

WAKING UP TO REALITY

The Ways Children are Exploited in Our Society

by Salma Sobhan

SOME years ago — in 1987 — I was invited to a meeting in Lahore on child labour organised by the Pakistan Human Rights Commission with Defence of the Child International and ILO. In the paper I prepared for that conference excerpted below, two main points were discussed. Firstly the obvious relationship between poverty and child labour. The other point I had raised was our insensitivity to the issue. The proposition I put forward was that this insensitivity was perhaps grounded in a general view of children — even the pampered middle class child — as extensions of the parents ego.

In the eight years that have passed, Senator Harkins' proposed bill to ban those imports that relied upon child labour for their manufacture (mostly garments) has led to much debate on the first issue. While the contribution of structural adjustment to the increase in poverty leading in turn to an increase in child labour is less focussed upon, the dangers to the children working in garment factories being suddenly displaced has been well documented and discussed. A policy to phase out working children from garment factories without throwing them out in the street has been formulated and is to be implemented. But the second issue that I had raised still needs to be brought into the arena of public debate.

Mrinal Sen in his poignant film on the death of a little boy servant contrasted the indulgence of his employers to their own child with their indifference to his similar needs. I think the point is more complex. At ASK (Ain O Shalish Kendra) we have handled cases of young middle class women being brutalised by their so-called loving families for refusing to agree to the "good match" being proposed to them. Young men are similarly pointed in the direction of careers their parents feel are suitable despite their own inclinations. Boys and girls are both equally under pressure to perform well in examina-

tions. Many years ago waiting to collect my youngest child from nursery school I overheard one mother say to another "I make quite sure that my child does two hours of work every day after school". Her child could not have been more than five years old!

Though Bangladesh was one of the very first signatories to the Convention on Child Rights we have a long way to go before we can internalise its concepts. It is of course doubtful that any society has done so — the so-called liberal societies more often than not use the rights of the child to deprive them of protection — but in Bangladesh we need to analyse our own attitudes not just in relation to the working child but all children.

Child Labour/Exploitation of Child Labour

The distinction has already been made in earlier fora between the fact of children working, which though exploitative, is different from the exploitation of working

While in some families a 10-12 year old child may be employed in addition to other help, and the main job may be only to run errands and be with the children of the family when they are playing and so on, in many other families which themselves are poor, a child will do substantially an adult's work.

children. The following forms of exploitation of working children can be considered under one rubric:

- absence or inadequacy of remuneration in money or kind
- long hours and few or no holidays
- unhealthy working conditions
- physically dangerous work
- lack of access to education and health services
- lack of legal protection

But certain types of exploitation fall into a totally different category. Where children are inducted into

activities that are not only exploitative, and illegal but are quite simply criminal, conditions of work in the list above become irrelevant except insofar as poor conditions of work merely compound the offence. Prostitution is obviously in this category. Also in a different category are those types of work which, while not in themselves wrongful, are unsuited to children. In these, employers, in order to maximise profits, tap the market of under-age workers, paying them substantially less than would be paid an adult (even women who are also underpaid in comparison to the men), and gain a cheap, bidable, easily replaceable labour force. Strategies and policies to deal with these types of exploitation have only marginal relation to the elimination of poverty, which is a contributory factor, certainly, but more in increasing the vulnerability of poor children who are more likely to be abducted or kidnapped, or sold into prostitution by desperate parents.

Other aspects of child

labour are not a result of the breakdown of family ties, but a part of family strategies for survival. It is here that an onslaught on poverty itself, with a parallel demand for "service" for the young workers would be the most effective and the only meaningful way of dealing with the problem. Child prostitution and child labour in industry however is a great money-earner for the boss. Such entrepreneurs need to be penalised where it hurts most: in their pockets, and in the curtailment of their freedom, if this form of exploitation is to be eliminated.

The realities of life in Bangladesh are pretty stark. Various development studies have documented the pernicious effects of short-time development strategies in the third world. In Bangladesh, as in other developing countries, most children (with their mothers) have always worked. But in a predominantly agricultural economy, where about 80% of the population lived in countryside, children in the rural areas who worked usually did so on family land where their fathers were small farmers or share-croppers, or where they came from artisan families, at family looms and potters wheels and so on. It was a hard life but the least it was in the context of a settled home environment, and, if the future was limited, it was at least assured.

Today, however, with a still rapidly growing population, and increasing landlessness, the situation is changing for the worse. It is

which is the life-blood of scores of small businesses and form the domestic support of low income households.

Urban Work

This work ranges from, again work done as part of a combined family survival strategy, to work done more or less to ensure one's own survival. Children are to be found in the recent growth industries of shrimp production and garment manufacture, as well as in the older established industries embracing leather work, bidi making, cane work and the newly revived cottage industries. Children working in the first two industries, though manifestly under-age (girls mostly), are schooled to say that they are 18 years old if questioned. Since even middle class families are casual about birth certificates — in educated families it is the age on the matriculation certificate that is accepted in lieu of a birth certificate

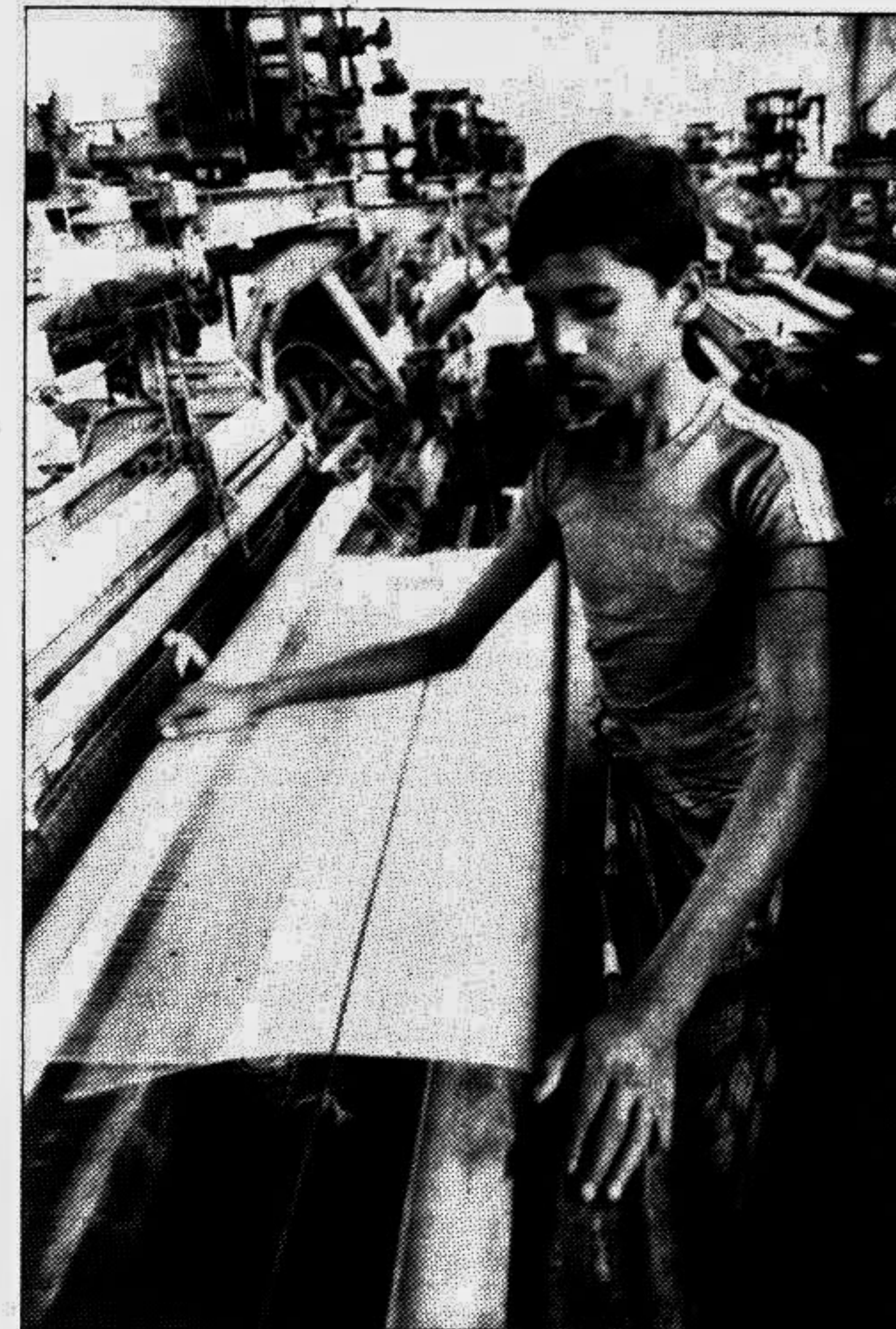


Photo credit — Shezaad Noorani

— UNICEF

(though that age is likely to be below the candidates' real age). In contrast, working children whose survival depends on their being able to pass for older than they are. It is not so easy to verify a child's exact age.

The largest number of children, both boys and girls, are introduced into households as domestic servants. It is here that the good offices of a friend or relative, or vouching by a fellow villager known to the employer are vital. An unvouched for child will not find employment in a household. Such jobs are in great demand because it is

felt that all needs are taken care of — work, shelter, food and clothes. It is not an easy life. While in some families a 10-12 year old child may be employed in addition to other help, and the main job may be only to run errands and be with the children of the family when they are playing and so on, in many other families which themselves are poor, a child will do substantially an adult's work. Marketing (not the main marketing which will be done by the man but the "running out to the shops for

a loaf of bread" level of shopping) washing the clothes, cleaning the house, grinding spices.

In a large majority of such households these children are totally exploited. The money that they earn is collected on their behalf by the adult who placed them — the children get their "keep". Thrifty housewives find it easiest to economise at the cost of their child helpers. There are no laws to safeguard these children at all, except the criminal law, and though traditionally Bengali

society is one in which children are much indulged in a family situation — disobedient and naughty children are forever being protected from their deserved chastisement by intervening grandparents and aunts and uncles — this indulgence does not extend to children who are servants.

Actual corporal punishment of child employees, especially in a domestic situation is rationalised, by both the perpetrators and observers, as part of the normal hazards of childhood and it is only openly cruel or vicious behaviour that is penalised — where indeed the perpetrator is caught and not able to buy his or her way out. Television reporting in recent times has been quite effective in jolting the consciences of the middle classes by interviewing some victims of violence. But though such reports will arouse passions and sentiments, the furor soon dies down leaving these children to endure their lives of slap punches or worse.

But all children are not relatively as "lucky". There are those who are "sold" into virtual slavery or kidnapped to be brutalised, perhaps even maimed, to prepare them for a life of petty crime and beggary reminiscent of life in 19th century Dickensian London. The induction of young girls into prostitution is of course a dimension of this evil. Many children join the ranks of the self-employed street-smart urchins born and bred in the fast growing urban slums, who literally scavenge a living from the detritus of urban slums, picking through dustbins for re-usable or recyclable waste materials: plastic, broken glass, paper, rusty iron — children in one particular slum have become expert at melting down the polythene bags in which milk is sold, to form sheets of polythene which are sold by the yard and used in the construction of the slum houses in which they live. It is a sad fact that in the Third World only the lives of its children have no value. to be continued.....

LIVING in the metropolises all our lives, we were astonished and pleasantly surprised to see the poor uneducated women of the remote little town of Thakurgaon involved in activities that might be unheard of in the cities. In a male-dominated society, well-known for its repression of women it was refreshing to see the village women fighting to gain recognition and respect and succeeding. Of course, with the support and backing of RDRS (with their policy of sustainable development for all) it is not only the women, but also the men who, in the rural areas of northern Bangladesh, struggle against the odds, striving for a better tomorrow.

Speaking to the Project Administrator, Ms Rafiq Akhter, we learnt that RDRS has five main components with which they aim to help the landless and almost landless rural poor of the area.



These are health, agriculture, education, women's development and employment. Also with these are environment and credit. These form the comprehensive project of RDRS which concentrate on organising and educating the rural poor through different group activities. After the male and female groups are formed, they are given social awareness training and literacy trainings on different subjects before RDRS supplies the loans for the various group projects.

Moving Ahead Slowly but Surely

One of the most dynamic project of women's development is the women's carpentry project 'Ummesh' in Thakurgaon Thana. It is truly

amazing to see the 12 women working away at what was traditionally a man's job. This project was started as a pilot project in March 1994. Preference was given to divorcees, widows, or impoverished and helpless women. They were given a year's training and divided into two groups of six each. A loan of Tk 15,000 was given to each group to help start the business. Speaking to the women while they worked away, we learnt that they are now a little sure of themselves, after all it is a big challenge to be working a man's trade. But business is picking up slowly and they already have lots of orders for furniture like chairs, tables, beds, dressing tables etc.

They pay an instalment of Tk 939 each month and the loan expires on the 28th of November 1996. Though at first these women faced opposition from their families and society, now they have their full support. Asking

them what they wished for the future, Mossamat Ayesha Akhter, the chairperson of group one and the spokeswoman replied that they wanted more training to be able to better their skills. RDRS is giving them another 3 months to establish themselves (since this is a pilot project) and they may be some more carpentry projects will be started.

Visiting the silk reeling factory was an intriguing experience. We learnt from Rehana (who was in charge) that work was closed down because the cocoons were not yet fully developed. It would resume in a couple of days. The first silk trees were planted at the group members' houses, there were given by RDRS. Previously the

government, used to purchase the cocoons, but now it has stopped. So RDRS has set up its own silk reeling centre. There are about 14 workers there at a time and 8 machines and they get a month's training with the machines before the work starts. The work is divided accordingly amongst them. 250-300 kgs of silk thread are cut per season and they also sell the waste cocoons. The silk thread is sold to weavers in Rajshahi. But, Rehana says that in the future, trade would be much better if RDRS could establish its own sales centre nearby.

Another interesting idea of women's development is value goes up and the marriage proposals come flooding in!

Another training was going on at the same time, this was on poultry rearing. This is a part of the agriculture unit. Md Shafiquzzaman the subject matter specialist on poultry and livestock was kind enough to speak to a group of village women about poultry vaccination and rearing. This is meant to be a sustainable project and RDRS supplies the training and maintains liaison with the government officers. When the training is finished, the women are given credit so that they can buy the day old chicks, when the chickens have been reared, they sell the eggs and meat and repay the loan. There is a refresher course and workshop every three months. But the supply of day-old chicks from the government is nonexistent now and this is the main problem. Maybe in the future, if RDRS could manage to have its own hatchery and incubator, a large amount of profit could be reaped in.

The RDRS staff training centre in Thakurgaon is a large fully equipped training centre. It is one of the many training centres situated in the northern regions, and it regularly conducts a wide range of training for project staff, project beneficiaries and partners and even staff of other organization. The training is usually given as per requirement and it is mostly need-based. The courses offered for training are development concepts, training and management methods, agriculture, livestock, forestry, fish-farming and bee-keeping, off-farm income generation, and health education. These courses cover all aspects of development work, and the duration varies from 2 to 30 days.

Speaking to the Thana Manager of Thakurgaon West Thana Mr Nur Nabi, we learnt that of the 15 fish ponds in that thana 80% are owned by female groups. These ponds were excavated with the help of WFP and ODA, and are a good source of income to the groups. Then there are the Children's Education Centre (CEC) and Shishu Nilay for non-formal primary education which are run by the RDRS staff. A small honorarium is given to the teachers, whose work is mainly voluntary. After some years, the government takes

over these schools. Besides this, the adult group members are given an 8 months adult literacy course and a 2 month social literacy course.

Women's Group Activities: Working For a Better Tomorrow

For the women of the Secretarypara female group in Ruhya union, the formation of the group by RDRS was a blessing in disguise. Now, instead of fighting poverty alone they can fight as a group and help each other. This group's main project is fish culture, and the help of a 10,500 taka loan by ODA they excavated a fish pond last December 3 members of the group got a 3-day training on fish culture from RDRS and the whole group got an awareness training before they began their respective projects. Besides the fish pond, they all have their own different projects which they started with the help of the taka 30,000 loan from RDRS. They are slowly paying back the loan in instalments and also give a weekly sum of Taka 5 to the group fund, so the group savings have grown to taka 8,000/-. The group members all do different things with their portions of

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Reaching For the Stars

LANDLESS GROUP ACTIVITIES IN THAKURGAON

by Tanya Huq

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The members of Christianpara women's group have taken Tk 25,000 loan from RDRS for various individual projects like a tea-shop, grocery-shop, cycle, rickshaw van, livestock etc. They have also leased 20 decimals of land for farming. They save taka 2 every week and their group funds amount to Tk 16,000/-. In the future, they hope to acquire training in different skills like sewing and handicrafts, because that way they feel they can earn a better livelihood. These groups are co-ordinated for about 3 years and then phased out. This means that they form federations which take over and then organize their own meetings, issues loans etc. Then RDRS is not involved directly any more but the officers extend supervision when needed.

The Akcha union sewing centre is one of the many run by RDRS to train girls in skill which may ensure a stable fu-

ture for them. Even during this six month training period, they are able to take orders, and begin earning. They get take 10 per day for food and some of this, along with what they earn, they give to the fund. As soon as they have given enough money, and the six month training is over, they can take the sewing machines home, and set up their own business in the village. They get all the basic tailoring training from there and the trainer is hired by RDRS.

The Superwoman

The Chowdhury Para female group (re-name Mondol Para) started about 9 or 10 years ago. Their is a fully phased-out group and the federation started about 3 years ago. They did several group projects including buying 7 rickshaw vans and also tenant farming which gave them a good source of income. The federation chairman and group members Shaheda Begum is certainly a dynamic example of women's development in these parts. This cheerful lady was only too eager to talk to us about her various projects. The groups current loan, which should be repaid by 28th November is taka 40,000. They give take 3 monthly and from the group fund Shaheda Begum says that she has managed to give all her group members ploughs, tubewells and sanitary latrines. The women have all had experience in farming and they can do it as well as a man

(according to them) Shaheda herself has a homestead garden (she proudly showed us the fruits and vegetables) and also raises livestock and poultry. She is also a trained TBA from RDRS and a chicken vaccinator. This gives her a good extra source of income. They loan out money from the federation fund as the interest rate then is much higher. From the federation they even started a sewing centre in which girls learn to embroider beautiful shawls, handbags and clothes, so much so that their orders are already piling in!

Shaheda told us that being a group and federation member has given her and the other women a lot of confidence. Previously, they were too shy even to come out in front of strangers. But now they are confident enough to get up to speak into the microphones in the federation meetings. Shaheda's wish for the future is get 1/2 to 2 lakh loan from RDRS so that her group is able to set up a garments factory in full scale, and without any doubt, this 'superwoman' will be able to achieve this in good time, too!

For the poor women of these groups, life was a struggle, a day-to-day existence but now, with the help of RDRS, they can plan a future for themselves and their offspring, a future with hopes and dreams.

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bulletproof courtroom, in which an anonymous jury heard testimony from more than 100 witnesses and saw more than 700 items of evidence, according to the lead prosecutor, Assistant US Attorney Jeffrey Ragsdale.

"It was one of the largest undertakings of its kind ever conducted," he said in an interview.

The mammoth trial reflected a "committed approach to prosecuting a gang," said Ragsdale, "once it became clear that this was a drug organization that was literally controlling the neighborhood."

Police, Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) agents, and several assistant US attorneys "were relentless," Ragsdale said. "They worked day and night, giving up their personal lives to convict these drug people."

The scope of the drug network is seen clearly in the size

of the drug cache that passed through the organization's hands from 1987 to 1992 — over 20 kilograms of crack cocaine distributed throughout Washington with a street value of perhaps \$40 million.

Twenty persons were arrested in connection with the drug ring. Their cases are in various stages of prosecution and sentencing, said Ragsdale.

He said that federal authorities are making a herculean effort to combat such drug rings. In this instance, as in many others, the states do not prosecute the suspects, but leave the task of fighting powerful drug organizations to the federal government.

Federal prosecution is easy to initiate because drugs and drug-related activities often cross state lines, Ragsdale said. In this case, the drug ring carried on business in Maryland, Virginia, New York, and Tennessee. Trial wit-

nesses said that Hoyle had established power by organizing robberies of other drug groups in these regions, and by kidnapping and killing members of other groups and potential witnesses.

Hoyle eventually gained control of a large area of Washington, DC, and his group became known across town as the Newton Street Crew. In 1989, federal authorities decided to devote large amounts of resources to tracking down the killers of some of the eight persons whom the Newton Street Crew were eventually convicted of murdering. "Drug murders usually lead us back to the drugs themselves," Ragsdale said. It took four years to gather all the evidence and prepare the cases, but it paid off in the end, Ragsdale declared. And there will be more such prosecutions in the future, he predicted.