

Child Sexual Abuse, Exploitation and Trafficking in Bangladesh

BACKGROUND

Children in Bangladesh are vulnerable to being trafficked into bonded labour or brothels; being sexually abused in the home, the workplace, community and at school; and being sexually exploited. There are few protections in place for children such as these.

In a country where less than 10 per cent of children are registered at birth, it is difficult to track whether children's rights are being protected. Those who are abused, trafficked or exploited are explicitly denied their rights to be safe from these practices under the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). They are also more vulnerable to HIV/AIDS, drug abuse, more likely to not finish - or begin - their education, or realize their right to be brought up with their family.

ISSUES

Child sexual abuse, exploitation and trafficking remain largely taboo in Bangladesh society. Because of this, there is little reliable quantitative data. Gaining qualitative data is also challenging because of the shame and culture of silence associated with abuse.

A major underlying issue behind child sexual abuse, exploitation and trafficking is that children are often unaware of their legal rights, or are made to feel they cannot exercise those rights. In general, the rights and desires of children are often overlooked, particularly for the most vulnerable groups, such as adolescent girls. Poor law enforcement compounds this.

Inequality is another critical issue. Often disabled children and girls are more vulnerable. Isolated or impoverished regions are also more attractive to gangs of traffickers because it is both harder for parents to seek law enforcement but also easier to sell the idea of "lucrative jobs" to impoverished parents. In general, services for exploited or abused children are scarce, but it is even more so in these areas. Children who have a lack of economic opportunities and poor education are also more at risk of being trafficked, abused or exploited.

Many children who have experienced, or are experiencing, sexual abuse, exploitation or trafficking are susceptible to drug and substance abuse as a form of escape. These children are vulnerable to HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections.

Reintegration into mainstream community is another issue that cuts across child sexual abuse, exploitation and trafficking. Many child survivors of these practices require psychosocial counselling and life skills training.

Trafficking

Human trafficking in Bangladesh is believed to be extensive both within the country and to India, Pakistan and the Middle East. Many girls are trafficked into sexual exploitation or bonded servitude. Many boys have also been trafficked to the Middle East to become camel racing jockeys. Children involved in camel racing (CICR) are often injured in the course of their work, are vulnerable to abuse from their employers and there are reports of employers deliberately keeping the children's weights low by not feeding them enough. Many children are taken with their parents' consent, having been duped by stories of well-paid jobs or marriages.

Reintegration into mainstream society is a huge issue for trafficked children, especially for girls with the stigma and taboo associated with it. If they return with a Sexually Transmitted Infection (STI) or HIV positive, it becomes more challenging for the family and community to accept them. For children involved in camel racing, many can no longer remember their own language. They become strangers in their own land.

Child sexual abuse

Child sexual abuse permeates all levels of Bangladeshi society. Children are at risk of abuse or harassment in their own homes, from relatives and family "friends". It is found in schools, communities and the workplace. While disadvantaged and disabled children are more vulnerable to abuse, it is not limited to them. Most children know their abuser, who is usually someone close to them.

Commercial child sexual exploitation

Child sexual exploitation can start when children are as young as 10 in Bangladesh's registered brothels, its hotels and its parks, streets and stations. Children of women who work in a brothel often end up working there too. In brothels, many children have to work as bonded sex workers. They must pay all their earnings to the brothel's madam for their first few years in return for food, clothes and essentials.

Child victims of commercial sexual exploitation can also end up in brothels or on the streets through trafficking, family break-downs or poverty. On the streets, many children are beaten and robbed. Many boys are drawn into crime through their pimps. Men having sex with men (MSM) is a growing and hidden issue but often not acknowledged due to the stigma or shame attached to it.



© Kiron/MAF/UNICEF 2005

ACTION

UNICEF Bangladesh is working to create a culture of respect for children's protection rights through development of child rights based and gender appropriate policies, advocacy, a change of societal attitudes, strengthened capacity in government and civil society responses to protection issues and



© Kiron/MAF/UNICEF 2005

the establishment of protective mechanisms against abuse exploitation and violence.

Empowering children

Life skills

UNICEF works to enhance the life skills of children at risk. The Life Skills programme uses a peer to peer approach where partner NGOs build the capacity of adolescent peer leaders for facilitating issue based life skills sessions. These adolescent peer leaders then pass these skills on to their peers and facilitate further discussions with them.

Various life skills are developed through discussing social issues that affect adolescents such as: child marriage, dowry, HIV and AIDS, personal hygiene, reproductive health, drug abuse, child abuse, trafficking and exploitation. These sessions develop interpersonal skills to make informed decisions, solve problems, think critically and creatively, build healthy relationships, empathise with others, and cope with and manage their lives in a healthy and a productive manner. The peer to peer networks provide support and help build self esteem, as well as enhance the adolescents' ability for stress management.

Community support for these children is also enhanced through orientation on life skills for parents, government officials, social workers and community members such as teachers and religious leaders. Community based dowry committees and forced marriage committees are formed to take action to protect children from this kind of violation of child rights.

Reintegration

UNICEF Bangladesh and UNICEF Gulf Area Office work with respective governments to repatriate children involved in camel racing (CICR). It is planned that 250 children formerly involved in camel racing will return to Bangladesh.

This repatriation has been in line with the Government of UAE's 2005 decision to ban the involvement of children under 18 in camel racing and to send any children back to their country of origin. UNICEF has supported the Bangladesh Ministry of Home Affairs to

establish a "Repatriation, Rehabilitation and Reintegration Committee" for the returned camel jockeys. This committee, which oversees the repatriation process, comprises the Government, UNICEF, IOM and national NGOs such as the Bangladesh National Women Lawyers Association and the Dhaka Ahsania Mission.

In Bangladesh, part of the repatriation involves tracing the children's families. Bangladeshi NGOs use individualized case management to contact the families and arrange appropriate social integration and alternative work or education for the child, in a way that ensures the development, protection and participation rights of the children. Before the former CICRs are reintegrated with their families, they stay in shelter homes set up by the national NGOs.

It is intended that their stay at these shelter homes is kept to a minimum, with the focus on reuniting the families as soon as possible. During their stay in the shelter homes, the boys are taught basic life skills, such as how to count in Bangla and to read and write their names. They are also provided with psycho-social support, legal support and medical care as required. The whole process is mirrored by discussions and meetings with the parents and the communities to strengthen community care mechanisms by creating community care committees (CCC) and supportive environments for the sustainable reintegration of children.

Support service to stop gender based violence in one urban slum area

UNICEF has undertaken an action research project to address the rights violations of the slum children, especially girls, and to empower them to fight for their rights. A local NGO (Nari Unnayan Shakti) is piloting this initiative to create awareness and sensitize community people regarding sexual abuse and other gender based violence among 2000 families living in 20 slums in Khilgaon Thana. They will empower community people by using 'Stop Violence Community Teams' in 20 slums, and at Thana level a 'Stop Violence Community Network' to take immediate action in case of any incident of violence and to take measures to prevent sexual abuse and exploitation of children and adolescents in the community.

Links with other protection tools

UNICEF's work in birth registration is another tool for combating exploitation, child marriage and trafficking. If children are registered at birth, and have their enrolment in school recorded, it is believed it will be easier to see when one slips off the radar. UNICEF is working towards universal birth registration in Bangladesh through birth registration drives, linking birth registration with other national campaigns such as vitamin distribution or vaccinations. Through the advocacy of UNICEF a new law for birth registration was introduced and the government has taken a mandate of universal birth registration by 2008. UNICEF is now supporting the government, specially the local government to achieve that mandate through capacity building and technical input.

Research, Networks and Advocacy

Research, networking and advocacy take on an important role when viewed through the cultural taboos associated with child sexual abuse, exploitation and trafficking. Efforts in this area have paved the way for the issues to be discussed publicly, but more is needed to properly understand the extent of the problems and the associated contributory factors.

A study on child abuse has been conducted by UNICEF, the Government of Bangladesh and the Save the Children Alliance. This study was unique in terms of children's involvement in the process of developing research tools, methods, etc. A child advisory

group, consisting of children exposed to and at risk of abuse, was consulted throughout the study. The study aimed to find out what Bangladeshi children considered negative behaviours, their coping strategies, the people who could support them and their recommendations to stop such behaviors.

As UNICEF has the goal to eliminate commercial sexual exploitation of children, it has decided to carry out a rapid assessment to understand the present situation and the extent of impact of commercially sexually exploited children in Bangladesh. A mapping of NGOs/Community Based Organisations working on this issue will include their existing skills, capacity, coverage and kind of interventions made.

Violence against Children Working Group

Under the supervision of this working group 20 district level consultations have taken place as a follow up of the UN study on violence against Children and Regional consultation on Violence against Children in South Asia. Another 44 district level consultations will take place in 2007.

IMPACT

- 169 children formerly involved in camel racing have been repatriated to Bangladesh. Of those, 168 children have now been successfully reintegrated with their families. Another 32 children are waiting for repatriation. 112 Community Care Committees (CCC) formed and regular follow up mechanism developed with the Ministry, relevant NGOs and CCCs. UNICEF is supporting the development and implementation of the livelihood component for these repatriated children for a sustainable reintegration and to protect them from the risk of re-trafficking.
- In 2006 Kishori Abhijan (Empowerment of Adolescents, Phase II) started with a new dimension based on the lessons learnt from Phase I of the project. In this phase adolescent boys were included and to date 2462 boys have received training on various social issues including gender awareness. 2860 adolescent centres in 27 districts are operational and managed by 5000 peer leaders. 86,000 girls have increased their mobility through participation in different activities with their families and communities.
- 575 community base committees to stop child marriage and dowry formed and will soon be functional
- The Child Sexual Abuse report (Bangla Version) published and disseminated.
- UNICEF is supporting the development and strengthening of practical mechanisms to rescue, recover, repatriate and reintegrate (RRRR) child victims of trafficking from Bangladesh to India. A Rapid Assessment of existing practices and mechanisms of RRRR have been conducted in both countries which highlighted the gaps and challenges of the whole process. The first inter- ministerial bilateral meeting was held in 2006, with technical support from UNICEF country offices and the regional office, to develop a common understanding between the countries and agree upon a way forward. As a follow up a draft action plan on RRRR in both countries is being developed.