

Hindu marriages are governed by laws exclusively applicable to the Hindu community.

few hundred years.

Pereira cites the sly changes in language made in Articles 7,8,9 and 12 of the Policy which correspond to women's equal right in adoption and implementation of economic policy, ownership and control of resources, inheritance rights, mobility in the public and market share and direct election in the reserved seats of women.

"The changes are contrary to what has been committed by the government internationally in the Periodic Reports submitted by the government to the CEDAW Committee" says Perreira. (**see box page 14**)

Clearly the revised policy aims to take away both economic and political rights of women. Article 7 ensures employment to all women both educated and illiterate. This has been changed to 'appropriate' employment to 'both educated and illiterate classes of women' which gives the scope of varied interpretations of what is appropriate. In the political arena the desire to leave out women altogether or reduce their role to one that is merely ornamental, is even more obvious. The original version of Article 8 calls for promoting active participation of women in politics and 'direct elections' in the 'increased reserved seats'; the new version only mentions 'increased reserve seats' . The government, in fact did increase the reserved seats to 45 but without direct elections they remained decorative and just useful for political consolidation of the parties.

The 2004 NPWA also completely deleted Article 9 of the original Policy which called for the appointment of women in high positions including Bangladesh high commissions, university grants commission, planning commission and judiciary. The same Article in its original form called for 30 percent at all levels of decision-making including policy-making process to ensure their equal and full participation but the 30 percent was omitted in the revised policy with 'more participation' rather than 'equal and full participation'. Article 12 of the 1997 document calls for encouraging and providing equal opportunities to women in agriculture, fisheries, livestock rearing and forestry whereas in the tampered version it uses the words 'encourage and give priority' to women in these areas which again is vague and does not guarantee equal opportunities.

Thus the fight to get full ratification of CEDAW is still on for women activists and human rights groups who have been relentlessly trying to establish fundamental rights for women as citizens of a sovereign nation. In 2004 a 'Shadow Report' formulated by Ain O Shalish Kendra, Bangladesh Mahila Parishad and Steps Towards Development was submitted to the UNCEDAW committee which pointed out the areas where the government had not complied with CEDAW although at the time nobody knew about the government's clandestine changes to the NPWA.

The next Periodic Report to the CEDAW Committee is due in 2009. Women and human rights activists fervently hope that the NPWA will be reverted back to its original form that is in harmony with CEDAW standards. Many believe that the present, non-political government, despite its apparent reluctance to do so, can make the necessary changes to the NPWA and significantly smoothen the road. "Those of us who are progressive minded and want women's development believe in a rights-based approach," says Ayesha Khanam, Mahila Parishad's General Secretary at a celebration of CEDAW Committee's 25th anniversary last week, "rather than a protectionist, patriarchial view point". She adds that it is necessary to reduce the historical gap between men and women due to socio-economic and political factors so that women can participate in a level-playing field. "Affirmative action is needed to reduce this gap" comments Khanam, "it is not enough to just announce laws on equality, these laws must have equity in their results". In the domain of private life women are still discriminated against because of personal laws. "If there is no equality in her personal life," says Khanam, a woman cannot be an effective citizen. We hope that the Bangladesh government will fully ratify it (CEDAW)."