

THROUGH HER EYES

Measuring commercial sexual
exploitation of girls in Dhaka,
Bangladesh



UBS Optimus
Foundation



BACKGROUND

Commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) in Bangladesh is widely recognised as a significant problem, driven by factors like poverty, cultural norms, exclusion from education, migration, criminal enterprises, and climate change. Globally, the lack of robust data on this issue has made it difficult to formulate effective policies and interventions.

To support evidence-based responses, the Freedom Fund and Population Council conducted a large scale study to measure the scale and nature of CSEC in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Fieldwork took place between 2021 and 2023, involving surveys with 1,245 young female sex workers (FSWs), aged 18 – 22 at the time, who were working in brothel and street-based settings.



KEY TERMS

CSEC is any sex act involving children aged 17 or younger, in exchange for money or in-kind payment. The sex act(s) may be performed in-person, remotely recorded or live streamed. CSEC is prohibited under the Bangladesh Penal Code (1860), Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking Act (2012) and the Anti Pornography Act (2019).

Street-based sex work typically involves meeting or negotiating 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, in private residences or hotels.

Brothel-based sex work typically involves meeting or negotiating the exchange with clients in a brothel venue. The subsequent sexual act usually occurs in the brothel as well, however it can also in other locations such as private residences and hotels.

Image credit top right: Nishaan Ahmed/Unsplash
Image credit bottom left: Tanvir Ahmed Rahat/Unsplash

KEY FINDINGS



Over one-in-five (22%) female sex workers in Dhaka were estimated to be minors age 17 or younger. The study sampled from street-based locations in Dhaka district, and brothels in the Dhaka division.

This translates to roughly 5,000 girls in street settings in Dhaka district, and approximately 700 girls in brothel settings across Dhaka division.



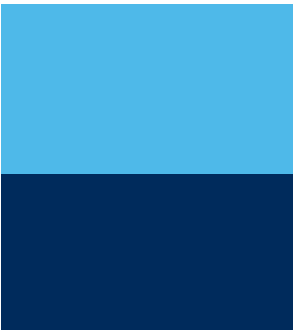
80% of survivors cited **needing money to survive** as the primary reason for their first involvement in CSEC.



is the average age at first incident of CSEC.

48%

of CSEC survivors endured additional forms of physical, sexual, financial and emotional violence.



24%

reported being locked up or kept in deprivation.



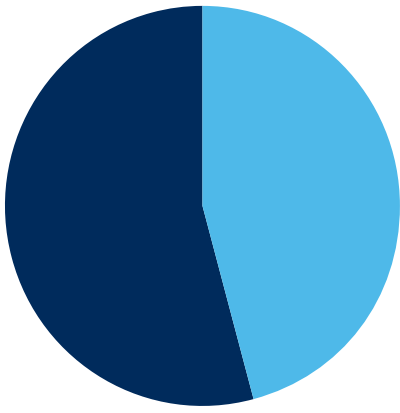
57%

of CSEC survivors experienced early pregnancy.



36%

terminated the pregnancy at home, risking life-long complications.



54%

of brothel-based survivors recalled having a boss, madam or pimp-like figure facilitating their entry into CSEC. These figures were often linked to coercion and violence, but also provided support and assistance.



59%

of survivors described living in constant control.



47%

were forced to work in conditions they had not agreed to.



32%

were prohibited from contacting family and friends.



Survivors engaged in sexual acts with an average of

25

perpetrators* per week while minors.



Brothel-based survivors reported an average of

44

perpetrators per week.



Street-based survivors reported an average of

17

perpetrators per week.

*In CSEC situations, this term is used in place of "clients" or "buyers".

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 Civil society organisations (CSOs) and CSEC survivor groups** to prioritise reaching at-risk children and vulnerable communities in areas where recruitment is likely to occur and to collaborate with government mechanisms such as Counter-Trafficking Committees (CTCs), Child Welfare Boards (CWBs) and community-based child protection committees (CBCPCs).
- 2 CSEC survivors and CSOs** to actively advocate for stronger enforcement of laws and comprehensive rehabilitation and reintegration support for survivors, while supporting the enhancement of CTCs, CWBs, and legal frameworks.
- 3 CSEC survivors and CSOs** to collaborate with statutory bodies to shift societal norms on CSEC and foster supportive attitudes towards survivors to transform perceptions towards CSEC.
- 4 CSEC survivors, sex worker organisations, CSOs and government public health departments** to strengthen their coordinated actions and increase awareness among FSWs about availability and use of contraceptives.
- 5 CSEC survivors, CSOs and government departments** to collaborate on improving the financial resilience of vulnerable families including FSWs, particularly mothers, to prevent their children from entering sex industry due to survival needs.

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

The main phase of this study which produced the statistical estimates is based on large-scale survey conducted with 1,245 young female sex workers (FSWs). Consisting of 853 street-based workers across 20 hotspots in Dhaka district, plus 392 brothel-based workers from three brothels in Dhaka division.

Respondents were all female, currently aged between 18 and 22 years and have engaged in commercial sex at least once in the past 12 months. All conversations with FSWs were conducted in Bangla and in safe settings suitable for confidential discussions and disclosures. This research project has been approved by the approved by ethical review boards at the Bangladesh Medical Research Council and at Population Council.



For further details, read the report at
bit.ly/through-her-eyes