

Women on the Move

# Widows Banding Together

by Margaret Owen

The author is a lawyer specialising in women's rights. She has been researching a book on the lives of widows. Here she reports on efforts by widows in many countries to band together for social change.

ON a scorching day in November 1988 more than 500 Indian widows, from many different villages surrounding a town in North Gujarat, gathered in the main square to share common problems, convey a list of the immediate demands to local officials and to work out a plan for future action.

This unique meeting came about through the efforts of Shramjivi Samaj, a local trade union of the poor whose members are mostly women. Everyone was astonished by the daring of the widows, whose militancy defied all traditions. The widows too amazed themselves by their actions, unprecedented in a patriarchal society where widows are seen as inauspicious, and expected to bear their dishonour in silence.

These widows were of all ages, from the very young, some mere children, to the extremely old. They had had enough of the obstructing bureaucracy and were angry about the futility of attempting to obtain the inadequate pensions that some among them — the destitute and the elderly — were on paper entitled to. They wanted legal protection to stay in their homes; to enjoy the inheritance rights given them under the Hindu Succession Law; to retain their dead husband's portion of land to feed themselves and their families. They also asked for proper remuneration for the long hours of work they put in, for example, in the tobacco fields, or as head-loaders, bidi-rollers, or piece-workers. Most of all, they wanted a future for their children, and an end to the dire poverty, degradation and discrimination they experienced due to their widowed state.

Holding informal meetings in each others' houses, at the wells, in the fields, these widows had begun to develop an acute collective awareness of the corruption, the injustice, and the paralysis of the panchayats (village councils) which were male-dominated and rarely responded to their complaints. The majority of these widows were illiterate, but by the time the big day arrived they were marvelously articulate, passionately angry, and had shed

much of their natural shyness at speaking in mixed company.

The event was a brilliant success. With the help of the local radio and the press, it created public awareness of issues that had barely been brought to light before, and gave the women themselves a new confidence to lobby for change.

One practical consequence of the rally was that many more widows began to apply, with Shramjivi Samaj support, for the pensions which the State had legislated for them. The administration, attacked by the media, and harangued by other political elements, could do nothing but yield to their demands.

Of course the pensions were quite inadequate to support destitute widowed women, and in any case ceased after six months, but the meeting enormously increased public support for the widows, and has spurred other similar movements in other states in India.

SEWA, the Self-Employed Women's Association, based in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, is the brain-child of the indefatigable Ela Bhatt. It has been a model, for several years, of how poor women can organize themselves for change and economic independence. Recently SEWA has developed new programmes aimed to assist not only their members who have already been widowed, but to prepare all the women for a usually inevitable widowhood, life on their own or as female heads of households.

Widowhood is inevitable for a majority of women because in all countries widows outnumber widowers, not only because women tend to outlive men even in the poorest countries, but because women usually marry men who are older than themselves.

against illness and accident and death of the main breadwinner, for a small premium, can protect women against sudden family disasters.

Similar activities are taking place in Bangladesh. There BRAC, the Bangladesh Committee for Rural Advancement, has been training para-legals in many villages where they have projects. The mullahs and traditional leaders disapprove of this new solidarity and independence among women, and show it by threats and harassment. In some villages the BRAC organizers have been ordered to leave, and cease all their activities.

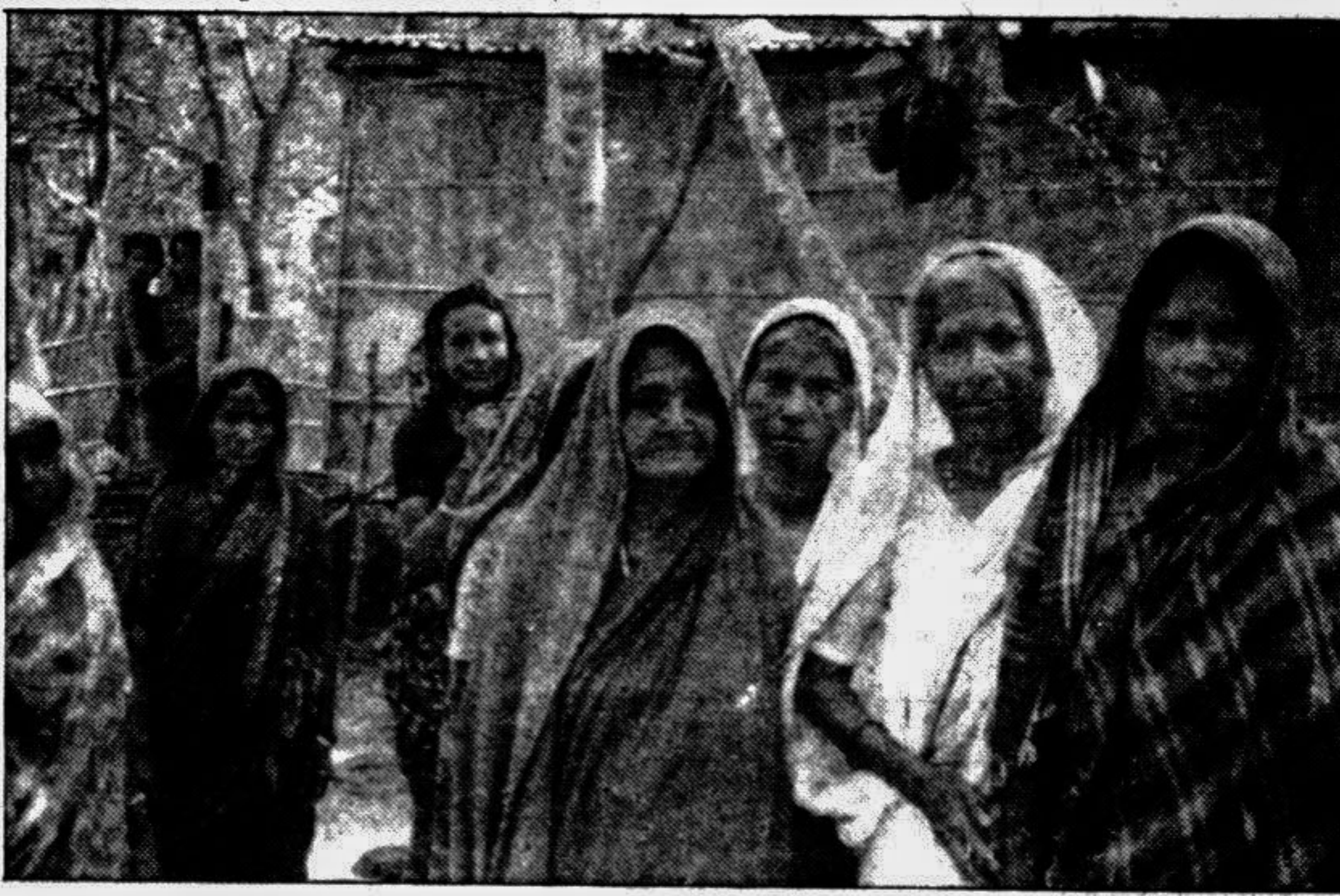
I met about 200 widows in the Manikganj District. Their para-legal is a young widow called Ishrat. It is to her that the women go at the first signs of trouble. Although under Muslim law a woman is entitled to half her husband's portion of her father's estate, and an eighth of the estate of her husband, in practice she rarely receives her due. Disputes with the husband's family over land are commonplace. Often widows find themselves evicted from their homes, and sometimes their children are taken from them.

Ishrat works to reduce confrontation, and achieve a just settlement. Sometimes she will take a small group of women with her and the plaintiff to confront the defendant with his alleged offence, and try to shame him into surrender of the stolen land and deeds. If this tactic doesn't work, she will represent the widow at the Salish (village council). If all else fails, she can ask the BRAC legal office to bring the matter to the courts. News of such challenges to the male-dominated establishment spread like wild-fire, so that everyone becomes better informed about widows' legal rights.

In Northern Ghana the self-styled 'Ministry of Wid-

ows' is a grass-roots organization that rescues those women who have been banished from their homesteads, and tries to provide them with income-generating activities and shelter. In Kenya, the Widows and Orphans Societies offer a safety-net for AIDS widows who are reduced to begging and prostitution.

Widows' associations in Africa tend still to be welfare and relief orientated. It is in India that the movements have shed the 'victim' image, become consciously political and give real meaning to that overused but little understood word 'empowerment'. In India, discriminated against and impoverished women are seen as people with vast potential for contributing economically and socially to communities, and who have the will and the skill to obtain this recognition from government.



Widows of Manikganj district holding a meeting.

need to earn a living often impels them to be more assertive than their married sisters. They can be real agents of change.

The driving force behind any change has, of course, to be the widows themselves. The means of action must involve proper knowledge of rights, legal battles, public lobbying and criticism of political parties, officials, traditional and religious leaders, and local village councils. Success comes when collective action backs up specific demands.

There will be a widows' panel at this year's NGO Forum in Beijing. Hopefully, it will encourage more banding together of bereaved women who should never be seen only as vulnerable, but as people who have much to contribute and who bring about much needed social change.

Courtesy — People & the Planet

Margaret Owen's forthcoming book, *The World of Widows*, to be published in 1996 by Zed Books, London, is being researched with a grant from Planet 21 and the Swedish International Development Authority.

## The Ayesha Abed Foundation

### A Model for Women's Development

by Nawshad Ahmed

WHEN thousands of women representatives from around the world were busy discussing women's rights in Beijing in the Women's NGO Forum meeting, and the World Women's Conference, thousands of poor women worked quietly in Manikganj, 60-km north of Dhaka, at the Ayesha Abed Foundation, an enterprise of BRAC. The Foundation was named in memory of late Ms Ayesha Abed, wife of Mr Fazle Hasan Abed, Executive Director of BRAC.

The two stated objectives of the Ayesha Abed Foundation (AAF) are, to alleviate poverty of rural women and to sustain commercial viability of the activities undertaken by it. Ms Abed initiated the enterprise in 1976 in Manikganj, with these two objectives in mind.

The AAF has since grown into a large undertaking with four centres functioning in Manikganj, Jamalpur, Jessore and Sherpur. Each of these centres have central production units as well as association-based sub-centres built around these centres. A total of over ten thousand poor women are engaged in economic activities in these centres, in handloom, dyeing, printing, and embroidery of punjabi, sari, bed spread, table cloth, cushion cover, wall mat, ladies dress and gents' shirt. The bulk of the products are sold through BRAC's sales outlet 'Aarong' while a limited quantity are also available for sale through the centres.

To meet its objective of benefiting the poor, AAF selects landless and extremely poor women, helps them with membership in associations, provides them with skills training, gets them into contributory savings schemes, provides functional education on numeracy and literacy, provides employment in the centres, subcentres or in their homes, and allows access to non-collat-

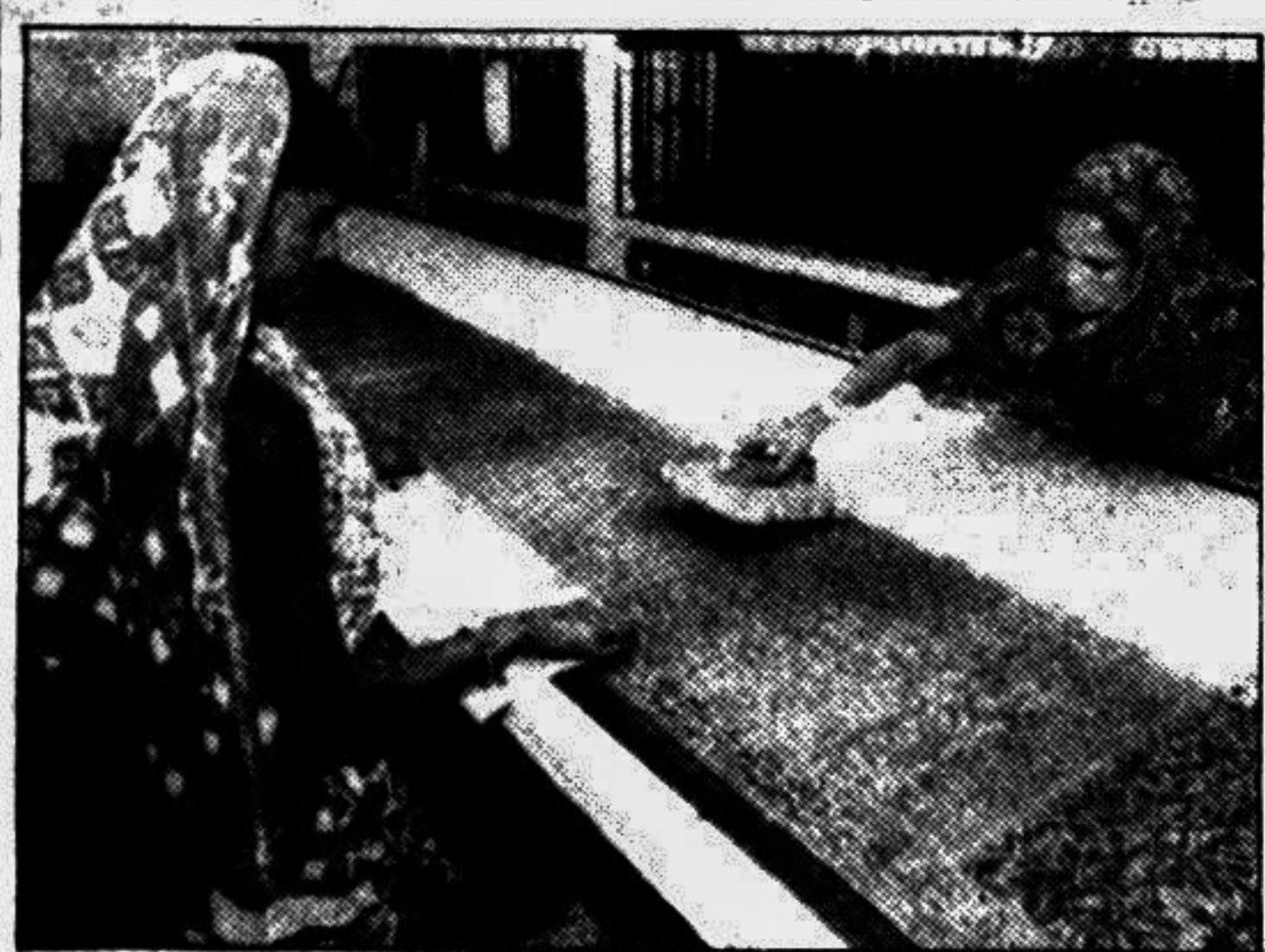
women in the sub-centres. A saree takes about a week to be completed by a group of ten women.

AAF uses cotton, pure silk and endi (second-grade silk) clothes in making punjabi, shirt, women's dress, and saree. Fabric is supplied by BRAC's own handloom factories. A limited quantity of saree is made at the centres' own handloom units. A part of high quality fabric is also imported.

AAF has its own pool of designers who continue to develop new designs for punjabi, fatwa, shirt, and saree. The same design is used usually on not more than 250 punjabis, 150 shirts and 50 sarees. However, an attractive design is used on a maximum of 500 Punjabis and 300 shirts.

Strict quality control is practiced at all levels of production process. Fabric is selected with care, and best quality dyeing and stitching materials are used. Although most of the products are targeted for local markets, an increasing quantity of products are now being aimed for sale through two Aarong sales centres, at London and Montreal. Improved product design has ensured steady growth of demand for the products.

AAF is run by active support of both BRAC-employed staff and elected representatives of women workers. The centres are headed by Administrators who report to the AAF Advisor. The Administrators control the Foundation operation through the Centre Managers. Under Centre Managers, there are Programme Organizers, Operation Section Chiefs, Accountants, Store in Charge, and other technical staff. Each sub-centre is supervised by a representative of Sromojibi, Mohila Sakti (Laboring Women's Strength) — a working women's association. Each centre has a Management Committee. Decisions on production, budget-



eral loans, up to a maximum of Tk 5,000 per person. Surplus generated from the Foundation's production activities are used to expand its programme and provide new loans to association members.

The potential women workers are initially trained by AAF in its workshops for six months in one of the specific areas: weaving, embroidery block-printing or sericulture. The training concentrates on design, prototype development, cloth and thread dyeing, block and screen printing, yarn making and reeling, weaving, tailoring and kantha stitching. After the training, the women are paid both on a piece basis and also on a monthly basis, depending on the type of work as well as whether one is employed at the centre, sub-centre or at home.

The Foundation centres have several units. These are dyeing, washing, block printing, weaving, tailoring, embroidery and kantha stitching units. The individual units are housed in separate rooms. The units are headed by professionally trained and experienced women supervisors called operation section chiefs. The section chiefs ensure both quality and quantity of products and work in the same rooms along with their fellow workers to enable them to supervise closely. There are several male cutting masters and designers in the centres also. The tailoring section looks like a modern garment factory where about one hundred women work in a large room. The Foundation uses vegetable dye on a limited scale as it is three times as expensive as chemical dye.

AAF arranges supply of fabric and other raw materials for use by the workers to ensure a consistently high standard of products and takes the responsibility of marketing all the products. The home-based producers are given work suitable for them, usually embroidery and stitching of punjabi. Embroidered quilt (Nakshi Kantha) and thread work on saree are done in groups of ten or so

Those who are employed with the Foundation for several years are believed to have achieved higher living standards. However, most of these women are still struggling to get their families above the poverty level. Most of the women have larger families, some abandoned by their husbands, and lack knowledge of modern contraceptive methods and are not health conscious. AAF has plans to cover these women under family planning and health programmes, arrange literacy programmes for family members, and open day care centres for their children, in future. The Ayesha Abed Foundation could become a model for comprehensive development of poor families in rural Bangladesh.

## Head of the Line

by Susan Mowris

IT isn't lonely at the top. Ask Deborah Stewart Kent. As assistant plant manager of Ford Motor Company's assembly plant in Chicago, Illinois, Kent oversees the work of 2,700 employees in a space the size of five football fields (450 meters). Daily, she traverses the huge facility innumerable times, meeting with managers, department heads and production-line employees on both the day and night shifts, checking for quality concerns, cost control and safety factors. So while she does not build cars, her approach is definitely an 'in the trenches' style.

Appointed to the job in May 1992, Kent is the first woman in Ford's history to serve as an assistant plant manager in an assembly plant. She sees nothing unusual about her position, however.

"I don't see myself as a woman in a man's job, but as an individual with a job and the accompanying tasks that I am expected to achieve," she says. "Being a woman, who happens to also be black, doesn't enter into it."

Kent originally planned to become a psychologist for a corporation. She received her undergraduate degree in psychology from Southern Illinois University at Carbondale and a graduate degree in clinical psychology in 1977 from Washington University

in St. Louis, Missouri. While still a graduate student, she applied to a handful of large firms in the St. Louis area, including General Motors (GM).

"I didn't even know the difference between hourly and salaried employees," she says. "It was just by chance the woman in personnel at GM sent me down the hall to the salaried department to drop off my resume." So when GM called for an interview the next day, Kent was surprised.

"I had no mechanical skills I could think of, but I know I had no fear of fixing things," she says. This 'can do' attitude, and the fact that GM was looking for a liberal-arts graduate to train in technical and engineering skills, earned her a position as a management trainee. "GM was looking for people with good communication skills because they weren't having much luck training people from the technical side in people skills. It sounded like a challenge, and I enjoy taking risks."

Kent started work in March 1977 while still working toward her master's degree. Her first day was memorable and somewhat intimidating. "I had never seen the

inside of a factory before," she says. "My first impression was, 'This big, noisy and definitely male environment. I had to duck and dodge fork lifts and listen to catcalls and yells. My biggest concern was not getting lost on the way back to the office.'"

Just being new, she remembers, was the hardest part of the first day. When she started working, she felt like an 'apple in a barrel full of oranges'.

"People told me I was over-educated and that this was no place for a woman," she says. "Many of the men were uncertain how they felt about a female supervisor who was young enough to be their granddaughter, and, as determined as they were to tell me it was no place for me, I was just as determined to dig in deeper and do a good job. Most of the people in that plant had migrated from the South, and my job was out of the traditional role they knew for women."

Kent held her ground. In her 10 years with GM she earned several promotions at plants in St. Louis; Bowling Green, Kentucky; and Detroit, Michigan. In 1985, as production superintendent at the Pontiac Assembly Plant in Detroit, she helped the plant

achieve a 25 per cent a year cost reduction.

Ford hired her in 1987 as chassis area manager at the Wixom, Michigan, assembly plant. While there, the 1988 Town Car and the 1989 Lincoln Continental were rated as best in their class for chassis. During her tenure as area manager at the Dearborn, Michigan, assembly plant, the plant won several awards, including the Q-1 and Preventive Maintenance Awards, and the Ford Mustang's top customer-satisfaction ratings. Since her appointment to the Chicago plant, Taurus/Sable has become the best-selling car nationally and has had a 25 per cent increase in customer indicators. Although she has received many awards, accolades and promotions, Kent laughs when she thinks of her start in the industry.

"I didn't even know what an axle was," she says. As part of her training programme, she was sent to school for six months with dealership mechanics to learn hands-on diagnostic testing and repair of vehicle components. "I was sent to learn the function of each component and where it was located. I participated 100 per cent, and rather than just observe, I learned

how to rebuild."

That kind of attitude and her love of a challenge have served her well in her leadership role. Kent attributes these skills to the lessons of childhood. Third in a family of nine children raised in St. Louis' inner city, Kent says teamwork, a sense of humor and a sense of humility are qualities her parents instilled in each child.

"My parents are proud of me, but they are equally proud of all their children," she says. "Each one of us is gainfully employed and functioning well in society. Our parents expected us to achieve, but not compete with each other. When we come together as a group, we still do what benefits the entire group." She has used the same teamwork philosophy on the job.

"For me, the best leadership role is to get behind everybody and push up the organization as a whole," she says. "I like to empower people to live up to their potential, and I see myself as a catalyst to make things happen."

Kent says she has received wonderful opportunities in

her life, noting the scholarships, promotions and training programmes that have helped her throughout the years. In October 1992, she was selected as Ford's only representative to attend a leadership program in Aspen, Colorado, for minority executives.

"It was a chance to network (interrelate) with 19 other minority executives and listen to minorities in leadership roles share the high spots of their careers," she says. As a busy single parent since her divorce six years ago, Kent looks for creative ways to spend time with her daughters, Jessica, 12, and Jordan, 10. If she works on Saturday, they go with her and work on her computer. If she brings paperwork home, they take turns reading it aloud to test their reading skills. Her daughters show signs of high achievement just like Kent, but they are encouraged to have fun, too.

Despite all her responsibilities, Kent says she looks forward to each day.

"I am organized to stay on track, so I'm not frantic or stressed out," she says. "I enjoy what I do, and through me, my daughters and others around me get to see the possibilities."

Susan Mowris is a St. Louis, Missouri-based writer.

## NEWS BRIEFS

### Violence Against Women

Compiled by SMS Joya

The Daily Star 5.2.96 (Pirajpur). On Sunday, the District and Sessions Judge sentenced a man to life term imprisonment for killing his wife, reports UNB.

According to prosecution, the convict following a family feud beat his wife Suchitra Rani Bepari to death on April 9, 1995 and hung her body from a mango tree nearby their dwelling house to hush up the murder.

The Judge Abdur Razzak has also fined the accused, Amulya Chandra Bepari Tk 5000.

The Daily Star 5.2.96. A housewife was strangled to death allegedly by her in-laws at Kamodda Village in Laksham thana recently, reports UNB.

The victim was identified as Rabeya Khatun, 18, wife of Arifur Rahman who is working in a Middle Eastern country. They were married two years ago.

Police arrested her mother-in-law Anwara Begum on Tuesday last, the day after the killing following a case, filed by Rabeya's mother.

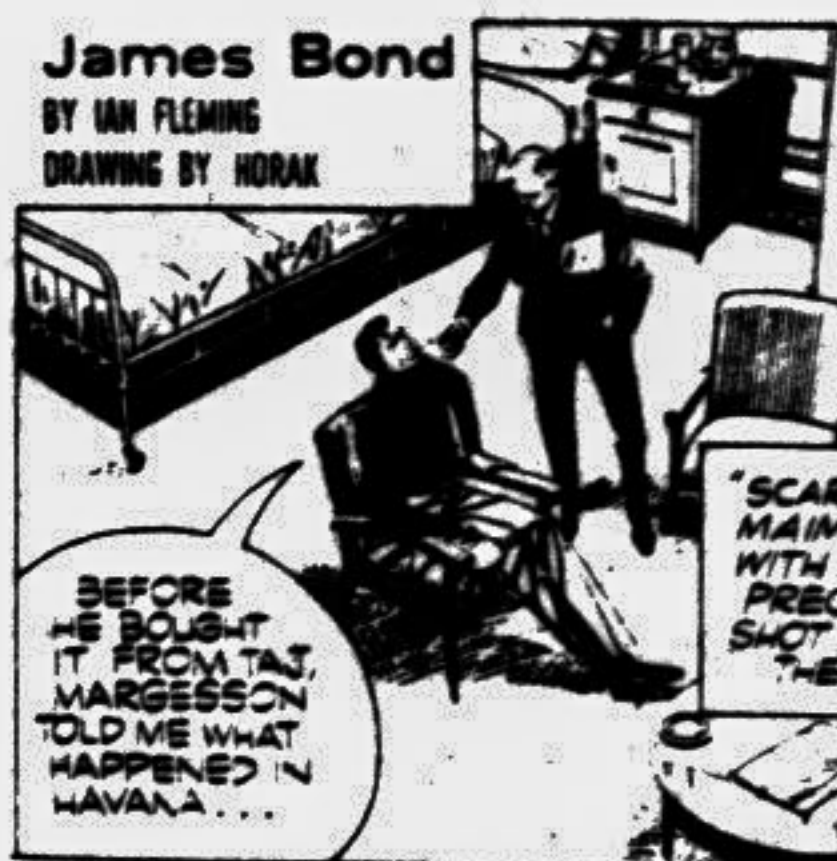
The Daily Star 3.2.96 (Gopalganj). Feb 2. A wife was stabbed to death by her husband of village Khyadria in Mukshudpur thana under

Gopalganj district recently. It was reported that, Santu Begum, 19, wife of Lablu Mia, a shopkeeper, was stabbed by her husband on January 27 last by a sharp weapon at midnight following an argument and soon after Santu Begum died on the spot.

A case has been filed in this connection with Mukshudpur police station. Police arrested Lablu Mia.

### Corrigendum

In the article titled 'Child Abuse — The Need to Expose It' published on February 1st in this page, a certain piece of information was inadvertently misinterpreted. The group 'Breaking the Silence' is run by about twenty child rights activists; who happen to be working in a number of NGOs. Besides a representative from Voluntary Health Services Society (VHSS) no other networking organisation — like ADAB and Naripokhoy — are members of this group. The group had invited networking organisations in their meeting on January 20, 1996 to help distribute their brochures within the NGO sector. The error is regretted.



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by Jim Davis

