

Women on the Move

Starting on a Clean Slate

PERSONAL security is perhaps the most important basic right that is denied to women. Especially vulnerable are young girls, who are faced due to poverty, to look for ways to basically stay alive. With no voice of protest and no protection from their family or society, they are subject to the worst kind of abuses. Sometimes coerced, sometimes because of survival, young girls go into prostitution. At other times they are raped by their employer working as maids or even by members of their own family. Whichever form it takes, the psychological wounds of the sexual abuse these young teenagers are confronted with may take a lifetime to heal.

Those who are 'lucky' are often rescued by the police during once in a while raids in brothels which bring them to what is known as 'safe custody'. Basically what this means is that the girls are kept in jail (ironically, for their own safety) until some one or some organisation takes up their cases and brings them out of custody. Among such organisations are Mahila Parishad, Ain O Shalish Kendra and Mahila Ain Jibi Samity.

But the question then is, what happens afterwards, that is after these girls have been set free? The stigma of their past (most of them have been prostitutes) ensures that they are not accepted by their families or by society even though many times their socially unacceptable occupations have been the result of coercion and foul play.

Here is where an organisation has stepped in with the objective of socially rehabilitating these young women who have been victimized through no fault of their own. The Association for Correction and Social Reclamation (ACSR) as the centre is called, is more appropriately known as Nirmal Asroy and runs like a hostel for these jail returnees.

But providing food and a safe place to stay is only a part

of what the centre offers. Essentially, the goal is to provide a full programme through which the girls will be given basic education, lessons in ethics and vocational training. The idea is to give them a fresh chance to be a normal citizen and be accepted in society.

Walking into the spottily clean study room where a carpet has been laid out for the girls to sit for their lessons, one has to remind oneself that this is supposed to be a 'correction centre'. But the severity of such a term does not do justice to a place that has become home to eleven or so girls now living at the centre. Wearing colourful clean shawl kameezes, their hair in neat plaits, it is hard to believe that these girls who are between 14 to 16 years are former prostitutes or offenders accused of stealing. Their shy smiling faces say very little of the trauma they have gone through.

Shompa (not her real name) who is now around 16 years old used to work in a garments factory for 550 taka a month plus 340 taka as overtime. She lived with her mother in a hut in Sadarghat for 200 per month. At the age of about 12, Shompa was married off to a local youth who worked in a small shop. She was quite happy at her husband's house until one day a fight between her mother and mother-in-law caused her to walk out of the house in frustration and go to her nana's (mother's uncle's) house in Mirpur. Later when she had calmed down she decided to go home. On the way, however, she met a woman in an expensive sari at the station who invited her to her house. The woman promised Shompa that she would drop her home later. Without thinking Shompa stepped into an auto rickshaw with the woman. Something was placed against her nose and the next minute she was unconscious. When she woke up Shompa found herself in a brothel. The other

girls told her that she had been kidnapped by the woman and now had to work for the brothel's madam. If she tried to escape she would be beaten and tortured. There was no way out.

Everyday, Shompa and the other girls had to satisfy from 10 to 12 clients each. The madam would take all the money.

Shompa stayed in the Tanbazar brothel for a year until a police raid took her to the thana where she was placed in safe custody. It was members of Mahila Ain Jibi Samity who rescued Shompa and brought her to Nirmal Asroy.

The other girls have similar stories. While most of them have been rescued from brothels, there are one or two who have been raped by their employees while working as maids and become victims of false cases filed by their employers.

Since most of the girls are either illiterate or with only class III schooling, the first priority is to teach them basic subjects — Mathematics,

Bangla, English and also Islamiyat. The trade teacher teaches the girls how to draw and paint, flower making, tailoring and embroidery. A resident supervisor or matron looks after overall activities. The girls have separate sleeping arrangements in two large rooms turned into dormitories.

For recreation the centre has a television and VCR which the girls enjoy watching after their chores. Indoor games such as chess and carom are also provided. The authorities of the centre plan to buy a microbus so that the girls can be taken out on field trips. Regular medical check ups are also given to the girls.

At present, there are three teachers who, apart from teaching also share the responsibility of keeping their morals high. "You cannot imagine, how traumatised these girls are when they come," says Dilara Begum, a teacher at Nirmal Asroy and a Masters student in sociology. "It takes a long time, patience and love to bring them to a normal state. Usually the girls stay at the centre from six to twelve months, after which they ei-

ther go back to their families or the centre finds them a job. In this way ACSR makes sure that the girls are accepted into society.

Counselling, which is essential for such victims of violence, is provided by the teachers. "At first," says Dilara Begum, "they are very unwilling to cooperate, but slowly, they became more responsive and accepting; I have to be constantly after them, says the super (superintendent), "telling them now it is time to eat, to study etc. It is like taking care of very small children."

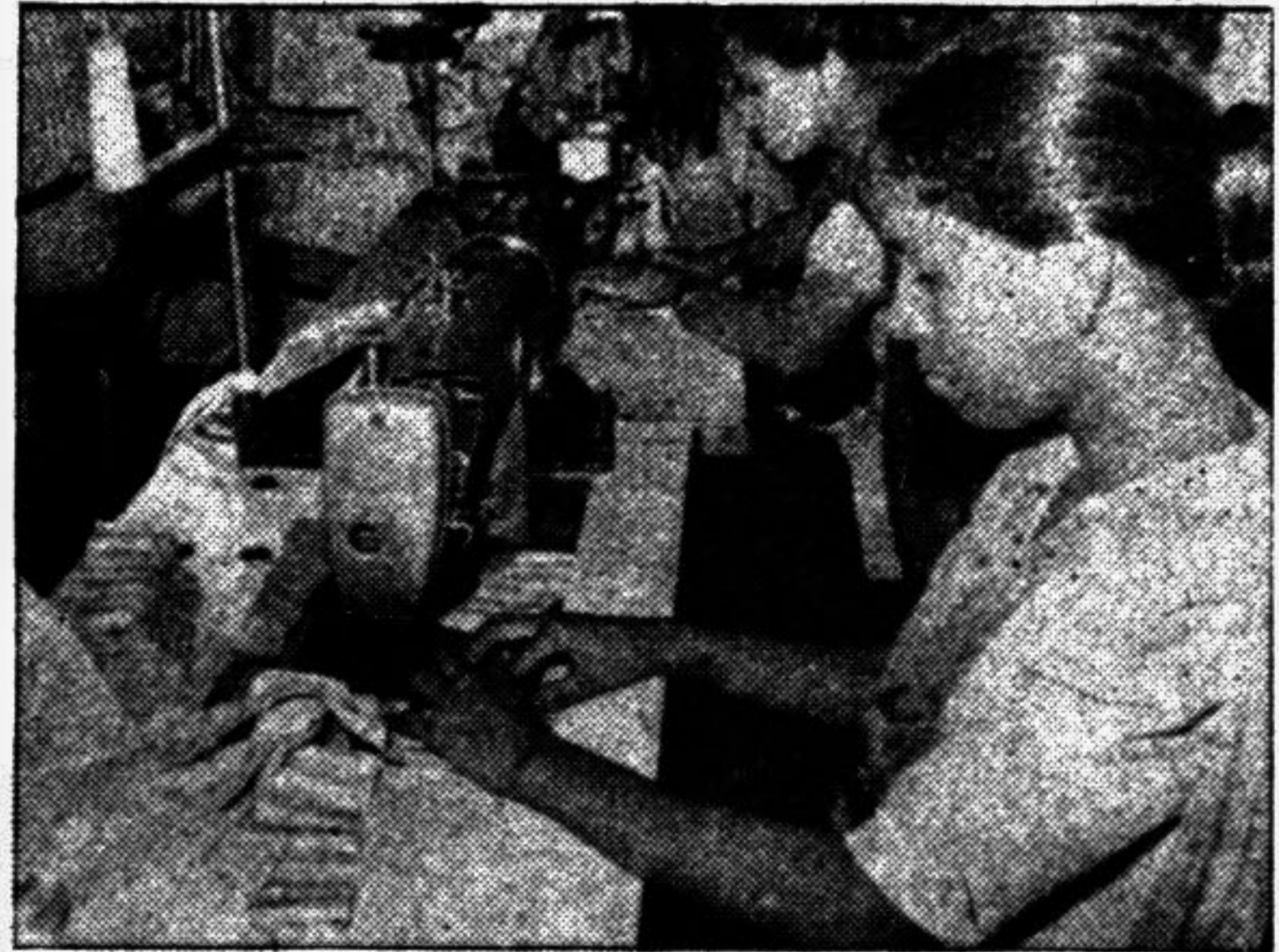
Founded by Tahera Kabir and supported by her husband Late Alamgir M A Kabir, who was the president of the National Executive Council of the centre, is financed by the Ministry of Social Welfare, Human Development Foundation and through personal donations.

The short term plans of ACSR is to build with government funding a two storied structure already underway for 25 residents. In the long run, an ambitious government project costing two crore seventy six lakh taka will accommodate 100 girls with special facilities for vocational training.

This, no doubt, is a big step forward for a project that started as early as in the 70s. "This kind of centre," says Shah Abdul Hannan, Chairman of the Managing Committee, "should be in every district and should be initiated by the respective municipal corporation."

There are many women Hannan continues, "in distress, who come from the villages and are stranded at the station or a bus stop with nowhere to go. These women should be able to take refuge in a safe place."

The ACSR Nirmal Asroy is such a refuge for helpless teenage girls who fall victim to unscrupulous touts and human trafficking. It is a place where these girls can forget their past and hopefully start on a clean slate.



When working becomes the only way to survive, personal security is the first right that should be ensured. — Star photo



Celebrating International Women's Day in the spirit of resistance. Photo: Karin Gregor

Ten Things Mothers Should Tell Their Daughters before Getting Married

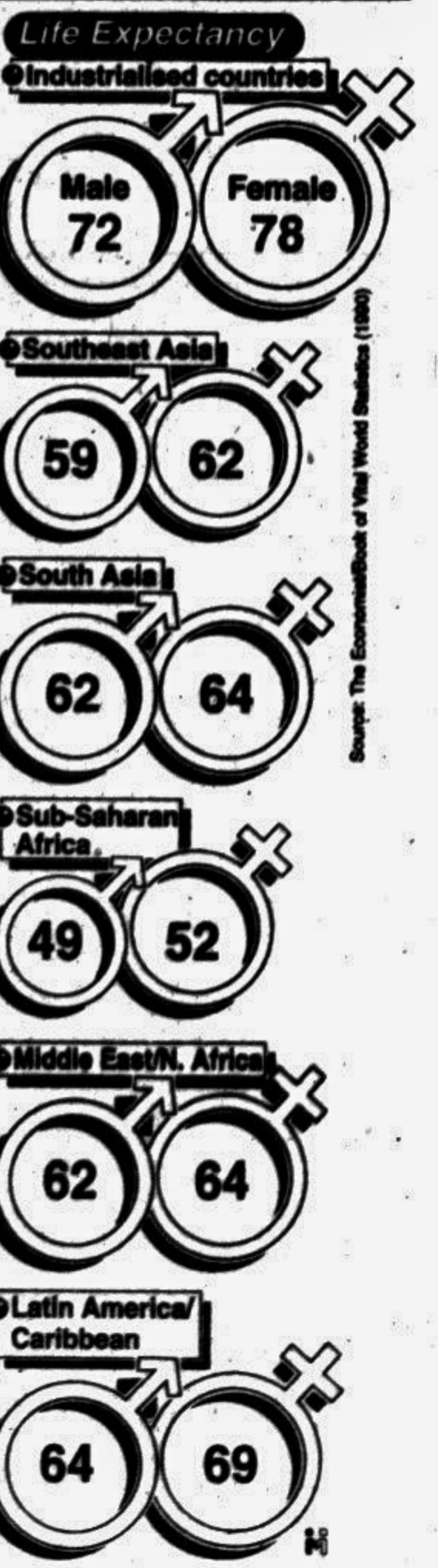
by Saifa Rashid

TO most unmarried women the word marriage implies a state of conjugal bliss where the sun always shines, everyone smiles, the food is always delicious and everyone lives in a haze of love. To most mothers of unmarried daughter marriage implies uncertainty of the highest degree. They can only consider the subject with foreboding especially with the stories that abound of unhappy marriages and of young brides tortured by husbands and their relatives. Whilst it is useless to deny that there are families who ill-treat their brides, most families do not fall into this category. They are usually all too ready to welcome a bride in their midst. Even so, some misunderstandings do occur. They can be avoided, if treated tactfully. There is no end to the advice one can give a daughter before marriage but these ten points should be helpful.

- 1. Always remember that your husband's home is not just his home, of your in-laws house but it is also your own home from now on and thus act accordingly.
2. Establish an amiable relationship with all your new relations. Treat your brother and sister-in-laws like they were your own brother and sisters. Buy them small presents from time to time and give them your time and your attention, make them feel you care for them.
3. Don't be impatient with your mother-in-law if she treats your husband like a little boy. After all he has been her little boy for the past 30 years or so. Just as you are a little girl to your parents.
4. Be patient and sympathetic with everybody but not at the cost of your self-respect.
5. Be accommodating. It is not wise to take a stance and stick to it come hell or high water. However, do not turn yourself into a doormat either. Then people will trample all over you.
6. Do not let yourself be swamped by petty jealousy if your husband spends his time, money or attention on his parents, brother or sister. The man can't be expected to give up his family because he married you. On the other

hand, he can't expect you to give up your family either.
7. Try to act dignified and do not allow yourself to indulge in petty arguments over trifles. It is better to ignore various snide remarks of some members of the family might make.
8. Do not make demands on your husband which he cannot meet whether monetary or not. If your husband earns Tk. 10,000 per month it isn't realistic to expect a Tk 5000 saree every month. You can't expect him to take you to your friend's house when he has to attend a family function.
9. Treat your husband with respect and consideration and show him that you expect your marriage to be a marriage of equals.
10. Try to make everyone understand that you are not just somebody's wife. This may be the most difficult part of all and it will take time to achieve — may be even years.
There is no foolproof of method to make a happy marriage. It needs patience, understanding, intelligence, care and adjustment. But advice from mothers can make the process a lot easier.

Lifelines



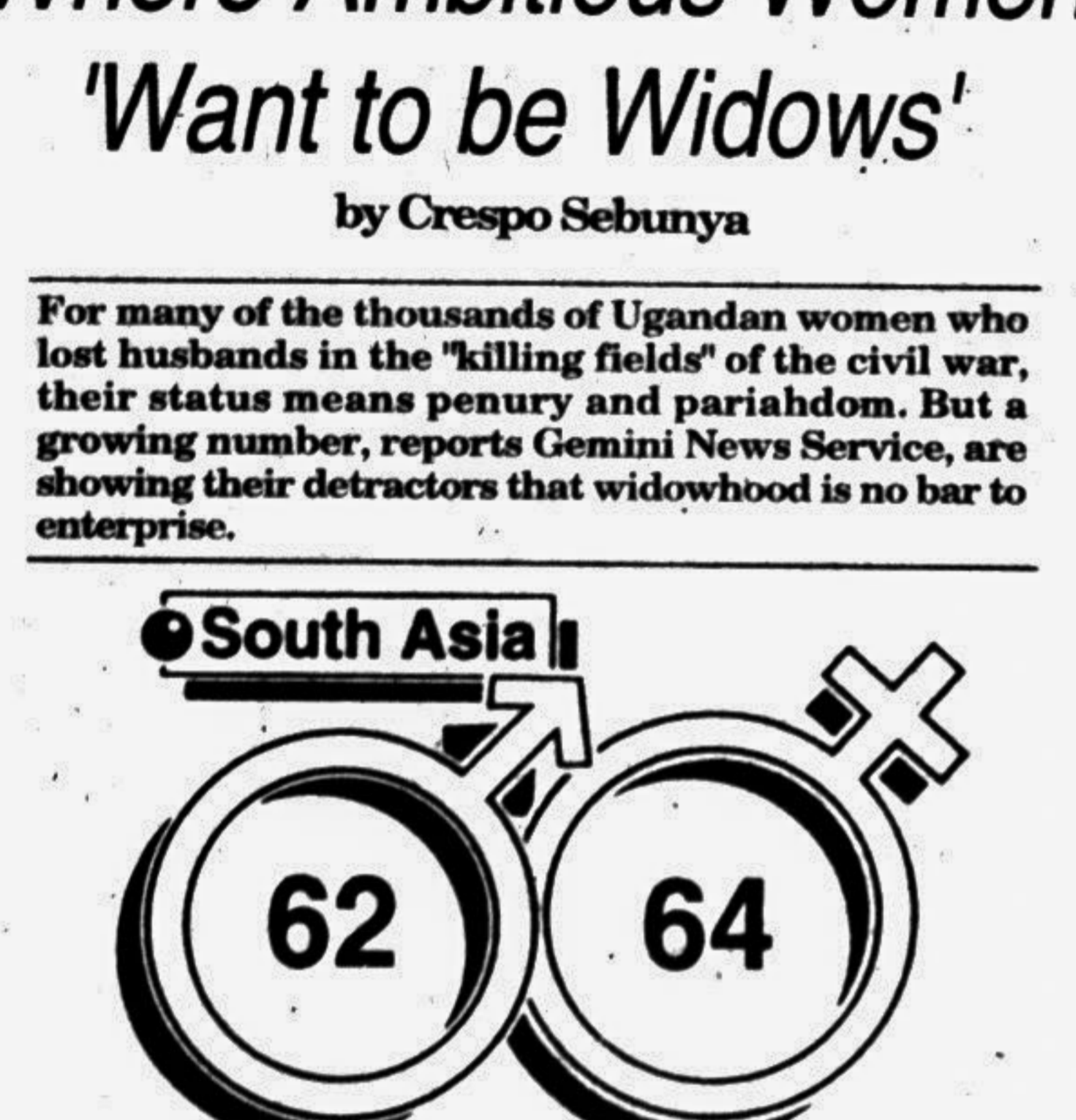
Where Ambitious Women 'Want to be Widows'

by Crespo Nabunya

For many of the thousands of Ugandan women who lost husbands in the 'killing fields' of the civil war, their status means penury and pariahdom. But a growing number, reports Gemini News Service, are showing their detractors that widowhood is no bar to enterprise.

Edith Namazzi is so respected that every family in the country wants her to visit their home and she is invited as a guest of honour to many functions. She has been showered with responsibilities, including secretary of two women's councils and head of the local Young Women's Christian Association. Start-up money for the widows' group — and for several others in the country — came from the War Widows Foundation, itself mainly financed by the International Development Association, the World Bank's soft-loan affiliate. Luwero has been a key area of operations, because an estimated 500,000 people were

South Asia



killed in the area in five years of fighting that ended with the coming to power of the current President, Yoweri Museveni. There were about 25,000 registered war widows in the area. Their plight, and that of the thousands of unregistered widows, was dire. Most had children to look after, but no money, land or resources. They were often looked down on by society. Many had been forced to work for their in-laws. Few had either assets or experience of keeping accounts, which, from a conventional lending point of view, made them a bad risk for banks. But they learned fast. The foundation used to explain to us that the money has to be accounted for," recalls Namazzi, "and persuaded us by picking only those who had books of accounts." Her group's book-keeping is impeccable. Other groups followed her example, helped by the foundation's careful monitoring and assistance. "We have to stress to them that these are not gifts," says the foundation's Luwero manager, Timothy Nkaja, "but that it is a fund that revolves around them, and the system could benefit many of their numbers if money is repaid on

Nari: A New Package Programme on BTV

A proposal for a new package programme called 'Nari' has been given to BTV. The 25 minute programme, created and directed by Muhammad Jahangir, will focus on various issues influencing women's lives — their problems, achievements, struggle for their rights etc.

With the possible date for the first airing of the programme falling on independence day, Nari will be focussing on the Liberation War. Farida Akhter of Nari Grontho Probortona will speak on women's role in the Liberation

Movement and an exclusive interview with Bir Protik Taramon Begum taken at her home village Shonkor Madhobpur in Kurigram will be presented. The programme will be hosted by Aditi Chowdhury and produced by Development Communications.



Interviewing, Bir Protik Taramon Begum on 'Nari' to be aired soon

Book Review

The Ushers of Hope

Christo-Mondolir Ithase Nari, a translation by Nicholas Biswas of the original, Women in Church History (20 Stories for 20 Centuries) by Joanne Turpin. Publisher: National Training Centre, Jessore. Price: Tk 100.

Reviewed by Shakib Ahsan

women have apparently not suffered enough. She believed in educating indigenous women in the realities of the world, and became a perceived threat to the local land owners. Her good work might have been lost on those handful of wolves who took her life, and those who did not raise a finger to save her, but not on the tens of thousands of mourners who gathered at her funeral and shared her dream. An ancient Arab myth spoke of women as the epitome of hope. But Long before Christ, when civilisation was monstrously young, organised themselves around the first law of nature based on whoever was the fittest. Women fought in their meagre ways against the pedestrian life they were talked and sometimes forced into. The corridors of imagination were blocked for them, and sensibilities carted away by an array of restrictive and macabre interpretations of a woman's role. The tales of the women told here however bring us face to face with the blinding truth that God had no intention of genderising the regions of our mind. This book

will encourage us to look hard at the fool of a world we have made for ourselves so far. These women's brutal, experiences do not do men proud, and if nothing the book is worth skimming because it attacks the myths of misogynists. Women are our last line of defence against the proliferation of weapons, drugs and

crime. We have failed where we have left them behind. In Belfast, Jerusalem or Sarajevo, women will have to take to the streets again for peace and trust, to return from where they had been exiled long since. This work will certainly be 'unputdownable' for anybody, who is in need of inspiration. There are some thoughts so alive and uncompromising that one has to read them over again. Being a person outside of the creed, I understand that it is paramount to try to know what people really believe in, because it is only then that we can differ without hurting each other. As The Economist puts it in its survey of Islam, "the distance between them would diminish, and the risk of misunderstanding be less, if Islam and the West no longer regarded each other as respectively amoral and fanatic." The paths of the different hues of people that make this world so rich and diverse have often crossed bloodily, and only through better understanding can we mend our age-old prejudices. The men who think women are too ambivalent by nature to be able to make a difference in the ways men have moulded their world-view should remember that women are better equipped to judge in a world which is becoming more stressful. And men, as the pastoral Bedouins would say, are getting lost.



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