

# WOMEN AND FOOD PRODUCTION IN BANGLADESH

**Khushi Kabir**

*The Women and Development Working Group of the Canadian Council for International Cooperation organized a Forum '85 workshop on the theme of Women and Food Production, at which Khushi Kabir of Bangladesh presented this paper.*

*Khushi Kabir, spécialiste du développement des femmes en Asie, et du développement international, examine la situation difficile que confrontent les femmes travaillant en production alimentaire au Bangladesh. Puisque les femmes dans la société musulmane ne doivent pas, selon la tradition, travailler dans la sphère 'publique,' les problèmes qu'elles rencontrent comme travailleuses agricoles sont redoublés. Ce sont: l'invisibilité dans le secteur agricole; un double fardeau de travail; la sous-évaluation et la sous-rémunération de leur travail; et le manque d'accès à la propriété et aux droits d'héritage. L'auteure décrit le travail de l'organisation de femmes Nijera Kori, qui tente d'aider ces travailleuses agricoles marginalisées à améliorer leur situation.*

While we sit here today at the End of the Decade Conference, I think of how oblivious we are to the majority of the women of the world – those who are actually involved in food production – and of how little impact this Decade actually has had on these most important women. I think the success of this Decade will come mainly to only the small number of us who actually benefit from these workshops that we are attending, and the different strategies and analyses we are gaining from them. How can we go back and try to expose our ideas to a greater number of people? Maybe, if certain changes do come about in the lives of the rural women, we can feel that the Decade is successful. It's not just a question of statistics, with the governments saying that ten per cent of seats are reserved for women in all levels of administration: it's more the basic question of how it is actually affecting the poor women, the rural women in the majority of under-developed countries of the world.

If you look at the question of women and food production in general, women

are often credited with having discovered agriculture. But look at their conditions now: their access to credit resources and land, their control over production and prices. I think it gives quite a dismal picture!

In Bangladesh, the situation is more or less the same. Women do a lot of the agricultural work but, being in a segregated society, they also do most of the work within the household – which is most of the post-harvest work. After the crops are harvested, the processing is usually done by the women within the house. They are also the ones who grow most of the vegetable crops, tend and look after the cattle. According to statistics given by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, in 1981 the population was 87.12 million people, of which women were 42.2 million. Only 333,000 women were considered to be in agriculture, although 36 million were living in rural areas at the time of the census. The population has increased now. This just gives you an example of how under-valued women's work is and to what extent their work is under-represented in the statistics. And these statistics were compiled in 1981, six years after the whole consciousness of the Women's Decade started coming out.

In Bangladesh, because of the kind of segregation that exists within the work area, women's work is largely invisible because they are not out working in the fields; thus women's work is under-valued and underpaid within the general statistics. If you ask a man who is cultivating what his wife does, he'll say she does nothing. If you start calculating the number of hours she works, and what she is doing besides all the housework, then she's also very much involved in food production. And when we start talking about the value of rice which is harvested and rice which is processed, the difference is the value the woman has put into the work. That's when people really start thinking that women's work actually does have a value!

Again, referring back to the statistics, they show that her weekly income is up to 50 takas (about \$2 U.S.); 65.5% of women agricultural workers get such low wages

as that. And this is only considering women working as agricultural workers: there are large numbers of women working as unpaid labour within their own homes or in other people's houses. They will usually get one meal a day for the work they are doing. This is in general the kind of work they do: they grow vegetables, look after the cattle, and do all the post-harvest work – which is not simple. It has to be learned and it takes skill to be able to have the food processed in exactly the right manner. It's a big skill involving different technologies.

Another reason why women's status in food production and agriculture is not considered is the question of property and how little of it women own. Legally women do have the right to own property. Because Bangladesh is a Muslim society, Islam has very clear definitions as to women's rights to inherit property from their husbands, their fathers, even from the sons. But in reality, it is never done. Women fear if they start claiming their share of the property or their share of the land, then in times of problems or distress their families won't support them. So the land is not cultivated by them. It is cultivated by the male members of their family who use the crop and maybe give a certain share to the women – and maybe not. Or they let her come and visit the natal home or whatever home, and if she's a widow, stay within the house and feed her off the land that she has given up.

The government has laws which are in favour of the landless population in terms of new land that comes up. Bangladesh is on the delta and there is a lot of new land every year. There is also a lot of fighting as to who owns the land. The government laws say that this land can be given to landless cooperative societies, but it is never given to women's cooperatives. The whole law is structured in a way that assumes that the land is to be used and cultivated by men only. Women are traditionally not supposed to be in the outside sphere or work, so if they do go into work in agriculture (such as weeding and some types of irrigation) then the wages they will get are very, very low. All this is not at all an encouragement for women to come

JANUARY



We need to earn money.



I'll teach you how to increase your production, run a cooperative, and keep accounts.

JUNE

Are you sure we should increase production to 400 kilos of cassava weekly?



The consultant said we should increase our volume to earn more income.

DECEMBER



Well, you couldn't sell your cassava and haven't made a profit, but look at all you've learned...



But we still don't have any money!!!

Illustration: Anne S. Walker

Credit: International Women's Tribune Centre

forward and start trying to push their way into the main spheres of food production where they can be recognized as being a potential force.

Also, socially women's status is such that within the home they are very dependent on the male members of the family and there is a fear of being deserted. Wife desertion is very common in Bangladesh in recent years. The question of dowry has just come up. The woman's father has to

pay money to get his daughter married and then, after a couple of years, there is a fear of the husband deserting her because of this dowry. Now these phenomena are all very new; twenty to twenty-five years ago they didn't exist. But as poverty and landlessness are increasing, the position of women is getting lower and lower still. They are facing more and more social problems. Of course there are also the problems of violence within the home and

the lack of access to credit resources.

There have been efforts to try and change things by groups such as ours, (Nijera Kori) and other groups of women. Certain laws *have* changed with Bangladesh; but these laws, though they are in favour of the people, are very seldom effective. In the kind of work we're doing, we just try to stay within the law and try to see that the laws are enforced. We face problems from the people

who are in power in those areas, both the rural elite and the government officials – which makes us question how effective laws can be when the people are unorganized and unaware exactly of what the laws are.

Some of the work we are doing is mainly to try and mobilize rural women first to analyze their situation, to find out their relationship to the food they are producing and what they are getting out of it, and to realize their value within the whole structure – and then try and get them to realize the need for unity.

In Bangladesh, over 60 per cent of the population own very little land, not enough to be cultivated all year and provide a year's survival. So they have to sell their labour elsewhere for a certain portion of the year. We try to help groups of women to understand their strength in numbers and to realize what the situation is and what the laws are; and to try and work for their own benefit on their own. As an organization, we do not provide any extra credit or any other facilities. We feel that women should be organized to mobilize the available resources and to utilize the existing laws for their own benefit, and to stand on their own. That means that if and when we leave an area, we don't leave a vacuum: we will already have created an autonomous organization.

We have been able to organize around 50,000 women all over Bangladesh. This sounds like a lot but it is not very much when you consider that the population in Bangladesh is over 90 million. We have organized 50,000 women to stand on their own and they have taken up a lot of social issues (such as wife-beating, dowry, and desertion). They try to stop those problems or to get more organized around them. In one area, where we have organized women's cooperatives and men's



Illustration: Anne S. Walker  
Credit: International Women's Tribune Centre

cooperatives, we have seen changes in government laws, giving 1,000 acres to these landless cooperatives (one third of this land must be given to the women's cooperatives). And that, I think, is a major breakthrough in Bangladesh where this has never happened before. This land will not be given to the women individually but on a 99-year non-transferable lease. That means the women will not be forced off their land after a couple of years.

We are also trying to organize women in joint cultivation programs in different areas. We are trying to get them to start demanding loans from the bank. They go in groups of three or four hundred and

demand that the bank manager give them loans and credit. In one area, three thousand women have gone to the local government official to try and insist that certain projects be done for women instead of just for the men. Generally, within the villages and the social situation, there have been some improvements as a result of the women's groups. But as a result of this, we are facing more and more problems not just ourselves as the organizers, but also the women.

Most of you are aware that at the end of May 1985, there was a cyclone which hit parts of Bangladesh. A lot of relief has gone to the country, and a lot of relief has been distributed – but very little is actually reaching the poor. A woman in one of the most conservative areas of Bangladesh stood up and attacked the local chairman, the head of the area, through whom the relief was distributed. This man was not distributing relief properly. She was beaten up in public and was threatened with violence and ostracisation. But because of the groups around her who supported her and our intervention, it has stopped for the moment.

This is just a small example to show that women are now beginning to speak up publicly and try to make their presence felt. There is still a lot of work left to be done. We are just beginning, but we hope that we – and especially the groups that are being organized – can continue our work and expand further.

*Khushi Kabir is presently Director of Nijera Kori and is a recognized expert in the fields of women's development in Asia and international development. For years she has worked with the poorest and most oppressed sector of Bangladesh society – rural women – to help these marginalized women understand their condition and to obtain the resources needed to improve their situation.*

## THE RAIN WITHIN MYSELF

To you I was a window.  
You opened me and enjoyed the  
scene as you pleased,  
And inhaled the breeze and the  
colours.

To shelter from the storm,  
You closed the shutters  
And I became a robe  
Smugly wrapped around you.

To you I was a tunnel,  
Where you could shelter when you wished  
And could conceal me too.  
To keep your footprints from sight  
You walked in me for life.

To you I was a dream:  
I was water;  
I was sand;  
I was reality on command;  
And like indigestion's aftertaste, forgotten.

While you talk in your dreams  
I have to listen lying awake.  
But no dream listens  
To my wakeful words.

*Kishwar Naheed*  
Lahore, Pakistan