

## FOCUS

International Women's Day

## Labour Lost

Ekram Kabir takes a look at the economic status of women, their contribution to the labour force and government initiatives to empower women



Women are increasingly taking part in economic activities

for about 15 per cent it was a secondary occupation. In rural industries, women work both in unskilled and semi-skilled jobs. In rural enterprises, a clear division of labour is seen: women rarely perform any managerial, supervisory or entrepreneurial functions. Women are also confined mostly to home-based production while their work is characterised by low labour productivity and profits. Only three out of a thousand women are in

professional jobs. Poor women take on a larger role in income earning activities for their households and their earnings is a critical input for household survival among the poor.

The government, however, has not been sitting idle. In an effort to improve women's position and to enhance women's role in the process of development, it has tried to break down norms segregating men and women over the past two decades. A policy decision was

taken by the government to integrate women into the process of economic development; efforts were made to increase utilisation of rural hospital services and improve maternal and neonatal healthcare, including training activities, and development of a human resource plan under several projects; there has been budgetary increases to the education sector, particularly primary education; and there has also been significant progress in recent

years in school enrolments, especially that of girls, at both primary and secondary levels, due to the implementation of compulsory primary education stipends for female secondary school students.

Even when the women are working full time, just as much as their male counterparts, they face wage discrimination. This has nothing to do with how much they work, but societal attitude towards women working. Modernisation has not been able to bring about a change whereby women will be accepted professionally as well. And for this we have the women themselves to blame. If nobody helps themselves, no one else can do it for them. Government policies and NGOs cannot realise women's rights. For them, this is what they do for a living. They may not have the sincerity to really bring about any changes, because once achieved, they would have to find new issues. Why would they want to move away from the status quo? Also, why do the women have to depend on others to achieve something they should be able to do themselves?

It is individual efforts that can really rock the boat. Each and everyone, male or female, should speak up if they feel that their rights have been impinged upon.

Even today, women are being set apart from men. At bus terminals, at crowded shops and streets they are being harassed.

To save themselves from shame they hide behind smiles and lead on life as though nothing happened. In fact, many have taken these things in their stride. The modern male does try to understand, yet cannot come out of tradition. Even if not consciously, they take women to be fragile and often meant only to look good. It would be difficult to come out of such behaviours.

## Beyond Rhetorics

Women blame men for not giving them what they deserve. But what are they doing for themselves? asks Navine Murshid



WOMEN'S Day is here once again. Yet, the age-old story of discrimination against women still holds true. The underlying reason

behind this is that the wrong people are screaming for women's rights, people who are hardly affected.

These people -- a section of elite women detached from the majority of the women -- are really not bothered about women's rights. It hardly matters to them whether the girl next door gets her due or not. It is deplorable that today 'gender issues' is one of the 'hot topics' and anybody who wants fast fame and recognition is selling this. And succeeding! Women's problems should not be esoteric, it should be a principle everyone can understand, a point everyone can talk about. The people who are the victims of discrimination must be able to speak up for justice to be done. Allowing the 'women's organisations' to be their spokesperson will not solve anything. The increase in crime rates involving women bears testimony to that.

Ironically, women are the ones who mostly denounce their rights. It is women who say that they are physically and mentally weaker. They are the 'fairer' sex and they take pride in being oh-so-fragile. It is the mother who gives her son the bigger platter; the grandmother who says the best place for a girl is at home. It is ironic how a woman publicly talks of females not being allowed to work outside the home and comes home to ask her daughter-in-law why the food hasn't been laid. It is the 'fighting women' who say that women's rights are not applicable in the Bangladesh context; women who denounce girls who have been sexually assaulted. An MP spoke about Badhan, the girl who was assaulted on New Year's eve, in derogatory terms, blaming her for the whole episode. The women MPs present during the 'speech' did not utter a word.

The women blame men for not giving them what they deserve. But what are they doing for themselves? It is high time that women realise that



A Role Model: Women like these can bring about change

screaming and shouting bring no result. If the huss and cries were really heeded, then why are there so many Tanias and Badhans out there? Why have the women's organisations not been able to do anything about the increase in crimes involving even the basic of human rights? True, there have been processions, there have been high-sounding speeches, but what did not become a reality is a decline in rape-related offences or other violence against women.

This is the time of action, of work and not speeches and processions only. People are tired of listening to what is right and wrong. Anything that happens that women do not like becomes a violation of their rights. These things are trivial when the context is so big; when even the basic rights of a woman cannot be provided. True, there is a lot of publicity involved, but in the long-run, nothing is achieved. Everything remains as it was and the women activists keep doing what they are best at -- scream-

ing. In the world of competition and progress, women have to come forward, not because they are women, but because they hold right qualifications. What the women activists want to achieve seems to be a bias towards them when opportunities are given. And to a certain extent, they are accomplishing this. The numerous 'job opportunity' adverts reading 'females are encouraged to apply' are examples of their feats.

Women do not need a day in tribute to themselves to establish their rights. If women want equality and equity seen to be done, then the key to it would be hard work and commitment. First of all, they should prove to themselves that they have the same capability as the males of society. Only then can they prove it to others as well. Quality and good work always speak for itself. The women do not have to publicise their aptitude for doing things. What they do have to do is to talk a little less and let their actions speak for it.

## Journey to Progress

Towhida Waheed writes on how women are overcoming barriers to education



FAZLE Hasan Abed, Founder and Executive Director of BRAC, told a World Bank conference in Washington last week that to transform Bangladesh society, no single intervention will be as significant as the promotion of education of girls in the thousands of villages across the country. In Bangladesh remarkable progress has been made in enrolling children - as many girls as boys - to primary schools. However, many girls drop out before completing secondary school; only 20 per cent enroll in higher education. Less than 14 per cent of our country's secondary school teachers are women, and only 8 per cent in rural areas. More than half of rural secondary schools have never employed a woman teacher. Bangladesh is not alone. At least 130 million children world-wide are not attending school; 81 million of those are girls. By the time she is 18, a girl has had an average of 4.4 fewer years of education than a boy.

The following stories show how real and imagined barriers work against gender parity in education.

## Three Stories

Mahfuza, aged 13, read ... in Class 7 in her village. Her teacher Rupali noticed that Mahfuza looked worried and often fell asleep during class. Upon gentle probing, Mahfuza revealed that her mother had been ill for a month, so she had to do all the housework and take care of four siblings. Her parents wanted Mahfuza to leave school and get married early, just like her mother did. They were worried that she had a long walk to school. They were also worried that she would fail her exams this year. Rupali visited Mahfuza's parents and asked them to give her a chance to help Mahfuza with her studies.

Rupali had her own diffi-

## Shared Experiences, Shared Efforts ...

The World Conference on Education for All held in Jomtien, Thailand in 1990, singled out education of women and girls as the most urgent development priority in the world. In China, a programme involving parents, community leaders, local and national government agencies, UNICEF, and other organisations, taught mothers literacy skills so that they could become more involved in their daughters' education. In Jamaica, a women's centre with a certified teaching programme for adolescent mothers was set up so that teenage girls who became pregnant and would normally drop out of school could continue to study and return to the formal education system later. In Zimbabwe, local communities formed discussion groups on gender issues and organised life

## Happy Endings ...

The Headmaster of Mahfuza's school happily wrote that Mahfuza had successfully passed her exams. She is studying harder and is determined to continue studying so that she can one day become a teacher like Rupali-apa. Rupali, after three repeat interviews, was eventually appointed as the science teacher at her school. The Headmaster convinced the School Management Committee that a good teacher is more important to the children than a classroom. She continues to make her lessons interesting and remains gentle and caring to the children in her class, paying attention, especially to those who need more help than others. Rupali is gaining a lot of respect among her colleagues and parents of the children, as well as the School Management Committee.

Shanaz attended the training. She was one of the most active participants in the program. Her enthusiasm, ability to reflect on new ideas and share her insights received special commendation from the trainers. Her contribution was much appreciated by other trainees. She is now working hard to implement an action plan for applying what she

learnt during the training. She also actively promotes participation of her women colleagues in professional development opportunities such as the one she was able to experience.

The stories of Mahfuza, Rupali, and Shanaz are based on actual cases reported to PROMOTE during 1999-2000. The names of the girls and women have been changed.

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## Hoping for the Impossible?

Campaign for equal rights for women stepped up in Nepal, reports Deepak Gajurel from Kathmandu



rights for women, including the right to parental property.

Even as the bill is being discussed by a parliamentary committee and is to be tabled before the House of Representatives, women's rights activists have been busy in the run-up to International Women's Day today, lobbying with Members of Parliament, particularly since few political parties have shown any inclination so far to pass the bill.

In a bid to mount pressure, a group of activists handed over a memorandum to Prime Minister K.P. Bhattarai demanding quick passage of the bill.

The government should seriously consider our demand, otherwise we will be forced to take to the streets," said Shova Singh, a women's rights activist.

This is the second time that a bill to amend the provisions of the Muluki Ain, or the Civil Code, has surfaced in Parliament. The first proposed amendment was shelved automatically when Parliament was dissolved last year. The bill proposes that daughters, like sons, be given equal rights over parental property, known as Ansha in Nepali. Currently, the Muluki Ain gives this right to an unmarried daughter. But after marriage, a woman has to give up her right to parental property. While a wife does have a right to her husband's property, many conditions are attached to this provision.

Last year the government was forced by an order of the Supreme Court to table in Par-

liament a bill providing women with equal rights, including the right to parental property. The Supreme Court issued the order following a writ petition demanding the denouement of provisions in the Muluki Ain that discriminate against women in various social and economic spheres.

Major political parties do not seem inclined to see the bill through and activists therefore fear the bill will never become an act. While the parties are afraid that going against the bill will make them unpopular among women, there is also the pressure of bowing to orthodox social values. One of the provisions says a woman cannot be divorced on the ground that she is having an extra-marital relationship. Another provision says a woman can lay claim to half her husband's property if she doesn't want to live with him any more.

--India Abroad News Service

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