



# BANGLADESH

Annual report 2024-2025

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The Bangladesh hotspot program aims to end the commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) within Bangladesh. Seven partner organisations work with the government and communities to strengthen services and systems to prevent and respond to trafficking among at-risk children in brothels, on the streets and in source areas with high migration rates.

In 2024, a major component of the hotspot program was implementing a U.S. Government-funded program supporting the Bangladesh government and communities to address the commercial sexual exploitation of children, a form of child-trafficking. The program works to increase recognition and generate action on internal CSEC, which has received comparatively less attention and fewer resources than CSEC that is associated with cross-border trafficking. Funding from UBS Optimus Foundation supported complementary research studies gathering evidence on internal CSEC to help inform program design, policies and practices.

Aporejeyo Bangladesh (AB), Dhaka Ahasania Mission and Rupantar, three leading NGOs in Bangladesh, joined the Freedom Fund program this year, complementing efforts by existing partners, INCIDIN, Justice and Care, Karmojibi Kallayan Sangstha (KKS) and Shapla Mohila Sangstha (SMS). Together, these seven NGOs will support thousands of children across some of the most vulnerable communities of Bangladesh. In 2024, the program supported work in six government shelters, six NGO-run private shelters and two drop-in centres, as well as outreach to at-risk children in ten brothel areas and other vulnerable communities. Partners also work closely with high-level government officials and community members to raise awareness, enhance capacity and generate targeted actions to improve systemic response to trafficking.



Despite the change in government that occurred in August and impacted activities and the government's response, the program made significant gains in improving access to birth registration for vulnerable children and improving standards in government and private shelter homes supporting survivors of CSEC.

Throughout 2024, the hotspot achieved promising results in both direct services and systems change. A total of 2,648 people received support services, 85% of whom were children. Of this group, 1,580 children received various types of services from comprehensive shelter services to referrals, 392 children were enrolled in school and 179 individuals were connected to government services. Child-friendly statutory bodies were activated and supported: ten counter-trafficking committees / child welfare boards and 17 community-based child protection committees are now playing an increasing role in protecting children.

## OPERATING CONTEXT

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In 2024, Bangladesh experienced significant political turmoil, economic challenges and environmental events, all of which affected people's daily lives as well as the hotspot program.

On the political front, while the incumbent government won a fourth straight term in elections held in January, students began protesting in July against government job quotas. The protests resulted in widespread violence, culminating in the exit of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and the establishment of a caretaker government led by Nobel Laureate Dr Mohammed Yunus. This led to widespread reshuffling in the bureaucratic cadre and law enforcement ranks. As a result, program interventions related to advocacy and law enforcement moved at a slower pace than planned. The gap in law enforcement led to an increase in petty crimes and violence across the country with marginalised groups particularly vulnerable. Sex worker communities in brothels and on the streets have reported a significant increase in violence and robberies.

However, the political change does not appear to have adversely affected Bangladesh's commitment to end human trafficking. Before the unrest, the government instituted the National Referral and Reintegration Mechanism to track delivery of comprehensive services to people impacted by trafficking, and two hotspot partners, INCIDIN and Justice and Care, have continued to assist the government in the development of the new mechanism. Meanwhile, the caretaker government also seems keen on continuing significant efforts to address internal trafficking.



# HOTSPOT OUTPUTS AND OUTCOMES

## Headline results

A total of 2,648 women and children received a range of social services such as food, counselling and education services at drop-in centres for street children, as well as awareness-raising on the risk of CSEC in their communities and referrals to other services such as livelihoods schemes.

There were 210 individuals receiving comprehensive shelter services, 392 children were enrolled in school, 179 people were connected to government services and 19 media stories were published.

Child-friendly statutory bodies were supported: ten counter-trafficking committees/child welfare boards and 17 community-based child protection committees were activated and 1,580 children received various types of services from intensive shelter services to referrals.

## Progress towards hotspot objectives

**Hotspot Objective 1:** Increased awareness and will to combat internal CSEC among government officials, law enforcement, civil society organisations (CSOs) and at-risk communities.

The Freedom Fund program strategy in Bangladesh aims to support government as well as community-level systems and services that can sustainably address trafficking. Freedom Fund partners play a facilitating role both with high-level government officials and with communities, thereby reaching people with power as well as those most impacted, to address CSEC. By sensitising government officials to respond to community needs, we hope to increase political momentum to address the issue. By supporting communities as they advocate for themselves and mobilise allies, we help



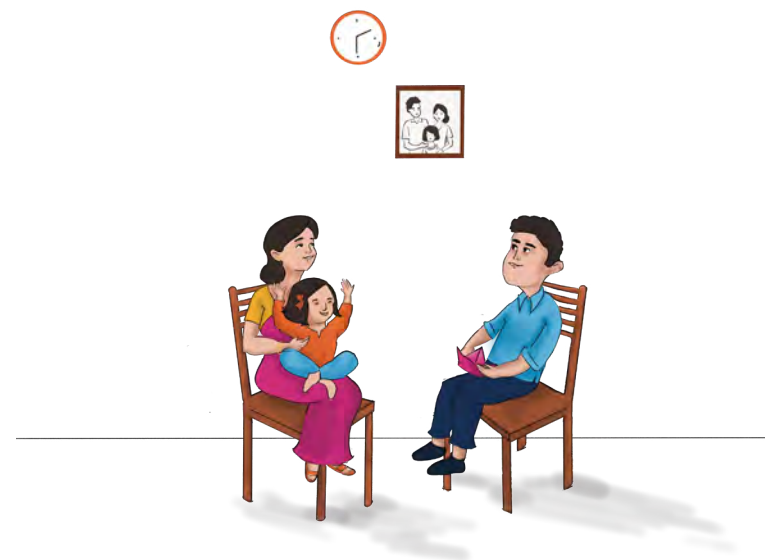


them build momentum toward achieving their rights and entitlements. Without work at both levels, government may not be able to respond to community needs, discouraging and dampening social demand and creating continued dependency on NGOs.

Outreach to government takes a variety of forms such as one-on-one meetings with representatives from partner organisations and community-led group meetings. Outreach by partners and communities is complemented by the Freedom Fund team's outreach to the high-level government officials, leading to joint planning between government and partners and resulting in significantly more empathetic and expedited solutions to long-standing issues. Some of these include barriers to obtaining basic documents necessary to access education, jobs training and all other services and opportunities necessary to escape child sexual exploitation. Outreach to high-level government officials also provides a channel of feedback about benefits experienced by community members and continuing challenges. As explained in the case study, this approach brought significant progress in birth registration.

One type of community outreach takes the form of group sessions aimed at raising awareness and generating concrete actions to address issues related to trafficking. To assist partners in maintaining quality community interactions that generate action, the Freedom Fund contracted *Breaking the Silence* as a technical assistance provider to develop a module to support partners. This module was endorsed by the Minister of Social Welfare, who highlighted its transformative potential in preventing CSEC. He noted that the module ensures that project participants not only have increased awareness but experience tangible benefits of the program in terms of services and protection.

Community outreach has also resulted in behaviour-change among mothers in brothel areas who are often the first line of defence against the trafficking of their children. Mothers have started to take proactive steps to register their children's birth and enrol them in schools away from brothel areas to prevent their entry into the sex trade through grooming and sexual abuse. Mothers have also formed vigilance groups to detect child trafficking and have facilitated the exit of a small number of children who were being sexually exploited in the brothels. They enthusiastically attend meetings with



government officials to advocate for their families' rights. This also promotes de-stigmatisation as they ensure that their concerns are respectfully heard.

In Dhaka, community outreach has resulted in transport workers staffing child help desks and referring vulnerable children to our partner INCIDIN as soon as they step off buses and well before they grow accustomed to life on the streets.

The media is an important tool in community outreach. During the political transition when government agencies were flooded with requests from every section of society, media outreach helped to elevate issues and place them on the government's action agenda. INCIDIN's outreach to media resulted in several articles urging the government to fix a systemic issue in a government computing system that prevented children from getting their birth certificates. SMS highlighted the sterling efforts of the Mymensingh Child Welfare Board (CWB), securing their goodwill and trust to accelerate service provision to children. As explained below, the Mymensingh CWB has been crucial in expanding access to government schemes for at-risk children.

The strategic interplay of top-down/bottom-up approaches helped **unlock government resources and deliver tangible change to survivors and at-risk children.** Partners were able to translate outreach into actual support for project participants, including referrals to government-funded safe shelters, educational support and allowances for widows. Partners have worked closely with social workers in the Department of Social Services who have entered at-risk children to their government systems, making them eligible for government-funded services. Finally, as described in detail in the case study, government engagement resulted in significant progress in birth registration.

In addition to working with government officials, partners are supporting the work of statutory child-friendly bodies that can play an important role in preventing CSEC by adding their influence to partners' requests for improved services. Six Counter-Trafficking Committees (CTCs), four CWBs and 17 community-based child protection committees (CBCPCs) are now meeting regularly and have incorporated internal trafficking issues more centrally in their agendas. Following partner encouragement, the agencies are developing action plans to provide support and unlock government support for at-risk children. This approach has resulted in these committees becoming engaged in family reunification of street-connected children, motivating children and families to use education/vocational training, linking children to government funded livelihoods schemes, ensuring that families receive government-funded food support and referring exploited children from brothel areas to government-run and other shelters. The CTCs in Dhaka, Faridpur and Rajbari are playing an active role in the safe reintegration of vulnerable children. In Dhaka, the CBCPC helped secure quality vocational training at significantly reduced cost for street-connected children. The Mymensingh CWB is encouraging prompt birth registration for at-risk children and referring children to government-funded shelters, counselling services and health support. In an important step, they are helping secure government-funded seed money for vulnerable girls to start small enterprises. CBCPCs in Daulatdia and Jamalpur are now jointly working with partners to identify the most vulnerable children. This significantly boosts the CBCPCs' learning about at-risk communities as well as their capacity to address issues. Community members also become aware of the CBCPC itself as an important source of support that they can reach out to.

While partners are engaging in community outreach in vulnerable communities, the Freedom Fund will support these efforts at a macro-level through a normative change campaign conducted through traditional media, social media and in communities to increase public awareness of the scale and harm caused by CSEC in Bangladesh.

**Hotspot Objective 2:** A robust evidence base on internal CSEC, inclusive of survivor voices, is generated and shared.

Research studies have played an important role in helping the Freedom Fund team design evidence-based program interventions and recommendations, and this increases the credibility of the program with high-level government officials. In 2024, with funding from UBS Optimus Foundation, the Freedom



Fund completed two major research studies in Bangladesh, one focusing on girls in CSEC and the other on boys.

The girls' study, *Through her eyes: Measuring commercial sexual exploitation of girls in Dhaka, Bangladesh*, surveyed 1,245 young women sex workers in street settings in the Dhaka district, as well as brothels in the Dhaka division, and provides critical data on the prevalence manifestations of girls' exploitation. Some of the key findings included:

- 22.2% of street-based and 21.9% of brothel-based female sex workers (FSWs) in Dhaka were estimated to be minors aged 17 or younger.
- More than 80% of the survey respondents reported needing money to survive as the main reason for entering the sex trade.
- 59% reported that they experienced some form of control and coercion when they were sexually exploited as a minor.
- 47% reported that they had experienced violence.
- 24% reported being locked up or kept in deprivation.

The findings and recommendations were presented to the Department of Social Services and officials said the study provided them with helpful context and information to guide their own planning, budgeting and decision-making including formulating rules and laws. They added that the study would also help them instruct their social workers to provide timely support, thus ensuring immediate impact on vulnerable children. Wider disseminations of the findings are planned for 2025.

The boys' study included a survey of 883 street-connected boys aged 12 to 17 years across 41 hotspots identified through formative research. In addition, 20 in-depth interviews were conducted with surveyed boys to explore their lived experiences and give a deeper understanding of their intersecting vulnerabilities and contextual realities. Early findings show multidimensional vulnerabilities of street-connected boys such as their migration to Dhaka at an early age, separation from parents, food insecurity, and engagement in hazardous work and harmful social activities for survival. Boys who were living without family were significantly more vulnerable to abuse and unsafe practices. The study will be published and disseminated in 2025.



Our partner Justice and Care has traced 422 survivors discharged from government shelters as part of their action research to improve reintegration services for survivors and assess their vulnerability to re-trafficking. Of these, 166 have consented to ongoing support, including counselling and destitution aid. The research also includes interviews with shelter staff and survivors to evaluate discharge and follow-up practices. Preliminary analysis suggests inconsistencies across different shelters; some conducted brief follow-ups (via phone for 7 to 15 days after discharge) while many lacked resources for any follow-up. Survivors' living conditions varied, with financial stability being a major concern. Most reported difficulties such as unstable income, poor housing and limited access to essential services. The study suggests survivors who have returned to the community do appear to experience threats from traffickers and their associates. In recent analysis of a sample of 14 cases, two survivors or their family members experienced threats from the accused or other member of the criminal network.

**Hotspot Objective 3:** Children exploited by internal CSEC have access to survivor-centred and trauma-informed rehabilitation and reintegration services provided by government and CSOs

The Freedom Fund supports two kinds of shelters in Bangladesh: those privately-run by NGOs and those run by the government. The NGO shelter homes are for children who are not safe in their home environments either because they have already been exploited or are being groomed for exploitation. The government shelter homes are for trafficking survivors who need a safe space while decisions are made about their safe return to their homes. In addition to providing direct support to the most vulnerable children and adults, this work helps generate evidence about the current status of shelter services and improvements that are needed.

In 2024, the Freedom Fund supported six NGO shelters to provide comprehensive services to survivors of CSEC. The Freedom Fund also supported two drop-in centres that facilitate referral services and exit options for street-connected children. An important objective of the program is to improve the standards of care and services offered to survivors. The Freedom Fund hired Capacity Building Services Group (CBSG) to assess each privately-run NGO shelter/drop-in centre and agree on a timebound plan

for improvement with each partner. As a result of CBSG support and partner efforts, many important improvements were seen in shelter care, including in fire safety standards, nutrition, safeguarding, hygiene, counselling protocols and use of complaint response mechanisms. Operators and staff at shelter homes are also being trained in how to run cost-effective shelters that provide quality services.

Support to six government shelters through Justice and Care has led to many improvements. This has included important infrastructural support, such as to upgrade water filters and power generators, that directly impacts the physical quality of survivors' experience in the shelters. Justice and Care has also provided crucial counselling support and vocational training to residents, staff training on safeguarding and case management, and support for psychiatric assessments and medication to residents where needed.

All partners are working to ensure that children exiting government and private shelter homes receive appropriate referrals and reintegration support including higher education and connecting to livelihoods programs and job placements. A total of 138 survivors of CSEC have been reintegrated and partners conduct regular follow-up to ensure that these children/adults do not re-enter the same exploitative situations due to vulnerability.

**Hotspot Objective 4:** Frontline CSOs and survivor leaders are supported to strengthen their organisational capacity, leadership and advocacy skills to contribute to the eradication of internal CSEC.

The Freedom Fund, through its partners, is supporting work that ensures that survivors are at the forefront of successful efforts to address trafficking. An important first step is ensuring survivors themselves are meaningfully included in program design, implementation and evaluation efforts.

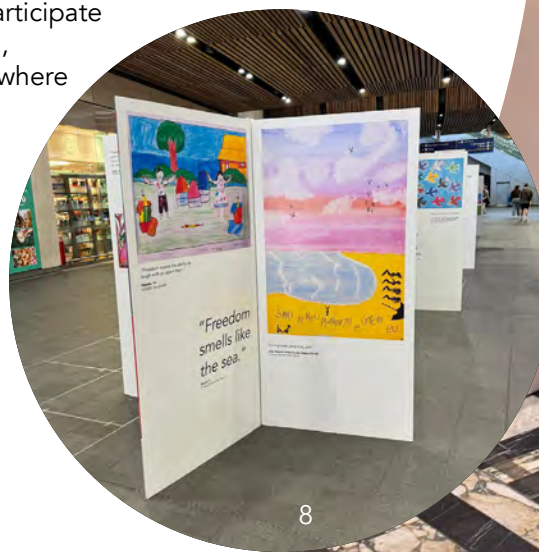
Partners are ensuring survivor participation is integrated into their own program work. For example, 15 survivor leaders supported by INCIDIN are actively engaged in preventing trafficking, sharing various government/private helpline numbers with their peers so that they can access support. In this way, hard-to-reach children who may not trust NGOs are linked to different types of support or returned safely home with INCIDIN's help. This



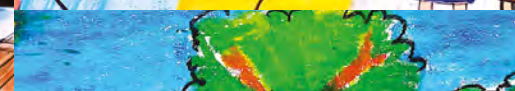
survivor group is instrumental in enabling INCIDIN to execute its strategy on preventing CSEC among children living on the street. Across all Freedom Fund partners, survivors are joining partner staff in advocating for changes in government policy and in advocating with CBCPCs.

Justice and Care has integrated inputs from survivors to improve livelihoods training offered as part of their reintegration support program. Survivor leaders suggested adding farming (poultry and livestock) to the vocational training options so that it meets the needs of rural as well as urban survivors. They also emphasised the need to ensure market analysis and seasonal variations are considered before starting income generating initiatives. Justice and Care has also shared survivors' feedback to government shelters to improve nutrition and expand recreational activities.

The hotspot found innovative ways of communicating survivor perspectives to government officials. Two art exhibitions were held in Dhaka and Rajbari where child survivors expressed their challenges and experiences through compelling artwork. Following this workshop in Rajbari, government officials immediately directed their teams to provide birth registration support to children. To mark World Day Against Trafficking in Person, the Freedom Fund amplified the children's work through our *Freedom of Expression* exhibition in London Bridge Railway Station. Following the success of the exhibition, the Freedom Fund was invited to participate in an event marking Human Rights Day at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office in London, where the Freedom of Expression exhibition was displayed.









## SUPPORTING A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

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Partners are increasingly working together and pooling resources.

They are relying on each other's support to address issues that impact survivors in material ways. For instance, SMS faced local level challenges in releasing a 12-year-old child from sexual exploitation in the Daulatdia brothel. During a community of practice meeting in March 2024, SMS explained that despite reporting the issue they were struggling to get local authorities to act. In response, INCIDIN leveraged its high-level Home Ministry contacts to secure her prompt release within a few days. The child was placed in the Faridpur government shelter home and received SMS support services.

Similarly, partners are collectively working on coordinated efforts to achieve joint goals. At the community of practice meeting in March 2024, frontline partners agreed to prioritise working together on increasing access to birth registration for children living in brothels or on the street. Specific objectives were set to improve the application rate from communities as well as advocating for increases in government resources to meet demand.



## CASE STUDY

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Survivors frequently describe their sense of alienation and isolation when they cannot access basic rights due to processes and procedures that do not accommodate their unique circumstances. Children born to sex workers are a compelling case-in-point.

These children often do not have a father's name to put on their birth certificates. Their mothers typically want to avoid stigmatising them for life by including their brothel address on this certificate, which they know will be used during every important stage over the course of their child's life – school enrolment, job placement and marriage, to name a few. The result is that, through no fault of their own, children in brothels are frequently deprived of this piece of paper that is so critical to establishing and proving their citizenship. On top of all this, the absence of a birth certificate makes it easier to sexually exploit them because their age can be easily falsified.

In the words of one survivor living in the KKS shelter, the birth certificate provides “invisible but strong support” to children born in brothels to claim their legal rights.

Until recently, progress on birth registration among Freedom Fund partners had been slow. While partners such as SMS were tenacious in their efforts on birth registration, systemic challenges slowed them down and their successes were mainly a matter of exception, often gained only after months of hard slog.

In 2024, the Freedom Fund team began high-level discussions with many agencies on how best to improve birth registration rates for children born in brothels. Following these discussions and guidance from UNICEF, Freedom Fund invited high-level officials from the Department of Births and Death Registration to speak at the March 2024 community of practice meeting so they could understand partner efforts as well as challenges and recommend solutions.

One such challenge was that problems in the online systems used for birth registration prevented street-connected children from receiving their birth certificates on time. The meeting led to joint problem solving between the government officials and partners. Based on recommendations of the government officials, INCIDIN held a series of targeted meetings and engaged in media advocacy highlighting their challenges as well as the consequences for children who could not access birth registration. As a result of INCIDIN's actions, the involvement of child-friendly statutory bodies and the continued support of the government officials, the Office of the Registrar General, Birth and Death Registration issued a letter resolving the difficulties and street-connected children started to receive birth registration.

In another sign of significant progress, Aparejeyo Bangladesh (AB) was able to use a little-known legal provision (Appropro) that enables vulnerable children in Jamalpur to receive birth registration without any documentation – a ground-breaking effort for children born in brothels. AB facilitated visits of government officials to their shelter home so they could hear first-hand from the children about the impact on their lives of lacking these crucial documents. AB worked regularly with the government officials to help them prove the children's citizenship and date of birth through non-documentary means. The partner's strong relationships with government departments resulted in waiver of late fees for children, an important step towards cost-effective programming and ensuring that birth registration is not dependent on NGO budgets.

Other partners like KKS and SMS have secured positions on the District Birth and Death Registration Committees, thereby placing them in a strong position to support work on birth registration beyond the communities that they directly support.

Thanks to the efforts of partners, one of the high-government officials expressed appreciation for the hotspot initiative as it was able to expand coverage of birth registration in brothel areas that the government had long intended to do but was facing the same challenges. Creating an interface between communities, NGOs and government was an important step to help communities access this important document and help government achieve its aim of last-mile coverage.



# IMAGES

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Illustrations by Nazneen Meem

Cover, pages  
1, 3, 4 and 5

The Freedom of Expression exhibition in situ at London Bridge train station and at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

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Artwork from the Freedom of Expression exhibition

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Meeting between high-level government officials and partners on removing barriers to birth registration

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# VISION

Our vision is a world  
free of slavery.

# MISSION

We invest in frontline organisations  
and movements to drive a measurable  
reduction of modern slavery in high-  
prevalence countries and industries.

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