HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN BANGLADESH: AN OVERVIEW

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TRAFFICKING HAS EMERGED AS ONE OF THE WORST AND MOST PERVASIVE FORMS OF HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATION OF WOMEN AND CHILDREN. TRAFFICKING IN WOMEN AND CHILDREN IS TODAY A MAJOR SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CONCERN GLOBALLY AS WELL AS NATIONALLY. IT HAS ALSO BECOME THE FASTEST GROWING CRIMINAL ENTERPRISE IN THE WORLD. AN ESTIMATED 1-2 MILLION WOMEN AND CHILDREN ARE TRAFFICKED ANNUALLY AROUND THE WORLD, GENERALLY FOR THE PURPOSE OF FORCED LABOR, COMMERCIAL SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OR DOMESTIC SERVITUDE. A UNITED NATIONS (UN) ESTIMATES CONDUCTED IN 1999 INDICATE THAT THE FASTEST GROWING INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS IS TRAFFICKING IN WOMEN AND CHILDREN (UNIFEM). ACCORDING TO AN ESTIMATE BY INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATION FOR MIGRATION (IOM), THE GLOBAL TRAFFICKING INDUSTRY GENERATES UP TO 8 BILLION US DOLLARS (STAR, FEBRUARY 1, 2001).

This article tries to study the problem of trafficking of women and children with special reference to Bangladesh. In the process, different dimensions of the problem have been looked into. At the same time, various efforts taken by the Government, international agencies, donors and NGOs to combat the menace were also reviewed.

Conceptual Issues

Currently, there is no internationally agreed definition of trafficking. The term "trafficking" is used by different actors to describe activities that range from voluntary, facilitated migration, to the exploitation of prostitution, to the movement of persons through the threat or use of force, coercion, violence, etc. for certain exploitative purposes. Increasingly, it has been recognized that historical characterizations of trafficking are outdated, ill-defined and non-responsive to the current realities of the movement of and trade in people and to the nature and extent of the abuses inherent in and incidental to trafficking (UNECOSOC, 2000).

Now it is argued that rather than clinging to outdated notions of the constituent elements of trafficking, which date back to the early nineteenth century, new understandings of trafficking derive from an assessment of the current needs of trafficked persons in general, and trafficked women in particular. New definitions also must be specially tailored to protect and promote the human rights of trafficked persons, with special emphasis on gender-specific violations and protections.

Trafficking is a dynamic concept, the parameters of which are constantly changing to respond to changing economic, social, and political conditions. Although the purposes for which women are trafficked change and ways in which women are trafficked from one country to other also change but the constituent elements remain constant. At the core of any definition of trafficking must be the recognition that trafficking is never consensual. It is the non-consensual nature of trafficking that distinguishes it from other forms of migration. The lack of informed consent must not be confused with the illegality of certain forms of migration. While all trafficking is, or should be, illegal, all illegal migration is not trafficking.

The United Nations General Assembly in 1994 defined trafficking as “the illicit and clandestine movements of persons across national borders, largely from developing countries and some countries with economies in transition, with the end goal of forcing women and girl children into sexually or economically oppressive and exploitative situations for profit of recruiters, traffickers and crime syndicates, as well as other illegal activities related to trafficking, such as forced domestic labor, false marriages, clandestine employment and false adoption”. The other definition on trafficking that has been put forwarded in the recent years is “the extraction of work and services from any women or the appropriation of the legal identity and/or physical person or any women by
means of violence, abuse of authority or dominant position, debt bondage, deception or other forms of coercion” (UNIFEM).

Trafficking: Demand and Supply

History of trafficking suggests that poor women and children are the key target group of trafficking, because of their marginalization, limited economic resources and predominance in the “invisible” informal sector. The major portion of trafficked women and girls are those who are unmarried, divorced, separated or widowed. The ethnic minorities, “scheduled castes” or “other backward classes” indigenous people, hill tribes, refugees, and illegal migrants also falls prey to the human traffickers around the world (UNIFEM).

Human trafficking is influenced by two factors, namely, demand and supply factors. Demand factors indicate the demand side and the supply factors indicate the supply side of the whole business in human trafficking.

Demand factors include the following:

· development policies and patterns of development promoting tourism, industrialization, rural to urban migration particularly of males, generate the demand for commercial sex;
· an expanding commercial sex industry in the Asia region has increased the demand for the services of sex workers. Male client’s preferences are for younger women and virgin girls because of the fear of HIV infection;
· demand by employers and enterprises for cheap labor of children and women. Women’s labor is often considered as low status work such as in the domestic and entertainment spheres; and
· male attitudes and perceptions of women, male dominated value systems in society, and women’s unequal and low socio-economic status maintains demands (UNIFEM).

On the other hand, supply factors include the following:

· poverty and deprivation, coupled with the low status of women and girls in society, are key push factors;
· inadequate educational and employment opportunities, gender disparities in access to opportunities, and lack of social safety nets;
· a lucrative business with low investments but high monetary returns is attractive to crime syndicates, facilitators, and even brings some financial gains to families;
· economic disparities within countries, and between countries and regions fuels the demand for trafficking from low income to high income areas;
· globalization and liberalization have relaxed controls, opened borders between countries, facilitating population mobility;
· internal and international migration of women into the labour market, provides increased opportunities and channels for trafficking;
· traditional and religious practices in some countries (in some south Asian countries) of dedicating girls to gods and goddesses, and social acceptance of prostitution encourages the trade. A sense of gratitude or “repayment of debt” by children to parents as in some societies, compels many young women and girls into the sex industry;
· social conventions such as child marriages, polygamy, dowry, and social stigma against single, unwed, divorced women and girls, and those sexually abused, are important contributing factors;
· erosion of traditional family systems and values, and the pursuit of consumerism encourages the sale of women and children;
· the growth of transnational crime, and the expansion of drug trafficking networks act as mechanisms for other forms of exploitation;
· lack of a strong political will, and weak law enforcement mechanisms and measures to penalize offenders, exploitation by corrupt law enforcers and officials, allows the trafficking trade to flourish;
· export of labour is a strategic response of governments in the current economic crisis in Asia, and hence exacerbate trafficking; and
· natural disasters also facilitate the problem of trafficking (UNIFEM).
Human Trafficking: The Bangladesh Scenario

It has been reported that there are about one million ‘undocumented’ Bangladesh women in Pakistan. A significant number of whom are believed to have been trafficked (Star, October 8, 2000). According to the UNIFEM, about 300,000 Bangladeshi children have been trafficked to brothels in India over a period of time. Over the last five years at least 13,220 children are reported as being trafficked out of the country, and it was possible to rescue only 4,700 of them. It is believed that about 4,500 women and children from Bangladesh are trafficked to Pakistan annually. On the other hand, Bangladesh boys in the ages between 4-12 years are trafficked for camel racing in the Gulf; sexual exploitation of these boys by the employers in not uncommon (UNIFEM).

In Bangladesh, various ways are practiced for the procurement of women and children for the purpose of trafficking. One of these practices is procuring young girls through marriage. For this purpose, men are being employed outside the country. They come back to their village homes to get married. After marriage, the young wife accompanies the husband to his place of work and since then, no trace could be found of these young girls.

The other way is that the traffickers entice young girls that they would provide them with jobs and better prospects in other countries (Shamim, 1997). “What is alarming is that a large number of garment factories are now acting as recruiting stations for the traffickers” (Star, October 6, 2000). In other cases, sometimes, parents also sell their children to the traffickers on account of poverty and hunger (Shamim, 1997). Kidnapping is another way that is being practiced for the procurement of women and children for trafficking.

Generally, traffickers apply the following techniques in recruiting and transporting women and children from Bangladesh. Women and children are generally recruited from rural areas or small towns. In the transshipment process they are handed over and taken over by numerous procurers, brokers, and intermediaries. In the recruitment process, traffickers enlist the help of local persons and villagers to identify vulnerable families. It has been observed that traffickers operate in an organized network having their agents make contacts with unsuspecting women and children around bus and train stations.

Interventions for Combating Trafficking

The menace of human trafficking has caught the attention of many both in the international and national arenas. Concerted efforts are on at both the levels to combat human trafficking. Some of these are discussed below.

The International Efforts

Trafficking of women and children is crime against humanity and also a gross violation of human right. As such, it has become a global concern. The Platform for Action (PFA) adopted in Beijing at the Fourth World Conference on Women is a call for concrete action to protect and promote the human rights of women and the girl child as an integral part of universal human rights and to eliminate all forms of violence against women. It has addressed the issue of trafficking in women in its three critical areas of concern that are violence against women, human rights of women and the girl child.

In the Fifty-first session of the United Nations General Assembly held in New York on the 14th November 1996, 43 countries adopted a resolution on the trafficking in women and girls. In the said resolution, governments are called upon to implement the Platform for Action adopted in the Fourth World Conference on Women. It also encourages cooperation and concerted action by law enforcing authorities and institutions so as to dismantle national, regional and international networks in trafficking. Governments are also asked to declare trafficking in women and girls in all its forms as a criminal offence and to condemn and penalize all those offenders involved. This would include intermediaries, regardless of the place where the offence are committed, while ensuring that victims of trafficking are not penalized; and to penalize persons in authority found guilty of sexually assaulting victims of trafficking in their custody.
The report of the Special Rapporteur Ms. Radhika Coomaraswamy of the 53rd session of the Commission on Human Rights held in Geneva on March 10th through April 17th, 1997, covered the rape and sexual violence against women including sexual harassment and trafficking in women and forced prostitution. In her recommendation on trafficking in women, she urged the international community to begin a dialogue toward an adoption of new international standards with regard to trafficking and prostitution. Such standards, she further suggested “should be developed along with international mechanisms to ensure reporting and monitoring of State activities.”

The declaration of the Ninth SAARC Summit in its section on women in development stated, “Expressing grave concern at the trafficking of women and children within and between countries, the heads of state or governments pledged to coordinate their efforts and take effective measures to address this problem. They decided that existing legislation in member states should be strengthened and strictly enforced. This should include simplification of repatriation procedures for victims of trafficking. They also decided that the feasibility of establishing a Regional Convention on Combating the Crime of Trafficking in Women and Children for Prostitution should be examined by the relevant Technical Committee (Shamim, 1997).”

The Government Efforts

The Bangladesh Government has also expressed grave concern about trafficking of women and children. To combat trafficking, the Government has enacted a number of laws. Noteworthy among these are The Children Act 1994 (GoB, 1994) and the Oppression Against Women and Children 1995 (Special Act) (GoB, 1995). Besides, the Government has taken some concrete measures to combat trafficking such as, the establishment of a Anti-trafficking Cell within the Ministry of Home Affairs. Moreover, with reference to the 3rd Beijing Biennial Ministerial Meeting at Male, Maldives, the Bangladesh Government is also contemplating the possibility of facilitating the setting up of a cross-ministerial Anti-trafficking Cell to coordinate actions in different areas of anti-trafficking, i.e., prevention, prosecution, and protection (UNIFEM, 2000).

The Donors Efforts

The donors, both bilateral and multilateral, working in Bangladesh have also shown their concerns about the increasing problem of trafficking of women and children in this part of the world. Some of them have taken a number of programs and projects to combat the problem. Noteworthy among them are the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), International Labour Organisation (ILO), United Nations Children Emergency Fund (UNICEF), NORAD, Asia foundation, Red Bernet, Denmark and International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM). The USAID’s project on trafficking titled USAID/ Dhaka’s Anti-trafficking Program has a five pillar approach. These are, appropriate targeted research, strengthening of Bangladesh’s anti-trafficking networks, supporting NGO/ CBO capacity building, prosecution and protection (rehabilitation) and targeted anti-trafficking prevention efforts (USAID, 2000). On the other hand, the UNIFEM has a project titled “Prevention of Trafficking of Women and Children in South Asia of a similar nature. But the project coverage includes countries of the South-Asian region, i.e., Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Maldives (UNIFEM, 2000).

The NGO Efforts

In Bangladesh, many NGOs and women’s organizations, from the last decade, have initiated interventions to prevent and eliminate prostitution as well as provide rehabilitation and support services to sex-workers and their children. Such interventions include, education, awareness development, research and documentation, action programs, advocacy and media participation for combating women and child trafficking. Various national NGOs like UBINIG, the Centre for Women and Children Studies (CWCS), Uttoron, besides many others, are playing an important role in addressing the issue of trafficking. Also there are regional networks like Action Against Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation of Children (ATSEC) playing an important role in addressing the issue through
different collaborative efforts. While at the national level, many NGOs are doing a lot of rehabilitation and reintegration work but the extent of successful reintegration is limited. This is primarily true in the case of South Asia due to the community resistance to accept the trafficked women or girls once they are identified as being associated with the sex trade. The social and cultural morality based code of conduct for women is defined by patriarchal norms of the South Asian society. However, certain NGOs have been able to strategize and find an effective way for dealing with this problem. NGOs in Bangladesh are observed to be involved in the following types of activities to combat the menace of trafficking. These are, awareness raising, research and documentation, action programs, advocacy and media participation, investigation, rescue and rehabilitation programs for trafficked women and children.

It has been observed that NGOs’ such as, Adarsha Samaj Seba Samity, Association for Integrated Development, Comilla, Association for Community Development, Bangladesh Shishu Adhikar Forum, Gono Gagor Kendra, Kapotakkha, Nari Kalayan Samity etc., to name a few, have awareness development programs on trafficking in women and children. The awareness development programs are being conducted through weekly, monthly and general group meetings, workshops, training, and other similar activities. Many of these NGOs use popular media and cultural activities like drama, folk song, video film, etc., to strengthen their awareness raising programs. Some organizations use paper clippings or various publication materials as a tool for the purpose. Moreover, various newsletters, leaflets, IC materials, hand written posters, books and press releases are also used as instruments to accelerate the awareness development program of the NGOs. Occasionally they act as a pressure group to lobby with the law enforcing agencies, community leaders, local administration and other government agencies.

A number of NGOs also conduct researches on various issues of trafficking or document the trafficking cases. These research findings are published as documents, mimeos and media reports. Grassroots level organizations like Association for Community Development has published a book on trafficking in women and children, based on field data in their working area in Rajshahi. The Bangladesh National Women Lawyers Association (BNWLA) has published materials based on the trafficking cases that they have rescued from Bangladesh, as well as from neighboring countries. BNWLA also undertook a survey in the area of Child and Women Trafficking supported by Red Barnet and UNICEF. The Centre for Women and Children Studies has undertaken dometnation of trafficking in women and children from media coverage. Bangladesh Shishu Adhikar Forum and human Rights J ournalist Forum of Bangladesh have compiled reports from news clippings on traffick-ing in women and children.

There are only a few organizations working in the area of action programs like investigation, rescue and rehabilitation. Gono Jagoran Kendro, Human Rights J ournalist Forum of Bangladesh, Bangladesh society for the Enforcement of Human Rights and Association for Community Development have undertaken investigations on trafficking in women and children. Organizations such as, Hotline Bangladesh (Asia), Ain-O- Salish Kendro, BNWLA, Nikusimaz Samaz Kallyan Protisthan, MUKTI are also involved in action programs like, investigation, and rescue of the trafficked women and children.

It has been observed that the rehabilitation of trafficked women and children is a very difficult task. As such, only a few organizations are involved in rehabilitation programs. NGOs like, Sinnomul Mohila Samity and Hotline Bangladesh (Asia) have programs for the rehabilitation of trafficked women and children (Fact-finding Meeting, 1997).

Conclusion

Trafficking has emerged as one of the worst and most pervasive forms of human rights violation of women and children. Trafficking is today a major social and political concern both globally as well as nationally. It has also become the fastest growing criminal enterprise in the world. The problem of trafficking has generated lot of concerns and apprehensions among the international and national policy makers and governments and the civil society at large.
It has been observed that the human trafficking is a age old problem. But the concern is that the magnitude of it is multiplying with the growing incidence of poverty and criminalization. As Bangladesh is a poverty stricken country, human trafficking is increasing at an alarming rate. However, concerted efforts are there on the part of the Government, the international agencies, the donor community and the NGOs to combat the problem. It has been observed that the problem has international and regional dimensions. As such, more concerted international and regional efforts should be mooted along side national efforts to combat the menace of trafficking of women and children from one country to the other.

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