

## SPOTLIGHT

“They forced us to drink beer and other kinds of alcohol. Then they stripped us naked and asked us to dance. After that, all of them took turns and ‘worked’ on us individually.”

This is how Sahana, a 16-year-old girl from Dhaka’s Tejgaon area—who was conned into going to India and later sold to a pimp there—describes just one of her many gruesome experiences last year.

Her voice quivers as she attempts to recall and narrate her story at a shelter house in Dhaka, where she has been staying since the first week of June, following her rescue. She is one of a dozen girls who returned to Bangladesh on June 5 this year. Like Sahana, most of the other girls too were forced into sex work.

The increasing number of trafficked victims returning from India in the last couple of years unveils a perilous issue that is only likely to get worse in the near future. There was a time when the number of Bangladeshi trafficked victims arrested in India was in single digits and the incidents were mostly confined to Kolkata. However, recent cases suggest that the web has spread all across our neighbouring nation.

According to the Bangladesh Embassy in Delhi, 164 victims have been repatriated in the first half of 2017 alone. That is more than twice the total figure of last year and already 33 more than the 131 sent back in 2015. Aside from the government, there are NGOs from both sides working together to send the victims back home.

One such NGO is the Bangladesh National Woman’s Lawyer’s Association (BNWLA) and it is in their shelter house that Sahana is currently residing.

The slight hesitation in Sahana’s voice compels the shelter’s caretaker, Najma, to step in and remind her that it was okay if she did not want to speak about her past. Sahana though, pauses for a bit and decides to continue. It is something that she has to do for the sake of her mother, she says later.

“I was in a relationship with a boy living in Farmgate. I used to meet him outside the parlour in Tejgaon, where I used to work. He told me to go to India with him. He promised that I would be able to work in a parlour there and earn more,” she says.

“One day, I told the owner of the parlour that I had to recharge my phone and just left. We crossed the border that day and after a long journey, reached Surat (Gujarat) in the morning.

“To my surprise, he took me to a flat where there were many men and then he disappeared. There was another girl like me over there. They forced us to drink and then two of them did their ‘work’ on me. After that, the other girl and I cried a lot. We cried the whole week,” she recalls.

After a week, the men took Sahana and the other girl to their first assignment. This time, the girls had to deal with 12 men. Again, they forced the

## THE DIRTIEST OF TRADES

NAIMUL KARIM



PHOTO: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

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girls to drink, made them dance and then raped them. It was over there that Sahana overheard one of the men saying that she had been sold.

“After they had finished, they were beating me. One of the men asked why I was getting beaten. The man who took me there said that he had bought me for two lakh rupees and that I wasn’t behaving as I should. I needed to be worth the money spent,” she says.

Sahana was sent to various customers. There were times when she was hit if she was not willing to have sex with her clients.

A few weeks later, Sahana realised that the only way to escape was to contact her mother in Dhaka. With the tips that she received from her customers, she managed to buy a phone. She then called her mother, who had by then filed a case against the parlour in Tejgaon in which Sahana used to work.

A few days later, Sahana’s mother contacted BNWLA and gave Sahana their emergency number.

“I got a call from an aunty at BNWLA. She gave me the number of an Indian NGO. I contacted the Indian NGO but I could not communicate with the *bhaiya* there because I didn’t know Hindi.

“So he asked me to give the phone to my customer and I did that. The customer gave him a wrong address and immediately after that informed my *dadal*. My *dadal* then decided to sell me to someone else,” she narrates.

“By then I was really shattered. I really wanted to escape. We were waiting at the train station for my new owners and that is when I started crying very loudly. The police noticed that, took me in, and at the same time arrested the traffickers.

“It was over there that the *bhaiya* from the Indian NGO came, spoke to the police and explained everything,” explains Sahana.

Sahana had to stay in a hostel in India for a year because of the cases filed

against 11 traffickers. Eventually, she returned to Bangladesh on June 5. However, more troubled ensued.

As the investigation into Sahana’s trafficking ensued in Bangladesh, her traffickers were brought under the police’s radar. As a result, her mother was threatened a number of times.

“They broke our milk and egg shop which my mother used to run. Now she is fighting alone. My mother left my father because he was a drug addict. My elder brother lives with my father and I have a sister who is younger to me. I really want to help my mother,” she says.

For survivors like Sahana, the ones who are rescued and brought home, the struggle is far from over. A glimpse across the shelter homes of the country gives you an idea of the pain that they have to endure after escaping their previous life.

Sukanya Roy, who is currently Sahana’s roommate at the BNWLA’s shelter home, is HIV positive. She was tricked into going to India for a better job at a parlour in 2015 and subsequently forced to work in a brothel for a year.

Tawhida, who used to work at a well-known departmental store in Gulshan 1, returned to Dhaka pregnant. She is due in August. She is just 19.

While speaking to the survivors, you gradually realise that most of them are trapped in a vicious circle. Yes, they are back, but they don’t really know what’s in store for them next.

They are not sure if their respective communities will accept them. They are not certain if they will be able to earn money once they leave the shelter homes. The worst aspect is that they can’t openly talk about the torture that they went through. These factors eventually compel many of them to return to India or to a new destination, putting themselves in precarious situations.

Take for instance, the case of 22-year-old Fargin Khatun. She married a boy

from her village in Jessore as a teenager. She then went to India with him, where she was forced to join a brothel in Mumbai. A few years later, her husband—the trafficker—attempted to sell her to another owner. However, before that happened, Fargin called her mother, who in turn informed an NGO (Rights Jessore) in Bangladesh. Within three days, the CID raided the area in which Fargin lived and they rescued her and two other victims.

After returning to Bangladesh though, Fargin went through a financial crisis

the homes, they take part in activities that help them recover and their needs are taken care of as well. However, once they leave, the fight becomes tougher.

Moyna, who was rescued and brought back from India six years ago, lives in a slum near the Khulna railway station today. She believes that victims like her need more help.

“If it wasn’t for the Bangladesh Embassy in India, I would not have been alive and I am grateful for that. But my life today is quite difficult. I keep changing homes every week. All I am



PHOTO: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

and decided to go to Saudi Arabia to work as a house cleaner. Unfortunately, the family she worked for did not pay her for eight months, and tortured her repeatedly, until she escaped.

She stayed at the Bangladesh embassy in Riyadh for 10 months, along with hundreds of other Bangladeshi women who were tortured by their employers, before getting a ticket home from the Bangladesh government.

The challenges intensify after the survivors leave their shelter homes. At

worried about is my next meal. And it’s not just me; there are many survivors who are struggling. We need more support,” she says.

Mosharraf Hossain, who works for the Bangladesh Embassy in Delhi and has been, along with the high commissioner Syed Muazzem Ali, strategising plans for the smooth return of the survivors, agrees that more work needs to be done regarding the rehabilitation of the trafficked victims.

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