



# BANGLADESH

**Hotspot report**

August 2024



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Bangladesh hotspot program aims to bring an end to the commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) within Bangladesh. This year marked the completion of the pilot phase during which we established our presence in Dhaka and provided grants and support to key local partners working in brothel communities and with street children. Subsequently, the program expanded the scale of its work, establishing new partnerships to prevent CSEC and improve protection services for victims and survivors.

Working with four local partners, in 2023 the hotspot provided social services to 3,449 individuals, most of whom were at-risk children living in brothels and on the street, and their mothers or caregivers.

A key objective of the program is to increase social protection for children to prevent exploitation. During the year, 521 at-risk children were enrolled in school and 796 individuals were connected to government services, mainly birth registration, national identity cards and government support allowances.

Partners jointly identified two advocacy issues that are critical to preventing CSEC: improving access to birth registration documents for at-risk children and to national identity cards for sex workers. Partners worked with affected communities and government bodies to overcome barriers to applying for these documents, without which children at risk and their mothers cannot access basic services such as education.

The hotspot also supported community-level initiatives such as mothers' and children's groups to help safeguard children from situations of CSEC, and worked with police to improve protection for children at risk.

In May 2023, the hotspot began implementing an award from the US State Department's Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons (JTIP) to increase protection for victims of internal child sex trafficking in Bangladesh. Working with new partners – Justice & Care, INCIDIN Bangladesh, Shapla Mohila Sangstha and Karmojibi Kalyan Sangstha – the four-year project aims to build better protection and reintegration services at government and privately-run shelter homes for survivors of CSEC.

## OPERATING CONTEXT

Bangladesh faced its worst energy crisis in a decade. The Russia-Ukraine conflict increased global fuel costs which hit Bangladesh hard as it relies heavily on fuel imports for power generation. Power outages have become a regular feature of daily life, along with fuel price hikes and high inflation.

Increased political strife and unrest including transport strikes in the run-up to the 2024 election disrupted life in Bangladesh from October to December 2023. Meetings with high-level government officials as well as some planned project activities such as dissemination meetings had to be postponed as government officials were engaged in election-related activities.

The Ministry of Home Affairs, along with civil society partners, updated and extended the National Plan of Action on Human Trafficking until 2025. An important focus was to work towards a comprehensive and coordinated referral structure that addresses the needs of victims of human trafficking (including internal trafficking) through support from various agencies including Counter Trafficking Committees, NGOs, and a high-level central coordination committee consisting of government and NGO representatives. Hotspot partners Justice & Care and INCIDIN were part of the drafting committee with the Executive Director of INCIDIN credited as a Chief Consultant of the drafting process.

*Dhaka, Bangladesh*  
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# HOTSPOT OUTPUTS AND OUTCOMES

## **Headline results**

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## **Progress towards hotspot objectives**

The Bangladesh pilot program was launched in 2021 to establish the structures and networks required to support a locally-driven solution to end the commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) in Dhaka. The Freedom Fund worked with four CSOs with extensive expertise working in brothels and with street children in Dhaka: INCIDIN, Karmojibi Kalyan Sangstha (KKS), Shapla Mahila Sangstha (SMS) and the Sex Worker Network Bangladesh (SWNB).

The pilot phase concluded in September 2023 and the program is now building on its achievements and expanding the scale of its work.

In May 2023, the hotspot began implementing an award from the US State Department's Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons (JTIP) to increase protection for victims of internal child sex trafficking in Bangladesh (see Objective 3 for details).

## **Hotspot Objective 1: Generate an evidence base to inform the design of an effective and scalable program model**

### ***Prevalence study on girls***

A key component of the pilot phase was to commission an independent prevalence study to gain a deeper understanding of the nature and scale of commercial sexual exploitation of girls in Dhaka. Led by Population Council, the study neared completion in 2023.

Primary research was based on quantitative surveys, with a census of 392 brothel-based female sex workers from three brothels in Dhaka, and 853 street-based female sex workers in 20 hotspots in Dhaka who were identified through respondent-driven sampling.

Validation meetings on the research findings were held with the Program Advisory Group and program partners followed by further consultations with both groups for input on recommendations. The final report and recommendations will be published in 2024.

### ***Prevalence study on boys***

The Freedom Fund also commissioned Population Council and INCIDIN to jointly work on a study to fill the knowledge gap around the commercial sexual exploitation of boys and transgender minors in Bangladesh. Like the girls' study, the research will have two parts, a formative study comprising of desk research and key informant interviews followed by a prevalence study.

Fifteen key informant interviews were conducted between September and October 2023 with subject experts including CSOs, transgender activists, CSEC survivors and government officials.

The formative research found that young boys aged 12-14 were most at risk. Boys living on the streets, in residence-based education and in religious institutes, and the children of sex workers were at particularly high risk. Boys working in the informal sector (e.g. in factories, workshops, restaurants, garages, domestic work, and the transport sector) were also at high risk.

The study noted gaps in laws, policies and services for boys who are victims of sexual exploitation and abuse. The formative research has been used to inform the design and modalities for the prevalence study. Ethical approval has been submitted and the field work should begin in the first half of 2024.

## **Hotspot Objective 2: Develop a protective network (including CSOs, families and government) to safeguard children from situations of CSEC**

During the pilot phase, the hotspot worked with a range of stakeholders who all play an important part in forming a protective network for vulnerable children.

### **Developing content for mothers' and children's groups**

Partners formed mothers' and children's groups with community members identified as being at risk of exploitation. The Freedom Fund commissioned Breaking the Silence to develop modules to help partners facilitate the mothers' and children's group meetings.

The Department of Social Services was closely involved both in the development and field testing of the modules which were endorsed by the Minister for Social Services as well as the Director General of the Department of Social Services. To our knowledge, this is the first time modules for community groups have been endorsed by high-level government officials.

### **Behavioural changes at community-level to prevent CSEC**

Our partner KKS noted significant changes in the behaviour of sex worker mothers after facilitating the modules with community groups. Mothers understood the harm *babus* (long-term customers/pimps) can inflict on their children and the strategies they use to groom their daughters and facilitate their entry into CSEC. Mothers started to enforce rules for the *babus*: no money or gifts should be provided to their children without their knowledge, restriction of free movement into their homes, segregation of sleeping areas so that *babus* and children would no longer sleep in the same bed. Some stopped entrusting their children to the *babus* while they are at work but instead placed them with trusted caregivers. Mothers also informed their children of the dangers of implicit trust in *babus*. Importantly, 30 mothers agreed to form an informal vigilance group so they can be KKS's eyes and ears in the community and alert them to CSEC-related incidents.

### **Identifying the advocacy agenda for preventing CSEC**

Partners jointly identified two advocacy issues that are critical to preventing CSEC: improving access to birth registration documents for at-risk children and to digital national identity cards for sex workers.

It is particularly hard to obtain birth registration documents for children living in brothel areas because of the mandatory inclusion of the father's name, the inability of many mothers to pay registration fees, and because children living in brothel areas tend to be born at home rather than in hospital. When a child lacks a birth certificate this becomes a barrier to accessing basic services such as education, child benefits and social security provisions.

For children, lacking a birth certificate leaves them exposed to a greater risk of CSEC. Partners report that if a girl's birth has never been registered, birth certificates can easily be obtained with a falsified age – enabling underage girls to have documentation showing they are over 18 (the legal age required to work within the registered brothels).

The national identity card is an important proof of citizenship, but sex workers are reluctant to apply for the cards because of the mandatory inclusion of their profession and address which leads to stigmatisation and increased vulnerability for them and their children. Partners are working with government officials to exclude stigmatising details from the cards.

*Sex Worker Network engages with the police*





*SMS-facilitated Meeting of Union Parishad with children from the brothel community*

### ***Mobilising community members to advocate for vital documentation***

Partners are working intensively with community members to call for action on the identified advocacy issues. For instance, SMS conducted reflection sessions with their community groups where participants identified 122 children who lacked birth registration.

SMS then facilitated a meeting between children of sex workers and the Union Parishad (local government administration). As a result, the Union Parishad appointed two elected officials to improve the birth registration process for children of sex workers.

Further advocacy with higher levels of government resulted in the District Commissioner offering to use his jurisdictional power to provide birth registration. This important decision was covered by two daily newspapers.

SMS also successfully influenced the chief district official to issue a special order to enrol 35 children in school pending their birth registration.

In addition, SMS supported 161 women to receive national identity cards.

### ***Connecting community groups to statutory bodies and other stakeholders to drive action against CSEC***

Partners are not only supporting communities in reaching out to government agencies but also working with the agencies to respond to community demands. This reassures communities that local government will respond to their concerns and issues, and in turn encourages further engagement from them. For instance, all partners are working closely with Community-Based Child Protection Committees to support them in responding to community demands. The committees have worked with SMS and INCIDIN to facilitate the rescue and reintegration of children who were being subjected to CSEC, and with KKS to develop a collective approach to reduce school drop-out rates and to persuade government officials to activate birth registration and social protection schemes for children.

### ***Engaging with other stakeholders who play an important role in ensuring an effective protective safety net for children***

KKS coordinated with leading civil society organisations like Save the Children, PIACT and Gano Shasto to access after-school remedial support for 143 children. They have also been working closely with teachers to monitor children's academic progress in order to help prevent school drop-outs.

KKS is also working with the police to improve protection against CSEC. The police placed a complaint box in brothel communities through which people can report abuses against children. To ensure that information is not misused to the detriment of the community, KKS conducts regular follow-ups with high level police officials and has involved the Community-Based Child Protection Committees in monitoring police action on the complaints. As a result of these efforts, four minors were liberated and reintegrated with their families through police support.

SMS organised an interface between law enforcement officials and residents of the Daulatdia brothel to raise awareness of the legal consequences of engaging minors in sex work.

Through its engagement with transport workers to highlight the issue of violence against children who live on the street, INCIDIN was able to advocate for a helpdesk to be established at Sayedabad-Jatrabari bus terminal. As a result, 16 children were referred to INCIDIN for support.

**Engagement with the Sex Worker Network Bangladesh**

As part of the Freedom Fund’s pilot program, a partnership was formed with SWNB, which is made up of 29 community-based organisations representing brothel and street-based sex workers who operate in areas with a high prevalence of CSEC.

SWNB’s outreach to the police is changing attitudes. The police, like most of society, tend to stigmatise sex workers or neglect their concerns. Despite these challenges, SWNB liaised with senior police officials to gain approval to conduct sensitisation sessions with police officers. During the sessions, SWNB explained how sex workers are often tricked into exploitative work and that stigmatisation and abuse from state officials compounds their exploitation. SWNB members also described their efforts to prevent children from entering CSEC and stressed that police support is vital to these efforts. SWNB received positive feedback from attending police officers including that this was the first time they had heard directly from sex workers, and they would like to hear from them more often. Immediately following the training, the police also acted on an SWNB complaint of violence against sex workers (including five minor sex workers) by the police and other people.



SMS engages with the police in Daulatdia to address CSEC

**Hotspot Objective 3: Establish and position the Freedom Fund in Bangladesh to scale programs**

In May 2023, the Freedom Fund received \$1 million USD from JTIP for year one of a four-year project aimed at enhancing the protection of child trafficking survivors in Bangladesh.

Shelter homes are important spaces for the protection of survivors of CSEC. However, protection and reintegration services can vary widely and are rarely survivor-centred. The Freedom Fund partners with Justice & Care, who collaborate with the Department of Social Services to support building this approach in four government-run shelter homes. The Freedom Fund also signed grant agreements with NGOs KKS and SMS to support two private shelter homes. The Freedom Fund will also partner with civil society organisations to support services in six private shelter homes.



Newspaper reports of SMS’s meeting with the DC

The JTIP-funded project was launched in Bangladesh in July 2023, at an event that was attended by the US Under Secretary of State for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights Uzra Zeya, US Assistant Secretary of State for SCA Affairs Donald Lu, and US Ambassador to Bangladesh Peter Haas. Also in attendance were US Embassy officials, USAID staff, Bangladeshi officials from the Home Ministry and the Foreign Ministry, and civil society leaders. The highlight of the event was presentations by survivors that illustrated the impact of survivor-centred programs. The Freedom Fund subsequently published a blog post by one of these ‘survivor champions’ about her presentation.

## Supporting a community of practice

The community of practice among Freedom Fund partners is growing: meetings have become important platforms where partners plan joint actions and share learnings.

Partners are also collaborating directly with each other, capitalising on their respective strengths and offering support where others face challenges. For instance, INCIDIN participated in SWNB’s sensitisation sessions with police and supported SWNB’s request to the police for support with birth registration for children at risk of CSEC.

All partners worked together on a joint advocacy plan to support INCIDIN in petitioning for safe night shelters for children living on the streets in Dhaka. Together, they gathered more than 7,100 signatures for a petition to the government calling for children living on the street to be kept safe at night. Partners are now advocating with authorities in Dhaka to re-open five spaces that provided beds and showering facilities to children living on the streets. The initiative has been reported on by several print as well as electronic media outlets.



## Case study

Abonti\* lived with her mother and brother in Daulatdia, Bangladesh's largest brothel. Her family had lived in the brothel community for three generations: Abonti's grandmother became a sex worker after her husband sold their house and ran away with all their money, and Abonti's mother herself began working in the brothel when she was 12 years old.

In 2023, at the age of 40, Abonti's mother was having financial difficulties. During the covid pandemic and lockdown she had almost no income and took loans from her landlord to cover the rent. Although she suffered from ill health, she couldn't afford medicine and was unable to provide three meals a day for herself and her children. Desperate for money, she decided to engage her 11-year-old daughter, Abonti, in the sex trade.

Troubled by this decision, Abonti's brother, who had attended Freedom Fund partner KKS's awareness sessions about the role of the Community-Based Child Protection Committee (CBCPC), immediately reached out to the CBCPC for support.

The CBCPC alerted child-friendly government bodies which organised a timely rescue for Abonti. She was placed in a KKS-run shelter home, but at first struggled to adapt to the disciplined environment of the shelter and tried to return home. But over time and through sustained support, including counselling and tutoring, she adapted to the different life of the shelter.

She was also able to resume her studies, surprising her teachers with her progress. Abonti attributes her academic improvement to the stable, calm atmosphere in the shelter home. When she lived in the brothel, focused study was difficult due to the chaotic atmosphere and her mother having to engage with customers at their residence. Abonti often could not complete her homework or wake up on time to attend school. Abonti is now doing well in her studies, has become interested in cricket and hopes to join a professional cricket team.

Abonti's mother is now able to visit her at the shelter home. She can see her daughter is doing well and that there is a chance for Abonti to have a different future – breaking the cycle of intergenerational exploitation of which she herself was also a victim.

Abonti's story illustrates the importance of working with CBCPCs to enhance their capacity to protect children who live within brothel communities from exploitation, and to provide sustained support to children at risk.

*\* Name changed to protect identity*



# VISION

Our vision is a world free of slavery.

# MISSION




Our mission is to mobilise the knowledge, capital and will needed to end slavery.

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