



Better a Small Fish

For the poor of Bangladesh, women's rights are a practical matter

▲ Mossamat Dulali Akhter (left) hopes to give microloans, not take them.

IN BANGLADESHI HOUSEHOLDS, the “muro” (fish head) is the prized portion of curry-simmered fish—a delicious, healthy source of vitamins. Traditionally, the muro is reserved for the father or husband, but at a recent health class for women in the Bogra district, a teacher offered this advice: “Better to get several small fish so everyone can eat a head.” The elegance of her solution is striking. Without confrontation or upheaval, one of Bangladesh life’s many small inequities is eliminated.

Such practical ingenuity has earned international accolades for Bangladesh’s poverty alleviation and women’s programs. And in 2006, Bangladeshi economist Muhammad Yunus and the Grameen Bank he founded won the Nobel Peace Prize for the use of microcredit. The approach Yunus implemented in 1974—tiny, collateral-free loans for poor women to buy livestock, plant crops or start small businesses—is as simple and elegant as the muro solution. But, despite microcredit, poor rural women in Bangladesh still face staggering hardships in the flood-prone, war-scarred country of 150 million. And as the nation teeters between Islamism and secularism, democracy and military rule, its women are deeply involved in the struggle over what direction society will take.

At the Oslo Nobel ceremony,

Bangladeshi women stood with Yunus as paragons of female empowerment. But in the backlash to Yunus’ prize, those women were portrayed by some as unfortunate dupes of a romantic liberal ideology. NGOs and microcredit programs focusing on women and girls have had facilities and schools burned by purported defenders of “traditional family structures.” Acid-throwing assaults on unveiled women and brutal fatwas by local imams and village councils are seen by some as intensifying the backlash to women’s empowerment. In the increasingly Islamist society of Bangladesh, a woman’s every action or decision—burqa-wearing, hair-covering, employment, education, divorce, dowry, polygamy—is claimed by Islamists or secularists as victory or calamity.

Elora Shehabuddin, an assistant professor at Rice University, has noted that these debates largely exclude the voices of poor rural women themselves. Her studies in the late 1990s showed that the choices those women make are neither a meek submission to secular microcredit organizations nor an expression of blind religious faith. Rather, “[I]mpoverished rural women create their own fusion of Islam, democracy, feminism and modernity and, in doing so, bring about further democratization of social, economic and cultural power.”

That complex reckoning is embod-

ied by Mosammat Julekha Khatun, a charismatic 40-ish mother of four who leads her village’s microcredit group. She gives two explanations of why the women of Bogra now wear burqas, along with chadors over their hair—a growing trend in Bangladesh, where most women have not traditionally covered. First, Julekha claims, it’s actually a sign of progress.

“Before, we didn’t know much,” she says. “Now women know more. We know that it’s in the book of the Prophet that it’s not right to keep your body parts uncovered.” Second, and more practically, there’s a safety function: Before microcredit, most women lived in purdah, never leaving their village or encountering outsiders. Now, Julekha and her colleagues often travel for business and claim they feel safer being covered.

Revolution for the women of Bogra takes place in small increments: using contraception, insisting on one’s legal rights in marriage or divorce, cooking several small fish instead of one large one. And for one Bangladeshi rural girl, revolution means studying to become a doctor so she’ll never even need a microcredit loan.

“I want to give loans to people,” says Mossamat Dulali Akhter, who’s 13, “not take loans.”

—INDRANI SEN