

# Women and Security

Imagination is more important than knowledge  
— Albert Einstein

## Public Dialogue on "Women and Security": A Report

A PUBLIC dialogue on "Women and Security" was jointly organized by Center For Alternatives and the Daily Star at the IBA Auditorium on Saturday, November 21, 1998. The objective of this dialogue was to bring together the women's movement activists, civil society and the concerned citizens for exchanging their views on the causes behind violence against women and their prescriptions for change. The dialogue was divided into two sessions. The first session was on Home, Body and Violence. The session focused on gender biased socialization that contributes to the insecurity of women. The second session was on State, Law and Violence. It dealt with state ideology and faults in the legal system that contribute to violence against women and how women can fight back. The participants drew on personal experience, tried to define theoretical concepts and analyze the linkages between social/political institutions (family, educational institutions, state) and the ways they produce patriarchal ideology. Their prescription for change varied from individual initiative to overhauling of the social structure.

**(i) Insecurity at Home:** Meghna Guhathakurata of DU, pointed out, the family's view of security is that women are weak so their activities, mobility, expression need to be controlled and contained within a socio-cultural religiously sanctioned sphere and women need protectors. Such notions as "women should be controlled for her own good" and "women need assigned protectors to ensure physical, economic security" reinforce the construction of weak women. Participants stressed that the root of the problem lies in not perceiving a woman as an independent human being. Thus, the women are not prepared to ensure their safety and the ideology of gender violence is reproduced.

Moreover, gender violence against women in the family further makes their position insecure. Niaz Zaman and Najmussema Mahtab of DU stressed that violence took many forms: physical, psychological, and emotional. In many cases domestic violence (esp. systemic violence) takes the form of psychological and mental violence through intra-household gender discrimination in food, space, resource allocation, sex preference of male children etc. that have deep impact on female children. This can also take the form of controlling women's activities (i.e. socializing with friends, natal family, verbal abuse). Niaz Zaman pointed out that justification of intra-family gender discrimination leads to production of male superiority and gender biased ideology among family members. This ideology further sustains the gender-biased attitude and systemic violence.

Sonia Amin of DU pointed out that family's excessive control to control girl's mobility is action is from the fear of sexual violence and the need to control the girl's sexuality. Instead of explaining the basic facts of life and teaching the girl to honor values most of the parents try to 'guard' their daughters (to and from school, colleges, and control their outside activities) so the family 'honor' is intact. Thus, women grow up without learning how to operate independently in the outside world or how to tackle sexual harassment effectively. Ironically, in many cases the young girls do become victims of incest or sexual violence perpetrated by relatives. Shaheen Anam, a social activist, also pointed at the violence faced by house-workers (physical and sexual abuse).

**(ii) Insecurity of the Body:** Participants emphasized that society deems women as property of some male and objectifies women's body. This gives rise to sexual violence, harassment and also the attitude to blame the women for their victimization. Some male participants demonstrated this attitude when they accused women of wearing 'provocative' dresses, which made men loose control. This patriarchal attitude about women's sexuality gives rise to the need for controlling women, assigning protectors and imposing all the burden of purdah on women. Fear of rape and sexual violence at educational institutions, workplace, public place etc. was pointed out by the female participants. Sexual harassment, eve-teasing faced by the garment workers, female students at educational institutions were specifically mentioned. Niaz Zaman mentioned that she had to reallocate office rooms of the female teachers of her dept because their offices on the fourth floor of Arts Building were deemed unsafe. The notions such as 'family honor of the victim is soiled' or 'one has lost everything in life if chastity is lost' etc keeps women in mortal fear of sexual violence. These notions also

teach women not to seek redress and to be passive. Moreover, female participants mentioned the 'body' was a 'weapon' for their male colleagues to psychologically harass them by spreading rumors about their alleged affairs, sexual involvement.

**(iii) Insecurity Created by the State:** Anu Mohammed of JU pointed out that prevalent perception that the state would be a refuge for women against violence is a misconception. The state justifies and sanctions gender violence in many cases. The participants identified the following four ways through which the state creates insecurity for women.

(a) Some participants pointed out that ideology of a 'masculinized' defense policy (based on external threat) and exclusion of women from the defense forces (except for in doctors and nurses core) perpetuates traditional view that women need to be protected and leaves the forces insensitive to gender violence.

(b) Participants also expressed that hegemonic nation state building (accommodating only the Bengali Muslims) sanctioned state violence against sub-nationalist groups. This is apparent in CHT and women are the worst victims. In 1991-92 alone 47 Hill women were raped by the forces stationed in Chittagong and no official steps were taken against the perpetrators. Shumari Chakma from Hill Women's Federation presented horrifying details of VDF raping school going children in CHT.

(c) Some participants stressed that state role in ensuring security of women is closely related to the class and political dynamics. Rehnuna Ahmed of JU pointed out that the rapists of the JU were let off because of their connections with the political elite and their action was 'sanctioned' by the state. The class question was also raised by many while discussing the security needs of garment workers. Many even asked the question whether the society and state would have been concerned about women's security if the middle class / upper class women were safe.

(d) Absence of women's representation in the state machinery and lack of political weight as a constituency marginalized women and allowed the state and political parties to pay lip service to preventing gender violence. Participants felt that this is one of the reasons why the state has not taken effective role to

change gender biased personal laws, or effective measures to curb rape, acid throwing (other than just passing laws).

**(iv) Insecurity Created by Law:** Two factors became evident through the discussion on relationship between law and women: (a) in many cases the laws were inadequate to deal with gender violence (and the ineffectiveness of the law enforcing agencies further aggravates the situation). (b) sometimes law itself perpetuates and contributes to gender violence. Salma Sobhan from Ain O Shalish Kendra (ASK) pointed out that law in Bangladesh was an imperfect weapon for women. In many cases the legal reforms carried out were 'surface' reforms that did not empower women. For example, the Family Court Ordinance of 1985 did not help women. She also pointed to the negligence /ineffectiveness of law enforcing agencies. She cited the Sheema Chowdhury case where the accused were let off because of the negligence of law enforcement officers. Salma Sobhan stressed that in many cases the women may suffer even more because of the attitude present in the law. For example, Khaleda Khatun, an advocate, stressed that the laws dealing with judicial process of rape cases further aggravate psychological and emotional traumas of rape victims.

Shirin Huq of JU also mentioned that many women were not aware about various provisions in the law and cannot take measures against gender violence.

### Recommendations

**(i) Enforcing Existing Law and Law Reform:** Prof Salma Sobhan mentioned that though existing laws were not perfect, if these were implemented properly then gender violence could have been curbed. The local administration needs to be made accountable for the incidents of violence in their area. For example, she mentioned that in cases of incidents of fatwa the local administration can take steps against the fatwabazs for inciting violence. She pointed that even if the attitude of the law enforcing officers cannot be changed, their behavior can be controlled if accountability of the system was ensured.

It was also recommended that existing gender-biased laws (religious personal law) should be reformed and new laws need to be enacted. Some stressed that the Constitution guarantees equal rights and

that it can be a basis for changing biased personal laws. Khaleda Khatun mentioned the Muslim family Law of 1961 (though not very radical) is the proof that these personal laws can be modified. She also gave a few examples of gender sensitive new laws that are still being formulated and stressed that more innovative laws need to be enacted. Khatun mentioned that currently a bill has been placed before the parliament that in rape cases the testimony of the victim should count as primary evidence. Khatun also mentioned that women's groups are pressuring that in case of police committing gender violence, a third party should investigate and that women should be included in the investigation board.

**(ii) Representation:** Center for Alternatives strongly suggested that the representation of women at the parliament should be at par with men (50% for increasing political weight of women as a constituency). The women's representation issue needs to be pursued seriously by the women's organizations and other concerned parties since by 2001 the time limit will be over for the present provision for reservations of seats for women. Rehman Sobhan stressed that the creation of a political constituency would lead to a better communication between women workers (right activists) and politically active women who would be able to push women's agenda. He also clarified that if women's representation was legally and constitutionally ensured then the process of taking a political campaign to women and exposing them to a political process will create a sense of political worth. This would give women a political voice and the gain would be incremental (not absolute).

**(iii) Fighting Violence In and Outside Home:** Suraya Begum from CSS pointed out that people should be made conscious about gender discrimination within the family (about food, resource, space allocation), which creates insecure position of women. She also mentioned that without changing gender biased family structure, which contributes to insecurity of women, violence at home, cannot be eradicated.

Many women activists identified 'inner strength' as the first stepping stone for fighting gender violence (esp. outside home). They felt that self-awareness and spirit to fight back empowers women and puts aggressor on their

back feet as they do not expect any resistance. They pointed out that instead of becoming a passive helpless victim, women must try to use their wits and strength (in some cases) and play an active role. Participants also suggested that families, educational institutions need to be made aware that traditional mentality of blaming the victims of sexual violence, the notion of family honor being soiled and keeping silent makes women more insecure. Instead the family and educational institutions should teach women how they can tackle sexual violence and harassment (it can be from Karate classes to anything).

They also stressed that awareness should be raised that rape is a deliberate act of aggression not a sexual act. The perpetrator exerts power over the rape victim. Provocation and 'male losing control' are mere excuses. (This needs to be done in order to prevent psychological and emotional violence inflicted on the rape victim by her family, community, society).

Shaheen Anam also stressed the role of the media in creating an intense advocacy program against gender violence. Shaheen stated that the Bangladeshi people need to be galvanized on the issue of gender violence (esp. rape, incest, harassment, violence against house-workers).

### (iv) Education and Curriculum Change:

"Genderization" at school is also very important to change the existing attitude about women. Prof Salma Sobhan pointed out that most 'gender training or sensitization' given to employees or students are at a later stage in life when information does not become an integral part of oneself. This is why gender sensitization programs should start at the primary level. Programs need to be designed and educational policy needs to be formulated for this purpose.

**(v) Sex Education:** Sex education was identified as a vital issue. Nibedita Das Purakayastha of PRIP mentioned that victims of child abuse and incest were easily victimized because of lack of proper sex education from parents or from school. Curriculum for such education needs to be created. Parents also need to be sensitized.

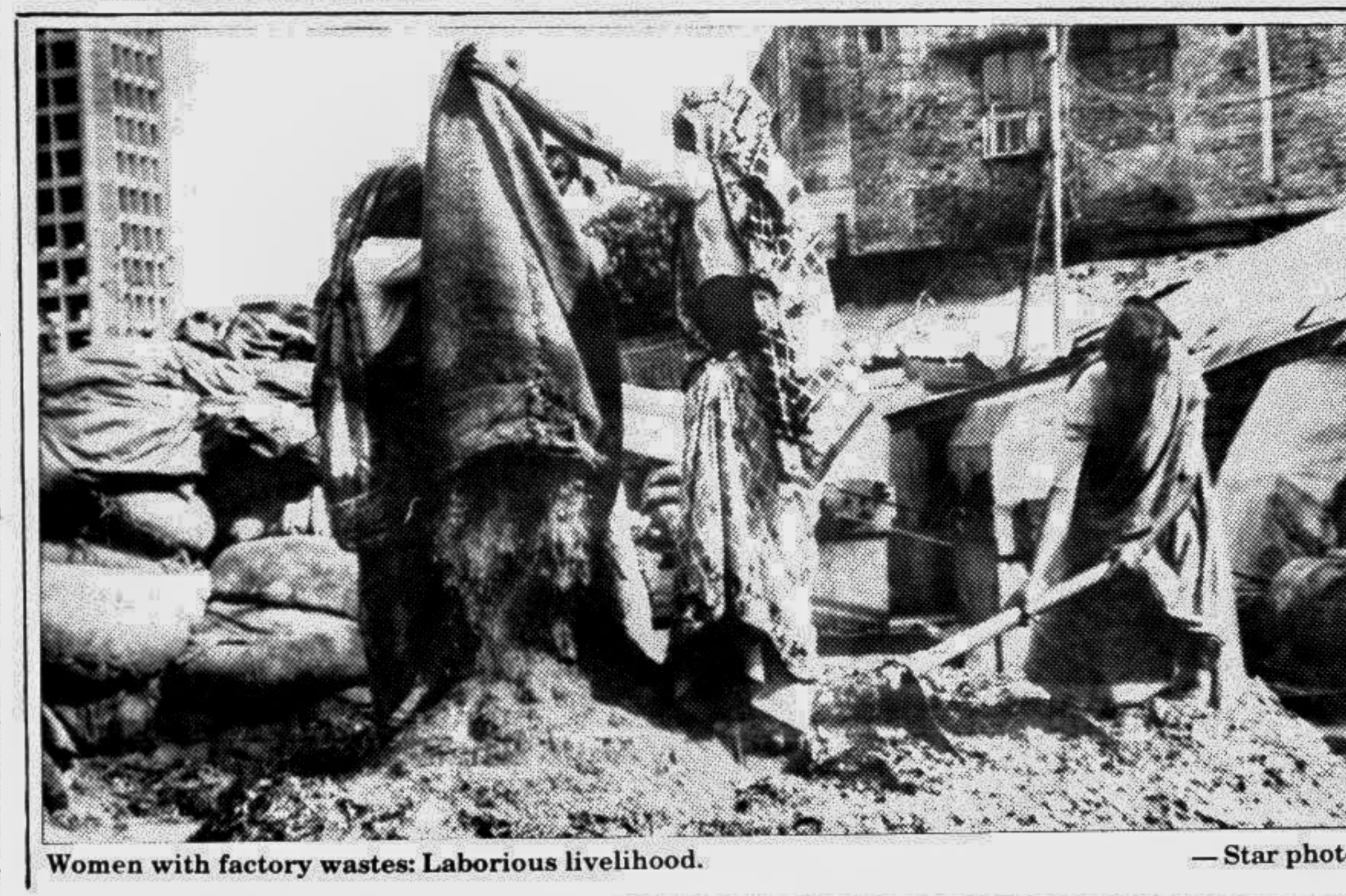
**(vi) Institutional Reform:** Many of the participants felt strongly that lack of specific policies on sexual harassment in the work places and educational institutions made women insecure. The offices and factories should formulate sexual harassment policies. The need for establishing help and counseling centers for victims of sexual and other types of violence was also recommended. Participants felt that educational institutions should have help centers for rape victims where they would

be advised about the legal, medical measures and provided psychological counseling. Shaheen Anam suggested that if a house-workers union could be formed then probably the workers would have more voice.

**(vii) Coordination among Ministries:** The GOB should push for co-ordination between MOWCA (Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs) and all other line and relevant ministries. Gender discrimination should not be viewed as an issue that can be tackled by MOWCA alone (which is the present mentality). Gender needs to be integrated into programs design of all ministries.

**(viii) Mode of Resistance and Integrated Platform:** Participants pointed out that mode of resistance used by women differed. (For example, despite the social taboo garment workers work late and return home in a group to ensure physical security). The resistance strategies of the Hill women against state inflicted gender violence differs from women of dominant ethnic group. Participants pointed out the class, ethnic factors should be taken into account and similarities and differences of needs of women belonging to different groups ought to be identified. An integrated platform needs to be created to fight gender violence.

Report prepared by Sohela Nazreen, Fellow, Center for Alternatives.



Women with factory wastes: Laborious livelihood. — Star photo

## Exploring Women in Media: Quest for a Positive Image

by Lailufar Yasmin

*Women's relationship with the media as is observed in the present reality is only an extension of its existing gender role — the role of a mother, daughter or sister. The deep-rooted attitudes of men and women which tend to perpetuate the existing subservient position of women in the society acts as themes of media. Not only that it tries to reproduce the hegemonic role of masculinity, but also rejects any attempts of fundamental changes in the status quo.*

THE process of transmitting information, ideas and attitudes to the people is disseminated through mass media. Ranging from the print media to the telecommunication—everything is part of mass media. Through the careful intermixture of entertainment and informational context media has an all-pervasive character but it functions in a very subtle way. Its implication often remains unnoticed and ignored, which has both direct and indirect effect on our psychological patterns and settings. The most obvious and prevalent form of mass media influence is manifested through advertisements, which through catchy slogans and constant repetition make the consumers buy the products. In today's age of consumerism, along with the quality of the product the presentation of the product in the market also plays a very crucial role.

The relationship of women with the media, therefore is very crucial in this context. Women's relationship with

the media as is observed in the present reality is only an extension of its existing gender role — the role of a mother, daughter or sister. The deep-rooted attitudes of men and women which tend to perpetuate the existing subservient position of women in the society acts as themes of media. Not only that it tries to reproduce the hegemonic role of masculinity, but also rejects any attempts of fundamental changes in the status quo.

On the other hand, the impact of mass media in forming public opinion or personal belief is immense. It not only affects people's self-perception but also the process of socialisation, ideology and thinking process. At the same time, in many cases the illiterate rural mass accepts uncritically what the media campaigns and to them it appears as "respectable" and ultimately become the prevalent ideology. Therefore those who control the media, also tend to manipulate and exploit the public by disseminating their own views, with regard to im-

plementing their own ideology, this is indeed very ideal for them!

Not only that the media reflects the existing social value and reality but also, it tends to affect the very value and reality itself. In fact, through the distortion of the image of women and propagation of sex stereotypes like motherhood, women's dependency over men, passiveness etc., it tries to interpret and create its own reality. Media has the control over its audience on what to let them watch and to a certain extent, think. Therefore under the existing set up, media recreates the following:

### Sustaining the Societal Inequality

Women in our societal

structure are portrayed as weak: dependent on the male members of the society; eternal sufferers; receivers; sacrificers and above all wrongdoers. The prescribed roles of women under the present norm as traditional mothers and subservient women are reproduced in the media in a way so that we start believing and practising the same in stead of questioning it. According to the present discourse, in which men hold the dominant position, even soap contain a gendered grouping. Lifebuoy soap is only meant for men, which reflects the symbol of success and masculinity. On the other hand, Shabnur or Mimi would always prefer a beauty soap, which stands as a symbol of feminine beauty. At the same

time why should a woman select a beauty soap for her? This is because according to the prevailing concept of society, she needs to be beautiful for a man. On the other hand, if the husband finds his shirt dirty, it must be the error of the wife, as she did not use an effective soap. So it is the responsibility of women to keep everything in order in the house whereas the male member does the hard job outside.

### Enforcing the Distorted Reality

The media not only reproduces the distorted self-image of a woman but also affects her socialisation process. The media depicted image of women influences the pattern of behaviour, learning, dreaming and aspiration (tends to teach a woman about how to manage the best as a housewife. Very few campaigns of the media uphold the daily struggle of women both as a housewife and a working woman.

### Commercialised Use of Women

Portraying women's role as traditional mothers and subservient wives does not mean that in our society women's use as commodity is absent, rather along with such traditional features women are also being used very blatantly as sex objects in the big screens, especially in the movies. Sex in this context is shown as enjoyable and exciting where inevitably rape is linked along with other individual acts of violence against women and of course exciting dances of the heroines along with their shakhi's (female companions) wearing short and obscene dresses are part of it.

Even women's presence in the advertisement campaigns of the products which are used by men only, is also inevitable. Why? The answer is simple. Firstly to present a beautiful face to the male consumers to appeal to them and also to have an enduring effect in their psyche so that while buying the product, the woman's face may create a profound impact on the male consumer.

### Pornography and Women's Exploitation

Pornography is another area where women are directly used

as objects or commodities in sexually explicit situations, which are degrading, demeaning, violent and abusive. Women are the main subjects and targets of pornography the purpose of which is sexual stimulation and gratification.

This is not all. With the spread of Internet, sexual harassment has acquired a different form. There are two types of violence taking place through Internet. Firstly, through e-mail, chat on Internet relay channel and sex shows and secondly pornography through cyberspace. The ongoing debate regarding the restriction or elimination of pornography through Internet is also interesting. The main thrust is not on whether pornography through Internet should be made illegal, but how to protect it from the child users.

### In Search of Alternatives

Given the present scenario of exploitation of women in the mass media, it is high time for us to start initiating some positive thinking.

### Where are We Heading For?

Is the reality presented in our movies consistent with the societal reality? For many it is not. One may argue that, the realities presented in the movies are quite entertaining for the uneducated and poverty ridden sections of the society who are the actual viewers. While for the affluent and the so called enlightened section there is ample scope of entertainment in the cable TV. So we should not bother and let some people make money out of the trash movies. But neither the cable TV programmes nor these movies reflect civil cultural tradition.

It is indeed praiseworthy that the newspapers though after a quite a long time, could reach the agreement that instead of publishing pictures of a rape victim, it would publish that of the rapists. But after the Shaheen rape and murder incident, a newspaper published the almost nude picture of her dead body. Nothing can justify such act. The media must not forget the impact it has over the mass people. It has a moral responsibility towards the society.

### Institutionalising Sex Education: Need of the Hour

The institutionalising of sex education is the need of the hour, some might possess a different view regarding the issue. But there is ample logic in favour of the argument. There is a saying that curiosity kills the cat. Yes, given the spread of 'dish culture' even in some of the rural areas, the curiosity of the younger generation for knowing what sex is tremendous. If sex education is made compulsory, it can gradually eradicate the young teenager's misconceptions about the matter and contribute to their understanding of the sexual factor from a positive point of view.

### Highlighting the Positive Image of Women

Highlighting the positive image of women is the most important aspect through which women's actual role in society can be unmasked. Women are not only passive recipient in the society rather their contribution (if we take it for granted that they only act as mothers, wives and sisters) towards the nurturing of the system which is often seen as unproductive work should get its due recognition. In case of working women, this is far more important. Often the media depicted image of women neglect that the role played by women as partners of men in the development process of the country. That is why in the

advertisement campaigns of agricultural products, banks or other financial institutions women's role is portrayed only as companion of the successful men, not as their partners. Due to these prevailing misconception, the fact that the primary role of women as producers and managers of food for the household in the Third World countries is neglected and sometimes deliberately manipulated. Therefore, a new and fresh look towards the issue is needed.

### Strict Censorship for the Pornography and Immoral Use of the Internet

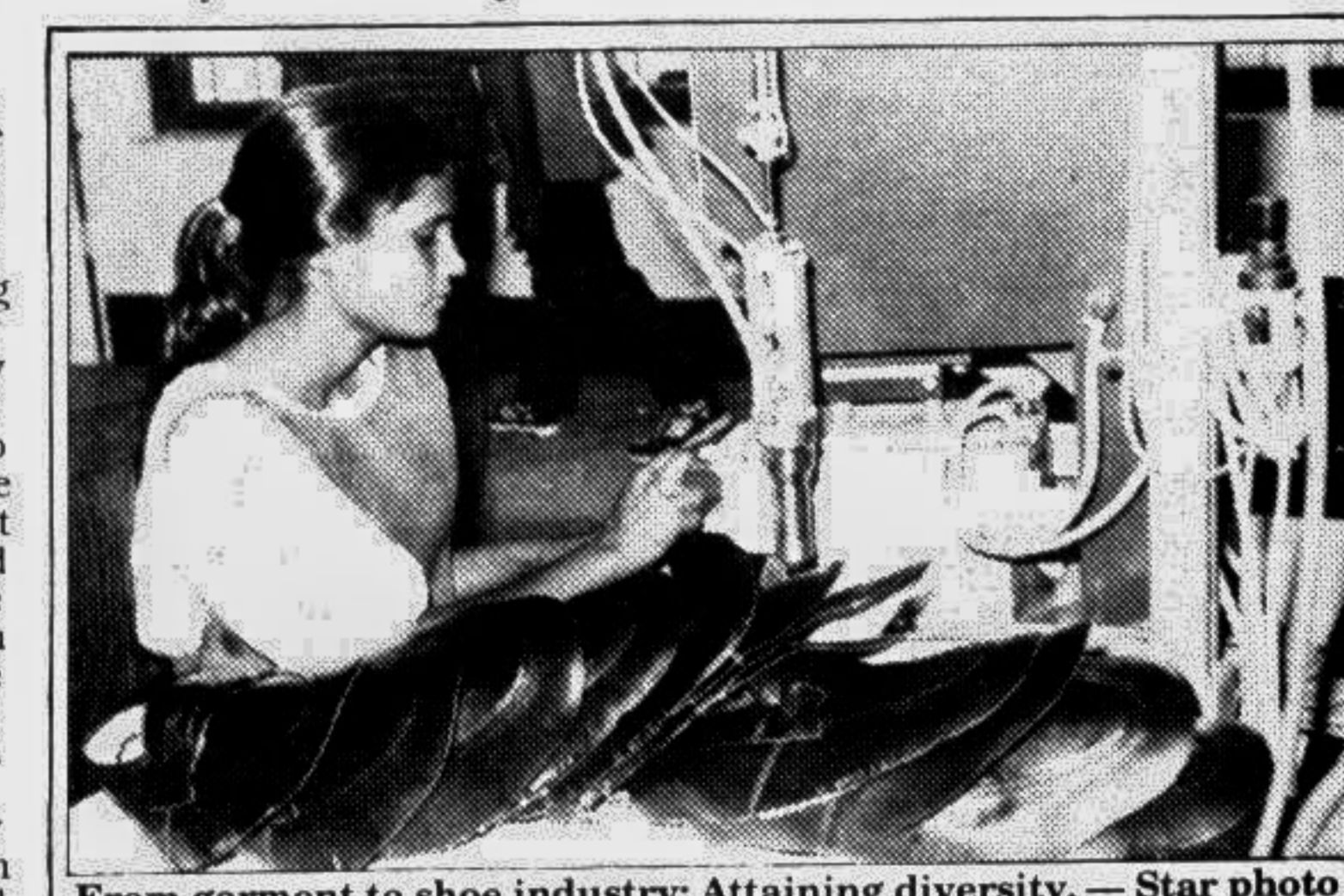
According to the Human Right Watch, at least 20 countries have imposed restriction on Internet channels that show sexually explicit or politically objectionable features. But at the same time we have to admit that it is not always possible to control the Internet system, since the scope of harassment remains open through e-mail.

The present portrayal of woman is indeed a dismal one. It is dismal not only for the women but also for the society for it recreates 'woman' not an independent being. This woman again is exploited and objectified by the society. We do look forward towards a media that would work hand in hand with woman in their search and march towards the establishment of a new woman.

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Women have been working in farms since long, but have they attained and security — economic or otherwise? — Star photo



From garment to shoe industry: Attaining diversity. — Star photo

The topic of the next issue is: "Political Protest: Search for Alternatives" to be published on December 10, 1998. Creative suggestions are invited from our esteemed readers. Please send your materials to: Imtiaz Ahmed, Executive Director, Centre for Alternatives, Room No 431, Lecture Theatre, Arts Building, Dhaka University, Dhaka-1000. Tel: 9661900-59, Ext. 4550; Fax: (8802) 836769; E-mail: imtiaz@bangla.net