



BANGLADESH

Hotspot report

February 2023



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The Freedom Fund hotspot in Bangladesh is focused on addressing Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC). The hotspot supports four partners based in Dhaka, Faridpur and Rajbari who provide services to survivors of CSEC, at-risk children who live on the street and at-risk children of sex workers. The partners also engage with government officials, mothers/caregivers and other community members whose support is crucial to address CSEC.

OPERATING CONTEXT

2022 was an exceedingly difficult year for Bangladesh due to the third wave of covid-19, floods and surging inflation all of which intensified the drivers of unsafe migration and trafficking.

Continuing impact of covid-19

Bangladesh was hit by the third covid-19 wave in January 2022. Schools were closed for four weeks in January/February bringing the total length of pandemic school closures to around 18 months. Prolonged school closures are likely to negatively impact children's learning and mental health.¹ Street children were particularly affected as services like drop-in centres and shelters, which closed during the pandemic, did not re-open.

Floods

Bangladesh, one of the world's most climate-vulnerable countries, also faced the worst floods in more than a century. Four million people were displaced in a forewarning of the disproportionate impacts of climate change on impoverished people and communities, who are least responsible for global warming yet who shoulder its disruptive effects on livelihoods, agriculture, infrastructure and clean water supply. This drives unsafe migration from flood-affected areas to the slums of Dhaka, increases school dropout and consequently increases vulnerability to exploitation and child labour.²

Inflation

Throughout Quarter 3 of 2022, Bangladesh faced frequent and unpredictable power cuts due to surging fuel prices. The government was forced to shorten the school week as well as work days for government offices and banks.



1 <https://www.unicef.org/bangladesh/en/press-releases/no-excuses-keep-schools-open-children-cant-wait>

2 <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/5/9/bangladeshi-children-leaving-school-to-work-due-to-climate-crisis>

HOTSPOT OUTPUTS AND OUTCOMES

Headline results

566 people were supported by the program including through education stipends, healthcare support and child protection. While a majority of these participants were children, many were adults whose involvement is critical to building a safety net for at-risk children.

Progress towards hotspot objectives

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

Efforts to develop a robust evidence base for the Bangladesh program are underway. The hotspot completed a formative research study and commissioned a prevalence study on girls in CSEC. The hotspot also began discussions with partners to commission a prevalence study on boys in CSEC.

Formative research

Formative research, consisting of 25 key informant interviews, was completed in April 2022. It provided an opportunity to hear directly from CSEC survivors and sector experts about their experiences, challenges, needs and preferences and will be vital to inform the programs of the Freedom Fund and other NGOs, as well as government policies. The study helped deepen understanding of the manifestations and forms of CSEC in Dhaka. It confirmed a significant presence of underage girls in Dhaka's brothels as well as high levels of CSEC among street children. An online validation meeting was held in April with 21 participants who represent leading organisations from the child rights and CSEC sectors. They were presented with the findings from the formative study and gave feedback on issues which seemed contrary to their own knowledge and experiences. Key findings were as follows:

- **Vulnerable groups:** street children, children trafficked internally from other parts of the country, children engaged in child labour (including domestic work) and the children of sex workers were found to be at the greatest risk of CSEC.
- **Perpetrators:** street-based perpetrators include rickshaw pullers, street hawkers, labourers, construction workers, pavement dwellers and migrant workers. Within the brothel context, clients come from all parts of society, socio-economic groups, and occupations.
- **Demand for underage girls** was reportedly driven by ease of manipulation, beliefs that sex with young girls is more pleasurable, low payment and less power to negotiate.
- **Facilitators:** older sex workers frequently organise deals for street children exchanging sex. Within brothels, dalal (pimps) and shardarni (madams) control the exploitation of children.
- **Gaps in research:** the study noted lack of evidence regarding online sexual exploitation of children.

Prevalence studies

Following the formative research, a prevalence study was undertaken to examine the phenomenon of girls in CSEC and its types and forms, including estimates of its prevalence, routes of entry into CSEC, and different types of exploitation girls experience in brothels and on the streets. Ethical approval was obtained from Population Council's Institutional Review Board and the Bangladesh Medical Research Council to undertake the data collection.

Findings from the formative research were utilised to develop research protocols as well as identifying sites for interventions by the prevalence study. These included Daulatdia, Rajbari which had the highest concentration of underage girls in brothels, and 20 hotspots in Dhaka city for a street-based sample.

Selection criteria for the prevalence study were young female sex workers aged 18-22 years who had exchanged sex at least once in the last 12 months. A total of 1,245 samples were collected: 853 street-based female sex workers and 392 in brothel-based settings. The street-based survey was conducted in 20 hotspots across Dhaka district identified with the support of the Sex Workers' Network (SWN). The brothel-based survey was conducted in three selected brothels - Daulatdia,

Town Roth-Khola and C&B Ghat - where the research participants were recruited with the support of our implementing partners KKS and SMS. The report is due to be finalised in mid-2023.

One learning from the prevalence study was that inclusion of NGOs with an on-the-ground understanding of CSEC was highly beneficial to connect researchers with the target group. In addition, inclusion of transgender children might make the study more comprehensive. We will explore how to incorporate these learnings in our prevalence study on boys in CSEC, which we are currently in the process of commissioning.

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

As part of efforts to build a protective network in Bangladesh, grant agreements were signed with two NGOs, INCIDIN and SWN. Project proposals were developed and approved with two other NGOs, KKS and SMS. They have applied for government permission to partner with the Freedom Fund and hope to begin implementing in 2023.

INCIDIN will work with street children in Dhaka, raising awareness of the risks of CSEC and providing a range of care and education services through a drop-in centre.

INCIDIN has started to implement its project by forming community freedom groups to create a protective network for children. Children in these groups, who don't have access to safe shelter at night, are finding support from each other to collectively counter attempts at abuse and exploitation. Children have reported several instances where collective action taken as a result of the group formation and orientation have helped them resist abuse. For instance, they stay together at night and jointly ward off abusers or exploiters.

INCIDIN has also set up and trained Child Protection Committees (CPCs). CPCs are formal committees formed under statute. However, participation is voluntary for community members. The committees include children's representatives, lawyers, journalists, elected representatives and government officials, among others. CPC members are supporting children in obtaining enrolment to schools. In time, local CPCs hope to be able to support vulnerable children living on the streets to return to their families.

INCIDIN led a series of consultations with different community stakeholders. Based upon the feedback, INCIDIN created a working group to ensure prompt action to support at-risk children. The outcomes of the consultations are also being shared with local elected officials to ensure that political will is aligned with social demand to end CSEC. Local elected officials have been approached and are willing to support with rescuing at-risk children and reuniting them with their families. They have also been supportive in referring children to education, healthcare and institutional care services provided by government as well as NGOs.

INCIDIN has also engaged with local religious leaders to develop support for the project and open discussions about risks to children.

SWN, a survivor/worker network of 29 community-based organisations, will offer support services to at-risk children and mothers, and to female/transgender sex workers in brothel and street-based sex work. This is the first time SWN will work on a project that engages children as a primary audience.

Project proposals with **KKS** and **SMS** have been finalised, and government permission for the Freedom Fund to provide funding is awaited. Both NGOs will form community groups to generate awareness and action against exploitation, provide direct services, connect project participants to government services and offer compelling information to government officials on successes of government schemes as well as ways to improve their reach to at-risk populations.

Capacity enhancement for our partners

To enhance INCIDIN and SWN's capacity on child protection, a technical services provider, Breaking the Silence, was engaged to deliver child protection training. Both partners found the participatory training approach useful. INCIDIN staff learned how to identify key risks faced by street children, how to mitigate this risk, and how to involve community members in supporting at-risk children. SWN staff found the training invaluable in supporting children exchanging sex and children at risk, especially in providing legal remedies. Many SWN staff said the training helped them realise, for the first time, that their own rights had been violated. SWN has already started utilising learnings from the training in their project funded by other donors.

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

The Freedom Fund's **application for registration** is progressing. Contractual disagreements necessitated a change in the registration consultant in May 2022, causing some delay, but the full set of registration documents were submitted to the NGO Affairs Bureau in October. The documents have passed a first-level check and are making their way through the relevant government ministries. We are currently working on aligning our application with the initial feedback received from the officials.

Meanwhile, **program implementation** has begun as our grantee partners applied for government approval directly. Two partners, INCIDIN and SWN, have received approval for funding partnerships with the Freedom Fund and two more NGOs, KKS and SMS, have applied for this approval. Two technical assistance partners will support implementing partners on livelihoods, sharing of best practices, development of modules and psychosocial support.

Additionally, a **Program Advisory Group** was formed to provide independent advice to help guide the Freedom Fund's set-up in Bangladesh including registration, prevalence research and program design. The Advisory Group has six expert members representing survivors, government officials, academia and a UN body.

Freedom Fund consultants are in regular touch with government agencies in project districts to update them on the progress of our registration, programming plans and implementation, and to seek their inputs.

Supporting a community of practice

In September 2022, the hotspot held its first Community of Practice meeting with INCIDIN and SWN. The partners identified several mutual learning opportunities. As a start, INCIDIN offered to share their learnings on case management with SWN which has no prior experience working with children. This sharing session was held in November. INCIDIN also shared awareness-raising materials on life skills, child rights and child protection which has helped provide SWN with an introduction to these issues. Both partners provided positive feedback on their interactions.

The two prospective partners, KKS and SMS, joined the second Community of Practice meeting in December. All four NGOs decided to converge their advocacy efforts towards the following goals: birth registration and national identity cards for mothers of at-risk children, accreditation of the National Plan of Action on CSEC, and keeping street children and children living in brothels safe at night.

Partners have prioritised access to birth registration and national identity cards because the application criteria can exclude at-risk communities. Partners are working positively with government officials to inform their efforts to ease access.

Challenges with birth registration are not only around the lack of father's details but also that many of these children are born at home rather than in hospitals and lack the first level of proof. Partners and project participants will work with government officials to explain these difficulties and find solutions. Partners will seek to emphasise that birth registration, apart from being necessary for all other government entitlements, also protects children and adolescents from being exploited in the sex industry through falsified age documents.

With national identity cards, a particular challenge for sex workers is the inclusion of their profession and address on the card, which leads to stigmatisation and makes them reluctant to apply for this important document. Our partners are working with government officials to exclude these details from the card.

The partners have formed a joint WhatsApp group and have developed a timebound plan with assigned roles and responsibilities to work towards these goals.



Case study

Anirban³ lived with his siblings and parents, a rickshaw puller and homemaker, until an altercation with his mother provoked him into running away from home at the age of 8. He received institutional care but ran away after around four years. At age 12, he reached Kamlapur bus station in Dhaka where he was sexually abused and exploited by pimps and street dwellers. Anirban was also bullied and beaten by local police officials. He lived on the street for 18 months until one day, he met INCIDIN staff who informed him about the drop-in centre. Anirban now attends the drop-in centre regularly. He receives different types of support: a bed to rest in, showering facilities, psychosocial counselling, recreation time and games, non-formal education, referral and case management support. Anirban, now aged 13, attends a government school and is in Class Four. INCIDIN staff regularly consult with Anirban's teachers on his progress.

Anirban also receives training on how to protect himself from sexual abuse and exploitation, how to avoid substance abuse, and how to guard against sexually transmitted diseases. He also received sessions on life skills, self-management and social behaviour and this has increased his resilience in dealing with difficult life circumstances.

Anirban is also a proud member of INCIDIN's Child Rights Violation Monitoring Group and reports on child rights violations in project locations. Anirban says: "I was extremely tense regarding my future but now I am totally tension free. INCIDIN Bangladesh ensured all the basic facilities for me."

3 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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