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A REPORT ON RURAL WOMEN OF BANGLADESH

by

Aloma A. Mascarenhas

Women in Development  
Agency for International Development  
Room 3243, New State  
Washington, D.C. 20533  
(202) 632-3902

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## PREFACE

This report on rural women in Bangladesh is meant to be a primer for those interested in the subject. Substantial additional research and review is advisable since reaching rural women in Bangladesh is an extremely complicated task.

The report is divided into four parts. The first is a general discussion on the status of women in Bengalee society. Their position is examined from four vantage points - legal, political, social and economic. In the second part I have attempted to provide some insights into the life of rural women through a description of their environment. The third section is a description of some of the development programs for rural women which are being undertaken by various Bangladesh Government agencies. The fourth section consists of recommendations for expanding the involvement of women in AID financed development programs in Bangladesh.

I have written this report with the intention of providing the USAID Mission to Bangladesh with basic background information on Bengalee women and fundamental analyses of the potential of that target group. I hope the report will meet that end.

Alona Mascarenhas  
Dacca, Bangladesh  
May 1975

## I. INTRODUCTION

The Percy Amendment requires that U.S. bilateral development programs authorized under Section 105 through 107 be administered so as to "give particular attention to those projects, programs and activities which tend to integrate women into the national economies of foreign countries, thus improving their status and assisting the total development effort."

The Percy Amendment triggered interest in a subject that was hitherto little explored and emphasized the fact that inclusion of women in development must be a conscious concern. Moreover, the designation of 1975 as International Women's Year by the United Nations has further focused attention on the plight of women the world over. To make this year meaningful, serious efforts must be made to improve the status of women, especially the least developed, hardest working, most disadvantaged group - the rural women in the developing countries. Improving the status of women means more than getting an education or improving their husband's ability to earn a better income. It also means providing women with opportunities which will make them economically and socially valuable assets to their families and the communities in which they live.

## II. STATUS OF WOMEN IN BANGLADESH

If we are to explore the condition of the rural women in Bangladesh, we must first have an idea of their overall status. The majority of the women in Bangladesh are Muslim, therefore, when I speak of Bengalee women, I mean Muslim Bengalee women since Hindus, Buddhists and Christians constitute a very small minority. Bengalee women have a long way to go before they can achieve even in a small way the freedom and independence enjoyed by their western counterparts. It is only recently that some studies have been undertaken on the status of Bengalee women, and the very scarcity of printed materials on women and their problems indicates the unimportant role to which women have been relegated for years.

Women in Bangladesh constitute almost half the total population or about 40 million people. Of these, 10% are employed in income-producing activities<sup>1/</sup>. The majority are engaged in traditional time-consuming household chores. Although women should enjoy the same fundamental rights as men, there is a tendency to treat them as second-class citizens - fit only for the traditional role of wives and mothers. That a women's status is inferior to a man's is the generally accepted idea of a Bengalee male. Even urban

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<sup>1/</sup> Rounaq Jahan: Women in Bangladesh, Ford Foundation: February 1974.

Bengalee men share this view. Bengalee culture and tradition are responsible for fostering this image of the woman in Bengalee society. It is an extension of the old feudal notion that man is the lord and master and woman the chattel created for man's comfort. It is difficult for women to throw off the age old shackles of subservience and search for true emancipation in a society that teaches women it is better to submit than to complain and that economic independence is not necessary because their husbands will provide for them. Although women make up 50% of the population, they are not found at the policy-making level - they do not have the opportunity to participate in the decision-making processes that affect their lives.

The status of Bengalee women may be viewed from four different aspects - legal, political, social and economic.

A. Legal:

Islam confers upon women legal rights which are seldom exercised by the women in practice. In Roanaq Jahan's Study of Women in Bangladesh it is mentioned that three noteworthy legal rights are given to Muslim women by Shariat (Islamic personal laws) regarding marriage, divorce and inheritance.

Marriage is a contract made in front of witnesses and this contract can be dissolved by divorce. In the marriage contract, provision is made for Mehr.<sup>2/</sup> Either husband or wife can initiate divorce proceedings, but it is easier for the man to do so. Islamic law allows a man to divorce his wife simply by pronouncing his intention to do so in front of witnesses. A woman is allowed to take a divorce by returning the Mehr. A woman with minor children at the time of divorce can get custody of the children but never their guardianship - that remains with the father. Where inheritance rights are concerned; a woman is entitled to inherit one eighth of her husband's property, however, if he dies childless she inherits one-fourth. Daughters are not given equal rights with the sons - they inherit only half of the son's share.

Though a woman has certain legal rights, she rarely exercises them in practice because Bengalee society frowns upon a woman who insists on her legal rights. A woman is always regarded as vulnerable, needing male protection and therefore, she can rarely be her own guardian. This role is usually delegated to a male relative who exercises her legal rights on her behalf. Thus, in the case of marriage, it is her father or

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<sup>2/</sup> A fixed sum of money, part of which is payable to the bride after the wedding ceremony, and the rest to be paid in case of a divorce.

another male guardian who arranges it for her and she usually consents to such an arrangement. It is the same in the case of divorce which is usually initiated by the woman's male relatives. Few women have the courage to initiate divorce on their own because it involves litigation and is not looked upon favorably in Muslim society.

**B. Political:**

The British Colonial Government granted Bengalee women the right to vote at the same time as the men, but aside from casting their votes, women do not play an important part in the political life of the country. At this time there are no women in the cabinet having the rank of minister. In 1974 two women were given the rank of Deputy Minister. However, they were given the traditionally feminine portfolios of social welfare and education. These posts have since been abolished.

Segregation of the sexes is the social norm in Bangladesh and this custom has been nurtured and strengthened by the system of purdah. The idea of separate worlds for men and women permeates even politics. In the political parties, women and men do not join together - there is a separate wing for women and the highest post a woman can aspire to in the party hierarchy is that of women's secretary. The Bangladesh constitution reserves 19 seats for women in the parliament. These women are elected not by the general public or the female electorate but by the 300 male members of the parliament which again is an indication of the unequal status of men and women in Bangladesh. The constitution does not prohibit women from contesting in the general seats, but as they stand a better chance in the reserved seats, Bengalee women are reluctant to contest for the general. In the various political movements of the country (e.g. movement for establishing Bengali as the national language, election campaigns, and the war of liberation, etc.) women have played only a marginal role. During the war of liberation, many young men were recruited as freedom fighters, but the number of women who took arms training is negligible. When world attention was focused on Bengalee women after the liberation war, it was the portrayal of them as helpless victims that evoked sympathy. This image of the Bengalee women as dependent and weak is still prevalent, and though there are signs of a change for the better, progress in this direction is slow.

C. Social:

In Bengalee society, women are still considered separate from and inferior to men. Segregation is an accepted way of life and this social barrier prevents women from participating in religious and social functions on the same level as men. Women are never seen in the mosques. They do not participate in congregational prayers. They are expected to carry out their religious worship in the privacy of their homes. Funeral processions too are devoid of women - they grieve in private and do not make a public show of their emotions. At social functions, such as weddings, women sit separately from the men. Of course, in urban Bangladesh these distinctions are less marked than in the rural areas and they may be less blatant, but they exist nevertheless. The unequal social status of women may be illustrated by a very ordinary example. If a woman is sitting among a group of Bengalee men and cigarettes are being passed around, she will automatically be bypassed on the assumption that she does not smoke as smoking is an unwomanly action. Men can freely smoke in public, women are constrained by social attitudes. Social custom is the greatest barrier to women's development and eventual emancipation.

D. Economic:

Very few Bengalee women are found in "modern" occupations. The careers they pursue outside the home are usually the type that can be classified as "women's occupations" like teaching, nursing, etc. The majority of women belong to the middle or low income brackets and very few hold top administrative posts. The post liberation period, however, has created an awareness among women of the problems that face them in the economic sphere. Many of them who were widowed or lost all their male relatives in the war suddenly found themselves faced by a situation they could not cope with. They had no means of support and their lack of training in any occupation made it difficult for them to find jobs. This emphasized the vulnerability of women and the need to equip them with some skills which would enable them to make a living for themselves. Many rehabilitation and vocational training programs for women were undertaken. Today, because of the prevailing economic conditions, women are encouraged to come out and work rather than stay home and be dependent on their husbands. The Government too has realized the potential labor force that exists in this once neglected segment of the population and is now encouraging the women to come forward and

take part in the monumental task of nation building. The social taboos that prevented women from engaging in income-producing activities are gradually evaporating in the face of such great need.

### III. A PROFILE OF RURAL WOMEN

The urban woman is not representative of Bengalee womanhood as she constitutes only a very small minority. The majority of the population is rural and therefore, rural women should be the focal point of our interest.

In a rural community, the distinction between men and women is sharply emphasized. Women are regarded as inferior to men and this idea permeates every facet of their lives. From their earliest childhood, they are made aware of the fact that they do not enjoy the same status as their brothers. Girls are considered somewhat of a liability rather than an asset. Therefore, the birth of a daughter is usually not as much an occasion for celebration as for a son. In a predominantly agricultural society boys are welcomed because they mean more hands to work on the land and added income to the family. Girls are taught from an early age that men get first preference. For example, when meal time comes around, it is the men who eat first and the women second. Their upbringing is directed toward making them aware of the submissive role they are expected to play; the ideals of Bengalee womanhood, and also patience and sacrifice are ingrained into their psychological make-up.

Until recently, education was not considered an important part of a rural woman's life. The highest rate of illiteracy may be found among village women. Education beyond primary school is rare for village girls. Although parents give their sons higher schooling, if they can afford it, they rarely see the advantage of giving their daughters a higher education. Few girls are sent to school because they are needed in the house to help their mothers with the household chores, i.e. cooking, cleaning, or looking after the younger children. It is considered more important for a girl to be trained in the art of housekeeping so that she can make a good wife and mother, rather than broaden her horizon through formal schooling.

The traditional outlook toward women is gradually undergoing change. There is currently a tendency to regard education as important for girls too; and parents if they can afford it daughters are sent for higher schooling. The number of literate

village girls is on the increase, and there are a few families whose daughters eventually sit for the Secondary School Examination (roughly equivalent to sitting for an American high school examination covering four years of effort). Families with educated daughters find it easier to get good son-in-laws when the time comes. Educated men, nowadays, prefer wives who can at least read and write.

Of the village girls who do receive education, the majority are usually educated up to primary level. Education up to secondary level is more common among Bangladesh's Hindu families. Muslim girls are hampered by purdah considerations. When they are young, there are no restrictions on girls mixing with boys. But once they reach puberty it is customary to place them in purdah. Thus, by the time a girl is 12 or 13 she usually drops out of school, as few villages have high schools for girls alone. Co-education at a higher level is generally frowned upon by village society. It would be a violation of the social norms for girls to attend the same school as boys.

The life of village women is dominated by the observance of purdah. But, it should be mentioned that purdah is not enforced as rigidly as it used to be. The rigidity of purdah observance depends on the socio-economic status of the family. To villagers, purdah is a symbol of respectability and social prestige. Therefore, as soon as a family improves its financial condition, it immediately wants to keep its women in purdah. Girls start observing purdah as soon as they reach puberty. Their movements are restricted and they are allowed to meet members of the opposite sex only with the family's consent. Also, once a girl reaches puberty the parents start thinking of getting her married.

In village society, there is no alternative for girls besides early marriage. If a girl is not married by the time she is 16 or 17 people think there is something wrong with her. Hence the anxiety of the parents to get their daughters married young. The marriage age has been advanced in recent years. Girls are now getting married between the ages of 14 - 16. Formerly, 11 to 12 years used to be considered the right age for marriage. Marriages are always arranged by the father and other male relatives. The marriage is not so much between the boy and the girl as between two groups of relatives. There is discussion with the women of the family but the ultimate decision rests with the men.

After marriage, a girl moves to her husband's house and is dependent on him for her status and food. As she is new to the household, she is expected to give way to the wishes of her in-laws and conform to their pattern of living. This is the time when the virtues acquired during childhood-like patience and sacrifice - stand her in good stead. Her prestige is enhanced if she produces a son - the more sons she begets, the greater her security in her husband's household.

This preference for sons is one of the barriers to birth control. For a man has the tendency to continue producing children till he gets the desired son. One of the striking features of a village is the large number of children. A village woman has children regularly as a matter of course unless she is practising family planning. It is not unusual to find families where the mother's youngest child is the same age as the daughter's first child. The decision to practise family planning usually rests with the husband. A woman will not adopt family planning if her husband is against it. Religious scruples sometimes stand in the way of family planning as some rural people believe it is against religion to control the size of the family through artificial means.

Divorce and remarriage occur in village society and are more frequent in the lower class, especially among poor farmers. Among families of higher social status, divorce is not prevalent as it tarnishes the good image of the family.

In rural areas, women do not have any activities other than household work and child bearing. A village woman is busy from dawn till dusk and has little time for socializing. She is afforded little opportunity for social or cultural involvements. Her daily activities are carried on in the environs of the house and can be divided into several categories - cooking, cleaning, looking after the children, and caring for domestic animals. At harvest time, she has the added responsibility of boiling the paddy, drying it in the sun, and husking it. This is a time-consuming chore. The parboiled paddy cannot be cooked and eaten until it is husked, and husking cannot be done by one woman alone. An instrument called a dhuki is used to husk the rice and generally two women are required to operate it while a third stirs the paddy as it is being pounded, removes it when husked and puts in new paddy. As little more than one seer can be pounded at a time, it is a long job.<sup>3/</sup>

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<sup>3/</sup> Ellen Sattar: Women in Bangladesh, A Village Study

There is a clearcut division of labor between men and women. Men do the outside work and women take care of the house. Men do not help women with their housework, and conversely, women do not help men with theirs. Few women work in the fields no matter how poor the family is.

The daily schedule of a village woman would be more or less as follows:

The first chore she performs is washing the dishes from the previous night's meal. Breakfast is then prepared and served, the woman eating last. A typical breakfast would consist of tea and mooril<sup>4/</sup>. In poorer families, there is no tea and breakfast consists of 'panta bhaj'<sup>5/</sup>. If there are any school-going children, the woman puts them to study either before or after breakfast. The kitchen and the house are cleaned before the day's main work begins. If the family owns any cattle, it is the woman's duty to look after them - milk them, stake them out, and clean the stables.

The main meal is cooked during the morning. In households that consist of a mother-in-law, she arranges what is to be cooked and the daughter-in-law does the cooking. Food is cooked on an earthenware stove called a chula. Wood and leaves are used for fuel. A typical mid-day meal would consist of rice, dahl<sup>6/</sup> and vegetables. Fish and meat are not eaten everyday - this depends on the family's economic status. After the morning work is finished, the woman takes her bath in the pond. Lunch is then served and eaten and the dishes are washed. After lunch, a woman may rest for a while or busy herself with some activity, like sewing, husking rice or seeing to the children.

The main chore in the evening is the cooking for the evening meal. It is not as arduous as lunch because often only rice or chappattias<sup>7/</sup> are cooked and eaten with leftovers from lunch. Evening is usually a more relaxed time than the morning and affords the woman some opportunity for sitting and chatting with the family or neighbours. Late hours are kept in the village and the woman usually turns in around 09-10 p.m.

From the above, it can be seen that village women have little time for leisure as they are always busy with something or the other. Moreover, the village offers very little opportunity for entertainment, for example, the village housewife cannot spend a relaxed evening at the cinema as an urban housewife can.

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- 4/ Puffed rice
  - 5/ Rice kept in water overnight
  - 6/ Lentils
  - 7/ Wheat cakes

#### IV. DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS FOR RURAL WOMEN

Rural women, as a whole have been neglected in the process of development. In the past, rural development programs were aimed at the men as women were not considered a moving force and their participation in development programs was hindered by social barriers. Some government agencies, however, realized the problems and conditions of rural women and undertook programs for their development. The most notable of these being the Bangladesh Academy for Rural Development and the Rangunia Thana Central Cooperative Association.

The war of liberation (1971) played an important part in focusing attention on women's problems. Thousands of women were left homeless and in desperate straits with no male protection or suitable means of earning a living. This brought home, more forcibly than anything else could have done, the insecurity and helplessness of Bengalee women and the need for them to develop self-reliance and economic independence. Projects aimed at training women in vocational skills mushroomed all over the country. However, most of the projects were urban-based; only a few concentrated on women in rural areas. Thus, urban women have had a far greater opportunity for developing themselves than have rural women.

Since the Independence of Bangladesh, the attitudes about women have undergone an encouraging change. New patterns are developing. Earlier Pakistani attitudes toward women had tended to be more conservative than Bengalee attitudes. Likewise, the departure during the war of liberation of many formerly influential Pakistani administrators and entrepreneurs allowed the more liberal Bengalee attitudes regarding women to prevail. It is also noteworthy to point out that the late President Sheikh Mujibur Rahman shortly after the liberation war publicly stated that it was his desire to "have those unfortunate women who were affected by the ravages of war to be considered as heroines." It has now realized that national development is dependent on the contribution of every individual, not only men but also women who constitute half the population. The economic situation has also given an impetus to women's development. The rising cost of living makes it very difficult for a family to support itself on the earnings of the husband alone. If a wife is capable of contributing to the family income, she is now looked upon as an asset and her status improves.

During field trips to Comilla and Rangunia I observed women's development programs. In Comilla, the most noteworthy agency

which carries out programs for women is the Bangladesh Academy for Rural Development.

A. Bangladesh Academy for Rural Development:

The Bangladesh Academy for Rural Development (BARD), formerly known as the East Pakistan Academy for Rural Development, started its program for women in 1962 in the fields of home development, health and family planning, adult literacy, and cooperatives. This program, known as the Women's Education and Home Development Program, started with six villages under the Comilla Kotwali Thana and gradually extended to a larger number of villages. The objective of the program was to bring about a functional emancipation of the village women without creating a total upheaval of tradition by training them in skills that were economically productive. In order to do this, it was necessary to break the prejudice of the men against the participation of women in development activities. It was also necessary to convince and motivate the women to think of themselves as useful members of society and they had a right to take part in social and economic development. A separate organizational unit was set up to deal with the women's program. This unit operates from the Abhay Asram Campus which maintains a close link with the Comilla Kotwali Thana Central Cooperative Association (K.T.C.C.A.) and other development agencies. BARD provides both funds and personnel to administer the program. One female member of BARD's faculty has overall charge.

BARD women's programs are carried out in cooperative villages so that it gets the necessary institutional support at the village level. It consists of six specific types of activity:

- Accumulation of capital by the women members of the village cooperatives through thrift deposits.
- Training of various women groups like village dais (midwives) and village organizers.
- General Education and Adult Literacy.
- Health education including maternity and child care, family planning, food & nutrition.
- Home crafts like sewing, knitting, etc.
- Kitchen gardening and poultry farming.

These activities are discussed in detail in the next few pages of this paper.

1. Cooperative Savings and Loan:

It was felt that women could be helped with education, health and family planning if they were brought together in an income producing cooperative. Initially, an attempt was made to have a separate cooperative managed entirely by women, but this led to criticism from the male members. Fearing that opposition from the men might endanger all their programs, the EARD staff discontinued the attempt to establish separate administrative and financial units for women. Thus, the present women's cooperative is a branch of the men's. A large number of women participate in the cooperative program through which they accumulate savings and obtain loans for various productive purposes.

2. Training of Women Groups:

Training is a very important aspect of the women's program. To bring about the changes desired, women must be trained and educated. The training program of the Academy aims at imparting basic knowledge to village women in order to improve the living conditions of rural families, upgrade economic and social life, and develop leadership among the village women. Two types of training courses are conducted - training of trainers and training for providing services. The training groups consist of women organizers, village dais, women teachers and public health agents. The present training groups are:

<u>Group</u>	<u>No. of Trainees</u>	<u>Average Attendance</u>	<u>Classes</u>
Village Organizers	15	15	Once a week
Dais (midwives)	155	138	Once a month
Health Agents	20	20	Once a week
Sewing	5	5	4 days a week

(a) Village Organizers:

Village women with leadership qualities and initiative are selected with the help of village cooperatives to be trained as organizers. These organizers then assist the women in their respective villages to successfully carry out the programs.

(b) Dai Training:

One of the earliest and most active programs is the dai training program. When BARD was in the process of setting up programs for rural women it found that elderly, uneducated women were doing the work of midwives. As they are a vital part of rural society it was felt they should be given some training. The objective of the dai training program was to change and improve the traditional and unscientific practices of the village midwives in an effort to decrease the high infant and maternal mortality rates. The dais receive training for one month in pre-natal care, delivery of the baby, personal hygiene, and baby care. After a month, they are given an oral test and the successful trainees are supplied with midwifery kits. The trained midwives have formed an association and meet at the center once a fortnight. The really good trainees are given further training for a period of one year.

3. Adult Literacy:

Sustained national development is not possible without basic education and functional literacy of the adults, both men and women. It is important to educate the women because a nation cannot be looked upon as progressive if half its population is illiterate.

When the BARD women's program came into existence, it was felt that basic education was a crying need as the rate of illiteracy among village women was alarmingly high - perhaps as high as 95 to 99 percent. (The national literacy rate in Bangladesh is about 20 percent). The Adult Education Directorate of the Education Ministry in conjunction with the Women's Section of BARD is conducting a pilot project in female literacy. The teachers are selected by the village cooperative societies from among the literate women of the village and sent to BARD for training. After training, they return to their respective villages as adult teachers and organize centers for adult education. The teachers visit the Academy every week to report on the progress of the literacy classes. The women attending the classes receive different grades of literacy certificates in keeping with their level of accomplishment.

4. Health Education:

Health education is another important aspect of the women's program. Health activities include home sanitation, nutrition, family planning, and providing health services to mothers through the Thana Maternity Center. During the years 1974-75, the following training programs were undertaken in the area of health:

<u>Activity</u>	<u>No. Trainees</u>	<u>Duration</u>
Mother-child care	25	8 days
First Aid	25	8 days
Home Sanitation	25	8 days
General Health	25	8 days
Health & Nutrition	25	8 days
Family Planning	25	8 days

(a) The Maternity and Child Welfare Clinic:

The Maternity and Child Welfare Clinic at Abhay Asram started in July 1963 as a joint program of the Health Directorate, UNICEF, and BARD. The clinic provides services to mothers and their babies who come to the center from different villages of the Thana for treatment of minor ailments. Pre-natal and post-natal advice is given to mothers. On an average, the clinic serves 150 women every month. At present, the clinic is not operating fully due to lack of medicine. Medicines which were normally supplied by UNICEF were received last in May 1970. To meet emergency needs, medicines are purchased locally, but these are not adequate.

(b) Mobile Health Clinic:

There is also a mobile health clinic program for women. A Team of four - one doctor and three helpers visit villages four times a week to give women information on health and treat them for any ailments they may be suffering from. Medicines are supplied to the women at a nominal charge of 25 paisa. The mobile health clinic restricts its services to those women who are members of the cooperative society. This is an incentive to the women to join the cooperative program.

(c) Family Planning Clinic:

The family planning clinic is open to all. Advice is given to the women on methods of contraception and contraceptives are supplied. The village organizers are involved in the family planning program. They attend classes every Monday and distribute contraceptives to women in the 20 villages where the program is active.

The family planning program includes a research section. Research is undertaken on the obstacles to family planning and how they can be removed, rate of acceptance, rate of continuation, and dropouts, the most popular contraceptives, and motivation and performance of agents.

5. Home Craft:

Sewing and knitting fall in this category. The purpose of this training is to enlarge the village women's opportunities to earn an income. Sewing classes are held for a duration of three months and the women are trained in garment making. At present, this activity is not very profitable because of the high cost of material and a poor market for readymade clothes. The knitting program is at a standstill during summers because there is no demand for woollen garments. In winter, however, classes are held 4 days a week for a duration of three months. The center has 8 knitting machines and 8-10 women are trained at a time.

6. Kitchen Gardening and Poultry Farming:

The growing of vegetables has long been a hobby among village women. Through the introduction of improved methods of cultivation, better seeds and fertilizers, village women have learned how to produce vegetables in large quantities and are earning substantial incomes from it. The women are given practical training at the K.T.C.C.A. Following training, they are supplied with improved varieties of seeds on payment. Large, open spaces at the backs of the houses are used by the women for the growing of vegetables which differ according to the season.

Like kitchen gardening, the poultry raising program is intended to raise the family food supplies as well as develop a new source of income for village women. The women are given courses on poultry farming at the K.T.C.C.A.

From the above programs, it is evident that the programs for women follow a more or less traditional pattern. Nowhere did I see women working alongside the men. When I asked the women if they ever worked in the fields with men - especially at harvest time - they informed me that their husbands would not allow them to do so as this would mean a loss of prestige on their part and a violation of the social traditions.

B. Jahanara Cottage Industries:

The Jahanara Cottage Industries in Comilla is not a government enterprise but deserves mention here because of its efforts to improve the lot of women through economic activity. It is a private handicraft training and marketing center run by Mrs. Jahanara who started in a small way in 1954. Since then the center has been expanded.

The women at the center not only receive training in different aspects of cottage industry, but also attend adult education classes. The adult literacy program for women employed at the center has been in operation since 1962 and is supported by the Directorate of Public Instruction. The daily schedule is as follows:

6:30 - 11:30 - literacy classes for women

12:00 - 5:00 - training in jute handicrafts, sketching, painting, machine embroidery, bag making, and bamboo and cane work.

When the trainees are selected preference is given to those who are desperately poor or have no means of support, such as widows and abandoned wives. The women require no prior knowledge of handicrafts to be selected for training. Ordinary women with practical knowledge have been successfully trained even in the finer aspects of the craft. For example, 17 rickshaw pullers' wives were trained as painters and they are doing a very good job.

After being trained, the women are moved into the production center where they are involved in various activities like doll making, making of cane trays, bamboo vases, table mats, and bags. One section of the production center is operated by men. This aspect of the program is one that was recently established. The men employed here are the husbands of the women working at the center, and are mostly involved in the production of cane and bamboo items. Employment of the husbands, as Mrs. Jahanara informed me, is one way of removing some of the obstacles to women's participation in this type of activity.

C. Rangunia Thana Central Cooperative Association:

The Rangunia Thana Central Cooperative Association (R.T.C.C.A.) is modelled after the Comilla cooperative system. Also, its women's program consists of the same types of activities that BARD is involved in. From my talks with the Project Officer and the Field Officer at the R.T.C.C.A. I was able to learn the following about the Rangunia women's program:

1. Background:

After the war of liberation when national consciousness was at its height, it was felt that the main obstacle to progress was the illiteracy of the masses. Subsequently, in January 1972, an adult education program was started in Rangunia. Two hundred men and 100 women were trained as teachers. The women teachers during their period of training at the R.T.C.C.A. got interested in the cooperative movement, and before long showed a keen desire to form a cooperative society for women. The R.T.C.C.A. at that time had no women's program and no plans for a women's cooperative. But they decided to try out the idea and that is how the women's cooperative came into existence. In other words, the adult literacy program was the spark that kindled into flame the latent emancipatory spirit of the women.

2. Women's Cooperative:

Though modelled on the Comilla cooperative system, the Rangunia women's cooperative differs in one important way. It is not amalgamated with the men's cooperative, and thus the women are free to handle their financial arrangements as they wish. This has given rise to women managers who are chosen by their respective village societies. The women's cooperative program does not revolve around one specific activity but has branched out in many different directions. The women are engaged in various income-producing projects, the most common being kitchen gardening, poultry farming, and jute handicrafts. Whatever the activity, the common link which unites them all is the fact that they are the kind that are carried out in the environs of the village home.

At present, there are 14 women's cooperatives covering 14 villages in Rangunia Thana. According to the R.T.C.C.A. officials, women from other villages are interested in joining the cooperative program. They have not been encouraged to participate because of economic constraints

and also because it was felt that the ongoing projects should be evaluated before any expansion was thought about. There are 14 women managers; one for each society. They attend classes at the R.T.C.C.A. every Thursday from 12 to 4 p.m. The classes deal with various subjects like family planning, poultry farming, vegetable gardening, and home sanitation. During their weekly meetings, the managers deposit the savings of the members and discuss any problems they might be facing. The managers work on a purely voluntary basis, and are only given a weekly allowance for their transport to and from the training classes.

3. A number of societies are engaged in poultry farming as an economic activity. Foreign breeds of poultry are raised such as Rhode Island Reds and Leghorns. The poultry is bought with loans taken from the R.T.C.C.A. The women earn a good income from this activity as the R.T.C.C.A. buys eggs from them at the rate of Tk. 1/- per egg. These eggs in turn are hatched in incubators at the R.T.C.C.A. and the chickens made available to the women if they so desire.

In Kulkurmai village, the women had started a poultry farming project with a loan from the R.T.C.C.A. Fifty birds were bought for a sum of Tk.200/-. For three months, everything went well, but suddenly 35 birds died from complications caused by adulterated feed. The women informed me that they now had 25 birds and were trying to get more in order to revive the project.

#### 4. Jute Handicraft:

Four of the 14 cooperative societies earn an income through the production of jute handicrafts. Most of the women are engaged in making shikas (pot holders) which are sold at the R.T.C.C.A. cooperative store. The women were taught the craft by a trainer who was sent to Dacca for training. The women are paid a good price for quality work, but sub-standard work is often rejected or bought at very low rates. It is interesting to note that most of the shika-making women were either Hindus or Buddhists. I was given to understand that Muslim women do not usually engage in this type of activity as their husbands are not in favor of their doing so.

#### 5. Other Activities:

Unlike the women's program at BARD, the Rangunia women's program is experimenting with activities that are not

commonly undertaken by women. These activities are carried out mostly by landless women and include the making of chicken wire used in fencing, the breeding of fish, and the purchase of two rickshaws which are given out on hire and thus bring in income for the women. In one instance, the members of the Kadamtali Village Cooperative had taken a pond on lease for a period of ten years for the purpose of fish culture. They also had plans to clear the sides of the pond in order to plant lime, banana and other fruit trees and thus earn an added income.

6. Women's Literacy Program:

The Directorate of Public Instruction and the Community Development Foundation were the initiators of the Adult Education Program in Rangunia. There are about 400 adult education centers of which 100 are solely for women. Female adult literacy teachers were recruited from among the wives of the cooperative managers and local leaders and trained at the center. Women teachers without advanced formal education were given short training courses including training in functional education. In order to reach village women, the adult literacy teachers had to go to the villages and hold classes during the hours that village women are least busy - in the afternoon either from 1 to 3 p.m. or 2 to 4 p.m. I was informed by the Thana officials that the literacy program for women had initially progressed very well, but now due to the prevailing economic situation and insufficiency of food, interest in education was wavering. To quote one official, "When a woman cannot fill her stomach, she is not much concerned about improving her mind."

7. Comments:

The women in Rangunia appear to be making an all out effort to be productive members of the rural society by participating in income-producing work. The economic situation now prevalent seems to have given them the push they needed to come out and prove to the menfolk that they are capable of undertaking activities other than the traditional ones of home-making and child-bearing. The Hindu and Buddhist women display a sense of social awareness and community spirit. However, their Muslim sisters seem to be lagging behind, hindered by their conservatism and the tradition of purdah.

Given the opportunity, the women are eager to work but they are hampered by the fact that the activities they can engage in are limited. Social custom is still strong and any activity undertaken outside the environs of the house is frowned upon. At this stage, I feel involving the women in agricultural production by getting them to work alongside the men in the fields is premature and would cause considerable consternation among rural society.

Among the ongoing activities, the jute handicraft activity does not seem to be doing well. The main difficulty, as I see it, is the lack of a proper marketing system. The jute products produced by the women although of top quality may lie unsold for months because of the lack of a good market. Thus, the women are discouraged by the slow progress. The officials at the R.T.C.C.A. informed me that because of a shortage of funds, they could not hire additional staff to set up a good marketing system. Then again, even if the system was improved, it may not lead to substantially increased sales because many export-quality jute goods are being produced in great quantities at this time by voluntary and government agencies engaged in this activity.

From what I have seen, I feel that an activity like weaving might be a good opening and elicit a good response. That is if raw materials are in sufficient supply. Then again, cloth printing might be an acceptable activity as it does not require the women to leave their homes. It could be carried on in the courtyard with all the women in the family lending a helping hand. These activities, however, presuppose a good marketing system without which they would not get very far. There are other avenues which can be explored but it is evident that progress would depend on good management and sufficient funds to carry out the activities intended.

D. Rural Works Project In Manikganj:

The Rural Works project in Manikganj under the "Food for Work" scheme is unique in the sense that it has provided an opportunity for the women to participate in an activity that hitherto has been strictly a man's domain. The Government has introduced this kind of a project in an attempt to bring about a social change by calling upon women of poor families to work side by side with men and thereby contribute to the socio-economic development of the society. It

is now the policy of the government to help those who help themselves. In other words, relief will not be given to potential workers of either sex - the government is anxious to replace the "relief" mentality (the idea that it is the government's responsibility to hand out relief to the needy people) with the "self-help" motto. Under the "Food for Work" program, the workers are not given wages but are paid with food (generally wheat) for the work they do. The project is financed by the Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation and implemented by the Union Council under the guidance of the Thana Circle Officer.

There are eight rural works projects being undertaken in Manikganj. The activities include building of roads, embankments, and excavation of canals. Women were participating in about four of the projects and did the same work as the men - levelling, shaping, and carrying bricks. They were paid at the same rate as the men; 14 seers of wheat for every 1000 cft. of earthwork. However, in practice, they got less because their output was lower than that of the men. The women usually worked in groups. In a few instances the women were working with their husbands. In the case of women workers, priority was given to the most deserving.

The majority of the women came from the surrounding localities. They had come forward on their own accord and were willing to do any kind of work because of their dire poverty. The people of the locality did not raise any objections to women participating in roadwork, an activity formerly considered totally unsuitable for women, because the current feeling was that social customs and traditions should not stand in the way of economic activity - it was better to do any kind of work rather than sit idle and die of starvation. Apart from the local women, a number of destitute women had also been engaged in one of the projects. These women were left homeless by the floods and had for some time been engaged in begging. They had no other means of support as they had been widowed, divorced or abandoned. In order to rehabilitate them, the government had sheltered them temporarily in a camp and put them to work on different projects, such as the earth moving one.

In some of the projects where women workers had been employed, they were put to work only for two weeks and then discontinued despite their eagerness to be involved in the scheme. The reason for this was that the allocations of wheat for the projects were insufficient.

Of all the projects surveyed, the Chandur-Milbari Road Project seemed to be the most advanced. The former road had been badly damaged by the floods so a new road was being built above flood level, with an embankment running parallel which would serve the purposes of irrigation and the drainage of flood waters. As many as 300 women had worked on this project for the first 15 days. Later because of the fast dwindling stock of wheat, they had been replaced by men. However, the women had not been turned away, their services were utilized in lighter work, such as the washing of the bricks.

The involvement of the women in the "Food for Work" program shows a progressive attitude on the part of the government. Even if it does not achieve much, it is a breakthrough in the sense that it has created an awareness that women can be utilized in traditionally "unfeminine" jobs. Similar schemes are being put into practice in other parts of the country.

## V. CONCLUSIONS

1. Besides the projects described above, there are other programs being carried out for the development of women. The fact remains, however, that these women's programs are in the nature of pilot projects and reach only a very small proportion of the rural female population. Though there has been a shift in the traditional outlook on women, the shift is not radical as indicated by the current pattern of female employment- women are still employed in "feminine" occupations, and their infiltration into men's domains is negligible.
2. In Bangladesh, women rank high as the country's underdeveloped human resources. Aside from their roles of wife and mother, they have been afforded little opportunity for developing self reliance outside the home. One of the drawbacks to their emancipation is that women are regarded as inferior to men. As a class, they have "little or no political power, control over the budget, or any significant place in the structure of government through which they can work to improve their status."<sup>8/</sup>
3. The factors that hinder their growth and development can briefly be summarized as follows:
  - (a) Lack of training and education - rural women especially have suffered in this respect. It is not enough to ensure that women are given equal job opportunities in an effort to upgrade their status. They must also be given adequate education and training in order to enable them to be in a position to make the best use of increased job opportunities.
  - (b) Role of men as policy makers and their unwillingness to share this role with women who are often considered physiologically and psychologically unsuitable.
  - (c) Failure of men to recognize that many of their attempts to "help" women only encourage their dependency and do not make them self-reliant, e.g. planning programs for women that are centered around the home with little or no encouragement to women to participate in outside activities.
  - (d) Beliefs at the middle, upper and elite levels of society that the rural poor are mentally inferior and therefore, incapable of assimilating advanced education.

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<sup>8/</sup> Sondra and Laura Zeidenstein: Observations on the Status of Women in Bangladesh, July 1974.

- (e) In traditional rural societies, the raising of girls to please men and conform to accepted feminine roles. The lack of alternatives to early marriage and motherhood is also an important factor in the development of rural women.
4. In Bangladesh, cultural constraints such as the tradition of seclusion and segregation of the sexes restrict the size of the female labor force. This is especially evident in the field of agriculture. There are many Asian countries where women mostly constitute the agricultural labor force. In Bangladesh, there is a preponderance of agriculture over industry, but despite the high dependency upon agriculture, working in the fields does not comprise, even in a minimal way, an intrinsic aspect of a Muslim women's life. Involvement of women in agricultural production is, I feel, premature at this stage. Emancipation in this direction must take place gradually. Then again, the question arises of whether the agricultural system would benefit from the utilization of female labor. Would women be a drag or provide a stimulus on raising the level of agricultural output? Dragging behind males in agricultural production will not add to the efficiency of labor productivity and will only perpetuate the economic and psychological dependency of women on men. Given prevailing rural customs and tradition, would involvement of women in agriculture raise their status and position in the social structure? These are questions which ought to be explored before any serious attempt is made to include women in agricultural production.

## VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

Women are a vital human resource and every effort should be made to utilize this resource to its fullest extent. If the process of development is to be accelerated, it is essential to reduce the high dependency rate of the female population by encouraging them to participate in various economic programs. It is not enough to improve the physical well-being of women through health and nutrition programs, it is also necessary to get them to participate in a broad range of activities and be recognized for their participation in order to expedite their socio-economic emancipation in the cultural context of Bangladesh. Only if women are fully utilized will they be able to develop their full human potential and make their maximum contribution to society.

AID can assist the development of women in a number of ways:

### 1. Mission Program Analyst:

Starting within the Mission, there is the need to create a slot for a program analyst in the area of women's development programs. Needless to say, this position should be occupied by a Bengalee

woman, preferably one with past experience in women's programs. Although AID does not have what may be called a women's program much thought is being given to incorporating women into development projects. The program analyst could be a valuable asset to the Mission in that she could explore avenues through which AID might improve the status of women, act as a liaison between AID and the Bangladesh Government, and develop programs that would enable AID to fulfil the tenets of the Percy Amendment.

2. Employment of Women:

AID could further boosting the cause of women by employing qualified women wherever possible. If a position in the Mission becomes vacant, preference should be given to women candidates if they are suitably qualified. A word of caution to the unwary male would not be out of place - it is dangerous to overrun the Mission with females by getting hung up on the subject of equal job opportunities. Before you know where you are, you might find yourself out of a job and a woman in your chair!

3. Participant Training:

This is an area in which AID has some scope for the training and advancement of women. AID can convey to the Bangladesh Government the importance of having women trained, and stress on the point that more women should participate in the training programs. It should also scrutinize candidates to ensure equal opportunity and even give priority to women when training needs arise. Future and existing projects should be reviewed to determine ways and means by which the number of women participants can be increased.

The Training Office could also explore the possibility of initiating in-country training programs for women in rural areas. Short-term training courses in various subjects would be a step in the right direction. Something in the nature of a "Training of Trainers" program would be most useful. Co-operative management would be another training possibility. Most of the government programs for women are based on the cooperative infrastructure. But apart from the Rangunia experiment, women's cooperatives are amalgamated with the men's. One reason for this may be that the women do not have the necessary expertise to run the cooperatives themselves. This situation could be corrected if the women were given training in cooperative management and thus be qualified to run their own cooperatives without depending on the men.

An important point to note in planning the training programs is that they should be concentrated on the utilization of rural

women. It is not good policy to spend thousands of dollars training urban personnel to work in rural areas when there are many rural women who could be trained. Women with little formal education who already live where their services can be utilized would be a better bargain than urban women who would have difficulty in adjusting to life in the rural areas.

#### 4. Education:

There is a great need to increase women's opportunities for education. The amount of education women receive has a strong influence on how much they can contribute to the development process. Women are the primary trainers of children. They teach the children. But lack of relevant, practical education makes them incapable of passing on to the children the capacity for self-improvement and adaptation to rapidly changing economic and social circumstances.

AID could explore the feasibility of conducting non-formal education programs for rural women. However basic the education, it will result in giving the women self-confidence and will not only increase their status but also their level of participation in the rural economy and rural society. I suggest non-formal education because it is more suited to rural women's needs than formal education. Non-formal education is a means of enabling women to develop literacy and skills allowing greater involvement in the developing process. If education is related to subjects which are of interest to rural women, then there is a greater chance of its being a success. The women can acquire knowledge about many different things, such as health, family planning, and nutrition through non-formal education programs. The participation of women in the development of the village will benefit not only the woman herself but each member of her family. The proper upbringing of the children, the health of the whole family, and the comfort of the home rests in the hands of the woman. AID could engage the expertise of a private voluntary organization to carry out a non-formal education project in a selected rural area, and if this proved to be a success, it would be replicated on a wider scale in other parts of the country.

Aside from non-formal education programs for women, thought should be given to post literacy programs. Women who have newly acquired literacy are apt to forget their skill if they are not given any opportunity for utilizing it. The post literacy program would be a sort of follow-up program for women which would give them the chance of employing their

educational skills for community development purposes. One of the activities under this program could be the publication of a rural newsletter on home economic subjects.

The literacy classes for women could also be used as the medium for motivating women to take part in economic programs. Women should be motivated to think of their employment not only as a supplement to family income but as a significant contribution of high value to the quality of their family's life and as a shared responsibility in national development. If men could see women as productive members of society instead of just reproductive devices, it might result in an uplift of their position. Moreover, the involvement of women in economic activities might have the beneficial effect of reducing their fertility rate.

#### 5. Rural Development:

In the area of rural development, AID could consider the development of rural based small-scale industries. Cottage industry would come under this category. A light industry, such as the assembly of sewing machines might be a means of providing rural women with the economic support they so vitally need.

One activity which would conform to the traditional pattern of woman's employment and at the same time give the women the opportunity of earning an income would be a dairy farming project. Dairy products are at present in short supply in the open market, and therefore, I feel there would be a good demand for items like curd, milk, butter, ghee, and cheese.

#### 6. Institutional Assistance:

Apart from initiating new projects, AID could also think about strengthening the institutional capabilities of institutions that are involved in running women's programs. For example, the Rangunia women's program is working well, but there is scope for better performance if its present marketing system is improved. Marketing is an important factor in the success of a project and lack of a good system might well herald the disintegration of a program into which a lot of hard work and effort is put.

The position of women in Bangladesh is improving, and the prevailing attitudes towards women's participation in development programs show a favorable trend. The plight of rural women is not going unnoticed. The Government currently feels that women should stand side by side with men in the process of national development.

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- Mr. Shahabuddin Ahmed, Sub-Divisional Officer, Manikganj, March 12, 1975 in Manikganj.
- Mr. Moslehuddin, Circle Officer (Development), March 12, 1975 in Manikganj.
- Mr. Grigranjan Shaha, Chairman, Gopara Union Parishad, March 12, 1975 in Manikganj.
- Mr. M.A. Chowdhury, Coordinator, Women's Programs, Bangladesh Academy for Rural Development, April 21, 1975 in Comilla.
- Dr. Abdul Aziz, Deputy Director of Training, Bangladesh Academy for Rural Development, April 22, 1975 in Comilla.
- Mr. Shamsul Haque, Vice Chairman (Administration), Kotwali Thana Central Cooperative Association, April 22, 1975 in Comilla.
- Mrs. Jahanara, Jahanara Cottage Industries, April 22, 1975 in Comilla.
- Mr. Saleh Ahmed, Project Officer, Rangunia Thana Central Cooperative Association, April 28, 1975 in Rangunia.
- Mr. N. Sarker, Field Officer, Rangunia Thana Central Cooperative Association, April 28 and 29, 1975 in Rangunia.
- Miss Kalpana Barua, Assistant Inspectress, Rangunia Thana Central Cooperative Association, April 28 and 29, 1975 in Rangunia.
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