

MUNIR UZ ZAMAN/ DRIKNEWS

Maldives. Both times, Boshiron had to sell or mortgage land to pay the fees and bribes required for him to get a job abroad, yet both times her son did not send or bring home much of what he earned. Instead, he brought a burqa for his mother -- something, as a working poor woman in Bangladesh, she had never worn -- insisting that Muslim women in Bangladesh (like those he had seen in the Middle East) should wear burqas.

Sufia, deserted as a young woman with a class four education, was in the first batch of block-printers trained by Brac. Today, she is remarried and supervises a Brac production center with 120 women block- and screen-printers. She was elected, and served one term, as a union council member, but did not stand for re-election as she found it too demanding to do both her Brac work and the union council work.

When her husband died, leaving her with two young sons and a small plot of land, Shunabon sharecropped out the land and returned to her mother's village. She became active in Brac, serving as both a health worker and a poultry extension agent, and engaging in Brac-sponsored poultry rearing. She educated her two sons, who now jointly run a successful grocery store, and support her in her old age. Of the four women, Shunabon appears to have prospered the most, economically and socially: her dress and bearing suggest that she has become a lower middle-class woman with a degree of social status.

Clearly, life has improved in many ways for these women. But the chronic risks of rural Bangladesh persist: there were two major floods and a major cyclone in Bangladesh during 2007. The Manikganj area was flooded twice, but, fortunately, fell outside the trajectory of cyclone winds that destroyed crops across wide stretches of inland Bangladesh. Also, clearly, the fortunes of rural women in Bangladesh still depend on social norms and social ties.

Although both were widowed with young sons, and both were entrepreneurial, taking advantage of what Brac had to offer them, Shunabon has fared better than Boshiron over the years -- in large part because her sons earn a steady income and maintain her.

While social norms restricting women's mobility had eased, they appear to be tightening up again. Men who have migrated for work to the Middle East are now asking their female relatives back home -- like Boshiron -- to observe purdah and wear burqas. What this will mean over time for the ability of such women to work outside the home and play leadership roles in their villages is not clear.

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