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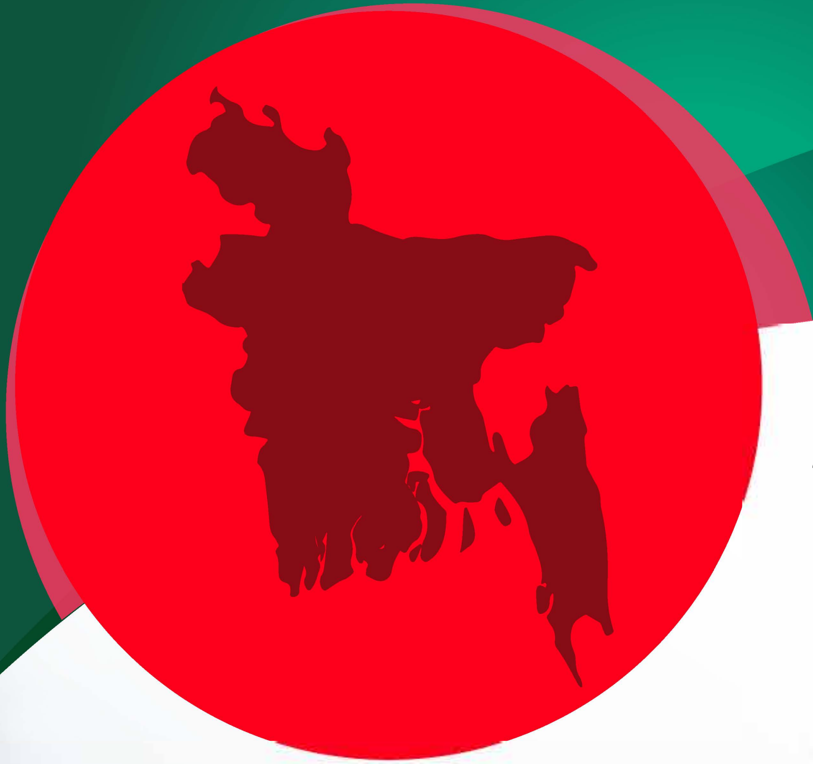

Journal of BANGLADESH STUDIES

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"DEVELOPMENT" REVISITED: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN BANGLADESH

Elora Shehabuddin

ABSTRACT

This article explores the policy areas of education, microcredit, and family planning, long regarded internationally and within Bangladesh as being among the most important areas of intervention to help the poorest women. While these areas are indeed of immense significance, I argue that it is essential that we delve deeper into each of these areas and problematize the manner in which they have been conventionally understood. Not only do the much-publicized success stories of high rates of loan repayment, school enrollment and contraceptive acceptance distract us from many problems associated with these very arenas of development, but they also forge a sense of complacency and obscure the importance of alternative ways of measuring "progress" or positive change and of other arenas that merit immediate attention in order to help millions of disprivileged women of Bangladesh lead truly decent, dignified and meaningful lives. I first examine the debates surrounding each of these three areas of development as well as linkages among them both within Bangladesh and in the wider international context. I show that in all three areas, there is no hegemonic position, permitting multiple perspectives to coexist. I then turn to the areas of democratic rights and personal security, which generally have received far less attention and recognition that they deserve, but which I believe are essential to any attempts to "empower" the women of Bangladesh, the vast majority of whom are impoverished, illiterate and live in rural area.

Introduction

Since the beginning of the United Nations Decade for the Advancement of Women (1975-85), millions of dollars have been directed towards helping the women of the poorer nations of the world and Bangladesh is no exception as both the state and non-governmental organizations increasingly have turned their attention to the situation of women in the country. A quarter-century later, it is possible to discern progress in a number of important arenas; nonetheless, a great deal still remains to be done. Today, Bangladesh ranks 139 out of 175 countries in the UNDP's 2003 Human Development Index (HDI), which "measures achievements in terms of life expectancy, educational attainments and adjusted real income."[1] In the UNDP's 2001 Gender Development Index (GDI), Bangladesh ranks 112 out of 144 countries.[2] Like the HDI, the GDI emphasizes the three primary "quality of life" indicators but it goes beyond the HDI by adjusting for inequalities between men and women. While the HDI itself provides a much-needed alternative to the traditional method of measuring a society's "development" through gross national product (GNP) per capita, it is incomplete; there is growing awareness that "development and its problems cannot be fully understood without also understanding gender" (Peinado and Cespedes 2004: 37). As geographer Joni Seager points out, the GDI clearly illustrates that "gender inequality can be largely affected by an international commitment to equality principles and policies." She cites the example of the Scandinavian countries which, having "adopted gender equality and women's empowerment as conscious national policies," now consistently rank among the top ten countries on the GDI (Seager 2003: 12-13).

In this article, I explore policy accomplishments and failures with respect to Bangladeshi women in the areas of education, microcredit, and family planning, long regarded internationally as being among the most important areas of intervention to help the poorest women in the world. While these areas are indeed of immense significance and many lives have been affected positively through initiatives in these policy areas, I argue that it is essential that we delve deeper into each of these areas and problematize the manner in which they have been conventionally understood. Not only do the much-publicized success stories of high rates of loan repayment, school enrollment and contraceptive acceptance distract us from many problems associated with these very arenas of development, but they also forge a sense of complacency—"We've already made enormous strides," "We're doing everything possible"—and obscure the importance of alternative ways of measuring "progress" or positive change and of other arenas that merit immediate attention in order to help millions of disprivileged women of Bangladesh lead truly decent, dignified and meaningful lives.[3] In the pages that follow, I first examine the debates surrounding each of these three areas of development as well as linkages among them both within Bangladesh and in the wider international context. I show that in all three areas, there is no

hegemonic position, permitting multiple perspectives to coexist. I then turn to the areas of democratic rights and personal security, which generally have received far less attention and recognition that they deserve, but which I believe are essential to any attempts to "empower" the women of Bangladesh, the vast majority of whom are impoverished, illiterate and live in rural areas.[4]

Targeting Women

Family Planning

An advertisement put out thirty years ago by the Campaign to Check the Population Explosion ominously warned:

> A world with mass starvation in underdeveloped countries will be a world of chaos, riots and war. And a perfect breeding ground for Communism. … We cannot afford a half dozen Vietnams or even one more. … Our own national interest demands that we go all out to help the underdeveloped countries control their population. (Cited in Hartmann 1995: 57)

Betsy Hartmann estimates that approximately $5 billion are spent every year on family planning in the Third World (Hartmann 1995: 113). For almost three decades, the international development community has placed the burden of bringing world population growth under control almost exclusively on women—and on the poorest women in the world specifically; it would appear that men play no role in reproduction. And within the poorest nations, such as Bangladesh, it is the fertility of poor women that must be regulated rather than that of their elite sisters. In many parts of the world, population concerns have tended to dominate development discourse to the point of excluding, even subverting all other programs, most significantly healthcare provision for women (Jeffery and Jeffery 1998: 241-2). Hartmann notes, "A family planning program designed to improve health and to expand women's control over reproduction looks very different indeed from one whose main concern is to reduce birth rates as fast as possible" (Hartmann 1995).

Recognized widely as the most densely populated country in the world, Bangladesh has been hailed as a success story for its achievements in reducing female fertility and increasing contraceptive prevalence. According to nationwide surveys on contraceptive among currently married women of reproductive age, the use of modern contraceptives rose from 7.7 percent in 1975 to 30 percent in 1989 and 45 percent in 1993 (Amin and Hossain 1995: 1328). Donor interest and state policies have long been geared towards bringing Bangladesh's "population problem" under control and a disproportionate share of aid is directed to that end.[5] According to the International Planned Parenthood Federation's magazine *People*, a great deal of resources are expended on glossy advertising of contraceptive options designed "to associate family planning with widespread aspirations such as better health, prosperity and a Westernized lifestyle" (cited in Hartmann 1995: 60). In addition, a variety of incentives are offered to both family planning workers and acceptors. While advocates of the incentive program argue that the poor are free to refuse such incentives, critics argue that poor women find it difficult to turn down "an immediate economic gain" (Hartmann 1995: 67), therefore, this does not represent real choice. In the end, as Hartmann argues, "When incentive schemes are substituted for social change, the result invariably discriminates against poor people, especially women, if it does not outright coerce them" (71).

Ever since the Indian foreign minister Karan Singh asserted that "Development is the best contraceptive" at the 1974 Population Conference, states and development organizations have supported indirect efforts to encourage increased family planning. Two such avenues of effort have been education and income-generation. I discuss projects to increase women's education in greater detail below; I focus here on efforts to enable women to earn a cash income. As Hartmann points out, "These projects follow the basic logic that if women are given the opportunity to earn cash income, often in a women's cooperative and or club, they will gain greater decision-making power within the family, have less need to depend on children, and be able to meet more easily with other women to receive information about family planning. Such projects would not only contribute to fertility decline then, but would also help increase women's power within the community" (129-30). To that end, in the mid-70s, also coinciding with the UN Women's Decade, the Bangladesh government established a variety of women's clubs, cooperatives and vocational training projects in order "to provide alternatives to childbearing." Put more eloquently, "When a woman touches the first *taka* she has earned with her own labor, she feels liberated, and her fertility behavior changes to a great extent" (130). Although some studies have found that contraception prevalence rates are higher among women in cooperatives than in the general population, it does not follow that participation in cooperatives necessarily leads to the acceptance or, more importantly, sustained use, of

contraception. For instance, a woman who starts earning a living may decide that she is better able to afford to have more children and may choose to do so as an insurance policy for old age or widowhood. In her study of poor families in Cairo, Homa Hoodfar finds that, generally, wives are more concerned than husbands about having sons—to take care of them after the death of their husbands, who are usually considerably older; therefore if they have only girls, they are likely to continue to have children until they have a few sons (Hoodfar 1997: 246-7). Moreover, in the Bangladeshi context, the poorest members of the village—in a sense those who are perhaps least able to afford a large family—are also those most hesitant and least encouraged by their peers to join a cooperative, most likely for fear that they will be less able to make mandatory weekly payments.

Throughout the world, the population policies of the last several decades have come under attack from various quarters. The different perspectives on population were perhaps most clearly delineated in the debates between various religious groups and the international proponents of family planning at the 1994 Population Conference in Cairo. Although attempts by the Vatican and some Islamic governments to maintain control over women's access to abortion and contraception were ultimately defeated, many remain skeptical of all the talk about "empowerment and autonomy of women" (Petchesky 1995; Jeffery and Jeffery 1998).

Both within and outside Bangladesh, critics argue that the policies that have contributed to the resounding success of Bangladesh's population control program ultimately are not motivated by concerns of gender equity or even women's welfare (Roushan Jahan 1995: 99). They point to the program's use of a variety of incentives, financial and otherwise, coercion, lack of adequate information and proper follow-up care, and the absence of satisfactory testing of contraceptive technology from overseas (Hartmann and Standing 1985; Hardon 1992). According to Farida Akhter, director of UBINIG, a policy research organization in Bangladesh, and an active member of the international group FINRRAGE (Feminist International Network of Resistance to Reproductive and Genetic Engineering), reproductive rights assume a different meaning in the context of Bangladesh:

> It is difficult for a feminist of the west to understand that a notion like the reproductive right of women or the control of women over their own bodies has no meaning to the majority of women in Bangladesh. … In the sterilization camps and clinics of Bangladesh, when a woman undergoes surgery for litigation, she allows her body for mutilation not because she wants to emancipate herself from reproductive responsibilities but in most cases for money and a piece of apparel…which is received as an incentive. These add to her ability to survive for a few more days because they can be exchanged for food. Nowhere [do] the rights of women become of any concern. (Akhter 1992: 2)

According to Akhter and other FINRRAGE members, women are compelled to accept contraceptive technology because they "do not have the power to say no to the sexual desire to men." At a 1989 conference organized by FINRRAGE, a participant from India responded, "We can change the man-woman relationship in 100 years, but right now we have 20 million people who want contraceptives." While Naila Kabeer recognizes the validity of some of the views propagated by UBINIG and FINRRAGE, she stresses the limits of their overall position:

> While the potential of traditional medicine has certainly been neglected by the population establishment, and shrugged off by the pharmaceutical industry, and while reproductive technologies have been distributed in ways that frequently violate human rights, the "either/or" politics of FINRRAGE paradoxically also leads to a denial of choice to women. The blanket condemnation of all forms of reproductive technology frequently leads FINRRAGE members to deny the legitimacy of the expressed needs and practices of women in many parts of the world, and to shrug off the possibility that women may *choose* contraceptive methods, with full knowledge of the risks. …If the population controllers created a situation where women feel "stupid" if they did not accept reproductive technologies, FINRRAGE members appear to regard women as dupes of patriarchy if they do.

In the end, FINRRAGE members do not seem concerned that "women might want to use reproductive technologies in order to have—or not to have—children" (cited in Kabeer 1994: 200-1). Santi Rozario agrees with Kabeer:

> while international networks tend to assume that indigenous women's organizations in South Asia are able to speak on behalf of local women, in practice organizations such as UBINIG, with their mostly educated, middle-class memberships tend to have little empathy with or understanding

> of the situation of village women. In this case, while UBINIG's opposition to the forms of contraception which are currently being promoted is entirely justified, they are prepared to cut off access to such modes of contraception without offering any realistic alternatives. (Rozario 1997)

The other major critics of the family planning program in Bangladesh are Islamist groups and individuals, who charge it with outside interference in "domestic" matters—domestic in the sense of internal not only to the state but to actual families and households. Islamist groups insist that global concerns of a population explosion hold no interest for them, and they denounce the international community's plan to bring Bangladesh's population under control. In an interview with me, a high-ranking member of the Jama'at began by distinguishing between "planning a healthy, educated family" and "birth control," arguing that it was wrong "to conflate the two": "God is responsible for planning our families for us—we don't need to do anything. Look at it this way: out of the millions of sperm in each ejaculation, only one is destined to meet up with the ovum and bear fruit. There is ample planning involved right there!" He was aware that families in economic distress might wish to take precautions against further pregnancies if they believed that they could not afford more children. He pointed out that in a true Islamic society, additional children would not pose a problem, since they could be easily redistributed to wealthy families without children. His main attacks were directed at the international organizations that work throughout the country to promote contraceptive use: "Why should outsiders tell us how many children we can have? We are opposed to these foreigners coming to tell us how to "plan" our families. The solution to our problems is not birth control—but an Islamic welfare state."[6]

Such objections from the Jama'at notwithstanding, the present family program has marshaled the assistance of local religious leaders wherever possible and the latter have cooperated, invoking *fatwas* such as the following 1964 pronouncement by Shaikh Abdullah Al Qaliqili, Grand Mufti of Jordan, to argue that Islam is not opposed to the use of contraception:

> There is agreement among the exponents of jurisprudence that coitus interruptus, as one of the methods for the prevention of childbearing is allowed. Doctors of religion inferred from this that it is permissible to take a drug to prevent childbearing, or even to induce abortion. We confidently rule in this *fatwa* that it is permitted to take measures to limit childbearing. (Cited in Sachedina 1990: 109)

The Bangladeshi government has long supported the Islamic Foundation's attempts to train rural *imams* to situate and disseminate information about social and economic development within an Islamic framework (Hours 1993: 76-78). Particular emphasis is given in the course of this training to endorsements of population control and the health benefits of smaller families. In 1985, following a request from the government's Planning Commission, the Islamic Foundation published a book emphasizing Islam's support for contraception entitled *Islam and Family*, by Shamsul Alam (Alam 1985; Amin and Hossain 1995: 1332). Even as recently as December 2003, Prime Minister Khaleda Zia called on the country's 600,000 *imams* to "play a wider role in turning our people into human resources in [the] real sense in light of the teachings of the holy Koran"; she further urged them to pay special attention to the women of the country, whom she described as "still deprived of their legitimate rights even at the family level because of ignorance and personal lust and interest."[7]

In rural Bangladesh, there is no evidence of religious disapproval of family planning programs or even menstrual regulation (MR), a synonym for first trimester abortion (Neaz and Banu 1992; Kamel and Sloggett 1993). There is however evidence that in some parts of the country, local religious leaders have voiced objections to specific methods such as sterilization and IUD and warned that women who underwent these procedures would be denied a proper Muslim burial. One possible reason for the objection to sterilization may be that since the procedure is performed mostly by male doctors, it would entail a violation of local norms regulating female visibility and exposure to non-kin men (Amin and Hossain 1995: 1327). Sajeda Amin and Sara Hossain report that while they could not find any court records regarding prosecutions for abortion, incidents of abortion or MR may be exposed in a village salish if the pregnancy was "the product of an illicit relationship or adultery" (1326). Hartmann argues that by neglecting, even showing outright disrespect for local culture, "donor-imposed…family planning programs have lost the opportunity to build on existing fertility control practices such as birth spacing, breast-feeding, and herbal contraceptives, and have failed to address people's other reproductive needs, especially problems of infertility" (Hartmann 1995: 64). In a social context where women are valued for their ability to produce

children, especially sons, women unable to have children are stigmatized, and live under the threat of divorce, desertion, or a co-wife. Their plight and health concerns—and those of any women not interested in contraception—are of no interest to the family planning policy makers (Amin and Hossain 1995: 1335; Hartmann 1995: 64).

Hartmann eloquently describes the gulf that separates the population control policymakers and the women they target:

> Most of the international agencies that shape Third World population policy are perched high atop Western metropolitan centers. In offices with the latest in communications equipment, a host of administrators, researchers, and consultants consider the business of "delivering" birth control to the Third World. A few peasant women's faces peek from glossy covers of promotional brochures or an occasional photograph in the lobby, but otherwise Third World women are mainly numbers in computer printouts, unidentified "targets," "clients," or "acceptors" in the technical journals adorning the office shelves. Their fate figures only in demographic calculations of "births averted" and "couple-years of protection." (Hartmann 1995: 58)

She adds that the chasm is almost as vast again between the policymakers in Third World capitals and the peasant women they target, point out that "those spreading the message often hold elitist attitudes and have no idea of how to communicate effectively with people who are beneath them on the social ladder" (59). Hartmann and Jim Boyce describe an encounter between urban middle-class family planning workers and poor village women that they witnessed in the early 1970s while living in a village in Bangladesh:

> In response to the villagers' pleas, we visited the government family planning office in the nearest town and requested that extension workers come to our village. After their arrival we learned why demand for birth control in the villages was not being met. Wearing expensive jewelry and silk *saris*, the extension workers were educated, middle-class town women, separated from the village women by a gulf of arrogance and indifference. They addressed the villagers in upper-class Bengali and in their presence asked us how we could stand the "inconvenience" of living in a dirty village. After they left, the villagers inquired if they were our sisters from America. (Hartmann and Boyce 1983: 115-21; Hartmann and Boyce 1990: 57-58)

Ultimately, none of those seeking to influence policy appears to recognize the right of the woman herself to choose whether or not to limit her fertility. The Islamists believe that she should do nothing because God will provide. The population control advocates want her to limit herself to two or fewer children; they believe that all she needs is access to contraception and decision-making power, the latter to come from education and an income. They seem unconcerned about and perhaps unprepared for the fact that women who experience an improvement in their "status," nebulous as the term is, may choose to have *more* children. It cannot be denied that while the demand for contraception and reproductive rights generally was a crucial part of the women's movement in the West, women in the poorest countries of the world were simply inundated with various contraceptive methods. This was done not out of concern for their "right to choose" so much as with the expectation that they would adopt family planning methods and contribute to a lower population growth rate. Married women in Bangladesh, at least, have had no difficulty gaining access to cheap, even free, contraception. I agree with UBINIG and its allies that it is necessary to be vigilant about the technologies that multinational companies choose to make available to poor women in the South, that state and donor interest in family planning is not primarily motivated by concern for women but based on an assumption that "empowered" women would automatically seek to reduce their fertility; at the same time, to argue that women have no need for any contraception is to deny the women any agency and to limit what few options are available to these women. Patricia and Roger Jeffery suggest that reproductive rights might be defined as "access to safe contraception when women themselves want it" (Jeffery and Jeffery 1998: 253). Moreover, there is much more to women's reproductive health needs than contraceptive provision and one of the disadvantages of the overriding emphasis on population control has been the neglect of all other aspects of women's well-bring, reproductive and otherwise. Maternal mortality, for instance, remains extremely high in Bangladesh: even as late as 1995, about 600 mothers died for every 100,000 live births, though down from 850 in 1990. This is certainly high within South Asia, less than only Afghanistan (820) and Nepal (830); the lowest in the region is Sri Lanka (42), with India (440) and Pakistan (200) managing to do at least better than Bangladesh (UNDP 2003: 203). While repeated and early childbearing certainly contributes

to the high Maternal Mortality Ratio in Bangladesh, contraceptives are no substitute for proper health care. I should point out here that Bangladesh has made impressive strides in combating infant and under-five mortality. Infant mortality is down from 144 per 1,000 live births in 1990 to 77 in 2001; for comparative purposes, Sri Lanka is the only country in the region with lower numbers, but these are significantly smaller numbers, from 23 to 19. The under-five mortality rate in Bangladesh has come down from 96 in 1990 to 51 in 2001; again, for Sri Lanka, the comparable numbers are 19 and 17 (209).

Education

Throughout the poorer countries of the world, the education of young girls has come to be viewed as a "silver bullet" policy instrument—largely thanks to studies that suggest a link between improvements in women's education and their status and, in turn, between their status and lower fertility (Cochrane 1979, 1983; Mason 1985). In the early 1990s, Lawrence Summers, then Vice-President for Development Economics and Chief Economist in the World Bank (now President of Harvard University), presented his enthusiasm for women's education as *the* solution to the problems of poor women in poor countries in the following terms:

> An educated mother faces a higher opportunity cost of time spent caring for the children. She has greater value outside the home and this has an entirely different set of choices than she would have without education. She is married at a later age and is better able to influence family decisions. She has fewer, healthier children and can insist on the development of all of them, ensuring that her daughters are given a fair chance. And the education of her daughters makes it much more likely that the next generation of girls, as well as boys, will be educated and healthy as well. The vicious cycle is thus transformed into a virtuous circle. (Summers 1993: vii)

Recent governments in Bangladesh have paid increasing attention to the education of girls and have implemented a variety of strategies to this end, including a food-for-education program, scholarships for female pupils, free secondary education in rural areas, and a separate school for girls in each *upazila* (sub-district). To quote a 1999 World Bank report: "Across Bangladesh a revolution is taking place in the schools. A peek into any secondary school classroom in rural Bangladesh is all it takes to see that enrollment trends are changing fast. It is becoming commonplace to see more girls there than boys" (World Bank 1999: 1). One program provides stipends to girls in grades 6-10. "The stipends cover full tuition, examination costs, and an increasing proportion of school fees, textbooks, school supplies, uniforms, shoes, transport and kerosene (for lamps), reflecting families' rising educational costs and the need for an extra incentive in upper grades to reduce high dropout rates" (2). Thanks to these and other initiatives to boost female enrollment, the ratio of girls to boys at the secondary level stood at an impressive 0.99 in 2000-01 (UNDP 2003: 204). Unfortunately, according to newspaper reports, corruption plagues even the distribution of stipends to deserving students.[8] At the primary level, the ratio of girls to boys increased from 0.81 in 1990-91 to 0.96 in 2000-01. Overall, the national literacy rate for girls and women five years and older rose fewer than ten points in a 20-year period, from 14.8 percent in 1974 to 24 percent in 1994 [66].[9] In 2001, the female adult literacy rate (age 15 and above) was 30.8 percent; the male equivalent was 49.9 (UNDP 2003).

While these figures are useful, it is important to be concerned about the quality and content of the education and the opportunity costs of focusing exclusively on schooling. Hartmann explains that education is a popular means of empowering women—not only because it is "a laudable goal in and of itself, it is also politically safer than advocating other forms of empowerment, such as letting women organise independent trade unions in free trade zones or on plantations" (Hartmann 1995: 134). According to Jeffery and Jeffery,

> Girls' schooling is often regarded as a basic requirement for other "empowerment" policies to succeed or, at the very least, as a significant contributor to them. Advocating girls' schooling is also usually non-controversial, since it is hard for any group in most societies to argue against most schooling, particularly if the state (or the religious leadership) remains in control of the curriculum. Female education has indeed become a rallying cry for international agencies, most notably the World Bank. (Jeffery and Jeffery 1998: 244-45)

This intimate coupling of education with other goals such as fertility, however, prompt fears that in areas such as Bangladesh and Tamil Nadu, where fertility decline has been achieved without large investments in education, one in fact may see declining interest in education and even expenditure cuts (252).

The Bangladesh government made one of its earliest policy statements on girls' education in its 1973 *First Five Year Plan*, where it argued that "[t]he level of schooling of women determines the efficiency of household management. Educated mothers pay greater attention to nutrition, health, and childcare than the uneducated one (*sic*)" (GoB 1973: 479). Twenty-five years later, as Jeffery and Jeffery point out, it is hard to find any group anywhere openly arguing against girls' schooling. In the Bangladeshi context, groups like the Jama'at have expressed opposition not to the idea of female education but to the content of curricula and to coeducation generally. During a television program just before the 1996 elections, three veteran journalists had the opportunity to question Jama'at leaders about their position on various issues. The party's Secretary-General Matiur Rahman Nizami outlined as follows the party's plans for mass education and for girls specifically:

> We have an economical plan to increase access to education by using already extant institutions. In every village is a mosque. It is a wonderful social institution. With a little government assistance—none of the *imams* is uneducated—the mosques can be used as centers for the education of adults, children, and farmers. This can be done easily if a small salary can be arranged for the *imam*. Soon everyone will have access to education…
>
> In keeping with the cultural and historical tradition of this country, women will be in separate institutions...It is because we wish to increase women's education that we wish to establish separate institutions for women.

Maulana Abdus Sobhan, a member of the Jama'at's Central Working Committee added, "Girls' schools and colleges already exist. We simply wish to increase the number."[10] This point is also made by the Jama'at's women representatives at a meeting organized by the Dhaka based research group Women for Women: "[W]omen should have equal rights [to] men to educational and health facilities. But...separate arrangements should be made for the education of girls from primary to university level… Girls should develop their talent and personality in a separate environment away from boys" (Women for Women 1995: 30).

In the mid-1990s, local opposition to NGO-run schools turned particularly violent. In many parts of the country, *mullahs* issued a *fatwa* that such schools were inculcating rural Muslim children with Christian values and ideas. They expressed particular objections to the education received by girls at such schools—they claimed that girls became shameless, too knowledgeable about their own bodies and "un-Islamic" legal rights, and irreverent towards religious authority.[11] About 25 BRAC schools were set on fire. Many parents withdrew their children, especially their daughters, from these schools (Begum 1994). Similarly, in Patiya in the southeastern district of Chittagong, BRAC was unable to open 80 new schools because of fierce opposition from local mullahs.[12] Journalist Mizanur Rahman Khan found the following story circulating among members of the rural elite:

> As they begin class, the [NGO] teacher first asks the pupils, "Who gives you candy? God, your teacher or your parents...who gives you candy? Tell me." Naturally, as Muslims, they respond, "God gives us sweets." The teacher then says, "Okay, then all of you shut your eyes," and they all do so. "Now," she continues, "Say, 'God, please give us candy.'" Obviously, they don't get any candy...
>
> Then she says, "Okay, shut your eyes again. This time, say, "*Apa* [Miss], please give us candy." She goes around at that point and puts candy in everyone's hands. She then asks, "Well, did Apa give you candy?" This is how they destroy the very essence of their faith—that God feeds us and protects us. They fill their minds with Christian rules and ideas.

When Khan pressed for more details, one person responded, "I haven't seen it happen myself, but I've heard" and another one asserted, "If I say something that I haven't seen with my own eyes, it would be an untruth. ...However, one can learn about such incidents from newspapers and magazines like *Sangram, Inquilab, Medina*" (Khan 1996: 50). In the end though, it is less important that the incident actually happened than that people believe it did.

Jeffery and Jeffery make a crucial distinction between education and schooling. They argue that "calling schooling 'education' bathes the whole topic in a warm positive glow, and draws attention away from the circumstances in which children are actually socialised and learn about the world around them. Since schooling is usually only a small part of this learning process, talking casually about differences between educated and uneducated women ignores the ways in which unschooled women are nonetheless highly educated in the specifics of their social worlds." They point out that "in the demographic

literature (and in much of the policy debate) education is, in practice, usually measured simply by years of schooling, rather than by taking cognisance of the quality and content of schooling, or considering adult and non-formal education." It is necessary, they argue, to examine the content of what they learn and the conditions in which they learn: "Schooling is … usually regarded unequivocally as a 'good thing', but feminists must surely ask whether and how gendered school curricula critique gender inequalities. Indeed, schooling often endorses images of the good wife and mother (as well as class and other inequalities), and may provide an education for consent rather than for independent thinking" (Jeffery and Jeffery 1998: 248).

In interviews S. M. Nurul Alam conducted shortly after a series of attacks on NGOs in 1995, he and his team found that among the points of conflict between local Islamists and NGOs are perceptions that NGO schools pose an alternative to Islamic schools and that they do not provide religious instruction (Alam 1995, 1996). Interestingly, writing as early as 1858, in the aftermath of what British historians refer to as the Sepoy Mutiny and some Indian historians as the First War of Independence, the Indian Muslim leader and educationist Sayyid Ahmed Khan listed as one of the causes of the uprising the existence of missionary schools where no Sanskrit or Arabic was taught. He observed, "[I]t makes villagers fear the reasons for the school. Also, all the talk about female education is annoying to natives since pupils go about unveiled; such schools have actually been established in Bengal" (Khan 1970: 24). Today, the sense of rivalry between NGO schools and *maktabs* and *madrasas*, the Islamic schools, is no doubt fueled primarily by the disparity in funding available. According to Ainoon Naher, "in places where students and teachers belonging to *madrasa* systems may see themselves as underfunded, the flow of funds to schools established by NGOs is sure to cause resentment and antipathy" (1996: 81).

Local Islamists have also voiced concern about the content of the texts being used at many of the NGO schools and, in some cases, the coeducational classes. Saptagram, an indigenous NGO targeting women, was a frequent target of such attacks. In its schools, it sought to provide an alternative education to its female members, to teach them to view the world differently. In the words of one of the top officers of Saptagram, "By 'education,' we do not mean simply literacy, but education for empowerment. That is, the kind of education that can enable women to target the causes of their oppression and socioeconomic misery—to see the 'bigger picture' and their own situation within that context—and can also provide them with the means to change their own lives" (Ghuznavi 1995).

For instance, Saptagram devotes a chapter in *Adult Education Lessons to Raise Consciousness* (Vol. I), to the subject of purdah and discusses it in the following terms: "Because of purdah, we are unable to work [outside the home]. That is why we are unable to earn money. That is why we cannot improve our situation" (Saptagram n.d.[a]: 8). The accompanying *Teachers' Guide* advises the instructor to tell the story of a young woman who is kept in the strictest of purdah and then dies at childbirth because her father refuses to summon a doctor to see her. It continues, "The purdah is an obstacle in the path of women's freedom and development. We are suppressed through being kept locked away behind purdah in the name of religion and unless we break free from such superstitions, we shall never be able to obtain our rights" (Saptagram n.d.[b]: 26-27). Saptagram's elementary reading books for girls and adult women alike include lessons that emphasize the need to register marriages; warn against child or early marriages, dowry, purdah, and exploitation; and list the grounds on which women can initiate divorce. The late Rokeya Rahman Kabeer, founder of Saptagram, explained in a preface why the organization had been compelled to develop its own textbooks:

> Before taking the initiative to write [this book], we carried out a far-ranging research to find out whether any government or non-government organisation had issued any "gender-oriented" publications. We could find none. And that, inevitably, made us deeply aware that although we were on the threshold of the 21st century, there was still no true acknowledgement of women's role. Instead, books were written about "cowboys" portraying them to be such good people and of course doing all the work. Or there would be Jack and Jill with Jill, as always, meekly following Jack. (Kabeer n.d.: 3)

Not surprisingly, Saptagram has often provoked rather strong reactions among local religious leaders.[13]

While policymakers clearly assume that education prompts a young village girl to gain a higher sense of status in her community and autonomy within her household, parents throughout South Asia are often willing to send their daughter to school for a few years with very different objectives in mind. Many believe that they will be unable to attract a groom

they like if their daughter has no education at all (Mukhopadhyay and Seymour 1994). Their primary concern then is that she master basic reading and writing, just enough "to manage her household when she gets married," as many put it. Carol Vlassoff, writing about a village in Maharashtra, observes:

> female schooling had become a prerequisite for marriage. An educated girl, for whom an adequate dowry had been paid, was deemed more likely to lead a secure and happy life in her husband's family. … Hence, the role of schooling was viewed more in terms of its "buying power" than of it potential contribution to the development of female autonomy. In other words, schooling had become a matter of prestige, rather than of autonomy. (Vlassoff 1996: 232)

Their own research in Uttar Pradesh has made Jeffery and Jeffery "doubt that girls' schooling is necessarily empowering" (Jeffery and Jeffery 1998: 250). However, even if we assume that education, with the appropriate content and dedicated teachers, does lead to greater autonomy for women, how can we assume that they will use their autonomy to limit their fertility? And, Hartmann asks, would all this funding for education trickle to a stop if it turned out that women with autonomy chose not to limit their fertility (Hartmann 1995: 134)?

Parents in rural South Asia often withdraw their daughters from school after they complete elementary school, not only, as mentioned above, because they believe they have learned enough to equip them for married life, but also because the secondary school is usually a great distance away. Valid concerns about safety, but also fear about loss of family honor, make parents hesitate about sending their daughters to the nearest secondary school; any stain on the family's reputation would harm their daughters' chances of marriage, so why take the risk? And, in any case, many parents ask, what can a girl do with all this education anyway? In the following section, I discuss in greater detail the income-generating options available to women today.

It is true that various educational programs targeting the women of Bangladesh are currently in place. In addition to regular, government-run and private primary and secondary schools, there are programs in adult literacy, legal literacy, animal farming, and voter education. The problem however is that traditional curricula, as used in government and other regular mainstream schools, are not designed to encourage independent thinking on the part of women, while the innovative NGO programs are confined to certain parts of the country. NGOs, for all their good work, cannot become a parallel state in the sense of taking over the provision of all public services. Such a scenario is both unlikely and undesirable. First, despite the vast numbers of NGOs in the country, their operations are not well-coordinated; there is considerable inefficiency and replication of services. Thus some parts of the country, particularly those within easy driving distance of the major metropolitan areas, host several NGOs, all offering roughly the same services, while some more remote corners remain untouched by NGO activity or interest. Second, the experience of the last two decades has shown that NGO interest in any issue is limited by donor interest in that issue. Thus NGO provision cannot be substituted for long term planning—especially in something so important as education. In the end, especially in a poor country like Bangladesh, there is no alternative to government provision. Public education programs however could learn from NGO initiatives and design their programs such that they produce not simply literate people who make good workers, but men and women who are educated in the true sense of the word and can become full participants in their community and nation.

Employment

As mentioned earlier, development policymakers harbor the hope that education will open up more employment opportunities for women and that the ability to earn an income will improve their bargaining position and decision-making power within the family. However, employment opportunities for women are limited and what opportunities are available, are not deemed desirable by all women or their families. In the last two decades, thousands of women in Bangladesh have entered the formal and visible labor force, with most of them working in the export-oriented garment factories in Dhaka and Chittagong. Between 1976 and 1985, the number of garment factories in these two cities grew from about four or five to 60.[14] Between 1980 and 1989, the number of female garment workers increased from 50,000 to 225,000, creating "a first-generation female industrial work-force" (Kabeer 1994: 181). By 2003, it is estimated that 1.5 million women (and 300,000 men) were working in 3,480 export garment factories (Kabeer 2004: 15).

As has been the case with the first generation of female factory workers elsewhere in the world, for example with factory girls in eighteenth- and

nineteenth-century New York City, such women are regarded by many as "loose" and "immoral" and not appropriate role models for their daughters (Stansell 1986; Kabeer 2000). Basic literacy requirements by many employers exclude a large part of the female population (Kabeer 1994: 169-70). Lack of adequate childcare facilities and lack of respect shown to the workers by supervisors all contribute to dissatisfaction among workers and no doubt serve to keep other women away from factory work all together. Kabeer's research demonstrates that while working conditions in such factories "are not as dire as anti-sweatshop campaigners claim, they nonetheless leave much room for improvements" (Kabeer 2000: 17-18). To explain the women workers' willingness to remain in these jobs, Kabeer and other researchers point to the basic lack of alternatives as well as to the actual gains made by women workers through working in the factories (Kibria 1995; Siddiqi 1996; Kabeer 2000). Kabeer finds:

> Women valued the satisfaction of a "proper" job in contrast to the casualized forms of employment that had previously been their only options. Their ability to earn on a regular basis gave them a sense of self-reliance, of standing on their own two feet. They also valued their access to new social networks on the factory floor, which replaced their previous isolation within the home; the greater voice they exercised in household decision-making because of their economic contribution; their enhanced sense of self-worth; and in some cases, greater personal freedom and autonomy. (Kabeer 2004: 18)

For similar reasons, in rural areas that generally have few options for stable paid employment—unless the village borders an Export Processing Zone—millions of women have flocked to take advantage of micro-credit opportunities. Today, Bangladesh is synonymous in international development circles with micro-credit and the Grameen or Rural Bank. Micro-credit is being hailed as the solution to both mass poverty and the population problem. Pioneered and popularized by Dr. M. Yunus, a U.S.-trained Bangladeshi economics professor who continues to head the vast Grameen Bank, micro-credit has been adopted by the state's development programs as well as most NGOs, large and small. At the international level, even the World Bank, traditionally more interested in funding big dams, bridges, and roads, has turned its attention to these tiny loans to individual men and women without collateral, not only in Bangladesh but throughout the world. The assumption is that micro-credit gives the rural poor, especially women whose mobility is socially circumscribed in many parts of the world, the opportunity to earn an income from within the confines of their homesteads.

Critics of the microcredit enterprise would make strange bedfellows indeed. Feminists, for instance, argue that micro-credit programs tend to restrict women to low-yield enterprises such as handicraft-making or poultry-raising rather than encourage them to engage in alternative modes of income generation. Furthermore, micro-credit alone cannot help women improve their lives. This is borne out by studies that women who receive these loans do not always maintain control over them; sometimes, males relatives seize the money from them and use it for personal or family needs; at other times, the women themselves choose to hand the money to their male kin to invest in more profitable ventures than those open to them as women. From the left come charges that, by facilitating the entry of individuals into the capitalist nexus and focusing on individual profit, micro-credit prevents the development of class consciousness necessary to bring about much-needed major structural changes; in other words, the situation of a few individuals may improve somewhat, but the lives of the majority remain unchanged, if they do not actually deteriorate. Islamists, for their part, approve of loans in that they enable women to work within the home, within purdah; however, they point out that the charging of interest itself is contrary to Islam and propose the provision of interest-free loans. As Bernard Hours points out, "the Grameen Bank has earned the hostility of rural fundamentalists because Islam prohibits interest" (Hours 1993: 99). Also, they object to the fact that in order to receive loans, women have to attend weekly meetings, shout slogans and often do physical drills, all under the supervision of predominantly male NGO officers—and in violation of the Islamist understanding of purdah. Many also object to the training sessions in legal and other rights mandated by some NGOs alongside their micro-credit programs.

While there are thousands of poverty alleviation programs in the private sector, 831 NGOs receive foreign funding (GoB 1995: 28)—and Islamists have spoken out against many of them, but particularly the larger indigenous organizations that receive funds from abroad. At the local level, many people, men and women, Islamist or not, have asked why organizations like the Grameen Bank prefer to give loans to women when, given the incidence of poverty, it would make more sense to invest in male borrowers. Indeed, given that "many NGOs themselves (Grameen Bank in particular) are mostly

run by men, it certainly makes no sense to tell the rural people that *their* women need to be empowered” (Naher 1996: 39). According to one religious leader in Sarail interviewed by Alam’s study team in 1995, “If a man asks for a loan, [NGOs] show indifference. There are millions of unemployed youths that deserve credit but on the contrary they give these to women. When men are capable to work [*sic*], there is no justification to advance [*sic*] loans to women” (Alam 1995: 15). A *madrasa* teacher complained, “Our women are going out of the house at the instigation of NGOs. They are doing whatever they like. They are going to town for training. We must stop all these objectionable acts in the country” (20).

On the subject of women’s employment more generally, Jama‘at members constantly point out that Islam has spared women the burden of earning a livelihood and providing for their families; women’s primary responsibilities lie elsewhere—as wife and mother. They hasten to add that this does not mean, of course, that women could not or should not work: they are free to pursue professional careers—within “the bounds of the sharia” (Women for Women 1995: 30). In other contexts too, Jama‘at leaders are quick to explicate that they are not opposed to women’s employment—their manifesto attests to this. However, they do not like that the present system permits, even encourages, women to dress immodestly, forsake religion, and work in close quarters with men—be they male factory supervisors or NGO staff members. Today the Jama‘at clearly recognizes that economic realities are compelling increasing numbers of women into the workforce, while improved access to education is permitting larger numbers of women to take better jobs. In an interview conducted a few weeks before the June 1996 elections, Kamaruzzaman, assistant general-secretary of the Jama‘at, clarified the party’s position on women’s employment:

> Many think that if we come to power, women will be put away in a box and never be seen again. That is not at all correct. We want women to study to the full extent of their abilities and also to work. However, we want them to dress in the manner prescribed in the Holy Quran.[15]

Women’s own apprehension regarding the Jama‘at’s position on women’s employment is manifest in a question posed to Saidi during one of his *waz* sessions with women: “Half of the nation’s workforce is women, yet the Jama‘at’s position on women is not very clear. Also, as a result of much propaganda, women have reservations and some anxiety regarding the Jama‘at. Is the Jama‘at taking any steps to allay these fears? If not, why not?”[16] Saidi responds that women have nothing to worry about, that if an Islamic state were established, “a quota certainly would be reserved for women in employment, in parliament, in the mosques, in business,” and their rights would be supported in every sector.[17] The Jama‘at has assured women that it wants to set up gender-segregated jobs where women would interact only with women, for example, women tellers for women bank customers. Unfortunately, the Jama‘at has been unable to offer any concrete proposals that can meet the needs of the vast majority of women—other than interest-free loans for home-based enterprises and a committee called “Al Hejab” to teach women income-generating skills such as sewing (Women for Women 1995: 30).

In sum, women throughout the country, literate and illiterate alike, are clamoring for paid work. The vast majority needs these jobs for basic survival but the women also appreciate the additional benefits that ensue, such as a greater sense of self-worth. There are significant problems with both factory work and micro-credit; for instance, both keep women confined to low-paid “women’s work.” However, given the lack of alternatives, the emphasis right now should be on tackling these problems rather than doing away with factories and NGOs or on trying to force women back into the home and into impractical codes of public conduct.

Towards a Broader Notion of “Development”

Although issues of income, education, and family planning (as I mentioned above, this serves as a proxy for healthcare) have received a great deal of attention from policymakers, national and international, these aspects of an individual’s life do not alone contribute to a fulfilling life. To feel that she can truly participate in the polity, society and economy around her, a woman must also enjoy democratic rights and personal security. These two issues, among many others no doubt, have not received the attention they deserve—certainly very little in comparison with family planning programs, for example.

Political Empowerment

Bangladesh is in a remarkable, indeed, unique position in the world in having had two women alternate as heads of government. What has the rise of these two women to such prominent positions in

national politics meant for the political participation and political empowerment of ordinary women in the country?[18]

While there is evidence that by their very presence, the two women leaders have persuaded some "ordinary" women that women are now capable of anything, including attaining the highest political office in the country, unfortunately, as the earlier discussion in this article shows, for the most part, female leadership has not translated into significant direct benefits for the vast majority of Bangladeshi women. In other words, it is not clear that Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia have done that much more for women than male prime ministers might have done given international rhetoric and pressure in favor of women's rights.

Democratic rights encompass the right to vote in and contest elections. With the restoration of democracy and the mobilization efforts of NGOs and to a lesser extent, political parties themselves, ever increasing numbers of women throughout Bangladesh have been making their way to polling stations to cast their vote in various general and local elections. In terms of women actually running for elected office however, the record is far from impressive. According to the 2003 UNDP Human Development Report, women held a mere two percent of parliamentary seats in 2003, a decline from ten percent in 1990. The smaller number is explained, of course, by the end of the provision in 2001 of reserved parliamentary seats for women. Given space constraints, I focus here on this particular aspect of women's political participation, the subject of reserved seats for women in parliament, the center of much intense debate between state and civil society in Bangladesh over the last few years.

Although a small group of women in British India received the right to vote under the Government of India Act of 1935, universal adult franchise was not granted throughout the subcontinent until the British left in 1947. The 1972 constitution of the newly-independent Bangladesh affirmed the political equality between men and women and their equal right to contest and vote in elections;[19] nonetheless, extended periods of military rule both before and since Bangladesh gained independence have meant that most Bangladeshis' experience of democracy has been rather limited.

In united Pakistan, a number of parliamentary seats were reserved for women, to be filled by the indirect election of women by the legislature. The framers of the Bangladeshi constitution retained that provision in order to ensure "a minimum representation of women" and "because [women] were not in a position to compete successfully with male politicians for territorial constituencies." As Najma Chowdhury points out, the "reservation of seats reflects a paternalistic approach to women's representation… The ruling parties did not nominate women for general seats in the first two elections—held in 1973 and 1979—but treated the reservation provision as a device to exclude women from the general seats, which thus came to be treated as seats for men." In practice, this provision has meant that the party with a numerical majority in parliament has controlled the women's seats (Chowdhury 1994: 98). Chowdhury observes more recently, "Instead of contributing to women's political agency and autonomy, [quotas] accentuated [women's] dependence in politics and reinforced their marginality" (Chowdhury 2002: 1).

Understandably, the women who have occupied these seats have felt at a disadvantage vis-à-vis the regular MPs for a number of reasons: they are entirely dependent for their nomination and election on the ruling party and its directly elected, predominantly male, MPs, who in turn have counted on their support during parliamentary votes and discussions; because they are not directly elected by a constituency, the women feel that they do not really represent anyone, and lack both a mandate and a power base. Nonetheless, indirectly elected female MPs such as Farida Rahman occasionally have sought to push through legislation that they believed would help women (Chowdhury 1994: 98). It should be noted that prominent female politicians such as Khaleda Zia, Sheikh Hasina, and Matia Chowdhury (Minister for Agriculture under the Awami League government, significantly the first time a woman minister has been given a portfolio other than women and children affairs), all entered parliament by winning general seats. The actual number of seats reserved for women has fluctuated over the years. The Tenth Amendment to the constitution passed in 1990 declared that there would be 30 reserved seats for women until the year 2000 (out of a total of 330). Even this amendment was passed, not through a democratic process, but following a discussion between the then First Lady Roushan Ershad and two factions of the ruling Jatiya Party—"There were no opinion polls [or] public discussions and no women's organizations were consulted" on the matter (Choudhury 1995: 9).

The percentage of women candidates nominated for general seats has been extremely low in all national elections since independence. Concerned that women candidates may not be as successful as male

candidates in gaining or even retaining parliamentary seats, parties have been unwilling to risk general seats by nominating women. Women who do receive nominations then encounter a variety of obstacles in the course of the campaign and such difficulties are by no means unique to Bangladeshi political scene. In neighboring India, some political parties proposed to overcome low women's representation through a quota of nominations for women candidates over the years.[20] In the U.S. context, for example, Elizabeth Dole abandoned her bid for the White House in October 1999 when she found that she could not compete against the fundraising capabilities of her Republican male rivals George W. Bush and John McCain.

In April 2001, the provision reserving 30 seats for women in Bangladesh's parliament expired. With the then-opposition engaged in a lengthy boycott of parliament, the provision was allowed simply to lapse and the parliament elected in the October 2001 elections did not include any reserved seats for women. Women's rights activists were hopeful however that when the matter was brought up again in parliament, the government would fulfill an earlier promise, not simply to renew the existing provision, but to increase the number of seats reserved for women and open them up for direct election. There was certainly popular support for such a move—in polls undertaken by the Fair Election Monitoring Alliance (FEMA) in the late 1990s, citizens had expressed a strong preference for direct election to seats reserved for women (Islam 2000).

Despite hunger strikes and massive protests by women's rights activists demanding directly elected seats, in early 2004 the cabinet agreed to propose a constitutional amendment increasing the number of reserved seats from 30 to 45; as before, these seats would be filled by indirect election, distributed "among political parties based on their respective strengths in Parliament" (Majumdar 2004). The amendment finally was passed in parliament on 16 May 2004 and strongly condemned by women's rights activists. Ayesha Khanam of Mahila Parishad, for instance, declared, "It will undermine women's political role…. It's insulting."[21] While a significantly larger female presence in parliament may certainly alter the terms of discussion, it would be imprudent to assume that very dramatic changes would follow. It is essential to keep in mind that all women do not necessarily represent or support women's interests and, ultimately, is more important that male *and* female legislators alike recognize the centrality of women's rights and issues to general human development and reorganize their priorities accordingly.

Violence Against Women

Women throughout the world assert that "their exclusion from education, training and employment has negative economic effects for a country, and that unless patriarchal power over their lives is reduced, nothing will change. If women are to participate in development, a more equitable distribution of political as well as economic power is needed. For a grassroots women's group in Bangladesh for example, 'empowerment' is not just about gaining access to credit or childcare services. It is about defending their rights not to be subjected to violence or abandoned, and this demands sufficient influence on local leaders to induce community sanctions against errant husbands" (Black 2002: 123).

Imelda Henkin, the UNFPA Deputy Executive Director, spoke along similar lines at a meeting in Dhaka in 2003: "Violence against women has a profound impact on development. It perpetuates poverty by reducing women's capacity to work outside the home, their mobility and access to information, and children's school attendance. … The brutal discrimination and violence they face is not only a violation of human rights, it is also a serious threat to their health and the health and well being of their families, communities and nations."[22] Indeed, it is impossible to overestimate the importance, nay, the absolute necessity, of a safe and secure environment, inside and outside homes, to enable women to take advantage of what education, employment, voting, and healthcare opportunities may be available. Concerns about sexual assaults or acid attacks can easily override parents' willingness to educate their daughters or allow them to vote.

The history of women in Bangladesh has been characterized by violence from the very beginning, with the mass rapes of the War of Liberation.[23] Just in the last decade, thousands of women have been the violent victims of illegal fatwas, acid attacks, murders, and sexual assaults, the last perpetrated not only by random strangers, but also the police, work supervisors, and political party workers. Countless more continue to suffer through domestic violence, often related to dowry demands. According to Seager, 50 percent of all murders of in Bangladesh are of husbands killing their wives (Seager 2003: 29). Every year, hundreds, even thousands, of Bangladeshi women are forced into the global sex and slave trades (Asian Development Bank 2002). Finally, Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen's concept of

"missing women" casts into sharp relief the very large numbers of girls who simply never even had a chance to grow up and work for fulfilling lives (Sen 1990; see also Clausen and Wink 2003).

In response to prolonged campaigning by women's groups, the government passed the Violence Against Women (Deterrent Punishment) Ordinance 1983 and Violence Against Women (Deterrent Punishment Amendment) Ordinance 1988. Under these laws, the infliction of physical injury, rape (with the exception of marital rape), provoking suicide, trafficking in women, kidnapping of women, and murder are all recognized as crimes and deemed punishable by law. What this law automatically does not cover is the mental and physical abuse to which countless women are subjected within their own homes, often even leading to their death; these cases are very often filed away as suicides or accidents. This law also excludes deaths resulting directly from illegal *fatwas*. An additional problem is that only the police can file a case under this law; this means that, more often than not, perpetrators of violence against women go free because the police have not investigated the cases (Kamal 1995: 30).

Under the 1939 Dissolution of Muslim Marriage Act, cruelty is one of the nine grounds under which a Muslim woman can seek divorce through a court. Nevertheless, in rural areas, battered women are hesitant to seek legal recourse through the police given the corruption in the police force and the complicated, expensive nature of court cases. Even though such matters fall outside the formal jurisdiction of a *salish* committee, villagers very often prefer to seek some sort of resolution through a *salish*. As mentioned earlier, a financially dependent woman may prefer to have her abusive husband around rather than in jail. Thus, even if she decides to publicize her abuse, she is likely to prefer a resolution through a *salish* rather than a court of law when the latter may result in a jail sentence. Following a *salish* hearing, an abusive husband is often excused after a public beating and humiliation. More often, however, as the following quotations suggest, it is not obvious to the community or even to a battered wife that an abusive husband deserves censure, even punishment. During a group discussion at a Gender Issues Workshop organized by the Jessore-based NGO Banchte Shekha, one middle-aged woman described what tends to happen when a wife charges a husband with domestic violence.

> The *morol-matbor* asks the wife what happened.
>
> "He beats me," she responds. "Just like that."
>
> "Why would he beat you just like that?" comes the immediate retort. "You must have done something wrong."
>
> "Why is there a *salish* about this?" demands another member of the committee.
>
> The *salish* is then dismissed without further ado[24]

The women present at the meeting perceived re is a close link between demands for dowry and violence against women within the home. In the words of one member, "Very often, under pressure from her husband, a woman goes back to her father to ask for more dowry. Her father shrugs helplessly, 'Where shall I get this money?' The woman returns to her husband empty-handed and is beaten up. In this way, women are often driven to suicide, killed or thrown out of the home by her husband and in-laws, just so that her husband can remarry and get another dowry from another family. If the woman's parents can take her in when she's kicked out, that's good; otherwise she's homeless."[25] According to another Banchte Shekha member, "If a woman dies (i.e., murder or suicide), the police may actually show up, but if they receive a bribe, they'll turn around and walk away." Another woman added, "If the matter is taken to a *salish*, the *matbor* usually dismisses the case by saying 'Allah has taken back what belongs to Allah.'" Very often, the woman's family may choose not to have an autopsy because "it won't bring their daughter back." In the end, then, "the family of the husband goes untried. They get away with what they've done."[26]

Under state law, rape is a criminal offence, carrying jail sentences from ten years to life imprisonment. For a conviction to be obtained in a court of law, the victim has to provide medical proof that she was indeed raped and the only proof that is acceptable is that provided by a medical examination conducted within six hours of the crime being committed—and by a doctor who has a rape kit on hand. In addition, the burden is upon the woman to prove that any evidence of penetration is from the rape itself rather than prior sexual activity. According to one respondent, nobody dares take a rape case to court because they have heard that the rapists are killed, that is, given the death penalty if found guilty; that strikes them as rather excessive. Moreover, a court case also entails expenses beyond the means of much of the rural poor. Given all this, it is easy to understand why a poor rural woman, even if she is prepared for the negative publicity and stigmatization

that would invariably accompany her revealing that such an incident even occurred, would still choose to seek redress through the village *salish* rather than a formal court of law.

While it is laudable that laws have been passed to punish perpetrators of violence against women, women are unlikely to take advantage of them as long as the crimes themselves cause no social outrage—for instance, as long as social norms persist in seeing rape as shameful, the victim's fault; marriage and hence, dowry, as unavoidable; domestic violence as sanctioned by religious texts. Fortunately, several NGOs such as Ain-o-Salish Kendro and Nagorik Uddyog are engaged in legal literacy projects throughout the country that involve not only teaching ordinary women their legal rights, but also training those villagers who tend to find themselves on *salish* committees.

It cannot be denied that much has improved in the lives of the women of Bangladesh over the past three decades. However, in every arena, change has been very slow, and in some cases, even negative. As we look ahead into the twenty-first century and ponder the prospects of sustained human development, we must recognize that for society as a whole to improve, the plight of women in the country must be alleviated. And the only way to achieve lasting results is by making it possible for the most underprivileged members of society—women, the poor, minorities—to be agents of change in their own lives, not simply the passive targets and beneficiaries of various projects. To that end, democracy is essential, but it must be a true democracy—one in which such groups can participate freely, without fear of violence or economic or social censure.

Endnotes

1. http://hdr.undp.org/reports/global/2003/pdf/presskit/HDR03_PKE_HDI.pdf

2. The number of countries is smaller because not all countries have the data necessary to compute the GDI.

3. While I do not explicitly engage with that literature here, I must acknowledge my indebtedness to the extensive work by Amartya Sen on continually expanding the very notion of "development". See for example, Sen 1999.

4. Parts of this article are drawn from earlier works, Shehabuddin 1999a, 1999b, 2000, and additional research in Bangladesh in 2001 and 2003.

5. Rounaq Jahan (1995) cites one estimate that suggests that, of the funds for project allocations in 1980-86, 19 percent of (about US $ 844 million) went to projects involving women and of this. Of this amount, 55 percent was directed into population and family planning projects, as opposed to two percent into health and eight percent into education.

6. Interview, Chittagong, 16 March 1996.

7. "Bangladesh-Religion-Women: Bangladesh PM Wants Muslim Clerics to Work for Women's Rights." Agence France-Presse, 23 December 2003; available at http://www.aegis.com/news/afp/2003/AF031298.html

8. *Independent* (Dhaka), 26 June 2003.

9. The corresponding figures for male literacy in that same period are 32.9 percent and 45 percent.

10. Bangladesh Television, "*Sobinoye Jante Chay*" ("If You Don't Mind, We'd Like to Know"), 4 June 1996.

11. For example, the Muslim Family Code requires that a man must have the permission of his first wife if he wishes to have a second wife; many consider this stipulation to be a violation of Islamic law.

12. *Bhorer Kagoj*, 15 and 17 April 1994.

13. See for instance *Daily Star*, 7 December 1995; Shehabuddin 1999a: 162-63.

14. *The Economist*, 23 September 1989: 46.

15. Interview, Dhaka, 8 May 1996.

16. During his wazes, Saidi often sets aside a half-day session exclusively for women, when they can pose questions to him about the movement or more generally about Islam.

17. "Maulana Delawar Hussain Saidi's Public Meeting with Women, Parade Grounds, Chittagong, 1997," audiocassette recording, Spandon Audio-Visual Centre, Dhaka.

18. For a comparative analysis of the phenomenon of female political leaders in South and Southeast Asia, see Richter 1990.

19. This stands in sharp contrast to the political rights of Muslim women in some countries in the so-called "heartland" of the Islamic world. Although a

fatwa in Egypt in 1956 (that is, after the 1952 revolution) declared that women could indeed vote and stand for election, an Egyptian jurist at the head of the Department of Jurisprudence and Legislation in post-Desert Storm Kuwait, in 1992 specifically, announced that women could neither vote nor run for office. Margot Badran (1998) identifies pressure from Saudi Arabia, a large neighbor and source of support in the Gulf War, as an important factor in the Kuwaiti state's resistance to women's enfranchisement.

20. Thus in 1989, the Congress Party and Janata Dal announced a quota of 30 percent, but this has not been implemented. Interestingly, rightist and regional parties like the BJP and the Akali Dal have nominated increasing numbers of women candidates over the years (Swarup et al. 1994: 368).

21. "B'desh Parliament Reserves 45 Seats for Women." *Times of India*, 16 May 2004, available at http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/678969.cms

22. http://www.unfpa.org/news/news.cfm?ID-303&Language=1

23. See http://www.drishtipat.org/1971/

24. Gender Issues Workshop, Banchte Shekha Office, Jessore, 15 June 1996.

25. Group discussion at Gender Issues Workshop, Banchte Shekha Office, Jessore, 15 June 1996. This horrific phenomenon is not restricted to the rural poor; one often reads in the papers about the mysterious deaths of young brides in middle and upper middle-class urban households. In India, the crime has been labeled "dowry-death." On the phenomenon of the "burning bride" in the Indian context, see Teays 1991.

26. Group discussion at Gender Issues Workshop, Banchte Shekha Office, Jessore, 15 June 1996.

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