



Huile sur papier de Monique Dussault

Credit: (Photo) Monique de Longeville

TRAFFICKING IN GIRLS AND WOMEN IN BANGLADESH

Dilruba Shahana

L'an dernier une descente policière menée à plusieurs bordels à Tanbazar, le plus grand quartier réservé au Bangladesh, a résulté dans la récupération de cinquante-cinq filles mineures qui avaient été obligées – par la pauvreté et la brutalité qu'elles subissent – de se prostituer. Elles étaient âgées de onze à quinze ans. Cette descente très bien publiée amena à la conscience publique la situation épouvantable de ces filles et des milliers d'autres femmes du Bangladesh exploitées par les trafiquants du marché sexuel. Dilruba

Shahana décrit les détails de leur oppression et les difficultés des femmes activistes dans leur lutte pour obtenir des lois justes contre les trafiquants, et l'exécution stricte de ces lois.

In this article I want to focus on the social problem of immoral trafficking in women in Bangladesh which is becoming increasingly visible and to discuss the legal provisions which prohibit immoral trafficking in women. Nowadays it is not uncommon in Bangladesh for girls and women to be abducted, sold and smuggled abroad for immoral purposes.

Recently police in Narayanganj (a small riverport city near Dhaka) conducted a three-hour raid in Tanbazar, the biggest redlight district in Bangladesh. This raid resulted in the recovery of fifty-five underaged girls engaged in prostitution.¹ Most of the girls who were allured into the so-called "world's oldest profession" had been kidnapped from various parts of the country. Although their real ages ranged from eleven to fifteen, in the age certificates obtained from the Notary Public they were declared 'adult.' The Notary Public declared them adult without seeing

them in person; usually the person who engages the girls in prostitution obtains these age certificates for them. The raiding police also arrested fifteen women brothel-keepers under whose custody the minor prostitutes were kept.

In their statements to the police, most of the recovered girls, said they were victims of circumstances and had been brought to Tanzabar without their knowledge or consent. One of them, Paru, said that she was kidnaped from her parent's house at Baganbari at Khulna (Southern District of Bangladesh). The kidnappers who brought her all the way from Khulna sold her to a woman brothel-keeper at Tanbazar for only Taka two thousand (\$93.00 Canadian). She initially refused to do the act directed by the brothel-keeper, but was regularly tortured until she complied.

Ruma, at 14, was brought from Kishorganj (a district near Dhaka). Utterly disgusted at her constant oppression by her step-mother, Ruma left home and arrived at Kamalapur railway station (the country's biggest railway station where the pimps and traffickers are always on the watch for poor, innocent and docile girls just arrived from various parts of the country in search of some means of survival). She was picked up by some women traffickers, brought to Tanbazar and sold. She, too, had been tortured.

According to the police, charges have been laid against the women brothel-keepers who confined the girls against their wishes in the redlight area the police sources said. Although fifty-five under-aged girls were recovered in the above raid, the actual number of underaged girls employed in prostitution totals about two thousand. After the raid, most of them were shifted to safe hideouts on the other side of the river bank to avoid further arrests.

The police operation was conducted in the wake of the recovery of Shab Meher, a Tanbazar girl, from Kamalapur railway station recently. This eleven year-old orphan, who came from Narsingdhi (near Dhaka), was the victim of inhuman brutality. She was kidnaped and subjected to three days of ordeal at the Tanbazar Brothel. She was originally enticed by a woman and brought to Narayanganj to be sold at the brothel. One woman brothel-keeper bought her and subsequently tor-



Participant at Forum '85

Credit: Nikita A. Crook

tured her until she lost consciousness. In spite of this cruelty she did not surrender her chastity. After she lost consciousness, Shab Meher was left by an inmate of the redlight area on a Dhaka-bound train. On reaching the Kamalapur station she was brought to the Dhaka Medical College Hospital. Shandhani, a voluntary organisation, had taken up the task of care for her. Many of the women's organisations came forward to rehabilitate her. But Shab Meher died. Her heart-touching story spread over the country through newspaper reports: the social conscience of people was awakened and they burst into protest against immoral trafficking.

This immoral trafficking in Bangladeshi women is not limited to the country itself. In the last quarter, according to knowledgeable sources, about five hundred girls between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five have been smuggled into Pakistan, India and the oil-rich Middle East to be used as prostitutes.² On average about two hundred women are being smuggled out of the country every month. Usually it is the women in the lower-income bracket and those who are searching for a job who are allured by the women traffickers. The ruse is a "well-paid job, clothes to wear, food to eat and a shelter over their heads." This encourages many girls to leave their

homes and fall into the clutches of the 'delal' (pimps) from whom escape is next to impossible. Many such women are rotting in different jails abroad. Many want to return but there is no way out. Many more are dying in the country carrying the stigma that has befallen them to their graves.

In August 1982 one such case made headlines. It involved a gang of five who were trying to smuggle 150 women out of the country. They were caught by members of the Bangladesh Rifles. Four alleged traffickers dealing in Bangladeshi women were charged in a Magistrate Court in Karachi (Pakistan) on 25th June 1985 with abduction and running a prostitution den. The four accused, themselves Bangladeshi immigrants, had according to the prosecution been engaged in slave-trading – abducting young women from the rural areas of Bangladesh and bringing them to Pakistan. About 500 girls had been illegally transported over the past few years, police sources said. Each girl was sold in Karachi and elsewhere in Pakistan for prices ranging from 1000 to 3000 rupees (\$65.00-160.00).³

Prostitution itself is not an offence but it is also not regularised under law. There is no system of permits authorising prostitutes to engage in this profession. The law states that it is a crime to engage any

woman against her will in immoral activities. The man who has engaged her will be punished. So the traffickers or pimps always manage to produce an affidavit for the prostitute under his custody in which it is stated that the prostitute, being above eighteen years old, *willingly* enters into this profession. But no prostitute enters into this profession out of choice. Statistical data has shown that 55.12% entered it due to poverty; 17.08% had been cheated by a lover and sold; 1.87% had been sold by a husband; 2.72% by a step mother; 15.12% kidnapped and sold by miscreant; and 8.29% for other reasons (e.g. as childhood, or after having been deserted by a husband).⁴

All legal provisions relating to immoral trafficking are directed against the persons who live off the earnings of prostitutes (pimps and traffickers). Thus the law implicitly accepts the existence of prostitutes in society. By promulgating the Cruelty (Deterrent Punishment) to Women Ordinance of 1983 the government has provided for the strict punishment of those engaged in immoral trafficking in women. Section 5 of the Ordinance states that:

whoever imports or exports or sells, lets to 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 or illicit intercourse with any person or for any unlawful and immoral purpose, or knowing it to be likely that such woman will be employed or used for any such purpose shall be punishable with transportation for life or with rigorous imprisonment for a term which may extend to fourteen years and shall also be liable to a fine.

Under section 4 a person accused of kidnapping or abduction is also liable to fourteen years rigorous imprisonment.

The National Women Lawyers' Association played a vital role in the promulgation of this strict law to suppress violence against women – like immoral trafficking – through repeated demands for the legislation. But to date no one tried under this Ordinance has been given this punishment. Strict enforcement of the laws would make it more difficult to exploit women as prostitutes.

¹*The New Nation* (April 1985).

²*Ibid.*

³*The Bangladesh Times* (26 June 1985).

⁴From a survey of 205 women conducted by the Bengali weekly *Bichitra*.

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KISHWAR NAHEED

All bonds
Break in the crush of spent passions
And waning seasons
Like falling unripe fruit.
All bonds,
All thirty eight years of life
Have ripened into your cheeks and hair
Like the glowing coins of life.

Kishwar Naheed,
A pearl-oyster with sealed lips,
Woman of the past,
Woman of today,
Afflicted,
You speak from the shore
To the winds of life's ocean
To move the feet of mountains.

Kishwar Naheed,
None speaks here.
No one wants to know the words of
speaking glances.
The fish slipping from the hand
Turns fear into hate.

Kishwar Naheed,
The desire to see you silent
Billows up even from the grave.
But speech is urgent
When listening is a crime.
Now I can see
Expressions which daunted me
Strike fear everywhere.

Kishwar Naheed
Lahore, Pakistan