

An eye for sale

Poverty forces Bangladeshi woman to turn to organ trade

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Shefali Begum, a 26-year-old Bangladeshi mother, became the focus of media attention last month after she took out a classified ad in a Bengali-language Sunday newspaper, *Ittefaq*, offering to sell one of her eyes.

Wholly dependent upon her husband's income for her livelihood and that of her two-and-a-half-year-old daughter, Shefali found herself penniless after he left her. Offering to sell her eye was the only option she could think of to find money to pay her rent and feed her daughter, she told reporters from the BBC.

"I have no education, so it's not possible for me, a single mother, to get a decent job," she said. "All I want is some money so that I can buy a piece of land for my daughter. I would not repent if that causes me blindness."

Following a public outcry and adverse international press coverage, Bangladesh Prime Minister Khaleda Zia felt it necessary to make a show of concern for the single mother's plight.

On May 3, Shefali was granted an audience with the prime minister. According to a government spokesman, "The prime minister called Shefali Begum to her chamber on Tuesday and pledged her a package of government assistance including a home, free food ration and educational expenses for her daughter.

"Shefali will now have protection from the state so that no human-organ buyers can approach her."

The prime minister has promised Shefali, who lives in a tiny, rented bamboo and corrugated-tin room in the country's capital, Dhaka, housing in a government-built shelter for the poor. She also will henceforth receive a monthly allowance to which single mothers are entitled and has been given an undisclosed sum to

pay for her daughter's education.

Though Shefali Begum's threat to sell her eye was found newsworthy, the fate of millions of the country's urban poor is similar or worse than hers. This section of the population has swelled to 12 million as a result of the neo-liberal reforms implemented by various governments since 1991. The prime minister's rare burst of charity in Shefali's case does absolutely nothing to address the growing crisis of poverty facing the country's masses.

According to World Bank statistics, Bangladesh has the highest levels of poverty in South Asia and among the highest levels of malnutrition in the world. More than two thirds of the country's 141 million residents are living in rural districts, but, according to a report submitted to the United Nations Statistics Department in 2000, only 14 percent of rural households are able to derive their living from agriculture.

Since the government scrapped a system of regulated prices and subsidies, the agricultural sector in Bangladesh has stagnated, creating essentially no new employment. Forty percent of the population is considered either unemployed or underemployed, and half of the population lives on less than US\$1 per day.

Five years after the 1971 secession of Bangladesh from Pakistan, a newly installed military government implemented "free-market" policies by means of martial law. Bangladesh became one of the very first countries to open up the former nationally regulated economy to foreign investment.

By 1982, another military regime, which came to power as the result of a second military coup in March 1982, implemented the "New Industrial Policy." This consisted of further privatisation and deregulation,

facilitating the flow of foreign investment into newly created Free-Trade Zones for garment factories.

In 1991, a government led by the Bangladesh National Party (BNP), with support from the Islamic fundamentalist party Jamaat-I-Islami, intensified the neo-liberal policies carried out by its military predecessors. This resulted in the privatisation of state banks, power generation and telecommunications, as well as substantial reductions in custom tariffs and the lifting of price controls on imports and exports. The average wage rate in Bangladesh is now half that in China, and Bangladesh has been transformed into a source of cheap labour to attract foreign capital.

The Bangladeshi business and political elite has promoted the country as a “haven” for ready-made garment industries, which it credits with bringing about a “phenomenal growth” in manufacturing and for creating “jobs for the poor.” The number of garment factories had increased to 3,618 by 2002—compared to 594 in 1986—employing 3 million workers (including industries affiliated to garment production). Most of the workforce is made up of women, who earn a pittance. They are subjected to severe exploitation, with employers taking advantage of traditional patriarchal values that encourage female docility to reinforce their control over the workforce. In 2002, the garment sector made up as much as 76 percent of the country’s total exports, with most products going to the US, the European Union and Japan.

The pro-business agenda of the government has produced mass unemployment, resulting in a decline in real wages and an increase in inequality. The former state-owned cotton and jute mills—the predominant industries under British colonial rule—were deemed unprofitable and forced to shut down, leaving thousands unemployed. Workers in the state-owned paper and chemical factories were also hit hard by mass redundancies. This destruction of jobs has been coupled with a decline in government spending on vital services such as health and education needed by the poor.

According to a recent World Health Organisation (WHO) document, “Status Report on Macroeconomics and Health: Bangladesh,” the country suffers from harrowing levels of poverty, low consumption, deteriorating health conditions, declining educational opportunities and poor housing. A staggering 77 percent of Bangladesh’s population lacks the minimal

requirements for a healthy human existence. They are also vulnerable to hygiene-related health problems. Health expenditures, according to the WHO, account for up to 46 percent of household expenditures.

These are the inhuman and unbearable social conditions that found tragic expression in Shefali Begum’s decision to sell her eye. Thousands find themselves forced to take this last, desperate option, selling the only possession most of them have left, either to the organ traders or by turning to prostitution.

“We strongly condemn it,” said Mustafizur Rahman, a leading eye practitioner and adviser to the Bangladesh Ophthalmological Society. He added, “This would be a first-ever instance of someone in Bangladesh selling an eye. We will ask the government to make it a criminal offence so that it doesn’t become a trend like the sale of kidneys.”

The trade in human kidneys has grown by leaps and bounds among the poor. A kidney is known to fetch up to US\$1,000, despite the fact that the sale of any organ, whether the donor is dead or alive, is illegal in Bangladesh.

Human organ traders, affiliated to international organ-smuggling networks, operate with the help of local government officials. In rural districts and urban slums, where the most oppressed workers and peasants are concentrated, itinerant kidney hunters, outlaw surgeons, medical technicians, makeshift transplant units and underground laboratories are an everyday presence.

A number of doctors have voiced fears that the offer to sell an eye could spark a “new trend” among the poor. This concern reveals the depth of the present social crisis in Bangladesh. The only answer provided by the ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party government, with the backing of Islamic fundamentalists, is to press for more “pro-poor reforms” that are aimed at further reducing labour costs and conditions of life to make the country more attractive to global capital.



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