

UNITED NATIONS



ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMISSION FOR ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

Status of Women in Asia and the Pacific Region

Series 2

SOCIO-CULTURAL AND ATTITUDINAL FACTORS AFFECTING THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN SOUTH ASIA

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PREFACE

Five papers on issues concerning women's status in Asia and the Pacific were commissioned for the Regional Intergovernmental Preparatory Meeting for the World Conference to Review and Appraise the Achievements of the United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace which was held on 26-30 March 1984 in Tokyo. The meeting was organized by ESCAP in co-operation with the United Nations Center for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs and hosted by the Government of Japan. These papers, which documented regional issues emerging from accumulated evidence during the United Nations Decade for Women, were subsequently expanded into more detailed studies which could be of value for governments and concerned agencies as a basis for planning and implementing programmes to advance the status of women and their full integration in the Asian and Pacific region.

The five studies on specific issues concerning women in development are now being published by ESCAP as the Status of Women in Asia and the Pacific Region *series which include the following publications:*

1. *"Women in the economy: employment", by Linda Y.C. Lim*
2. *"Socio-cultural and attitudinal factors affecting the status of women in South Asia", by T. Scarlett Epstein*
3. *"Impact of science and technology on women", by Malee Suwana-adth and the ESCAP secretariat*
4. *"Participation of women in politics", by Rounaq Jahan*
5. *"Role of the women's movement and non-governmental organizations in enhancing the status of women", by the ESCAP secretariat*

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INTRODUCTION

> "The stark reality is that the future of development and society lies in the future of women, equally with men. Never has it been more apparent that women's issue cannot be compartmentalized and isolated as secondary issues in development."
>
> (Executive Secretary, ESCAP, 1984).

Most ongoing discussions dealing with the development of less developed countries at least refer to the need for making women "equal partners" with men in society in general and in development processes in particular. Such references implicitly infer a concern not only with the lower status that has been ascribed to women by virtue of their sex, but also with measures that may help to substitute an "achieved" for the present "ascribed" system which allocates status to men and women. There is thus an attempt to establish "equality" between the sexes. However, "equality" has at least two meanings, both in popular and in technical usage. According to one view, people are said to be equal if, but only if, they are similar, if not identical, with respect to one or more critical attributes" (Spiro, 1979:7). This may be identified as the "sameness" meaning of equality. According to another view, people are said to be equal (even if they are dissimilar with respect to the critical attributes) so long as their differences are held to be of equivalent value. This view which might be identified as the "equal status" meaning of equality, is based on a pluralistic system of values, one in which the different forms assumed by criterial attributes are viewed as having (more or less) the same worth.

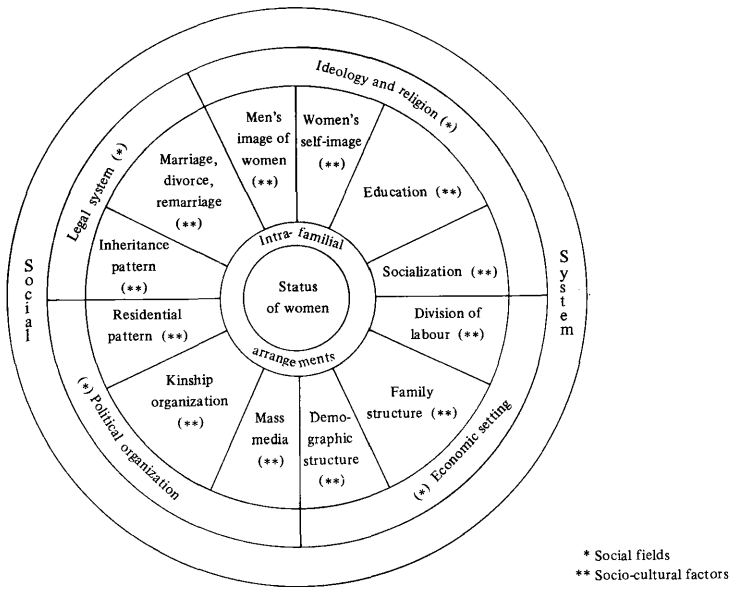
Some earlier western feminists advocated equality for women by assuming the "sameness" meaning. Since it was obvious that biological differences and their cultural superstructures prevent women from ever becoming the "same" as men, this approach gave way to the more realistic one of identifying the objective of equality with "equal" status. However, the plurality of values that this definition of equality involves has opened the floodgates to a variety of different, and often contradictory, theories. Different authorities each choose a different individual variable and treat it as though it exerted sole, or certainly overwhelming influence on the "status of women".

Many experts have become disciples of Boserup who, in her epoch-making study (1970), argues that women's economic dependence inevitably implies inferior status. This kind of economic determinism assumes a uni-variable status structure with economic relationships being the determining factor. Undoubtedly, access to, and even more important, control of resources is one of the major variables affecting prestige ranking. However, to consider it as the only factor determining the social status of women is a gross over-simplification of one of the most complex aspects of social relationships. Age and

kinship relations are examples of other than economic variables affecting the social status of women.

Status in general, and not just of women, is accepted to connote evaluation, hence honour, esteem, respect and prestige are its synonyms (Zelditch, 1968). It must therefore be viewed in its relative context. There exists not only a status distinction between men and women but also a status hierarchy among women themselves. It is thus unrealistic to assume that one single scale of values can account for the different prestige ranking society accords to the same individuals or groups of people in different social contexts. In line with this argument, this paper attempts to develop a model which postulates that the relative status of women is cocooned in concentric social circles, and that at least four separate status hierarchies exist. These four rank structures are embedded in four inter-dependent yet separate "social fields", namely: economic setting, political organization, legal system, and ideology and religion. Accordingly, the same individual or groups of people may occupy high rank in one "social field", while occupying low rank in another "social field". A number of socio-cultural factors intervene between each social field and intra-familial arrangements in which women are cocooned much more so than men. The model includes only the more important socio-cultural factors and does not claim to be exhaustive. The circles are meant to illustrate the mutual interdependence and interaction of the different "social fields" as well as socio-cultural factors which make up a social system and allocate prestige rank within it (see figure 1). This means that a change in any one variable, or factor, is likely to ripple throughout the total set of social arrangements. The *ceteris paribus*

Figure 1. The status of women cocooned in the social system



* Social fields
** Socio-cultural factors

clause so frequently used in economic analysis is inapplicable to the study of social relationships. Other things never remain equal in a social setting if a change in one variable occurs. This makes social change, particularly social engineering, such a difficult process to organize and to analyse, and "social prediction" a hazardous exercise. Yet the argument presented here leads to the proposition that a new type of education with a novel content is a necessary pre-condition of improving the position of women everywhere. This is particularly relevant in the context of Asian rural women.

In what follows, the twelve factors immediately affecting the status of women in the more tradition-bound societies of South Asia are discussed, grouped under four major "social fields" for the sake of analytical simplicity. Throughout the paper the need of a multi-variable approach to the understanding of the socio-cultural factors affecting the status of women is stressed over and over again. It cannot be emphasized too strongly.

A. ECONOMIC SETTING

> "Economic relationships are embedded in social and cultural relationships." (Long and Roberts, 1978:320)

As already mentioned, the economic setting is regarded by many experts as the "social field" which overwhelmingly determines women's status and roles. In her pioneer study, Boserup (1970) argues that under conditions of shifting cultivation, in areas with sparse population, women perform most of the work; with greater density of population and plough agriculture, men do more work than women; and where land is irrigated and intensively farmed, both put in a great deal of hard work. Boserup associates the first and last categories with higher status for women than the second. Though there is obviously some truth in this generalization, it does not apply everywhere. Moreover there are often other mediating factors which by their interaction help to produce the stated result. The effect of female labour force participation on their status depends also for instance, on the level of the socio-economic hierarchy at which they operate.

There are signs of change occurring at the two extremes of the socio-economic range. Young women of the top rural stratum, who have benefitted from education and therefore can take up professions such as teaching, are attracted to venture into the wider world. As yet, there are only very few rural girls with tertiary education, but that they already exist must be taken as a promising sign. However, the higher status they achieve in one field of social relations does not earn them equal treatment in all other such fields. At the other extreme of the rural socio-economic hierarchy, survival strategies dictate that Muslim women from the poorest households (the landless) become casual wage labourers and work for households outside their own kingroup, thereby helping break the mould in which Muslim rural women have lived for generations. The fact that these women provide for their own livelihood and that they are

not dependent on their men's earnings in no way raises their status. Quite the contrary, working as a casual labourer is a measure of last resort, precisely because it is associated with loss of honour, respect and prestige. If the proportion of landless families in Bangladesh villages increases, which is likely in view of the continuing high rate of population growth, female casual labourers will become a more frequent phenomenon. Jharna Nath's study (forthcoming) of a village in South Asia clearly indicates that female seclusion is a luxury which the poorest cannot afford and the new class of educated women are keen to shed.

In a number of developing countries the government is reserving a certain proportion of public service jobs for educated women, while at the other extreme increasing numbers of women are fast joining the agricultural labour force to work side by side with men (see e.g., Khatun, 1984). Yet it must be remembered that wherever it is prestigious for a family to claim that its womenfolk are not involved in directly productive activities, more women will tend to spend their lives within the domestic domain. More important still, in such societies official statistics stipulating the female labour force participation rate tend to under-record the actual productive contribution women make. This is exemplified in the female labour force participation rates recorded in the *I.L.O. Yearbooks of Labour Statistics* which show a considerable difference between the patterns of women's productive contributions in East Asian, South-East Asian and South Asian countries. A portion of these differences can be explained by work concepts used in different countries which in trun reflect their societal values.

1. Division of labour

The division of labour is, of course, part of the socio-economic setting of society and affects as well as reflects the status of women. The separation between the "public domain", where men predominate, and the "private domain", where women function, is often considered a general phenomenon occurring in all societies at all times in history. This is a myth. Only as families improve their well-being can they afford to withdraw women, who are after all an integral part of their labour force for productive activities.

Women living in more affluent settings often complain about their economic dependence on their husbands and their confinement to the unpaid and undervalued status of housewife. They are keen to break out of their "domestic prisons". "Hence, employment outside the household is widely regarded as the key to sexual equality and personal fulfilment. What tends to get overlooked, however, is that the liberating consequences of employment are entirely relative to the nature, conditions and remuneration of the job performed. For women in underprivileged classes, as for men in similar circumstances, the job market usually leads to nothing but drudgery, with the added penalty in the woman's case that she must now endure the sexism of her boss as well as of her husband" (Harris, 1981:vii). Gulati captured this notion exceedingly well in her *Profiles in Female Poverty* (1981). For the poorest women, who after all constitute

the majority of the world's women, the more leisured life of housewife seems an ideal of which they may dream but which they doubt they can ever attain.

Even in the poorest households there exists some degree of gender-specific division of labour. Women and girls perform by far the greater part of domestic work. If they belong to the poorer strata and their contribution to directly productive activities is a necessity, their workload becomes that much heavier. Time budgets collected in Asian villages clearly indicate that women work longer hours per day than do their men (see e.g., Chakrovarti, 1975; White, 1976).

It needs, however, to be stressed that the male/female division of labour does not necessarily mean that men are the breadwinners who provide for their women and chiliren. "There is no basis for the more recent Western feminist emphasis on shared roles and pooled resources. . . Under sex segregation, each sex provides those resources for which it is traditionally responsible. Under these conditions the introduction of more cash in the hands of men is not likely to be spent for family needs, especially where those needs were traditionally defined as the responsibility of women. The woman has no claim to her husband's support in those areas of family consumption for which she is responsible; yet the development process may make her less able to fulfil those consumption needs herself." (Bould, 1982:9).

The existence of at least some degree of male/female division of labour is often taken to reflect the different reproductive roles. There is no doubt that sex specific biological endowments do constitute certain constraints. However, these appear to have been heavily ritualised and culturally elaborated, so much so as to now represent a whole superstructure which takes the gender-specific division of labour as an unalterable law of nature. This assumption has been further reinforced by philosophical considerations in some cases where the difference in men's and women's roles came to be seen as part of the order of the universe ordained by supernatural forces.

Society attaches prestige to certain jobs not because of any intrinsic value but rather because of the person, or category of persons, who performs them. As soon as women begin to work in what have been traditionally male jobs, men shift to some other occupation and women are left to carry out the work for lower rewards than the men used to get. Conversely, when mechanization makes certain tasks more attractive to men, women cease to be involved and men take over earning higher rewards. Thus it must be remembered that it is not only the access to economic resources that determines the social status of individuals, but more important are the social characteristics the individuals possess. This helps to explain the differential reward system that operates for male and female labour and suggests a clue to the puzzling problem why men and women are awarded different levels of respect even when they perform the same tasks. A gender-specific value system contributed importantly to environmental adaptation and helped to ensure evolutionary survival of societies. The high mortality rates common until not so long ago in most Asian and Pacific

societies made compensatory high fertility necessary. This meant often that individual women had as many as 15 or more pregnancies, which in turn confined women to the "domestic domain" for a large part of their lives and encouraged fertility-inducing social mechanisms (Ssennyonga, 1977).

2. Family Structure

Family structure and concomitant domestic cycle phases are other variables which are affected by the economic setting and in turn influence societal attitudes relating to the status of women. Extended families, where three or more generations live jointly, usually exist only among the upper socio-economic strata who are in a position to take advantage of the intra-familial specialization that it offers. "Landless families and those with insignificant landholdings have for the most part remained elementary units" (Epstein, 1973:201). Thus, among poorer villagers, a woman may not have the opportunity to live in the same house with her grandchildren for long, since her son usually starts a separate homestead after a few years of marriage. In Bangladesh, "by becoming a mother-in-law a woman attains the highest position in her family. She holds power and authority over her daughters-in-law" (Nath, 1981:26) if she rules over an extended family household. The old lady usually wants her sons to be on her side, which often leads to conflict between herself and her daughters-in-law. She is anxious to have a grandson who will inherit the family name and property, and through whom the family lineage will be protected. There is a common saying in Bangladesh villages that "interest is better than investment" – the children representing the investment and the grandchildren the interest.

The relationship between the economic setting, family structure and the status of women throws a number of important considerations into relief. When discussing the "status of women", it is essential to specify the reference group involved; i.e., is the prestige ranking of women to represent a hierarchical organization among women or is it a question of comparing and contrasting women with men? Moreover, in societies where the senior woman in the family occupies a strategic position, young women may consider the hardships and discrimination they have to suffer as daughter-in-law as the price they have to pay for being able to exert authority once they reach seniority. All this also affects women's self-image.

3. Demographic structure

Demographic structure like the family structure constitutes a variable which intervenes between the wider economic setting and intra-familial arrangements. If culture is viewed as an "inventory of solutions to the problems of the natural habitat" (Ssennyonga, 1977:46), then the traditional emphasis on high fertility becomes understandable. The lower the level of control a social group can exert over its socio-physical environment the more essential become its effective adaptation methods. When many children die and the overall expectation of life is low society depends on its women to produce many children. Under such conditions it is not surprising that a woman gains prestige by bearing

many offspring. A socio-economic setting which forces people to operate in an "accommodating framework" (Epstein, 1977:223) leads to a continuing high birth rate even when mortality has been declining. For many societies surplus people are a novel phenomenon and therefore their traditional cultural inventory offers no solutions for it. The continuing high birth rate is thus a legacy from an era when it was an essential precondition to the perpetuation of society.

There is evidence that the rewards of production are not equally distributed among household members. For instance, dietary surveys among 130 study families in rural Bangladesh show that per capita male food intake consistently exceeds that of females in all age groups (Chen, 1981:61). The assumption still widely held by development planners that intra-familial arrangements are organized on an egalitarian basis leads to policies directed towards improving the status of the family as such, rather than affirmative measures to uplift women's status within the family.

As population begins to press on strictly limited resources, which is the case in many Asian villages, migration becomes the major relief measure. Migration data show that men are the first to leave an overcrowded village, leaving their womenfolk behind to look after the children and in general to keep the family going. "It is estimated that, around the world today, one household out of three is headed, *de facto,* by a woman" (Mandl, 1980:37). In the many cases where male outmigration means *de facto* severance of marital ties, the female heads of household left behind face all of the problems of the single parent in developed countries in terms of a need for full-time child-care and other support services that are not likely to be provided by state agencies. Under such conditions, jobs directed at poor female-headed families may provide some stopgap assistance, but they are not likely to provide a woman with the economic and non-economic support she needs (Bould, 1982: 11).

Male outmigration does not inevitably lead to the breakdown of marital units, though in many societies it does. In fact in some areas it has strengthened the bond between husband and wife and even more important it has resulted in women taking over their husbands' managerial responsibilities while their men are migrant labourers. Naveed-i-Rahat discovered this phenomenon when she studied Meharabad, a Punjabi village in Pakistan where more than 50 per cent of the men of working age are working outside their communities, most of them in the Arab oil producing countries (forthcoming).

Many Meharabad men have been migrant workers on contracts for periods between 18 to 24 months. The incomes they have been earning while away from home have been much higher than what they could have earned by staying in the village. In this sense Meharabad is representative of many other Asian villages from which a large proportion of men have gone to work in the Middle East. Men continue to remain integral members of Meharabad society in general and their families in particular even while they are away. Their higher incomes are channelled to their families. Women who used to only assist their menfolk in agricultural activities besides running their households now have to make

decisions not only over agricultural matters but also over household savings and expenditure. The woman whose husband is away has to exercise her exclusive judgement, unless some of her male kin are prepared to help or at least advise her. Thus as a result of male outmigration, although in most cases it is only temporary, female roles and activities have been changing. Some women now move between two spheres, the traditional female domestic cycle and the male arena which lies outside or in the public sphere. In households where the man is absent for long periods the woman becomes the central figure due to her dual duties. She represents the household on special occasions, which are recognized, thereby giving her decisions the air of importance. While some duties if performed in the presence of the man give a bad name to a woman, in his absence the same activities are generally considered part of the bravery and courage of the woman. There is thus undoubtedly a shift of importance in favour of the woman while the man is away. However, this does not imply a change in Meharabad's traditional patrilineal kinship structure. Men are still the formal heads of household. From his birth to maturity the male is preferred to the female, and is taught to exercise authority. The physical absence has not taken men altogether out of the village structure. There exists a complementarity between male and female roles: men leave their homes to increase their earnings, while women stay behind to look after their families. Outmigration has, however, widened women's social horizons. By shifting more weight onto women, these *de facto* female headed households have become "matri-weighted". These new types of matri-weighted households are an effective response to changed demographic conditions, triggered off by temporary male outmigration.

B. POLITICAL ORGANIZATION

> "Women's participation in politics is essential to their advancement: without their voice being heard at the decision-making level, how will women get the changes they need in employment, health, education and access to supportive services? On the other hand, without such changes, without equal access and opportunity, how are women to get into power?" (UN Division for Economic and Social Information, 1980).

In most societies there exists a formal or governmental as well as an informal micro-level political organization. The power structures in these two spheres of political organization are rarely identical; in fact they are often in conflict with each other. Many third world governments have adopted the western democratic system. This means that at the governmental level, political status is awarded on the basis of achievement. By contrast, at the micro-level of many societies, the traditional ascribed status system still continues to operate. Wherever "ascribed status is the rule and political positions are occupied by hereditary succession, women tend to have lower political status than they have under conditions where status is achieved" (Strathern, 1972).

1. Mass media

Mass media have the potential of raising as well as lowering the political status of women. "If the Press... is to fulfil its vital role of diagnosing the maladies that threaten our survival, it must reorient its approach to women's role in society" (Mazumdar, 1976). So far, however, mass media has been largely responsible for the perpetuation of men's and women's stereotypes.

Because women are usually less mobile than their male counterparts, they are much less exposed to new experiences and are dependent for their access to information on one or other form of media. Thus media have great potential to act in an educative as well as conscience-raising role for women. However, so far only little of this has been realized.

Discussions on women's issues usually include a plea for a more enlightened approach from the media. An example of this is ESCAP's Report SC/RIPMWC/9 which explicitly states that "in utilizing education and the mass media to overcome socio-cultural biases and instill more authentic as well as forward-looking images of women, removal of messages that reinforce negative and obsolete concepts of women from educational and media materials should be one of the first steps, followed by the introduction of more appropriate concepts" (1984:13). Similarly, another ESCAP Report SD/RIPMWC/11 pleads that: "Those who control the media should be encouraged to develop positive images of women to help women understand the implications of development and to motivate them to play a more active role in the development processes in all sectors" (1984:V). Or again at the seminar on Women and the Media run by the Press Institute and the Indian Institute of Mass Communication the consensus emerged that "the Indian media do not give adequate coverage to women's concerns" (Dasgupta, 1976:16). The Seminar on Women and Media organized by Asia-Pacific Institute for Broadcasting Development (AIBD) also included in its seminar report (1980) a strong recommendation that "Media should be used more effectively in the raising of self-awareness in women of their inherent and acquired capabilities and of their roles in society as active participants in development".

In view of all the criticism leveled against the media, it may seem surprising that it continues unperturbed along traditional lines. However, if we consider the conflicting tendencies which influence most media managers as well as many policy-makers it becomes easy to understand why this is so. Most important political offices are held by men. Even if at a formal level they support the claim that women should be enabled to exert more political influence and power, at a more informal level their actions are still conditioned by their traditional type of socialization. It must be stressed here that this consideration applies not only to men but also to most women in influential positions. This should help to explain why social change is such a slow process and why women still are only peripheral to the political power structure.

2. Kinship organization

Kinship organization is another socio-cultural factor which affects the political status of women. In most current societies there is a bias in favour of the male line of succession; they are either patrilineally structured with a strong patriarchical element or they are bi-laterally organized but emphasizing the male line. Matrilineal kinship exists only in relatively few societies these days. However, even where it does exist it should not be mistaken for matriarchy. Even in most matrilineal kinship systems access to property and political offices is passed on from one generation of men to another, only membership of the kin group is traced through the female rather than the male line. Though in both patrilineal and matrilineal societies men monopolize the access to productive assets and political offices, women in matrilineal societies tend to have more political influence than women in patrilineal societies. Women may be members of their respective kin groups but they are generally only second-class citizens. For instance, "in Hagen, a woman's political status disqualifies her from acting like a male clan member, nevertheless she exercises membership of a kind. Unlike most men, women regularly participate in the affairs both of their natal kin group and of the group with which they are associated by marriage" (Strathern, 1972:285). The dual loyalty that this involves for women makes them into good mediators in disputes between the kin groups in which they are directly involved. At the same time their split loyalties reduces their identification with any one particular kin group and therefore reduces their political commitment.

3. Residential pattern

Residential pattern like kinship organization is in most societies biased in favour of men, that is to say young couples settle patri-virilocally, i.e., in the husband's father's place of residence. However, there is a tendency for young couples to settle patri-uxorilocally whenever this offers certain advantages. The uprooting that residential change involves for girls when they marry, particularly if the village is the exogamous unit, which is the case in many Indian communities, constitutes a traumatic experience in the life of a woman. In her natal village where all men are her classificatory kin a young girl can move about freely. Monica Das Gupta in her study of an Indian village (1976), focussed on the changing roles and status of women. Patri-virilocal residence when the village is the exogamous unit breaks up female peer groups and thereby prevents the formation of female pressure groups. On the other hand, in villages where most marriages are intra-village and most of the female population were born in the village, women exert considerable influence, particularly in the matri-weighted households; they are certainly politically more active. Naveed-i-Rahat argues convincingly that the continued female peer group identity in the latter case facilitates the existence of strong female networks, which in turn enable women to exert considerable political power (forthcoming).

C. LEGAL SYSTEM

> "It must be recognized that in traditional societies, legislation by itself is an incomplete solution to the problems of social change" (Khosla, 1984).

Legal systems are only rarely in step with the generally accepted pattern of behaviour; laws usually either precede changing behaviour patterns, in which case they are often introduced to help bring about a desired element of social change, or laws lag behind social change processes. In terms of statutory regulations the legal status of women has been made equal to that of men in many countries affecting many aspects of social life. For instance "the constitution of Bangladesh provides equal rights to women in respect of adult franchise, employment in public service, education and all other benefits enjoyed by male citizens....Women have the right to inherit property and the right to divorce under certain conditions" (Khatun, 1984). The Indian Constitution too "guarantees equality between men and women and a number of laws have been enacted from time to time to implement this guarantee. Legislation has covered the field of inheritance, employment, marriage, maternity benefits and crimes against women....The Dowry Prohibition Act is in the process of being amended to plug loopholes in it and to make it more effective" (Khosla, 1984). Many governments signed the 1980 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, and have either already ratified it or are in the process of doing so. However, legal rights can not ensure social practice. In traditional societies in particular, legislation by itself fails to offer a complete solution to the problems of social change. "Despite constitutional and other legislative provisions aimed at achieving equality for women under law, a gap still remains between the *de facto and de jure* status of women. A main obstacle to the realization of equality was pervasiveness of social attitudes deep-rooted in tradition and history" (ESCAP Report SD/RIPMWC/11, 1984). This is particularly so because many nations have incorporated large parts of "customary law" in their statutory regulations. Customary law in its very nature existed to help maintain the social *status quo,* rather than to promote social change.

1. Inheritance System

Inheritance systems constitute an important part of customary law which in many cases has been taken over by legislation. Since many of the now independent third world nations were colonial dependencies, their inheritance laws often represent a strange mixture of customary and foreign law. This mixture has adversely affected women's legal rights to inherit particular claims to land. According to western codes of law applied to developing countries, claims to land are to be expressed in terms of individual and exclusive land titles. It seems that the "rational economic man model" on which most western economic thought is based has also penetrated into legal measures. In tune with this idea of individual land titles, cultivators may have access to productive inputs,

such as credit and physical plant, only if they can offer their individual land titles as security. This all-exclusive emphasis on the "individual landowner" conflicts with the complex land tenure system that still exists in many traditional rural societies. Customary law considers access to land at different levels; for instance, at the level of the social group which frequently is a kinship unit, within which its members have rights to particular plots of land; these members are made up of family units in which the wife often has usufructuary rights. "The fact of land being controlled by more than one person, in some kind of partnership, is one that must be kept in mind when dealing with the idea that 'traditionally' only men own land. Since in many societies they are in fact given land only at marriage, there is a clear implication that the women's participation is essential in its proper management" (Rogers, 1980:123). Residential pattern obviously affects women's rights to inherit land. For instance in Sri Lanka two forms of marriage are practiced by the Kandyans, *diga* and *binna.*

> "A daughter getting married in *diga* is given away to a different patrilineal group and takes up residence with her husband's relatives. A daughter marrying in *binna* stays with her father's patrilineal group and her husband changes residence. In the *diga* marriage, the daughter may obtain her inheritance as a dowry on the occasion of the marriage and cannot lay any further claim to her father's property, unless she returns to the parental household as a divorcee. In the *binna* marriage, the daughter inherits equally with her brothers as long as she maintains the locality of marriage. A departure to the house of the husband's relatives or the termination of the *binna* union leading to a fresh *diga* marriage on the part of the daughter erodes her right to inheritance. However, the children of the *binna* marriage retain the right to inherit their mother's father's property. An unmarried daughter shares equally with her brothers and sisters married in uxori-local residence.
>
> According to the historical sources, the inheritance laws pertaining to mother's property are different. In the case of a woman married in *diga,* all children, sons, patrilocally and matrilocally married daughters and unmarried daughters are entitled to equal shares of their mother's property. However, if the deceased mother was married in *binna,* all her daughters given away in *diga* marriage lose their right of inheritance.
>
> These principles of inheritance strongly emphasize one aspect of the Kandyan kinship structure. Though kinship terminology is presented as if the system were unilineal, the kinship behaviour resting on property rights is in many important respects bilateral" (Gunasinghe, 1980).

In Muslim society too women's legal position is guaranteed in the Qur'an, according to which daughters inherit half of their brothers' share of the ancestral heritage and a widow is entitled to one eighth of her dead husband's property. A Muslim woman also has the right to purchase land in her own name.

"However, the social reality differs considerably from the theoretical Muslim laws regarding women's property rights. As long as the parents are still alive, daughters married and unmarried alike – do not claim their share in the ancestral property. There are a few instances though in Natunpur where fathers handed over to their married daughters their heritage. This happened in two Natunpur households where the daughter married and settled patri-uxorilocally (i.e., the wife's father's place of residence) with a husband unable to support his family .... In most of the cases when the daughter gets her property share before her father's death, she in fact asks for it at the instigation of her husband.

Normally when the parental property is divided among heirs after the father's death, daughters either take their share or leave it in the care of their brothers. Young married women are expected to visit their parental home at least once or twice yearly and stay with their brothers as *naior* (i.e., married women's visit to their natal home). The frequency of their visits decreases with the age and years of married life of the woman. As she progresses through the different phases of the domestic cycle a woman gets increasingly more absorbed in her husband, children and affines affairs while being weaned from her natal family....

Among small farmer households husbands often pressure their wives and sometimes even torture them to get them to claim their parental heritage. Mostly in cases where the daughter's husband is considerably poorer than her parental household, she tries to exercise her legal rights to get her share of the ancestral property. If the land to which a daughter is entitled exceeds the area her husband possesses, then the latter is usually keen to sell his land and settle patri-uxorilocally, so that he can cultivate his wife's lands" (Nath, forthcoming).

This account indicates the strong relationship that exists between inheritance systems, residential pattern and the legal status of women. If according to customary law women can inherit part of their ancestral property, as is the case among Sinhalese and Muslims, poorer husbands try to settle in the wife's father's place of residence. Under these conditions inheritance by both men and women constitutes a mechanism by which property is redistributed from the wealthier to the poorer families in society. Moreover, women can continue to reside in their natal place, which promotes the continuity of their peer groups and in turn results in the establishment of stronger female interest groups.

2. Marriage, divorce and re-marriage

Marriage, divorce and re-marriage are social institutions which tend to favour men. In villages one can seldom find a man or woman who is not married. "Whether old, disabled, blind or dumb everybody gets married at least once.... Marriage is like a gateway through which women go to fulfil their lives" (Nath, 1981, 120).

As it states in the Qur'an that a woman must consent to her marriage, no marriage is performed among Muslims without the woman's formal consent in the presence of witnesses. Thus it looks as if every woman has a say in who she will marry. In practice, however, a village young woman does not choose her spouse. Most marriages are arranged by parents or relatives. Since her consent is asked only during the ceremony, she is prevented from saying "no" because that would give her family a bad name. By doing so she would jeopardize her chances of ever getting married. Lengthy negotiations and discussions between the two families usually precede the marriage ceremony. These days "even among the poor a few hundred rupees and a transistor radio are demanded by the groom's party. If a girl's parents are not in a position to offer a dowry she may be married to an old man or as a second or third wife or to a widower with children.... Since marriage is a contract, divorce is allowed among Muslims. There are various forms of divorce without the intervention of a court. These are, *talaq zibran* by the husband, *talaq-i-tafweez* by the wife and *kula* by mutual agreement between the parties... In practice it is the man who generally initiates the divorce... A woman is conditioned to submission from childhood so that she does not even know how to initiate a divorce or on what ground she can get it... A Muslim man can have as many as four wives, but a woman cannot have more than one husband at a time" (Nath, 1981:22). A Muslim woman will often not oppose her husband if he wishes to take a second wife for fear he might divorce her (Alamgir, 1977:39).

The asymmetrical relationship between men and women in marriage, divorce and remarriage practices is by no means unique to Muslim societies. The change from bridewealth to dowry and inflationary dowry as such is causing hardship to many young women, particularly from poorer households. Dowry prohibition acts in India and Bangladesh were enacted to correct the traditional practice of marriage payments. The customary bride wealth, handed over by the groom's father to the bride's father then symbolized the passing of authority over the bride from her father to her husband's kin-group. It also involved a compensation to her family for her productive services. The dowry payment also marks the passing of authority from the father to the husband of a girl, and it is meant to compensate for the economic liability wives have supposedly become. In this particular context, the guardianship aspect of marriage payments is more important than the economic implications. The generally accepted concept of male guardianship over their women militates against the effectiveness of legislation that gives equal rights to women and men.

D. IDEOLOGY AND RELIGION

Ideology and religion usually reinforce each other and together make up the one social field that is both most intransigent to change as well as constituting potential change agents. Gender ideology almost everywhere focuses on women's reproductive roles to the exclusion of their other social functions. The perpetuation of social units depends on reproduction. Thus childbearing is one of the basic social values. Since reproduction is the major venue for

recruitment to individual families and kin groups, blood relationship has come to play an important political role in many societies. For instance in many agnatically organized tribes where membership is determined by patrilineal descent, the kinship-based social unit exists to defend its members and their property against encroachment from similar social units. Patrilineality of course means that men need sons to ensure the continuity of their descent group. Therefore a man depends on his wife to produce his sons, and wants to ensure that he is the biological father of the child his wife bears, who will inherit his property and position. Under these conditions men consider chastity and seclusion of women an integral part of gender relationships. This helps to explain the cultural superstructure which translates physiological differences between men and women into gender differences.

In most traditional societies women's behaviour symbolises the honour not only of their immediate family but often of their whole kin group. To preserve the honour of the kin group women must remain chaste and to ensure their chastity they are often secluded from men other than their kin. Most women in South Asia are physically secluded to some degree at least. *Purdah* is usually considered the most extreme form of this seclusion. It is the "term commonly used to designate seclusion of women behind the walls of the *harim* or the folds of the veil" (Webster, 1984:252). Many western observers have described *purdah* as an extreme form of female repression; by contrast the *emic* (insiders) view of female seclusion does not see it always as such. Many women in *purdah* consider themselves privileged not only *vis-à-vis* other women whose families are too poor to afford complete female seclusion, but also *vis-à-vis* their menfolk. Any woman is theoretically able to enter any female territory at any time, while men other than relatives may never enter, and all men can be excluded at certain times. It can thus be argued that "customs of partitioning and veiling are exclusive of men as they are seclusive of women, and that women in *purdah* societies are not as passive and downtrodden as may be supposed by outsiders" (Webster, 1984:252). In fact "men admit that women know better and that they have a fuller grasp of the situations which arise from reciprocal interactions. Whenever some difficulty or complexity arises, a man will say: I do not know – the women of the household would know better....

For instance, it is a woman who keeps reminding the man of her household what he should do, when to do it, with whom to do it and how much to give" (Naveed-i-Rahat, 1981:72) in the context of *bhanji* (reciprocal) relationships. Accordingly, *purdah* may also be regarded as enabling women to act as power behind the male occupied throne, rather than as a means to keep women fully dependent on their menfolk. *Purdah* women "have the power to gear the *bhanji* interaction of men in the directions they want. It is in their hands to keep the family united or upset it. They can raise the status of their male kin or degrade it. (Naveed-i-Rahat, 1981:80).

The contrasting views of *purdah's* social function held by many outsiders on the one hand and many of the women who themselves live in seclusion on the other, is largely the result of different ideological stances and world

views held by different social groups. Ideology and religion usually reinforce each other and together constitute the most powerful influence on the pattern of social behaviour. It is this social field more than any other that determines value systems by means of role and status images and in turn, influences gender relationships.

1. Men's image of women

Men's image of women displays a considerable element of ambiguity. Men perceive women to be weak, helpless and in need of constant protection while at the same time they regard women as temptresses from whom they need to be protected. Altogether there often exists a considerable gap between the kind of image women think men have of them and men's actual images of women. Men frequently do not consider themselves anywhere near as much their women's superiors as they often try to make others believe. Men are aware that their womenfolk can either help them maintain their honour or destroy it. This is responsible for the ambiguity in the image they hold of women. As men's (unlike women's) purity is not a condition of the maintenance of the family honour, men are free to enjoy extra-marital sex without any social restriction, "but women's pleasures are curtailed" (Yalman, 1963:41). This dual morality which is part of the cultural superstructure relating to gender relationships is linked with men's concern over the purity of their blood descent' groups and their knowledge that to ensure it they depend on their womenfolk.

In most societies, the traditional image of womanhood is modeled on the ideal behaviour pattern of the upper classes which restricted women's roles to the home. Ideas and beliefs derived at best second or third hand from ancient literature influence ideals of present conduct and behaviour. Since it is largely men of higher social classes who are more influenced by this literature and since they are both visible and influential in society, their perceptions and ideas about how women behave and ought to behave, have obtained wide currency.

Most religions have references to the ideal life style of women in their sacred texts. However, it is important to note here that the corpus of religious literature is far from homogenous; moreover, folk culture usually differs from that described in religious texts although it often refers to them in order to legitimize ongoing practices. This accounts for the difference in life style of Muslim women living in different societies; for instance, Muslim women in Indonesia are not expected to wear the veil. They are much less constrained in mixing in the wider society than are their Pakistan counterparts who are expected to observe *purdah*, although Indonesians are no less devout followers of the Qu'ran than are Pakistan's Muslims.

2. Women's self-image

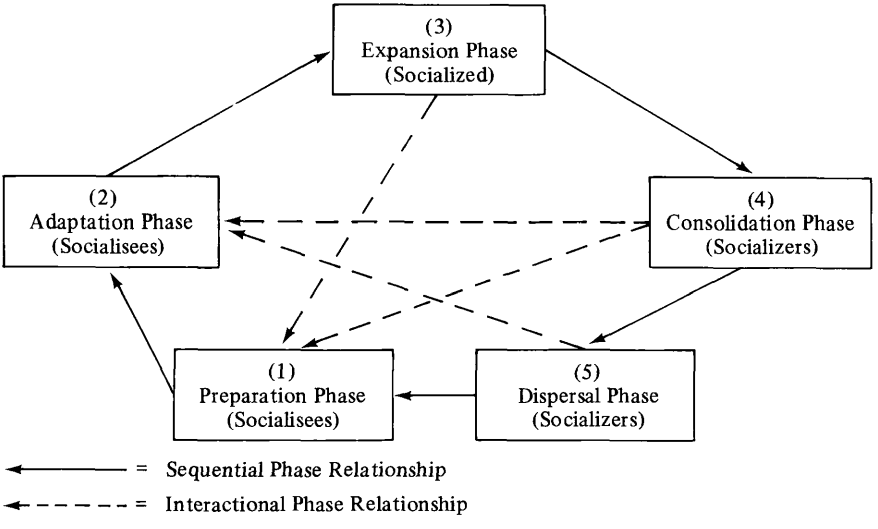
Women's self-image is directly influenced by the ideology and religious beliefs prevailing in the society of which they are part. Women thus share with

men their societal values. Women are so much cocooned by various social layers (see figure 1) that they often cannot and do not want to bring about changes in their own traditional life styles. Greater participation by women in society is assumed to undermine and erode traditional attitudes and values, which are still generally cherished. "Many women themselves share these feelings and are ambivalent about changing their traditional positions and attitudes" (ESCAP SD/RIPMWC/1:4). Women themselves often desire to "maintain inappropriate protective legislation for themselves" (ESCAP Report SD/RIPMWC/10). There is thus a great need for "the creation of the socio-political consciousness especially among the rural women....in enabling them to make a better use of their existing rights" (Panday, 1984:4). Such con-science-raising among women is likely to take place only as a result of imagi-native, appropriate and concerted educational drives to make the mass of women aware of their recently gained rights also to encourage them to exert them.

3. Socialization

Socialization provides the mechanism by which culture is passed on to succeeding generations through the domestic cycle which accommodates the changing lives of individuals as they pass through their ageing process. "In all human societies the workshop, so to speak, of social reproduction is the domestic group. It is this group which must remain in operation over a stretch of time long enough to rear offspring to the stage of physical and social repro-ductibility if a society is to maintain itself" (Fortes, 1966). Five phases in the domestic cycle can be distinguished, namely: "preparation", "adaptation", "expansion", "consolidation", and "dispersal" (see figure 2). During the first

Figure 2. The different phases through which women pass in the domestic cycle



phase the young generation is being initiated into its cultural heritage by the socializers who are then in their "consolidation" phase (Epstein, 1982). In three-generation families, the task of socializing young girls is usually left to their grandmothers. For instance, among Bangladesh Muslims there is a taboo on mothers talking about sex with their own daughters; only a grandmother can initiate a young girl into the sex mores of her society. In cases of prepuberty marriage, which is still a widespread practice, though in most countries it has been declared illegal, the move into an extended family often causes a serious problem of adjustment for the young bride. At a very young age the girl has to exchange the comparative freedom she enjoyed in her natal home for the often strict regime of her mother-in-law. As soon as girls reach maturity and their marriage is consummated they enter their "expansion" phase. By that time socialization has more or less preprogrammed them to conform to traditional norms. These young women usually lack the freedom from social constraints and the time to calculate the advantages and disadvantages of their recently acquired legal rights; moreover the heavy demand which frequent pregnancies, child-care, domestic and other duties make on their energies leaves them little chance to consider alternative ways of life. When the household of which a woman is part enters its "consolidation" phase when its children are old enough to contribute to its livelihood and the older ones begin to get married, she begins to enjoy much more freedom.

Domestic cycle phases are not only critical in determining women's roles and status but more important in determining their readiness to accept social change. Accordingly, women in the "consolidation" phase together with their granddaughters in their "preparation" phase seem likely to be the ones most amenable to adopt a changed pattern of behaviour. Yet hardly any attempt has so far been made either by governmental or international agencies to organize developmental programmes for grandmothers. Since they are the individuals mainly responsible for socializing their granddaughters they need to become an integral part of change processes if these are to materialize.

4. Education

Education, that is "formal" education, is still biased heavily in favour of men. This is noticeable not only in terms of differential school attendance rates of boys and girls but also in terms of its objectives; i.e., the type of training schools are supposed to provide and the type of knowledge they try to inculcate into the minds of the young.

In most cultures, older women do not only socialize girls but also young boys, who often learn societal values and norms from their mothers or grandmothers during their early childhood. Formal education rarely bears any relation to this informal socialization. In fact the two types of education often operate on different premises. Informal education usually aims to inculcate into the minds of the young an appreciation and respect for traditional social norms. It therefore emphasizes conformity. By contrast, formal schools encourage competitiveness rather than traditional conformity, and thereby pose a threat to

social continuity. Yet formal educational qualifications have generally come to constitute a passport to a better life and are therefore strongly desired (Rao, 1982); hence, the diploma disease (Dore, 1976). Even the more tradition-bound nations have not yet succeeded in providing formal education for girls that will make them into better educators, though they are referred to as the greatest teachers in the school of the family. "The responsibility of a woman must not be summarized in producing children and giving them physical nourishment to a certain age. They have a far greater duty to develop the intellectual and ethical capabilities of their children which is a very difficult, precise and valuable task." (Amiti-Tari, 1984:1).

There are now attempts to draw up a new Islamic curriculum (Afshar, 1984:249) presumably to try to harmonize the content of formal and informal education. This is an important area of development which so far has been neglected. Most educational systems in developing countries represent a colonial legacy and are not necessarily appropriate for the societies in which they operate. Action-research is urgently needed to help design curricula more in tune with the individual cultures to enable women to begin to take their rightful place in society together with their menfolk. Education holds the key to an improvement of women's position in society, provided it is organized in such a way that it focuses not only on youth but involves all members of communities. This constitutes a challenge to educational planners which if not met will result not only in women remaining third class citizens but also in failure to reach society's development potential. Care needs to be taken to ensure change within continuity to prepare women in emotional terms for a changing life style. "Human beings are conditioned by their culture, tradition and by their environment. If anything is suggested or attempted that will change the familiar pattern, then it represents a 'threat' and might, at first meet resistance...you cannot play the role of the mouse for so long and then suddenly be expected to play the role of the horse." (IERD Editorial Team, 1984:35). Ignoring the force of tradition, particularly in the context of women's issues during recent years when awareness of these problems has been raised, has led to a heightened resistance among defenders of the *status quo* (Social Development Newsletter, 1984:27). If women are to participate as equal partners in the development process, it is clear that existing educational arrangements have to be changed. However, women will not change unless men also change. There is thus a need for an integrated system of change which encourages greater complementarity between men and women both in public and domestic life. Such an integrated system of change, however, will succeed only if education channels into socialization revised values so that all members of society, both men and women, are being prepared for the change in gender relationship that has to take place sooner or later.

E. CONCLUSIONS

This paper has attempted to outline the complexity which surrounds the socio-cultural factors and attitudes affecting the status of women in South Asia.

The argument it has tried to develop can be summarized in the following propositions:

(a) The relative status of women is cocooned in several concentric circles of which intra-familial arrangements constitute the innermost and the one circle which most immediately influences gender relationships. The outermost circle represents the highest level of the macro-social system;

(b) At least four different social fields can be identified as part of the macro-societal system: "economic setting", "political organization", "legal system" and "ideology and religion". These various social fields are mutually interdependent, but for analytical purposes can be discussed separately;

(c) There exists not only one single status scale but a multiplicity of such scales; at least one in each social field. These different status hierarchies are often closely interlinked, but they do not necessarily coincide: the same woman or group of women may occupy a different rank in the status scale in different contexts or at different periods in their lives;

(d) Each of the social fields affects the status of women through the mediation of a variety of socio-cultural factors;

(e) There exists not only a relative status of women *vis-à-vis* men but also a prestige scale among women themselves. Women are not a homogenous group. The life style of upper strata women provides the role model for lower strata women. Though the various strata are intimately related to economic differentiation other social factors are also important here;

(f) Differential access to resources enjoyed by men and women is neither the sole nor the most important factor affecting gender relationships. Society considers each job in connection with different levels of respect not because of any intrinsic value but rather because of the person or category of persons who perform it. In the economic setting women occupy lower status than men because traditionally they have been associated with reproductive rather than productive tasks. Therefore whatever job is performed by a woman demands lower prestige and is paid a lower rate than if a man does the same kind of work;

(g) Population pressure leads to male outmigration and in time results in increasing numbers of female-headed households. Even where the marital tie continues the *de facto* female-headed households enable and expect women to take many managerial decisions which are novel to them and leads to the development of "matri-weighted" households;

(h) Mass media have the potential of raising as well as lowering the political status of women. So far media everywhere have tended to follow the traditional stereotyping of women rather than to exert an educative influence;

(i) Patri-virilocal residence particularly if it is associated with an agnatic kinship system and the village as the exogamous unit prevents the development of female pressure groups. On the other hand if the young woman on marriage does not have to leave her village, then the continued female peer group identity facilitates the operation of strong female social networks;

(j) Laws may precede changing behaviour patterns or they may lag behind actual change processes. Equal rights legislation in itself cannot ensure gender equality as long as the majority of women do not claim their legal entitlement. A gap still remains between the *de facto* and *de jure* status of women;

(k) The asymetrical relationship between men and women in marriage, divorce and remarriage is not peculiar to any one society but is a widespread phenomenon. The change from bridewealth to dowry and inflationary dowry is causing great hardship to many young women. Dowry abolition acts are likely to remain ineffective until women's pressure groups are formed to exert political influence;

(l) Gender ideology focuses on women's reproductive role so as to ensure succession from fathers to their biological sons in agnatically organized societies. The chastity of women is the condition of ensuring succession from progenitors to their sons and has made women into the repositories of the family honour;

(m) Men perceive women to be weak, helpless and in need of constant protection, while at the same time they regard women as temptresses from whom they need to be protected. Most women share the gender ideology of the society of which they are part, however discriminatory this may be against them;

(n) The same woman occupies a different relative status as she passes through the different phases of the domestic cycle. Older women who are in the "consolidation" phase and are the main socializers of younger generations continue to perpetuate traditional norms. These older women are potentially the most powerful change agents. However, so far they have received least attention from developers, or even the feminist lobby;

(o) Education holds the key to an improvement of women's position in society provided it encourages greater complementarity between men and women both in public and domestic life. Existing educational arrangements have to be changed from focusing on formal education of youth to reaching out to the society in its totality by imaginative non-formal educational measures. This poses a challenge to educational planners, which, unless successfully met, will result not only in women remaining third class citizens for a long time to come but it will also be responsible for the failure to materialize society's development potential.

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