

Gendered attitude towards human trafficking survivors

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Published : 16:44, Oct 20, 2018 | Updated : 16:46, Oct 20, 2018

A leading national daily of Bangladesh reports that around 1,000 women have returned from only Saudi Arabia to Bangladesh since January 2018. Among them, 82 women returned between Jun 1 and 6. All of them reported being victims of multiple forms of miseries including physical, mental and sexual tortures. Many



are reportedly rejected and not welcomed by their families. Although there may be a debate whether these cases involve migration or trafficking, such return of victims and such types of maltreatments abroad have brought the issue of trafficking to public attention again.

Human trafficking is a modern-day form of slavery that involves the illegal trade of people for some form of forced exploitation. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) defines human trafficking as any form of recruiting, transporting, transferring, harbouring or receiving a person by means of the threat or the use of force or other forms of coercion, abduction, fraud, or deception. According to the report of UNODC, the vast majority of all human trafficking victims are women and girls (71%) and one third is children. Bangladesh police statistics show that 267 cases have already been recorded from Jan to Jun 2018. The number of female victims was 96, male 118 and children 42. In Bangladesh, in general, there is a tendency of underreporting the case of trafficking to avoid financial damages and time consuming legal process and further social crises.

A recent study conducted by Bangladesh Institute of Social Research trust revealed that a significant number of respondents were forced into hazardous work where they faced multiple forms of violence including domestic violence, rape, prostitution, physical torture, etc. Around one-third of them experienced acute injuries and malnutrition, 15% were tortured and most alarmingly and inhumanly around 20% of them lost abilities to move physically. Among those who have reproductive health-related consequences, majority of the respondents (45%) suffered from different reproductive complications.

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Focusing on the social aspect of trafficking, however, the study explores that both male and female survivors found their social and financial reality different after returning home. Social acceptance or the attitude and the response of the community towards the survivors of trafficking were found different on the basis of gender. More specifically, the way society perceived trafficking and responded to women who returned from was 'gendered' and significantly influential to their subsequent identification and social positions.

For example, while males sometimes got sympathy for their miseries and losses, females were often considered 'polluted' and source of diseases. Negative attitudes of the community and 'local prejudices' about the survivors of the trafficking are primarily two- typed. Firstly, to men, those are somewhat degrading like "they did a bad job abroad", "they couldn't do anything in the country so they fled abroad", etc. Secondly, to women, like "they have been to brothel", "they are polluted", "they may have HIV", etc. These are not only degrading but also the question of their 'purity', 'identity', and social acceptance. While a group of males abroad is responsible for the loss of their 'purity', another group in native land blames them for being 'impure'.

As the findings revealed, such notions of 'purity' and 'pollution' were very important in determining the realities and social condition of female survivors although it was not equally important for male survivors. One female survivor said, "None of my family members came to the airport to take me home. After the shocking experience in Oman, it was another shock when I came to know that my family started considering me polluted."

In many cases, the husband's family became reluctant to accept the women in their family like before, therefore, they lost their 'own family' and sometimes even became separated from their children. In such cases, they had only their parents' homes to go to and hide their traumatic memories, but the situation is more complex because husband's place (Shamir Ghar) is considered the ultimate destination for women in our society. For example, if any married female survivors who have been living at their parents' homes for a long time, neighbours are likely to be suspicious about this 'abnormal practice' there. They often believe that something is 'wrong' with this woman and also label her as 'a bad character'. Another survivor said, "Most people thought that I have done something unacceptable at my husband's place otherwise why my husband left me at my father's home".

In such exclusionary situation, they have no option but to hide their background of trafficking to hold on to the socially accepted 'pure' feminine traits and 'normal' women identity. This is a process of marginalization which leads them to self-stigmatization and self-deprivation. As a result, they are likely not to access many of their basic rights or required services like health services, psychological counselling and legal action against the traffickers, etc., which res  Top in further society and health related crises. One NGO worker mentioned, "many of them are

having health crisis but still are reluctant to come to us or receive health service because they do not want anybody to know about their history”.

In Bangladesh, steps need to be taken from all sides to re-integrate those women into society. Although some NGOs are providing some particular services such as medical treatment, legal advice, psychological counselling, social awareness among community people, those are not always lasting due to the limited duration of the projects. Their priority should be to go to the local level coordination with multiple stakeholders so that they can keep their impact sustainable. They can also conduct studies to find out an effective and long-lasting means.

For psychological counselling, regular expert, psychologist/ counsellor can be made available at Upazila Health Complex of the vulnerable areas, who can provide proper care to the survivors and enable them to combat negative issues confidently.

Community people, service providers, and law enforcement agency members need to be provided adequate knowledge and awareness regarding the rights, trauma and vulnerability of these suffering women.

More significantly, Local Government Institutes (LGIs) in trafficking prone areas can integrate some NGO incorporated activities which have already been successful in the area. For example, legal advice, local level coordination and regular courtyard meeting with community people, etc., may be effective to change the people's attitudes towards the survivors by increasing social awareness.

Aminur Rahman works at the Bangladesh Institute of Social Research (BISR) trust. His areas of interest include gender violence, child rights, marginalization and social inequality, social exclusion, human trafficking.

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