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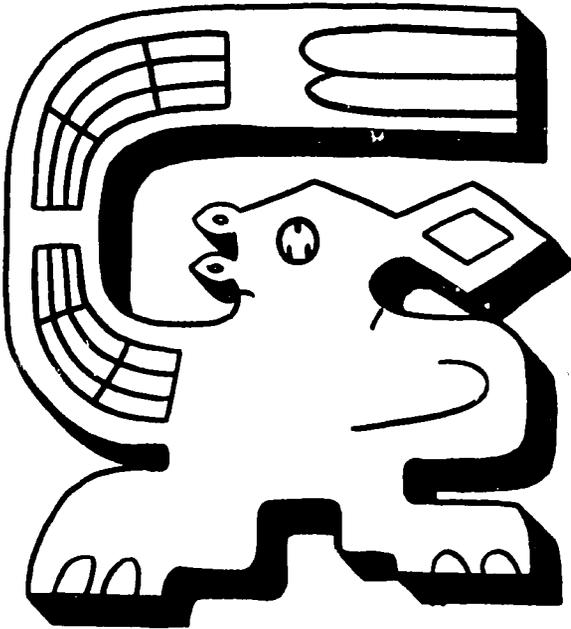
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# Social Change and Rural Women: Possibilities of Participation

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SOCIAL CHANGE AND RURAL WOMEN:  
POSSIBILITIES OF PARTICIPATION

--Shapan Adnan & Rushidan Islam\*

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The women of rural Bangladesh live in a world of real and symbolic seclusion. This is subordinate to a male-dominated world of thought and action where the concepts of problems and solutions are emphatically "monosexual". Yet Islamic legends tell us that Bibi Ayesha, the wife of the Prophet Hazrat Muhammad, served water to soldiers on the battle fields. Such accomplishments are beyond the flights of imagination of contemporary Bangladeshi women. Indeed in Vietnam, a country not too dissimilar to ours, women contribute 60% of the agricultural labour, and hold positions of effective authority and command. Even the Muslim women of Turkey or Egypt are not fettered in a way remotely comparable to their Bangladeshi counterparts.

2. In this paper we attempt to examine this paradoxical position of the rural women of Bangladesh

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(who are predominantly Muslim). This is a topic where discussion and pronouncement is fraught with the dangers of baseless self-righteousness, sexual taboos, and variants of male and female chauvinism. We hope however that the subsequent sections will help in formulating proposals for the increased and realistic participation of rural women in the development of Bangladesh.

## II. METHODOLOGY

1. The paper is specifically concerned with the rural womenfolk of Bangladesh, the vast majority of whom are from depressed low income groups [10,13,14,15,16]. As a depressed group, they may be regarded as being *triply* affected, as follows:

- (i) As females vis à vis males
- (ii) As being rural vis à vis being urban
- (iii) As being poor (exploited) vis à vis being rich (exploiters)

2. Since development is the professed context of this seminar, the predicament and role of women will be discussed in the context of social change. This will involve the consideration of economic, social and political factors. In many cases the term *development* may turn out to be a misnomer and we would prefer to use the more 'neutral' phrase, social change.

3. It is also necessary to be clear about the heterogeneous composition of rural women: manifold cleavages on lines of religion, class, language, 'shamaj'-membership, factional alliance, etc., exist. Hence not all problems and analyses regarding rural women will be universally applicable. Different groups of rural women may have precisely conflicting interests and the significance of this will become clear in the subsequent discussion.

4. We have attempted to develop a set of cogent arguments based on empirical evidence, wherever possible. The method has been to derive insights gained from village studies or studies of specific groups of women and institutions and generalize (even if a little unwarrantedly) on their bases regarding the womenfolk of rural Bangladesh. The empirical evidence used has been based on the findings of:

- (i) The study of four Bangladesh Villages by the Village Study Group, Dacca, and
- (ii) studies by other scholars interested in rural Bangladesh. All such sources are listed in the bibliography (Section IX).

5. In moving on to discuss the problems of women as a special case of the problems of depressed and low income groups, we have brought in the results of broader analytical and theoretical work on the nature of economy and society in selected villages done by the Village Study Group, Dacca [9, 10, 11, 12].

### III. THE PRESENT ESTATE OF WOMEN

1. The plight of women in Bangladesh, particularly in rural areas, requires no undue exaggeration. Extremely useful documentation has been provided by Ellen Sattar, Rounaq Jahan, Shirley Lindenbaum and Taherunnessa Abdullah [1, 3, 2, 4]. We shall not repeat here the detailed economic, social, legal and political bondage which has reduced rural women to second-class citizens. This predicament is further exacerbated by practices such as polygamy, real and symbolised seclusion (purdah), universal distrust of feminine emancipation and blatant flouting of the Family Law Ordinance. Even biological and child-rearing practices are not free from sexual discrimination. "Sons are not only preferred to daughters, they have a greater chance of survival. In two recent survey years,

the mortality rates for females under 5 years were 35-50% higher than those for males (Mosley 1970)" [2].

2. All this, however, raises an intriguing paradox. Can society and the economy do without the womenfolk it chooses to relegate to virtual serfhood in domestic arenas? Put another way, what are the contributions of women to the economic and social system of the country, and to what extent does this make them indispensable? The question loses its apparent absurdity as soon as we look at the facts. It is no surprise that even though depressed and exploited, it is the *economic* role of women which retains for them a decisive material value (and hence status) other than that of being mere sexual objects or objects of social decoration [2].

3. One of the major contentions of this paper is that the whole issue of the status and emancipation of women rests on their relations with the means of production and their consequent roles in production organization, including that of the family-based production unit which is typically present in the rural economy. Lack of organization and consciousness regarding these factors have contributed to the existing depressed status of women. Otherwise, the contribution of women to the rural economy, actual and potential, are staggering. This also explains the very recent conscious and/or unconscious concern of policy-makers with the plight of women. The material gains from the efforts of a more emancipated womenfolk would adequately justify any state evangelism in that respect. Let us illustrate.

4. We shall use data from the study of the villages Shangkhomala, Kongshogram and Radhashyampur [11, 14, 15, 16]. The male-female ratio in these villages are, respectively, 1:0.92, 1:0.98 and 1:1.004, giving an average of 1:0.98. This merely confirms that nearly half of the human resources of these impoverished communities are female. We found that

women in the age range 10-49 were normally involved in doing household and other work requiring physical strength, except for cases with particular, physical disabilities and the few months related to the period of pregnancy. Table 1 shows the age structure of women in the three villages. The active group (Age 10-49) are found to constitute 48.9%, 54.3% and 51.7% of the female population and 23.6%, 26.6% and 26.7% of the total population of these villages in the same order. In other words active able-bodied women in these villages constitute over a quarter of the population in these villages and are available for productive work (including household activities which are generally discounted in national accounts estimation). It is also found that each such active woman supports, including herself, a population of 3.76, 3.40 and 3.47 in the three villages as far as household activities are concerned. While this is a fair load for each woman within the traditional context (i.e., household and domestic activities), the figure in each case is such that much of the female labour force could be diverted to other productive work with a reasonable amount of economic and social reorganization. The extent and nature of the surplus female labour can be estimated as follows.

5. Given the staggered intensity of work in a predominantly agricultural and traditional economy, the concept of man-hours as used in organized industrial and urban occupations is somewhat inappropriate. One may however use the concept of a package man-year (or woman-year) which aggregates the seasonal fluctuations in terms of the actual time-pattern of work in the rural economy [18,19]. Experience from more advanced agrarian and peasant societies such as that of Vietnam [7] indicate that women are capable of putting in as much work as men. This means that women in the three villages are potentially capable of providing 134, 106 and 184 woman-years of labour. Given the dependency burden per woman in these villages as enumerated above, it is reasonably estimated that at most 50% of the

TABLE 1

## AGE STRUCTURE OF FEMALE POPULATION

Village	Shangkhomala	
	No. of Women	Percentage* (a) (b)
00-04	60	10.56 22.00
05-09	49	8.63 18.01
10-14	18	3.17 6.62
15-19	29	4.93 10.29
20-24	24	4.22 8.82
25-29	19	3.34 6.98
30-34	15	2.64 5.51
35-39	8	1.41 2.94
40-44	14	2.46 5.15
45-49	7	1.23 2.57
50-54	9	1.58 3.31
55-59	3	0.53 1.10
60-64	5	0.88 1.84
65-above	13	2.29 4.78
<b>Total</b>	<b>272</b>	
<b>Active (women in age-group 10-49)</b>	<b>134</b>	
<b>Average number of dependents on each working woman for household services</b>	<b>3.76</b>	

\* (a) means females in the age group as % of total village population.

(b) means females in the age group as % of total female population of the village.

TABLE 1

## IN THREE BANGLADESH VILLAGES

Kongshogram			Radhashyampur		
No. of Women	Percentage*		No. of Women	Percentage*	
	(a)	(b)		(a)	(b)
38	9.27	18.54	60	9.00	17.70
41	10.00	20.00	69	10.36	20.35
25	6.95	12.19	30	4.50	8.85
15	3.65	7.31	37	5.55	10.91
9	2.19	4.39	28	4.20	8.26
14	3.41	6.82	23	3.45	6.78
13	3.17	6.34	22	3.30	6.49
12	2.92	5.85	17	2.55	5.01
11	2.68	5.36	11	1.65	3.24
7	1.70	3.41	16	2.40	4.72
4	0.97	1.95	6	0.90	1.77
3	0.73	1.46	3	0.45	0.88
5	1.22	2.44	6	0.90	1.77
8	1.95	3.90	11	1.65	3.25
<hr/>			<hr/>		
205			339		
<hr/>			<hr/>		
106			184		
<hr/>			<hr/>		
3.47			3.40		
<hr/>			<hr/>		

\* (a) means females in the age group as % of total village population.

(b) means females in the age group as % of total female population of the village.

existing female labour-time would be needed to carry out the existing household activities, and that the other 50% could be diverted to other forms of productive work (provided of course that such employment could be generated).

6. The requirements for household work could be even further decreased if certain simple technological facilities could be provided. Rural women are plagued by time-consuming chores such as fetching fresh-water and dehusking paddy with the "*dhenki*", which could be conserved by providing running water on a communal basis, using dehusking machines, providing nurseries for children, etc. [1, 2, 13, 14, 15, 16]. Under conditions of conducive social change and organization, 75% of female labour services could be available for work other than household activities.

7. The above discussion, concerned with the potential level of female labour may have given the misleading impression that women do not do outside work. This is far from true. Indeed there are women in Bangladesh's villages who are fully employed by others or are in self-employment in sectors where the total output is aimed at the market. Table 2 provides a list of female workers in various income-earning occupations in the three villages. While the numbers of such workers are small compared to the labour force, they indicate a definite component of non-household income-earning female activity which could be expanded in the future.

8. The intensity and diversity of the workload of village women can be seen from the following case studies taken from the village Shangkhomala [14]. Ramiza Khatoon, aged about 30, is a young widow who has to provide for herself. She has kept her only son as a domestic servant in the household of a neighbouring rich farmer. For 9 months of the year she collects wood from the neighbouring forest and sells it at the Dohazari market a few miles away. She starts early, devoting the morning to

TABLE 2  
INCOME-EARNING OCCUPATIONS FOR FEMALES  
IN THREE VILLAGES

Occupations*	Number of Female Workers		
	Shangkhomala	Kongshogram	Radhashyampur
Domestic services <sup>a</sup>	5	1	6
Paddy-husking <sup>a</sup>	1	-	2
Agricultural wage labour <sup>a</sup>	1	-	-
Unspecified wage labour <sup>a</sup>	-	3	-
Weaving fishing net <sup>a</sup>	2	-	-
Cowgirl <sup>a</sup>	1	-	-
House-tutor <sup>a</sup>	3	-	-
Firewood collection from forest <sup>b</sup>	6	-	-
Vegetables collection <sup>b</sup>	1	-	-
Unspecified small trade <sup>b</sup>	-	1	-
Agriculture <sup>c</sup>	9	8	3
Fruit-growing <sup>c</sup>	1	-	-
Poultry-keeping <sup>c</sup>	2	-	-
Begging <sup>d</sup>	4	4	-

\*Occupations listed with (a) against them means that in these occupations employment is given by others while (b) means that people are self-employed in these occupations. Occupations with (c) are ones which are sources of income and do not lead to employment--these are attributed to women when they are the heads of family and the assets of the family are under their supervision; (d) is begging, which obviously is not a source of employment but is considered a source of income, given our social system.

wood collection and the afternoon to transportation and sale. Her normal work day exceeds 12 hours. During the other months of the year, particularly peak periods in agricultural activity, she works as a wage labourer. Her tasks include separation of paddy from paddy plants using legs (under heavy rains), separation of paddy from paddy plants using cows, transplanting paddy plants and domestic work.

9. Similarly, Islama Khatoon works as a teacher of religious lessons for village children. Her husband is also a teacher at the Local Primary School. The village also has a lady homoeopath, Shova Rani Jaldas.

10. The domestic activities (conventionally non-income earning) of women are also varied and intensive. Ellen Sattar has provided a painstaking and detailed picture of such activities for one year in one village [1].

TABLE 3  
PROFICIENCY IN MOTHERTONGUE OF THE FEMALES  
IN THREE VILLAGES

Proficiency	Shangkhomala	Kongshogram	Radhashyampur
No proficiency	21	16	17
Speak only	224	162	283
Speak & read	4	10	5
Speak, read & write	21	17	33
Not available	2	-	1
Total	272	205	339

TABLE 4  
LEVEL OF FORMAL EDUCATION OF THE FEMALES  
IN THREE VILLAGES

Level of Education	Shangkhomala	Kongshogram	Radhashyampur
No education	246	171	296
Class V or below	23	28	25
Class VI to Class IX	2	2	13
Maqtab† education	-	-	1
Primary level Madrasah† education	-	-	1
N.A.*	1	4	3
Total	272	205	339

†Maqtab and Madrasah refer to Islamic religious education.

\*N.A. or Not Available means that information on these people could not be collected.

11. The prospective level of *skilled* female manpower largely depends on the levels of educational attainment. Tables 3 and 4 will illustrate that such levels are dismally low for the three study villages [14,15,16]. This is simply because of the lack of conducive social values and opportunities, not from reluctance on the part of women. In Ellen Sattar's study, 91% of village women wanted their daughters to finish primary school [1]. Given that most of the best female minds of the nation do not even get the opportunity to go to school, it would seem that marginal social product

from incremental female education in rural areas would exceed those for males.

12. However, potential levels of available skilled female labour is in itself not much of an encouraging factor, given the dismal levels of male unemployment and underemployment in Bangladesh's villages. Given that, increased generation of rural employment still remains the overwhelming question, some contentions may be made regarding the devising of employment policies with respect to men and women. There are categories of work particularly suited for either men or women, as well as others which suit both. These non-substitutable and substitutable sectors should be identified. As agricultural work provides a sector where male and female labour may be substitutable, one could propose policies such that industries located in rural areas could absorb male labour while the women could work in the fields. During the peak periods in agriculture, the men could help the women in the fields. Such identification of factors on a local basis could allow for increased use of the available female labour force without displacing male workers.

13. The present estate of women in rural areas seems to be such that their contribution is substantial and indispensable, without this being recognized by the menfolk and society in general, as such. Potentially, too, the women could move out into increasing participation in the productive labour force provided sufficient employment for women could be generated with appropriate localized planning. It would seem that women could have a fair control over the means of production and the consequential social status arising thereof, provided forces of social change were conducive to such transformed roles and participation.

#### IV. WOMEN AND DEVELOPMENT: GENERAL ASPECTS

1. Having looked at the actual and potential contribution of rural women to productive activities we now propose to look at various efforts at social change and their effects on the role and status of women. We shall concentrate here on either state-sponsored development efforts or privately run institutional activities. The two subsequent sections (V & VI) will deal respectively with detrimental and beneficial factors. Case study materials will be utilized and generalized policy implications will be attempted.

2. It will be seen that issues cannot be confined to technological and economic aspects of the role of women in society. In other words, the evidence itself will suggest that we look at the role of women under the broader framework of modernization and social change. This will be attempted in Section VII.

3. It is also suggested that production and social relations are critical dictators regarding the participation of women in social change. As such these terms and conditions have to be discussed in some detail and the policy decisions be made consistent with the results of such analysis.

#### V. DETRIMENTAL PROCESSES AND IMPLICATIONS

1. The major indictment of development planning to date in this context is that there is very little indication of the awareness of women as a depressed group, whose contribution and participation in such efforts can be increased with conscious effort. This "monosex" thinking is somewhat akin to the "monocrop" fetish about high-yielding rice in agricultural productivity programmes [2].

2. One of the consequences of mechanization in the simple processing of agricultural products has been the technological redundancy of female labour. Replacement of paddy-processing work of women by mills and parboiling equipment is a case in point [2]. Such technological redundancy "raises the spectre of the devaluation of women at a time when there is some evidence that their economic status may already be in decline" [2].

3. A third feature is the ironic process by which "educated" and "acculturated" individuals become unemployable in traditional sectors. A rural woman, in the peasant household context, has to be, of necessity, a hard worker. Prevailing social attitudes demand that education and marriage aspirations lead to non-participation in manual household work. However, the education she receives in the rural educational system does not either make her employable elsewhere. Such forms of systematically generated structural unemployment for females need to be discouraged.

4. "Still, until now, motherhood has offered a role of social worth and women have been honoured for breeding the labour force needed in agricultural production" [2]. With the increasing realization and propagation of the concepts of population planning and smaller families, the traditional ideal of motherhood is likely to be devalued and underplayed. This relative devaluation of female worth in the matrimonial market (whose objective function may be termed as a socio-economic conglomerate) is also confirmed by the growing importance of 'groom price' with respect to 'bride price' or dowry [2]. Such trends can only be reversed by conscious and planned emphasis on the alternative productive roles of women concerned with the generation and sustenance of human capital as well as their increased participation in skilled professions.

5. There are other instances of more direct intervention of conservative social forces to undermine the participation of women in development. Shirley Lindenbaum cites two such instances in her report [2]. One is the purdah restriction on women which prevents them from participating in and having control over vital economic activities such as trade. This makes them structurally dependent on related males. In the second instance, a women's cooperative which has been evidently successful in activities including marketing, is seen to come under "moral criticism" from its (male) economic contenders. The active women cooperators were accused of an "immoral lifestyle." The pressure was such that the women's cooperative was discontinued to prevent the loss of participation and goodwill from village men. This is a concrete example of the acquiescence of a development agency to social conservatism (and established male economic interests) and indicates the insidious and complex ways by which an established social order (composed of classes as well as sexes) operates to prevent the emergence of forces which might conceivably threaten its own values and prerogatives.

6. A further instance of such pressure to prevent female education and population planning is our study of the highly conservative Barisal village, Char Shyamraj [13]. Here the reactionary religious leadership went to the extent of proclaiming that the devastating cyclone of November 1970 which nearly wiped out the child population of the village was the expression of divine wrath at the villagers' having accepted the sinful ways of female education and family planning measures. The office of the family planning unit has since remained closed. Here too is an expression of the mechanisms of social pressure and ideological brainwashing which form such major stumbling blocks to the gradual emancipation of rural women.

## VI. BENEFICIAL PROCESSES AND IMPLICATIONS

1. The post-war years (1972 onwards) have seen the advent of major private and state initiatives to assist and train rural women in which "there is an emphasis on economic self-support rather than the distribution of charity . . ." [2].

2. The People's Health Centre, run by Dr. Zafarullah, operates with young girls as paramedics who are mostly unmarried and aged 15-16; 50% of them are local village girls. Similarly other private agencies have developed programmes which train rural women for employment (including self-employment) in light industries such as handicrafts and sericulture which may be seen as adjuncts of the agricultural economy. In Daulatkhana Thana in Bhola, young school-going girls also operate as managers of cooperatives, citing one instance where the present unrelated educational system may be receiving worthwhile feedback from selfhelp programmes for women [2].

3. Such documentation easily explodes (if such explosion is at all necessary) the myth of the traditional aversion of women to social change. Rural women are already working in responsible and executive capacities. What is required is appropriate planning geared to accelerating and extending such demonstrated abilities. Localized planning can help in eradicating unnecessary structural unemployment (arising from inappropriate education for females). Conscious social organizations can delineate the opportunity frontier for women, prescribing appropriate patterns for the selection of educational and cultural alternatives. All this, of course, requires political will and acumen of an order yet to be demonstrated by any leadership to date. Politics and mass-level implementation brings in its wake other considerations which give rise to misgivings as against an otherwise encouraging record to date.

VII. BROADER CONSIDERATIONS AND MISGIVINGS

1. The demonstration of the participator women in social change mentioned above are all products of external initiatives and there is as yet no instances of such activities on a self-generating and self-sustaining basis. These active groups are either international or (national) élitist in character. Hence, there is no evidence as yet that women's participation would either emerge or continue if these "hothouse plants" cease to be supported.

2. A second interesting feature is that women from the Buddhist and Hindu Communities tend to be much more active in these efforts in comparison to the Muslim women who form, by and large, the predominant section of the rural womenfolk [2].

3. Since the encroachment of female participation in male job opportunities has not yet assumed a threatening character, even in a small way, the essential economic and social problems concerned with the differentiation of productive roles by sexes has not yet arisen. These however have to be borne in mind as realistic possibilities in the future.

4. We have seen earlier instances of the traditional order exerting pressure to prevent female emancipation, particularly in the spheres of education, trade, cooperative management, population planning, etc. Such trends can only be opposed by either populist movements at grass-root levels or the imposition of state authority to foster these ends with determination. While the former seems unrealistic, the latter would require nothing less than the assumption of power by a leadership which is not subservient to the ruling orders of rural Bangladesh.

5. Even enlightened notions of female emancipation as a basis for normal sexuality and a healthy,

productive society is unlikely to be received sympathetically by the traditional forces. It is precisely because of this that the emancipatory provisions of the Family Law Ordinance is effectively inoperative in rural Bangladesh and provides little security for the fettered womenfolk.

6. A final complexity is introduced by the fact that not all women are united in the struggle for female emancipation. The major consequences of pervasive female participation in social change would be to raise the price of cheap female labour from the working wage-earning classes. This would threaten the position of male and female employers (particularly women in rich families accustomed to a bevy of female servants as domestic help). Here class conflict would become a genuine threat to the united efforts for women's emancipation.

7. Ultimately, we are thrown back to the contention that the exploitation and degradation of women forms a special case of the more general phenomenon of exploitation in a class society. And it is the material relations which dictate the ultimate pattern of polarization in such situations of social and political conflict. We see elsewhere that the liberation of women from the bonds of traditional society has historically been the products of the overthrow of the imposing social order through the use of organized resistance. While this does not presently seem to be on the cards for Bangladesh, one fails to see how else the necessary social mobilization can take place to ensure effective success.

#### VIII. CONCLUSION

1. Women in Bangladesh work extremely hard, whether or not society chooses to recognize their efforts. However, we may not expect *women for development without development for women.*

2. Their increased participation is hence conditional on increased opportunities and the generation of more emancipated social attitudes. These are however unlikely since the emancipation of women will in the ultimate analysis affect the material interests of the present ruling social order. This order is adept at the use of selective extra-legal violence and general intimidation for maintenance of its material and political authority including the occasional dishonourment of the status of women [10]. Change can only be expected as a consequence of the purposive decimation of this conservative and reactionary order. This in its turn cannot happen without the emergence of such political power as is capable of contending with organized repression. The emancipation of the rural women thus seems inextricably bound up with the progressive (if not revolutionary) transformation of the social order of rural Bangladesh.

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# Social Change and Rural Women: Possibilities of Participation

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SOCIAL CHANGE AND RURAL WOMEN:  
POSSIBILITIES OF PARTICIPATION

--Shapan Adnan & Rushidan Islam\*

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The women of rural Bangladesh live in a world of real and symbolic seclusion. This is subordinate to a male-dominated world of thought and action where the concepts of problems and solutions are emphatically "monosexual". Yet Islamic legends tell us that Bibi Ayesha, the wife of the Prophet Hazrat Muhammad, served water to soldiers on the battle fields. Such accomplishments are beyond the flights of imagination of contemporary Bangladeshi women. Indeed in Vietnam, a country not too dissimilar to ours, women contribute 60% of the agricultural labour, and hold positions of effective authority and command. Even the Muslim women of Turkey or Egypt are not fettered in a way remotely comparable to their Bangladeshi counterparts.

2. In this paper we attempt to examine this paradoxical position of the rural women of Bangladesh

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(who are predominantly Muslim). This is a topic where discussion and pronouncement is fraught with the dangers of baseless self-righteousness, sexual taboos, and variants of male and female chauvinism. We hope however that the subsequent sections will help in formulating proposals for the increased and realistic participation of rural women in the development of Bangladesh.

## II. METHODOLOGY

1. The paper is specifically concerned with the rural womenfolk of Bangladesh, the vast majority of whom are from depressed low income groups [10,13,14, 15,16]. As a depressed group, they may be regarded as being triply affected, as follows:

- (i) As females vis à vis males
- (ii) As being rural vis à vis being urban
- (iii) As being poor (exploited) vis à vis being rich (exploiters)

2. Since development is the professed context of this seminar, the predicament and role of women will be discussed in the context of social change. This will involve the consideration of economic, social and political factors. In many cases the term *development* may turn out to be a misnomer and we would prefer to use the more 'neutral' phrase, social change.

3. It is also necessary to be clear about the heterogeneous composition of rural women: manifold cleavages on lines of religion, class, language, 'shamaj'-membership, factional alliance, etc., exist. Hence not all problems and analyses regarding rural women will be universally applicable. Different groups of rural women may have precisely conflicting interests and the significance of this will become clear in the subsequent discussion.

4. We have attempted to develop a set of cogent arguments based on empirical evidence, wherever possible. The method has been to derive insights gained from village studies or studies of specific groups of women and institutions and generalize (even if a little unwarrantedly) on their bases regarding the womenfolk of rural Bangladesh. The empirical evidence used has been based on the findings of:

- (i) The study of four Bangladesh Villages by the Village Study Group, Dacca, and
- (ii) studies by other scholars interested in rural Bangladesh. All such sources are listed in the bibliography (Section IX).

5. In moving on to discuss the problems of women as a special case of the problems of depressed and low income groups, we have brought in the results of broader analytical and theoretical work on the nature of economy and society in selected villages done by the Village Study Group, Dacca [9, 10, 11, 12].

### III. THE PRESENT ESTATE OF WOMEN

1. The plight of women in Bangladesh, particularly in rural areas, requires no undue exaggeration. Extremely useful documentation has been provided by Ellen Sattar, Rounaq Jahan, Shirley Lindenbaum and Taherunnessa Abdullah [1, 3, 2, 4]. We shall not repeat here the detailed economic, social, legal and political bondage which has reduced rural women to second-class citizens. This predicament is further exacerbated by practices such as polygamy, real and symbolised seclusion (purdah), universal distrust of feminine emancipation and blatant flouting of the Family Law Ordinance. Even biological and child-rearing practices are not free from sexual discrimination. "Sons are not only preferred to daughters, they have a greater chance of survival. In two recent survey years,

the mortality rates for females under 5 years were 35-50% higher than those for males (Mosley 1970)" [2].

2. All this, however, raises an intriguing paradox. Can society and the economy do without the womenfolk it chooses to relegate to virtual serfhood in domestic arenas? Put another way, what are the contributions of women to the economic and social system of the country, and to what extent does this make them indispensable? The question loses its apparent absurdity as soon as we look at the facts. It is no surprise that even though depressed and exploited, it is the *economic* role of women which retains for them a decisive material value (and hence status) other than that of being mere sexual objects or objects of social decoration [2].

3. One of the major contentions of this paper is that the whole issue of the status and emancipation of women rests on their relations with the means of production and their consequent roles in production organization, including that of the family-based production unit which is typically present in the rural economy. Lack of organization and consciousness regarding these factors have contributed to the existing depressed status of women. Otherwise, the contribution of women to the rural economy, actual and potential, are staggering. This also explains the very recent conscious and/or unconscious concern of policy-makers with the plight of women. The material gains from the efforts of a more emancipated womenfolk would adequately justify any state evangelism in that respect. Let us illustrate.

4. We shall use data from the study of the villages Shangkhomala, Kongshogram and Radhashyampur [11,14,15,16]. The male-female ratio in these villages are, respectively, 1:0.92, 1:0.98 and 1:1.004, giving an average of 1:0.98. This merely confirms that nearly half of the human resources of these impoverished communities are female. We found that

women in the age range 10-49 were normally involved in doing household and other work requiring physical strength, except for cases with particular, physical disabilities and the few months related to the period of pregnancy. Table 1 shows the age structure of women in the three villages. The active group (Age 10-49) are found to constitute 48.9%, 54.3% and 51.7% of the female population and 23.6%, 26.6% and 26.7% of the total population of these villages in the same order. In other words active able-bodied women in these villages constitute over a quarter of the population in these villages and are available for productive work (including household activities which are generally discounted in national accounts estimation). It is also found that each such active woman supports, including herself, a population of 3.76, 3.40 and 3.47 in the three villages as far as household activities are concerned. While this is a fair load for each woman within the traditional context (i.e., household and domestic activities), the figure in each case is such that much of the female labour force could be diverted to other productive work with a reasonable amount of economic and social reorganization. The extent and nature of the surplus female labour can be estimated as follows.

5. Given the staggered intensity of work in a predominantly agricultural and traditional economy, the concept of man-hours as used in organized industrial and urban occupations is somewhat inappropriate. One may however use the concept of a package man-year (or woman-year) which aggregates the seasonal fluctuations in terms of the actual time-pattern of work in the rural economy [18, 19]. Experience from more advanced agrarian and peasant societies such as that of Vietnam [7] indicate that women are capable of putting in as much work as men. This means that women in the three villages are potentially capable of providing 134, 106 and 184 woman-years of labour. Given the dependency burden per woman in these villages as enumerated above, it is reasonably estimated that at most 50% of the

TABLE 1

## AGE STRUCTURE OF FEMALE POPULATION

Village	Shangkhomala	
	No. of Women	Percentage* (a) (b)
00-04	60	10.56 22.00
05-09	49	8.63 18.01
10-14	18	3.17 6.62
15-19	29	4.93 10.29
20-24	24	4.22 8.82
25-29	19	3.34 6.98
30-34	15	2.64 5.51
35-39	8	1.41 2.94
40-44	14	2.46 5.15
45-49	7	1.23 2.57
50-54	9	1.58 3.31
55-59	3	0.53 1.10
60-64	5	0.88 1.84
65-above	13	2.29 4.78
<b>Total</b>	<b>272</b>	
Active (women in age-group 10-49)	134	
Average number of dependents on each working woman for household services	3.76	

\* (a) means females in the age group as % of total village population.

(b) means females in the age group as % of total female population of the village.

TABLE 1

## IN THREE BANGLADESH VILLAGES

Kongshogram			Radhashyampur		
No. of Women	Percentage*		No. of Women	Percentage*	
	(a)	(b)		(a)	(b)
38	9.27	18.54	60	9.00	17.70
41	10.00	20.00	69	10.36	20.35
25	6.95	12.19	30	4.50	8.85
15	3.65	7.31	37	5.55	10.91
9	2.19	4.39	28	4.20	8.26
14	3.41	6.82	23	3.45	6.78
13	3.17	6.34	22	3.30	6.49
12	2.92	5.85	17	2.55	5.01
11	2.68	5.36	11	1.65	3.24
7	1.70	3.41	16	2.40	4.72
4	0.97	1.95	6	0.90	1.77
3	0.73	1.46	3	0.45	0.88
5	1.22	2.44	6	0.90	1.77
8	1.95	3.90	11	1.65	3.25
<hr/>			<hr/>		
205			339		
<hr/>			<hr/>		
106			184		
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3.47			3.40		
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\* (a) means females in the age group as % of total village population.

(b) means females in the age group as % of total female population of the village.

existing female labour-time would be needed to carry out the existing household activities, and that the other 50% could be diverted to other forms of productive work (provided of course that such employment could be generated).

6. The requirements for household work could be even further decreased if certain simple technological facilities could be provided. Rural women are plagued by time-consuming chores such as fetching fresh-water and dehusking paddy with the "dhenki", which could be conserved by providing running water on a communal basis, using dehusking machines, providing nurseries for children, etc. [1, 2, 13, 14, 15, 16]. Under conditions of conducive social change and organization, 75% of female labour services could be available for work other than household activities.

7. The above discussion, concerned with the potential level of female labour may have given the misleading impression that women do not do outside work. This is far from true. Indeed there are women in Bangladesh's villages who are fully employed by others or are in self-employment in sectors where the total output is aimed at the market. Table 2 provides a list of female workers in various income-earning occupations in the three villages. While the numbers of such workers are small compared to the labour force, they indicate a definite component of non-household income-earning female activity which could be expanded in the future.

8. The intensity and diversity of the workload of village women can be seen from the following case studies taken from the village Shangkhomala [14]. Ramiza Khatoon, aged about 30, is a young widow who has to provide for herself. She has kept her only son as a domestic servant in the household of a neighbouring rich farmer. For 9 months of the year she collects wood from the neighbouring forest and sells it at the Dohazari market a few miles away. She starts early, devoting the morning to

TABLE 2  
INCOME-EARNING OCCUPATIONS FOR FEMALES  
IN THREE VILLAGES

Occupations*	Number of Female Workers		
	Shangkhomala	Kongshogram	Radhashyampur
Domestic services <sup>a</sup>	5	1	6
Paddy-husking <sup>a</sup>	1	-	2
Agricultural wage labour <sup>a</sup>	1	-	-
Unspecified wage labour <sup>a</sup>	-	3	-
Weaving fishing net <sup>a</sup>	2	-	-
Cowgirl <sup>a</sup>	1	-	-
House-tutor <sup>a</sup>	3	-	-
Firewood collection from forest <sup>b</sup>	6	-	-
Vegetables collection <sup>b</sup>	1	-	-
Unspecified small trade <sup>b</sup>	-	1	-
Agriculture <sup>c</sup>	9	8	3
Fruit-growing <sup>c</sup>	1	-	-
Poultry-keeping <sup>c</sup>	2	-	-
Begging <sup>d</sup>	4	4	-

\*Occupations listed with (a) against them means that in these occupations employment is given by others while (b) means that people are self-employed in these occupations. Occupations with (c) are ones which are sources of income and do not lead to employment--these are attributed to women when they are the heads of family and the assets of the family are under their supervision; (d) is begging, which obviously is not a source of employment but is considered a source of income, given our social system.

wood collection and the afternoon to transportation and sale. Her normal work day exceeds 12 hours. During the other months of the year, particularly peak periods in agricultural activity, she works as a wage labourer. Her tasks include separation of paddy from paddy plants using legs (under heavy rains), separation of paddy from paddy plants using cows, transplanting paddy plants and domestic work.

9. Similarly, Islama Khatoon works as a teacher of religious lessons for village children. Her husband is also a teacher at the Local Primary School. The village also has a lady homoeopath, Shova Rani Jaldas.

10. The domestic activities (conventionally non-income earning) of women are also varied and intensive. Ellen Sattar has provided a painstaking and detailed picture of such activities for one year in one village [1].

TABLE 3

PROFICIENCY IN MOTHERTONGUE OF THE FEMALES  
IN THREE VILLAGES

Proficiency	Shangkhomala	Kongshogram	Radhashyampur
No proficiency	21	16	17
Speak only	224	162	283
Speak & read	4	10	5
Speak, read & write	21	17	33
Not available	2	-	1
Total	272	205	339

TABLE 4  
LEVEL OF FORMAL EDUCATION OF THE FEMALES  
IN THREE VILLAGES

Level of Education	Shangkhomala	Kongshogram	Radhashyampur
No education	246	171	296
Class V or below	23	28	25
Class VI to Class IX	2	2	13
Maqtab† education	-	-	1
Primary level Madrasah† education	-	-	1
N.A.*	1	4	3
Total	272	205	339

†Maqtab and Madrasah refer to Islamic religious education.

\*N.A. or Not Available means that information on these people could not be collected.

11. The prospective level of *skilled* female manpower largely depends on the levels of educational attainment. Tables 3 and 4 will illustrate that such levels are dismally low for the three study villages [14, 15, 16]. This is simply because of the lack of conducive social values and opportunities, not from reluctance on the part of women. In Ellen Sattar's study, 91% of village women wanted their daughters to finish primary school [1]. Given that most of the best female minds of the nation do not even get the opportunity to go to school, it would seem that marginal social product

from incremental female education in rural areas would exceed those for males.

12. However, potential levels of available skilled female labour is in itself not much of an encouraging factor, given the dismal levels of male unemployment and underemployment in Bangladesh's villages. Given that, increased generation of rural employment still remains the overwhelming question, some contentions may be made regarding the devising of employment policies with respect to men and women. There are categories of work particularly suited for either men or women, as well as others which suit both. These non-substitutable and substitutable sectors should be identified. As agricultural work provides a sector where male and female labour may be substitutable, one could propose policies such that industries located in rural areas could absorb male labour while the women could work in the fields. During the peak periods in agriculture, the men could help the women in the fields. Such identification of factors on a local basis could allow for increased use of the available female labour force without displacing male workers.

13. The present estate of women in rural areas seems to be such that their contribution is substantial and indispensable, without this being recognized by the menfolk and society in general, as such. Potentially, too, the women could move out into increasing participation in the productive labour force provided sufficient employment for women could be generated with appropriate localized planning. It would seem that women could have a fair control over the means of production and the consequential social status arising thereof, provided forces of social change were conducive to such transformed roles and participation.

#### IV. WOMEN AND DEVELOPMENT: GENERAL ASPECTS

1. Having looked at the actual and potential contribution of rural women to productive activities we now propose to look at various efforts at social change and their effects on the role and status of women. We shall concentrate here on either state-sponsored development efforts or privately run institutional activities. The two subsequent sections (V & VI) will deal respectively with detrimental and beneficial factors. Case study materials will be utilized and generalized policy implications will be attempted.

2. It will be seen that issues cannot be confined to technological and economic aspects of the role of women in society. In other words, the evidence itself will suggest that we look at the role of women under the broader framework of modernization and social change. This will be attempted in Section VII.

3. It is also suggested that production and social relations are critical dictates regarding the participation of women in social change. As such these terms and conditions have to be discussed in some detail and the policy decisions be made consistent with the results of such analysis.

#### V. DETRIMENTAL PROCESSES AND IMPLICATIONS

1. The major indictment of development planning to date in this context is that there is very little indication of the awareness of women as a depressed group, whose contribution and participation in such efforts can be increased with conscious effort. This "monosex" thinking is somewhat akin to the "monocrop" fetish about high-yielding rice in agricultural productivity programmes [2].

2. One of the consequences of mechanization in the simple processing of agricultural products has been the technological redundancy of female labour. Replacement of paddy-processing work of women by mills and parboiling equipment is a case in point [2]. Such technological redundancy "raises the spectre of the devaluation of women at a time when there is some evidence that their economic status may already be in decline" [2].

3. A third feature is the ironic process by which "educated" and "acculturated" individuals become unemployable in traditional sectors. A rural woman, in the peasant household context, has to be, of necessity, a hard worker. Prevailing social attitudes demand that education and marriage aspirations lead to non-participation in manual household work. However, the education she receives in the rural educational system does not either make her employable elsewhere. Such forms of systematically generated structural unemployment for females need to be discouraged.

4. "Still, until now, motherhood has offered a role of social worth and women have been honoured for breeding the labour force needed in agricultural production" [2]. With the increasing realization and propagation of the concepts of population planning and smaller families, the traditional ideal of motherhood is likely to be devalued and underplayed. This relative devaluation of female worth in the matrimonial market (whose objective function may be termed as a socio-economic conglomerate) is also confirmed by the growing importance of 'groom price' with respect to 'bride price' or dowry [2]. Such trends can only be reversed by conscious and planned emphasis on the alternative productive roles of women concerned with the generation and sustenance of human capital as well as their increased participation in skilled professions.

5. There are other instances of more direct intervention of conservative social forces to undermine the participation of women in development. Shirley Lindenbaum cites two such instances in her report [2]. One is the purdah restriction on women which prevents them from participating in and having control over vital economic activities such as trade. This makes them structurally dependent on related males. In the second instance, a women's cooperative which has been evidently successful in activities including marketing, is seen to come under "moral criticism" from its (male) economic contenders. The active women cooperators were accused of an "immoral lifestyle." The pressure was such that the women's cooperative was discontinued to prevent the loss of participation and goodwill from village men. This is a concrete example of the acquiescence of a development agency to social conservatism (and established male economic interests) and indicates the insidious and complex ways by which an established social order (composed of classes as well as sexes) operates to prevent the emergence of forces which might conceivably threaten its own values and prerogatives.

6. A further instance of such pressure to prevent female education and population planning is our study of the highly conservative Barisal village, Char Shyamraj [13]. Here the reactionary religious leadership went to the extent of proclaiming that the devastating cyclone of November 1970 which nearly wiped out the child population of the village was the expression of divine wrath at the villagers' having accepted the sinful ways of female education and family planning measures. The office of the family planning unit has since remained closed. Here too is an expression of the mechanisms of social pressure and ideological brainwashing which form such major stumbling blocks to the gradual emancipation of rural women.

## VI. BENEFICIAL PROCESSES AND IMPLICATIONS

1. The post-war years (1972 onwards) have seen the advent of major private and state initiatives to assist and train rural women in which "there is an emphasis on economic self-support rather than the distribution of charity . . ." [2].

2. The People's Health Centre, run by Dr. Zafarullah, operates with young girls as paramedics who are mostly unmarried and aged 15-16; 50% of them are local village girls. Similarly other private agencies have developed programmes which train rural women for employment (including self-employment) in light industries such as handicrafts and sericulture which may be seen as adjuncts of the agricultural economy. In Daulatkhana Thana in Bhola, young school-going girls also operate as managers of cooperatives, citing one instance where the present unrelated educational system may be receiving worthwhile feedback from selfhelp programmes for women [2].

3. Such documentation easily explodes (if such explosion is at all necessary) the myth of the traditional aversion of women to social change. Rural women are already working in responsible and executive capacities. What is required is appropriate planning geared to accelerating and extending such demonstrated abilities. Localized planning can help in eradicating unnecessary structural unemployment (arising from inappropriate education for females). Conscious social organizations can delineate the opportunity frontier for women, prescribing appropriate patterns for the selection of educational and cultural alternatives. All this, of course, requires political will and acumen of an order yet to be demonstrated by any leadership to date. Politics and mass-level implementation brings in its wake other considerations which give rise to misgivings as against an otherwise encouraging record to date.

VII. BROADER CONSIDERATIONS AND MISGIVINGS

1. The demonstration of the participation of women in social change mentioned above are all products of external initiatives and there is as yet no instances of such activities on a self-generating and self-sustaining basis. These active groups are either international or (national) élitist in character. Hence, there is no evidence as yet that women's participation would either emerge or continue if these "hothouse plants" cease to be supported.

2. A second interesting feature is that women from the Buddhist and Hindu Communities tend to be much more active in these efforts in comparison to the Muslim women who form, by and large, the predominant section of the rural womenfolk [2].

3. Since the encroachment of female participation in male job opportunities has not yet assumed a threatening character, even in a small way, the essential economic and social problems concerned with the differentiation of productive roles by sexes has not yet arisen. These however have to be borne in mind as realistic possibilities in the future.

4. We have seen earlier instances of the traditional order exerting pressure to prevent female emancipation, particularly in the spheres of education, trade, cooperative management, population planning, etc. Such trends can only be opposed by either populist movements at grass-root levels or the imposition of state authority to foster these ends with determination. While the former seems unrealistic, the latter would require nothing less than the assumption of power by a leadership which is not subservient to the ruling orders of rural Bangladesh.

5. Even enlightened notions of female emancipation as a basis for normal sexuality and a healthy,

productive society is unlikely to be received sympathetically by the traditional forces. It is precisely because of this that the emancipatory provisions of the Family Law Ordinance is effectively inoperative in rural Bangladesh and provides little security for the fettered womenfolk.

6. A final complexity is introduced by the fact that not all women are united in the struggle for female emancipation. The major consequences of pervasive female participation in social change would be to raise the price of cheap female labour from the working wage-earning classes. This would threaten the position of male and female employers (particularly women in rich families accustomed to a bevy of female servants as domestic help). Here class conflict would become a genuine threat to the united efforts for women's emancipation.

7. Ultimately, we are thrown back to the contention that the exploitation and degradation of women forms a special case of the more general phenomenon of exploitation in a class society. And it is the material relations which dictate the ultimate pattern of polarization in such situations of social and political conflict. We see elsewhere that the liberation of women from the bonds of traditional society has historically been the products of the overthrow of the imposing social order through the use of organized resistance. While this does not presently seem to be on the cards for Bangladesh, one fails to see how else the necessary social mobilization can take place to ensure effective success.

#### VIII. CONCLUSION

1. Women in Bangladesh work extremely hard, whether or not society chooses to recognize their efforts. However, we may not expect *women for development without development for women.*

2. Their increased participation is hence conditional on increased opportunities and the generation of more emancipated social attitudes. These are however unlikely since the emancipation of women will in the ultimate analysis affect the material interests of the present ruling social order. This order is adept at the use of selective extra-legal violence and general intimidation for maintenance of its material and political authority including the occasional dishonourment of the status of women [10]. Change can only be expected as a consequence of the purposive decimation of this conservative and reactionary order. This in its turn cannot happen without the emergence of such political power as is capable of contending with organized repression. The emancipation of the rural women thus seems inextricably bound up with the progressive (if not revolutionary) transformation of the social order of rural Bangladesh.

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