

FOCUS

Sex Workers in Bangladesh
Rehabilitation or Empowerment?

by Lena Hasle

Department of Social Services, in partnership with NGOs, will have developed an operational strategy for how the Government of Bangladesh can effectively promote the empowerment of women and children living in brothel communities, including strategies to involve local communities in the protection and promotion of their human and constitutional rights.

THE recent eviction of sex workers in Tanbazar and Nimgoli has caused a public debate on how to best protect and promote the human and constitutional rights of sex workers and their children. Alongside the reports of actual events in Narayanganj, there have been several reports both from the Government and non-governmental organisations, including organisations representing the sex workers themselves, clarifying the issues at stake from their respective perspectives. Several of these reports have made reference to a UNDP assisted project which was designed to build the capacity of the government, particularly the Department of Social Services (DSS) to more effectively address the development needs of sex workers and their children.

The project formulation was initiated in 1997 by the Ministry of Finance, as a part of UNDP's Community Empowerment Programme. According to the Country Cooperation Framework (CCF) agreed between UNDP and the Government of Bangladesh, UNDP cooperation at the community level is directed to the most disadvantaged communities in specific locations and to specific deprived groups. With respect to specific deprived groups, the government requested assistance from UNDP to initiate the formulation of projects for street children, garment workers and socially disadvantaged women (sex workers). The Department of Social Services (Ministry of Social Welfare) was identified as the partner government institution for the sex worker project.

The project document resulted from a number of consultative workshops, using participatory methods (PRA), involving sex workers, other brothel representatives, NGOs, government representatives, UNDP staff and independent experts. The problems which the project is designed to address, were identified by sex workers themselves through a series of focus group interviews and life histories of women and children living in brothel communities. Separate consultations were had with the respective stakeholders in the brothels, as well as with representatives from the local administration, police, *maastaans* etc.

Since its approval, in June 1998, the project office has been established in Dhanmondi, House 363/1, Road 27, and the respective coordinators have taken up their work in each of the four project sites. As a first step towards implementation, local committees have been set up, with members from the local administration and the sex workers themselves. The project has also initiated a baseline study of each of the brothels, which is available from the project office.

The project is designed to protect and promote the welfare and rights of the sex workers and their children, taking a community approach in four brothel communities -- in Tanbazar (and Nimgoli), Jes-

sore, Mymensingh and Daulatdia. The project aims to build the capacity of the DSS to take a more active role in addressing the development needs of sex workers and their children, drawing on available best-practices from previous and ongoing projects. Recognising the considerable NGO experience in promoting the rights and welfare of sex workers, the DSS will directly contract NGOs already working in the sector to carry out the brothel-based ac-

implementation of the agreed activities, as well as represented in both national, project and local level committees. Services to be considered are:

— access to alternative livelihoods opportunities, including necessary education and skills training for both self-employment and employment in private/public sector agencies;

— access to secure financial services including saving schemes and access to credit for

implementation of the following results:

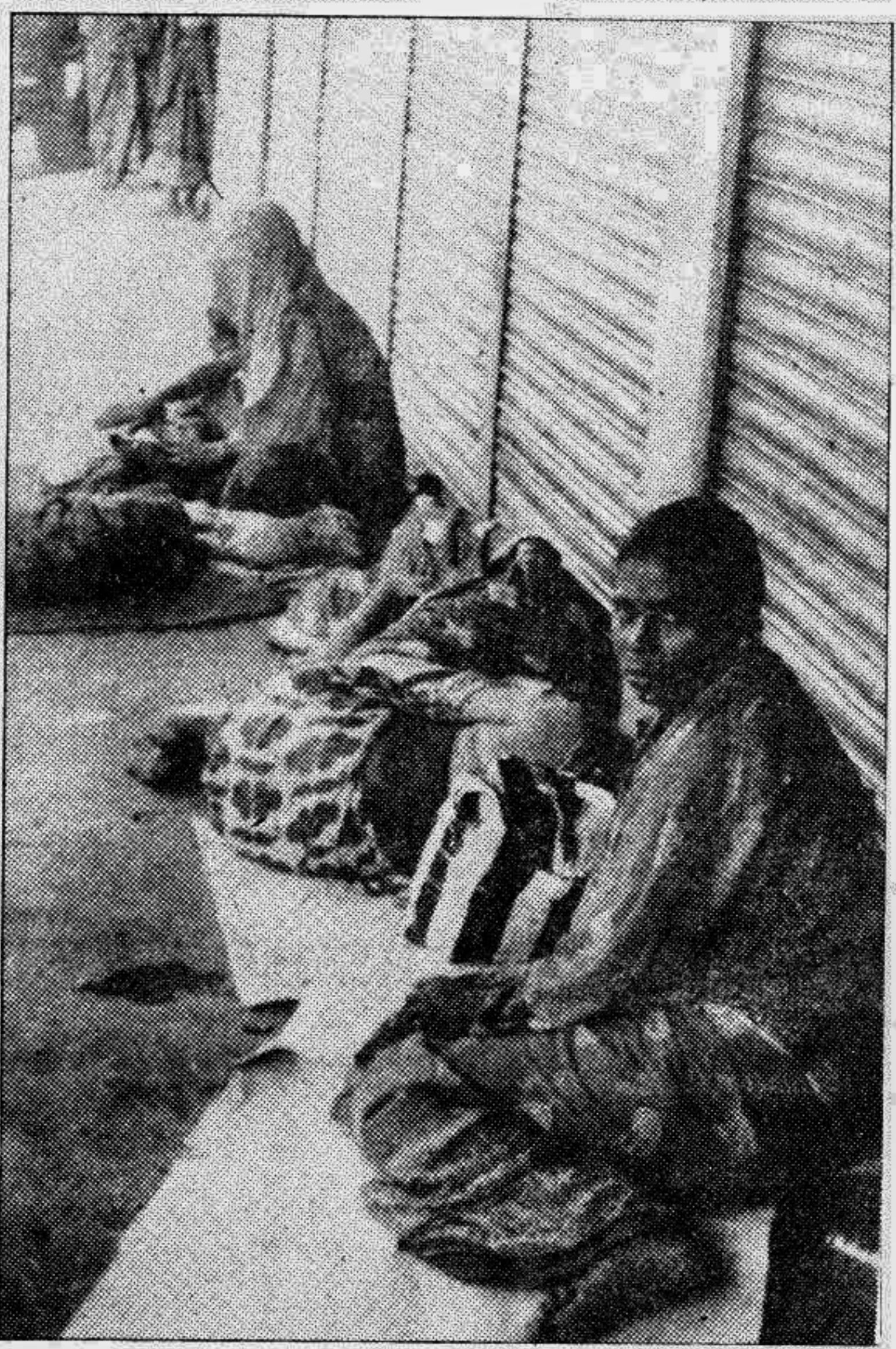
Department of Social Services, in partnership with NGOs, will have developed an operational strategy for how the Government of Bangladesh can effectively promote the empowerment of women and children living in brothel communities, including strategies to involve local communities in the protection and promotion of their human and constitutional rights.

Through the project activities, women and children living or working in the selected brothel communities, will have been given an opportunity to consider alternative livelihoods, including access to alternative living arrangements, savings and credit facilities, basic education and skills training, as per the needs and priorities of the sex workers themselves.

Through community interventions, group discussions, interaction with local power structures, police and local government, the project should also have initiated a process to ensure the social rights of these women and children, facilitating their ability to assert their constitutional rights on an equal footing with other members of the society. The project will directly address the issue of security and access to legal services. Thus, it is expected that women and children covered by the project will be less vulnerable to violence and exploitation, including being trafficked to other countries in the region.

The project will facilitate the prevention of spread of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases by providing necessary information and services related to reproductive and sexual health issues, including promotion of condom use, peer education and peer pressure, and behavioural change communication, creating an enabling environment for implementing 100 per cent condom use. This will improve the health status of the sex workers themselves, as well as their clients and other people who have sexual relations with the clients.

The author works for UNDP, Dhaka.



Evicted sex workers of Narayanganj brothels. —Star photo

activities. The selected NGOs will carry the main responsibility for coordinating the project activities, including taking the roles as Chair of the local Project Implementation Committee.

The project has three main components focusing on: welfare of the children; education and training; legal and social support.

To further define and operationalise appropriate activities for each of these components, the project will facilitate the formulation of a local strategy plan, to be developed through extensive dialogue and consultation with the women, children, NGOs, brothel owners, *maastaans*, police, representatives from the local administration etc. Beyond the participation of stakeholders in the identification and planning stage, the sex workers would also be directly involved in the management and imple-

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