

Last, Least & Leftover

WOMEN IN BANGLADESH

Cultural attitudes, compounded by poverty, all too often result in Bangladeshi women and girls being assigned to the back of the queue for food, clothing, health care, education and opportunities.

The discrimination can start at birth: a daughter is considered a liability, a drain on the family's limited resources. It continues throughout her childhood, where she works more and plays less than her brothers, to early marriage, accompanied by a significant dowry demand by her in-laws. After moving to her in-laws' house, she has to prove herself by giving birth to a son, but even then her husband is able to divorce her on any pretext, or take a second wife.

Over 50% of married women suffer some form of domestic abuse from husbands, mothers-in-law and other members of the family. A recent report found that the cost of physical abuse of wives costs 4% of the country's gross domestic product. Much-needed medical care is often withheld, particularly during pregnancy and childbirth, resulting in premature death or disability. Hindu, Muslim and even Christian women suffer from this second class citizenship. In research conducted by the rural health and development project in

which I worked, village women consistently cited family violence, early marriage, and dowry as barriers to health within their communities.

It was into this context that our Women's Advocacy Programme was created. Secular influences within the country were starting to champion gender rights, and we felt that our Christian organisation needed to provide an alternative: the Biblical position on gender, in contradistinction to secular, western feminism.

We went back to the beginning, the first chapter of Genesis, to look at God's original blueprint for society. "Let Us make human beings in Our own image' ... So God created human beings in His own image, in the image of God He created them, male and female He created them" (Genesis 1:26-27). From this foundation the principal aim of the programme was established: for both men and women to know that they are created equally in the image of God, and to strive for equal status, rights and just relationships within the family and society.

A change of heart cannot be legislated for. The gender policy reflected a desire to create an environment in which women are valued equally with men as the bearers of God's

image, as they pray and work towards the full restoration of those relationships – through the One who came in order that **all** may have abundant life.

The next step was the development of two workshops, to be run in small groups for all the project staff, from housekeeping and security staff through to senior medical and administrative staff – men and women together, Muslims, Hindus and Christians. The Gender Awareness workshop was based on Genesis 1:26-27, and the second workshop dealing with violence against women used Ephesians 5:28-33 – the concept of a husband loving and cherishing his wife as he does his own body.

It was remarkable to see these religiously and socially diverse groups come together to look at Scripture and apply the principles to their own lives! Both men and women started asking themselves how what they had learnt should impact their relationships: did they need to change how they treated their daughters, sisters, wives, daughters-in-law?

The two workshops became integrated into all the courses taught at our training centre, where men and women from various organisations across the country come for training in a range of health and development subjects. The workshops were also run at church seminars, with the cited Scriptures even challenging some entrenched traditions within the church... it was heartening to see church leadership opening their minds and hearts to change.

One of the most exciting developments was to see the Community Health and Development project staff – many of whom are Muslims – embrace the ideas with enthusiasm and take them to the communities in which they were working. Seminars were then held at all the Annual General Meetings of the community committees and income generating groups.

A creative staff member started a drama group amongst the local people, and took a play called “Stop Early Marriage” into villages to highlight the issues of dowry and early marriage. Although both dowry and marriage before the age of 18 are illegal, no prosecutions are ever brought. Dowry demands continue to rise, and create great financial pressure on the bride’s family.

Sobeda’s life was transformed as a result of the play: at the age of 12 she had been promised in marriage, with the groom’s family demanding a dowry of \$500 NZD (about a year’s wages). After watching the play, Sobeda’s father realised that both early marriage and dowry were harmful, cancelled the marriage plans and allowed Sobeda to remain in school. Change *can* happen.

A local non-governmental organisation is encouraging families to arrange marriages without dowry by facilitating marriages between families who have agreed to neither give nor demand dowry. Last year 46 such marriages were contracted in the area. Change *can* happen.

Staff and community members have become bolder in acknowledging instances of violence, injustice and neglect. Joni Rana was a pregnant woman in the sweeper colony, a very poor and marginalised section of society. She was encouraged to attend antenatal care by Abdul, a university-educated Muslim community project officer. Joni Rana not only came to clinic but encouraged other women to attend also. Previously excluded from mainstream society, she was amazed over how she had been actively sought and offered access to health care. Change *can* happen.

Village elders are becoming involved in addressing the issues and bringing about justice. Individuals within the project are becoming involved in their neighbours’ disputes, to bring about peace and reconciliation. Village women are standing for and being elected to local councils, where they bring these issues to a public decision making forum.

Women and girls suffer from the synergistic effect of poverty and discrimination in many societies, not just Bangladesh. As the bride of Christ we need to be active in bringing about change, and be willing to re-evaluate our cultural heritage in the light of our inheritance in Jesus. Much remains to be done... but change *can* happen. ☺

The author and her family spent many years in Bangladesh working in holistic mission at a rural health and development project and hospital.

