



Sexual Abuse of Our Female Children

Time to Speak the Unspoken

by Shaheen Anam

In a traditional society like ours, sex abuse is a subject not talked about openly. When children are involved the inhibition is even greater. There is a tendency to deny it, ignore it and even hide it. Yet, time has now come to bring such issues to the forefront.



around in impunity endangering the lives of young children. With the threat of AIDS and the misconception among some that sex with children will cure it, the danger to children will grow further. Trafficking of children from one country to the other has also increased reportedly.

In the above backdrop, concerned groups, organizations and individuals have not been quiet or inactive. There are people in our society who have spent a good part of their lives working in this field and trying to address this problem in many different ways. Terre des Hommes, a Swiss organisation has been working with children, both urban and rural for many years now. They run a hostel for street children and a drop-in centre in the city. Ruby Ghaznavi, the country representative for many years and now serving in the advisory board feels that abuse of children will continue unless we as a society address the problem in a serious and concerted way. One of

the most serious obstacle that workers face is of providing options and alternatives to children when they are rescued from an abusive situation. Other organizations working in this area are Rada Barnen, Shaishab, Shishu Adhikar Forum etc.

One recent incident that has come to attention and is an example of how difficult it is to provide any long term or even short term solution to the problem. A young girl of 10 was kidnapped from a city slum and then returned to her parents after several days. She was of course sexually abused. A doctor friend, when attending to her medical needs came across the most unbelievable insensitive remarks even from her professional colleagues. But the greatest problem she faced was trying to place the young girl in an institution or shelter where she would be safe and heal back to a normal life. The girl's parents do not want her back, the very few existing shelter programmes that do exist are highly inadequate to deal with a sensitive

issue as this. So where does the child go?

Workers in this field are totally stumped when it comes to providing any long term solution for these children. Helen Rahman, the director of Shaishab, an NGO working with urban street children says, all we do at present is provide counselling and try to demonstrate to these children that we care. According to her, the girls street child is the most vulnerable to sexual abuse. Another big impediment to rehabilitation is societies attitude towards women and girls. When a girl is sexually abused, she is made to believe that she has somehow become "bad" or "spoil" and can never go back to normal life. She then has no alternative but to become a prostitute.

Examples of abuse is so glaring that we can no longer afford to ignore it. It is there, right outside our front gates. Just think, the little girls playing in the park and selling water to passersby, will soon be forced into prostitution. The beautiful girl of 8 or 10 who sold you flowers when your car stopped at the red light will soon have to sell her body to survive. The many young girls you see in street corners, near lakes and other public places have almost all been forced into this life for one reason or the other. It is reported that these girls start this life at the age of 10 or 12 and by the time they are 16 they become disease ridden, mute and ready to die unless someone takes care of them. Sadly enough, once healed they go back to the subgroup, because under the circumstances it is only that group which provides some kind of support or protection to them.

Can we as a society allow this to happen? It is happening, please make no mistake about it. It is happening in the streets, in brothels and even in homes of so called respectable people. It is happening in rural Bangladesh where girls as young as 10 are being married off in complete defiance of the law which decrees that marriage under 18 is illegal. It is also happening in families, in the form of incest the most unspoken of them all.

There is no quick solution or easy answers. But let us at least think about it, acknowledge the fact, bring it to the attention of the public, policy makers and the civic society. Let us not look the other way any longer.

I know this is an highly inadequate piece. I have tried to scratch the surface. I am also aware of the sensitive nature of the topic. I request all those interested and involved in this issue to write about it.

Seeing the World through Women's Eyes

Francesca Buglioni writes from Berlin

JANICE Jirau had sex with her HIV-infected husband to prove that she loved him unconditionally. She was in effect committing suicide — she, too, is now infected with the virus that leads to AIDS — but he did not stop her.

Jirau, an Afro-American woman, tells her story in the Heart of the matter, a film by two female United States filmmakers which looks at AIDS from a woman's point of view. "I want you to stop being victims," is her message to women. "We can manage a lot of people's lives; we have to start managing our own."

The film is an example of how women, once ensured starring billing in the global film industry because of glamour and sex, are now making a name for themselves on the other side of the camera.

American Independents and Features Abroad (AIFA), a consortium of film-makers, companies, distributors and sales agents, says films by and about women made up a record 35 per cent of the films it represented at this year's Berlin International Film Festival, the world's second largest film showcase.

AIFA founding director Lynda Hansen describes the figures as "a milestone". In its previous seven years AIFA screened only six films by and about women, though Hansen adds cautiously that it is not yet clear whether this is the start of a new pattern or a one-off occurrence.

Certainly, however, films by and about women played to packed audiences in Berlin. It was the year of female producers, directors, camera crews, film editors and writers. And the Festival organisers stress

that the films were mainly about "strong women" not just screen goddesses and fairytale queens.

The AIDS film brings home the point that because men try to control women's sexuality, women often lack the power to take independent responsibility for their sex lives — a major factor in the rise of AIDS among women: Harvard University forecasts that 20 million women worldwide will be infected with HIV by the turn of the century.

Similar social pressures lie behind the mutilation of female sexual organs still

euphemistically known as female circumcision but which in reality is equivalent to a form of male castration. The practice, which affects 80 million women, was featured at Berlin in 32-year-old Somali film-maker Soraya Mire's Fire Eyes.

Her film challenges the myths such as "cleanliness" which help propagate the practice. She points out that many "circumcised" women are plagued for the rest of their lives by the medical and psychological consequences of mutilation, and suggests it is the ultimate form of child

abuse and sexual control.

First-time South African film-maker Bethany Yarrow focuses on more positive resistance in her study of a group of five black women in Mama Awethu (Power to Women).

They go about their daily business only too aware that apartheid is still alive and well. "De Klerk is a liar," says one woman bluntly, straight to camera. In her effort to fix apartheid on film, Yarrow follows the women's daily routines, hearing their stories of being burned out of their homes or of their children's deaths in township violence.

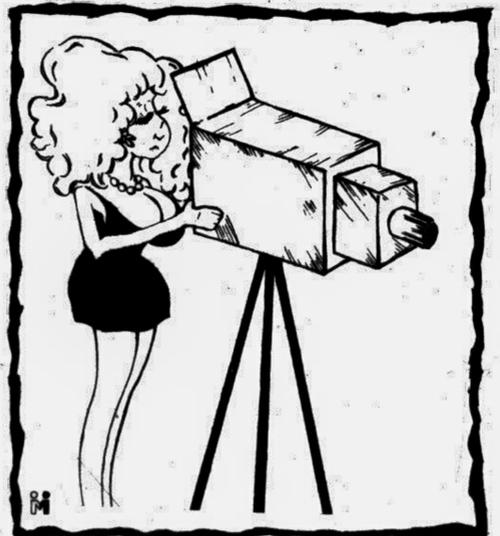
The film's power derives from its focus on ordinary women "because women rarely occupy positions of power. It is the men who are interviewed by the media," points out Yarrow, "the men who speak, the men who discuss. The voices of the women for the most part have been silent".

A different aspect of female power is featured in German film-maker Mirjam Quint's record of the extraordinary life of Phoolan Devi, the Indian "Bandit Queen" who was gang-raped and got her revenge by subsequently killing the perpetrators of the crime.

The film turns her into a symbol of a woman who, having no faith in men, liberates herself from them.

The range of issues in these and other films that stole the show in Berlin illustrate that the concept of "a woman's point of view" is far too simplistic, but proves the existence of a female viewpoint capable of picking out alternative realities. — Gemini News

The writer is a freelance journalist based in Berlin.



BANCHTE SHEKHA

is an NGO in Jessore set up by Angela Gomez to redress the protracted injustices meted out to women. She intended to teach these deprived children of god their worth and potentials by restoring their confidence.

Angela identified the core problems and then engaged in their solution with the help and suggestions of those deprived. Banchte Shekha members firstly create awareness among these people about their potentials then organise and mobilise them to cater to their diversified needs. Village women are specifically targeted.

Men had difficulties accepting this success. Husbands inflicted physical torture on their wives for becoming Banchte Shekha members. They faced the wrath and injustice of the community and religious leaders as well. Perceived as a threat to their status quo men tried to highlight, at times invent, negative impacts of Banchte Shekha programmes. Banchte Shekha members suffered pain and stigma over the years in their refusal to submit to pressure.

The members of Banchte Shekha represent the most backward and weak part of the community. They form groups of 20-40 with names like "Friend" "Light of Hope" etc in their respective localities. The first task of a group is saving. New members save Taka 2 per week, older members put in Taka 5-10. The groups have their own jointly operated bank accounts. Everybody's contribution gets deposited at the end of the week.

Groups are run by the members themselves. They have their own presidents and secretaries. A group member, as treasurer, looks after the financial matters. The groups meet regularly. In these meetings members talk about their own lives, problems and difficulties, and arrive at decisions which are documented.

Group members can borrow money locally from their own group or centrally from Banchte Shekha. Generally loans are given for three reasons, (a) Emergency need, (b) Small business or professional, and (d) Personal or family needs. Loans require the approval of at least five members of the respective group. Both locally and centrally there is a 1% annual service charge on loans. Only 1 per cent of the

Learning to Live with Dignity

by Farah Kabir

The members are provided legal aid as and when required. Since 1987, many cases have been heard with help from the legal aid programme. Such cases are first heard in village arbitration courts (Salish) and then taken to administrative courts if needed. The exception of Banchte Shekha lies in their practice of following up.

Banchte Shekha has achieved assertiveness and a degree of clout over the years. Conservative religious leaders have withdrawn under its pressure. An Imam who was creating problems over a marriage was forced to back down when the women withheld their contributions to the local mosque. In another case Rokeya reported the evil designs of a married man to remarry and get wealthier were dashed. He did not seek his

authority of the shalish, let alone that of a women iconoclast one.

Banchte Shekha is now viewed by these women and men as a quasi-governmental body. An institution for women through which grievances can be addressed. The impact of all this that men hesitate to mistreat or cheat them. The women teach their daughters the legal provisions so that they (daughters) are equipped to face the world. This programme succeeded to create a congenial atmosphere for acceptance of better rights for women (equal rights are yet to come) which is definitely a very positive development.

Angela has 20,000 plus women working for or with Banchte Shekha in six districts — Kushtia, Jenaidah, Jessore, Narail, Khulna and Barisal. It is not only helping improve the status of women but also the community as a whole. The community is better off since Banchte Shekha offered them its diversified programmes. Women are literate or on the path to literacy, definitely more knowledgeable today in health and child care, sanitation and environment and legal provisions.

Banchte Shekha is accorded recognition by the donor communities and they offer assistance in numerous areas. Banchte Shekha however proudly informs us in the wake of the Gulf War and its aftermath self-reliance programmes undertaken by them would have seen them through a few years if funds were withdrawn provided they did not go for expansion. The food grown and the savings of its members would have been adequate for the Banchte Shekha families.

"We shall overcome, we shall overcome, we shall overcome someday... /O, deep in my heart, I do believe, that/Women shall be free someday."

This song composed by Angela is a continuous source of inspiration for her girls. Angela is one Bangladeshi that places service before self. She infuses dynamism in Banchte Shekha and all those who come in contact with her. Banchte Shekha could be replicated all over Bangladesh as it is a tested and proven programme. Its success merits consideration of the policy makers and developers who want Bangladesh to develop.

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Angela Gomez (right), Director of Banchte Shekha, discusses legal rights with village women.

first wife's permission as required by law nor inform the present bride or the family of his marital status. Once the marriage was solemnised the man became demanding forcing the second wife to bring cash or goods beyond her means. This young girl approached a Banchte Shekha paralegal for legal succour. The paralegal succeeded to get the girl divorced and two bighas of land as maintenance and compensation. It is quite an achievement by any standards particularly in a system where the men and affluent parties are unwilling to submit to the

Rural Women: In Need of Health Care

by Dr Salima Rahman

AT the tender age of 16, Dalia Begum was given in marriage by her father to Jamal Sheikh, a farmer from Dologram village, Lalmonirhat. Within a few months, Dalia was pleased to discover she was pregnant, and hoped for a son to please her husband. But it was not to be.

On the morning of 29th October, 1993 some weeks before her baby was due, Dalia was brought in a semiconscious state to the Aditmari Maternity Centre. The health centre staff knew she was suffering from eclampsia, the poisoning of her pregnancy, and in great danger. The next day she was transferred to Lalmonirhat Maternity and Child Welfare Centre, and then to Sadar hospital. The doctors there arranged for her to be taken to Rangpur Medical College Hospital that same evening, but Dalia died on the way.

Like Dalia, Parbati from Kulaghat village was married at a young age and quickly made pregnant by her husband looking for a son. Unlike Dalia, she carried her child for nine months and then went into labour. Parbati's only help during all this time was an untrained Dai, or traditional birth attendant (TBA). Ill-educated, she did not realise that Parbati was having difficulties. By the time she was brought to Lalmonirhat MCWC and then transferred to Rangpur MCH, it was too late and Parbati's son was still-born. As a result of the mishandling of the labour, Parbati developed Vesico Vaginal Fistula, or continuous dribbling of urine. Having failed to give her husband his son and requiring money for her treatment, Parbati's husband left her and she had to return to her brother's house where she stays, neglected and ill.

Both Dalia and Parbati suffered from conditions which would never have arisen if the women had been in good health, properly fed, and well-taken care of during their pregnancies. How sad it is to think that there are many women in our society who have so little security in their lives that they die just because they are pregnant. Women in

thousand, far below the national average. But even this number is too high.

Of the 20 women who died, 11 did so because of eclampsia, which could have been avoided if the women had eaten more nutritious food, had sufficient protein, and taken care of themselves. It seems that some women are reluctant to attend the clinics when the signs of this illness appears and are taken to hospital too late. For others, their deaths occur because their husbands are reluctant to spend the money on transferring the woman to hospital. It is easier, and cheaper, to let the woman die at home.

But, despite all effort and commitment put into the RDRS and other antenatal clinics, women will still die in childbirth because there are not yet fully equipped emergency obstetric care units or blood-transfusion and other facilities at the local hospitals.

No woman wants to die like Dalia Begum or end up leading wretched life like Parbati. Every woman should have the right to choose whether or not to become pregnant by having access to safe family planning methods. She should be able to lead a healthy life through better nutrition and support from her menfolk when she is ill. When she is pregnant and giving birth, she needs to receive the best possible care and attention from properly-trained health care workers in well-run and fully equipped clinics and hospitals. Through the combined efforts of the Government and NGOs, it should be possible to give women what they deserve.

Once women's health is improved, both mother and infant mortality rates will fall; when family planning is fully accepted by both women and men, the population growth rate will decrease; the result — a nation of healthy women with fewer children — can only benefit us all.

Today the country is observing World Health Day. Let us hope that women's health will be addressed wholeheartedly and the lives of other Dalia or Parbati will be happier.

The writer is associated with RDRS, an NGO.



Women receiving training in an ante-natal clinic.