

Women on the Move

Working with the Lense

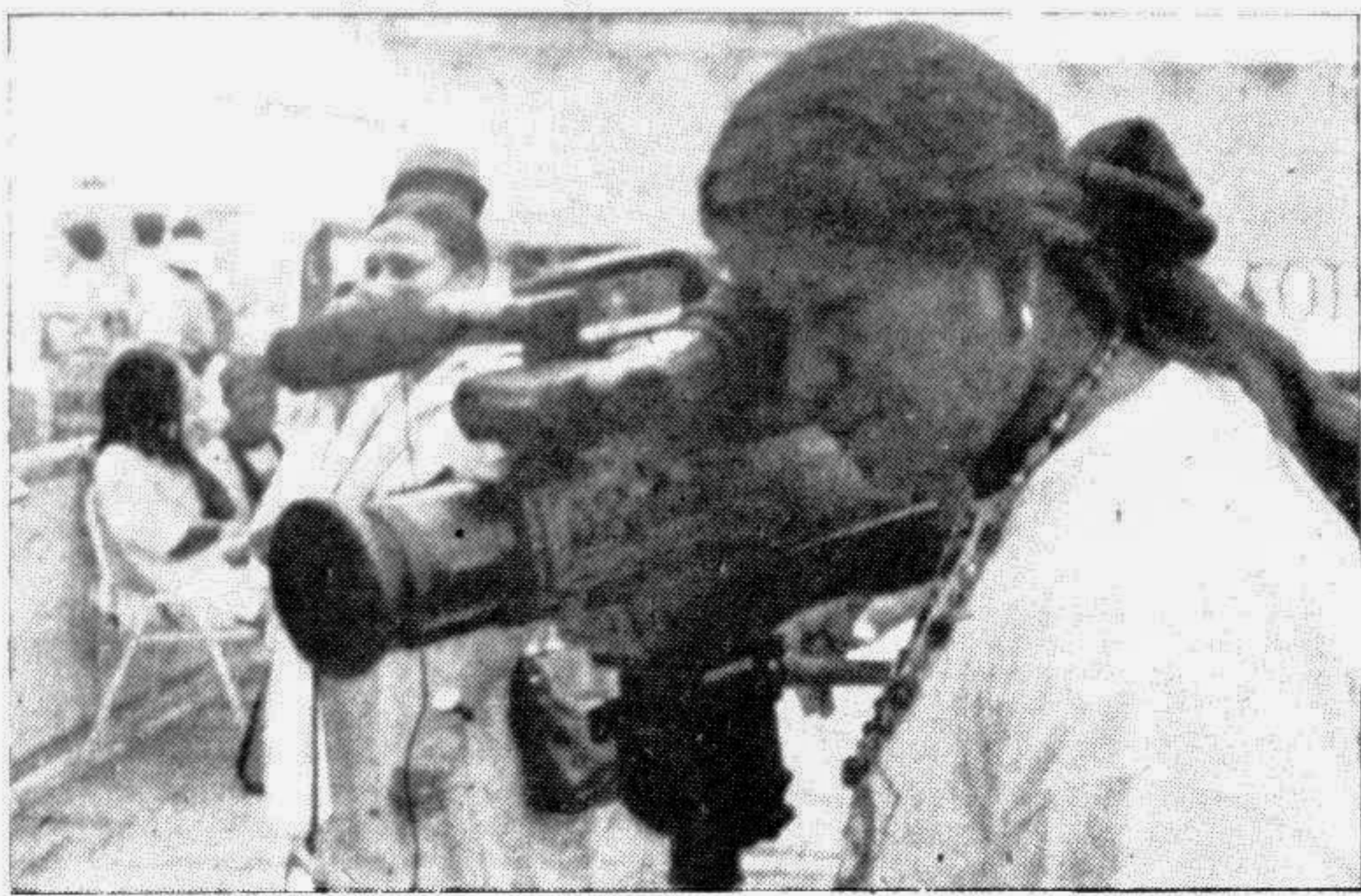
by Fayza Haq

FEM Com is the first all woman video production team of Bangladesh. Its director and camera woman is Nargis Akter; the sound recordist is Raunaq Sharmeen while the light technicians are Mahmuda Khanum and Samreen Ahmed. Mohida Begum is the production manager while Nilufer Yasmin is in charge of the logistics. Parveen Ahmed is the co-founder and advisor.

Nargis Akter was a socio-economist working with Swedish SIDA in Madaripur (RESP) when she got a taste of film making with World View International Foundation as she took part in a participatory video programme. Women were encouraged as production managers, script-writers and other desk oriented jobs but the problems of women at grassroot level could be solved only if there was a woman's exclusive camera team. I took part in a meeting 'International Women's Networking: Women's Role in Visual Art'. Parveen Ahmed and I got together and established Fem. Com'. Nargis explains how the Fem. Com came into being. "We got the assistance of Canadian Cida for a workshop in video for women. From this group six women got interested in joining Fem Com.

The first two contracts included from Canadian Cida, one on Gender Analyses Workshop and the other was Working With Women. Everything from the research to the editing was done by women. At that time they had as their director Deborah d'Entremont. Later Nargis got advanced training in editing and worked as a co-editor in Canada. She is also trained by World View, International Foundation and at Bangalore.

Fem Com worked for overseas development agencies such as US Aid, Women Entrepreneurship Development Programme, Business Advisory Services, International Coalition on Women and Credit (New York). It has also dealt with local concerns such as the Mohila Parishad. The film that Fem Com showed the audience at Beijing was 'The Women' which covered the change of



Nargis Akter — capturing important events at Beijing

women on grassroot level in 50 years. This dramatises the birth and follows the life of the women to the day she is a mother in-law. She faces lack of acceptance in the family as she is a girl child. She is allowed to study only till class five and is then rushed into household duties and is shortly forced into marriage as a teenager. Women are portrayed as suffering for their children but they nevertheless allow the wrong doings to their daughters such as early marriage. The women are helpless themselves. Contradictions in women's role are brought in. They hate the role of the mother in-law when they themselves are daughters in-law but when the time comes they too can be demanding mothers in-law.

While this film was shown at Beijing 20 copies of the video were given away and a workshop was held with participants from South East Asia.

The pride of Fem Com which was shown at the Goethe Institut recently was 'NGO Forum on Women, Beijing, 95'. This covered 20 events and included the opening and closing ceremonies. It covered as many workshops as possible despite the heavy rain. This was

compiled into a 45 minutes film. "Most of the video coverage on Beijing was done by men. Even the Indians didn't have a video of their own except 'SEWA' who were working on their own and were making a personal document. People asked us which part of India we came from. 'Nargis says about her Beijing experience.

Dwelling on the difficulties that she faced on making the film on Beijing Nargis says, "there were only two members of the group working instead of the normal six. Participants from Bangladesh helped with the carrying especially Afroza Huq (RICK) and Clara Biswas (Food for the Hungry). To locate the places of the workshops and seminars in the 50 hectares was not easy. One hundred and fifty workshops took place at one time and it was difficult to pick and choose. Due to the incessant rain we found it hard to control the light and sound. Indoors, the places were crowded as more participants came than intended. It was difficult fixing the light, tripod and the microphone. The timing and venue given for the programmes were sometimes inaccurate. At times the scheduled workshops were

cancelled as in the case of 'Send a Sister'. Again, we had the language problem as the Chinese hosts had difficulty in understanding us. However the Chinese students, posted there to aid the visitors, were extremely helpful. We paid 8-yens a day for our room and 60 yens for our meals and this was relatively cheap".

The report on Beijing has proved to be a splendid video piece which has clearly and cleverly shown what Bangladeshi women like lawyers and social workers such as Ayesha Khanum, Sigma Huda and Dr Najma Chowdhury did as regards economic revolution through banks; women and fundamentalism in Bangladesh; legal empowerment of women and other socio-economic subjects. The images were clear, and so was the recording of voices. The background commentary in English was in good precise English. The video also depicted scenes from Bangladeshi cultural programmes that were presented at Beijing.

Nargis who has a masters in Socio-Economics, says that a lot of her success is due to the encouragement and support of her husband ABM Yunus Khan, who has stood by her unconventional line of work.

When a Girl is Not Fair Enough

by Muneera Parbeen

I N a society such as ours which is surrounded and embalmed by superstition, illiteracy and some not-so-good traditions, a woman has a small role to play. Of course, the part she plays is a significant role no doubt, but given little importance by everyone else. A girl is born — it would seem from what happens in reality — to be brought up to be married and bear children. The first half of her life is spent under her father's domain, learning skills that would be of use in her husband's house and, the second half of her life is spent in utilising them in her husband's house.

Getting a daughter married is a prime and no doubt difficult duty of a set of parents. One of the major requirements that a prospective bride has to meet, is to possess 'adequate' beauty. She should be tall, fair, slim and have a good education. She should have good culinary skills, have sound knowledge of stitching, household management and other skills to run a house, or rather a kitchen. She should also be 'bhadro' (courteous), 'nomro' (quiet) and 'lajuk' (shy) — qualities which can aptly be translated to their real meanings — humble, submissive and dumb — when it comes to expressing her opinion. If the girl is fair, she can be excused from possessing a lot of the above, for example any flaw in terms of her height or weight or education. In fact, the colour of a girl's skin is one of the foremost things that is noted down.

On the contrary, the requirements of a good groom is usually limited to having a fat bank balance or good job. If he works, or lives abroad (be it as a not-so-legal immigrant or whatever else) he is considered an even better 'catch'. His height or weight hardly matters, least of all his

looks and certainly not the colour of his skin. No one even wants to know whether he has any hobbies or listens to music.

The life of a dark girl is a miserable one, and so is the life of the parents of such a daughter. At her birth, she is met with long and heavy sighs and if she is born to a poorer family, her coming is seen as nothing but a punishment on her parents. The parents then set about to try and amend for the shortcomings of their daughter. They try to save a large dowry for her and when she becomes of age she is dragged to beauty parlours to bleach her skin, pluck her brows and trim her hair (things otherwise not very liked in many families) in order to make her appearance more attractive. She is not allowed to go out in the sun (lest she becomes darker), made to apply tons of herbal mixtures on her skin to lighten its colour. She is put on a diet to maintain her weight, forced to learn 40 kinds of continental dishes and taught to stitch, embroider and sew. A music

teacher is hired to teach her to sing (if the parents can afford it). If all these efforts are not enough, then her parents push her headlong into studies, and onto a professional course — preferably a medical one (to be a doctor — the eternal favourite in our society which should guarantee her a husband). Other careers may pose as a threat to prospective husbands.

The fairer daughter in a family, is usually saved from this kind of nightmarish life. Her parents do not worry too much about her for she has enough assets to acquire a good 'catch' in the present matrimonial market. They are only taught how to maintain and polish their present assets, and it's not very important whether she learns to cook or stitch or sing. Education is also kept to bare minimum.

In this way, two daughters grow up in the same household, one constantly aware of the prize catch she will land some day and the other aware of her shortcomings. Invariably one sees the fair daughter of a family married

to an established and well off husband and the darker one paired with a not-so-educated and not-so-established gentleman. After all, who really wants a dark bride? So the two sisters start their lives from two extreme corners of the society.

Ask any man (and his mother) what kind of bride they are looking for and the answer is always the same, "tall, slim and fair", though perhaps these words will be camouflaged a bit with more gentle-to-the-ear adjectives. "We don't mind a dark girl if she has all the 'goons' (talents)," many proudly declare but it's very often that they somehow end up choosing the fair-skinned ones. One sees, even the mother of a very dark (and hence 'problematic' daughter running around in search of a 'fair' bride for her son. Whether her son is dark, short, fat, old or bald is something very few enquire about. Perhaps it doesn't matter even if he resembles the Hunchback of Notre Dame! Like they say, you will invariably come across an extremely pretty woman walking with a pot-bellied, bald man but can you imagine a handsome man with a pot-bellied, bald woman?



"So what if she's a little on the bulky side, wears a wig, false eyelashes and thinks Shakespeare is a rock star from Canada, at least she's white enough with all the bleach she's been using!"

In a society like ours, girls are not supposed to have many preferences and so must take what they are given. Whether she too desires to have a tall or good looking man as a partner is something no one asks her and if she is dark and not too pretty, then she definitely cannot have a choice. Alas! Such has become the way of life in this society and we all accept it in silence for very few of us want to be rebels. One wonders whether we shall ever hear of mothers (and brothers) saying that they are looking for a 'dark' bride. It's nothing but wishful thinking!

Pakistani Women Break into Export Markets

AYESHA Ali is the type of person who can turn a setback to her advantage. This quality stood the mother of two in good stead when her husband had a heart attack a few years ago. She decided to start a small business, to make sure her young children were provided for in case their father was not able to work again. She began producing leather garments while nursing husband Mehboob back to health and looking after the children.

An arts graduate, Mrs Ali had one advantage: she already knew something about leather garments, having been an agent and quality control inspector in Pakistan for the Italian market.

Today she is a successful exporter and the proud owner of a medium size manufacturing unit in Karachi, Pakistan. Her daughters Laeeqa, 22 and Maleeha, 18, help run the business while attending to their studies.

A chance for Mrs Ali to consolidate the business

came in February when she visited Britain and Germany on a promotion tour arranged by the Commonwealth Secretariat. The tour was the latest in a series of marketing programmes to encourage greater participation of women in the export trade.

The first such tour, also to Europe, involved Indian women and took place in 1990. Similar groups from five other Commonwealth countries — Cyprus, Ghana, Kenya, Mauritius and Solomon Islands — have since visited Europe and North America.

Sponsored by the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation, the Commonwealth's own development agency, the missions were arranged by the Secretariat's Export and Industrial Development Division (EIDD) which helps Commonwealth developing countries find lucrative export markets for their products.

Many women who took part in the programmes have established successful export

trade with the countries visited. Most were engaged in producing clothes, leather garments, jewellery and handicrafts.

In the latest exercise, EIDD collaborated with the Export promotion Bureau of Pakistan which selected Ayesha Ali and eight others for the programme after a survey of more than 30 Pakistani firms owned and run by women.

Product samples were prepared and market tested in Britain and Germany before the group's visit. Potential buyers were identified and interviews arranged in London, Cologne and Dusseldorf before their arrival. The importers chosen were mainly representatives of big retail houses or chains with an interest in new or exotic designs.

The women produced goods which could sell well in Europe and could be adapted to Western tastes and standards. Although the mission was mainly to help them obtain trial orders, it

also enabled them to identify new products for manufacture in Pakistan and to introduce new designs.

Ayesha Ali was asked by a leading London store to send five different samples of her products, which range from leather trousers to motorbike jackets.

"I was thrilled to bits," said Mrs Ali. She confidently expected to sell US\$25,000 worth of goods from the first order and was hopeful this would lead to larger and regular orders in the future.

Another participant was Amna Javeri who helps run a family jewellery business in Karachi. Although she did not get orders, Mrs Javeri said she was happy with the outcome. The visit gave her ideas and updated her on the designer jewellery scene and the latest production techniques in Europe.

Group leader Rukhsana Shah, deputy director of the Export promotion Bureau based in Lahore, declared the mission a success.

— Depthnews Young Asia

New Laws Crack Down on Sex Crime

Mallika Wanigasundara writes from Colombo

SRI LANKA has introduced tough new laws for sexual offences following complaints that rapists and child abusers were escaping with virtual impunity.

Amendments to the penal code prescribe long mandatory jail sentences for serious offences. The changes follow reports that a high proportion of women suffer sexual abuse, and that some poor parents have been selling their children to paedophiles.

Until now, the implementation of laws protecting women and children has been weak. Women's groups have complained bitterly that some judges have been too soft — for instance, handing down suspended sentences to gang rapists. Earlier this year, a Frenchman was fined only \$30 for the sexual exploitation of several boys.

Violence against women is more common than people are willing to admit, says Dr Radhika Coomaraswamy, a Sri Lankan lawyer, social scientist and member of the civil rights movement, who has been appointed the United Nations' Special Rapporteur on violence against women.

She says that a recent survey showed 60 per cent of women interviewed said they had been subjected to violence by their husbands. Another study indicated that 81 per cent of women working in the public sector had suffered some form of sexual harassment, mainly in crowded buses.

The new legislation, which may help bring about a shift in public attitudes towards sexual violence, has been welcomed by campaigners. But they say far more needs to be done, particularly to help battered and sexually abused wives, who receive little or no protection under the legal changes.

Previously, judges were not compelled to pass any minimum sentence, and there seemed to be no sentencing policy. Women activists and lawyers who served on two committees set up to amend the laws pushed hard for rapists to be punished as severely as other violent criminals.

A minimum of seven years imprisonment — plus a fine and compensation award — must now be imposed with up to 20 years for serious attacks such as gang rape.

Incest has also been criminalised. In the past, the use of force had to be proved for a prosecution to be brought. Sentences of between two and 10 years have been introduced for offences relating to child pornography; and for committing or encouraging child sex abuse the penalties

have been raised from 12 to 18, except — to the anger of women activists — within the Muslim community, where it remains at 12. From now on, any man convicted of having sex with a girl aged under 16, with or without her consent, will be guilty of statutory rape.

Attempts to liberalise abortion laws — to allow termination in the cases of rape, incest and evidence of abnormality in the child — were defeated by conservatives.

A new and controversial offence included in the amendments is marital rape. But it becomes a crime only if the couple are judicially separated. The sentence ranges from seven to 20 years.

However, few Sri Lankan women seek judicial separation because of the expense and possible humiliation of a court case in a society where divorce is frowned on. If a battered or sexually abused wife separates unofficially and leaves the marital home to live with her parents, there is nothing to prevent her husband from repeating the assaults.

"There are many such women who need protection under the law," says Professor Savitri Goonesekera, Dean of the Faculty of Law at Colombo's Open University.

— Gemini News

One 20-year-old woman was raped by her brother-in-law when her sister, with whom she was living, was away from home. She became pregnant and sought the help of Women in Need (WIN), a non-government organisation which helps victims of sexual or domestic violence.

Lucille Fernando, a WIN counsellor, says the victim's boyfriend wanted her to have an abortion. But Sri Lankan law does not allow this, except when the mother's life is in danger. Finally, with the help of WIN, a home was found for her. She had the baby and it was given for adoption.

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— Gemini News

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NEWS BRIEFS

Violence Against Women

The Daily Ittefaq: 18.11.95 (Faridpur) A house wife Kobori Begum (22) from village Kershail of thana Boalmari was raped and then murdered by cutting her throat in broad daylight. The police discovered the body from a jungle near her house and arrested a man named Baki Mia.

The Daily Ittefaq: 15.11.95 On 21st October, the police rescued a girl from village Shailagach of thana Chunarghat late at night. Investigation shows that the girl, Jaybanu (15) was

kidnapped from the village Horipasha of thana Bahubal twenty days back. The abductors, Mashuk Mia and Md Mostur Ali were arrested. The victim's statement was heard at the first-class Magistrate's Court under section 164 of CRPC.

The Daily Janakantha: 12.11.95 Maleka Banu, a sixty year old woman was strangled to death in a Mirpur slum on 9th November. The woman, wife of late Rahmat Ali, used to live with daughter Nilu who works as a maid and usually comes back

at the end of the day. That particular night, Nilu did not return home for unknown reason and the murder took place.

Bhorer Kagol: 12.11.95. A college girl was forcibly kissed by two of her classmates of Kushtia Bheramara College on the 18th November.

The boys, Rubel and Hafiz, who were students of the business department did their misdeed in front of two teachers and were expelled from the college.