SCOPE OF THE PROBLEM

Statistics and Cases

Bangladesh is a country of origin for trafficking of women and children. Although exact figures on the scope of the problem vary widely, the consensus is that the problem is growing rapidly.\(^1\) Estimates project that a total of 25,000 Bangladeshi women and children are trafficked out of the country annually.\(^2\) Of these women and children, 10,000 to 15,000 are trafficked across the border to India,\(^3\) and 4,500 are trafficked from Bangladesh to Pakistan,\(^4\) although experts recognize that these numbers are probably low. Despite the fact that abduction and trafficking of women and children carries the death penalty, more than 300 instances in 2000 have been documented in which women and girls were reported missing, abducted, or sent abroad for purposes of prostitution.\(^5\) In addition to victims who are being trafficked for purposes of prostitution and despite a ban on overseas domestic employment by Bangladeshi women, officials state that more than 14,000 Bangladeshi women are working as maids and domestics outside of the country. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) indicate that more than 40,000 women from Bangladesh are working in the Gulf states alone.\(^6\) Repeatedly, instances have been documented in which women and young girls who are promised lucrative jobs in Gulf states agree to them, only to find themselves in sexual servitude. Recently, 1,000 children, mostly girls, were reported missing from Tungipara, 25 miles from Dhaka. They had left with labor contractors, who had promised them lucrative jobs in the Persian Gulf. The children were never heard from again, and

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\(^1\) International Organization for Migration, “Prostitution in Asia Increasingly Involves Trafficking,” *Trafficking in Migrants*, no. 15 (June 1997): 1


\(^3\) Radhika Coomaraswamy, UN special rapporteur on violence against women, as reported by Dilip Ganguly, “Bangladesh Convicts Pair in Smuggling Case,” *Associated Press*, 8 May 2001.


after months of investigation, the head of Women and Children International concluded that the employment agencies were slave traders.7

On average, at least 70 women and children are trafficked daily to India through the Satkhira, Jessore, Chaudanga, Meherpur, and Kushita districts of Bangladesh. According to the Centre for Human and Children Studies, 200,000 Bangladeshi women and children have been sent out of the country in the last 10 years. Jatiya Mahila Ainjibi Samity of the Bangladesh National Women Lawyers Association says that approximately 25,500 women and children are crossing the borders every year.8

Human rights activists and agencies estimate that 200 to 400 young women and children are smuggled out of Bangladesh each month, mostly to Pakistan.9 An estimated 4,500 women and children from Bangladesh are trafficked to Pakistan annually. According to Sigma Huda, a women’s rights activist in Bangladesh, 200,000 women and girls were smuggled into Pakistan in the past decade.10 In a 1998 case, 21 children between the ages of 5 and 15 years were rescued from a hotel in Dhaka from which they were to be trafficked to Saudi Arabia for purposes of prostitution.11 Police also arrested four people belonging to an organized gang of traffickers that lured women and children to the hotel with promises of better jobs in Saudi Arabia.12

Prostitution is legal and prominent within Bangladesh. In 1994, approximately 30,000 people were prostituted in Dhaka alone.13 It is estimated that there are between 10,000-29,0090 children in prostitution in Bangladesh. There is also a problem with boys being prostituted that remains unrecognized by the government.14

Related Activities

Traffickers take advantage of Bangladesh’s sizable borders to transport the women, often using large criminal networks and deceptive tactics to avoid detection and prosecution. Bangladesh maintains that trafficking is carried out by well-organized regional gangs that have links with the various law enforcement agencies. Traffickers between India and Bangladesh often even marry their victims to protect themselves against prosecution under Pakistan’s stringent Islamic Hudood laws.15

12 Ibid.
13 “International Workshop on International Migration and Traffic in Women,” Foundation of Women (Thailand), Women’s Studies Center (Chiangmai), Women and Autonomy Center (Leiden University), 17–21 October 1994, appendix II, p. 6.
14 “Ending Child Prostitution, Pornography and Trafficking,” ECPAT resource kit, p. 11.
15 The Protection Project Database.
In desperate attempts to ensure their own or their families’ survival, young women believe promises for employment that are made to them, and parents sell their children in an attempt to alleviate some of their own suffering. One recent case documents a young woman, Farida, whose father sold her to a pimp when she was 7 years old. She was then sold to an Indian brothel, where the Bangladesh National Women Lawyers Association eventually rescued her.16

Hunger is a significant factor that creates an environment for criminals to prey upon young women and children. “Unless the fight against rural hunger takes priority now, trafficking of women and children will continue to rise,” according to one vocal anti-trafficking advocate.17

Traffickers are able to prey on the country’s disadvantaged women and girls because of economic difficulties and social norms that leave many females feeling desperate. The effect of poverty is quantified by a social devaluation of the role of women in Bangladesh society. Little value is accorded to girls, and a daughter is often more valuable to a family by virtue of the price she brings from an outside buyer.18 Nearly 85 percent of Bangladesh’s population faces economic hardships.19 The low socioeconomic status of women has left many of them without land, particularly in rural areas, where property laws and the commercialization of agriculture have marginalized women.20 The population has also experienced an increase in the number of poor, female-headed households; an increase in violence against women; and a decrease in the social status of women.21

Related Countries

People from Bangladesh (and Burma and Nepal) go to Malaysia as illegal immigrants through Thailand, according to Malaysia’s inspector general of police.22 In addition, considerable numbers of women from Bangladesh are trafficked to eastern Europe. Most Hungarian asylum requests are made by people from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Iraq.

In addition to being a country of origin for trafficking, Bangladesh is also a transit and destination country for women.23 According to the Bangladesh National Women Lawyers Association, poor and disadvantaged women and girls from Bangladesh are routinely trafficked to India, Pakistan, and the Middle East.24

References

17 Ibid.
19 Ibid.
20 “International Workshop on International Migration and Traffic in Women,” Foundation of Women (Thailand), Women’s Study Center (Chiangmai), Women and Autonomy Center (Leiden University), 17–21 October 1994, appendix II, p. 6.
21 Ibid.

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LAW AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

Legislation

Prostitutin and trafficking for the purpose of prostitution or other immoral acts are covered in the Penal Code, the 1995 Oppression of Woman and Child Act, and the 1993 Suppression of Immoral Traffic Act.

Criminalization and Penalties

Prostitutin is legal in Bangladesh. Women in prostitution must obtain a special license issued by a magistrate. The Oppression of Woman and Child Act prohibits abducting and trafficking women and abducting women and children for the purpose of committing immoral acts.25

The Suppression of Immoral Traffic Act prohibits keeping a brothel or allowing premises to be used as brothels,26 soliciting for the purposes of prostitution,27 living on the money transacted in prostitution,28 procuring individuals for the purpose of prostitution,29 importing a female for the purpose of prostitution,30 and detaining a woman for the purpose of prostitution.31

The Penal Code prohibits procurement of a minor girl under the age of 18 for illicit intercourse with another person;32 selling, letting, hiring, or disposing of minors under the age of 18 for the purpose of prostitution;33 and buying minors for the same purpose.34

The Oppression of Woman and Child Act prohibits being a customer of a child, encouraging a child to prostitute himself or herself, and deriving economic support from a child in prostitution. The Suppression of Immoral Traffic Act also prohibits encouraging a girl under 18 to be in prostitution.

Labor Law

The constitution prohibits forced or compulsory labor. The Factories Act of 1965, as well as the Shops and Establishment Act of 1965, also prohibits forced labor and establishes an inspection system to enforce this prohibition.

The Factories Act bars children under the age of 14 from working in factories.

25 Article 8.
26 Section 4.
27 Section 7.
28 Section 8.
29 Section 9.
30 Section 10.
31 Section 11.
32 Section 466A.
33 Section 372.
34 Section 373.
International Conventions

Bangladesh has ratified the International Labor Organization (ILO) Convention (105) on the Abolition of Forced Labor; the ILO Convention (182) to Eliminate the Worst Forms of Child Labor; the United Nations (UN) Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade, and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery; the Optional Protocol to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution, and Child Pornography; and the UN International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families.