

Women on the Move

Across the Borders of Despair

Trafficking in Women and Children in Bangladesh

by Saira Rahman

An account of the cases relating to people recovered from 1992-1994.

There were 102 cases filed in the last 3 years and 223 children, 205 women and 154 men were recovered. The police do not know how many women children and men are being trafficked, but they have informed that the number of such crimes have not been tried for lack of specific evidence and therefore, they cannot take effective steps in this regard. It has also been gathered that in the last 3 years more than 2 thousand incidents have occurred and in most of the cases the victims were women. In most of the cases which have been filed against the accused, they have been set free because of lack of proper evidence.

Some children manage to escape-only to get lost in the big cities, end up as domestic servants or fall again into the clutches of agents and be doomed to continue this vicious cycle.

It is also very common to find children who were once victims of such kidnapping languishing in jail. On carrying out raids on trafficking dens, the children found by the



Save the victims, punish the traffickers

police are put in jails on the doctrine of safe custody. Some, however, remain in custody for long periods as there is no one to claim them. This is also due to negligence of the police who fail to properly inform or advertise the fact that an identified child is in their custody.

The increasing number of children in jails is ample proof of how this vile trade is flourishing. The large number of such children in custody is just a fraction of the large hordes trafficked outside Bangladesh.

Children are also, horrifyingly, sold for parts of their anatomy, specially their kidneys and are later discarded, if alive, to lead a life of begging on the streets. Sometimes they are kidnapped, cruelly mutilated and converted into beggars to earn a living for their controllers. It has even been reported that the skeletons of young children are in great demand — and that these even find their way into US hospitals.

International or trans-border trafficking of children is a profitable business and without a transborder network, this vile business could not be carried out.

Most reports on such trafficking conclusively point out not just one route but several destinations ranging from India to Pakistan to countries in the Middle East. Some middle Eastern countries had, until recently, a great demand for children from the sub continent to use as jockeys for camel racing.

The Trafficking of Women:

Trafficking in women is more an international trade in Bangladesh — and most of it is funnelled into the age-old business of prostitution, mostly in India and Pakistan.

As mentioned previously, increased poverty, lack of skills, illiteracy and over-population are reasons why women fall easy prey to agents — who approach them with stories of lucrative jobs as maids outside the country or who pose as prospective bride grooms.

The recent expansion of tourism in many countries is also a contributing factor towards a flourishing sex trade and the increasing demand for women in that area.

A majority of Bangladeshi women so trafficked, end up in India, Pakistan and the Middle East. There are already thousands of Bangladeshi women languishing in jails in India, Pakistan, Malaysia, and Thailand due to illegal immigration papers, false passports and, in Pakistan also jailed under the Hudood Ordinance.

Migration of Female Labour:

Economic hardships for poor, indebted countries results in governments acting as competitive agents for export of female migrant workers. Governments remain driven

need to be employed. This is due to the following reasons — 1) The agents hold the monopoly over jobs. 2) The government affords no protection to these women. 3) She must send a bulk of her money to dependents at home and has little or no savings despite her incessant labour. 4) Governments in receiving countries do little to protect her, despite the fact she is contributing to the national economy.

Government Stand:

The Government is aware of the problem and has taken up measures to stop such practice, one of them being the strengthening of border check posts. However, government resources are too stretched to be effective in stopping the practice of trafficking and in the absence of systematic statistical information, the magnitude and nature of the problem is not properly monitored or even understood.

Alarmed by the increase in trafficking in women and children and pressurized by protests from different conscious groups, in June 1994 the Government announced that it was considering the enactment of a new law — the Women and Children Repression (Special Provision) Bill 1994, incorporating into it a provision for awarding capital punishment to offenders. This Bill was passed in July 1995.

However, with corruption in the lower government echelons, the passing of such deterrent laws is not a solution to the problem. This is because those engaged in trafficking have special links with border security on both sides. While some law enforcers have shown great alacrity and honesty in dealing with human traffic, some of their fellow colleagues have failed miserably to preserve that same high standard of integrity. A uniform high standard would surely have stooped up the holes and prevented leakage of innocent women and children into India, Pakistan and other countries. Thus the weak point is not the lack of proper laws but the lack of proper implementation of the existing laws.

The Government has economic policies and plans to alleviate poverty, but sadly lacks the will to implement them. Poverty alleviation, education for all, social security and basic necessities form part of the state policy and such provisions are contained in the Constitution of the Peoples' Republic of Bangladesh. Unfortunately, the state is more interested in spending for the unproductive sectors, the armed forces, the bureaucracy, city beautification etc — then in improving the lot of nearly 80% of its citizens.

Apart from being bound by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, The Government of Bangladesh has ratified the 1926 Slavery Convention and the 1956 Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery.

Bangladesh has thus undertaken to suppress all forms of slavery — including that which arises from trafficking. The language of the Conventions bind state parties to prevent, suppress and eliminate slavery in all its forms. The 1956 Supplementary Convention requires state parties to criminalize "the act of enslaving another or inducing another to give himself [sic] or a dependent into slavery" (Article 6), as well as slave trading, which is defined by the Convention for the Suppression of Traffic in Persons and of the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others as 'conveying slaves from one country to another by whatever means' (Article 1).

The State has also ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women, which specifically mentions that parties must take all measures to suppress all forms of traffic in women and exploitation of prostitution. (Article 6)

Bangladesh also signed the Convention of the Rights of the Child in 1990. According to the Convention, Bangladesh has to submit a report on the policies, situation and measures taken in favour of children every two years. It has yet to submit such a report.

It must be mentioned here that Pakistan where a large number of Bangladeshi women are trafficked, has also ratified the Slavery Convention of 1926 and 1956. However, instead of protecting the innocent victims recovered, law enforcement personnel charge the women and girls under the Hudood Ordinance and imprison them — while the agents and controllers slip through the system.

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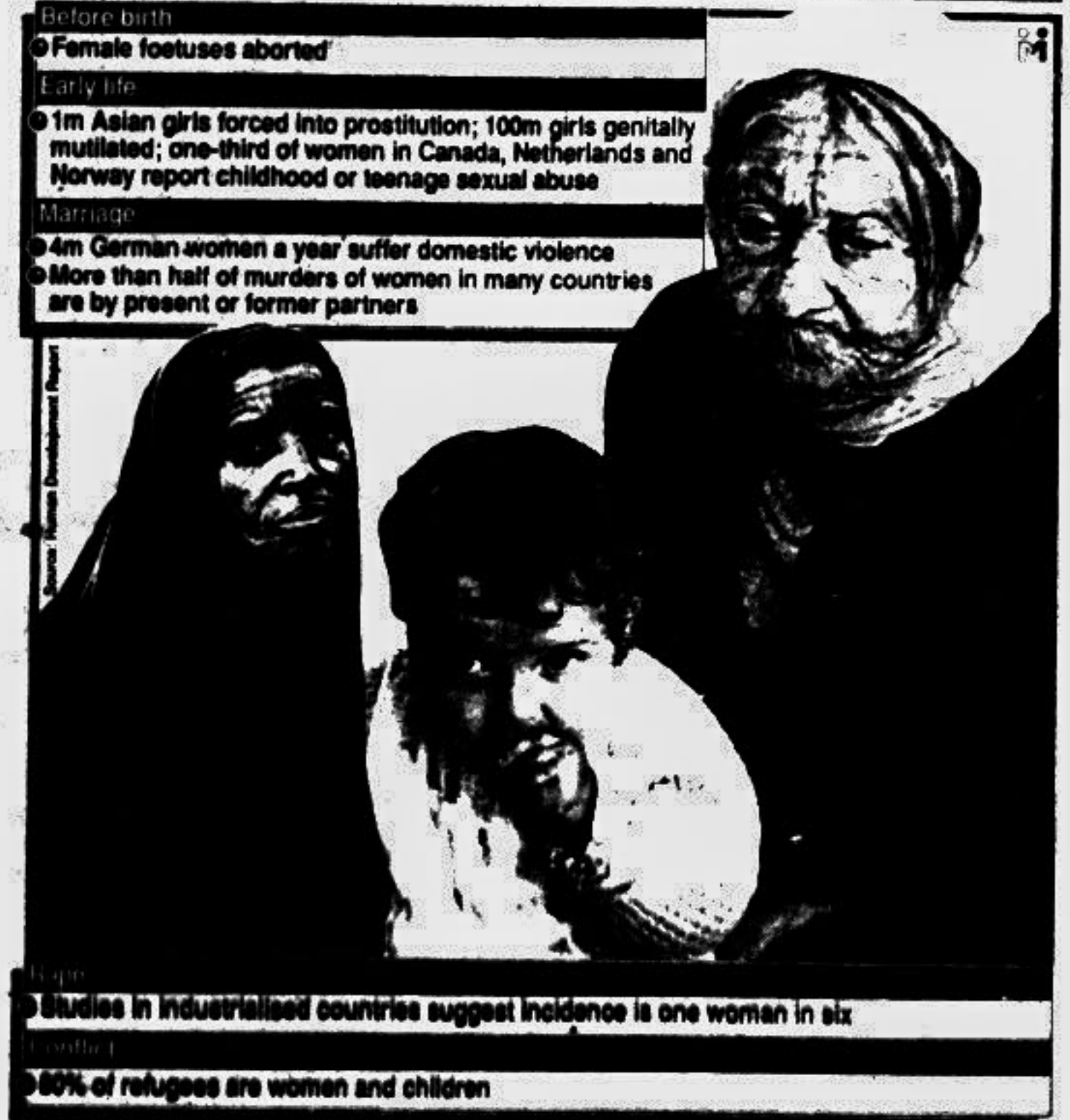
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Why 88-yr-old Hedwig is a National Heroine

by Petar Hadji-Ristic Marwitz, near Berlin

Thousands of east European women faced unemployment, exploitation and a loss of respect in 1995 in the continuing post-communist economic turmoil. In east Germany, however, reports Gemini News Service, many have taken their future into their own hands, creating tens of thousands of new jobs in the process.

Women in a violent world



Studies in industrialized countries suggest incidence is one woman in six

AT 88, Hedwig Bollhagen laughs at the very thought of being one of Germany's new strong women. She might be the oldest of all east Germany's new entrepreneurs, but she would never give herself such a comical title.

"Actually, I am not that assertive and do not always get my own way. And sometimes I shy away from conflict," she adds, as she sits among the ceramic tea-sets and vases in her sparsely-furnished office. Her factory was nationalised by East Germany's communist rulers in the 1970s and was offered back to her in the recent round of privatisation of state enterprises.

Hedwig Bollhagen appears the opposite of everything that symbolises success in today's Germany. She always wears a blue and white check smock to work and her silver-gray hair is tied at the back in an old-fashioned bun. The concept of "power dressing" (to impress) is completely alien to her.

She speaks slowly, appears to have time for everyone, even the schoolchildren who learn to paint in her studio at the back of the ceramic works.

She has never complained of sexual discrimination because she says she has never faced difficulties as a woman.

But despite competition from the modern, macho-female images which glare from glossy magazine advertisements, Hedwig Bollhagen has become something of national heroine — at least in the East.

She founded the ceramic factory in Marwitz as a young artist more than 50 years ago, handed it over to the communists when they demanded it rather than see it disappear, and seems determined to remain on the premises for the rest of her life.

This refusal to retire, when most east German women over 55 have lost their jobs and given up hope of ever working again, has captured the public imagination.

"If I hadn't dared to accept back the business now, the whole place would have been torn down and everyone thrown on the street. I didn't want to be responsible for that," Bollhagen explains.

Her decision saved 45 jobs, and today her hand-painted ceramic tea-sets and vases with the distinctive "HB" mark are on sale across Germany, a country reunified after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989.

Bollhagen is a phenomenon, but she is just one of an estimated 146,000 women entrepreneurs operating in the five new states that were formed from the old east Germany.

For many of the new businesswomen, their enterprise drive has been sharpened not just by the chance to fulfil a previously impossible dream, but also by the spectre of unemployment resulting from the communist collapse.

Ruth Kiesow, from Schewed, near the Polish border, ran an agricultural cooperative before the fall of the Wall. Today, in her mid-40s with three children, she is a successful publisher.

"I couldn't have been independent before — it was inconceivable," she admits, although there were a few private publishers in communist times.

But the transition from a manager and cattle-breeder

to fulfilling a childhood dream was not easy, she says. "I still have to fight against the reaction that people first had when I announced I would be a publisher: 'This old woman of 45 can't do this, she is just a farmer — and a female farmer at that.'"

In response, she now employs only women — and only if they are over 40.

"Here in Germany a woman of 40 can't get a job, so I will not employ any woman under 40. First, they are well-qualified, and second, it is very difficult to find work at that age."

South of Berlin, in Dessau, a city of 100,000 people, Angelika Storz is another example of the new breed of entrepreneurs. She played an active role in the opposition movement that swept away the communists, and admits this helped her career — although her qualifications also counted when the workers voted her head of the firm in 1991.

Her company, in which she was book-keeper, was one of the few private trading cooperatives selling building materials.

Rather than take a safe job in a bank after the fall of the Wall, she decided to stay and fight for the firm's survival, becoming like everyone there — part-owner of a business employing 120 workers.

The struggle for survival was difficult. "The changes that followed the fall of the Wall — a time when we were almost stripped of our very skin — are not yet over. We still have to fight for our existence." However, she adds: "For our firm, the restructuring process is almost over. We have the feeling today that we have won."

Dessau has the highest unemployment of all east German cities, and she says: "Almost every other person in Dessau is without work and two-thirds of them are women."

"For east German women, work is not just a question of earning a living but is linked to their new identity."

"They feel degraded," says Storz, and advises them not to give in to despair, but to involve themselves in social activities and politics.

Not all women have suffered economically from the collapse of the old regime. The winners are those under 35, who are less likely to be unemployed. A quarter of the new entrepreneurs in east Germany come from this segment of the population.

Carola Schneider, a 33-year-old Berliner and a teacher of locomotive builders in East German times, is a typical example.

"In 1993 I just said to myself, 'Make yourself independent' — and I jumped into the cold water. Before, one could never have dreamed of such a thing."

Today she runs her own marketing and management company, employing two other women.

"I never fear that I will not have enough food or a job. The ideas never stop coming. I have thousands."

Well-versed west German government schemes and billions of deutschmarks gave the new entrepreneurs a head start when going into private business. Now, six years after the fall of the Wall, hard-pressed women elsewhere in eastern Europe will be seeking to follow their example. — GEMINI NEWS

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TRAFFICKING and migration are significant problems common to Asian Societies. Bangladesh is no stranger to the problem. The victims, both women and children come from poverty stricken families, over burdened with many mouths to feed. The women lack skills and those who do any sort of work are paid even less than minimum wage. Some women and children are abducted from outside their home while working at household chores or are at play. Some children or young women are sold by their parents out of sheer necessity-regardless of whether they are aware of the dangers their child may face or not.

An agent usually approaches the parent or the victim with false promises of a better future — good jobs with good pay — and hypnotise them into believing that there are many different, lucrative jobs outside the country. These agents then charge a fat fee for their services-usually amounting to the total life savings of a poor family. If they cannot afford it, they somehow raise the money to finance a false dream.

There are also stories of unsuspecting young women being enticed into a false marriage, only to be sold by their 'husbands' once they reach a certain destination. The Bangladesh Observer of 9 December 1995 carried an article on the arrest of eight women traffickers who were charge-sheeted. They promised jobs and marriage to two poor girls, Mina and Nupur, and took them out of Dhaka. They were arrested by the police at the bus terminal at Jessore while they were trying to cross the border into India.

Another reason for the alarming increase in trafficking and migration is frustration and the need to escape from the traditional family system, oppression and constant poverty. Young people-men and women — from rural Bangladesh migrate to the cities to escape the shackles of poverty. Most men find some sort of job, while the women, completely at loss in an alien society, ignorant and, for the most part, illiterate, fall easy prey in the clutches of agents waiting to sell them in local brothels or traffic them abroad.

Border crossing takes place at night into Pakistan and India. The Agents have links and networks all over and strong links with law — enforcing agencies. Those who are engaged in trafficking women and children by air (to the Middle East or South-East Asia) supply the victims with false passports and fake documents. Trafficking also takes place by sea. Trafficking of Bangladeshi women and children into India has reached such enormous proportion, that the Indian government has apparently proposed to barb-wire the border as a preventive measure.

The reasons for trafficking of women and children are two fold: 1) Sex Tourism; 2) Labour Migration.

The Trafficking of Children:

Materialism and blatant, unabashed consumerism have been identified as some of the root causes of child exploitation.

According to Government statistics, in 1993, there were 19 cases of trafficking where police recovered a total of 2000 people-86 of them children. These young victims of greed are sold as "Commodities" both domestically and beyond national borders. These children are prone to long-term physical and psychological abuse due to the horrors and hardships they are forced to face and bear.

Children are sold by agents and brought to the big cities of Dhaka, Khulna and Chittagong to be sold to brothel owners. Sometimes the children may be sold to agents by uncles, aunts or neighbours. In the case of Abdul Kashem -V- The State (43 DLR 1991), one Abdul Kashem, on the pretext of taking a young girl called Rebeka (his neighbour's niece) to watch a movie, took her to a brothel meaning to sell her. Realising her plight, she raised a hue and cry and Abdul Kashem was arrested.

Independent studies were conducted regarding child prostitutes in 1993 and October 1994. Both studies conclude that: 1. Almost all the girls were within the age group of 13-18 years. 2. Almost all bore symptoms of malnutrition. 3. A majority did not have relatives in the cities where they were bought. 4. Most come from troubled backgrounds or have, at this tender age, been divorced/abandoned/sexually exploited in their own surroundings and have therefore been isolated and rejected, making them easy target for agents'. 5. Many suffer from venereal or sexually transmitted diseases and are unaware of contraceptives.



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Girls' Rights

Child labour is often veiled in industrial countries where, as elsewhere, it is subsumed into basic culture. For example, girls are being enlisted as almost full-time caretakers for younger siblings while their mothers work outside the home to support the family or attend classes in an attempt to improve their earning power. In Bangladesh, poverty and custom have created a class of child domestics, most of them girls, who are sent to work in urban households by their parents at age 6 or 7, often living in a corner of the kitchen, eating scraps. UNICEF estimates that 400,000 children, most of them girls, labour in domestic work in New Delhi alone.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women both affirm social and economic rights as well as civil and political rights as human rights; both assert that the future life of any nation depends on promoting and protecting its children. CEDAW recognizes that no society can thrive in the absence of gender equity, and acknowledges the need for temporary special measures. Because discrimination against female children is so pervasive and so destructive to the social order, strengthening girls' rights offers a critical opportunity to enhance not only individual lives, but also the lives of nations. Girls' rights are inseparable from women's rights. Raising the needs of girls high on the international human rights agenda represents an important step toward carrying out one of CEDAW's most powerful and urgent mandates: "To modify the social and cultural patterns of conduct of men and women, with a view to achieving the elimination of prejudices and customary and all other practices which are based on the idea of the inferiority or the superiority of either of the sexes or on stereotyped roles for men and women" — UNIFEM