

## FOCUS

# Women in Development and National Planning: Sensitisation Needed

A two-pronged strategy is suggested for effective integration of 'Women in Development' into the 'National Development' process. The strategy is based on the premise of raising/creating awareness about women's empowerment needs and scope among the planners/decision makers as well as among the beneficiaries of such empowerment.

by Dr K B Sajjadur Rasheed

Five years after the 1995 Beijing World Conference on Women, the UN has met to review and assess 'Beijing Plus Five' status on gender equality. A 180-page report on 'The World's Women 2000' released by the UN Statistics Division has recorded a mixed picture of progress in the 1995 Beijing Declaration, and underscored that gender equality still remains a distant dream. This assessment is valid for Bangladesh too, where the pace of progress in mainstreaming women in the development process of Women in Development (WID) capability has been neither remarkable nor steady. A large number of promises and pledges have been made here, but have not been matched with actions. In other words, the WID scenario is long on rhetoric, but short on actions.

The low social, economic and legal status of women in Bangladesh is not the result of any historical accident, rather it is the cumulative result of a skewed social process that is conditioned by bigotry, tradition and inequitable custom. It is nearly 25 years since we had observed the International Women's Year, but the progress toward gender parity is far from satisfactory. Women have continued to endure endless political rhetoric, social shenanigan and economic marginalisation. It is also ironic that women themselves have often assisted in institutionalising discrimination through their actions which fix the idea of inferior status among the girl children. Part of the responsibility for slow progress in enhancing WID capability also lies with some of the women's advocacy groups whose main preoccupations are festive rallies and symposiums (largely for media attention) rather than focussing on implementation-oriented agenda of actions.

The concept of WID has been accepted in principle by the Government of Bangladesh with a view to raising the status of women in society. Yet, the successive Five Year Plans have not adequately articulated policies, strategies and implementable actions in order to translate the WID concept into reality and integrate it with the national planning mechanism. The policy statements of various ministries envisaged a secondary role for women — not as equal partners with men in the economic mainstream. In the first three Five Year Plans, conscious policy attempts to mainstream women in the development process and minimize

their poverty were lacking or half-hearted. The First Five Year Plan (1973-78) focussed on the rehabilitation of war affected women and merely upheld the traditional child-bearing and child rearing roles of women. The Second Five Year Plan (1980-85) recognized needs for skill development and income generating opportunities for women, but resource allocations to meet such goals were not commensurate with the needs. The Third Five Year Plan (1985-90) had included in its objectives the reduction of gender disparity, yet, at the end of the Plan period, very little attainment of that goal was noticeable. The Fourth (1990-95) and the Fifth (1997-2002) Five Year Plans placed women within the macro framework focussing more on the development of poor and disadvantaged women. Nonetheless, verifiable tangible results of the proclaimed goals/objectives in the Plans are at best sub-optimal.

Beside the Plan commitments, the government has taken several policy actions to ensure women's empowerment as a follow-up of the Beijing World Conference on Women. A National Policy for Women's Advancement (NPWA) was adopted in 1997 with one of the goals stated as "elimination of all forms of discrimination against women and girls." However, Bangladesh, in its ratification of the UN Convention of the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (UNCEDAW), had expressed reservations to certain articles, dealing with family, marriage, custody and eradication of discrimination. Without full endorsement and implementation of the UNCEDAW, the goals of NPWA will remain truncated.

The reservations to parts of the UNCEDAW are retrogressive and contradictory because the Constitution of Bangladesh specifically lays down principles and commitments to ensure gender equity and equal rights for men and women through Articles 10, 19, 27, 28 and 29.

Following the Beijing Conference's Platform For Action (PFA), Bangladesh has prepared a National Action Plan (NAP) for the implementation of the PFA. The NAP includes in its objectives the translation of the policy statements contained in all ministries in order to sensitise them on gender issues and perspectives. The NAP has listed this as one of the several strategies, though specific formats have not yet been concretised. Such training to effect

equality in order to strengthen WID capability. The Ministry of Women and Children Affairs (MoWCA) is designated as the lead agency for women's development. But, the MoWCA does not have any specific overriding authority over policy actions on gender issues made by other ministries. WID Focal Points were identified in 32 ministries/divisions by the MoWCA in 1996; the nature and content of output from such focal points in addressing gender concerns at the national level are unknown or unclear. Examples of yawning gaps between commitments and actions are found in almost all ministries. The NAP specifies (for the implementation of the PFA) activities in the programmes of all ministries for social, economic and legal empowerment of women. To cite instances from the Ministries of Agriculture, Environment and Health, one can highlight such proposed activities as ensuring "women's right to land," "Women's right to waterbodies," and "equal rights of inheritance irrespective of gender." It is common knowledge that little or no progress has been made in these sectors.

A principal reason for the lack of WID integration into national planning process is the absence of gender sensitivity among the policymakers and implementing personnel — both at the national and local levels. This is true for bureaucrats as well as elected representatives. The age-old traditional mindset acts as a brake on gender enlightenment among those who are responsible for planning and implementing schemes.

A two-pronged strategy is suggested for effective integration of WID into the national development process. The strategy is based on the premise of raising/creating awareness about women's empowerment needs and scope among the planners/decision makers as well as among the beneficiaries of such empowerment. WID should be the concern for all sectoral ministries, while the MoWCA should only play a catalytic (and not exclusive) role in implementing the NAP.

One of the two above mentioned strategies relates to developing skills and competency — through training — among the staff (both men and women) of all ministries in order to sensitise them on gender issues and perspectives. The ultimate goal is to incorporate the gender dimension in development planning with a view to attaining gender

gender sensitisation should also be arranged for the Members of Parliament (including women MPs) as well as elected officials of local governments.

The second strategy involves a policy decision to incorporate mechanism in the Planning Commission to screen all development schemes in order to make them gender-friendly. It should receive the same priority and importance as do the process of environmental screening of all development schemes. The officials of the Planning Commission should be given orientation on gender perspectives through training as well as through a Manual for Gender Sensitivity Assessment so that WID components receive similar weightage as environmental issues get in environmental screening.

Our universities and research institutes can assist the government in their training programmes and manual development. The University of Dhaka has been in the forefront in imparting gender related studies for quite some time.

Gender and women's studies have been included in the curriculum of the Department of Geography and Environment for over a decade. Similarly, gender studies are also included in the curricula of Sociology and Anthropology, where the course contents are largely addressed to the basic tenets of their respective disciplines. On the other hand, gender related course in the Department of Geography and Environment have been designed with broader vision, scope and applicability.

These include, *inter alia*, themes on women's livelihood and economic potential, their role in natural resource utilisation, conservation and management, and analysis of women's differential social, cultural, biological and economic needs and aspirations. Women's studies are best developed in a cross-disciplinary format, and the university's different disciplines which have gender components in their curricula, could pull their resources together to assist the government in its efforts to sensitise the policymakers and implementing staff. The WID programmes in Bangladesh, however laudatory they might be, *in theory*, hardly yield tangible results without active sensitisation of the implementing staff on the gender dimension.

The writer is Professor of Geography and Environment at the University of Dhaka.

# Water is the Key to Thirst for Peace

One salient fact overrides all others in the 21st century: Today's six billion people — projected to grow to eight billion within 25 years — must share the same amount of water on this planet shared by less than one-sixth that many before the turn of the 19th century, write Nobel Peace Prize recipients **Mikhail Gorbachev** and **Shimon Peres**

As population grows, megacities expand, greater and greater demand will be placed on freshwater supplies. Unlike a resource like oil, for which coal, wind or nuclear power can be an alternative, water has no substitute.

This condition can either be a motor for peace, leading to unprecedented cooperation to manage supplies, or it can generate greater conflict, perhaps even war in water-scarce regions.

Unless we acknowledge this crisis and take steps to head it off, our future on a global scale could look a lot like certain locales in the past when, 4,500 years ago, the city states of Lushash and Umma went to war over irrigation rights along the Tigris River.

Indeed, in our time, we are already witnessing outbreaks among farmers fighting over resources from Cochabamba, Bolivia, to Cauvery, India.

And if nothing is done in the next 10 to 15 years, the thirst for peace in the dry and volatile Middle East may revert to a beligerent fight over water.

A glance at a world map conveys the erroneous impression that there could hardly be a water problem. But 97 per cent of Earth's water is in the sea and very expensive to desalinate. Two per cent is locked in the polar ice-caps.

Subtracting the amount lost to floods, evaporation, inaccessible regions and contamination, that leaves a mere 0.1 per cent of global water resources to sustain billions of us in the coming century.

It is true that this limited freshwater is a renewable resource; in principle it can be fully recycled and reused. But contamination beyond repair diminishes even what is available in limited quantities.

Much of the world relies on natural underground aquifers

for freshwater. Yet, we are rapidly using those reserves, digging ever deeper wells like those in northern Syria and lowering water tables in every continent. Some alarmed Chinese leaders have even suggested moving their capital from Beijing because of chronic water shortages.

More than half the major rivers in the world are going dry or are so polluted they endanger the health of those depending on them. In 1998, 25 million people fled their homes because of water crises in river basins — a far higher number than refugees from war in that same period.

Unless we already acknowledge this crisis and take steps to head it off, our future on a global scale could look a lot like certain locales in the past when, 4,500 years ago, the city states of Lushash and Umma went to war over irrigation rights along the Tigris River.

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We all know that deserts create poverty, and that poverty often leads to war — especially when everyone is armed to the teeth. But missiles in an armed desert can't carry water any more than minefields can stop pollution from crossing borders.

The alternative to another round of conflict, this time over water instead of land, is cooperation. Desalination or joint management is cheaper than launching wars for rivers.

Recently, Green Cross International, supported by the *Pe-Res* Institute for Peace, has launched a joint effort to encourage cooperation among all stakeholders by finding a way to manage water on a regional basis.

Such an effort is especially critical for Israel, Jordan and the Palestinians, who must get water from the same aquifers. In March, Jordan's King Abdullah, Israel's President Ehud Barak and the Palestinian Authority's President Yasser Arafat all announced support for this initiative.

In the long term, of course, any settlement of the water issue would have to include Syria and Lebanon, which will hopefully be brought into the process sooner rather than later.

Overall, we are optimistic about the prospects for cooperation in the Middle East. This should be an example for other areas, from the Parana Rio de la Plata in South America to the Nile River Basin in Africa. More than 300 water basins in the world are shared by two or more countries — all of which will have to work out complementary arrangements.

On the international level, several proposals have been set

forth that will help encourage regional cooperation, ease conflict and offer a peaceful and sustainable solution to the problems of water scarcity and pollution.

Green Cross International, which promotes international mediation to prevent water conflicts and encourages integrated basin management, has proposed the creation of water-course management authorities for critical international basins, with the authority and tools to implement regional decisions.

The legitimacy of such regional bodies derives from a new concept made necessary by 21st-century realities: Like liberty and the right to a livelihood, access to clean, safe water should be regarded as a human right.

US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright has also recently proposed a worldwide water alliance to keep neighbouring countries from fighting over water. Instead of a formal Nato-like structure, the water alliance would be open to those countries and governments that "understand the urgency of working together to conserve trans-boundary water, manage it wisely and use it well."

We support these proposals as important steps in a new awareness that the planet's most precious resource must be harnessed in the 21st century.

If this awareness can be translated into a political practice of cooperation instead of conflict, humanity as a whole will have reached a new watershed for peace.

**Mikhail Gorbachev** was the last President of the Soviet Union and now heads the International Green Cross and former Israeli Prime Minister **Shimon Peres** is currently Minister of Regional Cooperation. (Courtesy: The Sunday Star)

# The Embarrassing Secret Sue Torr Kept from Her Husband

Britain ranks among the world's top ten countries in the UN's 'quality of life' index, with a literacy rating of 99 per cent. But the table conceals an embarrassing secret — seven million Britons cannot read or write a simple sentence. Gemini News Service reports on a cycle of deprivation that tends to be passed from parents to children.

**T**HIS story is not about you. If you are able to read this then you are not one of the millions of illiterate people in the world.

Nor are you one of the seven million functionally illiterate people in Britain.

That statistic means that one in five Britons over the age

**Jennifer Leask** writes from London

of 15 cannot read well enough, for example, to find the word "plumber" in a telephone directory.

For most, such as Sue Torr, it means a life of subterfuge as they try to avoid revealing their inability to read and write.

Born into a poor family of eight children, Torr says she had little encouragement to read from her parents: "My mum and dad worked. They didn't have time to help us with anything. They were too busy putting bread on the table. Survival

highlighted me, it has brought great honour for my country and my people. This prize has imposed upon me the noble duty of working towards making this world a happy, peaceful abode for all human beings.

Although we live in one corner of the world, we have gone

through a long history of social, political, economic and cultural struggle and have suffered a lot and learnt a lot in the process.

Our struggle for self-determination from 1947 till 1971 is an undeniable proof of this.

We too, like Pearl S Buck, believe that truth shall prevail in the long run and that evil shall be destroyed finally."

Highlighting the condition of the womenfolk in Bangladesh, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina said, "If we can save the women from exploitation and discrimination in the 21st century, they will be able to make valuable contributions to the establishment of a universe of peace, love and fraternity. To realize this dream, we must give them education. I remember a famous saying by Napoleon: 'Give me an educated mother, I will give you an educated nation.' Whenever I talk about the valor of our people, I make a special mention of our women as we cannot dream of a future developed nation by keeping the majority of our 120 million people in darkness."

She also mentioned the indomitable courage and the indefatigable energy of our people who have been waging a relentless battle against the destructive forces of Nature in order to reconstruct their battered lives. In this connection, Sheikh Hasina said, "I find an ample similarity between the philosophy of Pearl S Buck and the bravery of our people who fight against all odds and adjust themselves to the most different of circumstances. She then narrated the steps she had taken to increase the participation of women in the development activities of her country.

Both the Americans and the Bangladeshis were enthralled by the song. Almost all the members of the Award Selection Committee in their speeches remembered the contributions of Bangabandhu, the war of liberation and the rich tradition of the Bangalee nation.

They informed the audience that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was the second Asian personality after Corazon Aquino of the Philippines to receive this highly honourable Pearl S Buck award.

In her speech, Sheikh Hasina said,

"I am very happy to have received this highly prestigious prize. This prize has not only

7m Britons are functionally illiterate - with reading and writing skills below those of an 11-year-old

Adults with poor basic literacy and numeracy skills are more likely to:

- ✗ be unemployed
- ✗ live in a household where both partners are not in paid employment
- ✗ have children at an earlier age, and to have more children
- ✗ have children who also struggle with basic skills
- ✗ be in bad health
- ✗ be homeless
- ✗ be over-represented in prisons and young-offenders institutions

"I used to write disgustingly scruffy so that people couldn't understand," she says. "You just don't tell anybody. You just keep it to yourself. I never even told my husband."

It was her secret until she was 38, when a teacher at her son's school handed out books to parents, asked them to read the stories and then told her what they thought. Torr finally summoned up the courage to tell someone that she couldn't read and needed help.

But only 250,000 of Britain's army of illiterates are on courses like the one that finally taught Torr to read.

The Department of Education and Employment has pledged to increase the number of people on courses to 500,000 a year, by 2002. But functional illiteracy is part of a wider problem: comparative poverty.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the grouping of the world's most industrialised countries, says in a report released in mid-June that it is no coincidence that the poverty rate in Britain of 20 per cent — the worst in the industrialised world — matches its rate of functional illiteracy. (It points out, too, that Britain has the largest proportion of people 60 per cent, who say they watch television for more than two hours a day.)

Stewart says that is why the UNDP's pioneering Human Poverty Index is so important, as it takes into account generally-ignored factors such as functional illiteracy, long-term unemployment, and the percentage of people not expected to survive to age 60.

And this is where Britain falls down flat, ranking 15 out of 44 countries of High Human Development in the 1999 list.

The author is a Canadian journalist.

## World Peace and Women's Empowerment

### Experience of an International Recognition

by Anisur Rahman

warm reception so far away from our native land.

The topic of the public address was, "Leading a Country in Transition: Challenges and Opportunities". The opening speech was given by Kim Campbell, ex-Prime Minister of Canada and Chairperson, Council of World Women leaders. She mentioned various qualities of Sheikh Hasina, both as a person and as a leader.