

# THROUGH HER EYES

Measuring commercial sexual exploitation of girls in Dhaka, Bangladesh

AUGUST 2024



UBS Optimus  
Foundation



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report summarises the key findings from a study titled “Baseline Prevalence Study of Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Girls in Dhaka Vicinity,” led by the Population Council in Bangladesh. The summary report is authored by Aditi Chatterjee, Dr Varsha Gyawali and Yuki Lo from the Freedom Fund. The full research report was prepared by Iqbal Ehsan, Md Irfan Hossain, Sigma Ainul, and Dr Sharif Hossain from the Population Council. We would also like to acknowledge other members of the Population Council team – especially Dipak Kumar Shil, Md. Joynal Abedin, Md. Kamruzzaman Bhuiyan and Rakibul Hasan – for providing day-to-day managerial and administrative support to the project.

We are grateful to other colleagues, Khaleda Akhter, Michelle Mendonca and Pauline Aaron, for their subject matter expertise in guiding the design and implementation of this study.

We would also like to thank the Program Advisory Group members for their critical inputs during the study design, tools and findings: Aleya Akter Lily (President, Bangladesh Sex Workers Network), Prof Ishrat Shamim (President, Centre for Women and Children Studies), Md. Jahangir Hossain (President, SCAN Bangladesh Society), M M Mahamudullah (Additional Director, Social Safety, Department of Social Services under the Ministry of Social Welfare), Mahmudul Kabir (Country Director, Terre des Hommes Netherlands, Bangladesh) and Dr Saima Khan (Country Director, UNAIDS Bangladesh).

We express our gratitude to Aninda Kundu (Senior Finance Officer, Karmajobi Kaylan Shangstha), Fakir Zahidul Islam (Assistant Executive Director, Karmajobi Kaylan Shangstha), Md. Mozaffar Hossain (Audit & Monitoring Officer, Karmajobi Kaylan Shangstha), Sex Workers Network and Shyamal Prokash Adhikary (Deputy Executive Director, Shapla Mohila Sangstha) for their cooperation in conducting the study in Dhaka, Rajbari and Faridpur. We sincerely thank the peer outreach workers of Karmajobi Kaylan Shangstha, Sex Workers Network and Shapla Mohila Sangstha for their collaboration in accompanying our research team to the survey areas and in conducting the survey. We are thankful to the entire data collection team supervised by Bobita Khatun and Maksuda Begum for conducting the survey in Dhaka district and three brothels in a timely manner and while ensuring the safety of the team members. We are indebted to those who participated in the validation workshop and provided their valuable comments and suggestions to improve the analysis and insights.

We also express our gratitude to the UBS Optimus Foundation for its financial support for this important study.

Finally, we wish to extend our deepest appreciation and gratitude to the female sex workers and survivors of commercial sexual exploitation of children who generously gave their time to share their experiences and insights with us. This study would not have been possible without them. We sincerely hope that the results of this research will lead to more effective policies and programming to end the sexual exploitation and abuse suffered by girls in Bangladesh.

Suggested citation: Freedom Fund (2024). *Through her eyes: Measuring commercial sexual exploitation of girls in Dhaka, Bangladesh*. New York: Freedom Fund.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) is widely understood to be a problem in Bangladesh but its extent, types, causes and other factors are only minimally documented. It is thought to be driven by multiple factors including poverty, cultural norms (including patriarchal norms that support violence against women and girls, such as child marriage), exclusion from education, rural-urban migration, criminal enterprises and the effects of climate change. However, there is very little reliable data on CSEC provided by law enforcement, government agencies and civil society organisations (CSOs). The best research to date is from a 2016 study by the National AIDS/STD Control Programme (NASP), however, its focus was on estimating the number of sex workers rather than the exploitation of minors. As a result, formulating effective policies and interventions to address CSEC become challenging in the absence of robust data and evidence. To date, this study is one of the largest in Bangladesh to examine the phenomenon of CSEC, including its scale and forms of abuse that girls experience in brothels and on the streets.

The study was conducted in two phases between October 2021 and February 2023. The first phase was a formative study to understand the characteristics of CSEC in Bangladesh. This was undertaken to inform the design of a prevalence study and to identify hotspots for CSEC in Dhaka district where primary data collection can take place. The second phase was the prevalence study itself, with the main objectives of examining the socio-demographic characteristics of CSEC victims, understanding the various forms of harm experienced by people in CSEC, documenting the profile of perpetrators and estimating the prevalence of CSEC in two distinct settings – in selected brothel settings in Dhaka division and in street-based hotspots within Dhaka district.

The formative study included secondary research and primary research in the form of 25 key informant interviews (KIIs) with local organisations, CSEC experts in Bangladesh, and CSEC survivors working as peer outreach workers in the Sex Workers Network. The prevalence study consisted of primary research based on quantitative surveys, with a census of 392 brothel-based female sex workers (FSWs) from three brothels in Dhaka division, and 853 street-based FSWs in 20 hotspots in Dhaka district who were identified through respondent-driven sampling (RDS). Due to ethical and legal considerations, a decision was taken to not interview girls under the age of 18. Instead, interviews were conducted with FSWs between 18 and 22 years old who had been sexually exploited as minors in the past, and who reported on their own experiences from that time. This led to a subsequent sample size of 306 brothel-based respondents and 632 street-based respondents who answered questions about CSEC through the recall method.

## Findings from the study

**Current socio-demographic characteristics:** FSWs in the study were between 20 and 21 years of age, mostly Muslim, and with low levels of education or none at all. Nearly half of them (48.5%) had been both married and separated at a young age, while half (50.6%) had children. Average age at first marriage among street-based and brothel-based FSWs was reported to be 15.3 years.

**Migrants:** Three-quarters (75.1%) of the respondents were internal migrants and, among them, 31.0% reported having experienced CSEC as minors, compared to 24.8% of non-migrants reporting CSEC. Poverty, family migration and deception were the top three reasons for migration among both groups of FSWs. As compared to their non-migrant peers, migrant FSWs appeared to be less able to stop sex work if they wanted to and to be more likely than non-migrants to experience forced labour conditions when they were minors.

**Commercial sexual exploitation (CSE) for the first time as a minor:** Almost three out of four FSWs reported being sexually exploited as minors (73.5% of all street-based FSWs and 78.1% of all brothel-based FSWs), with the mean age of first exploitation being 14.8 years (street-based) and 14.5 years (brothel-based). Most first-time experiences were facilitated by a pimp/madam, and the FSW received money as payment. The main reason cited for their first experience of CSEC was that they needed money to survive (80.1%). More than half of all respondents (55.7% street-based and 62.4% brothel-based)

mentioned that they would have faced serious consequences if they had refused, such as physical violence, sexual violence, emotional violence, or deprivation of food, water or a place to sleep.

**Conditions of sex, coercion and control as a minor:** CSEC survivors recalled that, as a minor, they were sexually exploited almost all days of the week (average 5.4 days) by a large number of perpetrators (average 16.8 per week for street-based, 44.0 per week for brothel-based). The majority of survivors reported that they could not stop the sexual exploitation even if they wanted to. A high proportion (59.1%) faced some form of control and coercion when they were sexually exploited as a minor. Nearly one-fifth (19.6%) of street-based and more than half (53.3%) of the brothel-based survivors also said their personal life was controlled and they had no freedom of movement. Rates of coercion, control, violence and physical restrictions among minors were higher for brothel-based (64.4%) than for street-based CSEC survivors (59.3%).

**Contraceptive use and pregnancy as a minor:** Nearly all CSEC survivors (96.7%) recalled using contraceptives during sex work as a minor, though only about two-thirds of them reported to “always” using contraceptives (60.8% street-based, 69.6% brothel-based). Despite the high usage of contraceptives, more than half of all street- and brothel-based respondents reported pregnancies and terminations, with almost one-third of all terminations happening at home.

**Use of alcohol and drugs as minors:** More than a quarter of all street-based CSEC survivors (25-39%), and a lower proportion of brothel-based survivors (13-26%), reported using or being forced to use alcohol and drugs while they were a minor, starting at an average age of 15 to 16 years and primarily to deal with the day-to-day trauma of sex work. Respondents mentioned that the main consequences of such usage were that it helped them either forget their experiences or avoid fatigue from dealing with multiple perpetrators.

**Profile of perpetrators of commercial sexual exploitation:** CSEC survivors recalled their perpetrators<sup>2</sup> typically being between 19 and 45 years old. These perpetrators came from a wide range of professions, most commonly businessmen, bus or truck drivers, transport workers and salaried individuals. Unique to brothel-based CSEC, a large proportion (71.9%) of the perpetrators were reportedly students. Interviews with key informants also highlighted that the perpetrators of CSEC were from a broad range of socio-economic groups for brothel-based workers, while for street-based CSEC the perpetrators were mostly from lower socio-economic groups.

**Support services for CSEC:** CSEC survivors reported that during their exploitation as minors, they primarily received support during emergencies from non-governmental organisation (NGO) workers (17.1%), friends (13.7%) and family members (12.2%). Among brothel-based CSEC survivors, a high proportion (39.9%) also mentioned receiving help from *mashis/pimps*. When asked if they had ever sought help from a professional, 54.6% answered yes, with the most common sources being NGO workers and healthcare professionals.

**Prevalence of CSEC:** In Dhaka district and in the sampled brothels in Dhaka division, about one-fifth of FSWs are minors aged 17 or younger: 22.2% among street-based FSWs in the Dhaka district, and 21.9% among brothel-based FSWs in the Dhaka division. In absolute numbers, the population of girls in CSEC is estimated to be roughly 5,000 in street settings in the Dhaka district, and roughly 700 in brothel settings in the Dhaka division.

## Recommendations

Actionable recommendations based on the findings of this study suggest collaboration among various stakeholders – government, policymakers, law enforcement agencies and civil society organisations (CSOs) – to work on preventing CSEC and reducing its prevalence, as well as protecting FSWs who are already engaged in sex work. This research relied on the trust, expertise and operational support from sex worker networks and CSEC survivors. Therefore, funders and NGOs should work closely with survivors and survivor groups, involving them across all stages of intervention, from program design to implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

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<sup>2</sup> ECPAT recommends using the term “perpetrators” instead of “clients” in the context of child sexual exploitation and sexual abuse. This report therefore follows this recommendation, please see section 3.2.2 for further details.

Insights from study	Recommendations
<p>Deception was one of the main reasons why young girls migrated to cities and fell prey to CSEC.</p>	<p><b>CSOs and survivor groups</b> to prioritise reaching out to at-risk children and vulnerable communities in areas where recruitment is likely to occur, such as source locations and high-risk hotspots. Collaborate with existing government mechanisms such as Counter-Trafficking Committees (CTCs), Child Welfare Boards (CWBs) and community-based child protection committees (CBCPCs).</p>
<p>Rates of coercion, control and violence faced during CSEC were very high, with brothel-based respondents being especially vulnerable and even facing physical restrictions on their mobility.</p>	<p><b>CSEC survivors and CSOs</b> to actively advocate to statutory bodies for stronger enforcement of laws against CSEC and to ensure that survivors receive comprehensive rehabilitation and reintegration support. Support efforts to strengthen existing units such as the CTCs and CWBs and ensure that statutory bodies establish support systems so that identified victims receive rehabilitation assistance, as well as help strengthen legal frameworks and guidelines on rehabilitation and reintegration.</p>
<p>A significant proportion of FSWs reported fear of humiliation and stigma as one of the main deterrents to them referring a minor in CSE to support services.</p>	<p><b>CSEC survivors and CSOs</b> to collaborate with statutory bodies to shift societal norms on CSEC and foster supportive attitudes towards survivors to transform perceptions and attitudes towards CSEC. This could include increasing awareness on CSEC in the community, including the many manifestations and the high prevalence of it. Leverage the influence of people with exploitative power to minimise harm to exploited children and decrease the presence of minors, particularly in brothels.</p>
<p>Many survivors recall turning to alcohol and drugs to be able to deal with the trauma of CSEC.</p>	<p><b>Survivors, CSOs, donors and government</b> to advocate for greater provision of specialised services to children/CSEC survivors who are engaged in substance abuse. Service providers to work towards providing comprehensive and holistic rehabilitative support interventions for CSEC survivors and children in CSE and create awareness among at-risk children on services available to them.</p>
<p>Despite high usage of contraceptives, a high proportion of survivors have faced situations of pregnancy and termination as minors.</p>	<p><b>Survivors, sex worker organisations, CSOs and government public health departments</b> to strengthen their coordinated actions and increase awareness among FSWs about availability and use of contraceptives. Increase awareness about contraceptive use and ensure FSWs have access to direct and free/affordable services at public health centres.</p>
<p>FSWs were found to be financially vulnerable. Given that a majority of FSWs were mothers themselves, this could increase the risk of their children following them into the same exploitative work due to poverty.</p>	<p><b>Survivors, CSOs and government departments (such as social services, women &amp; children, and education)</b> to collaborate on improving the financial resilience of vulnerable families including FSWs. Focusing particularly on mothers and on identifying ways to reduce the likelihood of their own children ending up in the sex industry due to poverty and survival needs. Actions could include support in accessing social protection schemes, help in increasing/diversifying income through alternative livelihood opportunities and improved access to safe saving mechanisms.</p>

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## ABBREVIATIONS

<b>BBS</b>	Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics
<b>BDT</b>	Bangladeshi Taka
<b>BMRC</b>	Bangladesh Medical Research Council
<b>BSAF</b>	Bangladesh Shishu Adhikar Forum
<b>CBCPC</b>	Community-based child protection committee
<b>CI</b>	Confidence interval
<b>CSE</b>	Commercial sexual exploitation
<b>CSEC</b>	Commercial sexual exploitation of children
<b>CSO</b>	Civil society organisation
<b>CTC</b>	Counter Trafficking Committee
<b>CWB</b>	Child Welfare Board
<b>FSW</b>	Female sex worker
<b>ILO</b>	International Labour Organization
<b>INCIDIN</b>	Integrated Community & Industrial Development Initiative in Bangladesh
<b>KII</b>	Key informant interview
<b>NASP</b>	National AIDS/STD Control Programme
<b>NGO</b>	Non-governmental organisation
<b>RDS</b>	Respondent driven sampling
<b>USD</b>	United States Dollar



# SECTION 1: BACKGROUND

While the commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) in Bangladesh is widely understood to be a serious challenge requiring an urgent response, there is limited reliable data to support evidence-based policies and interventions.

More than 56 million children aged 17 or younger make up a third of the total population of Bangladesh, however the country's societal reality of poverty and lack of education put children at risk (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics or BBS 2015; UNICEF 2009). Ten percent of the population lives below the international poverty line of USD 2.15 per day (2017 purchasing power parity) (The World Bank, 2022). Despite near universal enrolment in primary school, a third of children do not complete lower secondary school.

The children who are at increased risk of commercial sexual exploitation include children of sex workers, children living on/or working on the street or in brothels, as well as migrant and ethnic minority children (Bangladesh Shishu Adhikar Forum or BSAF, 2013). CSEC in Bangladesh is thought to be driven by multiple factors including poverty, patriarchal norms that support violence against women and girls, child marriage, exclusion from education, rural-urban migration, criminal enterprises, cultural norms and the effects of climate change (BSAF, 2013a; Prothom, Alo, 2020).

In Dhaka, the nation's capital and largest city, and in its vicinity, CSEC is concentrated in brothels and red-light zones, hotels, private residences, slums and streets, with children subject to high levels of violence and coercion (Alam et al., 2021). It's not uncommon for the children of brothel workers to find themselves entering the same trade and repeating a cycle of exploitation (ECPAT International, 2011; BSAF, 2013). Child survivors of commercial sexual exploitation can face ongoing hardships, living on the streets through trafficking or poverty, or wanting to escape from abusive family members (Shoji and Tsubota, 2022). It is estimated that there are more than 1.5 million street children in Bangladesh, three-quarters of them living in Dhaka (Reza and Bromfield, 2019). Many of these children have left their rural homes and migrated to cities in search of a livelihood. Their work might be in street vending, rag picking, metal work and transport work, or dealing in drugs. Deprived of their basic rights to health, food and education, street children are particularly susceptible to manipulation, drug addiction, abuse and exploitation, including commercial sexual exploitation (BBS, 2022).

The International Labour Organization (ILO) defines CSEC as "sexual exploitation by an adult of a child or adolescent below 18 years of age that involves a transaction in cash or in kind to the child or to one or more third parties." (ILO, n.d.) It includes the use of children in sexual activities in return for cash or kind, trafficking for sex trade, child sex tourism, the production, promotion and distribution of pornography involving children, and the use of children in sex shows (public or private).

Despite the apparent scale of the problem in Bangladesh, rigorous evidence on its extent and nature is scarce. In 2016, Bangladesh's National AIDS/STD Control Programme (NASP) estimated that more than 15,000 girls and young women (age 10 to 19) were involved in commercial sex across Bangladesh, representing 14.9% of all female sex workers. However, this study did not provide further details on how these children became vulnerable to CSEC or the violations that they experienced. Other small-scale studies by civil society organisations (CSOs) – most notably those by Jannat and Letchamanan 2022, Shoji and Tsubota 2022, and Begum 2012 – have shed some light on CSEC in Bangladesh but are based on either small samples or outdated data.

Given the lack of credible data needed to inform effective policies and interventions, this research aims to provide new insights on the level of exploitation and vulnerability of girls in CSEC. This report represents one of the largest scale study to date to examine the phenomenon of CSEC, including its scale and forms of exploitation experienced by girls in brothels and on the streets.

# SECTION 2: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

## 2.1 Objectives and methodology

The research was conducted in two phases, as described in Figure 1. The Phase 1 formative research involved a literature review as well as key informant interviews with local organisations, experts and survivors. The Phase 2 prevalence study was based on quantitative surveys with street-based FSWs in Dhaka district and brothel-based FSWs in three sampled brothels in Dhaka division.

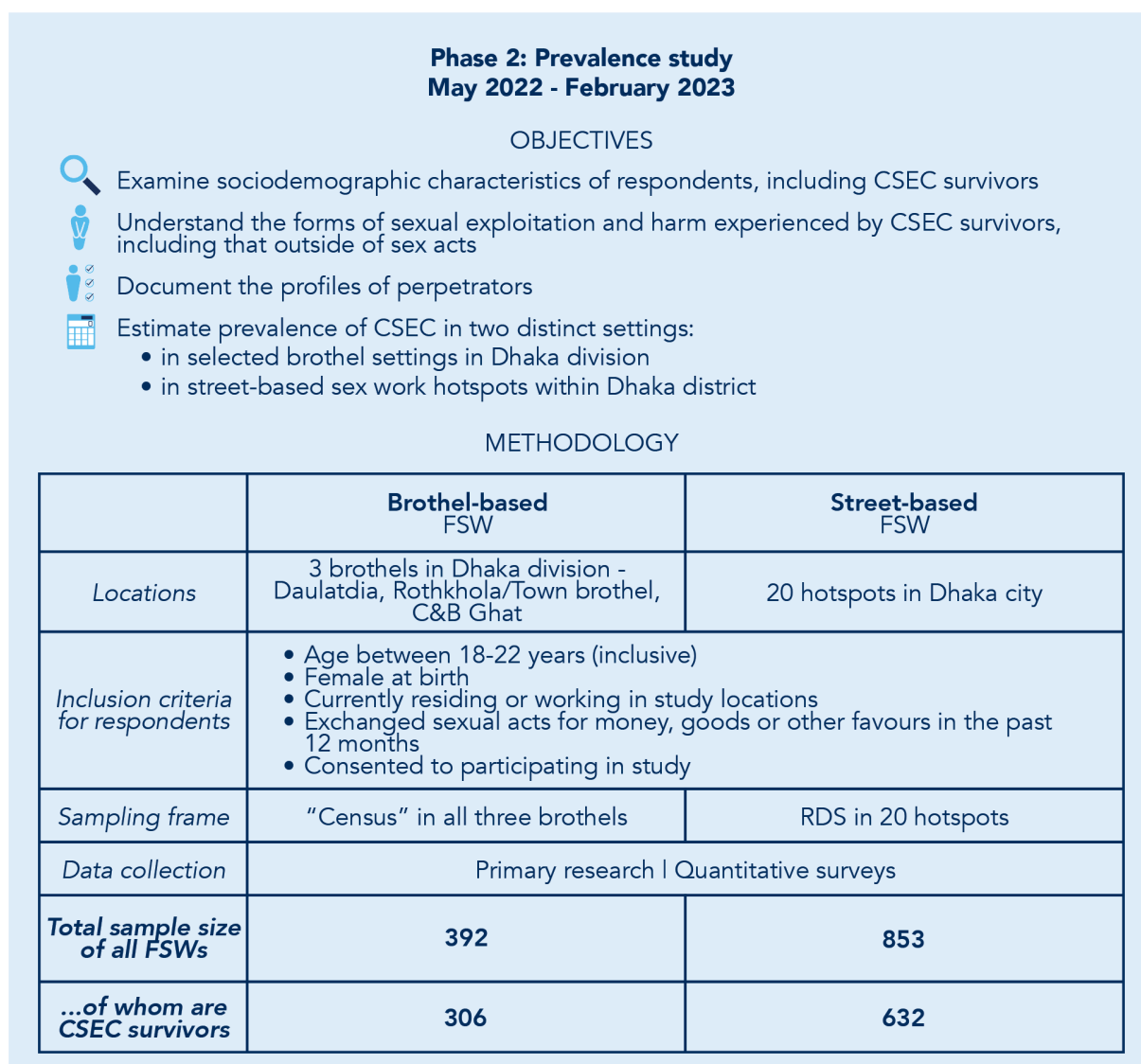
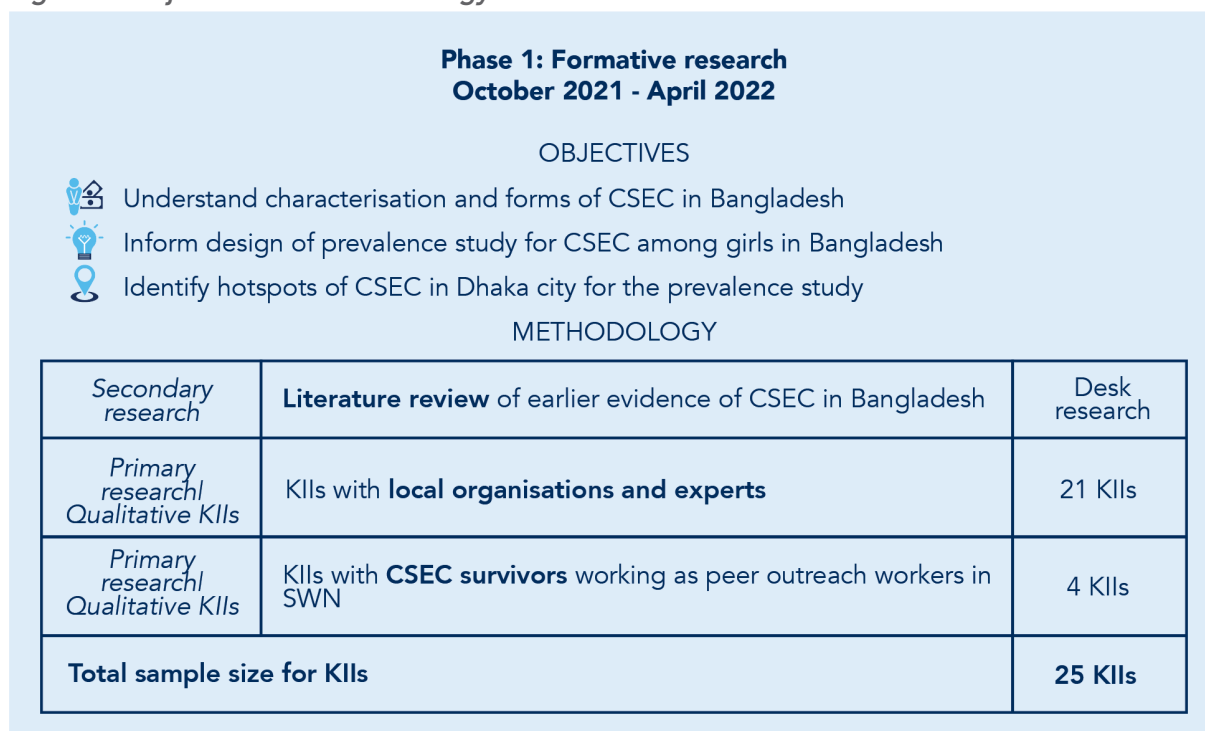
Due to ethical and legal considerations, particularly “duty to report” requirements for cases of child sexual abuse, primary data were gathered from adult FSWs who were aged 18 to 22 years old at the time of the study and reported a personal history of CSEC. To assess the scale and nature of CSEC, the survey focused on their recollections of their experiences from when they were aged 17 or younger. Based on findings from the formative study, it was determined that these young women still had recent and relevant memories of their experiences being sexually exploited in childhood.



Image: Flood affected village in northern Bangladesh

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Figure 1: Objectives and methodology of the research



## 2.2 Study population and key definitions

To be part of the survey, a respondent had to meet all seven of the following criteria:

1. Currently between 18 and 22 years old (inclusive);
2. Female at birth;
3. Currently resides or works within the sampled area for the study;
4. Has exchanged sex for money, goods, or other favours at least once in the past 12 months;
5. Observed to be mentally capable of providing informed consent, including not being under the influence of alcohol or drugs;
6. Observed to be freely providing informed consent, not under coercion by someone else to participate in the study; and
7. Understands the terms of the study and has provided written informed consent.

Definition of key terms used in this study:

**Child sexual abuse:** The involvement of a child in sexual activity that he or she does not fully comprehend, is unable to give informed consent to, or for which the child is not developmentally prepared and cannot give consent, or that violates the laws or social taboos of society. Child sexual abuse is evidenced by this activity between a child and an adult or another child who by age or development is in a relationship of responsibility, trust or power, the activity being intended to gratify or satisfy the needs of the other person. (World Health Organization, n.d.)

**Commercial sexual exploitation of children:** Any sex act involving children aged 17 or younger, in exchange for money or in-kind payment. In-kind payment can be in the form of goods such as food, drugs, cell phone, clothing or other gifts, as well as in the form of favours such as a ride or access to a party, housing or shelter. Sex acts include penetrative sex, oral sex, masturbation, touching of private body parts and erotic performances, as well as taking pornographic photos or videos – and may be performed in-person, remotely recorded or live streamed. For the purpose of this research, we consider the definition of CSEC to fall under the broader category of child sexual abuse.

**Street-based female sex workers:** Females involved in commercial sex and who typically meet or negotiate the exchange with clients on the street or in other public areas. The subsequent sexual act can be in other locations, such as street-side or in private residences or hotels.

**Brothel-based female sex workers:** Females involved in commercial sex who typically meet or negotiate the exchange with clients in a brothel venue. The subsequent sexual act usually occurs in the brothel as well, however it can also occur in other locations such as private residences and hotels.

## 2.3 Ethical considerations

A research protocol, data collection instruments and informed consent documents were developed, submitted to, and approved by institutional ethical review boards (IRB) at the Population Council and Bangladesh Medical Research Council (BMRC). Data collectors and supervisors for the study were selected by a panel comprising Population Council's research staff after a shortlisting process and in-person interview. All of them had at least two years of experience in survey data collection, exposure to android-based data collection and experience in conducting surveys with FSWs. They also underwent a three-day training that covered topics such as an overview of the study, research ethics, consent forms, the sampling and data collection plan, target distribution, questionnaire, app usage and review, and administrative and financial details for the execution of the study. On the final day, the supervisors and data collectors were further trained by three local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) – Karmajibi Kaylan Shangstha, Sex Workers Network and Shapla Mohila Sangstha and – to understand the situation at brothels and hotspots, and to practise mock interviews. In addition, counselling services

for both interviewers and respondents were made available with the Integrated Community & Industrial Development Initiative in Bangladesh (INCIDIN), Karmajibi Kaylan Shangstha and Shapla Mohila Sangstha. The field team and data collectors were extensively trained in trauma-informed research, psychological first aid, and the process of referral to counsellors in case respondents showed signs of distress. During the period of the field work, however, none of the respondents or interviewers asked to be referred for counselling.

## 2.4 Data collection, management, protection, and analysis

**Development of data collection tools:** The survey tool for the study was developed in close consultation with a Program Advisory Group, bringing together a diverse range of expertise including anti-trafficking/child protection programs, government policies, research design and lived experience in sex work and or/living on the streets. Following field testing, the tool was reviewed and validated through further consultations with survivors of CSEC. Their feedback, along with subsequent changes to survey items that might be perceived as overly sensitive by the respondents, was incorporated before finalising the tool. The consent process and survey tool were administered and recorded in Bangla.

**Site selection:** For brothel-based FSWs, three government-recognised brothel areas in 1) Daulatdia, 2) Rothkhola or Town brothel, and 3) C & B ghat brothel were selected, as they had the highest number of FSWs as reported in the formative study. For street-based FSWs, 20 hotspots<sup>2</sup> were identified through formative research.

**Data collection:** Data collection for the prevalence study took place between August and October 2022. For the two groups of respondents – brothel-based FSWs and street-based FSWs – two different probabilistic methods for sampling and recruitment were used, but with some aspects in common. The surveys were conducted outside of the respondent's peak business hours so as to minimise disruption to their work. The survey, on average, took 35 minutes to complete and all respondents were given 300 BDT<sup>3</sup> (about USD 3.1) to compensate for their time in taking the survey.

- **Brothel-based FSWs:** While random sampling was initially planned to obtain a sample of 411 brothel-based FSWs, the total population size at the selected brothels was too low for randomisation. As a result, all of the FSWs at the three brothels were contacted. Of the 416 that were contacted, 392 (94.2%) completed the survey. The non-response rate of 5.8% included 2.6% who did not meet the age group requirement and 3.2% who were not present at the time of the survey. While a few FSWs came to the NGO partner's centre to complete the survey, most of the FSW surveys were conducted at the brothel where they worked. An NGO outreach worker accompanied each data collector to locate the brothel and secure an empty room where the interviews could take place. However, to ensure privacy, the NGO worker stayed outside the room where they could not hear the questions and responses.
- **Street-based FSWs:** The street-based FSWs were sampled through the RDS method. The NGO partner's outreach workers identified a seed participant in each of the 20 hotspots for street-based FSWs. After each seed participant successfully completed her own interview, she was given 3 coupons to distribute among her peers who met the eligibility criteria for the study, which made up the first wave of referrals. In addition to the BDT 300 given to them for a successful survey, they received an additional BDT 200 for each successful referral who also completed the survey. Between three and four waves were completed in all 20 hotspots to reach at least 40 respondents per hotspot, and a total of 866 street-based FSWs. Of these, 853 FSWs (98.5%) completed the surveys, while 13 FSWs (1.5%) could not be surveyed because they did not meet one or more of the eligibility criteria. All interviews were safely conducted in the NGO partner's offices and drop-in centres.

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2 1) Sadarghat launch terminal area, 2) Gabtali bus terminal area, 3) Kamalapur railway station, 4) Dhaka Airport railway station area, 5) Surrounding Jatrabari bus terminal/under the flyover, 6) Surrounding Sayedabad bus terminal/under flyover, 7) Mugda stadium area, 8) Mirpur Shah Ali Mazar, 9) Gulistan Golap Shah Mazar, 10) Surrounding Paltan area, 11) Ramna park, 12) Chandrima Uddan, 13) Dhanmondi Lake area, 14) Surrounding Sangsad Bhaban, 15) Mohammadpur (Rayer Bazar Bodhyo Bhumi area), 16) Surrounding Shyamoli cinema hall, 17) Surrounding Kawran Bazar, 18) Kakoli station area, 19) Chairman Bari hotel area and 20) Tongji bridge area.

3 Based on the average exchange rate during the period of field work, from August to October 2022, USD 1 = BDT 97. Source: <https://www.investing.com/currencies/usd-bdt-historical-data>

**Data management and data protection:** Interviews and audio recordings of KIIs were stored in password-protected computers. Quantitative survey data were deleted from interviewers' handsets/tablets periodically after getting confirmation from the Data Manager that the data had been downloaded from the cloud server and securely stored. The Data Manager restricted data access to include only the research team. Stored data contained no personally identifiable information.

**Data analysis:** Key informant interviews (KIIs) were recorded, transcribed, and translated to English. The qualitative data were coded, thematically analysed, triangulated and compared to the quantitative data in order to identify patterns and nuances. The primary analysis of the quantitative data was descriptive and the results presented are based on weighted data except for estimates related to CSEC prevalence. STATA/MP version 17 was used for quantitative data analysis and RDS Analyst statistical package version 0.71 was used for calculating the weights for respondent-driven sampling.

## 2.5 Validation of data

Two validation workshops were conducted with the Freedom Fund U.S. team, as well as with experts and practitioners in Bangladesh working on the issue of CSEC. One was conducted after the formative study and the other after the prevalence study before preparation of the main report. These validation workshops helped with the following:

- Seeking input to identify geographic hotspots pertinent to conducting surveys in prevalence part of the study.
- Establishing terminology to be used in the study, specifically with regard to describing transactions, using consultation with individuals with lived experience facilitated by the Sex Workers Network. The result is to use the term "commercial sexual exploitation" rather than "exchanging sex," thereby acknowledging that any sexual exchange involving a minor is inherently exploitative, regardless of whether the child may have agreed to or initiated the exchange.
- Considering future research to explore the issue of CSEC among boys and non-binary populations.

## 2.6 Study limitations

The three main limitations from this study are as follows:

- Due to ethical and legal considerations, primary data were gathered from adult FSWs who were aged 18 to 22 at the time of the survey. Situation of CSEC was based on their recollection of their past experience of CSEC. There may be some degree of survivorship bias in the selection of respondents, as well as recall bias in their survey responses.
- Brothel-based FSWs reported high income, though our survey results also indicated high levels of expenses and low rates of savings. This might be due to our selection of government-recognised brothels in Dhaka division and not within the Dhaka city precincts. Therefore, income and savings related insights cannot be generalised for the other eight brothels across Bangladesh.
- The findings from the study are specifically relevant to street-based FSWs in Dhaka district and brothel-based FSWs in the Dhaka division. Therefore, these findings cannot be extrapolated and generalised to other regions of Bangladesh.

## SECTION 3: KEY FINDINGS FROM THE STUDY

A total of 1,245 FSWs – 853 street-based and 392 brothel-based – completed the quantitative survey, and their responses informed the study’s insights on socio-demographic characteristics and financial conditions. A subset of these FSWs – 632 street-based and 306 brothel-based – further reported that they had been commercially sexually exploited as minors. Insights about CSEC were generated based on the responses of this subset of FSWs. All results in this section are weighted and, as such, they represent the situation of FSWs in the study area and their recent experience of CSEC.

### 3.1 Profile of FSWs

#### 3.1.1 Socio-demographic characteristics

**FSWs in the study areas were, on average, between 20 and 21 years old, predominantly Muslim, and with low levels of education (see Figure 2).** Education attainment across street-based and brothel-based FSWs were similar – 35.1% of the women had no formal education, 10.9% had completed primary education but not secondary, and only 4.0% had completed secondary education or higher.

*Figure 2: Current age, religion and education of FSWs*

	Street-based (N=853)	Brothel-based (N=392)	Overall (N=1,245)
Average age	20.5 years	20.9 years	20.6 years
Religion	99.4% Muslim	99.5% Muslim	99.4% Muslim
Level of education			
No formal education	34.5%	36.5%	35.1%
Did not complete primary education	31.8%	28.6%	30.8%
Completed primary education	9.5%	14.0%	10.9%
Did not complete secondary education	20.5%	16.6%	19.2%
Completed secondary education or higher	3.8%	4.3%	4.0%

**A large proportion of FSWs had been married and separated at a young age, with half of them being mothers to living children.** As shown in Figure 3, average age at first marriage<sup>4</sup> among street-based and brothel-based FSWs was reported to be 15.3 years. Nearly twice the proportion of street-based FSWs reported being currently married. Almost half of the women reported being currently divorced, deserted, separated or widowed, with the rate being higher among brothel-based respondents. Over half (50.6%) of all FSWs had children, and this included those who had never been married. Of those who were never married (n = 356), 16.7% of brothel-based FSWs had children, compared to 5.5% of street-based FSWs.

<sup>4</sup> The research participants self-reported on questions related to ‘marriage’ based on their own understanding, which included legal marriages as well as various cultural and religious unions between individuals.

Figure 3: Current marital and motherhood status of FSWs

	Street-based (N=853)	Brothel-based (N=392)	Overall (N=1,245)
<b>Current marital status</b>			
Never married	25.9%	35.2%	28.8%
Currently married	26.8%	13.8%	22.7%
Divorced, deserted, separated, widowed	47.3%	51.0%	48.5%
Among FSWs who have ever been married, average age at first marriage (n=889)	15.4 years	15.1 years	15.3 years
Among mothers, average number of living children (n=626)	1.2 child	1.1 child	1.2 child

### 3.1.2 Current financial situation

Average monthly income from commercial sex work was almost three times higher for brothel-based FSWs. This was also reflected in higher rates of savings, on average, 51.5% of brothel-based FSWs were able to save part of their income, compared to 26.6% of street-based FSWs.

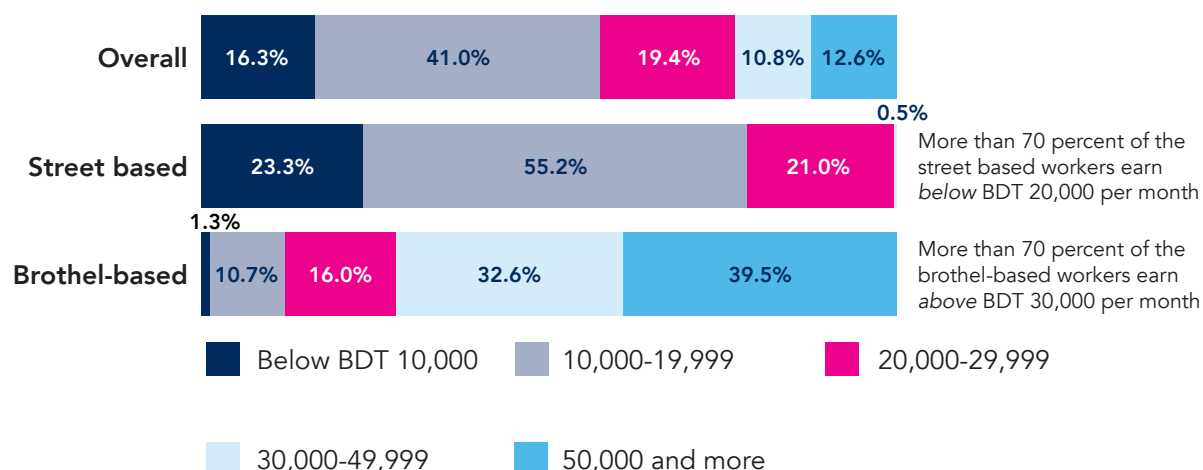
**Income:** More than 70% of street-based FSWs were earning less than BDT 20,000 (USD 206.2) per month, while more than 70% of brothel-based FSWs earned more than BDT 30,000 BDT (USD 309.3). As shown in Figures 4 and 5, average monthly income from commercial sex plus other work, as reported by street-based FSWs, was 66.9% lower than the average reported by brothel-based FSWs (BDT 13,971 vs BDT 42,266, USD 144.0 versus USD 435.7). Street-based FSWs were also much more likely to supplement their income from commercial sex with other sources of income. Even when focusing only on their income from commercial sex, street-based FSWs had significantly lower earnings, 69.2% or BDT 29,181 (USD 300.8) less per month than the average earnings of brothel-based workers.

Figure 4: Current total monthly income earned by FSWs

	Street-based (N=853)	Brothel-based (N=392)	Overall (N=1,245)
Average total monthly income, from commercial sex plus other work	BDT 13,971 USD 144.0	BDT 42,266 USD 435.7	BDT 23,018 USD 237.3
Median total monthly income, from commercial sex plus other work [middle 50%/interquartile range]	BDT 14,000 [10,000-18,000] USD 144.3 [103.1-185.6]	BDT 40,000 [25,000-60,000] USD 412.4 [257.7-618.6]	BDT 16,000 [12,000-25,000] USD 164.9 [123.7-257.7]
Only earn income from commercial sex	76.6%	97.2%	83.1%
Earn income from commercial sex plus other work	23.4%	2.8%	16.9%
Average total monthly income, from sex work only	BDT 12,997 USD 134.0	BDT 42,178 USD 434.8	BDT 22,344 USD 230.4
Median total monthly income, from sex work only [middle 50%]	BDT 12,000 [9,000-16,000] USD 123.7 [92.8-164.9]	BDT 40,000 [25,000-60,000] USD 412.4 [257.7-618.6]	BDT 15,000 [10,000-25,000] USD 154.6 [103.1-257.7]



Figure 5: Current total monthly income, from sex work and other sources



**Savings:** Similar to their income patterns, street-based FSWs also reported lower rates of income savings. After a **share of their earnings was deducted by other parties**, only 26.6% of street-based FSWs were able to save a portion of their income, compared to 51.5% of brothel-based FSWs (see Figure 6). Among those who were able to set aside savings, the amount that they were able to set aside each month was 4.2 times higher among brothel-based compared to street-based FSWs.

Figure 6: Savings by FSWs per month

	Street-based (N=853)	Brothel-based (N=392)	Overall (N=1,245)
Proportion of FSWs who are able to save part of their income	26.6%	51.5%	34.4%
Among FSWs who were able to save, average amount saved per month (n=432)	BDT 2,025 USD 20.0	BDT 8,531 USD 87.9	BDT 5,091 USD 52.5
Among FSWs who were able to save, median amount saved per month [middle 50%] (n=432)	BDT 2,000 [600-3,000] USD 20.6 [6.2-30.9]	BDT 6,000 [5,000-12,000] USD 61.9 [51.5-123.7]	BDT 3,000 [1,500-6,000] USD 30.9 [15.5-61.9]

### 3.1.3 Migration

A very high proportion of respondents were internal migrants (75.1%), while poverty, family migration and deception were the primary reasons for moving to Dhaka. However, the trends were slightly different among street-based and brothel-based FSWs (see Figure 7). While poverty was the main reason for migration among both street-based and brothel-based FSWs (77.2%), family migration was the other main reason for street-based sex workers (37.7%), whereas for brothel-based sex workers it was deception (30.9%).

Figure 7: Top 3 main reasons for migration

	Street-based (N=853)	Brothel-based (N=392)	Overall (N=1,245)
Proportion who are migrants	73.6%	78.3%	75.1%
Among migrants, reasons for migrating (n=935)			
Poverty	78.0%	75.6%	77.2%
Family migration	37.7%	9.5%	28.4%
Deception	14.3%	30.9%	19.8%
Escape from home	11.3%	5.5%	9.4%
Violence	6.5%	6.2%	6.4%

*“The vulnerability starts from the family. Traffickers take advantage of this and create traps through deception such as, fake love, marriage, better job, and life. Besides, some children from ultra poor households leave their home for food and work and become victims of CSEC.”*

**Researcher and program implementer, national NGO**

*“Girls from poor and low-income families are at risk of CSEC because they do not have protective support systems to fight with the perpetrator. Poverty brings family crisis and girls suffer most during the crisis. Many girls from broken families run away from home after experiencing domestic violence. Some girls come to Dhaka with boyfriends with false hope of marriage and fall in the trap of trafficking. Those trafficked victims engage in sex business in brothels or hotel under the strict control of shardarnis/pimps.”*

**Survivor of CSEC**

**Among CSEC survivors, those who are migrants appeared to have faced a worse degree of control, coercion and violence.** Recalling their first incidence of CSEC, 31.0% of migrants were age 14 or younger at the time, a higher proportion compared to 24.8% of non-migrants. Migrant CSEC survivors were 2.6 times (23.6 percentage points) more likely to have entered CSEC through a pimp, boss or madam; 1.5 times (18.2 percentage points) more likely to be forced to work under worse conditions; and 1.2 times (11.7 percentage points) more likely to report difficulties in ending their involvement in commercial sex (see Figure 8).



Image: Dhaka  
Image credit: Sazzad Aryan/Unsplash

Figure 8: Among CSEC survivors, vulnerability of migrants versus non-migrants

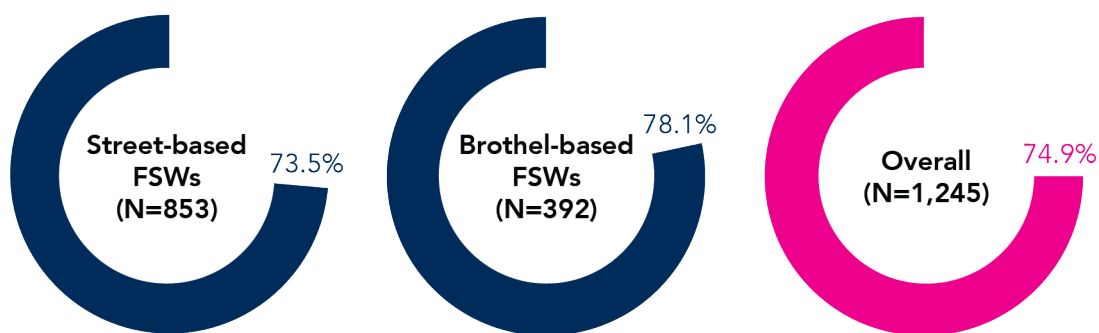
	CSEC survivors who are migrants (n=702)	CSEC survivors who are not migrants (n=236)	Overall (n=1,245)
First suffered CSEC when they were age 14 or younger	31.0%	24.8%	29.4%
<b>Experience during period of CSEC</b>			
Could not stop sex work if they wanted	61.0%	49.3%	58.0%
Entry into CSEC was due to force or coercion	63.2%	42.1%	57.9%
Forced to work under worse conditions than what was initially agreed to or discussed, such as different working hours or the type of activities involved	51.4%	33.2%	46.8%
Physical violence such as being slapped, punched, kicked, burned, or attacked with a knife or other weapons	43.8%	21.9%	38.3%
Entry into CSEC was facilitated by pimp, boss or madam	38.6%	15.0%	32.6%
Prohibited from seeing or keeping in touch with family/friends outside of work	36.0%	19.1%	31.8%
Personal life was controlled, and they could not physically move around in the local community etc.	35.0%	17.8%	30.7%
Engaged in sexual acts that they did not agree to	34.8%	15.2%	29.9%
Been confined, kidnapped or had food or other basic necessities withheld (such as food, water, sleep, clean clothes)	27.5%	13.3%	23.9%
Had identity documents confiscated	10.4%	4.7%	9.0%

## 3.2 Commercial sexual exploitation as a minor and harm from CSEC

### 3.2.1 Commercial sexual exploitation for the first time as a minor

Almost three-quarters (74.9%) of FSWs reported being commercially sexually exploited as a minor. The average age when survivors first experience CSEC was 14.7 years, with 29.4% entering into CSEC while they were below age 14. Those based in brothels tended to enter CSEC at a younger age, as shown in Figures 9 and 10.

Figure 9: History of CSEC among the FSWs



Among the CSEC survivors, the most common route into CSEC was through facilitation by a pimp, boss or madam. The vast majority of respondents (74.5%) mentioned that they were initiated by someone other than themselves. As shown in Figure 10, the highest proportion mentioned by both groups as their first time in CSEC was facilitation by a pimp/madam (22.4% street-based, 53.6% brothel-based). The involvement of a pimp, boss or madam as a facilitator was 2.4 times higher among the brothel-based versus street-based sample. Additionally, 14.2% said their first time was facilitated by/involved a friend and 12.6% mentioned a random perpetrator. Also worth noting that one in four survivors reportedly said that it was their own idea when asked about their first incident of CSEC. In the vast majority of cases, during their first experience of CSEC the form of payment was cash.

Figure 10: First incident of CSEC as reported by survivors

	Street-based CSEC (n=632)	Brothel-based CSEC (n=306)	Overall (n=938)
Average age at first incident of CSEC	14.8 years	14.5 years	14.7 years
Proportion who were below age 14 at first incident of CSEC	26.0%	36.3%	29.4%
First incident of CSEC was instigated by (top 5)			
Pimp, boss or madam	22.4%	53.6%	32.6%
It was my own idea	21.4%	34.0%	25.5%
Friend(s)	19.5%	3.3%	14.2%
Random perpetrator	18.3%	1.0%	12.6%
Neighbour or family friends	7.8%	1.6%	5.8%
What they received in return (top 3)			
Cash	87.4%	99.0%	91.2%
Gift	17.6%	2.9%	12.8%
Food	17.2%	2.0%	12.2%

For the majority of CSEC survivors, entering into commercial sex was not their choice. When recalling the first time they experienced CSEC, 80.1% of the respondents cited needing money to survive as the primary reason. However, the use of force and coercion is also prevalent, particularly among brothel-based CSEC, where 50.7% of survivors reported that they were forced into CSEC through physical violence or intimidation, and 44.8% were pressured, coerced or manipulated into it (see Figure 11). Furthermore, more than half (57.9%) of the survivors mentioned suffering a consequence if they had refused to participate in the CSEC at the time, with a list of these consequences shown in Figure 12.

Figure 11: Main reasons for commercial sexual exploitation as a minor for the first time

Reasons for first involvement in CSEC	Street-based CSEC (n=632)	Brothel-based CSEC (n=306)	Overall (n=938)
Needed money to survive	84.0%	72.2%	80.1%
Can earn a lot of money quickly	25.6%	29.4%	26.8%
Forced through physical violence/intimidation	15.0%	50.7%	26.7%
Pressured, coerced or manipulated into it	14.7%	44.8%	24.6%
Needed money for an emergency	19.4%	4.9%	14.7%

*“At the age of 12, I was raped by a neighbour. Then I faced domestic violence and ran away from home and started living in the street. After running away from home, I found myself free and emancipated in the street. But I was alone, and my male peers wanted to have sex with me. Sometimes they forced me to have sex. One day I was picked up by a pimp, and he sold me to a brothel. I started selling sex at the age of 14 years. When I was new in the brothel, I was given only food and shelter in exchange for sex. I was helpless and I could have died if I did not sell sex. I escaped from the brothel with the help of a client. Now I am working independently in hotels.”*  
Survivor of CSEC

Image: Girls going to school  
©Tareq/Adobe Stock.jpeg



Figure 12: Coercion and force during their first time in CSEC

	Street-based CSEC (n=632)	Brothel-based CSEC (n=306)	Overall (n=938)
First involvement in CSEC, would have suffered one of the following consequences if I had refused	55.7%	62.4%	57.9%
Physical violence	35.4%	54.2%	41.6%
Deprivation of food, water and/or place for sleep	28.7%	51.0%	36.0%
Sexual violence	21.0%	31.0%	24.3%
Emotional violence/abuse/rebuke	17.4%	36.3%	23.6%
Would have killed me	12.7%	17.3%	14.2%
Neglect and discrimination	2.1%	29.1%	10.9%
Would have been evicted	10.6%	9.5%	10.2%
Harm to family members of someone I care about	2.2%	4.3%	2.8%
Drugged/kept drunk	1.3%	3.6%	2.0%
Confiscation of savings or other valuables	0.9%	2.6%	1.5%

### 3.2.2 Conditions while engaged in CSEC

*“Under-aged adolescent sex workers in brothels usually stay under a shardarni [brothel owner/manager] who take the money from clients and shardarni provide food, shelter, perfume and clothes for the underage sex workers.”*  
 Program implementer, legal aid, national NGO

When recalling their experience of CSEC, survivors described frequent and multiple forms of exploitation and violence. On average, brothel-based FSWs were exposed to 44.0 perpetrators<sup>5</sup> per week, significantly more than reported by street-based CSEC survivors, who averaged 16.8 perpetrators (see Figure 13). While engaging in sexual intercourse was the norm as recalled by 94.4% of the CSEC survivors, they were also made to pose nude (29.2%), or have sexually explicit videos and photos taken (10.7%).

5 As per ECPAT’s “Terminology guidelines for the protection of children from sexual exploitation and sexual abuse,” it is recommended that “the terms ‘perpetrator of sexual crimes against children’ or (if a shorter expression is needed) ‘perpetrator of child sex offences’ or ‘child sex offender’ be used as the preferred terminology in the context of child sexual exploitation and sexual abuse.” This report therefore uses the term “perpetrators” instead of “clients” for minors in CSE (though the term “client” may be used for adult FSWs). For middlemen like *mashis* and pimps, the term “facilitators” has been used.

Figure 13: Frequency and payment to CSEC survivors

	Street-based CSEC (n=632)	Brothel-based CSEC (n=306)	Overall (n=938)
Average number of days per week	4.8	6.7	5.4
Average number of perpetrators per week	16.8	44.0	24.5
Average fee per perpetrator	BDT 419 USD 4.31	BDT 417 USD 4.29	BDT 418 USD 4.30
Had to share fees with other parties	48.6%	73.9%	56.9%
Rough proportion of fees that go to other parties	51.7%	93.7%	69.8%

Three in five (61.0%) CSEC survivors recalled facing some form of physical or sexual violence, coercion or control during the time when they were experiencing CSEC. A higher rate was reported among brothel-based CSEC survivors (64.4%) compared to street-based CSEC survivors (59.3%), as shown in Figure 14. The main forms were being forced to work under worse conditions than initially agreed, suffering physical violence such as being slapped, punched or kicked, and not being permitted to stay in touch with family or friends. There were alarming differences between the two groups. Survivors of brothel-based CSEC were 3.0 times more likely to mention being confined, kidnapped or having food or other basic necessities withheld, and 2.7 times more likely to recall their personal life being controlled and being unable to physically move around.



Figure 14: CSEC survivors facing some form of coercion, control, or violence

	Street-based CSEC (n=632)	Brothel-based CSEC (n=306)	Overall (n=938)
Any form of physical or sexual violence, coercion or control	59.3%	64.4%	61.0%
Any form of physical or sexual violence... <sup>6</sup>	45.0%	53.3%	47.7%
Physical violence such as being slapped, punched or kicked	36.9%	41.2%	38.3%
Engaged in sexual acts you didn't agree with	25.3%	39.2%	29.9%
Been confined, kidnapped or had food or other basic necessities withheld	14.2%	43.8%	23.9%
Forced to exchange sex to pay back money you owed	21.0%	29.1%	23.6%
Sexual violence towards you or someone you care about	8.5%	15.0%	10.6%
Any form of coercion and control...	56.9%	63.7%	59.1%
Forced to work under worse conditions than what you initially agreed to	48.2%	44.1%	46.8%
Prohibited from seeing or keeping in touch with family/friends outside of work	20.5%	54.9%	31.8%
Personal life was controlled, and could not physically move around	19.6%	53.3%	30.7%
Had money withheld from you to stop you from leaving	25.3%	32.0%	27.5%
Received threats to report you to the authorities	20.0%	33.7%	24.5%

In addition to suffering abuse as a direct result of being in CSEC, 84.5% of the survivors also experienced discrimination in their day-to-day life as children. Reflecting on their time as minors in commercial sexual exploitation, they were most frustrated about people not treating them with respect as compared to other girls their age, refusing to talk to them or be seen with them, or refusing to serve them at stores and restaurants. At the time, 75.4% of the respondents also remember struggling to imagine a future where they would be happy.

### 3.2.3 Contraceptive use and pregnancy as a minor

Despite a high rate of contraceptive use, more than half of all FSWs for both groups reported pregnancies. As shown in Figure 15, most of the respondents said that they always used contraceptives during sex work as a minor (60.8% street-based, 69.6% brothel-based), whereas some said that contraceptives were sometimes used (34.8% street-based, 29.4% brothel-based). More than half of all street-based

<sup>6</sup> The results for sexual violence are based on the respondents' own understanding and self-reporting. By definition, all respondents in this subgroup (n = 938) are survivors of CSEC, which is a form of sexual violence and illegal in Bangladesh. But many of the study participants do not seem to recognise CSEC as such, which demonstrates a gap in knowledge to be addressed by local authorities and civil society actors.

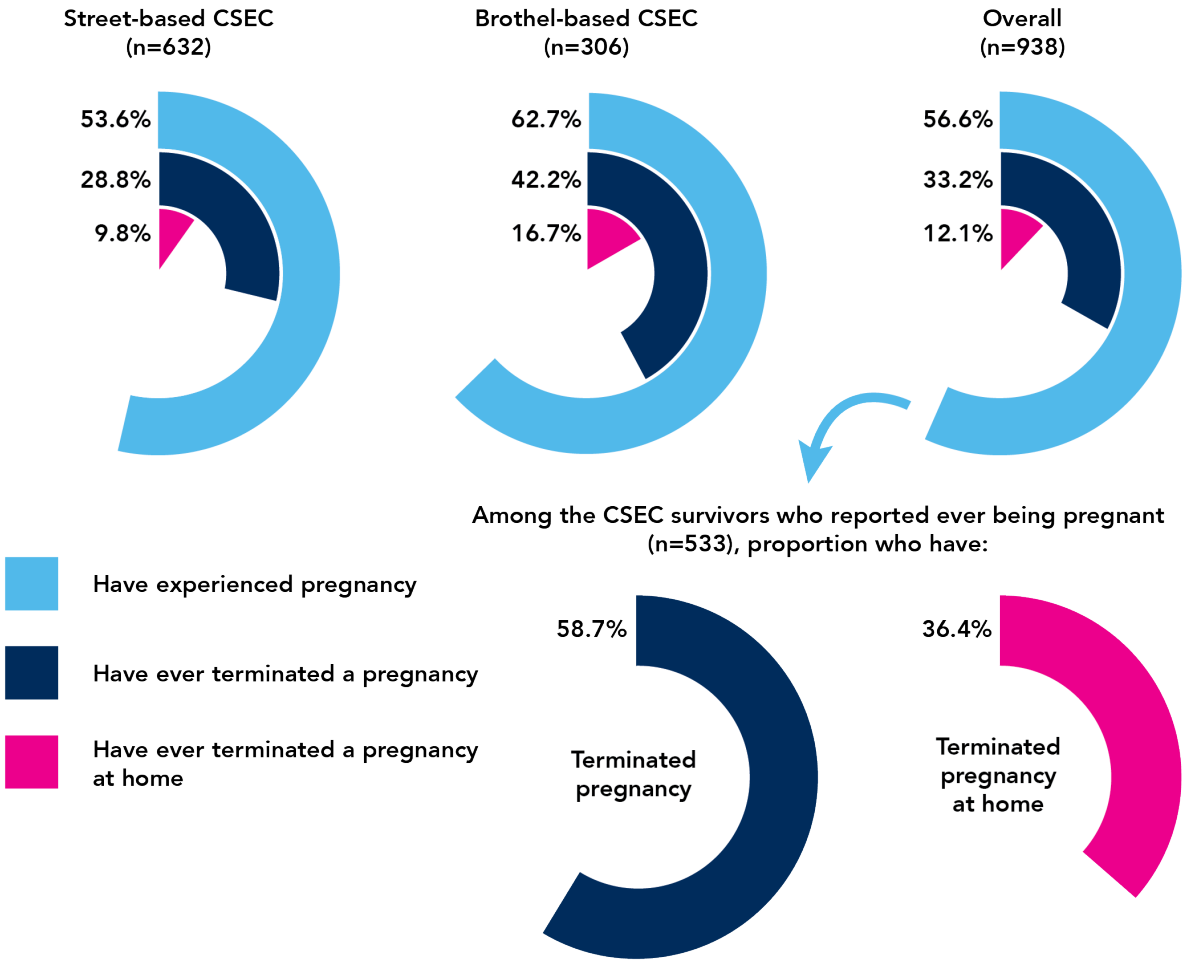


and almost two-thirds of all brothel-based CSEC survivors reported having pregnancies as minors (see Figure 16). Among the 56.6% of the survivors who have ever been pregnant (n = 553), more than half of them (58.7%) terminated the pregnancy. Among the 33.2% who have ever terminated a pregnancy, more than one-third (36.4%) did it at home, placing them at high-risk of medical complications.

Figure 15: Contraceptive usage by CSEC survivors

	Street-based CSEC (n=632)	Brothel-based CSEC (n=306)	Overall (n=938)
<b>Use of contraception</b>			
Contraceptive always used (condom/pill/injectables/others)	60.8%	69.6%	63.7%
Contraceptive sometimes used	34.8%	29.4%	33.0%
No contraceptives used	3.1%	1.0%	2.4%
(Did not answer)	1.3%	0.0%	0.8%



Figure 16: Pregnancies and terminations during period of CSEC



### 3.2.4 Alcohol and drug use while engaged in CSEC

Roughly one-third of the survivors reported consuming alcohol or using drugs while under 18 years of age (see Figure 17). Nearly a quarter (24.9%) who were in street-based CSEC and 12.7% who were in brothel-based CSEC recalled being forced to use alcohol and drugs by others as a form of control, starting very early at an average age of 15 years. The three main consequences of alcohol and drugs cited by both groups were that it helped them forget, to make them feel better about themselves and to cope with handling multiple perpetrators.

Figure 17: Alcohol and drug consumption during time of CSEC, and its consequences

	Street-based CSEC	Brothel-based CSEC	Overall
<b>Among all CSEC survivors</b>	(n=632)	(n=306)	(n=938)
Had alcohol or drugs while a minor	39.1%	26.1%	<b>34.8%</b>
Forced to consume alcohol or drugs by someone who exercised control	24.9%	12.7%	<b>20.9%</b>
<b>Among CSEC survivors who had ever had alcohol or drugs...</b>	(n=247)	(n=80)	(n=327)
 <b>Alcohol use</b>			
Consumed alcohol regularly (daily or at least twice a week)	30.3%	36.2%	<b>31.7%</b>
Consumed alcohol regularly before, during or after sexual acts ('all of the time' or 'more than half the time')	20.1%	22.5%	<b>20.7%</b>
Average age when they first started consuming alcohol	15.4 years	15.7 years	<b>15.5 years</b>
Consumed alcohol to			
... 'forget life's sufferings/ease pain'	50.4%	52.5%	<b>50.9%</b>
... 'feel good about myself'	39.7%	51.2%	<b>42.6%</b>
... 'cope with multiple perpetrators'	32.9%	33.8%	<b>33.1%</b>
 <b>Drug use</b>			
Used drugs regularly (daily basis or at least twice a week)	46.0%	25.0%	<b>40.9%</b>
Used drugs regularly before, during or after sexual acts ('all of the time' or 'more than half the time')	32.2%	25.0%	<b>30.4%</b>
Average age when they first started using drugs	15.5 years	15.8 years	<b>15.6 years</b>
Used drugs to			
... 'forget life's sufferings/ease pain'	51.6%	22.5%	<b>44.5%</b>
... 'feel good about myself'	44.1%	20.0%	<b>38.2%</b>
... 'cope with multiple perpetrators'	41.7%	22.5%	<b>37.0%</b>

### 3.3 Profiles of CSEC perpetrators

CSEC survivors from both groups mentioned that when they were sexually exploited as minors, their perpetrators were on average as young as 19 years and as old as 45 years. Perpetrators were from a wide range of professions, most commonly businessmen, bus or truck drivers, and transport workers (see Figure 18). However, unique to brothel-based CSEC, a large proportion (71.9%) of the perpetrators were reportedly students. While the survey data showed perpetrators belonging to a wide age range and varied professions, interviews with key informants also highlighted that the perpetrators of CSEC were spread across various socio-economic groups for brothel-based workers, while perpetrators of street-based workers were mostly from lower socio-economic groups.

Figure 18: Profile of perpetrators of sexual exploitation for CSEC survivors

	Street-based CSEC (n=632)	Brothel-based CSEC (n=306)	Overall (n=938)
Age range (minimum-maximum)	20.5 to 41.8 years	19.2 to 45.2 years	20.1 to 42.9 years
Most common professions (top 5, multiple responses possible)			
Businessman	61.8%	66.3%	63.3%
Truck/bus driver	51.4%	69.6%	57.3%
Transport worker/helper	45.6%	66.3%	52.4%
Salaried individuals	51.4%	51.0%	51.3%
Rickshaw puller/CNG driver	33.8%	54.9%	40.7%
Students	18.9%	71.9%	36.3%

*“Children are safe, easy going, and have less power to reject.”*  
**Program implementer, national NGO**

### 3.4 Support and referral services for CSEC

During their period of CSEC, survivors described receiving support from NGO workers, family members and friends (see Figure 19), with a high proportion of brothel-based CSEC survivors also stating that they received support from *mashis*/pimps. When asked specifically about professionals they sought help from, NGO workers and healthcare professionals were the top two sources for both groups. About half of CSEC survivors sought help from a professional (see Figure 20), the highest proportion being from NGO workers (28.2%), followed by healthcare professionals (19.1%). Less than 10% sought help from police or other law enforcement personnel, although more street-based CSEC survivors (12.7%) recalled ever seeking help from police than brothel-based survivors (3.6%).

Views about the police were mixed. In the case of street-based CSEC, almost half of all the survivors (48.0%) reported being assaulted or injured by the police, as compared to 16.3% of brothel-based survivors.

Figure 19: During period of CSEC, who survivors would seek help from if there is an emergency

	Street-based CSEC (n=632)	Brothel-based CSEC (n=306)	Overall (n=938)
No one	42.3%	19.6%	34.9%
NGO workers	19.2%	12.7%	17.1%
Mashis/pimps	4.2%	39.9%	15.9%
Friends	17.2%	6.5%	13.7%
Family members	10.7%	15.4%	12.2%

Figure 20: During period of CSEC, survivors' history of interaction with professionals

	Street-based CSEC (n=632)	Brothel-based CSEC (n=306)	Overall (n=938)
Has ever sought help from a professional	55.0%	53.9%	54.6%
Has ever sought and received help from a professional	42.8%	50.7%	45.4%

Professionals that FSWs sought help from (multiple responses possible)						
	Sought help	Found assistance useful	Sought help	Found assistance useful	Sought help	Found assistance useful
NGO worker	27.0%	24.2%	30.7%	29.4%	28.3%	25.9%
Doctor, nurse or community health worker	17.5%	15.0%	22.5%	21.6%	19.1%	17.1%
Elected officials (including Ward Council, Upazila Chairperson)	14.8%	4.9%	0.3%	0.0%	10.0%	3.3%
Police or other law enforcement personnel	12.7%	6.0%	3.6%	2.9%	9.7%	5.0%
Women's group leader	4.5%	1.6%	10.8%	9.5%	6.5%	4.2%

**Potential referrals for minors being commercially sexually exploited:** When FSWs were asked who they would currently inform if they knew of minors being commercially sexually exploited, a higher proportion of street-based FSWs (69-75%) were open to reporting such cases to formal and non-formal support groups, as compared to brothel-based FSWs (41-64%), as shown in Figure 21. Referral to formal support groups, such as NGOs and law enforcement agencies, seemed to be the preferred choice (71.2%). For those who were unwilling to report, the main reasons for their unwillingness to inform such groups were fear of humiliation or stigma, lack of trust in the groups, their belief that nothing would come of it, lack of time to report, or lack of knowledge about who to report to.

Figure 21: Among FSWs, willingness to refer a minor in CSE to support services

	Street-based FSWs (n=632)	Brothel-based FSWs (n=306)	Overall (n=938)
<b>Any informal support services</b> (for example, family, friends, fellow workers, community-based clubs, brothel-based management committees etc.)	69.1%	41.1%	60.3%
<b>Any formal support services</b> (for example, police or law enforcement agencies, NGOs, local government)	74.6%	63.8%	71.2%

## SECTION 4: PREVALENCE ESTIMATION OF CSEC

Based on data gathered in this study from street settings in the Dhaka district and brothel settings in the Dhaka division, it is estimated that during the period immediately preceding this study (2019 - 2022), roughly one in five (21.9 – 22.2%) FSWs were minors aged 17 or younger.

As illustrated in Figure 22, the projected population of street-based FSWs in Dhaka for 2022 is 22,427. Based on the results of this study, the number of recent CSEC cases among this population is estimated to be 4,976 (with a 95% confidence interval [CI]: 4,590 – 5,362). This results in a CSEC prevalence rate of 22.2% (95% CI: 20.5 – 23.9%) among the street-based FSW population.

Among the FSWs in all six brothels in the Dhaka division, the projected population for 2022 is 3,180. Based on the results of this study, the number of recent CSEC cases is estimated to be 698 (95% CI: 664 – 732). This results in a CSEC prevalence rate of 21.9% (95% CI: 20.9 – 23.0%) among the brothel-based FSW population.

To validate these estimates, the research team also compared them with other estimates derived from different data sources and methods, including the RDS method, and found all prevalence measures to be within the ballpark of approximately 5,000 street-based CSEC cases in Dhaka district and approximately 700 brothel-based CSEC cases in the Dhaka division.



Figure 22: Estimated prevalence of minors in CSE, within the population of FSWs

Street-based FSWs (N=853)	Brothel-based FSWs (N=392)
<b>FSW population projection for 2022 (A)</b>	
<b>22,427</b>	<b>3,180</b>
<b>Estimate for Dhaka district</b>	<b>Estimate for all 6 brothels in Dhaka division</b>
Population Council calculation, based on two components:  17,908 as FSW population estimate for 2016 for all non-brothel based FSWs in streets, hotels, residences in Dhaka district (NASP, 2016)  3.75% as growth rate for Dhaka district which was used instead of national growth rate, since Dhaka district - especially Dhaka city and its metropolitan areas - are growing faster than the national rate (Alam, 2018)	Population Council calculation, based on two components:  2,957 as FSW population estimate for 2016 for all 6 brothels in Dhaka division (NASP, 2016)  1.22% as national growth rate for Bangladesh (BBS, 2022)
<b>Estimated number of recent CSEC cases, girls only (B) 95% CI</b>	
<b>4,976</b>	<b>698</b>
<b>(4,590 - 5,362)</b>	<b>(664 - 732)</b>
Population Council calculation, based on survey data from this study (N=853 street based FSWs in 20 Dhaka district hotspots)	Population Council calculation, based on survey data from this study (N = 392 brothel-based FSWs in 3 brothels in Dhaka division)
<b>Prevalence of CSEC cases among FSW population (B)/(A) 95% CI</b>	
<b>22.2%</b>	<b>21.9%</b>
<b>(20.5% - 23.9%)</b>	<b>(20.9% - 23.0%)</b>

## SECTION 5: DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Two validation workshops were held with the Freedom Fund team, as well as with experts and practitioners in Bangladesh working on the issue of CSEC, to seek feedback on the research and findings. Recommendations were developed in consultation with the Program Advisory Group, also comprising diverse stakeholder experts from the domain in Bangladesh.

The findings presented in this report draw upon a large-scale study conducted with 1,245 adult FSWs and CSEC survivors covering 20 street-based hotspots in Dhaka district and three brothels in Dhaka division. **Alarmingly, about one in five FSWs in the study areas, aged 18 to 21, have experienced CSEC during the period of 2019 to 2022.** The insights from this study suggest that collaborative efforts among government bodies, law enforcement agencies, policymakers, civil society organisations and adult sex workers are crucial for reducing the prevalence of CSEC and preventing other forms of violence against children and women. These findings and their associated recommendations are further discussed below.

### Major findings

**An assessment of adult FSWs' current financial situation reveals that two-thirds (65.6%) live month-to-month without any savings, placing them in a precarious position.** Over half (50.6%) of the adult FSWs are mothers and their children are at risk of entering the same cycle of commercial sexual exploitation, echoing findings from previous research on CSEC in Bangladesh (ECPAT International, 2011 and BSAF, 2013). This study also identifies poverty as a primary factor driving children into CSEC, suggesting that the financial precarity of FSW mothers could significantly increase their children's risk of sexual exploitation.

**Three-quarters (75.1%) of the FSWs surveyed were internal migrants from outside Dhaka, primarily migrating to escape poverty in their home communities.** One in five (19.8%) respondents who are migrants also reported being deceived into migrating. Among CSEC survivors, migrants experienced a higher degree of control, coercion and violence compared to survivors who are non-migrants, indicating that migrants are particularly susceptible to CSEC and overlapping forms of exploitation.

**Three in four (74.9%) of the FSWs reported being commercially sexually exploited as a minor.** The average age when survivors first experienced CSEC was 14.7 years, with 29.4% entering into CSEC while they were below age 14.

**Concurrent with sexual violations, CSEC survivors also faced physical violence, coercion and control while they were exploited as minors.** Common violations include being forced to work under worse conditions than initially agreed (46.8%), suffering physical abuse such as being slapped, punched or kicked (38.3%), and being prohibited from contacting family and friends (54.9%). Coercion and control were especially severe among brothel-based CSEC survivors, over half of whom (53.3%) recall being physically restricted and unable to move within their local community

**More than half of the CSEC survivors became pregnant while they were minors.** Among the minors who have ever been pregnant, nearly three in five (58.7%) terminated the pregnancy, including 21.4% who did so at home, likely under unsafe conditions. This highlights the harmful consequences and desperate measures taken in the absence of accessible, affordable family planning services.

**To cope with the trauma of CSEC, survivors reported a high rate of dependency on drugs and alcohol while they were minors.** Two in five (40.9%) survivors disclosed using drugs daily or at least twice a week, while 31.7% said they regularly consumed alcohol. Helping to "forget about life's suffer-

ings," "feel good about myself" and "cope with multiple perpetrators" were the main reasons given for their reliance on drugs and/or alcohol.

**While they were subjected to CSEC, about half of the survivors tried to seek help from a professional when they faced difficulties.** Among the 54.6% of survivors who sought assistance, they were most likely to approach an NGO worker or healthcare professional. Those who refrained from seeking help did so due to fear of humiliation or stigma, lack of trust in professionals, their belief that nothing would come of disclosing their problem, or not knowing who to report to.

## Recommendations

The findings of this study underscore the urgent need for coordinated action by government, policy-makers, law enforcement agencies, survivors, and non-governmental and civil society organisations to prevent CSEC, reduce its prevalence and offer survivors pathways to rebuild their lives with agency and the ability to make choices for their future.

1

**Funders and CSOs to work closely with survivors and survivor groups** and involve them in all phases of their interventions from program design to implementation, monitoring and evaluation. This research, as well as the nuanced situation that it revealed, would not have been possible without the trust, expertise and operational support offered by sex worker networks and CSEC survivors. Such a collaborative model is needed across all efforts to ensure the relevance and effectiveness of onward actions to target CSEC. To ensure meaningful engagement, funders should include resources for survivor-inclusion in programs so that survivors are fairly compensated for their expertise and efforts.

2

As the research indicates, a major cause of CSEC is deceitful recruitment of girls, particularly minors, when migrating to cities under false promises of lucrative jobs, marriage or a better life. **CSOs and survivor groups should prioritise reaching out to at-risk children and vulnerable communities in areas where recruitment is likely to occur, such as source locations and high-risk hotspots.** Working closely with existing government mechanisms such as Counter-Trafficking Committees (CTCs), Child Welfare Boards (CWBs) and community-based child protection committees (CBCPCs) is critical. These collaborations should:

- **Organise awareness sessions in schools and communities at source locations and high-risk communities** to educate girls and their families about recognising deceptive practices that traffickers use to get girls to migrate for the purposes of exploitation. Content should be informed and designed by those with lived experience of trafficking. Models providing opportunities for survivors to be trained as peer educators should be explored to increase legitimacy of the messages within communities and reduce stigma.
- **Conduct vulnerability surveys in high-risk hotspots** within the jurisdiction of the statutory groups, focusing on brothel areas, railway stations and bus stations to help identify at-risk children and link them to social protection, education and vocational training agencies and programs.
- **Build the capacity of local units, such as child help desks at police stations and child affairs police officers,** possibly with the help of government support from CWBs, so that the local units are prepared to take action against any potential trafficking risks reported by the communities or through CSOs/police hotlines.

3

In the research, respondents who experienced CSE as minors reported high levels of exploitation, facing physical limitations on movement, isolation from family, physical and sexual abuse, and threats. Those in brothels faced even greater levels of exploitation and violence compared to those on the streets. **CSEC survivors and CSOs should actively advocate to increase the will and capacity of statutory bodies to enforce laws against CSEC and ensure that survivors receive comprehensive rehabilitation and reintegration support.** They should:



- **Engage to activate and strengthen existing units such as the CTCs, CWBs and CBCPCs** to identify minors in situations of exploitation and strengthen mechanisms to rescue minors where individuals are held under coercive conditions.
- **Ensure that statutory bodies establish support systems so that identified victims receive comprehensive rehabilitation assistance** to support their journey of recovery and enable them to access livelihood and education opportunities to increase their prospects of successful reintegration to the community.
- **Help strengthen legal frameworks and guidelines for rehabilitation and reintegration** to help create safe pathways for exit and rehabilitation for CSEC survivors within Bangladesh. Use existing evidence to systematically develop and mainstream reintegration guidelines with government bodies and CSOs.

**4** A significant proportion of FSWs reported fear of humiliation and stigma as one of the main deterrents to them referring a minor in CSE to support services. **CSEC survivors and CSOs should collaborate with statutory bodies to shift societal norms on CSEC and foster supportive attitudes towards survivors to transform perceptions and attitudes towards CSEC.**

- **Survivors, CSOs and statutory bodies need to increase awareness of CSEC in the community, including the many manifestations and the high prevalence of it.** This could include working constructively with the media to increase awareness of the high levels of exploitation in CSEC. Media could be encouraged to report on success stories of survivors and their bravery in rebuilding their lives as a way to help reduce stigma and change social attitudes towards survivors of CSEC.
- **CSOs should leverage the influence of people with exploitative power** (*shardarnis, mashis, pimps, bosses and madams*) **to minimise harm to exploited children and decrease the presence of minors, particularly in brothels.** This will involve collaborating with them to identify ways for their involvement as allies in combating the exploitation and presence of minors in sex work.

**5** The research indicates that minors in CSE often turn to alcohol and drugs to cope with the trauma and pressure of sex work. **Survivors, CSOs, donors and the government should advocate for increased specialised services to children/CSEC survivors who are engaged in substance abuse.** This would involve working with the Department of Narcotics Control under the Ministry of Home Affairs and other relevant statutory bodies.

- **Service providers should work towards providing comprehensive and holistic rehabilitative support interventions for CSEC survivors and children in CSE** because substance abuse cannot be addressed without also dealing with the underlying issues of trauma and exploitation. These should include safe housing and protection from harm, substance abuse services and psychosocial counselling.
- **CSOs and survivor groups can create awareness among at-risk children in brothels and street hotspots** about the presence of structures such as Child Clubs and drop-in centres, which can be platforms to build trust and signpost minors to more comprehensive counselling and rehabilitation services.

**6** While the research revealed that contraceptive usage is high among FSWs – both adults and minors – it is not used all the time, resulting in a high rate of pregnancies and terminations. **Survivors, sex worker organisations, CSOs and government public health departments should strengthen their coordinated actions to increase awareness among FSWs about the availability and use of contraceptives.** They should:

- **Help increase awareness about contraceptive use in general, and female contraceptives in particular, by advocating for sex education in schools, organising awareness campaigns and disseminating information, education and communication materials** in brothel and hotspot areas for FSWs, minors engaged in CSE and the children of adult sex workers.
- **Improve access for FSWs to direct and free/affordable services at public health centres close to the brothels and street hotspots**, so that they can easily procure contraceptives and receive confidential family planning advice and referrals to services.

**7** The research found that all FSWs in the study population, nearly half of whom were mothers, experienced significant financial vulnerability. **Survivors, CSOs and government departments (such as social services, women & children, and education) can collaborate to improve the financial resilience of vulnerable families including FSWs.** They should focus particularly on mothers and on identifying ways to reduce the likelihood of their own children ending up in the sex industry due to poverty and survival needs. Actions should include:

- **Support access to social protection schemes**, such as those that provide stipends for female headed households and for children's primary, secondary, undergraduate and technical education, as well as those that increase their access to birth certificate and digital registration schemes.
- **Help increase and diversify their income by providing alternative livelihood opportunities**, especially through skills development, entrepreneurship training and access to micro-credit.
- **Improve access to safe saving mechanisms** by helping them open bank accounts and increasing their financial literacy.



Image: Dhaka at night  
Image credit: Ahnaf Tachsin/Unsplash

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Image: Bus terminal in Mawa Ghat.  
Image credit: David Baker/Unsplash



# VISION

Our vision is a world free of slavery.

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