



# BANGLADESH: COMMERCIAL SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN

Annual report 2025-2026





## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Bangladesh hotspot combats the commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) living in brothel communities and on the streets. These already marginalised children – especially those without legal identity documents – face extreme vulnerability due to poverty, social exclusion and the absence of basic protection. Traffickers and individuals controlling brothels and street-based areas exploit children through coercion, threats and deception. Many girls in brothels are groomed into the same exploitation experienced by their mothers. This abuse persists because of weak systems for identifying children at risk and limited support services, creating a cycle of control, harm and profit built on these crimes against children.

The hotspot implements the Enhancing Protection of Child Sex Trafficking Survivors in Bangladesh program, funded by the U.S. Department of State's Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons (TIP). Under this initiative, the Freedom Fund works with seven partners across 13 locations, strengthening collaboration with government agencies to provide direct support to children most vulnerable to CSEC and to reduce the prevalence of internal child sex trafficking in brothels and on the streets. Together, these stakeholders are building coordinated protection mechanisms for survivors and children at high risk.

In 2025, although Bangladesh's caretaker government focused primarily on institutional reform and engaged less in policy dialogue, it remained committed to anti-trafficking efforts and continued the rollout of a National Referral Mechanism (NRM), the first nationwide system for identifying, referring and protecting trafficking survivors.

The Freedom Fund's partners continued to drive systemic improvements, particularly in helping vulnerable children obtain birth certificates – a critical protection tool for those affected by or at risk of CSEC, providing legal identity, age verification and access to essential services. A major advocacy achievement was the removal of administrative barriers that had prevented children without parental documentation from obtaining birth certificates. Through high-level government engagement and a targeted media campaign promoting the special provision for undocumented applicants, 710 survivors, high-risk children and mothers obtained birth certificates.

The Freedom Fund's national visibility and influence also grew through the dissemination of two research studies – “Beneath the Surface” and “Through Her Eyes” – which strengthened the evidence base on CSEC in Bangladesh. The public launch event for the two studies brought together 150 participants from government, civil society organisations (CSOs), UN agencies, embassies and community groups. Survivor inclusion, a central principle of the program, proved highly effective. Hearing directly from individuals with lived experience accelerated momentum for system reform. Inspired by the insights shared at the event, government officials requested community visits to partners' project sites and have since increased their collaborative engagement.

## OPERATING CONTEXT

Throughout 2025, a caretaker government was in place in Bangladesh to prepare for parliamentary elections scheduled for early 2026. During this period, advocacy and lawenforcement-related program interventions progressed more slowly than planned, as the government prioritised institutional reform with limited engagement on new policies. High levels of turnover within the police and other law enforcement agencies also delayed activities such as facilitating police training.

Despite the uncertain political context, Bangladesh's commitment to combating trafficking remained strong. The government provided significant support, including issuing birth registration certificates to CSEC and child sex trafficking (CST) survivors, revising the National Plan of Action for Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking (NPA), which now includes internal CST, and approving the Digital Victim Identification Guideline under the National Reintegration Mechanism. These developments represent important policy progress. With national elections expected in early 2026, the Freedom Fund and its partners anticipate stronger momentum for advocacy once a new government is in place.

In January 2025, the Freedom Fund received a stop work order from the U.S. government, resulting in a 90day suspension of all activities and expenditures under the State Department's (TIP) program. During this period, the Freedom Fund continued to support implementing partners in Bangladesh by maintaining staff salaries and essential services, including dropin centres and shelter operations for vulnerable children. Full program services resumed and the program was able to continue spending down the second tranche of funding. However it was confirmed that funding for the final phase of the program would not be available and the Freedom Fund has made plans for the close-out of the TIP award in mid 2026.

The Freedom Fund also obtained NGO Affairs Bureau (NGOAB) registration as an international NGO in Bangladesh and has received important support from government officials, including the assignment of a focal point to facilitate Freedom Fund programming – an encouraging sign of strengthened institutional collaboration.

*Daulatdia, the largest brothel in Bangladesh ©KARKHANA/The Freedom Fund*



## PROGRAM OVERVIEW

The Bangladesh hotspot program works with seven partners across 13 locations to provide direct support to children most vulnerable to commercial sexual exploitation (CSEC) and to reduce the prevalence of internal child sex trafficking in brothels and on the streets. Hotspot partners Aparajeyo, Dhaka Ahsania Mission and Karmojibi Kallayan Sangstha deliver comprehensive, traumainformed services in five residential shelters while INCIDN Bangladesh runs two drop-in centres (DICs) for children living and working on the streets. Another partner, Justice and Care, works with the government to improve minimum standards in ten government shelters.

Additionally, hotspot partners such as SMS and Rupantar engage in community outreach and collaborate with local statutory bodies to build a protective environment that prevents exploitation and supports children's safe reintegration into their families and communities. All partners complement their direct services intervention by advocating with government to raise the profile of internal CSEC and bring about legal and policy reforms that better protect children from abuse.



## HEADLINE RESULTS

In 2025, hotspot partners worked with local government to activate statutory child protection mechanisms including:

- 7 counter-trafficking committees (CTCs).
- 4 child welfare boards (CWBs).
- 20 community-based child protection committees (CBCPCs).

The program supported significant improvements in standards of care service in **15** shelters across Bangladesh, including provision of medical care and psychosocial counselling, fire safety and emergency preparedness, as well as improvement of case management systems and safeguarding practices.

Comprehensive shelter, rehabilitation and care services were provided to **2,371** children, while **1,108** children accessed reintegration support and referrals to other services such as health, education and job placements.

During the year, **79** survivor leaders actively contributed to the program as advisors, peer mentors or speakers at events.

## Direct impact in communities affected by slavery / Improving the quality of protection services

Comprehensive shelter, rehabilitation and care services remain an essential shortterm intervention for children who have experienced CSEC, providing immediate safety, stability and access to critical support at moments of acute crisis. Children often require a protected environment where their basic needs are met and where they can receive traumainformed care, medical attention and the space to begin recovering. A key focus of the U.S. TIPfunded project is to improve the quality of protection services and ensure that traumainformed care meets survivors' immediate needs while supporting personalised plans for their longterm reintegration into their communities. This directly benefits children in shelters and also establishes a set of positive systems that can be built up to improve institutional care in Bangladesh.

In 2025, Freedom Fund partners supported five private shelter homes for CSEC survivors and two drop-in centres for survivors and children at heightened risk of street-based exploitation. For this effort, the Freedom Fund contracted the Capacity Building Services Group (CBSG) to help six partners to strengthen shelter quality and management through training, technical assistance and regular monitoring visits. This sustained engagement, along with oversight from the Freedom Fund team, led to significant improvements in fire safety and emergency preparedness, documentation and file management, hygiene and cleanliness, and the consistent delivery of structured counselling sessions. Safeguarding systems were strengthened through upgrades in staff training, complaint mechanisms, monitoring tools, action plans, recruitment checklists and community feedback mechanisms. A key outcome is that children and residents gained better access to information about their rights and can now raise concerns more confidently through the institutionalised Complaint Response Mechanism (CRM), reflecting stronger safeguarding practices overall. Going forward, the program will address remaining challenges as it continues to help partners further institutionalise and strengthen staff capacity, supervision and accountability systems.

Justice and Care support service delivery across ten government shelter homes. While conditions in these shelters is highly challenging for residents and NGO access is typically limited, there have been notable improvements.

A comprehensive package of services was delivered to 919 survivors, including individual and group counselling, family counselling, psychiatric and medical support, recreational activities and hygiene assistance tailored to individual needs. Survivors also received safeguarding and life-skills training, vocational and income-generating support, and assistance with birth registration, family tracing and reintegration.

## Increasing support for reintegration

During 2025, partners scaled up a multifaceted approach to increase referrals to health, education, job training and social protection services for children identified as highly vulnerable to or rescued from CSEC. A total of 1,108 children received referral and reintegration support – a 168% increase from 2024. This helps promote safe, sustainable reintegration, ensuring that children are in institutional care only for as long as they need to be.

Partners facilitated family dialogue sessions to support children to return to their families in their home districts. They also worked with local community-based child protection committees in the home districts to link families to government social safety net schemes to strengthen their economic stability, a key driver of why children often leave home in search of work. For children unable to return to their families, partners expanded their network of referral pathways. As a result, 696 children were enrolled in full-time education. A new partnership with training provider UCEP Bangladesh supported 100 girls aged 17 and above to enrol in a vocational training course in sewing and textiles. In addition to technical skills, participants received counselling and mentoring from community-based child protection CBCPCs to prepare them to transition into employment. With support from UCEP, all participants successfully secured employment after the four-month program. Through another referral pathway, five 17-year-old girls received training, counselling and life skills training from the Department of Women Affairs. The Department of Social Services then provided the girls with a seed funding, which they used to start small businesses in tailoring, laundry and retail groceries.

The Freedom Fund has also engaged a consultant to develop a strategy to integrate support for the CSEC survivors' specific needs – such as housing

and psychosocial counselling – into vocational training programs, thereby strengthening the pathways for adolescents to transition to alternative livelihoods. The strategy will focus on adapting and scaling existing government and civil society organisation programs, such as the examples described above, while trying to leverage support from corporate social responsibility job placement programs. A pilot project will be implemented in 2026.

## Building a stronger evidence base to inform anti-trafficking programs

The Freedom Fund continues to commission high quality research to enable evidence-based policy and practice. Following on from the studies it commissioned on girls in CSEC in 2024, the Freedom Fund commissioned further research to understand the vulnerabilities of street-connected boys in Dhaka. The study, "[Beneath the Surface](#)," surveyed 883 boys ages 12 to 17 years, including those both living and working on the streets. Key findings included:

- **61.7%** of streetconnected boys were migrants to Dhaka from nearby districts.
- **97.1%** had worked to earn money or in exchange for food, shelter or favours, with monthly incomes averaging **BDT 6,726 (USD 56)**.
- **32.6%** reported skipping at least one meal in the previous four weeks due to lack of money.
- **4.0%** had experienced commercial sexual exploitation, with the average age of first experience at **13.1 years old**.

This study highlights the urgent need for targeted interventions to protect and support streetconnected boys in Dhaka. It underscores the importance of connected services for education, nutrition, psychosocial support, livelihood training and protection systems to allow adolescent boys to have the space to grow up as responsible citizens. This requires stronger coordination among government agencies, law enforcement, policymakers and CSOs to address the systemic vulnerabilities that place these children at risk.



## Challenging the demand for commercial sexual exploitation of children

Another aspect of the work in Bangladesh is to raise awareness among the public regarding the impact of CSEC on children. Targeted at potential perpetrators, this campaign is run by Red Orange, a media agency in Dhaka. Campaign messages were developed and pre-tested with key target groups including students and transport workers who were identified as high-risk perpetrator groups in a 2024 Freedom Fund study on CSEC among girls in Dhaka. Red Orange ensured campaign messages, to be run through social media platforms in 2026, were rooted in real audience insights to influence social norms effectively.

## Fostering systems change to shift power / Strengthening anti-trafficking systems

In recent years, the government adopted a National Referral Mechanism and Victim Identification Guidelines, establishing the first nationwide system for identifying, referring and protecting trafficking survivors. The new mechanism

and guidelines include children exploited in brothel and streetbased settings, marking a significant change in the government's approach to internal trafficking. This year, hotspot partners INCIDIN Bangladesh and Justice and Care, which have been closely involved in developing the mechanism and guidelines, trained hotspot partners in their use in preparation for the rollout of the fully digital National Referral Mechanism planned for 2026.

Strengthening rehabilitation and reintegration systems has also been a key focus of the hotspot program. Justice and Care conducted a comprehensive study involving 200 residents of government shelters, tracing more than 300 discharged survivors, and carrying out interviews and focus groups with an additional 100 stakeholders to identify system gaps and recommend improvements.

The recommendations call for standardised referral processes, strengthened traumainformed care, survivorled reintegration planning, betterprepared families and communities to enable reintegration, and coordinated longterm followup. In partnership with the Department of Social Services, Justice and Care has already advanced several actions, including drafting the Shelter and Safe Home Operational Guidelines, which has been approved in principle and is awaiting formal endorsement by the Ministry of Social Welfare.

To leverage the findings, the Freedom Fund is ensuring the translation of the research findings into national reintegration guidelines. This will enable consensus building among hotspot partners and government stakeholders and facilitate adoption and implementation of the operational guidelines.

In a symbolic shift toward a more survivorcentred, rightsbased approach, the Ministry of Social Welfare (MoSW) officially renamed government shelter homes, replacing the stigmatising title "Training and Rehabilitation Center for Socially Disadvantaged (Disabled) Girls" with "Training and Rehabilitation Center for ProtectionDeprived Girls."

## Removing barriers to birth certificates

In 2025, the hotspot program led a successful effort to remove a systemic barrier that had prevented hundreds of children born in brothels in Bangladesh, particularly in Daulatdia, from obtaining official birth registration.

By using a little-known 2018 legal provision, the “Appropo Option,” which allows registration without paternal identification, the Freedom Fund built support for the use of the provision by facilitating conversations between government officials and brothel communities to help them understand the barrier and impact on children’s lives when they lack documentation. Partners then mobilised local media, generating 34 stories on the issue and helping raise public awareness about the provision.

In parallel, INCIDIN successfully advocated for the government to waive birth registration fees for survivors and vulnerable children. This signals a shift toward proactive, government-led solutions to address documentation barriers for getting birth registration.

Partners then directly supported applications through the Appropo process and, as a result, 710 individuals received birth certificates. This, in turn, unlocked access to education, healthcare and essential citizenship rights, removing the barriers that made them “invisible” to the system.

The Freedom Fund and its partners are now working to further embed the Appropo Option by advocating for amendments to the Birth and Death Registration Act 2004, which is under the Local Government Division and would provide guidelines to empower officials, health workers, NGOs

and family planning staff to ensure greater use the provision enabling communities to complete birth registration more easily.

## **Strengthening of civil society organisations and movements / Reinforcing community outreach networks as frontline defenders against CSEC**

The Freedom Fund’s partners significantly expanded community outreach efforts, transforming local networks into protective systems against CSEC. Core Mother Groups, religious leaders’ groups, teachers’ groups, child rights monitoring groups and transport worker groups played key roles in identifying vulnerable children, raising awareness about exploitation and providing trusted reporting channels.

Frontline community groups were linked to local protection bodies that can support survivors through referrals and access to social services. During 2025, partners worked with local government to activate statutory child protection mechanisms, including seven counter-trafficking committees, four child welfare boards and 20 community-based child protection committees. Through regular outreach, home visits and sustained community engagement, these groups enabled children, families and community members to act as the first line of defence, strengthening protection and accountability at the local level.

## **Supporting partner organisational development**

As part of its support to organisations, the Freedom Fund facilitates a process called the Organisational Capacity Analysis. Led by its staff, this process encourages partners to reflect on their organisation rather than their program and identify priority areas for concentrated work. The Freedom Fund supports this process with a grant of USD 5,000. One partner, who has completed the OCAT process, has opted to prioritise strengthening its fundraising strategy and improving real-time data collection systems. Both these efforts will improve the organisation’s overall ability to deliver on its programs and engage the donor community. All remaining partners will complete the OCAT process in 2026.



*Birth certificate registration ©KARKHANA/The Freedom Fund*

## Convening stakeholders to promote evidence-based policy making

In November 2025, the Freedom Fund held a high-profile event to disseminate findings from two prevalence studies focused on the sexual exploitation of girls and boys. This event engaged 150 influential leaders across government, civil society and local communities. The consultation resulted in a unified commitment among key stakeholders to the following strategic pillars:

- **Legal identity.** Improving streamlined access to birth registration and National IDs for at-risk children and families to ensure they can access state protection schemes.
- **Root cause mitigation.** Working together to address the underlying socio-economic drivers of vulnerability like poverty, unsafe migration and lack of skills training.
- **Prevention and mobilisation.** Scaling early prevention programs and community-led mobilisation to identify risks before exploitation occurs.
- **Legal enforcement.** Strengthening the response of law enforcement to effectively prosecute trafficking and exploitation cases.

## Strengthening survivor engagement and decision making

The program has been working to strengthen opportunities for survivors to contribute to national advocacy by sharing their expertise and recommendations at high-level events (such as the convening above) and to ensure their feedback has been systematically integrated into advocacy strategies to reflect survivor priorities.

In 2025, INCIDIN Bangladesh trained survivors as peer supporters in drop-in centres, strengthening outreach among high-risk children through trust built on lived experience. The organisation also provided insights on emerging CST trends – including online recruitment via social media, hidden brothels in residential spaces and climate-induced migration – that have informed tailored interventions. Also in 2025, survivor groups further supported updates to drop-in centre guidelines, conducted surveys on reintegration and referral needs, facilitated legal aid sessions, mapped high-risk locations and motivated vulnerable children to enrol in vocational training.

## Supporting a community of practice

Every quarter, partners are convened in a community of practice (CoP). Over the years the CoP has served as a strategic platform for coordinated, evidence-driven advocacy with the government. In 2025, it helped establish an inter-partner coordination mechanism, a collaborative platform including partners and government representatives from the Department of Social Services (DSS), Ministry of Home Affairs and Ministry of Local Government, which was designed to enhance survivor-centric services, strengthen government systems and facilitate the sharing of good practices.

Partners received training from INCIDIN Bangladesh on the National Referral Mechanism and on trauma-informed and survivor-centric care for CST survivors. Justice and Care provided training on Victim Identification Guidelines, on improving understanding of survivor-centric approaches and on case handling. Challenges in accessing qualified mental health professionals were identified, and some of the hotspot partners secured government-supported counselling services from DSS.



## CASE STUDY

### Journey from exploitation to empowerment

*“When I was living on the streets, I never imagined I could return to my mother or stand on my own. Today, I see my mother every day, I have a respectable job, and I am treated with dignity.”*

Eighteenyearold Halima (not her real name) is a survivor of CSE who now works as an industrial sewing machine operator.

After losing her father, Halima moved from Narsingdi to Dhaka to support her family, earning a small income selling vegetables near Kamalapur Railway Station. There, she faced severe physical and sexual exploitation by local pimps who forced her into sex work for three years. In November 2023, INCIDIN Bangladesh identified her as a trafficking survivor and immediately began planning her reintegration.

With no available space in night shelters, INCIDIN arranged alternative protection measures through its Child Rights Violation Monitoring Group, members of which help map highrisk areas, ensure children stay together at night and provides emergency contacts and support. A member of the group worked closely with communitybased child protection committees, local authorities and service providers to ensure Halima’s safety.

A major barrier to Halima’s recovery was her lack of a Birth Registration Certificate (BRC), which prevented access to education, healthcare, training and social protection. INCIDIN fasttracked the process to obtain her BRC, enabling her to enrol in a residential skillstraining program run by UCEP Bangladesh. “When I saw my BRC and signed the forms, I realised I could finally escape this cycle of abuse,” she recalled.

After completing three months of technical training, Halima secured employment in a garment factory. In July 2024, she was reunified with her mother in Narsingdi with support from the local counter-trafficking committee and child welfare board, as well as the Department of Social Services. With one year of followup support from INCIDIN and government agencies, she later obtained a betterpaying job at another factory, strengthening her path to independence.

Halima also now serves as a Change Maker (volunteer role) in her community, sharing knowledge about birth registration and helping other underprivileged and at-risk children access vital government services.

# 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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