

WORLD RURAL WOMEN'S DAY 2011

Contribution of rural women

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TODAY is "World Rural Women's Day." The day is being observed to highlight the role played by rural women in food production and food security. For the first time, international NGOs at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 came up with the idea of honouring rural women with a special day. It was suggested that October 15 would be celebrated as World Rural Women's Day. The first International Day of Rural Women was observed in New York on October 15, 2008.

World Rural Women's Day was established by the General Assembly in its Resolution 62/136 of December 18, 2007. The resolution recognises "the critical role and contribution of rural women, including indigenous women, in enhancing agricultural and rural development, improving food security and eradicating rural poverty."

At the 10th session of the Regional Conference on Women in Latin America and the Caribbean in 2007, member states of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean expressed their decision in the Quito Consensus to promote the adoption of an International Day of Rural Women. Their decision of honouring rural women was enlisted "as an explicit recognition of [rural women's] economic contribution and the development of their communities, in particular with regard to the unpaid work they perform."

The work and economic and social contributions of rural women can be grouped in two broad categories, imbedded in the community and embedded within the household. In a community, the economic production base determines the work or labour of rural women in the various segments of production. Rural women actively contribute to community production in most countries, thus improving social linkages and kinship relationships and facilitating resource exchange in times of need.

In the household, the traditional gender role ideology, founded on culture and religious tenets, determines the participation of rural women in household production. Contributions made by women within the household are increasingly affected by changes external to the household. For instance, rural poverty has acted as a push factor whereas new economic opportunities outside the household have emerged as pull factors encouraging rural women to cross cus-

tomary gender role boundaries and to participate in the economy outside the household, often in farm production and sometimes in off-farm production.

Poor educational attainment, inadequate training and social immobility often prevent them from responding to these opportunities. Working at home (family care) is always seen as regular work of women without proper recognition of their labour. The women are primary care givers and domestic workers within the household at every stage of the life cycle, and this responsibility of care-giving is expanded to serve the needs of the community too.

In general, the work patterns of rural women are marked by change and continuity as well as flexibility and rigidity (Gurung, 1999). Change and flexibility in the role of rural women in farm production, off-farm production and community production are only to ensure the

field as well (Shirin, 1995). About 60-70% of women from landless and near-landless households now work as agricultural wage labourers, and earthwork and field-based workers, activities that traditionally have fallen within the male domain (Jahan, 1990).

Despite their routine domestic work, rural women in Bangladesh play an active role in ensuring household food security. They are in general responsible for most of the agricultural work in the homestead. They not only ensure protein supply of the family through rearing livestock and catching fish but also contribute to the household diet by growing various vegetables and fruits in the homestead garden. Farm activities in the homesteads, ranging from selection of seed to harvesting and storing of crops, are predominantly managed by women.

Female earning is increasingly becoming vital to the rural households, espe-

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SHAFIQ ISLAM/DRINK NEWS

family's access to food and household resources. However, continuity and rigidity of social norms dictate that rural women and girls should assume home production responsibilities in rural households. The intra-household decisions on allocation of labour are often biased against rural women and girls.

Due to increasing economic pressures, gender roles are becoming flexible to enable women to engage in work traditionally regarded as belonging in the male domain. Traditionally, rural women in Bangladesh have played an important role in a wide range of income-generating activities, which include post-harvesting, cow fattening and milking, goat farming, backyard poultry rearing, pisciculture, agriculture, horticulture, food processing, cane and bamboo works, silk reeling, handloom weaving, garment making, fishnet making, coir production and handicrafts.

Social norms and traditions are changing due to extreme poverty and food crisis, and women are appearing in

cially the poor households. It is found that 25% of landless households in rural Bangladesh are female headed and completely dependent on female earnings (Safilios-Rothschild and Mahmud, 1989). Earnings of female members of a rural family contribute 25-50% of household income in 25% of the total male headed households (World Bank, 1990). Rural families are becoming economically dependent on the earnings of female members.

With the change of time and social dimension, rural women can no longer be identified as the "victim," rather they must be considered as the "manager" of the household for food security. Rural women always adopt diverse and intense household resource-use strategies to cope with food deficit situations, such as during the lean season and natural disasters, when they intensify their efforts in homestead production and seek non-farm production options.

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From Tahrir Square to Wall Street

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REVOLUTIONS and social movements, scholars tell us, produce all kinds of outcomes some intended but mostly unintended. The recent unfortunate developments in Egypt that led to killings of 23 Coptic protestors in Tahrir Square send a chill. The Coptic Christians, who make up 10% of the Egyptian population, had experienced attacks from fringe groups of extremists before. It is different this time because of their clash with the military. The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) has been in power since the fall of Mubarak regime early this year with a promise to return power to the civilians. Although the military government has asked the civilian prime minister to launch an investigation in the events that led to bloodshed, the future of the Arab Spring in Egypt hangs in the balance.

The word Tahrir, in Arabic means liberation. The Zuccotti Park, which is the eye of the storm of recent protests in New York near Wall Street, was formerly known as Liberty Plaza Park. The similarity is more than symbolic. Whichever way the revolution goes in Egypt, one thing the Egyptian protestors at Tahrir Square have already accomplished is that they have inspired protest movements in Spain, Israel, and now in the United States of America.

The protests at the Wall Street have been named as Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement. Their goal is simple. They know that the real power lies not in the Capitol Hill or the White House. The real power lies in the capital of corporate America. The corporate oligarchs who played a key role in the economic crisis were rewarded with bailouts where the poor were left to fend for themselves.

Like Peter Finch, the protagonist in the famed movie "The Network", the average Americans are now saying, "enough is enough." The shout is reverberating not just in Wall Street or in the camps of Zuccotti Park but also in 70 (and now more) places across the United States. And as in the Arab Spring, the new media -- Facebook, Twitter, etc. -- is playing a vital role in connecting people. The protest movement has gone global as fifty leading Chinese academics signed a petition of solidarity with the protestors, as if in a role reversal of the US reaction to the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989.

The mainstream Americans have always been suspicious of the Sixties style protest movements and in recent years with the rise of the conservative Tea Party movement, which was professedly in favour of the rich and those privileged groups whose bulging profits and corporate tax cuts reached

obscene proportion.

A well-known German Marxist sociologist Clause Offe, who I was recently talking to, expressed his surprise with the turn of events. Offe was in New York on September 11 this year and he saw no hint of the simmering protests. It all looked patriotic and normal. Barely a week after that, on September 17, the first storm clouds of the OWS movements became visible. The turn of events is remarkable.

I too was walking down the Wall Street in July this year where the only heat bearing down on me was the hot summer. The rest looked placid and tourist-friendly. We visited a friend in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, who ran a hardware shop -- not unlike the fictitious family in *The Happy Days*. Now retired, broken by old-age and ill-health he was not well, as his wife put it. Their daughter came back from work, her wage -- as she told me -- was an incredible \$2.83 an hour. "This is well-below the minimum wage," I protested. "But my company gets away with it. The job market is bad and I need work," whimpered Lisa.

The protestors in New York have managed to put across their message loud and clear for the whole world to see. A poster in Wall Street says it all: "1% rich, 99% poor." The growing inequality in America, which was known to sociologists, careful readers of the *New York Times* op-ed pages or readers of the *Nation*, is now becoming public knowledge. The link between Washington and the Wall Street, explored long ago by the likes of C. Wright Mills, is now under the very nose of everyone.

The mainstream political parties are either in denial, dismissing the protests as "anti-American" activities of the hippies or are trying to coopt them, as the Democratic Party seems to be trying. Which way the protests go is anybody's guess. Will these protests morph into a revolution? Will they change the mindset of the Americans, especially those who have forgotten about social contract, the obligation of the state for the people? Will these protests bring to light the deeper problems of US-style capitalism and democracy of the rich? Could it be that the collapse of socialism that was the cause of celebration in the late 1980s and early 1990s was a prelude to the collapse of the unbuttoned, neo-liberal capitalism?

Capitalism will perhaps survive the wave of protests, but it is time for a new social compact to be drawn for all the parties involved -- a compact that would be truly inclusive of the majority -- poor, hippies, the middle class -- in other words, the 99%.

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BITTER TRUTH

The squeezed middle class



MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

WHEN the anxious citizens are waiting to see some peace prevail after a peaceful election in which the AI-led alliance won, they are witnessing an upsurge of violence, a steady worsening of the economy and polarisation of the society.

Despite the pledges made by successive governments, the expectations of a country free from poverty and exploitation have remained unfulfilled. Apprehension, despair and despondency hang over the country as the people ponder over the hardship in the days to come because of the crippling state of business, price escalation of essentials and non-functioning industrial sector.

The economy of the country is in recession. Unemployment is surging. An ominous addition is that out of about 10 million Bangladeshis working abroad, several lakhs have come back because of job squeeze in those countries. This also indicates a hard time for a good number of families who were enjoying prosperity and comfort on the remittances from these earning members.

There is a feeling that buildings and superstructures that are springing up in the big cities do not actually reflect the economic situation. Although the wealthy are doing somewhat better, most Bangladeshis, especially the middle class and the lower middle classes, feel squeezed. Compounding the problem, the sudden big rise in the price of petroleum products has pushed them to the brink.

The government handout explaining the rationale of price hike as a bid to save the exchequer of the subsidy burden appears somewhat logical, but transferring the burden so quickly on to the people already living on the margins is a very unkind gesture to salvage a sinking economy. The transport sector will bear

the brunt of the price hike of fuel most. The optimistic note sounded by the policy makers that transport owners will not increase the fares disproportionately and small increase will have a negligible impact on the cost of living is wishful thinking.

Contradicting the government estimate of the poverty situation, leading economists revealed in a seminar at the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh that the actual percentage of people living below poverty line may be about 83% and not 32% as the official

handout reveals. According to a leading research organisation in the country, because of the increase in the price of the fuel of all varieties by about 40%, inflation now hovering around 11.29% will go up by about 2%. Consequent upon the fuel price hike, expenditure on house rent, education, and medical treatment has shot up.

Since the 1980s, Bangladesh has been mostly dependent on agriculture gradually supported by technology. But because of our failure to give proper thrust to agriculture, the rural landscape unveils a shocking litany of poverty, joblessness and deprivation that continues to drag the country down. The oft-vaunted growth has hardly made any dent on poverty.

Our approach to poverty alleviation often seems to be illogical and perverse. We attack poverty through subsidies, along with many schemes and programmes that are only palliative. If the amount spent in such haphazard ways was invested in public works, such as irrigation canals, or wells, small dams, water-harvesting projects, rural roads, and above all houses for the rural

poor, it would have multiplier effect and transform the economic landscape. Alas! We do not invest money, we only spend it.

Government policies toward poverty elimination look good on paper, but implementation remains highly flawed. The economic boom or spate of development, if there has been any, has not distributed its benefits evenly. In the past decade, the rich have gotten richer, the poor have gotten poorer and those in the middle have gotten squeezed.

Bureaucratic red tape and official lethargy are matched by the increasing cynicism of the political class and falling standards of public life. Politicians are interested in the people's votes, but not in their well-being. To make liberty and democratic ideals meaningful, the government has to concentrate on those basic needs that have eluded millions of Bangladeshis -- education, healthcare, housing. Only when we have ensured access to those requirements to the largest number of people can we

claim prosperity for the entire nation. Economic growth is meaningless unless it leads to social development and social security, as the prime minister emphasised in a recent meeting. True prosperity is that which benefits the last man in the last row. The big questions that nudge us today are, can we leave behind us forever the horror of hunger and the darkness of illiteracy? Can we create a society free of discrimination in any form? We can if, as a nation, we can rekindle the hope that suffused the people and revive the determination that drove this nation 40 years ago.

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The stark reality is that the poor are getting poorer with each passing day. Evidently, while the rich have made gains, incomes of the middle class have been barely sufficient, and the poor seem to be worse-off than they were 10 to 15 years ago. The present government has to identify the pitfalls and governance failure that continue to drag the nation down.

We have failed to create employment opportunities for the teeming millions. The saddest part is that 33 lakh investors, mostly young men without jobs belonging to middle class and lower middle class, invested all they had in the stock market, but the continued fall resulting from the scam last December has taken away their capital.

Paradoxically, regardless of the size of its majority in the parliament, the AI-led government ran out of steam to govern the country seemingly because of lack of moral force and commitment to the cause of the people. Fortune seekers masquerading as party adherents or politicians or bureaucrats have brought the country almost to the brink of a disaster.

With most of its members falling prey to poverty, the middle class seems to be becoming extinct. For many people it takes more than one job to earn enough to get by. What is most alarming, the schooling of the children puts the middle class under ever-increasing strain. Many families have more than one child in educational institutions. How can they make both ends meet in such a desperate situation?

Life is simply getting harder for middle class citizens, and the condition of the poorer classes beggars description. Today, the soaring prices and the diminishing value of our currency have eroded even the minimum standard of life. The middle class spans the whole country. Given proper incentives, good conditions of employment, better housing, and schooling facilities for children, they can provide steady support to national development and economic growth.

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