

Research Article

## **FAMILY AND COMMUNITY REINTEGRATION OF CHILDREN OF SEX WORKERS LIVING IN INSTITUTIONAL CARE IN BANGLADESH**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Sex workers in Bangladesh are deprived of their basic rights and face abuse and violence in their daily life. The children living inside the brothels are the worst sufferers. They are exposed to early sexuality, subject to physical, psychological abuse and maltreatment. Sex workers and their children face stigma and discrimination in the community. Children of sex workers usually do not have access to health and education; they are vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. Daughters of sex workers are at risk of getting involved in sex work from very early stage of life. Save the Children worked on the protection of the children (especially girls) of sex workers in Daulatdia brothel and implemented Safe Home (institutional care since 1997) and *Aparajito* (community-based project since 2012). Safe Home started by providing residential care support to daughters of sex workers, but over the years the objective has been evolved to identify community-based care solutions for those children. The project focused on ensuring that the girls are protected, and contributed to their empowerment to build a better future for themselves and their families. Major interventions of Safe Home included providing accommodation, food, medical and basic care support to girls staying there, creating opportunities for sports and cultural activities, arranging psychosocial counselling for the girls, preparing personal education plan, including access to basic and vocational education, capacity building of the girls through trainings, workshops and awareness sessions on child rights and child protection, reintegration of the girls with families/communities following assessment and developing a case management plan, providing family counselling to mothers and other family members, home visits to ensure a safe and smooth transitioning into families and communities and identifying job placements and livelihood options to support them in reintegration. Through *Aparajito*, sex workers were sensitised on the importance of education of their children, and were empowered to claim rights. Advocacy with community-based groups and local administration helped in creating a protective environment, and there have been attitudinal changes regarding children of sex workers in general. A total of 120 girls received support from Safe Home since the beginning. Among them, 79 girls have been reintegrated with families/communities through education and marriage, 29 girls have been reintegrated through higher education and job, and 12 girls are in direct care services of Safe Home (will be reintegrated by 2018). 14 Girls are continuing higher education in different universities and attending job placements simultaneously; 35 girls have completed School Secondary Certificate; among them, 21 girls completed Higher Secondary Certificate; 23 girls received vocational training, and among them, 18 girls are in jobs. Long-term support to continue education followed by linkage with employment opportunities proved to be critical in reintegration of girls living in Safe Home. Motivation of mothers about alternative

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livelihood options for their daughters helped in bringing the change. Community sensitisation activities contributed to the successful reintegration of the children in the mainstream society. At present, Save the Children and partner NGOs are implementing a programme involving child protection, education and health, nutrition and HIV/AIDS interventions in three brothels including Daulatdia.

**Keywords:** Safe Home, Alternative care, Reintegration, Community-based interventions, Protection

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## INTRODUCTION

Save the children has been working in areas of care, protection and empowerment of extremely vulnerable groups of children in Bangladesh for more than two decades. Safe Home project was a part of the broader programme on care and protection for the children whose mothers are involved in sex work in Daulatdia brothel.

Sex workers and their children faced stigma discrimination in the community. Children of sex workers did not have access to education, health and other protection services. Daughters of sex workers were at risk of getting involved in sex work. A Safe Home was established by Save the Children and local partner Karmojibi Kallayan Sangastha (KKS) in 1997 at Goalanda, Rajbari district, for daughters of sex workers living in the brothel community of Daulatdia who were most vulnerable to sexual and physical abuse and exploitation, violence and discrimination. The girls were isolated from mainstream society and could not access basic government services such as healthcare and primary schooling. By providing them with safe accommodation and educational assistance, Save the Children allowed the girls to be protected from abuse, to participate in wider society and have greater choice over their own profession and alternative livelihoods than their mothers. Along with assistance in completing primary and secondary education, the girls participated in vocational training to build their self-esteem and life management skills for living a self-reliant life. The secondary school graduate girls also received general education besides vocational training. Over the years, the approach of Safe Home management process has been shifted from institutionalisation to family and community-based reintegration. Community-based initiatives were facilitated through *Aparajito* project since 2012. At present, Save the Children is implementing an integrated programme of child protection, education and health, nutrition and HIV/AIDS sectors in three brothels of Rajbari and Faridpur districts and KKS; Mukti Mohila Samity (MMS) and Shapla Mohila Sangstha (SMS) are the implementing partners.

## SAFE HOME INTERVENTIONS

### Basic and Psychosocial Support

Girls living in Safe Home received quality food, clothing & school uniform, medical, emergency, psychosocial and counselling support. Emotional and mental support was ensured through individual and group counselling throughout the year by staff of partner NGO and Save the Children. Girls of Safe Home visited their homes

during vacations, met with family members on weekends and at the time of religious festivals, which addressed their emotional needs.

### **Capacity Building of Children**

Extra-curricular activities like art, dance, computer classes, drama and cricket were very helpful to build self-confidence and capacity of girls living in Safe Home. Girls become well-groomed through those activities throughout the year that resulted in their participation in school level, upazila or district level contests. In December 2012, Safe Home cricket team participated in the inter-school cricket tournament at sub-district level on behalf of Daulatdia Model High School and became the champion. One girl living in Safe Home participated in the sub-district level badminton competition and was the champion. Girls also received awards in national level essay competition organised by the Ministry of Education. These were significant achievements for children who faced social marginalisation and discrimination due to the profession of their mothers; their success helped them in developing a new identity and increased their self-esteem too.

### **FROM SAFE HOME TO FAMILY AND COMMUNITY REINTEGRATION**

Following the recommendations of the evaluation of Safe Home in 2008, the project has changed its approaches. The study recommended that girls living in Safe Home could be placed in family or wider community through developing other alternative care options. Decision was made by assessing every case, and then support was ensured for family and community reintegration through a proper case-management plan. Most of the girls had been reintegrated into wider community by providing education and job placement support. During the process, they lived outside Safe Home (in small group homes and dormitories), but received intensive follow-up support to make the transition smooth. The following initiatives were taken:

#### **Linking Girls with Vocational Training and Job Placement**

Girls were linked with vocational training courses in different training institutes and centres supported by Save the Children or government. Vocational training was identified as the key solution for making them self-reliant to make the community integration smooth. Four most senior girls attended computer course under a computer training centre of Youth Development Department of the Ministry of Youth. It enhanced their confidence to search employment opportunities in development organisations at local level; now four of them are in fulltime job. Girls also attended 6 months vocational training in industrial sewing and electrical and electronics courses under technical and vocational education and training, Goalanda, a training centre that had been established with the support of Save the Children for children living in brothel and its premises.

Girls in college level and higher studies received additional tutorial support as and when required for achieving better grades. Girls in job placement attended extra

coaching and tutorial fees from 1 month prior to their final exam. During exam time the job-holder girls were on leave without pay while Safe Home carried their living expenses.

Psychosocial expert was hired for providing counselling for girls (receiving vocational training or attending job placement) to assist them to cope with the emotional stress during the transitional period from supervised living arrangement to independent life. Through the support, children were able to learn how to accept their identity, family background and deal with the challenges of their daily lives. The majority of them have successfully moved into self-dependent life from a supervised living arrangement.

Girls of small group home attended group counselling sessions on assertiveness, problem solving skills and coping with stress and anger. Through attending these sessions, girls learnt how to control their own stress and emotions while facing stress in real life.

Girls in job placement also attended group counselling sessions. As most of the girls were adolescents, special support was required for their emotional well-being as well as ensuring their protection in the job environment. Group sessions were organised to help them learn how to control self-defeating thoughts, manage their negative emotions and risk behaviour so that they could continue their job efficiently and perform their responsibilities in the given situation. Mostly cognitive behavioural therapy technique was applied by the counsellors that equipped them with the skills of learning how to cope in challenging environment.

Regular annual learning and reflection workshops were held for all the girls of Safe Home. The sessions focused on reintegration plan, coping with the changes due to transition (supervised living arrangement to independent living) and problem solving skills. Girls from job placement and phased out girls joined the event to share their experience and lessons learnt with all girls of Safe Home.

### **Capacity Building of Staff**

Save the Children and partner staff attended trainings and workshops regularly within and outside of country. These trainings improved capacity and skills of existing staff that ensured better care, protection and support to children. This included training of trainers (ToT) on family group conference model, 5 days long training on ‘anger, stress and burnout management’, 3 days long training on ‘positive discipline’, 5 days training on basic counselling for residential caregivers and other staff to improve their counselling skills as well as to refresh their communication skills. Staff members also attended 5 days ToT on child rights and child protection. After participating in those capacity building activities, the staff have better understanding on protection and rights of vulnerable children.

## **Sensitisation of Mothers/Family Members**

Meetings were organised for mothers and family members to educate them about child rights, child protection, parenting skills so that mothers and other caregivers are able to take care of the children after family reintegration. Through these meetings mothers became more sensitised about the well-being of girls and became actively involved with the process through which girls from Safe Home transitioned to self-reliant lives.

## **Advocacy Initiatives**

Advocacy workshops were organised regularly at district level where government officials, service providers (e.g. health, education and social welfare) and representatives of law enforcement agencies were present. The workshops advocated for ensuring the rights of children whose mothers are involved in sex work at brothels. The workshops aimed to make the community people and service providers involved with the process of reintegration, into wider communities. Workshops were also organised at the local level with participation of government officials, local elites and representatives of School Management Committees and Community-Based Child Protection Committees. The workshops contributed to strengthening the child protection system in and around Daulatdia brothel to ensure children's access to basic services and to reduce stigma and discrimination faced by them.

## **MAJOR ACHIEVEMENTS**

Girls participating in the Safe Home project are better able to protect themselves from abuse and exploitation. Their self-confidence and abilities to meet the challenges of life are much improved, and they have access to education, health and protection services. A total of 120 girls received support from Safe Home since the beginning. Among them, 79 girls have been reintegrated with families/communities through education or marriage, 29 girls have been reintegrated in recent years but linked with Safe Home for emotional support, and 12 girls are in direct care services of Safe Home (will be reintegrated by 2018). 14 Girls are continuing higher education in different universities besides their jobs. 35 Girls have completed Secondary School Certificate (SSC); among them, 21 girls completed Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC); 23 girls received vocational training and among them 18 girls are continuing jobs. Some of the employed girls are renting homes and bringing their mothers outside the brothel.

Sex workers are sensitised on the importance of education of their children, and are empowered to claim rights. Through community discussion and awareness raising about discrimination, children of sex workers experienced increased acceptance within mainstream society. Advocacy with community-based groups and local administration helped in creating a protective environment for children.

### **From Safe Home to Save the Children**

*“Today my dream has come true! I never thought that one day I will be part of Save the Children!! I remember the day when I saw the advertisement. Instantly, I decided to apply for this post, then the call came for the written and oral tests. I was so tensed with the thought – will I be able to get the job? I prepared myself and I sat for the tests. Couple of days passed silently, then Save the Children informed me that I have been selected for the position. I could not control myself, just cried a lot. These were tears of happiness”*, said the 22 years-old Mukti Akhter, a phased out girl of our Safe Home. From 26 August 2015, Mukti became a staff member of Save the Children. She joined as a social worker of Chetona project (implemented by Child Protection and Health, Nutrition and HIV/AIDS), based at Rajbari district. One of her core responsibilities is to form the community-based committees in addition to create awareness among the floating female sex workers and their children on various aspects of child protection issues.

Mukti was 10 years old when she came to the Safe Home. During her 12 years stay in the institution, she completed SSC and HSC examinations. She is now in the 3rd year of BA honours programme in Political Science, studying at Rajbari Degree College. Mukti was with other four girls who were reintegrated with families/community through an educational grant of BDT 300,000 (USD 4,000) deposited under individual bank account. The local project partner KKS facilitated the process. This financial support enabled the girls to receive a monthly stipend (from bank interest) of around BDT 3,000 to manage their day-to-day as well as education- related expenses. Mukti struggled with the money. At this stage she was about to abandon her higher education plan. Considering her situation and also valuing her talent, Safe Home recruited her as a dance instructor for the girls of the home. This changed the course of her life. Mukti gained confidence to be a self-reliant person in life.

Mukti also worked for Shapla Kuri (NGO that provides residential care for the children of sex workers of Faridpur brothel) and gained practical experience of conducting counselling and group sessions. Save the Children supported various skill development programmes, which equipped her with the job skills that she can use now. In her own words, *“Without this support I could not be the person I am today. I had the opportunity to interact with community people and it was a great exposure to learn the societal norms and values – that ultimately helped me to be reintegrated into wider community”*. Mukti enjoys her new identity. She continues, *“Now I dream a complete family life with both parents living under the same roof, my mother will shift from brothel to Rajbari soon, and after completion of my Honors, I shall take admission for my Masters degree. I wish success of all girls of our Safe Home.”* Mukti hopes to rent a house in Rajbari where her parents will join and will live a family life together – a dream she nurtured for long.

## **MAJOR CHALLENGES**

- One of the major challenges was poor support and acceptance of community people regarding reintegration of girls from Safe Home to community. The project understood that without community support, reintegration will not be possible. In most of the cases, mothers do not have any safe accommodation outside the brothel and extended families are not interested to take the children back from Safe Home. Thus, several activities were undertaken to mobilise the community people and to get them involved at union and upazila levels through different advocacy activities. These initiatives made them more sensitised on girls' reintegration process. In this way phased out girls are able to live decently in upazila and union level with support of community people.
- In some cases, it was challenging for the girls to adjust outside Safe Home, as their living arrangement and the way of life has been changed. Staff members had to invest significant amount of time and effort for follow-up and monitoring. Few girls engaged in skills training while continuing higher education were susceptible to poor performance and even drop out. So psychological and emotional support was provided for smooth completion of their studies and vocational training.
- Attitudes of mothers were a challenge in the beginning of Safe Home. Some mothers wanted to take the children back to the brothel to engage them in sex work while their earning capacity decreased. Huge amount of motivational work was required to prevent this from happening.

## **LESSONS LEARNT**

- Providing long-term educational support and linking girls with alternative livelihood options helped them to be self-reliant and get back into family and wider community.
- Rigorous psychosocial support is required while children shift into family and community lives from an institutional setting.
- Having a proper case management system of children living in institutions is important for getting them back into family and community.
- In cases where the mother is living in the brothel and family members are not interested to get the girl back into family due to the mother's involvement in sex work and when identity of the father is missing, reintegration of children is possible only through empowering the children.
- On-going capacity building of staff is required to ensure quality programming and their well-being should also be taken care of, as they deal with difficult situation, while giving care to children in Safe Home and offering support during reintegration.

- Some mothers became largely dependent on Safe Home. In future, initiatives should be taken to ensure active involvement of mothers for any institutional care project from the very beginning, which will support in making them accountable for the well-being of their own children.
- Lack of rigorous assessment on the alternative care options available for children lead to unnecessary institutionalisation (This is relevant for the initial stage of the Safe Home project only). Detailed assessment should be conducted before placing any child in an institution care like Safe Home.
- Community-based alternative care provision is needed for the children of sex workers. In future, if institutional support is required (as a last resort when other alternative care options are not available), then that institution can be run with the financial contribution of the mothers. Most of the mothers have financial capacity for keeping their daughters in a safer place. They consider that Safe Home is the best place for their daughters' safety. So in future, the project can easily motivate mothers to contribute to the expenses related to the care of their children in Safe Home. In fact, some sex workers have already taken initiative to place their daughters with relatives outside the brothel, and they provide the expenses for the child, which shows the willingness of the mothers to contribute financially to ensure that the children have alternative life choices.
- Coordination, linkage and capacity building of the government agencies can create a strong ownership of the government and other like-minded organisations regarding Safe Home and other community-based alternative care options for children of sex workers. Extended support is required from government, service providers and community people for social inclusion of children living in brothels.