

Distribution: limited

SHS-85/CONF.803/15
Paris, 9 August 1985
Original: English

UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL,
SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION

International Symposium of Experts on
the Changing Roles of Men and Women in
Private and Public Life (Cat. VIII)

(Athens, Greece, 26-29 November 1985)

30 JAN. 1986

THE ROLE OF BENGALI MUSLIM WOMEN IN THE 19TH AND 20TH CENTURIES

by

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Division of Human Rights and Peace

(SHS-85/CONF.803/COL 7)

THE ROLE OF BENGALI MUSLIM WOMEN
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If we review the role of the Bengali Muslim women in the 19th and 20th centuries, we find that it gradually underwent a change. This change started specifically from the 20th century, and by the present decade of the 20th century Bengali Muslim women it must be said has made much progress in their march towards emancipation. A study of the role of Bengali Muslim women in the 19th and 20th centuries is a fascinating study as it throws light on the condition of the Bengali Muslim society of that period as a whole.

By the beginning of the 19th century Bengali Muslims had already lost all political power. Their economic condition had been affected by this new political situation. All of a sudden they found that almost all government posts were out of their reach. They were not recruited in the British army as the East India Company were not sure of their loyalty. Their economic condition was further affected by the permanent settlement of 1793 when many Muslim landlords lost their estates. The introduction of English as the official language of the East India Company Government barred the Persian and Arabic educated Bengali Muslim gentry from all government posts. We find Bengali Muslims in an utterly desolate condition towards the beginning of the 19th century. As a matter of fact Muslims all over the Indian subcontinent were suffering from depression, frustration and a futile pride for their past glories. The loss of political power, economic decadence, an alien culture and educational system gradually superimposed over the older ones made the Indian Muslims of this period inward looking, seeking solace in self pride in past traditions and religious precepts. The vanquished Muslims of Bengal were neither encouraged to cooperate with the British nor they, on their own, tried to be friendly with the ruling power. The Hindus of Bengal on the other hand made friendly contacts with the English. They were gradually learning English. They held government posts and became rich merchants and wealthy landlords. The impact of western education and western ideas created in the 19th century a renaissance in Bengal which developed a new outlook among the Bengali Hindus and gave rise to movements for the advancement of the Hindu women through social reforms and advancement of women's education. Specially the Brahmo movement of Raja Ram Mohan Roy aimed at modernising the Bengali Hindus in the light of a new interpretation of the Hindu religion. In the contemporary Muslim society on the other hand we find the rise and development of religious reform movements which mainly tried to purify the society by going back to the path of the early Islam. As a result of these movements the Bengali Muslim society became more conservative and orthodox and their conservatism and orthodoxy found best outlet in the manner they treated their womenfolk. The Muslim reform movements were not at first anti-British. But later on, hostilities developed between the followers of these movements and the British rulers in N. W. F. P., Sind and Bengal. The culmination of these hostilities reached in the Sepoy Mutiny in 1857 when with the final British victory over the Indians the rule of the English East India Company over this subcontinent ended and henceforth began the hegemony of the British crown.

Unfortunately, the Muslim subjects were mainly blamed for the upheaval of 1857 and recriminations and punishments fell mostly on their lots. At this crucial period of the history of the Indian Muslims two eminent Muslims Sir Sayyad Ahmad of the Upper Province and Nawab Abdul Latif of Bengal took the role of pioneers in improving relations between the British and their Muslim subjects. They also aimed at spreading western education among the Muslims because they believed that to achieve advancement and material progress the latter must reconcile with the alien British rule and take up western education. Both Nawab Abdul Latif and Sir Sayyad Ahmad contributed much towards the spread of western education among the Muslims. But they hardly gave any thought about the condition of their women. To both these eminent persons who were the founders of the modernist movements in their society, education was the central concern. But all their endeavours were concentrated on males. It was Sir Syed Amir Ali who among the 19th century Muslims of India spoke first in favour of female education in his society. But he made no specific efforts to spread education among women though in the association founded by him, viz., 'Central National Muhammadan Association', the rising Muslim middle class had a predominating number. In 1883 some western educated Bengali Muslims founded an association at Dhaka called 'Dacca Muslim Friends Association'. The prominent workers of this association Maulavi Abdul Aziz, Maulavi Fazlur Rahim, Hemayatuddin started to spread liberal ideas about women's rights and female education. They even tried to introduce a system of imparting education to women at home. As a result of the gradual change in the society we find from the census report of 1901 that 400 Muslim women of Bengal knew English.

The practice of purdah, and polygamy made the lives of 19th century Bengali Muslim women deplorable. The literal meaning of purdah is 'curtain' or 'veil'. It represents a system in which Muslim women are isolated from outsiders and are to observe high standards of female modesty. Observations of purdah restrict the mobility of women. It also restricts women's contact with men. Islam sanctions purdah for modesty, but it has been misinterpreted according to existing social circumstances. The Qur'an states:

'And tell the believing women to lower their gaze and be modest, and to display of their adornment only that which is apparent, and to draw their veils over their bosoms, and not to reveal their adornment save to their own husbands...' (Sura XXIV, v. 31).

Observance of strict purdah was the general custom followed by the Bengali Muslim women of the 19th century. Purdah was the sign of chastity of a woman. It was also a symbol of family aristocracy. The aristocratic classes of women observed purdah not only from unrelated men but also from unrelated women. Polygamy was another practice which made the Bengali Muslim women's lives in the 19th century miserable. This practice is enjoined by the Qur'an and incorporated in the traditional Muslim law. A Muslim male is allowed to marry up to four wives at a time provided he has the means to maintain the wives properly according to their status and he gives equal love and affection to all the wives and treats them with complete equality. Another custom prevalent among the Muslims of Bengal in the 19th century was the custom of giving girls early marriage. Though Islamic laws enjoin consent of both the bride and bridegroom before the marriage is contracted in actual practice child marriage

made this injunction non-effective. Purdah, polygamy, early marriage all these practices made the condition of the Bengali Muslim women really pitiable. Little attention was given to a girl's education. They were generally taught to read the Qur'an like a parrot without understanding its meaning. In aristocratic classes sometimes a girl is taught a little Urdu. Great stress was laid on giving training to the girls in sewing and cooking. Islam has enjoined an unequal status for women considering as it appears the greater physical strength of men. But it has again been misinterpreted as the inferiority of women and the authority of men over women. The Qur'an states:

'Men are in charge of women, because Allah hath made the one of them to excel the other, and because they spend of their property (for the support of women). So good women are the obedient...' (Sura IV, v. 34)

Obedience to male guardians was expected from a woman according to male interpretation and she was to play the role of a docile daughter, a compliant wife and a dependent mother. A 19th century Bengali Muslim woman was expected to be within the four walls of her house, doing domestic work and playing always a subservient role.

Even in the dark period of the 19th century two notable Muslim ladies appeared in Bengal who by their extraordinary personalities and merit made a mark in the society of their time. These ladies are Nawab Faizunnesa and Karimunnesa Khanam Chaudhurani. Their lives are also in many ways, illustrative of the condition of the contemporary Bengali Muslim women. Nawab Faizunnesa was born in 1834 in an aristocratic zamindar family of Comilla district. She was taught at home by private tutor Bengali, Sanskrit, Urdu, Persian and Arabic and due to this private tuition she became a learned lady. After the death of her parents she became a zamindar herself and with great ability she administered her estate. She did many public works like establishment of schools for girls and boys, founding hospital for women. In recognition of her benevolence, the British Government gave her the title of nawab. She patronized contemporary Bengali periodicals like Dhaka Prakash, Sudhakar and Islam Pracarak. She wrote several books the most famous among these being Rup Jalal. She was a member of the 'Central National Muhammadan Association' of Syed Amir Ali and the Calcutta based women's organization 'Sakhi Samiti'. Her personal life was full of unhappiness and sorrow. She was the second wife of Chaudhury Muhammad Gazi and she had a bitter experience in the polygamous household. Faizunnesa never came out of purdah. Before her death in 1903 she made a Wakf of the major portion of her large estate for the welfare of the community. She died in 1903.

Karimunnesa Khanam Chaudhurani was born in 1855 in the village of Pairaband of the Rangpur district. She was the daughter of Pairaband's landlord Zahir Mohammad Abu Ali Saber and the eldest sister of Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, the pioneer Muslim feminist of Bengal. In her childhood she was taught to read the Qur'an and a little Bengali. Karimunnesa was married at the tender age of 14 with Abdul Hakim Ghaznavi of the famous Ghaznavi family of Delduar, Tangail. Here in Delduar with the help of some students who were her brothers-in-law she learnt Bengali properly. Her married life lasted only 9 years and she became a widow with two minor sons at the age of 23. She held progressive ideas and much against the wishes of her relations gave her sons western education. Her sons Abdul Karim Ghaznavi and Abdul Halim Ghaznavi became eminent among the Muslims of Bengal. Karimunnesa also promoted the education of Begum Rokeya. Karimunnesa used to write poetry and she wrote at least two books Duksa Tarangini (a river of sadness) and Manas Bikas (a manifestation of

the mind). She also knew English. Her name is also connected with the progressive movements of her times. She patronized and financed the fortnightly magazine Ahamadi. The famous writer Mir Musharraf Husain also received her favours and patronage. She spent her whole life in purdah and never came out in public. She died in 1926.

Towards the end of the 19th century we find the rise of a Bengali Muslim middle class and a gradual awareness among them about the pitiable condition of women. This feeling for women of the society became more prominent from the beginning of the 20th century and Bengali Muslim intellectuals started to propagate ideas about the necessity of female education through Bengali Muslim press. It was at this period that Begum Rokeya appeared as the herald of a new age for Bengali Muslim women. She was born in 1880 in the village of Pairaband in the Rangpur district. Her family belonged to the landed aristocracy class, a class which was superstitious as well as highly orthodox. Begum Rokeya's education in Bengali and English was promoted by her elder sister Karimunnesa and elder brother Ibrahim Saber. She was taught the Qur'an. She also learnt Persian and Urdu. At about the age of 16 Rokeya was given in marriage to Saiyad Sakhawat Hossain of Bhagalpur, Bihar. He was then a Deputy Magistrate. Though it was his second marriage, it turned out to be a happy one. Sakhawat Hossain was an educated gentleman who, before becoming a Deputy Magistrate, had gone to England on a government scholarship. He seems to have appreciated the qualities of his educated wife and most of the works of Begum Rokeya which reveal her bold and creative thoughts were written during his life time. He encouraged his wife to publish her works and was a supporter of female education. He died in 1909. Before his death he made a will to dispose of his property and in it he kept aside 10,000 rupees specifically for a female school to be founded and managed by his childless wife Rokeya. Accordingly, in the very year that her husband died, she founded the Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School at Bhagalpur which was later shifted in 1911 at Calcutta. From 1911 till her death in 1932, Calcutta was the centre of her activities.

Begum Rokeya was well known to the Muslim literati even before 1911. Her reputation as a bold thinker on women's rights was firmly established in the Bengali Muslim society with the publication of the Maticur, which was an anthology of seven papers of Rokeya published before in contemporary periodicals. The date of the publication of the Maticur was 1905 and this date may be taken as the starting point of the movement for the emancipation of women in the Bengali Muslim society. The Maticur commenced a current of liberal and free thoughts in the narrow and immobile Muslim society. In this work Rokeya discussed the inferior status of women, the causes of women's degradation and ways and means of women's advancement. She identified lack of opportunities as the main cause of women's degradation and also complained that in the name of religion women had been kept in their present position of degradation. According to Rokeya the goal of women should be achievement of equality with men. She further propagated the idea that the women should get equal opportunities of education like that of men. Rokeya also wrote other works like the Avarodhavasini, the Padma Rag, the Sultana's Dream. In all her works Rokeya propagated the ideas of women's emancipation. Rokeya's bold ideas created much stirring in the Bengali Muslim society, but these also made it rethink the issues raised by her.

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To bring the Muslim women out of the four walls of their house, she established an association in 1916 called the 'Anjumane Khawatine Islam' or the society for the Muslim women. This was the first organization of the Bengali Muslim women and contributed much in generating consciousness among the women of the Bengali Muslim society. Rokeya was also much concerned about the Muslim males unconditional and unregulated rights to divorce their wives and wrote a paper on this subject before her death. Rokeya also started a movement to amend Muslim family laws so that women be granted better rights in this respect. From 1911 she devoted much of her time to the advancement of the school founded by her. Due to her untiring efforts and zeal the school advanced and in 1930 it became the first girls high school for the Muslim girls of Bengal.

Rokeya died on 9 December 1932 at the early age of 52 due to over work and strain. Most of her life she devoted to the cause of the women she championed as a writer, as an educationist and as a social worker. Even in her life time the seeds sown by Rokeya started to bear fruits. We find a rise in the rate of female literacy in the Bengali Muslim society. More educational institutions were being set up for the Muslim girls. Rokeya also got a band of co-workers like Begum Shamsunnahar Mahmud and Mrs. M. Rahman. The educated section of the Bengali Muslims also started to support Rokeya in unequivocal terms. In this connection mention may be made of the role of the Bengali Muslim press. The periodicals like Navanur and especially the Saogat did contribute much in making the Bengali Muslim society realize the need for the advancement of women for the welfare of the society as a whole. Before her death Rokeya was even fortunate enough to see several Muslim lady graduates coming out of the Calcutta University, and one Muslim lady, Miss Fazilatunnesa, even going to England for higher education with a government scholarship. All these are sure evidence of Rokeya's success as a champion of the cause of the women of her society. And when Rokeya died there were educated Muslim women like Begum Shamsunnahar Mahmud (1908-1964) to carry on her unfinished work to success. In 1938, a college for Muslim Girls named Lady Brabooone College was established at Calcutta by British Government. This was no doubt a further impetus to Rokeya's ideals.

British government in India did not like to touch the family laws of both the Hindus and Muslims. But the practice of child marriage in vogue in India caused serious thinking about the ills of this practice and there started a movement for prohibiting child marriage in India which ultimately resulted in the passing of the Child Marriage Restraint Act, 1929. This act prevented girls from getting married before the age of 14.

The Pakistan movement which started in the forties of the present century and the aim of which was to obtain a separate homeland for the Muslims of the Indian subcontinent gave further impetus to the advancement of the Bengali Muslim women. With the birth of Pakistan on 15th of August 1947, Eastern part of the British province of Bengal became a part of Pakistan and was first named East Bengal and then East Pakistan. The new independence acted as a great stimuli to the awakening of the Bengali Muslim women. We find increasing number of schools and colleges being established for women. There was an increase in the number of female students in educational institutions. Many

girls from orthodox families started to enter educational institutions to get formal education. It is true that East Pakistan as part of the Islamic state of Pakistan could not be as modern as any European state, still much progress in women's advancement was made during the period 1947-1971. The progress and advancement of the Bengali Muslim women of East Pakistan was reflected in the increase in the percentage of female literacy and in the increase in the number of Bengali Muslim women in different professions. The rate of female literacy in East Pakistan was 9.6% as against 29.3% of male literacy. A land mark in the advancement of the socio-legal status of women was the Family Laws Ordinance of 1961 which tried to regulate polygamy. The Ordinance states that 'No man, during the subsistence of existing marriage, shall, except without the previous permission in writing of the Arbitration Council, contract another marriage, nor shall any such marriage contracted without such permission be registered under this Ordinance'. It also lays down that any person who contracts another marriage without the necessary permission from the Arbitration Council shall be punished. The punishment laid down in the Ordinance consists of the immediate payment of the dower or Mehr, and imprisonment up to one year or a fine of Tk. 5,000, or both. But the Ordinance does not declare the illegal subsequent marriage or marriages as invalid and consequently lost much of its effectiveness. The Ordinance, however, fixed up the minimum age requirement of marriage for girls as 16.

The liberation war of 1971 and the birth of Bangladesh have given great impetus to the advancement of the Bengali Muslim women. Women suffered a lot during the war and, some women even directly participated in the war of liberation. Many women lost their lives, many lost their husbands, fathers and brothers. Many of them again were dishonoured by the Pakistani occupation army. So when the war was over and the independent country Bangladesh started its life, women thought that a new era of progress and advancement had begun for them. The Constitution of Bangladesh seems to fulfil their expectations to a great extent. It has several provisions which concern women directly or indirectly. Article 15 of the Constitution specifically gives the state the responsibility of providing social security to widows, amongst others. Article 18 gives the state the responsibility to take measures to prevent prostitution. The political rights of women is recognized in Article 19 which clearly enunciates that no discrimination on the basis of sex shall be permitted. Article 19 further states that 'the state shall endeavour to ensure equal opportunity to all its citizens'. Again, Article 27 of the Constitution states, 'All citizens are equal before the law, and are entitled to equal protection by the law'. Article 28 states that the state shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of sex. Clause 2 of Article 28 further assures that women have equal rights with men in all spheres of state and of public life. But there are contradictory provisions in Article 29 of the Constitution which deals with employment in the service of the country. On the one hand clause 2 of this Article states that '... no citizen, shall, on grounds only of sex... be ineligible for, or discriminated against in respect of employment or office in the service of the Republic'; but on the other hand there are provisions in clause 3 of this Article under which the state has been given the right to reserve certain employment or office on the grounds that it is in its nature unsuited to the members of the opposite sex. This is undoubtedly a breach of equal rights and it shows that the framers of the Constitution could not fail to acknowledge tacitly the fact of inequality present in the status of women. In parliament thus they can only be nominated to 30 reserved seats and to all new recruitments in the public sector only 10 per cent of positions.

On the whole, however, Muslim women of Bangladesh is marching towards progress. We find greater number of female students in all educational institutions. More schools and colleges are being set up for girls. The female literacy rate at present is 16 per cent. There are more women lawyers, doctors, teachers and even engineers in Bangladesh. Women employees are found working in Government offices, banks and other semi-autonomous and autonomous bodies. There are women magistrates and munsiffs. In the literary field also they hold a prominent position. They have earned fame as poets, novelists, short story writers and essayists. In this connection mention may be made among others of the names of Begum Sufia Kamal, Makbula Manjur, Rajia Khan, Romena Afaj, Selina Hossain and Nilima Ibrahim. At present women labour force is also a factor in the industrialization of Bangladesh. They are found working in great number specially in garment, ceramic and silk industries. Women are also very much active in politics and the two most prominent political leaders of Bangladesh are women. Their names are Begum Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina Wazed. They hold the topmost position of their political parties, the Bangladesh Nationalist party and Awami League respectively.

Bengali Muslim women at present have been working under projects like Food for Work Programme. Various organizations like Bangladesh Academy for Rural Development, Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee, Bangladesh National Women's Association take development programmes for women in which Bengali Muslim women actively participate. Family planning programmes taken up by the Bangladesh government and various other non-governmental organizations have been operating successfully especially among the educated section of the urban population of Bangladesh. Family planning methods have made the educated wives a little independent minded and self reliant as they now can limit the number of children they would bear according to their wish. This is indeed a psychological boost up.

The policy of the government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh from the very beginning has been promotion of women's participation in the development activities of the nation. The government has set up a number of institutional facilities and has encouraged voluntary agencies and organizations to work in the field of women's social and economic emancipation and family planning. Women of Bangladesh are now eligible to compete in examinations for foreign and all administrative positions. The government has a separate Ministry of Women's Affairs which assist the government in the formulation of policies and programmes relating to women. The Ministry of Education has issued directives to appoint 50 per cent female teachers for government primary schools. All these positive steps of the government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh has contributed much towards the advancement of Bengali Muslim women.

Bengali Muslim women, especially the educated section, are at present very much conscious about their rights and they think that much is needed to be done for their advancement and emancipation. Equal status with men is their goal. They want amendment of family laws because these make discrimination against women. They want property rights which would give them equal rights with men to inherit property. They want that polygamy be abolished by law. They also want equal rights as to marriage, during marriage and at its dissolution. They also want equal job opportunities. They make their opinions heard through writings in symposium and seminars organized by the women's organizations like 'Mahila Parishad', 'Mahila Samiti', 'Zonta Club',

'Business and Professional Women's Clubs of Bangladesh'. Sometimes the Ministry of Women's Affairs also holds seminars on women. There are also study groups like 'Women for Women' which occasionally publish papers on women's socio-economic status and ways and means to improve them. As a result of the movements of women for reform several ordinances relating to women have been proclaimed recently by the government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh. Among these mention may be made of antidowry ordinance, ordinance for prevention of cruelty to women, ordinance setting up family courts to settle cases regarding divorce, dower, custody of children, etc. But the educated Muslim women are not fully satisfied with these ordinances as their goal is nothing less than complete equal status and equal rights with men. Recently the Bengali Muslim women started agitation for ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women. After making some delay the Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh has ratified the Convention but with the provision that some of its clauses which go against the sharia remain suspended. This act of the Bangladesh government has created much anger and dissatisfaction among the educated Bengali Muslim women of Bangladesh and agitation is still going on for the total ratification of the Convention.

A review of the role of the Bengali Muslim women in the 19th and 20th centuries from the historical perspective shows that they have advanced much. In the 19th century they led a life of inanimate dolls under the guardianship of male relatives and spent their lives behind curtain. But by the eighties of the present century many women have crossed the barrier of purdah and have established themselves in society. Modern liberal ideas and conceptions have touched their lives and they are enjoying many fundamental rights. Of course, it is true that much needs to be done for the alleviation of the socio-legal status of Bengali Muslim women. There should be wider spreading of education. There should be reform of laws so that women are granted equal rights with men. The pace of change in the role of Bengali Muslim women is commendable but slow. It needs to be quickened so that Bengali Muslim women may be free from the age old trammels of superstitions, prejudices and ignorance in the near future.

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