



BANGLADESH

DHAKA'S INVISIBLE SLAVES

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ADISA IS 13 YEARS OLD AND COMES FROM A VILLAGE TWO HOURS AWAY FROM DHAKA. SHE WAS HANDED OVER BY A "RELATIVE" TO A FAMILY WHERE SHE IS OBLIGED TO PERFORM EVERY TYPE OF DOMESTIC WORK. THE LADY OF THE HOUSE, RUNA, DOES NOTHING IN THE HOME BUT SPEND HER TIME ON SOCIAL NETWORKS AND SHOPPING. BY HER OWN ADMISSION SHE IS DEPRESSED BECAUSE OF A FAILED MARRIAGE. THERE IS NO ROOM OR BED IN THE HOUSE FOR ADISA.



A ROOF IN EXCHANGE FOR A LIFE. DRIVEN BY THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF TAKING CARE OF THEIR OWN CHILDREN, BANGLADESH'S POOREST FAMILIES ARE THE FIRST LINK IN AN INVISIBLE CHAIN OF SLAVERY THAT TIES CHILDREN TO UNSCRUPULOUS MASTERS AND DENIES THEM THEIR FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS. IN EXCHANGE FOR BOARD AND LODGING, THEY LEAVE THE SHANTY TOWNS AND NARROW DIRT TRACKS TO WORK IN GREY BUILDINGS AS "DOMESTIC HELPERS". WITHOUT PAY, WITHOUT FIXED WORKING HOURS, WITHOUT ANY TYPE OF PRIVACY, BUT WORST OF ALL, WITHOUT ANY WAY OUT. ISOLATED FROM THE REST OF THE WORLD AND DENIED ANY POSSIBILITY OF AN EDUCATION, FOR SOCIETY THEY DO NOT EXIST. VERY OFTEN THEY ARE CHILDREN FROM THE METROPOLITAN AREA OF DHAKA, THE COUNTRY'S CAPITAL. THEY GROW UP CLEANING BATHROOMS, SCRAPING OVENS, TIDYING, LIVING IN FEAR OF BEING RAPED FROM ONE MOMENT TO THE NEXT, OR BEING VICTIMIZED BY THE CHILDREN OF WELL-OFF FAMILIES. FOR THESE CHILDREN, THE OUTSIDE WORLD IS A SLIT OF LIGHT FROM BEYOND THE WINDOW SHUTTERS OR THE SPACES BETWEEN THE BARS. THE LUCKIER SLAVES RETAIN FOGGY MEMORIES OF THEIR FIRST YEARS OF LIFE, WHEN THEY COULD STILL RUN BETWEEN LAUNDRY HANGING OUT TO DRY OR PLAY CRICKET AMIDST THE RUBBISH.

THE STREETS OF BANGLADESH ARE ALSO LAWLESS PLACES WHERE BOYS AND GIRLS ARE KIDNAPPED, OR SIMPLY LED AWAY BY SHADY INTERMEDIARIES THAT WORK FOR PEOPLE TRAFFICKING ORGANISATIONS. THE ONLY HOPE IS FOR THE INTERVENTION OF AN NGO, LIKE ASD (ACTION FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT), WHICH OFFERS COURSES IN EARLY LITERACY, TRAINING AND DOMESTIC SAFETY. BUT IT ALSO TEACHES PERSONAL RIGHTS AND, WHEN POSSIBLE, MEDIATES WITH THE MASTER OR MISTRESS OF THE HOUSE. THE WOMEN OF THE HOUSE MAY WELL BE STUCK IN UNHAPPY MARRIAGES THAT THEY DID NOT CHOOSE AND ARE OFTEN READY TO VENT THEIR FRUSTRATIONS ON THE DOMESTIC SLAVES WHO END UP DEVELOPING SERIOUS PSYCHOLOGICAL AND PHYSICAL DISORDERS. THANKS TO THE INTERVENTION OF THE NGOS, THE GIRLS LEARN TO SING, DANCE AND ACT, ENJOYING UNIQUE MOMENTS OF RECREATION IN THE COMPANY OF OTHER GIRLS THEIR AGE AND ENABLING THEM TO DREAM OF A DIFFERENT WORLD. A WORLD IN WHICH EVEN THE MASTERS AND MISTRESSES CAN FIND COMPASSION, IF THEY ARE FORCED BY TIRELESS VOLUNTEERS TO COME FACE TO FACE WITH THEIR OWN RESPONSIBILITIES, OR IF THEY ARE BROUGHT TO JUSTICE BY LAWYERS IN SEARCH OF LEGAL PROTECTION THAT THE STATE DOES NOT YET PROVIDE. THESE SHORTCOMINGS, HOWEVER, CAN SOMETIMES OPEN UP UNEXPECTED SPACES OF FREEDOM.



MOUSUME, AGED 12, WORKED FOR TWO YEARS IN A HOUSE WHERE SHE WAS SUBJECTED TO SEVERE PHYSICAL ABUSE. SHE NOW LIVES ON THE STREETS NEAR THE MAIN STATION IN KAMALAPUR. AS A CONSEQUENCE OF WHAT SHE WAS SUBJECTED TO, SHE HAS BEGUN TO SELF-HARM, CUTTING HERSELF ON HER ARMS.



14-YEAR-OLD SONIA WORKS FOR SHEELA, ONE OF THE WOMEN INVOLVED IN THE ASD PROJECT. SHEELA CHECKS SONIA'S WORK.

DHAKA FROM ON HIGH. THE VIEW FROM THE OFFICES
OF THE DAILY STAR, ONE OF BANGLADESH'S MOST
IMPORTANT ENGLISH LANGUAGE NEWSPAPERS.



THANKS TO THE ASSOCIATION ASD, SHARMIN, AGED 15, HAS
MANAGED TO ESCAPE FROM HER STATE OF SERVITUDE AND
IS ABOUT TO LEAVE FOR WORK IN A CLOTHING FACTORY.



THE NGO NAMED ASD IS PART OF A NETWORK OF ASSOCIATIONS COMMITTED TO PROTECTING THE RIGHTS OF CHILDREN IN ALL OF BANGLADESH. ITS FOCUS IS ON DOMESTIC WORK. IN THE ABSENCE OF APPROPRIATE LEGISLATION, THE ORGANISATION TRIES TO MAKE THE WORKING ENVIRONMENT SAFE FOR CHILDREN THROUGH VARIOUS INITIATIVES, ABOVE ALL, MEETINGS TOGETHER WITH THE "EMPLOYERS". THE AIM IS TO RAISE AWARENESS IN ORDER TO IMPROVE CONDITIONS. USUALLY NO MEN ARE PRESENT AT THE MEETINGS.





NISHAT AND JANNATUL, AGED 14.
HER SITUATION IS PERHAPS THE BEST
OF THOSE ENCOUNTERED. ANSWERING THE
QUESTION OF WHY JANNATUL IS TREATED
SO WELL, NISHAT RESPONDED THAT "WE
UNDERSTOOD THAT THIS WAY SHE IS A
BETTER SERVANT FOR US".

RUNA DISCUSSES ADISA'S BEHAVIOUR. ADISA,
AGED 13, WORKS AS A DOMESTIC. HER FAMILY
SENT HER TO WORK IN THE CITY, AS THEY
WERE UNABLE TO TAKE CARE OF HER.





DHAKA'S FARMGATE AREA AT ONE OF THE CITY'S MOST CHAOTIC CROSSROADS.

SONIA, 14 YEARS OLD, IN THE KITCHEN.
SHE WORKS AT THE HOME OF SHEELA, ONE
OF THE WOMEN INVOLVED IN THE ASD PROJECT.



AKHI, AGED 12, WORKS AS DOMESTICS BUT LIVES
IN THE SHACK TOGETHER WITH HER FAMILY.





ONG ASD. A TRADITIONAL
DANCING LESSON.

DHAKA. A MAN WORKS ON A ROOFTOP WITH
A VIEW OF PART OF THE CITY BEHIND HIM.





RUMA, AGED 14, AND AKHI, AGED 12, ARE SISTERS WHO WORK AS DOMESTICS BUT LIVE IN THE SHACK TOGETHER WITH THEIR FAMILY. BOTH CLAIM TO RECEIVE A SMALL SALARY.

JANNATUL, AGED 14, IN THE KITCHEN.
HER SITUATION IS PERHAPS THE BEST OF
THOSE ENCOUNTERED, ALSO THANKS TO
THE ACTIVITY OF THE ASSOCIATION ASD.





MOSUME'S ARMS. THE GIRL, AGED 12, WORKED FOR TWO YEARS IN A HOUSE WHERE SHE WAS SUBJECTED TO SEVERE PHYSICAL ABUSE. AS A CONSEQUENCE OF WHAT SHE WAS SUBJECTED TO, SHE HAS BEGUN TO SELF-HARM, CUTTING HERSELF ON HER ARMS. SHE NOW LIVES ON THE STREETS NEAR THE MAIN STATION IN KAMALAPUR.



RUNA'S HOUSE. HERE ADISA,
AGED 13, WORKS AS A SERVANT.





DHAKA. RAISED WALKWAY AT ASAD GATE, AN AREA WHERE ARE LOCATED THE MOST IMPORTANT AND EXPENSIVE CATHOLIC SCHOOLS OF THE CITY.

ADISA, AGED 13, DOES THE LAUNDRY BY HAND. SHE COMES FROM A TOWN TWO HOURS AWAY FROM DHAKA. HER FAMILY SENT HER TO WORK IN THE CITY, AS THEY WERE UNABLE TO TAKE CARE OF HER.



A MEMBER OF A FAMILY OF CONSTRUCTORS
IN DHAKA THAT OWNS VARIOUS HOTELS AND
NUMEROUS APARTMENTS, STANDS IN FRONT OF A
PORTRAIT OF HIS FATHER, THE FOUNDER OF THE
BUSINESS. FOLLOWING THE AWARENESS-RAISING
WORK OF ASSOCIATIONS SUCH AS ASD, HE HAS
DECIDED TO STOP USING MINORS FOR DOMESTIC
WORK AND ON HIS CONSTRUCTION SITES.





MOMENA, AGED 15, WITH HER MOTHER. THEY LIVE IN A SMALL SHACK. AFTER WORKING AS A DOMESTIC SERVANT MOMENA RETURNED TO LIVE WITH HER FAMILY. NOW SHE CONTINUES TO WORK AS A DOMESTIC AND IS ONE OF A MINORITY THAT MANAGES TO EARN A SMALL SALARY.



TWO MEN TAKE A SELFIE IN FRONT OF THE PARLIAMENT. ONE OF DHAKA'S MOST IMPORTANT BUILDINGS, IT WAS DESIGNED BY THE GREAT ARCHITECT LOUIS KHAN.



JANNATUL, AGEDI 14, IN THE HOUSE WHERE SHE WORKS AS A SERVANT. SHE SLEEPS IN THE SAME BEDROOM AS HER "EMPLOYERS".



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