

# Alternatives

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## On Securing Women's Security

From the *Alternatives* Desk

There is no question that we have failed in ensuring women's security both at home and outside. While some would say that much of women's insecurity at home existed for centuries and therefore is an old tale, it cannot be denied that physical violence on women both at home and outside has risen considerably in recent times. Indeed, at places and in some socially identified groups it has reached such a level that daughters or young brides are hardly allowed to stay at home on their own or even move freely in public alone after sunset. A lone woman is now more than ever a ready target of the scoundrels, rapists, acid-throwers and the like!

It would probably have mattered differently if the scoundrels, rapists and acid-throwers were gender neutral, but the fact of the matter is that invariably all of them are men and that again, not all 'strange men' or even strangers! More importantly, so freely and frequently these men go on to reproduce their vicious deeds that women and their close (both male and female) relatives are fast losing confidence on the state and society in ensuring women's security. There are several things to consider in what seems to be an ominous development in the midst of all the hullabaloo of development.

Firstly, there is an element of masculinity in the conceptualization of 'security,' somewhat readily found in the organization and reproduction of national security. In fact, the latter is not only manned by men but also the things that it deals with remains far removed from issues related to women. Put differently, relatively high investment on national security has done little to mitigate women's state of insecurity nationally. Such is the irony of the organization of security in Bangladesh.

Secondly, the difference between physical and mental violence, although significant, is fast becoming irrelevant in some of the victims' lives. To give one example, in 1993 alone there were 6000 suicides committed by Bangladeshi women, almost all of them in their young or middle age. This is particularly significant because even in Japan, which probably has the highest number of suicides in the world (21,679 in 1994), most of the suicides are committed by Japanese male (over 67 percent) and that again in their old age (over 51 percent). Indeed, in Bangladesh often a woman commits suicide (no doubt, a physically violent death) to overcome her mental agony arising out of an experience largely imposed by a masculinized social structure. The latter includes things ranging from male-dominated *shalish* to incest to sexual harassment in the streets.

Thirdly, 'women' as a universal category has also been problematic, particularly in redressing some of the problems faced by women of socially marginalized classes and groups. While the tension between *purush* and *mohila* is a valid one, equally important is the division, on the one hand, between *bhadramohila* and the so-called *o-bhadramohila* and on the other, the division between the majority Muslim *mohilas* and *mohilas* of marginalized groups, from Bengali Hindus to non-Bengali Hill people. Unless there is a clear cut recognition on the part of *bhadramohila* and the majority Muslim *mohilas* of the plight of *o-bhadramohila* and that of the *mohilas* of marginalized groups little can be done towards the task of disempowering the masculinized structures and correspondingly in overcoming women's state of insecurity. Since the agony of the former is intrinsically tied up with the pain of the latter, it would be wise to take up a political agenda that would creatively resolve divisions between them and lead the way where one would help the other in mitigating their unique sufferings.

Finally, with the rise of violent incidents against women, it has become necessary to raise the question, why people choose violence? That is, one needs to watch more closely and intensely the *violent-performer*, and not just the performance of violence or the victim of violence, as it has been the tradition. Such a change of focus is required mainly to create a milieu for a least violent, if not violence free, society.

How do we go about changing all this? There is, of course, no easy answer. At least two types of activities are urgently required. For the sake of brevity and convenience, I will divide them into *political* and *intellectual*.

At the political level and amongst many other things, women representation in the national parliament must be brought up at par with that of men. Since almost half of Bangladesh population is women, women representation in the parliament should not be less than 50 percent and all of them directly elected by both men and women alike. This must not be viewed as a panacea to all the ills suffered by women, but will surely be a milestone towards the task of empowering women.

At the intellectual level, a serious campaign ought to be initiated in schools, colleges, universities, radio, television, print media, billboards, and all other places that we can think of, that would have the effect of demasculinizing the state and society and of simultaneously reorganizing the relationship between men and women. Only then possibly we will be able to cultivate a place where women will no longer suffer from insecurity.



Women recruits in Ansar-VDP: Building self-confidence.

— Star photo

## Women and National Defence Policy

by Syed Imtiaz Ahmed

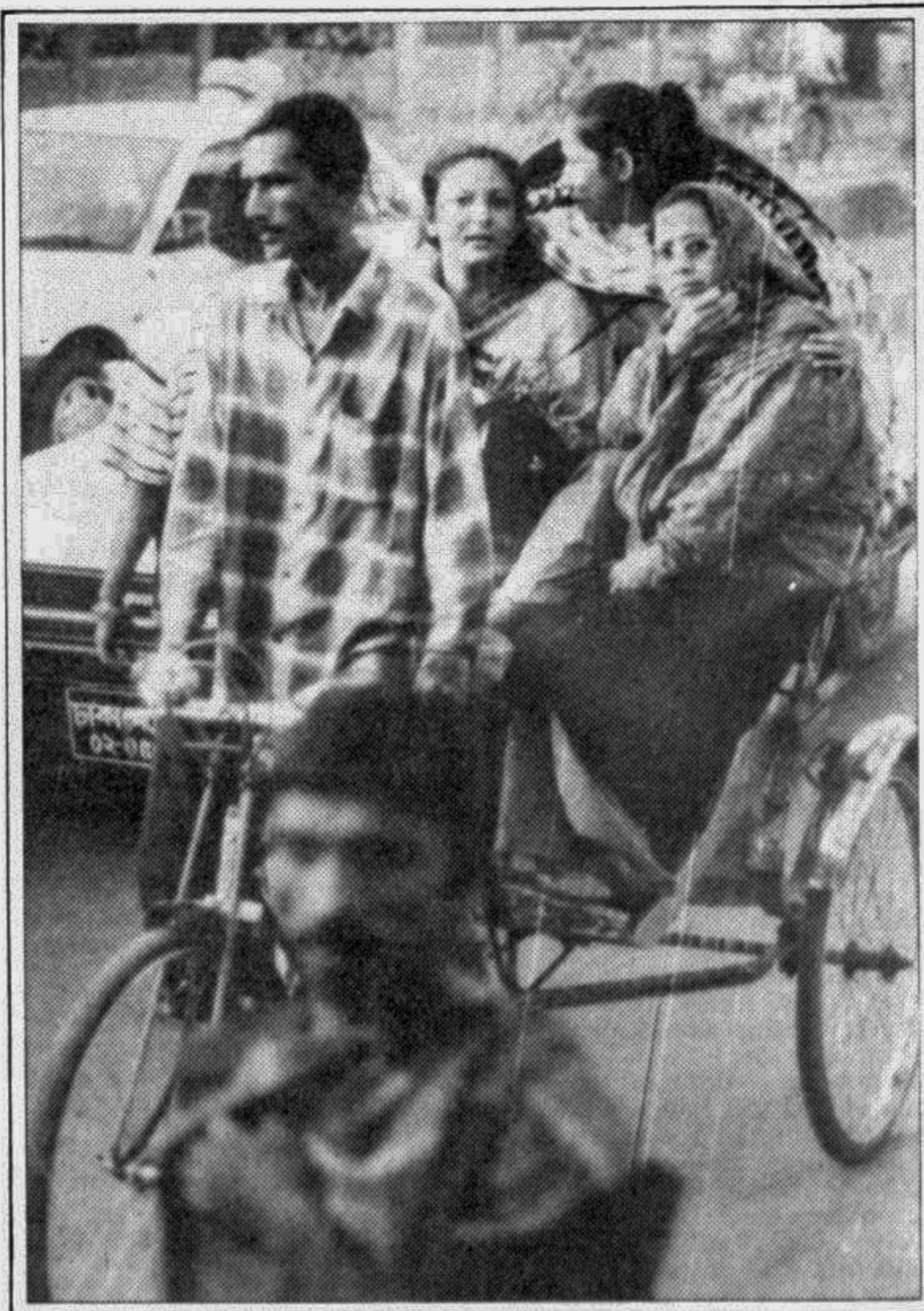
*The concept of national security and national defence have turned into such a narrowly applied and complicated matter that general people fail to understand the role of national security policy in their everyday life. Rather the weapons, uniforms and sometimes the pompous attitude of the members of the defence forces have led to a distance between the two groups.*

MILITARY men standing with loaded guns to fight the invaders, soldiers sacrificing their lives to save the honour of the country's flag, high military officials having close door meetings to design plans for fighting the external enemy — ideas like these actually constitute the common peoples' view about the national defence of the modern states. In other words, the central theme of the modern national security agenda remains the defence of the state from the external enemy. This militaristic notion of national security was thoroughly institutionalised over the ages, particularly during the years of the cold war. The preoccupation of states with ideological, block based rivalry, high-tech weapon systems, and nuclear warfare in fact, confined the notion of national security to certain patterns of military preparations; and to some high sounding nationalistic jargons about the assumed overwhelming importance of the survival of the state as an institution.

With the end of Cold War and more specifically with the transformation of the nature of problems facing the states in the last decade of this century, the inadequacy of the traditional idea of security has been exposed. The voices favouring a national security agenda more concerned with the interest of the masses of the states rather than the states as separate entities have become stronger. Thus, concepts like environmental security or economic security are gradually becoming crucial factors in designing national defence and security policies of several states.

The UNDP has sought to institutionalise such non-military security concerns by introducing concepts like the Human Security and Human Development. In fact, in the 21st century, the threats facing the states cannot be handled by guns. Social unrest, economic collapse or environmental disasters have the ability to put the entire existence even of a militarily robust state at jeopardy.

The author is President, Human Rights Watch-Bangladesh.



Three together in place of two: Sense of security? — Star photo

However, through out the last three decades many independent scholars and analysts have questioned the merit of a national security agenda designed to protect the abstract concepts like state sovereignty, national honour, while the fundamental rights of the people in many states remained unrealised.

Lack of any concrete effort to address the non-military issues, has in fact, reduced the capability of our state to cope with the problems. The people are now more aware and vocal than they were in 1960s and 1970s, so the national security and the defence policy of our state has now come under critical review and analysis from different angles.

Given our geopolitical location, scarcity of resources and the abject poverty level, it is quite unlikely that any country would want to physically annex our territory through military means. From this point of view some may conclude that functioning of the military forces has got confined only to controlling minor border skirmishes, civil commotion and the cross border drug trafficking. This will be sheer wastage of the skills and technical resources of the army. The defence policy can however, provide more effective defence if it tries to accommodate the broad masses of the people and locate the actual security groups who require special security measures. In this context comes the question of the women of our country, who constitute half the population and are socially and economically more vulnerable than men. They are the most frequent victims of discrimination, violence and abuse. Thus, addressing the threat toward the women can be a very crucial factor for designing a more prudent and effective national defence policy.

With such argument in my mind, I talked to twenty people, ten males and ten females, from different sections of the society. I enquired about their ideas and perceptions of our defence policy and the defence forces.

### Let's Know Each Other

The first impression that came to my mind while talking with the interviewees was that most of them specially those representing less educated, are hardly acquainted with the concept of defence and security. Most significantly five out of the ten women respondent whose average educational level was between grade II to SSC, confirmed that they hardly understand the idea of border security, though one said that the armies are there to fight against the non-Muslim invaders. Thus finding an answer about how to design more women friendly defence policy was almost impossible.

Renu (25) however held that if the police forces was sympathetic to the cause of the women and change their hostile and at times immoral attitude toward the women, life would have been much easier for them. In fact, none of these five respondents seemed to understand that defence policy and defence forces could by any way contribute towards ensuring their security. Sharmin Ahmed (33), a housewife identified that the distance between defence forces and the general masses is the major factor behind such inadequate understanding about the actual role of defence policy and defence forces in the society.

The concept of national security and national defence have turned into such a narrowly applied and complicated matter that general people fail to understand the role of national security policy in their everyday life. Rather the weapons, uniforms and sometimes the pompous attitude of

the members of the defence forces have led to a distance between the two groups.

If the current defence policy is to be reoriented and if it has to contribute towards women's security one principal starting point might be to gradually close the information gap between the structure of defence and the people. In general it requires a great deal of transparency about the structure, formation and activities of the defence forces. Regarding the women population in particular, first of all there is the overwhelming need of what prominent researcher and women activist Dr. Roushan Jahan 'described' as, 'sensitising' the defence personnel about the problems and condition of the women in our society. The issues like discrimination, harassment and violence against women may be introduced in the foundation of the advance courses of the defence academy so that, the trainee soldiers and officers can be conscious about the specific problems, specially the security problems of the women. This means that women's issues actually have to be accommodated in the national defence policy.

Secondly, on the other side awareness should be created among women that national defence and national security is not only about protecting the borders only. Defence policy and the defence forces do have a role to play in safeguarding the population from the threats of various kinds. Such awareness can act as a pressure mechanism to reform our defence policy in terms of addressing the internal sources of threat to the population groups, including the insecurity of women. Educational institutions and the NGOs can play a major role in raising this awareness. Awareness about each other, specially awareness among the defence forces about women issues, may remove the first major impediment regarding the framing of a defence policy and structure concerned with ensuring the security and the rights of women in the society.

### Defending the Women

If the policy and the structure of defence is rethought and reoriented and the defence personnel are made aware about the condition of the women, the next question arises as to how the defence policy and forces can play a role. It has to be kept in mind that given the existing reality, the defence force cannot play the role of police, nor can it practically contribute towards women's empowerment. Given the expertise and the resources of the defence forces, it is perhaps most suitable for them to take steps relevant to the physical security of the women.

In this connection, Md. Abu Taleb (43), a banker, suggested that, if the military court be given the responsibility of prosecuting the law enforcement officers who raped and murdered young women. In fact, four of the respondents in total (3 male and 1 female) spoke about prosecution of the law enforcement officers charged with rape in military courts, for the sake of fair trial. Mrs. Nusrat Chowdhury (30), a housewife, however, opined in this connection that as the military officers are male, no fair trial can be expected from them either. Such sentiments indeed are reflective of the distrust between the two groups.

Dr. Roushan Jahan identified another important area where the military forces can practically contribute. She held that, forces placed in the border areas might play a crucial role in preventing the illegal trafficking of women across the

border. Such task of course, does not require much reform of the current defence policy. Just a little bit of sensitivity on the part of the policy planners and also on the part of the military high officials can save thousands of women from ill fate. Border forces should be specifically assigned to check such trafficking and a single event of success could profoundly strengthen the possibilities of designing a more 'humane' defence policy and structure.

### Gendered Code of Conduct

One basic obstacle in rethinking the defence policy in terms of the women is the unfavourable record of the military forces regarding their dealings with women. Numerous instances can be cited when the victorious forces raped and killed thousands of women just for demonstrating their male ego and power. The institutions of modern defence are actually so much oriented towards male power and chauvinism that it will indeed be very difficult to reorient the defence policy towards being more women friendly, without reforming these institutions.

Dr. Jahan suggested in this point that the code of conduct for the military personnel during deployment must include specific concerns about the security and rights of the women. In this regard military courts must arrange exemplary punishment for the soldiers and officers violating women's rights. In fact, during wars and other extreme situations a 'proactive gender role' of the defence forces can contribute significantly in ensuring the physical security of the women. Such code of conduct of course will have to be based on the introduction of gender issues in the foundation and advance courses of the training academy and the Staff College.

### Women in the Armed Forces

Many of the female interviewees particularly those belonging to the educated section suggested increased participation of the women in the armed forces. First of all, limiting women participation in the forces violates their democratic rights. The logic of physical impediment, according to them, is faulty since, now a days more and more women are taking part in various sports the require huge physical strength and tenacity. Moreover, in case of the guerrilla forces the inclusion of the women should be much easier.

The increased number of women can have various positive implications for designing a women-friendly and people-friendly defence policy. For instance, the presence of women can efficiently restrain any act of gender violence by the members of the forces. Moreover, the women members can also gradually sensitise their male colleagues by their presence and performance.

Actually, it is very difficult to apprehend whether, given the gender biased power relationships and structures in our society, it is possible to redesign and effectively use such a highly masculine institution like the defence for ensuring women security. But if the national defence and national security are to actually import their proper meaning, it will have to accommodate the women who constitute almost half of the members of this 'nation'. It is about time we start to look beyond the traditional structures and values, for the sake of none but our security.

The author is fellow, Centre for Alternatives.

## Women Trafficking in Bangladesh

by Muid Khan Mamun

*In a report published by the UNICEF it has been observed that around 40,000 Bangladeshi women are engaged in prostitution in Pakistan. Another 10,000-12000 is forced into prostitution in Bombay and West Bengal.*

IN this article an attempt will be made to focus on the women trafficking in Bangladesh which deprives the women from their social security.

### Women Trafficking

Each year many a number of women are being trafficked from Bangladesh. Day by day it is increasing in an alarming rate. Documents with photographs on women trafficking from Bangladesh are being published both at home and abroad. In a presentation of the Manila-based ISIS International it had been reported that 150 women are being trafficked from the country each month. We are in no position to deny this report by the ISIS. The average women and children rescued during smuggling in the last year stands at 21.83.

### Trafficking Routes

On the border side, the traffickers are using all the routes (air, water/sea or land) available and convenient for the purpose of trafficking. Previously, air routes were used by the traffickers. But due to due awareness of the immigration officials this has now decreased

### Destination — India and Pakistan

Women trafficked from Bangladesh are generally taken to India and Pakistan.

Although Pakistan is the main destination of the Middle East traffickers, due to many obstacles they are forced to sell some of the women in the Indian brothels. These brothels were previously dominated by Nepalese women, but today Bangladeshi women are slowly taking over. Bangladeshi women, therefore, are now sold more in India than are being trafficked into Pakistan. This is because of three main reasons—

Firstly, the border security of these countries has been strengthened in recent years. Therefore, no one wants to meet the fate of the Rann of Kuch of Banashkanta District Gujrat (Indian security forces have found fifty corpses of Bangladeshi men and women near a well at the Rann of Kuch Banashkanta, Gujrat. These people were trying to enter Pakistan when they were chased by the border security, lost their way, and died of thirst and hunger.

Secondly, because of operation 'Push in' undertaken by the Indian authorities, the Bengali slums at New Delhi were broken down. Low-earning Bengalis from West Bengal used to live in these slums. These slums were used as the intermediary base for the traffickers in India.

Thirdly, due to the high risk involved in trafficking, traffickers are not encouraged to enter Pakistan. They exchange

the women for money with their Indian counterparts right after crossing the border. Like these the women are being transferred from one hand to another. Besides, if prices are higher, then these women are also sold in the Indian market. India has already earned a name as the international market for women and children trade.

### A Tale of Blood

In his confession, a trafficker from a village at the noman's land at Sathkha said that some girls were trafficked in four phases during August and September. All of them were aged between 20 to 25 and worked in garment factories at Dhaka. They were brought with promises of high paid jobs in foreign countries. He also said that, in one such group of five women, Jahanara was also being trafficked to India. She overheard a conversation between the traffickers and learnt that she had fallen in the hands of women traffickers. At that time, they had already reached India and were residing in the residence of an Indian trafficker after crossing the Bhabhanga canal at the border. There Jahanara said that she wanted to return home. She was tortured and raped in front of all them. The others were speechless at the sight of such torture. All of them are now in different brothels throughout India.

In a report published by the UNICEF it has been observed that around 40,000 Bangladeshi women are engaged in prostitution in Pakistan. Another 10,000-12000 is forced into prostitution in Bombay and West Bengal.

The trafficked women are confined to dens while being closely monitored by the pimps who are assisted by their wives and daughters. They are kept in crowded rooms and deprived of food and clothing. They are forced and often beaten to do chores in the den.

In the meantime, the pimp arranges a buyer. Each sale earns him between \$200 and \$220 net on the average and the pimp makes approximately 120 to 125 such sales a month. The bigger pimps employ an intermediary pimp to make the sales for them, where the latter makes \$15 average commission on every sale. The sale price of the women generally ranging from \$1285 to 248 depends on her age, beauty, virginity, education etc.

The humiliating procedure used by the pimps to sell the women, including young girls was documented by an undercover reporter of the Urdu daily 'Jung'. The 'commodity' is paraded in front of the buyers, each and every physical attribute of the women is appraised according to the buyer's needs, skills are assessed and the bargaining begins. Eventu-

ally, the women are auctioned off into servitude, if not right away, after a number of similar demeaning and degrading displays.

Then a registered marriage takes place and the buyer actually marries the purchased women, thus legalizing her enslavement. The husband then either sells her to some one else and makes a neat profit for himself or keeps her in a brothel, so that she may become a permanent source of income.

Once sold or married off, the women are either forced into working at brothels, used, abused and sold again or kept and subjected to various forms of torture.

Occasionally, token raids are made in which only the women and children are arrested and the real criminals of the trade the pimps go scot-free. The arrested women are again victimized by the police. The participation of local police, border control officials, and magistrate in this illegal market encourages the increase of this illegal trade.

### Legislation Against Trafficking

To combat trafficking in women from Bangladesh and punish the criminals engaged in the trade, the government of Bangladesh promulgated an Ordinance—Cruelty to Women (Deterrent punishment) Act-1983.

This enactment/Act provides exemplary punishment to those who are guilty of woman trafficking and any other form of cruelty to women. Article-5 of the Ordinance runs as follows:

'Whoever imports or exports, or sells, lets on hire or otherwise disposes of, or buys, hires or otherwise obtains possession of any woman of any age with intent that such woman shall be employed or used for the purpose of prostitution of illicit intercourse with any person or for any unlawful and immoral purposes, or knowing it to be likely that such woman will be employed or used for any such purposes shall be punishable with death or with imprisonment for a term which may be extended to 14 years, and shall not be less than seven years and shall also be liable to a fine.'

Thus, the Ordinance states the following punishment to the offender who imports or exports women and girl children, for the purpose of prostitution: (1) death, (2) imprisonment for life, (3) rigorous imprisonment for 14 years, and (4) fine.

Again Bangladesh Penal Code also provides harsh punishment for women trafficking. Article 372 of the Penal Code reads as follows:

'Whoever sells, to hire or otherwise dispose off any person under the age of 18 years with intent that such person