

# Women With Disabilities in Bangladesh

by Anika Rahman and Polloby Ahmed

*Au Bangladesh, les femmes handicapées subissent une double forme d'exclusion. Les services de soutien sont minimaux et les tabous religieux et culturels concernant les femmes et les personnes handicapées empêchent les femmes handicapées d'être intégrées et acceptées socialement.*

Understanding the situation of women with disabilities in Bangladesh first demands an understanding of the position of women in this country. Both the Prime Minister and Opposition Leader in Bangladesh are women, and they are popular among the majority of the population. Yet many women throughout the country are still oppressed and suppressed by their husbands. They are accustomed to this oppression and resigned to their fate. Women now work in all spheres of life—medicine, engineering, science, technology, politics, and the intellectual arena. But, at the same time, five and six year old girls are given forcibly in marriage to men 30 to 40 years old. And, as ours is a patriarchal society, women are considered naturally inferior. Failure to give birth to a boy-child often results in rejection of women as wives. Sometimes they are beaten to death for failing to please their husbands.

The world-wide movement for gender equity has recently given rise to some provisions for women. But these provisions do not effectively apply to all women. Although a woman may be able to overcome obstacles at every step, she is still discriminated against on many grounds. If a non-disabled woman can be subjected to continuous discrimination, it is easy to understand the condition of women with disabilities. In a country where it can be a curse to be born a woman, the problems of a woman with a disability are fourfold: she is a woman; she has a disability; she lives in poverty; she is a victim of illiteracy and superstition.

The extent to which a woman with a disability is accepted is determined by the social position of her family. There are three



Reprinted with permission from the IWTC  
Artist: Grace Jung

broad divisions in the class structure of Bangladesh families—a handful of upper class people, a growing middle class, with the lower class making up the majority of the population.

A child with a disability born to an upper class family is fortunate in that he/she has access to modern amenities and treatment, as well as social facilities. She/he also has the protection of economic security. Nevertheless, he/she is still viewed as an extra responsibility.

In a middle class family, a person with a disability is always a burden.

On the other hand, the surviving members with a disability in lower class families become a source of income. They are used to beg, displaying the disability to arouse people's kindness.

Most people in Bangladesh live below the poverty line. And the largest segment of the population, the lower class, live far below it. Illiteracy is highest among the lower class. Reli-

gious fanaticism, superstition, prejudice, and unawareness is also prevalent. Disability is considered a curse and the result of sin which has no remedy.

The necessary specialized medical facilities are very expensive. Since only 45 per cent of people in the total population have access to medical facilities—most of them general care facilities—permanent disability becomes inevitable.

Literacy among the middle class is highest, and yet religion is no less influential. They are preoccupied with maintaining their standard of living and cannot accept disability easily. The effect is fatal. The person with the disability is kept hidden, his/her identity is concealed, and sometimes he/she is disowned as a family member. In most cases, he/she is not allowed to go outside the home, and is confined to a room whose walls become a prison. His/her world is reduced to that which he/she can see through a window. Eventually he/she becomes mentally unbalanced.

If a woman with a disability attempts to pursue a general or

technical education, the whole environment is hostile to her. A non-disabled woman is not sufficiently accepted, a woman with a disability is subject to severe restriction and humiliation. If she overcomes all these obstacles, she is then confronted with discrimination or rejection in the labour market. In many cases, women with disabilities are paid less on the grounds of their disability, and they have no choice but to agree to this injustice.

In some cases religion plays a vital role in preventing a woman with a disability from getting proper treatment. If a male physician or physio-technician (we only have a few recognized physiotherapists in our country) touches the woman's body, it is viewed as a sin.

Though we now have dowry-protection laws, in reality these laws are not fully enforced. In many cases, without dowry, marriages are hindered. Marriages of women with disabilities are doubly difficult. The idea that the child of a woman with a disability will be born disabled also prevents such marriages. Women fall in love with and marry men with a disability but the reverse is extremely rare. Women with a disability marry only after the exchange of a handsome dowry.

A national policy and plan of action for citizens with disabilities is still to be developed in Bangladesh, despite the establishment of a ten per cent quota for hiring candidates with a disability in some employment sectors. This quota is not respected or enforced. The quota ensures on paper that jobs will be given to deserving applicants with a disability, but without policy, there are no measures to provide the education and resources necessary to make this vulnerable group "deserving" applicants. Since disability is a curse and the result of sin, people with disabilities are supposed to be dishonoured, and they are not to speak of equal opportunities and participation. Total rehabilitation of women with disabilities is far from being accomplished, and no steps have been taken in this direction yet.

Until and unless the above barriers are removed, women with disabilities will continue to be the most marginalized of marginalized peoples. The following poem depicts the condition of a woman with a disability in Bangladesh.

A woman with disability is not a woman.  
She is a shadow of woman.  
A woman with disability has no choice.  
She is only to be ordered.  
A woman with disability has no voice.  
She is supposed to only listen.  
A woman with disability should have no heart.  
She has to kill or conceal her feelings.  
A woman with disability is no longer a woman.  
She is only to hear from everywhere 'Goodbye.'

*Anika Rahman is the President of the Social Assistance and Rehabilitation for the Physically Vulnerable (SARPV) in Dhaka, Bangladesh.*

*Polloby Ahmed is also a member of SARPV*

*This article was translated from Bangla into English by Mayeen Ahmed.*

## JENNIFER FOOTMAN

### Amputations

The good Romans in the old Roman way  
would cut off the arms, the legs and the cocks  
of the nasty Greek statues so no one  
could compare Greek and Roman. It would never do.

for a Greek to have stronger arms to bear  
greater burdens, have longer legs to run  
faster races, or be proud possessors  
of larger members to excite the dumb

women out of their vacant heads.  
Mass jealousy could lead to suicide,  
democracy, socialism, fascism—  
so we were to learn at a later date.

This surgery they performed only on the males  
though there were a few exceptions. What is her  
name? That  
Venus-something-or-another. Armless

wonder. Well...the female statue is  
really nothing but a frivolous lump  
of marble for a slight admiration.  
Perhaps for garden decoration...with fountain  
or flowers?

We all know that the skull of the female  
contains the brain of a fish  
and is made of three segments: smell, vision  
and balance; the largest being vision.  
When this simple brain gets  
a message, behaviour too, is simple.

Time counts for nothing for the female brain.  
Her cold brain works only  
in the present tense and that is why we  
have no need to mutilate the female

at least not their statues, not their statues.

*Jennifer Footman is originally from India, but spent most of her life in Edinburgh and is now living in Brampton. She has had poetry published in a number of magazines, and her poetry collection, Through a Stained Glass Window, was published by Envoi Press in 1990.*