
ANTI HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN BANGLADESH: OPTIONS AND STRATEGIES

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INTRODUCTION

Human trafficking in Bangladesh is believed to be extensive both within the country and to India, Pakistan and the Middle East. Many girls are trafficked into sexual exploitation or bonded servitude and many boys have also been trafficked to the Middle East to become camel racing jockeys. Many children are taken with their parents' consent, having been allured by stories of well-paid jobs but unfortunately later they are being killed by the traffickers just to collect kidney and liver from their body. Reintegration into mainstream society is a huge issue for trafficked children.

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CONCEPTUAL NET

Over the last three decades, human trafficking has become one of the most visible and articulated social problems in Bangladesh. Women and children from Bangladesh are trafficked to India and Pakistan for sexual exploitation. Bangladeshi women migrate legally to Gulf states—Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, the U.A.E., and Saudi Arabia—for work as domestic servants, but often find themselves in situations of involuntary servitude. Additionally Bangladeshi boys are trafficked to the Gulf to serve as camel jockeys and internally as bonded laborers in the harmful industry. But it is a matter of regret that the Government of Bangladesh does not fully comply with the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking; however, it is making significant efforts to do so. Bangladesh continued to make progress on efforts initiated two years ago. In the last year the government repatriated 166 child camel jockeys from the U.A.E., rescued 160 children from bonded labor in the fishing industry, launched a broad public awareness campaign, and provided anti-trafficking training to border guards and diplomats. Despite these achievements, Bangladesh continues to face a significant internal and international trafficking problem. Bangladesh should assign greater priority and resources to its law enforcement efforts to trafficking and it should also institute programs to protect witnesses.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research reports and publications of various organizations working in the area of trafficking, journals, reports, booklets, newsletters, photographs, and newspaper clippings were reviewed. Existing information was extracted from various sources to enable readers to understand the problems relating to trafficking from various perspectives. Several key informants selected from NGOs and research organizations were interviewed to add an additional perspective on trafficking and to increase the range of activities and

interventions on trafficking covered in this report and some convicted prisoners, rescued women and children were also interviewed.

TRAFFICKING ROUTES

Unfortunately Bangladesh is mainly a country of origin for trafficking in women and children. Over the past decade, more than 500,000 Bangladeshi women and children have been trafficked - smuggled into prostitution or forced labour across country borders. Women are abducted and lured by traffickers through threats, physical force, illegal confinement and debt bondage. At least 20,000 Bangladeshi women and children are trafficked to India and Pakistan and to Middle Eastern countries in every year. According to another estimate, 50,000 Bangladeshi girls are trafficked to or through India every year. The girls end up in brothels in India or Pakistan or in Middle Eastern or other South Asian countries. Internal trafficking in women and children occurs from rural areas of the country to the capital, Dhaka. Human trafficking has spread slavery to every continent and most countries. It rivals the drugs and illegal arms trade as one of the most profitable forms of illegal activity. Its high profit, low penalty nature makes it attractive to small criminal rings and large-scale organized crime, forcing a growing number of people into slavery around the world.

ACTIONS AGAINST HUMAN TRAFFICKING: A VIEW FROM BANGLADESH GOVERNMENT

In March 2001, Bangladesh government ratified the International Labour Organization Convention on the Worst Forms of Child Labour No.182. Under this Convention, the government agreed to protect children from working in conditions that damage their physical and psychological well-being. The trafficking of children and the work into which they are being sent contravenes this Convention.

Under Bangladesh's Suppression of Violence against Women and

Children Act (2000) trafficking of women and children is illegal. Harsh penalties are prescribed for traffickers. However, this law is frequently not implemented and fails to safeguard the rights of people who have been trafficked.

Prostitution and trafficking for the purpose of prostitution or other immoral acts are covered in the Penal Code; the 2000 Suppression of Violence against Women and Children Act, which replaced the 1995 Oppression of Woman and Child Act; and the 1993 Suppression of Immoral Traffic Act.

The 2000 Suppression of Violence against Women and Children Act punishes the crime of trafficking in children and women by capital punishment or by imprisonment for life and a fine.

The Suppression of Immoral Traffic Act prohibits keeping a brothel or allowing premises to be used as brothels, soliciting for the purposes of prostitution, living on the money transacted in prostitution, procuring individuals for the purpose of prostitution, importing a female for the purpose of prostitution, and detaining a woman for the purpose of prostitution. The act also prohibits encouraging a girl under 18 to be in prostitution.

The Penal Code prohibits procurement of a girl under the age of 18 for illicit intercourse with another person; selling, letting, hiring, or disposing of minors under the age of 18 for the purpose of prostitution; and buying minors for the same purpose. In addition, the code prohibits abduction.

The Ministry of Women and Children Affairs (MWCA) of Bangladesh carried out a 3-year pilot project called Coordinated Program to Combat Child Trafficking. As a result, a counter trafficking framework report was published to help the Bangladeshi government with its future counter trafficking plan of action. MWCA operates support centers at six divisional levels that offer shelter and training for rehabilitation. The ministry also hosts a rehabilitation center for destitute children and a home for boys. The National Task Force for Anti-Child Trafficking was formed under this

project. The task force is comprised of the representatives of 10 ministries and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

As a part of the National Plan of Action for Children, the government established mechanisms to regularly review the situation of trafficking in people and of programs to prevent child trafficking and punish the perpetrators.

NONGOVERNMENTAL AND INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATION RESPONSES

The Bangladesh chapter of Action against Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation of Children (ATSEC) and Bangladesh Forum against Human Trafficking jointly organized a USAID-supported daylong workshop in March 2004 called Anti trafficking Issue for Media Representatives. ATSEC is a coalition of 15 NGOs working in Bangladesh to prevent trafficking in children and women for sexual exploitation. The coalition focuses on advocacy, awareness raising, technical support, research and program support, capacity building, and coordination among individuals and organizations. ASTEC has established a national resource center for information dissemination on trafficking issues and has worked on a program to sensitize and mobilize policy planners on the issue of trafficking in Bangladesh.

Resource Bangladesh, an NGO, organized the Children's Congress, a platform from which disadvantaged children can speak about the conditions of their lives. Sessions of the Children's Congress were planned for approximately 10 Bangladeshi districts. Ain o Salish Kendro of Dhaka is a human rights and legal aid organization consisting of 25 member organizations. Activities include raising awareness on human rights and legal issues, advocacy, and legal aid.

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) undertook a regional technical assistance in July 2001 in India, Bangladesh, and Nepal. ADB aimed at increasing its understanding of how its existing country programs and

regional policy could be used to support and strengthen anti trafficking initiatives in the region.

On February 8, 2004, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in Dhaka, MWCA, and the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation jointly organized a conference to review the Bangladeshi government's efforts to combat trafficking in women and children. Representatives from the government, IOM, the World Bank, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and the United Nations Development Programme attended the conference.

In November 2001, the Bangladeshi government and UNICEF co hosted a 3-day South Asia Consultation for the Second World Congress against Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children. One hundred and fifty participants from seven member countries of the South Asian Association for Regional Corporation (SAARC) attended, including high-level government delegates, children, and representatives of NGOs and media and international organizations. The SAARC forum, founded in 1985, aims to promote cultural ties and economic and social development among its member states (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka).

In January 2002, the Bangladeshi government signed the SAARC Convention on Prevention and Combating Trafficking in Women and Children for Prostitution. Resolutions were adopted to step up cooperation among law enforcement authorities to fight trafficking in women and children, terrorism, and drug trafficking. In January 2004, leaders from SAARC member states met in Islamabad for the first summit in 2 years.

In September 2004, a 3-day, UNICEF-sponsored meeting between representatives of South Asian governments, UN agencies, and NGOs took place in Colombo, Sri Lanka. Government officials signed a five-point joint statement, agreeing that children in South Asia deserve better protection from traffickers and sexual abusers. Participating countries were

Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Maldives, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka.

So it is badly needed to add NGO initiatives with the government activities to bring any change in the society. A collaborative effort of GOs and NGOs can reduce human trafficking. This type of collaboration would save money and time, prevent duplication of work and provide maximum services for the victims. In this connection, the collaborative attitudes and relationships between GOs and NGOs should be increased to eradicate human trafficking.

PROSECUTION

The Government of Bangladesh sustained efforts to punish traffickers in 2005, prosecuting 87 cases and convicting 36 traffickers – 27 of whom received life sentences.

Although the number of prosecutions increased over 2004, the number of convictions declined. Police also arrested 150 alleged traffickers. Notably, Bangladesh began prosecutions against child camel jockey traffickers although a lack of resources hinders investigations, Bangladesh expanded anti-trafficking police units to every district to encourage victims to testify against their traffickers and to compile data on trafficking. In response to inadequately trained police and prosecutors, the government worked with legal experts to provide specialized training to prosecutors and with IOM to develop a trafficking course for the National Police Academy at Rajshahi. Bangladesh made some progress in prosecuting trafficking cases and began taking some action to address trafficking for involuntary servitude. The government prohibits the trafficking of women and children for the purpose of commercial sexual exploitation or involuntary servitude under the Repression of Women and Children Act of 2000 (amended in 2003), and prohibits the selling and buying of a minor under age 18 for prostitution in Articles 372 and 373 of the penal code. Article 374 of Bangladesh's penal code prohibits involuntary servitude, but the prescribed penalties of

imprisonment for up to one year or a fine are not sufficiently stringent to deter the offense. Bangladesh lacks laws criminalizing the trafficking of adult males for commercial sexual exploitation. In 2006, the government prosecuted 70 trafficking cases and obtained convictions for 43 individuals, with 4 receiving death sentences and 32 receiving life sentences. Bangladesh also arrested five immigration officers and one former police officer on suspicion of complicity in trafficking; their prosecutions are pending. The government also reported filing 117 cases for forced child labor. Nonetheless, the government did not report any convictions of traffickers for involuntary servitude during the reporting period. Bangladesh should continue to prosecute and punish sex trafficking and should increase law enforcement efforts against labor forms of trafficking, including seeking criminal penalties against any convicted traffickers.

PROTECTION

The Government of Bangladesh continued to provide an inadequate level of protection to victims of trafficking over the reporting period. With limited resources, the government supported crisis centers in hospitals that are open to trafficking victims, but it also relied heavily on NGOs to provide legal, medical, and psychological care to victims.

Bangladesh should institute a clear system to protect witnesses from retribution and to encourage more to testify at trials against traffickers. Bangladesh did not make discernible progress in protecting victims of trafficking this reporting period, but continued efforts from previous years. Police anti-trafficking units encourage victims to assist in the investigation of cases against their traffickers. Victims reportedly are not jailed or punished, but the government does not offer victims legal alternatives to their removal to countries where they may face hardship or retribution. The government supported crisis centers in hospitals that are open to trafficking victims, but relied on NGOs to provide medical and psychological care to victims. The government also provided a building to a local NGO for use as

a shelter for at-risk children. Bangladesh developed a witness protection protocol permitting victims to submit testimony in writing or to testify in front of a judge only. Nonetheless, the government reported no efforts to protect adult male victims or victims of forced labor. Bangladesh should continue to support protection services for victims of sex trafficking, and should increase assistance to victims of involuntary servitude, including Bangladeshis repatriated after being trafficked abroad.

PREVENTION

Bangladesh made significant progress in its trafficking prevention efforts throughout the year through broad public awareness campaigns and specialized training.

The Ministry of Social Welfare also provided anti-trafficking information to micro-credit borrowers, reaching over 400,000 at-risk women. Bangladesh noticeably improved its training efforts, providing entry-level diplomats and over 20,000 border guards with specialized anti-trafficking training. Over 2,100 imams received training on the risks, threats, and modalities of trafficking and 100 imams received training as trainers.

AWARENESS CAMPAIGNING

“Awareness Creation,” two examples of generalized categories include: safe migration awareness; and general awareness associated with the risks of trafficking. Awareness rising campaigns in the media and more communication between media, NGOs, Police, public etc should establish. For safe migration, an effective prevention method is to provide potential migrants and communities with focused information that will help to educate and protect them from the trafficking “harm/exploitation.” The target audience for this includes local leaders, decision-makers, prospective migrants, etc. Some of the activities include: the distribution of easy-to-read and understand safe migration pamphlets; posters that highlight important information on safe migration; group orientations and one-on-one counseling

on the subject; creation of migration referral centers that ensure that all migration opportunities are legitimate (these centers monitor sites, help with logistical arrangements and report any problems that are identified); and in some countries, referral hotlines exist to allow prospective migrants to get answers to questions that help them migrate safely.

Another strategy used is a general awareness campaign that focuses on the risks associated with migration and trafficking – not to scare people, but instead to empower them with the information they need to protect themselves. This can be done at all levels of society using targeted mass media, rallies, school-based programs, posters, community workshops, etc. The objective is to help people to understand what trafficking is and what can be done to stop it within their community.

RESPONSE BY MASS MEDIA:

The Media either electronic or press has a significant role in information and dissemination of the incidents of violence, awareness raising and campaigning against the violence. Everyday newspapers bring out a number of different incidences of violence to the public notice. Newspapers, Radio, TV are important and effective media for raising public awareness. The press as a whole is playing very laudable role in reporting the cases of women torture of various scale and dimension. Through editorials, columns, features and reporting of cases of Women repression the press is drawing public attention which on the other hand mobilizing or awakening public opinion or awareness on various nature of women repression. The electronic media both public and private channel are found equally pro-active in building public opinion and raising hatred and anger against violence.

CONCLUSION:

I observed that many research reports are based on information gathered through anecdotes, and from secondary analysis and unreliable data but I relied on a few good reports that collected field information describing the

trafficking practices and that mapped out the trafficking routes.

Given the regional nature of trafficking and the international implications of this problem, reports on the nature, magnitude, trends, and forms of trafficking in the SAARC countries are needed. The advantage of establishing cross-regional teams and resource centres to help identify the dynamics of trafficking, both from local and regional perspectives. A uniform plan of action on the issue of trafficking of women and children involving the governments and NGOs of the region needs to be developed, so that a coordinated approach towards the conviction of traffickers is possible. Human trafficking is a 'social evil' that seems to be growing at an alarming rate throughout the world. This practice results in unimaginable human suffering and represents one of the most important human rights violations of our time, resulting in a form of 'Modern Slavery'. For Bangladesh, this condition is more acute. In order to prevent this crime, human trafficking should be integrated as cross-cutting issue related to social protection from all sectors of the society. ❖

NOTES:

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