

Empowering Rural Women

by AZM Obaidullah Khan

"The exercise of power is determined by thousands of interactions between the world of the powerful and that of the powerless, all the more so because these worlds are never divided by a sharp line, everyone has a small part of him or herself in both".

PLAY-WRIGHT President Vaclav Havel of the Czech Republic discusses power in his book "Disturbing the Peace". He says, "I have never fixed my hope on what is happening above. I've always been interested in what was happening below". What could be won there and what defended. All power is power over someone, and it always somehow responds, usually unwittingly rather than deliberately, to the state of mind and behaviour of those it rules over. One can always find in the behaviour of power what is going on in a vacuum. The exercise of power is determined by thousands of interactions between the world of the powerful and that of the powerless, all the more so because these worlds are never divided by a sharp line, everyone has a small part of him or herself in both". And that is what this essay is all about.

I begin with four general propositions. First, development from the top, including its compassionate variation of women in development has generally meant development for the top, and quite often, exacerbated the dependency relationship between the dominant and the subordinate.

Second, control over resources and control over knowledge or ideas each reinforcing the other, enables those in power to determine the parameters within which debates in development can be conducted, which problems are to be considered within the decisional agenda and which subset of solutions will be considered.

Third, empowerment of the powerless is essentially subversive to the dominant development establishment. A focus solely on women tends to imply that the problem and, hence, the solution can be confined to women. What is required perhaps is a focus on social relations that extends our analysis and understanding from women and men as isolable categories to the broader interconnecting relationships through which women are positioned as a subordinate group in the division of resources and responsibilities, attributes and capabilities, power and privilege. That is precisely what Beijing Conference came up with when the Platform for Action emphasized the imperative of "women's full and equal access to economic resources, including the right to inheritance and to ownership of land and other property, credit natural resources and appropriate technologies."

Fourth, political will for taking on politically contro-

versial issues which address women's strategic gender interests is contingent on women themselves organizing to demand and promote change. Solidarity around strategic gender interests is cut across by class and other social divisions. Solidarity is likely to be most effective when it is built from below in response to locally identified needs and priorities rather than imposed by some compassionate universalistic notion of sisterhood.

Let me start with the conventional wisdom regarding women's marginalization in the development process because of culturally biased stereotypes and preconceptions that had distorted planners' perceptions about the nature of women's contributions. One of a series of conversations with various representative of international agencies recorded by Rogers (1980, p. 55) suggests how this might happen:

FAO Representative: I've just been filling in a questionnaire from headquarters about women. But you know there's hardly anything to say, because we don't have the sort of projects that would involve them. We have nothing against them, in fact we like to have more for them, but you see all our projects here are concerned with cattle, and it just so happens that women have very few cattle. Of course, we get criticized because cattle are owned by richer people.

Rogers: Is it perhaps more than just a coincidence that all money is going into cattle and almost nothing for crops, when cattle are men's responsibility and crops are women's?

FAO Representative: I never really saw it like that. But I suppose that there is a connection.

(Quoted by Naila Kabeer, 1994)

While the conversation hints at the way in which gender and class interact to shape the distribution of development resources, it is offered mainly as an example of what Tinker called the error of omission: failure to notice and utilize women's roles in traditional society. Rogers suggest that alerting planners to such omissions might persuade them to take them into account in future efforts.

The question I would like to ask is, will better information result in more enlightened planning? Judging from an analysis of female farming in Sub-Saharan Africa, the answer appears to be: it is not enough. Dixon points out that while definitional and procedural biases had generally led to the invisibility of women's contributions in national statistics, this was not the case in

sub-Saharan Africa. Here the agriculture contribution of women farmers had long been documented in labourforce statistics. Independent female farming in the region meant that women farmers were classified as 'self-employed cultivators' rather than 'unpaid family helpers'. However, the visibility of women's economic contributions in statistical data had not been matched by a corresponding visibility in the distribution of development resources such as land, livestock, transport, capital equipment, credit, information and training. Dixon concluded: "It is the blindness to these inequities more than the blindness of invisibility that stands in women's way. The blindness has an institutional and political base. One cannot help concluding that the real issue is who controls the resources distributed to, and deriving from, agricultural households. The reluctance to 'see' women farmers comes not from their invisibility, but from a reluctance to share scarce resources with them. Land, labour, livestock, capital, technology, information, training — all are valued goods that imbue those who own or control them with power and prestige. Why should these resources be shared? Why should institutions be restructured, power bases challenged?"

In other words, there are material realities including male power as a property of gender relations, which shape politics and the priorities of planning institutions in ways that a focus on individual bias is likely to miss.

The continuing marginality of women's concerns is revealed in the organizational structures of national and international development bureaucracies. Increasing awareness of women as a category of development led to the setting up of national machineries of women's affairs and WID units in the bilateral and multilateral aid agencies. However, these tend to be 'perched on the peripheries of mainstream' development concerns." (Goetz, 1992). They are never located in the crucial 'technical core' of rule-making, budgeting and personnel policy within bureaucratic processes.

The so-called 'women's desks' attached to many ministries are often literally no

more than a desk (Staudt, 1985, 1990). WID units usually operate with minimal budgets, staff and authority. As Staudt (1990, p. 9) has estimated 3.5 per cent of the projects of UN agencies, representing 0.2 per cent of budget allocations, benefit women; less than 1 per cent of FAO projects specify strategies to reach women farmers (figures cited in Goetz, 1992). The limited resources and authority give to most WID units provide little leverage for carrying out their mandates." (Naila Kabeer, 1994)

Land, as the Beijing meeting rightly stressed, remains the most important tangible asset in a predominantly agrarian economy, enabling command over different types of resources. It enhances a household's productive base, and hence its capacity to meet its longer-term consumption requirements, as well as offering the possibility of meeting more immediate needs. Women's main access to tangible property is through kinship entitlement: inheritance and marriage gifts. Daughters inherit land, though less land than sons, under Islamic law. However, even in this less than equal sharing of land, women seldom enforce their entitlement to land, preferring to waive it in favour of their brother in exchange for a claim of widowhood, abandonment or divorce.

Inequalities in land entitlement are also manifest in access to credit. While the wealthy are able to tap into most sources of credit, including officially subsidized programmes, the poorest sections of the population are confined to the informal market where interest rates are several times higher. Even credit at the local village store is offered on discriminatory terms to the poor. Moreover, it is more likely to be extended to households with regular income earners, a practice which in effect discriminates against female-headed households where income is predominantly earned through casual forms of labour.

As Whitehead (1985) points out, the 'contractual inferiority' in the capital market which characterizes the relations of poorer peasants to richer ones is also likely to characterize those between poor women and

elite male officials. The point about gender-based 'contractual inferiority' is succinctly made by a poor slum woman, interviewed in a study of female informal sector workers in Bombay, talking about bank lending: "If we go alone, who will listen to us? We don't know who to meet, what to ask for? People are rude to us, they think we are dirty and talk to us badly. They don't try and explain anything to us" (Everett and Savara, 1983, p. 166).

Professor Yunus, the founder of the bank for assetless women, the Grameen bank recounts his own experience: "In the early days when I was trying to persuade the bank to lend to the poor but could find no support from them... I repeatedly alleged that banks are anti-poor, anti-literate and anti-women. If a woman applied for a loan, she would be questioned whether she had discussed it with her husband and if he approved of her move. Finally, she would be asked to bring him along for the meeting. Nobody demands this kind of spousal approval to sanction loans to men... Barely 1 per cent of the borrowers in all Bangladesh were women... Therefore, I wanted to ensure that poor, illiterate women had an option for financial resources... Now almost 94% of our membership comprises of women."

There is a story that Schumacher is supposed to have told to a conference he once attended and I am quoting Naila Kabeer. According to this story, Schumacher was sitting in an airport restaurant waiting for his flight to the conference and observed a family — a father, a mother and their child — at the next table. The waitress came to take their order. The mother turned to the father who was hidden behind his newspaper to ask him what he wanted. Not bothering to lower his newspaper, he announced that he wanted a hamburger. The child piped up that she would like spaghetti hoops but her mother ignored her and said to the waitress, "That will be three hamburgers, please." The waitress turned in the direction of the kitchen and shouted, "Two hamburgers and one spaghetti hoops." The child turned to her mother in amazement and said, "Did you see that, she thinks I am real." Different meanings can of course be read into an anecdote like this, but for me it illustrates quite graphically the disempowering and ways in which policymakers have frequently treated the poor, particularly poor women. By and large, in as much as poverty alleviation has addressed the needs of the poor, policymakers have tended to prioritize men's needs over women's. Women are rarely treated as knowing what they need; rather, agencies seek to think and act on their behalf. Either women's needs and priorities are subsumed (and then forgotten) within those of the household collectivity or, when they are addressed separately, they tend to fall in the category of women's practical gender needs as mothers, wives and carers within the family.

What emerges from the experience of the innovative NGOs is that where a space is created for women's own voices to be heard, either through participatory processes of needs identification or else by organizational practices that encourage participation in shaping and changing the 'decisional agenda', a different set of needs may come into view. In providing this space, therefore, such organizations have helped to challenge conventional stereotypes about gender needs, to make visible hitherto hidden categories of women's needs and to lay bare the interconnections between different aspects of women's lives.

Again, the Grameen Bank in

Bangladesh offers an example of how the use of participatory methodologies throws up very different needs and priorities from those which arise out of 'expert-led analysis. Grameen started out as a poverty-eradication project in 1976 as the result of the findings of action research on poverty carried out in areas adjacent to the university by Md Yunus, a professor at Chittagong University. The research helped to counter many conventional preconceptions about the rural poor enshrined in the development literature in Bangladesh: that they were primarily landless wage labourers; that their poverty resulted from inadequate access to waged labour; and that they were (implicitly) men (Sultan, 1992).

The research revealed instead that the rural poor earned their livelihoods from a variety of self-employed activities rather than relying solely on wage labour, and that their major constraint was the lack of access to financial institutions rather than to the wage labour market. The research also helped to spell out the gender dimension of poverty. It drew attention to women's key contribution in household livelihood strategies among the poor and their greater tendency to devote their incomes to family, rather than personal welfare. It was evident that self-employment was more important for women, given the paucity of wage-labour opportunities open to them. Yet in terms of access to credit, they were, if anything, more disadvantaged than poor men.

A comparison of gender relations within the household and the 'gender-subtext' of apparently neutral financial organizations helps to highlight the lack of fit between women's circumstances and constraints and the organizational logic of formal credit delivery. The urban location of most banks, the bias towards large-scale enterprises, the reliance on influential contacts and networks; the need for literacy and time to complete bank procedures; all these militate against loans to poor rural women without any need for overt discrimination. The Grameen Bank can be seen as an institutional innovation which seeks to revise these biases against the poor.

Similarly, as Naila Kabeer notes, "The gender implications of new technologies cannot be predicted a priori but have to be assessed on the basis of rules, resources and practices within different locational and social contexts. Take the example of food processing technologies. Where female seclusion and highly segmented labour markets coexist with a large class of landless labour, as in Bangladesh and parts of northern India, home-based processing of crops is generally carried out in wealthy households by hired, rather than family, female labour. In this situation, the introduction of rice mills will have very different implications for women from different classes. (Greeley, 1987; Whitehead, 1985). For women who have to undertake crop processing as unpaid family labour along with their other domestic chores, mechanization represents a lessening of their labour burdens. For women from wealthy households who merely supervise hired female labour in rice processing, the introduction of mechanized processing will simply cut down on supervisory time. But for women from the landless households, for whom rice processing for wealthy households represents one of the few wage-earning opportunities for women in a traditionally secluded culture, mechanization imposes an enormous loss of income."

(Naila Kabeer, 1994).

That brings me to a related point namely, the resurrection of women as far as food security and bio-diversity are concerned. Although there is no such thing as a set of universal gendered knowledge systems, the challenge for the scientists in national and international research institutions is to accept that women farmers are germplasm consultants and research curators and to support field methodologies that support women farmers in these roles.

If women lack the opportunity and the means to develop their capacities and obtain control of the decisions regarding their knowledge, there is a danger that women's ecological knowledge will be 'packaged as a product to be collected, owned and sold in the market place of ideas of the scientific community without them being compensated in any way.' Moreover, this distinctive knowledge of women, being derived from direct experience of a labour process empowers and gives them confidence.

If sustainable agriculture is to be more than a rhetoric, it has to be fully engendered. "Women, especially rural women are also the ones whose survival is most threatened by ecologically destructive development. When forests or lands or rivers or wells die, these women mourn the most, because they are the most affected. Because women know the pains of creation, they hate destruction most. This is why in struggles to save forests, struggles against pollution, in movements against militarization, women are at the forefront. This why women have to be at the centre of sustainable development and a sustainable society." (Kamla Basain).

A word of caution here. Rochleau (1990) points out in her paper on *Gender Complementarity and Conflict in Sustainable Forest Development*, a policy view of women-as-resources, as fixers of forestry and resource management problems has frequently degenerated into "a narrow focus on women as forced (or cheap) labour to work on forestry projects in the community 'interest'". Such devaluation of women's labour is quite apparent in Volume 1 of the book "Adjust-

ment with a Human Face" and I quote, "there is a scope for decentralizing many activities in health, nutrition, childcare, etc. to the family (or community) level... while such an approach may increase time-costs for women, it will place extremely modest monetary costs on the household, and will lead to substantial savings in the public sector". The assumption behind such argument is that, in cost-benefit terms, women's labour has a zero opportunity cost. (Naila Kabeer)

Women's collective strength and creativity constitute the main hope for transformation of existing power relations. One recalls the tribute paid by the DAWN group to the resourcefulness and resilience of women all over the world: "It is easy to be discouraged about the concrete improvements in women's economic and social position. They appear to have been as meagre as agencies and governments have actually directed to women... We know now... how deeply ingrained and how far back historically is the subordination of women. What we have managed to do in the last few years is to forge worldwide networks and movements, as never existed before, to transform that subordination and in the process to break down other oppressive structures as well."

Whether the skeptics call these micro-initiatives marginal and diversionary, romantic and pastoral, I believe that our hope in the deepest and most powerful sense lies in these social movements from below and their advances. Such hope, and I quote President Vaclav Havel once again, is not the same "as joy that things are going well... but to work for something because it is good... it is also this hope above all, which gives the strength to live and continually try new things even in conditions that seem as hopeless as ours do here and now."

The question is, are we ready to ally with these movements from below not as dispensers of superior wisdom but as partners in creating common wisdom?

The author, a former Minister and a Secretary of GoB and also our Ambassador to USA has recently retired as Asstt DG for Asia-Pacific of FAO.

Garfield®



by Jim Davis



IAN FLEMING'S James Bond



DRAWN BY JOHN MCLUSKY



HERE and THERE

BPS
Deputy Speaker Abdul Hamid yesterday urged the pharmacists to dedicate themselves to the welfare of the people, reports BSS.

Jibur Rahman Khan and executive member of BPS Subas Singha Roy.

IUB
AKM Rafiqul Islam, Managing Director and CEO of Pragati Insurance Company, at a function on Saturday distributed certificates among the participants of 'Effective Business Correspondence' course, conducted by the Independent University Bangladesh (IUB), says a press release.

Dr BM Chowdhury, Rector of the University was present on the occasion.

France-Bangladesh Chamber of Commerce and Industry

A 13-member executive committee of France-Bangladesh Chamber of Commerce and Industry was elected at its AGM yesterday for a two-year (1997-1999) term, reports UNB.

Francis Dubus was elected president, while A K M Shamsuddin and Oaul Galzin vice-president and treasurer of the committee respectively, said a press release.

Customs seizes goods worth Tk 50 lakh

Officials of Customs Intelligence seized 21 cartons of various goods, worth about Taka 50 lakh, while the cartons were being checked out from the air freight godown in the city without payment of the custom duty, an official press release said yesterday, reports BSS.

On the basis of secret information, the officials seized the cartons, imported from Dubai, for rechecking after the Custom authorities had performed the custom duty formalities.

The cartons were found packed with razor blades, umbrellas, deodorant sprays, and pencils, among other things, which were not declared before the Custom formalities.

A departmental case was filed in this connection.



The popular musical band, LRB, performing at a concert, sponsored by Coca-Cola, on the occasion of BUET Rag '97.



Students of Loretta School visited the Liberation War Museum at Segun Bagicha in the city recently. The visit was arranged by the museum as part of its programme to bring school and college students to the museum to learn about the history of the Liberation War.

WCI hails PM Call to create SAARC fund for victimised women

Women and Children International (WCI), a Boston-based humanitarian organisation, yesterday hailed Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina for her strong role in adopting the Male Declaration on trafficking of women and children, reports BSS.

In a press release issued Saturday in the city, the president of WCI, Dr Abdul Momen, urged the Prime Minister to take the initiative to create a SAARC fund for victimised women and children and to increase public awareness on the issue.

Publication ceremony held

The publication ceremony of two books translated by Prof Kabir Chowdhury was held at the Jatuya Press Club on Sunday, reports BSS.



M A Syed, Chairman, Rupali Bank, addressing an exporters' conference at Narayanganj recently. A K M Nazmul Haque, Managing Director, Prof Nazma Rahman, Director, S M Monaim Hossein, GM and other high officials of the bank were also present.



Mohammadi Group was presented with the 'International Supplier of the Year 1996' award by Wal-Mart of the USA recently.