

DELEGATES from 126 countries gathered in Stockholm last week to discuss for the first time actions to stop crimes that are committed against children in the form of sexual abuse. The World Congress Against Sexual Exploitation of Children in Stockholm agreed to a draft agenda terming sexual exploitation of children as akin to slavery which needs international support and collaboration to curb. Carroll Bellamy, Executive Director of Unicef, one of the major mover behind this important Conference, in her speech said that sexual exploitation of children is damaging children in every country of the world and has called for urgent cooperation to put an end to this violation of children's rights.

Modern day society, with all its progress and innovations, has not been able to make a dent on this brutal of all crimes. On the contrary the scourge has grown posing a great menace to millions of children all over the world. It is estimated that 2 million children sell their bodies for money, with Asia alone making up half that number. Millions others are abused in the form of child marriage, incest, rape and assault. Such crimes are committed everyday, in the streets, in people's homes, in brothels and in the workplace, cutting across culture, religion and geographical boundaries.

The World Congress, the first of its kind has no doubt brought into world focus the plight of these millions of children. It has succeeded in getting 1200 delegates including government officials and NGO's to sit and talk about this problem and plan action. However, discussions and planning actions is a far cry from implementation. One is obviously skeptical of Conferences that end in joint declarations but have no power to commit governments to take actions. However, having said that, getting different stockholders together in Conferences to discuss these critical issues is perhaps the first important step towards ending child exploitation.

In the case of Bangladesh, poverty of its people means far more poverty for its women and children. Women and children

BRAVING the oceans Arab merchants used to sail to Bengal for a piece of Muslim. That was hundreds of years ago. Today, Muslim is a history. If Paris is known for its Eiffel Tower, Dhaka was once renowned for its Muslim — a handloom-woven fabric, so fine that a matchbox was enough to hide a Muslim sari. So goes the saying.

The matchless tapestry and wonderful designs of Muslim sari attracted international demand also from Royal families of Asia, Africa and Europe. Sounds like a fairy tale? Yes, it is.

Muslim is now gone. It's not the end of the story. Because of negligence, lack of proper capitalisation and new difficulties

faced by the weavers the country's entire handloom industry is now fighting a losing battle. Scarce capital and skyrocketing prices of raw materials have made handloom products uncompetitive to that of powerloom.

Besides, the industry is receiving virtually no support from the state. Weavers do not get training and counselling to develop products to suit the present-day demands. As a result the handloom products are becoming costly, and at the same time, losing market.

Many weavers quit their ancestral trade. Many have switched over to more profitable jobs, some migrated to India, where they found better support from the state.

In some cases weavers left this trade just because they were unable to repay the bank loans.

The number of loan defaulters is estimated at 16,000 who are facing court cases until December 1995.

According to an estimate, 50 per cent of the country's six lakh handlooms have become idle over the years. Smuggled Indian fabrics have occupied the market.

In Kushtia, a district traditionally famous for handloom, there were 25,000 handlooms even five years back. At least 25 per cent have now disappeared.

In village Kutipara under Goswami Durgapur union, weaver Waliuddin said the village had once about 1,000 looms. Four hundred of them have

been compelled to closed down in past three years.

Capital constraint is the biggest problem as most weavers pointed out during a survey by News Network at a handloom pocket in Kushtia.

Institutional financial supports to handloom are almost absent. Commercial banks, including the state-owned ones, do not have interest in providing credits to the traditional sector, saying previous loans have remained unpaid. Though fingers of the banks are burnt and huge amount of loans to the sector has become bad loans.

The government has disbursed an amount of Tk 1.5 crore among 8,500 weavers in the dis-

trict in 1983, which mounted to Tk five crore in interest and principal.

However, weavers have a different version. They complained that the loans went to wrong hands. In 1982, the government introduced a credit scheme for handloom weavers. The money went to take weavers, they said.

"Touts, intermediaries and local mahajans, in fact, were benefited from the loans," said Fazil Haque, a poor weaver.

Although the government wrote off credit up to Tk 5,000, few received the benefits. No gazette notification was issued in this regard and cases were being filed against so-called de-

faulters, who should have been covered by the government offer, they complained.

With banks turning their back, weavers are now being forced to go to mahajans for loans at high rate to buy yarn and dyes. So returns from investment is gradually getting slimmer.

In Kutipara, weavers said a loom could produce fabric of one bundle or 7.5 pounds of yarn a week. They buy this yarn from Kumarkhali Haat, which sells twice a week. Each bundle costs Tk 1,200 on an average with which a loom can produce 20 pieces lungis or 35 pieces gamchhas.

Weaver Fazil Huq said all the members (8) of his family — from his old mother to four-

year-old son Sujan — have to work dawn to dusk to produce those 35 gamchhas. But he gets a profit of only Tk 400 a week after all these combined labour. "I could have earned Tk 700 to 800 a week by paddling a rickshaw van. I could relieve my family members from the strenuous labour," he said.

Marginal return is thus pushing weavers to other professions. Most are ending up as rickshaw-pullers, and many day labourers.

The government can still save the handloom sector from extinction at least to curb the unemployment problem. Things are not absolutely out of control. Still there are about 15 lakh people engaged in this sector, scattered all over the

country. The number could be raised if authorities could arrange easy loan for weavers and make inputs available to them.

The handloom sector accounts for 57 per cent of the country's textile needs. Its annual contribution to the economy is worth more than Taka 1,000 crore.

Many say the handloom Board needs to be roused to handle the sector more efficiently. The weavers need technical support from the Board, which should also help weavers market their products.

Or else Bangladesh's once-glorious handloom industry may find only one place: the museum.

— News Network

STOCKHOLM SUMMIT

Nations Must Act Now

by Shaheen Anam

share a greater burden of early death, malnourishment, disease and all other forms of abuse, and exploitation. Added to this is our socio cultural norms and traditions that often condones the exploitation of women and girls.

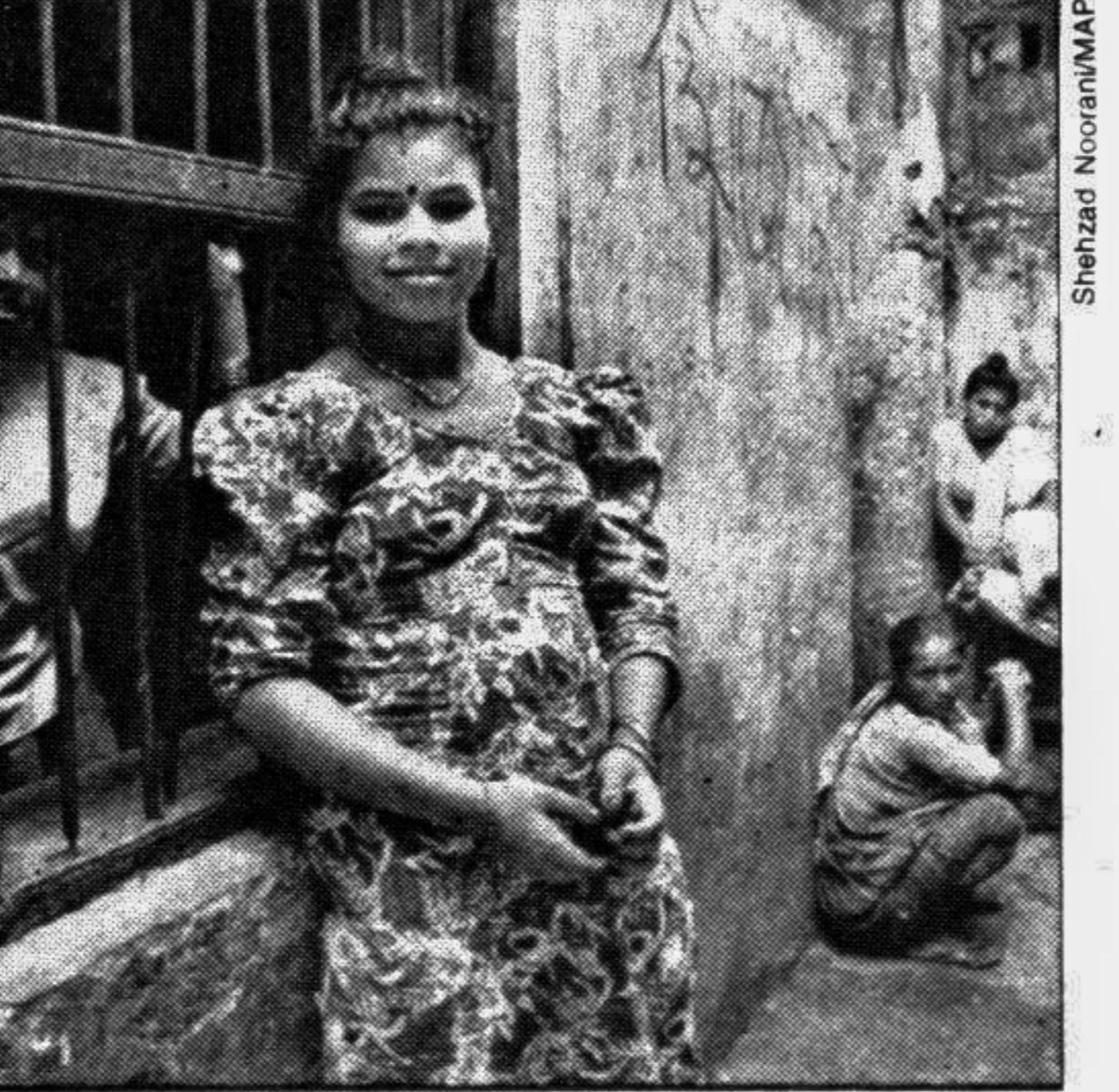
While overt sexual abuse in the form of forced trafficking, prostitution and rape is punishable by law, there is no punishment for crimes against children in the form of incest, forced child marriage and sale of children by members of the family. Furthermore, the laws that have been enacted to protect women and children from abuse is bogged down in lengthy bureaucratic procedures seriously hampering conviction.

First of all very few cases are filed as child sexual exploitation because of socio financial situation of parents and guardians. Those who have the courage to file a case face such humiliation that many give up half way. The case of Yasmeen, the 14-year old girl who was raped and killed by policemen a year ago still remains tangled in a web of technical, bureaucratic and legal mess inspite of the support given by women's organizations. Even after a year, justice seems as elusive as ever.

Several consultations were organized between NGOs, women's organizations, and UN bodies prior to the World Congress. These consultations ended in concrete recommendations. These inputs came from organizations and individuals who have been working on issues of child abuse for many years and have demonstrated that with proper will and commitment the problem if not eliminated can be substantially reduced. Curbing commercial and all kinds of sexual exploitation of children requires the will of society as a whole. It is not the job of the NGOs, women's organization or some UN body alone. We must come to grips with the fact that children are abused in homes, in the streets as well as

in brothels; that it is not only the pimps, unscrupulous criminals and rapists who are responsible for child abuse. We must wake up to the fact that often family members are equally responsible in allowing child marriage, turning a blind eye to incest and allowing children to be trafficked in the name of lucrative jobs abroad.

Much has been written on the effects of sexual exploitation of children. The experience often leaves psychological scars which lasts a lifetime. But more damaging is society's attitude towards children specially girls who have been abused. Rehabilitation of young girls who are victims of abuse is almost impossible because of perceptions of the sexuality of women whereby she becomes unclear



Girls waiting for customers inside Kandupatti, Dhaka

and not fit to be a part of society once she has been abused. Often young girls are forced to go back to a life of prostitution because all doors to their social integration are closed.

To rid society of this evil unified actions has to be taken at the country, regional and international level. The issue must be taken up at senior levels by all countries who are affected by trafficking of women and children whether they are recipient or transporter. Nationally, this issue must be debated at national forums such as the Parliament, cabinet meetings etc. There should be much more articulation of protest and resistance against crimes committed against children and much more public outrage than is presently expressed. The media has a very important role to play and should be used as an ally to bring into public focus the flaws and legal loopholes that prevents curbing child abuse. The media can also be used for changing perceptions and attitudes that prevents rehabilitation and integration into society of those who have been abused.

Rather than piecemeal interventions the problem has to be dealt in a holistic way. Sexual exploitation of children flourishes because of a number of factors and not for one reason alone. These are related to attitudes, perceptions, poverty, profit motives, social and traditional values, legal loopholes, poor implementation of laws, lack of proper birth and marriage registration, lack of proper policy or resources for rehabilitation plus lack of political will and commitment towards the issue. There needs to be a massive and serious collaboration and a partnership among all concerned individuals, groups and organizations with a vision and a commitment towards the future to eradicate our society of this social evil.

As Carol Bellamy in her speech at the World Congress has said so eloquently, "We are here to affirm, without compromise that children are not property to be bought or sold, that their human rights are to be taken with utmost seriousness and that their voices must be heard in the fulfilment of those rights."

Deadly Legacy of the Cruel 'Dream Merchants'

Jan Sharma writes from Kathmandu

At least 8,000 Nepali girls are lured to India every year and sold into prostitution. Only the lucky ones are ever accepted back into their families. As Gemini News Service reports, the trade is helping to spread the AIDS virus in south Asia.

prostitution.

Fortunately, many parents and families have accepted them back with open arms.

Poonam was 14 and living in a Nepalese village when she met a boy who swept her off her feet with promises of marriage and city lights.

Instead of Kathmandu, she found herself in Mumbai, formerly Bombay, in neighbouring India.

"My boyfriend took me to a house and introduced me to his relatives," recalls Poonam, shaking and crying. "I was asked to take a shower and dress up. Later, I was repeatedly raped. I do not remember how many times."

When I resisted, they beat and tortured me. They took me by the hair and dragged me about. It was like being in narka (hell). They told me my boyfriend had sold me."

That was 18 months ago. Now, together with 217 other girls and young women, she has been returned to Nepal by the Indian authorities, following police raids on Mumbai brothels.

Despite government assurances of repatriation assistance, Nepal's Ministry of Social Welfare and Women was less than welcoming.

"What help?" ministry official Prabha Basnet was quoted as saying by officials of non-government organisations (NGOs) looking after the returnees. "What guarantee is there that they are Nepalis? They went out to India when they looked like young and fresh apples. Now they are rotten. Why should we welcome those rotten apples?"

Many of the women fear their parents might be equally hostile. If their fears are borne out, say the NGOs, the women might be forced to return to

politicians and powerful people in Kathmandu, and if the government ended its ostrich-like, head-in-the-sand attitude.

One of the side-effects of the activities of the "dream merchants" who lure and sell Nepali girls — and of the increasing practice of prostitution of boys — is the spread of AIDS.

"Nepal has largely been able to avoid the influence of the outside world for centuries," says Mervyn Silverman of the American Foundation for AIDS Research. "But no amount of cultural preservation will keep AIDS and [the related virus] HIV from crossing its borders."

Official figures give the number of HIV-positive Nepalis up to mid-1996 as 374-51 of whom have died of AIDS. But the World Health Organisation (WHO) says the HIV rate is under-reported in Nepal and that up to 10,000 people are likely to be infected.

The WHO estimates that 1.5 million Indians are infected, and says that by the year 2010, there will be 3.9 million cases in India, 2.9 million in Bangladesh and 22,000 in Nepal.

Earlier this year, officials of member countries of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) said the movement of people within states and across common borders made a regional approach vital. They recommended the establishment of permanent SAARC technical committee on AIDS.

JAN SHARMA is Contributing Editor of the weekly news magazine "Spotlight" in Kathmandu.

The Glory of Bengal Handloom Wanes Fast

Ashrafuddowla writes from Kushtia

Monday 16th September
(All programmes are in local time. There may be changes in the programme)

BTY

3:00 Cleaning Announcement Al-Quran Programme Summary
3:10 Recitation From The Bible
3:15 Cartoon Film: Macron 3:45 Drama series: Telecast of Selected Dramas 4:00 News in Bangla 4:45 Esho Gan Shikhi 5:00 News in Bangla 5:25 Nazrul Songs 5:50 Sports Programme 6:00 News in Bangla 6:30 Shikhangaran 7:00 The News 7:05 Open University 7:25 Unish Bish 8:00 News in Bangla 8:40 Package Drama 10:00 News in English 10:30 Shasthathata 10:35 Sukher Thikana: Family Planning Programme 10:55 Comedy series: Coach 1:30 News in Bangla 11:35 Tuesday's programme 11:40 Close down

BBC
6:00 BBC Newsroom in World News-night

Business Report As A Today/24 Hours 9:00 BBC World Headlines 10:00 BBC Newsday 1:00 BBC World News 1:15

The Money Programme 2:00 BBC World News 2:30 Time Out: Jeremy Clarkson's Motorworld 3:00 BBC World News

3:30 Time Out: Fat Man in France 4:00 BBC Newsdesk 6:00 BBC News Headlines 6:05

Correspondent 7:00 BBC World News 7:15 World Business Report 7:30 BBC Newshour Asia & Pacific 8:30 Time Out: The Farnborough Air Show 9:00 BBC World News 9:15 The Money Programme 10:00 BBC World News 10:30 Time Out: Tomorrow's World 11:00 The World Today 1:30 BBC World Headlines 1:45 The Money Programme 1:50 Early Report 2:00 BBC World News 2:30 Time Out: The Travel Show 3:00 BBC World Report inc. World Business Report/24 Hours 5:00 BBC World News 5:10 News-night

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BBC
6:00 BBC Newsroom in World News-night

CHANNEL V

6:00 Frame by Frame 7:00

Rewind VJ Sophie 8:00 Jump Start VJ Trey 9:00 Frame by Frame 11:30 The Vibe VJ Luke 12:30 Rewind VJ Sophie 1:00

By Demand VJ Trey 2:00 Frame by Frame 2:30 First Day First Show 3:00 Sansu Mangta Ha 4:00 Planet Ruby 4:30 By Demand VJ Trey 5:30 Rewind VJ Sophie 7:00 Big Bang VJ Alessandra 8:00 Planet Ruby 8:33 The Vibe 9:00 BPL Oye! 10:00 First Day First Show 10:33 Launch Pad VJ Sophie 11:33 The Ride VJ Trey 12:00m Over The Edge VJ Sophie 12:30 Big Bang VJ Alessandra 1:00 Hasya 2:00 By Demand VJ Trey 3:00 Big Bang VJ Alessandra 4:30 Asian Top 20 VJ Trey

6:30 VJ Sophie 7:00 Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles 7:30 G.I. Joe 8:00 Saber Rider And The Star Sheriff 8:30 The New Adventures Of Black Beauty 9:00 Aerobics Oz Style 9:30 Charles in Charge 10:00 Mr Belvedere 10:30 Cooking Secrets of the CIA 11:00 Videofashion News 11:30 Gabrielle 12:30 Santa Barbara 12:30 The Bold & The Beautiful 2:00 The Oprah Winfrey Show 3:00 Remington Steele 4:00 Cooking Secrets of the CIA 4:30 Videofashion News 5:00 Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles 5:30 The New Adventures Of Black Beauty 6:00 Lost In Space 7:00 Home and Away 7:30 Charles in Charge 8:00 MASH 8:30 Mystery Moves: Inspector Morse Service Of All The Dear 10:30 The Bold & The Beautiful 11:00 Santa Barbara 12:00m The New Twilight Zone 12:30 Hearts Afire 1:00 Grace 1:30 The Oprah Winfrey Show 4:00 Hooper 4:30 Home and Away 5:00 The Sullivans 5:30 Gabrielle

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