

FOCUS

Miss Bangladesh Beauty Pageant What's All the Fuss About

YASMIN Bilkis Shathi was recently selected as Miss Bangladesh 1995, taking over the title from Anika Taher in the second ever beauty contest held in this country. The event was not only covered by the dailies here, but also made its way into the front page of the Jakarta Post in Indonesia.

But instead of praising this new trend in Bangladesh, the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Cultural Affairs has condemned it as being against the traditional cultural heritage of Bangladesh. The Committee criticised the event and urged intellectuals and eminent persons not to involve themselves in these programmes.

In an interesting turn of events, Naripokkho, a feminist organisation, has sided with the government on this issue by slating the contest as well, though not for the same reasons given by the committee. The NGO decried this contest as something that can "neither be seen as a progressive step for women nor can it change their position in our society." Their statement added that "emphasis on physical attributes can only reinforce the conventional idea of the importance of physical beauty for women."

As the subject seems to have attracted so much attention, the Daily Star decided to find out what people really think. Are beauty contests against our culture? Are they contrary to feminist ideals or do they violate Islamic values? The opinions of intellectuals, eminent persons, business people, artists and others are presented here.

Meghna Guhathakurata,
International Relations
Department, Dhaka
University

I am not condemning it for the reasons given by the Parliamentary Committee. I object to the commercialisation of the woman's body, especially by male dominant institutions. However, I don't think that it is necessarily antithetical to Bengali culture.

Senior government servant (male)

This is a sign of social progress and modernism — that women can do whatever they want to do par with other women in modern society.

This is not something against Bangladeshi or Bengali culture. Culture is a way of life and it changes with social development, economic development and growing interaction in the age of global information revolution. Fashion and dress are also reflective of society's change, from restricting oneself to traditional options to trying other types.

There is nothing in beauty contests to object to from the point of view of decency. These contests are another way of propagating Bangladesh's image in a modern society and of putting the country on the map. If contest participants are well-educated and well-groomed, then this gives the impression that we do have educated women in Bangladesh. The general impression of Bangladeshi women abroad is that of the persecuted, burkha-clad person which is not reflective of the fact that Bengalis were the first to embrace modernism in the whole of Asia.

In any case, why discriminate against women? If men had a similar contest, no one would bother about it. In the age of satellite T.V., you can't just turn the tide. We used to condemn Indian culture, but because of T.V. now it is in every house. We already have global cultural intrusion. In this context, it is more important to project our own culture, for example by wearing Jamdani sarees at a contest, instead of withdrawing into our cocoons.

Tarek Masud, film director

As such, I am not against beauty contests. But in this society where only women's beauty contests are held, then I don't think women are positively appreciated. Because if this wasn't the understanding, then there would be male beauty contests. The female entity is thus reduced into either

by Aasha Mehreen Amin and Lamis Hossain



Photo courtesy: Daily Janakantha

mere good looking or bad looking.

If beauty as such is something appreciable then it should be relevant to men as well. But it doesn't matter for men because they are seen in terms of their intellectual merit and competence, whereas women can only prove their worth by being beautiful. Beauty contests are thus part of the condescending attitude towards women from a predominantly male dominated society.

Selina Hossain, writer

Beauty contests are happening worldwide. This is nothing new. It is not only physical beauty, but also intelligence and mental competence which form part of an overall evaluation. From this point of view it is nothing offensive. The objection raised is that these beauty contests are not harmonious with our

culture. But if beauty contests can be done in a way that is culturally conscious, then there is nothing objectionable. If it is done in a way that our girls are wearing Jamdani sarees in a contest, isn't this a reflection of our culture?

Actually, those who are worked up about it want to evaluate Bengali culture from a fundamentalist's point of view. In reality, some elements introduced into culture disappear during the natural course of events and culture retains only the best parts.

At one time, even Islam as a religion was alien to this country, but now it is an integral part of our life, because its ideals are acceptable to our society.

Electronic media has brought everything nearer to us. There is therefore no point in closing our windows. If it is a good thing, it will

become part of our culture no matter what.

Maqsodul Haque, lead singer of the band Feedback

We Bengalis are basically a hypocritical race. We take pride in the fact that (last year's) Miss Universe, Susmita Sen from India was a Bengali, but we wouldn't let our women show themselves.

In the context of Bangladesh I tend to look at it a bit differently. I think our women are beautiful. Instead of locking them up at home they should rightly be displayed on a pedestal for the world to see. But as a male feminist, I am opposed to the idea of women's bodies being used as a commodity.

Dr Razia Khan Amin, professor of English Literature, Dhaka University, and writer.

I don't support it. I see it

as part of stereotyping women as sex symbols and will always protest against this. I think women who subject themselves to be used sex symbols are responsible for the low status of women.

Moreover, in a country that is so poor and where people are in such hardship, all our efforts/funds should be employed in essential activities and not for such frivolous events.

Syed Shamsul Haq, writer and one of the judges of the contest

I don't see anything bad in such contests. It is kind of a sport. In an international forum if a woman can represent her country, then what's the harm in it.

Its not just a contest on physical appearance but on a combination of attributes, personality being one of the most important. In the interviews for example we asked

them questions on politics, literature, social welfare etc.

In any case I really don't think there is any reason to be concerned about. The clothes they wore were very decent and in no way immodest.

Shafiq Rehman, Jai Jai Din Editor and one of the judges of the contest

I don't see it as exploitative at all. In the world scenario, Bangladesh is always known for its floods, disasters and poverty. Let the world know that there are good things such as beautiful, talented women in Bangladesh.

As for this being a 'foreign import,' if we can import our 'daal' and our rice why not this? I don't think there was anything about the contest that was against our culture. The women wore very decent clothes — sarees, shalwar kameez and evening dresses. I don't think I would have liked it if they were swimsuits since perhaps this would go against our culture.

In fact quite the opposite: towards the end of the contest one of the contestants (who became fifth) came in wearing a shalwar kameez in green and red representing our national flag. Just when she was going she very cleverly unfurled her dupatta and showed off against the green and red background, the map of Bangladesh similar to the flag that was brought out after Independence. This prompted spontaneous clapping which showed that this gesture had evoked national spirit amongst the audience.

Zamir Ali, Secretary-General of Bangladesh Muslim League

Culture is difficult to define. But since we are in a predominantly Muslim country, one could call our culture Muslim. From the Islamic point of view, beauty contests in this context are neither feasible nor acceptable. I don't oppose women participating in sports. Women are equal partners. But this is an alien culture. I don't encourage these things.

Tarana Halim, actress and lawyer

It all depends on how you

look at it. Many people who object to such contests do so because they view it with narrow minds. It is this limitation that needs to be changed.

I welcome such contests. I don't see it as being exploitative. If it is equality that is at stake why don't we also have male beauty contests just to balance it out?

Perhaps one of the criticisms to be made is that in a country like ours the money could be used for a noble cause say for building a school. But this particular contest was nothing very extravagant so I don't think there is any reason to criticize it.

Syeda Saira Hussain, home maker living in the US

All other countries have beauty contests, why shouldn't we have them? There are many beautiful women in our country. Why should we not show something positive about Bangladesh instead of always showing our women to be poor, helpless and downtrodden. Beauty contests give women the opportunity to show off not just their beauty but also their talents, their intelligence.

There are lot of other things going on in Bangladesh that are really exploitative of women, why don't we focus our attention on them?

A young businessman

I don't see what the fuss is all about. Admittedly before, beauty contests were really just based on women's physical attributes but nowadays they are very different. Personality, intelligence, stage performance etc are more important now, for which reason its not always the prettiest women who wins. Moreover, the things shown on say, cable TV and Bangladeshi cinema, are much more exploitative of women. Why don't they object to that. The miss Bangladesh contest is perfectly harmless and should be encouraged since it is something that will give women more confidence and a sense of accomplishment.

BANGLADESH is again under severe flood since the beginning of August. The rainfall in the country as well as in the catchment of the three river basins have intensified. The chances of a severe flood by the end of August is forecast.

The flood situation in greater Rajshahi, Pabna, Bogra, Naogaon, Natore, Dinajpur, Kurigram, Rangpur are likely to aggravate if the Ganges and the Brahmaputra continue to rise. Both the rivers are flowing above danger level since 17 August. The flood situation in the northern districts will deteriorate further if the rise in the water level in all the other rivers continue. The flood situation in the districts of Faridpur, Mithrapur and Munshiganj will deteriorate further during the next week or so. The flood situation is also critical in Dhaka, Mymensingh, Greater Sylhet and Chittagong.

The MET Office predicted heavy rainfall in most of the districts in August. Out of 300 mm of rainfall for the whole of August in Dhaka Division, 230 mm of rainfall was recorded in the 1st two weeks. The Sylhet district recorded 357 mm of rainfall in 2 weeks out of a monthly average rainfall of 460 mm. Chittagong recorded 298 mm in two weeks out of a monthly total of 531mm. Rajshahi recorded 321 mm of rainfall in two weeks of August out of an average monthly total of 389 mm. Khulna recorded 188 mm rains in 2 weeks out of monthly total of 284 mm. Barisal recorded 195 mm of rains out of 453 mm in two weeks of August.

The flood in 1995 have already affected 16 million people in 246 thanas of 40 districts. The Ministry of Disaster Management & Relief has indicated that crops of about 2.34 million acres of land and 1.4 million homes were damaged either totally or partially. The damage to education institutes, roads, bridges and culverts and embankments are heavy. The death toll has gone up to 137. The reports of diarrhoea in epidemic form has broken out in many flood affected areas.

The worst flood of the country occurred in 1988 when 67% of the country was flooded causing immense loss of properties and lives. The World community was sympathetic about our flood problem. The G-7 summit meeting in Paris in 1989 decided: "We stress the urgent

Politics of Flood

by Anjad Hossain Khan

need for effective, coordinated action by International Community in support of the Govt of Bangladesh in order to find solutions to this major problem which are technically economically and environmentally sound.

It is a matter of international concern that Bangladesh one of the poorest and most densely populated country of the world is periodically divested by catastrophic flood.

The Prime Minister of Bangladesh addressing the second conference on Flood Action Plan in March 1992 said "In the past no coordinated long term steps were taken for flood control. Only a few studies were conducted. We now want to go for concrete measures which will lead to a permanent solution of flood problem. The problem, no doubt, is wide and complex. There is no room for sluggishness, as it is a question of our life and death. It involves the success of our endeavour to alleviate poverty and to attain national autarky and prosperity."

It has, therefore, become imperative for us to go for an effective and meaningful programme that will face the challenges of flood and other national calamities."

The flood problem of Bangladesh has a chequered history of its own. It started in 1954 and 1955 when the country was severely flooded for two consecutive years. A series of consultants of international repute prepared reports including the ones prepared by the then East Pakistan Government of flood control plan. A Master plan was also prepared in 1964 followed by IBRD report in 1972. A national water plan was also prepared in 1986 and 1991. Flood Action Plan completed their studies in 1994. So far all these studies produced voluminous reports for the last 40 years.

If we look back we find that from 1955 to 1995 we have done studies only not to be implemented as none of the Governments took it seriously to solve the problem. The main problem of Bangladesh is that we are not sure what we want and how we want the problem to be solved. The series of meetings which took place after the 1988 flood with heads of the Governments in the region is ample proof of the ba-

sic problem — the problem of flood can not be solved alone by Bangladesh.

Bangladesh needs cooperation of all the upper riparian countries to prepare an integrated plan for flood mitigation. India who is a big neighbour and could do a lot in helping Bangladesh to solve the problem is not willing to help. The other small neighbours who has all the sympathy are not willing to go ahead as it may annoy India. We were left on our own to solve our own problem. Here lies the tragedy of Bangladesh. Because we are so much donor-oriented that we cannot think of trying to

solve our own problem without donor assistance. And donors have a different perspective. That is the reason we have not got a permanent solution of the flood problem as yet.

After 1988 flood, Bangladesh expected a solution of this chronic problem. The 150 million US dollar PAF studies were spent on studies and most of the money was syphoned back to the consultants of the donor countries. Even the very concept of Action Plan as adopted by G-7 Summit was diluted.

Bangladesh did not get an effective and meaningful pro-

gramme that will face the challenge of flood and other national calamities as desired by the Prime Minister.

The 1995 flood has become critical due to heavy rainfall in the upper catchments of the three river as well as heavy rainfall within the country. The pattern is similar to the catastrophic flood of 1988. The situation will get worse if the three river start rising simultaneously. The flood forecasting the warning is try hard to give timely warning. But they have their limitation too. The forecast is good for 48 hours. With data from India and Nepal they could do better. But Bangladesh does not have data in time from India in spite of agreement. In case of Flash Floods, we may get data from India after the flash flood is over.

The key to effective disaster management to what cannot be controlled and protected lies in gearing up the action of advance preparedness. Disaster preparedness focuses on developing plans to respond to any sudden disaster when it threatens to occur or has actually occurred. It involved estimation of emergency needs and identification of resources to meet the requirements. Contingency action plans prepared in advance outline the preparedness and response pattern and specify responsibilities of various administrative units.

Bangladesh has developed a strategy for comprehensive disaster management programme after 1988 flood. The over all disaster management programme are coordinated by the National Disaster Management Council headed by the Prime Minister. The Council has the task of evaluating the general state of preparedness of the relevant Ministries and Agencies before the disaster, monitoring their actions during the disaster and reconstruction works after the disaster.

Floods are a recurring problem in Nepal, India, Bhutan and Bangladesh. Each country within their own capabilities and availability of fund has taken up flood mitigation measures — structural and non-structural as may be applicable in their own country.

Recent floods of 1993 and 1995 in Nepal, India and Bangladesh have proved that

such individual efforts are not enough guarantee against floods of severe magnitude.

An integrated catchment management is a must for all the riparian countries. The objectives of an integrated catchment management plan are:

- 1) To assess and severe man made ecological degradation
- 2) To rehabilitate degraded are through reforestation
- 3) To reduce runoff and soil erosion to the minimum

Catchment Management involves forest management on a macro scale specially in the Himalayan where deforestation has systematically degraded hill slopes. The indiscriminate destruction of forests in Nepal, India and Bangladesh has aggravated the situation. Catchment and water shed management will improve the situation.

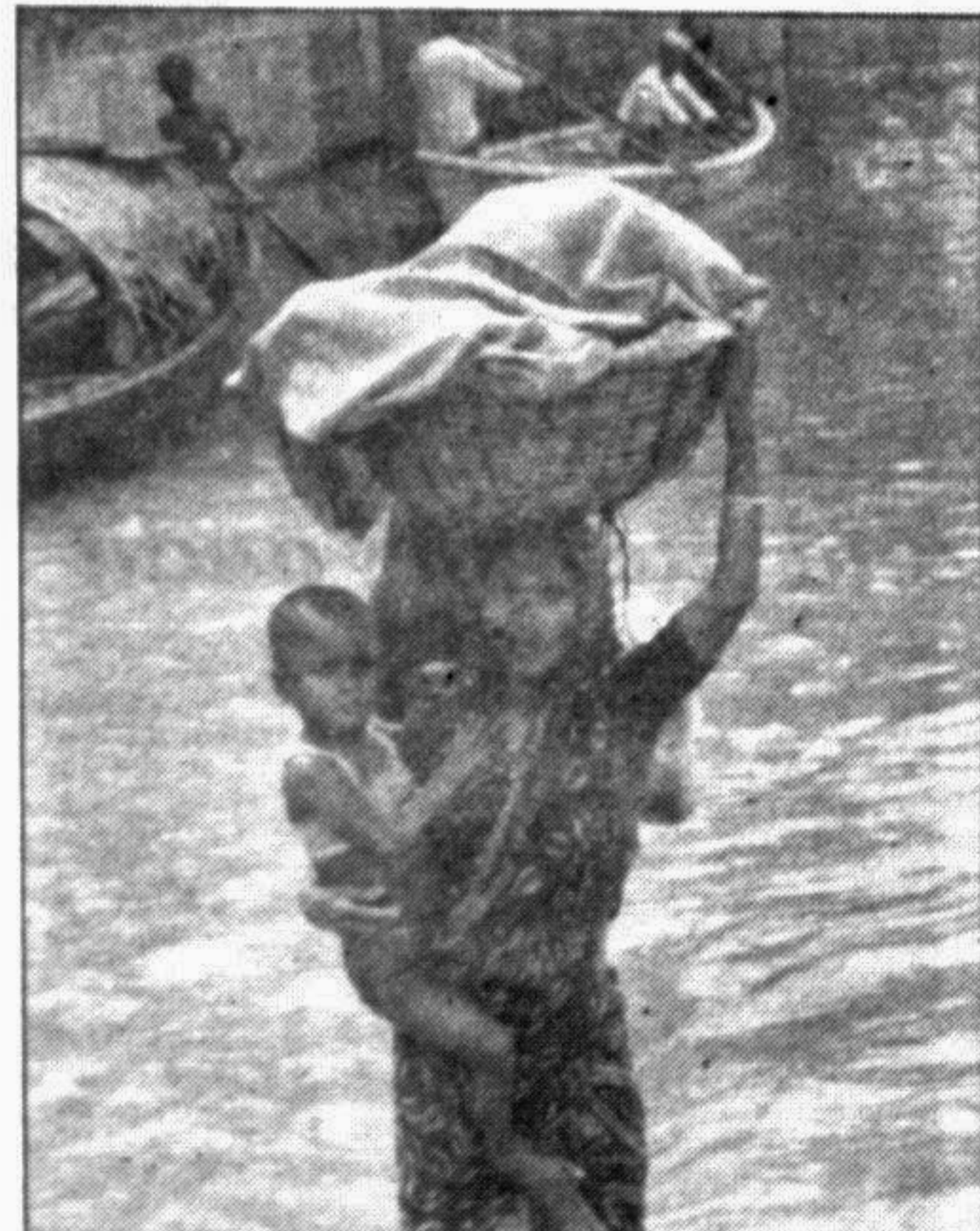
Experience has shown that multipurpose reservoir in combination with embankments in lower reaches provide more effective flood mitigation than only embankments and river training works. Non structural measures in individual countries may be effective if the entire river is within the territory of one country. But if the river is shared by more than one country, then such non structural measures are not very effective. The best approach would be to combine both structural and non-structural measures like construction of storage reservoirs, Catchment Management, River Training, Flood forecasting, Flood Plan Zoning, Flood Preparedness and Disaster Mitigation Measures.

To achieve these objectives, basin-wide cooperation of riparian states are considered imperative.

We have wasted 40 years in discussing flood and how to mitigate the flood problem with concrete measures. We all admit that flood is a life and death problem and solution of the problem will alleviate poverty and attain prosperity of the countries.

Bangladesh alone can not solve the problem. If regional cooperation is not forth coming, then Bangladesh should prepare her own plan for mitigation of flood problem and give people the security they need for food, fibre and living. Donors may not like this approach — does it matter? Let the politics of flood be over once for all.

The author is former Chairman, Bangladesh Water Development Board



—Star file photo

FLOOD DAMAGES IN 1995 SO FAR REPORTED ARE:

District affected	40 Nos
Thana affected	246 Nos
Family affected	3.0 million
People affected	1.60 million
Crop damaged	2.34 million acres
Household damaged fully	0.35 million
partially	1.07 million
Death	137 Nos.
Livestock	14 thousand
Educational Inst. damaged fully	150 Nos.
partially	5700 Nos.
Road damaged fully	3900 km
partially	19,500 km
Embankment damaged	2400 km
Bridges and Culverts	2500 Nos.

Fourth World Conference on Women Human Rights

THE 1993 World Conference on Human Rights (June 1993) reaffirmed that human rights of women and the girl child are inalienable, integral, and indivisible parts of universal human rights.

Global trends
It may not be the content of the law which is the major obstacle to women's advancement for equality, but rather the commitment with which Governments adhere to the provisions of the laws, and the attitudes of the judiciary, law enforcement officials, and society at large.

Law stacked against women
Until a 1989 legal reform, a husband in Ecuador had the right to force his wife to live with him no matter how abusive he may have been.
Laws in Chile and Guatemala specifically exonerate man who agrees to marry the girl he has raped; his marriage to the victim is perceived as restoring her and her family's honour.

Legal literacy
Reports from Asia and Africa indicate that women are still often fearful, reluctant, not willing, or not comfortable in pursuing judicious settlements through litigation — especially on family disagreements.

Dualistic legal systems and ineffective laws
In many countries society remains influenced and regulated by traditional customary and religious practices and regulations, often in direct conflict with the principles of international human rights standards and national laws.

Legal training is providing new opportunities for women to enter high-level governmental and political positions. The percentage of women in Law and Justice positions in government in 1994 ranged wildly from lows of 0% in East, Southeast and Central Asia and 0.9% in Eastern Europe, to highs of 22.2% in the Caribbean, 16.7% in northern Africa, and 14.6% in Central America.

Women have been able to make important inroads in law at the third level in 1990, the number of women enrolled per 100 men were: Caribbean (119), developed regions (103), Latin America (80), East and South-East Asia (75), North Africa (55), West Asia (43), sub-Saharan Africa (39), and South Asia (25).
In a number of countries, the right of inheritance to property, by cultural tradition and custom, still belongs to male heirs only, even when by secular law the rights could be shared equally between women and men.
Despite international legislation, including the 1949 Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and the Exploitation