

# Some Forms Of Trafficking In Women

## —The Results Of A Survey

THERE are numerous historical examples of trafficking in women. Women are given in marriage, taken in battle, captured, exchanged, sent as tribute or gifts to kings, nobles and holy men, traded, bought and sold. Far from being confined to the "primitive" world, these practices are prevalent today and seem to become more pronounced and commercialized in more "civilized" societies. An independent study on women in Pakistan has revealed some startling facts.

Bride wealth is the price paid by the bridegroom to the father or guardian of the bride. This custom is still observed among certain tribes in the north west frontier province and Baluchistan, and to a lesser degree among particular socio economic groups in Punjab and Sind. The Pathans call bride wealth *velvur*. Among the Persian speaking people of Iran it is known as *sheer bahau*, literally the price of milk. Baluchi speaking people call it *lab*. In these societies bridewealth is paid in cash. The amount paid depends on several factors such as the virginity, age, working capability, childbearing capacity and physical appearance of the woman.

Virginity, symbolized by the intact hymen, is most highly prized in tribal and patriarchal feudal societies. In Pakhtunwali, the Pathan code of ethics, the woman is the repository of the man's *ghairat* or honour. As in traditional Arab societies, an entire ethos is built around female virginity. Since the price paid is for virginity, a widowed or divorced woman fetches much less. It is not uncommon for a woman suspected of having lost her virginity before marriage to be returned by her husband to her parents. Not only is she disgraced but the bridewealth must be returned to the

husband. The woman who manages to escape death at the hands of a father or brother is ostracized and may finally take her own life or become a prostitute. Loss of virginity is also used as a pretext for divorce in case a husband finds his wife unsuitable in other respects.

There is a high correlation between bridewealth and the physical beauty of a woman. Skin colour, the shape of the nose and the size of the eyes are the determinants of a woman's beauty. Thus the birth of a dark skinned girl is an occasion for mourning in the family. A fair skin has its own price. It tops the list of requirements even in today's matrimonial columns. Not unlike modern capitalism which commercializes every part of a woman's body, traditional societies too have traded in women's beauty. Recently a group of doctors went to a village near Peshawar university on a vaccinating campaign. Surprised by the ifflisual enthusiasm of a man who had brought his three little daughters for vaccination, one of the doctors questioned him. "Doctor saheb, if I don't get them vaccinated", responded the father, "and Allah forbid they catch small pox, what will happen to their god given beauty? It will surely be destroyed and what a loss that will be to me. I will be ruined, doctor saheb."

With the export of manpower to the middle east and the subsequent prosperity of certain tribes in the north west frontier province, the commodity of exchange most hit by inflation is the tribal, woman. Fathers and brothers of marriageable women have cashed in on the boom. Young men, earning petro dollars abroad are now expected to pay anything between Rs 50,000 and 100,000. In 1982 a young woman belonging to the Afridi tribe was sold for



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Rs 1,020,000. Mumtaz Rashid reports the sale of a woman in Sind for Rs 60,000.

This escalation has adversely affected who have not been fortunate enough to find their way to the middle east. An Orzakai tribesman in his early forties and still unmarried, expressed his despair at not being able to pay the current bridewealth. Ironically, it seems that the system created by men has boomeranged on themselves.

In the Punjab, where the feudal tradition is much older, dowry replaced bridewealth, but incidents of women being sold as wives are legion. In one case, a young woman was betrothed in childhood to her cousin who works as a labourer. Her youthful beauty was considered too valuable by father to be wasted on a labor so he decided to sell her to another suitor for Rs 10,000. On hearing this, the girl ran away from and was kept in hiding for some time before she was married to cousin.

In another case, a *maulvi* from a village outside Lahore bought 14 year old girl as a wife in Chitral. The girl wilted and wasted away, so after some time he took her to her parents and claimed a refund. With Rs 500 in his pocket he left for Peshawar where he bought another wife. On returning home, however, he discovered that burqa clad woman was older than he had thought her, so he disposed of her to the first buyer.

Among the Baluch it is said that a woman is saleable up to the of 40. I have recorded cases women being sold as wives not once but over and over again. One such case is that of a young Baluch woman who was given in marriage to an aged cousin on the basis of be traditional *vatta*

*satta*. However, this unwritten code was violated by her husband who refused to give his sister in marriage to the woman's brother. The infuriated brother abducted the woman and I sold her to another man whose sister he married himself. After being threatened by her first husband, this woman was returned, declared *kari*, and tortured no end. *Kari* is a Baluch tribal custom whereby a couple suspected of having an illicit relationship is punished by being stoned to death. An accused woman may find shelter in the chief's house where she works as a bonded servant in return for the protection she receives. Once again, the woman escaped with her brother, who sold her for the third time. A fortnight later she was taken to another village where she was sexually abused by a relative and sold to a policeman for Rs 2,000. As the policeman failed to pay the full amount, the woman was taken away from him and sold for a fifth time for Rs 12,000, her brother receiving Rs 8,000 while the middleman got the rest. Her purchaser had sold his cattle to raise the money. Once her first husband located her, he threatened to abduct the women of her purchaser's tribe. Influential people intervened and she was returned to her first husband. The tribal council of elders declared the woman *kari* and fined her brother Rs 20,000. In order to raise the money, he sold her yet again for Rs 10,000.

A girl is culturally conditioned from birth to take pride in the fact that she is saleable. The higher the bridewealth, the greater her worth. In the frontier I was told the following story. A bridal party was crossing a river when one of the boats in which they were travelling capsized. Seeing the bridegroom trying to rescue the bride, the others called out: "Come back, don't endanger your life. Leave her to drown — remember, she cost us nothing." Thus women who have not been purchased live in extreme insecurity.

In areas like Punjab and Sind, the tradition of selling daughters is frowned upon. Here outright sale has been replaced by exchange. Women are exchanged for other women through *vatta satta* marriage.

In this system a family gives a daughter in marriage to a man who can give his sister in marriage to their son. In this arrangement, there is often a vast difference between the ages of the spouses. What is of importance is simply the availability of a wife. I encountered many cases where if one of the women was ill treated, beaten or divorced, the husband of the exchanged woman would retaliate by meting out the same treatment to her. This retaliation takes place not so much out of sympathy for the abused woman, as is often claimed, but out of a sense of wounded male pride. Since the women are objects of exchange and men the exchangers, there is little the women can do about their situation.

There are innumerable cases of bridewealth taking a new guise in contemporary society. Daughters are exchanged for much coveted "connections" and alliances which make possible the good life—job appointments, promotions, political influence, plot allotments and so on.

The practice of mortgaging women is also prevalent in certain parts of the country. According to one report "in the area around Attock, Jhang and Bahawalpur, growing daughters are given over as hostages and securities for paltry loans to creditors who may put them to whatever use they may like." A number of such girls mortgaged with Hindu moneylenders were forced to migrate to India at the time of partition. This was disclosed to me by a woman member of a team set up to recover abducted women during partition.

It is evident that many customs which are considered to be part of "primitive" societies are very much in practice in our own contemporary society. Moreover we find that cultural patterns, traditions and customs rise out of and are therefore inextricably linked to the socio economic structure and organization of any given society, whether it be pastoral, tribal or feudal. The mercenary trafficking in women will be checked not by sermonizing and reforms but by the abolition of the social structures which give rise to their practice. □

## Women For Peace

In response to the crisis in Punjab, and the ensuing violence there, several women's organizations, groups and individuals have joined to form the Rashtriya Ekta Andolan, a women's campaign for communal harmony and national integration.

An appeal "to the people of Punjab, to all the political parties and religious bodies, to the government of India and the state governments involved, to realize the gravity of the situation and to lose no time in reaching a settlement" with one lakh signatures appended to it, has been sent to Indira Gandhi and to Sant Longowal.

The Andolan sent a delegation to Amritsar, organized a public meeting and rally in Jullundur city on June 15, and is engaged in mobilizing public opinion in favour of communal peace and harmony. Women from different parts of Punjab, from Delhi and from some other towns joined the Jullundur rally, and plan to follow it up with a rally in Delhi.

## Exacting Vengeance

On June 16, 1982, Chandramohini, a stenographer, died under mysterious circumstances in Simla. Her family alleged that she had been harassed by her husband Rajan Saluja, a high court advocate, and his family, ever since her marriage a year before. (See **Manushi** No. 12) Chandramohini's younger sisters have been systematically following up the case but have not been able to get the Salujas punished by law.

On the morning of Sunday, June 19, 1983, a group of men and women including many relatives and neighbours of Chandramohini's family, arrived at the Saluja residence CII/141 Lajpat Nagar. Some demonstrators, among them some members of the Rashtriya Sanjay Manch, entered the house and dragged out Rajan Saluja, beat him and stripped him naked. The police then arrived and marched Saluja off to the police station for his protection. Saluja walked naked, guarded by policemen, and followed by a crowd chanting: "Look at the murderer." After a while the police lathi charged the demonstrators and arrested 12 of them,