

Women and Equality: The Context of Bangladesh

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN FULFILMENT OF THE
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DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
IN PHILOSOPHY
OF
UNIVERSITY OF DHAKA
DHAKA, BANGLADESH

Ph.D.

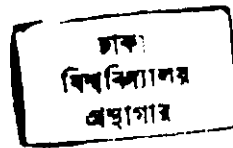
JUNE, 2001

BY

Zobaida Akhter

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Certified that the Thesis entitled

Women and Equality : The Context of Bangladesh submitted by me for the award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Philosophy at University of Dhaka is based upon my own work carried out under the Supervision of Dr. Kazi Nurul Islam and that neither this thesis nor any part of it has been submitted before any degree or diploma anywhere/elsewhere.

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June, 2001

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Introduction

The question of women's right and equality has been a perennial question throughout history. Giving women a definition and a separate status from that of men has been a historically persistent demand. Just as important is the fact that the definitions handed down through history are those of men who have been in a position to impose their analysis and prescriptions--whether intellectual, economic or political. Polemics against women were common, for example, during the late Middle Ages in Europe. Generally speaking, the arguments were based on old misogynist attitudes; women were cursed by the concept of the original sin of Eve and they were believed to have been made out from a rib-bone of a male person and therefore crooked; they were found bestial by nature, greedy and crafty. The Renaissance and Reformation brought major shifts in viewpoints and values. '*la querrelle des femmes*' (the dispute about women) became a long-running debate on women's capabilities. Christine de Pisan, one of the most learned women of her time and probably the first female voice to be heard on the question, suggested that if women understand less, it is because they do not go out and see so many different places and things but stay at home to mind their work. In fact, she claimed, 'their understanding sharper' than that of men. This was strong stuff in an age when Aristotle closely reasoned biological theories, which defined the female

And lastly and most significantly, this thesis has been made possible for the three special people who are integral parts of my life -- my husband, K.M.Harun, my eldest daughter, Kizzy and my youngest daughter, Brity. Harun has always desired to see me as an independent and career woman almost with an international reputation. He has encouraged me at every step of my life. Kizzy and Brity are growing up with their own viewpoints and own identities. I am profoundly inspired to have two daughters like them. Without their support, I could not have begun and finished my thesis.

Introduction

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as a sort of 'mutilated male', and which were influential in embryological work of William Harvey and in psychoanalytical theory of Freud.. While Plato's egalitarian arguments for the common education of women and men for joint military, intellectual and political leadership were radical and exceptional, Aristotle, following his belief in fundamental biological and psychological sex differences, placed women firmly in the area of household task, and took for granted the exclusion of women from any political or even public function. Aristotle, Rousseau, Hobbes, Locke, Hegel--all explicitly exclude women from their theoretical models and assign them to a different social status, based on their reproductive role.

✓ The central theme of my thesis is the equality of men and women, without which social justice can never be fully attained. In fact, history tells us that in most of the civilizations, man has taken every advantage of his usually superior strength and of his biologically good fortune. Many stern religious and social customs left women weak and vulnerable, and dependent on men. The distinction and discrimination that women at present suffer from are basically socially imposed and not biologically determined.

On the contrary, moderate feminists claim that women as members of the human species and in the interests of their own development should have the same considerations applied to them as are applied to men. Nineteenth century feminists could be described as attempting to ensure equality for men and women alike. One

of the central ideas of modern feminist thought is that women share a common oppression greater than men do. There is a prescribed time and space for women's activities. They have few choices and fewer options. They are given low wages for paid work, and are expected to fit into a whole range of pre-set moulds. The main constraint on women's employment is the level of demand for their labor. Female-headed households are now, out of necessity, entering the competition. But, these women carry the double disadvantage of poverty and gender.

The proposed research will focus closely on the women's situation in Bangladesh and the way towards a more equitable and fair share for them of the fruits of civilization. Modern feminists expect justice, not charity. The unequal representation of the Bangladeshi women is reflected in every sphere of life – social, economic and political continues. Although the constitution guarantees women an equal status, man-woman relationship in Bangladesh is typically that of the superior-dominant and the subordinate-dependent nature. Social customs and traditions reinforce such relationship. And the stereotype role is one for which she has been groomed since birth. The justification behind this thesis lies in the essential correlation between the rights of women and through cultural and attitudinal change. And, for this purpose, I have chosen up the best way –that is, raising the question of education for women.

The aim of this thesis is to find out ways to improve the position of women. And I believe that cultural images reflect and promote the values of the

powerful. So, it is necessary to change the attitudes of both male and female members in society through education in the real sense. Here, by 'education in the real sense,' I would like to mean the education that would liberate the body and mind of women from their subjugated position. For most women, marriage is the first and only available option in life. As such, the institution of marriage has become the central interest of their lives, finally to be subjugated by patriarchal society.

The basic question that this thesis seeks to answer is whether education and cultural change can empower the women of Bangladesh, and if so, to what extent and how. In fact, the story of the struggle for an equal status of women is a very old story. It has got several aspects, viz: historical, sociological, anthropological, political, legal, cultural, ethical and philosophical. The scope of their discussion is very vast. As a student of Philosophy, I have attempted in this dissertation to focus on the philosophical aspects of women's rights with special emphasis on education and cultural change. It also seems very important to me to discuss the historical development, by way of understanding the background as well as providing material for drawing the conclusion of my thesis. Although the women constitute half of the population, they are deprived of their rightful position in society, and are not allowed to take their proper place alongside men in the nation building process. According to recent statistics, the literacy rate among women is only 25.5% as against 38.9% among men (B.B.S.1998, Unadjusted). Deprived of

political and economic powers, and victims of social injustices, they have become the easy prey of social malaise. Their calorie intake is far less than that of men, death rate among women is higher, and there is prevalent a glaring disparity in the upbringing of male and female children. Women are also easy victims of violence, rape, kidnapping, illegal trafficking and random divorce. Although the National Parliament of Bangladesh has recently passed a number of legislations in order to prevent such cruelty, situation is still far from satisfactory.

It is not the purpose of this thesis to consider women's rights in all their aspects. This thesis has a limited aim to study the case of women from a philosophical angle. The principle of equality is rooted in morality, and it interprets justice as fairness. So, there is a need for communication between men and women on this subject, and there must be communication that is explicit. Lack of understanding results from lack of precision, as well as lack of knowledge.

Better communication would lead to greater understanding on both sides. Women must be granted equality of treatment if they are to make their full and just contribution to the achievement of ideals of peace and international understanding on which the United Nations is based. This will require broadening the focus of societal decision-making now held with notably few exceptions by men. Attitudinal changes will be needed to remove the cultural and educational obstacles in the path of women; they must be enabled to share power on an equal basis.

The thesis is divided into five chapters including a conclusion. All the chapters, however, are interconnected and overlap each other. Chapter I lays down the foundation and background of the entire thesis. I found it necessary to place the lives of women within historical, religious, social and economic context. Therefore, I have discussed the status of women in Europe before the nineteenth century and the period of British rule in India. In Chapter II, I have discussed women's rights and the present situation from the feminist perspective with special reference to Liberal feminism, Socialist feminism and Radical feminism. I have also discussed the issues that got importance in the International Women Conferences held in Mexico, Nairobi and Beijing. Chapter III covers the prevailing social problems in Bangladesh related to women's status.

In Chapter IV, I have discussed issues of early marriage, dowry, divorce and constant violence that goes with it. The concluding chapter of the thesis assesses the potential attitude and culture related to formation of women's mental condition to improve the lives of women in Bangladesh and examines various strategies for such reformation.

Status of Women: Some Preliminary Observations from Historical and Religious Perspectives

1.1 Introduction

The most burning issue throughout the world regarding woman is her status with special reference to social, economic and political conditions. Historically speaking, in most of the societies, throughout the ages, women's legal, economic and social status were determined by the patriarchal system. The fact that women suffer from inequalities is attributable to inherent factors within society to which men are not subjected, and these factors may most conveniently be described as patriarchy. As Cain *et al* define patriarchy, it is a “set of social relations with a material base that enables men to dominate over women. It describes a distribution of power and resources within family through which men maintain power and control of resources, and women are powerless and dependent on men.”¹

The concept of status of women in society is very intimately related to the concept of rights, which are directly or indirectly decided by religion. In fact, the personal laws of each religion govern the important aspects of family life such as marriage, divorce, guardianship of children. In Bangladesh, as in many other countries, civil or state laws have reformed religious laws relating to these matters. Women's lives are also subject to the social and cultural norms and rules that are

more or less embodied in the legal order. That is why the rights that an individual enjoys in a particular society are completely different from those of other societies. By 'status,' sociologists mean a position, which an individual is holding in society. Women's rights are allowances that societies have sanctioned for motherhood. Advancement of women is impossible until and unless genuine and natural status of women are fully protected.

In this chapter, our main objective is to find out the real status, which women held in the past. In order to get the real picture, we have divided the chapter into four sections. The first section deals with the European context before the nineteenth century. In this section, we have actually discussed the influence of Christian law or church on women. In the next section, we have given an outline of women's status from the Indian context. Here, we have given emphasis on Hindu laws both in *Vedic* and *Post-Vedic* periods along with Buddhism and Jainism. In the third section, we have dealt with the medieval period. And in the last section, we have explained, in brief, the British period with special reference to Raja Ram Mohon Roy, Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar and Mahatma Gandhi's views on women.

We have analyzed all those periods from three angles: economical, political and cultural. In this chapter, we have also mentioned the turning point, which covers the period after 19th century. While discussing all these issues, it becomes evident that the concept of rights of women is directly or indirectly connected with

religion. Hence, we have tried to discuss the problem mainly from religious points of view. As religions are mainly patriarchal in nature, they have defined male authority as supreme and presented “Patriarchal order as being supernaturally ordained.”² It may be mentioned that there are many religions, which consider women to be inferior, impure, sinful, thus creating double standards of morality and behavior and using laws to justify violence against deviant women.³

1.2 Status of Women: A Historical Introduction

The status of women in society is very much related to the concept of rights, which are directly or indirectly involved with religious instructions. The concept of right is related to a particular society or culture. So, the rights that an individual enjoys in that particular society are different from those of other societies to some extent. On the other hand, in almost all societies, women have some special rights just for being women. Women’s rights are generally confined within the four walls of motherhood. As a result, women are deprived of certain normal human rights. If we want to discuss the problem of women’s right, it is very important to inquire into the social status of women. The role which women are playing in these societies are also different. We should discuss the status of women in terms of the denial of equal right and the process of affirming human rights.

1.3 The Concept of Status

The term 'status' is not a simple one. It is rather complex. It is related to many components of a society. It is mainly related to culture, tradition, religion, custom and social norms. It can be said that the term 'status' is the combination of rights and duties. Actually, status is the complete picture of an individual's identity as a member of a society, or an individual in a given society is a reflection of that particular society. From the beginning of creation, men and women have been co-existing in this world. Women constitute half of the human population. So, the status and progress of women in a society is a significant indicator of the level of development.

But, it is very much unfortunate that still now the social norms of conduct that treat women as half-human beings are acting as powerful hindrances against women's progress. Woman should have all sorts of basic rights and fundamental freedoms. But, practically, they are not enjoying most of the rights they deserve. Women are still bearing the marks of a secondary status. Lesser rights for women relating to marriage, divorce, inheritance of property, etc. are the results of male-supremacy. In most of the societies, throughout the ages, women's legal, economic and social status has been determined by the patriarchal system. That is why women's position is doubly jeopardized by sex and by their marital or family status.

In the economic sphere, women are considered as supplementary earning source to that of the breadwinner. Women's opportunities to enjoy their rights and freedoms are often hindered by social or religious norms that always discriminate against women's status. Sometimes such norms are evidenced in the treatment of women as the property of their father before marriage, as the property of their husband after marriage and as the property of their son in old age. In fact, all these treatments take place in various stages. The whole of their life is a list of different forms of gender discrimination, namely the segregation of women and their prohibition from leaving their homes and participating in any public activity. Denial of the recognition of equal rights of women is decreasing but still remains strong.

In some primitive societies, men and women received equal social treatment and sometimes women enjoyed more rights because both had vital economic roles to play in supporting their families and communities. There are even instances of matriarchal societies in Malaysia, Java, the Philippines and India. Practically, subjugation of women began after the advent of certain religions and got firmly entrenched as the centuries rolled on. If we want to measure the status of women in a developing society, we must take into consideration three indicators: economical, political and cultural. We find that these three indicators are very low in their performance. Generally, women in the developing countries are economically dependent on male persons, because in most cases they are less

educated and less skilled. Family burden and social bondage are depriving them of participating in the public field. It is a natural tradition of the male-dominated society that women are born for indoor areas. Though women are sacrificing themselves for the family in terms of power and privilege, but within a family they are receiving a lower status. Generally, they have no voice in decision-making.

Women are traditionally conditioned to their lower status. They take it as natural as anything else. Still, in developing countries, the traditional image of women is also being glorified by their dependency and obedience. But, in the case of financially developed countries, economic indicators are much better. The women of today are in a better position to overcome the unfair myths and prejudices against them. They have started to think of their independence in concrete terms, but they are not finding proper ways of leading a life of complete human beings. Still, in those societies, the power and provision of women is rather low. In any sphere of life, women are subjects to a lot of discriminations.

If we want to have a better understanding of the present society, we must go through the historical paths and we must know about the traditional norms and natures of the past societies. All of us know that certain kinds of norms have their roots in the past. We also find that all sorts of discriminations at present are the continuation of patriarchy. So, in order to understand the present situation, we must try to understand the nature of male-domination in the past. There is a

humble endeavor to provide a brief and general overview of the status of women of the past in the following pages.

1.4 Status of Women : The Pre-nineteenth Century Europe

If we analyze the European history of women, it would be clear to us that women were subjugated mainly under the influence of the church. European Christianity considered women as primitive creatures of nature, the source of corruption, pollution and death. The Christian priests hated women saying that they were the roots of all evil, because Satan had provoked Eve and Eve had provoked Adam. As a result, women as the descendent of Eve are devil's friends. During this period, women did not enjoy any freedom. They didn't have any identity of their own. There was also sexual exploitation of women.

According to Martin Luther (1483-1546), the great German theologian and reformer and John Calvin (1509-1564), the great French theologian and reformer, women and men were spiritually equal. They also believed that women's subordination to men was ordained at the time of creation and must be maintained in order to fulfill God's will. It is a divine will. So, it could not be disobeyed.⁴ According to Christianity, husband is the lord of the wife, as Christ is the head of the Church. Tertullian writes: "Women, you are the devil's doorway. You have led astray one whom the devil would not dare attack directly. It is your fault that

the Son of God had to die; you should always go in mourning and in rags.”⁵
Women were so neglected at that time that they possessed no other dignity and status other than giving birth to a son.

1.4.1 Economic Status

Women were considered unfit for holding any property of their own. So, they had no economic status of their own. The entire property belonged to men. Even the property which women inherited was transferred to their husbands.⁶ Women were not allowed to have property rights. In this respect, the wife’s position in the common law of England was worse than that of slaves of many countries. According to the Roman laws, for example, a slave might have his/her allowances that to a certain extent the law guaranteed to him/her for exclusive use.

Women were treated as being capable of only household activities. Household work was also very hard at that time. Yet, they did not get honor and recognition for their hard domestic work. All sorts of masculine occupation remained closed to them before the 19th century. It is true that women’s economic position started to change from 19th century. The female status has been gradually changed into a milder form of dependence. This dependence, as it exists at present, is not an original institution. It is the successive mitigation and modification of original dependency and brought all human relations more under the control of

justice and the influence of humanity.⁷ Church had no intention to improve women's position. As long as land in the west remained under the control of the Christian priests, women remained without rights there. All the rights over land which women in European society has gained are a result of their own struggle and of the slackening of the hold of priests over Western societies and laws.⁸

1.4.2 Educational Status

The educational opportunities for women were limited, because, girls were considered to be fit for only domestic activities. Although women were permitted to enter the educational field, actually it was a discriminative education.⁹ Science and technology were reserved for boys. It was commonly believed that women's subordination to men was ordained at the time of creation and also must be maintained in order to fulfill God's will. Some reformers like Martin Luther and John Calvin were very serious in their views of women's role in the family. Before the 19th century, women's only vocation was that of the wife and the mother. Therefore, the society did not want to give them equal education with men.¹⁰ Women received wrong education which was the cause of their uncultivated mind and many narrow prejudices. The ultimate aim of women's education was the cultivation of the understanding which would help them to acquire some corporeal accomplishments. That is why Mary Wollstonecraft wrote in her book, *A*

Vindication of the Rights of Women, that women were educated only to do everything in an orderly manner through a disorderly kind of education.¹¹ As a result of such mistaken education, they could not succeed in breaking the tradition; so, they do today what they did yesterday. There is no doubt that one partial education system turned women to habitual slavery. Napoleon preferred to see in women only a mother. He gave the mother more priority than the wife. He did not like to give any rank to women other than that of the mother. To him, to be a mother is the only identity of a woman. All these are the continuation of a patriarchal attitude of men and society at large.

1.4.3 Marital Status

Women had no right to give any opinion in so highly personal a matter as marriage. Under the marriage law of the Christian Church, women, when getting married, had to pledge solemnly to obey her husband.¹² Before the 19th century, in European history, the father had all the power to dispose of his daughter in marriage. A father never thought about the girl's consent and the girl never thought of protesting against the father. On the other hand, after marriage, husbands were given complete power over their wives. The Church required one formal "yes" from the woman at the marriage ceremony, and there was nothing to prove anything other than compulsion. They better knew that it was practically impossible for the girl to refuse her father's proposal. The society was of such a

type! And, after marriage, the man had the power of life and death over his wife. She could apply no law against him; he was her sole tribunal and law. By the old laws of England, the husband was called the lord, literally meaning sovereign. The wife was the actual bondservant of her husband. As he was a lord, she vowed a lifelong obedience to him at the altar of his feet. The higher classes have been given an analogous advantage over their women through special contracts setting aside the law and on conditions of pin money. They were treated as the dolls of their husbands.¹³

1.4.4 Legal and Political Status

We know that if any body has legal rights, she will not be deprived of any other rights and progress. Before 19th century in the European society, women did not enjoy any legal right and that has ultimately become a barrier to women's rights. There were three legal traditions: Roman law, English Common law and Community law.¹⁴ Actually, Roman law was personal law. In that case, it specially dealt with personal relationship between individuals. English Common law dealt with the public matters among citizens traditionally only of interest to the Crown, other cases being left to equity. And the third type of law is Community law, which dealt by the practices of community. All the European legal codes were created on a basis of these three laws, which were actually unfavorable to women. For instance, Article 213 of Roman law denied the identity of wives apart from

their husbands. Article 217 declared that the wives could not dispose of their personal income without their husband's consent. Article 214 compelled her to live in his choice of domicile. Actually, Roman law itself came under the influence of the ideology of Christianity. In early Christian times, women were treated with relative honor. Women took it passionately, and showed obedience as their natural duty.

It was not to her sex, but for her position within the family that she owed her legal incompetence. She had no absolute right of independence that a woman should have concerning her property and assets; those have been denied in Europe from the ancient time up to the second half of the nineteenth century.. From this, we can say that women have been denied the right to possess their property just like a minor, a lunatic or someone forbidden by law. By means of settlement, the rich usually contrive to free part of the inherited property of the wife from the absolute control of the husband but if he takes it from her by personal violence as soon as she receives it, he can neither be punished, nor be compelled to restitution. This is the amount of protection which under the laws of this country the most powerful nobleman can give to his own daughter as respects her husband.¹⁵

In England, where the personality of a woman was wholly obscured under the personality of her husband, two laws, one in 1870 and the other in 1882, were passed under the name of "The Married Woman's Property Act," and thus, interdiction was raised from woman. In Italy in 1919, a law removed women from

the category of interdicted persons. In the Civil Law of Germany after 1900, and in the Civil Law of Sweden after 1907, a woman had the same legal capacity as her husband. Women had no political power. Women could only inherit in the absence of male heirs, but in that case, her husband was guardian and exercised control over the property and its income; she was a part of the property, and by no means emancipated. Polygamy was practiced; a woman was married without her consent, and put away at her husband's caprice; and she was treated as a servant. The laws gave her strong protection from injury and insult, but only as man's property and mother of his children. As the state became powerful, the same changes occurred as had occurred in Rome; guardianship became a public charge protecting women, but also continuing her enslavement.

Divorce was forbidden and marriage was required to be performed in public. Christian law permits divorce only in the case of adultery. Thus, when a husband and wife got tired of married life, or when they found that it was impossible to stay together, then they could cut the tie that God had joined. Now, the law preferred to compel dissatisfied husband and wife to choose between a miserable life and adultery to secure an end of their unbearable life in company with each other. Divorce court proceedings were generally expensive, and so, it was luxury beyond the means of the poor who replaced it by almost only living an adulterous life. Even the rich people avoided going to the court because of their

social prestige and position. By mutual consent they gave each other a freedom to do whatever they wished.¹⁶

Women were not considered as capable persons for political affairs. They were considered more conservative, less active and less knowledgeable.¹⁷ That is why they were excluded from political matters. They had no right to franchise. And, they were barred from joining any political organization.

1.5 Status of Women in Christianity

Christianity considers each and every woman as an Eve who has been described as the *devil's gateway*. The indirect charge sheet from Christianity against women contained the following charges:

1. The woman was the first to disobey God.
2. That woman prompted Adam to follow her in disobedience.
3. That woman was the cause of the fall of Adam.
4. That woman's guilt has been transmitted to the whole of mankind and every child is born in sin.
5. That woman, even if she is a Christian, is responsible for seeing her own un-baptized infant going to eternal fire.
6. That God had to send Jesus to be sacrificed because of the first crime of woman; so, she is responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus.¹⁸

Women were not allowed to speak in the church, and also not to teach, to baptize, or to offer. As a result, they could not claim to be a priest. Women were particularly subject to evil influences, and those witches, with their mental and moral infirmities, were pre-eminent among their sex. Even Joan of Arc, a noble fame, fell a victim of the superstition of witchcraft, and was killed by an English in France. Joan was accused of three crimes:

1. Joan was convicted of witchcraft, because she listened to evil voices.
2. She refused to submit to the authority of the Church, saying her noises had a higher authority.
3. Her third crime was that she was woman but dressed as a man.

The issue for Joan was that she refused to wear women's clothes while she continued to be held in a military prison with male guards constantly in her cell. Joan was burned at the stake on May 30, 1431. She was accused because of absence of her feminine character. We are proud to say that Joan received recognition after 500 years, in 1920. She was canonized as a saint in the Church that had executed her.¹⁹ Many learned of their age like Coke and Bacon helped in passing a law that subjected witches to death. Shakespeare also shared with their belief. Even during the reign of Elizabeth and James I, poor women were killed as witches. It may be mentioned here that never in the history of Islam have women suffered like this, even under any superstitious belief like witchcraft.²⁰

Before the nineteenth century, women under Christianity in Europe lived in really a dark age. Buddhism treats women badly, Judaism worse but Christianity worst. Christianity considers her a criminal of the worst type, and so much unholy that she cannot touch the altar or raise her voice in the Church. The learned men, the Church, legislatures and the social laws have always degraded women in all areas of life.

1.6 The Turning Point

It was in the nineteenth century that feminism was favored in general by the reform movement because it sought justice in equality. In the nineteenth century, women regained an economic importance, which they had lost in the prehistoric period. It was the machine that made possible withdrawal of women from only domestic activities. They started to go out for work in those factories. Industrial revolution played the most significant role as the turning point in women's liberation. As a swift growth of industry demanded a larger working force that the male alone could not furnish, the collaboration of women become necessary. That was that grand revolution of the nineteenth century which transformed the lot of women and opened for her a new era. This was the significant transition from pre-modern economy to modern one. This change first began in Britain, and later it spread all over Europe. The first change in the status of women was brought about in the economic sphere in a particular way.

With the rise of capitalism there was a demand for cheap labor. Since women and children were generally uneducated and unskilled, they could be employed at very low wages. Again, since their own wages were also very low, the husband did not prevent their wives from going to the factories for such employment. But this stage did not last long. Very soon women found themselves back in their original place, i.e. their domestic work. Finally, it seemed that a powerful event like Industrial Revolution could not really bring any change to women's status. In the beginning of the nineteenth century, woman was more shamefully exploited than the male workers. Labor at home constituted what the English called the sweating system. In spite of constant toil, the working women did not earn enough for their needs. There were large opportunities for employment in the cotton, wool and silk industries. Women were used especially in spinning, weaving and laundering. The employers generally preferred them to men because women did better work for less pay. Women were considered as the cheaper source of labor than men. Spinning and weaving were done under unhygienic conditions.

In 1931, the silk workers labored in summer from three o'clock in the morning until dark and in winter from five to eleven at night, seventeen hours a day, at workshops that were often unwholesome and where the sunlight never penetrated.

Gradually, the attitude towards female labor was regulated. The first charter for female labor was dated November 2, 1892 ; it forbade night work and limited the factory day, but it left the door open for all kinds of evasion. In 1907, the working women were granted free handling of her income, in 1909 leave with pay was guaranteed to women for child birth; in 1913, the periods of rest before and after child birth were regulated and dangerous form of labor were forbidden.

Women struggled for equality at the political level. That is why all the improvements related to their work came from the political arena. Their demand was for right to work, right to enter the parliament, and they insisted on improvement in the legal system. We know that only economic change cannot bring any change in women's status. Political and cultural changes are also necessary for positive change in society. As Engels had foreseen, women's social and political status was necessarily to be transformed.

1.6.1 Mary Wollstonecraft's Contribution

Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1799) was born in a poor family at Aping forest outside London. In her childhood, she saw her mother being abused by a tyrannical husband who drank too much and squandered what little money the family had. Later, she helped her sister to escape from a similarly cruel husband. She herself attempted committing suicide when a man with whom she had a love

affair left-her immediately following the birth of their child. From her childhood, Mary faced many troubles such as subjugation, illiteracy, etc. She learnt to read and write on her own because she desired to be independent.

In 1792, she wrote an influential book – *A Vindication Of the Rights Of Women*. In this book she says: “Make women rational creatures and free citizens and they will quickly become good wives and mothers – that is, if men do not neglect the duties of husbands and fathers.”²¹

Wollstonecraft concentrated on describing the state of ignorance and servility to which women were condemned by social custom and training. She believed that from very early childhood women were taught to be submissive and obedient which would help them to remain in a subjugated position. Only mistaken education conditioned them to be parasites rather than complete human beings with their own identity. That is why she states: “Men and women must be educated in a great degree, by the opinions and manners of the society they live in. It may then fairly be inferred that till society be differently constituted, much cannot be exploited from education.”²² The demand for free individual development in a society open to talent was a demand of the French Revolution. Mary Wollstonecraft extends this idea to women, widening out criticism of hereditary rights, duties and exclusions, to include those, which derive from sexual difference. According to Mary Wollstonecraft, women, as members of the human species, have the rights due to all human beings.

A Vindication of the Rights of Women was published three years after the French Revolution, a period within which it had become clear that the new Republic has rested on brotherhood of men. At times, women were excluded as citizens as persons with voting and property rights made clear that women were the subjects of men and not of the republic. Mary Wollstonecraft has shown how women's rights were not incorporated in the revolution. *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* is mainly about women's proper education and the need for reform in this area. She suggested, that women had to be suitably trained in order to make them independent. Wollstonecraft graphically holds up the sexual nature of women's enslavement. Physically at service for another or others, both women and slaves are deprived from the most basic rights.²³ Her influence was very widespread in the field of women's progress. She thought about the equality of sexes, which also influenced the thinkers of later centuries.

1.6.2 John Stuart Mill's Contribution

John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) was a philosopher, political economist and exponent of utilitarianism. He wrote the famous book, *The Subjection of Women* in 1869. It was written about the contemporary legal system under which women were subordinate beings without any rights. Mill showed interest in women's suffrage. He was taken into custody by London police at the age of seventeen for distributing birth control information. In 1865, when he was elected to the

parliament, Mill became the political voice of the recently organized British Women's Suffrage movement. It was 1867 when John Stuart Mill made the first speech before the parliament seeking the right to vote for women, though ultimately it materialized only in 1918. Mill believed that without equality between men and women, human progress is not possible. In the opinion of Mill:

Women in general would be brought up equally capable of understanding business, public affairs and the higher matters of speculation with men in the same class of society, and the select few of the one as well as of the other sex, who were qualified not only to comprehend what is done or thought by other, but to think or do something considerable themselves would meet with the same facilities for improving and training their capacity in the one sex as in the other.²⁴

Mill's views on equality of women are very important both historically and theoretically. He demanded equal rights and opportunities for women, presenting the case that not only legal subordination in itself, like any other forms of slavery, but also oppression on women in general is a hindrance to the advancement and happiness of the human race as a whole.

According to Mill, women's nature as regarded by society was artificially created by men. He believed that once all legal disabilities were removed, individual women and men would be able to follow roles that best suited them. Mill's argument remains within the parameters of liberalism and utilitarianism. He

has simply applied the liberal principles of rationality, autonomy, and utilitarianism to the position of women. Mill took up the difficult question of the relationship between women's nature and her environmentally determined character. He only talked about the women of educated classes. Mill could not speak about the most profound feelings of the opposite sex. That is why it could not make any impact on the women's movements in the third world countries.

1.7 Status of Women: Indian Context

The status of women in ancient India still remains somewhat obscure and even controversial. Life in ancient India had none of the complexities of the modern political world. The common man had nothing to do with the political structure or administration. In those days, women could hardly enjoy any special status. In monarchical times, the king strove to keep his subject happy. In that case, women were not seriously discriminated. And the people in general enjoyed considerable measure of freedom. In those days, all the people including women had full rights of free movements, free associations and free expressions. In fact, peace and tranquility, law and order, progress and contentment and all that constitutes good government were essentially the features of national life of India of the memorable past.²⁵ Women were treated as goddess or regarded as a sacred being at cultural and ideological levels. In *Epics* and the *Puranas* women were represented at very powerful and significant contributors to the welfare of society

and family. Women's education took place at home under the supervisions of the women of the family and was directed towards the household tasks they would perform as wives and mothers. Eventually, Hindu women were encouraged to think of their husbands as their god. Apotheosis also extended to women who were viewed as goddess in certain rituals and as the goddess *Laksmi*, the bringer of prosperity in the home. *Mahabharata* offers complex and varied images of women but *Ramayana* emphasized on women as faithful wife.²⁶

1.7.1 Vedic Period

The *Vedic* period was much better than the Post-*Vedic* period regarding women's position. That period was patriarchal, and sons were more welcome and acceptable than daughters. Yet, women led a dignified life and enjoyed highly respectable position in family and society. They were the masters of the family with full decision-making power. The *Vedic* Age, however, presents a glimpse of women in political and administrative spheres, and, later in the Epic Age, we find them bearing the brunt of protecting sovereignty along with men. Unfortunately, our sources are entirely non-historical and, therefore, we cannot ascertain the actual position in the *Vedic* period. At best, the contemporary literature is a positive indication that women had some role to play in the political life of the state. The earliest religious texts of the Hindus are the four Vedas, the best known of which is *Rig-Veda*.

1.7.2 Marital Status

The high ethical standards attained by the Aryan Society have been recorded in the *Rig Veda*.²⁷ Marriage was regarded as a social and religious duty and therefore as a necessity during the *Vedic* age. Marriage was considered as one of the important criteria to enter into the heaven. So, it is a holy duty for one to get married. A willing bride at a customarily arranged marriage could enjoy the privilege of *svaymvara*, choosing from among many suitors. She was on perfect equality with her husband, subject to absolutely none in the house, not even to her parents. She had complete power over the household, and she was the prime influence on the children. During this period, *Sati* system was absent, and remarriage of widow was also permissible. Even when a husband died without any issue, his widow was allowed to raise issue by *Niyoga* (brother-in-law).²⁸ The wife of *Madagala* (Indrasena) helped her husband in hunting out the robbers. She helped him in the chase driving the cart. Not only this, when her husband was put in a tight corner, she took up her husband's bow and arrows giving a fierce battle to the robbers, defeating them and rescuing the state property. This shows women were trained in use of weapon and did at times prove their mettle battling along with their husbands.²⁹

1.7.3 Educational Status

Educational status of the women were equal to that of men. The education of women was encouraged in the *Vedic* age, because the deity for learning was and still is the goddess *Saraswati*. Married girls were also allowed to study. Proper education was a pre-requisite of marriage. That is why parents of an unmarried girl looked after the education of their daughter.³⁰ Women had to go for study, whether it was inside or outside home. Co-education was well known in those days. Women could go anywhere for education. There was no bar to be educated. They learnt theology, philosophy and medicine. As a matter of fact, they had complete freedom of choice in educational matters. That was actually a literal and progressive period. If that period continued, women had not to fight for equality with men.

1.7.4 Religious Status

In the *Vedic* age, all sorts of religious rights and privileges are open to women. Men were compelled to associate their wives in all spiritual matters. In that case an unmarried person was unfit to perform any religious sacrifices. During those days, the initiation ceremony namely *Upanayana* was not confined only to boys, girls also underwent that ceremony.³¹

Reference from *Rig Veda* makes it clear that the female participants in religious ceremonies were not mute, rather they took active part in the deliberations.³² R.S. Sharma, however, relates the characteristic that differentiated *Vidatha* from *Sabha* and *Samiti* and the frequent association of woman with it. A desire is expressed even in the marriage ceremony that the bride may not figure only as a housewife but also may uphold the cause of her family in the *Vidatha* of which she was a powerful member. Again, in *Rig Veda* and in *Atharva Veda*, both men and women were expected to speak to *Vidatha* in their advanced age.³³ From the above references, it clearly follows that women enjoyed equal religious voice with men in the *Vedic* period.

1.7.5 Political Status

In the *Vedic* period, it was tradition to confine succession to the throne to the males, but there was no bar against holding the throne by women. For instance, in the case of *Rama*, when he was banished, his wife *Sita* was offered to hold the crown.³⁴ But, she chose to accompany her husband. In the early Indian society, women played an effective role in the political structure of the country. Women were in joint collaboration with their husbands. They had no property of their own, they were joint owners of their husband's property. They did not have self-identity, yet they enjoyed all kinds of facilities. Male-oriented traditional philosophy was also there in that period. However, it can be generalized that the *Vedic* period was

a golden period for the women, as compared to the later *Smriti* and medieval period during which we observe all kinds of discrimination being there in a bigger volume. In the *Rig-Veda*, it is mentioned that at the time of crisis, women entered into politics and even in the battlefields. Eventually, women were relegated to the background in matters of war, which became only a male prerogative. The ancient Indian monarchs being human beings were subject to all caprice and vices, the epic woman was instrumental influencing the king and changing the course of history.³⁵

1.8 Post-Vedic Period

In the *Post-Vedic* period, i.e. '*Smriti*' age, women were mostly confined to the household activities. The women were totally powerless in that period. They started to lose their rights, which they have gained, in the *vedic* period. It was an age of complete-male-domination, where all sorts of rights of women were violated. Women were called *abala* (devoid of strength). If women failed to perform their duties towards their husbands, they were punished. That age was full of all kinds of cruelties which can be compared to those in ancient Europe. There was no social, legal and ethical protection which women could get. Moreover, child marriage and *satidaha* were forms of extreme violence against women.

1.8.1 The age of Manu

Most of the great religious traditions formulate law books which are generally ideal representations of how things should be. Hinduism has its *Manu Smriti* or law of *Manu*, which was and is, consulted by the orthodox Hindus, when they are in doubt as to correct any procedure. The goal of this text is to codify Hindu religious law in all aspects of daily life. It is a collection of the works of different authors at different times. According to *Manu*, women should be protected and honored. Women must be honored and adorned by their fathers, brothers, husbands and brothers-in-laws. *Manu* considers that the male contribution is more important than women's in case of childbirth. Woman has been considered as soil and man as seed. *Manu* believes that women must not be independent. Husband's sacred duty is to give happiness to his wife throughout her life. Husband must be constantly worshipped as a god by a faithful wife, because he is the sovereign. By violating her duty towards her husband, a wife is disgraced in this world and also in the life after death. According to the laws of *Manu*, those who disobey their husbands will enter the womb of a jackal and those who obey their husbands will reside in the heaven. *Manu* means to say that the husband is the sole authority over a woman's fate in this world and in the world here after. A woman must never even mention the name of another man after her husband has died.

By a girl, by a young woman, or even by an aged one nothing must be done independently in her own house. According to the *Manu Samhita* and contemporary Hindu law, the father has the right to give away a daughter in marriage as charity or *daan* or the giving away of the daughter. *Manu's* fundamental principle was to keep women dependent on the male relations. According to *Manu Samhita*, the father protects a woman during childhood, the husband during youth, the son during the old age.³⁶ Women were essential for private work but totally inessential for public duty. Because of the lack of knowledge of the *shastras*, they were not able to understand what was good or bad. To *Manu*, there was no difference between a housewife and a goddess. The influence of *Manu* upon the later ages up to the modern times has been very powerful.³⁷ *Manu's* code regulated almost all the aspects of a Hindu woman's life from childhood to old age. *Budhyana* stated that a woman was not entitled to inheritance, for she lacked strength.³⁸

Education was denied to them, because they were not entitled to go out. It was thought that women were not equal in strength and stamina with men, no thought was given to their education. Women were prohibited from reciting the hymns of prayers. They were not allowed to listen to any *Vedic* prayer.³⁹ Although some primary education was provided to girls, their guardians did not make any special effort to send them out for study. The society preferred marriage to education. Hindu law gave unequal and indifferent treatment to women as regards

marriage, marital status, inheritance, divorce and widowhood.⁴⁰ There was no other option for women than marriage. The marriageable age was 9 to 10 or less, but not more. It was called *gouridana* (marriage of a child before eight years of age). Sometimes these child brides were married off to bridegrooms 40 to 50 years old. The parents did it because of social pressure.

As the girls could not understand about family activities, they were beaten up by the husbands and by other members of the family. Social, economic and political conditions of the early middle ages forced women to become *sati*. *Sati* means - women burning themselves on the funeral pyre of their dead husbands. Some women were forced to accept *sati*, others were brain washed to do it willingly through glorification of *sati*. The laws of Manu define woman as a vile being who should be held in slavery. In matters of property rights, there was a concept of *stridhana*.⁴¹ It included whatever was given to the women by her parents and kith and kin at the time of her marriage. *Stridhana* was her own property. Nobody could interfere with it. But women did not have any right over their husband's property except the right of maintenance and residence. The concept of *Stridhana* or the separate property of women has become complicated and even bewildering owing to the absence of a precise definition in ancient texts.

Here it seems that Hindu Law had never subscribed to the view that women are to be denied property rights. However, only particular descriptions of property belonging to a woman constituted her *Stridhana*. Rules of succession to *Stridhana*

property which were highly complicated have been radically changed by the present Act.⁴² Just as the daughter is given equal right to the father's property along with the son, so also the son who was hitherto excluded by the daughter, is given equal rights of succession to the mother's *Stridhana* property. Similarly, the husband is also made simultaneous heir. The Hindu religious leaders opposed extending inheritance rights to Hindu women, because inheritance involved the obligation of performing religious rituals for ancestors, which women could not do. Sri Shankar Acharya Swamigal of Kamakoti Pithan claimed that female rights to inheritance and to separate maintenance would lead to the destruction of the Hindu family.⁴³

The *Manu Smriti* was a collection of rules of conduct and explanatory principles based on the Vedas. The *Smriti* comprised texts like *Manu Smriti* (written between 300 B.C. and 300 A.D.). Hindu understanding of law was quite different from the modern Western concept of law. The *Smriti* were restrictive in the areas of rights as educated Indian women of the twentieth century would demand. In the *Smriti*, early marriage was prescribed, marriage was indissoluble, divorce and remarriage of widows prohibited, women had limited property rights, and polygamy was allowed. Most Hindu religious texts treated women as dependents, requiring protection, and considering them to be incapable of exercising independent authority. In the patriarchal Hindu joint family, there was a sense of common rights over ancestral property and a common household in which

male relatives and their wives lived. Since women were viewed as dependent upon the males, Hindu Law gave them rights to maintenance, but not to inheritance. Succession to property under Hindu Law was extremely complex.⁴⁴

Women did not have any power at all in the administration of the state. According to *Manu*, women disclosed secrets of the state. The kings were warned not to hold any secret council in their presence. It was perhaps due to this general notion about the character of women, that they did not take part in public administration. For the head of the state, the word 'King' has been used - but never 'Queen'. This shows that a woman was never dreamt of as the head of the state. For this reason, there was a restriction on women to the succession of thrones. During the *Mahabharata* period, the greatest political right of the time, namely succession to the throne was denied to women. Even a *Stri-rajya* (woman kingdom) was having a male king.⁴⁵ Ordinary women had no place in the political life and administration of the country. In ordinary course, women were not to wear the crown. However, if circumstances required, they were installed. The royal owner exercised maximum influence upon their husbands and they advised their sons and husbands in the event of political matters.

It is clear from the above discussion that the status of women was not superior to that of *shudras*. The *shudras* were considered as the lowest in the division of castes. They were not allowed to perform any religious activities, because they were considered sinful from their birth. They had no entrance to

educational institutions. Like *shudras*, women had also no separate entity. In every stage of their life, men protected women, and they were honored being objects of the male community.

The statement of *Manu* seems to be contradictory. On the one hand he states women should be honored but on the other hand he sanctioned no rights to them and make them as parasite creature. Though *Manu* texts impose many restrictions, *Dharmashastra*, on the other hand, glorifies women. It was the duty of her husband to show respect to her and protect her safety and dignity within household. Though socially and politically women's position was inferior, they enjoyed some privileges on the cultural and religious level. We will now discuss women's status in Buddhism and Jainism.

1.9 Buddhism

The position of women in Buddhism was not better than that of Hinduism in the earlier period. There were marginal improvements in their religious status, primarily due to the basic principles, which Gautama Buddha laid down in his teachings. Buddha considered men and women as equal for reaping the fruits of their past karma. He believed that a woman had to depend upon her own acts for her future good or evil or salvation. In that case, none, not even her parents, teachers or spiritual preceptors could help her. Therefore, the distinction made

between a son and daughter in the pre-Buddhist period was annulled, and this raised the status of a daughter. Buddha opposed the *Brahmanic* rituals, wherein women were denied the primary role and a woman or a widow provided no place.

Buddha made no distinction between a man and a woman for attainment of spiritual ends. He delivered messages for men and women alike, and the moral code designed by him was applicable to both. The lower position of women, in the spiritual world and culture, was elevated as evidenced by the stories of several nuns achieving the highest goal '*Nirvana*'. From an ethical point of view, there is hardly any religion, which stands on such a high idealistic plane as Buddhism does, yet, it does not have much to say in favor of women. During the Buddhist period, a woman was encouraged to become a nun instead of entering into matrimonial bond.⁴⁶ All kinds of women--married, unmarried, widows and others--were permitted to enter nunnery or monastery. Instead of considering women a necessary adjunct of society, her company was considered to be an obstacle in the development of high powers in men.

1.9.1 Marital Status

While in the Hindu society, marriage was absolutely essential, Buddhism encouraged monasticism, and celibacy was extolled as the greatest of all virtues. During this time, both arranged and love marriages were prevalent. A widow was also permitted to marry, though it was a very rare case. Buddha did not believe in

Satidaha. The marital status of women was much better under Buddhism. Majority of the Buddhists did not follow their teacher's ideology, at least in respect of matrimonial consideration. Majority of them enjoy a family life in spite of the teachings of Buddha.

1.9.2 Economic Status

In Buddhism, the economic status of women was much better than that in Hinduism. In economic spheres, women enjoyed some sorts of autonomy. Agricultural production and cloth manufacturing were the profession of women in rural areas. Another profession was dancing and music. Those who were engaged in these professions were economically solvent, though they had no social status and prestige. Unfortunately, prostitution was also widespread during this time.

1.9.3 Property Rights

The Buddhist social system accepted the complete inheritance rights of women. They shared the property of their husbands. Women were able to make any kind of gift independently. Even widows were allowed to inherit property of their husbands, and daughters also had a share in their parent's property.

1.9.4 Political Rights

In the Buddhist literature, it appears that religion was mingled with political rights. This is the reason that a few queens like Mahaprajapati, Gautam Buddha and Kundalakasa are found to embrace the Buddhist order.⁴⁷ With regard to the political status of women, the views of Buddha remained negative. He disliked the idea of women participating in politics. He never thought women fit to rule a nation. According to him, women were completely misfit for administrative duties. He explained that women were easy victims of senses, passion, anger, greed, etc. Further, he denounced the *strirajyas* and the male subject that admitted women away.⁴⁸ It can be briefly concluded on the basis of the Buddhist literature that except in religious matter, women during the Buddhist period could make no real advancement. The real reason for this might be that Gautama Buddha was not interested in temporal power.

1.10 Jainism

Jainism was never as popular as Buddhism. Jainism believes that all irrespective of caste and gender were equal. This notion of equality lies in the conception of non-violence or *Ahimsa*. Jainism was divided into two sects-- *Digambara* and *Shwetambara*.⁴⁹ According to the *Digambaras*, women were not capable of attaining salvation. And, on the other hand, *Shwetambara* believes in

women's access to *Nirvana*, which means the liberation of soul from the cycle of birth and death.

Though Jainism showed some progressive attitudes towards women's status, it could not fully overcome the traditional dogmas of women's inferior position. They preferred women's position within the limited area of household activities. Married women in Jainism had their right to their *stridhana*. They helped their male members in family business, though sometimes they managed it independently. Widows held the best position in Jainism. She could inherit the property of her deceased husband. She had sovereign power to handle this property. She could spend it or sell it. It should be mentioned that widows in Jaina community were much happier. We come to a conclusion by saying that though under Jainism, women enjoyed some sorts of rights, they were treated like subordinate beings. They were not independent but honored.

1.11 Medieval Period

During the medieval period, women did not enjoy any privilege, and did not command much respect. In the medieval period, women's education was not widely encouraged. Some girls from middle class family went to school but it was restricted for the girls from poor family due to seclusion or *purdah*. Women were deprived of education due to the practice of early marriage. Moreover, the subject

matters of studies were mainly domestic sciences such as needlework, embroidery, cooking, etc.

During this period, Islam began to be preached in Arabia with the revelations received by the Prophet Muhammad (570 C.E.-632 C.E). Eventually, these revelations were written down and organized as the sacred book of the Muslims, the Qur'ān. It is known from Muhammad's biography that some women had position and prestige in the early days of Islam. Gradually, however, the religious practices of men and women became distinct. The *Qur'an* is arranged into 114 suras or chapters. The Sura on women opens by making reference to the creation of women from the soul of man (see also Sura 7.187). The secondary status of women is elaborated upon in this Sura which sets forth how women are to be treated by men. The Qur'ān is called the complete code of life. The subsequent development and evolution of moral and legal codes are mainly based on the interpretations of the verses in the Qur'ān and the sayings of the Prophet Mohammed (peace be upon him) narrated in the Hadith.

1.12 Status of Women in Islam

The Holy Qur'ān is comparatively liberal in its treatment of women. Islam professes that from a material as well as a spiritual point of view, the position of women are the same as that of men. It is mentioned in the Holy Qur'an:

And Allah gave them
A reward in this world
And the excellent reward
Of the Hereafter, for Allah
Loveth those who do good.⁵⁰

The Holy Qur'an says:
On the other hand, for those
Who fear their Lord,
Are Gardens, with rivers
Flowing beneath; therein
Are they to dwell (for ever), --
An entertainment from Allah;
And that which is from Allah
Is the best (bliss)
For the righteous.⁵¹

During this period, women had certain religious freedom. They observed fasting and offered prayers. Some women, who had learnt to read, devoted their time to reading religious books. That is why Fatima and Zulekha were able to devote themselves to religious activities. It is said that the both male and female will enter into paradise, and its blessing are equally for both (cf. Q, 40: 4; Q. 4:

124) both shall enjoy higher life (Q. 16: 97); even from a material point of view, women are recognised as equal to men, and she can earn money, own and inherit property and follow any profession as men can do (Q. 4: 32; Q. 4: 4, Q. 4 : 7). The interpretation of the above Quranic verses does at least theoretically give the impression of absolute equality of man and woman in Islam. But, there are other verses in the same holy scripture which clearly state the inferiority of woman to man – in spite of all equality or rights, man is given superiority over woman. Few such verses may be quoted: And men are a degree above them (women)... And they (women) have rights similar to these against them in just [this 'just' is in what discrimination is implied] manner (Q. 2: 228)

And, men are the protectors and maintainers of women with what Allah has made some of them [man, of course] excels the others,..... (Q. 4: 34)

And covet not things in which Allah hath made some of you excel others. Unto men a fortune from that which they have earned, and unto women a fortune from that which have earned..... (Q. 4: 32).

If we want to find out the status of women, we shall have to examine the following aspects prescribed in the Qur'ān and the Hadith as a moral code of life.

- a) The Purpose of women
- b) Education of women
- c) Seclusion of women

- d) Functionally defined role for women, and
- e) Legal status of women.

1.12.1 The purpose of Women

The purpose of creation of women is twofold as explicitly stated in the Qur'ān in the following verses: He (Allah) it is who created you from a single soul and of the same did He make his mate (women) that he might find comfort in her (Q. 7 : 189). And of His signs in this that he created mates for you from yourselves that you find quiet of mind in them (Q. 30: 21). From the above two verses, it is clear that the purpose of women from the creation point of view is to comfort man. Women are not subjects, they are only objects. All these imply that woman's life is not worthy of itself. They have not intrinsic value, the only value they owned is the extrinsic value. The other purpose of creating women is still more interesting. This is for the procreation of mankind. Here also man has got priority. "Your women are a tilth (to cultivate) for you, so go to your tilth as ye will....." (Q. 2 : 223). Here we find a similarity of opinion with Judaism. The Jews consider women to be soil and men to be seed.

The Holy Qur'ān never neglected the womanliness of woman and the manliness of man. The Qur'ān looked at women as she is in nature. The Qur'ān states: Woman and man are two stars in two different orbits. It is not for the Sun to

overtake the Moon, nor does the night outstrip the day. They float each in a heaven. (Qur'ān, 36 : 40) It implies that if they have risen up against the natural order, it will be harmful for both. In Islam, women's role is completely stereotyped. They have no right to change their pre-determined path.

1.12.2 Education of Women

On the whole, education among women was not widespread during the medieval period. Some girls from the middle class families used to go to school and studied, but poor families were restricted. Due to *purdha* system and the convention of early marriages, women were deprived of education. Moreover, the subject matter of studies were mainly domestic science such as needle-work, embroidery, cooking, etc. About education of women, this saying of the Prophet (SM) deserves mention: "If a man has a slave girl, and giving her good education and proper training and then sets her free and marries her, then such a man will have a double reward" (cf. Bukhari, Kitabul 11 em). In the Holy Qur'ān, there is another viewpoint regarding education of women. "They are losers who besotledly have stain their children by keeping them ignorant "(Q. 6: 140). The above two quotations need some analysis. The curriculum of education and training are not mentioned anywhere. The cardinal virtues of women are considered to be obedience and also modesty.⁵²

It is not difficult to understand that the aim of education was to teach how to be obedient to one's master, i.e., husband of whom she was a slave. Her education should be a special education to teach how to be submissive. An educated man needs an educated companion (wife) for better spiritual comfort. This comfort can be both physical and mental or spiritual. "Islamic prescriptions with regard to the rights of women to education, property, approval of marital partner and the like were never institutionalized nor generally granted."⁵³ The whole purpose of educating women is based on the Qur'ānic injunction that women are comfort to men.' There is a saying of the Prophet: "In the case of boy two goats, and in the case of a girl one goat (should be sacrificed). [Recommendation for a ceremony similar to Christianity]."⁵⁴

From the above saying, it is again clear that in religious consideration, women are inferior to men.

1.12.3 Seclusion of Women

In the Holy Qur'ān, there is no prohibition for women against going outside the house in case of absolute necessity. But, even in such circumstances, a woman has to wear a veil so that her beauty is not displayed. The Qur'ān says: Oh Prophet, tell thy wives and thy daughters and the women of the believers to let down upon themselves their overgarments (veils)... (Q. 33-59). They can go out

veiled and they should lower their gaze and restrain their sexual passion and not display their beauty. *Purdah* represents the system of isolation of Muslim women from outsiders and imposes high standards of female modesty. In its narrowest sense, it involves the seclusion of women within their homes and the veiling of women when they move outside the home. In the broader sense, *purdah* involves the exclusion of women from the public 'male' sphere of economic, social and political life.⁵⁵ These prejudices against women are products of the feudal era wherein the Muslim ruling classes wanted to protect their womenfolk and kept them under strict seclusion. In the Hadith, the Prophet states: "Everyone of you is a ruler and every one shall be questioned about his subjects; the king is a ruler of his kingdom, and the man is a ruler over the people of his house, and the woman is a ruler over the house of her husband and his children, so every one shall be questioned about his subjects." (Bukhari, 67: 9).

From the ethical point of view, a question may arise as to why women are restricted from becoming the ruler of a nation, even if she is capable of being a ruler. It is also said that she is the ruler of her husband's house and her husband's children. But, in a society, where polygamy is allowed and practiced, how can a wife be the ruler of her husband's house, what will happen to the other wives with equal rights? The authority, which is given to the women, is simply a consolation and not more than that.

The origins of *purdah* in the Indian sub-continent are probably both Hindu and Muslim. Some authors argue that women in the sub-continent were much freer and enjoyed higher status until the Muslims brought with them the system of *purdah*, and blame Islam for what they see as the main cause of inequality of the sexes. For example, Elizabeth Cooper is of the opinion that it was the Muslims who brought the *purdah* system into India; before that time, the women of India went about freely.⁵⁶ But, now the Hindus are practically as secluded as the Muslim women. Others argue that the practice of *purdah* predates Islam. Thus, Patricia Jeffrey suggests that *purdah* cannot simply be regarded as an Islamic institution, although 'Islamic ideals' or notions of 'honor' and 'shame' are important in providing religious and moral justification for the seclusion of women. The seclusion of women or *purdah* is not only for the Muslims: "neither is it for the poor (no matter what their religion), nor for those who live in the more egalitarian systems based on agriculture. The seclusion of women is but integral part of a particular type of social system."⁵⁷ It seems that *purdah* was and is observed by both communities, Hindu and Muslim.

1.12.4 Functionally Defined Role for Women

In the Holy Qur'ān, it is categorically mentioned that man and woman differ in respect of their natural capacities. It means that the world of man is totally different from the woman. A woman cannot think like a man or act like a man, this

is because the world of both are different. Man and woman do not differ from each other only in their outlook towards matters of family life, the very way in which they are attached to each other is different. To be more clear, the nature of the attachment of man to woman is not the same as the attachment of woman to man. Despite the fact that attraction is mutual, still unlike inanimate bodies, the smaller body attracts the bigger body towards itself. Creation has made woman a symbol of sentiment, belovedness and attraction. The sentiments of men are to seek, while the sentiments of women are to be sought. Men are physically stronger, and therefore, better fitted for earning a living which involves hard work. Women are physically weak, and therefore, better situated for domestic work and the care of children. As duties of man and woman are different according to natural capacity, it is not difficult to understand that the Qur'ānic injunctions imply the biologically determined functional differences between men and women. It is not acceptable that women are devoid of intellect to earn their own livelihood.

In the contemporary world, physical strength is not the consideration of society. As a rational being, as a member of same species, women cannot think to be fit only for domestic work. Women's nature is certainly more than that, because there are many things common in nature of men and women, which also must be included in the full description of women's nature. Islam has defined the role of women considering her partial nature, which is illogical. On the whole, men and women have an equal capacity for work; may be, their nature is different.

1.12.5 Legal Status

Legally, women are considered as a half human being or a second-class citizen. The legal status of women in Islam is not respectable for them. Regarding the capability of being a witness, the Qur'ān states: "And call to witness, from among your men, two witnesses. And if two men be not (at hand) then a man and two women, of such (women) as yet approve as witness, so that if the one erreth (through forgetfulness) the other will remember..." (Q. 2: 282). Here women's capability has been seriously questioned. It is said that if one female witness errs then there is another female who will remember. But, why not the same in the case of men? All of us know that to err is human. It is an accepted proverb. Under Muslim Law, marriage is a contract and not a sacrament. Once the marriage comes into existence it takes the form of a sacred covenant and the man and the woman may: "mutually settle their own terms for the entire duration of the partnership and in respect of all its aspects and phases"⁵⁸ Various authors stress on the fact that upon marriage, a Muslim woman's individuality is not merged in that of her husband and that she retains her legally separate identity. At the same time, however, the duty of obedience owed to the husband by the wife and his 'higher authority is also dwelt upon.⁵⁹ Islam does not consider sex to be the original sin: it tries, however, to regulate sexual unions within the framework of a marital unit, which is essentially patriarchal in nature. Sexual relationship outside this is considered to be '*Zina*' or adultery. According to Islam, therefore, sexual relation

outside marriage has not only been declared harmful but also has been condemned.⁶⁰

In respect of marriage, there is also strong religious discrimination. If a Muslim woman in some of the Muslim states marries a non-Muslim alien, the husband would not acquire citizenship, rather she herself will lose her own citizenship. But, in the case of a Muslim man, the consequence is quite different. If he marries an alien, she would get the citizenship of the Muslim State of which her husband is a citizen.⁶¹ Here, international law is being violated. International law permits naturalization through marriage. Whereas men are getting the full rights of citizens of the country, women are getting half, only because of sex difference.

1.12.6 Women's Right to Divorce in Islam

Marriage is compulsory for every Muslim, and celibacy is categorically discouraged. Divorce is generally discouraged. It is allowed as a resort when it is the lesser of the two evils. Discrimination in marriage is there mainly in the areas enumerated below:

- a. Polygamy;
- b. Guardianships for marriages;
- c. Intermarriages with non-Muslims;
- d. Women's consent in marrying;

- e. Marriage with slave girls;
- f. Rights of divorce; and
- g. Adultery.

1.12.6(a) Polygamy

In Islam, polygamy for male person is allowed. But, for women only monogamy is prescribed. As a matter of fact, cases of full justice with a number of wives are very few. In Islamic jurisprudence, it is said, "If you fear that you shall not be able to behave justly among your wives, then marry only one". In fact, our people in the full knowledge and full intention that they will not behave with justice, marry several women, and do it in the name of Islam and under the cover of Islam. It is important to note that a man can have concurrently up to four regular wives, if he can afford the needed dowry. On the other hand, if a woman marries a second husband, she is liable for bigamy.⁶²

1.12.6(b) Guardianship for marriage

An adult male is not required any guardian for marrying. On the other hand, women irrespective of age, requires guardian for marrying. The guardian who has the power to contract the marriage is called the '*wali*'. The *wali* has the power, under Muslim law, to contract a minor daughter or son into marriage without his

or her consent. The power of imposing the status of marriage on a minor is called '*Jabr*', and the right of guardianship, '*wilayat*'. This is recognized by all the schools of Muslim law, although they disagree on certain aspects relating to the guardianship right.⁶³ According to Fyzee, the following persons are entitled in order of priority to act as wali or guardians in marriage:

1. father,
2. father's father,
3. the brother and other collateral according to the priorities in the laws of inheritance,
4. the mother and maternal relations, and finally,
5. the ruling authority of, that is the *Quazi* or the court.⁶⁴

The right of guardianship extends until the attainment of puberty by the minor concerned. Though it is true that male relatives in order of priority have the right to give in marriage, the mother, in the absence of prior guardians, does have the right of guardianship. Therefore a female can be a *wali*.⁶⁵

1.12.6(c) Women's consent in marriage

According to the Hadith, the consent of women in her marriage should be obtained. The Prophet (Sm) said, "The widow shall not be married until she is consulted and a virgin shall be not married until her consent is obtained."⁶⁶ They

said, "O Messenger of God, how shall her consent be obtained?" He said, "(It is sufficient) that she remains silent. It is just a social custom not even necessary. The two primary sources of Islamic Law, the Qur'ān and the Sunna are both clear as to the requirement of consent in marriage. Verse 2.232 of the Qur'ān is interpreted as saying : "Prevent them not from marrying their husbands when they agree among themselves in a lawful manner."⁶⁷

The Holy Qur'ān is said to lay down expressly that the husband and the wife both must agree to the marriage. The necessity of consent is stressed upon in the Hadith. If a man gives his daughter in marriage in spite of her disagreement, it is invalid.⁶⁸ Thus, the consent in a Muslim marriage must be given by the parties themselves, i.e. the bride and the groom, or an agent on their behalf; or in the case of a minor, by a competent guardian.

The consent of a virgin is taken to be implied by her silence.⁶⁹ Since she may be suffering from shyness, her smile may also signify assent; whereas weeping may be construed as disapproval. As regards widow, it is necessary that her compliance be particularly expressed by words since she "has not the same pretence to silence or shyness as a virgin and consequently the silent signs before intimated are not sufficient indications of her assent to the proposed alliance."⁷⁰

According to Syed Ameer Ali, free consent on the part of the woman forms the very essence of the contract of marriage and, therefore, when the consent has been obtained by coercion or fraud, the marriage would be invalid unless ratified

after the coercion has ceased, or the dress has been removed, or when the consenting party, being undeceived, has continued the assent.⁷¹

The correct view, from the above appears to be, that under Muslim law, lack of free consent invalidates the marriage, unless it is ratified by the woman. It is certainly the just and equitable view to allow the women today to say in her marriage. According to Tahir Mohammad, the marriage of unequals are ill-sorted 'marriage'.⁷²

1.12.6(d) Marriage with Slaves

The Qur'ān allowed marriage with slaves of any free man. There are a number of verses in the Qur'ān where it is said that men can have sexual rights to what their "right hand possess" i.e. slave girls and women as war prisoners.⁷³ There is, of course, a caution to the master that he has no right to sexual enjoyment with a married girl. This caution thus seems to be only a measure to prevent a slave woman from becoming bigamous. On the other hand, if a free Muslim woman marries a slave without the permission of his master, she cannot demand dowry from the slave. She can marry her own slave, if she can obtain the approval of her guardian.

1.12.6(e) Right to Divorce

In Islam, there have been some jurists who have given their verdict that divorce is unlawful for Muslims. Whether it is a requisite for the sanctity of marriage that there should be no recourse to divorce, it is true that Islam is not in favor of forcing the wife to stay with her husband. The Islamic principle is retention honorably or setting free kindly. Regarding right to divorce, there is also discrimination on the basis of sex. A man can divorce his wife without any explanation. It depends on his personal pleasure. He possesses unconditional rights regarding divorce. Women may have the right to divorce assigned to her: the husband's right of *talaq* may be delegated, if the husband wishes, or by way of pre-nuptial or post-nuptial agreement between the parties. This gives the wife the right to divorce by delegation or *tafweejal talaq* or *talaq-e tafwid*. The *Hedaya* defines the right of *tafweezal talaq* as: "Where the husband delegates or commits the pronouncement of divorce to his wife, desiring her to give the effective sentence."⁷⁴ Fyzee calls it the most potent weapon in the hands of a Muslim wife to obtain her freedom without the intervention of the court.⁷⁵ Though the right of delegated divorce is thus an important safeguard for the women, it depends entirely on the wishes of her husband and/or his family. Therefore, the right of *talaq* of husband and wife cannot be equal. Certain conditions may be specified as necessary before the woman can exercise the right of *talaq* delegated to her. The delegated power of *talaq* by the wife may therefore be challenged by the husband

on the ground that the conditions required have not been fulfilled. The right of *talaq* or divorce may be an important safeguard for women, although it can in no way be called equal to the right of the husband as regarding divorce.

After divorce, the questions of custody of children become important. Here also an absolute injustice can be found. The guardianship of children lies with the husband. Even if her husband is proved to be insane or is dead, the custody will be given to her husband's father or brother, etc. In the absence of any male in the father's lineage, the custody will be on male guardians on the mother's lineage. These attitudes prove the continuation of patriarchal domination. Another important point is that, after divorce, a woman has to wait for three months before she can remarry. Within this period, the woman has to live in the house of her divorced husband⁷⁶ On the other hand, a Muslim man can marry again just after pronouncing the divorce.

1.12.6(f) Adultery

Adultery is another aspect where discrimination is explicit. In the Qur'ān, there are many verses where punishment for adultery is stated to be equal for man and woman. Women is much more vulnerable to adultery in her peculiar situation. She is bound to share her husband sexually with other co-wives. It is mentioned in the Hadith that a woman is to remain chaste and not allowed to remarry for one full year even if her husband is missing.⁷⁷ A man has access to four wives

officially and other irregular ones, over and above his slave women to enjoy sexually. He hardly needs to be adulterous. Another important point is this: if a husband doubts about his wife's chastity, he can suspend all sexual relationship with her; on the other hand, if a husband is adulterous, she cannot deny the rights of her husband unless she can prove the accusation.

1.13 Inheritance and Women

The Old World gave absolutely no inheritance to women, or when it was given, the woman was treated as a minor which meant that she was not given independence and the status of a person having rights. Among the pre-Islamic Arabs, women themselves were considered to be property, and hence, women's right to property by inheritance was out of question. The principle of Islamic law of inheritance regarding women are summarized below:

1. The husband and the wife were made as heir to each other.
 2. Females and cognates (even if they are females) were male competent to inherit.
 4. As a general rule, a woman was given one half the share of a male.
- The specific Qur'ānic injunction regarding this unequal approved inheritance law deserves mentioning: "Allah thus directs you as regards your children's (Inheritance): to the male, a portion equal to

that of two females:" (Q 4: 11) There are also other verses in the Qur'ān with similar implications (Q 4: 11, 12).

Regarding female inheritance, it is clearly said in the Qur'ān that if the deceased leaves behind sons and no other relatives, the property will be divided among them equally. If there are sons and daughters, the sons will get twice the share of the daughters. But if there is no son, but only one daughter, she will get only one-half of the property. If there are two or more daughters and no sons, two thirds of the property will be divided among them equally.

In the case of husband and wife, same unequal treatment is prescribed. If the wife dies leaving behind children, the husband will get one-fourth of her property and the remaining three-fourths will be given to her children in the ratio of one male being equal to 2 females. If there are no surviving children, the husband will get one-half. But, in the case of the husband's property, if he dies leaving behind children, the wife gets only one-eighth or else one-fourth, when no child is alive. According to Islamic laws, a woman's inheriting one half of the share of a man is due to a special state of affairs. As a woman is entitled to a dower and maintenance and as she is incapable of taking an equal part in the defense of the community, her share is one half of her brother. The holy Qur'ān says:

And give the women
(On marriage) their dower

As an obligation; but if they,
Of their own good pleasure,
Remit any part of it to you,
Take it and enjoy it
With right good cheer (Q 4:4)

1.14 The British Period

During the British period, the position of women had deteriorated. British rule was not good for women politically and economically. But, the period gave emphasis on women's education, though religious leaders did not approve of this. But, they could not go against the British rule. It was during the British rule that the social reformers Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwarchandra Vidyasager, Mahatma Gandhi brought about revolutionary changes in India regarding women's status. Raja Ram Mohan Roy alone was committed to advancing the feminist cause without any compromise. He fought to abolish the blind superstitions for an end to the practice of burning widow or *sati*. He pleaded to the British to execute a ban on *sati*. He molded public opinion in favor of this bill by drawing people's attention to this barbaric custom. On 4th December 1829, the British brought the bill against *sati* system. *Sati* system was made a crime of culpable homicide - punishable with fine, imprisonment or both.⁷⁸ The abolishing of *sati* was also a recognition of the widow's right to re-marriage. If the term "feminist" can be

applied to persons of both the sexes, Ram Mohan Roy was the greatest feminist of his time. Ram Mohan pleaded for recognizing that

1. women are equal in all respects to men; and in some areas, for example love, trust, and sacrifice, they are even superior;
2. they should be given equal opportunity to acquire education and training;
3. women should participate in public affairs;
4. a woman, if she finds marriage unbearable, must break free and steer her own life the way she chooses; and
5. no social institution can be allowed to restrict the liberty of women.

1.14.1 Mahatma Gandhi's Role

It was Gandhi, the father of the nation of India, who brought a dynamic change among women, and it was at his time that they came out in large number to take part in the struggle for India's freedom. Gandhi gave equal responsibility to women during the Nationalist Movement for independence. He gave emphasis on equal participation of men and women for the welfare of India. He took into consideration the Indian women as a whole. In the opinion of Gandhi:

Woman is the companion of men, gifted with equal mental capacities. She has the right to participate in the minutest details of the activities of man and she has the same rights of freedom and

liberty as he. By sheer force of a vicious custom, even the most ignorant and worthless men have been enjoying a superiority over women which they do not deserve and ought not to have.⁷⁹

In 1936 election many women entered legislative assemblies, municipalities and local boards. The women members of the Constituent Assembly made significant contribution to its deliberations. He admired women's qualities of self-suffering and spirituality as can be seen by the following statement: "To me, the female sex is not the weaker sex. It is the nobler of the two; for, it is even today the embodiment of sacrifice, silent suffering, humility, faith and knowledge."⁸⁰ Gandhi's belief in contemporary sex roles however meant that he was not always so supportive of women's participation in public life. Gandhi stated, "Equality of the sexes does not mean equality of occupations. Nature has created the sexes as complement to others."⁸¹

Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar and Behramji Malahari formed associations of men, wrote pamphlets and lobbied for legislation to allow widow remarriage and to prohibit child marriage. While laws were passed on these subjects, few widows' remarriage took place, and child marriage continued to be widespread. Most high-caste Hindus appear to have exhibited a traditional consciousness concerning these laws. If the words of reform did not reach them, they followed their usual practices; and if it had reached them, they strongly opposed the reforms.

Compared to the dark medieval age and some other historical periods, the attempts to improve women's status definitely seem to be quite substantial. Yet, in practice, a lot remains to be done. Many women still do not have economic independence. Many families are still very conservative regarding women's liberty. At the close of this brief survey on the status of women, it is clear that both in the past and the present, women in almost all the societies, and all over the world, have failed to enjoy the same status, rights and powers as men have done.

Various significant legal reforms, such as the Abolition of Sati Act (1827), the Widow Remarriage Act (1856), Hindu Women's Rights to Property Act (1937) and so forth contributed much to the amelioration of the position of Hindu women. As regards Muslim women, only one piece of legislation by the British, the Dissolution of Muslim Marriages Act of 1939 that dealt with women's right to divorce, clearly benefited Muslim women.

According to Salma Khan, due to the fact that the emancipation of the Bengali Muslims started nearly one hundred years later than that of the Hindus, the economic participation and education of Muslim women remained much lower. The census of 1931 gives the percentage of literacy for men at 11.7 and for women 1.9 out of which Muslim women constituted 1.2 percent only, that is only about 12 Muslim women in a thousand were literate. During the struggle for independence from British colonial rule, Muslim women took part in the

movement, but their contributions were much less significant than those of Hindu women.

1.15 Positions of Women in Pakistan

In 1947, British rule of India came to an end, and the Indian sub-continent was divided into India and Pakistan. After 1947, enrollment of women in schools, colleges and universities increased. The education of women became an integral part of the social reforms; as regards legal reforms affecting the position of women, in 1961, the Muslim Family Laws Ordinance was promulgated, based on the report by the Family Laws Commission appointed in 1955. Among other things, the Ordinance made the registration of marriages compulsory, limited the husband's right to polygamy, modified his unilateral right to divorce and raised the age of marriage for both men and women. The women of East Pakistan, however, took a more active role than before in many of the political movements in the 1950s and the 1960s. Female students of the University of Dhaka and some colleges joined political organizations and participated in the language movement of 1952 when the West Pakistan-based central government tried to make Urdu the state language of the whole of Pakistan.

1.16 The Birth of Bangladesh

In December 1971, after a long and bloody war, Bangladesh came into existence. As mentioned earlier, women's oppression has existed in various forms in Bangladesh from ancient times. These historical traditions combine with modern forms of oppression, of patriarchy. In Bangladesh, the practices of fundamentalism have become a part of the way of life. Due to prejudice and illiteracy, most of the women in the village are becoming victims of fundamentalism. Actually, *purdah* or seclusion is imposed on women on the basis of religion. Though the observance of *purdah* varies from person to person, in the urban areas, the practice of *purdah* although important but take place in a symbolic form. Observance of *purdah* there is generally less strict than in the rural areas. In urban areas, there are schools and colleges, which are for girls only, free mixing among boys and girls, are frowned upon, and girls are expected to observe modesty and propriety. There are separate branches of banks, separate buses for women where women are catered to by female employees. Women who take extra-ordinary jobs which are considered to be exceptions. With wider contact, the growing necessity for both partners in a marriage to earn, and other contemporary changes in the everyday lives of the people, many urban women are becoming more aware of their need to become independent. And, society in general is beginning to accept or is being forced to accept the changes.

Generally, women in Bangladesh are brought up with the idea that they are inferior to men, and that they ought, above all, to guard their chastity and purity.

Therefore the opinions and feelings of the women who have to bear the burden of the system of *purdah* is not simplistic or apparent; one cannot easily assume that all women are eagerly waiting to be released from the inequalities of the practice of social system.

1.17 Conclusion

After analyzing the historical period and dark medieval age regarding women's status it seems to be quite substantial. There are also a lot remain to be done. Attitude toward women's equality is still in some respect conservative. Women are treated still as objects of pleasure or as robots intended to serve man. It is true that there are some kind words said about them. But, in law and in practice, women are treated as inferior or half human beings. They were like slaves who needed struggles to become free. On marriage, a woman passed from one family to another, which also is mostly dependent on the father or other male guardians. The position of women in the west also was similar. In fact, the domination of father over daughter, husband over wife and son over mother was exercised more under the early Roman Law. They had no right to property on marriage. The English married women's right to property was reformed which attempted to modify the rigors of law to some extent. Now, there is a constitution, there is a feeling, that some attention need be given to the problems of women

which are mostly sociological in character. But, an attempt is being made to give a religious color to those problems with ulterior purposes. God is not certainly pleased if women are made to starve, thrown out of domestic servant. Whatever may be the provisions of the constitution and the laws providing for equality between men and women, their real utility depends upon the manner in which they are applied and enforced. It is possible to make the best laws useless by a dishonest approach that we find going on all around.

The terms female and male are essentially symbols, and as such, are completely void of meaning until they are invested with meaning by society. Religion is significant for these interpretations of gender, because religion has the divine authority. Religion teaches people what it means to be female or male, when it expands gender symbols into narrative laws, custom and rituals, into the sacred texts and ritual acts of the tradition. Patriarchy is the religion of the planet, because many religions are controlled by men. Since religion is a social institution for the last six thousand years, the public realm of religion is usually dominated by men while women hold domestic level. One consequence of male dominance in the public sphere of religion is the allocation and confinement of all positions of prestige. The denial of these positions to woman has far-reaching social and spiritual implications. Hindu laws and customs were extremely unfavorable to women. Women were treated in Hindu religion as inferior to men. Their great lawgiver *Manu* says, "Day and night must women be held by their protectors in a

status of subjection." That shows that the woman there is under the subjection of the male person. Instead of considering woman as a necessary adjunct of society, her company was considered to be an obstacle in the development of higher powers in man. The Jew says in his duty prayers: "Blessed art thou, O Lord our God! King of the universe! Who hath not made me a woman." Under Judaism, women has never had a franchise – religious, social or political rights. She is unclean from religious point of view, and she was nonentity from a political point of view. The whole fabric of Christianity rests upon the criminality of women. If Eve had not shown the frailty of going astray, if she had not tempted innocent and childlike Adam, sin would not become inherent in human nature, no saviour would have been required, no spilling of human blood would have been needed to "cleansed".

Women under Christianity is really a pitiable creature in spite of all her education and culture. Buddhism treats her badly, Judaism worse, but Christianity worst. The prescription of moral code in Islam, as discussed, depicts a persistent immoral code based on sex. In paradise, men will not only be accompanied by their wives but will have a host of other chaste women and beautiful *Hurs* as reward, but the reward for women is to be only one, the numerous other women and *Hurs* accompanying her husband (44: 54). In paradise also, women will not get rid of their functionally defined role as for the pleasure of men. Discrimination on the basis of sex is persisting in the world and also will persist in the heaven.

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Feminist Perspective of Women's Right and Present Situation : A Brief Review

2.1 Introduction

In the first chapter of my dissertation, I have undertaken a historical survey of the status of women in our country from *Vedic* period up to modern time in comparison with the status of women in Europe before nineteenth century. The historical survey and connected discussion have helped us to build up our hypothesis that the basic cause for almost all the oppositions and injustices from which women in every country suffer is their unequal position in society. We agree with Mill when he says, "That the principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes.... the legal subordination of one sex to the other is wrong in itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement; and that it ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other".¹ The present chapter will be an attempt to analyze a concept of women's rights in the light of the principle of equality. It seems to be plausible to hold that the concept of equality is the main clue to women's right. So, it is essential to have a primary idea of the concept of equality.

2.2 Concept of Equality from Various Perspectives

Equality is such a concept as is relative rather than absolute. The word 'equality' has a quantitative value. For example, $3+3=6$ is a perfect expression of equality. But in the case of human beings, we cannot use the term 'equal' in the above sense. Generally, the concept of equality is presumed to mean 'the same' which women and men are actually not. It is also impossible to think that two individual beings are equal. They may differ in many ways—biological, psychological, physiological and so on. But, they may be similar in skills, honesty or physical strength. If it is held that two individuals are equal, it is not necessarily meant that they are 100% equal. In fact, in some particular aspects they are equal and in some other respects they differ from each other. We do not want to use the term 'equal' in a vague way. We prefer to use the word in a prescriptive sense. The concept of equality as a social good is widely accepted. Actually, it is expected that men and women should be equal in power relations of the society. According to *Stanley I. Been*,

“The principle of equal consideration may be more than what is necessarily implied by the concept of rational action. The notion of acting with good reason does not in itself rule out any inequality of treatment, for it may always be possible to argue that there is some relevant difference between members of a given class. But, the principle that all men should be treated as members of the class whose equality is procedurally presupposed is not necessarily implied by the notion of rational action.”²

From above quotation, it is clear that equality is a basic criterion for individual progress. It is acceptable that men and women differ from one another but it is not acceptable that they should not receive equal treatment from society. The view of Ernest Barker is worth mentioning here: "The principle of equality means that whatever conditions are guaranteed to me, in the form of rights, should also and in the same measure, be guaranteed to others, and whatever rights are given to others shall also be given to me."³ Thus, by equality, feminists mean freedom from all types of domination. That is why, when women argue for equality, they do not first argue, for bringing women up to men's level or men down to their level. What they really want is that the whole society in terms of needs and capacity suggests that since men and women have the same needs, they should be treated equally. Here by needs, we like to mean the basic needs. Both of them have the same basic needs like liberty, freedom, dignity, sympathy, etc. And it seems very common in society that women are discriminated in their basic rights in all respects because of their differences in capacities with men. Here, we can present Hobhouse's distinction between generic and specific qualities. In certain cases, women may not have specific qualities; but the generic qualities may still be present in some other forms. In the opinion of Hobhouse:

"As a matter of interpretation of experience, there is something peculiar to human beings and common to human beings without distinction of class, race or sex; which lies far deeper than all the differences between them. Call it what we may, should reason, the abysmal capacity for suffering, or

just human nature. It is something generic, of which there may be many specific, as well as quantitative differences, but which underlies and embraces them all. If this common nature is what the doctrine of equal rights postulates, it has no reason to fear the test of ordinary experience of life, or of our study of history and anthropology.”⁴

The term ‘inequality’ is used in various contexts, such as race, color, status, sex, age, etc. Sex inequality exists when one sex is considered superior to the other. For the inferior position of women, social norms, values and traditional systems are responsible. All these factors prohibit women from equal participation in social, economic, political and cultural life of a society. The concept of equality is found in all societies. It is appreciated by all but in a conservative way. No country, even advanced ones, can claim to have materialised the idea of equality. It is not considered from the moral point of view. It is always judged on the basis of patriarchal or male-dominated society. The concept of equality between men and women could be best understood from different perspective. And in that case, it could be best understood through the feminist theories. Because, anyone who recognizes the discrimination against women on the basis of male domination and patriarchy and who takes some actions against it, is a feminist. Unlike many other “isms,” feminism does not derive its theoretical or conceptual base from any single theoretical formulation. There is actually no specific abstract definition of feminism applicable to all women at all times. For the sake of clarity, a sharp distinction has been made among liberal, socialist and radical feminism. But, in general, we could say that while liberal feminism emphasizes upon the political

aspects of women, socialist or Marxist feminism emphasizes upon the economic, radical feminism emphasizes the cultural aspects.

2.3 Liberal Feminism

The best-known type of feminism, which got prominence in the eighteenth century, is liberal feminism. Its activities are more than two centuries old. Liberal feminism originated with the French Revolution. During the time of the French Revolution, it was expected by the women that the result of Revolution would go in their favor. Practically it appeared to women negatively. Actually, the Revolution brought nothing for the women. At that period, women enjoyed a sort of liberty that was anarchic.⁵ That was simply an eyewash. After the French Revolution, when the society underwent re-organization, they were firmly enslaved anew. Liberal feminist movement started as a reaction against this result of the revolution. They were imbued with the zeal of implementing the ideas of liberty, equality and fraternity which were the main slogan of the French Revolution.⁶ Liberty meant free exercise of certain definite but limited rights based on generally the Declaration of the Right of Man. Equality meant the equality of status and opportunity, so far as this is compatible with the institutions of private property and capitalistic enterprise. 'Equality' during the French Revolution meant the abolition of privileged classes. The word, 'fraternity' meant the abolition of local privileges of internal tariff boundaries of diverse codes of

law. 'Fraternity' is a word, which expressed a sense of national unity. Rise of individualism open to talent in all fields was the demand of the French Revolution. Though it was partially implemented for men, but women were totally excluded from that development.

2.3.1 Mary Wollstonecraft

' *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*' by Mary Wollstonecraft was a revolutionary book, which might have changed society's perception on women. But, it was a period of patriarchy, so it got a negative reception. Starting with the noble ideas of the French revolution, Mary Wollstonecraft reopened the question of the extension of rights to women. She was the first woman who raised her voice against the unequal and unjust treatment received by the women. She strongly depends Rousseau's argument that women were just an object for men and those women were created for men. Rousseau refused to say that there is any common nature or similarity between men and women. He claimed that the virtues of men and women were not the same. Mary Wollstonecraft said:

“What nonsense! When will a great man arise with sufficient strength of mind to puff away fumes which pride and sensuality have thus spread by nature inferior to men, their virtues must be the same in quality. If not in degree or virtue is a relative idea, consequently their conduct should be founded on the same principles, and have the same aim.”⁷

The basic concern of the liberal feminist is equal rights through social and legal reformation. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, she protested against the whole system of law and custom that governed women. The most important cause responsible for women's inferior position and identified by the liberal feminists is that women are always judged first as women and second as human beings. On the other hand, men are judged individually on their own merits. In Mary Wollstonecraft's consideration, as member of the human species the women should have the same opportunity in all the areas of life. After the French Revolution, it became clear to Mary Wollstonecraft that women were the subjects to men, but not to the Republic. Women as citizens and as individual beings were devoid of the right to vote, right to property. It became clear that the status of woman as an independent person was still unchanged.

Wollstonecraft identified some main causes responsible for discrimination against women and also put her suggestions to overcome these. Generally, women like to consider marriage as the highest good or ultimate end of life. In this connection, she suggested if women got proper education, they would be able to apply deliberate and rational choice regarding marriage. The main thing that Wollstonecraft wanted to say is that through proper education, women could acquire self-respect. Habitual slavery to first impressions which developed in childhood is another reason due to which women are less rational than men.⁸ Domestic environment was identified as the most significant cause responsible for

discrimination against women both in society and at home. Wollstonecraft suggested that women should be capable of performing duties within domestic sphere in a self-reliant way. Domestic work will not be slavery if it is done willingly. And women would get rid of ignorance and discard emotional aspects from their nature to a great extent. According to Mary Wollstonecraft, unless women could achieve the art of coquetry, she would not be able to face any crisis. Rousseau also had advocated the same opinion.⁹

She was very much confident that equality of women would be possible if they could destroy their parasitic attitude and if women could forget all pre-conceptions of pleasing men and withdraw herself from maternal duties. Women should consider themselves first as a rational being, second, as a citizen and lastly as a mother. It should be expected by all that women and men should receive equal protection from the state and civil law because both are citizens of a state. Wollstonecraft also added that “It is justice, not charity that is wanting in the world.”¹⁰

The liberal feminists believe that traditional social institutions like family trained women in a way that they became an integral part of male persons' identity. From the early life of childhood, girl learns to be submissive, to be emotional and to take interest in personal and family affairs, whereas the boy learns to be competitive, unemotional and outward-looking. The above-mentioned roles for male and female were socially created which ultimately become the

permanent structure of a society. In this connection, we can mention Simone de Beauvoir's famous phrase, "One is not born but rather becomes a woman."¹¹

2.3.2 John Stuart Mill

John Stuart Mill is another pioneer of liberal feminism. He wrote his classic, *The Subjection of Women* (1869) with the help of Harriet Taylor, who was his emotional and intellectual partner. He considered legal disabilities as one of the main reasons for women's unequal position. Mill actually applied his utilitarian principle to discussing the problem of women. Mill argued that in the present system of society, the number of qualified men is small. So, for practical reasons, women are not getting skilled. His utilitarian principle is based on liberal creed in discussing the status of women. He argued that whereas rational freedom is the cornerstone of the liberal identity of mankind, still rational and free choice of women are denied. They are only allowed to choose a married life.

According to the liberal code, women's freedom is possible only through complete equality between men and women. Mill strongly believed that there is no difference between men and women under the liberal creed.¹² He meant to say that the subordinate states of women were created by privileged class of society. He also believed that it would be very unnatural to think of the progress of a society without equality of women with men. This view of Mill has come to clear shape in Harriet Taylor and Mill's statement. "In the present closeness of association

between the sexes, men cannot retain manliness unless women acquire it.”¹³ According to the liberal creed, if women can acquire men’s rational nature, then it will be possible for them to acquire equal position with men in society.

There is a common belief that environment determines women’s character. Mill discarded the view by giving priority to education. He believed that by receiving mistaken education, women are holding unequal position in society. Another important point discovered by Mill in women’s nature is their power of intuition.¹⁴ He also criticized the intuitive nature of women. He said that a rapid and correct insight into present fact has nothing to do with general principle. It is impossible to perceive a scientific law of nature by intuition. Mill believed that women’s intuitive nature form through social training and environment. As a result, women like to perform their domestic duty first and then public duties. Mill completely disagreed with the view that women are inferior due to their biological difference with men as August Comte claimed.¹⁵

Regarding marriage, Mill emphasized on legal treatment. He thought that family is a voluntary association, where it is not necessary for one to rule over another as in case of a business partnership. Mill believed that power and privilege within a family and also in society are the result of potential voice, which comes from the capability of earning subsistence. According to Mill, marriage should be recognized as any other profession. In that case, any woman would be able to choose freely either to marry or to follow other profession.

Mill meant to say that women should have free entrance to any type of public responsibilities, so that they can prove their capabilities and competence. With the advancement of civilization, men are taking more interest in domestic life. The participation of men in domestic work is taking a significant shape. Men are getting pleasure with wives' association and wives are also getting the meaning of life. Though this is not the common picture, but it would be to a greater extent if women could play their role as an intellectual partner of their husbands. Mill argued that, if life partner could not be an intellectual and emotional partner, equality within domestic sphere would not be possible. He also believed that the rule of equal justice is possible when human beings can cultivate their strongest sympathy with equal rights and their cultivation.¹⁶

As we know that cultivation of rights is possible through the unity of private and public life, women have to cultivate the rights, which would help them to be full citizens. Mill strongly declared that if all legal disabilities can be removed, then it would be possible for women to gain equal position with men. Both Wollstonecraft and Mill are of the opinion that acquiring rationality similar to men is the best way to acquire equal position with men in society. In that case, similar education should be received by both male and female. Thus, according to the liberal creed, liberation of women is not only in favor of women but also of society. Liberal feminism is based on a number of presuppositions. They are

derived from a more general theory of liberalism itself.¹⁷ These pre-suppositions may be summarized as follows:

1. Essentially men and women are same.
2. Accordingly, both men and women should be treated equally, specially in public affairs.
3. According to liberalism, equality means equality before the law and equal opportunities to take part in public activities.
4. And, such equality is based on the rights of a citizen.
5. The franchise right is the most fundamental right for women.

From the above pre-suppositions about liberalism, it has become clear that participation in public affairs is the most important criterion to hold an equal position with men. It is generally accepted that reformation is better than sudden change or any type of revolution. And we believe that the reformation that would come through education could minimize the problem related to equality of women with men in public and private fields.

2.4 Socialist or Marxist Feminism

Another independent movement recognized as a significant approach to the question of women is the socialist feminist movement. This movement developed out of Marxist ideals. Marxist feminism holds that subordination of women is a result of private ownership. According to Marxism, women are suffering from the

traditional family system, which makes them slaves. The socialist feminists have taken the Marxist goal as their own. They also believe, like Marx, that the source of the inferior position of women lies in the traditional family system. Here, we find some similarity between radical and socialist feminism. But, radical feminism does not want abolition of the whole traditional family system. According to Marx and Engels, it is artificially created by society that women are best suited for domestic works. Family, according to them, is the result of private property feelings, which are considered as the means of production.

Both Marx and Engels considered monogamy as the primary cause of discrimination against women.¹⁸ In monogamy, patriarchy is more prominent. The larger social group transformed into family as an economic unit of society. And, in that case, the father's right within the family becomes meaningful. Engels saw in monogamy not reconciliation of men and women, but the subjection of one sex by the other as the proclamation of a conflict between the sexes entirely unknown hitherto in pre-historic times. According to socialist feminism, the subordination of women is going through a system of chain. For, monogamy is essentially based on traditional marriage system and marriage is based on the idea of private ownership linked to capitalism. Engels meant to say that family, private property and the state are the foundations upon which all Marxist questions regarding women are founded.¹⁹ Under the shade of capitalism, the bourgeois family introduced the first division of labor between men and women.

The socialist feminists found a necessary connection between capitalism and patriarchy. Patriarchy is the common enemy of women as capitalism is of the working class. In *The Manifesto of the Communist Party* of 1848, Marx and Engels proved many critical attitudes. They thought that women are exploited within the wider context of capitalism. It has been observed that in such type of family, the wives and children are gradually transforming into simple means of commerce and instruments of labor. *The Communist Manifesto* exposed, when Karl Marx denounced the bourgeois claptrap about family and education, the hallowed co-relation of parents and children.²⁰ This view of Marx is based on historical analysis. The relationship within this type of family is becoming money relationship. The ideology of Marxism has been taken up by the social feminists. They have come to an agreement for a separate autonomous women movement focusing on patriarchy. Their main target is to abolish both patriarchy and capitalism, otherwise it would be impossible for women to acquire equal position with men.

Socialist or Marxist feminism suggested that some changes are necessary to achieve women's equal position in society. The changes should be like these – women should not depend on their husbands for their maintenance and child-rearing. They also added that household work should be shifted from women to society, i.e. state should take care of all the burden of a family, women's work should be treated on par with men's work. Considering the views of socialist

feminism related to the question of women's equality, we can come to a conclusion that socialist feminists fail to recognize the complete extent of women's struggle. In fact, they have connected politics to economics. According to socialist feminism, the power of gender is related to class and economic interests. From the exploitation point of view, the position of women are different from that of men in various ways: women form a reserve army of productive labour with low wages, have no prospects and a total lack of security; they perform unpaid work in the family and they are exploited by capitalism as consumers and sex objects. Their domestic labor is totally excluded from the realm of economic activity. Socialist feminism compared women's relation to de-skilling with that of the reserve army of labor. They used the term reserve army of labor in relation to employment fluctuations. Labor markets are perfectly competitive. Wages depend on the direct relationship of human capital and productivity. According to the socialist feminists, there are some genuine causes behind this. Women are spending maximum time for family and are working harder for their unpaid labor than for paid labor. Practically, the double burden which the working women are bearing is the main cause of their less productive capacity and therefore low wages.

It is believed by the socialist feminists that if other things are equal, the economic output would be the same, irrespective of sex. By the term 'other things,' they mean the social factors, which are responsible for women's inferior

position. Actually, the women's inferior position is the output of their position as housewives. The 'housewife' conception is a non-productive conception and, thereby, inferior also. Socialist feminists along with Marx and Engels are in favor of abolishing traditional family system. Traditional family system seems to them to be the root of encouraging patriarchy and oppression on women. Housework, as Lenin wrote, 'chains the women to the kitchen and nursery, and she wastes her labor on barbarously unproductive, petty nerve-racking, stultifying and crushing drudgery.'²¹

At present, the main concern of socialist feminism is to reconsider the nature of domestic world already existing in society. According to Juliet Mitchell, all sorts of oppression which the wives are suffering within the family create great damage to their mental development.²² All types of pressure imposed by family are creating in women a tendency to small-mindedness, petty jealousy, irrational emotionality, dependence, selfishness, a lack of vision and conservatism. All these negative qualities help them to become incapable of doing any productive and creative work. Ultimately, they become powerless within the family and outside the family.

According to the socialist feminists, there are ideologies behind oppression. These are religious dogmas, political doctrines, like capitalism, fascism or a kind of imposed cultural patterns like the 'happy housewife' myth. Inspired by such a myth, women are giving free service both to capital and also to husband. For such

condition, Juliet Mitchell blamed the psychological state of women. She meant to say that as a result of continuous subjective pressure generated by the family, women are confined within their lower social status. Generally, it is observed that the household activities, maternity and socialization of children — all these things consider women as natural as anything else. They mostly like to engage in status competition with other families. They generally like to define themselves as sex objects. From clothes to shoes, to hairstyles and make up, women express their feelings of femininity only. According to Juliet Mitchell, the psychological states, which women are bearing, are the important factors responsible for their lower status in society.²³ Marx and Engles recognized economic exploitation as the main source of all other exploitations. They also took into consideration the feminine mystique, racial relations, habits, cultural norms, religious dogmas, historical force, complex relationship between men and women and the nature of class struggle.²⁴

Marx argued that women's liberation movement must be a part of the larger revolutionary struggle for socialism and communism. Socialist feminists also believe that women's struggle would not be successful without its collaboration with that of the working class. The main target of the socialist feminists is to abolish patriarchal system, which is indirectly related to the socio-economic system as a whole, including the traditional structure of the family. We get similarity between Shulamith Firestone's (a renowned radical feminist) view and

socialist feminism. They believed that all women are oppressed by a gender-based system of domination that may vary according to the mode of production.²⁵ The main difference is that the socialist feminist's notion of patriarchy conceptualizes patriarchy as a structure with a material basis, while radical feminists tend to think of it as the idea of the day-to-day lived reality that men universally oppress women.²⁶ The intuitive political connection between feminism and Marxism has turned out to fail as a theoretical one. This failure has not been the result of faults of Marxism, rather, it is due to the repeated misapplication by the class or have been subjective working of feminist women. That means that all women do not describe their interests as women's ones in feminist terms.

2.5 Radical Feminism

As Marxist feminism and Liberal feminism are part of a larger ideology, Radical feminism is not like that. We have already discussed that Liberal feminism is implied in the liberal creed. As a whole and Marxist feminism is a part of a much larger class struggle, namely socialism. Radical feminism fundamentally differs from both. It does not subordinate feminism to some larger doctrine. To express their own new vision, they concentrated on art and literature because they believe that the present day culture is a big hindrance against women's equal position in society. The radical feminists are ambiguous on the political ground. Although they claim that they are revolutionaries they do not

want to join existing revolutionary movements, which are male-dominated. They also do not want to accept any reformation implied by Liberal and Marxist feminism.

One of the best arguments for radical feminism appeared in Shulamith Firestone's book, "*The Dialectic of Sex*" which she claimed both to encompass and enlarge socialism by grounding Marxist theory more deeply in objective biological condition.²⁷ Firestone is very much precise in her argument. She is in favor of biological revolution grounding on the validity of the Marxist theory of socialism. Some American pioneers of radical feminism are Sanger Margaret (1883), Albert Jane (1947), Dunbar Roxanne (1937), Kate Millett (1934), etc. Their main view is that women's biological role in reproduction is a primary cause, and secondary causes are differences in strength, aggression and the capacity for violence that reinforce oppression. They believe that male-supremacy is mainly responsible for oppression against women.

In the early 1960's, many members of the women's liberation movement left the group and became radical because of the conflict between their shared political belief about equality and the treatment they actually received from their comrades.²⁸ From the idealistic point of view, the New Left tried to eliminate the sources of established power by direct action including violence. A radical feminist organization, founded in 1969 in New York by Ellen Willies and Shulamith Firestone, was considered as the first formal consciousness-raising

group.²⁹ It came to an end as a formal group after 1970. The main views of the radical feminists are centered round mainly four themes: patriarchy, family, sexuality and women's history. In defining the concept of equality, the radical feminists have considered mostly the historic dominance of men over women.³⁰

According to them, patriarchy is the origin and also a continuation of all other sorts of social oppression. Here, the radicals mean to say that patriarchy is very much related to class system. In all spheres of life, one class is oppressed and another class is the oppressor. Male supremacy is the oldest and most basic form of domination. It is also a common belief among men that women are weaker and inferior to men in all respects. The radicals carefully analyzed the cause of women's inferior position, and have come to an agreement that women are crippled by their biology.³¹ According to Shulamith Firestone, "natural reproductive differences between the sexes led directly to the first division of labour."³²

She suggested that it is possible to achieve equality in two ways: by a technological revolution which will separate childbirth from the female body or by heterosexual activity and childbirth altogether. Both the radicals and the socialists widely accepted the second argument because it seemed to them that through the second way of revolution, social definition of women's biology would be possible to a greater extent. The radical feminists strongly demand the elimination of nuclear family consisting of one man (the head), one women (his wife) and their

children.³³ They considered marriage as the real institutional source of exploitation just as capitalism is for the whole society. They also added that family destroyed self-identity of women and also perverted the mind of children by sustaining patriarchal power of men.³⁴ The radical feminists suggested that maternity could be a subject of joy and benefit, if it were undertaken as an optional choice independent of nuclear family. Transformation of sexuality is their demand. The radical feminists felt the necessity to have a separate history of women. Otherwise, true history of women would remain undiscovered as a subject of misinterpretation by the dominant class. Therefore, it seems essential to them to reconsider everything from a woman-centered perspective. The radicals are very much interested to find out the origin of patriarchy and its relation to capitalism. They are determined to recover the theory of matriarchy.

We have seen that the extreme arguments of the radical feminists go far away from the traditional value. Radical feminism becomes subject to criticism from epistemological point of view also. By accepting the rational/irrational distinction that men are identified as the natural occupants of the sphere of rationality and women are the occupants of the sphere of irrationality, radical feminists perpetuated the dichotomy that constitute feminine inferiority. We believe that it is not the sacred fate of nature, but a social policy, which supports male domination in society and in the family. This argument get support from a historical analysis of the early periods, when there was neither clan, nor family

system; women enjoyed equal status and sometimes enjoyed superior position to men. It is already established that biological inequality cannot be the only source of inequality between men and women. It may be one of the causes, but not the only cause. Through socio-cultural changes, it would be possible to overthrow the minor difference in the biological state.

In general, radical feminists have stressed on the connectedness of women across time and culture, and while most have not been willing to argue that the female body is a sufficient explanation for women's oppression, all have implied that the female body is a necessary precondition for continued patriarchal oppression. In a sense, to argue that a female body is not a necessary precondition for oppression against would have left radical feminists with no basis for their original argument that women are oppressed as women. If the body does not unite women as women, what does?

Initially, therefore, the word "women" was understood to include both biological and socially constructed gender traits. Shulamith Firestone was virtually unique among the American radicals in attempting to explain the connection between materialism and biology. She argued that women's liberation had to be fundamentally linked to physical changes in female reproductive functions.³⁵ Like Marx, who had attempted to historicize the essential category "human", Firestone made a futile attempt to turn women into a materialistic category. Firestone's work has been heavily criticized. She claimed that presence of the female body was the

only explanatory variable that did not change across time and culture. Thus, it was sufficient to explain the permissiveness of women's expression.

In contrast to Firestone, most radical feminists, even today, have yet to be persuaded of the need to find a historical or material grounding for oppression against women. From the very beginning, we have seen that the radical feminists have drawn a contradictory picture for oppression. The radical feminists found themselves defending female behavior and, by implication, female nature, because they had found no other convincing way to conceptually separate the two. As a result, women's ways of being were simultaneously understood negatively, since they had been foisted upon women as a means to oppress them, and positively, as a set of behaviors that was uniquely female and to which all people might even aspire.

After considering various feminist perspectives on women's right, it is possible to discuss certain concrete measures to minimize the unequal position of women. Before that, we would like to analyze critically the theories in brief. The term 'equality' in the sense of absolute is not possible. The whole system of the creation is a sort of bondage. From birth to death, human beings lead their life under some compulsions. Every person differs from the other in some respects. It is not desirable to be the same as the other. It is only desirable to be unique in one's own manner. Nowadays, the most sensitive 'ism' regarding the problem of

equality between men and women is feminism. It is not a single theory, but it is united in the basic goal, though the ways of implementing the goal are different.

Shulamith Firestone, a radical feminist in *The Dialectic of Sex* (Bantam Books, New York, 1970) argued that “the reproductive capacity of women is responsible for women’s inferior position. Her proposal was to substitute test tube babies.”³⁶ Firestone’s argument is not generally acceptable. Because, we know that the reproductive capacity of women is natural for women. It is a common belief that things natural cannot create any negative result. Whereas Shulamith Firestone only talked about the transformation of the reproductive capacity of women, there are also other physical differences between men and women. These differences are in brain structure, in hormones. These are naturally constructed which cannot be transformed. So, it would not be justifiable for us to take biological inequalities into consideration. The socialist feminists consider women’s issues as class issues. They find it proper to conduct the feminist movement under the umbrella of the class struggle.

According to the Marxist feminists, women represent either the proletariat class or bourgeois class. So, there is no need go under separate women’s movement. The first consideration of the socialist feminists is a class struggle. In fact, Marxist or socialist feminists failed to take gender account adequately. It would not be possible to consider women’s movement from the perspective of class struggle. Because, women movement is a movement of both working women

and non-working women. In fact, women have to develop their struggle in collaboration with the working class, but have to wage their particular struggle independent of the working class. What the Marxist philosopher said about women's equality would be only possible under socialist society. We know that the concept of socialist society still remains a dream to the Marxist philosopher. Without a significant change in relation to production, without change in the patriarchal society and change of values related to society and women, the equal position of women would remain far away. The concept of the socialist society is a very complex one. So, we can opt for thinking about the problem of women's equality in a more simple and natural way.

In the above sense, liberal feminists are in a very safe and convenient position. They mainly demand for fair field and no favor. The liberal feminists also demand for the same platform and same opportunity both for men and women. Actually, liberal feminism appeared in the history of feminism as a potentially winnable theory, because, their way of achieving equal position with men is grounded on practical situation. Their main slogan is that women should be first judged as human beings and next, as women. They also believe that legal changes and educating women in a proper way are the techniques of achieving women's equal position with men. According to the liberal feminists, women's weakness is the result of social conditions, women's psychological state and their inherent feminine nature. They strongly believe that through self-realization, self-

respect and self-estimation, it would be possible to enlighten womanhood. Otherwise, they would always be in a lower status. Like any other power structure, gender has some rules, some of which are as follows:

1. Women are sexually attracted to men, and vice versa.
2. Women are physically smaller than men.
3. Women are more passive than men.
4. Women are not as good at thinking abstractly as men are.
5. Women are more emotional than men.
6. Women are physically weaker than men.
7. Women are nurturing, caring, generally more fit to be parents.
8. Women cry, men do not.
9. Women are peace loving, but men are aggressive.
10. Women are narcissistic about their appearance but men do not care about their appearance.

The above list is an accurate depiction of the stereotypes associated with gender. In fact, we can conceptualize gender as an ideological structure. Gender constitutes subjects in its own image, and is sustained and reproduced by rituals and practices. If we can change the other ordering system with which gender interacts, it would be easier for us to minimize gender discrimination. The basic action programme will include the following changes:

1. Changing the existing male-dominated social structure and building up a new one based on the equality of sexes.
2. Changing the wrong attitudes and values and preferences of both the sexes.
3. Building up a new value system based on justice, equality, dignity and rights of both the sexes.
4. Making women themselves aware of their duties and rights.

2.6 A Brief Review : UN Conferences and Women Issues

Feminist movement in the past as we tried to identify women's problems from different perspectives. Recently, the United Nations Organization has organized several conferences all over the world to sort out the problems of women in general and also to chart out programmes for their progress. Gender equality is a very important tool for attaining the goals of a new development order, where equality, development and peace all go hand in hand. It is now very important to realize that for sustainable development in human relationship it is necessary to analyze everything from the gender perspective. For, it is known to all of us that women as half of the world population play a vital role.

Having realized the reality, United Nations has been trying for developing a conscientious approach to gender justice and parity through its agencies, international regional conferences and conventions. For instance, there were

Mexico Conference of 1975, Copenhagen Conference of 1980, Nairobi Conference of 1985, the Vienna Conference of Human Rights, 1993, the Cairo Conference on Population and Development, 1994, the Social Summit of 1995 and Beijing Conference, 1995. The latest one was the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. It was participated by 189 nations, which ended up with a concrete platform for action. The commitments made in Beijing are not only the result of diplomatic negotiation. The movement has gained momentum, strength and visibility, and influenced the decisions at the international level. The women's movement has found a big place in the United Nations since its foundation in 1945.³⁷ Since 1946, various steps were taken within the UN system to eliminate discrimination against women and improve their status.

Various groups for the rights of women and human rights both at international and national levels were working outside the UN system also to build awareness and advocate reforms to improve the status of women. As a result of all these activities regarding women's development, the general Assembly proclaimed the year 1975 'International Women's Year' to promote equality of men and women to ensure the full integration of women in development efforts and to increase women's contribution to strengthening world peace. The First-World Conference in Mexico (1975) adopted the World Plan of Action for the implementation of the objectives of the Women's Year. The Second World Conference held in Copenhagen in 1980 reviewed the progress made in the first

half of the Decade and adopted the following sub-themes: Employment, Health and Education. The Third World Conference held in Nairobi (1985) reviewed the achievement of the Women's Decade and adopted 'Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies' for the advancement of women. In fact, the three objectives of the Decade—Equality, Development and Peace are broadly interrelated and mutually reinforcing.

2.6.1 Mexico to Nairobi

After the Second World War, in response to the world interest in the subject of the status of women in the UN system of organization, the General Assembly decided to proclaim 1975 as the "International Women's Year" (IWY) and to hold a World Conference of the year in Mexico city from June 19 to July 2, 1975.

Highlights

The IWY Conference in 1975 was the first opportunity for two important emerging movements: (i) the feminist and (ii) the movement to integrate women and development. The feminist movement was to continue the age-old struggle to free women from oppression. Their demands focussed on a limited number of issues: childcare, work force discrimination, reproductive right and violence against women. The movement, however, had created new insights for an attitude

towards women. The Women and Development Movement started as much at the same time as the feminist movement. In 1967, the development bureaucracy was challenged first by the UN Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, which promoted the greater economic participation of women as a means of ensuring the integration of women in the total development. By 1970, the full integration of women in the total development effort was adopted as an objective of the International Development Strategy for the Second Development Decade.

Then feminists started to evaluate that their movement was only one part of the global women's movement--a spontaneous awakening of women was a universal one. On the other hand, those concerned with women and development began to consider their issues from a feminist perspective. Feminists offered them with a holistic approach to changing women's lives through the interaction of political, economic and social institution, basic oppression of sexism as well as poverty and activities towards transformation of all aspects of women's lives.

In fact, the Mexico Declaration began by recognizing that women everywhere share the painful experience of oppression. It linked oppression with inequality, the problem of underdevelopment, and it called on women to unite in order to eliminate all types of violence against women. Apart from adaptation of this Declaration, a number of important decisions were taken at the Mexico Conference.

1. A World Plan of Action was adopted for the implementation of the objectives of the International Women's Year.
2. It was decided to establish 1975–1985 as the United Nations Decade for Women.
3. Creation of the Voluntary Fund for the Decade for Women to provide financial and technical assistance to women was an important step.
4. Establishment of an International Institute for Research and Training for the Advancement of Women was undertaken to complement the work of the existing and proposed regional research and training centers. It was to provide selected training opportunities and to undertake multidisciplinary and comparative research.

2.6.2 Copenhagen 1980-1985 –The Mid Decade Conference

The conference adopted a programme of Action for the second half of the United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace. At the above conference, the sub-themes were Education, Health, and Employment of Women. The important resolutions were:

1. Implementation of the goals of the United Nations Decade for women within the framework of the United Nations efforts to achieve the New International Economic Order.

2. To ensure that the interests of women are taken into account in all development of planning and implementation.
3. To establish appropriate machinery for integration of women in development.
4. To ensure that both recipient and donor countries keep watchful eyes to protect the interests of women.
5. To promote equality in education and training by increasing financial assistance and other inputs through their national budget.
6. To exercise freely the rights to determine family size by provision of information, education and necessary means of self-determination.
7. To take necessary steps and measures for elimination of all forms of discrimination against women.

If we carefully observe the resolutions, which have been taken in the Copenhagen Conference, we can see that the Conference had given the participants greater opportunity for mutual understanding, networking and co-operation among women of the world. An opportunity for self-evaluation for each nation was also opened.

2.6.3 Nairobi

The 1985 World Conference had the mandate to review and appraise the achievements of the United Nations Decade for Women with the purpose of providing guidelines for the future, particularly within the framework of action-oriented strategies. It was held in Nairobi, Kenya from 15 to 26 July 1985. The keynote of the conference was to attain equality between male and female in all spheres of life. Under areas of special concerns, 14 disadvantaged groups were identified. These were women in areas affected by drought, urban poor women, elderly women, young women, destitute women, women as victims of trafficking and involuntary prostitution, women deprived of traditional means of livelihood, cases of women who were the sole supporters of families, women with physical and mental disabilities, women in detention and subject to renal law, refugee and displaced women; issues of migrant women and “indigenous” women were also considered. The strategies reaffirmed the international concern about the situation of women, and outlined a framework for commitment by the international community for the elimination of gender-based discrimination towards advancement of women.

It identified the overwhelming obstacles to the advancement of women caused by varying combinations of political, economic as well as social and cultural factors in addition to which, increasing poverty constituted another major obstacle to the advancement of women in the developing and particularly the least

developed countries. It urged member governments to have adequate, comprehensive and coherent women's policies by the year 2000 for full and equal participation of women in all spheres of society and to establish strength or appropriate machinery for successful implementation of the basic strategies. This should include women's greater and equal access to education and training, employment, financial resources including land and capital, technology and other productive resources, nutrition, health services and the women's greater participation in the analysis, planning, decision-making, implementation and education of development. Strategies called upon all countries to pursue the objectives of securing women's equal participation both as agents and beneficiaries in all sectors and at all levels of the development process.

2.6.4 United Nation Conference on Women and Environment :

Rio de Janeiro (June 3-14, 1992)

Human development depends on physical and socio-cultural environment within which people are located. In the third world countries, women constitute half of the entire population, and they are the poorest of the poor not merely in wealth but also in education, health and every other aspects of development. So, women are the worst hit victims of environmental hazards like cyclone, flood and other natural disasters. This is because women's lives are interlinked with the

natural system for food, fuel, water, shelter and so on. They are in close contact with nature not only as consumers' environmental resources.

It is proved that the strategies for development and protection of environment or any other concern cannot lose sight of women or gender issues. Practically, development, environment and gender issues are interlinked. Therefore, concern for the environment of women in various fields was felt in such a way that this disadvantaged half of the population be turned into skillful and efficient managers of environmental resources for creating the way to sustainable development. The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) was held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in 1992. The main theme was global action for women towards sustainable and equitable development. It emphasized specially Nairobi Forward Looking strategies for the advancement of women with women's participation in national and international ecosystem management and control of environment degradation.

2.6.5 Jakarta Declaration and Plan of Action

The second Asian and Pacific Ministerial Conference on Women in Development was held in Jakarta from 7-14 June 1994. The conference was held to review and appraise the implementation of the Nairobi's Forward Looking Strategies for the advancement of women and to make preparation for the Fourth World Conference on women. A Plan of Action was prepared on the basis of the

impact of these global processes of the Asian and Pacific region. The Plan of Action identified 14 critical areas, which include:

1. The growing feminization of poverty.
2. Inequality in women's access to and participation in economic activities.
3. Inadequate recognition of women's role and concern in environment and national resource management.
4. Inequalities access to power and decision-making.
5. Violation of women's human rights.
6. Inequalities and lack of access to health services.
7. Negative portrayal of women in the media.
8. Inadequate mechanisms for promoting advancement of women.
9. Inadequate recognition of women's role in peace building.

The last one, the Beijing conference in China was organized on a very large scale. It was the Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW) was held in Beijing from 4-15 September 1995. The FWCW and was one of the largest global conferences ever held with delegates from 189 member countries of the United Nations, representatives of non-governmental organizations and large group of international civil servants and media people. The delegates from 189 member countries including Bangladesh are committed to translate the PFA into concrete

action. As in many other UN-member countries, in Bangladesh also, the Beijing Follow-up process has started.

Beijing conference took up twelve issues to discuss all kinds of violence against women and to propose remedies. It proclaimed various programmes and measures to ensure education, training for women, employment, economy, health, etc. It passed certain resolutions for the member countries to follow. These are:

1. by the year 2000, universal access to basic education should be provided;
2. completion of primary education by at least 80 per cent of primary school-age children;
3. closing the gender gap in primary and secondary school education by the year 2015.³⁸

The Beijing conference has proposed some long-term projects to improve women's lives in all spheres of life. The twelve critical areas of concern identified by the PFA are :

1. The persistent and increasing burden of poverty on women.
2. Inequalities and inadequacies in and unequal access to educating and training.
3. Inequalities in and unequal access to health care and related services.
4. Violence against women.
5. Effects of armed or other kinds of conflicts on women.

6. Inequality between men and women in the sharing of power and decision making at all levels.
7. Inequality in economic structures and policies in all forms of productive activities and in access to resources.
8. Insufficient mechanisms at all levels to promote advancement of women.
9. Inadequate promotion and protection of women's human rights.
10. Stereotyping of women and inequality in women's access to and participation in all communication systems, especially media.
11. Gender inequality in the management of natural resources and in the safeguarding of the environment.
12. Persistent discrimination against and violation of the rights of the girl child.

It is very encouraging to notice that in China, the government has already started to inspired the idea that the husband and wife should take up same career together and both of them should share together the task of doing the household duties and looking after the children. In Sweden, the employers were hesitant to employ women because they had to give them maternity leave. Recently, the Swedish government has converted maternity leave into 'Parents leave'. That is why employers are less hesitant to take women employees.

The Fourth World Conference on women held in Beijing (1995) received and appraised the implementation of Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies over the

period 1985-1995. The objectives started in NFLS mostly remained unachieved. Barriers to women's employment still exist in spite of the efforts made by the Government and people worldwide. The impediments include economic, social, political, ecological as well as those arising from armed conflicts, civil wars and terrorism, failure to protect human rights of women and the ingrained prejudicial attitude towards women and the girl child. During the past 20 years UN has held Global Conferences on women. These conferences identified the obstacles to gender equality and also impediments towards achieving Equality, Development and Peace, which are mutually inclusive and dependent.

By analyzing the resolutions which has taken in the above conferences we can briefly say that the Mexico City Conference which coincided with the observance of "International Women's Year" was the beginning of an international effect to set right the wrongs of history which led to the proclamation of 1976-1985 as the UN Decade for women. The Copenhagen conference, a mid-term evaluation plan adopted an action plan for the second half of the Decade where 15,000 men and women participated. The Nairobi Conference adopted a programme for the advancement of women to the year 2000. It was observed that although some countries made commendable progress in most of the third world countries, women's status and situation actually declined. In this Conference 20,000 men and women belonging to 100 Countries participated. In Beijing the representative of 189 countries participated and adopted a new five-year Global

Action Plan, aimed at equality, development and peace. More than 100 countries made formal commitments to carry out specific programme action by allocating additional funds for education, health, changing laws and increasing women's participation in decision making. It must be clear that women's struggle is against the socio-economic system and not against men. This fact has been repeatedly stressed every year on 8th March, the 'International Women's — Day' and also during the women's decade, 1975 to 1985.

Fortunately, Bangladesh Government which signed the document of PFA without any reservations were exceptionally agile and took the initiative to implement the follow up Action Plan. Bangladesh Government has realized that it is the responsibility of the Government to implement PFA as it is the signatory of the treaty like document in presence of thousands of participants. Ministry of Women and Children Affairs (MWCA) was designated as the model ministry for follow-up and proper implementation of the part of the Government. A national policy for the advancement of women has been announced in December 1996.

1. The government should take steps to operationalize the policy which will continuously guide and inform action at every level and every sector.
2. Government should identify priority areas and activities.
3. Women's access to decision making positions should be increased through lateral entry. To promote women in the public service quota

of 10 per cent of gazetted posts and 15 per cent of non-gazetted posts have been reserved for women.

4. Government should review all existing legislation to remove gender discrimination in the area of marriage, inheritance, guardianship, custody of children, etc. Introduce a uniform family code to eliminate gender discrimination and establish equal rights of women.
5. Improved collaboration and co-ordination between government, NGOs and women's organizations are necessary to ensure effective implementation on the PFA commitments.

It is essential to note that with the advent of various efforts at international level, a remarkable change has occurred in all societies. The transformation of women from domestic to public field has also changed the traditional family structure etc. At present, women are inspired to enter into all spheres of life like education, employment, politics and cultural field. Women are still not at par with men. It is happening because the society cannot accept the transformation of women so cordially. That is why Maureen Dowd mentions: "Women are feeling more independent but they are still feeling wronged."³⁹

Even after the largest conference in Beijing the world's governments and societies are still not clear as to how to execute the agenda of women equality. We know that in ancient Greece and Rome, the mothers were advised to desert female babies. In Bangladesh and in other third world countries, girl child was not so

welcomed. This type of negative attitudes is still prevailing in most of the rural parts and in some urban parts of Bangladesh. It is worth-noting that the attitudes of even the well-known male personalities have not changed. The world famous American boxing champion Muhammad Ali was once asked: “How many children you have?” He replied “One boy and seven mistakes.” i.e. seven daughters.⁴⁰

Majority of people all over the world still prefers a male child. It also must be noted that this preference for male child is not confined only to men, women too prefer a male child. It is not uncommon to observe those in many cases daughters-in-law suffer at the hands of mothers-in-law for giving birth to a female child. In the field of education and employment women have a less favorable status than men. They are paid less for the same work. This is very common in case of daily-wage earners. Now a days women are found both in the organized sector and in so-called unorganized sector also known as informal sector. Maximum export-oriented industries thrive on cheap labor. Much of this cheap labor is supplied by poor and below poverty line women. It is because exploitation of cheap female labor for export to developed countries is easier. Trade Union is legally allowed to labor. In that case women’s role in labor union is marginal. Even in female dominated garment industries, the leadership rests with the males and it has been complained that male leaderships work for their personal ends rather than promoting the cause of women.

There is in fact, a vacuum in the study of women's situation vis-a-vis trade unionism. Women's leadership in trade union is necessary for the promotion of the interests of women workers and ensuring increasing entry of women in industrial labor market. In the case of many developing countries child marriages and dowry deaths are common. However, in most of the cases mother-in-laws are equally responsible for dowry deaths. Even at the negotiation stage, in many times it is the bridegroom's mother or sister who fixes the amount of dowry. If the parents of the bride cannot fulfil the demand, the bride is responsible for this and usually she is tortured or even killed. Sexual abuse is another important factor, which is not confined only to the third world countries. According to the statistics made available by United Nations Organizations documents, the percentages of rape is one in five in industrialized countries and one in seven in developing countries.⁴¹

In Islamic countries, women are now fighting for civil law instead of Islamic law. In fact, the holy Qu'rān does not sanction any such inequality or injustice. Muslim jurists and theologians have interpreted the holy Qu'rān in favor of them. The recent case of Talibans in Afghanistan is very significant example of extreme cruelty. The Taliban government has stopped girls and women from going to school, to learn, to read and write. They have closed all girls schools. They have ordered all women to stay at home. Women are strictly following conservative Islamic code of dress, which covers face and body. Women are not able to raise

their voice against such cruel rules. If they do, they are punished. From the above discussion, it is clear that we are still within the framework of patriarchal ideologies. The global and national efforts to change such attitudes have not been very effective.

2.7 A New Perspective in Social Order

It is generally expected that as a human being, women should receive the same treatment from society. As a social and rational being they demand same right and same dignity. In that case both have equal participation in social and state matter. But the actual picture is very negative. Our society is still far away from this conception. While the economic factor constitute an important part of gender disparity in most of the societies, male domination is the most important factor responsible for inequalities between men and women. There are many other spheres of differential benefits, e.g. in the division of labor within the household, in the extent of care or education received and in liberties that different members are permitted to enjoy. That is why we need to establish a gender justice where the status of men and women and relationship between the two sexes are to be based on justice. It is interesting to note that the tendency to dominate is not only in men but in women also. Actually domination of one class over another class come out of power in strength, economy and status and also age. It is not an unusual picture that women are oppressed by women. L. Raj Sebasti says:

“A Western woman does not feel inferior to a non-Western man: A rich woman does not feel inferior to poor man. A high caste woman does not feel inferior to a low caste man.” Moreover, when one group of men dominate another group the female members of the dominating group do not protest.⁴²

We find it to our experience that impact of race, cast, wealth, power etc. are the main factors, which are essentially responsible for domination of one class by other or individually. It is a very common picture of the society. For instance, senior officers dominate juniors, mother-in-law dominates daughter-in-law, senior wives dominate junior wives, etc. In short, the issue of domination and oppression is too complicated to be explained away on the basis of gender differences alone. We have seen that feminists also faced difficulties to establish equality. To overcome the difficulties, feminism must entail the reconstruction of both woman and man and must be, in effect, a new version of humanism. The need to do this restructuring has come from the fact of female oppression since the structure of gender is by definition, based on dualism and inequality.

2.8 Conclusion

Women are generally the victims of the pattern and structure of society. They grow up with a subjected position. That is why they cannot be self-confident about their rights and duties, dignities etc. Men take advantage of their weakness.

Men use women as a doll to satisfy their desires. On the other hand, women think it as a natural order of life, as a result they easily fall under men's trap. Thus, on the basis of the above discussion, we can suggest the following action programme through some social changes :

1. The social structure, which is mainly based on male-dominated social structure, should be changed. And a new structure irrespective of sex should be established.
2. Changing women's attitude and behavior to other women.
3. It is necessary to establish healthy relationship between sexes. They should think them companion to each other. The duties and responsibilities related to society should be shared by both men and women,
4. The misconception that create wrong attitudes and values toward women should be change.
5. To build up a new system based on equality, justice and fairness.
6. By giving women proper education, make them aware about their social rights and duties.
7. We should think of women degradation as human's degradation.

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Women's Problems in Bangladesh

3.1 Introduction

In order to explore the actual position of the women of Bangladesh, it is necessary to analyze the diverse forces in society which mould the lives of the women who are the focus of the present thesis: "The dilemmas and directions of the women and society are not fortuitous. They are the result of multiple factors which determine the drift of the whole cultural complex considered as a part of the social realities of the period."¹ There is a need, therefore, before examining the real cause of women's inferior position, to know something about the modern contexts of their lives. We know that the factors, which design women's lives, actually lie within the patriarchal system. These factors combine to define the woman in Bangladesh, and the complexities of her character, her reactions to society. That is why it is not possible to make any simple definition about the status of women in Bangladesh.

The issues are interrelated in such a way that it is simply impossible to separate one from the other distinctively. Each is an individual voice affecting the others through the patriarchal system of the society. Failure to understand the nature of the pressure on her may mean a failure to fully grasp all the specific challenges and difficulties of Bangladeshi women. This chapter deals with socio-

cultural and religious factors, which determine her position in society today and her treatment within the family and outside of it. We have discussed in this chapter women's education, health and work, which necessarily involve a discussion of class and social stratification also. Here, the effects of poverty on women's lives have been examined.

3.2 Women, Islam, Culture and Society : Islam and Local Culture

In Bangladesh, men in familial, social, political and economic areas have dominated women for generations, as symbolized in the institution of *purdah* or seclusion. This generally accepted picture has begun to change in a critical manner. Even though women's position might still be figuratively compared to those of "birds in a cage", that cage itself is beginning to show potentially irreversible signs of breaking up. The upheavals and changes that have taken place through the years and which have ultimately led to the creation of independent Bangladesh has left deep impressions on the people of this country.

There are two significant contradictory identities existing in Bangladesh i.e. being Bengali on the one hand and Muslim, on the other. Islam in its purest form existed in Arabia, the land of its origin. There are two types of trends prevailing in Bangladesh--one is to maintain and observe Islam in its orthodox form, and, the other, the natural process of assimilation with the Bengali culture and practice that

creates enormous tension. Asim Roy describes it as “Cleavage and dualism in Bengali Muslim’s cultural position, caught between the opposite poles of Bengali localism and the Islamic extra-territoriality.”²

Today many Bengali customs and practices are considered as Hindu culture or un-Islamic by the orthodox Muslims. They also demand for the elimination of such culture. Bengali culture is, for them, equated with that of the Hindus.³ Actually, the difficulty however lies in the fact that the majority of the people are Bengali-speaking, but they are also Muslims with strong faith in their religion. These conflicts are affecting the status of women in Bangladesh and also make their situation more complex. Blanchet argues in defense of these beliefs and practices, which are considered Hindu in origin. She indicates that it is only the ancient tribal religions that had been followed by the lower casts of Hindus. “... On what basis can we state that Bengali Muslims actually borrowed such features from their Hindu neighbors? These practices may have been those of the Muslims all along for Bengalis have a common origin.”⁴

It is quite logical that since there were tribal religions, which predated Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam, the ancient beliefs and practices of these religions have become incorporated into all the other religions, including Islam that came later.

Whatever may be their origin, actual fact is that the practices of Islam have a greater impact on women than they do on men. We have seen that the rural

women are much affected by the practices or misinterpretation of religion than the urban women. Because rural women are less socialized than men in Islamic values and doctrines and less literate. Women of different religions also cannot ignore or disregard these practices, because they are connected with the most important events of their lives, viz., marriage, birth and fertility. Like religion, such practices “also meet women’s needs for self-respect, spirituality, identity, and purpose...”. Caroline Remazanoglu, however, has advised to challenge the above issues with great caution.⁵

In spite of religious fundamentalists protesting against some of those customary practices, such practices continue to be observed, having become a part of the way of life. In Bangladesh, fundamentalism or on the other hand secularism becomes more pronounced at certain times and then again is on the wane. Much hatred and violence is carried out in the name of religion. Discrimination and even violence by men towards women is often justified in the name of religion. One of the main causes of the low status of Muslim women and of their subservient position in society has been attributed to the practice of *pardah*. Women’s position in Bangladesh necessarily contains the reference to *pardah* at some points or the other. Shelly Feldman and Florence McCarthy mentioned: “It is difficult to understand women’s subordination without some analysis of *pardah*.”⁶ *Purdah* in its broader sense represents the system of isolation of Muslim women from outsiders and imposes high standards of female modesty. In its narrowest sense, it

involves the seclusion of women within the four walls of their homes and the veiling of women when they move outside the home. According to Martha Alter Chen, *purdah* involves the exclusion of women from the “male” sphere of economic, social and political life.⁷

There is a great dispute and confusion about the origin or *purdah*. In fact, *purdah* in Bangladesh is today socially enforced and practiced on the basis of religion. The justification offered for the continuation of this practice, which many believe is the most important cause for the backwardness of women, is that Islam has specially decreed its observance. Muslim women at the time of the prophet have often served as reference groups for the roles of women; for example, Hazrat Fatima (daughter of the Prophet), Hazrat Khadiza (first wife of the Prophet and a business woman) or Hazrat Ayesha (last wife of the Prophet) provide important role models in the ideal sense. Their struggle, their relations with their husbands and interaction with other members of the community point out the multifarious roles of Muslim women which was far away from the role of women as chattels that is found in the developing countries. After the death of the Prophet, all sorts of distortions were incorporated into interpretation of Islam for personal and vested interest.

In rural Bangladesh, most of the religious leaders are half-educated, and few of them can explain the real interpretation of Islamic instruction about the status of women in Islam. In some places, the village religious leaders are being

patronized by the power structure leaders. As their vested interests lie in maintaining their interest, they are influenced by the ruling class. Empowerment of women is a direct protest against a male-dominated society. So, the powerful leaders of the village use the Muslims to interpret the version of the Qu'rān and the Hadith in their favor. As Villagers are very ignorant, they are easily influenced by the religious leaders and accept their instruction about woman without any question. Whatever may be the origin of *purdah* in Bangladesh, it is necessary to understand the relation between Islam and the veiling of women. It is believed by many that the observance of *purdah* is a sacred duty of Muslim women as it is sanctioned by the religion.

In Bangladesh, although it comes in many styles and forms, *purdah* is generally enforced and legitimized in the name of Islam. The Qu'rān clearly states: "Enjoin believing women to turn their eyes away from temptation and to preserve their chastity; to cover their adornments (except such as are normally displayed) to draw their veil over their bosoms and not to reveal their finery."⁸ The Fundamentalists are of the opinion that the position of women are subordinate to that of men, and that it is the duty of the women to hide her charms so as not to be considered sexually attractive. Ameer Ali, in his famous *The Spirit of Islam*, comments that the Prophet recommended that women observe privacy, "but to suppose he ever intended his recommendation should assume its present inelastic form, or that he ever allowed or enjoined the seclusion of women is wholly

opposed to the spirit of his reforms. The Qu'rān itself affords no warrant for holding that the seclusion of women is part of the new gospel."⁹

Most liberal thinkers believe that Islam preaches propriety, modesty and decorum. According to them, it is wrong to interpret that the teachings of the Qu'rān mean total restriction or lack of freedom and free will. According to this view, Islam enjoins upon women not to display their charms so that they become objects of attraction; but the Qu'rān does not advocate veil or segregation of sexes, neither does it restrict their freedom of movement. The propagandists of strict *purdah* are alleged to have purposely infused wrong meanings in the Holy verses and *purdah* which "reduces the women to clumsy shapeless bundle is only customary and not Islamic."¹⁰ We have seen that these debates about seclusion of women is integral to various aspects of society in Bangladesh, such as evaluation of status, ownership and inheritance of property, arrangement of marriages, division of labor and control of desire. Hanna Papanek likes to say that the *purdah* system is very much related to the maintenance of moral standards as regulated by society.¹¹ These moral standards have become so deep-rooted in society that it is no longer only the males who have definite ideas about the behavior of women but also the women themselves.

The women of Bangladesh are used to remain under the symbolic shelter provided by the system of seclusion. The institution of *purdah* is the general picture both in urban and rural areas. But it differs in nature and extent. In recent

times even if the '*burqa*' is not worn, *purdah* may be observed in other symbolic ways. The end of the *sari* may be pulled to cover the head and hide the face. A rickshaw in the villages has a *sari* draped over the front to seclude the women inside. But, on the other hand, a man both in the villages and cities when travelling without woman will invariably throw back the hood of the rickshaw, even in the scorching sun. From the above matters, it is very easy to be sure about the superiority feelings of the male-part of a male-dominated society. In the urban context, the practice of *purdah* is taken in more symbolic forms. The younger urban educated women may not like to live such secluded lives as the past generations did. In the urban areas, the observance of *purdah* is generally less strict than in the rural areas.

Though the middle class families send their daughters to schools, colleges and universities, some go to offices to work and some of them also become teachers and doctors. But, the observance of *purdah* has not been forsaken. The demand is still there for separate buses for women where women will be served by female employees. In the universities also that have co-education, there are separate common rooms and separate hostels. Generally, the men and women sit in separate groups. It is not also unusual that women are taking jobs, which are out of trend and particularly defined for them. With a wider contact, growing importance of both the partners in a marriage to earn and other contemporary changes in

everyday lives of the people, many urban women are becoming more aware of their need to become economically independent.

And, it is very much encouraging to say that the society in general is beginning to accept or being forced to accept the changes. Another dimension of *purdah* rigidly laid down sexual division of labor within households which, broadly speaking, allocates indoor works to women and outdoor works to men. Women alone perform all the familiar chores of 'domestic' work, and thus often have a 'double' working day, even though their total workload might well remain invisible to male eyes.¹² Indeed, when services provided by women take the form of unpaid family labor with no market prices being either required or paid, such work is traditionally not regarded as income-earning. The irony of the matter is that the position of women is undervalued in economic terms by society categorizing them as dependents, so that their unpaid family labor continues to be taken for granted.¹³

In fact, women in Bangladesh are not expected to become independent persons in a social sense. Rather, they are required to remain under the protective guardianship of successive male kinsmen in the respective stages of their life cycles, father or brother, husband and eventually son. This means that women are often unprepared for or disallowed from making their own decisions. *Purdah* and marriage--both these institutions assume the greatest importance in the lives and attitudes of the women of Bangladesh, particularly because of the belief that

without marriage, the life of a woman is doomed. This concept is equally applicable to both rural and urban women. Because, the only way to ensure that a girl succeeds in making a good match is to carefully guard her chastity through *purdah*. In Bangladesh, most marriages are arranged. The parents or other guardians feel that they are the best people to decide suitable matches, keeping in view various factors like equal status of the families and future financial stability. It is general belief that the arranged marriage can provide a real shelter or at least a symbolic shelter for women in Bangladesh.

Purdah in Bangladesh is therefore not an insignificant phenomenon that affects the lives of only a woman. It is an institution, which fashions the way the whole society behaves and interacts and in particular affects the women at the time of her marriage, especially in relation to the age of marriage and the women's right to give consent to it. Generally, women in Bangladesh are brought up with the idea that they are inferior to men, and that they ought, above all, to guard their chastity and purity. According to Jeffery, "Abolishing these practices would merely be attacking the symptoms of something much more pervasive, since they have their niche in a complex social system."¹⁴ Therefore, the opinions and feelings of the women who have to bear the burden of the system of *purdah* is not simplistic or apparent. It is not possible for one to assume that all women are eagerly waiting to be released from the inequalities of the practice.

3.3 The Social Content of Women's Lives

The majority of the women in Bangladesh live in rural areas. So, when we speak of women in Bangladesh, we actually mean the majority of rural women and not the small percentage of urban ones. In Bangladesh, the rural women are not aware of their rights and do not know, in most cases, what is justice or injustice, suffer deprivations and bear the injustice of social, traditional and customary practices like *pardah*, patriarchy and pollution. Due to their lack of proper education, they are more tradition-bound and more *pardah-conscious* than the urban women.

In our social context, it is natural that all aspects of women's life are decided by men. A woman cannot take up any job outside home without her father's or husband's permission. Even they cannot freely decide as to the number and spacing of children to be born to her. The husbands have to give consent to their use of contraceptives. The high infant mortality rate discourages women to accept family planning services and encourage more childbirth to replace the lost ones. The rate of fertility is kept deliberately at the high level to make sure that some children survive through their adult lives.

In order to provide a fuller picture of the world in which these women live, it is necessary to examine in particular the forces that influence their lives today in terms of health, education and work.

3.3.1 Women and Health

The birth of a daughter is not usually welcome in patriarchal, poverty-stricken Bangladesh. The ritual call of '*azan*' (call for prayer as a celebration) is generally not given; this symbolizes the community's non-acceptance of a girl's arrival and both the family's and the community's disapproval of the birth of girl instead of a boy. A son is needed to carry on the family name and to take care of parents in their old age. Daughters are not considered good investments for the future, for, they are to be married off into another family and so will only reside temporarily at their parental homes. The cycle of neglect continues throughout a women's life: "from birth to death, from infancy to old age a female goes without consideration in all aspects of life within or outside the family."¹⁵

It is the general picture of our society that from infancy, woman is treated and trained for domestic works only, as she has to leave her home upon marriage. Girls from very tender age begin to help their mothers. In fact, the girls are designed to play the role of her mother in future. She becomes the mini substitute of her mother.

The preferential treatment accorded to the boys and sons in the family is obvious from very early period of their lives. The daughter learns to take it in their stride, and do not think to question the difference in their treatment. After

marriage, this attitude is transferred to the husband-wife relationship, so that the wife is always treated as inferior, and she believes herself to be so. The female child's first lesson is to learn that she is a liability and to accept the difference with brothers as a fact of life. She is perceived as, and perceives herself as, a temporary member of the family having fewer claims on the family resources than the male members. This early acceptance of inferior status is later on reflected in her interaction with the society at large.

In the rural areas, the poverty level has reached terrible proportions. The girl child is usually the one who gets the least. She is discriminated against not only as regards the treatment accorded to her generally, but also in relation to the distribution of food and the option of education. This inevitably means that: "In a milieu of scarcity, whatever little is available, be it good food or clothing or opportunities for education and health facilities, is first offered to the men."¹⁶ It is usually seen that nutritionally, the daughter in the family suffers more than the son. This deprivation has a lasting effect on her health through her life. Malnutrition among the majority of children is pervasive in Bangladesh, but compared to boys, a higher percentage of girls become severely malnourished, and throughout childhood are never really able to catch up nutritionally with boys.¹⁷ At birth, more female children survive: in 1998, infant mortality per thousand live birth was 58 for males and 56 for females (BBS 1998). However, by the time they are four/five years old, lack of proper care and nutrition results in a higher

mortality rate for girls. A 1986 report for WHO and UNICEF found that every sixth death of an infant girl in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh was due to neglect and discrimination. (UNICEF Report 1991: 13-14).

In fact, all sorts of discrimination are rooted in a complex set of social cultural and historical factors. All the differences and discriminations exist both inside and outside the home, at different stages of life. It affects a girl's nutrition, health, education, social status and economic position. From gender differences in health and nutrition, we can understand about the clear picture of the total discrimination against women.

Women of all age groups suffer from inadequate food intake. The food deprivation that starts in infancy continues through out her lives. It becomes more pronounced after the new bride becomes pregnant. Pregnancy-related mortality is high; 50% of the pregnant women suffer from anemia. The birth of each child leads to further depletion of energy. The wide gap in calorie and protein intake results in wide spread anemia, general weakness, acute diarrhea, during post-natal period, locally know as *Sutika*, and a large number of women die due to noncommunicable diseases. They get less health care and medical expenditure in a typical household. They get less food, can share on average 20% less calorie than men. Women on average die earlier than men. Illness of wives and daughters are not reported until they are visible because of social customs and norms compelling females from childhood to suppress their suffering.

The status of emotional health of a mother remains totally unperceived. That is why the stress associated with poverty, poor marital relations, dissatisfaction, and divorce is reflected on both physical and emotional health. As a result, they often lead to psychosomatic disorders or hysteria. In the name of *purdah*, the traditional rural society treats it as influence of some supernatural evil power, and, in the name of treatment, the women are made to suffer unspeakable torture. Amulets (locally known as *Tabiz*), charms and sanctified water given by religious leaders (*Moulavis or Fakirs*) are very popular antidotes for them. In the case of abortion in villages, crude ways including herbs, roots and plants are used by the practitioners causing great risk to the life of the patient. It is propagated that family planning is a feministic issue. Women, while availing more family planning facilities compared to men, avail less of medical service. The biased attitude of household members against the female child is in part old and traditional. We think that this attitude is closely linked with household prejudices like son preferences, work worth, dowry claims, etc.

3.3.2 Women and Pollution

The concept that women are polluted at certain times affects their day-to-day lives. From such beliefs and low self-perception stem, she suffers all through her life. From the outset of puberty, a girl is seen as being ready for marriage and vulnerable, and therefore to be guarded jealously and suspiciously. The notion of

women as being polluted at certain times has over-whelming effect on the position she occupies in the socio-religious community. Pollution, which is the notion of ritual uncleanness, is a quasi-religious one with roots both in Islam and pre-Islamic Bengal.¹⁸ Menstruating and parturient women are considered to be impure or polluted. At such times, she is prohibited from taking part in various religious activities as well as certain ordinary household functions. From a religious point of view, the idea that menstruating and parturient women are impure and cannot take part in religious activities is laid down in the Qu'rān. "They cannot participate in religious activities for they are considered to be in a state of pollution. They must wait for a certain prescribed number of days before ritually bathing to regain purity."¹⁹

For the Muslims, the idea of pollution is not like that of the Hindus that is related to the position one occupies in the hierarchical caste ladder. The women of Bangladesh, specially Muslim villagers tend to see most forms of ritual purity as norms approved and enjoined upon by Islam: "and it is in the name of Islam that certain practices are reinforced which in fact belong to a sub-continental, largely Hindu, tradition."²⁰ It is believed that a menstruating woman must not cross a crab-hole, nor should she eat eggs, a pregnant woman must not pluck flowers, nor move in public. All these are done out of belief in religious superstitions. As a result of this, women are socially exploited by prohibitions and superstitions that are linked up with sexism. Man has never experienced such restrictions, which are invariably

imposed on women. Most of these prohibitions emphasize negative attitude towards women and restriction of works. These prohibitions are mainly based on superstitions and customs that the women cannot ignore. Actually, the state of impurity imposed on women is sanctioned by the society. It is impossible for one to be born impure, and for another, pure. If we believe in divine order where it is mentioned that everyone is similar in the eye of God, we could obviously avoid the factors that make differences between men and women regarding their social status.

3.3.3 Women and Education

Lack of education is one of the major causes of backwardness of the women in Bangladesh. This lack helps to perpetuate the inequality between the sexes. The literacy rate for the population, according to the 1991 census was 31 percent for males and 19.49 percent for females (BBS 1998). According to the 1981 census, a person was treated as literate if she could write a letter in any language. In 1989-90, at the primary level (5 to 9 years) there were 5433 thousand girls in school, compared to 6912 thousand boys and at the secondary level (10 to 14 years), 1197 thousand girls compared to 2330 thousand boys (source : BBS 1991). Even at the highest level of education, which is urbanized and caters to a more affluent class, the same trend of less education for the females is apparent. During the period of 1998, at the nine universities of Bangladesh, out of a total of 67,282 students,

51,091 were male and 16,191 were female (BBS 1993). In general, a far higher percentage of children, both male and female, attends schools in urban areas.²¹ The overall female literacy rate is extremely low, and it is three times in the rural areas than in the urban.

We can sort out various reasons behind the low literacy rate of women in the rural areas. These are lack of education amongst the adults of the family, distance of the schools, necessity of joining the household works and too many sibling and *purdah*. Early marriage and motherhood are among the most important factors. Both in the rural and urban areas therefore, there is a close but complex connection between education and marriage. For the first five or six years of their lives, however, both female and male children grow up without much social restriction. It is after that period that the life of the girl child becomes very different. The period of indulgence ends and the teaching of essential values required to be a good wife/daughter/mother begins. Another important factor is to be found in the economic burden--the expenses involved in arranging marriages, giving of dowry and so on. So, it seems to the parents that the sooner they are married, the less money will be wasted on them. They do not want to invest for the education of their daughters who will leave home for her in-laws very soon.

Sometimes it is expected that being educated might make it difficult for her to adjust with the traditional society after marriage, and the parents have to pay more to get an appropriately educated husband. Parents are confronted with the

dilemma as to whether the present educational system helps them in preparing the daughter for the domestic role, which they have to play in future. They are also unsure as to whether and how education will affect a girl's value in the marriage market. Girls who are educated may thus be educated in order to make them more valuable in the marriage market. In the urban and more affluent areas also, parents are deeply concerned about the marriages of their daughters. As education may improve the marriage prospects, rather than for its own sake, that a large number of girls have been educated up to the university level. And, in maximum cases, they get married soon after completion of her education. This may mean that her education ends there, and she devotes herself full time to being a housewife.

If we consider the matter about women's education from the Islamic point of view, we would see that Islam attaches great value to education, and prescribes it as the duty of a woman as well as that of men to acquire knowledge. The Holy Prophet said to his followers, "Knowledge enables its possessor to distinguish what is forbidden from what is not. It lights the way to heaven." In actual practice, the injunctions of the holy Qu'rān in this respect were completely ignored. The Muslim community, as it had misinterpreted many other principles of Islam, considered education for girls also as an unnecessary step. On the other hand, religious education is considered indispensable for rural Muslim women. Social motivation for participation of girls in education is extremely poor and the dropout rate is alarmingly high. Now a day there is a growing consciousness among the

parents of Bangladesh women to send their daughter to school without any discrimination. Studies have found that mothers with higher self-esteem, which comes from education, play more assertive roles in the family. She could no more be treated as totally dependent on men, because the altered situation has given her some independence. The new role allotted to a woman brings her up in the estimate of others, and we hope that ultimately, she will be legally treated at par with men.

3.3.4 Women and Work

Like discrepancies in health care and education, women lag far behind men as regards work and labor also. Islam is not against women working in such areas, as are suitable for them. She can earn money and own property just as man can do, and, therefore, she may, if she feels the need, follow any profession. Islam, in fact, allows her to work and earn. We have seen that the constitution of Bangladesh guarantees equal opportunities for all citizens in respect of employment or office work in the service of the country. Article 29 of the constitution has clearly mentioned: "No citizen shall on grounds only of religion, race, caste sex or place of birth, be ineligible for, or discriminated against in respect of any employment or office in the service of the Republic." Despite this guarantee, in practice, women in Bangladesh have very little access to regular employment.

In agricultural activities (agriculture, fisheries, poultry), 77.4% women are employed at present. Of the total-manufacturing workers, 22.6% are women working at major non-agricultural manufacturing industries (BBS 1996). In the private sector, female workers are paid less than male workers. At present, it is encouraging for us that a number of government and non-government organizations have developed packages for entrepreneurship of women in traditional and non-traditional sectors. Moreover, slow growth in per capita income, fall in production, food crisis, shortage of business capital, hindrance in proper transaction, unsteady political scenario, and the alarming poverty level have all contributed to create a gloomy socio-economic picture. Problems of poverty, over-population and unemployment seem to be unavoidably bound together in developing Asian countries. This grave economic situation has compelled a large number of women in Bangladesh, both in urban and rural areas, to enter the labor market for survival.

However, over the past two decades, norms segregating and suppressing women have been crumbling down. Nevertheless, women's access remains limited to services that can equip them to acquire knowledge, obtain essential social services and overcome gender-specific constraints to labor force participation. Ill prepared for the outside world, women are vulnerable to limited economic opportunities and continue to occupy subordinate position in household and the economy. In society, men have generally been the main beneficiaries of economic

development, while women have remained largely unskilled or semi-skilled. Women now comprise the largest share of those living below the poverty line (according to the Planning Commission, in 1985, the poverty line was defined by the government in terms of calorific intake per day of 21222 calories.) and constitute about 5% of the rural population. Due to severe economic and financial constraints in some cases and in order to survive also, women have in the past decades been breaking away from the confines of seclusion and patriarchal control. The number of women who have to go out to work have increased. The World Bank foresaw that this participation would reach 12.2 million in the year 2000.²²

Although women play a crucial role in a family's economy, their efforts are not recognized, as no quantitative analysis has been made of that. They are regarded more as a commodity necessary only for bearing and rearing children. They are politically exploited, socially oppressed, legally ignored and technologically deprived. Female-headed households, in which women, due to widowhood, divorce or desertion, have to take on the burden of their family on themselves, have also increased in number. As more and more women are forced to come out of their homes to earn a livelihood, and men are no longer able to provide for and thereby control them, they will learn to make decisions for themselves. For the future, this will mean that these women will realize the need for the education of their daughters. Various factors like landlessness and male out

migration have increased women's responsibilities as sole primary and secondary income earners of their households.

Some rural women are being lucratively employed in food for work programs in non-governmental activities and other small business ventures like *bidi* (home made cigarettes) rolling. Women have become more independent, but sadly this is due not to the improvement in their position and status but to the acute need to maintain themselves and their family. The economic situation of the country has forced Bangladeshi women to come out from within the confines of their homes. Through education and women's labor, the economic independence of the women would come true. Despite different kinds of difficulties, the lives of many Bangladeshi women are changing in crucial ways.

Women are not merely taking part in village-based work like earth digging, road making activities, etc. There are also many Bangladeshi women who have migrated to the cities and taken up non-traditional employment. 85-90% of the workforce of the garment industries of Bangladesh, which is the country's principal foreign exchange earner consists of women; it is a brave venture in defiance of society. For such women who are engaged in economic activities, marriage becomes less urgent, and the parents also get relieved from the burden of dowry to a great extent. The women who are working in the public field can overcome many social pressures such as, early marriage, dowry, etc. They get the time and opportunity to gain a measure of self-assurance and alliance.

3.3.5 Women and Poverty

Any discussion of Bangladesh necessarily involves some reflection on the current economic situation of the country. In order to be able to understand the lives of the people, especially the women, more easily, some basic understanding of the economic situation is required. The national economy has been undergoing a wide range of macro-level structural adjustment. It is likely that, at the margin, it has been the poorest women of the country who have been hit hardest by these adjustment processes.²³ Although the economic situation of Bangladesh has reached such proportions that it affects both men and women, nevertheless, it is the women who are affected more acutely. The women have to struggle not only with the lack of resources but also with social and cultural constraints and prejudices. Compared to men, they have a much lower rate of literacy, education and skill. In fact, *purdah* and economic segregation due to non-accessibility to resources has kept them far away from income earning opportunities strengthening her subordination to male authority. Rural women suffer much more from appalling poverty and misery than the urban women.

An overwhelming majority live in extreme economic hardship, misery and exploitation. Furthermore, the natural calamities, like flood, cyclone, famine and epidemic have aggravated women's suffering and vulnerability. A careful analysis gave us the understanding that the women who have joined the labor force or have become self-employed did that due to some unnatural circumstances or family

mishaps, such as migration, divorce, husband's sickness, violence, second marriage and death of husband. These include female-headed households with the divorced, widowed, abandoned or even the unmarried women who maintain the family as its head, refraining from marriage due to economic problems or tragedies in personal life. The others are the displaced women and migrant women who have become victims of natural hazards like floods and river erosion or problems of landlessness or loss of possession of land.

3.3.6 Female-Headed Household

The abandoned, widowed, separated and divorced form a class known as female-headed households. These distressed women face untold suffering, and have to struggle in order to survive and bear the burden of a family which former husbands have left them with. Brick breakers, vendors, day laborers and housemaids are among the rural female migrants to different areas who take up the professions previously dominated by men, forsaking their treasured prestige as home makers. These women would, of course, have never left their rural bodies, if they had some arrangements for income in the villages.

With growing impoverishment, the role of women as the most potential development input in poverty alleviation is beginning to be considered. This results, although not intentionally but more out of necessity, in the greater

independence of women. At present, there has been a widespread break down of traditional patriarchal families, especially amongst the poorest classes. This has affected the institution of marriage also. One of the main reasons that women get married in Bangladesh is for economic survival. We have seen that amongst the landless, presently the patriarchal family has stopped functioning as an unit of production, and, therefore, the economic necessity to marry has gone.²⁴ Marriage and motherhood are no longer any guarantee to the poorest women, since the need to be self-supporting forces them to such employment at all stages of life.²⁵ Poverty has also been responsible for breakdown of marital relationships. It has led to increase of marital relationship, divorces and desertions and also explains why if the husband marries again, the first wife has no alternative but to accept and give consent to the second marriage.

Families, which have to depend on the income of the women, tend to evaluate their position differently. Poverty in Bangladesh is primarily a rural phenomenon. One of the major objectives of the Fifth Five-year Plan is poverty alleviation. Recognizing the development of women to be an integral part of the government's strategy to alleviate poverty has been a recent development. In fact, women have remained outside the mainstream of development activities. To ensure balanced socio-economic development of the country, emancipation of women with a change in their status is a pre-condition which can be fulfilled only through increased participation of women in development activities.

The concept of self-image and how a woman perceives herself places a vital role in the manner in which she conducts her daily life. Women's negative self-image continues to be one of the main causes of inequality between men and women. The concept of male dominance and female passivity is the pre-dominant image for centuries. For a long time, women's quest for self-improvement has become a global movement. The Nairobi and Beijing Conferences have demonstrated the consciousness of women throughout the world, and it is worth noticing the impacts these effective conferences and their follow-ups in the developing countries have brought about for women, specially the women of the third world nations.

3.4 Social Stratification and Class

The social stratification and status in Bangladesh is now based on a variety of determinants, such as, land ownership, wealth, education and occupation. Descent has become less important in determining status. As Peter J. Bertocci said, quoting a Bengali proverb, now a days if one's economic position is good, one's lineage status is good.²⁶ The basis of stratification of Bangladeshi society is thus increasingly divided among classes based on economic considerations. However, in the case of marriage, the question of lineage still remains relatively important. Therefore, marriage "only within groups recognizing one another as being of equal status is extremely widely practiced; indeed it is almost universal."²⁷ Although

stratification based on high birth or lineage has become progressively weaker, these still exist in the families who can claim such distinction.

Bangladesh has undergone changes in the sphere of industrialization, urbanization and modernization. But, these changes did not appreciably affect the traditional image of women in Bangladesh society. There might have been some peripheral changes affecting a minority of the female population mainly based in urban areas. But, the basic norms remain unaltered because of the fact that values and normative standards do not change at the same rate as changes in other material aspects of society. Actually, there is a lag between material and non-material culture. This lag explains the frequent failure of law and technological innovation to produce a gap between the right statuses accorded to women by laws and the constitution and those imposed on her by social norms and traditions. What is given to women in theory is rarely within her reach in practice. Innumerable instances may be cited. As for example, law prohibits child marriage in this country, but it is still widely practiced. In fact, the ideal remains the same, the actual behavior pattern deviates from the ideal, and is different for women of different classes.

Bangladeshi society is a stratified one, and situations of Bangladeshi women differ according to the structural division of the society. In discussing the condition of women of Bangladesh, we must take into consideration the basic structural divisions, and examine the position enjoyed by women in each strata.

Economic affluence in urban areas and land holding in rural areas may however be viewed as the basic elements in the stratification pattern. In urban area, we may distinguish three structural units based on income levels: upper, middle and lower.

3.4.1 Women in Urban Class

The upper urban class consists of industrialists, professionals, big businessmen, senior officials and so forth that are economically affluent. They form only a small part of the urban population, and their lifestyles are very different from the average Bangladeshi. Their life is more or less designed by the western ideas. Of the total female population, only about 7 percent live in urban areas. The image of ideal womanhood is not equally fulfilled by the three classes of urban women. Generally, upper class women live a secure and comfortable life, and can afford many modern devices as well as domestic servants to help them in their household work. They usually continue their education to a higher level and are less tradition-bound. *Purdah* restriction is much relaxed and they exercise some say in family decisions.²⁸

Although they live very different and much better lives than the average Bangladeshi women, “the social expectations about female behavior pattern and role have not been denounced or challenged significantly by urban women. The basic concept of unequal male-female relationship lingers among all classes of urban women.”²⁹ Even today, 90 percent of urban women find it easier to go out

and work; nevertheless, at home she has to generally conform to the above type of unequal relationship. Those who do not are still considered to be exceptions. They have to face, sometimes, society's disapproval.

3.4.2 The Lower or Working Class

Working class women represent the lower class, which is the lowest ring of the society. This class is formed of the poverty-stricken, working and illiterate people. They are primarily migrants from rural areas, and usually live in urban slums. Poverty has driven this landless, rural population to the cities in search of work. Due to their lack of skill, training and education, males of this class get low-paid job of domestic servants, laborers, rickshaw puller, etc. People working at a low pay at offices and equally illiterate and unskilled also seek lowly domestic jobs and sometimes wage labor to supplement family income. These families always maintain a link with their own villages and never become totally urban in character.

The lower classes usually live in slums, which lack many basic necessities, and their lifestyles are similar to that of the rural poor in the sense that in case of both these classes, poverty difference develops between the lifestyles of the urban working women class and rural women. Like the poor rural women, the poor urban women also cannot afford to observe *purdah*. Their housing pattern is conducive

to relaxation in observing *purdah*. Girls marry at an early age and have low literacy rates. Divorce and remarriage are frequent. In their devotion and obedience to husbands, these women try to fulfil the image of ideal womanhood. They do not denounce male superiority in man-woman interpersonal family relationship. Instances of husband beating the wife are more common in this class, even though the wife may be bringing some income to the family as a wage earner.

3.4.3 Middle Class

Between the two ends of the pole is the middle class, whose members form the majority of the urban population: the members vary from the borderline of poverty to the borderline of affluence. Middle-class, urban girls are usually given an education. Economic necessity may require them to take up gainful employment outside the house as teachers and in offices. They enjoy more mobility and less seclusion.³⁰ Women in the urban middle class usually live in a nuclear family. Female orientation for girls in these families begins at a comparatively later age. They have better opportunities for education and are less discriminated as compared to girls of the lower class and extended families. As compared to rural women, they have more say in family matters and better access to family resources. The younger generation of educated, middle-class urban women have fewer children. Research has shown that education tends to encourage use of contraceptives and reduce fertility.

Working class urban women have to play the dual role of an earning member of the family as well the traditional roles of wife/daughter-in-law and mother. Marriage is also important for the urban middle class women: single women have no status even in the urban areas and a good marriage is regarded as the ultimate goal of a woman's life. Marriages are usually arranged. Although they marry at a comparatively later age as compared to the lower, rural class or poor urban women, they are usually married in their early twenties.

A small section of educated, middle class urban women work for remunerative jobs outside the home. The number of working woman however is increasing. On the other hand, opposition to women working down outside the home is breaking down because of economic need. There is a growing awareness among parents that education of their daughter should be utilized for gainful employment that brings economic solvency to the family. Acceptance of working women by society has been facilitated by the attitude of these urban working women who have neither challenged nor forsaken their traditional role of wife and mother.

These women, like their less fortunate counterparts, continue to believe that it is their duty to serve their husbands, look after the children and maintain the household. Their outdoor occupation has not resulted in any change of role, but has merely extended their role and obligation. To the domestic role of wife and mother has been added the role of the earning member of the family, and, at the

same time, retaining the traditional role has increased the burden and workload of urban educated women. The additional burden has not, however, been matched by upliftment of the status of the women. It is unfortunate that except for a small minority, educated women are not conscious of women's position in society. In Bangladesh, urban working women have not yet been released from the traditional roles of women.

3.4.4 Rural Class

Rural Bangladesh society is stratified into several classes depending upon economic stability based mainly upon agriculture-based resources e.g. land. The division of classes depends on the ownership and/or control of land and other sources of capital such as ploughs and farm implements, livestock, tube wells and may include non-agricultural investment also. The classes are; 1) the upper/higher class or land lords; 2) the middle class ; 3) the subsistence or marginal class and 4) the landless class. It is not unusual to see that the women may occupy a position, which is different from their male counterparts within the class they belong to.

3.4.5 Rural Upper Class

Rural Upper Class consists of the rapidly diminishing numbers whose land holding leaves a surplus wealth after meeting their needs of subsistence. The

women of these families don't have to work outside their homes and do not wish to do so either. They are, therefore, able, if they wish, to hold on to traditional practices such as observance of *purdah*. The fact that the women can practice strict *purdah* is indicative of the status of the family in that society. Hanna Papanek says: "Women's proper behavior as sheltered persons becomes an important source of the status of their protectors."³¹ Education amongst this class has become more important. It enhances the marriageability of daughter and has become increasingly important bargaining point for girls family. It seems to us that education and connection with the outside world may mean that the class, which is ideally able to afford the luxury of strict *purdah*, may not observe it so strictly.

3.4.6 Middle Class

These families own land but not enough to leave a surplus. They own up to four to five acres of land. The men earn enough from their land to support their families, and the women need only contribute through their unpaid labor within the homestead. Though the middle class families are only able to support themselves from the marginal point of view to maintain respectability and a certain status, they try to educate their daughters. Women of this class may be allowed to work at prestigious village-based occupations for which education is required; for instance, they may become primary school teachers or hold government posts such as lady health visitor, family welfare assistant, etc. They try to maintain a middle

line between holding on to traditional values as well as adapting to needs of the times. Daughters are therefore allowed to work, but, in order to preserve the modesty of the female family members whenever they leave the home, a *burqa* may be used.

3.4.7 The Marginal or Subsistence Class

The members of this class own some land but not enough to adequately provide for their families and must engage in some other forms of employment, so that they may work as sharecroppers or wage laborers on somebody else's land. In that case, the supplementary income of the women is essential, and, therefore, the women of these families have to engage in paid labor in the village. Their earning is very necessary for their families. They generally work at the households of rich farmers. Women from such families cannot meet the costs of *purdah*, because *purdah* is considered as a luxury matter. So, the situation necessarily dictates one more open behavior of women: "Women cannot observe *purdah* in their baris or in the village, they may borrow *burqas* to wear or wrap a sari around a rickshaw, or carry an open umbrella."³²

3.4.8 The Landless Class

Due to smaller fragmentation of land and overpopulation, the number of rural families who have no cultivable land is growing at an alarming rate. This class may have a homestead, but have no land, which they may cultivate and subsist upon. So, many of the women of these families may be forced to take part in paid village labor, but even then they cannot subsist, all members of the family are deployed to seek wage labor outside the village. There is less discrimination between boys and girls in these poor households. Neither boys nor girls get education, and both are deployed to find whatever work can be found. *Purdah* observance is impossible for the women of this class, and although they are conscious of breaking traditions, they have no alternative. They take whatever jobs they can find. We mean to say that they work within the village or outside; it may mean migrating or tours to seek employment or being reduced to begging or even to prostitution. Rumors about their lack of honor and chastity may affect their chance of marriage and the groom may demand higher dowry.

3.5 Women in kin groups

Women in Bangladesh live in matrilineal kin groups within a patriarchal family structure at patrilocal residence. In this patrilineal kinship system, inferiority of women is reflected, firstly, in the system of transferability of the daughter to the husband's kin group and, secondly, in the tracing of descent

through the male. A married woman is known through the husband and not through the father. When she becomes a mother, she is identified by her child and normally by the first child. She loses her own identity and is called the mother of so and so. Even before the birth of the first child, a married woman is not called by her given name. Until she becomes a mother, she is called "*bau ma*" or in short "*bau*" by the elders. In Bangladesh society, a man is also sometimes called as father of the child. But, in that case, it is reciprocal; the child also takes his name. The usual practice is that a man is called by his own name throughout his life. But a married woman is never identified by her own name. She is usually called by kinship terminology. A man is identified throughout life through his father. But a woman can identify herself by reference to her husband. As she is transferred to the husband's family, her own kin identity is also changed from the father's to the husband's. A widow also continues to identify herself with the deceased husband. Only in the case of divorce, all connections and identities with the former husband are permanently severed.

In Bangladesh, patrilineal kinship is supported by patrilocal residence where women have to accompany their husbands on marriage. Married women are not free to live with their own relations or to invite them to their house to live. Each household has some peculiarities that are distinctly its own, and the new bride is expected to adapt herself to these peculiarities. She is often at a loss as to how to do it, as her parents can be of little help, and society does not sympathise

with her because of the social conventions. She must, therefore, pass through tensions all alone and attempt to adjust herself to the situation. If she succeeds, she is lucky. If she fails, she is doomed to condemnation. Matrilocal residence is rare in Bangladesh. Unless there is some unusual situation, a man does not live with in-laws and when a man at all lives in the law's house, he is not expected to show a close attachment or belongingness to the family. He is treated like a privileged guest and does not sacrifice superiority and domination over wife, and the children are known through his own kin group.

In the preceding section, we have mentioned the position of women in Bangladesh from different social perspectives. It is true that changes in women's position in Bangladesh have taken place during the last few decades. To some extent, the capability of earning income through labor and product markets has undoubtedly served to improve women's position in relation to men. It is now possible for the average woman to question her inferior status, as well as the social restrictions imposed upon her activities in ways that were inconceivable even a generation earlier.³³ Not surprisingly, the capacity to earn market incomes has tended to lead to a certain re-valuation of the status of women by their immediate families—particularly the men, i.e. fathers, husbands or brothers.

We have seen some women industrial workers were the sole earning members of their respective families, and their dependents included parents as well as brothers and sisters. In recent times, the value of women workers in the

marriage market has risen, because potential grooms now express a preference for brides with income-earning capabilities. Such a rise in the value of women, whether as earning wives, daughters, or sisters can, in its turn, be expected to generate a consequential rise in the value of female children during the coming decades. In fact, the birth of a girl no longer implies that she will necessarily be a certain 'burden' for her parent, including that of marrying her off as soon as possible.

3.6 Conclusion

Though some changes and development has occurred in favor of women in Bangladesh, a great majority of women could not be brought into the mainstream development activities. The objectives of the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies could not be achieved due to limited resources and ill-designed programs and uncoordinated efforts. The targets for women in employment, education and health sectors could not be reached. The female literacy rate has increased from 15 to 25.5 percent (B.B.S.1998). Women's share in the government officers and autonomous bodies has increased from 6 to 8 percent (MCWA 1996). Therefore, gender gaps are found to have remained as wide as ever. However, in the recent years, signs of improvement in the status of women in education and health sectors have been noticeable. Legal reforms have been made to protect the rights of

women and prevent violence against them. Despite a little progress in some areas, male female disparities still exist in Bangladesh. An alarming trend is noticed in the rate at which women are falling into the poverty process. The rapid feminization of poverty has thrown a challenge to the poverty alleviation efforts in this country. Violence against women in various forms is increasing fast, despite enactment of some laws. All these necessitate a concrete and specific national plan of action to achieve the objectives of Equality, Development and Peace.³⁴

The experience of the last two decades indicate that the operational approaches of the state and international agencies for promoting advancement of women fell short of target in four critical areas:

1. No serious attempt was made by agencies and the state to clearly identify the core elements of women's agenda and shape various policies around that agenda.
2. Policy objectives were articulated in a broad and diffuse manner.
3. Process focused objectives, e.g. integration and "mainstreaming" were highlighted which detracted attention from the substantive agenda e.g. gender equality, women's empowerment, women's well being, and so on.
4. The distinction between ends (e.g. gender equality) and means (e.g. mainstreaming) were not clarified.

Though the Constitution of Bangladesh guarantees equal rights and status for women and men, barriers to women's empowerment still exist in spite of the efforts made by the government. In concrete terms, to achieve the goal of equality between women and men, empowerment of women is a must. Empowerment of women implies that women are able to influence decisions that concern them and choose their opinions. The strategic interests of women could be attained through women's effective participation in decision-making in all aspect of life. We believe that women's empowerment and strategic interests are political issues and are directly concerned with relations of power.

Bangladesh must take into consideration this vital issues and concern. Hence, the policies and programs of all the sectors should be made responsive to gender issues, if women's advancement and equality with men in both public and private spheres are to be ensured. Although gender inequality is a universal phenomenon, it is especially affecting the women of Bangladesh socially, economically, culturally and politically. Amongst the millions of poor, Bangladeshi women are the most deprived of all. Their social status is lower than men's. Their key role in production is unrecognized; often low and household income is controlled by men. Female child mortality is higher, their enrollment in primary and secondary education is lower. They have less access to food, clothing, medical services and legal rights. Early marriage, dowry and divorce, combined with the constant fear of violence often ruin their lives.

Equality between women and men is seen as an important issue for the whole of the society, and not as women's issue. Gender disparities are important hindrances to development. To promote equality between women and men, we have to focus on both women and men and the relationships between them, rather than make an exclusive focus on women. It is also necessary both to understand and tackle the structural causes of inequality, rather than the symptoms, and to be able to ensure that both women and men are engaging in, and taking responsibility for promoting equality. We know the constitution of Bangladesh grant equal rights to women with men, but it seems to us still to be very theoretical.

Actually, by custom, the life of a woman is shaped by the patriarchal nature of the social system. It is almost a common thinking of the people that a woman should never be independent. Her father has authority over her in childhood, her husband in youth and her son in old age. This social custom is a threat to women's position in society and clear indication of regarding women as inferior in every possible way. It is the women who are the poorest of the poor because of the social prejudice, customs and conventional attitudes, which affect them adversely. Specially in the rural areas, and even in female headed households, decisions are taken by the male relatives. There is no single social indicator to measure the status of women, as this varies with cultural difference.

All the forces described above, historical as well as health, education, work and economic, form important parts of women's lives. The combination of the

various factors discussed above is responsible for the uniqueness of the Bangladeshi women's situation. She is different from other Muslim women, as well as from women of other poor third world countries or those belonging to other patriarchal societies. The various factors described in this chapter operate alongside institutional patriarchy that in their turn reinforce the historical, traditional of patriarchal domination. All in all, "social, cultural and religious institutions reflect or reinforce female dependency, even as they guarantee women love, honor, protection or worship."³⁵

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Some Social Practices Combined with Constant Violence Against Women

4.1 Introduction

In the present chapter, we have discussed some common social practices by which the women in the India-Pakistan-Bangladesh sub-continent are affected to a large extent. Violence against women in various forms has started figuring at the top of women's agenda in Bangladesh. Of them, dowry, early marriage, wife beating, rape, sexual harassment, divorce, etc. are significant. This ranges from non-violent forms of mental torture, such as the constant threat of abandonment and divorce to physical acts of violence, such as murder. The practices of violence affects the lives of the people, particularly the women, in variety of critical ways, and, therefore, it is necessary to find out the true nature of this phenomenon. Violence, as it exists in Bangladesh, is therefore the subject matter of this chapter. This includes its historical assimilation with the social framework, how it operates within the structure of contemporary society, the practical ramifications of early marriage, dowry and divorce on the lives of the men, women and their families who are affected by this practice.

In the first section of this chapter, we have discussed early marriage and its influence upon women, upon family and society as a whole. In the second section of this chapter, we discussed divorce and tried our best to show that due to non-

payment of dowry, sometimes families break up as a consequence of death or divorce. And, in the third section, we have discussed other forms of violence, especially family violence, violence at work place, violence in the form of trafficking and forced prostitution and violence resulting from *fatwa*, etc.

4.2 Child Marriage

The age at which women are married play an important role all over their lives. It does not affect only their lives but society as a whole. It has far-reaching repercussions upon the fertility of women, and thus, the whole population of Bangladesh. The age of marriage is directly related to the position of women as regards their status. Early marriage actually confines a girl within four walls of domestic and social pressure. All the opportunities of discovering her as a complete human being with potentiality become closed to her. That is why both Muslim and Bangladeshi laws prohibit child marriage. State law sets the legal age of marriage for girls at 18 years, and Muslim law requires that both parties enter into an agreement willingly. It is also common practice for villagers or rural people to assume a marriage to have taken place despite the absence of all necessary officials. This makes the conditions of marriage very arbitrary and easily imposed ones, which provide the “husband” with overwhelming power and authority over his “wife”.

4.2.1 Civil Law Relating to the Age of Marriage

The law relating to the age of marriage is an important example of the plurality of laws that is a feature of personal laws in Bangladesh. There exists in Bangladesh a specific state law relating to the age of marriage i.e. the Child Marriage Restraint Act, 1929, with subsequent amendments in 1961 and 1984. Muslim law, on the other hand, lays down certain rules and prescriptions relating to the age of marriage that sometimes come directly into conflict with statutory laws. Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929 represents one of the major legislative changes that occurred during the British reign, which substantially interfered with customary and religious practices of India. This law could be there as the country was then under foreign rule. An earlier attempt in the first half of the 1880's by some Indian social reformers to bring about laws prohibiting child marriages had failed.¹ It was only after the passing of the Age of Consent Act of 1891, which recognized the offence of rape within marriage that legislation restraining child marriages was considered seriously.

4.2.2 Child Marriages in the Sub-continent before the Act

In this sub-continent, before this Act, child marriage was practiced. Marriages were considered as normal as anything else. They felt it as their holy

duty. Under Hindu law, which has a great influence on all the people of the sub-continent, child marriages are allowed; in fact, they are commended.

“Orthodox Hindus of all castes until recent times have insisted upon marrying off their daughters before the attainment of puberty, a practice that at times has been adhered to even to the detriment of the parties.”² Orthodox Hindus therefore greatly favoured child marriage considering it as a sin for the parents to keep their daughters unmarried. It was believed by some authors that it is from the early Christian era that child marriage began to take place in India.³ In ancient India, child marriages were not the norms; it only became so from the early centuries of the Christian era; the Hindu religious texts of the period from 600 to 900 A.D. advocated for the marriage of girls normally between the ages of 8 to 10 and certainly before the age of 12 years.⁴ During the period of 800 to 1000 CE, this practice found greater and greater social acceptability and came to be widely practiced.⁵

Although sanctioned by religion, the Muslim community practiced child marriage widely. The majority of the people belonging to religions other than Hinduism in India are alleged to have copied the custom of child marriage from the Hindus.⁶ On the other hand, William Hunter explained the phenomena of child marriages by saying that Muslim atrocities perpetrated on Hindu women drove the population to adopt child marriage as a measure of safety, because the Muslims were reluctant to violate any woman who was already married.⁷ Thus, some

believe that child marriage like *purdah* became security against violation by Muslim invaders. Whichever community was responsible for the phenomena initially, the practice of child marriage became equally prevalent amongst both.

4.2.3 Child Marriage in Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, (according to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistic) during the period of 1951 to 1961, there was a decrease of the age of marriage from 14.4 to 13.9 years. In 1961, the Muslim Family Law Ordinance fixed the minimum age limit at 16 years. Following this increase, the mean age at marriage for women in the years 1965, 1974, 1995 and 1998 rose to 14.8, 15.9 and 16.6, 20.2 respectively (B.B.S. 1998). In the eighties, the Child Marriage Restraint (Amendment) Ordinance of 1984 further increased the age limit for females to 18. The age of marriage officially continued to rise until the official statistics show that in the year 1989 –90, the age of marriage reached the required minimum age of 18, and in 1992, it became 18.2 (B.B.S. 1993.) In 1998, it rose up to the age of 20.2 (B.B.S.1998).

4.2.4 Child Marriage: Cultural and Social Attitudes

The cause of early marriage in Bangladeshi society is first and foremost religious belief. Actually, child marriage facilitates the continuation of patriarchy,

since it depends on the authority of the male family members to arbitrarily decide the future of their children. Through the institution of child marriage, like *purdah*, the parents seek to ensure the purity and chastity of the girl until she marries. In support of child marriage, many argue that prepubescent girls are at risk of rape, sexual abuse and molestation, any of which would render not only them but also their female siblings unmarriageable. Female child marriage therefore, is seen as a preventative measure and a proactive solution to the problem of child abuse. As well, both families benefit in that one reduces the number of children to be fed while the other acquires free domestic help. So long as girls remain unmarried they must continue to reside in the home of a male member of their family (father, uncle, brother, grandfather) and are viewed, therefore, as a burden both financially and in terms of the increased responsibility of ensuring that they remain “marriageable” as they get older.

In Bangladesh most marriages are arranged, the parents with the male members having the greater say, considering themselves the best judges of what is good for their daughter. Marrying their daughters off at an early age ensures that the young girl can mould and adapt herself to her husband and in-laws. The new daughter-in-law would not have the time to develop her own personality and would be still malleable.⁸ High mortality rate may also be an important factor responsible for early marriage, for early marriage is considered helpful in producing more children to guard against the risk of death.⁹

In a poor rural family the economic burden of unmarried daughter who would not be a good investment for the future also means that girls are married as soon as possible. Therefore, economic considerations have an effect on the age of marriage. This can operate in another manner. Muslim weddings in Bangladesh involve a great amount of expenditure for the bride's family which some families can ill afford, especially if they have a number of daughters. The presence of an unmarried girl over the age of 16 is often a sign of poverty.¹⁰

It is a common picture that the parents of a daughter, unmarried beyond a certain age, face the criticism and ridicule of society. This is true both for urban and rural areas, although there may be differences as to what is considered the proper age.

According to Therese Blanchet, "Unmarried adolescent girls spell danger. They are hidden, marginalized and teased. This is specially pronounced in rural society where they are still an anomaly."¹¹ Though there has been some change in the attitudes of the people, this change does not correspond to the minimum age set down by law. In Bangladesh, where the majority of the population is rural, child marriages below the age prescribed by the Act is still the rule, rather than the exception.

4.2.5 Physical, Emotional and Intellectual Effects of Child Marriage in Bangladesh

4.2.5(a) Physical

Physically, early consummation and frequent childbearing affects a girl's health permanently. The UNICEF report of 1991 says:

“given her early age at marriage and frequent pregnancies, in addition to being under-fed and overworked by the mid-30s , the average Bangladeshi woman is drained and exhausted.”¹² The major criticism against child marriages is that it involves the woman in the roles of wife and mother before she is ready for it. Early marriage and thereby early pregnancies takes thereby toll of her health.

4.2.5(b) Emotional

Even though a girl might come from the poorest of households where she had to, from a very early age, help in the household tasks, nevertheless the proximity, familiarity and affection of her parents, siblings, aunts, uncles and grandparents gave her a sense of security. As soon as she is married, the young bride is expected to have security from her husband's home, but she is also deprived of the security from her in-laws house.

When a girl is married as a child, she has to deal with various sorts of relationships, which she is not equipped for before marriage. The husband does not

have to leave his familiar environments nor be separated from his family. The child bride has, on the other hand, to deal alone with being a wife with all the consequences, physical and otherwise, of marriage. She is deprived from enjoying an untroubled childhood, even though poverty-stricken, and have too soon to cope with the realities of life.

Since economic considerations play such a great part in marriages in Bangladesh, most women in Bangladesh are aware of the fact that once married, they cannot go back and burden their parents, especially after the money spent on dowry and other marriage expenses. Whyte and Whyte describe the frightening effects of early marriage upon young Asian girls:

“Something of the tensions suffered by young girls, uprooted from a loving family environment to one where, at best, they must be on their guard because their behaviour and performance of duties are being subject to critical security by all around them is revealed in studies of suicide.”¹³ If the marriage ends in divorce, the girls are rarely welcomed back into their paternal homes. Unable to adjust with the unpleasant situation both at their father’s home and their husband’s home, they are forced into prostitution and undesirable activities.

4.2.5(c) Intellectual

Actually child marriage throws the women in the stereotype role of wife and mother without giving her a chance to develop her intellectually. She is deprived of education, and, therefore, remain in the dark. Because of the sole responsibility, which they have to bear on so early in life, their whole existence is centered round survival so much that they cannot think for themselves or formulate opinion. One of the major causes of backwardness in education amongst women of Bangladesh is the early age at which they are married off. Usually girls are married much earlier than boys in Bangladesh. The age difference between the spouses is usually very wide.¹⁴ There are also other big factors that help to create an environment in which child marriage has become a common factor in Bangladesh. These factors are deeply rooted in history, culture and religion, and are not easily circumvented or counteracted. Usually, the young girls are forced into marriage either due to concerns that they will be rendered “unmanageable” through rape, sexual abuse or the perceived need to pay dowry or an increased risk of abuse.

4.3 Dowry

The institution of dowry is responsible for many types of violence against and repression of women. Dowry or *joutuk*, as it is known in Bengali, is a type of

marriage payment made in goods or property by the bride's side to the groom and his family. This ranges from non-violent mental torture such as the constant threat of abandonment and divorce to physical acts of violence, such as beating or even murder. Suicides of young married women are also largely attributed to dowry demands. The sharpening of focus on women's issues which followed the UN declaration of the Women's Decade (1976-85) and the publicity given by newspapers and various women's rights groups to the abuse of young married women due to non-payment of dowry, a very recent phenomenon among Bengali Muslims have been instrumental in bringing family violence against women to public attention. Even the limited news-coverage (in the words of one editor, "This is just the tip of the ice berg") suggests that while men figure both as aggressors and victims in family violence, the overwhelming majority of women figure only as victim of family violence. The number of female victims' abnormal death including homicide occurring at families is considerable and the number of women who suffer from beatings and torture inflicted by husbands and in-laws is likely to be much greater. These shocking facts has compelled Bangladeshi society to acknowledge that the most treacherous form of danger which threatens the safety of a Bangladeshi woman is hidden right in her home which is socially regarded as the safest place for her to be in. Some grim items have become a regular feature in newspaper. The nerves of the reading public are jolted every

morning by reports of such sensational and shocking cruelty committed by apparently sane people on their near and dear ones.

The presentation of reported incidents of family violence mentioned in the newspaper shows that statistically the most 'dangerous' and 'unsafe' relationship in the family from a woman's point of view is the marital state. The demands for dowry often continue after marriage, and the wife may be forced to suffer physical and mental torture for the inability of her parents to fulfil her husband's and his family's additional and continuing demands. The inability of the wife's family to pay dowry may cause the marriage to end in divorce or the husband to marry again in order to procure more dowry. According to *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, March 20, 1989, the institution of dowry was responsible for the breakup of 200,000 marriages in Bangladesh each year according to the National Association of Marriage Registrars.¹⁵ Actually, the practice of *mahr* has been replaced by dowry in the form of money, property and gifts given to the groom by the bride's family in the last two decades. Dowry system is very much associated with women's lower status. It is a significant source of violence against women and can have a powerful influence on a women's relationship with her original new one." We have seen that mistreatment on account of dowry may be the result either of demands for additional dowry or on account of failure to pay the originally promised dowry.

We know that cats and other domestic animals are useful as long as they do what they are supposed to do and remain available at the pleasure of their master; even if that pleasure includes kicking, so be it. But woe to that cat who leaps away too quickly or bites or claws back. Woe to the wife whose family refuses or is unable to pay a dowry, the cause of a host of murders. Most men in our society look upon women as domestic animals placed on earth to serve or please them. Women have no more sensibilities, no more rights, and no more soul than a cat. They can be maltreated with much impunity, at least until the laws and courts provide the protection, which women need and deserve.

4.3.1 Legislation Against Dowry Violence

In 1983, the Cruelty to Women Deterrent Punishment Ordinance was enacted. Sec. 6 of the Ordinance lays down: "Whoever, being a husband or parent, guardian or relation of the husband of any woman, causes or attempt to cause death or grievous hurt to that woman for dowry shall be punishable with transportation for life or with rigorous imprisonment for a term which may extend to fourteen year, and shall also be liable to fine." Recently, the Women and Child Repression (Special Provision) Act of 1995 was enacted in view of the escalating number of crimes against women. Section 10(1) of this Act imposes death penalty on the husband and/or members of the family for causing death for dowry and life imprisonment for attempting to cause death. Section 11 lays down penalty for

causing grievous hurt to a woman in connection with the payment of dowry. A person may be sentenced to life imprisonment or 14 years' rigorous imprisonment (which will not be less than 5 years) and be required to pay additional monetary compensation.

4.3.2 Dowry Prohibition Act of 1980

In Bangladesh, the percentage of marriages in which dowries are demanded and paid has increased in the rural areas in recent years. The institution has become so crucially important that the inability to pay dowry may mean that the daughter of the family remains unmarried. Bangladesh is the third country in this sub-continent (the first being India, the second Pakistan) that had to recognise the increase in this system and take heed of the problems caused.

On March the 13th 1979, a female member of the parliament, Mrs. Deulat Nessa Khatoon M. P. introduced the Bangladesh Anti-dowry Bill as a Bill to safeguard the rights and status of women. She was an M. P. from the ruling party.

Dowry Prohibition Act of 1980, as amended by Dowry Prohibition Amendment Ordinance 1986. Sec. 3, states. "If any person, after the commencement of this Act, gives or takes or abets the giving or taking of dowry, he shall be punishable with imprisonment which may extend to five years and shall not be less than one year, or with fine or with both" (*The Bangladesh*

Gazette, Extract, April 2, 1986). The maximum penalty for dowry was thus increased from one year to five years with the Additional Provision Act (since it came into effect from the end of 1981)

Although people know about the Dowry Prohibition Act, some of them were under the impression that they would have to follow society's contemporary trends; otherwise, their daughters must remain unmarried. The existence of laws prohibiting dowry payments was vague threats compared to the immediate and practical threat of having unmarried daughter in their family. The family members think of their daughter's happiness and secured life; therefore they prefer giving dowry. It may be concluded from the above findings that the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1980 has failed to achieve its objectives of stopping the escalation of the practice. We can mention here that the practice of dowry is responsible to a great extent for the unequal treatment to daughters. Undeniably the costs involved in getting a daughter married have increased greatly with the rapid spread of the dowry system. According to Barbara Miller's hypothesis, negligence to female folk and the costs involved in marriage are strongly connected.¹⁶

In Bangladesh, Muslim women are by virtue of Muslim inheritance laws entitled to only half of the share of their male counterparts. Custom prevailing in Bangladesh dictates that women, once married, give up even this unequal share. For the rural women, going on visit to their paternal village is almost the only recreation they ever have. In order not to compromise their welcome at their natal

homes, the women usually never claim their share in the property to which they are by law entitled to; although this is half of what their brother's have. Practically, therefore, the woman is deprived of her inheritance in favor of dowry. So, it is much better that they receive neither a dowry nor an inheritance. Muslim inheritance laws support her position as an unequal member of her natal family. Her lack of equal claim is further intensified by customs and social norms, which discourage her not to claim even that portion to which she is legally entitled. Violence against women is one defined very broadly to include any act "involving use of force with an intent of perpetuation or promotion of hierarchical gender relations in all social structure: family, community, work place and society."¹⁷ We can define it in this way that it includes any violation of women's basic rights on the ground of gender as an act of violence. In this sense, various forms of violence may take place in private and public area, committed by family members or strangers. Of them, major types of violence against women are:

1. Family violence;
2. Violence against women at work place;
3. Trafficking in women and forced prostitution;
4. Violence resulting from Fatwa, etc.

Violence committed by family members within the family home is the most serious and repugnant of all types of violence. The intimate context makes it difficult for the victim. To seek redress, at the same time, the closed family

structure makes it possible for the aggressor to repeat the violence. Though family violence includes child abuse, parent abuse and in-law abuse perpetrated by male aggressors on female victims, at present marital violence (wife abuse) has become the most serious type of family violence. We have already discussed family violence in the form of child marriage, divorce and dowry. Violence in the family is perhaps as old as the institution itself, yet this grave social problem has received inadequate attention from Bangladeshi researchers so far. The threat posed by violence committed against family members by members of the family remained largely hidden from public attention. The sharpening of focus on women's issues which followed the UN Declaration of the Women's Decade (1976-85) and the publicity given by newspapers and various women's rights groups to the abuse of young married women due to non-payment of dowry among Bengali Muslims have been instrumental in bringing family violence against women to public attention. Of the motives identified, majority of family violence are due to family quarrels. In a tradition-bound society with patriarchal family structure the wife has little say in decision-making activities. She is always to be blamed, and being the weaker sex, she is tortured inhumanly. Surprisingly, family quarrels ending in the fatal murder of wives are not something new.

4.4 Rural-Urban Comparison of Violent Acts

Family quarrels have been pointed out as one of the major causes of death. More than 50 percent of murders are due to family disagreements in decision-making, lack of understanding and unfulfilled demands of the husband both in the rural and urban areas. Demands in cash or kind to young wives by their husbands and in-laws are common in both rural and urban areas. Dowry deaths are compared to 10 percent in the cities. Mostly, the younger age groups are victimized just after they are married or after some years of married life, even when they have become mothers. Although death figures are much lower in the cities, still the phenomena of dowry remain an enigma, and its influence on social life is unrelenting. Most deaths are undetected due to the secondary relationship of urban living. Suicides of young brides due to inhuman treatment of husbands and in-laws either due to dowry demands or family maladjustment have not been documented, but such incidents do occur.

Actually, suicides are committed by those who have gone beyond the limit of tolerance, being treated and neglected most cruelly both mentally and physically. Generally, young girls or housewives after suffering much cruelty from their family members--either husbands or their parents--commit suicide.

Murder for property rights are negligible. It is 5 percent in the urban areas as compared to 2 percent in the rural areas. Mostly they are of the older age group

and married. Such low percentage is due to the fact that women hardly assert their property rights.

In a rural household, a girl is married off at an early age and loses her maiden identity. She is identified through her husband, and her position becomes secured only after the birth of a child with emphasis given more to a male child. Although women know of their claim to their father's property, they let the brothers enjoy in exchange for the benefits the brothers bestow on them like inviting them to visit once or twice a year or presenting gifts occasionally.

Urban women in possession of property are also controlled by male members of their family. Property rights are legally sanctioned by Muslim Sharia Law, but decision-making relating to property matters is usually controlled mostly by men. Independent, income-earning women are not only comparatively few, but almost negligible. Marital status is one of the determining factors in murders committed for various motives outlined above. Murders are committed more by married women than by single women. Single young girls are usually raped after being forcibly taken away by miscreants from their homes and then murdered.¹⁸ It occurs more in the villages where they are unprotected and insecure and law-enforcing agents like police are unapproachable. Rape victims are found also among married women in the rural areas. One such case is that of a young housewife, aged 17, who was kidnapped by a group of miscreants, raped and then battered by sharp weapons.¹⁹ On the other hand, a vast majority of married women

in both rural and urban areas are mercilessly killed due to strain family relationships either with husbands or in-laws. Thus, it can be concluded that some types of crimes are committed on married women, more than single women.

4.4.1 Violence at Work Place

Women are exposed to various forms of violence because of their gender. Solutions however have not been easy because of the complexity of gender relations, which has placed women in subordinate positions. The subordination of women is when women are often forced to accept such abusive behaviour, because the constraint threat of losing their jobs and consequently their livelihood is always a factor. When we speak of violence in Bangladesh, we refer also to harassment that takes place every day on the streets, in market places, in every institution, whenever women go to their work place.

Harassment on the streets is widespread especially while travelling on the bus, said one NGO worker. There is a lot of unnecessary pushing and shoving, if a woman travels alone by rickshaw and she invariably has to face lewd and suggestive comments. One NGO worker says she is often asked to pay extra fare when she travels by the bus alone; she feels that this constitutes men controlling public spaces. Harassment is a seriously discouraging factor, which may compel

many women not to take up employment. One of the most debilitating forms of harassment is conduct that interferes with a woman's ability to do her job.

The garments sector employs 80% women. It is an excellent example of the increasing participation of Bangladeshi women in the formal sector. These women have added to the number of women who have, for a very long time, been involved in informal sectors such as jobs of domestic servants. Women in most societies face discrimination regarding pay and working conditions. In that case, NGOs are working with women in the garment industries to improve such conditions, to ensure safety, health and hygiene at work, etc. However, these women face discrimination not only regarding working conditions but continuous harassment.

Young female employees are almost exclusively at the bottom of the hierarchy; the upper levels are invariably male. The sexual element of the relation between female employees and male boss is not contained and shaped by kin relations, and that is one cause for factory girls to be regarded as not quite 'respectable'.²⁰

In many areas of the workforce, women still represent a minority, and are relatively recent entrants into the field. Because of their predominately junior and minority status, for some women it is more difficult than it is for men to win credibility and respect from employers, co-workers, and clients or customers. That can make women's position at the workplace marginal or precarious from the start. Sexual harassment operates to further discredit the female employee by treating

her as a sexual object, rather as a credible coworker with the potential to succeed. Because of women's different status at the workplace, conduct that may be "just a joke" for men may have far more serious implications for women.

To recognize the violence against women, it has to be talked, defined, and has legal provisions for protecting the women of Bangladesh. Article 27 of the Constitution of Bangladesh states that: "Nothing in this article shall prevent the state from making special provisions in favour of children or for the advancement of any backward sectors of citizens." And even CEDAW, which has been adopted by the Government of Bangladesh states that --

Article II:

1. State parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the field of employment in order to ensure, on a basis of equality of men and women, the same rights, in particular:
 - a. The right to work as an inalienable right of all human beings.
 - b. The right to protection of health and to safety in working conditions, including the safeguarding of the function or reproduction.

Though with the increase of globalization and industrialization, women's entry to work is increasing in Bangladesh. Women in garments sector are the most vulnerable group exposed to a world of non-recognition of their labour, less

dignity at workplace, and they are easy prey of subjugation to physical violence leading to sexual harassment. Nearly about 1400,000 women are working now in this sector. Laws at workplace are not recognized at all, and even the findings in respect of the government of Bangladesh on platform of Action recognized that the most of the women workers of Bangladesh are unaware about their basic working rights.²¹ With the increase of violence in Bangladesh, sexual harassment is also increasing. A big number of women workers of the garment sector are regularly being harassed for wages. These women workers in reality are low-paid, having no access to other benefits; even leaves are denied as well as night work is mandatory for every single worker of this sector. Night shift is totally prohibited under the existing Factories Act of 1965. But, this provision is not at all recognized by the most reputable foreign exchange earner of Bangladesh. The struggle for basic rights at workplace is so little recognized; as a result, the sexual harassment issue is a totally forbidden domain existing in the garment sector. The socio-cultural background and the middle class sentiment and physiology of the women workers do not reveal the existing forms of violence that is rampant in this sector. Recent incidents of alleged rape of garment workers of a garment factory by the employer reported in the newspaper may create concern in some quarters, but this is a common form of violence encountered by the women workers of Bangladesh.

Lack of recognition and legislative protection, and the urgency of safeguards by an alternative mechanism in the absence of legislative measure are

extremely needed. In the absence of legislative measures, the need is to find an effective alternative mechanism to fulfil this felt and urgent social need. Violence at the work place is but the violation of the fundamental rights of equality and of life and liberty. It is clear violation of the rights under the Articles of the Constitution of Bangladesh.

No longer it is possible for all the women to remain cocoons within the confines of their homes, secluded in *purdah* and under the patriarchs' strict control. Thus: "Factors which cause widespread poverty also contribute to weaken the patriarchal family as a unit of production. This has important consequences on the lives of women whose traditional encapsulation is increasingly broken."²² As already described, women have had to go out to seek work in order to survive; as a group of women succinctly put it, '*purdah*' does not feed us.²³ With growing impoverishment, the role of women in poverty alleviation or as the most potential development input is beginning to be considered. This results, although not intentionally, but more out of necessity, in the greater independence of women. Thus, the fundamental right to carry on any occupation, trade or profession depends on the availability of a safety and dignity through suitable legislation and the creation of a mechanism for its enforcement. Protection from sexual harassment and right to work with dignity is a universally recognized basis of human right. The common minimum requirement of these rights have received

global acceptance. Sexual harassment at workplace is a wide spread violence globally, but little recognized.

Countries fighting for establishing gender equality are concerned about this violence, which do not have definition of legislative coverage. Countries like the Philippines and India have strongly advocated for introduction of a legislation on this form of violence. In 1992 in India, a landmark judgment was given in bringing out interpretation of the Judiciary on this issue in Writ Petition (Criminal) No. 666-70 of 1992. The landmark judgment filling the legislative vacuum on this issue has narrated effective and norms on this issue. The principles of CEDAW and Beijing statements of Platform of Action have been outlined to formulate the guidelines. As such, Bangladesh can also take right measures to develop a protective legislation for the workingwomen of Bangladesh and acknowledge the sexual harassment at work place. Adequate measures are needed to develop a mechanism for the workers to voice their rights as well as legislative structure to check this violence.

4.4.2 Violence resulting from Fatwa

Bangladesh is a predominantly Muslim country with rigid attitudes toward women's affairs. State law is based on interpretation of Muslim law. However, village heads, religious leaders and others in positions of power often interpret

Muslim law in a manner that contravenes that of the state and that jeopardize more than state law would have them. Specifically, those living in rural areas, the illiterate majority and the uneducated are particularly vulnerable to such extremist interpretations. Instance of “fatwa”--cases in which women are tried and punished on the basis of extremist or fundamentalist interpretations of Muslim law are not uncommon. However, an unexpected inhumane situation in respect of women’s status has been prevailing in Bangladesh since a long historical past, though some significant changes have taken place over the years. At present, presence of women is being felt more and more in different areas of life.

Their increased involvement is observed in all sectors of economy. Legal reforms have also been made to protect them from violence and abuses.²⁴ But as the benefits have been unevenly touching the women living in rural and urban areas, the rural Muslim women are still being exploited under the coverage of the religious beliefs prevailing in the society of rural Bangladesh. Now, the tragic scenario of exploitation of women in rural Bangladesh is an open secret, as it is reflected in their marriage, divorce, dowry, *purdah* education, employment and mode of religious practice, etc. It seems to us very clear that the oppression of Muslim women in rural Bangladesh as well as in the global atmosphere does not result from the divine injunctions of Islam rather it is due to the religious misconception of the so called *fatwabaz* Muslim *ulamas*, *mowlanas* and *mollahs*.

In the history of the world, Islam is the first religion and first social system which recognised the human status of women and conferred on them the highest dignity and honour and granted them equal rights with men in every respect, and abolished all discriminations on the basis of sex -- God has clearly defined and guaranteed the rights of women in Al-Qu'rān, so that they could no more be subjected to those wrong injustices and oppressions which had been inflicted on them since the beginning of the human species.²⁵ Islam considers a woman as a fully independent and thereby also responsible human being. For Muslim women of the rural Bangladesh, the status is not only poor, rather it is alarming. It is because the so-called Muslims changed the teachings of God and His Prophet, and misinterpreted those in which injunctions about women had been given. As the Qu'rān, the Hadiths and history were interpreted by Muslim males, they diverted every divine law to their own advantage and snatched from women all those rights which had been given to them by God, and thus they made their women more deprived, more enslaved than ever.

Though in the global context, many learned *ulamas* or Islamic scholars have appeared in the scene with unbiased interpretations of the divine laws relating to women's status, the male-biased Muslim community of rural Bangladesh are still refraining themselves from recognising those justified interpretations. The so-called *fatwabaz* Muslim *ulamas* and *moulanas* are still propounding their views against the Qu'rānic concept of gender equity by interpreting the Qu'rānic verses

for the protection of their class interests as well as to ensure their narrow gender advantages. Actually, of those who are literate, a major portion educated from Madrashes where no teaching from history, philosophy, science or social sciences are given. That is why the Muslims educated from this sort of institutions are, in fact, partially literate. Because, they only can read or memorize the verses of Al-Qu'rān and Al-Hadiths without understanding the meanings or interpretations of the verses. The so-called literate Muslims possess faulty religious beliefs and feelings and are strongly influenced by the so-called *fatwabaz ulamas* and *mowlanas* like the other illiterate Muslims.

As the Holy Text is compiled in Arabic language, most of the people educated or uneducated do not understand it's actual meaning. In respect of meaning and interpretations, they mostly depend on the *Waaz* (description) and verdict of the so-called *ulamas* or *mowlanas*. At present, due to *fatwa*, the incidents of the oppression on Muslim women of rural Bangladesh are being perpetuated at a large scale. The cases of *fatwa* are related to oppressing women on accusation of breaking social values, especially when the question of illegal sexual connection is raised. The cases of Noorjahan, Kadbanu, Shabmeher and Feroza deserve mention here. Their fatal and inhuman ending was widely circulated in mass media. In fact, the type of *fatwa* witnessed in rural Bangladesh is a rear-guard action of the male chauvinists against women's struggle for equality and self-reliance.²⁶ In fact, the following viewpoints on the issue of women's

status in the name of religion and Sharia are still prevailing in the Muslim community of rural Bangladesh. The viewpoints are:

1. Status of women is inferior to that of man, and for the same reason, she has less rights.
2. Woman has been created for the comfort and enjoyment of man; and therefore, she is compelled to remain under his subjugation.
3. Husbands are made governors over their wives, hence, the wives are bound to obey their husband without raising any question. The duties of wives are only to please their husbands, breed children and to do the drudgery of the home.
4. A husband has the right to keep four wives at a time. He is empowered to beat his wives and even to divorce them at his will.
5. A woman is not allowed to go out of the house without the permission of her guardian/husband, and in case of going outside, she is imposed to maintain *purdah*.
6. The testimony of two women is equal to that of one man and her right of inheritance of parents' property is also half of her each brother.
7. A woman has no need for higher education, rather, she should learn to read the Qu'rān, cooking food and other household works, which will make her a good housewife to all.

Because of religious fundamentalism also, all these practices continue to be observed and also have become a part of the way of life. Fundamentalists are of the opinion that the position of women is subordinate to that of men. So, they declared that it is the duty of the women to hide her charms so as not to be considered sexually attractive. Although most liberal thinkers agree that Islam preaches propriety, modesty, decorum, they believe that it is wrong to interpret such teachings to mean total restriction or lack of freedom and free will. The Qu'rān advocates neither the veil, nor segregation of sexes; nor does it restrict their freedom of movement.²⁷

It is significant to note that there are some enlightened and liberal *Ulamas* in Bangladesh who are concerned about the socio-economic backwardness of Muslim women in the country. Such *Ulamas* who understand and believe in the real Islamic position of women should be approached, and actively involved in propagating the message to other religious leaders. In absence of authentic information, which is not available, negative propaganda flourishes. So, it is necessary to circulate good resource books on the "status of women and family welfare" based on the Qu'rān and Hadith. This could be supplemented with fact-sheets based on local needs. But, the approach should be rational, rather than emotional, persuasive rather than antagonistic.

4.4.3 Trafficking

Trafficking in women results in the most terrible forms of human rights violation against women--sexual abuse and enslavement, beatings, torture, denial of the freedom of movement, detention, debt bondage and other practices. Many have been known to perish while being trafficked and many more continue to live in the most horrendous conditions. Among the issues that were prominently discussed and debated in the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing was the trafficking of women and girls. It was in the women's movement that refocused attention was given to this problem as early as the 80's with the development of sex tourism as a global phenomenon. It is worth mentioning that the Beijing Platform devoted a whole section on the problem of trafficking (Strategic Objective D. 3 on Violence Against Women), which could be the basis for advocacy on this issue at the national, regional and international levels.

According to the investigation, it was observed that the trafficker's target families are poor, illiterate and have number of children. The following factors are used by traffickers to exploit the women:

- a. Promise of a job abroad with a handsome salary;
- b. Fake marriage / child marriage / polygamy;
- c. Divorced or abandoned women; and
- d. Internal family problems, like torture or abuse by stepparents.

The traffickers are often set free even after committing a major crime in the absence of witness. Poor people cannot afford to appoint a lawyer or even go to a police station. Illiterate Bangladeshi people do not even know where to get justice. All these reasons stand as barriers against eliminating trafficking. Trafficking is a concern of Bangladesh. Poor and distressed women are being smuggled out through land, water and sky route. Citizens must be conscious and must come forward to prevent trafficking. So, we should take part in the awareness raising campaign against trafficking and also should remember that the highest punishment for this act is life imprisonment or death sentence. Sex slavery is a practice that is controlled and dominated by highly skilled, heavily armed and very menacing gangs and individuals who have been able to buy police protection in most countries.

It is evident that the number of cases of trafficking in women, which have never come to the attention of the authorities, is quite high. Trafficking in women is defined as an indictable offence to them, inducing or leading astray a woman or girl – whether she is a minor or has reached the age of major and even if she consents – with a view to making her engage in prostitution in a country other than that in which she usually resides; ‘disguised traffick is the act of hiring women in one country with a view to making them engage in certain types of employment in another country as dancers, cabaret artists, barmaids, etc and in conditions in which they are subjected, exposed to prostitution.’²⁸

Forced labor and slavery are all situations in which women are made to provide work or services while being held against their will or in such a manner that their movements are controlled. This can be done in a number of ways, but as with trafficking, the critical element is coercion, threat of violence, abuse of authority or dominant position, debt bondage, deception or others as well as forced labor and slavery like practices include all situations in which a women's legal identity is appropriated. Certainly, the appropriation of a women's legal identity while she is being held in a foreign country curtails her movements radically and puts her at increased risk as she should not succeed in escaping from abusive working conditions. This is particularly true in countries which tend to persecute those trafficked as illegal aliens.

Various law-enforcing agencies are of the opinion that economic hardship is the cause for trafficking in women. Women who are sent to India and other places are usually of lower middle class. Those who willingly agree to go are mainly from the landless and agricultural labour class households. Procurers and traffickers exploit them by taking the opportunity of their deprived economic conditions. Women who are victimized by such vicious circle of procurers and traffickers are illiterate or less educated, separated, divorced or widowed or have been married due to huge dowry demand that their parents could not afford to meet. So, when an offer of marriage not requiring dowry is made, most poor families accept regardless of the fact that such offers usually require girls to

migrate to India or Pakistan where they become isolated from their families and villages. On the other hand, separated and divorced women depend economically on their parents or brothers without having any means of livelihood. In that case, they are easily motivated by the traffickers. In most rural areas, there are hardly any job opportunities for young girls and women. Women traffickers, therefore, try to convince them that there are various types of jobs available to such women abroad—trafficked mostly to India, Pakistan and the Middle East. Emphasis is given to better jobs and future.

4.4.4 Child Marriage and Trafficking

Review of newspaper reports during the six months of July to December 1997 showed only 15 cases of child marriage as a form of recruitment out of a total number of 271 trafficking cases. Despite this small number, it is known that marriage is often used as a way to gain control over children and women who are subsequently trafficked. Two significant points related to child marriage appear important to us: 1) No instance of “rescue” of involved women who had been trafficked following marriage; and 2) half of those who did identify as having been trafficked through marriage were between the ages of 14 to 18 years. The only case involving a child or woman trafficked through marriage and who subsequently returned to her home village was that of a girl returned to Bangladesh by her trafficker whose family in India pressured him into doing so. If a person

identified and questioned claims marriage to a child and is supported in this claim by the child herself, he will not be identified as a trafficker despite suspicions that the child is under the legal age of marriage. This fact arises from cultural and religious attitudes that encourage the marriage of young girls.

As in all trafficking scenarios, the element of coercion is apparent in those involving child marriage as a recruitment practice. A true story is outlined here in total, because religious, social and cultural attitudes came into play in the story related to trafficking. Fatema was forced into marrying 50 year-old Murad when she was 10 years old. Murad was believed to have the power to converse with spirits and, through them, to predict the future. In the recruitment of Fatema, he made use of this belief and began by convincing her parents that the child and one of her brothers would die due to a curse put on her by a jinn or spirit. In order to ward off this fate, he said, Fatema would have to undergo daily treatments, which took place in a darkened room where windows and doors were shut against outside observation. After some time, Murad explained that the new treatment was required. That is why Fatema had to spend nights alone at Murad's house. He assured Fatema's parents that the child would be safe, because her elder sister-- one of his wives-- would be present. During treatment, Murad drugged and sexually abused Fatema. Fatema has no recollection of the incident, but was informed by her sister the next day that at night Murad had done bad things to her. Then the issue of marriage came up again, and although it seems clear that Fatema

continued to resist, she did so less strenuously than before and this time was no longer supported by her male relatives. A marriage was held, though it did not conform to either state or Muslim law (Fatema was well below the legal age of marriage, and there was no contract involved, as it was required according to Muslim Law). Regardless, the marriage was viewed as legitimate by both Fatema's family and the other members of the village in which they lived. Shortly after the marriage, Murad took Fatema to Shyamnagar in India via Jessore. There she was kept confined at a house, raped and beaten every night. At one point, she overheard Murad negotiating the sale of her to a group of men. When Fatema confronted him, he threatened her with a gun. This prompted Fatema to run away. A shopkeeper helped her to return to her home village in Bangladesh. However, as Murad's wife, there was no place for her in the village except at Murad's house, which is where she ended up. When Murad returned from India, he beat her severely for having run away. This prompted Fatema's sister to take the child to the house of a doctor, for whom she had once worked. He informed the police who moved Fatema to safe custody in the local jail. After being confined there for 15 days, members of "Bangladesh National Women Lawyer's Association" arranged for her transfer to their shelter home in Dhaka. She still resides in the shelter. It is very unfortunate to say that Fatema lost support from her family and community once it was determined that her status as a good or pure female had been lost. At present, Fatema's fate is uncertain. Although Murad is now in police custody

awaiting trial under trafficking and kidnapping charges, Fatema continues to be viewed as his 'wife' despite the fact that the marriage was illegal. Having been married and given the fact that she is no longer a virgin, she has lost her age status as a child despite her age. She is no longer, therefore, marriageable. She is unable to return to her home village and, essentially, has no assigned position in a community that determines the status or role of women based nobly on their connection to men. Although the specific details of Fatema's history are unique and the ultimate resolution (Murad's arrest) unusual, the general story is not uncommon.

Thousands of women and children are married annually under similar suspicious circumstances, many involve under-age girls, and most include a degree of coercion. All of those married are at risk of being trafficked to another country by their husbands, sold to recruiters, forced into prostitution, kept as domestic slaves, etc. Trafficking in women and children straddles several dimensions – it is an issue of women's human rights and violence against women. There are hundreds of incidents of trafficking in women and forced prostitution. But, to what extent they are apprehended still remains unanswered as a result of economic degradation that alienates women's labor through process of rapid urbanization and migration resulting in unemployment and under unemployment. The problem however can no longer be dealt simply by one country alone. The UN must take action in an area increasingly assuming a massive human rights crisis.

There is no accurate statistics available regarding trafficking in women and children because of invisibility. However, law-enforcing authorities documented that between January 1979 and August 1983, there were 832 women and between May 1989 and December 1989, the number increased to 880. These women and children were the ones who have escaped and had been apprehended by the police especially to border forces. The above figure indicates that the rate of trafficking in women and children from Bangladesh is quite high and have remained constant through the years. Still, police officials are of the opinion that the hidden incidents are much higher. Wives travelling with husbands are hardly apprehended or detained by law- enforcing agencies. And then, there are women who consent to go with procurers without knowing the consequences.²⁹ Trafficking in women and children has increased in magnitude and has become a global problem. The roots of this problem are economic and social.

4.5 Conclusion

Violence against women is a social evil, and must be faced socially. Social action is probably the most effective shield against it. Social mobilization must, therefore, be attained to curb violence. There are several pre-conditions to ensure a social movement. First, society must know the extent and gravity of the problem, and harmful effects should be brought home to them. People must be made to feel the harm, the loss, the agony, and the cruelty that they or their near and dear ones

may suffer from unabated violence. Every one must know that he himself may be victim one day. The only way to achieve this awareness is collection of information and their dissemination. All data of the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics should be desegregated on violence issue. For example, in recording mortality, violence should be included as one of the causes of death. Secondly, vigorous publicity should be given through all types of media, pictures, rallies, demonstration, etc. Thirdly, anti-violence committees should be formed in union and thanas with Government representatives, UC members, leaders of political parties, teachers, students, representatives of NGO's with proper proportion of women in the composition of the committees. These committees may be the focal point for sustaining the anti-violence movement. Lastly, men should be motivated to consider violence against women as a problem vitally affecting them as well.

The general impression is that women alone should fight for their cause, because the gain by women is a surrender by men. This feeling needs to be despoiled. Men should be made to appreciate that woman's welfare contributes to healthy and happy family and a cohesive, prosperous society. Men should, therefore, be equal targets for awareness and advocacy programs. It has been found that many well-meaning families fail to take up the cause of their affected women members, because they are not aware of the legal position. The patriarchal legal system needs to be salvaged from the traditional foundations of discriminatory norms about women. A new system should be built on the solid

foundation of equality, reciprocity interdependence of men and women. Recruitment of women in administration will have long-term effect. Law enforcing must be opened to the women. In that case, women should be recruited in lower ranks as well as in the higher official positions. In all foundation courses and in-service training programmes, special training module on violence should be included. In the police handbook, special instruction about violence should be inserted. Women's organizations should reorient themselves as mass organizations by establishing branches outside the cities and by networking with local women's groups. Women's organizations can lobby with political parties to include women's issues in the respective manifestos.

The issue of violence was in the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies in 1985 and in the Beijing platform for Action in 1995. Beijing Platform for Action states that "In all societies to a greater or lesser degree women and girls are subjected to physical, sexual and psychological abuse that cuts across lines of income, class and culture. The violence against women is a matter of concern to all states and should be addressed. Violence has thus been identified as a priority issue on the global basis. Attempts designed to reduce violence in Bangladesh has been very limited. The implications of this limited success is extremely grave. We have seen that a majority of the Bangladeshi women have to suffer from the double load of patriarchy and poverty that reduce their lives to a state of acute deprivation. We have to take some immediate measures and strategies, which are

likely to initiate a process of change in attitudes, values and practices, which would strengthen women's social position, enhance their status, facilitate the achievement of gender equity, undermine the basis of the ideology of gender hierarchy and unequal gender relation, and ultimately succeed in reducing gender violence both at home and abroad.

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Women and Equality: Some Concluding Remarks

This thesis has focused on the question as to how educational and cultural changes may be used to improve the position of women in Bangladesh. Because of the centrality of the influence of cultural behavior in the lives of Bangladeshi women, education has a central importance, and that has been demonstrated throughout the thesis. The dismal picture of women's status can only be changed if a number of factors including economic dependence on men go through drastic transformation. We believe that education as well as change of attitude can only play important roles in bringing about such transformation by enabling them to take the first entry into men's sphere. Women's access to education must be treated as their fundamental right. And it is only through education that they would get the chance to prepare themselves in order to play their roles in nation's social, economic and political spheres as equal members of society. We know that attitudes are difficult to change, but changes are needed in those male attitudes that are derogatory to or patronizing of women, and equally in those attitudes of women that are self-denigrating. Change in attitudes can only be brought about by making the facts known through knowledge we can have of the outer world and of human factors.

The lives of Bangladeshi women are so complex that no simple solution is possible to their problems. It is very much impractical in the present context of the Bangladesh scenario to suggest overnight and radical changes in the disparate relationship that exists between men and women in Bangladeshi society. One must, therefore, find ways that are acceptable, if not to all the people, at least to the majority of the population. Through education, one can become self-reliant, more aware of the changes in the surroundings, and have better self-esteem. The role of education in development is so vital that the UN, in its Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, included right to education as one of the fundamental rights of human beings. Its importance is aptly reflected by the various forms of discrimination against women subjected to their social and economic dependence on men in a male-dominated society of Bangladesh. In order to improve their lot, they must have wider access to education.

Usually, women's minds are conditioned from their birth. They are forced to relate everything to the male, to their families and even to society. Women's mind must be liberated, so that they can begin to think of themselves to be individual persons and, like the male, learn to think and to lead. Women can then, with their newly born consciousness, become more useful members of their families. A woman's body belongs to her -- it does not belong to her race or community that can ostracize her, kill her, or murder her. Her body does not belong to her male-dominated society or religion that passes absurd laws over her

reproductive system without the simple courtesy of consulting her. In fact, patriarchy seeks to ensure a strict division of labor, and this division is consistent with the norms of *purdah*. Mead Cain observed in 1979 that the patriarchal system of Bangladesh is in a state of disequilibrium.. He believes that the kinship--political and religious institutions--support male domination and remain strong and intact while associated sanctions ensure that males carry out their responsibilities to women. It is clear from the above statement that women's dependence upon men is due to economic dependency. The family as the chief institution of patriarchy is dependent, for its continued existence, upon the maintenance of its material basis, and, for the sake of social and cultural survival, women accept male dominance. It should not be expected that man would purchase a woman, nor should he decide when to cherish, monopolize, neglect, abandon or discard her, as one does in case of a commodity. Man-woman relationship should be on an equal level. And, it would be possible if both sexes act from the same principle. Women must be allowed to found their virtue on knowledge, which is possible through education by the same pursuit as men. For, they are now made so inferior by ignorance and low desires. Women must embark on a determined struggle to achieve liberation of the body, the intellect and the spirit of womanhood from fear, enslavement and oppression.

Despite her inferior position, a Bangladeshi woman has multifarious roles to play. She is a housekeeper and key actor in child rearing and development. She

bears the child, and faces great nutritional pressures of repeated pregnancies. She spends almost 14 hours a day to cook, look after the children, sick and elders, clean the house, wash the clothes and dishes, fetch water and collect firewood and assist in agricultural work. In fact, she is a de facto household manager without having any say in decision-making. Development of women from broader perspective should, therefore, mean their mental liberation and integration into the mainstream. The vision of more equitable gender relations, however, poses the problem of gaining support not only from those who must relinquish their present hold on power, but also from those who are under subordination and are conditioned by tradition and culture to accept their situation as generally inherited. Overcoming such ideological pre-conceptions requires a long-term process of consciousness involving discussion and vision building-- and raising social awareness. In this process, women would begin to acquire a sense of the long-term social changes that is necessary, if gender equality is to be attained.

The lives of Bangladeshi women are largely influenced by traditional and religious beliefs and social norms that make them economically dependent. Thus, gender gaps exist in all spheres of life, e.g. health, legal rights, economic participation and decision-making. It seems to me that the root of all these disparities lies in a misconceived and misapplied education. The neglected education of women is the grand source of the misery. The conducts and manners of women in fact evidently prove that their minds are not in a healthy state.

Marry Wollstonecraft in her book *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* observed that women's lower position lies in the false system of education collected from the books that were written on this subject by the men who did not consider women as human beings. The conception of sex of most of the people is bizarre, and they lack the basic point that modern, educated, civilized women are more capable of having nobler ambition, virtues and respect.

In the context of Bangladesh, a woman is termed successful when, by her own efforts and skills, she has achieved an honorable position in her family and society and become a role model in terms of women development. Education is highly valued in this society, and is seen as means to success in life. While considering the factors that may influence women's success, the constraints that come to our minds first are socio-cultural in nature and prevent women from access to education and other means that may lead them to success. The constraints may be summarized as follows:

1. There is very little access for women in the public field. Actually, social practices, such as early marriage, prevent girls from going to school, ultimately, to public spheres.
2. Inadequate incentives and poor economic condition deter girls from education.
3. Lack of participation in community life and any active attempt for changing negative attitudes towards women's active participation in

education and the present economic status of women make things stagnant. Incidents of sex violence are a recent concern for girls and women going to school and work places.

To enable women to achieve success in life, all these constraints should be removed and, thereby, the way paved for women's success. We know that the more educated the members of both sexes of a nation are, the bigger are its development spheres of life. Education is one important area that can help addressing social, cultural and political attitudes in overcoming them for improving the situation of the disadvantaged sections of a society. Assessment of the status of women in education calls for having an overview of the situation of the women in Bangladesh. It needs to be said at the beginning that it is a challenging task to portray women's status in a country where poverty is grim, unemployment is chronic, malnutrition and illiteracy are acute, expectancy of life is short, and quality of life far from the desired. Status may be seen here as women's ability to enter into the realm of activities, enjoy facilities and participate in activities and interact with others in dealing with problem as well as for improving the overall situation. In other words, status indicates women's access to and control over resources.

Women's education is vitally important and specifically significant in the context of Bangladesh, because women, 50% of the society, are grossly destined to be disadvantaged, and development efforts stand threatened. Women's invisible

contribution to the society not only adversely affects women, but it affects society at large. If women are to be made visible, they have to be educated, because women's education can be a single factor, which can effectively act as a mighty vehicle of social change and transformation. In Bangladesh, women's success in terms of economic activities or employment is determined largely by social norms. Fear of losing feminine character or softness prevents many girls from getting technical training. However, it is heartening to note that women have started coming out of these social chains. John Stuart Mill (1806) declared that the power of earning is essential to the dignity of a woman, if she has not independent property.

However, the notions of equality and rights refer to existing political and cultural practices, and are based on them, and are not necessarily progressive. Women are faced with discrimination even within legal and constitutional structures. The struggle for equality for women has to address the differentiated legal terrain, and to work to reform the law and make it work in favor of women. The discourse of equal rights needs to be unpacked for women. The dilemma of difference, which the liberal equality doctrine seeks to avoid through the equal treatment approach, is unavoidable. Equal treatment has assumed that if social institutions treat women as they already treat men, equality between women and men can be established. Women are subjected all over the world to acts of violence both within and outside the home. According to John Stuart Mill,

women's disabilities are due to their subordinate position in domestic life. For, generally the male sex cannot tolerate the idea of living with an equal. Constitutional struggle for women's rights nationally and internationally centres on the interface between human rights and women's rights. Eleanor Roosevelt, in a statement made in 1958, made clear that the issue of rights is not just about the relation between the individual and the state, but informs the most private areas of human existence. Equality has to be guaranteed within the home, in the educational institution and at workplace. Equal justice rests on equal dignity, and this can only come about through non-discriminatory practices both within and outside home. Again, rights are not just something conferred by the state, but inherent in every social, political and cultural practice.

Men have friends, women have relatives and slaves have masters. The struggle by women to transcend the boundaries of kinship and private life and to incorporate the demand for freedom and personal space has not always been welcomed. There is a strong tendency to ignore the issue and to consider it as regressive, harmful to women's legitimate struggles. In *Chitrangada*, a famous dance-drama written by Rabindranath Tagore, we find a woman struggling to transcend gender-defined roles. Brought up as a warrior, the princess Chitrangada is celebrated for her "manly" abilities, and she prides herself for them, as she goes hunting and riding in the forest. It is only when she beholds Arjun and falls hopelessly in love with him that she realizes that she is a woman. Rabindranath's

text inverts established sex roles, only to highlight on a woman's desire and longing. Finally, Chitrangada emerges as an individual woman to a realization of a self, which combines both the "manly" roles (she pretends to be a prince, and is a warrior and protector of her people) and the so-called feminine ones as she languishes in hopeless love and desire. It is only when she is able to assert herself both as a prince and a woman in love that she emerges self-realized. The fight for women is not just one for more opportunities, more resources, not only for bread. The struggle is for bread and roses. Like Begum Rokeya in *Sultana's Dream*, we must not be afraid to hop on to air cars and fly into dream-lands where the absurdity of our subordination and the preposterous invisibilization of women glare into our consciousness and demand that we act, and that we act now.

Literature can provide that space where the surreal nature of our 'plight' and our inferior positioning in everyday life confronts our consciousness and vision with a sharpness that is bound to wound our complacency and slash open the fence that seals the private terrain of intimacy, of marriage, of family and of home. Literature allows us to trespass. We must learn to use that facility to abandon the safe places we have thus far occupied in the manifesto of social change and the shelters we have transformed into homes in our relations with men. We have to put our bodies and ourselves on that line where all the assumptions, the definitions, the codes, the rules that govern us can be re-examined and challenged without fear and without orthodoxy.

Attitudes towards women and attitudes inculcated into women must be changed. Women must be granted equality of treatment, if they are to make their full and just contribution to the achievement of the ideals of peace and international understanding on which the United Nations is based. It is also important for men to understand, appreciate and learn to value from an early age the complex roles played by women in society, so that they do not inherit the views and attitudes held by their elders which are detrimental to the status of women both in the household and the community.

We know that socio-economic and cultural environment help perpetuate male superiority, and enhance prejudices against women. From the very childhood, women face discriminatory treatments not only from outside the house but from inside as well. In the family's attitude towards other female member, mother's role is very important. Usually, mothers, who themselves were the victims of similar circumstances instill different sets of values between the male and female children. The latter face less preferential treatments, including provision of food, parental affection, etc. They are constantly told and brainwashed that success or failure in their lives depends on whether or not they can become good wives and mothers. And, to achieve the success, they must have feminine qualities, like compliance, obedience and self-sacrifice.

An inquisitive mind is often discouraged by mother's stern warning, as independence and inquisitiveness are considered to be signs of rebelliousness

which may bring disaster in a daughter's adult life, whereas boys in the same family experience preferential treatment which instill feelings of superiority in them. The myth prevailing in society that women are inferior in nature must be broken. Otherwise, cultural, religious, social and psychological factors would help continue social institutions, which discriminate against women without any hesitation. According to Wollstonecraft, women are in fact so much degraded by mistaken notions of female excellence that though it is a paradox, she asserts that this same artificial weakness gives birth to cunning-- the natural opponent of strength--and it allures them to play off those contemptible infantile airs that eat into esteem even while they excite desire. Some women govern over their husbands without degrading themselves, because intellect will always govern. Contending for the rights of woman, Wollstonecraft's main argument is built on this simple principle that if she will not be prepared by education to become the companion of man, she will stop the progress of knowledge and virtue; for, truth must be common to all. In that case, men and women must go by the opinions and manners of the society they live in. In every age, we know that there has been a stream of popular opinion that has carried all before it, and given a familiar character, as it were, to the century. The most perfect education is an exercise of the understanding that is best calculated to strengthen the mind, or in other words, to enable the individual to attain such habits of virtue as will render it independent. In fact, it is impossible to call any being virtuous whose virtues do not result from the exercise of their own reason. A mistaken education, a narrowly cultivated

mind, and many sexual prejudices tend to make women more stereotyped than men. Until women are more rationally educated, the progress of human virtue and improvement in knowledge must receive continual checks.

Moralists have unanimously agreed that unless virtue be nursed by liberty, it will never attain due strength, and that being cannot be termed rational or virtuous, who obeys any authority but that of reason. To render women truly useful members of society, they should be led by having their understandings cultivated on a large scale to acquire a rational affection for their country founded on knowledge, because, it is obvious that we are little interested about what we do not understand. It is reasonable to say that if women change their character and correct their views and follies, they will be allowed to be free in a physical, moral and civil sense. Let women share the rights, and she will emulate the virtues of man; for, she must grow more perfect when emancipated, or justify the authority that chains such a weak being to her duty.

To illustrate my opinion, I need only to observe that any of the mental differences supposed to exist between women and men are but the natural effects of the differences in their education and circumstances, and indicate no radical difference, far less radical inferiority of nature. The problem of the equality of women is complex, because they have to struggle a lot to obtain their rights. Without obtaining rights, it is not possible even to talk about equality. The past, in this regard, is certainly not encouraging. The present is a period of struggle and

assertion. We have also to think of the future where all the members of the society have their due status, live their life respectfully and happily. I have already discussed various patriarchal theories, and an attempt has been made to discuss the problem of equality from the point of view of feminist theories, and it is suggested that liberal feminism, Marxist feminism and radical feminism have difficulties with the doctrine of equality. Marxist feminism regards private property as the basic cause of women's oppression. Therefore, for Marxist feminism, mere education will never solve the problem. What is required is the abolition of private property as the means of production. But, it does not propose any fundamental change in the family system.

A whole range of institutional practices embedded in the family and the kin-group condition women's dependence upon, and subordination to, men. Patriarchy seeks to ensure a strict division of labor, and this division is consistent not only with *pardah*, but also impose a powerful element of patriarchal control over women, enforcing women's dependence on men by denying them direct access to income-earning opportunities. It appears to us that the patriarchal system in Bangladesh is in a state of disequilibrium, so that kinship, political and religious institutions that support male dominance and authority remains strong and intact, while associated sanctions that ensure that males carry out their responsibilities to women have weakened. The family, as the chief institution of patriarchy, is

dependent for its continued existence upon the maintenance of its material basis, and for the sake of social and cultural survival, women accept male dominance.

The women working in urban factories or part of organized groups are beginning to redefine the norms of *purdah* in various ways. This, in turn, causes the weakening of institutions such as dowry, child marriage and so forth, which require for their continuance this dependence on marriage as the only option for women. The main obstacle to the realization of equality is the persuasiveness of social attitudes, deeply rooted in tradition and history. While under general law, women are entitled to equal status and educational rights like those of men, in practice, a large number of women especially in the rural and in the tribal areas still cannot enjoy equal educational opportunities. Socio-economic reasons, attitudes, including traditionally defined sex roles and customary practices and misinterpretation of religion continue to impede rural women's access to equal opportunity and implementation of legal rights. As a result of this, in spite of many protective laws there are still cases of murder for dowry and cases of rape, grievous hurt and death caused by acid. The desired result cannot be achieved unless poverty, illiteracy, ignorance, unemployment, violence, economic dependence of women, misinterpretation of religious principles and traditional attitudes of the society towards women change.

Analysis of this definition indicates that the factors influencing a woman's success are mostly connected with the social environment in which she lives, or in

more concrete terms, the opportunities she gets to develop her potentialities, so that she can contribute to the developing society. The foundation of the Bangladeshi society is rooted in the belief that men and women are not equal, rather women are inferior to men. It is traditional for women to work inside the household. Patriarchy has assigned only a domesticated role to women dependent on men for everything including decision-making regarding her marriage, education and what not. Despite these impediments, a high value for education is perceptible in Bangladesh. The impact of development on women is positive not only in terms of financial gain, but also in terms of change in their attitude, which is extremely useful in creating conducive environment for development.

The issue of women's rights and status in society is a very complex one. It has several aspects to be tackled very carefully and delicately. In fact, basically, it is the issue of mutual understanding and agreement amongst all members of society. Although the movement to gain the due rights of women has taken a form of struggle, it is not a struggle by one part of the society against another part of the society. Nor does this struggle intend to divide society into two sexes and create a picture of an antagonism between them. This is a struggle of the moral conscience of each person against his attitudes and tendencies to subjugate any other person, especially the weaker or less privileged one in society. The task to regain the due rights of women is the task of the entire society, because society is always homogenous, and attempts to bring all members of society on equal status will

serve the cause of prosperity, harmony, peace and happiness of each and every member of society. However, I may very briefly suggest the following guidelines for a better feminist philosophy in regard to equality of women:

1. In order to serve the long-term interest of equality of women, the present curriculum and contents of textbooks must be reviewed to ensure that women are portrayed in a positive image that highlights their multiple roles as producers, nurturers and bearer of children.
2. It is essential for women to learn to value themselves from an early age as individuals, so that they do not practice their mothers' and grandmothers' practices, such as favoring the son's well-being over the daughter's and accepting the subordinate position of women as inevitable.
3. It is also important for men to understand, appreciate, and learn to value from an early age the complex roles played by women in society, so that they do not inherit the views and attitudes held by their elders, which are detrimental to the status of women both in the household and the community.
4. Suitable family education should include a proper understanding of motherhood as a social function and the recognition of the common

responsibility of both men and women in the upbringing and development of their children.

5. Appropriate measures should be taken to modify the social and cultural patterns of conduct of men and women, with a view to eliminating the prejudices and customs and all other practices which are based on the idea of inferiority or superiority of either of the sexes or on stereotyped roles for men and women.
6. There will have to be equal access of women/girls to the same curriculum, the same examinations, teaching staff with qualifications of the same standard and school premises and equipment of the same quality, whether the institutions are co-educational or not.
7. Equal rights of both the spouses must be recognized in respect of ownership, acquisition, management, administration, enjoyment, and disposition--whether free of charge or for a valuable consideration of inheritance of property--whether property is to be owned by one spouse or both of them.
8. Bangladesh has ratified the United Nations Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, but this, like other ideas regarding women's liberation, has very little practical effect.

9. Since religion plays such an important part in the lives of women, some reforms should be made keeping within Islamic means of reform and by following the path of the modernist Muslim feminists. It must be remembered that democracy cannot be established without liberating women. Actually, resistance to women's rights is in fact a resistance to democratic principles and human rights.

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