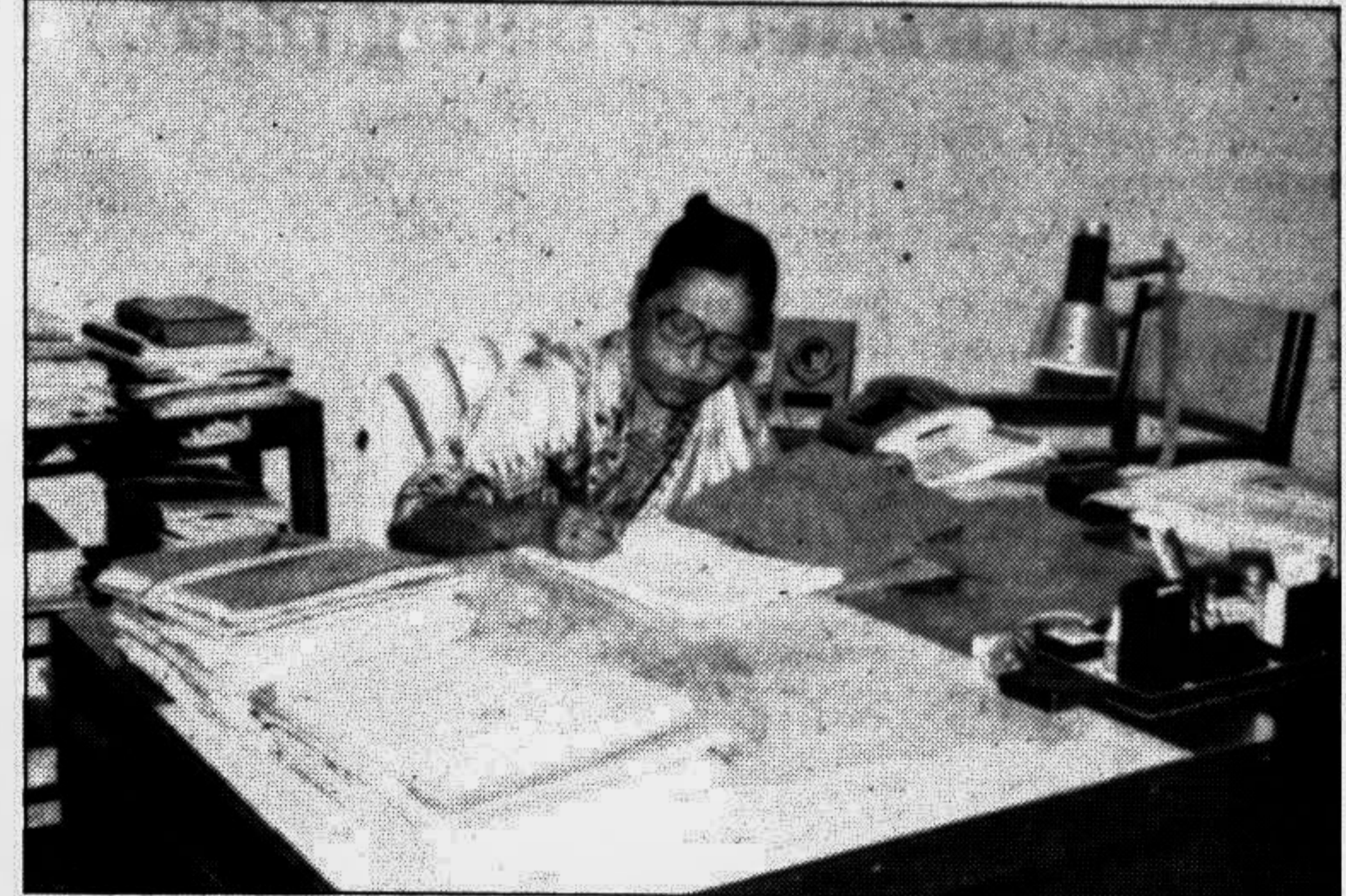
According to Nafis Sadik, Executive Director of the United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA), "if we respond to women and take care of their needs, demographic issues will take care of themselves." Yet we persevere in socially-sanctioned mores and values which victimize women and continue to fail to see the wisdom of the above call. Yes, everything is tied to everything else.

(The author, a sociologist, has published A Perspective in Development: Gender Focus, University Press Limited, Dhaka, Bangladesh, 1995.)

Reaching for the Sky

by Aasha Mehreen Amin

There is a quota for women at the entry levels but no such fixed quota system for higher posts which makes it difficult for women to get senior level positions."



Nilufar Begum at her office in BPATC, Savar

IN an environment of scarce opportunities and unequal privileges making a career in public office is a daunting task for women in Bangladesh. To be able to actually move up the career ladder is even more challenging where starting from the highest ranks to the lowest posts there is the predominance of male colleagues. Family obligations, fewer opportunities for training and education and the generally scornful attitude of society towards any initiative to enhance one's life, only pose as added disadvantages.

Yet with all these odds working against her Nilufar Begum has managed to reach what for most women, is unreachable. She is the Member Directing Staff (MDS) of Bangladesh Public Administration Training Centre (BPATC), a post that is equivalent to the level of Joint Secretary or above. As one of the first women to hold such a position Nilufar Begum has relied on her hard work, sincerity and a determination to reach the top.

"Except a few rare cases, I have never said 'no' to any assignment from any superiors", says Nilufar Begum, "and I tried my best to complete it as sincerely as possible". This attitude has, no doubt, smoothed her path towards success. Her present job requires her to teach assignments to the trainees and also monitor the various training programmes of the centre. Being in charge of the Programmes and Trainings Division she looks after the BPATC administration in Savar as well as four regional BPATC's in Khulna, Rajshahi, Chittagong and Dhaka. In addition to all this she is the chairperson of the Managing Committee of the BPATC school located within the beautiful Savar Campus.

As the daughter of a diligent teacher Nilufar Begum's life has been one achievement after another. After completing her Bachelors and Masters in Sociology, she has travelled extensively to acquire training and experience, assets that have proved

invaluable in her line of work. This includes a course in Public Administration from Manchester University in England, a training course in Training Design from an international centre in Sydney, Australia and a training course on Business Management from East Germany. Other countries where she has gone for education are India, Italy, Sri Lanka, The Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia and Pakistan.

According to Nilufar Begum, one of her greatest achievements have been being able to coordinate the innumerable activities in a vast organisation as BPATC which is almost entirely staffed by men. Being able to fulfil her obligations as a wife and mother while reaching such a high level in her career, has also been a notable accomplishment.

This balancing act between career and family, Nilufar Begum admits, is not easy since it means a doubling of one's work load. "It is

becoming increasingly difficult for women to hold such government posts and reach senior positions", says Nilufar Begum, "and competition is getting stiffer". "More importantly", she continues, there is a quota for women at the entry levels but no such fixed quota system for higher posts which makes it difficult for women to get senior level positions."

In order to encourage more women into the training field for such jobs, Nilufar Begum feels that the education system at the school, college and university levels for women should be improved and standardized. "Above all, the training which aims at improving the standard of education cannot be imparted by those who themselves have substandard levels of educational qualification."

With work as demanding and time consuming as hers, taking care of the family has been quite trying at times. Nilufar Begum, however, be-

lieves that the only way to keep both sides happy, is by keeping them separate. "One is bound to face some problems this way or that way; but the degree and intensity of the problem can be greatly reduced by adopting the proper temperament, good planning and timely adjustment.

But taking care of the family alongside her duties as an administrator is not all that keeps Nilufar Begum busy. She is also a prolific writer of short stories and has written several books such as 'Jibon Shonglap', 'Jibon Ekti Bigyapon', 'Shornirbachito Golpo' and 'Grameen'. She has also written for many journals such as Development Review and Quota Bulletin.

She has read out many of her stories over BBC radio and directed several programmes in Bangladesh radio. She is also associated with several organisations including Dhaka University Senate and Women for Women's Asian magazine.

Sex-role Differentiation and Women's Subordination

by Farhana Azim

THE tasks and roles assigned to men and women in our own cultural tradition are assumed to have a high correlation with anatomically based aptitudes. It is still a commonplace belief that anatomy is destiny. Since the mid 1960's there has been a strong revival of the view that social roles and intellectual differences between men and women, are physiologically based and supported by a number of books and articles of psychologists and neurophysiologists. Anthropologists have in the past picked up these views and tied them to theories of bio-social evolution.

Exploitation of Women: From Ape to Men

Because men are larger than the females of their species, it is held that they are naturally 'dominant' over women. 'Dominance' — a vague term at best, may take several forms: having priority of access to food resources or acting as a provider; fulfilling a leadership position; acting as protector of the females and young; taking the initiative in sexual intercourse, or simply getting others to move out of the way. Women — smaller, softer and fatter tissue — are supposed to be eminently better equipped to be nurturant, affectionate, docile followers.

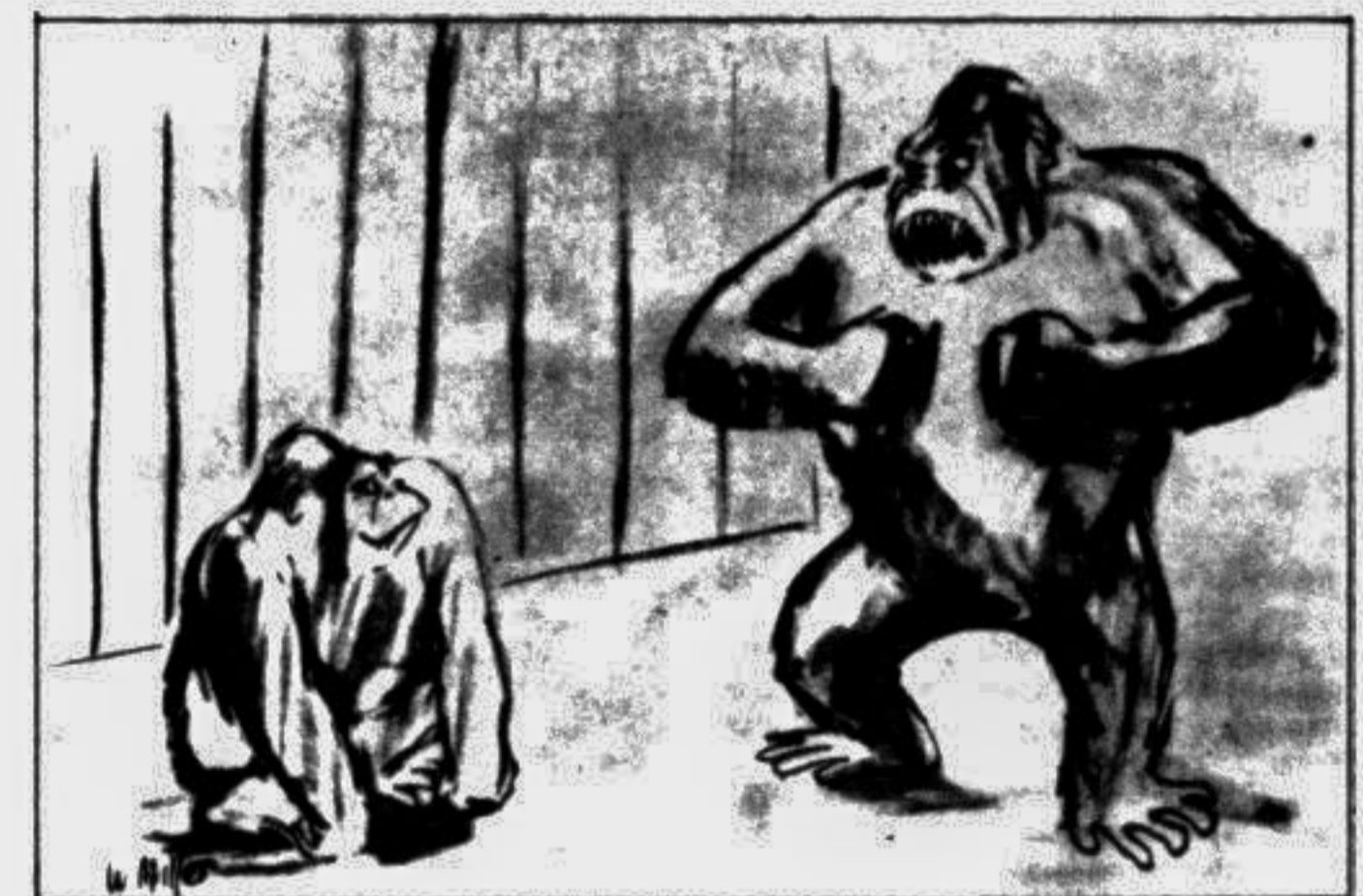
Dominance and large size supposedly go together in nonhuman dimorphised primate species. In short, the argument traces physical differences between the sexes back to sex-role differences among our supposed ancestors. Contemporary physical differences are seen as the result of ancient sex-role differences, and contemporary social-role differences that became established in early human and pre-human populations, i.e. from early apes to modern human beings.

But the social arrangements among gibbons, orangutans, gorillas and chimpanzees do not confirm the relationship between physical differences and sex-role differences. Sex related differences among humans have been tied to pair-bonding, a pair-bonding in which males are protectors, aggressors and leaders. Yet pair-bonding shows up only among gibbons, who lack any significant sex differentiation either physically or with respect to social roles. Chimp (males weigh around 150 pounds, females weigh about 130) and gorilla (up to 600 pounds for males and 400 for females) adult males differ from females in that they sometimes develop flaring, sagittal crests, have furry backs that turn silvery at maturity and usually have larger canine teeth. Orangutan (males weigh about 160 pounds and females 80 pounds) males have gouterous-looking throat socks which lend volume to their voices, they also have much larger canine teeth than do females and heavier bony prominences around their faces. Chimp, gorilla and orangutan populations lack pair-bonding but are dimorphic.

Physical Dimorphism and Sex-Role Differentiation

The lack of dimorphism among gibbons has been attributed to an adaptation in which males do not play particularly distinctive roles as leaders, protectors or aggressors. But orangutan males show a similar lack of leadership, and orangutans are dimorphic. Among the dimorphic primate species, the sexes play different roles in different circumstances. Gorillas are the only dimorphic apes to live in groups stable enough to have leaders. Yet while the silver-backed males may set the direction of troop movement, they are mild mannered.

Among the chimpanzees, leadership — in terms of direction setting — is temporary and unstable. Furthermore, chimpanzee and gorilla males do not go for fights in which big canines are used. Orangutan males are neither group leaders nor protectors, nor do they live with groups. Since orangutan males generally avoid each other, they rarely get into fights. Predators are not significant threats to any of these animals as long as they can escape into trees or remain in large enough groupings to scare them off. Thus the sexual dimorphism in these primate species is not tied to the social-role arrangements that are often cited as the basis of sexual dimorphism among humans. The baboons also join the orangutans, chimpanzees and gorillas in what appears to be, at best, a loose correlation between sex-role of behaviour patterning and physical form.



"Gimme a break, you don't scare me with your growling - sex discrimination occurs only among humans!"

Sex-Role Patterns and Socio-Cultural Values

Since sexual dimorphism among primates is not clearly associated with, or attributed to, any particular set of sex-role patterns, anthropologists have studied other factors which are responsible for the origins and functions of sexual dimorphisms. Differences in pubertal growth rates are the key to understanding the physical differentiation of the sexes of primate species, because, sex differences in size and body form begin to become marked only after the age of which both males and females are reproductively mature. So, anthropologists emphasise those factors which give a reproductive advantage to females — they stop growing shortly after they achieve sexual maturity, and to males who continue to grow after maturity.

In the social adaptations of orangutans, chimps, baboons and gorillas, however, there is one common sex-differentiated behavioural denomination: males move around more actively than females. It is not that they are more mobile, but ecological settings and their differences have direct or indirect influences on the differentiation of sex-role, mobility of male/female, physical growth of male/female after their maturity, etc. Male dominance upon the female is not permanent at all. It is rather influenced by the cultural environment and ecological setting of a certain society.

Male domination over the female is therefore not particularly correlated with any special sexual prerogative, rather it is more related to the environment, ecology, social beliefs and values of the society developed, and practiced by the so-called dominant male parts.

Conclusion

Modern Anthropologists and Human Biologists are now arguing that there is no specific correlation between sex-role behaviour and physical differences. Their various scientific inventions are now helping the social scientists to dispel the idea that women (or men) are unable to do some of the tasks assigned to them in our own cultural tradition as well as in global culture.

NEWS BRIEFS

Violence against Women

12.12.95 The Daily Star

A housewife, Rashida Akhtar was strangled to death by her husband Jalaluddin in Charkhali under Dhamrai thana. Acting on a tip the Dhamrai thana police recov-

ered the body at 3 am on Thursday (11.12.95).

Dhaka Medical College sources reported that there were marks on the victim's neck and chin.

The husband has been absconding since his incident.



Garfield®

by Jim Davis

