A Congress Against Sexual Exploitation of Children

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Commercial sexual exploitation is a complicated issue to deal with and when children and adolescents get involved it becomes a grimmer story. It is not easy to imagine a nine-year-old being solicited by an adult to entertain him in exchange of hard cash. No matter how repulsive this thought is, we have to face the fact that children are being used for commercial sex in Bangladesh and the world at large. It is a reality that needs to be first acknowledged by the respective societies before steps can be taken to combat this deplorable crime.

Much has been done in this sector and Bangladesh is no stranger to the process and has active participation in the drive. Preparing for the upcoming World Congress III against Sexual Exploitation of Children and Adolescents, which will take place from 25 to 28, November in Rio Centro, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, the government of Bangladesh is currently going through the preliminaries ahead of its participation at the world congress. More than three thousand people from five continents, 300 of them adolescents, are planning to attend the third congress.

The opening theme of the Congress will be "Guarantee of the Rights of Children and Adolescents and their Protection against Sexual Exploitation For a Systemic Approach". Throughout the three days of the event, there will be workshops, discussions and five panels Forms of Commercial Sexual Exploitation and its new scenarios; Legal Framework and Accountability; Integrated Cross-sector Policies; Initiatives of Social Responsibility; and Strategies for International Cooperation. Apart from its articulating character and its capacity to gather knowledge on the subject, the event hopes to discover viable strategies for fighting the sexual exploitation of children and adolescents.

Coming back to the Bangladeshi context, the facts and figures of a rapid assessment report prepared by Unicef are appalling. Boys and girls in Bangladesh are vulnerable to both Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) and Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC). It has been found that although girls can be exposed to organised CSEC in the rural set-up, the boys are sexually exploited on a commercial basis almost exclusively in urban settings. Generally, poorer children are exposed to sexual exploitation, especially during times of family disintegration. The risks for children without parental care are high, and those who are not cared for in an appropriate alternative setting are just as likely to be entrapped into commercial exploitation. Disabled children who live in institutions, refugee children, children of sex workers, orphans and other ostracised groups are especially vulnerable.

"The prevalence is high no doubt. I can say that the government is taking care of the issue of CSEC along with other crimes. Under the umbrella and cooperation of the government, several NGOs are working to improve the situation. The Home Ministry is mostly working against trafficking. As a separate issue, CSEC is going to get more priority once the NPA is finalised," comments Dr.Nomita Halder, Project Director (Deputy Secretary) Empowerment and Protection of Children Project, Ministry of Women and Children Affairs.

Bangladesh Women Lawyers' Association (BNWLA) is playing an active role in the entire process. Advocate Salma Ali, Director of BNWLA, is extremely passionate regarding the legal reforms in the sector. Speaking at a National Consultation Meeting on CSEC and review of