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AN OVERVIEW OF WOMEN'S ROLES AND  
USAID PROGRAMS IN BANGLADESH

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Abstract: The status of women in Bangladesh is a product of many years of cultural, social, and religious traditions. The practice of purdah in this predominantly Muslim society with its condition of female dependence and gender segregation has provided a strong historical basis for establishing women's roles and attendant division of labor within the household. In rural areas, women's activities are limited primarily to the home and homestead. Overall, the inferior status of women has been detrimental to their access to education, nonagricultural employment, and participation in political activities. The system, however, is being challenged as poverty is forcing destitute women from traditional roles, and, even in the urban middle class, economic pressures are pushing women into employment outside the home. Employment options are restricted by the slow pace of economic development and the critical absence of job skills. Education for women is seen as a priority element in Bangladesh's development strategy.

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## AN OVERVIEW OF WOMEN'S ROLES AND USAID PROGRAMS IN BANGLADESH<sup>1</sup>

The issue [of women in development] is not analogous to the rights of marginal populations, minorities, and other disadvantaged groups, but is one concerning half the total population of any country and their involvement in all spheres of life in the process of social and economic transformation.

Professor Rounaq Jahan  
Dhaka University, Bangladesh  
Annual Meeting of the  
Association of Asian Studies,  
Boston, 1974

### Introduction

Women occupy important roles in the economies of most developing nations, yet it has been only in the last decade or so that the nature and significance of their contributions have been acknowledged in development programming. The information that has been assembled, primarily since 1975, discusses the roles played by women and the various constraints they face. In all developing societies, the specific tasks assigned to women are being defined by the general role limitations placed on them by society and within the household. Evidence indicates that women's tasks are accompanied by varying access to and control over land, labor, and capital resources related to household output. The tasks assigned to women expose them to a gender-determined incentive structure that is too often ignored by development planners.<sup>2</sup> Development changes are contemplated through projects without understanding the degree to which they can alter or eliminate traditional female roles. Much of the recent attention given to the roles of women in economic development has been directed towards trying to understand these gender-defined activities across the divergent social, religious, and cultural conditions in the developing world. Progress has been made. As a result, development agencies now have a clearer understanding of the importance of creating development strategies that include concern for the contributions of women.<sup>3</sup>

Bangladesh has participated in this general movement and progress. Headway has been made in outlining the roles women fill in the society in general and, more particularly, in the rural regions where gender-determined roles are especially pronounced. There is presently a fairly large informational base on women's roles in Bangladesh, but it is largely descriptive and does not provide the analytical evidence needed to quantify the influences women have over resources and productive processes or the degree to which gender roles interrelate with incentive structures in the society. Even so, the current information provides an initial base for understanding the general scheme of women's roles--a scheme that is influenced considerably by the widespread practice of the Moslem faith.

The object of this paper is to present a synopsis and general overview of the position of women in Bangladesh and the roles they play in the fabric

of society. For the most part, it is a descriptive summary of conditions as reported by various scholars who have studied Bangladesh's social and economic evolutions. Focus is given to five primary aspects of women's roles: (1) a historical perspective grounded in religious and social tradition; (2) accessibility to education; (3) opportunities in nonagricultural employment; (4) participation in politics; and (5) contribution to agricultural development. These discussions are followed by descriptions of the organizational programs concerned with assisting women in Bangladesh, including the position given to women's issues in the current U.S. developmental assistance program in Bangladesh.

### Historical Basis of Women's Status in Bangladesh

Women in Bangladesh have traditionally been relegated to the positions of "docile daughter, compliant wife, and dependent mother."<sup>4</sup> They have had lower status than men in every phase of life, both inside and outside the home. Within the family structure, a well-defined system places females under male authority throughout their lives. A woman passes from being the responsibility of her father to being the responsibility of her husband and then of her sons when she is widowed. The traditional status accorded women has been upheld by strong social pressures and religious beliefs.<sup>5</sup> For example, the Koran says, "men have the authority over women because Allah has made the one superior to the other, and because they spend their wealth to maintain them. Good women are obedient."<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, women have not been associated with the authority structure of Islam nor have they been expected to participate except in a peripheral way. Even today, they are excluded from the public meetings and rituals of the faith although they engage in private, individual prayer.

Two principles of social organization characterize the status of Bangladeshi women: (1) the segregation of sexes; and (2) the dependence of women.<sup>7</sup> These two principles and the structure of roles and activities assigned to women have been greatly influenced by the practice of purdah throughout the predominately Muslim society. Purdah literally means "curtain" or "veil." The system advocates the seclusion of Muslim women from those outside the home and defines a strict code of female conduct. Strict practice means that a woman stays within the family compound and is not encouraged to make contacts outside the home. If a woman leaves the compound, she must be veiled in a burkha (a garment covering the entire body).<sup>8</sup> Purdah is a basic tenet of Islam, but its importance to economic development arises not so much from its religious significance as from the way it affects the behavior and role patterns of women in Bangladesh, particularly those who live in rural areas.

Women in rural Bangladesh can be divided into three groups with distinctly different lifestyles.<sup>9</sup> The poorest are the destitute women who are generally divorced, widowed, or abandoned. These women must beg or seek work outside the household as laborers to support themselves and their families. A second group is comprised primarily of the wives of small farmers, sharecroppers, and landless farm laborers. These women constitute a large majority of all rural women and perform work roles within their households or homesteads. The third group is made up of the wives of

merchants, professionals, and large landowners. These women employ household servants, enjoy leisure time, and are usually the most educated.

One of the most distinctive, traditional signs of status in rural Bangladesh is the behavior of the women of the family. Appropriate behavior for women includes strict purdah and the complete gender division of labor. The practice of strict purdah requires extra expenditures to establish facilities in the house to guarantee gender separation and to purchase the special clothing required. In addition, purdah results in an opportunity cost in terms of foregone income or other home benefits. Only higher income families can afford to support the strictest form of purdah, and this economic limitation generally excludes the two lower rural classes. But, because the observance of purdah is such a strong status symbol, demonstrating both social influence and economic welfare, most families aspire to it, particularly the use of the burkha when in public. As a consequence of the varying economic conditions of families, the behavior of rural women in relation to the tenets of purdah varies considerably. For a large majority, the strictness of the system has been and is being relaxed by circumstance.

Still, the general limitations on the mobility and status of women engendered by purdah help to explain the roles defined for them in Bangladesh society. The household or homestead has been identified as their domain. Heavy demands have been placed on women for childbearing, and, consequently, their roles have been limited to family and homestead-related activities. Women's principal source of prestige and security has been bearing children, primarily male descendants. Male children are accorded a significant preference to the point of preferential nutrition, medical care, and education relative to their sisters. Among rural women, the system has been reinforced by precedent, and they have been locked into their traditional roles from birth. Their social, legal, and marital status and rights have all been defined by the system.

The strictness of the system is being challenged, however, by circumstance and social changes that are weakening some of its tenets. Change is more apparent in urban areas, but alterations are occurring even in rural areas. For example, while poverty reinforces the structure in some rural households, it is a force for change in others. Divorced or abandoned rural women who are forced by economic necessity to work outside the home cannot comply with the strict purdah code. These women have no choice but to seek employment where possible, and this takes them outside the home and places them in direct contact with men. Even though these women are regarded as quite socially inferior, the fact remains that the process is having its impact on the strictness of the system. Poorer rural women are being forced into factories, fields, and the homes of the more affluent to find work. Many women in Food-For-Work (FFW) projects, for example, are landless, divorced, or abandoned women. Others come from economically disadvantaged homes. Even in middle and upperclass homes in both rural and urban areas, economic stress is causing changes in attitudes toward outside employment and limiting the degree to which strict purdah is practiced.

A further influence on the practice of purdah is the exposure to western education and lifestyles, especially among the urban upperclasses. Women in these groups have been able to discard the outward symbols of purdah. Generally, these women do not use the burkha, and their mobility has increased rather than decreased.<sup>10</sup> In the case of the more affluent, the greater freedoms are seen as evidence of higher social status. In contrast, among the rural poor, similar freedoms are seen as evidence of lower social status. The underlying principles of purdah are still accepted, but its practice has been altered. The rigidity of conduct and the limitations on movement have been lessened considerably since independence, particularly in very recent years.<sup>11</sup>

The social and cultural barriers that disadvantaged rural women face in attempting to enter the economic system are formidable, and the stereotyped perceptions of women and their capacity to contribute to social betterment are difficult to overcome. Several of these perceptions have been categorized as myths in the following way: (1) women in Bangladesh do not do economically productive work; (2) women's roles in Bangladesh are predetermined and static; (3) if women are encouraged to work, this will add to male unemployment; (4) women necessarily benefit from development programs directed toward men; (5) programs for women should be directed exclusively toward their roles as mothers and homemakers; (6) women are too busy to take on additional activities; and (7) women in Bangladesh are helpless and ignorant.<sup>12</sup> Evidence refutes or significantly alters these characterizations of Bangladeshi women.

#### Women and Education

One of the indications of women's status in Bangladesh is their lack of formal education. Bangladesh has a low overall rate of literacy (22.2 percent), but the rate for women is only 13.7 percent compared to 29.9 percent for men.<sup>13</sup> There is, correspondingly, a low level of primary school enrollment among females. "Out-of-school" percentages for females in the primary school-age group are much higher than those for males. The situation for the secondary schools is similar.

The low level of female participation in formal schooling is an extension of the status issues. Where household income is limited, boys are accorded preference in most activities involving expenditures. Furthermore, young girls are an asset in the home, particularly for rural families. Girls begin filling the "helper" role at about five years of age, the age at which they should be starting school.<sup>14</sup> Young girls commonly engage in such activities as tending animals, collecting firewood, carrying water, caring for younger children, washing, and cleaning. As they become older, they assist in threshing, boiling, and drying rice and other more demanding domestic duties. The prolonged period of childbearing in large families means an extended period of need for help in the home and deters primary school participation for girls.

Purdah is a secondary constraint on school enrollment for primary school girls, but it does influence the quality of education for girls who do attend school, since female teachers are in extremely short supply. It is

estimated that only approximately 5 percent of the total primary/secondary teachers are female.<sup>15</sup> The absence of female teachers restricts the contact young girls can have with female role models at early ages, as well as the scope of the curriculum which is predominantly oriented towards the needs of male students.

Income is, however, a basic constraint to female school enrollment and is the theme of a USAID-supported pilot study for secondary school children in five unions in the Comilla district. Parents receive a Tk. 120 (about \$5) quarterly scholarship to offset the costs of school attendance for female children.<sup>16</sup> The project is still in its formative years, but early results are encouraging.

The influence of purdah is seen as an additional deterrent to school attendance in the secondary schools because coeducation often occurs at an age when the practice initially begins. All-girl schools, where they exist, are mostly in urban areas. With no alternatives, motivated girls must either attend coeducational schools or drop out.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, the cost of education escalates in the secondary schools since most of these schools are privately administered with only some government subsidy. A final barrier is in the course options for girls. Agricultural courses are offered only to boys, despite the considerable involvement of females in agricultural processes. Only traditional home economics courses, nominally described as vocational training, are available for girls. Furthermore, the system offers no programs for training girls in agriculture or industrial arts as the basis for increasing the supply of female teachers with competence in these disciplines.<sup>18</sup>

University education is even less available for women than secondary education and for many of the same reasons. Large numbers are eliminated from the educational system by the costs and the social pressure of gender-determined roles, and they cannot qualify for university admission. Higher education for women has generally been viewed as deviant behavior.<sup>19</sup> In 1980, however, an estimated 10 percent of the students enrolled in the universities were women, which suggests a changing trend. Even so, most women in the university come from urban upperclass families; there are almost none from rural households.

The lack of educational opportunities for women is significant in terms of both economic and social welfare. Many options are lost to them both inside and outside the household from lack of training. A factor of critical importance is the impact formal education has on fertility and family planning. Higher levels of education have been demonstrated worldwide to be positively and significantly correlated with reduced fertility and family size.<sup>20</sup> Similar findings have been made in Bangladesh.<sup>21</sup> Education and fertility are intricately related to many social, economic, and psychological processes which give rise to a new set of values and circumstances of consequence to population planning. The evidence is compelling and, as much as any other single factor, demonstrates the need for insuring higher participation in formal education by the female segment of Bangladesh's population.

### Women in Nonagricultural Employment

The activities of women in the nonagricultural sectors are determined, in large measure, by poverty and the widespread practice of female isolation. In rural areas, their tasks are largely restricted to the household, and few venture outside for off-farm work unless poverty and adverse circumstance dictate. Urban women are, of course, more likely to engage in nonagricultural work. In large part, the jobs "appropriate" for women have been defined in terms of the amount of contact required with men; the less contact required, the more appropriate the job. In addition, the denial of adequate educational opportunities, which has been inherent in the segregated system, has left many women without prerequisite skills; they are ill-prepared to qualify for employment in many occupations.

The system of gender segregation has created a particular division of labor. Trade and retail sales work is done almost exclusively by men. This contrasts with the situation in Latin America, for example, where women dominate the marketing sector, especially for agricultural products.<sup>22</sup> In Latin America, women control most of the retailing functions for agriculture and more than a proportionate share for other items. Many possess highly developed entrepreneurial skills. In Bangladesh, a high proportion of secretaries are men, which reflects both the frequent interactions this profession has with male associates and an absence of female skill training. School teachers are also mostly men, which is indicative of training deficiencies and the social difficulties women often encounter teaching in the coeducational schools found in most villages. Nursing, traditionally a woman's job in many countries, was initially male-dominated in Bangladesh since its nature was said to violate the basic conditions of pardah.<sup>23</sup> In recent years, however, more women have entered nursing and now probably dominate the profession. Because of gender separation, medical training for women has always been advocated, and some urban women have entered the profession. Women who practice strict pardah are often not allowed contact with male physicians, even at the expense of foregoing medical treatment; the demand for women doctors is a response to this problem.

In many areas, the practical needs dictated by poverty as well as some degree of social change are causing breakdowns in these traditional nonagricultural work roles. More and more women are becoming secretaries and nurses, and some are occupying important positions in public administration. At present, one woman is a minister in the national government. A number of women occupy scientific positions in agricultural research institutes. Approximately 150 women have been trained by the extension service for posting in rural regions. Women fill secretarial positions in government as well as professionally oriented staff jobs such as researchers in ministry planning units. Women are permitted to enter the civil service, although only a very limited number do so and few of these come from rural areas. Very few women have achieved top management positions in the private sector, except in those rare cases where they may operate their own businesses, but females are increasingly being employed as bank tellers and retail clerks.

In general, attitudes toward women in the labor force seem to be changing and women are more willing to work outside the home, especially in urban areas. In a 1977 survey of 548 nonworking women in Dhaka, 72 percent expressed a willingness to accept outside employment if offered. The main reason was economic stress in the home.<sup>24</sup> No similar survey is available for rural women, but one could hypothesize that a high percentage of the destitute rural women would respond positively to work opportunities outside the home. Rural married women with less drastic economic pressures, on the other hand, would be less inclined to break with tradition by working outside the home.

### Women and Politics

Political activity by women has been mostly an urban prerogative. The right to participate in politics is established for all women by the constitution of Bangladesh, but the social position of women has retarded their ability to exercise this right. The legislative system specifically reserves 30 seats in the 330-seat parliament for women. Other seats also may be contested by women but seldom are. Of course, the fact that martial law has prevailed in Bangladesh for several years of the nation's short existence means that the legislative branch has not operated and, consequently, women's participation has been curtailed. Women who have held legislative responsibilities have generally come from the urban elite rather than from rural families. In the first national election (1973), an estimated 10 percent of the voters were women, but the participation rate was considerably higher among urban than rural women. During that election, two women successfully contested general parliamentary seats.<sup>25</sup>

There are few politically active organizations promoting the causes of women in Bangladesh. In 1976, a Division of Women's Affairs was established and later elevated to ministerial rank, headed by a woman as minister. In the most recent (1982) government consolidation, the Women's Affairs Ministry was continued and is still headed by a woman. One joint secretarial position is also filled by a woman. Several national women's organizations, such as the Bangladesh Jatio Mahila Samity, the National Federation of Bangladesh Business and Professional Women, the Bangladesh Women's Association, and the Bangladesh Women's Rehabilitation Foundation, are promoting programs dealing with women's issues.

Historically, the involvement of women in the politics of Bangladesh has been minimal. Their ascension to roles in government has represented token appointments. Still, the present government has publicly favored improving the status of women in the society. There appears to be an undercurrent of a more liberal perspective on women's status, especially in the urban regions. Social movements often generate their own momentum once in motion, and long-term alterations in women's political involvement may become more significant.

### Women in Agricultural Development

The influence of purdah and consequent restricted mobility of women have provided the basis for a clear division of labor between men and women in

agricultural regions and rural households. Simply stated, men engage primarily in production and marketing activities while women's duties are seen as homemaking, postharvest processing of crops, and care of a range of products produced from the lands surrounding the homestead. The home and homestead are the domains of women. Their influence is especially apparent in three primary activities of the household, i.e., agricultural production, family welfare, and decision making.

### Agricultural production

Women's most important responsibilities in the production of agricultural crops are the postharvest activities associated with grain production.<sup>26</sup> Women do no field work with the men. Threshing grain is a man's job, but the woman prepares the threshing floor and is responsible for proper the drying, winnowing, and storage of the rice. Parboiling (a process of steaming to get a higher return of rice per unit of paddy) and husking also are done by the woman. The homestead production of horticultural products is entirely under the stewardship of the wife, except in cases where fruits and vegetables are commercially produced in the fields. A wide range of vegetables, fruits, and spices is grown on homestead lands. The woman prepares seedbeds and plants, cultivates, waters, and harvests these crops. It is her job to stand night vigil when crops are ready for harvest and theft potential is high. She also must preserve spices and other storable items for future use.

Small animal and poultry production is also the responsibility of the wife. Chickens, ducks, and pigeons are given high priority in the household because their products can be used to generate cash. Rural women without poultry enterprises are often accorded lesser status. Milking, watering, and feeding cows, bullocks, and goats are also women's chores. Goats are generally tended by elderly females in the household. Fishing is a man's responsibility, but, increasingly, women are participating in fish-production schemes, especially those using fish ponds established on or near the homestead.

### Family welfare

A woman's primary task is to bear and raise children. Most of her status arises from these activities, particularly in relation to male children. Marriage traditions reinforce this role. In Bangladesh, a high proportion of women marry at least once, although divorce and abandonment are widespread. A 1981 survey found that 85 percent of women age 20 or older had been or were married. On average, women married for the first time at about age 17, but marriages at earlier ages were common. The mean marriage age for men was about 25 years. The average number of children for all ages of married females in Bangladesh is 6.0 born or 4.0 living children, but the tendency to have larger families, of course, increases with age. Those in the age group from 40 to 49 years reported a mean of about 7.5 children ever born.<sup>27</sup>

Within the home, meal preparation is a major responsibility three times daily, and one meal normally must be delivered to the men who work in the

fields. Time also is spent preparing rice in various forms (such as boiling or powdering) for special dishes. The woman also is responsible for collecting fuel of all types for household use. Wood, leaves, cow dung, and rice hulls are the most common fuels. Many women engage in handicrafts, especially during the monsoon rain season when more free time is available. Most handicrafts are for household use, but in areas where a handicraft tradition exists or if the woman has special skills, she will market some of the products. There are villages in Bangladesh specializing in handicrafts or other income-producing activities and, in these, the woman participates closely with her husband in the production process, i.e., oil crushing, pottery, weaving, and fishing.

The housewife is generally fully occupied, despite the fact that children and older members of the extended family often assist in some tasks. A typical rural woman's daily timetable has been described as follows:

- 5-6 a.m. Rising, washing, and cleaning the house and compound, releasing the poultry, collecting eggs.
- 6-7 a.m. Preparing the early morning meal for the working members of the family before they go out to the fields.
- 7-8 a.m. Milking, collecting fuel, making dung cakes, tending kitchen and garden, cleaning cowshed and compound, drying straw to burn.
- 8-9 a.m. Preparing food for the midday meal, grinding spices, peeling vegetables.
- 9-12 p.m. Husking paddy, winnowing and sifting, preparing rice products.
- 12-1 p.m. Washing clothes, bathing, fetching water, feeding animals and the poultry.
- 1-2 p.m. Drying jute and paddy, putting other stores out in the sun to dry.
- 2-3 p.m. Feeding her husband and family; after this, eating herself.
- 3-5 p.m. Preparing and cooking the evening meal.
- 5-6 p.m. Praying, bringing the children home, shutting up the poultry and animals.
- 6-7 p.m. Eating the evening meal and cleaning up.
- 7-8 p.m. Rest period, sitting on the verandah talking and smoking before going to bed.<sup>28</sup>

Decision making<sup>29</sup>

The segregation of labor within the household leads to a certain amount of independence in decision making by women, but the interdependence of production and consumption in the home keeps the decision process from becoming totally uncoordinated. The husband appears to dominate decisions regarding land purchases, major crops to be planted, location of plantings, agricultural input use, and credit acquisition. For the most part, the husband controls the money resources of the household. The wife, on the other hand, has fairly exclusive decision rights with respect to subsistence horticulture and animal husbandry, food processing for household consumption, food preservation, and the manufacturing of household items and handicrafts. Collaborative decisions occur more frequently for matters affecting family welfare such as selling assets, food needs, and education. Husband and wife have independent access to credit, and the woman can be a member of special cooperatives developed to meet the particular needs of women.

The marketing of agricultural products is a male-dominated activity. All the major functionaries (wholesalers and retailers) in the marketplace are men. Decisions regarding sale of surplus field production and regular cash crops are normally made by the husband. The wife has some dominion over the marketing of the products she controls, but the restrictions on her mobility and participation in the marketplace limit the effectiveness of her authority. Normally, she must rely on middlemen, usually her husband, sons, or other male family members, or sell directly to merchants who come to the farm gate. She is often exploited in the process. If she can gain possession of income generated from her activities, it is generally hers to control, but, given the restrictions on her participation in marketing and her forced reliance on middlemen, gaining possession of money from her efforts can be difficult. Nevertheless, the funds she does control often represent the major cash savings of the rural household. Memberships in cooperatives are often favored by women since coops offer a safe place for their money that is accessible only to them. It has been observed that women periodically withdraw their money and then redeposit it shortly thereafter as reassurance that their money is safe and will be delivered on demand.<sup>30</sup>

In response to the severe economic pressures faced by many rural families, women will often seek means to supplement the household income. Storing rice at harvest and holding for later sale (sometimes without the knowledge of the husband) is a common and sometimes effective method of speculative earnings. Significant amounts of rice can be accumulated by setting aside a handful (called musti) now and then as a system of forced savings.

The consideration of rural women's role in agriculture to this point has been based on the landowning family. Yet, there are other groups of women who own no land and must rely on work opportunities to support themselves and their children. These women are forced by necessity into roles and activities that violate the basic premises of purdah. Fieldwork and household work for others are among the common responses. Some of the most

destitute have entered the Food-For-Work programs to engage in earth-moving work for wheat. Most are indigent. Some pay a high price in family conflict and social disapproval to enter these new roles; but, for the most part, neither family members nor neighbors are highly critical of women working in Food-For-Work projects where needs dictate. A 1981 survey revealed that only 8.2 percent of the workers' families and 18.6 percent of their neighbors were highly critical of them for working outside the home.<sup>31</sup> For most, the choice is to accept these jobs or to face hardship and starvation.

### Organized Programs for Women

The period since independence has seen a growing awareness by the government and foreign donors of the problems faced by Bangladeshi women. Efforts have been initiated to ameliorate the limited work options for women and to incorporate them more fully in developmental efforts. The War of Liberation in 1971 produced conditions which, in a tragic yet subtle way, affected the attention given to the problem faced by women. The government officially addressed the plight of distressed women who were widowed or who otherwise suffered at the hands of the Pakistani army by creating the Bangladesh Women's Rehabilitation Organization. Rehabilitation centers were established nationwide for these women; although the need has since diminished, the organization has taken on expanded programs in vocational training.<sup>32</sup> Since this beginning, the number of organizations providing assistance to women in Bangladesh has mushroomed.

A 1980 census of women's organizations in Bangladesh by UNICEF identified 214 that could be considered actively operating with assistance.<sup>33</sup> Forty-two additional organizations formally registered following the closing dates of the census. Most of the organizations focus on skill training and adult literacy. Of the initial group, 85.5 percent were private organizations, 13.1 percent were government-sponsored, and 1.4 percent were supported by international agencies. Most of the organizations have multiple objectives, but programs to provide economic benefits were the most common (26.8 percent). Training (18.5 percent), adult literacy (17.3 percent), women's leadership (14.4 percent), other developmental programs (11.7 percent), and cultural activities (11.3 percent) were the other activities. Among the varied sources of support for these programs, direct government assistance amounted to only 18.6 percent of the total received. Subscriptions and sale of goods produced by the programs were the most important sources of assistance. Of the women attending programs at the time of the study, 39.8 percent were distressed or landless, 32.2 percent came from the lower-middle class, and 16 percent from the middleclass. No upperclass women were in training.

The locations of the women's organizations were not clearly identified, but the list suggests that they were mainly concentrated in urban and suburban areas. No evaluation of programs or their effectiveness was undertaken, but the issues of program relevance and whether they reach target clientele are continually raised. Shamina Islam, a prominent Bangladeshi scholar, makes the following observations:

The major efforts toward non-formal education for women in Bangladesh overlook the clientele's existing economic and socio-domestic roles, and instead of attempting improvement of the present level of knowledge and competency of rural women, they are trying to initiate new roles for women through varieties of skill training programs which clearly demonstrate preconceived notions and urban biases. Moreover, apart from the initial supplies, the problems of funding necessary inputs and creating a marketing channel have been the major deterrents to the success of these programs.<sup>34</sup>

The accuracy of such criticism for existing programs depends on the clientele being trained. Landless, abandoned, or widowed women, who have no other base from which to derive income, need new skills or other options from which to generate family support. To a large extent, this need has been serviced by existing programs, although their effectiveness is unclear. The other clientele who can benefit from women's programs are rural women whose lives and productivity are centered in the homestead. New roles are not usually desired by this group, but new knowledge can have dramatic impacts. The homestead is an intricate, complicated, production unit which produces an array of agricultural outputs. At the same time, it is a consumption unit with all of the associated inputs and outputs. Improvements in any phase of homestead operational efficiency could generate increased levels of individual or family welfare. The list of potential changes is wide and ranges from increased output of garden vegetables to development of wood fuel production and from more efficient land utilization to better nutrition from improved food preparation. The varied aspects of homestead life offer excellent topics for training to augment the existing skills, competence, and knowledge of rural household managers. The homestead is also a viable unit for extensive study and can benefit greatly from many forms of research and extension programming, especially those directed to improved production, consumption, and management efficiency.

#### U. S. Development Assistance for Women<sup>35</sup>

The UNICEF survey, which classifies organizational support for women's programs in Bangladesh, translates into about four international agencies that are providing assistance for these efforts. The agencies and their programs were not specifically identified in the survey report. One of the major donors with concerns for women in development (WID), however, is the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). A brief summary of its program focus is presented here since the agency has been giving special attention worldwide to issues of women as part of the development assistance of the United States.

The WID programs of USAID began shortly after Bangladesh gained independence and were focused initially on the critical national needs associated with relief and rehabilitation in the aftermath of the war. The programs were designed to improve the earning potential of disadvantaged women, and women's assistance groups in Bangladesh were used as implementing agents. The efforts were generally unsuccessful because of the

bias introduced by upper-class, highly politicized, urban women's leadership. The activities emphasized mostly the development of new skills in the production of handicrafts for sale but were stagnated by lack of market outlets, which resulted in low pay for participants and little potential for permanent economic betterment. The broader needs of women, beyond economic betterment, were not addressed.

Presently, the USAID Mission is using its two-sector strategy--population and agriculture--to provide an orientation for WID activities. Population and family planning activities primarily assist women to achieve greater control over their reproductive lives by increasing contraceptive use. Beyond these family planning initiatives, the Mission is supporting a pilot scholarship program for secondary school girls to encourage higher enrollments. The program is based on the well-established fact that those with secondary education delay marriage until a later age and also tend to limit the size of their families.

The Mission is also supporting a program of management training for women. The program is designed to encourage the career development of women in the government, including those in the nationalized banks. In addition, funds are being used to assist women employees of the Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industries Corporation (BSCIC) to attain improved extension skills. An attempt also is being made to encourage rural women to undertake entrepreneurial activities in fields of their choice where they feel competent to succeed. Loans are being provided for this purpose. A related effort is a preliminary study of street food enterprises, many of which are operated by women, to look for potential development interventions.<sup>36</sup>

The role of women in agricultural production has been explicitly recognized in the agricultural research program currently funded by the Mission. Development of improved horticultural products and technologies and the introduction of improved home food processing methods are identified as component project activities specifically for women. A horticultural specialist will be contracted to develop these initiatives. As part of the program, discussions are in process with the government to bring 150 women extensionists, trained previously through a non-USAID project, under the administrative jurisdiction of the research project to specifically interface with rural women in agricultural production, food processing, and other homestead-related activities.

Title II Food-For-Work projects for women only were initiated in 1978 to permit payment of a higher wage rate to women. Between 1978 and 1981, approximately 303 "women only" projects were undertaken. These projects disbursed only 4 percent of the total Food-For-Work wheat distributed for all projects.<sup>37</sup> So far, the "women only" projects are not an important part of the total Food-For-Work program and have created special administrative problems in supervising the payment of a differential wage rate for women. A pilot women's road maintenance program was initiated in 1983. Under the program, women are paid a fixed daily salary to continually maintain an assigned segment of road.

The Mission's other WID-related initiative is a study of the impact of rural electrification on fertility. The analysis is part of the evaluation for the rural electrification initiatives supported by USAID. The project also is designed to enhance productive uses of electricity, some of which will specifically address women's work needs.

### Concluding Comments

The status of women in Bangladesh is a product of years of cultural, social, and religious traditions. The practice of purdah with its related conditions of female dependence and segregation has provided a strong historical basis for establishing women's roles and attendant division of labor in the household. The practice varies among rural and urban households as the urban upper class has had more of a tendency to discard many of the outward signs of purdah. Among rural residents, the impacts have been strong, and roles for many women are identified in large measure by the immobility created for them.

Despite these strong traditional forces, change seems inevitable and will be greatly influenced by practical necessity arising from the pervasive impacts of poverty. Already, major tenets defining the role of women are being challenged by the economic pressure created by widespread poverty among poorer segments of the population and the deterioration in "real" wealth of higher income groups. Women are being forced more and more into the labor market, and their participation in the labor force is creating new roles and relationships.

In many instances, work for women is limited both in amount and salary levels. The large and rapidly growing population in Bangladesh represents a major obstacle to economic development and improved individual welfare. Women are just a part of a large labor force that even today faces an open unemployment equivalent of near 33 percent.<sup>38</sup> Without the creation of more jobs in the economy, women will find employment opportunities increasingly more difficult to obtain as more women and men compete for the finite number available.

The potential for future employment is diminished even more by the critically inadequate skill levels of most women in Bangladesh. The inaccessibility to education by such a large segment of the population since nationhood in 1971 and the overall deficiencies in the educational system have led to a dismal present-day situation. Without employment skills, remuneration levels are restricted and mobility for most women is highly limited.

Women comprise a significant part of the growing population and related demographic pressures which now place national needs in Bangladesh on a collision course with the capability of the land base to support a growing population. With nearly 2,000 people per square mile, Bangladesh is one of the world's most densely populated countries.

More than any other factor, the capacity of Bangladesh to come to terms with these issues lies with what happens to its population. i.e., can its

growth be curtailed and can an educated, skilled, and innovative populace be created? The traditional developmental orientation that has limited and, in the case of women, virtually ignored the need for these qualities throughout the population in favor of a natural resource and production focus will not serve the strategic needs of Bangladesh.<sup>39</sup> Many elements of a developmental strategy are enhanced by improved education and work skills. Innovations become more commonplace, people are more productive, and employment options are widened. In fact, two of the major deterrents to population control, illiteracy and poverty, can be confronted by a strategy focus on human development. Greater attention to the education and the training of women in Bangladesh should be a particular priority in the nation's developmental strategy given the far-reaching benefits to society that would surely follow.

NOTES

1. This research was partially supported by USAID/Bangladesh. An earlier draft of this manuscript was included in: "An Assessment of the Agricultural Sector in Bangladesh: A Report of Consultancy," by E. Boyd Wennergren, USAID/Dhaka, August 1983. The opinions expressed herein, however, are entirely those of the authors and do not reflect those of either USAID or Utah State University.
2. For examples of the differences in women's roles among some LDCs, see Janet Z. Giele and Audrey C. Smock, eds., Women Roles and Status in Eight Countries (New York: Wiley and Sons, 1977); and "A Seven Country Survey of the Roles of Women in Rural Development," report prepared for USAID, Development Alternatives, Inc., Washington, D.C., 1974.
3. Bureau for Program and Policy Coordination, "Women in Development, AID Policy Paper" (Washington, D.C.: USAID, October 1982). In this document, USAID calls failure to recognize women's roles both wasteful and self-defeating.
4. Rafiqul Huda Chaudhury and Nilufer Raihan Ahmed, Female Status in Bangladesh (Dhaka: Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies, no date).
5. For a historical perspective of the cultural and religious background of women's status in Bangladesh, see Audrey C. Smock, "Bangladesh: A Struggle with Tradition and Poverty," in Giele and Smock, Roles of Women, pp. 83-126.
6. Susan Fuller Alamgir, Profile of Bangladeshi Women (Dhaka: USAID, 1977), p. 12.
7. Giele and Smock, p. 92.
8. Chaudhury and Ahmed, p. 6.
9. The classification of rural women and the information regarding the class observance of purdah were provided by Louisa Gomes, USAID/Bangladesh in a memo to the authors dated April 12, 1983.
10. Rural women, too, have generally discarded the burkha, but the incidence of use is still higher than among the urban elite.
11. Giele and Smock, p. 94.
12. Khushi Kabir, Ahshed Abed, and Marty Chen, "Rural Women in Bangladesh," Proceedings of Role of Women in Socio-Economic Development in Bangladesh (Dhaka: Bangladesh Economic Association, 1977), pp. 12-19. In this article, the authors describe and repudiate stereotypes as myths.
13. Shamina Islam, "Women's Education in Bangladesh," in The Situation of Women in Bangladesh (Dhaka: UNICEF, 1979).

14. Barkat-E-Khuda, Fertility Level and Attitudes and the Value of Children in Sreebollobpur: A Relatively Developed Bangladesh Village, New Series No. 29 (Dhaka: Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies, 1980) pp. 53-55.
15. Islam. pp. 100-103.
16. S. A. Ather, Evaluation Report on USAID Scholarship Program for Girls in Sharashati Thana, Comilla (Dhaka: USAID, 1983).
17. It is of note that community leaders (mostly male) in the Comilla Pilot Scholarship Program generally expressed no objections to girls attending a coeducational school and identified no significant social problems.
18. Islam, p. 11.
19. Islam, p. 116.
20. For a summary of several nations, see Kathleen Newland. Women and Population Growth, Choice Beyond Childbearing (Washington, D.C.: World Watch. 1977).
21. R. H. Chaudhury, "Education and Fertility in Bangladesh," The Bangladesh Development Studies, Vol. V, No. 1, January 1977.
22. For a discussion of Bolivia as an example, see E. Boyd Wennergren and Morris D. Whitaker, The Status of Bolivian Agriculture (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1975), Chapter 5.
23. Giele and Smock, p. 110.
24. R. H. Chaudhury, "Married Women in Non-Agricultural Occupations in a Metropolitan Areas of Bangladesh--Some Issues and Problems," The Bangladesh Development Studies, Vol. V, No. 2, April 1977.
25. Rounaq Jahan, "Political Participation of Women in the 1973 Election in Bangladesh," paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association of Asian Studies, Boston, Massachusetts, 1977.
26. The descriptions presented here draw heavily from Rene Gerard, et al., "Report of the Feasibility Survey of Productive Income Generating Activities for Women in Bangladesh," (Dhaka: UNICEF, 1977).
27. Ministry of Health and Population Control, Bangladesh Contraceptive Prevalence Survey--1981 (Dhaka: Bangladesh, 1983).
28. Gerard, et al., p. 29.
29. This section relies considerably on Alamgir, pp. 62-82.
30. Alamgir. p. 79.

31. M. Elizabeth Marum, Women at Work in Bangladesh, (Dhaka: USAID, 1982, p. 47).
32. Chaudhury and Ahmed, p. 152.
33. Salma Khan et al. (eds.), Inventory for Women's Organizations in Bangladesh (Dhaka: UNICEF, 1981).
34. Islam, p. 119.
35. This section draws from Hugh Plunkett, "USAID/Bangladesh Women Development Strategy, 1983-85," (mimeo/draft), USAID, Dhaka, undated.
36. The loan project is from Mission funds. The food enterprises study is centrally funded by AID/Washington.
37. Marum, p. 3.
38. World Bank, Report No. 4292-BD, March 11, 1983, p. 13.
39. E. Boyd Wennergren, Charles H. Antholt, and Morris O. Whitaker, Agricultural Development in Bangladesh (Westview Press: Boulder, 1984).

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