

THE FEMALE FACTOR

Success in a Land Known for Disasters

By **BETTINA WASSENER**

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Munem Wasif for the International Herald Tribune

Nur Jahan cared for a relative at a hospital. Ms. Jahan worked on a road maintenance crew for two years and hopes to one day run for a local government position.

SOMESHPUR, Bangladesh — To many outsiders, Bangladesh is best known for its poverty and the natural disasters that hit it with depressing regularity.

When it comes to the position of women, however, this country has made progress that would be unthinkable in many other Muslim societies. Bangladeshi women have served in United Nations peacekeeping missions. There are women ambassadors, doctors, engineers and pilots. Two powerful women — the prime minister, Sheikh Hasina, and her rival, Khaleda Zia — have taken turns at the country's helm for years. The proportion of parliamentary seats held by women is 19.7 percent, not much lower than the 22.3 percent in the British House of Commons.

“This is a country where women are active in every field,” Dipu Moni, the minister of foreign affairs, said at her office in Dhaka, the capital. Ms. Moni, the daughter of a prominent politician and a Western-educated lawyer and physician, has campaigned for years for women's rights and improved health provisions in the country.

Such efforts by successive governments and development groups have led to major improvements in the lives of women across the country, with expanded access to

health care and basic education in rural and urban areas. Decades of microlending and, more recently, the growing garment industry have underpinned the progress by turning millions of women into breadwinners for their families.

Nur Jahan, who lives in Someshpur, a ramshackle village of about 1,000 people four hours from Dhaka, illustrates how tough life remains for many Bangladeshi women, but also how many women's lives are being transformed.

Ms. Jahan's husband abandoned her, penniless and in rags, on the main square of Someshpur when she was pregnant with her second child about 10 years ago. A compact and vivacious woman who is about 26 years old — she does not have an exact record — Ms. Jahan spent years doing odd jobs for other households to support herself and her children. In a country that ranks as one of the poorest in the world, she was about as low as it was possible to get.

Then, two years ago, luck finally arrived in the form of a development project that arranged for women who had been widowed or abandoned by their husbands to get jobs maintaining roads.

The project, financed by the European Union and the United Nations Development Program and carried out with the assistance of local governments helped about 24,400 women like Ms. Jahan across Bangladesh.

For two years, they cleared shrubs and smoothed surfaces. They were paid about \$1.20 a day. But the savings they accumulated allowed many of them to buy a plot of land or small dwelling. In addition, they were taught to start tiny businesses that should allow them to make a living.



Munem Wasif for the International Herald Tribune

Women worked on a roadside project in Sirajganj, Bangladesh.

Ms. Jahan now makes and sells compost and trades dried fish. Others in the village sell wood, cookies or stationery for a slim profit. One became the proud owner of a hand loom. Instead of being destitute, these women are now merely poor. They can afford to eat and to send their children to school.

Ms. Jahan hopes to run for a local government office in a few years. Already, people come to her for help, she explained proudly. Recently, the relatives of a sick neighbor asked her to accompany them to the local clinic. Before, they would have hardly looked at her.

“When I think about my past, I want to cry,” she said. “When I think about life now, it is nothing but smiles.”

The groundwork for many of the development jobs was laid in the aftermath of the Bangladeshi war for independence from Pakistan in 1971. What started off as an effort to support the tens of thousands of women who were widowed during the fighting was expanded to alleviate poverty and empower women, said Ferdousi Sultana Begum, senior social development officer at the Asian Development Bank in Dhaka.

“There is still a long way to go, but there has been a lot of gradual progress, especially over the past two decades,” she said. Girls’ education in particular has been widely embraced, she added.

Statistics underline the improvement in women’s lives. The number of births by teenage mothers, for example, plummeted to 78.9 per 1,000 in 2010 from 130.5 in 2000. That is still high by Western standards (the figure for the United States is 41.2), but it is below the 86.3 per thousand in India.

In addition, fewer babies die: 52 out of 1,000 in Bangladesh, compared with 66 per 1,000 in India and 87 in Pakistan. And population growth has been stemmed. In the late 1980s, women in Bangladesh had 5.1 children on average. By 2009, the rate had been more than halved, to 2.3 children. India women have an average of 2.7 children, according to the World Bank.

Progress has occurred in the toughest of backdrops. Over all, Bangladesh ranks 146th out of 187 countries on an index measuring human development compiled by the United Nations — ahead of Myanmar and many African countries but behind Iraq. Nearly one-third of the population lives in poverty. Corruption, red tape and poor infrastructure mar everyday life. Access to clean water and electricity is scarce in the villages that dot the flat landscape of the country, whose 160 million inhabitants are squeezed into an area that is smaller than Florida.

Conservative traditions are deeply enshrined, and about 70 percent of the people live in the countryside. There are frequent reports of domestic violence, often related to demands for dowry payments. And many women who have achieved top leadership positions owe their prominence in part to powerful male relatives.

But while women in many other Muslim nations are seeing their rights eroded by the rise of conservative Islamism, that is not the case in Bangladesh. Extremism is a fringe phenomenon, and women's development projects encounter little religious opposition.

The country is predominantly Muslim, but moderate; Buddhist and Hindu traditions are respected, and there is a widespread acceptance of the concept that women can work outside the home.

Micro lending, which took off in the 1980s, has allowed many women to start tiny businesses. More recently, millions of people have found work in the garment industry, which accounts for about three-quarters of the nation's exports.

At the Mustafa Garments Industries factory in the southeastern port city of Chittagong, hundreds of women, most of them in their 20s and early 30s, were recently bent over sewing machines and cutting tables, making shorts for customers in the United States and Europe.

The factory employs about 500 people — 95 percent of them women — who earn about \$2 a day, according to Kallol Majumder, the general manager. But even that gives them breadwinner status, and it underlines the fact that women in Bangladesh are not simply recipients of Western charity.

“Bangladesh is undergoing a structural change in the economy, from agricultural to manufacturing,” said Stefan Priesner, the United Nations Development Program's country director in Dhaka. “Women have played a huge role in this.”

Men still outnumber women in the universities, but the number of women enrolled has risen steadily. In an attempt to help redress the balance, a women-only university was set up in Chittagong in 2008.

Kamal Ahmad, a Bangladeshi who has worked in development organizations and as a lawyer in the United States and Britain, spent years raising donations and lobbying the government for land for the school, known as the Asian University for Women. The goal, he said, is to create women leaders capable of bringing about change across Asia.

The first class is expected to graduate next year, and many of the students — who come from 12 countries — have plans to set up businesses, campaign groups, banks or schools at home.

“I have a real responsibility to help social progress,” said Moumita Basak, a 21-year-old from Chittagong. Her goal: to become a writer and set up organizations to promote social causes.

Blog post:

IHT Rendezvous

A Work-and-Save Project in Bangladesh: It Makes a Village

By BETTINA WASSENER

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Bettina Wassener for The New York Times

Women in Someshpur, Bangladesh, were helped by a development project aimed at lifting them out of poverty.

SOMESHPUR, Bangladesh — The village of Someshpur is a ragged collection of huts made of metal sheeting and thatch. Children scamper among the chickens in the unpaved square. The village, like the rest of Bangladesh, struggles to make ends meet.

But a dozen women here, and more than 24,000 around the country, have recently become micro-entrepreneurs. They now fish, they now make compost, they now trade firewood — thanks to modest savings they accumulated during two years of work maintaining roads in the vicinity.

As I report more fully in my story here, the project that arranged the work and trained the women to make a sustainable living from their savings is one of many that has helped Bangladesh, slowly but steadily, reduce poverty, illiteracy and infant mortality while raising life expectancy and bringing population growth under control.

Much of the development work, including the microlending schemes that were pioneered in Bangladesh in the 1980s, have been aimed at women, based on the idea that women tend to spend more of their income on their children than do men.

The women of Someshpur — widows or women deserted by their husbands — certainly back up this theory: As they crouched on mats on the ground in front of me when I visited last month, one after another said their priority was to feed and educate their children.

“I would sell my flesh and my blood to send them to school,” said Nur Jahan, a mother of two in her 20s.

Interestingly, this particular project gave the ladies much more than “just” a livelihood. The work on the roads also meant social status, and the purchase of a small plot of land or a sewing machine further cemented that status.

Such was the success of the project that several of the men who left their families returned after hearing of their wives’ newfound luck.

They were chased off.

“There is no room for them here,” Mamata Khatun, one of the newly minted micro-entrepreneurs, said of the men — to the animated agreement of the other women in the group. “If they come back, we will get rid of them!”

When I cautiously asked whether they might contemplate remarriage, the entire group burst out laughing. Clearly, they thought this was a very silly question.