



Stop, Please Stop This Violence

by Shaheen Anam

Believe it or not but we have the unique distinction of being the only country in the world where maternal mortality is decreasing but another killer is showing an upward trend and that is Death of Women due to Unnatural Causes. The statement is not a fiction of anyone's imagination. This is a documented fact. The figure might vary slightly but at present there are about 52 deaths per thousand due to pregnancy related causes and 67 per thousand due to unnatural causes. The Home Minister disclosed in Parliament on 22 November that of the 21, 622 reported suicides since Jan 1992, women totalled 12,470. In this respect Jessore tops the list with 1,788 person committing suicide out of which 1,081 were women. We all know what these so called "suicides" mean. Most of these are cases of dowry deaths domestic violence etc. whereby women are murdered in a planned way and their husbands or relatives report that they have committed suicide. In other cases their lives are made so unbearable that they are forced to commit suicide which is tantamount to murder also.

ONE wonders, how much more violence against women is needed before society to finally react. Perhaps like most other issues such as poverty, infant mortality, diarrhoea etc. we have become desensitized towards violence also. Or is it because after all it is not my sister or mother or wife who is being raped, burned, mutilated and murdered.

Violence against women is on the rise. We read about it in the news papers every day. We also know that for every reported case there are thousand others which are not reported. The statistics compiled on death of women in a certain age group due to unnatural causes are so horrifying that no civilized society can remain indifferent to it any longer. But somehow it seems that violence against women is not considered a threat to civilized society.

Until very recently, death of women at the reproductive age, say between 18 and 35 was primarily pregnancy related.

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The story of Noorjahan Begum from village Chata-khara, Peroza of Kalipur and another Noorjahan from Modhukahi all of the whom have been victims of illegal village salish are by now familiar stories.

There has been protest meetings, discussions and appeals to stop the unlawful activities of village salish. The Amnesty International has also documented these gross violations of Human Rights. Unfortunately, the reaction from our law enforcing authorities or from the judicial system has been muted at best and total indifference at worse.

Although some of the offenders were taken into custody they are out on bail now. Court cases are going on against them but this will be a long process. Moreover we can never be sure show these trails will be conducted. In a society where witnesses are bought and sold with impunity one can only imagine the outcome of the trails.

What about the media and

the way it reports violence against women? Newspapers usually reports the statement given by the policemen connected with the case. We all know how fair and gender sensitive our police force is. Moreover, we hardly ever find

out what happens after the crime. There is very little follow up on the cases. The general public need to know whether the guilty person has been punished or not. This gives a message to the society in general and to potential offenders

who will know whether they can or cannot perpetuate violence on women. The other fault with the media is sensationalizing violence. Because of this only the more sensational ones gets prominent coverage the rest are ignored after a certain point

Therefore, although it is the responsibility of the media to inform the public, there is a great need for the media itself to become sensitive to the whole issue of violence against women. Two weeks ago, I watched, along with thousand others on

national television, the fate of a young girl whose life has been completely destroyed by her kidnapper/husband. This was shown in a programme called "Drishtikon". This young girl who is just about 19 now was kidnapped 3 years ago and forced to marry her kidnapper.

Not being able to bear the physical and mental abuse that she inflicted on her regularly she attempted suicide 3 times. About 6 months ago she escaped to her parents house. The torture that was inflicted upon her by her husband and his friend after she was caught was open for all of us to witness. She now carries 125 stitches all over her body as a result of the brutality. As if that was not enough for her tormentors, she and her family are under threat of death for daring to report the matter to the police.

She now lives the life of a fugitive because her tormentor along with his friends are around and boast of killing her entire family. These people are mastans of the area against whom even our police force is helpless. This young girl begged for life, on National Television. What answer does society have for her?

Where then does a victim of violence go to seek redress? The various women's organizations

and certain NGO's are doing a valiant job of helping them but the problems are so great and resources so constraints that a vast majority remains un-served. The Social Welfare Ministry also has programmes to rehabilitate victims of violence but falls far short of an effective programme which would protect them on a long term basis.

What then is the answer? Who is responsible for the dangerous upward trend of violence against women? What can we do, you and I. The first and primary thing to remember is that this is not only a women's issue. Therefore information and awareness about violence on women should be directed towards men and women both.

The second is, this cannot be treated any longer as stray or isolated cases. The numbers are far too high to define it as an outcome of domestic violence only. The deaths, and all other outcome of violence is a sickness of our society whereby one half feels superior to the other half and gets religious and social sanctions.

There is a need to network among us. All like minded organizations and individuals should pool in their resources and work in a concerted effort to eradicate this curse which results in the ultimately deaths of women. Our whole judiciary system will have to be sensitized to the issue. The existing laws that protect women should be strictly enforced and if need be there should be a movement to change some of them. There should be a public outcry, expressed by our civil society against such outrage. These issues can no longer be shrouded in secrecy or discussed in small groups at private meetings. It is now time to take a proactive and militant attitude by us all and give a clear message:

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IS NOT ACCEPTABLE.



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How Prostitute Rosa Found a New Life

ROSA became a prostitute at the age of 17. By the time she was 20, she was living off the earnings of other prostitutes in Colombia's emerald-mining region of Boyaca. At 24, she owned a bar with 15 prostitutes and was contracting business in Ecuador.

Then Rosa, also a mother, began to think about the kind of image her children had of her. Now she has another kind of business. She is a seamstress, and she also spends time helping other young women escape the misery of a life of prostitution.

Rosa is one of hundreds of Colombian prostitutes starting new lives with the help of the Sisters of Worship through an integrated programme for personal advancement.

Her story is not unusual. Like that of many other prostitutes, it is rooted in poverty, ignorance, and exploitation. Lacking an education, she could not find a job and slipped into prostitution.

She says: "After three months, I was completely demoralised. I lost contact with my family for several years."

The opportunity for a new life came at a centre for venereal disease control in Bogota. There, she was given a pamphlet with information on the Maria Micaela Centre, headquarters for a social programme sponsored by the Sisters of Worship to aid prostitutes. The goal of the programme is to offer rehabilitation without incarceration.

The Sisters aim to provide literacy, job training, housing and comprehensive assistance. Emphasis is put on work with the family. The Centre, for which ground was broken in 1979, was named after a Spanish saint who worked to combat prostitution based on the idea that it results from social injustice.

For Rosa, as for the others who have used the Centre, such a profound life change was not easy. She says: "In the beginning, I had ups and downs. Since I was trying to train myself and find other ways to earn a living it took time to overcome my predicament. Now things are definitely different."

The true extent of prostitution in the Colombian capital has yet to be identified. Statistics provided by authorities show that anywhere between 45,000 and 200,000 women work in the sex trade. The doubt about number shows how little is known about the problem. Studies show that 82 per cent of the prostitutes are 15 to 40 year old, and eight per cent are nine to 14.

Help is available to those who find their way to the Maria Micaela Centre, which receives

Patricia Iriarte writes from Bogota

Hundreds of prostitutes have found their way to a new life, thanks to a centre run by nuns in the Colombian capital, Bogota. One such is Rosa, who by the age of 24 was running a bar with 15 prostitutes. Today she is a seamstress, helping others to escape a life of misery. Gemini News Service reports on the work of a centre called on to give advice by 1,000 people every day.

on average 1,000 people a day. The Centre has a kindergarten for 200 youngsters, mostly the children of women being trained or employed at its workshops. The women learn to sew, knit, embroider, make toys or become qualified beauticians.

Marina is another girl who has benefited from the Centre's rehabilitation and training programme. She had been jailed for stealing a watch from a customer who refused to pay and met a nun who visits the jail to counsel inmates.



WEAVING A FUTURE FOR STREET WOMEN
A nun at Bogota's Maria Micaela Centre teaches a former prostitute how to use a weaving machine

A high school for about 400 students gives preference to children from high-risk families or social situations. The Centre's educational facilities are also used to train a floating population of students.

They get two hours instruction daily for three months on subjects that range from reading and writing to the creation of small enterprises. A factory employs 60 people and sponsors about 25 interns, primarily adolescents in need of special attention.

They talked about the possibilities of a new life. After release Marina worked in brothels, then went to the Centre. There she learned to operate a sewing machine and discovered a talent for embroidery.

Marina gave up prostitution and began supporting her children with earnings from the Centre's clothing factory. She pulled together enough money to buy a sewing machine. Turning life around was a struggle. A lazy husband tried to take advantage of her. People

refused to accept her as an honest woman. And she endured economic hardships while looking for a job.

Yet Marina succeeded. Her rehabilitation was the result of methods of the Sisters of Worship that are based on values, self-esteem, respect and training. She was able to regain dignity and educate her children.

The Sisters of Worship know that much remains to be done. An evaluation in 1990, sponsored by UN Children Fund, highlighted shortcomings that are being remedied. A reception office opened recently in the city's red-light district, a home for teenage mothers has begun operating, and a cooperative is being organised to provide home loans and credit for small enterprises. Funds are needed to renovate machinery and equipment at the Centre's workshops, and the staff need training in health and psychology.

Prostitution is still a problem. Along 13th Avenue and many other streets of Bogota, as well as any other Colombian city, women routinely sell their bodies to survive, enduring a life of exploitation, violence and contempt. For the lucky ones, the Maria Micaela Centre offers hope for a better future.

Flesh Trade Arises Out of Crisis

by Raffat Bint Rashid

PARUL, from Kutipara, Rangpur is only eleven years old. She used to live with her grandmother, a beggar, but hardship and poverty has drawn both of them to the romantic city Dhaka.

Dhaka, seemingly the only answer to their prayer, has been a magnetic city for the needy and poor. Parul was offered work as a maid servant by a woman. Stricken by hunger, she grabbed it, as it was the best offer she had in two days.

The woman handed her to another woman in Kandupatty saying "stay here, you will work here." Parul remained there in good faith. Little did she know that she had entered the forbidden city, that there was no return from there, that she had been sold for only Tk. 200. She was to serve as a prostitute.

Every day, on an average, Parul has to entertain at least 15 clients, from 6 am to 10 pm, even when she is sick. This "service" is in exchange for residence, protection and food. She must share the major portion of her earnings with her sardarnis (pimp or madam), apart from the occasional tips of Tk 5 to Tk 20. Such is the job description

of Parul, who has no other alternative. She has signed her contract with her flesh, killing her conscience. There is no saying "I won't do it," in Kandupatty where rebels are dealt with severely. Either they agree or end up like Shab Meher, victimised for her refusal to engage in flesh trade.

Parul is just an example among the lakh and half of these unfortunate women. This is the unofficial number of prostitutes in the country and of them the majority are teen-

aged girls. These girls are rigid and self-centered, they become desperate in the face of extreme poverty. After receiving assurances for survival, from the pimps, they adopt prostitution as a profession. In many cases the parents bring their daughters in exchange for monthly financial assistance.

Their customers are school boys, students, service holders, police, BDR, army, old men and others. Some visit the brothel daily, some twice a week. None are allowed more

But what about the ones not licensed, the ones venturing in the streets of old Dhaka or in front of Ramna park? They sleep under the open sky in the footpaths and live only on bread and tea. They earn between Tk. 5 to Tk 20 which at least ensures their meals, according to them.

But then again, there are also "willing prostitutes" who are educated and are used by the businessmen to achieve deals. They are even taken abroad.

The constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh in Article No 18 (2) states: The state shall adopt effective measures to prevent prostitution and gambling.

Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on November 20 1989, said in Article 34: states parties undertake to protect the child from all form of sexual exploitation and sexual abuse.

Unfortunately these laws only add pages to the books; in terms of implementation, initiatives are negligible. Rehabilitation of these girls are not of any standard. Sometimes they are given in marriage but later they return to their old profession after being tortured by their husbands.

In Baby Moudud's write up 'Teenagers are forced for Flesh Trade' she quotes a girl, "we have developed a lifestyle here, and we need good clothes and food including egg, banana, milk, meat and fish" says the girl adding "therefore in the name of rehabilitation we cannot remain in confinement, to live our lives through work like sewing and having ordinary meals like rice and vegetables. "These girls are so hardened by the cruelty of fate that sweet talk or compassion mean nothing, they ought to be rehabilitated in the true sense, guaranteed security, then only can they try to give up and better their lives again."

The family deprives them while society condemns them. The state too does not provide them with security. Such an offence should be acknowledged with our heads bowed in shame," says Baby Moudud.

There must be freedom of will of the individual, these immature girls are forced to be prostitutes. Teen-age prostitution should be abolished. A fourteen year old cannot take charas and ganja (drugs) and say she wants to stay at Kandupatty, that she has no intention of being good nor does she want to work. It is our moral obligation to rehabilitate them and rescue them.



The rescued teen-age girls from Kandupatty

Preparing for Beijing '95

OVER 700 women from Asia and the Pacific representing diverse cultures, communities and political systems met in Manila last week in preparation for the Fourth World Conference of Women to be held in Beijing in 1995, says a message, received here yesterday.

The UN sponsored conference is expected to identify strategies for a Plan of Action for women's development. The discussions at Manila focussed on a critique of development strategies relating to the economy, health, agriculture, labour, education and culture, science and technology, violence, family, political development and human rights.

In drawing upon their experiences the women clearly rejected the dominant model of development, by providing evidence of the negative impact of structural adjustment programmes, restrictive trade agreements. In fact the new economic policies were shown to be based on a utilisation of women's labour on exploitative terms.

In pursuit of such policies, the state and become more coercive. Systemic attempts were being made to homogenise plural and mutually tolerant societies resulting in a marked departure from human rights standards by both state and non-state forces. As a result of these policies not only was the principle of gender equity systematically ignored, but there was an increasing evidence of violence against women, within the family, the community and the state.

The women from the South Asian countries (Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka) addressed their concern over the threat to peace in their region from the competitive increase in military budgets, the encouragement given to obscurantist, communal forces. Both tendencies contributed to a growth in the levels of poverty and to violence. The women demanded that their concerns be recognised by the member governments at the Ministerial meeting to be held in Djakarta in March 1994.

The women of South Asia further articulated their alternatives for a UN Plan of Action for Women's Development to be undertaken by member governments, NGOs and women's organisations-alternatives leading towards the ideals of social justice and gender equality in the region.

aged girls. The Social Welfare and Women Affairs Minister recently stated in the parliament that there were 9,107 prostitutes in the country of whom 5,529 are listed while the rest 3,578 are floating.

"Ninety percent of these girls step into the trap for their whole life, unknowingly and are forced into dark life," said Ayesha Khanam, General Secretary Mahila Parishad. These devils trap the girls exactly the way they catch the birds. Flesh traders have emerged taking advantage and exploiting the situation arising out of deep socio-economic crisis. Booming their business by luring with job promise the innocent and poor girls including the minors of rural Bangla, Ayesha described.

Many are drawn at an early age into the sub-culture of prostitution. They are frequently associated with male procurer or pimp or with a house of prostitution or the brothels managed by a supervisor or madam. This is not a matter of their choice, being oppressed in the families, orphaned or tortured by step mothers, poverty and discrimination. Victims of neglect, not to mention lack of awareness and literacy, these girls finds themselves at the crossroads of Kandupatty — their ultimate death.