

GUDRUN MARTIUS-VON HARDER: Die Frau im ländlichen Bangladesh  
(Sozialökonomische Schriften zur Agrarentwicklung, Bd. 29)  
Saarbrücken: Verlag breitenbach, 1978, 219 pages.

Research work on developing countries has until now hardly included studies on the role of women in the development process. The relevance of the problem, however, is obvious, since there is an inherent development potential in women, the neglect of which can be the reason for the failure of development projects.

The study conducted by Gudrun Martius-von Harder is a precise description of the economic, political and social situation of women in Bangladesh. After an introductory presentation of the problem complex, which is concerned mainly with the development perspectives of rural women and their mobilisation potential for development policy, while taking into consideration inhibiting social factors, such as seclusion<sup>1</sup>, the author provides a short survey of the very sparse available literature on this topic. In the following section on the genesis of the sexual division of labour and change in the position of women, the author clearly shows that social development in Third World countries has led to a deterioration of the situation of the woman. The modernisation of agriculture, for example, has resulted in the exclusion of women from this sector. "The opinion is rampant that men take over modern techniques and women, the more primitive, traditional ones." (p. 36) As the author shows, this leads to the integration of men in the monetary sector, whereas women remain in subsistence production, a situation which widens the already existing status gap between men and women in a way detrimental to the latter.

The empirical study by G. Martius-von Harder, which covers four typical villages of Comilla district, centres around the themes of the family, household, agriculture and employment outside the home. The main subjects of the investigation were the wives of household heads. Interviewing them with the help of a standardised questionnaire was to yield a comprehensive picture of the various activities of the women, as well as their economic and political participation, and cultural norms and values. Precise time measurements of the women's various chores in the course of a year aimed to establish precisely, through calculated average values, the expenditure of labour by women. The result of the survey is that, with few exceptions, the majority of women in Bangladesh are engaged in processing agricultural products - above all, rice - and in tending animals in the courtyard of the house. Because of seclusion, women are not allowed to work outside the house. Fifty-one percent of households do not produce sufficient food for home consumption and thus, women from these households have to work as labourers (processing agricultural products like paddy, etc.) in the households of richer peasants. Here, too, however,

they work in the courtyard under the guidance of women from the richer household. They are normally paid in kind.

The empirical data of this survey are highly detailed, but unfortunately the rather technocratic tendency of this descriptive survey cannot be overlooked. Doubtless, this study fills the gap mentioned earlier in research work of this kind on developing countries. Nevertheless, it would have been highly desirable had this book gone beyond being a purely static picture of rural Bangladesh. A more detailed investigation of the reasons for the failure of the majority of programmes carried out by the Rural Development Academy might have improved the possibility of developing alternate strategies. In the final analysis development efforts are hampered by religious institutions like seclusion. Of course, seclusion as an obstacle to the mobilisation of women should not be underestimated, but no solution will be found if the author keeps to her initially formulated hypothesis that the precondition necessary for the participation of women in the economic and social spheres of society is the granting of equal rights to women (see p. 54). G. Martius-von Harder briefly mentions proposals concerning the integration of more women into the Women's Programmes by transferring the latter to the villages. This, however, contradicts the above-mentioned hypothesis. The question should be raised as to whether a qualitatively oriented method of investigation might have been an approach more apt to the envisaged objective of the study. Nevertheless, the book gives an interesting insight into village life of rural women in Bangladesh and is a milestone of the way to greater awareness of the situation of women in the Third World.

Note:

- 1) Seclusion, i. e., segregation of the sexes, a common practise in Islam and Hinduism, is meant to isolate girls and women from public life from the age of puberty onwards.

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