

Forum: UN Commission on the Status of Women

Issue: Addressing commercial sexual exploitation of women in Bangladesh

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Introduction

Despite global movements towards gender equality, millions of women and girls worldwide continue to face commercial sexual exploitation. The International Labor Organization (ILO) estimated that in 2021, around 6.3 million women around the globe were victims of forced commercial sexual exploitation.

In Bangladesh, the legal ambiguity of prostitution has led to weak enforcement and deep corruption in regulation systems. It's unclear of the government stance on prostitution as policy is vague while laws both in favor and opposing prostitution have been passed.

This lack of government intervention, combined with pre-existing gender inequality and rampant poverty, lead to permanent prostitute communities in urban areas, such as red-light districts. Bangladeshi women are already disadvantaged through social norms and access to education.

These informal economies leave detrimental effects on women, from beatings to psychological attacks to sexually transmitted diseases, women are left without any form of escape. Instead, they are forced to stay in this vicious cycle of commercial sexual exploitation.



Image 1: Young girls enslaved in a Bangladeshi brothel

Key Terminology

Commercial Sexual Exploitation (CSE)

The commercial sexual exploitation of women includes a wide variety of often linked sexual activities, where typically men or purchase a service from women, objectifying and harming them through physical and mental abuse. These acts include things like prostitution, phone sex, chatrooms, stripping, pornography, trafficking, and sex tourism. Women involved often live in low-income classes, are exposed to illegal drugs, and are commonly victims of other forms of gender-based violence.

Human Trafficking

According to the UN, human trafficking is the “recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of persons by means of threat, or use of force, coercion, or deception.” Human trafficking is achieved through exploitative means, where people have control over other humans.

Forced Prostitution

Forced prostitution is defined as human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation. There isn't a single type of forced prostitution, but rather various forms of commercial sexual exploitation that trap people in vicious cycles of human trafficking with no way out, especially children and women. For instance, in red-light districts, the majority of women work under coercive conditions and are sexually exploited.

Gender-Based Violence (GBV)

Gender-based violence is any harmful act, whether that be physical, sexual, or emotional, perpetrated against a person's will that is based on socially ascribed gender differences between males and females. While GBV can affect both males and females, women are the main victims.

Informal Economy

The informal economy refers to all economic activities by workers and economic units that are not covered or insufficiently covered by formal arrangements, whether in law or in practice. This part of the economy is neither taxed nor monitored by any form of government, and often makes up a significant portion of economies in less economically-developed countries. This lack of recognition leads to difficulties for governments trying to crack down on prostitution.

Victim Rehabilitation and Reintegration

Rehabilitation means to restore someone to their previous status in society, helping victims of abuse be able to live with their past. Reintegration is similar, but takes this process a step further, ensuring that return is sustainable often helping victims find a stable job or make friends.

Background

History

The sexual exploitation of women in Bangladesh has roots dating back centuries, with deep historical origins. References to sex workers first appeared in ancient South Asian texts, such as *Kautilya's Arthashastra* or the *Kamasutra*, which often portrayed sex work as an established profession and even developed art form. Under Mughal influence in the Nawabi era of the early 17th century, specialized performers known as *baijis* or *tawaiifs* emerged in East Bengal. These women often entertained elite audiences at *mehfil* gatherings, developing distinct cultural niches in urban areas such as Dhaka. Over time, these workers migrated to other regions and expended their presence, establishing permanent communities in the city.

Under British colonial rule in the 19th century, professional sex work became more visible and was increasingly associated with urban life. The British implemented a regulation system in 1864 that formalized sex work under the Cantonment Act, where sex workers need to register themselves into the system, to address public health concerns among their European troops regarding sexually transmitted diseases. In the 1900s, prostitution continued in urban spaces, where brothels such as the well-known Tanbazar were established in colonial port cities like

Narayanganj to serve colonial populations. These areas would later become red-light districts. In the late colonial and post-Partition era, the sex trade evolved into multiple formal and informal structures within Bangladeshi cities. Legal and illegal brothels rose and fell, many of which in red-light districts. Although prostitution was always historically present, the legal status and regulation of these workers was consistently ambiguous until the late 20th century, where court decision and statutory laws began to shape the legality of prostitution.



Image 2: Imagery of sex work in ancient South Asia

Political and Legal Causes

Policy and law surrounding commercial sexual exploitation in Bangladesh is complex and sometimes even contradictory. Under Bangladeshi law, prostitution is technically legal and regulated. Women over the age of 18 may engage in sex work if they register and declare their participation before a magistrate. However, the Constitution of Bangladesh simultaneously calls on the state to “adopt effective measures to prevent prostitution,” showing dissent among government. Commercial sex work is only partially legal and socially stigmatized.

This ambiguity leads to inconsistent and selective enforcement. Corruption rots seemingly official regulation systems. Mandatory registration and eligibility criteria are not always followed, while sex workers often pay bribes to authorities to obtain permits or avoid harassment. Similarly, laws against organized commercial exploitation, such as brothels, pimping, and sexual trafficking, are weakly enforced. Law enforcement prioritizes moral policing and brothel evictions over actual victim protection. Even then, brothel closures and

evictions occur irregularly. Sex workers are frequently displaced without being offered alternative work, pushing them into informal and unprotected environments while making them vulnerable to exploitation. Only around one-third of victims of sexual exploitation successfully access legal remedies or protective services due to fear of arrest and stigma (Santhya et al., 2022) In fact, nearly 70% of survivors distrust police or judicial authorities because of this corruption (Rob and Thompson, 2022).

Minors are also taken advantage of. Although legally prohibited from sex work, many children are still sold into brothels or coerced into sexual labor due to weak enforcement from the government. Insufficient funding for social protection leads to low prosecution rates, poor witness protection systems, and little accountability for recruiters of traffickers. Minors are pushed into sexual exploitation in both formal and informal sectors, without any form of escape.

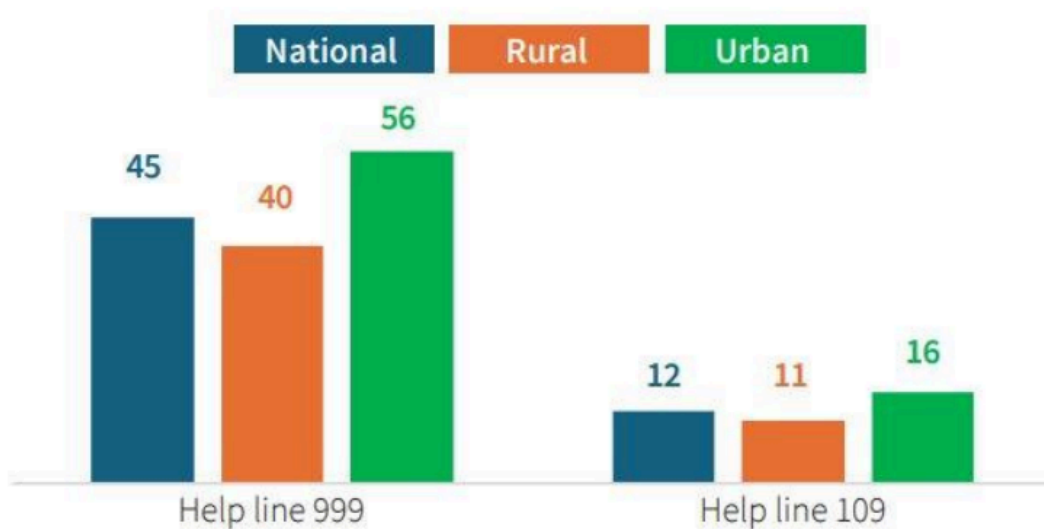


Figure 1: Percentage of all women aged 15 and above who have knowledge about the Bangladeshi government helpline (IARA SEA, 2025)

Socioeconomic Hardships

Social and economic barriers play the most important role in commercial sexual exploitation in Bangladesh. Poverty and limited access to stable employment lead to marginalization for lower class families. Over 75% of women and girls involved in sexual exploitation originate from households living near or below the national poverty line. This also

means little opportunity for education and social mobility. While some women willingly choose sex work as a survival strategy, others are trafficked or coerced into the sexual exploitation industry by brokers promising jobs and economic relief.

Furthermore, gender-based violence and other social vulnerabilities lead to a higher risk of exploitation. Women who experience familial instability, divorce, domestic abuse, or lack of support family members are especially susceptible to exploitation. Many predators even use false assurances of marriage and fraudulent job offers to lure girls from rural areas into urban brothels. Child prostitution, in particular, is tied with this vulnerability. Families under severe financial stress may be forced to sell their children to traffickers in exchange for money. In fact, women facing food insecurity or housing instability were more than twice as likely to experience sexual exploitation or abuse compared to economically secure counterparts.

Gender inequality exacerbates these issues. Women with limited education or no independent income were disproportionately represented among survivors of sexual exploitation, with 80% of survivors lacking access to secondary education. Social stigma against divorced or abandoned women takes away from their opportunity to secure stable employment, meaning that these women are more likely to be sexually exploited. They have no choice but to go into prostitution in order to support themselves.

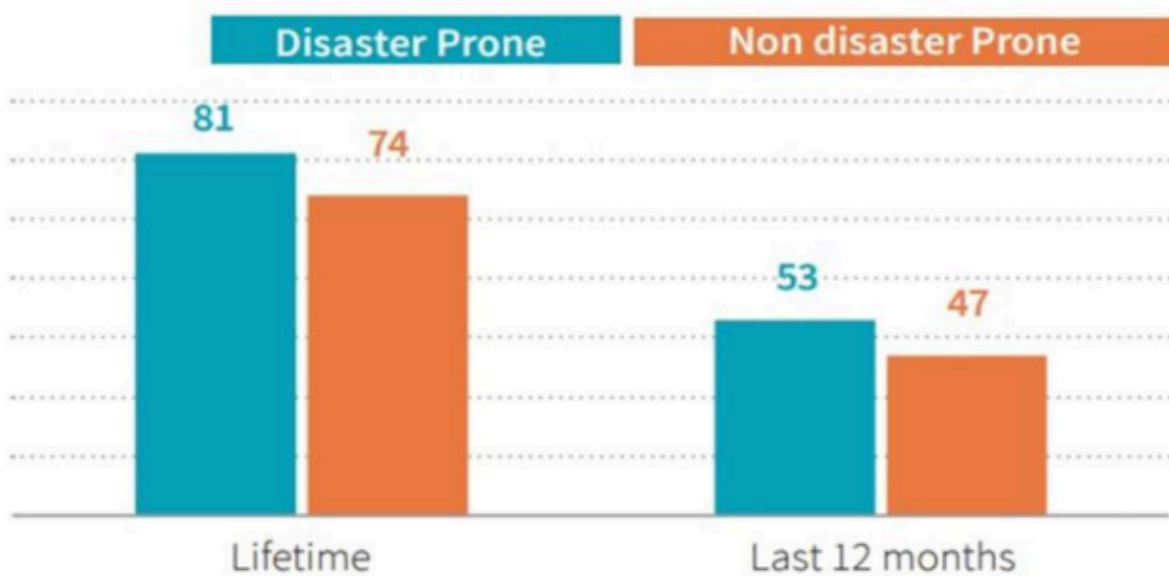


Figure 2: Prevalence of violence among every-married women in disaster vs. non-disaster-prone areas in Bangladesh (IARA SEA, 2025)

Effects on Women

Scientifically, sexual exploitation in Bangladesh has proven to have detrimental effects on its victims. Women are subjected to physical abuse, including beatings and coercive control. Over 55% of survivors report experiencing physical or sexual violence from clients, traffickers, or authority figures (IARA SEA, 2025). Many also report being denied medical care or being forced to work while injured. This has often led to increased exposure to sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Rates of STI exposure among exploited women are several times higher than women in the general population due to inconsistent condom use and request lack of healthcare.

Additionally, women who work in prostitution also receive psychological harm. More than 70% of victims exhibit symptoms consistent with depression, anxiety disorders, or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Rob and Thompson, 2022). Further lack of mental health support services worsens outcomes, meaning that these women often live in persistent fear, emotional numbness, and suicidal ideation.

Beyond physical and emotional harm, women who have been sexually exploited also face severe social exclusion. Cultural stigma surrounding sex work in Bangladesh often results in rejection by families and communities. Over 60% of survivors remember being ostracized by families and denied reintegration opportunities (Santhya et al., 2022). Even if women could escape sexual exploitation, there was very little chance that they could properly resume with their lives. Rehabilitation and reintegration seem like impossible routes, and women are often stuck in this cycle of exploitation.

Major Parties Involved People's Republic of Bangladesh

The Government of Bangladesh is primarily responsible for legislation and victim protection to commercial sexual exploitation. With ministries such as the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs, Ministry of Home Affairs, and Ministry of Social Welfare, Bangladesh maintains formal authority over policing, border control, and judicial proceedings. While officially Bangladesh's government condemns human trafficking and sexual exploitation, many

of the legal frameworks adopted are not heavily enforced. Furthermore, Bangladesh keeps the legality of prostitution very ambiguous, where it is technically legal but still discouraged. Corruption and insufficient funding for rehabilitation prove to be challenges, while many are still reluctant to openly address the issue as it is stigmatized and deemed taboo.

United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women)

UN Women is a body of the United Nations dedicated to gender equality. They support Bangladesh through policy advising and legal reform, often collaborating with government ministries and local NGOs to strengthen protections for women at risk of exploitation. UN Women believe that sexual exploitation is a form of gender-based violence and inequality, significantly influencing agendas and reform in Bangladesh. While they do lack enforcement power, UN Women mainly works through the government, focusing on prevention and long-term solutions.

International Organization for Migration (IOM)

The IOM mainly focuses on human trafficking and cross-border exploitation. Given Bangladesh's geographic position, the IOM tracks victim identification, data collection, and border control. They believe that sexual exploitation is strongly linked to migration, and focusing on cross-border movements and organized trafficking networks is key to solving commercial sexual exploitation. In Bangladesh, the IOM handles regional cooperation with India and Southeast Asia, along with border official training and reliable trafficking data collection.

Timeline of Events

Date	Description/Note
1864	Formal registration for sex workers begins under British rule during the Cantonment Act, although mainly for public health concerns regarding STDs.
1888	Official establishment of the brothel complex at Daulatdia, one of the largest brothels in Bangladesh.
1971	Brothels dismantled during Bangladesh's Liberation War but many still exist.

12 July 1999	Tanzabar, one of the most well-known brothels in Bangladesh, is closed by property owners under government pressure
2000	Bangladesh affirms that prostitution is legal under certain conditions.

Previous Attempts/Solutions

Bangladeshi Government Initiatives

The Bangladeshi government has undertaken a few legislative measures to address sexual exploitation. One significant effort is the Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking Act in 2012, which criminalized sex trafficking and child prostitution. While this act does address child prostitution, it still leaves the government stance on adult sex trafficking unclear. In addition, the government has also established shelter homes, rehabilitation centers, and vocational training programs for survivors through the Ministry of Women and Child Affairs. While implementation has been inconsistent due to a lack of funding and enforcement, these rehabilitation and reintegration programs prove to have potential in the near future.

Regional Cooperation

Bangladesh has also participated in South Asian cooperative frameworks, collaboration with nearby regions to address trafficking and sexual exploitation, like the SAARC Convention on Preventing and Combatting Trafficking in Women and Children for Prostitution. Bangladesh has also engaged in negotiations with neighboring countries, mainly India, to address cross-border trafficking routes. These efforts include information sharing and joint investigations. While these collaborations have improved dialogue between nations, weak enforcement and differing laws in respective nations has shown an inherent flaw in this form of regional cooperation.

International Support

International bodies and non-government organizations have also played a role in preventing sexual exploitation in Bangladesh. Agencies like UN Women, the IOM, UNICEF, and the UNODC have all support Bangladesh through technical assistance and services. NGOs like

Bangladesh Rehabilitation Assistance Committee (BRAC) have also focused on poverty and economic hardships for these exploited women.

Potential Solutions

Anti-Corruption Solutions

One major potential solution to the issue is stopping corruption. The Bangladeshi government seems to have the right idea, but has issues executing their plans. Delegates could propose solutions such as forming independent anti-corruption monitoring units, where specialized groups are formed by either the Bangladeshi government or third-party bodies or both. These groups could then conduct audits and investigate misconduct. Delegates could also dive into specific and more targeting alternatives, such as establishing specialized gender justice courts for exploitation cases. Instead of relying on general criminal courts, Bangladesh could explore the possibility of using dedicated judicial branches for sexual exploitation and trafficking, improving conviction rates while also gaining back the trust of the population in the legal system.

Rehabilitation & Reintegration

Another major solution that delegates could investigate would be the rehabilitation and reintegration of women after they have escaped sexual exploitation. Delegates must combat social stigma and rejection in their resolutions, showing how governments and organizations can aid these women in getting their life back on track. For instance, increasing funding for survivor rehabilitation centers can provide sustained support for victims of sexual exploitation. Expanding these centers could provide opportunities to women in less fortunate circumstances and in rural areas. Delegates may also focus on education, providing routes for victims of CSE to educate themselves and get degrees. With diplomas, these women may be able to overcome stigma from job markets towards their previous background in sex work.

The Bigger Picture

Lastly, delegates are strongly encouraged to look at a broader picture of sexual exploitation apart from prostitution. CSE includes all sorts of sexual harm, like internet sex, online chatrooms, and sex tourism. These acts may not be as severe in physical violence or emotional harm in comparison to CSE like prostitution, but still impact a significant portion of women. Thus, delegates are encouraged to adhere to the wording of the topic, which focuses on all forms of sexual exploitation, instead of only focusing on prostitution.

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