

Gender Equality

9

READING 1

Swapna Majumdar. “Bangladesh Garment Workers Have Taste of Freedom,” 17 July 2002, in Women’s eNews (www.womensenews.org/).

-- Discussion of Reading 1 -----

1. Why is the presence of women in Bangladesh’s garment industry a huge achievement? (In Bangladesh, women’s visibility has been extremely low. They were expected to cover their faces with a veil and to stay in their homes, according to traditional beliefs.)
2. What triggered the silent revolution that took place among the women in Bangladesh? (The income and independence of these working women triggered a silent revolution among them. Women say they are no longer content to live a life of anonymity behind their veils.)
3. What were the effects of this tremendous social and cultural change? (Women increased their status. They also increased their visibility, which brought about a socio-economic transformation, according to social activist Khushi Kabir.)

4. Why are factory conditions unsafe and wages low in Bangladesh? (Garment factory owners, all of whom are men, know that the women will accept low wages and long working hours even if it takes a toll on their health, so they have no incentive to improve conditions.)
5. What do the women garment workers do with their income? (They remit about 25 percent of their income to their families living in the villages and have opened bank accounts and begun to spend money on themselves.)
6. What breaks from tradition resulted from women's economic independence? (First, a majority of these women have become the principal wage earners of their families. Second, they are living on their own, without their families, sharing rooms with other female workers. Third, husbands are sharing domestic chores, a tangible social change. Also, women have an alternative to the traditional customs of early marriage and motherhood.)
7. How does the literacy rate for Bangladesh women in rural areas compare with the literacy rate in urban areas? (The literacy rate among the rural female population is about 35 percent, compared to 57 percent in urban areas where the garment industry is centered.)
8. What is the correlation between women's level of education and their wages? (Women who have been educated beyond the primary level earn at least 76 percent more than less-educated women.)
9. How have women's attitudes changed in Bangladesh? (Many women now insist that their daughters study further to improve their future prospects.)
10. Write a one-sentence statement in your own words of the main idea of the article. (The opportunity to work outside their homes in the garment industry has transformed the lives of Bangladesh women by giving them their own income, independence, and visibility.)

Nicolas Pelham. "Arab Women Demand Quotas," *The Christian Science Monitor*, 6 November 2002, 7.

-- Discussion of Reading 2 -----

1. At the second Women's Summit held in 2002, why did Arab women call for quotas for Arab deputies? (They decided to ask for affirmative action because it would achieve their goal of helping women seeking to enter Parliament. They were tired of waiting for incremental changes in the electoral system.)
2. Why was this controversial campaign difficult? (It followed a series of election gains for Islamists, whose recourse to tradition might subjugate the role of women even further.)
3. What explained the increased number of female parliamentarians in the Moroccan elections in 2002? (Morocco guaranteed 10 percent of its 325 parliamentary seats to women.)
4. What was the position of Jordan's King Abdullah on adopting a female quota? (He shied away from it because he feared a backlash from increasingly strident Islamist and tribal lobbies.)
5. What did Jamil Abu Bakr, deputy head of the Islamic Action Front in Jordan, say about quotas for women? (He said that people should be elected on merit and that the state should not use quotas to interfere with the political process.)
6. Describe the delegates who attended the Women's Summit. (Most of the delegates were unveiled, Westernized, and polyglot. They were the elite from their societies. Queen Rania of Jordan hosted the summit, and the wives of four other Arab rulers attended.)
7. Why was Suzanne Afanah, the summit's spokeswoman, worried that the authorities are failing to change traditional attitudes? (She was worried because the government was addressing the Westernized elite rather than engaging the poorer mass of society. Its campaign was more top-down than down-up.)
8. What electoral setbacks have Arab women faced? (In Bahrain's first democratic elections in 30 years, all eight female candidates lost to male rivals. In Kuwait, the Islamist-led Parliament voted against granting women political rights. In Lebanon, Parliament

had only three female deputies. In its ten years of existence, the IAF had fielded no female candidates.)

9. In the opinion of Alia Abu Tayeh, how does Arab culture prevent women from achieving empowerment? (Women don't vote for each other because they want men to rule, said Alia Abu Tayeh. She blamed the election results on a culture of *aib*, Arabic for shame, which brands women who forsake the home for the workplace as immoral outcasts.)
10. Beside Islamic traditionalists, what other factors may be keeping power in the hands of males in the Arab states? (An Iraqi delegate said the state of militarization and conflict prevailing in the Middle East was keeping power in the hands of males.)
11. Would you support female quotas for parliaments in Arab states?
12. Since this article was published in November 2002, what changes have occurred in the Arab world with regard to women's political participation?

Vocabulary

Fill in the blanks with the correct words. Use each word only once.

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|-----------------|----------|---------------|----------|
| patriarchal | quotas | empowerment | status |
| merit | launched | unprecedented | hurdles |
| disenfranchised | tangible | incrementally | setbacks |

Even in the 21st century, in some regions of the world, women are not given their full rights in the electoral process and are still disenfranchised. The United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) promotes women's leadership, "with the goal of giving women an equal voice in shaping the policies that affect their lives and choices."¹ According to UNIFEM, "Worldwide, women remain underrepresented in political and decision-making positions."² Thus, UNIFEM works to strengthen women's participation in politics. In fact, women have made gains in recent years, and the political power of women has been increasing incrementally, not

1. "Governance, Peace and Security: Overview," 2002, in United Nations Development Fund for Women (www.unifem.undp.org/governance/).

2. "Governance, Peace and Security: Gender Justice, Strengthening Women's Leadership," 2002, in United Nations Development Fund for Women (www.unifem.undp.org/governance/gender_justice.html).

only through political appointments but also through elections. Currently, many women are serving their governments as members of parliament or cabinet officers.

Women have important governmental positions in the United States. In 2003, 13 women were members of the U.S. Senate, 59 were members of the House of Representatives, and 3 were delegates to the House. Nancy Pelosi, a Democrat from California, was elected the minority leader of the House in 2002. The U.S. Supreme Court has two women justices, Sandra Day O'Connor and Ruth Bader Ginsburg. President George Bush chose a woman, Dr. Condoleezza Rice, as his national security adviser. Actually, it is possible that a woman will be elected president of the United States within the next generation.

In Japan, Hiroko Mizushima was elected to the Diet (parliament) in 2000. She had been a psychiatrist who worked to promote social change and improve women's status in Japan. As a member of the opposition Democratic Party, Ms. Mizushima has pushed for legislation favorable to women, such as pension reform and tax exemptions for married couples that would favor working women. She won election through her determination and ability to appeal to both men and women voters.³

In Pakistan in October 2002, a/an unprecedented number of women were elected to the parliament as well as to national and provincial assemblies. According to a news report, "The results so far show that the October 10 polls produced the highest ever tally of seats won by women in any general election in this South Asian country since 1970."⁴ This outcome in a conservative, patriarchal country is quite remarkable. In Pakistan, quotas for women were established to increase their political representation, and 60 women were elected to these reserved seats in the national legislature. Beyond these 60 women, 13 women were elected to open, nonreserved seats in the National Assembly. Another 11 women were also elected to provincial assemblies, which allot 17 percent of their seats to women.⁵ However, despite these tangible gains by women, a political alliance formed by six religious parties may generate hurdles women will have to overcome if they want to achieve empowerment in Pakistan.⁶

In Africa, immediately after the African Union (AU) was launched in 2002 to establish a single African State, African leaders announced a new policy to create gender representation in the AU Commission, which

3. "Asia: A Winning Woman; Japanese Politics," *The Economist*, 2 November 2002, 70.

4. Muddassir Rizvi. "Pakistan: Women Win Record Number of Parliament Seats," *Global Information Network*, 16 October 2002, 1.

5. *Ibid.*, 1.

6. *Ibid.*, 1.

determines the agenda of the AU. The Commission, an intergovernmental organization, will be composed of 50 percent women and 50 percent men. No other governmental body in the world has instituted such a gender equity law.⁷ This policy puts into practice the principle that women and men have equal merit.

The women in Eastern Europe have been taking advantage of the freedom that resulted from the fall of communism in 1989 by seeking influence in the political arena. In Estonia, many women have been elected to parliament since 1999. Latvia elected a woman president in 1999. In Lithuania, female members of parliament strengthened the law on equal opportunities and discrimination. The Czech Republic was attempting to increase the number of women in politics by emphasizing the arrival of a new era for women.⁸ However, the reality of life in these countries is that women have experienced many setbacks in their fight for equality, so gender justice remains a distant goal.

7. Tom Mbakwe. "Good News for All Women of Africa," *New African*, September 2002, 21.

8. Carla Power. "The Shackles of Freedom; The End of Communism Was Supposed to Make Life Better for Women. Has It?" *Newsweek*, 18 March 2002, 74.