

Dacca Raising the Status of Women While Aiding Rape Victims

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DACCA, Bangladesh, May 11— Officially sponsored efforts to assist the thousands of victims of rape by Pakistani soldiers in Bangladesh are being expanded into a national program to advance the status of women generally. In this conservative Moslem country, women in orthodox families are traditionally secluded.

An organization called the National Board of the Bangladesh Women's Rehabilitation Program, appointed recently by Prime Minister Sheik Mujibur Rahman, has set up headquarters in Dacca for a nationwide training project to prepare village women for jobs.

200,000 Victims Reported

Among the 1,500 who have applied for job training here so far are many housewives who "have never been out of their homes before and don't know what the outside world looks like," according to the chairman of the National Board, Justice K. M. Subhan of the Dacca High Court.

Most of the applicants, Justice Subhan said in a recent interview, come from homes where all the men were killed by Pakistani troops.

According to official estimates at least 200,000 Bengali women and girls were raped by Pakistani soldiers during a

nine-month reign of terror aimed at putting down political dissidence. The intervention of India led to the two-week war in which the Pakistani province became the independent republic of Bangladesh.

There are reports circulating in Dacca that systematic rape was a policy of the occupying army. The object, according to these accounts, was to produce a large number of children with non-Bengali fathers to dilute the prevailing Bengali nationalism.

The thousands of pregnancies resulting from the rapes created "a very delicate and sensitive social problem" in this overwhelmingly Moslem nation, a high Bangladesh official said recently.

Foreign specialists sent here by the International Planned Parenthood Federation and other agencies to perform abortions have found that few of those made pregnant by rape will come forward because they are reluctant to have their condition known.

Abortion Techniques Taught

Dr. Geoffrey Davis of the International Abortion Research and Training Center in London, who has visited villages throughout the country to instruct physicians in abortion techniques, says he heard of countless instances of suicide by pregnant girls, and many cases in which unwanted babies

were disposed of by drowning or other means.

Dr. Davis, an Australian, made a "conservative" estimate that at least 5,000 pregnancies caused by the rapes had been terminated by crude but effective "indigenous" methods. He said that while gynecologic complications were common in such cases, fatalities had been rare.

About 100 abortions were performed in the first month at the clinic opened by Dr. Davis in Dacca under the auspices of the Planned Parenthood Federation. An "increasing number" are being performed scientifically in 17 major outlying centers, he said.

Many victims of rape from more affluent Bengali families have had abortions performed quietly in Calcutta, it is said. The number of babies that have been born and have survived is unknown since the families often keep the births secret.

Adoptions Hampered

"The abused women don't want their position to be advertised," said Mrs. Sultana Islam, president of the Bangladesh Women's Federation, which is helping the rape victims, who are referred to officially as "war heroines."

The secrecy has hampered the efforts of International Social Service and other agencies that arrange the adoption of unfortunate children.

Widespread venereal infection sharply reduces the chance that children born of rape will be adopted, according to Dr. Davis.

"Almost every rape victim tested had a venereal disease," he said.

The abortion program will be ended by August, the last month in which a birth can take place as a result of rape during the Pakistani regime. Meanwhile, advanced pregnancies are being terminated almost up to time of normal birth by a method developed in Britain about two years ago, according to Dr. Davis.

The technique involves severing the umbilical cord to cause the death of the fetus, which is then stillborn naturally "but faster, easier and with less risk than in normal labor," he said.

High Dowries Sought

About 10,000 former "freedom fighters"—Bengali guerrillas in the war against Pakistan—and others have responded to a plea by the Prime Minister for young men to marry the "war heroines," said Justice Subhan. But the project has failed because of what he termed the "fantastic demands" of the would-be bridegrooms for dowries, as well as the re-

luctance of the women to come forward.

Meanwhile, the United Nations Children's Emergency Fund has given several hundred sewing machines and about a million yards of cloth to get the rehabilitation program started with a sewing project.

"It is in the interest of the community to emancipate women from the household," said Odert Von Schoultz, a representative of the International

Planned Parenthood Federation. Mr. Von Schoultz, a Swede, and his wife, a feminist who prefers to be called "Mrs. Ana Maria," her given names, are advisers on the rehabilitation program.

"Statistically, it is proven that working women have fewer children," said Mr. Von Schoultz. "In Bangladesh, where the birth rate is three per cent, if we don't make jobs for women we shall have to create more jobs for their sons."