Victims of Vulnerability

Young Girls From the Brothels of Tanbazar

AATI, Kulsum and Shahnaz have been lured, sold, used, and beaten up, but their appearance reveals little about their life as child prostitutes. Newspaper reports conjure images of downtrodden victims, but nothing prepares you for the girls who act like women. These young girls rescued from the brothels of Tanbazar, look good and speak tough.

The well groomed girls. spoke of their ordeal with some bravado. "I didn't let ever beat me up, I would have left!" Saati sporting a boyish haircut, declared. Kulsum, again with a fashionable layered hairstyle, narrated how she argued back with her me. 'jaiga ta bhalo achey' (this place is quite good) and I retorted, 'Kisher bhala?' (how is it good!).

Though the girls did not seem 'crushed' by their experience, they appeared to be disturbingly hardened. They looked barely 16 or 17, yet spoke as if they had seen everything there was to see in the world.

EWS of arrest of traf-

fickers and rescue of

child prostitutes find

their way into column inches.

but not much is said of the

subsequent fate of the young

girls. Do circumstances lead

them back to prostitution or

after only two weeks in

Tanbazar said that she felt

"dirty" after the experience.

"I can't stay in this bad job!"

she declared. She wants to go

back to Dinajpur after com-

pleting training in cutting

and sewing. Saati believes she

will be able to face her par-

ents. However, she wants to

protest against her rape and

institute a case against her

dent as her or fortunate

enough to be found after two

weeks. Salma Ali of BNWLA

admitted that there are girls

who want to return to the

other kind of existence.

A lot of effort was made to

bring them back to the pro-

fession probably because

and very popular with the

clients. Ali explained. When

they were rescued, the girls

Not everyone is as confi-

phupa once she returns.

Saati who was rescued

do they return home?

Saati was on the train from Dinajpur to Dhaka in search of a job, when the train stopped at a station on the outskirts of Dhaka, and two women pushed her off. The train took off, leaving Saati flanked by the

"I had never come to Dhaka before," Saati said. The women dressed her, bathed her, fed her and said that another lady would come to get her. Saati subsequently found herself at a brothel.

Kulsum was on a train as them beat me. If they had well, when she was approached by women who asked whether she was looking for work. Although she was a little suspicious at first. Kulsum followed them of her own accord in the hope of kidnappers: "One girl told landing a job. Once in Tanbazar, however, she was sold off as a prostitute.

Shahnaz had been in a garments factory until a road accident caused her to lose the job. She was working in a glass factory when two well dressed women came up to her and sneered. "Still working so hard? Why don't you come with us - we will give you garments work". Once

Shahnaz arrived in Dhaka, of course, there were no signs of such a job.

The girls were not only economically vulnerable but emotionally exploitable as

Saati had left Dinajpur out of sheer humiliation. She had been raped by a phupa who was also her neighbour. When she protested, her uncles only scolded her and disgraced her.

Shahnaz was upset after her road accident and after three months in hospital, was desperate to find a job. Living at home was not an option because her mother had married elsewhere and Shahnaz did not want to depend on a stepfather. Under these circum-

stances, although the girls related their brave attempts to run away, they really did not have the strength to try anything. Once Kulsum realised that she was being sold, she declared, "I'm leaving!" only to change her mind when she was told that the police would take her away. " was scared at the mention of the police," Kulsum admitted.

Kulsum did try to escape

by Lamis Hossain

later when a boy who visited the brothel said he would take her away and marry her. She tried to shave off the window grills, but was caught by the sardarni (female pimp). "A little more and I could have escaped," Kulsum said wistfully, adding that

"the boy was a good one." Shahnaz never had a chance to escape. When she had the audacity to ask about the so-called garments job. her query was received by a slap. She was handed over to Rahima who threatened to beat her up. The young girl was kept at an English road brothel in Dhaka for a month before being transferred to Tanbazar alongwith others like her.

Shahnaz tried to shout and escape on the way to Tanbazar, but all she can remember is being pinched at the throat and then being woken up with water. Once in Narayangani, her abductors took Shahnaz and other girls to a room, put loud music on. and beat them.

To corroborate her story,

Shahnaz dropped her salwar without inhibition and pointed to the black marks on her knees and thighs. "This is where they hit me." she said matter of factly.

All three girls informed that their rooms in Tanbazar were usually locked in from the outside. They were not allowed to go to the shops and could not leave because of the men, (not mastans, the girls insist), posted near the doorway/gate. The servants who cleaned the girls rooms and did their laundry were not allowed to speak to them either. They were usually compelled to wear make up and even their fashionable hairstyles were forced on them.

Their clients included what the girls called 'bhodrolok' from respectable families. The girls would stand by the doorway and wait to be chosen. Each client would pay the sardarni from Taka 500-600, but the girls would only get a Taka 10 bakshish at the most. Kulsum informed that the

according to aptitude. The

vocational programme will

begin once an assessment of

skills in demand in the mar-

ket is completed. Ideally, the

girls will be kept for a year

because the job of instilling

confidence in the young girls

is one that requires time and

patience. The ultimate aim is

first six girls two months ago.

and is hoping to have 15 by

the end of August. So far the

building can accommodate

20 girls, but Nasir hopes to

start construction and in-

that the number of such homes for women is woefully

low compared to the need.

The government run Tongi

Correctional Institute is for

boys only and there is noth-

ing similar to rehabilitate

young girls. The few homes

run by women's groups are

for young girls awaiting trial.

Otherwise, there is a home

called "Bhogoghura" which

keeps teenage girls and is in

a very bad shape, according

taking time to recognise the

need for more initiative in

this field. "People are not the

offenders." he said. "If you

give them the opportunity,

they can live in society and

fulfill their duties as well.

Those who speak of simply

abolishing brothels, have a

narrow vision. This cannot be

done without making alter-

native arrangements for the

- Lamis Hossain

Society. Nasir feels, is

to Salma Ali.

young girls.

Nasir, like Ali, pointed out

The home welcomed the

social rehabilitation.

crease this to 100.



girls were given condoms to hand to their clients and capsules to take (most probably birth control pills).

The sardarnis could seeure the young girls obedience by threatening either to beat them up. Even if the girls had escaped, they would and might have ended up in a worse situation.

Unfortunately, the stories stories support studies con-

Bangladesh National Women Lawyers Association), who rescued the girls, first began these sort of "raids", in 1993. The week before 14 year old Shahina's story was picked up by the press, Ali had pulled off another rescue, involving 13 and 12, year olds Nazma and Reena. These young girls were sold for a paltry Taka 3,000 and handed over to a sardarni named Shahnaz. Ironically, Shahnaz herself was once kidnapped and forced into prostitution. Nazma and Reena have now been returned to their parents, and Shahnaz has been arrested,

Salma Ali of the BNWLA

who sells girls. The police are in a position to curb child prostitution, but sometimes it appears that the law enforcers

but no attempt has been

made to arrest Shiroo, a man

informed that she occasionally saw a policeman with a mole at the brothel. She once heard him say, "Paisa dia diben kintu" (Please make sure to pay the money).

Salma Ali informed that she does not have the authority make rescues without the police. The police also insist that they have to move in first because it may not be safe for her to do so. Ali suspects that the law enforcing agents often warn the prostitutes of the raid.

Kulsum, Saati and Shahnaz were lucky to escape, but without rehabilitation of the youngsters and cooperation from the police. they might find themselves back in Tanbazar selling themselves for a ten taka tip. They look good and they act tough, yet unless everything around them changes, they

Rehabilitation Homes Needed



profession. Life in Tanbazar is more colourful and in some ways more comfortable than could not be located later. what they may expect else-Kulsum too, wanted to rewhere. Many of the girls are turn at first. Her stay of about also ill-prepared for any seven months was the longest of the three, and she had obtained a licence to Hashi and Nazu, the two girls who were rescued last practice prostitution even month, returned to Tanbazar. though she was underaged.

these two girls were beautiful she does not want to return. Kulsum, Saati and Shahnaz have been referred to training programmes and were each found carrying a are now learning garments baby which they claimed was related skills and receiving theirs. They were released on intensive education. Salma bail paid for by a man who Ali, however said that the

Kulsum even thought that the

food at Tanbazar was good.

However, she now says that

number of rehabilitation programmes is "very small." compared to the need and demand for them. Some women's groups and NGOs have shelter homes but do not have provisions to prepare young girls for a different life.

There is however, some initiative taken in this field of late. The Association for Correction and Social Reclamation established in 1965, has started a new home in Mirpur with Canadian assistance and a grant from the Bangladesh government. Rafigul Islam

Nasir of the Association informed that the home called "Nirmul Ashroy", will accept girls and young women who have gone to jail for minor offences and when released need to-re-establish links with society, women who are "in moral danger" and want to leave brothels and others who are in "safe custody" in

The association composed mainly of journalists, academics, lawyers, police officers, hopes that the Mirpur home will be able to provide shelter, a functional education, and vocational training

hand them to the police or to not have known where to go

narrated by Kulsum, Saati and Shahnaz are not out of the ordinary. The way in which the girls were lured, the location where the abductors struck (i.e on the way to work, at the train station) their age and their social and emotional status all conform to the versions narrated by other young girls rescued from prostitution, and the ducted on the subject.

are on the other side. Saati

remain vulnerable little girls.

Reacting to an Emergency in Bangladesh 7

the poorest countries in the world and has one of the greatest needs for family planning and reproductive health services. The government and the Bangladesh family planning association (FPAB) have made significant progress over the years but a great deal still remains to be done. One of the key factors hindering acceptance of family planning in the country is religious opposition:

FPAB has met this challenge head on by conducting a series of orientation meet ings for local religious leaders (lmams) and local opinion leaders, with the object of

enlisting their support for the promotion of family planning in the light of the Holy Qur'an and the Hadith. This project has been very successful in gaining their back ing for family planning.

Recently, FPAB heard that a group of 35 poor rural women were being ostracized and punished by their community because they had ac cepted permanent methods of family planning and become members of a women's development programme. This involved the women tak ing small loans from the local rural bank and developing cottage industries as part of a self-development plan.

All this happened in a re-



mote village called Badekusha in the northern part of the Seraigani district of Bangladesh. The village elders of Badekusha were unhappy that the women were being encouraged to change from their traditional roles, gaining some financial independence and demanding a greater say in family decisions and community life. The women's "crime" was that they had accepted family planning and were attempting to improve their status within the family and their local community. The punishment was that they were not allowed to take part in any social or religious activities and their small trading outposts were closed No one would perform wedding or luneral rites for them and the women were banned

FPAB leapt into action, ar ranging to visit the area and organising an orientation meeting for the religious leaders and opinion leaders in the village. The Honorary Secretary-General of the Association took personal charge of the proceedings.

from other social rituals.

The discussions revolved around the interpretation of religious prescription with regard to marriage, family life, social and economic preconditions for marriage, and the responsibility of a father and husband towards his children and wife. Other topics included an explanation of the consequences to the nation should the current birth rate continue, and especially the harmful economic and social problems that could result.

At the end of the meeting. the Imam of Badekusha Mosque and two local headmen gave an unqualified apology to

the distressed women who had adopted family planning methods — an unprecedented step - and the women were then publicly invited back into community life.

This case was reported extensively in the various Bangladeshi newspapers, a further boost of FPBA's efforts to foster a more favourable attitude to family planning.

and Social Council.

Married Women.

Mesico City

Women.

1945: The UN Charter declares the principle of

to race, sex, language or religion".

1946: The Commission on the Status of Women

1957: The Convention on the Nationality of

equal rights for all "without distinction as

(CSW) is established by the UN Economic

The Convention on the Political Rights of

1960: The Convention on the Consent to Marriage

Declaration on the Elimination of All forms

The LIN observes international Women's Year

First World Conference on Women is held in

The UN General Assembly declares 1976-

1985 United Nations Decade for Women.

Convention on the Elimination of all Forms

Programme of Action for the second half

Forms of Discrimination against Women

The Committee on the Elimination of

Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)

The General Assembly adopts the

of Discrimination against Women.

1979: The General Assembly adopts the

of Discrimination against Women.

(Coperhagen, Denmark); adopts a

1988: Second World Conference on Women

of the UN Decade for Women.

comes into force.

1981: The Convention on the Elimination of Al

O be born female is not a crime, but you would never know it by looking at the deplorable conditions of girls in many parts of the world. Often underfed, neglected, overworked and denied access to proper health care and education, girls are forced into early marriages and pressured to bear children when still teenagers. Deep prejudices against girls mean that many are never even born, because of sex-selective

1945-1995: FIFTY YEARS OF UN WORK FOR WOMEN

To be Born Female . . .

abortions, or are neglected or killed as infants, with the result that an estimated 100 million fewer women are alive today than could be expected. Cultures and customs offer social support and nurture, but for girls they can also cast a pall over talents, aspirations and survival itself. Consider the following: Sexselective abortions, infanti cide and killing by neglect

The Third World Conference on Women

(Nairobi, Kenya); adopts the Forward-

looking Strategles for the Advancement

CSW begins work on reviewing progress

towards implementation of the Natrobi

Austria); recognizes women's rights as

World Conference on Human Rights (Vienna,

numen rights and recommends appointment

of a Special Rapporteur on Violence against

Declaration on the Elimination of Violence

against Women is adopted by the General

Regional preparatory process for the Fourth

neetings are held in indonesia, Argentina,

International Conference on Population and

the empowerment and autonomy of women

(Copenhagen, Denmark); calls attention to

the pivotal role of women in addressing the

problems of poverty, unemployment and

Development (Calro, Egypt); underscores

World Summit for Social Development

Fourth World Conference on Woman

World Conference on Women; regional

Austria, Jordan and Senegal.

as the basis for development

social integration.

of Women to the Year 2000.

Forward-looking Stretegies.

are common in parts of Asia and North Africa. In a study in one community in South Asia, 51 per cent of the 640 families questioned admitted killing a girl baby within a week of birth.

Female genital mutilation, an extremely painful procedure to keep a girl "pure" for marriage, endangers her health and emotional state throughout life. It is performed on an estimated 2 million girls every year.

Early marriage and pregnancy, sometimes as early as age 12, is encouraged in many cultures despite the fact that the practice increases the risk of injury, poor health and death for both mother and child. Maternal mortality in girls under 15 was five times higher than among 20to-25-years-old, according to a study in Bangladesh. Babies born to young mothers have lower birth weights and are twice as likely to die in their first year

Child labour sends girls as young as 6 and 7 to work, mostly as domestic servants. Many endure grueling schedules and receive no salary.

Sexual exploitation often accompanies child labour. In addition, each year hundreds of thousands of girls - many more than boys - are forced into the degrading and risky

sex trade as prostitutes. AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases affect not only sex workers but also girls forced into early sexual encounters and marriage. In some areas as many as 30 per cent of girls and women of child-bearing age are be-

lieved to be HIV-infected. The infection rates for girls between 15 and 19 years old are alarmingly higher than for boys in the same age

group. For example, in Uganda the ratio of girls to boys 15 to 19 years old who are infected with HIV is 6:1. In Zambia and Malawi the girl/boy infection ratio in that age group is 5:1.

The mandate to address the needs of girls has been clearly affirmed by the world community: The 1990 World Summit for Children singled out with urgency the situation of girls, declaring that "Girls must be given equal treatment and opportunities from the beginning." The Summit's 27 worldwide goals up to the year 2000 include those to advance girl's and women's health, nutrition and education.

The fundamental principle of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, ratified by 175 countries as of mid-June 1995, is equality and non-discrimination among all children.

The convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, ratified by 140 countries as of 15 June 1995, aims to end all practices that deny girls and women basic human rights, mandating countries to assure their full and equal participation in all

Today's girl is tomorrow's woman, her future clearly mapped out in the stages of her life cycle. To ensure that life cycle doesn't become a vicious cycle, we must work together to stop disadvantage and discrimination at its roots - in the lives of girls.

The prejudices girls face cross boundaries of culture. nationality and economic class and follow them into adulthood. A broad and united alliance is needed to ensure that equality - every woman's birthright - begins at birth.