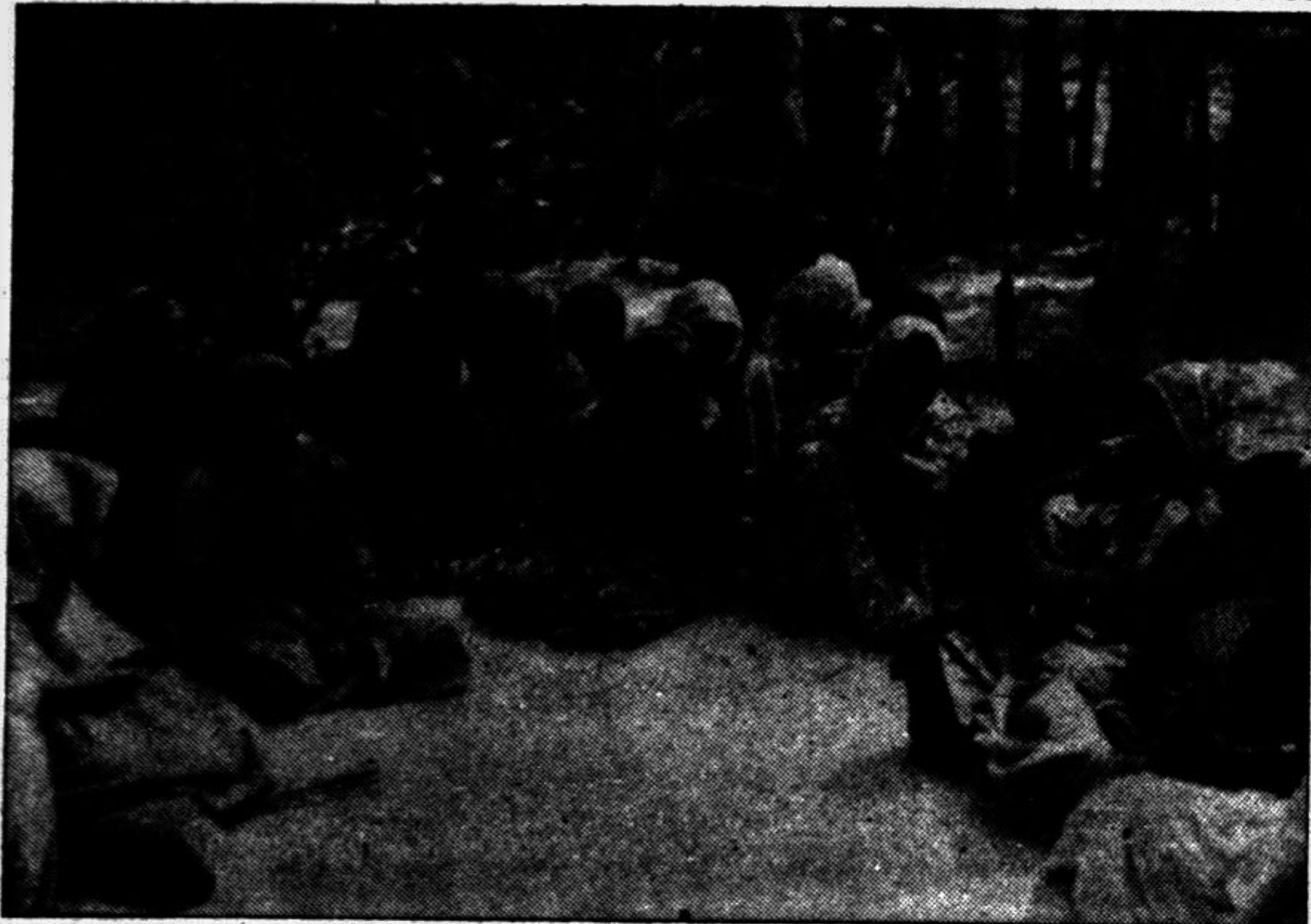


Women on the Move

Self-help Helps Find the True Self

Ekram Kabir back from Tala, Sathkhira



Chanting the songs of Chetona (inspiration): The members



From sanitation to society: The builder

Photo: Dipak

AFTER her marriage with Abul Quasem at Hasadanga in Manirampur, Jessore, Sakhina Begum came to know that her husband had three more wives. This was enough to shatter Sakhina's womanhood dreams. More so when Quasem started to live at Sakhina's mother's house, for she was fatherless, at Chakurda village in Dumuria thana of Khulna district. Abul Quasem, an occasional rickshaw-van puller by profession, used to get most of the money he squandered from his mother-in-law's savings, though there were not much to be squandered.

At one point, Quasem vanished in the middle of the night, with whatever money and jewellery Sakhina and her mother had. He was found a couple of years later when Uttaran, an NGO, after two years of running a case at the local court, in favour of Sakhina. What made Sakhina approach Uttaran was her husband's cavalier lifestyle, and moreover she became mother of a beautiful girl a year after their marriage for whose well-being she was going door to door. The court ordered that find Quasem be found and made to promise under the law to carry out his family responsibilities in the future. "By that time,

Quasem became quite a human being", said Dr Chittaranjan Das, who looks after Uttaran's Legal Aid Programme, "and to create this sort of gender-equal social atmosphere in our working areas, we had to sweat through many odds". Uttaran — initially a club set up in '76 by a group of university students was turned into an NGO in '86. It operates in the coastal belt of south-western region in Bangladesh where vulnerability towards women were claimed to be the most severe. The programmes accelerated by Uttaran are: group formation, savings and credit, legal aid, education disaster preparedness, health and sanitation, and environmental training.

"At the beginning, while helping the grassroots women know their legal rights, we came across strong opposition from the religious leaders — that includes the religious malpractitioners — and the local elites. But over time, we've succeeded to make them believe that what we're doing will ultimately benefit the entire society," said the legal expert of Uttaran.

The organisation had to do even more than that — it had to be convincing enough to the opposing people that there was no perfidious motive behind their work. In order to do

so, it had to make sure that the influential *Murubbis* (local elites) did not feel totally left out: Uttaran has associated them with its Legal Programme, where with their pull and influence, it tries to eradicate marital injustices and settle family disputes through local *shalish* even before going to the court.

"A few years back, this confidence in us was absent because we didn't know what our rights were and this ignorance made us the lame-ducks of male domination. All this time domestic violence has been totally ignored by the society at large," said Nurjahan Begum who is a member of Chetona — a Uttaran-backed women's group — at Panchrakhi village in Jatpur union, adding: "Presently, all sorts of practices that subjugated women in the past are drastically decreasing. Now the men of our area know that their attempts to injure women, both mentally and physically, won't be overlooked and go unprotected."

It was quite telling from the expressions on the faces of members of Chetona group at its weekly meeting that they didn't get together to simply brag about their achievements. Talking to the members of the group was a strong pointer that awareness-building has

taken a firm position; and this time, they really meant business.

Chetona group is one of Uttaran's 218 women groups operating in 16 unions of Jessore and the coastal districts of Khulna and Sathkhira. There are more than a hundred such groups, working with inspiration of Uttaran, for the well-being of the poor in general. Every one of these consists of 15 to 30 people and each group has a clearly spelt-out set of activities which they carry out with near-absolute accuracy.

"With the increasing number of literate mothers, which was close-to-zero a couple of years back, it now seems magical how we mothers perform better than our children's fathers in every battle of human life," said Shireen who is currently the president of the group she added that women of Jatpur are more conversant on health and sanitation-related issues that have taken away many innocent lives in the past. There has been a noticeable improvement in the field of health and sanitation coverage in recent years.

"Almost every household of our area has a user-friendly sanitary latrine and access to safe drinking water. And this, too, was possible because the

womenfolk here are keener to save young lives," said Jaharara Begum, an unmarried woman of 40 who had to be walked to the meeting place because of her blindness. "I can even prepare oral saline, though I can't see, and have required knowledge of family health and hygiene," Jaharara added with a confident urban-like accent.

Said another member Rabeya: "Incidences of water-related diseases have turned out to be much less than what it was before; we teach our kids not to spoil the environment in which they'll be living in the future, and there is hardly any filth in the open places these days."

The Chetona members expect their thana to come under hundred per cent sanitation coverage by end '96. With the assistance of Department of Public Health & Engineering (DPHE) and NGO Forum for Drinking Water and Sanitation, it has been possible to build this sanitation infrastructure. And assisted by NGO Forum, Uttaran has seven other village sanitation centres (VSCs) in its working areas. VSCs are the places from where the organisation extends all sorts of support related to sanitation and safe water.

What is more encouraging that the Chetona group-members' involvement in income

generating schemes, and for the moment, they are working as farmers with some other projects in the offing. Under their savings scheme, these women, at the beginning, generated a sum of Taka 29,801 with which Chetona bought 1.3 acres of fertile land.

"We the members physically work in our land and share the profit at the end of each crop-season," said the president, giving most of the credit of their agricultural know-how to their husbands and fathers.

Shireen further said: "What seems more intriguing these days that whatever opposition came from the religious leaders against our presence in the crop-field and possession of property has lost strength since the *jotdars* (large-scale land-owners) have increasingly become interested in leasing their land to us." This statement qualifies the decaying stubbornness of so-called conservative people under the veil of religion.

As Sayeeda, another member, commented: "Self-reliance breeds power; and when that power benefits all for a better future, it's widely accepted by everybody; and now we also know how this power can be abused and so we are careful not to do so."

The Girl Child

Eradication of discrimination against the girl child and the root causes of son preference and implementation of policies, plans and programmes for the survival, protection, development and advancement of the girl child are the need of time. During this year's observance of the International Women's Day, on 8 March, with the theme "Celebrating the Past, Planning for the Future," all-out measures should be taken to eliminate the gap between girls and boys.

GIRLS are at a higher risk of dying before age of 5 than boys in a number of countries, despite their biological advantage of being more resistant to infection and malnutrition.

Childhood Health

• More boys than girls are immunised and treated by hospitals.

In Colombia, only 75 deaths of boys aged 1-2 occur for every 100 deaths of girls.

In Haiti, among every 1,000 children aged 2-5, 61 girls and 48 boys die.

In India, there are only 957 females aged 4 years or under for every 1,000 males in the population.

Son Preference

The estimated loss in female lives represented by physical neglect of girl children of girl children is between 60, and 100 million worldwide.

While the standard "biological" sex ratio is estimated at 95 to 96 female births per 100 male, deviations have been found. In 1988-1989, 91 girls were born per 100 boys in India.

Son preference is more evident in higher order births. Data indicate that the ratio of female to male births decreases at higher birth orders, suggesting that couples who already have children are less likely to accept another daughter.

Harmful Traditional Practices

Female genital mutilation (FGM), a harmful traditional practice in some countries, can cause trauma, swelling, haemorrhage, obstruction of urine and menstrual flow, and risk of AIDS transmission. It can lead to lifelong physical and psychological scars or serious injury and death.

At least 2 million girls are believed to undergo FGM every year; approximately 6,000 per day. Girls most commonly experience FGM at 4-8 years of age.

Education

• Primary school enrolment for girls and boys from 1960 to 1989 more than tripled in Africa and doubled in Asia and Latin America.

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• Almost half of the children of primary school age in Africa are still out of school, the majority of them girls.

• In 1993, approximately 60 per cent of the 130 million children aged 6-11 who were not in school were girls.

• In 1990 southern Asian girls were found to spend on average only 1.26 years in school, a slight rise from 1.16 years in 1980.

A Girl's Working Day

• According to a government study in Nepal, the work burden of girls in both the 6-9 and 10-14 age groups is much heavier than that of boys in the same age-group in both rural and urban areas.

Positive Programmes for Girls

• As of April 1995, 173 countries had ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

• Genetic testing for sex selection has been banned officially in India under the 1994 Regulation and Prevention of Misuse Bill, and in China since January 1995.

• The seven-member South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SARAC) has created programmes to raise the age of marriage and provide girls with healthcare and other services, and declared 1991-2000 the Decade of the Girl Child.

• Through the Organisation of African Unity, in 1990 African nations adopted the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, with a special focus on girls.

• Throughout southern Asia, a UNICEF-initiated multimedia campaign projects an empowering view of a little girl named Meena. Through television programmes, video and comic books, the Meena Initiative targets both parents and children in an effort to change negative images of girls.

UNICEF Feature

Across the Borders of Despair-II

by Saira Rahman

LEGISLATION and implementation of standards are urgently needed, particularly in view of a future globalization of the labour market. In this context domestic work requires special notice since it involves women workers who, once outside Bangladesh, face discrimination based on gender and race and which could lead to exploitation of women's human rights.

The statutes which have been enforced to curb trafficking in women and children are: 1. The Penal Code, 1860; 2. The Cruelty to Women (Deterrent Punishment) Ordinance, 1983; 3. The Suppression of Immoral Traffic Act, 1933; 4. The Children Act 1974; 5. The Children (Pledging of Labour) Act 1933

I. THE PENAL CODE: When women or children are abducted by agents, they are kept confined in a room/rooms till they are taken across the border or flown to different countries. The Code lays down that whoever wrongfully confines a person will be punished with imprisonment for a term which may be one year,

two years or three years, depending on the number of days such a person is confined. [Sections 342-346 of the Code].

Punishment for kidnapping, abduction, slavery and forced labour is also provided for in the Code. A person who kidnaps another from Bangladesh is punished for a term which may extend to 7 years [Sec. 363]. Again, if a person kidnaps or abducts anyone under the age of 10 in order to subject the latter to grievous hurt, slavery or the lust of any persons' will be punished with death or rigorous imprisonment for upto 14 years [Sec. 364A]. The punishment for the procurement of a minor girl (under 18 years of age) and the punishment for 'habitual dealing in a slaves' both carry a maximum sentence of 10 years.

The Penal Code also has sections dealing with wrongfully concealing an abducted person, buying and selling minors for the purpose of prostitution and compelling a person into unlawful compulsory labour. [Sections 363, 365, 268, 372, 373 and 374 of the Code].

Thus the Penal Code deals extensively with trafficking of

children, women and men. However, punishments range from prison sentences of only one to fourteen years, and the traffickers and their agents are rarely caught. Even if they are, they hardly ever serve the full term of their (comparatively) short sentences.

II. THE CRUELTY TO WOMEN (DETERRENT PUNISHMENT) ORDINANCE, 1983. Section 3 of this Ordinance declares that its provisions will override the contents of all other laws in force.

According to the Ordinance, the penalty for kidnapping or abduction of women for 'unlawful or immoral purposes etc.' is a prison term of upto 14 years. The same sentence is imposed on persons caught trafficking in women. [Sections 5 and 6 of the Ordinance].

III. THE SUPPRESSION OF IMMORAL TRAFFIC ACT 1933. This Act lays down that any person who detains any

female under the age of 18 years in any house or room or place where prostitution is carried out will be punished. **IV. THE CHILDREN (PLEDGING OF LABOUR) ACT 1933.** The Act prohibits the making of agreements to pledge the labour of children under the age of 15 years and the employment of such children whose labour has been pledged. It states, inter alia, that any agreement, other than the agreement made without detriment to a child, written or oral, express or implied, whereby the parent or guardian of a child, in return for any payment or benefit undertakes to cause the services of the child to be utilized in any employment is void.

The Act provides for penalizing such wayward parents or guardians with a punishment of a fine of upto taka 50. **V THE CHILDREN ACT, 1974.** Part VI of this Act includes special offenses in respect of children. It provides

among others, that whoever employs any child for the purpose of begging will be punished with imprisonment for a term which may extend to one year or a fine of upto taka 300- or both (Section 35).

It also provides punishment - for upto two years (!) - to those guilty of causing or encouraging the seduction or prostitution of young girls under the age of 18 years.

Constitutional Provisions:

The Constitution of Bangladesh also provides of safeguards as to the security of women and children. The relevant Articles are: ART. 14: It shall be a fundamental responsibility of the State to emancipate the toiling masses — the peasants and workers and backward sections of the people from all forms of exploitation.

ART 15: It shall be a fundamental responsibility of the State to attain, through planned economic growth, a constant increase of productive forces and a steady improvement in the material and cultural standard of living of the people, with a view to securing to its citizens:

a) The provision of the basic necessities of life, including food, clothing, shelter, education and medical care; b) The right to work, that is the right to guaranteed employment at a reasonable wage having regard to the quantity and quality of work; c) The right to reasonable rest, recreation and leisure; and d) The right to social security, that is to say to public assistance in case of undeserved want arising from unemployment, illness or disability, or suffered by widows or orphans or in old age, or in other such cases.

ART 17: The State shall adopt effective measures for the purpose of:

a) Establishing a uniform, mass oriented and universal system of education and extending free and compulsory education to all children to such stage as may be determined by law; b) Relation education to the needs of society and producing properly trained and motivated citizens to serve those needs; c) Removing illiteracy within such time as may be determined by law.

determined by law.

ART 18: 1) The State shall regard the raising of the level of nutrition and the improvement of public health as among its primary duties, and in particular shall adopt effective measures to prevent the consumption, except for medical purposes or for such other purposes as may be prescribed by law, of alcoholic and other intoxicating drinks and of drugs which are injurious to health.

2) The State shall adopt effective measures to prevent prostitution and gambling.

ART 28: 1) The State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth.

2) Women shall have equal rights with men in all spheres of the State and of public life.

3) No citizen shall, on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth be subjected to any disability, liability, restriction or condition with regard to access to any place of public entertainment or resort, or admission to any educational institution.

4) Nothing in this article shall prevent the state from making special provision in favour of women or children, or for the advancement of any backward section of citizens.

ART. 34: 1) All forms of forced labour are prohibited and any contravention of this provision shall be an offence punishable in accordance with law.

2) Nothing in this article shall apply to compulsory labour:

a) by persons undergoing lawful punishment for a criminal offence; or b) required by any law for public purpose.

Thus, there are plenty of laws to prevent trafficking. All that is required is the effective implementation and some stringent amendments. This can be done by incorporating the provisions of the new Bill into the relevant laws already present. There is really no need to overburden the legal system.

The Role of Non-government Organizations:

Political parties have campaigned against specific issues of violence against women — issues which have a political motivation or link

	INDIA, 1990				NEPAL, 1989			
	Age 5-9	Age 10-14	Age 15-19	Age 20-24	Age 5-9	Age 10-14	Age 15-19	Age 20-24
Work	3.0	4.8	5.4	6.1	3.2	4.8	5.4	6.1
Non-attendance	0.7	0.6	0.3	0.3	0.3	0.3	0.3	0.3
Substance	0.5	0.7	0.8	0.5	0.7	0.8	0.5	0.5
Household	0.4	0.7	0.3	0.6	0.7	1.0	0.8	2.0
Reading/studying	0.4	2.5	0.2	1.1	2.1	4.8	3.8	0.3
Leisure	1.3	1.5	0.8	1.2	—	—	—	—

Source: Compiled by the Statistical Division of the United Nations Secretariat from national studies.

with a rival party, like, for instance, the issuance of *fatwa* behind which, it is justly alleged, is the Jamaat-ul-Islami party. They have little time to deal with other women-related issues. Surprisingly enough, the women's wing of progressive political parties do not campaign against issues affecting women either.

There are pathetically few non-government organisations which deal directly with the subject of trafficking and prostitution. Only in the last five years or so have NGOs and human rights groups taken up the cases of women and children in police custody as a result of being victims of trafficking.

Some NGOs are working actively in this sector by —

1. Campaigning against exploitation of women and children.
2. Monitoring the violence.
3. Lobbying, advocating and providing information and support.
4. Carrying out investigations regarding the reasons and number of women and children in safe custody.
5. Lawyers groups actively work to get the victims out of jail custody.

Recommendations:

- In order to curb and ultimately put a stop to the trafficking of women and children from Bangladesh, the following steps are necessary:
- 1) The awareness and support of civil society; 2) Commitment of human material and financial resources; 3) Mass awareness of Constitutional bindings and legal remedies and related laws; 4) The amendment of existing laws instead of formulating new ones and thus refraining from overburdening the legal system; 5) Establishment of a multi-disciplinary task force; 6)

Effective steps to remove corruption from within law-enforcing agencies; 7) Proper police monitoring on the kidnapped victims, saved during police raids, so that they can be safely returned to their families when dimmed; 8) Role of mass-media to boost public awareness of the magnitude of the problem and ways to combat it; 9) The need for Bangladesh to adopt a 'welfare-state mentality' so as to take proper care of its citizens — specially the younger generation; This can be done by cutting down the defence budget by nearly 70%. 10) Bi-lateral and multi-lateral support of international organizations.

To protect children in particular the following steps must be taken: 1) Knowledge of basic and practical survival skills side-by-side with primary education. 2) Child rights to be introduced in primary and secondary school curriculum. 3) Government/private initiative to send street children to school and provide them with an inexpensive, nutritious meal. Take Nelson Mandela's education system as an example: No infrastructure. No formal teachers just volunteers paid an honorarium. This will keep the children out of the clutches of agents and 'touts'.

For the Migrant Workers: 1) The urgent need for separate legislation for the protection of migrant workers, including special provisions for female migrant workers. 2) The need for a labour liaison offices between the foreign states receiving Bangladesh migrant workers are the High Commission of Bangladesh present in those countries to monitor the extent of protection the worker is receiving. 3) The need to establish an association for domestic workers to empower such women.

