

Women on the Move

Soap, Handkerchief and Credit for Norplant!

by Farida Akhter

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of the side-effects of Norplant. They have been sharing information among themselves about the harmful effects of this method, which was given to some women in the adjacent thana, Kalihati.

In the village Nurunda, the two male Family Planning workers went to a family called 'Boro Bari' and contacted the young educated girl. They asked her to organize a meeting in the evening for a slide show on how Norplant will help to keep good health and to keep good relations between the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. They also assured that the participants will be given soap and biscuits.

In the evening there were over 100 people to see the slide show. They were given the soap and biscuits. Next day, the Family Planning workers came to the village and targeted a woman for Norplant insertion. The girl from the Boro Bari was asked to take her to the clinic. No car came to pick her up. Boro Bari girl was given the transport cost for taking the woman to the clinic. But at the clinic, Boro Bari girl asked whether they would do medical check ups. It was found that the woman had high blood pressure. The Boro Bari girl did not allow

the Family Planning workers to give Norplant to this woman although the Family Planning workers insisted that it would be alright.

In the meantime, Family Planning workers in Nallapara village convinced a woman for Norplant insertion. But next day, when she was supposed to go to take Norplant, her mother who is a village midwife, visited her. After hearing that her daughter will be taken for Norplant insertion she waited till the FP workers came. She told them, that this method has many side-effects. So she did not want her daughter to take this method. The Family Planning workers became very angry. At one stage, they threatened her that she would be put in jail because she was opposing Norplant.

In the month of October, a meeting was called where mothers-in-law were asked to be present. The old women were quite thrilled about the meeting, where they were told that they would be given soap and biscuit. They brought their grand children with them. In the meeting, they were told that the reason the daughters-in-law behave badly with their mothers in laws is because they have more children. If they had only one or

two children, then the daughters-in-law could take care of their mothers-in-law better. However, this argument was discarded by the old women saying that "it is nothing but due to the bad habit of the daughters-in-law." Next day, the old women laughed about the meeting. They said, the most attractive part of the meeting was the 'soap and biscuits'. They were quite happy to share the biscuits with their grandchildren.

Although Norplant promotion is done in a very funny manner, it has become a matter of serious concern. It is known that a non-government family planning organisation is carrying out these activities in the areas mentioned above in the district of Tangail. They are totally disregarding the concerns expressed earlier by the women health activists and research organisations. They are taking different ways to promote the method. The clinical trials could not prove its safety nor could it show proper service delivery. Norplant promotion was always based on false information and now on 'bribing with soaps and biscuits'. More importantly, the trial revealed clearly that removal of Norplant was certainly a problem, and there were possibilities of coercion on the users. There are not enough doctors who are trained in Norplant removal. UBING has held many press conferences and discussion with the Ministry of Health and Family Planning on the unethical and coercive aspects of the Norplant Trial. The latest concern was that the shelf life period of the imported Norplant lying in the warehouses was over by June 1995. Yet the efforts to distribute Norplant is going on desperately. This time, the effort is going on mostly through Family Planning NGOs such as the Family Planning Association of Bangladesh. They are now trying to dispose off the Norplant in the warehouses by any means, by carrots or by sticks!

As of April, 1995 the total Norplant insertion all over the country is 13395, according to the IEM unit of Ministry of Health & Population Control, GOB. This constitutes 1% of the total contraceptive prevalence in the country. For a drug which has not passed the trial stage, 1% of so-called 'acceptance' are high, only indicates that the proponents of Norplant are not following the rules. They are simply distributing the available sets. In Tangail, till April '95, 279 sets of Norplant were given to women. Since the beginning of the second phase trial, they were working through Kalihati Thana Health Centre. Since last year, efforts were being made through Family Planning NGOs to just 'find' any woman in any village for insertion.



Let her make her own decisions, don't coerce her.

NEWS BRIEFS

Violence Against Women

12.12.95 The Daily Star

A housewife Rina Akhtar Mala was allegedly set on fire by her husband Rafiqul Islam on December 4th at Babu Bazar area under Kotwali thana. Mala died at the DMCH on 11.12.95.

Relatives said that Mala's husband reportedly demanded Tk 20,000 from her as dowry a few days before the incident. As one stage Islam set her on fire during a heated argument.

In her statement at the hospital given before her death, she said that her husband always pressed her for

dowry and her mother-in-law supported her husband.

Mala, who got married to Rafiqul Islam three years ago, has a one and a half year old daughter Disha.

A murder case has been filed with the Kotwali Thana against Rina Akhtar Mala and her mother. No arrests have been made yet. Rafiqul Islam is still absconding.

The Daily Ittefaq 14.11.95. A housewife named Krishna Nanni got mugged near the BNP office in Naya Paltan yesterday.

The muggers stopped the rickshaw she was in to snatch a gold chain from her neck and reportedly fled away by an auto-rickshaw (Dhaka Metro Thana-02-4244) soon after.

A case has been filed at the Moulvibazar police station.

Sangbad 17.11.95. On 16th November a woman trafficker of Kandupatti brounel along with three of his accomplices were sentenced to 14 years imprisonment at the Katiyadi Thana under a violence against women case. The sentence was carried out under

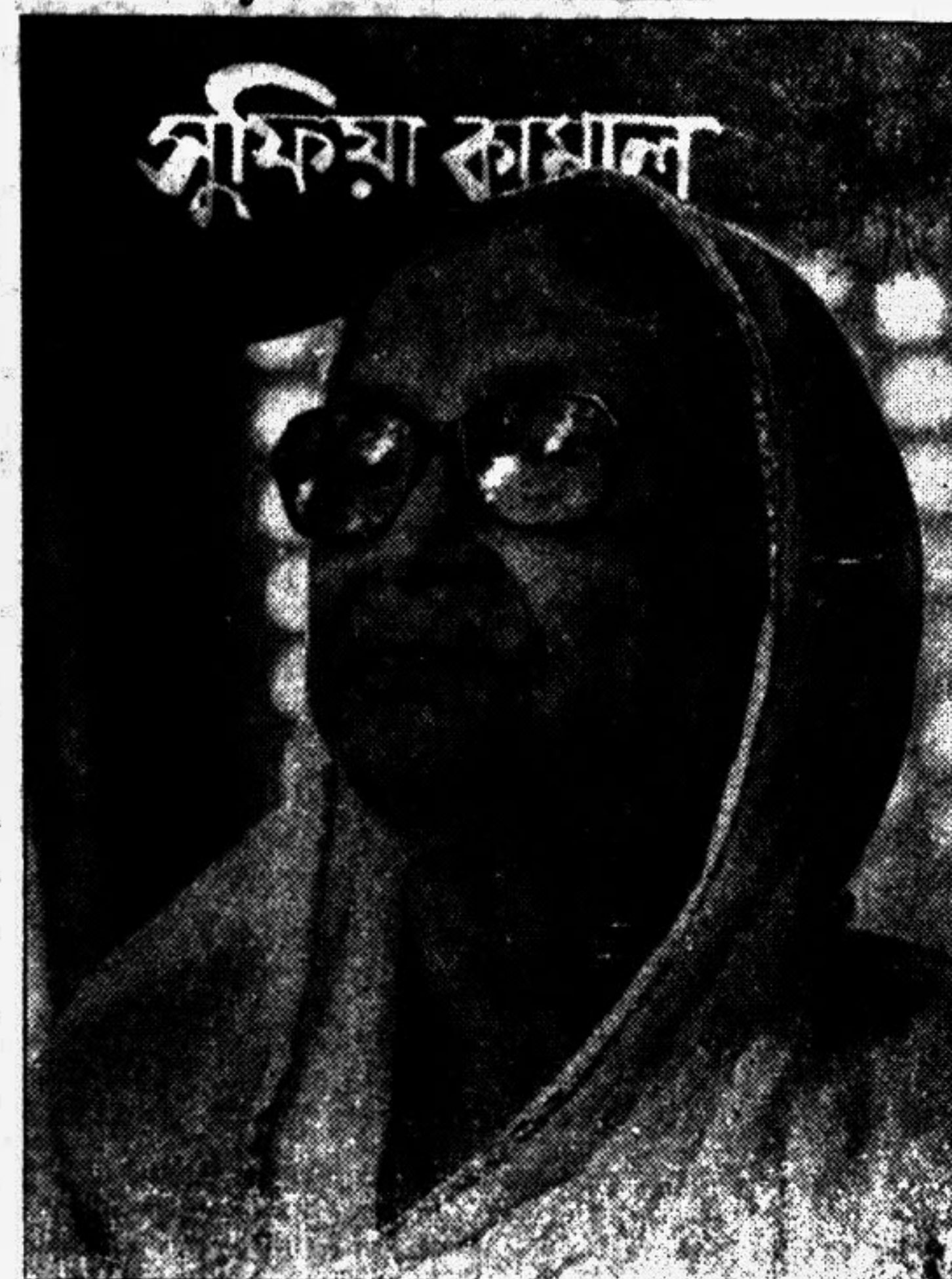
No. 5 of the special tribunal's judge Muhammad Shamsul Huq.

In 1992 the accused lured a young woman named Parveen to Kandupatti promising her employment.

They forced Parveen to work for a broriel there. Later a complaint was made against the accused where upon the police carried out an investigation and brought out charge sheets against 4 persons. Three of them were sentenced to vigorous imprisonment and one was released.

Begum Sufia Kamal: Breaking Barriers, Clearing the Way for Others

by Raffat Binte Rashid



DRESSED like her brothers, in pyjama, achkan, and a topi, Begum Sufia, a mere child, went to Pyarilal's school to learn Bangla.

A zealous woman born with a burning passion for knowledge, Begum Sufia Kamal was the daughter of Syed Abdul Bari (BA, BL), a pundit who knew nine languages. By profession he was an advocate practicing in Comilla and Balzidpur. Her mother, Syeda Sabera Khatun, was the youngest daughter of Nawab Syed Mozammel Hossain of Shaistabad.

Begum Sufia was born at her grandparents' house in Shaistabad on the 10th of Ashar, 1318 (June 20, 1911). When she was just seven months old her father left his family in search of a spiritual life. Thus her mother came back to her father's house with her two living children: a three and half year old son and seven-month old Sufia.

In Sufia's grandparents' house her maternal uncles maintained an aristocratic, highly cultured status. Even though all her uncles were well educated and had their own career, they were extremely conservative about their women folk. Her eldest maternal uncle, who was also a pundit in many languages and had a big, well equipped library at his own house, never actually gave much thought about women's education. He was strongly against it, as it was considered very demeaning to their status.

Yet defying all these age old conservative thoughts, Sufia expressed her desire to study Bangla. During those times people from respectable families only spoke in Urdu, women folk only learned Arabic and Persian at home. Young Sufia along with others went to the family mosque to learn Arabic but that too was stopped when she turned seven — an age considered to be old enough to be married.

It was Sufia's mother who actually inspired her and allowed her to learn Bangla like her brother and cousins. She stole books from her uncle's vast library and laboriously read them. Her interest grew, from her introduction to Bangla epics and novels.

When she was only seven years old she first met Begum Rokeya. This left a deep mark in her life. Begum Rokeya impressed Sufia and wanted her as her student but due to

lands. Moreover on religious occasions she would be fascinated by hymns and loved to hear ballads sung by the workers. These small opportunities to acquire knowledge made young Sufia even more thirsty for it.

Seeing her enthusiasm, her uncles, brothers who were in hostels in Calcutta used to send her story books by post. When they came home for vacation Sufia's favourite game with them was 'school-school'. In one such game she secured 100% marks in English and as a prize her brothers made her the subscriber of the famous Sandesh magazine. Her brother with his own scholarship money sent her the first 'Sandesh' by post.

It was a grand occasion for her but at the same time she was extremely tense, and wanted the matter to be a secret. A girl from the Nawab family receiving Bangla books by post was considered an impudent act. However the post master being her teacher Pyarilal, kept it under cover and secretly continued to encourage her.

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the circumstances and the rigid family rules she was prevented from the only chance of any formal education.

According to her family tradition she was married to her maternal cousin Syed Nehal Hossain, a law student, in the year 1923, when she was a girl of 12. She came to live in Barisal with her husband. Barisal at that time was extremely progressive and Nehal was acquainted with the editor of weekly Tarun. He first gave him his wife's writing to be printed.

Her first publication, where she wrote as Sufia N. Hossain, was appreciated widely except of course by her uncle, who called them back to his residence. There she was under surveillance while her husband was abused for such an 'insane' act. While she was in Barisal she also started doing some social work as well.

She came to Calcutta with her husband and there she had the opportunity to meet Kazi Nazrul Islam, Saigal's editor Md Nasiruddin, poet Rabindranath Tagore, Sharat Chandra, Subash Basu, Lila Ray, Shamsunnahar Mahmud etc.

Inspired totally by her husband she became the first Bangalee Muslim woman to

fly an aeroplane. At that time, she flew in a small aircraft with only a male pilot. This, however, created enough wave in the society. But for her it meant fulfilling a childhood dream of flying. Even though she had this desire to be a pilot herself, her lack of official academic certificates put an end to it.

However, her carefree life was brought to an end when her first husband died prematurely at the age of 26 leaving behind his loving wife and a six-year-old daughter.

This unfortunate incident brought her to a turning point in her life. She was regarded as a bad omen by everyone. Hard working and self reliant as she was she took a job as a primary school teacher in Calcutta Corporation School. To earn this job of a Tk 50 pay check, Sufia had to prove her credibility as she had no academic certificates. Studying hard for three months, she sat for an exam, proved her worth and got the job.

Sufia N. Hossain remarried in the year 1939 to Mr Kamaluddin Khan (MSc) and became Sufia Kamal.

Begum Sufia Kamal was always conscious about her surroundings and took active part in every social change. She came back to Bangladesh after the 1947 partition and started social work.

During the war of independence, Begum Sufia Kamal stayed at her own residence in Dhanmondi and continued to help our Mukti-jodhas. When her relatives and neighbours left for India, they gave Sufia Kamal their ration cards. With all these cards she supplied the Mukti-jodhas with food and grains.

During these nine months she stitched nine Nakshi Kathas, which later she described as sewn with her blood.

Begum Sufia Kamal being an ever diligent woman set up a rehabilitation cell for the war-affected, suppressed women.

Arduously anxious and active, she was at the forefront of the silent procession during the '90s mass uprising.

A girl who was born in a conservative family, she broke many barriers and paved the ways for the generations following hers. Hers was a journey through wild and untamed territories.

Information taken from Dr Salim Jahangir's book Sufia Kamal published by Nari Udday Kendra.

The Gender Factor: Blame it on the chromosomes

by Muneera Parveen

In most developing countries, the birth of a daughter is one of the least desired events in a family. For reasons ranging from anything to everything, the birth of a son is anticipated eagerly by all and if the child turns out to be a girl, the mother is blamed for it and very often, advised to have another baby. In a country as ours, where the bringing up of a daughter is considered extremely expensive, for they will not be able to support their parents at old age as is commonly believed, a female child is not welcome. If modern technological facilities as an amniocentesis was more freely and cheaply available then the number of 'female foetus' abortions would shoot up alarmingly. Luckily this is not the case.

In illiterate and some so called 'educated' families, the mother is still blamed for the birth of a daughter, and the pressure is on her to produce a male offspring. The fact that the father may have some contribution towards the gender of the child is something many are ignorant about. One often hears it being said that 'It's God's wish whether the baby is a boy or girl'. God's wish is certainly all but God has provided us all with all the relevant factors, so why not try and understand so simple a process?

The gender of a human

being is determined by the 'sex chromosomes' he acquires or gets at birth. These are the special set of chromosomes which determines a person's sex. There are two types of sex chromosomes in human beings. These are the 'X' chromosome and the 'Y' chromosome. A human being always gets a set of these chromosomes and a combination of 'XX' renders a female gender and 'XY' renders a male gender. When a zygote — i.e. the first starting cell of life which develops into the embryo — is formed, all of its chromosomes are obtained from the parents' cells.

All chromosomes in human beings divide before fertilisation occurs (chromosomes always occur in sets of two so that their number is halved. When fertilisation takes place, one chromosome each is contributed from the male and female parents and the resulting zygote gets a complete set of chromosomes.

The ovum mother cell divides into two ova, each containing one 'X' chromosome.

The sperm mother cell (here mother cell means the originating cell) also divides into two sperms, each containing one chromosome from the mother cell. Since the sex chromosomes of a male are 'XY', the sperm cells get, one 'X' chromosome and the other a 'Y' chromosome.

A zygote is formed when a sperm contributed by the male fertilises an egg contributed by the female. At the time of fertilisation, the zygote contains one X chromosome each and therefore is the type of sperm, whether containing an X or a Y chromosome, which determines whether the resulting zygote is an XX type, a female. The chances are 50-50 i.e. equally split for there will always be an equal number of X sperms and Y sperms meeting an ovum, therefore equal chances of a boy or girl baby.

Research shows that slightly more number of boys than girls are born in most parts of the world. Though the reason for this is not very clear, but it also happens that the mortality rate for baby boys and men is also slightly

higher than the mortality rate for baby girls and women!

The 'sex' of the offspring is therefore clearly seen to be a complete biological process oriented one.

It will take a lot of 'education' to educate the mostly illiterate masses of our country before they clearly understand such a natural and scientific and surely fascinating process. To educate the already 'educated' masses who refuse to understand and still openly blame a woman for the sex of their children, will however require different methods. Our general 'close-minded' approach to life, the tendency to blindly accept things running in the way they already are and the refusal to try and UNDERSTAND the actual process is the longest barrier of all. We can only hope (and hope there always is, even if there is nothing else) that in the very near future, we will have a whole generation of people, all understanding and appreciating so natural and simple a process of life.

Needed: Mechanisms to Enable Mothers to Breastfeed

BREASTFEEDING empowers women. It gives women greater control over their bodies. It makes them less dependent on the business interests that promote bottlefeeding, and on doctors and other medical professionals.

Not only does breastfeeding have a contraceptive effect which helps couples to space their children. It also reduces the risk of anaemia for the child and helps protect the mother against ovarian and breast cancer, osteoporosis and multiple sclerosis.

Recognising women's right to breastfeed, more-

over, is acknowledging that reproductive activity is equally valuable as productive work, and that a way has to be found to integrate the two types of activities.

Not the least, breastfeeding challenges the view that the breast is primarily a sex object.

Advocates of the practice reiterated these points anew in discussions on women's reproductive rights at the global gathering of women held in Beijing last year.

Endorsed at the NGO Forum, which took place in Beijing's Huairou county from August 31 to September 8, 1995, was the resolution that

'breastfeeding is a women's issue'.

Mechanisms to promote breastfeeding and the welfare of the mother and the child include maternity and paternity leave, child care facilities, flexible work hours and a private place where women can express and store breastmilk.

The Alliance, which is based in Penang, Malaysia, asked individual consumers and women's groups to actively oppose misleading marketing practices of baby food companies, to boycott products whose advertisements use women's breasts

as promotion, and to lobby for the inclusion of the breastfeeding issue in action plans from the local to the national levels.

Depthnews Young Asia

CORRIGENDUM
The by line of the article 'Essence of People's Participation in Development Programme' printed in this page yesterday should be read as 'by M Sair Rashid' which was inadvertently printed as 'by Someshwar Singh'.

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