

**SEX TRADE WORKERS IN BANGLADESH:
AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF THE SEX WORKERS' MOVEMENT
WITHIN THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT AND PATRIARCHY,
18TH CENTURY TO 2002**

by

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for the degree of Master of Arts
in the joint Women's Studies Programme**

at

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This Thesis is dedicated to the sex workers in Bangladesh and more specifically to Hajera, the chairperson of Durjoy, who has taught me to listen to women's voices and has been a continual inspiration to me in writing this thesis.

Sex Trade Workers in Bangladesh: An Exploratory Study of the Sex Workers' Movement Within the Women's Movement and Patriarchy, 18th Century to 2002

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Date of Submission: September 13, 2004

Abstract

This thesis explores the situation of sex workers in Bangladesh through a feminist holistic analysis, and using a feminist methodology, it traces the status change of sex workers from the pre-colonial era to the present time. While sex workers' status deteriorated with the introduction of capitalism and British colonialism in the 19th century, in recent times, sex workers have gained some significant political and socio-economic rights in Bangladeshi society. This thesis examines how a collective women's movement in the 1980s, stemming out of the UN Decade for Women and global feminisms have helped sex workers create a political platform to put demand their women's human rights . The illegal evictions in 1999 of sex workers from the Tanbazar brothel has been examined in this thesis to analyze how national and international organizations, women's organizations and civil society responded to the evictions and through a collective movement created a political platform to demand sex workers' human rights. This thesis also proposes two overlapping and alternative approaches sex workers might consider using at the present time to look forward and effectively integrate their voices, concerns and needs into the policy and decision making arena and into the larger socio-economic and political realm in Bangladeshi society.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

This thesis is an exploratory study that uses a Holistic Feminist Analysis to examine in context the unique local experiences of the sex workers' movement in Bangladesh. It examines the situation over time through a historical study of prostitution from late 18th century to nineteenth century Bengal to the present, exploring how and suggesting why the status of sex workers in Bangladesh has changed dramatically over time. It also examines the links among sex workers, women's movements, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), international organizations, and civil society in contemporary times. The thesis is specifically focused on the sex workers' movement in the context of historical patriarchal trends that have oppressed sex workers in Bangladesh and factors which led to the sex workers' movement. This thesis, however, does not analyze in detail the sex workers situation within neo-patriarchal trends in recent times, such as the emergence of trafficking of women across and within borders but raises the issue in the last part of the thesis as a directive for further feminist research.

The thesis encompasses the following principal components: a feminist analysis and methodology to analyze the situation of sex workers in Bangladesh which also underlies every chapter, a historical analysis of sex workers' status in Bangladesh from early-colonial era (late 18th century to early 19th century) to British colonial rule (19th century to early 20th century) to post-British colonial rule (1947 to 1971); a critical analysis of the events of 1999 that uprooted thousands of sex workers from brothel areas; and an analysis of the response of the government, NGO community, international organizations and global community to the worsening situation of sex workers in Bangladesh. In the

last section, I develop two overlapping alternative platforms which might be useful for the sex workers' movement at the present time to look forward. Both approaches are influenced by feminist theories and methodology, as well as my research on this thesis, but the first approach is more empirically-based (grounded specifically on the data I collected from the field), while the second approach is more theoretically based (grounded specifically on integrative feminisms and Southern feminist theories developed by DAWN).¹ The two overlapping and alternatives approaches developed in the last chapter suggest possible avenues for the sex workers' movement to consider at current times to help open political spaces in Bangladeshi society for sex workers, not only to demand their human rights and their rights as Bangladeshi citizens, but to integrate their voices and concerns directly into the decision making and policy arena.

Rationale for Studying the Sex Workers' Movement

Sex workers in Bangladesh present an interesting case to study for several reasons. Firstly, and of initial attraction, was the political significance of the events surrounding the 1999 evictions. In 1999, the government illegally evicted sex workers from two of the oldest brothels *Tanbazar* and *Nimtoli* in Bangladesh. The legal victory² of the mobilized women's movement to coin the evictions illegal was an occasion in which the strong local women's movements were able to gain power in the socio-economic and political platforms in Bangladeshi society. I decided to specifically focus on the 1999 evictions, rather than examining the previous evictions in 1991 of sex workers from the *Kandupatti* brothel because the 1999 evictions helped open a political space for sex workers and

¹ DAWN is a network of feminist activists, researchers and policy makers who have come together from different parts of the Economic South, to develop alternative approaches and methods to attain the goals of social and economic justice, peace and development free of all forms of oppression by gender, class, race and nation (Sen & Grown, 1987).

² See The Dhaka Law Reports Vol. LIII, 2001 for more information.

move their agenda forward. The examination of the second evictions is based on a Holistic Feminist Analysis that examines the unique experiences of the sex workers' movement within larger women's movements in Bangladesh. Through this thesis, I examine the unique sex workers' movement within the women's movement to understand how women's empowerment can be effectively addressed within the Bangladeshi society.

In Bangladesh often the women's organizations have had different and conflicting mandates, but during a crisis, such as the 1999 evictions, these organizations came together to stand in solidarity and mobilize a social movement extremely effectively. The second reason why I chose to study the sex workers in Bangladesh is that often this sense of solidarity and collective action has not been sustained over a long period of time. In my thesis, through an examination of why and how non-governmental organizations (NGOs), international organizations and diverse women's movement organizations can join forces at certain points in the Bangladeshi social movement history but cannot maintain their solidarity, I wanted to identify possible avenues to open a space for dialogue and sustained collaboration to empower the sex workers in Bangladesh.

As I began to research the evictions and the aftermath, I discovered a third reason for the importance of the Bangladeshi case study—the historically changing status of sex workers from the period of early-colonial India to the present time. Drawing on research done by Sumanta Banerjee (1998), Helaluddin Khan Arefeen (1992), and Zarina Rahman Khan (1992), I found it was important to analyze how the status of the women involved in the trade has changed over time and the reasons why their status has changed.

The changed status of sex workers in Bangladesh has not been linear, however. The fourth reason why I decided to focus on the Bangladeshi case study is that while with the introduction of capitalism and British colonialism in nineteenth century and later the militarization during the independence war,³ the sex workers status had fallen, in the late 1980s and the 1990s sex workers gained some socioeconomic and political recognition in society through a mobilized women's movement demanding sex workers' rights as human rights. This is an interesting and dynamic change that has not been well documented and analyzed by the academics in Bangladesh, and I wanted to study it in more depth to better understand the status change of sex workers.

It is also interesting to note that Bangladesh is a Muslim majority country and one would expect prostitution to be illegal in Bangladesh as it is in other Muslim majority countries.⁴ However, despite Islamic notions outlawing prostitution, women can legally engage in prostitution with a license in Bangladesh. This is an interesting issue,⁵ both culturally and historically, and it is important to explore in more depth why prostitution is legal in a Muslim country like Bangladesh, while it is banned in many other Muslim majority countries.

While it is legal to prostitute with a license in Bangladesh, the cultural and social attitude towards sex work and women in sex work is one which treats women sex workers as morally degraded and as social outcasts. It is worth examining why, despite the legal status, women in the sex trade are treated as outcasts and what are the socio-economic, political, cultural, and historical dynamics that have influenced the status of sex workers in Bangladesh.

³ Bangladesh became independent from Pakistan in 1971.

⁴ Prostitution is illegal in Muslim majority countries, such as Pakistan, Indonesia, and Iraq.

⁵ According to Islam, prostitution is immoral and a sin.

Despite these interesting changes in the status of the sex workers, and the active involvement of NGOs, international organizations and women's movements in the sex workers' movement in recent times, research on prostitution and sex workers has been an area that has been largely neglected by academics in Bangladesh. Even though historical research has been done on the status changes of sex workers by academics such as Helaluddin Khan Arefeen and Zarina Rahman Khan,⁶ contemporary work on prostitution and women in the trade is still very scanty. There are some scattered data, but very few systematic empirical studies have been done in recent times. Within the Bangladeshi context, this is partly due to the sensitive nature of the phenomena and partly due to various stigmas attached to it. Furthermore, the data that are available often show discrepancies and gaps. For example, estimates of the numbers of prostitutes in Bangladesh vary greatly. According to the NGOs, there are approximately 150,000 women who are involved in prostitution in one form or another, while according to the official government estimates the number is closer to 9,000 women (Morol & Tahmina, 2000:152). As I went on with my research for the thesis, I found it interesting that the numbers varied because of varying perceptions of the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) and NGOs as to whom they considered to be a sex worker.⁷ I think it is important to examine these discrepancies to understand how civil society influences the lives of sex workers.

Lastly, in the broader scholarly literature while there has been an increased interest in studying prostitution (Enloe, 1983; Barry, 1995) sex work (Delacoste & Alexander 1983;

⁶ Helaluddin Arefeen Khan is a Professor of Anthropology and Zarina Rahman Khan is a Professor of Political Science at the Dhaka University.

⁷ While the government considered women in the brothels as sex workers, and all other women in prostitution were labeled as vagrants in the statistics, NGOs took into account women working in the street, hotels and other floating sex workers in their estimates.

Bell, 1987), sex tourism (Truong, 1990; Jeffrey, 2002) and some work in terms of trafficking and the impact of globalization on women being bought and sold across borders in South Asia (Abueva, 2003; Coalition Against Trafficking of Women, 2001; Derks, 2000; Hughes, 2003; Johnston & Khan, 1998) by academics, there has been little or no work done in the Bangladeshi context. I believe this thesis may contribute towards building an academic interest in prostitution and the situation of sex workers in Bangladesh within the broader academic community.

Feminist Theoretical Framework Based on a Holistic Feminist Analysis

The concepts prostitution, sex work, the sex trade and trafficking are very similar to each other and are also dynamic in their meanings. They are often used interchangeably but it is also useful to understand both the theoretical and historical roots. Commonly, prostitution refers to the sale of sexual services for money or other kind of benefit, generally indiscriminately with many persons (Word IQ, 2004). Sex work also refers to sale of sexual services in return of monetary or other gains, but the actual act is considered work in the same light as other employment. The concept grew out of an attempt by sex workers to claim the dignity of work (See Delacoste & Alexander, 1987; Bell, 1987). The sex trade involves all activities relating to sex work and prostitution both locally and at the global level. And trafficking is related to the concept of sex trade where women are traded both within the country and across borders for sexual purposes. Usually, trafficking involves forced prostitution, where women are forced to provide sexual services, often even without any pay in return. The trafficking of women can thus be seen as a form of slavery (See Hughes & Roche, 1999; Johnston & Khan, 1998).

Prostitution and sex work has been much discussed and debated especially by feminists in the north in what have become two very polarized theoretical positions and politics, each with its own language, arguments and strategies. The two main approaches that have emerged from these debates are the abolitionist approach and the decriminalization approach.

Feminists who advocate the abolitionist approach argue that historically women have been forced into prostitution because of economic vulnerabilities. Women in the public sphere have always been paid lower wages, done menial jobs, and been economically exploited by the patriarchal society. Sex work has been their last resort to earn better money and survive (Barry, 1995).

Thus, prostitution is seen as part of the sexual-economic exchange that takes place among men and women both at the public and private spheres. At the public sphere, prostitution is a male consumer market. Prostitution exists because of the male consumer demand. Sex industries from brothels to trafficking are a place where female bodies are provided to satisfy the male demand. Women in prostitution are thus, nothing more than commodities, forced into the trade through economic vulnerabilities, and facing oppressive situations by the male clients, the pimps and the madams (Barry, 1995:38-39). The abolitionist approach, thus, defines prostitution as a social problem that needs to be eliminated if women are to be liberated from the oppressive forces of patriarchy. They argue that women were forced into prostitution, there is no choice involved (Dworkin, 1989).

According to feminists who believe in decriminalization of prostitution, if prostitutes are not punished for selling their bodies, then sex workers on the street can have more

control. Commercial sex work is viewed as a fair economic transaction between two consenting adults.

According to the decriminalization approach, all laws against prostitution should be abolished, even those against pimping in prostitution. There are two major grounds for abolishing all laws: first, laws against prostitution have been used to oppress and harass the women in prostitution rather than punishing the clients. Secondly, laws specific to activities against prostitution also become laws against women, both against the prostitutes and even the brothel owners, many of whom are in fact women who were prostitutes in the past (Carpenter, 2000; Pheterson, 1989; Pheterson, 1996).

Contemporary feminist debates have shifted focus away from eliminating prostitution or focusing on the laws toward a third approach. The more pressing issue for feminists has become how to empower the women in prostitution given the oppressive framework of patriarchy that subordinates women in the sex trade and at every sphere of life.⁸ This approach integrates the voices of the sex workers and proposes a platform that would be created, used and altered by the sex workers themselves in collaboration with other feminists who are part of the women's movement and academia. Feminist analysis through sharing personal stories has been crucial in building alliances and women's causes. Thus looking at prostitution through sharing the experiences with feminists in academia can help raise important questions that get to the core of prostitution, such as who's benefiting from it? (Bell, 1987)

⁸ This approach is also adopted by sex workers' organizations in the North, such as Stepping Stone in Halifax, Canada. Stepping Stone advocates for safe working conditions of sex workers, integrating their voices into policies, as well as supporting women in prostitution regardless their choices of either staying in the trade or finding alternative livelihoods.

This third approach is similar to what DAWN advocates about directly involving the women at the level of analysis, policy-making and implementation. Integrating the sex workers' voices in collaboration with feminists in academia working on prostitution in Bangladesh can give their voices more power and validity. I believe this approach can be very useful in the case of sex workers in Bangladesh. As Ferdous Azim points out, academic women are getting more involved at the local levels to open spaces between women who are involved with local groups and women who are academics. This increased communication, in turn, increases better understanding of the problems women face today and creates a collaboration that is strong in facing the patriarchal institutions and structures that oppress women (In-depth Interview with Ferdous Azim, December, 2002).

Furthermore, within the feminist movement in Bangladesh, some groups have strongly advocated the use of the term sex work over prostitution in defining women in the sex trade, but this shift is not unanimous. For example, the Bangladeshi feminist organization, Naripokkho (On the Side of Women), strongly believes that labeling the women as sex workers is absolutely crucial to demand their rights as human rights, whereas the Bangladesh National Women's Lawyers Association (BNLWA) does not even recognize prostitution as work and advocates that the women are victims and need to be rehabilitated. This division based on definitions has created animosity between Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) working with sex workers in Bangladesh. Furthermore, the overly politicized use of these concepts narrows the possibilities of developing new concepts and creates false dichotomies. Thus a third approach outlined above based on a holistic feminist analytical framework can help different NGOs, the

women's movement and the sex workers' movement work together rather than dividing them into separate and opposing camps.

In this thesis I use a holistic feminist analysis that is based on four main components (Christiansen-Ruffman, 1998). The four components used in the feminist analysis are interconnected and overlapping. The four components of feminist analysis I use to examine the situation of sex workers in the context of Bangladesh are the following:

- The analysis is based on women's diverse and specific experiences in the trade, both locally and globally. It also focuses on women's multi-centered ways of recognizing and theorizing the world they live in. Furthermore, it analyzes the way women operate within these structures to fight against violence and oppression.
- This analysis tries to understand patriarchy and its various forms within society and how it affects women's lives and especially the lives of sex workers. It recognizes that women are often discriminated against based on their gender and other factors, such as class, race, colonial status, age and sexual orientation to name a few.
- It is based on the effort to envision and create a transformed world in which the institutions in our society are oriented to meet the needs of poor women such as sex workers and their children.
- This analysis works toward that change through working with the women's movement as a whole at the global, regional, national and local levels to create a collaborative platform for women, such as the sex worker's movement working

with the women's movement to demand their rights as human rights.

The feminist analysis I use throughout this thesis examines the local realities of sex workers within the patriarchal institutions existing in Bangladesh and globally and also examined how the women themselves, civil society, the non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the women's movements and the government of Bangladesh have contributed to the political and social status change of sex workers in Bangladesh and have created a platform for sex workers to demand their rights as human rights and how that has changed their status in society.

Feminist Methodological Approach

Methodologically my thesis used in-depth interviews with key officials within the NGOs and the Government of Bangladesh working with sex workers. More specifically I interviewed officials from international organizations such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and workers from five national NGOs such as Naripokkho (On the side of Women) and the Bangladesh National Women's Lawyers Association (BNLWA).⁹ Furthermore, I interviewed journalists and academics who work on the subject of sex work in Bangladesh.

I also analyzed documentary data focused on sex workers situation that I collected from the NGOs and international organizations. Most of the documentary sources concentrated on the organization's mandates and their projects on sex workers. They were useful in understanding the different standpoints and theoretical frameworks which

⁹ My sample includes interviews with three academics working in the area of prostitution from Dhaka University and two officials from UNDP working on the Capacity Building Project focused on sex workers. It also includes interviews with the chairperson of the sex worker's organization, Durjoy (Unbeatable), and another worker from Durjoy, the chairperson of the national NGO, Nari Unnayan Shakti (Women's Power for Development), and the chairperson of Naripokkho (On the side of Women). I also interviewed the chairpersons of two legal NGOs working with sex workers, The Bangladesh National Women's Lawyers Association (BNWLA) and Ain o Shalish Kendro (Law and Order Center). Furthermore, I interviewed two journalists, Shishir Morol and Qurratul-Ain Tahmina to shed light on the evictions and the current situation of sex workers in Bangladesh.

the organizations used to propose policies and actions for the sex workers. Moreover, examining the data of the organizations' mandates over a given period of time helped me understand the changes NGOs and international organizations have gone through during the 1980s and the 1990s as a result of the global changes at the United Nations (UN) and international platforms. The secondary sources also included historical analysis of prostitution and the status change of sex workers.

I contacted the officials within the NGOs mentioned above through emailing and faxing from Halifax, Canada. However, a large portion of the participant selection for the in-depth interviews was done when I was in the field, as it was quite difficult both to establish contacts from overseas and to identify key informants.¹⁰

I decided to use in-depth, open ended interviews as the major methodological approach for my thesis because in-depth and open ended interviews as a qualitative data gathering technique allowed me the opportunities to clarify and discuss relevant information with my interviewees. Open-ended interview research "explores people's views of reality and allows the researcher to generate theory"¹¹(Reinharz, 1992:18), and thus helped me establish some of the theoretical links and explore other approaches that I have not been able to identify through the secondary data (Reinharz, 1992). Furthermore, open ended interviews helped me acquire information and gather actual images of the evictions of sex workers and the aftermath of it. I chose in-depth interviews because I

¹⁰ I contacted the NGO officials myself, and they were informed about my thesis project before the interview, through the distribution of a brief letter outlining my research proposal. The information provided to me through the personnel at UNDP and the national NGOs was consensual, and I received permission to quote them. Following the demands of ethics, I have kept all interview transcripts, audiotapes and related information under lock and key and with me during my fieldwork. In addition, once I returned to write my thesis, I did not share information related to the interviews with anyone other than my thesis supervisor.

¹¹ As Linda Christiansen-Ruffman argues, in-depth interviews are a particularly suitable research approach for feminist scholars as it facilitates the development of new ideas, grounded concepts and autonomous feminist theorizing, consistent with exploratory research.

wanted to learn from my respondents and let their experiences speak for themselves, and furthermore, to let them describe and construct explanations about the situation of sex workers.

Most of the formal interviews lasted between 45 minutes to 2 hours. I conducted the in-depth interviews with some of my respondents more than once. The multiple in-depth interviews are crucial in feminist research, as it enables a strengthened bond between the interviewer and the interviewee. Increased understanding between the two parties not only improves the quality of the data, but, as many argue, feminist research is based on learning from each other and listening to the respondents' voices. Multiple interviews can increase the chances of integrating the voices of the respondents and ensure that correct information has been gathered. As Reinharz states, "multiple interviews are likely to be more accurate than single interviews because of the opportunity to ask additional questions and get corrective feedback on previously obtained information" (Reinharz, 1992:37). Speaking with my respondents several times helped me construct a better understanding of their perception of the sex workers' situation before and especially after the 1999 evictions.

Initially I was planning on conducting in-depth interviews with sex workers who were working in the brothels and were evicted in 1999. This would have been ideal to understand the status change of women in the trade as it would include sharing personal accounts and collecting first hand data. However, this was not feasible for two main reasons. Firstly, interviewing sex workers directly could breach confidentiality for the women and jeopardize their situation in the trade. Powerful groups such as madams, pimps and political leaders involved may not appreciate women in the trade sharing their

life experiences with a researcher collecting data to be shared with the international academic community.

Secondly, it was also difficult to position myself as a young Bengali researcher asking questions to a group of women who are considered fallen and impure. I would have had limited access to their lives and their stories, as it is not socially acceptable for women like me to mix with women working as sex workers. It is important to realize that any work on the issue of sex work and sex workers in Bangladesh is difficult because of sensitivity, cultural barriers, and social stigma. If I pursued my initial intent of interviewing sex workers, I would have been challenging some of the inherent negative social attitudes about sex work and the cultural barriers of interacting with a group of women who are considered social outcasts. This would have been very difficult for me, because as an outsider living abroad for more than a decade, in many instances I do not understand the social and cultural restrictions placed on young Bengali girls in society and am not able to fight against them effectively. Furthermore, I was depending largely on my family to establish necessary contacts for pursuing my research project. Given the social stigma surrounding prostitution, they would not have been very supportive of my interviewing women directly involved in the sex trade. Given these limitations of me being a young Bengali girl and of protecting the confidentiality of women in prostitution, I decided to shift my focus to examine the responses of civil society, NGOs, international organizations and the women's movements to sex workers. However, I do plan to do a Ph.D. in the future and extend my research based on my M.A thesis.

The theme of the present thesis was not an easy one. Even the theoretical framework explaining sex work in Bangladesh has not been well developed. The linkages between

patriarchy and sex work are yet to be fully understood. The scarcity of empirical work made the exercise even more difficult in terms of substantiating arguments. Furthermore, as mentioned, mobilization of information at the field level proved to be quite difficult. These conditions called for an exploratory study.

This exploratory study, however, may be quite useful. It may provide some important insights into the situational analysis of sex work and sex workers in Bangladesh and point to some effective policy options and open a political space for sex workers' movement and dialogue among the NGO workers and the women in the sex trade and government officials. Furthermore, it may contribute to both the Southern and Northern feminist literature on prostitution and sex work.

Furthermore as the Bangladeshi case study in this thesis shows, there are interconnected and historical factors perpetuated by patriarchy that change the situation of women in prostitution in different ways. Any feminist approach that does not take into account these factors, i.e. the effect of capitalism, colonialism and militarism¹² into the analysis, cannot build a complete understanding of prostitution and the experiences of women in prostitution.

Apart from the theoretical limitations of the decriminalization and abolitionist approaches, the undue polarization created between the feminists in the North also restricts developing practical strategies¹³ that can empower women in the sex trade to demand their rights as women and as human beings.

¹² Patriarchy takes these different forms to oppress women and marginalized groups not only in the Economic South but in the North as well.

¹³ Practical strategies can be built on a feminist theoretical analysis that accounts for local women's experiences and the different tools women use to fight against patriarchal structures and institutions.

Lastly, the decriminalization approach outlined in the Northern feminist literature in current times has become less relevant and applicable to the sex workers situation in many countries around the world. In many countries, such as Germany (2002), the Netherlands (2000) and some states in Australia (1980) prostitution has been legalized in recent years. While legalization has opened avenues for women in prostitution to demand their working rights more effectively in some countries, such as the Netherlands, it has not been that useful in countries such as Bangladesh. It is apparent from this thesis that despite having legal rights to be sex workers, women in prostitution in Bangladesh have experienced very unsafe working conditions, unhealthy living conditions and has been treated as sub humans in society. They have earned little or no social rights through legalization and their political rights are limited to the women's movements. In fact the government of Bangladesh has used the legalization to tax brothels and earn revenues while not ensuring any socio-economic or political rights for the women in the sex trade. Thus the feminist literature in the North might benefit from critically analyzing the socio-economic and political factors that push sex workers further to the peripheries in a society like Bangladesh and try to understand prostitution in that context rather than focusing on the legalization vs. abolitionist debates to prostitution. This theoretical approach of contextualizing the experiences of sex workers in a society within the socio-economic, cultural and political framework can also help them practically to demand their rights more effectively and transform patriarchal structures that have oppressed them in countries across the globe.

Chapter Organization

In this thesis, I trace the status change of sex workers starting from early-colonial India (late 18th century to early 19th century) to the British colonial rule (19th century to early 20th century) and to the post-British colonial rule (1947-1971). Historically women in prostitution in the sub-continent of India had enjoyed a relatively revered and respected status. In early-colonial India, women in prostitution were not looked down upon and were a significant part of society. They played an important part in entertaining the kings and the Mughals and were patronized by the elite class in Indian society. However, with the introduction of capitalism and British colonialism in the nineteenth century, prostitution and women in the trade underwent significant changes, the status of prostitutes deteriorated and sex workers became social outcasts and marginalized at the peripheries.

More specifically, in analyzing the status change, I examine how the British colonial rulers effectively condemned prostitution and developed patriarchal institutions to control them, they segregated prostitutes in brothels and categorized them as registered and unregistered prostitutes to label some of them (unregistered women) as criminals. Through regulatory mechanisms such as the Contagious Disease Act, the British introduced Victorian moral values of good women and purity, which dramatically lowered the sex workers' status to that of "fallen women". Thus the underlying assumption of this status change throughout this thesis is that patriarchal institutions and structures in one form or another have directly contributed to the degraded status of women in sex work (See also Banerjee, 1998).

However, the direction of the changed status of sex workers in Bangladesh has not been unilinear. Although with the introduction of capitalism and British colonialism in nineteenth century and the militarisation later in history, women in the sex trade became social outcasts and their status had fallen, in the 1980s the sex workers gained some socioeconomic and political recognition in society through a mobilized women's movement demanding the sex workers' rights as human rights. In chapter 3, I trace how women have been involved in political and social reform movements from the colonial period, and through that active participation, women created a political and socio-economic space to demand their human rights and rights as Bangladeshi citizens. Furthermore, the 1980s collective women's movement stemming out of the UN Decade for Women and the collaboration of women's movements across the globe opened a women's human rights platform for women in Bangladesh. Through the examination of the 1980s women's movements in Bangladesh, in this chapter and in Chapter 4, I study how the creation of a women's human rights platform and the participation of the Bangladeshi government in the UN conferences and conventions enabled women's movements to hold the government accountable for demanding and implementing women's human rights.

The sex workers' movement in the 1990s effectively used the women's human rights platform and their collaboration with the Bangladeshi women's movements to demand their legal right as Bangladeshi citizens and their human rights. Indeed the sex workers' movement in the 1990s has been a landmark in the history of women's movements in Bangladesh. After the illegal eviction (1999) of sex workers from their homes in one of the oldest brothels in Dhaka, the collective women's movement was able to appeal to the

legal system and coin the evictions illegal as prostitution with a license in Bangladesh is legal. This Legal victory has not only been a turning point in changing the fallen status of sex workers, but it has also been an instance of strong local women's movements gaining power in the socio-economic and political platforms in Bangladesh. I examine the evictions and the socio-economic and political factors that influenced the evictions in chapter 5. I also look at how the women's movement as a whole mobilized to demand sex workers' rights as human rights and their rights as Bangladeshi citizens and how the sex workers' movement opened a political space in this chapter.

Despite the solidarity of the women's movement, NGOs and international organizations during the crisis, the national and international organizations working with sex workers both before and after the evictions often have had different and even conflicting mandates. Their mandates can be based on very opposing theoretical standpoints regarding prostitution and women as I discuss in chapter 6. In chapter 6, I examine the evictions and the responses of national and international organizations, the women's movements and the civil society to the evictions. I also analyze how during a crisis these organizations are able to stand in solidarity and mobilize a social movement extremely effectively to help women and marginalized groups demand their human rights and their rights as Bangladeshi citizens. However, this sense of solidarity and collective action has not sustained itself over the long period of time needed to bring prolonged changes in the lives of the sex workers, in part because of the different mandates of the partners in the coalition.

In chapter 7, I propose two alternative platforms based on feminist analysis and feminist principles for the sex workers' movement at present times. The collaborative

platform proposes some avenues for the Government of Bangladesh, national and international organizations to work together despite their opposing standpoints about sex work in Bangladesh. While I point to some real differences based on my interviews, I argue that collaboration does not have to be based on absolute agreement on all converging issues and, in fact, putting the sex workers' needs at the center of the collaboration can avoid such divisions and help the women in prostitution. The feminist analytic platform based on integrative feminist theories and Southern feminist theories developed by DAWN focuses on understanding the sex workers' situation in relation to patriarchal mechanisms that oppress women and marginalized groups. Furthermore, the analysis proposes collaboration across the diverse women's experiences in Bangladesh and, politically, creates a collective voice that strongly demands women's empowerment. I argue that a transformation of the patriarchal institutions and structures in Bangladeshi society is more likely to happen as the women's movement as a whole becomes stronger through raising greater awareness about women's oppression, through a collaboration among feminist organizations and NGOs working with women at the national and international levels and through increased legitimacy of the sex workers' movement by including women from different backgrounds and socio-economic classes. The analysis in this chapter directly addresses sex workers and through proposing alternative and overlapping approaches for them, this chapter suggests different ways the sex worker's movement can move forward and demand their human rights and empowerment in Bangladeshi society.

Chapter 2: Historical Analysis of Prostitution in Colonial and Post-British Colonial Bengal

Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss the status of prostitutes during the early-colonial period of the late 18th century to the British colonial rule in 19th century and early 20th century Bengal and explore how their status changed and the trade itself changed once the colonial powers took over the sub-continent of India. Several interesting dynamics are examined during the British colonial rule that indicate how prostitution underwent a drastic change as a result of patriarchal interventions of British colonialism.

In this chapter, after examining the status of prostitution in early-colonial times, I discuss how and where the red light areas were set up with the introduction of British capitalism in the mid 19th century into the Indian sub-continent. These red light areas started the tradition of segregating sex workers into specific areas. In the next section, I outline two specific reasons the British colonial powers used to regulate prostitution and control the women within sex work, and thus changed prostitution into a trade. Lastly, I discuss how prostitution continued after the British colonial powers left the sub-continent, and how other patriarchal powers in the forms of militarism pushed the women in sex work further to the periphery of Bangladeshi society and robbed them of their basic human rights and dignity.

Early-Colonial Period¹⁴

During the early years of British colonial rule, many prostitutes in India enjoyed a high social status and were an important part of the society. Through the examination of

¹⁴ Early-colonial period in this section refers to the late 18th century and early 19th century.

contemporary literature of the time, it is evident that during the early-colonial era, prostitutes did not simply exchange sexual favors for money or other material gain, but their main role was to provide entertainment in the form of classical Indian music and dance to the elite groups of society (Joardar, 1984:52-53).

In 19th century Bengali society, as Banerjee (1998), Arefeen and Khan (1992) and Ghosh (1996) describe, there were mainly two types of prostitutes based on religious differences and existing caste systems of the times. The *Baijis*¹⁵ were mainly Muslim and from the upper class. They were trained in classical Indian dancing and music. The *Khemtawalis* were predominantly Hindu. They were also dancers and singers but came from a humbler background of rural folk culture (Banerjee, 1998).

The *Baijis* mainly catered to the needs of the kings and the Mughal emperors. These women lived in or around the palaces and their primary duty were to perform in the palaces or courts whenever they were invited or engaged by a customer, and prostitution was secondary for them (Ghosh, 1996:845). Most of these upper class prostitutes were expected to be trained in at least sixty-four different types of arts. “These formed a stock list, which not only included music, dancing, and singing, but also acting, the composition of poetry, flower-arrangements, and garland making, the preparation of perfumes and cosmetics, cooking, dress-making etc” (Ghosh, 1996:18).

The *Baijis* amused Nababs (kings) and Mughals (emperors) during *jalshas*¹⁶ with their dancing feet, spelling out untold rhythms, mysteries and with their veiled faces, tantalizing the audience. These high-class prostitutes were often educated and were well equipped to discuss different types of literature with their clients, as well as to engage in

¹⁵ The *Baijis* were professional dancers who entertained the high class of Indian society.

¹⁶ *Jalshas* involved evening entertainment at the prostitutes' living quarters with the kings and emperors.

animated discussions about contemporary music. As Banerjee states, “the *Baijis* were the darlings of the late 18th century—early 19th century Bengali grandees, who used to organize their famous *nautches* (dances) for British patrons and friends” as well as, for kings and Mughals (Banerjee, 1998:12).

Not all prostitutes were in a position to enjoy the privileges as the *Baijis*. There was another class of prostitutes in early-colonial periods. They came from poor, indigenous rural families of Bengal who had become penniless because of famines, natural disasters, displacement or the loss of traditional means of livelihood. The Hindu prostitutes or the *Khematwalis* were from a poorer background and were proficient in folk or local singing and dancing. Their patrons were mostly low class Hindu clients and very few poor Muslim men. They occupied the lower rungs of the socio-economic hierarchy in the trade and the common representation of their cultural entertainment was the *khemta* dance. The *khemta* was a strongly rhythmical dance set to lively music accompanying jubilant love songs. *Khemtawalis* usually performed these vivacious folk dances that were traditionally popular in the western parts of Bengal (Banerjee, 1998:12).

The lower class prostitutes, the *Khemtawalis* being mostly Hindu, rarely entertained Muslim clients. The doors of the upper class *Baijis* were open to both wealthy Hindu patrons, the Muslim emperors and to the high ranked British officials. As Banerjee states, “in the upper class range, both the prostitutes and their clients could afford (through their mutually interlacing superior socio-financial positions) to ignore the prevailing religious injunctions (mainly ordained by the Brahmin clergy for the Hindus) that could obstruct the smooth commercial transactions involved in their trade” (Banerjee, 1998:11).

The upper class *Baijis* did in fact have more social and legal rights than sex workers in current times and they enjoyed a certain degree of acceptability and respect in society. However, the patriarchal system also oppressed them. As Banerjee (1998) points out, the women in prostitution were still working within the parameters of patriarchy and the state, which defined and determined the role they would play in Bengali societies at that time (Banerjee, 1998:22-23).¹⁷

British Colonial Era¹⁸

After the invasion of the subcontinent by the East India Company (1757), the business of prostitution was carried out in the same manner as during the Muslim period and the Mughal era. There were the *Baijis*, who still entertained the higher-class gentlemen in Bengali society and what was left of the feudal Mughal aristocracy, but now they also entertained newly arrived high-class British settlers who were enthralled by the exotic Orient. The *nautches* mentioned earlier, were especially popular among the British men and women as a form of mysterious and glamorous Indian art. It is interesting to note that it was not the *Baijis*, as much as the clerks and upper class Bengalis who served under the East India Company, who gained monetarily by providing prostitutes to their British masters. Often, in order to earn the favor of their masters, they passed off the prostitutes as their wives, and the literature of the time also indicates it was not unusual for them to in fact provide the masters with their married wives at times. These traditions further exhibited the way men controlled women and their bodies at that time and used them as a tool to advance their careers.

¹⁷ See Vikram Seth's "*A Suitable Boy*" for more information on the life of *Baijis* in early-colonial India.

¹⁸ The British colonial era refers to the 19th century and early 20th century.

It was not until mid 19th century when the British became well-entrenched colonial rulers (from their earlier role of traders) that the business of prostitution underwent a radical transformation. With the penetration of capitalism into the Indian economy, the status of prostitutes changed from a prestigious and aesthetically appreciated one to an economic one, where they were viewed as a commodity that could be bought and sold on the market. Furthermore, “the colonial system not only gave birth to a new breed of prostitutes, treating them exclusively as what we today describe as ‘commercial sex workers’, but also set up moral and legal boundaries which excluded them (as well as their colleagues from the pre-colonial past—the dancing girls and courtesans) from the rest of society” (Banerjee, 1998:22).¹⁹

Initially with the entry of the British colonial rule in India, prostitution flourished in the mid 19th century. This was especially true around the ports areas, such as Bombay, Calcutta, Cochin and Madras in India, as well as around Dhaka, and Khulna in Bangladesh. The first cluster of ‘commercial sex workers’ started to set up their businesses in cities that were central to trade and commerce and were near the economic networks set up by the East India Company. Calcutta, the metropolitan centre of colonial trade, became the home of many brothels, with an emerging new patron and clientele from the trade areas and the high rank British rulers who conducted their business from Calcutta.²⁰ Even in cities such as Dhaka, the number of prostitutes was increasing steadily during the 1860s. A newspaper published in Dhaka in 1864 states, prostitution in Dhaka had increased at least four-folds in the last ten years and almost all the well-built houses on both sides of the main roads have been taken over by prostitutes (Dhaka

¹⁹ This further shows how the British rulers started to marginalize sex workers to the peripheries of society with the introduction of capitalism.

²⁰ Calcutta was the colonial headquarters and the center of British colonial trades.

Prakash, 1864 in Mamun, 1991 in Banerjee, 1998:77). The clientele of these new commercial sex workers also included foreign traders who came to the sub-continent without their wives and needed mistresses or concubines to fulfill their sexual appetites. There were different classes of foreigners who were entertained by both the higher and lower social classes of prostitutes (Banerjee, 1998:34-35).

The British colonial rule introduced the subculture of prostitutes in brothels during the mid 19th century that has persisted to present times, yet that was started from a handful of areas in the northern and central part of Calcutta (Joardar, 1985:8-9). Of these red light areas, *Sonagachi* and *Harkata* of Central Calcutta were the largest and most notorious, and to date have not lost their notoriety.

The *Sonagachi* area was one of the largest colonies of prostitutes. This was a relatively affluent brothel area. Unlike poorer brothel areas, none of the prostitutes of this area stood on the doorsteps or on the balcony calling out to men. The women in *Sonagachi* had pimps and madams who would find clients for them (Joardar, 1985:8-12).

The *Harkata* brothel area was in central Calcutta where the women were poorer and spread out in a larger land area than *Sonagachi*. Most of the prostitutes used to be seen in the evenings sitting at the doorstep of their brothel or at the windows of their rooms waiting for customers. Most of the brothels in the *Harkata* lane area were near the schools and colleges. Their customers were students from the colleges, as well as poorer laborers and taxi drivers. Whereas the *Sonagachi* area catered to the needs of British soldiers, traders and other high-class men, *Harkata* catered to the local men.

Most of the traders, who frequented *Sonagachi*, were traveling without their families and became involved with Indian women to curb their sexual appetites. Furthermore, the

Indian woman represented the exotic and the unknown to European men (Ghosh, 1996: v.1). The Indian women with their expressive countenances, large black eyes, luscious black hair down to their knees, finely shaped necks, tapered waists and well turned ankles fulfilled the Englishman's fantasy of the sensual and exotic women of the Orient (Banerjee, 1998).

Thus by the mid 19th century women in prostitution became market commodities and were divided into different sections of the cities based on their socio-economic status. This was slightly different from the religious divisions among prostitutes²¹ that were prevalent in early-colonial India and helped the patriarchal structures to not only curb the sex workers social mobility, but also create competition among the women in different brothels for clients, and even create a sense of inferiority towards the women in *Harkata* by prostitutes in *Sonagachi*.

The Europeans however did not allow the uninhibited free mixing of British rulers, settlers and soldiers with Indian women for very long. British settlers who came to India in the last half of the 19th century became less and less involved with native women. One of the main reasons for a decrease in European interest for Indian women by the mid 19th century was that there were more and more English women who migrated to India in hopes of finding suitors among the British rulers. Thus the Englishmen had more choices as opposed to earlier in their rule, when their only option was having relationships with Indian mistresses (Arefeen & Khan, 1992:5-6; Joardar, 1985:52-53).

Furthermore, the British government was very wary of the spread of venereal diseases, and they started to regulate and test all the women who encountered British

²¹ As already mentioned, in early-colonial era, women in prostitution were divided into two categories: the *Baijis* were Muslim and the *Khemtawalis* were Hindu.

soldiers, sailors and clergy. This helped to set up the brothels, such as *Kandupatti*²² that existed in Dhaka even a few years ago. In this process, certain types of prostitutes were legitimized, while others became illegal. Thus the British administration institutionalized prostitution and used the brothels to quarantine sex workers into restricted areas. They also used the arguments of pure women and good morals against the sex workers to oppress them and take away their basic human rights and dignity. In the early years of the colonial rule, even though women in prostitution had a lower status compared to other women in society, at least then they were able to make a place in society that did not treat them as outcasts. Though patriarchal structures even then controlled their lifestyles and treated them as objects in front of the kings and Mughals, they had certain negotiating power and some choices within the trade. But once the colonial powers intervened were segregated into brothels and became social outcasts (Banerjee, 1998).

By the last half of the 19th century restrictive laws imposed by the British changed the status of some prostitutes to criminals. The laws were imposed by the colonial rulers for two main reasons. Firstly, the laws were set up to control the spread of diseases among the soldiers who freely associated with prostitutes and were believed to have become infected through the women. Secondly, the laws supported the Victorian moral values (that condemned prostitution) that were becoming more and more apparent in British society at the time (Banerjee, 1998:42-43).

The regulation of prostitution was seen as the only means of controlling venereal disease among the British soldiers and officers. It was believed that mainly associating with prostitutes spread these diseases and thus the British colonial rule designed and implemented the Contagious Diseases Act (CDA) in 1868. The CDA was modeled after a

²² *Kandupatti* in Dhaka is claimed to be at least 155 years old (Tahmina & Morol, 2000).

similar act that already existed in Britain for the same purpose. The CDA cut across all divisions of prostitutes. It affected the courtesans and high-class prostitutes, as well as the common prostitutes. British officials, who used to attend *nautch* parties, were now self-consciously distancing themselves from the uncivilized salacity of a native society, which recognized, accepted and celebrated prostitution. The efforts by the British to control the association with prostitution through surveys and censuses resulted in homogenizing the multiple identities of courtesans, performers, concubines, common prostitutes, into a single term, prostitute (Sen, 1999:191-193).

After the CDA, the two main categories of prostitutes became the registered sex workers and the unregistered prostitutes. To regulate and control the spread of sexual diseases, the British demanded that all women entering the sex trade register with the Commissioner of Police in their area of business. A woman could not register to prostitute under the following conditions: girls below the age of 16, women who were virgins,²³ pregnant women, married women not legally divorced and women infected with venereal diseases. The last category of women were first sent to the hospital to be treated and once released could be registered as sex workers (Joardar, 1985:64).

This screening system itself was derogatory and imposed restrictions on women in prostitution, which was a patriarchal step towards subordinating sex workers. While the law of not allowing a child under 16 to prostitute could have been explained by the colonial rule as protecting the rights of children, the laws against virgins entering the profession was a clear suggestion of patriarchy trying to control women and their bodies. In this way, the patriarchal British institutional structure not only tried to control women and their bodies, but they also shaped the standards of purity and set the boundaries

²³ Virgins were refused registration and sent to a rescue home.

within which women would be considered to have good morals. By not allowing virgins to willingly become prostitutes the rulers were able to monitor who was a good woman and who was considered fallen.

Apart from women who volunteered to be registered, every woman living in a brothel was required to appear before a medical examiner and be examined periodically to make sure women in the brothel were not spreading diseases to the soldiers who frequented the brothels. The official visited the brothels periodically for that purpose and conducted the medical examination. Prostitutes failing to see the medical examiner were reported to the Commissioner of Police by the medical official, and the Commissioner, in absence of a valid reason for missing the regular visit, was allowed to take necessary steps to ensure examination as soon as possible. This is also one of the ways in which the British colonial rule slowly started controlling and monitoring the movement of sex workers and set up medical boundaries that separated them from the rest of the society (Mukherji, 1986:405).

A woman who was diagnosed with venereal diseases was at once ordered by the Commissioner of Police to present herself at the hospital for treatment under a penalty of a fine. When a prostitute was admitted into a hospital set up by the British administration to control and regulate diseases, she had to remain there until the medical officer discharged her. These hospitals were known as “lock hospitals” and mostly women stayed there for at least six months to receive treatment. Very often women resisted registration because they did not want to be examined for venereal diseases. Women, who defaulted, absconded or failed to register usually got off with a light sentence. But if they registered and were diagnosed with venereal diseases, they had to be hospitalized for

at least six months. Women found the periodic examinations in the lock hospitals very offensive and devised various means to evade the examinations (Sen, 1999:194-195).

The enforcement of the CDA was not very successful in Calcutta. The women stubbornly resisted registration, examination and admittance to the lock hospitals. Soon after the CDA was enacted, a large number of women in the trade left the city to move to the outskirts and suburban areas to set up business. However, as more poor women migrated to the city, the problem of unregistered and 'clandestine' prostitution grew intractable. The police became more attentive about tracing and keeping watch on widows and destitute and poor women in general. The categorization of prostitutes into registered and unregistered sex workers was proving to be ineffective because it was impossible to geographically and spatially separate registered and unregistered prostitutes since they could easily disappear into the poorer quarters of the city. While the CDA did not help in controlling the spread of disease among the soldiers, it contributed to the changed the status of prostitutes and segregated the women in brothels to become social outcasts (Ibid).²⁴

The educated Indian society was also against the practice of prostitution.²⁵ While the British were merely concerned to control and manage the sex trade effectively to prevent diseases, the Indian upper class wanted it abolished on moral grounds. They argued along the lines of the reformist discourse in Britain that Indian society was inherently not immoral and the poor women in prostitution needed to be saved from the social evil. In the 1890s, these Indian babus organized against *nautch* parties, petitioned the government

²⁴ It is interesting to note that in 1870s and 1880s England, feminists such as Josephine Butler was campaigning against the CDA, and their protests were understood as a successful feminist movement against militarisation, against collusion between the military and the state to control women during times of wars. The acts which were first introduced as a measure to prevent diseases among the soldiers soon became a mechanism for the state to control women's sexuality (Enloe, 1983:25).

²⁵ The Indian educated society also adopted the British Victorian culture prevalent in England at that time.

for greater control of the brothels in the city areas, and pointed out the need for rehabilitation of prostitutes and their children. The elite native society argued that by taxing women in prostitution in order to finance the lock hospitals, the British administration was in fact legitimizing the sex trade. The argument that prostitution was already legal in India and accepted by society was rejected by the educated Indian opinion. They argued that women in prostitution were not criminals, but were victims of the government's double standard of morality, of the brutal police, and of greedy husbands and promiscuous men (Joardar, 1985:64-69).

However, their campaign was not very strong and prostitution flourished under the careful control and management of the British administration. The difference was in the way the women were viewed both as victims and criminals and the morality of the Victorian times labeled them as fallen women, as opposed to the earlier times, when they were appreciated and had a certain amount of respect from the high class segments of society. Prostitution continued to expand throughout the 19th century and became a commercial trade that discriminated against the women in sex work and treated them as social outcasts.

Post-British Colonial Rule²⁶

After the British left in 1947,²⁷ prostitution continued to be practiced in the Sub-continent of India. Prostitution became a flourishing business in East Pakistan (presently Bangladesh). The number of brothels and red light areas increased in towns, cities and

²⁶ Post-British Colonial Rule refers to the time period between 1947 and 1971.

²⁷ When the British left in 1947, the sub-continent of India was divided into two countries, India and Pakistan. Pakistan had two parts, West Pakistan (presently known as Pakistan) and East Pakistan (presently known as Bangladesh).

seaport areas after 1947 and continued to be mushrooming until 1971 when Bangladesh gained independence from Pakistan (Ghosh, 1996, v.1:79).

Prostitution became active and thrived in various forms during the independence war in Bangladesh, especially when west Pakistani soldiers forced a number of poor women and young girls into prostitution. “One of the most devastating effects of the war was the take over of the sex trade by the invading army and the criminal underworld, who took advantage of the breakdown of families as a result of massacre of men, seizure of women and girls and social disintegration and economic hardships” (Ghosh, 1996, v.1:79). Although the state was based on Islamic ideologies, state agencies such as the municipalities, the courts and the police continued to control and run the brothels. Thus the Pakistani state took an ambivalent position regarding prostitution. Furthermore, brothel areas grew near military bases to cater to the sexual needs of the west Pakistani army (Arefeen & Khan, 1992; Ghosh, 1996, v1).²⁸

It is interesting to note that Muslim Bengalis in the then East Pakistan were believed not to be true Muslims by the West Pakistanis. Thus often the west Pakistani officials justified the raping of Bangladeshi women and girls as purifying them of bad Muslim blood and making them true Muslims through having sexual intercourse with Muslim men from West Pakistan. The argument of the West Pakistani rulers that women needed to be raped and purified and a new nation would be reproduced through the womb of the woman is thus a patriarchal notion of being able to control women and have power to not only decide that they were contaminated, but purify them through sex. The civil war and the patriarchal way of thinking forced more and more women to cater to the west

²⁸ Examples of the militarization of prostitution and the emergence of prostitution flourishing near military bases to cater to the needs of the soldiers has been studied by academics such as Cynthia Enloe (1983).

Pakistani men, be raped and continue to be used as ‘comfort women’ (to use a Japanese term) until the end of the war. Thus the war itself also led to an intensification of patriarchal culture that oppressed sex workers.

Conclusion

The trends in prostitution have changed considerably through time in Bangladesh. The social status of women in prostitution has drastically deteriorated during colonial times as women in prostitution became the poorest of the poor and the most oppressed group in Bangladeshi society.

This history of prostitution in Bangladesh allows us to better understand the present deteriorated status of sex workers and how the fall in status has changed women in prostitution into a commodity that has been bought and sold in the market since the British colonial powers invaded Bengal in the 19th century. It also shows patriarchy operating in different ways. As Maria Mies points out, with the rise of capitalism as a world system based on large conquests of the Economic South and colonial plunders, and the emergence of the world-market, the exploiters or rulers exterritorialized or externalized the people of the colonies. The progress of the European capitalist society was based on colonizing the rest of the world, such as the sub-continent of India, and subordinating the people and their lands. As she argues, the law of progress is always contradictory and not evolutionary. “Progress for some means retrogression for the other side; ‘evolution’ for some means ‘devolution’ for others; ‘humanization’ for some means ‘de-humanization’ for others; development of productive forces for some means underdevelopment and retrogression for other” (Mies, 1986:76).²⁹ Thus, with the colonial

²⁹ It is important to note that during the colonial rule in Bengal, certain groups within the sex workers may have benefited from the colonial powers, as often happens with patriarchy and colonialism .

rulers in the sub-continent of India, the people were subordinated, robbed of their natural resources and oppressed in the political and socio-economic systems. The women were pushed to the bottom of this system, and the sex workers became the poorest of the poor, and a sub-human class in society (Mies, 1986).³⁰

Furthermore, under the British, prostitution intersected with the colonial power, and prostitutes were increasingly seen as possible pools of contagion—both physically and morally. During the independence war of 1971, religious differences affected a different kind of patriarchy and ‘othering’ the Bengali impure women. Thus, the different facets of patriarchy had played a significant role in changing the lives of women in prostitution and forced more women into it. In the war, patriarchal values created clashes between the men that were exhibited through the raping of the women and cleansing the Bengali Muslims. Once Bangladesh was free, these women were not welcomed back into Bangladeshi society and were pushed further out to the periphery. Many of the women who did survive drifted to cities, entered brothels and became sex workers.

The women’s movements in Bangladesh during the colonial period, the 1970s and the 1980s, however, created a political platform that helped sex workers demand their women’s human rights. Though women in prostitution do not have any respect in Bangladeshi culture today as courtesans and artists, they have acquired a certain amount of political and socio-economic power within the women’s movements and in turn within the Bangladeshi society. In the next chapter, I discuss in greater detail how the women’s movements formed in the colonial and post colonial period and how these movements influenced the changed status of women in the sex trade at present times.

³⁰ See chapter 3, ‘Colonization and Housewifization’ in *“Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale”* by Maria Mies for more detail (Mies, 1986).

Chapter 3: Women's Movements in Bangladesh

Introduction

In this chapter, I trace some of the women's movements in Bangladesh from the British colonial period to the present time. In the first part of the chapter, I discuss three different types of women's movements that took place during the British colonial period (before 1947): women's political movements, women's social reform movements and feminist literary movements. First, although women's political movements were vibrant and active from an early period, in most cases, they acted as part of larger political movements for independence, national liberation, or communist revolution etc. Secondly, women's social reform movements had a specific focus on social mobilization and women fought vigorously against the patriarchal institutions and structures that treated them as secondary citizens during that time period. Third, the women's movements in Bangladesh have had a unique component compared to women's movements in some other parts of the world. Historically, from an early period, there have been people in Bangladesh who have become conscious through literature of gender inequalities and dynamics of patriarchal institutions in Bangladesh.

In the second part, I introduce the women's movements in the 1980s and the global feminist platform that helped the local women's movements gain momentum and demand women's empowerment. I discuss the global feminist platform and the sex workers' movement in relation to the Bangladeshi human rights platform in more detail in the next chapter.

In the last section, I describe the women's movements in the present times, and examine some of the constraints imposed by the neo-liberal patriarchal structures and institutions that the movements face currently.

It is important to trace the history of women's movements in Bangladesh to understand how women have gained some political and socio-economic power in Bangladeshi society in recent times. The history also helps to understand how the global feminist movements in the 1980s influenced women's movements at the grass roots level in Bangladesh to create a women's human rights platform that has been crucial in advancing the sex workers' movement.

Historical Analysis of Women's Movements during Colonialism

Women's Political Movements

The women's movements in the South Asian context can be defined as having a broad agenda of mobilizing social change that affects both men and women at the local and national level. Women's movements are often associated with national movements demanding human rights, democracy, and national liberation, and thus have a vision that does not solely focus on women's empowerment within society (Basu, 1995:9). Feminists from the South recognize that the women's movements in the third world have to critically analyze the existing social patriarchal structures, macro-economic policies and social development paradigms to understand and change women's status in society. Feminists from the Economic South advocate visions of a future that do not simply add on women to the existing social setting but transform the patriarchal institutions and

structures to create an alternative society that empowers women (Jahan, Rounaq. 1995: 8-9; Sen & Grown, 1987).³¹

In historical accounts of the women's movements in the western world, political emancipation and women's suffrage have been a crucial focus. These historical differences between the South and the western world may account for some differences in the conception of women's movements in the South. The voting right for women in European countries, such as Britain (1928), Sweden (1919) and France (1933) have been important in defining the role of women in society. In North America, the first wave of feminism was focused on achieving women's voting rights. In the South, however, the women's movements in the political sphere have followed a slightly different path. The Indian subcontinent had been under colonial rule since the 19th century. Men and women were fighting together against the colonial powers for liberation. The focus was not on women's political rights but simply on gaining independence and forming an autonomous state. Though traditionally women were confined to the private sphere according to patriarchal notions, the urgency of those in society to free themselves from colonial powers moved women into the public political space.

Both as individual women and as groups of women, therefore, women participated actively in the movement against the British colonial rule. Women became part of the political space and their political role in society was formulated through their active participation in the anti-colonial movement. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, since the main focus at this time was gaining freedom from the British, the women's

³¹ This chapter includes references from Roushan Jahan in two different sources, as well as references from another author, Rounaq Jahan. To clarify the name of author and title of source, I am using the full name of my references and publication dates in this chapter and throughout the rest of the thesis.

movements were not autonomous, but nevertheless, they played an important role in forming a political platform for women to demand their rights as human rights in later years.

As early as 1914, Bidi Abadi Begum attended the Indian Congress as the first Muslim woman to do so. She spoke about the necessity for Hindu and Muslim women to join together to fight against the British to gain independence (Khan, 2001:40).

Women were also very active in the guerrilla rebellions of the 1920s and 1930s. For example, Pritilata Waddeddar, a 21-year old student of Chittagong, led the Bengali guerilla squad in an uprising against the British rule and attacked the Pahartali European Club in Chittagong in 1922. She, along with other women fighters, risked her life to participate in anti-British movements (Sen, 2000).

Women actively participated in the non co-operation movement or the “Swadeshi Andolon” in the 1920s. The movement was focused on boycotting government censuses and government jobs, not attending government schools and colleges, refusing to buy British merchandise. During the colonial period, the Swadeshi Andolon rebels banned all foreign products imported from Britain and used locally made products, such as handloom cloth, soaps, local ink. Women in Bengal at that time not only worked side by side with their male comrades to facilitate the movement, but they also helped weave the desi (handloom) cloths and distributed it among the people. This was considered a political statement not to tolerate anything British.

Along with the Swadeshi Andolon defying British rule, there were other movements that were taking place at that time, some of which focused specifically on a women’s platform. For example, Muslim women played an active role in the Khilafat

Andolon (movement), which was similar to the non co-operation movement against the colonial powers. Both Hindu and Muslim women participated in raising funds, marching on the streets and organizing gatherings to create a platform for women to speak up against the colonial rule (Khan, 2001:40-41).

Between 1928 and 1935, the anti colonial movement gained momentum. In Sylhet,³² the Srihatta Women's Committee was created in 1930. "Hundreds of women came out on the streets in protest of the Sale Tax imposed by the British government, defying anti-riot orders. Sixty of the women were jailed. In fact, between 1930 and 1932, the women of Bengal fought with their lives for independence from the Raj" (Ibid: 41).

In 1936, when the All India Student Association was created, women formed a female wing of the association. Women in the Federation took to the streets with their male counterparts to protest against the British rule and became very prominent in the movement.

In 1941, a similar organization was created for Muslim women under the Muslim League.³³ The Muslim League Women's Council worked to emphasize the need for a separate Muslim state, Pakistan, and more specifically it demanded equal rights for Muslim women. This subcommittee looked into the needs of destitute women, health and nutritional needs for women, and the need to change the Muslim laws that degraded women (Ibid).

A legendary women's movement leader in Bengal was Ila Mitra. As an activist, she was involved in the communist movement in Bengal from the early 1940s. She became the revolutionary leader of the popular peasant movement known as the Tebhaga

³² Sylhet is situated in the northern part of Bangladesh.

³³ Muslim League was the leading political party in East Pakistan at that time.

Andolon.³⁴ The political leadership for the movement came from the Bengal Peasant Association, an association formed with peasants and landless farmers in the region. Ila Mitra became central to the movement in the late 1940s when the movement was at its peak. Ila Mitra toured villages and met with peasants and small farmers to publicly address the issues of the Tehbaga movement (Alam & Khan, 2001; Roy, 2002:3).

In 1950, Ila Mitra and her comrades got involved in a direct confrontation with the army, police and armed forces of the government. They fought along side thousands of peasants and small farmers demanding their rights to their lands. The unequal fighting resulted in many deaths and inhuman repression for the rebels who were caught in the hands of the police. Ila Mitra was apprehended and was exposed to various types of physical and emotional tortures. They tortured her in particularly inhumane ways to punish her for being a Hindu woman involved in men's business of war and fighting, and leading the Landless Peasant Movement. She survived police custody and returned to India later on (Roy, 2002: Part I).

In addition to fighting for the rights of poor peasants and the common masses, Ila Mitra, played an active role in the independence war of Bangladesh in 1971. During the liberation war, her house and party office were open shelters for many of the freedom fighters. She was a friend and a co-fighter during the war. In remembering those days, she states, "to fight as [a] co-fighter with the people of Bangladesh... became my foremost duty; to me it was an opportunity to repay my debts to the people of Bangladesh from [whom] I received so much- my life, my own liberation. Those people had released

³⁴ The Tehbaga was a movement to demand two-thirds share of the harvest for the farmers or cultivators as opposed to the larger share being confiscated by the landowners. The peasants and tenants organized together to defend their rights to the crops they produced.

me from the.....and from the prison of Pakistani jail- how could I forget them in their distress. Can I lag behind in their freedom of war?" (Roy, 2002: Part III)

She was seen as an infinite source of inspiration for the struggle for democracy, secularism and equality of men and women during that time. She and many other women comrades have thus been actively involved in the struggles for freedom and democracy in Bengal during the colonial period (Roy, 2002: Part II).

The advances made by women fighters in the 1940s and 1950s may well have contributed to helping the sex workers create a similar human rights platform and open a political space to demand their women's human rights later. These narrations of women fighting against the colonial power also support the argument that Bengali women have been aware of and fought against patriarchal state forms and for rights to viable livelihoods from the onset. It also portrays some of the institutionalized mechanisms patriarchy used during that time to place women in subordinate positions such as the example of Ila Mitra who faced inhuman torture especially for being a woman.

Despite their active participation in the struggle, after independence from the British colonial rule, women in Pakistan were expected to go back under the purdah, maintaining the connection with Islamic traditions of secluding women within the household. This attempt by a new patriarchal state to subordinate its women was a common feature of post-independence struggles in many parts of the world. In Pakistan, as sometimes seen elsewhere, women protested against such measures and used the previously created political platform to demand their rights to public participation. In 1949, Begum Rana Liaquat Ali Khan, the wife of Pakistan's first prime minister, created the Apwa Society. This society invited women of all creeds, religions, and colours to

join. In 1950, the East Pakistan branch held its first meeting in Dhaka to demand their right to participate in the public sphere and not be kept in seclusion. The meeting also addressed the needs and rights of women of the country. Most members of the society were part of the anti-colonial movement and had played an active role in the non-cooperation movements earlier. Even though they had supported the political party against the British rule and still supported the Muslim League government, they did not accept the discriminatory attitude of the party (Khan, 2001:43-44).

The government tried to discourage women from becoming politically active and prevent the formation of autonomous women's organizations and groups on the grounds of religious practices of keeping women in seclusion. The women in East Pakistan protested against these measures and continued to mobilize themselves to demand their socio-economic and political rights throughout the 1950s and 1960s.

One important landmark in the women's organized movements at that time was the formation of the East Pakistan Women's Society. This became the central place for women from middle and lower social classes and diverse political activist backgrounds to join forces to fight against the patriarchal notions of keeping women secluded. Begum Sufia Kamal, a revered feminist, poet and social activist became the chairperson for the group and led the organization into protests, marches and rallies against the patriarchal government in the late 1940s and 1950s.

In 1951, the Language movement³⁵ began in East Pakistan. The Pakistani government ordered the state language for East Pakistan to be Urdu, even though more than 90% of the population spoke Bengali. On 21st February 1952, a mass protest was

³⁵ This movement was a landmark in the independence movement that was starting to form against the Pakistani rulers in Bangladesh in the 1950s.

organized by the University students, professors, intellectuals and the common people in Dhaka to demand Bengali be the official state language of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) along with Urdu. Women students from Dhaka University, women colleges and schools took part in the street marches and many were arrested and killed by the Pakistani police during the protest. Then on the 28th of February, women of East Pakistan gathered together to denounce the government and the mass killings that took place on the 21st. They also demanded freedom of the press, freedom of speech and denounced all anti-democratic laws imposed by the Pakistani government. Women used different forms of demonstration during this time, apart from rallies, protests and marches as well. For example they walked barefoot for a week on campus to protest against the government's order of Urdu being the only official language (Khan, 2001:44-45).

Thus, women were organizing themselves along with men to demand their freedom from the Pakistani ruling party since 1952. In 1966, when Awami League, the strongest opposition party started to mobilize to demand their independence, a group of young women activists mostly affiliated with the leftist parties formed a women's action committee. This committee worked with Awami League to demand freedom from the Pakistani rulers. The women's action committee formed in 1966 led to the formation of one of Bangladesh's oldest women's organization, the Mahila Parishad (Jahan, Roushan. 1995:92-93).

Women also fought side by side with men during the liberation war of 1971. They were active in the guerilla movements, and many women in the rural and urban areas helped the freedom fighters struggle at the front line.

Thus women's active involvement in political movements had a long history in the Subcontinent. The women's movements in the South Asian context did not have suffrage movements to earn political rights. The focus during the colonial and post-British colonial period was on achieving independence from foreign powers, namely the British and the Pakistani rulers, and improving the lives and well being of the Bengali people in an independent state, and by default, improving the lives of women, as well. However, though there was not a specific focus on women's political rights, a political space for women's activism opened up as a result of women leaders and groups actively participating in liberation movements. This helped women later on to organize themselves to demand women's human rights and protest against patriarchal institutions and structures that still oppress women in Bengali society. However, women not having their autonomous political platform, or having to fight for it shows how patriarchy used women to serve their own agendas. During the liberation wars, Bengali society needed women to actively participate in the political sphere to gain independence from British and Pakistani powers, however once that aim was achieved, the men expected women to go back to the private sphere. So women were given a voice in the political space, but it was based on the terms and conditions imposed by the patriarchal powers. It is important to realize that though Bengali women made advances in the political and social areas during the 1950s and 1960s, it was still restricted by patriarchal structures and institutions.

II. Women's Social Reform Movements

Women's movements have been defined in slightly different ways by South Asian academics. In contrast to the definition used earlier in this chapter,³⁶ a women's social reform movement focused on questioning the legitimacy of the basic tenets in Bangladeshi social structure, namely the male dominance and the female subordination, protesting against the customs, practices, laws and institutions designed to impose and perpetuate patriarchal values in society, and lastly, initiating actions for changing societal values and attitudes to transform the class and gender inequalities that are deeply embedded in the Bangladeshi culture. Historically, social reforms centered on women have been important in placing women at the forefront in socio-economic and political agendas (Ahmed, 1985 in Jahan, Roushan. 1991:231).

Social reforms geared towards empowerment for women dates as far back as the 18th century. Social reformists like Raja Rammohan Roy (1772-1833) dedicated his life to abolish customs such as child marriages, widow burnings and polygamy in Indian culture. He worked towards establishing laws against the practice of Sati (widow burning) and even proposed establishing a trust system for destitute widows. The traditional and orthodox Hindu class vehemently opposed Roy's anti-Sati campaign, but finally in 1832, a law was passed in the legal system that banned widow burnings (Khan, 2001:33-34).

Another social reformist, Ishwar Chandra Bidyashagar strongly advocated for female education and the remarriage of the Hindu widow in particular. In 1860, after a long and hard battle against the influential upper class Hindu orthodoxy, the "Permission of

³⁶ See Basu (1995) for another definition stated in the Women's Political Movements section of this chapter.

Cohabitation” law was drafted that banned child marriages of girls under the age of 10; this law was finally passed in 1891 (Ibid).

Social reformists during that time worked tirelessly to establish a new social order that would empower women in Bengali society and establish their human rights, create opportunities for them and eliminate the patriarchal discriminatory attitudes toward them. One of the areas that social reformists focused on was education for women. Education was seen as a key to women’s empowerment and improving their social status. Southern feminists believed educating women would be a first step in integrating women in the public sphere and create a space for women to overcome social inequalities and injustices that are perpetuated by the patriarchal society on an everyday basis. Education was seen as providing women with opportunities to participate in the public sphere and be involved in decision-making at the community and state levels. There have been several women who dedicated their lives to educate women both in the rural and urban areas (Khan, 2001:33-38).

Begum Rokeya, one of the pioneers of the women’s movements in Bangladesh, first launched the movement to educate women in Bangladesh about a hundred years ago. She was born in 1880 in a conservative Muslim family at a time when Muslim women were strictly confined within the walls of tradition. In her family, like other Muslim families, women were not allowed to study Bengali or English. However, with the help of her brother, from an early age, Begum Rokeya realized that education was the main key to women’s freedom, and thus she began her relentless effort to educate herself and other Muslim women.

In 1910, Begum Rokeya established the Sakhwat memorial girls' school in a house with five students and a bench. Begum Rokeya had to fight against the conservative Muslim society every step of the way to keep her school going and teach young girls how to read and write. In 1915, the school became a primary school and the number of students increased to eighty-four. In 1930, Begum Rokeya was able to transform the school into an English medium institute³⁷ with the help of some Christian women skilled in English. The establishment of the English medium school was seen as a landmark towards the access of education for women in Bangladesh at that time. Begum Rokeya believed women's right to education was a necessity and not a charity handed down by the elite male groups in society.

Begum Rokeya and her followers worked for women's right to education and their increased mobility in the public sphere. She was one of the first feminists who raised questions about gender inequalities that were and still are ingrained in the Bangladeshi patriarchal society. She criticized the universal belief of male superiority based on subordination and motivated the society to bring women out of seclusion and into the public sphere of life. Other feminists along with Begum Rokeya believed that education would increase opportunities for women, increase their public mobility and establish their rights to economic independence (Jahan, Roushan. 1991:232).³⁸

³⁷ English medium institute or school refers to an educational system where all the subjects are taught in English, whereas, in a Bengali medium school all subjects are taught in Bengali and English is taught as a separate subject.

³⁸ Some academics from a different school of thought view the movement initiated by Begum Rokeya as an elite, middle class and urban women's movement that did not necessarily reach or understand the issues and concerns of poor rural women (Basu, 1995:91).

III. Influence of Feminist Literature

There has been a trend in the Bengali literature to focus on women's socio-economic and political issues. This has been another platform, along with the political and social ones where women have at least been able to raise issues related to their human rights and bring their agendas to the forefront.

The feminist movement within literature in Bangladesh has been a latent one. There are certain historical time periods in the literature, such as the 1950s and 1960s, that focused on the gender inequalities and patriarchal structures that oppress women in Bengali society. Bengali literature during the Pakistani rule, for example focused on women's active political involvement in the independence war. Jahir Raihan's, "Arek Falgun" (Another Spring) portrays the involvement of women students during the language movement. The story describes how female students from Dhaka University, Medical College and other educational institutions in Dhaka at that time organized protest rallies along with their male counterparts in the movement and died for their freedom and their right to speak Bengali (Raihan, 1968).

The latent feminist literature never materialized into a women's movement. It did, however, help people think about the patriarchal Bengali society and what effects it had on women. The literature also taught Bengali women to think critically and develop their feminist analysis skills at different points in history to fight against patriarchy. For example, the rights of sex workers were critically analyzed and brought to the forefront through the feminist literature focused on women's human rights.

It is important to mention that, although historically the platform of feminist literature did not mobilize women at the local level, in recent times, Taslima Nasreen, a

renowned feminist from Bangladesh, has used the feminist literature platform to mobilize against patriarchy in the public sphere. She has been able to use the literature podium to bring the social norms that are oppressive to women to the forefront and demand change. She has been especially successful in challenging religious institutions and their patriarchal traditions that have oppressed women for centuries and are continuing to do so.

Post-Colonial Women's Movements

Since Begum Rokeya had encouraged women to step outside of their homes and the purdah (seclusion), the women in Bangladesh have come a long way. We have seen that the women's movement in Bangladesh has been and still is diverse in its goals and visions, and the organizations involved within it can be very different from each other. But, the women's movements as a whole is working towards the empowerment of women, establishing their rights as human rights and eliminating the violence that is perpetuated against women in every sphere of society.

During the 1980s, there were several different movements in Bangladesh and many changes were taking place in the society. The women's movements gained momentum during this time that helped to bring positive changes to women's lives. By the 1990s, there were between three hundred to five hundred women's organizations registered with the Women's Ministry in Bangladesh which were working to establish women's rights and empowerment in the Bengali society (Jahan, Roushan. 1995:87).

In the 1980s issues relating to violence against women became a visible and crucial concern. Furthermore, matters such as rape, dowries, wife abuse, trafficking, and forced prostitution that were just 'women's issues' became part of the public forum and

were articulated with increasing volume, frequency, and intensity. This was partly due to the growing awareness of women's issues resulting from the United Nations (UN) decade for Women (1975-1985) and partly due to the media attention given to violence against women. During the early 1980s, a press conference was called by the Mahila Parishad³⁹ where a 20 point demand list to eliminate violence against women was presented to the government. At that time, the Mahila Parishad also spearheaded a petition to establish an anti-dowry law that collected seventeen thousand signatures and through vigorous lobbying by other women's groups and civil society, women members in parliament were able to draft and pass the 'Prohibition of Dowry Act' in 1980. This was an instance that showed that collaboration and strong advocacy on the part of the women's movements could influence institutional structures and hold the government responsible and accountable for social change. And it also shows that the government did not willingly change the laws relating to anti-dowry, but were forced to do so in the face of strong opposition from the women's movements. (Jahan, Roushan.1995:100-101)

It was also at this time that Bengali researchers started documenting the extent to which violence against women was being perpetuated, as well as starting to explore and analyze the causes of violence against women. Women activists started to form intervention programs that dealt with violence against women and protested such atrocities (Jahan, Roushan. 1995:100-101).

By the 1990s women's movements had made some positive gains in demanding women's human rights and putting their concerns on socio-economic and political agendas. Firstly, the number of women's organizations increased considerably in the 1980s and the 1990s. Secondly, most of the women's organizations changed their

³⁹ Mahila Parishad is one of the oldest women's organizations that were formed in the late 1960s.

approach from a welfare perspective to an approach focusing on empowerment for women and establishing women's rights as human rights. Third, a lot of the organizations and NGOs spread out into the rural areas and the movement was characterized with a strong rural women's base, as well as an active urban base. Moreover there were collaborations between the rural and urban groups to open a space for dialogue and better understand the situation of women in rural areas. According to one estimate, by 1990, more than one million rural women were engaged in regular group meetings and activities, and over one thousand projects were established in rural areas to involve women in development policies, mandates, resources and services (Jahan, Roushan. 1995:101). Lastly, there were active efforts on the part of the women's movements and other NGOs to establish links and collaborations among themselves. Through alliance building with civil society, the women's groups were able to integrate women's voices into other public forums and demand their women's human rights in the government platform (Jahan, Roushan. 1995).

In the 1990s the women's movements also changed some of their strategies and modes of operation to counter the emerging global and national patriarchal trends that undermined women's interests. Some of the patriarchal trends that negated the gains made by women in the 1980s are the following: the 1990s saw a non-democratic and militaristic regime come to power that was willing to take any measures to consolidate, strengthen and promote its power base, even if it meant harming women and other marginalized groups in society. Secondly, the neo-liberal structures and the increased trends in globalization both internationally and nationally prevalent in the 1990s meant that governments and multinational corporations were willing to exploit the vulnerable

section of the labour force, namely women, to accumulate capital and gain profits at any cost.⁴⁰ The 1990s in Bangladesh also saw a rise in fundamentalism and conservative powers. This meant the Islamic leaders were dedicated to revive the past glory of Islam and regain their power with a significant part of their campaign concentrated on controlling the mobility and participation of women in public life through domestication and curtailment of their hard won civil, political and legal rights (Jahan, Roushan.1991:241-242).

The changes in the socio-economic, political and cultural spheres meant the role of women, their status and situations were also changing in the 1990s. Firstly, the women at the grass root's level started to actively network with researchers and women in the academic world. Women researchers have contributed greatly to bring women's issues into the public sphere through their work. Moreover, academic women in Bangladesh have realized that value neutral research that does not take local agency and action into account cannot help bring change in society. Women activists on the other hand, have started to view academic research as an important instrument to societal change. Activists are now using research done at the academic level to protest against the patriarchal structures and transform society (In-depth Interview with Zarina Rahman Khan, December 2002).

Secondly, the women's movements have been broadening their agenda to include different issues relating to the environment, the technological revolution, the debt crisis etc. The movements have been trying to include women's voices in different social and political issues to mainstream women.

⁴⁰ This will be explored further in the last chapter, where I examine neo-patriarchal trend of trafficking and its effects on women.

Thirdly, the women's movements have also tapped into the media to bring issues concerning women to the forefront. They have used the media effectively both nationally and internationally to publicize women's human rights. "The role of media in perpetuating gender-stereotyping and patriarchal values and the use of media by fundamentalists has generated a considerable protest among women's organizations. They have now recognized the need for co-opting media which has responded on issues such as dowry-murder, gender violence, and malpractice and use of experimental drugs on women in family planning" (Jahan, Roushan.1991:242).

A fourth trend has been the linkages women's organizations have made with both the government and other development NGOs. National NGOs, such as the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) have worked extensively with women in rural areas to help them gain economic rights through micro-credit programs, social rights through awareness building about legal rights, human rights. BRAC advocates a holistic approach that includes women's own voices about their needs and empowerment. Thus, BRAC and other NGOs alike have advocated participation of women in NGO activities, which in turn, have started changing their role in the public space in the villages and also influenced their status within families and the domestic arena. "Already, women members of organized groups have taken several noticeable steps in furthering their rights in employment, such as bargaining for better wages, and in family matters relating to divorce and dowry" (Jahan, Roushan. 1991:242). The other important collaborations women's organizations have established are with trade unions and the labor movement in Bangladesh which has become more gender aware through networking with women researchers and activists (Jahan, Roushan. 1991:240-242).

Conclusion

As the number of women's organizations has increased, their focus and mandates have broadened to include many issues important to women, and even the style of leadership within the organizations has become less hierarchical and less class biased. Presently there is greater awareness about inherent patriarchal structures that subordinate women. Thus the women's movements are better prepared to fight against the neo-liberal patriarchal trends and globalization (Women for Women 1975 in Jahan, Roushan. 1991:243).

However, one challenge women's movements still face is to build and sustain alliances among different women's organizations and other NGOs working with women. As mentioned earlier in the chapter, though the movements have a collective vision of women's empowerment, their mandates and approaches are quite different. Thus it is only at times of crisis that the organizations come together and fight from a common platform.⁴¹ The women's movements in Bangladesh are trying to figure out ways to connect with other organizations for a long-term period to implement positive and transformative changes in society to empower women.

In the next chapter I discuss the 1980s and the women's movement's efforts to connect at the local level to organize women from a human rights platform. I discuss the sex workers' movement in particular, which gained momentum in the early through late 1990s and how it connected to the larger women's movements. The history outlined in this chapter is relevant to better understand how the women's movements came together by using the political space that was created by earlier women's movements and how

⁴¹ One situation where this coalition took place will be discussed in the chapter relating to the evictions of sex workers from their homes in 1999; also as will be seen sustaining the feeling of solidarity past the crisis period can be very problematic.

during the 1999 evictions, women's movements effectively demanded the sex worker's rights as women and Bangladeshi citizens from a human rights platform created by their predecessors.

Chapter 4: Sex Workers, the UN Decade and Women's Movements in Bangladesh

Introduction

Women in Bangladesh live under a patriarchal system that treats them as secondary citizens and suffer social injustices in different spheres and at various levels. Roushan Jahan defines the women's movement in Bangladesh as an organized attempt by women's groups and NGOs to bring about women's empowerment to transform society partially or totally and break away from patriarchal institutions that have oppressed women throughout history (Jahan, Roushan.1995:87).

In this chapter, I will briefly discuss the role which global feminist movements and the UN platform have played in organizing women's groups and organizations within Bangladeshi women's movements. There had been many important changes in the 1980s both nationally and internationally that shaped the women's movements. The two main trends that affected the sex workers' movement in particular have been the creation of a women's human rights platform and the government's increased accountability to both the national and international community to promote and protect women's human rights. In this section I will discuss in detail how the UN Decade for Women (1975-1985) and the global feminist movement influenced the above-mentioned trends.

In the last section, I will examine how the vibrant women's movements within Bangladesh in the 1980s helped sex workers become visible in the public sphere and break some of the cultural taboos attached to their profession. Furthermore, I will briefly examine how the women's human rights platform helped sex workers to organize and

demand their rights as women's human rights and hold the government accountable to protect their rights as citizens of Bangladesh.

As mentioned above and for the purpose of this thesis, I focus on two main trends that emerged in the 1980s: the emergence of the local women's movements based on a global feminist framework and the government becoming accountable to the women's movements for women's empowerment. The first two parts of this chapter are focused on these two trends to understand how the sex workers in the 1990s used the global feminist platform and how they pushed government to integrate their voices into national agendas. Firstly, an effective and strong women's human rights platform was formed and integrated into the women's movements as a result of this history of women's movements described in chapter 3, the UN Decade for Women, and a strong global feminist movement that helped to strengthen movements at the local level. Secondly, because Bangladesh participated in many of the UN international conferences that focused on women's rights and their basic needs and signing and ratifying many of the international conventions during 1975, the 1980s, and 1990s, the government became accountable to both national NGOs and the international community to uphold women's human rights in Bangladesh and this in turn, gave women's movements a political space to hold the government accountable for promoting women's human rights. Furthermore, this created a point of transparency among the government, national NGOs and international organizations that work with women in Bangladesh and gave the women's movements an avenue to insist the government defend and maintain women's human rights in Bangladesh.

Women's Human Rights Platform in Bangladesh

The UN Decade for Women created a global space for women to demand their rights as human rights. The UN advocated that 1975 be the International Women's Year (IWY) to create global awareness about women's rights. In July 1975, the UN conference in Mexico declared the years between 1975 and 1985 as the UN Decade for Women, a suggestion which was subsequently ratified by the UN. The goal of the decade was to promote women's development throughout the world (Hussain, 2002:230). The UN Decade for Women opened up spaces for women in communities all over the world and created a forum for women across the globe to meet and exchange ideas with each other. The meetings within the UN decade allowed women from different racial and ethnic groups, cultures, classes and occupational bases to meet and gain new knowledge and learn from each other's experiences. These women's groups created networks locally, regionally and globally, which helped promote research and feminist analysis that in turn, advanced women's advocacy in areas such as women's human rights. As Peggy Antrobus⁴² explains, the conferences and meetings of the 1990s "forged and strengthened links between organizing at local and global levels: they facilitated the growth of a global women's movement of the greatest diversity and decentralization, a movement that expanded its agenda from a narrow definition of 'women's issues' to one that embraced a range of concern for human welfare and transformed itself into a major alternative constituency" (Antrobus, 2003).

Within this framework, the women's movements in Bangladesh also shifted its focus from economic independence and development oriented goals to a more

⁴² Peggy Antrobus is a Southern feminist who is involved with the DAWN network and has worked extensively with women's movements in the South and globalization. I have emailed Peggy Antrobus to ask her permission to quote her from the rough draft of her book, "*Global Women's Movement*".

comprehensive vision that included women's concerns in the realm of socio-economic, political, and cultural rights. Before the UN Decade for Women, most of the women's movements in the Economic South were intertwined with struggles against colonial powers, national liberations and social movements demanding better lives for people of Bangladesh. The UN Decade for Women brought the issues relating to women into focus and autonomous movements of women by women and for women were formed. Conferences during the UN decade, such as the workshop on 'Feminist Ideologies and structures in the first half of the Decade' sponsored by the UN Asia and Pacific Centre for Women and Development (APCWD) held in Bangkok in 1979 opened a space for women in the Economic South to come together and question women's involvement in some of the national struggles and social movements. Women have often been marginalized in these movements, and once the battles were won, they were expected to go back to the private sphere.⁴³

Conferences, such as the one mentioned above, made connections between the women's movements and struggles for civil rights, independence movements, and movements that addressed questions of structural imbalances between people and countries. The workshop helped women question their roles in these struggles, in bureaucratic settings within their national governments, in the UN structures and helped them understand the power of feminism to transform their position and responsibility within these institutionalized structures (Antrobus, 2003).

As Peggy Antrobus (2003) explains in her book, "*Global Women's Movement*,"⁴⁴ the UN Decade for Women was unlike any other UN decade. The quality and quantity of

⁴³ As has been noted in the description of women in post independence from the colonial powers in 1947.

⁴⁴ According to both Antrobus and Zed Press, this book is expected to be published in October, 2004 and launched in South Africa at DAWN's 20th anniversary meeting.

activities and commitments generated by this decade was unprecedented. The opportunities and resources that were provided in this decade resulted in a social movement for women that included all spheres and aspects of women's lives: from the personal to political, from the domestic to the public, from the levels of deepest levels of women's consciousness to the most outward expressions of women's agency (Antrobus, 2003).

The women's organizations in Bangladesh participated in these meetings at the international level, and worked with the Bangladeshi government to prepare official reports for the conferences at the national level. This created an excellent opportunity for the women's movements and activists at the grass roots level to articulate and reflect their position and opinions about women's human rights in Bangladesh and question the lack of institutionalized bodies to monitor and implement equal opportunities for women within the government structure. Many research groups held national conferences to come together to discuss issues such as violence against women and critique the gaps between the government's commitment to women and implementation of policies and programs geared towards that goal (Jahan, Roushan. 1995:98).

The UN decade helped Bangladeshi women link themselves to a broader global movement through the active participation in the global conferences and helped create a women's human rights platform through the sharing of knowledge and experiences with women from other countries.

Another international achievement for women during the decade was the drafting and adopting of the UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) by the United Nations in 1979. Since CEDAW is a human

rights convention, it had to be adopted by each national government by 2003. CEDAW was ratified by more than 175 countries and its provisions are designed to eliminate the inequalities present in patriarchal societies. A United Nations' Committee monitors the implementation of this women's' human rights treaty based on government report to which relevant party may reply and submit an alternative report. The Committee then recommends what governments should do to stop gender-based discrimination in their respective societies (Canadian Feminist Alliance for International Action, 2004).

Bangladesh, as a member of the UN, ratified the convention in 1984 with reservations.⁴⁵ When Bangladesh ratified the convention, it opened up a space for women's organizations working within the human rights platform to monitor government's commitment to women's human rights and demand the proper implementation of policies promoting equality and empowerment of women (Khan, 2001:264-266).

The Women's Movement and Government Accountability

To further the women's equity agenda, during the UN conference on women held in Mexico in 1975 governments agreed that they would establish institutional mechanisms within the government structure to promote women's equality. The government in Bangladesh created the National Women's Council in 1978 and the Social Welfare and Women's Affairs Ministry was created at that time too (Hussain, 2002:232). In the Second World Conference on Women in 1980, these achievements of national implementation could be reported. In addition, the ratification of CEDAW meant that the Government of Bangladesh was responsible to report to the UN on the progress of

⁴⁵ The Government of Bangladesh ratified CEDAW in 1984 with reservations on articles 2, 13.1[a], 16.1[c] and [f] on the basis of religious sentiments.

promoting women's human rights and eliminate gender-based discrimination a year after the ratification and every four years after that. In a report prepared in 1986, the government stated that it was "taking all necessary steps to create awareness among men and women to achieve elimination of prejudices based on the idea of inferiority of women and to emphasize the equal role of father and mother for the overall development of the children" (Khan, 2001:267). This was in conjunction with article 5 of the convention that called states to take action to eliminate sex roles and stereotyping.

Furthermore, the government of Bangladesh committed itself to implement legislative measures to suppress all forms of trafficking in women, and eliminate exploitation of women in prostitution as per article 6 in the convention. The government in this case cited the Cruelty to Women (Deterrent punishment) Act of 1983 to show the government's active commitment (Ibid).

The government of Bangladesh has drafted and enacted laws to establish women's human rights directly linked to the UN Decade for Women and to the ratification of CEDAW. Despite expressing reservations on the CEDAW convention, the government has amended some of the national laws to empower women in Bangladesh. In 1982 and 1986, the government amended the Muslim Laws Ordinance (1961) to grant women the right to divorce and increased punishment for non-observance of this law. Furthermore, the government enacted a series of laws in the 1980s to complement the convention and promote women's human rights, for example, the Dowry Act Prohibition (1980), the Cruelty to Women (Deterrent punishment) Act (1983), The Family Court Ordinance (1985) and Suppression of Immoral Trafficking Act (1993).

It is important to mention here that even before the 1980s and the UN Decade for Women, the women's movements in Bangladesh recognized the importance of establishing laws that open a space for women to demand their human rights and rights as citizens of Bangladesh. In 1971 when Bangladesh became independent, women were guaranteed equal rights in every sphere of life by the Bangladeshi constitution. Articles 28(I), 28(2), and 28(3) outline equal rights for women. The constitution has also sanctioned proactive measures in favor of women. The government in Bangladesh introduced a quota system that ensures women's increased participation in politics, developed legal reforms that protect women from violence and undertook special measures that increases girls' enrolment in schools (Jahan, Rounaq. 1995:26).⁴⁶

Though the constitution guarantees equal rights to men and women, the laws relating to marriage, divorce, child custody and property inheritance for instance, are still based on religious and traditional laws. Bangladesh follows an Islamic Shari'a Law system, which discriminates against women and treats them as second-class citizens. Thus though women have rights according to the constitution, the social system based on religious and traditional beliefs often creates barriers for women to access the legal system and demand their citizen's rights.

In 1973 a group of young women, mostly academics and professionals, took up some of the issues relating to the constitutional dynamics that affected the position of women in society. The organization named "Women for Women" was one of the first autonomous women's research organizations formed in Bangladesh. Since its inception,

⁴⁶ The government of Bangladesh had to guarantee women's equal rights in the constitution because women human rights activists in the 1940s were actively fighting to put women's human rights on the agenda as it was first introduced in the UN at that time and there was also a national legacy of women freedom fighters demanding women's human rights in the colonial and post colonial Bangladesh as seen in chapter 3.

it has been doing important research work on the situation of women in Bangladesh. In 1975 (International Women's Year) the organization published a report on the status of women in Bangladesh that has become a base for many women's organizations and NGOs to advocate for women's rights and their roles in development policies (Jahan, Roushan. 1995:95).

Thus, through these laws and specific ministries focusing on women, the government became accountable to the national NGOs, the women's movements and the international community to actively promote and implement women's human rights in Bangladesh. The women's movement as a whole has worked hard to establish women's ministries and divisions within the government structure to put women back on the agenda. However, often governments do not give the women's ministry enough power and budgets to formulate and implement programs and policies for women's empowerment. Many feminists working with the sex workers' movements have argued that after the evictions in 1999, the government pushed the sex workers agenda to the women's ministry, and did not take responsibility for the unlawful evictions. In fact, the government stated that the sex workers cause was the women's ministry's concern, rather than a national concern (In-depth Interview with Dr. Ferdous Azim, December 2002).

Despite these difficulties, the formation of a women's ministry created a platform for the women's movements to demand implementation of women's human rights by the government. For example, in 1982, a number of women's groups jointly organized a national seminar on "Prevention of Oppression against Women", which was inaugurated by the Minister of Women's Affairs. During that time, the Bangladesh National Women Lawyers Association (BNWLA) held a regional seminar as well, which demanded

government accountability to prevent violence against women. While establishing these laws have opened a space for women to demand their human rights, as Saira Rahman Khan explains, the existing laws, despite amendments and government's apparent commitment, are ineffectual because of social patriarchal attitudes that fail to recognize violence against women as a legal issue. Furthermore, corruption within government ministries and bureaucracies impede the implementation of these laws (Khan, 2001).

Nevertheless, the interactions and collaborations formed at the international level through the UN has brought the issues of violence against women to the forefront and at least has opened a platform to question the government on implementing women's human rights and demand equal opportunities for women. The sex workers' movement had been able to use international tools, such as the CEDAW convention and other international documents to demand their rights as human rights in the political realm. Their political platform enabled sex workers to achieve legal victory through the Bangladesh High Court as will be discussed in detail in chapter 5.

The Women's Movements and the Sex Workers

The sex workers' movement in Bangladesh is a leading example of the women's movements bringing positive changes to the lives of marginalized and oppressed women. The women's movements as discussed earlier in this chapter have played an active role in bringing the issues of sex workers into the public arena and creating a platform to demand their rights as human rights.

The women's movements have been involved with the causes of sex workers from early 1990s when the government tried to evict the women from one of the oldest brothels, *Kandupatti*. In 1991, sex workers marched on International Women's Day for

the first time in public under their own banner. During that time, the women were faced with threats of evictions and abuse from Islamic groups and social groups against prostitution. The women's movements moved forward through these difficulties and helped organize press conferences to bring the issue of unlawful evictions and violation of sex workers human rights to the forefront (In-depth Interview with Mahbooba Mahmood, Naripokkho, December 2002).

Thus the early 1990s opened up avenues of discussion within the women's movements and larger society about the situation of sex workers where brothels became the focus. This subculture was sustained into the 1990s and was well organized and well practiced (In-depth Interview with Zarina Rahman Khan, December 2002).

In this thesis, I focus on the second evictions of the brothels, *Tanbazar* and *Nimtoli* that took place in 1999. But it is important to mention the International Women's Day rally (1991) and the *Kandupatti* eviction (1997) because they illustrate that the women's movements have been actively involved with the sex workers even before the *Tanbazar* evictions took place.

In the 1999 evictions, the women's movements for the first time focused solely on demanding sex workers' rights as human rights and actively got involved even before the late July evictions took place. The women's movements organized with NGOs and civil society under the 'Shonghoti' movement⁴⁷ in early July and focused on sex workers' rights to shelter, to security and their right to work and acknowledge prostitution as sex work (Azim, Mahmood & Sheli, 2002:12-13). However, it is also important to note that the women's movements took a dual approach to the sex workers' movement: they

⁴⁷ Shonghoti is the collective women's movement (approximately 60 organizations joined forces) that formed in early July, 1999 to prevent and later protest the illegal evictions of sex workers from the Tanbazar brothel in July, 1999.

fought from a human rights platform demanding sex workers' human rights and they tried to help the evicted women through service providing assistance (In-depth Interview with Ferdous Azim, December 2002). Since the Shonghoti movement was established in July, 1999, the police abuse had decreased and sex workers were able to leave the vagrant homes, where they had been treated hideously. Approximately 60 organizations worked together at that time to combat these human rights violations (In-depth Interview with Hajera, Durjoy, December 2002).

The Shonghoti movement organized sex workers effectively to use the news media to bring the sex workers' issues to the public, and place their demands in front of the government and the civil society. Shonghoti demanded that the government take steps to prevent the evictions from happening, implement development programs for empowerment of the sex workers while letting them stay in their homes and also take steps to identify the reasons why women go into prostitution and look into the factors forcing women into sex work. Lastly, Shonghoti demanded that the government punish the pimps, madams and people who force women into prostitution rather than punishing the sex workers by throwing them out of their homes (Azim, Mahmood & Sheli, 2002: 53-55). The women's movements also brought the case of evictions to the legal system and the sex workers' movement won this battle, which I discuss in detail in later chapters.

Conclusion

Thus, although the groups and individuals comprising the women's movements have different perspectives, mandates and objectives, their collaborative efforts worked toward the common goal of demanding the sex workers' rights as human rights, as will be seen in later chapters. The women's movements focused on women as human beings

and though not everyone has the same ideology, all women within the Shonghoti movement believe in women's empowerment (In-depth interview with Mahbooba Mahmood, Naripokkho, December 2002). The women's movement as a whole was instrumental in protesting the atrocities against the sex workers during the evictions in 1999 that will be discussed in the next chapter. It is important to mention here that the women's movements in this particular situation collaborated with the international community and civil society, with people and organizations from different ideological backgrounds and created a platform that forced the government to acknowledge that the sex workers' human rights had been violated.

Thus the women's movements used a human rights platform to force the government to answer to the civil society about the unlawful evictions. They opposed patriarchal mechanisms of oppressing women, such as illegally evicting sex workers from their homes. It is crucial to realize that the tradition of a strong women's movements that came out of the 1980s have been instrumental in providing sex workers their own voices and a political platform from which the women have been able to effectively demand their rights as women and as citizens of Bangladesh. In the next chapter, I discuss how the patriarchal Bangladeshi society forced sex workers out of their homes and robbed them of their basic human rights and also discuss in more detail how women have been fighting against such atrocities and the gains they have made since the evictions.

Chapter 5: The Situation of Sex Workers and the Evictions of 1999

Introduction

The evictions in 1999 were a turning point for the sex workers. They pushed sex workers to organize and create a platform using the human rights argument to demand their rights as women and as citizens of Bangladesh. The women's movements in Bangladesh have not only advocated that the sex workers' movement be included in the women's movements, but the sex workers position needs to be respected as such. The women's movements in the 1980s helped bring the issues of sex workers to the forefront, but did not contribute to a status change for them. The positive changes made at that time stemmed from a reaction of treating sex workers as victims, but in 1999, when the evictions were planned and the issues were raised, their platform of a needs based approach to sex workers changed to a sex workers' rights as human rights platform (In-depth Interview with Ferdous Azim, December 2002).

In this chapter, I begin by describing the situation of sex workers using a survey done by two of the national NGOs, Alliance Cooperation of Legal Aid Bangladesh (ACLAB, working with UNDP) and Program for the Introduction and Adaptation of Contraceptive Technology for Bangladesh (PIACT, an NGO working with UNDP). In the next section, I briefly describe the *Tanbazar* and *Nimtoli* brothel, how they operated on a daily basis, some of the socio-economic hierarchies within the brothels and their political connections with the outside world. Later I discuss how and when the evictions took place, and more importantly, why the government decided to evict illegally the women working in *Tanbazar* and *Nimtoli*. The underlying reasons for the illegal evictions help one better understand how patriarchal institutions oppress women in Bangladeshi

society. In the last section, I briefly examine the responses of NGOs and civil society to the evictions and discuss some of the dynamics of the legal response to sex workers' demand to return to their homes in *Tanbazar* and *Nimtoli*.

Situation of Sex Workers in Major Brothels before 1999 Evictions

I. Background

ACLAB and PIACT conducted a survey of the brothel communities in the districts of Jessore, Mymensingh, Narayanganj, and Daluadia⁴⁸ to better understand the situation of sex workers and the factors that usually push them into prostitution. This UNDP project aimed to develop more effective policies designed to offer alternative livelihoods to sex workers and for their gradual integration into Bangladeshi society (Choudhury, Mia, Islam, Khatun & Haque, 2000). The sex workers' voices were considered essential to accomplish any changes in the situation of the women in the trade (In-depth Interview with Dr. Naima, UNDP, December 2002). The survey of sex workers in brothels is particularly useful for this thesis because it helps us to understand what were the socio-economic and cultural conditions of sex workers right before the 1999 evictions took place, especially because it includes *Tanbazar* and *Nimtoli* brothels in Narayanganj. This is important to contextualize the sex workers' situation both before and after the evictions.

II. Methodology

The methodology used in the project was a field survey of sex workers and their children in their own environment: the brothel communities. As Table 1 indicates data were collected from 1771 sex workers and 412 sardarnies (madams) in the seven selected brothels within the four districts mentioned earlier. Sex workers were directly

⁴⁸ Narayanganj and Daluadia are cities that are part of the Dhaka district and are situated near port areas.

interviewed in their homes at the brothels with a structured interview schedule. In addition, interviews were also conducted with sardarnies (madams), children of the sex workers and a group of local informants, including, local politicians, administrators, politically and socially influential leaders in the area and concerned professionals. In addition to questionnaire style interviews, the researchers also held informal discussion groups with sex workers and sardarnies (madams) to gain insight on topics including the causes of choosing the profession of commercial sex work, intentions for choosing alternate vocations, awareness of STD/AIDS and other health concerns. Furthermore, the physical condition of the brothels, i.e., environment, water and sewerage etc were observed and recorded by the researchers (Choudhury, Mia, Islam, Khatun & Haque, 2000).

Table 1: Number of Sex Workers and their Children interviewed in the four brothel areas

District	Brothel	Total habitants (sex workers & sardarnies)	Respondents of Interview			
			Sex workers	Sardarnies	Children over 10 years	Local influential
Narayanganj	<i>Tanbazar</i>	2500	691	138	20	8
	<i>Nimtoli</i>	300	132	25	5	
Jessore	Miroman-dir	200	113	36	14	7
	Jhalaipatti	70	54	10	4	
	Babubazar	65	47	8	4	
Rajbari	Daulatdia Ghat	1000	1000	137	62	10
Mymensingh	Teripatti	300	155	58	17	10
Total		4435	1771	412	126	25

Source: (Choudhury, Mia, Islam, Khatun, & Haque, 2000)

III. Difficulties in Conducting the Survey

There were a number of problems the researchers faced when conducting the surveys in the brothels. Firstly, the survey aimed at interviewing all the women within the brothels but only 49% of that target was reached because some women were either busy with clients or waiting for clients at their doors when the interviews were conducted. Some of the women were busy doing housework, cooking, taking baths or visiting the nearby markets during the scheduled times for interviews as well (Choudhury, Mia, Islam, Khatun & Haque, 2000). It is interesting to note that the researchers from the survey group did not seem to consult either the sex workers or the sardarnies about when would be the best time for the women to be interviewed and what format of interview the women would prefer.

Secondly, the sex workers were not interested in giving interviews because they did not want to lose clients by spending time in interviews. Furthermore, some sardarnies refused to let the women talk to the survey group for that same reason. Several house owners, pimps and other interested influential groups discouraged women from giving interviews to protect their anonymity (Ibid).

IV. Situational Analysis of Sex Workers by ACLAB/PIACT

Some of the data collected focus on the age breakdown, the marital status and health issues for sex workers in the brothels studied by ACLAB/PIACT. The average age of the sex workers is 24.2 years. Three-quarters of the women in the brothels are between 15 and 29 years old.⁴⁹ Most of the sex workers' working life cycle is within the above-mentioned age range because the younger the women, the more customers they attracted and thus younger women are most in demand within the brothels. Moreover, due to the

⁴⁹ This did not include data on the sardarnies (madams).

stressful working conditions and often the damaging lifestyles of over drinking, smoking, and taking some form of drugs⁵⁰ women face hazardous health conditions early in their life. On an average, the sex workers are usually in the profession for about 7 years. About half (49%) of the women stay in the profession for six years or more, and about 8% are new in the brothels with less than a year of being in the trade.⁵¹

There were also young sex workers below the age of 15 in brothels, particularly in *Tanbazar*, according to the information the researchers collected from other sources than the interviews. Such young sex workers are usually kept hidden by the sardarnies from outsiders except customers, as child prostitution is illegal in Bangladesh (Choudhury, Mia, Islam, Khatun & Haque, 2000).

As indicated in Table 2, the biggest proportions of sex workers are unmarried and the second largest group is divorced or separated from their husbands although in *Tanbazar* and *Nimtoli* the second largest group is married. Among those who had been married an overwhelming number of them entered the sex trade after they were married which suggests that either unhappy episodes pushed them into prostitution or they were deserted by their husbands and became prostitutes for economic reasons. Disturbance or suffering caused to women in the forms of physical abuse, polygamy, divorce and violence related to dowry are typically seen as major factors for women to become sex workers. Bangladeshi society does not provide a safe and positive life style for women who are divorced, separated or are unhappy in their marriages. Women who are single and are not trying to find a husband are also looked down upon as fallen women (Choudhury, Mia,

⁵⁰ A large majority of the sex workers have the habit of chewing betel leaves, and smoking bidi-cigarretes. About a third of the workers are addicted to ganja, alcohol/wine and opium.

⁵¹ This shows that the turn over rate of women entering and leaving the brothels are relatively low and suggests that once women entered the brothels it was unlikely for them to leave the brothels. Once they became old, they became sardarnies from being a sex worker.

Islam, Khatun & Haque, 2000). Thus these negative attitudes often push women to choosing a profession where they are not questioned about their marriages or the failure of it. This way the patriarchal Bangladeshi society marginalizes a particular group of women and pushes them to the periphery of society.

**Table 2: Sex Workers by Brothel and Marital Status
(percentage of respondents' sex workers)**

Marital Status	Brothel					Total
	Tanbzar	Nimtoli	Jessore	Daulatdia	Mymensingh	
Married	29.8	25.8	16.4	5.0	16.1	18.6
Divorced	16.2	21.2	29.0	24.5	23.9	21.5
Separated	13.6	10.6	15.9	23.1	6.5	16.1
Widowed	2.2	3.0	1.4	2.4	1.9	2.2
Unmarried	38.2	39.4	37.4	44.9	51.6	41.6
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100

Source: (Choudhury, Mia, Islam, Khatun & Haque, 2000)

V. Health and Hygienic Conditions

The hygienic conditions of the brothels were quite poor. There were not many health facilities available for the sex workers either. Furthermore, the sex workers were reluctant to give true information regarding health problems and diseases. The women tended to hide their health problems in fear of losing customers if others knew about their illnesses (Choudhury, Mia, Islam, Khatun & Haque, 2000). However there were some NGOs working with the sex workers to treat their health problems, raise awareness about HIV/AIDS and STDS, and promote condom use among the customers. The NGOs working in brothels at the time of this survey were Bangladesh Women Health Coalition,

Social Marketing Company, a project supported by NORAD in Narayanganj, the Salvation army in Jessore, Karmajibi Kallayan Sangstha in Daulatdia, and Nari Maitree in Mymensingh.

At the time of the survey, there was low awareness among sex workers about different types of diseases and the need to treat them immediately, as well as to have better hygienic conditions in the brothels. They were barely surviving and had little or no time to be concerned with health issues that were not a direct threat to their work. The brothel owners were simply interested in collecting money from the women and had little concerns in maintaining a clean brothel environment. The public service authorities usually ignored the brothel areas and the inhabitants there. Thus except for a handful of NGOs, almost no attention was paid to providing women in the brothels with much needed health care services and promoting a cleaner and healthier brothel environment for the women and their children (Choudhury, Mia, Islam, Khatun. & Haque, 2000).

VI. Use of Contraceptive and Condoms by Sex Workers

A large majority of sex workers claimed to use some form of contraceptive to prevent unwanted pregnancies. The rates of contraceptive use as seen in the Table 3 below were much higher than the data collected on the rest of the population. Condom use was highly prevalent, although sex workers complained that there were many customers who refused to use a condom during the intercourse. And sometimes the women could not refuse their clients' preferences because that would result in losing clients and angering their sardarnies.

Table 3: Distribution (%) of Sex Workers by brothel and Contraceptive Use Method.

Use of Contraceptive	Brothel					Total
	Tabular	Nimtoli	Jessore	Daulatdia	Mymensingh	
Use	79.6(550)	88.6(117)	86.9(186)	80.1(464)	92.9(144)	82.5(1461)
Do not use	20.4(141)	11.4(15)	13.1(28)	19.9(115)	7.1(11)	17.5(310)
Total	100(691)	100(132)	100(214)	100(579)	100(155)	100(1771)

Source: (Choudhury, Mia, Islam, Khatun & Haque, 2000)

Note: Figures in parentheses indicate number of respondents

The high rates of contraceptive use among the sex workers may be explained by three reasons. Firstly, they wanted to avoid pregnancies as it could disturb their work, secondly, increasingly they were more likely to want to use condoms to avoid health risks,⁵² and lastly, the high rates may in fact be skewed as sex workers may be inclined to lie about contraceptive use to NGO workers, as it was expected that they use condoms during intercourse with clients.

As Table 3 indicates, the numbers varied within the different brothel areas. The highest numbers were in the smaller brothels such as *Nimtoli* or *Mymensingh*. It may be that the clients who frequented bigger brothels, such as *Tanbazar*, did want to use condoms during intercourse and that the larger brothels provided more choices for these clients.

The methods of contraception also varied among brothels. Table 4 shows some of the methods used by sex workers in the brothels. As seen in Table 4 below, the most used method is the condom followed by the oral pill. It is interesting to note that none of the

⁵² More and more, sex workers are becoming aware of the dangers of HIV/AIDS and STDs through programs offered by different NGOs in the brothel areas.

brothels relied on safe periods⁵³ as an effective contraceptive method. Also, the interviewers stated that many of the women combined the contraceptive methods mentioned below on a regular basis.

Table 4: Distribution (%) of Sex Workers by Contraceptive Methods Used and by Brothels

Method of Contraceptive Used	Brothel					Total
	<i>Tanbazar</i>	<i>Nimtoli</i>	Jessore	Daulatdia	Mymensingh	
Condom	56.5	59.0	59.7	62.5	69.4	60.3
Oral pill	39.6	40.2	38.7	32.8	29.2	36.3
Injection	2.0	0.0	1.6	1.7	0.0	1.5
Norplant	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.9	0.0	0.3
Ligation	1.5	0.9	0.0	1.5	1.4	1.2
Copper-T	0.4	0.0	0.0	0.4	0.0	0.3
Safe Period	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.2	0.0	0.1
Total users	550	117	186	464	144	1461

Source: (Choudhury, Mia, Islam, Khatun & Haque, 2000)

VII. Awareness of HIV/AIDS and STDS and Protection by Sex Workers

Bangladesh is still considered a low HIV prevalence country. However, the rates of HIV infections are increasing at an alarming rate in the metropolitan cities. Presently according to surveys done by international organizations such as the World Bank, the HIV prevalence rate in Bangladesh is 0.03%. The countries surrounding Bangladesh, such as India, Pakistan and Nepal have a much higher rate of HIV/AIDS occurrences (World Bank, 2001).

⁵³ Safe periods refer to the menstruation cycles where certain time periods have lower risks of pregnancy associated with them.

Bangladesh has a population of approximately 130 million and according to a UNDP report on HIV/AIDS in Bangladesh, the estimated prevalence for HIV/AIDS among adults and children in 2000 was 21,000 in total and estimated AIDS cases at the end of 1999 was approximately 4,900. The reported HIV cases at the end of 2001 were 157 while reported AIDS cases were 12. However, as the study by the World Bank explains the officially low numbers of reported cases of HIV/AIDS is hiding the real picture of the existing 'high risk' sexual practices that result in much higher numbers in HIV/AIDS infections among the population in Bangladesh. The estimated numbers according to NGOs and civil society at the end of 1999 were approximately 13,000 people infected with HIV/AIDS (UNDP, 2003).

The spread of HIV/AIDS has affected certain groups more severely than others. The HIV sentinel surveillance done in 1998 found that the two groups with highest rates of HIV/AIDS infections were sex workers (working in the brothels and on the streets) and injecting drug users (BSS, 2002). In 1998 the Bangladesh government with the support of UNAIDS undertook the first wave of expanded surveillance for HIV. One of the groups that were screened for HIV/AIDS and STDs were sex workers, particularly those women who worked in the brothels. Street sex workers were also included in the surveys especially those who worked in Dhaka, the capital. There was another survey conducted again in 2000. Some of the findings about the prevalence of HIV/AIDS among sex workers showed that they still remained a high-risk group with increasing rates of infections among women in the sex trade. There was little change in the use of condoms during sexual intercourse with their clients between the two waves of surveillance (Ibid).

According to the HIV/AIDS update 2001 report by the World Bank, the large commercial sex industry with more than 36,000 workers who have 3-4 clients on average daily increases the risk of an HIV/AIDS epidemic in Bangladesh in the near future. It is interesting to note that the rate of condom use among brothel workers is reported at approximately 4% while among street sex workers it is much higher at 27.8% (World Bank, 2001).⁵⁴

There are several factors both at the social and economic level that prevent sex workers from using condoms with their clients. As mentioned, most often the sex workers have little or no say with their client's preferences of using condoms. The male clients in most cases are reluctant to use condoms. They believe condoms will not give them maximum sexual pleasure and as paying customers they feel they are entitled maximum satisfaction and that the women have no rights or preferences in this matter. Often in brothels where there are many women working as sex workers, there is high competition among them to receive customers and insisting on condoms might result in their losing clients and making less money than the others. Furthermore, in brothels the women are expected to obey the madams, and if the madams do not want to have condoms in the house, the women cannot access and use condoms either. Lastly and most importantly, sex workers do not have enough knowledge and information about HIV/AIDS and STDs and about the health risks involved with practicing unsafe sex. Often they have vague ideas about the diseases and how women can die, but have not been informed about simple preventive methods such as using condoms. One woman in the sex trade talks about her daughter being in the sex trade,

⁵⁴ The numbers quoted by World Bank are different from the surveys done by ACLAB and PIACT. This shows how often there are discrepancies in the data as has been mentioned in chapter one.

What would I do knowing about diseases? These days there are too many diseases. It was not so when we are in the trade, said the mother, who apparently has no idea that due to her youth, her daughter is still more susceptible to sexually transmitted infections. Her daughter says she knows about AIDS: This is a new disease that kills people. If my client does not use a condom during the sexual act I may get the disease. I prefer them to use condoms because then I'll not get pregnant. I think syphilis and gonorrhoea are two names for AIDS (Tahmina, 2002).

There are also high rates of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) among sex workers in Dhaka, (60% have syphilis, 18% have gonorrhoea and 20% have chlamydia). The high rates of STDs among sex workers often help spread the HIV/AIDS virus as well (UNDP, 2003).

Sex workers and the spread of HIV/AIDS and STDs have been on the agenda of international organizations, the government of Bangladesh and national NGOs for a while. According to the Health Ministry and the National Policy document outlining the various aspects of HIV/AIDS and STDs, the extent of HIV transmission arising from prostitution depends on many interacting factors (UNDP, 2003). Some of these factors include: the low level of knowledge about HIV, STDs and the methods of prevention among sex workers and their clients; high level of prevalence of HIV infections among them; the high risk behaviors and sexual activities among sex workers and the clients; low availability, acceptability and use of condoms for safe sex; high numbers and frequency of different partners among sex workers'; and high prevalence of STDs causing genital lesions in clients and sex workers (Ibid).

The Government of Bangladesh has been active in trying to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS among high-risk groups and the population. The government has formed a Strategic Implementation Plan for HIV/AIDS Prevention and Control that focuses

particularly on sex workers and other high-risk groups. This plan focuses on controlling the spread of the virus among high-risk groups through education and awareness programs and encourages increased use of condoms and safe sex among sex workers. The program has been especially attentive not to discriminate against and stigmatize the high risk groups such as women in the sex trade and one way the government is trying to eliminate the social stigma and discrimination is by scaling up the NGO programs working with sex workers and the prevention of HIV/AIDS and STDs in the shortest time possible (World Bank, 2001).

The Government has also been involved with the UNDP project working with sex workers and the prevention of HIV/AIDS. The UNDP project focuses on HIV prevention and education. The project has set up a health clinic near one of the thriving brothels at the outskirts of the capital Dhaka. The clinic provides services to the women in the sex trade and their children. There is a doctor and two paramedics who treat minor illnesses and STDs and also perform minor surgeries when needed. The UNDP project has been trying to educate and raise awareness about HIV/AIDS and methods of prevention to the sex workers. However, as the program mandate states, it is not enough to be aware about the disease and preventive methods, the community needs to help these women become socially empowered by providing them with the necessary services, education and support. One of the main concerns of the workers at the UNDP project is that the women do not identify HIV/AIDS as their major concern, when they are under constant personal insecurity and are concerned with taking care of their children (Shames, 2002).

While UNDP has been involved in empowering and educating sex workers with capacity building programs, the focus on HIV/AIDS has been a recent one. In addition to

educating the sex workers, the preventive campaign also targets the clients and the young people in the community to educate them about HIV/AIDS and STDs. One of the issues raised by sex workers has been the client's refusal to use condoms and practice safe sex. Thus the project has decided to intervene at the client level because in most cases the sex workers do not have the power to make clients use condoms (Shames, 2002).

The women who take part in the awareness raising programs and use the clinic for health services believe that the project had given them a space to consult and learn more about the health risks involved in their profession, as well as given a 'ray of hope' for their children to not be involved in the sex trade.

Most of the sex workers who were interviewed by ACLAB/PIACT however had some knowledge about STDs. They've mostly obtained information from NGO doctors, posters around the area put up by NGO workers, and the TV or radio promotions (See Table 5). Approximately 95 percent have heard of AIDS and about the same proportion were aware that condom use can prevent STDs.

During different NGO workshops the sex workers were very aware of the need of using condoms and claimed they insisted clients wear condoms during sexual intercourse. A sex worker who came from the Tangail brothel said she believed almost every woman in her brothel uses condoms and condom use has become a norm in the brothel. But she also informed the field reporters that sometimes it becomes very difficult to convince clients to use condoms, and this is especially true in *Tanbazar*. Her sardarni took part in this discussion, and in her opinion, those clients who strongly refuse condom use should be allowed to have sex without condoms. From the discussion, the field workers

concluded that though there is a high awareness among sex workers about using condoms during their work, there is also a strong resistance to it from some clients and madams.

Table 5: Distribution (%) of Sex Workers by Brothel and by source of knowledge about AIDS

Source of Knowledge about AIDS	Brothel					Total
	<i>Tanbazar</i>	<i>Nimtoli</i>	Jessore	Daulatdia	Mymensingh	
Radio	30.2	23.0	26.7	21.6	8.7	24.5
Television	41.2	39.7	52.0	35.8	34.9	40.0
NGO	57.2	74.5	75.7	82.6	78.5	71.2
Poster	15.2	20.6	19.8	10.6	10.1	14.4
Newspaper	6.8	6.3	5.4	2.0	2.7	4.6
Physician	54.0	52.4	61.4	32.7	69.8	49.1
From other persons *	7.9	4.8	5.9	5.6	2.0	6.1
Health worker/ Govt. office	3.7	0.8	3.5	0.0	0.0	1.9
Cinema, video, drama	1.1	0.0	0.5	8.5	0.7	3.3
Total Respondents	648	126	202	556	149	1681

Source: (Choudhury, Mia, Islam, Khatun & Haque, 2000)

Note: More than one answers possible. Included in this table are only those who have heard of AIDS

*Clients, Sardarnies, and Sex workers.

According to the survey group, the main factor pushing women into prostitution was acute poverty along with stressful family situations. Women and their children ended up living in brothels under undignified living conditions. Thus any policies to empower these women would need to focus on providing alternative livelihoods for the women and their children.

Moreover, any effective project will have to change the complex personality structures of the women developed through interactions with many men, and the inherent feeling of being inferior and fallen, an ingrained social attitude imposed by society. ACLAB/PIACT realized that changing inherent social behaviors that have been ingrained in the Bangladeshi society for centuries was not an easy task. “Therefore, intervention in the other end would mean changing social climate and institutional provisions in order that the women in brothels and their children have equal opportunity as others to have significant improvement in their life situation including a positive attitude to them as human beings” (Choudhury, Mia, Islam, Khatun & Haque, 2000:13-14).

Background to *Tanbazar* and *Nimtoli*

Tanbazar was one of the largest brothels near the capital Dhaka. Both *Tanbazar* and adjacent *Nimtoli*, a smaller brothel, were situated in Narayanganj town. Before the evictions on July 24, 1999, *Tanbazar* was one of the largest and most famous brothels in Bangladesh. There were approximately 21 houses between *Tanbazar* and *Nimtoli*. Historically, researchers have claimed that *Tanbazar* was formed some 150 years ago in this port city to cater to the sexual needs of traders and businessmen who passed through town. It was built in 1888 on the outskirts of the capital Dhaka (Arefeen & Khan, 1992; BBC News, July24, 1999).

Narayanganj, a port city, was also known for the large Jute mills where jute trading would take place between businessmen from different cities and adjacent countries on an every day basis. At the beginning, the businesses were controlled by Marwaris.⁵⁵ The Marwaris would often entertain the European traders by using women from the *Tanbazar* brothel. It is interesting to note that during that time most of the women in *Tanbazar* were

⁵⁵ Marwaris are a social class of people who had monopolies in the business sector.

Hindu widows. There were not a lot of Muslim women who were openly involved in the sex trade. Eventually not only the Marwaris profited from the flesh trade, but local landlords and other rich groups got involved in *Tanbazar* and reaped benefits from the women working in the brothels (Morol & Tahmina, 2000:43).

Most of the Hindu widows and old patrons left in 1947 when the British left India and Bangladesh became part of Pakistan, but *Tanbazar* flourished under new Muslim elite groups who took over from the Marwaris and the local Hindu landlords.

Before the evictions that are discussed later in this chapter, *Tanbazar* and *Nimtoli* housed approximately 6,000 sex workers and their children, according to unofficial counts by the sex workers, NGOs working in the area and local journalists. The number of women in *Tanbazar* varies according to different organizations' estimates. But there is no doubt that the number of sex workers ranged between 3,500 to 6,000 in *Tanbazar* and *Nimtoli*. A few days before the evictions, the Department of Social Services (DSS) did a quick four-day survey of the *Tanbazar* area and counted 1059 women and their children living in the quarters (Morol, & Sircar, 2002).

The 21 houses in *Tanbazar* and *Nimtoli* were owned by influential groups in the area, who mostly came from the elite groups and generated profits from the brothels through generations. They also had important political links with the government and the opposition party in Bangladesh. While the sardarnis (madams) who looked after the women in the brothel were women and had control over the sex workers direct incomes and their livelihoods, it is interesting to note that the absolute power of the brothels and the incomes generated in the brothels were in the hands of a few men. If one looks through the list of landlords of the 21 houses, there were only 3 women landlords out of

21. This property ownership further supports the point that patriarchal institutions controlled by a few men held power over the women involved in prostitution (Morol & Tahmina, 2000:43).

It is difficult to state exactly how much money the landlords took from the women. However, some landlords confess to have taken advances from the sex workers in amounts ranging from 10,000 Taka to 50,000 Taka (\$1US = 60Tk.) as rent for the rooms. An ordinary room was usually rented out for approximately 250 Tk to 400 Tk. It is rumored that air-conditioned rooms would cost almost 1,000 Tk. per day. It is important to note that these amounts did not include utilities such as water, electricity, gas or other appliances such as ceiling fans. In *Tanbazar*, the sex workers had to pay a certain amount every day to the madams to be put in an emergency fund to be used in crisis such as sudden evictions or health emergencies. Perhaps not surprisingly none of the sex workers evicted in July 1999 received a single cent from the emergency fund (Ibid).

Apart from the sex workers, *Tanbazar* housed approximately 100 madams and 300 pimps. There were also 50 odd small shops in the area that sold alcohol for the clients and the sex workers. Men who had good relations with the landlords ran these shops and reaped benefits from each other.

Thus an ordinary day in *Tanbazar* consisted of at least 6,000 sex workers entertaining clients by the night and socializing with each other during the day; approximately 500 pimps and salesmen from the shops lounging around during the day and doing good business by the night; and about 100 madams and managers supervising the women and the various activities in the houses while enjoying a drink or two from the

shopkeepers every now and then. The men who frequented *Tanbazar* ranged from truck drivers and low class men to influential politicians, journalists, and tourists passing through town. There were others who controlled the brothel activities and were an important part of *Tanbazar* but were invisible in the everyday scene, such as the police who often collected money from the madams, the pimps, the shopkeepers and the sex workers, as well as the hoodlums who terrorized the women and madams and acted as pimps from time to time.

Some of the pimps and landlords had inherited the business through their fathers and grandfathers, and once in power, like their forefathers, they had continued harassing the women in *Tanbazar* and extorting money from the women. The businessmen used this money to build hotels and shopping malls and to operate cinema halls and amusement parks around Dhaka. Thus it is not only the women who became prostitutes and continued in the sex trade through generations, but the men involved also had generational links dating back to their grandfathers. The men continued to serve their self interests and become richer and richer, while the women became poorer and more oppressed with each passing day. Patriarchal mechanisms set up by pimps and landlords have thus subordinated women in the sex trade and set up the brothels in a way which closed all doors for women to integrate into society or break out of the cycle of prostitution.

Most of the brothels around Dhaka and other cities had strong political affiliations. Most of the landlords of the brothels were connected to political parties and earned money from the business. The brothels also became a central place for politicians from different parties to gain patronage and more votes for their constituencies. Zakir Khan

and Bodiuzaman Bodu, affiliated with the opposition party, Bangladesh National Party (BNP) at the time of the evictions patronized *Tanbazar*. There were allegations from different sections that the ruling party, Awami League MP Shamim Osman and his party, had political interests in *Tanbazar* as well and wanted to gain complete control of *Tanbazar* in Narayanganj.⁵⁶ It had been rumored that Zakir Khan and Bodiuzaman Bodu, who were landlords in *Tanbazar*, had used the money earned from the brothels against Shamim Osman. Many believe the women in *Tanbazar* got caught in the middle of this political rivalry between Shamim Osman and Zakir Khan and paid the price by being evicted from their homes and robbed of their livelihoods. However, Shamim Osman denied these allegations and when questioned by reporters about it said, “none of them are fit to become my political opposition” (Morol& Sircar, 2002). So apart from socioeconomic interests by elite groups and other power groups in the brothels, there were also suggestions of political interests involved in the evictions that took place in *Tanbazar* and the aftermath of it.

Evictions: How and What Happened

On July 24th 1999, in the early morning around 4am local time, the women sleeping in their houses in *Tanbazar* were woken up and taken by surprise, as the police and musclemen surrounded the area and shouted at the women to get up and leave the premises and to come with them to unknown destinations. The officials of Department of Social Services aided by five magistrates, the Superintendent of Police, officers at all 7 police stations and hundreds of policemen captured approximately 267 commercial sex workers and took most of them (227) to a government run vagrant home in Kashimpur, in

⁵⁶ Interview with anonymous.

the district of Gazipur. The rest were taken to Pubail (40), another government run vagrant home around that area, for the purpose of rehabilitating them (Hashmi, 1999).

The rumors of an expected raid by the police had already forced many of the women to leave the brothel before the night of the 24th. It is estimated that some 2,400 women had already vacated the premises before the authorities raided the brothel on the fateful morning in July 1999. The night of the eviction, some of the women managed to escape the raid by going out the back doors before the officials stepped into their rooms and pulled them out by force. The journalists, NGO workers and other humanitarian groups who investigated the evictions and tried to speak to the women in vagrant homes described the evictions as a ruthless and illegal move on the part of the government. Sources also mentioned that the 267 women were forcibly taken from their houses in the brothel and were physically tortured during the eviction. Journalists were not allowed to talk to the women in the vagrant homes, but some of the women climbed up the trees by the walls in the compound and shouted to the journalists to free them from this prison. The women told journalists that they were systematically tortured, raped and abused by the shelter officials, the guards and the police officers posted there (Ibid).

The girls who climbed the trees and tried talking to the journalists through the steel grills of the gates showed marks of brutal torture on various parts of their bodies especially on their faces, thighs, legs, hands and necks. The women alleged that the shelter officials and others inflicted daily tortures on them if they refused to have sex with them. The home officials denied such claims and said that the women were unruly and were acting out for not being able to have their regular doses of drugs and alcohol they were used to in the brothels and the officials were at a loss about how to handle the

women who were out of control. “The DG of the Social Services Department told the newsmen [sic] that the girls had to be disciplined and in order to tame the sex workers long used to a free-style life some measures were taken. Home officials also said the torture marks were there on the girls’ bodies before they reached their shelters” (Holiday, July 30, 1999). However one of the sex workers taken to Kashimpur, Rupa, appeared in front of the journalists with terrible swellings and bruises on her face and on her thighs. She complained, “I was severely beaten by the employees of the [Kashimpur] vagrant center (Morol& Sircar, 2002).

Some of the women who fled the scene during the raid and those who left earlier returned to their homes in *Tanbazar* the next day to collect their belongings and found that the police and the musclemen looted their money, gold ornaments, clothes etc. A few hours after the raid, when journalists visited *Tanbazar*, they found most of the rooms in *Tanbazar* and *Nimtoli* open, beds and household materials scattered, the fans and the lights on, and the place had been rampaged and looked like a disaster area. Not only did the women lose all their belongings, they never received any of the emergency money the landlords had collected from them on an everyday basis during their stay in *Tanbazar*. The leader of the sex workers, Sathi, and her 11-month-old girl were taken away in a separate bus during the evictions and went missing afterwards. Two other girls who were apprehended by the musclemen that night have been missing since the fateful night on July 24th. The girls were not even allowed to be visited by their parents or relatives. They told journalists that they were kept in confinement against their will.

Shamim Osman, who is alleged to be one of the main organizers of the evictions, and other officials involved, deny all the accusations of brutality and forced eviction of

the women from *Tanbazar*, and stated that the operation was conducted peacefully and in a civil manner. Shamim Osman said, “The sex workers have been taken for rehabilitation (on their own free will). After a long time Narayanganj has become free of stigma” (Morol, & Sircar, 2002).

Evictions: Why It Happened

There had been earlier attempts to evict the sex workers from *Tanbazar* and *Nimtoli* throughout the mid eighties and the nineties. Two particular times when there were unsuccessful attempts were in 1985 and in 1991 and these attempts help shed light on the many factors which led to the evictions in 1999.

In 1985, when an under-aged sex worker, Shob Meher, died mysteriously in *Tanbazar*, there was a social movement to evict women from the brothel and close it down to clean Narayanganj of all Un-Islamic and social evils (Morol & Tahmina, 2000: 38). This attempt and the later one did not succeed for several reasons that I will discuss a little later in this chapter.

The second attempt to evict the women was prompted mainly by the desire to take control over the brothels by the then government BNP and one of the opposition parties, Jatiya Party. In October, 1991, there was a committee formed named “the Narayanganj Unislamic Activity Banning Committee” that tried to wipe out *Tanbazar* and *Nimtoli* to rid Narayanganj of impure activities that are against Islamic laws and values (Ibid). When the fighting about who should have more control over the earnings from the brothels between the musclemen of the two political parties mentioned above hit their highest point, the Committee decided to evict all the women from the brothels. But this attempt also failed and the women were able to keep their houses in the brothels.

The main reason why the evictions did not succeed in both cases was because the women in the brothels had strong support from the landlords and their madams to demand their rights to their homes. During the worst of the 1991 movement, the madams and landlords even helped out the sex workers financially so they could sustain themselves and keep their homes. In both instances the movement to abolish the 150 years old brothel was backed by Islamic groups and the social elites in Narayanganj and all the groups within the brothels (the sex workers, their pimps and madams, the landlords and the shopkeepers) fought back in solidarity and helped each other to make sure they could not uproot the women from the houses and throw them on the streets.

The interested groups in the brothels had a lot to gain from a successful business in the brothels and were looking out for their self interests, and this in turn helped the women in *Tanbazar* protest against the attempted evictions effectively. Before the 1999 evictions, the landlords in particular, always supported the sex workers causes behind the scenes and provided both political and economic support for them to be able to go on with their everyday business of prostitution. Needless to say the landlords were concerned about their own interests since if the brothels were to shut down, a large source of their income would have been destroyed as well.

The evictions in 1999 were unique in several ways and resulted in the uprooting of the women from their homes without much resistance. Unlike previous attempts, this time Shamim Osman initiated the eviction process in the name of rehabilitation for the women who wanted to leave prostitution on their own free will. Thus his actual motive of eliminating his opposition, Zakir Khan, was well disguised under the name of a rehabilitation program that seemingly was willing to integrate the sex workers voices and

their concerns. It was also supposed to be a long-term process of bringing the women out of prostitution gradually. Thus the two factors that were different from earlier attempts were firstly, the main actor in the eviction process, Shamim Osman, had strong political backing from the ruling party Awami League government and other powerful local interest groups. Secondly, his effort was legitimatised by disguising the evictions under the term rehabilitation. This rehabilitation project was supposed to empower the sex workers and offer them opportunities to leave prostitution in order to have better and socially acceptable lives (Morol& Sircar, 2002; Morol & Tahmina, 2000:38).

Unlike past efforts of evictions, the movement in this instance was supported not only by politically interested groups and Islamic groups, but was also backed by the public in the middle and upper classes including teachers, students, businessmen, politicians, and legal practitioners in Narayanganj. They supported the evictions mostly because it seemed more like a rehabilitation plan than an eviction attempt by the ruling political party.

In a meeting on the 9th of July 1999, a Narayanganj Citizens' Committee was formed by the social elite in the area, police officials and political figureheads, who urged the sex workers to give up their sinful profession and Un-Islamic activities to be rehabilitated by the governmental efforts. During this meeting, the sex workers were promised that they would be able to stay on in their houses without paying any rent until their rehabilitation process was completed. Furthermore, they were told that their advances on their rooms would be returned to them and the emergency fund money⁵⁷ would be properly distributed once the rehabilitation process had started (Morol & Sircar, 2002).

⁵⁷This money was collected from the sex workers on a monthly basis for unforeseen crisis, such as the evictions.

This plan of action was not particularly well received by the sex workers. They were not sure what the rehabilitation plan proposed by the government entailed. Many of them spoke up at the community meeting clearly stating that they were not interested in this program and did not want to leave their homes in *Tanbazar*. The main leader of the 'sex workers rehabilitation program', Shamim Osman, elected from constituency 4, was also unable to clarify the concept to the reporters attending the meeting. He said, "the Prime Minister has already granted 20 million Tk. for the rehabilitation program". However, he could not outline what steps that would be taken by the various government actors, such as the Youth and Sport Ministry, Women and Child Ministry, and the Social Welfare Ministry to execute an effective rehabilitation program for the sex workers and their children (Morol& Sircar, 2002).

Thus as discussed in this section, the evictions were driven by political motives and economic gain for particular groups and did not include any plans for rehabilitation or empowerment for the women involved in the sex trade in *Tanbazar*. The sex workers urged the public and the NGOs to help them keep their homes even before the evictions actually took place. The women had been suspicious of the rehabilitation program from the beginning and most were sure this was only a ploy to evict them. In several instances leading up to the eviction in the last week of July, the sex workers tried to have their concerns and fears heard through the media by organizing protests on the streets and holding press conferences in Dhaka to demand their right to shelter and to their homes.

Immediate Response by NGOs and Civil Society

Even before the actual evictions took place more than sixty social, human rights and feminist organizations stood in solidarity with the sex worker's cause and held press

conferences and public meetings to demand the sex workers right to their homes in *Tanbazar*. They also stated that any rehabilitation program for the sex workers should be planned and implemented with the direct and willing participation of the women in *Tanbazar* and not by a few representatives of self-interested groups deciding the women's fate through a round table meeting which excluded the sex workers' voices.

As already discussed, immediately after the evictions, journalists and NGO workers tried to get in touch with the sex workers who were taken to the vagrant homes in Kashimpur and Pubail, but the police and the guards at both places refused journalists and social workers entry into the vagrant homes to provide moral support or any other kind of help the women needed at that time.

Naripokkho, a leading feminist organization based in Dhaka, sent out an international human rights alert after the predawn evictions on July 24th. Naripokkho had already taken the initiative to form Shonghoti (the *Tanbazar* Movement Solidarity Council), an alliance of approximately 62 organizations in Bangladesh who came together to protest the human rights violation of sex workers at *Tanbazar* and *Nimtoli* and help build solidarity in support of their rights and demands. Some of the organizations that came forth to take part in the solidarity action initiative were Naripokkho, Bangladesh Women's Health Coalition (BWHC), CARE from Bangladesh, Nari Maitree, Bangladesh Society for the Enforcement of Human Rights, Women for Women, Manobadhikar Sangstha, Ain-o-Salish Kendra, Phulki, Ulka (association of evicted sex workers of *Kandupatti* brothel), Durjoy (association of floating sex workers of Dhaka), Mukti Nari Sangha (association of sex workers of a brothel in Tangail), Nari Uddug Kendra, Bangladesh Nari Progoti Sangha, Bangladesh National Women Lawyers'

Association (BNWLA), Nari Unnayan Shakti, CATW, Oxfam Bangladesh, BRAC, etc.⁵⁸

It is important to note that these organizations have different mandates and visions within the women's movements and the broader social agenda. For example, BNWLA and Naripokkho have different and opposing stands on the issue of legalizing prostitution. BNWLA strongly opposes legalizing and even recognizing prostitution as a legitimate profession, whereas, Naripokkho not only believes that prostitution should be legal and the women within it should have the same rights as any other professionals, but also advocates the freedom of sexual behaviour for women and that being prostitutes is a choice made by women freely. However, at a time of crisis, these organizations that may not see eye to eye on the very issue of sex workers prostituting themselves within *Tanbazar*, put aside their differences and stood in solidarity to demand the sex workers rights to their homes. This is one of the unique trends of the Bangladeshi women's movements I discussed earlier in Chapter 3.

Shonghoti organized themselves along side the displaced sex workers from *Tanbazar* and held several press conferences at influential locations around the city to demand sex workers' rights to return to their homes in *Tanbazar*. The women's movement platform (Shonghoti) organized to demand that the evictions could not be termed legal under the Bangladeshi law system. Furthermore, Shonghoti urged civil society and the legal system to take action against the Director General of DSS and the supervisor at the Narayaganj Police station for physically abusing and throwing the women from *Tanbazar* on the streets, as well as against the abuse that had been going on

⁵⁸ See Appendix 1 for a complete list of all organizations that were part of Shonghoti.

in the vagrant homes in Kashimpur since the evictions (Azim, Mahmood & Sheli, 2002:90-92).

Along with Shonghoti, the sex workers organizations, such as Durjoy, Ulka and Akkhay, as well as civil society also expressed their discontent, anger and sadness at the unlawful evictions, the inhuman torture and abuse imposed on the women from *Tanbazar*. The women's organizations and other humanitarian groups stood in solidarity to use the media, both nationally and internationally, to have their demands heard by the public and to have *Tanbazar* returned to the women it belonged to.⁵⁹

Protests against the evictions in *Tanbazar* were not only heard at the national level, but they were also reflected within the global feminist movements as well. The sex workers from West Bengal staged a demonstration to protest the unlawful evictions of sex workers from *Tanbazar*, Dhaka on August 6th, 1999. The women's groups and sex workers from West Bengal severely disapproved of the Bangladeshi Government's actions against the women in *Tanbazar*. They marched through the city to the Bangladeshi Deputy High Commissioner's Office in Calcutta to present the Deputy High Commissioner with a memorandum that demanded a stop to the inhuman treatment of the evicted women from *Tanbazar* (Azim, Mahmood & Sheli, 2002:125).

The evictions of sex workers from their homes in *Tanbazar* became an issue around which women in Bangladesh organized themselves effectively. The global women's movements also aligned with the Bangladeshi women's movement to demand sex workers' rights as human rights and strengthened the sex workers' movement in Bangladesh.

⁵⁹ See Appendix 2 for a detailed account of Shonghoti's actions since the evictions.

Legal Response to the Unlawful Evictions of *Tanbazar* and *Nimtoli*

The *Tanbazar* Movement Solidarity Council, Shonghoti, organized a press conference soon after the evictions to state that they would go to court to challenge the evictions of sex workers from *Tanbazar*. “We are planning to legally challenge the illegal eviction within a couple of days as the authorities had no court order as required for eviction,” advocate Alina Khan said at a press conference in the city (The Daily Star Staff Correspondent, 26th July, 1999). The Advocate spoke on behalf of the solidarity council and termed the forcible eviction illegal and state sponsored terrorism and condemned the government action. Advocate Khan delivered a four-point demand list at the press conference that described the violations of the human rights and the fundamental rights of the sex workers (Ibid). Shonghoti, on behalf of Khadiza Khatun, the mother of the missing sex worker’s leader (Sathi), delivered a motion to the Bangladesh High Court against the Commissioner of the DSS, the supervisor of the Narayanganj police station and Deputy Commissioner of the town and other officials involved in the evictions (Daily Janakantha Staff Correspondent, 27th July, 1999). The persecution argued that according to the Bangladeshi law, the government was supposed to give them in-advance notice about any planned eviction. The women in *Tanbazar* did not receive any prior notice about the evictions and were thrown out on the streets in the middle of the night and, furthermore, were physically abused and beaten up and forced to go to the vagrant homes in Kashimpur although they were not homeless people (Ibid).

The petition was filed at the end of July and soon after, the High Court Division of the Supreme Court asked the government and five other officials to show justifiable cause within two weeks as to why they detained Sathi and her infant daughter in a

vagrant home in Kashimpur against her will and why this action should not be considered unlawful. Furthermore, the High Court Division asked the government and the others to show justifiable cause as to why the eviction of women from *Tanbazar* should not be considered illegal. However, it was not until March, 2000 that the High Court ruling on the matter was announced.

The Daily Star, one of the leading English newspapers published in Bangladesh, reported on March 15th 2000, that in a comprehensive judgment, the High Court ruled that prostitution in Bangladesh is not illegal and that the evictions of women from *Tanbazar* and *Nimtoli* were unlawful, as was the confinement of some of the evicted sex workers to government vagrant homes. The Ruling demanded the immediate release of any sex workers still remaining in the vagrant homes. The court stated in its verdict “the wholesale eviction of *Tanbazar* and *Nimtoli* sex workers and putting a part of them into government vagrant homes are without lawful authority and without any sanction of law” (Dhaka Law Reports, 2001). Although the verdict did term the evictions illegal, the court observed that the verdict could not help women restore their possessions of their homes and their lost/stolen belongings because the verdict of the High Court does not belong to the writ jurisdiction. The court, however, advised the women to file a separate petition to the civil court to demand their homes in *Tanbazar* back. It is important to note that the court stated that since women earn their livings through sex work, prostitution could not be illegal, as long as the women have licenses to practice the trade. The license is traditionally given to women who can convince authorities that they have no other means to earn an income to support themselves and their families. This selection process of the license shows patriarchal mechanisms controlling women’s lives and their choices.

Women cannot choose to work as sex workers until and unless they can prove to society they have no other choice left. This means even if women do not want to be in other professions or if they really want to be in prostitution, they have to follow the rules that stem from notions of purity and good women vs. bad women ideology.

However, the verdict also stated that any rehabilitation or choice of leaving the profession had to be the women's choice through free will. The women cannot be forced to stop their work as sex workers by any individual or group, or even the government. "Sex workers being citizens of the country have the freedom of movement and their right to movement should not be curtailed by confining them to the vagrant homes or any other forcible means" (The Daily Star Staff correspondent, March 15th, 2000).

The verdict in favor of the sex workers was a significant victory in the history of the women's movement in Bangladesh. Lawyers in Bangladesh said it was an unusual judgment because it made Bangladesh one of the few countries with a Muslim majority that did not ban prostitution (BBC Staff Correspondent, 14th March, 2000). The sex workers celebrated their victory by taking to the streets of Dhaka, singing and dancing and handing out pamphlets to surprised bystanders explaining that if they were not allowed to work, they would not be able to feed their children and families. However, the high court decision angered some Islamic groups and other conservative groups who argued that prostitution is a social evil that should not be allowed to be practiced freely, especially in a Muslim country like Bangladesh.

At the end of March, the Supreme Court was deciding whether or not they would hear an appeal by the government against the ruling suspended verdict. The Law minister told BBC reporters that the Supreme Court order meant that prostitution was still

generally forbidden but would be tolerated in some areas designated for that purpose (BBC Staff Correspondent, 30th March, 2000).

The society is severely divided on the issue of legalizing prostitution. While feminist groups such as Naripokkho believe prostitution should be legal, the Islamic groups in Bangladesh have developed a strong moral platform against prostitution and the women who work in the trade. Gholam Azam, leader of the religious Jamaat-e-Islami party argued that the government's eviction of prostitutes in 1999 did not work because it did not offer the women a genuine alternative. He also told BBC reporters that legalizing prostitution would mean that "sex life can be a profession. It is highly immoral and it is inhuman rather. If you can rehabilitate them to society, if people are ready to take them as wives, then the rehabilitation would be meaningful" (BBC Staff Correspondent, 21st August, 2000). His party's lobby against prostitution did not, however, include any thoughts about the violations of the sex workers' human rights, their right as citizens to choose their livelihoods, or any consideration about if the women even wanted to be rehabilitated as wives. The notion of women as wives, as the absolute goal on women's part is a gendered notion that society decides for women and patriarchal institutions, such as Islamic parties reinstate through their platforms. The Islamic platform seemingly does not think it important to integrate the sex workers' voices in any rehabilitation plan for the sex workers.

Despite the Islamic platform, the evictions did not stop prostitution but only made it worse for the women. Most of them were dispersed throughout the city without a roof over their heads, any steady income and are presently still working out of parks and hotels in unsafe conditions. The evictions and the legal aftermath has pushed women

further underground and has sparked fierce debate among groups in society about the issue rather than trying to help the women get back their homes in *Tanbazar* and empower them to demand their rights as human beings and citizens of Bangladesh. While there are valid arguments on both sides of the debate, none of this has been remotely helpful to the women who have been dealt a severe blow by the evictions and whose lives have been shattered to pieces since then.

Government Response to the Evictions

The government responded to the evictions and the questions raised by civil society about the inhuman treatment of the women thrown out of their homes illegally, by firstly denying the charges of the evictions being forced and the women being beaten up by the police. Secondly, the government condemned the media, human rights organizations and other NGOs for stirring up the women and causing unrest among sex workers and other concerned groups.

A section of the press has been trying to create confusion and suspicion in public mind through misleading and untrue reports in this regard [the evictions]. Besides, some organizations have been campaigning unnecessarily and motivated information against government's noble efforts. They are also continuing their unwarranted endeavor to attract foreign bodies through disseminating this information. As a result, confusion among international organizations is being created. Furthermore, the image of the country is being tarnished abroad despite government's sincerity towards the rehabilitation of the fallen women (The Bangladesh Observer Staff Correspondent, August 6th, 1999).

One of the government sources also said that 90 percent of the population of the country is Muslim. Protection of the brothels hurt the populations' religious feelings and it is the responsibility of any welfare and democratic government to prevent and discourage prostitution to show due honor to the religious sentiments of the people. The

Bangladeshi Constitution 18(2) also says that the state shall adopt effective measures to prevent prostitution and gambling (The Bangladesh Observer Staff Correspondent, August 6th, 1999).

Furthermore, according to government sources, there were quite a number of reports filed about innocent young girls being lured away from their homes in poorer section of the country in hopes of getting jobs in the city to end up in *Tanbazar* and *Nimtoli* and being forced to prostitute themselves. The government argued that the evictions were also a move towards rescuing young girls, especially minor ones, from the clutches of pimps and madams, who were forcing them into prostitution.

Lastly, the government in defense of the evictions stated that the events leading up to the evictions guided the government to take action.⁶⁰ The government claimed that police were stationed at the brothels prior to the evictions to ensure the women's security and not to threaten them. The government felt compelled to rescue the 267 women still remaining in the brothels and avert any further deterioration of law and order in that area. The women were shifted to public shelters for further rehabilitation and to ensure their safety (Ibid).

Soon after the evictions the prime minister promised to set up vocational training centers at the abandoned Tanbazar and Nimtoli area for the displaced sex workers. However, since this announcement, the project has not been implemented. There has been no move by the government to properly rehabilitate the women and integrate their voices in any projects undertaken for the sex workers and their children (The Daily Star

⁶⁰ The killing of the sex worker Jesmine right before the evictions resulted in tension within the brothels and as a result, a lot of the women in Tanbazar and Nimtoli fled and were soliciting on the streets in unsafe conditions.

Staff Correspondent, September 24th, 1999). The plan of the government to build the vocational training centers has not been implemented as of 2004.

The government actions have been severely criticized by several sections of society, as well as international media despite the government's efforts to justify the evictions. The opposition political party leader, Khaleda Zia, condemned the government action of evicting the sex workers from *Tanbazar* and *Nimtoli*. "We don't want that women engage in this profession. They (sex workers) should be rehabilitated properly so that society is not polluted," Khaleda Zia told NGO leaders in a meeting (The Observer Staff Correspondent, 29th September, 1999). The BNP leader believes that poverty is the main reason why women are pushed into prostitution and while it is important to get them out of the vicious cycle of prostitution, there needs to be proper rehabilitation plans for them to be reintegrated into society gradually rather than being uprooted from their homes and thrown into vagrant homes. Khaleda Zia accused the ruling party government of violating human rights and repressing the women's right to their homes (Ibid).

As already mentioned, several NGOs and human rights organizations in Bangladesh have severely criticized the government for their ill-planned rehabilitation project and the sudden evictions driven by self interests of a few politicians in the Narayanganj area. Many have claimed that the evictions were merely a plan to get hold of the land to pawn it off at high rates to interested parties to build a multi-storied shopping complex. Before the evictions, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) was actively working with the sex workers and the Department of Social Services of the Bangladeshi Government to plan a rehabilitation, which would allow women to gradually reintegrate into society and offer them services, while they were still in the sex trade.

The evictions destroyed any hopes of helping the sex workers and to everyone's dismay the women got caught in the middle of political interests and economic gains for the elite (Khan, 1999).

The government's initial efforts at what they termed proper rehabilitation was unsuccessful and the evictions only increased the number of sex workers who ended up on the streets, barely surviving. As Fedous Azim from Naripokkho stated, before the eviction, the sex workers had no social acceptance outside *Tanbazar*. But now they don't even have that safe space and their lives are in grave danger. Those women who were taken to the vagrant homes suffered severely and the atrocities inflicted upon them by the police have been recognized as one of the worst incidents of human rights violations in Bangladesh's history. As is the case often in Bengali culture, women often get caught in the games played between powerful groups in society and end up paying a heavy price to compensate for the patriarchal society's benefit (In-depth interview with Ferdous Azim, December 2002).

Update on the Situation of the Sex Workers since the Evictions

As already mentioned most of the evicted sex workers were dispersed on the street working out of parks and hotels in Dhaka since the evictions. However, the evicted sex workers have organized effectively with other women's organizations and human rights groups to protest the evictions and have been able to have the Bangladeshi legal system support their cause. At various points throughout the years since July, 1999 the women have tried to enter *Tanbazar*, especially since the High court ruling that termed the evictions unlawful. They have not been able to reclaim their homes but at least their

attempts have not gone unheard and even the international human rights platform has supported and helped the women get back on their feet.

A year after the evictions, the sex workers were still holding demonstrations to have their voices heard in civil society. I discuss some of the actions taken by the sex workers before and after the evictions in more detail in the next chapter. Briefly, however, it is important to mention here that the women have shown remarkable strength, organizational skills and persistence to demand their rights to their homes. The sex workers have effectively integrated themselves into the larger women's movements in Bangladesh and have worked side by side with feminists, women's organizations, and other human rights groups not only to protest the evictions and demand entry back into *Tanbazar*, but also to demand their rights as women, as human beings and legitimate citizens of Bangladesh.

Conclusion

The sex workers from *Tanbazar* and *Nimtoli* have suffered dire consequences as a result of the evictions in July 1999. More than 4,000 sex workers by unofficial estimates have become homeless and are barely surviving and meeting basic minimum needs. There have been moral debates about whether or not prostitution should be legal and whether or not the evictions were lawful. There has, however, not been any debate that the violations of human rights of the sex workers during and after the evictions were shameful and not justified by any arguments the government put forth since then. The evictions have increased the health risks for the women, as NGO workers have been finding it more difficult to trace sex workers and help them with health problems, and other needs. Most importantly, as has been stated by various officials working with the

women, such as Dr Naima from UNDP, the evictions took place to serve financial gains for interests groups and thus with no intention to properly rehabilitate the women in *Tanbazar* (In-depth Interview with Dr. Naima, UNDP, December 2002) Also as Ms. Hajera from the sex worker's organization, Durjoy (Unbeatable), stated, the evictions were motivated by political rivalry between the two leading political parties and the government was never really interested in women's empowerment within the sex trade (In-depth Interview with Hajera, Durjoy, December 2002).

Many women's organizations, international organizations and national NGOs, as well as a large part of civil society have been working diligently alongside the sex workers to get them through this trying ordeal and establish their right to shelter, their human rights and their rights as citizens of Bangladesh. In the next chapter, I discuss some of these specific efforts made by International NGOs, national NGOs and women's movements focusing on the post-eviction situation, as well as other efforts made by the different organizations working with sex workers even before the evictions to help them become empowered and to provide them with necessary services.

Chapter 6: Organizational Responses to the Evictions of 1999

Introduction

Women's issues have been at the forefront of concerns for both national NGOs and international organizations focusing on women and their socio-economic and political empowerment globally in recent times. Keeping with these trends, international organizations, women's organizations and NGOs in Bangladesh have been actively involved with the empowerment of women in the sex trade since the early 1990s. This chapter focuses on NGOs and international organizations that work with sex workers in diverse capacities, sometimes in partnership with the Government of Bangladesh. Despite their diverse mandates and different theoretical standpoints regarding prostitution, these organizations were able to form solidarity during the crisis faced by sex workers in the 1999 evictions, as has been discussed in the last chapter.

This chapter analyzes some of the organizations that worked with sex workers both before and after the evictions to examine how some of these organizations shifted their focus from a service delivery approach after the evictions in order to meet the needs of sex workers. I also map out the different activities of the organizations to identify certain commonalities among the organizations that could help them build long term solidarity and integrate themselves into the sex workers' movement to effectively demand the sex workers' rights as human rights and rights as Bangladeshi citizens.⁶¹

There are several international organizations, such as United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and CARE that work with sex workers. During my field work, I located some of these organizations in Dhaka and through preliminary research I

⁶¹In the next chapter I build on this chapter to propose two alternative and overlapping approaches that the sex workers could consider using at present time to move their cause forward in Bangladeshi society.

identified UNDP as an important case study. I interviewed officials from UNDP because this international organization has been involved with the sex workers in Bangladesh before the evictions took place, and the 1999 evictions in fact, changed their project focus from *Tanbazar* and *Nimtoli* brothels to floating sex workers in Dhaka. Through UNDP I collected useful and timely research data describing sex workers in brothels, including *Tanbazar* and *Nimtoli*, which gave me considerable insights into sex workers I was not able to interview directly as I discuss in chapter 1.

The national NGOs studied in this thesis are Nari Unnayan Shakti (a women's organization working with the UNDP sex worker's project), Naripokkho (a feminist organizations working for women's empowerment), the Bangladesh National Women's Lawyer Association (BNWLA), Shonghoti (a collaboration of organizations working for sex workers), and lastly, two sex worker's organizations, Durjoy and Ulka.

Furthermore, the UNDP project is directly linked to the national mandates of the Government of Bangladesh and this gave me an opportunity to gain insight into the government's perspective on the issue as well.⁶²

The national NGOs studied in this thesis had four main purposes. Firstly, the national NGOs that worked with UNDP helped to better understand the relationship between national NGOs and international organizations and how they collaborated on the issue of sex workers in Bangladesh. Secondly, Naripokkho offered a feminist perspective not only on the sex workers' movement but also on the issue of prostitution, women's empowerment and patriarchy in Bangladesh. Furthermore, Naripokkho has been

⁶² I was not able to interview government officials directly due to lack of accessibility, bureaucratic delays and lack of enough time spent in the field. Moreover, Since UNDP works with GoB and this collaboration points to some of the underlying politics of international organizations working with governments. I could not interview CARE officials due to time limitations and lack of establishing appropriate contacts.

instrumental in the sex workers' movement and in bringing together different social actors to stand from a women's human rights platform to demand the sex workers' human rights. While the UNDP project has been more concerned with helping sex workers to leave the trade and find alternative livelihoods, organizations such as Naripokkho have focused on advocating sex workers' rights to their homes, their rights as equal citizens of Bangladesh and their rights to enjoy the same opportunities and respect as the rest of the society. Thirdly, the legal victory stemming from the 1999 evictions was a landmark not only in the sex workers' movement but in the women's movement in Bangladesh, and the legal NGOs, including BNWLA and Ain O Shalish Kendro (Law and Order Center), provided insight in the process of legal issues surrounding prostitution and how they collaborated with feminist organizations, such as Naripokkho on this issue when some of them have very different perspectives on prostitution.⁶³ Lastly, the sex workers' organizations that stemmed out of the evictions examined in this thesis helped to place the sex workers' movement in the context of the women's movement, including national and international organizations working with sex workers, and to examine how the different social actors working together with the sex workers' organizations and their causes helped to validate and strengthen the sex workers' movement.

In the next part of the chapter, I outline each of these very the different organizations and their work with the sex workers and the sex workers' movement. In the conclusion, I briefly analyze the collaborative development of the sex workers' movement and how the movement opened a political space to demand sex workers' human rights and rights as Bangladeshi citizens.

⁶³ The Legal NGO, BNWLA has an opposing perspective on prostitution from Naripokkho as has been discussed earlier in this thesis.

The UNDP Project “Capacity-Building, Poverty Alleviation and Sustainable Livelihood of the Socially Disadvantaged Women and their Children.”

The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) based in Dhaka and the Government of Bangladesh started a project for the rehabilitation of women in prostitution within the brothels in 1998. The project by UNDP advocated empowerment of women and children living in brothel communities in Jessore, Mymensingh, Daulatdia Ghat, and *Tanbazar* in Narayanganj. Though the project was supposed to be implemented by mid July 1998, it was not until the middle of 1999 when the initial survey reports done by ACLAB and PIACT to assess the situation of sex workers in the brothels were completed as discussed in the last chapter. Soon after the surveys, however, the evictions of *Tanbazar* and *Nimtoli* took place and stalled the project. UNDP with the Department of Social Services (DSS) decided to change the project areas to the brothels in Jessore, Mymensingh, Daulatdia and to floating sex workers in Dhaka after that (Morol & Tahmina, 2000:204-205).

The UNDP project, “Capacity-Building, Poverty Alleviation, and Sustainable Livelihood of the Socially Disadvantaged Women (SDW) and their Children” was planned in collaboration with the Bangladesh Government and five partner NGOs. The NGOs were Nari Maitree in Mymensingh, PIACT Bangladesh in Daulatdia, Nari Unnayan Shakti (NUS) in Dhaka, ACLAB Bangladesh in Jessore, and the Development Organization of the Rural Poor (DORP) in Dhaka..

The mandate of the UNDP project, “Capacity-Building, Poverty Alleviation, and Sustainable Livelihood of the Socially Disadvantaged Women (SDW) and their Children” is to ensure that sex workers and their children can freely access the same

rights and privileges as other citizens in Bangladesh. Based on their specific needs and constraints, the NGOs working on the project were to implement activities aimed at socio-economic empowerment, specifically in the fields of access to reproductive and sexual health services, formal and non-formal education, management and skills training, micro finance services, legal services, access to safe shelters and community mobilization.⁶⁴

This project was unique from other NGO and government projects in that it focused on building alliances between the different sectors in society, such as national NGOs working at the grass-roots level, international agencies, and the government of Bangladesh. Dr. Naima of UNDP believed that the unique strength of the project was being affiliated with the Ministry of Social Welfare, as it gave the project necessary political backing to be most effective (In-depth Interview with Dr. Naima, UNDP, December 2002). Furthermore, as stated in the mandate, this project was strategically designed on how the Government can continue, replicate and upscale the programs that have been working in this sector. This could possibly open spaces for dialogue between the government sector and the civil society and facilitate the sharing of resources among the public and private sectors.

The UNDP project was based on certain assumptions about women in prostitution and its relationship to the rest of Bangladeshi society and was designed under a particular theoretical framework regarding prostitution in general. Firstly, UNDP advocated that prostitution in the Bangladeshi context cannot be defined as sex work because no woman chooses prostitution as a profession, but socio-economic conditions force women into it. Unlike many other international organizations and feminist organizations in Bangladesh,

⁶⁴ See Appendix 3 for detailed list of different components of the UNDP project.

UNDP does not support the legalization of prostitution in Bangladesh. Stemming from this framework, women in prostitution are seen as victims of circumstances. The patriarchal Bangladeshi society usually blames women for the existence of prostitution and given that they work in a questionable and stigmatized profession, any attempts to change their status is thus considered almost impossible (In-depth Interview with Dr. Naima, UNDP, December 2002). The women in prostitution in this project are referred to as Socially Disadvantaged Women (SDW) to avoid the social stigma attached to other commonly used labels as sex workers, fallen women etc. According to UNDP, the term SDW distances these women from their profession and recognizes the women's position within the social context of Bangladesh (In-depth Interview with Md. Fazlul Haque Fakir, Deputy Coordinator, UNDP, December 2002).

The situation of SDW is related to larger issues of inequality in society, where women are often placed in subordinate positions. According to the UNDP project mandate, presently women in Bangladesh are more susceptible to acute poverty, class exploitation and polarization, marginalization in work and education and are more likely to be pushed out of normal life because of social taboos of castes, marriages. When these factors present themselves in the extreme form, women are forced to enter the commercial sex trade. Furthermore, the UNDP project proposed that the patriarchal elements of society through its inequitable institutions place these women at a social disadvantage, whereby their only option is to earn a livelihood through providing commercial sex on the market. The assumption underlying projects developed by UNDP is thus, that women do not willingly enter prostitution, and they have no 'true choice', and in cases where there is a conscious choice made to become a sex worker, it is made

as a result of lack of viable alternatives. The SDW have no social acceptance in society and once they enter the trade they have very little opportunity to leave. They are not only neglected and isolated, but are also stigmatized, exploited and deprived.

The UNDP project has been implemented since December 1998 and is planned to continue until December 2004. The project addressed to some extent the immediate needs of SDW and their children in their working areas. One of their contributions has been to put the issue of SDW and their children on the national agenda of the Government of Bangladesh. Furthermore, the Directorate of Social Services (DSS) and the Ministry of Social Welfare (MoSW) have taken a public stance on an issue that is socially and culturally a very sensitive area in Bengali society. The UNDP project does not align itself with the feminist movements because feminist movements are seen as too confrontational to be effective for empowerment of women. Feminist movements are forever criticizing and not taking action that would result in effective negotiations (In-depth Interview with Dr. Naima, UNDP, December 2002).

The project has given women in prostitution a social recognition that has increased their mobility outside the brothel areas through the work done with social workers from the project. Previously, as UNDP officials state, the outside world was closed and hidden from the SDW and their children and their mobility outside the brothel areas was restricted by rituals such as not being allowed to wear shoes outside the brothel areas. The active interest of the government, the international organizations and the SDW organizing to demand their human rights has abolished such traditions and at least recognized these women as part of the larger society. There have been practical actions taken to integrate the sex workers into society and mainstream their daily lives. One

example of this was the SDW opening their own bank accounts in public banks, which has enabled them to do transactions in socially acceptable institutions (In-depth Interview with Dr. Naima, UNDP, December 2002).

Another outcome of the project has been for the SDW to exit the commercial sex work trade and enter alternative livelihood through capacity building, vocational and skills training by UNDP. However officials within the program realized that it was still difficult for SDW to find jobs outside the brothel communities or floating sex trade, and the skills/vocational training also needed to match up with current market demand for labor in specific sectors. Thus the women needed to be trained in a sector where there was market demand and their income could be as high as their earnings from the commercial sex trade. The UNDP project, unlike other NGOs in Dhaka, had long term plans to offer sex workers alternative livelihoods as mentioned above rather than offering promotional services to the women (In-depth Interview with Md. Fazlul Haque Fakir, Deputy Coordinator, UNDP, December 2002).

While the project in the short term has been able to achieve its targets in vocational/skills training, increasing access to sexual and reproductive health care and access to formal and non-formal education for both SDW and their children, the basic theoretical framework of the project is problematic because UNDP assumes that all women choose prostitution by force and are looking for alternative livelihoods. However, the different interviews sex workers have given to NGOs and newspaper reporters after the July 1999 evictions show that many women would prefer being in the sex trade over other professions that would pay a lot less and would offer lesser flexibility than they have in the sex trade. This was especially true in cases where sex workers have rejected

social rehabilitation that did not include a choice in being rehabilitated and did not include total integration: socially, economically and politically into the larger Bangladeshi society. This meant that though rehabilitation programs promised alternative livelihoods, they did not deal with the social stigma sex workers still experienced even once they had exited the trade.

It is also important to recognize that while UNDP highlights the collaboration between government, NGOs and UNDP on this project, UNDP is selective of the NGOs it collaborates with on various projects. UNDP is especially wary of NGOs that have feminist mandates (In-depth Interview with Md. Fazlul Haque Fakir, Deputy Coordinator, UNDP, December 2002).

Furthermore, as has been mentioned by academics working in this field, and other NGO workers, the collaboration between the government and UNDP raises issues of political motive on part of the government rather than having the women's best interest in mind.

Despite these shortcomings, the project has offered considerable positive benefits for the women participating. It has advocated having self-respect and self-dignity for SDW, economic independence, emotional and mental readiness to make alternative choices, be knowledgeable about legal rights and health issues etc. It has been an important component in the sex workers' movement to empower themselves.

Nari Unnayan Shakti (NUS) – A Woman's Organization in Dhaka, Bangladesh

Nari Unnayan Shakti (NUS) means, "women's power for development". It was established in 1992 by a group of young and energetic women who had a vision of raising the status of women and children in Bangladesh and establishing their rights in the

socioeconomic, cultural, environment and health realms, to mention a few (Nari Unnayan Shakti, 2002:1).

The group contrasts the gender balance of the population of Bangladesh (currently is around 130 million, half of which are women) with the lack of women's equality, pointing out that women are deprived of equal access to resources, an equal voice in decision-making processes, and lack basic human rights and opportunities. NUS was created to demand the potential human resource and unique societal contribution women deserve but were non-existent in the Bangladeshi social and economic structure (Ibid). "NUS works toward a violence free and gender balanced Bangladesh where people enjoy fundamental rights in a well developed society" (Nari Unnayan Shakti, 2002:1).

The Mission Statement of NUS outlines a mandate that proposed bringing positive changes for the women and children in Bangladesh in areas of development that include social, cultural, environmental, health and economic areas.

NUS has been involved in a number of activities since its inception.⁶⁵ Most of the projects NUS works on have two purposes: first to provide services for women and children, and secondly to raise awareness about women's subordinate status in Bangladeshi society along with planning and implementing strategies to fight their inferior status.

NUS has organized different conferences and workshops that focus on violence against women and ways to prevent it. The organization has worked closely with commercial sex workers especially in areas of violence perpetuated against the women in the trade. NUS and the women involved have been working side by side to fight against

⁶⁵ See Appendix 4 for a detailed account of the objectives of NUS and projects focused on sex workers.

such atrocities and design strategies that challenge the institutions that inflict the violence.

The NUS project has influenced lives of sex workers in different capacities. There are two important ways it has made a positive impact on the lives of CSW and their children. Firstly, it has created effective collaborations among the Government of Bangladesh and international organizations. It has developed a thorough understanding of the working procedures of the government. Secondly, NUS has been able to establish credible relationships with many senior and influential government officials. Furthermore, NUS has also exhibited good coordination skills with local and international organizations such as the World Bank, CIDA, UNICEF, and UNDP. Thus, NUS has been an effective link among the government, the international and national NGOs working in Bangladesh (Nari Unnayan Shakti, 2002).

NUS has involved the community in the policymaking and decision making phases that affect the lives of the CSW and their children living in the brothel areas. NUS has involved the brothel community leaders, interested parties, the women and the madams in both initial consultation and development of the programs. Over the past 10 years, the NUS has learnt that the success of the CSW projects depended largely on community awareness, involvement and support. NUS advocates multiple levels of community involvement in projects involving children. This also inspires and motivates community leaders to become actively involved in improving the status of the CSW and their children (Nari Unnayan Shakti, 2002: 1992-2002).

NUS states that the only way to raise the status of women in the sex trade is to provide them with alternative means of livelihood through providing some of the services

mentioned above, but also, to advocate and demand their rights as women's rights. As Afroza Parvin, the executive director and founder of NUS stated, skill training and having sex workers work at garments and other job opportunities will not be effective unless these women are socially accepted and respected as citizens within their areas and in the larger Bangladeshi society (In-depth Interview with Afroza Parvin, the Executive Director, NUS, December 2002).

The Bangladesh National Woman Lawyers' Association (BNWLA)

BNWLA has been a pioneering organization in demanding women's human rights using the legal platform in Bangladesh. A few prominent lawyers in Bangladesh who were committed to improving the legal rights of women founded the association in 1979. In 1981, the association was registered as a legal body. Since 1979, BNWLA has been working towards three main goals. Firstly, BNWLA has worked to set up a framework that will provide integrated legal aid and rehabilitation services for women and children in disadvantaged positions. Secondly, the association has been working to establish the rightful legal status for women, as well as to integrate women into mainstream economic and social spheres. Lastly, aiming at social justice, BNWLA has been striving to build a bulwark of safeguards against all forms of violence, exploitation and discrimination against women and children by ensuring legal and rehabilitation support (BNWLA, Annual Report, 2001:1).

BNWLA advocates that social injustices can be reduced significantly by targeting the vulnerable groups in society and providing them proper legal support to empower themselves and opening spaces for these groups to become integrated into mainstream socio-economic and political activities. BNWLA has been working towards this goal by

addressing issues such as violence against women and children, trafficking in women and children, and reformation of laws relating to the women and children in Bangladesh. BNWLA envisions a society where the legal system integrates gender equity into their mandates and BNWLA's mission is to improve the civil, economic and political rights of women and protect their human rights to that end (Ibid).

BNWLA works with sex workers and their children in a few projects.⁶⁶ The organization works with two types of sex workers: women who work in brothels--namely young girls who are forced into prostitution and women and children who are trafficked across the border to India and neighboring countries. It is important to note that the focus of BNWLA's mandate is on young girls and children and the aim is rehabilitating them to reintegrate into mainstream society.

The BNWLA mandate mainly focuses on trafficking and forced prostitution of women and children. The organization has been very active in demanding the children's legal rights and promoting rehabilitation programs that are sensitive to the social stigmas attached to prostitution. It works for children's gradual integration back into society. BNWLA strongly advocates for the sex workers' rights to be established as the rights of Bangladeshi citizens. As Salma Ali, the Executive Director, states, "sex workers are legal citizens of Bangladesh and as such have a right to basic needs, access to proper health care and above all, to be treated with respect and dignity" (In-depth Interview with Salma Ali, BNWLA, December 2002).

BNWLA does not agree that women get involved in prostitution through free will. Most cases that the organization deals with are of forced prostitution in one way or

⁶⁶ See Appendix 5 for a detailed description of BNWLA projects focused on sex workers and their children.

another. Thus BNWLA works towards rescuing, rehabilitating and repatriating saved victims into society through projects and advocacy that raise awareness about the situation and through legal action (In-depth Interview with Salma Ali, BNWLA, December 2002). The assumption about women not having any choice in entering the trade can be problematic, but nevertheless, the work done by BNWLA has been important in establishing the sex trade workers' rights as human rights in the legal arena.

The BNWLA have been active in the international arena as well. They have participated in conferences and built alliances with organizations such as ATSEC and Save the Children, USAID etc. They receive funding from these organization and others alike that help to implement their projects at the national level effectively. BNWLA has also been closely involved in preparing the National Plan of Action against the Sexual Exploitation and Abuse of Children, including trafficking. Along with projects that focus on the immediate needs of trafficked women and children, BNWLA has also created a platform that effectively advocates their legal rights, which has been key in the movement for empowering women in prostitution.

BNWLA has been closely involved with women and children in prostitution and trafficking since its inception and continues to work in collaboration with national NGOs and international organizations to fight for sex workers' rights while providing them with alternative options that are comprehensive and take into account their social, economic, physical and emotional well being.

Naripokkho (On the Side of Women): A Woman's Activist Organization

Naripokkho is a woman's activist organization in Bangladesh that was started by a small group of women in 1983. Naripokkho was started as a voluntary and membership

based organization. The mandate of Naripokkho encourages discussion and consultation among its members on issues pertaining to women and develops the core of these discussions into a platform for activities that help empower women. Naripokkho started off as a small group that met every Tuesday to discuss whatever issues seemed to be important to the women involved. Even after 18 years of existence and going through extensive changes, the organization has still maintained the weekly meetings to brainstorm, debate and thrash out issues and concepts relating to women. These discussions form the basis for Naripokkho's programmes and activities, which include research, campaigns, protest work, discussions, lobbying and advocacy, cultural events etc. Occasionally, this leads to the adoption of a specific project, which is carried out with grant funding and outside contributions. However, most of Naripokkho's activities are voluntary and are supported by Naripokkho's membership.

Naripokkho's mandate is based on the belief that women are human beings and should be treated with respect and dignity. Naripokkho has no political affiliations and the organization is non-hierarchical and democratic. Not everyone within the organization has the same ideology but all the women in Naripokkho believe in women's empowerment (In-depth Interview with Mahbooba Mahmud, Naripokkho, December 2002).

Naripokkho focuses on advocacy, research and training on various issues related to women's rights and development. Naripokkho's work revolves around four main areas: violence against women and human rights; reproductive rights and women's rights; gender issues in the environment and development; and representation of women in culture and media politics (Azim, 2001:1).

Naripokkho is an autonomous group that has links to other women's organizations and activist groups around the country. Naripokkho's mandate makes it particularly well placed in recognizing and responding to the needs of constituency building, solidarity building and the formation of a common vision of the future for women among all concerned organizations. While Naripokkho focuses on local women's mobilization and creating collaborations among local women's organizations, it has also created bridges with both national and international organizations that work on issues similar to the Naripokkho mandates.

Naripokkho has undergone transformations throughout the 1980s and the 1990s and has influenced the mandates of the women's movements in Bangladesh during that time as mentioned in earlier chapters. Naripokkho has always maintained its focus on integrating women's voices both within the organization and at the national and international level platforms. Moreover, Naripokkho has never been focused on abstract theoretical approaches but on working together through the issues and problems women face at large in Bangladeshi society. The diverse activist and academic background and previous life experiences of its members have definitely influenced the conversations and issues discussed within Naripokkho.

Naripokkho has worked with women in the sex trade in various capacities. Naripokkho members worked with the women even before the evictions and had helped them to create a platform to demand their rights as human rights, to prevent and later protest the *Tanbazar* evictions in 1999 as discussed in previous chapters. They have also advocated that sex work is work and the way women in the trade are treated by social

actors at different levels is nothing short of professional discrimination (In-depth Interview, Mahbooba Mahmood, Naripokkho, December 2002).

Naripokkho does not have specific projects with sex workers like other organizations discussed above. Naripokkho states that sex workers are a part of the women's movement and Bangladeshi society and thus do not need to be separated "as a target group." Like all women in Bangladesh, sex workers suffer from patriarchal oppressions and their rights are abused at every level of society. Thus Naripokkho works to demand the human rights of sex workers from the same platform used for demanding women's human rights. Naripokkho's demands for women's empowerment and the sex workers demands are not very different from each other (Ibid).

Naripokkho also taps into the issues concerning sexuality and women's choices to be sexually active and freely. Naripokkho advocates removing the social and cultural stigma attached to women for being sexually active like men (In-depth Interview with Mahbooba Mahmood, Naripokkho, December 2002).

Naripokkho also networks with other women's organizations in Dhaka to establish sex workers rights as human rights and to have equal social and economic opportunities as other working groups in Bangladesh. There have been several instances when Naripokkho took the leading role in organizing other NGOs and civil society to stand by the sex workers and protest the inhuman treatments the women received at the hands of the pimps, madams and other political groups. One prime example of this has been discussed at the end of chapter 3 when Naripokkho led the movement of Shonghoti to prevent and later protest the *Tanbazar* evictions in 1999. Naripokkho mobilized women at that time from the human rights platform and held press conferences and spoke to the

government officials to demand back their homes in *Tanbazar*. Naripokkho also states that service providing organizations need to recognize the sex workers' rights as women's human rights and not separate them from the women's movements. This in turn means these organizations need work from a collaborated political platform that targets women's empowerment (Ibid).

Naripokkho thus has not planned and implemented projects geared towards services for the women in the trade but their mandate is broader and their programs for the women are planned from a fundamental platform of women's empowerment with a feminist perspective.

Sex Worker's Organizations: Durjoy and Ulka

Durjoy (Unbeatable)

Several sex workers groups with the help of Naripokkho and CARE have been organized in the late 1990s in Bangladesh. In the last decade the sex workers have realized that unless they raise their collective voices against exploitation, no positive changes will take place in their lives. Furthermore, sex workers have realized that demanding their rights collectively can also help create a better future for their children. Along with the sex workers, some of the NGOs have also realized that programs that are geared towards the sex workers cannot be effective unless the sex workers voices are directly integrated into the planning and implementation of these projects (Morol & Sircar, 2002:11).

One of the sex workers organizations that have been very active in demanding women's rights is Durjoy Nari Sangha. Durjoy is a Dhaka based group that works with street based sex workers. Although Durjoy is an autonomous organization for sex

workers and is run by sex workers themselves, it was initiated by CARE, an international organization working in the area of health. CARE started a project called “Shakti” in 1995 to decrease the risk of HIV/AIDS infection among high-risk groups through practicing safe sex. Sex workers were part of this project since women in prostitution are primary targets for HIV/AIDS and STD infections. Shakti was based near areas sex workers frequented and their health clinics provided diagnostic care and sold condoms to the sex workers. These projects also focused on raising awareness on these issues and providing information on safe sex practices. However, CARE found it difficult to effectively implement this project as sex workers were not organized and often did not even know about the existence of Shakti. Thus they started to organize women in the trade to form a collective group that voiced the concerns of sex workers and their children effectively. In 1998 Naripokkho and Shakti jointly organized a workshop where representatives of sex workers from around the country were invited to participate in a brainstorming session. The idea of a collective was initiated during that workshop and many women actively participated in forming an organization for sex workers. From this workshop, Durjoy was created to work for the empowerment of sex workers and their children (Ibid: 12).

Durjoy started off as a small group of sex workers coming together to discuss their situation and create a space for strategy planning and implementation to empower themselves. It started off with 20 members and now has increased to approximately 2000 members as of 2002. (In-depth Interview with Hajera, Durjoy, December 2002) Durjoy was registered as a women’s organization with the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs in 2000. Durjoy’s has an advisory committee, which consists of representatives

from different NGOs. There is an 11 member central committee, which is an elected body. Most of its 2000 members are street based sex workers living in the metropolitan area of Dhaka. The chairperson of the organization is an ex sex worker.

Initially the focus of the group was aligned with the concerns of CARE about the spread of HIV/AIDS and STDs among the women, but once they started talking with each other and other organizations, the women realized there are other pressing issues that needed to be brought to the forefront such as police abuse, violence and the social stigma attached to the trade (In-depth Interview with Hajera, Durjoy, December 2002).

The chairperson of Durjoy, Hazera believes that the organization has both long term and short-term goals. The women look forward to a future where their work will be recognized as valid work and women in the trade will enjoy basic and fundamental human rights like the rest of the society. "Short-term goals include making the sex workers aware of their legal rights, strengthening their movement for women's rights, mobilizing against exploitation, building awareness about healthy living, providing temporary shelter, running educational programmes, rehabilitating the aged and ensuring an honourable cremation for the dead etc" (Morol & Sircar, 2002:13). Long-term goals focus on changing social attitude towards prostitution and the women involved and create platforms to empower women in the trade.

Durjoy receives funding through various activities such as condom sales, donor funding and earnings from conferences and workshops the organization holds for themselves and other organizations. Durjoy also receives annual funding from CARE and the national NGO, Concern (In-depth Interview with Hajera, Durjoy, December 2002). CARE gave Durjoy a large amount (approximately 45 thousand US dollars) last year and

continues to provide them with the necessary funding to run smoothly. These funds are used for sex workers' services and organizing conferences and workshops to raise awareness about the situation of sex workers.

Ulka

Both Durjoy and Ulka are sex workers' organizations that work for the empowerment of women in the trade. They had worked side by side after the *Tanbazar* evictions to demand their rights to their homes and protest against the abuse perpetuated in the vagrant homes. But Ulka's mandate differs slightly from Durjoy. Unlike Durjoy, Ulka was originated through a movement. "We fought back to get back *Kandupatti* brothel from where we were evicted. We became organized and created Ulka," said Mamtaj, president of Ulka (Morol & Sircair, 2002:12). After the *Kandupatti* evictions the civil society, women's movements and other NGOs collaborated with Ulka to help them demand their rights to *Kandupatti*. Naripokkho helped the women from *Kandupatti* to organize together and form Ulka and to create a platform to demand their human rights. The women's organizations in Dhaka played a crucial role in supporting the organizational development of Ulka. Ulka organized rallies and protests, contacted lawyers for legal advice, and visited the press and other organizations to have the women's collective voices heard (Ibid).

Ulka started with 35 members and now have 51 members, most of whom were evicted from the *Kandupatti* brothel in 1997. Most of the members of Ulka are older sex workers who have reached an age where they cannot work anymore. The membership composition of Ulka is quite different from that of Durjoy and thus their mandates differ from Durjoy too.

Ulka has a small working committee that oversees the organization's activities. The committee meets once a month, while the members meet every fortnight to discuss different pressing concerns and plan of actions. Membership is fee based where women pay 20/30 Tk. monthly. In addition to its Dhaka office, Ulka has branches in other brothel locations outside the city. At present, Ulka provides vocational training for its members and provides legal assistance.

Both Durjoy and Ulka target the needs of sex workers in brothels and women working on the streets. They have different mandates and target either services sex workers need such as legal assistance, or empowerment for women in terms of their human rights. The phenomena of women in the sex trade organizing themselves into groups that use the public platform to demand their rights is a relatively new one, but one that is absolutely necessary to improve the lives of the women and their children.

The civil society and other NGOs have generally encouraged such groups and have stood in solidarity with them to make their voices heard. However, the patriarchal institutions and structures in Bangladeshi society make it very difficult for women who are socially excluded to be active in the socio-economic and political realm. The women have been fighting against such odds with great strength and insight that helps them create a platform for themselves and raise issues of empowerment effectively within Bangladeshi society.

Conclusion

The sex workers' movement has collaborated with some of the NGOs to advance their demands of right to shelter, to security and their right to work as sex workers. The sex workers' organizations have received support from certain international NGOs, such

as CARE. Furthermore, NGOs that do not directly work with the sex workers causes of empowerment and breaking away from the patriarchal mechanisms that marginalize them, have provided them necessary services such as health care, and shelter after the evictions, which in turn, has helped the sex workers move their causes forward.

Another dynamic of the sex workers' movement that has been empowering has been their collaboration with women's movements internationally, especially India and other parts of South Asia. Moreover, members of Durjoy have participated in conferences in Switzerland and France. Durjoy in collaboration with CARE has put the concerns of sex workers on the global agenda (In-depth Interview with Shahnaz, Durjoy, December 2002). The global platform can be strengthened even further if national NGOs and the government work together to put the sex workers' agenda in the international arena as a united front.

It is also important to realize that NGOs, especially the national ones, are dependent on external funding and sometimes need to modify their mandates to keep in line with the donors' wishes. Often this reinforces patriarchal notions of what empowerment for women means and how these goals can be achieved. For example, NUS is dependent on UNDP's project for funding and I believe UNDP's mandate of rehabilitation for women in prostitution and their views of treating sex workers only as victims is a patriarchal notion that further marginalizes sex workers and deprives them of safe working conditions. Apart from Naripokkho, none of the NGOs I have mentioned above in this chapter raised the issue that Bangladeshi society does not punish the men for buying sex and solely focuses on women selling their bodies.

The government of Bangladesh, on the other hand, has not taken any responsibility to integrate the sex workers needs and concerns into national policies, or even integrate them into the UNDP project. This has resulted in the government not being accountable to the sex workers, especially those who were evicted from their homes by the government. The government through creating a women's ministry and limiting the sex workers issues to that ministry, has pushed their concerns off the national agenda. This way the government has stepped away from its responsibility to the sex workers.

The government's reluctance to take responsibility, the lack of funding and opposing perspectives of different organizations on the issue of prostitution often result in short term unity but not sustained solidarity for women's empowerment in general and sex workers' empowerment in particular. Using this chapter's outline of the different organizations' activities with sex workers, in the next chapter I identify certain commonalities these organizations can build upon to work with the sex workers' movement. It is important to realize that these organizations do not have to agree on all issues, but their differences can in fact contribute to both the sex workers' movement and the women's movement as a whole. For example, the *Tanbazar* Solidarity Council was able to focus on the illegal evictions and demand the sex workers' legal rights, which in turn opened a political space for the sex workers to build from and move their movement forward. This chapter has shown the diversity among the different social actors within the women's movement in response to the sex workers' cause and identified only a few of the key actors within the broader movement which has been demanding sex workers' rights as human rights and as Bangladeshi citizens.

In the next chapter, given the shortcomings of the government and NGOs, I analyze their positions in relation to the sex workers' movement and propose possible collaborations among the NGOs, international organizations and the government to create an effective platform that would empower women in the sex trade and integrate their rights and concerns in the larger Bangladeshi society. I also propose an alternative approach based on the feminist analysis and methodology I have used throughout this thesis that the sex workers could use to examine their cause and experiences within the patriarchal Bangladeshi society through a feminist lens and move their movement forward.

Chapter 7: The Sex Workers' Movement: Looking Ahead

Introduction

The sex workers' movement in Bangladesh, by connecting to the country's larger women's movements, has been able to bring the demands of sex workers for safer working conditions, human rights and the rights as Bangladeshi citizens to the forefront. The sex workers' legal victory discussed in chapter 5 has made history in the women's movements in Bangladesh and in Bangladeshi society more generally. The victory has had the political impact of putting sex workers on the national and international agendas. It has created a legitimate political space for sex workers to legally demand their homes back in the *Tanbazar* brothel.

Nevertheless, the sex workers' success in terms of policy changes and meeting practical needs such as shelter for themselves and reclaiming their homes in the brothels has been quite limited. This is not surprising given the increasing depth of conservative, fundamentalist and neo-patriarchal structures that are trying to push women and sex workers in particular off the political agenda. While celebrating the gains, neither the sex workers nor the women's movements should remain complacent at present times. Given the current position of the sex workers' movement, in this chapter I propose two alternative and overlapping approaches the sex workers might consider using at the present time to move their movement forward. Both alternative approaches are informed by my empirical analysis of sex workers in Bangladesh and on the feminist analytical principles and methodology I use through out this thesis.

This chapter is centered on the sex workers and specifically, develops a strategic analysis of the sex workers' movement within the women's movement as a whole from the following two analytic approaches:

- The first examines the possibilities for reaping benefits for the sex workers' movement in Bangladesh through an active national collaboration between the sex workers, the women's movements, NGOs supportive of the sex workers' movement and the Government of Bangladesh (GoB), as well as an international collaboration with sex workers' movements around the globe, especially with the active sex workers' movements in India. This approach also focuses on examining the possibilities of integrating the human rights platform discussed in chapter 4 into the approach.
- The second alternative approach evaluates the structural and historical context of the sex workers' movement through a feminist analytical lens using integrative feminist theories by Angela Miles and southern feminist theories developed by DAWN.⁶⁷ This approach considers the effectiveness of using global feminist theories to empower sex workers and further their cause within the patriarchal Bangladeshi society.

Both of these approaches draw on my analytic understanding from this feminist research and analysis. The first one draws more explicitly on empirical findings, while the second draws more heavily on the theoretical literature. Thus, this chapter suggests alternative possibilities to integrate the sex workers' voices into policy making, eliminate

⁶⁷ DAWN is a network of feminist activists, researchers and policy makers - who have come together from different parts of the Economic South, to develop alternative approaches and methods to attain the goals of social and economic justice, peace and development free of all forms of oppression by gender, class, race and nation, as has already been mentioned in chapter 1 and as Peggy Antrobus (cited in this thesis, mostly chapter 4), one of the founding members and DAWN's coordinator defines it (Sen & Grown, 1987:9).

the violence perpetuated against the sex workers and improve the status of sex workers to create a better future.

Collaborative Approach to Sex Workers, NGOs and the Government

A collaborative approach between the sex workers, NGOs and the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) would involve open dialogue, understanding and transparency about their intentions and activities. Most importantly, it would involve a change in the inherent belief within civil society that sex workers are fallen and immoral. Such a change is not possible without a space for open dialogue and a willingness to listen to each other.

There are challenges – both strategic and practical barriers - that social actors face in transforming the social values and attitudes that have been set over a long period of time. Strategically, NGOs and the government of Bangladesh (GoB) have different and often conflicting interests and different visions of societal changes. Furthermore, historically NGOs and the GoB have acted as opposite forces in the development process. The NGOs allege that more often than not the government becomes involved in the development process for women to further their political goals rather than be interested in the welfare or increased status of the women. This was apparent in the evictions of *Tanbazar* and *Nimtoli*. There seemed to be political interests related to the evictions⁶⁸ and disguising them as rehabilitation gave the NGO allegation some validity. As has been pointed out, once the rehabilitation took place, the government did not take any responsibility for the sex workers. The government treated the women as potential health hazards and dealt only with the issues related to HIV/AIDS, STDs and birth control for the sex workers (In-

⁶⁸ As I discussed in chapter 5, the evictions by the government was more related to the political rivalry and gaining power in the Tanbazar brothel between the two leading political parties rather than rehabilitation for the sex workers.

depth Interview with Ferdous Azim, December 2002; In-depth Interview with Hajera, Durjoy, December 2002).

On the other hand, the government feels that NGOs are too focused on the long term goals and on issues that do not help women and other marginalized groups in the near future. They claim NGOs are not result-oriented and do not understand the need of immediate service delivery for the poor and marginalized groups in Bangladesh.⁶⁹

There are also tensions between and among the NGOs and international development organizations. With the recent mushrooming of NGOs in Bangladesh, many are working with sex workers, but very few outline a sustainable alternative livelihood based on feminist visions' of empowerment for the sex workers. Furthermore as Fazlul Haque states, while an international development organization like UNDP proposes that women are forced into this trade and need an alternative, many NGOs do not understand the real problem and the practical needs of the sex workers. Rather these NGOs focus on legalization of prostitution, treating sex work as work and a respected profession, which is absurd in a country like Bangladesh (In-depth Interview with Fazlul Haque, UNDP, December 2002). Thus, collaborations among the national NGOs and international organizations working in Bangladesh are also problematic and currently rest on unstable grounds.

Even within the NGOs, both at the national and international levels, there are strategic differences of opinions about the best paths to women's empowerment. Institutionally many NGOs working with women are "challenged to balance the urgent needs of their members with the strategic interests of the ideological and political empowerment of women" (Jahan, Rounaq.1995:106-107). Furthermore, given the

⁶⁹ Interview with anonymous.

political sensitiveness around alliances of NGOs, it is difficult to form collaborations as often NGOs feel they need to agree on all issues and great interpretive differences exist. For example, some NGOs, such as BNWLA state that women are forced into sex work and thus their group efforts need to go towards rehabilitation, while others, such as Naripokkho advocates that a lot of women choose to enter this trade and that prostitution is the woman's own choice (In-depth Interview with Sultana Kamal, Ain O Shalish Kendro, December 2002).

The division among NGOs is perpetuated by other reasons as well. For example, with limited resources available, the NGOs are always competing for funds from international donors. The Government of Bangladesh favors certain NGOs that have safe mandates that do not challenge its patriarchal powers and ignores more feminist minded NGOs and give them with little or no money to fund their projects. This structured competition further divides NGOs and moves them away from the common goal of women's empowerment.

However, there are still spaces for collaboration even with these diverging interests if NGOs recognize that alliances do not have to be based on convergence on all issues or tactics and that the diversity among themselves can be a tool to move forward and empower women rather than dividing them into separate camps. Indeed, this case study has shown the power of coalitions in achieving both political and legal gains in earlier chapters.

There can be collaborations between international and national NGOs on commonalities among their mandates. For example, children of sex workers are a concern for all the NGOs and for most of the sex workers themselves. These parties all agree that

they do not want the children to grow up to become sex workers. Thus this can be a platform for NGOs, the government and the sex workers to cooperate with each other and try to improve the children's livelihoods. The NGOs could work together with the help of the government to allow children of sex workers to enroll in public schools and break the social barriers in schools against them. Another area for collaboration is providing training for the older children in alternative professions and in self-esteem. While doing this, the NGOs can also work with the children to portray their mothers as respectable human beings removing the connotation of outcast often attributed to prostitution in Bangladesh. They could even develop projects for youth around the urban areas and raise consciousness about the sex workers' situations and their deprived social status.

In the long term, perhaps one of the most fruitful areas of collaboration for improving both policy and the social status of sex workers is one focused on the human rights platform as discussed in chapter 4. The national and international conferences during the UN Decade for Women, the UN conferences of the 1990s and women's activism around CEDAW⁷⁰ have helped women's movements to demand their women's human rights within the government structures. The collaborative approach can focus on using the women's human rights platform to bring together the different social actors, such as the government, the national and international NGOs and the women's movements to focus on basic needs, such as shelter for the sex workers and their children.

The women's movement could also focus on CEDAW and through collective action and through demanding the government remove the reservations, such as the one on Article 2, can help create a political space for sex workers to demand their human

⁷⁰ CEDAW: The Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Discrimination Against Women was established in 1979 by the UN to promote women's human rights and equality.

rights and eliminate social and cultural discriminations against them. Furthermore, the Canadian Feminist Alliance for International Action (FAFIA) has used the CEDAW convention to put violence against women and poverty on the socio-economic and political agendas to demand that the Canadian government takes steps to eliminate violence against women. The Bangladeshi women's movement as a whole might consider using a similar analysis to put elimination of violence against women on the political agenda and demand the government take action to eliminate violence against women, especially against sex workers in Bangladesh.

The collaborative approach could also use the CEDAW protocol to advocate for education rights for the sex worker's children, as well as housing and employment rights for sex workers themselves. Violations of these rights would mean that the government is accountable to the international body and sex workers can demand their rights as human rights. Second, according to the human rights platform, discrimination against an individual based on their race, color, sex, language, religion, profession etc. is a violation of their human rights. Thus sex workers cannot be discriminated based on their professional work.

A collaborative approach among the sex workers, the government, and the national and international organizations could take many initiatives including public education campaigns to raise consciousness at the different levels within the Bangladeshi society to address the sex workers' human rights and their rights as Bangladeshi citizens.

Feminist Analytical Framework⁷¹ to the Sex Workers' Movement

Use of a feminist analytical framework throughout the thesis has helped me to understand the sex workers' movement. The principles within this analytic framework, I argue, would also be useful for on-going analysis within the sex workers' movement. The present section uses the four components of the global and local movement-based feminist analytical framework outlined in chapter one, especially the theoretical work of feminists from the Economic South in DAWN (as summarized in Sen and Grown, 1987) and integrative feminist theories outlined in Miles, 1996.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, while the sex workers' movement has been able to put their agenda to the forefront of Bangladeshi society, they are still struggling to integrate their voices and concerns into the policy making arena. At this point in the sex workers' movement it might be useful to assess their situation through a feminist analytical and theoretical framework that helps the sex workers themselves to better understand their unique experiences within the patriarchal structures and institutions that exist in Bangladeshi society and that oppress the sex workers along with other women and marginalized groups. A feminist understanding of the sex workers' lives and movement might help the women organize collectively to demand that the sex workers' human rights, their concerns and needs are integrated into policy making structures.

The feminist analysis used in this chapter has four main components that are interrelated, connected to each other and overlapping with each other. These components focus analytic attention on the sex workers' situation within the patriarchal structures and institutions in Bangladesh and can be understood through all four components of the

⁷¹ The Feminist Analytical Framework I use in this section is based on integrative feminist theories (Miles, 1996) and the Southern feminist theories developed by DAWN (Sen & Grown, 1987).

feminist analysis. For example, this analysis uses integrative feminist theories to propose a theoretical platform to share the sex worker's perspectives with other women's movements and offer practical alternatives to fighting patriarchy and unite them with women across their socio-economic and cultural differences. This encompasses all the components: the women's unique and diverse experiences, understanding their situation in the patriarchal structures, envisioning a transformed world and strategies leading us there and the important role of women's movements in creating change.

Using the first component, the analysis recognizes that sex workers in Bangladesh experience their lives in a very different way than what civil society envisions their lives to be like. While civil society sees them as victims and fallen women, some sex workers believe prostitution to be a profession that brings a living for them and their children, they refer to the actual act of prostitution as work (In-depth Interview with Hajera, Durjoy, December 2002). In considering prostitution as work they argue that the problem is not that they are prostitutes but is a societal problem of double standards in a patriarchal society. While civil society has set up social values and moral boundaries that stigmatize the women who are prostitutes, it has encouraged prostitution for the sake of the capitalist patriarchal structures that exist in society. Thus it is a hypocritical approach that civil society takes in dealing with the issue of sex work. Given the social attitudes, the sex workers can take an integrative feminist approach to their cause, which as Angela Miles explains, has women's empowerment at the centre of politics (Miles, 1996:90). Such a conceptual shift would allow prostitutes, sex workers and sex trade workers to bring feminist perspectives to general social questions and place the concerns of sex workers in the centre of socio-economic and political agendas.

This is similar to the DAWN approach that also advocates people-centered projects and policies because overall policies should be directed to meeting the basic needs of a population, specifically the marginalized groups of women and children. Often basic needs are ignored using the economic rationale that such defined gratification ensures investment for future consumption. But DAWN argues that in doing so the burden of the unmet basic needs weigh most heavily on the poorest of the poor in a nation and in turn on poor nations in the global context. One way to avoid such an impact is involving people, policy makers, NGOs and the bureaucrats in an open dialogue to address the needs of the poorest people (Sen and Grown, 1987:40-41). Thus, with opening a political space based on integrative feminist theories and Southern feminist theories developed by DAWN that situates women at the center, the sex workers can not only place their needs and concerns at the center of socio-economic and political agendas, but also fight against some cultural taboos that marginalize the sex workers in Bangladesh.

While sex workers argue their cases, they can also focus on the progressive struggles of changing societal values and transforming the patriarchal structures that oppress all women and all peoples, not just themselves. “The dialectical process of naming both women’s specificity and their universality allows women to argue that ‘women’s struggle is not only crucial but central to the transformation of exploitative social structures and the creation of a more just society” (WAND/APCWD, 1980:27 in Miles, 1996:90).

The feminist analysis not only places women at the center, but analyzes the ways women operate within patriarchal structures to fight against violence and oppression. The feminist analysis explains how the sex workers’ movement within women’s movements tries not only to gain power, but also to transform and change society. Using self-

empowerment as an organizing tool, sex workers could identify and try to address the gender inequalities and help transform the institutions that perpetuate the socio-economic and cultural barriers within Bangladeshi communities. The DAWN approach could help sex workers use self-empowerment as the starting point to fight discriminatory policies. (Sen and Grown, 1987:81-82) Then, the sex workers in collaboration with national and international women's movements could take this a step further, and as D'Souza (1992) explains, "we women, coming as we do from the peripheries of power, may together with other oppressed people find through our powerlessness a redefinition of power, an alternative concept of power that encourages and enhances the potential of each one, and then perhaps collectively we may find new human strengths that will help us find new possibilities"(Miles, 1996:91). This would be a challenge for sex workers in Bangladesh due to social taboos, but women in the trade have already broken some of the social barriers⁷² and have effectively aligned themselves with the women's movements. This could move them forward to approach other marginalized women in society and through their shared experiences of patriarchal oppression discover a platform from which to change the structure from 'power over women' to 'women with power advocating transformation'.

Thus, the first component focuses on placing the unique sex workers' experiences within the women's movements, on opening a political space to analyze the patriarchal structures and on using DAWN tools, such as self-empowerment to redefine power and align with other women in Bangladesh to fight against the sex workers' oppression.

⁷² "It used to be that we could not wear sandals outside the brothel areas. We were treated as untouchables. But now we have greater mobility and we do not hesitate to identify ourselves as sex workers. In fact, the language within society itself is changing from fallen women to sex workers. This in itself has been a significant victory" (In-depth Interview with Hajera, Durjoy, December 2002).

The second component of the feminist analysis concentrates on understanding patriarchy and how it affects sex workers' lives. Earlier discussions have already indicated how British colonial powers before independence imposed patriarchal institutional structures that have resulted in a lower status for sex workers in present times, how the Pakistani army during the war in 1971 has perpetuated violence against women and pushed more women into prostitution, and how women's movements have fought against patriarchal forces and how the lives of sex workers have changed over the 1980s and 1990s. It has also suggested that neo-patriarchal forms have developed with the conservatism and neo-liberal economics of the era.

In understanding and fighting patriarchy, this feminist analysis also tries to emphasize diversity within women's movements as strength. An integrative feminist approach understands that various systems of patriarchal oppression cut across gender and points actively to the differences among women, but it also strongly commits to building feminist struggles across those differences as in many other countries.⁷³ In Bangladesh, the sex workers' situation is different from what is faced by other women in the society. But these differences or diversity among the women can be a platform from which women learn from each other's experiences and learn that despite their differences, they all experience patriarchal oppression and fighting it is the common goal for women. As Nawal El Sadawi, an Egyptian feminist states in an interview: "Women have always been viewed as second class citizens all over the North and the South....Women's problems

⁷³ The DAWN vision also stresses the diversity among feminisms and their political movements. This vision recognizes that despite diversity there is a unifying commitment among the feminisms to break down the structures of gender subordination and treat women as full participants with men at all levels of societal life (Sen and Grown, 1987: 79).

are everywhere, of course we might have to use different strategies to fight them, but eventually the goals are the same” (Kalemara 1998, 16 in Miles, 1996:94).

The sex workers’ movement has a different experience from the anti-dowry or anti child-marriage movements observed in South Asia. For example, sex workers are fighting against a social value system that treats them as sub-human, not just subordinate to men. They have to fight against not only men and patriarchal institutions, but against cultural values ingrained both in men and women and even the sex workers themselves. But the movement can gain from putting aside these cultural differences and focus on the basic powerlessness women feel in Bangladeshi society and realize that their differences are, in fact another way of recognizing how patriarchy oppresses women and marginalized groups. While sex workers are oppressed from all levels, other Bangladeshi women also experience different forms of discrimination and oppression. If sex workers and other Bangladeshi women can relate and work together towards the common goal of fighting the violations against their human rights at different levels, as it is outlined in the DAWN approach, they could unite for some common causes. Collective action can be a powerful tool to address the various discriminations and gender subordinations that occur among women from different class and professional backgrounds (Sen and Grown, 1987).

This alternative approach could encompass collective women’s movements based on the recognition of diversity among the issues and methods that can help women to work effectively within the given structure and eventually work towards changing the existing patriarchal structure (Sen and Grown, 1987:80). In Bangladesh, the sex workers’ movement could consider to fight against the violence and the social injustice through

collective action and open dialogue with and within women's organizations in Bangladesh, as well as with the international organizations that promote women's rights as human rights. This would be based on "integrative feminisms that emphasize women's values and strengths as well as their oppression and diversity, and are more inclusive than feminisms that, on varying grounds, deny or choose not to deal with women's specificity"(Miles, 1996:95). Thus integrative feminisms can offer sex workers a theoretical platform to share their perspectives with other women's movements and offer practical alternatives to fighting patriarchy and unite them with women across the socio-economic and cultural differences.

Thus a feminist analysis understands not only how patriarchy affects sex workers but also how women and sex workers have fought against patriarchal mechanisms can help sex workers move forward towards empowerment. Furthermore, sex workers could consider using the diverse women's experiences in Bangladesh to build a collective women's movement that would stand in solidarity to fight against patriarchy.

The third component of this feminist analysis focuses on the effort to envision and create a transformed world so the institutions in the society are oriented to meet the needs of poor women and children. It is evident that by putting the issues of sex workers to the forefront, women's movements in Bangladesh have already taken a step towards a transformed society where women are treated as human beings and their rights irrespective of their choice of profession or economic status are respected as such. Furthermore, the demand put forth by Shonghoti to the government for the sex workers' right to shelter and their citizen's rights also elaborates on efforts towards changes that focus on women's needs and empowerment. This is difficult to achieve as patriarchal

beliefs and values are deeply ingrained in Bangladeshi society and challenges for real change have been met with great resistance from the government and other patriarchal structures that hold power in Bangladeshi society. A particular method within the DAWN framework used to change patriarchal perceptions is to use the popular culture, the media, and informal education to raise awareness about women's subordinate position. More often than not, such activities are not considered important and usually take secondary position in policy making and implementation. But as DAWN suggests, if we want to go beyond the peripheral advancement of women, we need to focus more on collective action and consciousness-raising activities. The feminist analytical approach to empower sex workers could consider using the popular culture to further raise awareness about the violence perpetuated against women in the sex trade. Moreover, if such an initiative is integrated into the feminist analytical approach, it will give this form of education greater legitimacy. This in turn could help tackle the notion of informal education and media approaches being trivial in policy-making decisions.

As the collective women's movements along with the sex workers' movement gain a feminist understanding of how patriarchal structures and institutions oppress women especially sex workers, and try to integrate alternative avenues to fighting against patriarchy,⁷⁴ one can expect to see institutional and structural changes take place that will empower women and marginalized groups, especially sex workers in Bangladesh.

These transformations are further encouraged through the fourth component of the feminist analysis that focuses on working with women's movements both at the global and local level. The analysis of connecting with local and global women's movement will

⁷⁴ One possible avenue in this case could be using the popular culture and media to increase awareness of oppression against women within national and international organizations, government structures and civil society.

create a collaborative platform for women to fight oppression and patriarchal powers. The global feminist platform is an avenue that the sex workers' movement in Bangladesh has yet to explore fully to move their causes forward. While there have been attempts to connect with sex workers in India and build solidarity that has been celebrated, there are still long ways for the women to go before they can effectively be integrated into the global feminist platform. Entering the global platform can be difficult given the nature of their struggles and given their limited access to social groups and organizations within Bangladesh due to the still persisting cultural taboos. It is important to realize that once the collaborative approach discussed earlier between social actors is advanced, they can connect more easily with the global platform, and there have already been steps through the national women's movements to share their local experiences in a global setting, as already mentioned.

Thus, the sex workers can integrate the fourth component by continuing to develop relationships with the Bangladeshi women's movement that evolved as a whole through their collaborating with the sex workers and also create stronger connections with the global feminist platform and with the global women's movements, such as the sex workers' movement in India in their efforts to change the situation of the women in the sex trade in Bangladesh.

A global feminist platform can be very useful for the sex workers' movement because recently new decentralized forms of organizations have been created to enable collective analysis and resistance. "These organizations are based on autonomous local processes of dialogue and mutual theory building; emphasize women's experiences as the basis of analysis and, therefore, put priority on the inclusion of all women as experts on their

conditions and needs; address patriarchal oppression in the context of all systems of domination and address the whole society” (Miles, 1996:118), and thus can offer sex workers an international connection to be actively involved in the process of understanding their situation and address the institutions and structures that treat the women as sub-human and non-citizens.

Conclusion

The women in the sex trade in Bangladesh are facing a turning point at present. If the socio-economic and political status of sex workers is to change, the social organization in Bangladesh will need to be restructured to eliminate the cultural taboos and the patriarchal oppression against sex workers that exist in structures, policies, and programs. A feminist analysis will help women sex workers become more aware of the patriarchal mechanisms built in both at the national and international levels that subordinate and oppress women and marginalized groups. At this point in their movement, sex workers need to engage more actively with the national NGOs, the different government agents, women’s organizations at the local and national level, and other social actors to represent their voices at a more operational level, becoming representatives in voicing their right to their homes, security and their human rights and in proposing effective solutions. Furthermore, through a feminist analytical framework sex workers can not only put their demands in the forefront, but strongly advocate for their rights to be treated as human rights. This can empower them to move a step forward towards the vision of transforming a society that oppresses them, other women and other marginalized groups.

Recently, there have been neo-liberal and neo-patriarchal trends that involve the trafficking of women within and across the borders for prostitution. If feminists advocate that sex workers right to work should be respected as such, it then, in turn, raises questions about whether women in trafficking should be considered as migrant workers who simply face poor working conditions. On the one hand, it is important to define and recognize sex workers rights as human rights and their right to work, but on the other hand, in the present time, defining their workers' rights can go against the fight for their empowerment and recognition as Bangladeshi citizens, and simply categorize them as migrant workers.

The sex workers status in Bangladesh has undergone dramatic changes as has been discussed in this thesis. However, there has been limited research done to document these changes and theorize the sex workers' movement in Bangladesh. Hopefully, this research project will contribute to the existing literature on the topic and open spaces for further dialogue and research between the local, national and international community. Last but not least, this thesis might help question and fight against some of the cultural and social taboos attached to the sex workers in Bangladesh.

Appendix 1

A Detailed List of All Organizations that Participated in the Sex Worker's

Movement since the Evictions

Some of the organizations that came forth to take part in the solidarity action initiative were Naripokkho, Bangladesh Women's Health Coalition (BWHC), CARE from Bangladesh, Hotline Bangladesh, Nari Maitree, Bangladesh Society for the Enforcement of Human Rights, Bangladesh Human Rights Journalists Forum, Coordinating Council for Human Rights in Bangladesh, Women for Women, Utsho Bangladesh, Bangladesh Manobadhikar Sangstha, Ain-o-Salish Kendra, Bangladesh Shishu Adhikar Forum, Bangladesh Association of Women for Self Empowerment (BAWSE), Coalition for the Urban Poor (CUP), Legal Awareness Forum, Phulki, Ulka (association of evicted sex workers of Kandupatti brothel), Durjoy (association of floating sex workers of Dhaka), Mukti Nari Sangha (association of sex workers a brothel in Tangail), Odhikaar, Bibartan, Gonoshasthaya Kendra, Badda Self Help Centre, Steps Towards Development, Nari Uddug Kendra, Theatre Centre, Prodipan, SARPV, Association for Social Advancement, Centre for Rehabilitation of the Paralyzed, Concerned Women for Family Planning, Massline Media Centre, National Forum of Organisations Working With the Disabled, Uddipan, Breaking the Silence, Institute of Democratic Rights, Action Aid, Assistance for Slum Dwellers, Prottoy, Thengamara Mohila Shabuj Shangha, STD/AIDS Network, Voluntary Health Services Society, Proshika, Shoishob Bangladesh, Shaptadinga, Rural Health and Development Society, Organisation for Mothers & Infants, SSUK, Bangladesh Nari Progoti Sangha, Dustha Shasthya Kendra, Bangladesh National Women Lawyers Association, Nari Unnayan

Shakti, CATW, Aparajeyo Bangladesh, Social Welfare Organisation for the Poor, Society for Environment and Human Development, PEDAB, Oxfam Bangladesh, BRAC, Monisha, Integrated Social Development Network, Nijera Kori.

Appendix 2

A Detailed Account of Shonghoti's Activities since the Eviction on 24th July 1999.

TANBAZAR ALERT NO. 2

10 Sraban 1406 / 25 July 1999

Pre-Dawn Eviction on 24th July 1999:

Yesterday morning the sex workers of Tanbazar and Nimtoli were evicted in a pre-dawn raid by police and officials from the Department of Social Services. Several hundred were taken away to government vagrant homes. During the eviction on Saturday morning the area was cordoned off for several hours. Initially, the women were reassured that only those who had opted for "rehabilitation" would be sent to the vagrant homes. However, even those who had not wanted to be rehabilitated were forced out and bused away.

Although authorities as quoted in the papers say that about 250 sex workers were removed, eyewitnesses report that at least four hundred women were forcibly taken away.

The rest fled into hiding. Once inside the buildings, the police beat the women indiscriminately and dragged them into the waiting buses. Journalists who have visited the now deserted buildings report having seen signs of panic and flight. In the panic mothers were separated from their children. As of today one mother has still not been able to trace her child. Relatives of the sex workers have not been told where they have been taken. The injured were not given any medical attention. Those who fled were forced to leave their belongings behind. Many who returned later to gather their possessions were forced into buses or trucks and taken to vagrant homes. Those who

were able to enter the buildings found that nothing remained of their possessions - everything had been taken away. One of the leaders of the sex workers, Sathi, was beaten almost unconscious and dragged into a police truck. Although it was reported that she was in police remand, the Narayanganj Police Station denied all knowledge of her whereabouts. They initially denied all knowledge of the eviction but later acknowledged that they had cooperated with the Department of Social Service staff, as reported in several papers. It has been reported that the sex workers were severely beaten up by the police and employees of the Department of Social Services after being removed to the vagrant homes. We urge all concerned groups, individuals, and organisations to protest against this eviction.

On 27th July:

A habeas corpus writ petition was filed against the Government challenging the illegal detention of Sathi and her 11-month old daughter at Kashimpur. As a result of this legal action, the courts have required the Government to show cause why Sathi and her daughter should not be released, and why the Government's actions should not be considered illegal. Following the writ petition, so far 80 of the detained sex workers have been released. The government claims that they have been "handed over" to their "guardians". In many cases they were simply released into the custody of pimps who claimed to be relatives. It is clear that the Department of Social Services does not have any clear plan or procedure for the release of the women. Each released woman was hastily provided with Taka 5,000 in cash and one sewing machine, and alternatively Taka

7,000. It should be noted that this is not even sufficient to compensate them for the loss of their belongings and of rent they had paid in advance to brothel owners. In the name of "rehabilitation" they have simply been made destitute.

On 29th July:

Evicted sex workers who had escaped detention demonstrated outside the Dhaka office of the United Nations Development Programme. They had heard that UNDP had extended assistance to the Department of Social Welfare for a brothel-based development project for sex workers (see the Background section below). They felt strongly that UNDP should not watch in silence while the Government evicted and illegally detained them, especially as such actions are contrary to the Government's own stated project goals. They wanted their voices to be heard by the international community, which is what the UNDP office represented to them. Many of the placards they held complained that there was no one else to whom they could turn, as Bangladesh has neither an independent judiciary, nor an independent human rights commission, nor an ombudsman's office.

On 30th July:

About 40 people representing Shonghoti attempted to hold a silent, peaceful demonstration at the Tanbazar brothel area to protest the violation of the sex workers' rights. Almost as soon as it began, the demonstration was attacked by a handful of well-known local thugs, who created a panic by firing shotguns and pistols into the air and exploding bombs. Though this incident took place in broad daylight only 50 yards from

the Narayanganj Sadar Police Station, the police took no action to protect the demonstrators, though they were informed of the protest in advance. Though the police had been deployed in the Tanbazar brothel area for over a month, they were conspicuously absent during the demonstration and attack. This incident shows beyond doubt that Narayanganj is held hostage by armed thugs who enjoy the collusion of the police and local administration. Local thugs, with full support of the Narayanganj police, had patrolled the riverside all morning preventing any woman from crossing the Sitalakhya river suspecting she may be an escaped sex worker attempting to join the human rights workers protest or to return to the brothels.

On 1st August:

Five NGO's and voluntary organisations on behalf of Shonghoti (Bangladesh Society for the Enforcement of Human Rights, Naripokkho, Bangladesh National Women Lawyers Association, Bangladesh Manabadhikar Sangbadik Forum, and Ain-o-Shalish Kendro) filed a writ petition in the High Court. The writ asked the Court to require the Government to show cause as to:

- i. Why the sex workers in confinement should not be allowed to return to their accommodations in Tanbazar and Nimtoli, and
- ii. Why the Government's actions should not be considered illegal, in which case the Government should compensate the sex workers for their loss and injury.

Officials of the Ministries of Home Affairs and Social Welfare and the Deputy Commissioner of Narayanganj were made respondent to the complaint. The court issued a Rule Nisi against the Government, granting four weeks in which to reply why its

actions should not be considered a violation of fundamental human rights and why the detainment in vagrant homes should not be considered illegal. On the same day, representatives of Shonghoti met with the UNDP Resident Representative, who is also the Resident Coordinator of all UN agencies in Bangladesh. The UNDP was urged not to remain silent while the sex workers' human rights were violated, and to issue a press note clarifying the fact that the government's recent repressive actions are not linked to the UNDP assisted project. UNDP was also given a letter written by Shonghoti to the United Nations High Commissioner on Human Rights to be forwarded to Geneva.

On 4th August:

Shonghoti held a demonstration outside the Department of Social Services in Dhaka to condemn its leading role in the repression against them. During this protest some DSS officials explained that the forcible removal took them by surprise; they had been preparing to take part in the UNDP assisted project for the sex workers. It is obvious, then, that an arbitrary decision taken at a political level has undermined the government's own efforts to engage in a phased, longer term project which could improve the living conditions of the sex workers while creating alternative livelihood options.

Demonstrations continue:

On 5th August, Shonghoti held a demonstration outside the Sonargaon Hotel in Dhaka where the Ministers of Health and Education were attending a seminar. On 8th August, Shonghoti held a demonstration in front of the Department of Women Affairs demanding their intervention in the situation in support of women's human rights. In the meantime,

the government has continued its repressive actions by now apprehending floating sex workers in Dhaka. In the Tanbazar area, the apprehension and harassment of any burqa clad (veiled) woman continues. The Prime Minister, during a high-level government meeting on 5 August, has issued directives to expedite the "rehabilitation effort" and has condemned journalists, human rights workers and women's rights activists for protesting the government's noble initiative! It was also stated that the brothels in Tanbazar and Nimtoli could not be allowed to continue in order to prevent the spread of sexually transmitted diseases, especially, HIV/AIDS. On 6 August, the State Minister of Social Welfare presided over a meeting in Narayanganj where he announced that all brothels in Bangladesh would be eliminated.

Appendix 3

Detailed List of Different Components of the UNDP Project: “Capacity-Building, Poverty Alleviation, and Sustainable Livelihood of the Socially Disadvantaged Women (SDW) and their Children”

The strategies for Dhaka’s floating sex workers and their children consisted of three major components: education for empowerment and skills training for alternative livelihoods for SDW, alternative environment for children of SDW, and strengthening the legal/social support system to mainstream SDW in Bengali society. More specifically, the strategies had the following major features:

- **Education for Empowerment and Skills Training for Alternative Livelihoods for SDW:** This strategy was based on recognizing that empowerment of SDW depended on addressing the multi dimensional factors that influenced their lives. This part of the project focused on addressing their basic human rights through educational projects such as basic literacy, vocational and skills training for alternative professions, access to information and services related to reproductive and sexual health issues, participatory peer education programs to raise awareness and prevent HIV/AIDS and STDs among SDWs, as well as, other programs that addressed their socio-economic status in society.
- **Alternative Environment for Children of SDW:** Addressing issues of children of the sex workers can meet both practical and strategic needs for the women. Children of SDW are a very vulnerable group, and are stigmatized by being associated with their mothers’ profession. The project tried to present different options to the children of SDW, for both boys and girls through formal and non-formal education and crèche

facilities. There were four residential areas around Dhaka that house children of SDW between infants and young boys and girls of age 18. The facilities are divided by age groups, between the ages of 0-5 years, 6-11 years and 12-18 years respectively. The older children in the age group of 11-18 years were predominantly female. These facilities were open to the mothers to come in during the day for skills training, to rest and shower and spend time with their children, but mothers were not allowed to spend the night at the center. The mothers had to pay a minimum amount of money to be able to have their children stay at the center, which made the women feel that they were taking care of their children and being responsible parents. It also promoted time-sharing with their children and by participating in the day-to-day activities mothers' felt a part of their children's lives. The children through their skills training were able to earn money that they could save for the future. There were no restrictions on the younger women participating in the commercial sex trade, but the girls were strongly advised against it by presenting alternative options. I personally believe that taking the children away from their mothers and portraying their mother's professions in a negative light pushes sex workers into the shadows and stigmatizes their profession further as well.

- **Strengthening legal/Social Support System:** This component of the project focused on improving the human rights situation, creating a supportive policy and legal environment for the target group: the SDW and their children. Over the long term to have a significant impact, the project mandate recognized that wider changes are needed to improve the situation of the target group.

Appendix 4

A detailed Account of the Objectives of NUS and Projects Focused on Sex Workers

The objectives as outlined in the NUS Annual report “Ten years of NUS: 1992-2002” are as follows:

- To develop leadership qualities in women through education, awareness building and training.
- To alleviate poverty by encouraging and supporting women to be self-reliant through savings, credit and skill training.
- To advocate for an increased human rights for women and children.
- To ensure access to health care and education for women and children.
- To promote behavior and participation in activities leading to a pollution free and friendly environment.

The NUS Projects Focused on Commercial Sex Workers and their Children

NUS has been working with commercial sex workers (CSW) in both brothels and floating sex workers for the last 7 years. NUS has supported CSW in one of the oldest brothels in Dhaka, *Kandupatti*, from 1995 to 1997. The Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) funded this project. This project was aimed at raising awareness about HIV/AIDS and STDs among the CSW in the brothel and also increasing condom use among the clients frequenting the brothel. NUS provided training and technical support to the development of peer educators to work with CSW. The project included services for counseling, treatment for STDs and general medicine distribution among the CSW. NUS also worked to do advocacy and networking geared towards establishing the human rights of the sex workers, and provide legal and social support for

the pregnant CSW in particular (NUS report on Commercial Sex workers, Ten Years of NUS:1992-2002).

NUS has designed and implemented projects specifically focused on the children of CSW. In 1994 NUS conducted a six-month study on oral testimonies of adolescent children in *Kandupatti*, with the partnership of UNICEF. The study sought to find out the status of the children, their life styles, and vulnerabilities in the brothel. Then in 1997, NUS conducted another study at *Kandupatti* that examined the psychological and social status of the children. The project was funded by the international organization, Save the Children. In 1998, based on the above study, NUS hosted an advocacy conference with the support of Save the Children. Several donors, NGO leaders and government officials attended the conference that focused on raising awareness on the issues for children of CSW, hoping to integrate important considerations into future policies for the CSW and their children (Ibid).

In 1998, NUS joined the UNDP project, “Capacity-Building, Poverty Alleviation, and Sustainable Livelihood of the Socially Disadvantaged Women (SDW) and their Children”. The NUS mandate in particular focused on creating safe environments for work in the target areas, encouraging and educating the SDW in savings and credit programs, and providing skill development training and income generating projects to help the SDW leave the sex trade. The specific services NUS provided within the project were the following:

- Health care delivery (STD and general medical treatment) and counseling to promote better health and safe sex practices among the SDW.
- Crèche for children up to five years old.

- Vocational training for children of sex workers and adolescent CSW.
- Boarding for adolescent CSW who have left the trade.
- Schooling for the children and the CSW.
- Counseling for addicted CSW to reduce their drug use habits.
- Legal Aid support.

Appendix 5

A Detailed Description of BNWLA Projects Focused on Sex Workers and their Children

a. Protection and Legal Action against Women and Child Trafficking Project

This project was designed to combat trafficking in women and children through multifaceted programs. It was to run from July 2000 to December 2002 and was funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The major component of the project was to create awareness and enhance the skills of stakeholders in combating trafficking through training workshops both at the district and national levels (BNWLA, Annual Report, 2001:4). The project also investigated trafficking related incidents and provided legal support to the survivors of trafficking. BNWLA also used the platform of the project to rescue trafficking survivors from various types of confinement including brothels, cage brothels and safe custodies (jails) etc. BNWLA repatriates trafficking survivors from India, Pakistan and UAE on a regular basis. Some of the expected outcomes of the project are to provide legal action against the perpetrators of women and children trafficked, to rescue and to repatriate the victims of trafficking etc.

b. Capacity Building and Support to Child Victims of Trafficking and Sexual Abuse

This project was aimed at rehabilitating and reintegrating child victims of trafficking into society. The main components of the project were providing basic living support including educational and recreational facilities for the children, vocational training on various trades including learning to use computers, and need-based psycho-social counseling for traumatized children rescued from trafficking. Some of the expected

outcomes were rehabilitation support for the victims in terms of food, shelter, education, vocational training etc., providing knowledge and capacity of staff members on how to deal with issues of children who have been sexually abused, forced into prostitution and trafficked, raising awareness of parents and local communities on social problems relating to sexual abuse and trafficking etc. The project was to be implemented from July 2000 to December 2001 and was funded by the international organization, Save the Children, Denmark.

c. BNWLA-- Integrated Rehabilitation and Resource Centre for Child Victim of Sexual Abuse and Trafficking

This project was designed to provide long term support in terms of psychological counseling to children who have been involved in prostitution and trafficking. This was a three-year project that started in October 2001 and was funded by Save the Children, Denmark. Under the project an integrated rehabilitation centre has been established that provides referrals and related information to local communities and the children and provides training to the children to be reintegrated into society. The centre is comprised of four main components: the open centre, the safe home, our home and the hostel. These homes provide a safe space for child prostitutes and children who have been sexually abused and trafficked (BNWLA, Annual Report, 2001:6).

d. Cell for Combating Trafficking

The cell is a unique concept within the BNWLA mandate. It overlooks the projects and implementation of the different activities that focus on the prevention of trafficking of women and children, as well as the protection and recovery of the victims of prostitution, rehabilitation and providing legal aid for women and children.

The cell has established 10 focal points at 10 different districts around the country that are considered risk prone areas for trafficking in terms of recruiting area, transit area and exit area. The field workers at the 10 focal points implemented different activities including awareness raising meetings with civil society in the area, such as journalists, teachers, lawyers, local elected representatives, politicians etc. These activities are geared towards building bulwark of safeguard against women and child trafficking. The field staff also visits police stations, jails, the court and brothels in the area to gather information about trafficked victims and cases related to forced prostitution and trafficking (BNWLA, Annual Report, 2001:16).

One distinctive component of the cell is that it has a computerized database that includes victim's profiles, information about traffickers, information about cases etc. Legal information about trafficking issues is also incorporated into the database. The database developed by the cell has been used effectively to combat trafficking by other organizations as well. The cell works in collaboration with other NGOs, such as ATSEC, CLPTP,¹ and the Core group for the formulation of the National Plan of Action against the Sexual Exploitation and Abuse of Children within the government etc.

¹ ATSEC: Action Against Sexual Exploitation of Children; CLPTP: Child Labor Prostitution and Trafficking Program.

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Certificate of Ethical Acceptability of Research Involving Human Subjects

This is to certify that the Research Ethics Board has examined the research proposal or other type of study submitted by:

Principal Investigator: Nasheeba Salim

Name of Research Project: Sex Trade Workers in Bangladesh: An Exploratory Study of International Organizations and NGO Responses to Sex Workers

REB File Number: 2002-072

and concludes that in all respects the proposed project meets appropriate standards of ethical acceptability and is in accordance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement on the Conduct of Research Involving Humans. Please note that approval is only effective for one year from the date approved. (If your research project takes longer than one year to complete, submit form #3 to the REB at the end of the year and request an extension.)

Date:

Oct. 23, 2002

Signature of REB Chair:

Dr. John E. MacKinnon