

Service and Transition

by Rebekah Wingert

It was January in northwestern Ohio; I was sitting in a friend's basement tightly wrapped in an ugly yellow and brown afghan. I had just arrived from the tropical monsoon climate of Bangladesh and was not adjusting well to the sub-zero wind-chill. Friends were scattered throughout my friend's basement sharing stories and discoveries from the three years since we had all graduated from university. When the topic of gender came into our conversation, I commented that I had never noticed discrimination toward women in



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America until I lived abroad in a culture that had completely different ideas about women.

My friend asked me what would happen if I chose not to participate in systems that practiced inequality toward women in America. The full implications of what that meant, how far from society I would need to remove myself hit me, and I was struck by the impossibility of it.

I never imagined that I would be considering such radical ideas three years ago when I was planning to go to Bangladesh; I was focusing on the hardships of women there. I was told that it was difficult for women in Bangladesh; that it would be hard for me. By going to Bangladesh, I idealistically hoped to show the women there how wonderful it was to live without prejudice based on gender. Our enlightened American society was free of discrimination toward women, and this was the better way, I thought.

Soon after my arrival in Bangladesh, I realized how exhausting it was to fight against the ingrained societal norms. The first question

Bangladeshi women weaving baskets and mats from natural materials such as grass, water hyacinth, coconut stick, bamboo, and cane. These handicrafts are purchased by fair trade organizations in North America, Europe, Australia, and Asia. During their busiest times, around 100 women are employed.

The handicrafts made for fair trade stores by rural Bangladeshi women like the weavers pictured here (left), provide food, lodging, and education for women and their children who would otherwise have no source of income.

that I was always asked when I met someone was not my name or my reason for being in Bangladesh, but if I was married. Bangladeshis were surprised to learn that I lived alone and functioned independently. But soon, I unconsciously began to follow the prescribed limitations of my sex: conscientiously covering myself, staying inside, lowering my eyes when walking down the street, not talking to men without an introduction, and not going out after dark. It made life much easier to fall in line with their established social norms instead of flaunting the self-sufficiency of women from North America.

Now that I've had a chance to reflect on my experience, I think perhaps I focused too much on what I, as a woman, could not do in

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Bangladesh that men could do in Bangladesh, and that I could also do in America. I saw limitations, in contrast to Bangladeshi women who had accepted their situation. This attitude was an advantage that put them many steps ahead of me.

Photo by Rebekah Wingert



Bangladeshi women weren't wasting their energy on shortening hem lengths or prolonging their curfew hours. They were focused on succeeding at more admirable goals. They were advancing careers, furthering their educations, refusing to continue to be victims of domestic violence, giving up dreams of marriage in order to support their mothers and siblings, traveling freely, raising their children with new ideas about gender, and contentedly dreaming of a better future. While I was complaining with other expatriates about limitations of dress, freedom of movement, and attitudes toward women, they were padding savings accounts, investing in real estate, opening up businesses, and making handicrafts in order to send their children to school. They were doing everything they could to gracefully improve their situation. They knew the limitations of the social norms, yet, they were working within them.

I had initially thought of Bangladeshi women as not being liberated, and thought of myself as being

free—able to do whatever I wanted to do, be whomever I wanted to be and go wherever I wanted to go—as a North American woman. Many North Americans continue to see Bangladeshi women as living under oppression, but I don't think of them in this way any longer. When I picture the women of Bangladesh, I see them as creative, intelligent, ambitious, adventurous, and aware. They aren't wallowing in bitterness and unhappiness. They don't see themselves as oppressed.

Since I've come home, I no longer overlook gender discrimination in America. After seeing and experiencing discrimination toward women in Bangladesh, I notice it here. Most women in my generation haven't seen blatant inequality or oppression of women. Women my age have grown up viewing themselves as equal to men and able to do anything. It is easy for us to forget about the many centuries of struggles European and American women endured when they were not treated equally in North America, and the many women in far-away lands who continue to experience inequality.

Today, more liberated women don't seem to understand that we should appreciate the freedom to walk down the street without experiencing abuse, the freedom to be whoever we want to be, to have options besides marriage, to live without limitations based on gender. We think that discrimination doesn't exist here, when vestiges of it still do.

With this awareness comes questions of how to handle attitudes and practices that don't seem just. I learned an important lesson while trying to show Bangladeshi people the independence of American women: trying to live in opposition to social norms is exhausting. In America I have the advantage now of being in familiar surroundings, and I know and understand the role of women in our society. I don't have to reject all of our systems of inequality; recognizing the inequality is half the challenge.

Sometimes I close my eyes and instantly I am surrounded by Bangladeshi artisans, the women who make handicrafts to provide for their families. They pull their saris over their heads and speak to me in rapid Bengali. They are momentarily distracted from their work, excited to tease this foreigner about arranging her marriage. They aren't bitter, they are happy to have work earning the dollar that will sustain them and their children for that day. 📷



Bitu Barua (left) and Ferdoushi Howlader (right) both work for the job creation program of MCC Bangladesh. As an MCC worker, Rebekah worked with them in Mymensingh, Bangladesh. Here, they are traveling by boat to a village to meet with artisans.

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