

Women on the Move

Slaves of Our Feudal Society

by Aasha Mehreen Amin

WHEN Bangladeshi expatriates come home for a visit the first thing they appreciate is having servants to do their laundry, clean their bathrooms or cook their meals. The luxury of not having to lift a finger for any of those mundane domestic chores that eat away most of the weekend is what is most looked forward to in home coming. For those of us who live here, such privileges are taken for granted — until of course the 'bua' (maid) gets sick or the cook threatens to leave. Unfortunately, however, even at these times, while people panic because of the 'servant crisis', there are very few who really appreciate how much this 'class' makes our lives better.

Domestic servants, in Bangladesh are the most neglected and most exploited members of the community. They belong to no unions and have no person to speak in their interest. While both men and women are victims of such widespread exploitation it is the women and children who suffer the most. Being usually illiterate and



Recognize the dignity of her labour

with no family support they are easy prey to so-called educated middle class employers who treat them with utter negligence and humiliation.

This is the scary part. That while we make lofty speeches about child's rights, women's rights and the need to help the poor, we pay very little attention to the gross violations of human rights in our own homes.

The very term 'servant' — in Bangla it is 'chakor' is demeaning enough. When the 'bibli' shaheb calls the 'bua' (maid) she will address her as 'tumi' or even 'tui' instead of 'apni' (a more formal address) even if the bua is much older. Verbal abuse such as 'haramjaadi' (bastard), 'kuthar bachcha' (dog) and other insulting terms are hurled at the slightest provocation. These same bibli shahebs can be seen dressed in the latest fashion making polite conversation at parties without a hint of their crude behaviour at home.

Physical abuse is also common. Sometimes it is the employer, his wife or his children who think they have the right to hit the maid or the little girl or boy who works for them. Sometimes the beatings are so severe that the victim either is permanently disfigured or in some cases end up in the morgue.

Many times maids, especially young girls are sexually abused. Preeti a thirteen year old (not her real name) was raped by her employer's son one afternoon when no one else was at home. With the

help of another maid she managed to escape and file a case with the thana. Ironically, instead of chastising the son, Preeti's employer filed a case against her for stealing. It has been established that Preeti's rapist is very well educated and comes from a well to do family with a high social standing.

This is what is so unforgivable. That those who commit such heinous crimes are people who are educated, wealthy and are the so-called enlightened elite. How they live with themselves with the knowledge that they have committed the grossest of crimes on helpless people, is a disturbing question.

The answer lies somewhere between the internalized notion that poor people are somehow 'inferior' to us and also the fact that even if they are abused they are too weak to protest. Thus the offenders get away with, anything — sometimes even murder. Only this week a newspaper reports that police found the body of a young girl, possibly a maid, in a ditch in Dhaka.

Moreover, there are no ethical standards either by law or social dictates that can be imposed on employers of domestic servants. There are no minimum wage limits for domestic maids, for example and often (especially in the case of minors) they do not even get any wage at all; the employers think that giving food and a place to stay is enough remuneration. It is also true that women domestic servants are paid much

less than their male counterparts even though they may work much harder and longer. A security guard may get 2000 taka per month just for sitting around the whole day and opening and closing the gate a few times. A 'bua' on the other hand, who works the whole day doing all sorts of heavy chores (washing all the clothes, sweeping and wiping rooms, grinding the spices and many other errands) will be paid a fraction of the sum, something between 300 taka to 500 taka per month.

Working terms are also often quite unjust. Saira Banu, a 14-year-old girl works day and night for a wealthy family in Banani washing dishes, cleaning the rooms, taking care of the children etc. She does not get a regular wage or any day off. Even though she is very interested in going to school, her employer feels there is no need for a poor girl to get educated. In any case, says Saira, her long working hours leave no room for studying.

Even food is given sparingly to the domestic servant. The dinner table maybe filled with fish, meat and other delicacies but what does the 'bua' or 'pichchi' get — the left over dal or a bit of bhaji from last night. This negligence and stinginess indicates a kind of contempt for those who are under privileged and helpless — a legacy of our feudal mind set.

In a society that is so obsessed with practising the rituals of religion, it is

strange that it does not bother with its fundamental law — to treat all men (and



Working for longer hours, for less or for nothing: With all these investments in time and labour why are the returns so poor?

women equally). How can we possibly call ourselves 'civilized' or 'democratic' when we continue to treat people according to their financial status? Perhaps the first step would be to abolish the term 'servant' and all the demeaning connotations associated with it.

Girls' Rights

SOCIETIES world-wide continue to place girls in peril that is so routine it is virtually invisible. In countries of every economic and social profile, gender inequality is deeply ingrained in girls' lives from birth — or even earlier. A wide range of violent or discriminatory practices compromise girls' health and shrink their chances for productive development. This is not random violence; the risk factor is being female.

In some parts of the world, including China, India and the Republic of Korea, access to amniocentesis and ultrasound techniques to determine the sex of the foetus are sufficiently widespread to allow selective abortion and the consequent skewing of male-female sex ratios. This practice is rooted in the social and cultural stigma attached to having girl children and the considerable costs of marrying off a daughter. Some countries, including China, are beginning to enact legislation to limit this practice.

Infanticide is believed to account, in part, for distorted male-female sex ratios in many developing countries. One study in a remote region of Southern India found that 58 per cent of deaths among female infants were due to infanticide, usually within seven days of birth.

Female genital mutilation — the ritual cutting and removal of all or part of the clitoris and other external genitalia — affects an estimated two million girls and women each year, mainly in Africa. Most commonly, girls undergo this ritual between the ages of four and eight.

Nurture discrimination is the greatest cause of sickness and death among females between birth and age 5. According to the World Health Organization, girls in many developing countries receive less nourishment than boys. They are breast-fed for shorter periods of time, receive fewer calories, and suffer from malnutrition (leading to death or to mental or physical disability) at higher rates than boys. In rural Bangladesh, malnutrition has been found to be almost three times more common among girls than boys.

Girls also have less access to health care. Studies show boys outnumbering girls

at diarrhoeal treatment centers, although both sexes suffer from diarrhoea with equal frequency. For all of these reasons, the mortality rate among girls is one to four times higher than among boys in 43 of the 45 countries for which data are available.

Early marriage (typically arranged) compromises the health and autonomy of millions of young girls. In many parts of the developing world, significant numbers of brides are younger than 15. (Many countries have formally adopted a legal minimum age for marriage above 15, but only in cases where parents withhold consent.) The minimum marriageable age for women in many countries — including Chile, Ecuador, Panama, Paraguay, Sri Lanka, and Venezuela — is 12. In many other countries, legislation has set the minimum age at 16 or above, but traditional practices often persist.

Early marriage leads to early maternity, further undermining girls' health. The World Health Organization recently reported that in part of Asia, maternal mortality is five times higher among girls aged 10 to 14 than among women aged 20 to 24. Because a young woman's pelvis may be too narrow for childbirth, obstructed labour is among the serious risks of early pregnancy; this is further complicated for women who have undergone female genital mutilation, which doubles the risk of maternal death. Early maternity also deprives girls of education, foreclosing their hopes for future employment.

Girls are frequent targets of sexual abuse, in part because they lack the status and the education to advocate for themselves, especially in negotiating abstinence and protected sex. There have been few population-based studies on the sexual abuse of children and adolescents; however, those that exist suggest that it is widespread. There is also substantial indirect evidence of the sexual abuse of children, including alarming numbers of very young girls being treated for sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). For example, a 1988 study conducted in Zaria, Nigeria, found that 16 per cent of female patients treated for STDs were under age 5. — UNIFEM

Who Cares About the Red Light Girl?

by Towheed Feroze

IT is a chilly wintry night. The stars are shining in the frigid cold cloudless sky, the roads are empty and silence dominates. It is after twelve o'clock. Most Dhakaites are under the comfort of their quilts, enjoying the warm feeling. But there are some who are not as fortunate, like the girl standing by the gate of the Ramna Park, shivering. The bitter cold seems to penetrate her soul.

She has no respect, no rights, no affection and no permanent home. Our civilised society mocks at her face. She is dejected and rejected. When girls her age are spending their days in fantasising and dreaming, she is engaged in earning her livelihood in the most barbaric way: when girls her age are sleeping under the loving arms of their parents, she is standing in the dark waiting to be violated. There is no room for fun, games, laughter in her life, only pain and humiliation.

She is a child prostitute, one of the thousands, roaming around the streets of Dhaka. They are all around us — we see them as they are

but what have we done to rehabilitate them? What have we done to mitigate their sufferings? Child prostitution is a heinous crime against civilisation and against everything that is deemed 'CIVILISED'.

It is a scar on the conscience of the civilised world and contrary to the principles of sanity, yet in Bangladesh, we see an alarming rise in child prostitution. Young girls faced with severe circumstances are compelled to become prostitutes. At a very tender age, thousands of innocent girls are forced to walk into this world of darkness. Isn't it our moral duty to ensure a comfortable, secure life for these children?

Every year thousands of young girls come to the capital city to earn their — living. Due to the twist of fate, many



Save her from the clutches of depravity, let her be the child that she is.

end up as prostitutes. Poverty, family complications, failed marriages, physical torture necessitate many young girls to go into this vicious trade. There are about 5000 child prostitutes in Dhaka and the number is increasing at an alarming rate. About 2,000 are working in licenced brothels whereas the rest are floating prostitutes.

In this savage world their only instrument of survival is their body. If one goes to the Ramna Park at around eight at night, he is likely to have perturbing encounters with little girls dressed in vulgar clothes and make up. The scene in the authorised brothels is even more horrifying. In the brothel at English Road, for example, 60 per cent of the girls are underaged.

These girls deserve a normal life and a little effort

by us can ensure a better life for them. Let's not just show our sympathy, our sympathy will only add oil to the flames. Combined efforts should be undertaken to rehabilitate the underaged prostitutes. These girls should be given the opportunity to acquire education, they should be given the chance to live a free and beautiful life, they should be given the chance to appreciate the sweet and graceful aspects of life. The government wants popularity, well, if not for the sake of humanity, then why not build rehabilitation centres for the sake of political popularity?

Dhaka has become the city of wealthy people. The flashy cars testify to the immense wealth accumulated by the people. Why do not the privileged ones make contributions and use that to establish rehabilitation centres for these girls? Surely, the idea is quite logical.

Promoting Greater Reproductive Rights

by Muneera Parveen

WORKING with women has given me a new approach to life. We hardly realise how lucky some of us are. We all tend to take all that we have — support from home, from our husbands, children etc. — for granted. We don't realise how many women in this country are deprived of these basic things and the right to be themselves.

These are the words of Rubina Sultana, the Community Counsellor of Bangladesh Women's Health Coalition Project at Mirpur. The main objectives of this NGO is to provide health services to the women in Bangladesh and also to create 'health awareness' among them by educating them about it. At the project at Mirpur, there are basically two sectors, one on family planning and the other is clinic based — which provides for general health care. Sultana is the community counsellor of the

former. Her main job is to provide counselling for the women who come here, mostly for advice and facilities provided.

"Our basic objective is to provide Family Planning services to all women. Many are uncertain about what methods to follow or even about whether to follow them or not. The main problem that is seen among these women (who come from all classes and walks of life, from the lower to the upper middle class), is the lack of support they get from home, especially their husbands. The majority of women who come here for birth control advice, say that though their husbands encourage them to take preventive methods, they (the husbands) are extremely reluctant to participate or help," she adds.

Rubina cites the example of a middle aged woman who came a few months back. She had had a heart attack only a month before and as she al-

ways had problems with both contraceptive injections and pills. Rubina advised her to stay off these for sometime more as they could be fatal to her health. "She literally cried and pleaded to be given an injection for she said that her husband would absolutely not help in anyway. I would rather risk death than have another baby at this stage again," was her plea," says Rubina.

"There are so many other cases like this," Rubina says, "each time the problem is the same, an unsupportive husband."

Rubina, the mother of one child — a boy — has been involved with this organisation for a long time. This is her 10th year with the organisation. She started out as a community supervisor but has moved up since.

"Working in an organisation as this, doesn't give one much scope for career enhancement," she confesses, "but the

job satisfaction is tremendous. It is really satisfying to find that women who at first visits were very reluctant (and doubtful) about the facilities available, are now so confident and satisfied about the results that they encourage others to come forward. The majority of our clients now have come through women who are already taking advantages of our services."

When asked about the kind of problems she herself has had to face working in an organisation as this, her prompt response was the inconvenient training hours. The staff here (as with most other similar NGOs) have to be trained regularly on the various methods implemented. Most of these training programmes are 'in-residence' ones, which poses a great problem to women with young children. She herself has had to face this problem over the years when her own son was extremely young. Rubina was, however,



Rubina Sultana — helping women take better care of themselves.

lucky enough to have had a young unmarried sister, who took care of her child while she was away. Other women are not so lucky she points out. She thinks that no training sessions should require the women to stay back for the night. "Family support, especially from a husband is extremely important," she says, "for any women, whether she is working or not".

Rubina also says that though her job may not seem to be the most important job around, it gives her immense satisfaction when she thinks that she has contributed even a little towards creating 'better health' for the women in our country. She beams with enthusiasm as she explains the latest project on their agenda.

We hope to open in-work clinics within the garment industry premises to provide services to the women. The garments sector comprises of a majority of working women and though they are interested, their work hours and lack of cooperation from their employers, prevents them from attaining any health services," says Rubina. "It will take some time to implement this programme but as with all other development issues, a one-sided effort is not enough to reach our target. The workers themselves as well as owners (ie employers) must come forward with a helping hand."

One hopes that in our present society, a lot of other women, as dedicated as Rubina Sultana herself, keeps on working, all in their own ways, to provide for such a strong support for women. The more we have of this kind of dedicated women, the easier it will be to reach a target of 'complete health' for all — especially for our so-long neglected female population.

Capturing Reality Through the Lense

ONE of the few women filmmakers in Pakistan, Shireen Pasha works have won numerous national and international awards. Her film, *Life in the Walled City of Lahore*, which was shown at Sakhi's film festival last year, was nominated for the 'Prix Futura' at the 1991 Berlin Film Festival. From 1975 to 1991, Pasha was the programme producer at Pakistan Television Corporation. She currently heads the Film-makers, a Lahore-based group founded in 1991, which is dedicated to developing communications, especially around social and environmental issues. The organization's highly-acclaimed docu-drama about environmental awareness, *Before It's Too Late* was Pakistan's official entry to the Rio Environmental Summit in 1992.

About the film: *The Only Way* (Aik Hi Rasta) is a docu-drama focusing on safe motherhood, family well-being and population control in Pakistan. Its dramatic approach, real locations and use of age-old

proverbs are designed to speak directly to rural people, but also appeals to the widest possible audience in Pakistan. Its goal is to make couples think about, discuss and decide upon the best course of action for the welfare of their children, their families, and each other. *The Only Way* received support from the Pakistan Ministry of Population Welfare, the Johns Hopkins University Population Communications Services and United States Agency for International Development.

Dedicated to the mothers of Pakistan, the narrative begins with Noor Muhammed's journey back to his village to attend his daughter's wedding. Twenty-five years ago he migrated to a city in search of work. Now in his sixties, Noor reflects on the paths he has taken and the choices he has made. To the sound and rhythm of the train in which he travels, Noor remembers his lost lands, his young bride, his move to the city, and his attempt to make the best life



Shireen Pasha, for his family. He and his wife Sakina, after having too many children too soon, confront the consequences of their choices. (1992; 53 min; Urdu).

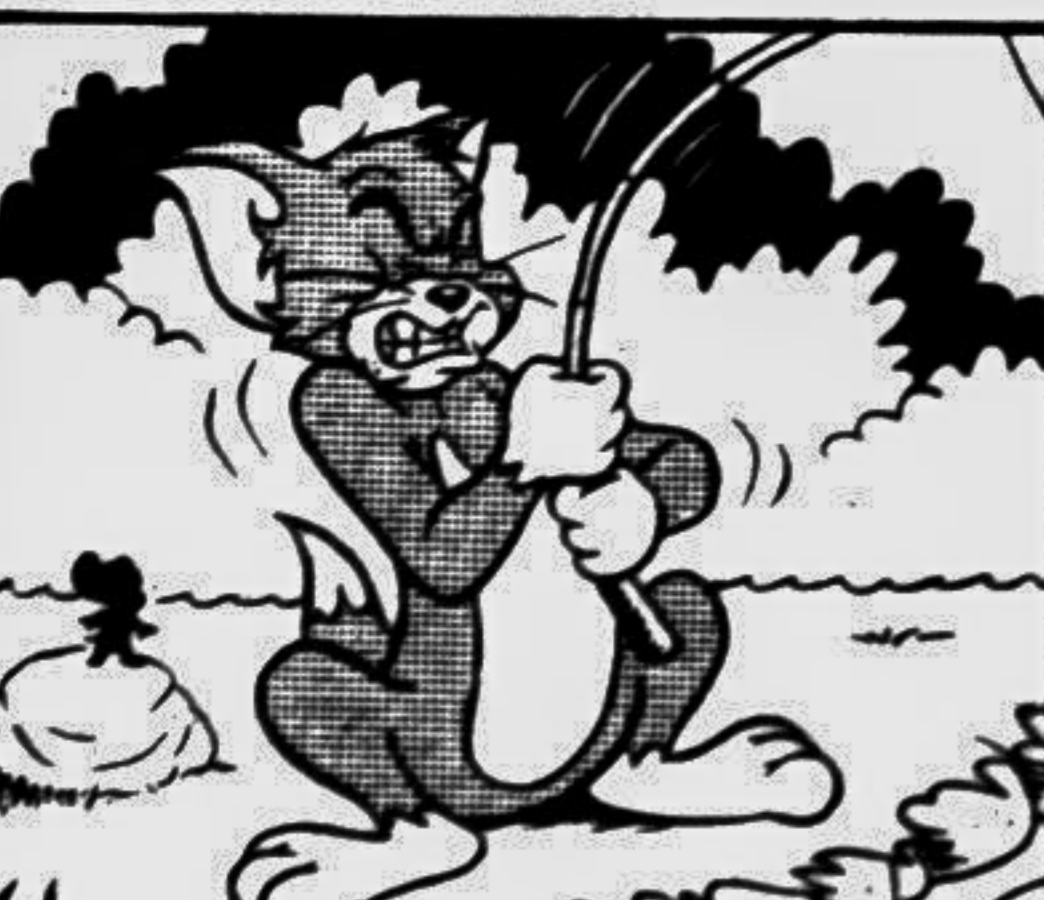
About the Director: Shireen Pasha is a renowned documentary filmmaker and artist from Lahore, Pakistan. Educated in Pakistan, the United States and Germany, Pasha has had a prolific career not only in film, but also as an artist, scholar and educator. She has exhibited in the US as well as in Pakistan, where her work is displayed in the permanent collection of the National Gallery in Islamabad. She has also designed and taught courses in Pakistan on Art History and video production.



A scene from *The Only Way* — courtesy Sakhi for South Asian Women



JAMES BOND BY IAN FLEMING DRAWING BY MORAK



TOM and JERRY



DID YOU REALLY CATCH THIS BIG FISH, TUFFY? YEP! AND I DIDN'T EVEN HAVE A ROD AND REEL!