



Qualitative Analysis Report

**Life Stories of Survivors & Children and
Young Women At-Risk of Commercial Sexual
Exploitation in Daulatdia, Bangladesh**

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March 2024



About Terre des hommes

Tdh is the leading Swiss organization for children's aid, helping over four million children and their families in more than 30 countries. We aspire to a world in which the rights of children, as defined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, are always respected. Tdh has been working in Bangladesh since 1974, implementing successful relief, recovery, and development projects in climate-vulnerable areas before extending its response to the Rohingya Crisis in 2017. Tdh now operates through four bases in Kurigram, Dhaka, Teknaf, and Ukhiya, implementing responses in Health, WASH, Child Protection, and Migration.

About the project

The research, conducted between November 2023 and March 2024 in Bangladesh, forms the basis of this report, implemented by Terre des hommes in partnership with Mukti Mahila Samity as part of the project titled 'Protecting children and young women from commercial sexual exploitation in Daulatdia, Dhaka, Bangladesh.' The overarching goal of the project is to break the cycle of intergenerational commercial sexual exploitation experienced by children and young women in the Daulatdia brothel, thriving toward a future where children are empowered, protected, and free from violence, abuse, and exploitation. The project has received the Modern Slavery Funding provided by the UK Government's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) for the financial year 2023-24.

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Citation

Muhsina, M., Tabassum, T., Zaved, A., Debnath, R., Kundu, S., Sayem, M., & Afroze, J. (2024). Qualitative Analysis Report: Life Stories of Survivors and Children and Young Women At-Risk of Commercial Sexual Exploitation in Daulatdia, Bangladesh. Terre des hommes. March 2024.

Drawings used in this report are made by the project participants.

Design

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Acknowledgement

We extend our deepest gratitude to the children and young women in Daulatdia, Bangladesh, who have bravely shared their experiences of survival and vulnerability to commercial sexual exploitation. Their courage and openness have been invaluable to this research.

We would like to express our appreciation to the MMS for their assistance in organizing the research participants.

Special thanks are due to Laila Khondkar for her technical review of the report. Additionally, we extend our gratitude to the regional technical team of Tdh – Sukanta Paul (Regional Q&A Advisor – Asia), Mohammad Ehsan ul Islam Chowdhury (Regional Child Protection Advisor – Asia), and Sandhya Sitoula (Migration Regional Programme Coordinator – Asia) – for their insightful review. We are profoundly grateful to Martin Swinchatt, Tdh Bangladesh's Country Representative, for his inspiration and leadership.

Finally, we express our sincere appreciation to the British High Commission in Bangladesh and FCDO for their generous support, which made this project possible. Their commitment to this project has been instrumental in advancing our understanding of this critical issue.

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Introduction

Daulatdia, one of the largest brothels in the world, is situated in Rajbari, Dhaka. An estimated 1,300-1,500 sex workers currently operate within the area, along with over 500 of their children [1]. Although several NGOs have been working for decades to ensure that children of sex workers are not engaged in the same profession, pervasive socio-economic factors such as poverty, unemployment, low wages and social stigma, have made it extremely difficult to sustainably break the inter-generational cycle of sexual exploitation. Children living in Daulatdia face discrimination and barriers to accessing their basic rights from birth. Isolated from mainstream society, they lack positive role models and essential life skills. Parenting in such conditions, marked by single female parenthood, societal stigma, irregular working hours and an unhealthy environment, presents significant challenges.

A qualitative participatory research study was conducted in Daulatdia to surface the dynamics that drive children and young women into commercial sexual exploitation and to identify sustainable solutions to break this intergenerational cycle. The aim of this study was:

- ▶ To build a comprehensive picture of how children and young women perceive their lives and the options they have.
- ▶ To understand how children and young women are driven into and or make choices to enter sex work and how it impacts on their lives.
- ▶ To identify and understand how to contribute towards a future where children are protected, and free from violence, abuse and exploitation.

The research is part of a project implemented by Terre des hommes (Tdh) in partnership with Mukti Mahila Samity (MMS). This project aims to help break the cycle of intergenerational commercial sexual exploitation of children and young women in Daulatdia brothel. The project has been funded by UK government's Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office (FCDO) from November 2023 to March 2024.



[1] CNN (2020): "She was tricked as a teen into prostitution. A decade on, she has no work and faces starvation": <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/05/26/asia/daulatdia-bangladesh-brothel-as-equals-intl/index.html>



Research methodology

2.1 Research Design

The study gathered life stories from 50 children and young women either at risk of or surviving commercial sexual exploitation in the Daulatdia brothel. The research team from Tdh with prior experience in story collection and conducting sensitive research with vulnerable communities were responsible to collect these stories. Unlike traditional in-depth interview method, life story telling sessions allowed the participants to share the narrative of their life

experiences with the researchers. In addition to the primary plan to collect only life stories, four Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) have been conducted

to ensure the inclusion of diverse perspectives, facilitating a collective exploration of the viewpoints of individuals who hold influence in the lives of sex workers.

2.2 Participant selection criteria

The data collection process centred on the collection of life stories, supported by a simple guideline. Researchers initiated conversations in an open manner, utilizing probing questions such as “Tell us about your life” or “Share the story of your growing up.” This approach aimed to create a safe environment so that participants feel comfortable in sharing their experiences authentically and at their own pace, without the constraints of a structured guideline. Moreover, by encouraging participants to delve into topics personally significant to them, rather than those typically pursued by researchers, richer and more nuanced insights were obtained.

Differentiated approaches were adopted for data collection with children at risk and women already involved in sex work. Discussions with women focused on their personal experiences, their journey to the brothel, their methods of coping and their overall living experiences in the area. For children, the conversations were more about their experiences of growing up within a brothel environment. Five female researchers collected all the life stories from 50 participants. The female researchers also facilitated

FGDs with mothers residing in brothels and brothel house owners (typically known as Bariwalis). In contrast, male researchers led FGDs with distinct groups such as shopkeepers and clients of sex workers with whom they had a special relationship (typically known as Babus).

2.3 Data collection

The participant selection criteria were simple – any girl or young women between 12 to 24 years old who are either at the risk of or engaged in sex work in and around the brothel. The at-risk participants were selected from families where either the mother or any other family member is directly involved in sex work, and the child lives either in the brothel or at the close vicinity of the brothel. This approach ensured that the research captured firsthand perspectives from those deeply embedded in the context of commercial sexual exploitation. While selecting the participants the willingness and availability to tell their stories were considered for participation in this research. Initially, MMS compiled a list of potential

participants according to these criteria. While doing this, it was considered that participants were not close relatives. Moreover, individuals involved in intergenerational sex, as well as those who came from the outside, were also identified for inclusion in the participant list.

The sampling strategy for this research involved a targeted approach to identify participants closely connected to the context of commercial sexual exploitation. Initially, potential participants were shortlisted from the implementing partner’s database, which provided a pool of individuals with relevant experiences and backgrounds. Subsequently, these shortlisted candidates were approached to obtain informed consent, ensuring transparency and voluntary participation in the research process. Those who expressed willingness to participate were selected for this study. This sampling approach facilitated the recruitment of participants deeply entrenched in the realities of commercial sexual exploitation, enhancing the richness and depth of the research findings. Out of the 50 storytellers, 15 were children at risk of sexual exploitation and 35 were practicing sex workers (who are actively involved in sex work and reside inside the brothel). Among them 13 were aged between 11-17 years and the remaining 37 were aged between 18-25 years.

2.4 Analytical approach

The research team employed two analytical approaches to examine the data: 1) narrative analysis, focusing on direct causal links and consequences of involvement in sex work and 2) qualitative analysis, which forms the basis of this report, delving into participants’ narratives to grasp the complexities of their lives.

While the narrative analysis explored the drivers that push individuals into sex work and the consequences of coming to brothel, the qualitative analysis aimed for a deeper and nuanced understanding of the complexities involved. Initially qualitative analysis was not part of the plan. However, the team recognized the need for qualitative analysis upon realizing the richness of insights provided by participants. This approach was deemed necessary to gain a deeper level understanding of the lives of these individuals and the interconnected nature of commercial sexual exploitation.

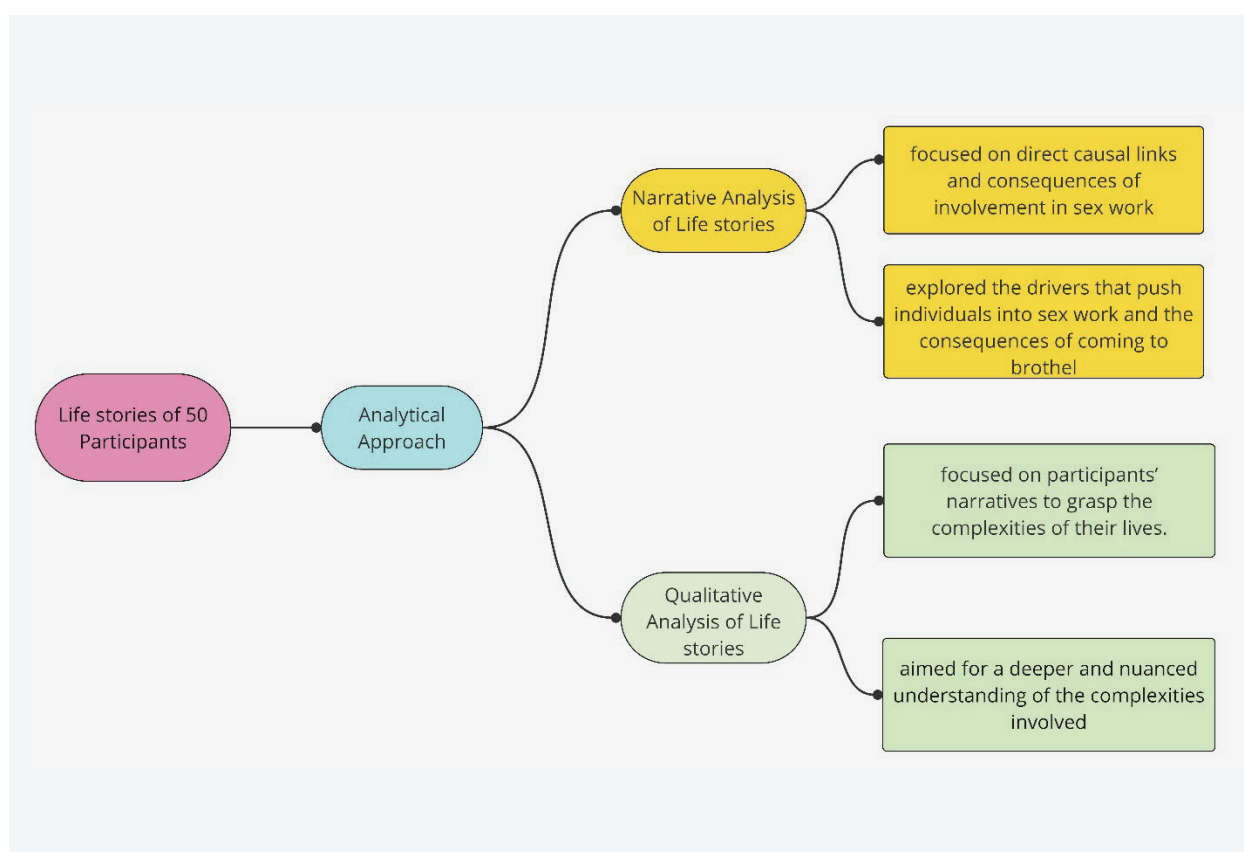


Figure 1: Qualitative analytical framework in a flowchart

All the interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed by the research team. Given that all researchers were fluent in Bangla, translation of the interviews was not necessary. Instead, the Bangla transcripts were uploaded into the software Dedoose a qualitative data analysis software, to code the entire dataset. Dedoose was chosen for its collaborative functionality across teams. Both inductive and deductive approaches were employed in constructing the code tree. Initially, some codes were prepopulated based on drivers identified during the narrative analysis. Additionally, researchers added further codes during the coding process, resulting in a total of 108 codes. Subsequently, a team of seven individuals convened to

ensure a shared understanding of the meaning of each code. Codes were refined and reorganized. The full sample of stories was then randomly divided among the team, with all 50 stories coded. Regular meetings were held between the coding team to address any issues in the process.

Following individual coding by seven researchers, a collective analysis workshop [2] was organized. Individually, researchers received coded extracts focused on specific themes and were tasked with identifying elements that were new and surprising, exploring areas that could deepen understanding, and identify information useful for facilitating positive

❗ [2] Collective analysis in qualitative research refers to a collaborative process where researchers work together to analyze data and interpret findings. Through collective analysis, researchers can benefit from different viewpoints, challenge assumptions, and arrive at more nuanced understandings of the research topic. It promotes transparency, reflexivity, and peer validation, ultimately contributing to the richness and depth of qualitative research outcomes. For more detail see: Burns, D. et al (2017). 'Patterns and Dynamics of Bonded Labour, Child Labour and Child Marriage in the Nepali Eastern Terai: Findings from Life Story Analysis'. Brighton: Institute of Development Studies.

change. Participants documented their findings on sticky notes, which were then discussed collectively in small groups and later in the broader group to deepen the exploration of issues together. Subsequently, key observations were discussed within the larger group, leading to the collective clustering of codes into 16 themes.

Four researchers then individually wrote analyses on each theme, producing separate 16 files. These thematic write-ups were later compiled into the qualitative analysis report. Throughout the report, the analytical perspectives of individual researchers were integrated into different sections. The qualitative analysis significantly enriched our understanding of the drivers and pathways into sex work, as well as the broader experiences within the brothel and its surrounding environment. This analytical process enabled the identification of recommendations for further action.

Many of the themes outlined in this report are interrelated with multilinear connections. For example, the separation of parents can lead to the unattendance of the child, which in turn can lead the girl into vulnerable situations, ultimately resulting in trafficking. On the other hand, it is also linked with multidimensional causalities, such as economic crises leading to child marriage, and child marriage exacerbating economic crises. For better understanding, some themes are kept as stand-alone, while others are integrated into bigger themes.

2.5 Ethical considerations

Throughout the story collection process, utmost priority was placed on preserving the privacy and confidentiality of the storytellers. Prior to the sessions, storytellers were contacted to determine their preferred timing, and they were granted complete freedom to select the storytelling venue. Some chose to share their stories at the Project Office and others opted for the comfort of their own homes.

To maintain the confidentiality of the process, strict measures were taken to ensure that only the storyteller and the designated story collector were present during each session. Written consent was obtained from each participant, with additional consent sought from parents or guardians for individuals under eighteen.

Trust-building activities, such as small icebreaking activities like puzzles and drawing were used before beginning the story collection process.

Before commencing data collection, efforts were made to ensure that participants provided informed consent, realising their voluntary engagement and understanding of research objectives. Each individual was given the opportunity to freely decide whether they wished to participate, with no pressure exerted. During the interview process, great care was taken to create a safe and comfortable environment conducive to open dialogue. Interviews were conducted in private settings, allowing participants to express themselves freely without fear of judgment or reprisal.

By fostering an atmosphere of trust and honesty, we sought to honour the unique experiences and perspectives shared by each participant. In recognition of the time and effort contributed by participants, standard compensation was provided upon completion of the interview.

Throughout the data collection phase, our adherence to ethical guidelines remained strong. Sensitivity to the emotional well-being of participants was paramount, and no pressure was placed on individuals to discuss topics that they found uncomfortable or distressing. Additionally, all questions posed during interviews were carefully crafted to ensure they were respectful and non-intrusive, reflecting our commitment to upholding ethical standards.

Above all, the privacy and dignity of participants were safeguarded at every stage of the research process. Confidentiality measures were rigorously implemented to protect the identities and personal information of participants, thereby honouring their trust and confidentiality. In summary, our approach to data collection was guided by principles of empathy, respect, and reflexivity. By prioritizing ethical considerations and treating participants with the utmost dignity and respect, we aimed to conduct research that is not only academically rigorous but also ethically sound and socially responsible.

Moreover, considering the sensitivity of the research topic, proactive measures were taken to prioritize the well-being of the team. Regular debriefing sessions were organized among researchers, providing a structured platform for processing emotional responses and accessing necessary support. These

sessions fostered an environment where team members felt comfortable expressing their thoughts and emotions, facilitating mutual support and understanding. Additionally, professional counselling services were made available to researchers to address any psychological distress that may arise during the research process. Furthermore, a peer

support system was established within the research team which ensured a sense of solidarity, guidance, and encouragement. This served as a valuable source of emotional support, enabling researchers to navigate the challenges of their work with resilience and compassion.







Findings and discussions

This section discussed the factors influencing the involvement of children and women in sex work and commercial sexual exploitation.

3.1 Economic hardship and understanding women's engagement in sex work

In most cases, where girls are either sold to brothels or deceived by someone is often rooted in economic hardship. In this section, we will discuss cases where

economic crisis directly led girls to engage in sex work or where family members sent them to brothels.

Economic crisis for outsiders of the brothel

From the following story, we understand that the girl initially sought employment at a cloth colouring factory. However, faced with the unsafe conditions of the workplace, she made the decision to enter into sex work without actively seeking other options. Thus, while economic hardship may not have been the primary driver in this scenario, there is intricate relationship between the absence of a guardian and concerns regarding workplace safety which were the key factors influencing her decision.

'After around 15 days, when everyone left the garment factory, the guard did not let me leave. He told me, there is this place, you have to do bad work (sex work), do you want to go? You will stay and earn on your own. I told myself that so many people wanted to harass me in the factory, but I never gave anyone the chance to even touch me and now this is happening to me.'

-Female, 22

According to the following excerpt, economic hardship was the primary driver for which the sex worker had to stay in the brothel.

"I am living here for many days. After staying here for quite sometimes I hear that my mother is suffering from cancer. All my siblings abandoned her, but I can not do that as after all she is my mother. I gave her a lot of money for treatment. But to pay that money, I had to take a lot of loan and then I am spending my life to pay back that loan"

– Female, 18

Economic crisis for insiders of the brothel

Although the respondents claimed that they could earn more money through sex work, we found that they also faced economic crises within their families. As their mothers aged and became unable to generate sufficient income, coupled with the escalating burden of their mother's loans, the daughters opted to engage themselves in sex work. This profession was familiar to them, having been exposed to it since childhood, with mothers, sisters, and other family members already engaged in it. The excerpts presented here depict girls chose sex work to assist their mothers.

"My mother faced an accident when she was 35-40 years old. the doctors strictly said she needs proper bed rest. by then house owner was asking for the rent, it hit our ego, then I told myself I need to pay back the money

anyhow, I left education and then I told my house owner what do I need to do to pay back the money? She then said you have to stay for one year"-Female

Mother push the daughter for sex work

The following excerpt highlights the absence of responsibility taken by the father towards the family, leading the mother to see involving the daughter in sex work as the only means of survival.

"When my mother brought me here, our family circumstances were not good. My father was engaged in gambling, and eventually, my mother sought refuge in this brothel. It seemed preferable to remain here than at home, where conflicts and abuse were rampant. Here we find peace... although my mother keeps on asking about money all the time."

Female, 23

Stories from family members: mother and sister

A parallel narrative emerged concerning the mothers and sisters of the sex workers, whose own mothers were also involved in the profession. These mothers, facing economic difficulties, similarly resorted to the brothel to overcome their economic hardship.

"My father abandoned both me and my mother, without any inquiry or communication. Then my mom became helpless. At the age of 10 or 11, I had personal expenses that my mother couldn't afford. With no money, my mother ended up here in the brothel. All my mother ever wanted was to raise her child properly"

– Female, 19

The girls residing within the brothel, who were not actively involved in sex work, also reported economic crisis as a reason for their mothers and sisters' entry into the profession.

“When it comes to hardships, we’ve faced our share of scarcity. My mother has three sisters and one brother. My paternal grandmother used to make pithas (Bengali sweets) and my mother would travel around in a van to sell them. That’s how the family sustained itself. Since a very young age, she had to take care of immense responsibilities as the eldest daughter. Yet, the struggle persists.” – Female, 16

The above discussions illustrate that economic crisis stands out as one of the primary factors driving women and girls into brothels. However, upon critical examination, it becomes apparent that the absence of social safety and familial responsibilities also play considerable influence in these situations. In such critical context, both girls and their mothers perceive sex work as the most straightforward path to survival. Moreover, access to sex work was also relatively easier for them.

3.2 Exploitation and fraud: drivers behind sex work

Each instance of being sold is intertwined with narratives of fraud and deceit. The discussion focuses on how sex workers are sold and deceived, identifying the perpetrators and common criteria leading to their exploitation. Through the narratives of sex workers and intergenerational accounts, we reveal stories of deception spanning across generations.

Selling and fraud cases

The perpetrators included:

- ▶ Close family members: including husbands and mothers
- ▶ Known individuals
- ▶ Unknown individuals

Additionally, we explored a kidnapping case, as it falls within the realm of sold cases.

Sold by husband

We unearthed numerous accounts of husbands engaging intermediaries to sell women to brothels. In certain cases, marital discord prevailed, while in others, the relationship with the husband seemed

devoid of violence or strife. Nevertheless, in both circumstances, husbands resorted to deceit and falsehoods. The common *modus operandi* involved husbands luring their wives under the pretext of visiting specific locations. Upon reaching their destination, they would entrust their wives to intermediaries or Sardarnis, pledging to return but failing to do so. Notably, both love and arranged marriages featured among instances where women were sold.

“At the time of my mother’s marriage, the Dhaka airport was relatively new. Her husband suggested to visit there to watch airplanes fly, which ultimately led to her being sold.” Female, 17

Sold by mother

In the following account, a participant’s mother introduced her to sex work. When the participant objected to this arrangement, her mother resorted to selling her into the brothel.

“My mother lived in Dhaka. While my father went to work, Amma remained at home, keeping me confined to the room. Eventually, she took me to someone else’s room in Dhaka, which I didn’t comprehend at the time. Later, I was instructed to engage in this work, but I refused. Consequently, my mother beat me.”- Female, 22

Deceived by false job offers and assistance

From the excerpts, it is evident that participants readily placed trust in individuals offering them employment or assistance during their vulnerable circumstances, including unstable marital relations, precarious financial situations of their parents, elopement from home, or departure from their in-laws’ residence. A common trait among these women is their high emotional susceptibility and tendency to believe others without much thought, regardless of the person’s familiarity or the duration of acquaintance, often within just one or two days.

"I used to stay at home, then someone approached me and told me that there was work opportunities and then sold me off here. He told me that there was a job in the garments factory. He suggested why should I sit idle at home. So, I ended up here, and I've been here for six years now." - Female, 19

Emotional blackmailing and sale

Here, we emphasize excerpts to show how unknown people managed to emotionally manipulate her by establishing false relationships.

"I was coming to Dhaka for a visit [to my aunt]. But honestly, I didn't know my way around here. Couldn't remember where I needed to get off or where they live. Then this woman told me, 'You know, if I had a daughter like you, I'd have married her off by now. I've got no one to call my own daughter.' And then she said, 'Why don't you stay at my place?' She also said that I may find a job in the garment industry and earn my own living, build my own future. She gave me food and I was able to sleep. And then, in the afternoon, she called the Sardarni who took me to the brothel. The woman whom I trusted actually sold me off." - Female, 18

Kidnapped and sold

We came across two instances of kidnapping where unattended girls were abducted by unknown individuals. In one case, despite the girl's school being distant from her house, she was left alone. She mentioned that the location where she was kidnapped was notorious for frequent child abductions, including boys. This area is geographically close and connected to the Daulatdia brothel via the Padma River. In another incident, a girl was kidnapped by an acquaintance while staying at her cousin's place without parental supervision. "I used to live in my village and then I was brought here. All I can recall is this guy, all dressed up, wearing a cap, and he has got this spray thing in his hands. Next thing I know he sprayed me with that and it's like I was unconscious for long before I got my senses back." - Female, 23

"So, there's this guy, my uncle. My sister was living in the capital, and I came to visit her and my cousins. This uncle of mine, he was staying at this place too. He gave me something to eat, and after that, it's like everything went blank. Next thing I know, I'm being sold off for BDT 50,000 (Pound 375). I stayed with him for a couple of months, then I started living on my own. But when I tried to leave as I wasn't feeling right, this woman, she told me I was sold here and that I had to work. I begged her, but she scared me and forced me to stay" - Female, 20

The girls' experience of being deceived by someone they trusted and entering relationships with them is reiterated in the FGD we had with the shopkeepers. This highlights how easily they get into the trap of romantic relationships and become tangled in the illusion of a better life.

"Sometimes girls engage in relationships, and by deception, they are sold here in the brothel. So, the feeling of self-esteem gets shattered as she thinks she has already been deceived by one and what else can be done to her with her chastity. So, she remains here in this place being a sex worker." – FGD with Shopkeepers

3.3 Marriage dynamics and prevalent drivers of sex work

This section unveils the intricacies of marriage in the lives of sex workers from the Daulatdia brothel. We specifically address marriages that occurred prior to their involvement in sex work. It delves into the nature of these marriages, the circumstances surrounding their marriages, and the challenges they encountered post-marriage. Furthermore, it sheds light on the consequences of these marriages, including any instances of oppression or exploitation they may have experienced.

The women who were married before entering the brothel were all married before the age of 18, with some cases occurring as young as 12 or 13 years old.

"How old was I at that time? Thirteen years. I know it might sound like I'm making stuff up, but seriously, as far as I can remember, the first time I ever saw menstrual blood was in that month. The same month they were discussing about my marriage. Yeah, my first period. I didn't really understand much of it at the time."-Female, 22

In most cases, marriages were arranged by parents or stepmothers, although there were a few cases of love marriages. Love marriages usually happened within local communities, often supported by communication through mobile phones. A lack of self-awareness and foresight was common among them. Nevertheless, it's important to acknowledge that parents forcing children to marry early also influenced children's decision for elopements and love marriages.

"I was taking my first term exams in ninth grade and did not want to get married. I used to talk with a boy over phone, so when my family found out, they arranged my marriage. I agreed out of frustration because I was facing a lot of pressure from my family. I believe we talked for about fifteen days before the wedding was arranged. I have never seen him before."-Female, 18

Despite their young age, the girls felt compelled to obey their boyfriends' wishes. In some cases, they found it difficult to strongly refuse the idea of eloping from home, even if they didn't want to.

"So, my boyfriend sent his cousin to call me. I went to him, and he said, 'Come with me.' I was like, 'How can I go in this state, wearing just one dress?' There were family members around, so I refused to go. But because I loved him, I felt compelled to follow his wish. Eventually, I left my family's house." -Female

There are several causes of forced marriage for the girls, with poverty being a significant factor as mentioned by the respondents. In the following

excerpts, we found instances where the groom was already married and had a child. Even after hearing this, the respondent's mother agreed to the marriage.

"Yeah, so back when I was in ninth grade... I got married. I was pretty slim, and that's what caught my husband's eye, I guess, so he decided to marry me. He had been married before, you know, in another place, and there was a son from that marriage. But his wife left him for another man. I mean, even after hearing all this, my mother agreed to marry me off as we were from a poor background."-Female, 24

The respondent mentioned that the separation between parents is also a cause for girls' forced marriage. When the father remarries and the stepmother wants to remove the girl from the home, arranging her marriage is seen as the best solution for them.

Challenges faced by girls after marriage

The participants told that after getting married they did not see any positive changes in their lives. Some had husbands who had been married before and had children, which brought more difficulties into their lives. Post-marriage, they encountered different forms of abuse and exploitation, which eventually led some of them to resort to sex work. Furthermore, many of these women had husbands who were much older than them, creating a significant generation gap in their relationships.

Child marriage and violation

Girls endured humiliation and physical abuse after getting married at a young age. The next passage demonstrates how one girl suffered humiliation at her in-laws' residence, leading to significant mental distress. Despite being just a child and having no alternative but to reside with her in-laws, she felt powerless to protest against the mistreatment she faced.

"So, I was there for about six months, and if my mom brought any home-cooked meal for us during that time, they'd say we're poor. They'd make a show of throwing it in

front of everyone, saying in a mocking tone that 'This is what they brought for us', and everyone would just laugh. They'd mock us when we made pitha and brought it over; it'd end up being a joke among people, like, 'Who brought this stuff?' He'd torment me endlessly. Sometimes he'd make me stay out on the balcony, saying stuff like, 'You're no better than the dog out here.' It was constant torture... No, he never mentioned dowry, but he sure loved to beat and torture me like this. And whenever I'd sit down to eat, he'd make remarks, like, 'Your parents aren't here to feed you, so eat what you have.' – Female, 19

Physical torture was very common in their conjugal life. Following the marriage, the child entered into the world of child labour within her in-laws' house, bearing the burden of all the household chores. Additionally, dowry played a significant role in the physical abuse she faced.

"So, I'd be working all day long, sometimes till eleven at night. And what's worse, I'd constantly be getting beaten. They were really poor. My husband would beat me over dowry. He'd say, 'Bring the money, but who am I supposed to ask for it? I can't explain this to them.' After I got married, I slowly started to understand. This isn't my father's house, it's not my stepmother's home either, it's my father-in-law's house." - Female, 22

In most of the cases, their husbands were addicted to drugs and lacked sufficient income to support the family. Despite their guardian's belief that marriage would improve their daughter's lives, it actually worsened the situation for these girls' post-marriage.

Child marriage and separation

Child marriage often sets in motion a chain of events that is linked to domestic violence, causing separation and ultimately leading to the entry into the brothel. The vulnerability and powerlessness inherent in child brides render them susceptible to various forms

of abuse within their marriages. As they navigated the challenges of married life at a young age, they encountered physical, emotional, and sexual violence perpetrated by their husbands or in-laws. This cycle of abuse, coupled with the lack of support and resources, pushed these young girls further into isolation and desperation. In some cases, the unbearable circumstances drove them to seek refuge outside their marital homes, only to find themselves with limited options and resources. The allure of financial stability and independence in the brothel industry may appear as a bleak but viable alternative.

Extramarital relationships were another common feature in their conjugal life. We found some cases where husbands had extra-marital relationships, leading to violence, separation, and eventually divorce.

"So, after the baby was born, I headed over to my parents' place. And then, after I left... I mean, what was I supposed to think about my husband, right? And then, out of the blue, I find out he's messing around with my own brother's wife. Can you believe it? Like, seriously, what a mess. But, you know, he's still the one I fell for, my first and only love. I couldn't even wrap my head around it when I saw him sneaking out of my sister in law's room one rainy night... I was just trembling, asking him why, and all he had to say was to mind my own business, threatening to leave me if I said anything. Like, seriously?" -Female, 24

Pressure for marriage and back to the brothel

From the following excerpt, we learned that the girl who experienced violence in married life does not want to go back to that life again. In her perspective, the brothel and engagement in sex work appeared preferable to marriage. When her parents forced her into a second marriage, she protested and returned to the brothel. After separating from her husband, the girl stayed in the brothel but did not start sex work. When she returned home, as she did not like the brothel environment, her parents forced her to marry again.

"So, like, here I am again, after 13 years, getting married all over again, but this time it's outside, you know? But it's not like I'm considered impure or anything in this place. I stuck around for a bit after arriving, but

honestly, I got bored really quick just looking around. Like, how does anyone escape from this same old routine, you know? So, I told my mother I will leave this place. When I got back home, it was like I was right back in the middle of that same chaos. There was another marriage proposal coming my way, but my child wasn't even grown up. How am I supposed to take care of him if I tie the knot again? Like, sure, I might end up getting married and having another child, but is that really how my life's going to roll on? I don't think so. I told them, 'Even if it's [the brothel] a bad place, it's still better for me than leaving my child.' So, yeah, I came back... I think I was like 15 or 16 at that time."-Female, 24

The findings presented here reveals that marriage failed to bring happiness to the girls and women, with their parents and guardians prioritizing alleviating their own burdens over the safety and well-being of their daughters. The participants experienced significant levels of family violence, both physical and psychological, after their marriage, likely exacerbated by their age and lack of ability to exercise their agency.

3.4 Lack of social safety for girls

This section sheds light into the unsafe childhood experienced by sex workers in Daulatdia brothel. It explores the nature of oppression, exploitation, and violence they faced before coming into the brothel, as well as how their childhood memories became traumatic. Additionally, it discusses the various avenues through which exploitation occurs and how children are deprived of their rights. The analysis presented here two types of violence: sexual and physical. The childhood of sex workers was found to be very oppressive and exploitative. This absence of social safety serves as a significant factor driving their involvement in sex work. Various actors, including parents, family members, workplace dynamics, and external influences contributed to the pervasive lack of social safety experienced by these women.

Lack of safety in family

Instances of physical and mental abuse were all too frequent, with one particularly distressing case involving a girl's own father as the perpetrator of sexual abuse.

"My father hugged me and cried. I cried along with my father. After crying, he took me home and gave me water, clothed me, bathed me, and fed me. He did everything: rub oil on my head and braid my hair. That night, he raped me. He was my biological father; I shared this with some people in the community. But nobody believed. I told my mother too. What my mother said is, "Bad people like him will die in a car accident." I asked, "What about my life?" My father kicked me out from there." – Female, 18

Girls left unattended by parents most vulnerable during their childhood. Parental separation and remarriage often left them neglected. The following excerpt illustrates how a maternal uncle seized the opportunity to sexually exploit a girl, with no avenue for justice as she lacked access to any support.

"My maternal uncle had sex with me. But nobody knew about it. It was like this big secret. Then one day, my cousin recorded a video on his phone and showed to everyone. That's why it became known. Uncle had sex with me twice before that, but nobody was aware of it. Then my grandparents came. I told them, but they did nothing, as he was their son. They asked me not to say anything. My mother also abandoned me. So, everyone just forgot about it. People started to say that I was just like my mother." - Female, 19

Many of the individuals who were married before entering the brothel experienced physical, mental, and sexual violence at the hands of their husbands.

"My husband beat me for the dowry. He used to say that you should bring money. But who will give me this money? I'm unable to clarify it to them." Female, 18

Social safety and law enforcement

The narratives of the participants illustrate that there was no avenue for seeking justice or receiving support against exploitation. The child's voice goes unheard.

"My uncle was doing sexual harassment from the beginning. But he kept it a secret from others about it. Again, my uncle was in slightly privileged circumstances, and he had some goats. The uncle's circumstances are somewhat better than any of ours. So, Uncle provided cash to the chiefs of the village as well as the police. All of them said it [sexual abuse] occurred somewhere else. Maybe on the way to school. But it was not like that. The incident was recorded, and I had that proof. They also broke the phone. So that no one can see that recording." -Female, 19

The participants in the described scenarios faced significant obstacles in receiving social justice. All the participants depicted that they faced various forms of abuse, including physical, sexual, and mental harassment, without any support from their families or society. The lack of support and accountability at every level of society contributed to their inability to seek justice for the injustices they endured.

Lack of safety in the workplace

Workplace for women and girls is not safe, as there is no safeguarding reporting channel. In the following excerpts, the employer, even the guard, tried to exploit the girl. Many sex workers reported unsafe workplaces outside the brothel.

"I've been working in a garments factory on embroidery. After around 15 days of work, one day everyone left the garments factory. The gatekeeper at the factory didn't let me leave when everyone else did. When I arrived, he clutched me tightly and tugged. He closed the gate behind me. When everyone else left, he kept the gate open. But when I tried to leave, he closed the gate again. He wouldn't let me go." -Female, 22

For the following girls, while she was working in the garment industry, her mother was employed as a sex worker in the brothel. Despite her mother's efforts to keep her daughter away from the brothel, circumstances led her to return to be with her mother, ultimately resulting in her engagement in sex work.

"I used to sew hems on t-shirts. It's 3 a.m. and time for breakfast. Our group had left, leaving me alone. As I sat there eating, I realized I seldom engage in conversation at Garments, neither with the men nor the women. Then one of the managers, approached me with an indecent offer. I declined. The day passed, but the next day he repeated the same proposal, adding a threat of termination, 'if you don't agree, I will fire you'."
-Female, 23

Children often are given false promise to get better opportunities for work and often they are forced to work as housemaids. Some of the participants mentioned that they were sexually abused by their employers while working as housemaids.

"I lived in a single residence for five years. There was a boy. He forced me to have sex. I didn't have the courage to tell anyone. That's why I left the house. I went to another house. In the other house as well, the men often stared at my body. Eventually, I thought, if they are focusing on my body only, then let me go to the brothel and move on!" -Female, 21

Concerns for daughters' safety

Mothers harboured concerns about their daughters' safety. In the following excerpt, this apprehension served as a motivating factor for mothers to engage in sex work. In the Bangladeshi context, the absence of a male guardian renders girls even more susceptible to vulnerability.

"So, like, out of nowhere, my dad just cut off. His phone was switched off. We couldn't find him anywhere. And my mother, she's freaking out. Meanwhile, I was growing up, becoming this young girl. And then my mom started panicking, like, 'I'm alone, I don't have a husband.' She's worried that when her daughter will go to school then bad boys may tease her. Mother was scared, thinking she's on her own, no man to protect us, cover our expenses, especially for her daughter. And that's when she thought of entering into this brothel." - Female, 19

Lack of guardian and social safety

The lack of a guardian is an important cause of the lack of social safety for girls. Without parents, nobody wants to take responsibility for the child. The death of parents, separation, or divorce creates a gap in social safety for the children. This also happened for the respondents and their mothers.

"After I was born, my mother got married to someone else. Later, my mother abandoned me. I grew up with my aunt and uncle. My uncles did not allow me to eat, read, or give anything. Later, the aunts hated me too. Uncles and aunts used to beat and insult me." -Female, 18

One of the respondents told, how she discovered a motherly figure as a sex worker during her early childhood. With her parents separated and a harsh stepmother, she sought affection elsewhere. Upon meeting this woman, who later she came to know was involved in sex work, and experiencing her genuine love and care, the girl felt a strong urge to run away with her.

Even if someone within the brothel endeavours to seek out alternative means of livelihood and slowly break free from that environment, societal perceptions and stigma from those outside often trap them in a cycle of abuse and exploitation.

"They offered to teach me sewing and pay me 600 takas. They promised that once I finish the course, I'd even receive a sewing machine. But when I went to check it out, I found there was abuse too. We weren't taught the basics like how to stain or cut cloth beforehand. The instructor is supposed to guide us, but instead, he took advantage, holding our hands too closely to demonstrate. It made me uncomfortable, like he was touching too intimately." -Female, 19

It points out extreme violations of child rights among all respondents. Lack of social safety at every stage is identified as a significant factor driving individuals into sex work. Some choose sex work over facing sudden insecurities in their families or workplaces. Despite hidden fears about the outside world, girls and women often feel safer in the brothel, where they can control their work and income to certain extent.

3.5 Intergenerational influence and continuation of sex work

This section delves into the influence of family members, who have been involved in sex work and living in the Daulatdia brothel. The aim is to understand how intergenerational chains persist and why breaking this cycle is challenging, leading to the continuation of sex work for many children within the brothel.

Family members involved in sex work

From the stories we gathered, we found that family members such as maternal grandmothers, mothers, sisters, maternal aunts, and cousins were involved in sex work, and some girls and women later became influenced by them to engage in sex work themselves. We did not find any relatives from the paternal side. This might be because families of fathers are not residing in the area. Married mothers or grandmothers who were divorced or separated were also involved in sex work. Those who were engaged in sex work before marriage often became mothers through their customers or Babus. In most cases, these fathers do not take responsibility for the child. While some Babus stay in the brothel and act as fathers or family members, their families reside outside the brothel.

How children came to know about their mothers' work

Some mothers attempted to keep their daughters away from the brothel environment. Among them, some kept their daughters in the village, some rented a separate house outside the brothel, and some enrolled them in the daycare centre established by an NGO.

"I used to live outside. I did not live here. We had a home outside. My grandmother, sisters, and I lived there. My mother used to live here. There is a home outside, and I used to spend my days and nights there." -Female, 22

Those who were unable to keep their children separate from them kept their children with them but attempted to hide their profession. In most cases, daughters came to know about their mother's profession from other persons such as friends, neighbours, and relatives.

"My mother did not tell me that. Can you say that to anyone? One day, I hurried into the home and found a guy lying alone. Mom went to the store to get some cold drinks. I hated to see this. After that, I left the house. I then questioned a few close friends, and they suggested several ideas to me. And I do have some understanding now that I'm a bit older. Mom didn't say that." – Female, 13

Mothers unable to protect daughters.

Mothers who were already involved in sex work didn't compel their daughters to follow the same path. However, in many cases, they also didn't make efforts to discourage their daughters from entering the profession. This trend is highlighted in the following excerpt.

"The doctor advised her to refrain from sex work and advised bed rest. The landlord was in dire need of money, which led to distress for my mother, who would often cry. They would speak disparagingly, suggesting it was a

matter of honour. Consequently, I dropped off from my studies, determined to do whatever was necessary. When I asked what I could do to settle the debt, he replied, "If you want to repay the money, then you'll have to stay." I agreed, asking how long I'd be required to stay, to which he responded, "For a year." Realizing words alone wouldn't resolve the situation and no one else would come to our aid, I reluctantly accepted." -Female, 19

However, we found one excerpt where, the mother registered her daughter as a sex worker. The respondent was very young and unable to make her own decisions. She relied on her mother, believing that her mother would do what was best for her.

"Worried about her expenses and the expenses of her child, my mother quietly started working in the Daulatdia brothel. Then she put me in another place. I used to live there. My mother was a sex worker. Then my mother brought me here on her own. I was at my grandmother's house. Anyway, then my mother took me to the brothel. When my mother brought me, many people said very unpleasant things to her. My mother didn't listen to anyone. My mother asks me, "What do you want to do?" I tell my mother, "I make all my decisions based on you. I have to do whatever you say". Now that we've learned the difference between right and wrong, if my mother tells me to do something wrong, I won't do it. I didn't know that then, but I do now." -Female, 19

Kinship care and sense of responsibility towards parents

The following excerpt depict how a girl demonstrated a caring and loving attitude towards her mother. Despite the girl's desire to break free from the brothel, her mother opposed the idea. Ultimately, the girl was unable to leave the brothel, choosing to remain with her mother.

"I told my mother many times, 'We'd better go out and work. But you don't need to be here'. She said, 'No, I'll stay here'. My sister turned into a nasty person and after that me also. My mother wanted both girls to be in a bad place. When I said to my mother, sister, and brother, 'Let's go. I'm not staying here anymore'. And my mother said, 'No. I'm not leaving this place. That's how my life has been'. I said, 'This is your life, not ours'. Then she said, 'You can leave if you want to'. We were young. Where are we going to go without Mom? Mother has adapted herself to this place." – Female, 23

It was noted that many respondents engaged in sex work to alleviate their mothers' sufferings, provide support, and repay loans taken by their mothers. They exhibited a deep emotional attachment and harboured a soft spot for their mothers. This sentiment likely stemmed from witnessing their mothers' struggles since early childhood. Additionally, without their mothers, they lacked close familial connections. They consistently acknowledged their mothers' contributions to their lives and upbringing.

"My mother and I have lived here since I was little. I was born here. After seeing my mother struggle, I tried everything, but I couldn't. Later, I thought whether a girl like me could save her mother's life. I have horrible luck, therefore I am here. If I get lucky, I would be able to get outside. I think I have become a nasty person by coming to this place." – Female, 23

Besides, not only do they feel responsible for their mother, but also for their sisters and other family members they have.

"My older sister warned me, 'This place is not good. You shouldn't start working in this place'. Then I found out my older sister had appendicitis, then she had a baby-my first niece, her father left. My older brother was taken away by the police. We were helpless.

One day I had food, the next I didn't. Then I started to do sex work. There's no one to see my family. What am I supposed to do?" – Female, 23

Inherited practice of the brothel

The girls who were at risk of commercial sexual exploitation reported that their families and mothers are very supportive and would not push them into sex work. However, the following girl, while confident about her own safety due to her family's support, describes how a girl can still become bound to engage in sex work in the brothel.

"Yeah, it happens sometimes where the mother is pushing the child into this path. But the girl doesn't agree; she wants to study. Take for instance, MMS, they've taken in many girls at the safe home where there's also a school, no money required. Some mothers leave their children there. When the girl grows up, some mothers take her from there and push her into this life. But the girl doesn't want it. The authority does not want to let her go, but if the mothers push too much, then they call the police. There's this place called Rehabilitation Centre for the Socially Disadvantaged Girls. If the police keep the girls there, their mothers can't force them into this anymore". – Female, 19

Normalization of sex work

Additionally, for individuals raised in the brothel since childhood, the environment has become their norm. We observed that some of the at-risk girls provide strong justifications for their mothers, sisters, and other family members engaging in sex work. The respondents exhibit a normalized attitude towards the sex work of their immediate family members. One girl justified her sister's engagement in sex work in the following manner:

"We were living in a terrible family condition when my sister started this job. My father doesn't give us money, my mother has quit her job, so the family is very poor. We would have perished from starvation if my sister hadn't started this sex work. So, my sister joined the work after struggling a lot." – Female, 19

Children also have easy access to drugs and customers, as these are in very close proximity to them. This is also a strong reason for normalizing these things to them. The following excerpt validates this notion:

"No, my parents separated a long time ago. My mother had an affair with another man. I used to call him Uncle. I used to work at his grocery store. I was about 11 or 11.5 years old. Then my mother broke up with the uncle. I joined sex work. My mother was getting old and could not attract customers as someone of my age could" – Female, 18

Sex workers, having lived a life of poverty without any opportunity for savings, now look up to their daughters as a source of financial security. However, some mothers resign to the belief that no one will marry their daughter because of their impoverished background. Thus, they feel compelled to involve their daughter in work that may not align with their aspirations but seems necessary for their survival. This cycle of economic hardship and limited opportunities perpetuates their situation, as revealed in discussions with individuals familiar with their circumstances.

"A woman who is older now and she has a girl child. She could not do any savings for herself and her family during her whole life, but the child is beautiful and young. Now she is suffering from poverty, so she wants her child to earn, and the mother wants to have some savings through the child's income. The mother usually thinks that no one will take her daughter to marry as she is born here, so she has to be involved in this work, and in this way, they are leading their life". – FGD with Babus.

3.6 Brothel environment

This chapter dives into the realities of Daulatdia brothel. It explores the setting, touching upon elements like dance bars, alcohol, drug use and the grim truth of forced labour. Furthermore, it also highlights the experiences of young girls who find themselves drawn into the brothel, with a focus on their age of entry, the challenges of adjustment, and the hardships they face. Furthermore, the chapter highlights the perspectives of those born within brothels, shedding light on how their surroundings shape their experience. It also considers the viewpoint of the sex workers, what they perceive about their work, exploitation, and experience of betrayal.

"Can a girl engage in sex work with five to six people in one day, will she stay mentally stable? But maybe they can, there are girls who take around ten to fifteen clients per day, they need to take medicine." - Female, 18

Age at which girls are transported to brothels for sex work

The narratives of research participants indicate that girls between the ages of 10 and 15 are typically sold into brothels, and within 10 to 12 days of the sale, the girls are forced to have intercourse. If someone has not yet begun to menstruate, she is given medication to induce menstruation, and then she is forced to engage in sexual activity.

"My period did not start when I came here. I started to menstruate after sometime. Then I started sex work." – Female, 18

"I was ten years old back then, but the Sardarni asked me to say my age twenty-three. The police said that he wants to talk to the girl first. He took me to the room and asked me questions such as, whether I am here by my will and I said, "Yes". Did anyone force me to come here? I said, "No". Did anyone sell me off? I said, "No". He told me that he will visit me that night and if I was able to handle that. I replied that I was able to do that." -Female, 22

Crime

Crime has been a daily event to witness by the people of the brothel community. The girls and women referred to stories of murder and rape. One of them said,

"Yes, I have heard twice that someone was taken from here and then murdered, the case is the girls fall prey to false hopes when they get romantically involved in a relationship with a boy, primarily the boy seems very nice, and who wouldn't want to go out from here and start a family of their own, and then when they go out to start a family the problem of money arises and some other problems also emerge, which then lead the boy to kill the girl to get out of the misery" – Female, 24

'She used to love this boy, and then the boy lured her into a room, where she was told that they would just talk and chill for a while and then when she entered, there were four boys, who then wrapped a cloth around her mouth and raped her, her friend saw this incident and rushed to tell the girl's mother about the incident, after that the girl's mother came and handed over the boys to the police, the bed was filled with blood.'" – Female, 16

Use of drug

Drugs like alcohol, cannabis, methamphetamine (yaba), diamorphine (Heroin) and cigarettes are commonly used in brothels. Sex workers use drugs for various reasons, including meeting customer demands, self-medication, escape and dissociation from their circumstance. Finding shows the negative consequences of drug addiction for sex workers, particularly those with underlying health issues.

"I had a friend who was abducted from her wedding by a boy, then she came here and started working as a sex worker, she had breathing problem, no one knew, then she started taking drug and her breathing problem increased, then during pandemic, she overdosed alcohol and then we took her to the hospital and then she died". – Female, 22

Dance bar

Aside from the sex work in the brothel, numerous girls earn a living by dancing or providing companionship to customers. While some prefer dancing over engaging in sexual activities, others believe that spending more time dancing results in lower income, prompting them to choose sexual services instead. There used to be a central dance bar in the brothel where girls entertained customers through dancing, but it closed down after an unpleasant incident.

Now as the dance bars are closed, a few girls dance only. There were videos of these dancing which were leaked on social media. The leaders here and the police saw the video and declared that the dance bars would be closed – Female, 23

At present, some houses in the crowded parts of the brothel have dance halls, which open in the evening. Generally, more, or less all the girls in the brothel dance. But some prefer dancing, and customers or brokers have their contact numbers. If a group says they have come to enjoy dance, those who dance are called.

"The girls who dance later get calls, the customer then looks for them specially, and then they come to them and take the liked one's to the dance." – Female, 19

Violence inside the brothel

This research consistently indicates that sex workers who have encountered instances of fraud, kidnapping, or trafficking and being sold into the industry tend to have notably worse mental and physical well-being compared to those who have not experienced such events.

The physical hardship of sex work, including exposure to unwanted pregnancy, physical violence, substance abuse, and lack of access to healthcare, can significantly impact a sex worker's physical well-being. The risk of injury, illness, and chronic health conditions is often heightened in this population, leading to long-term health complications and reduced quality of life.

These girls are forcefully given injections or medication to make them look more appealing, particularly when they are young girls who have not yet started menstruating or when minors are abducted and sold to brothels. Moreover, young girls were forced to take the pill to prevent pregnancy and gain fat to attract customer.

"I was forced to take medication to prevent pregnancy. Every night, they made me swallow pills that increased my appetite and caused weight gain. But whenever I took them, I felt dizzy, nauseous, and like I was going to throw up. I didn't want to take them. In the morning, they'd come to check if I had taken the medicine. While everyone else seemed to adjust to it, I couldn't. If they noticed there was some left, they'd beat me to take two pills at once. I started having stomach pains. That is how I became sick". -Female, 22

If a woman is forced to keep using any method to prevent pregnancy without talking to a doctor or if the pill is only used to stop her periods for a long time, it's common for her to have issues with her uterus. The Sardarni continued it with every young girl who are sold by others.

Others who arrived in brothel as adolescents tried to raise voice against the torture; some may have had their limbs or legs broken.

"Those to whom my mother was sold used to beat her a lot. My mom said they once broke her leg by hitting it with a hockey stick. They used to beat her a lot. My mom had saved a lot of money to leave the brothel. But they took everything. They wouldn't let her leave." -Female, 24

When this torment occurs under the Sardarni, a girl is pressurised to have sex with fifteen to twenty-five men every day and night. To prevent the girls from escaping from this torture room, a guard is assigned for each of them. Even when the women use the restroom, these guards remain outside the door to keep a constant watch on them. Furthermore, those who attempt to flee still face torture.

"My mother tried to escape but was taken from the station. She was about to board the train when she was captured by someone who intended to sell her. My mother was slapped and beaten with sticks. Later, she feared that if she tried to escape again, she would be beaten, or if she refused to take customers, they would get angry, scold her, and deny her food. Based on this, my mother realized she had no choice but to stay. If she tried to run away, she would surely die. They would beat her with a stick, smoke cigarettes, and burn her with them." -Female, 12

A girl is given medicines (painkiller) if she is sick or exhausted from sex work

"They used to give me medicine at night so I could sleep. I don't know what medicine to take, I don't even understand when my body, hands and feet hurt. They injected me with sleeping pills to make me sleepy and then I fell asleep." -Female, 17

After giving painkillers, they are forced to have sex again. Apart from coercing girls into sexual activities, if a girl gave birth a son, sometimes the Sardarni would sell the child. In addition, a lot of girls get uterine issues as a result of forced and multiple sex at a time.

"I had to engage in sex with all types of men-old and young. Sardarni brought them. Some sexual intercourses were very painful. I had an ultrasound and was diagnosed with a tumour in my uterus. I have been in such a condition; I have shed blood for a whole year. Even then they (Sardarni) did not care. They gave me blood-stopping capsules to stop me from bleeding." -Female, 22

Although the narratives of the girls and women highlight instances of deprivation and violence, discussions with the house owners reveal that the cycle of violence persists even as these individuals achieve financial independence. Despite assuming





authority and holding symbolic positions of power within the brothel as house owners, they are still subjected to violence.

"Let's say I'm deeply in love with someone, but he doesn't feel the same way about me. When he's in the mood, he'll stay, but when he isn't, he'll just throw me from my own home".
-Female, FGD with House owners

that applying it to genital areas could help reduce discomfort or pain that may arise from frequent sexual activity.

"The first time I did it was very difficult, but then I gradually controlled myself. I took a cream from our doctor's shop in this place. By the grace of Allah, I used that cream."
-Female, 21

Sexual and reproductive health

Sex workers frequently encounter challenges concerning their sexual and reproductive health. While working under a Sardarni, they often have fewer opportunities to prioritize their sexual health. Furthermore, even when they become independent, some may struggle to maintain preventative measures during sex, leaving their reproductive organs at risk.

"This kind of thing happens sometimes. But most of the time we make them use condom for their own safety. For those who don't want to accept it, the demand is a little high.... we take pills." - Female, 18

Another example:

"If we think about condoms here, we may have to die. Suppose, I have five customers and all of them deny to use condoms. And if I don't agree to have sex with them then I will have to be without customers." -Female, 22

Engaging in multiple sexual encounters at a young age can indeed be challenging, both physically and emotionally. The forced sex experience sometimes becomes intolerable for the sex workers that people need to call doctor. In some cases, seniors or mothers within the sex work community may suggest using ointment as a means to relieve pain experienced by younger sex workers. Usually, ointment is used as an antiseptic to clean and disinfect minor wounds and cuts. However, some individuals may believe

Mental health

The trauma associated with being coerced or deceived into sex work can have profound and lasting effects on mental health. Many sex workers experience symptoms of depression, anxiety, and other psychological disorders as a result of their negative experiences. They may struggle with feelings of shame, guilt, and worthlessness, which can further exacerbate their mental health challenges. As a result, some sex workers attempted to commit suicide and hurt themselves as a way out of this terrible life, respondents added.

"There were times when we had to handle three or four people in an hour. It became incredibly difficult. The uterus would swell even if it was slightly injured. Sometimes, even taking medicine wouldn't help. I remember another sister beside me, who, after everyone went to sleep, was so distressed that she would secretly cut her hand with a blade."
-Female, 19

Sex workers who cannot tolerate the suffering of living in the brothel become addicted to drugs and alcohol for short time comfort.

"Since I came here, I went through a lot of trouble. I used to think what did I come here to do, why did I come, what will happen to my life, will the end result be like my mother. I also start drinking when I think that maybe this will ease my sadness. But on the contrary, nothing happens if I drink, my body feels bad, I get sick myself, I stay at home. They don't want to

work, and this is how they live their lives. Many try to commit suicide by cutting their hands in despair. Many people are doing this. Maybe someone is committing suicide with a rope around their neck. Someone might be taking poison, poison means savlon (antiseptic) so that death is certain.” - Female, 19

This excerpt highlights a deep sense of despair and uncertainty about the trajectory of their life, compounded by fears of ending up with a miserable life, suggesting a cycle of hardship and adversity. Moreover, the reliance on alcohol as a coping mechanism underscores the desperation for relief from emotional pain, yet it ultimately exacerbates their physical and mental suffering, leading to a cycle of self-destructive behaviour. This illustrates the complex interplay between psychological distress and maladaptive coping strategies.

In addition to the trauma, girls and women residing in brothels also face significant psychological distress and emotional turmoil. Their presence within the brothel environment exposes them to the same pervasive atmosphere of exploitation and vulnerability that affects sex workers.

Parenthood

In our earlier discussion on social relationships, we learned that love and marriage are not strictly followed in brothels. This means there is uncertainty about things like the child's name, where they live, and how they are raised. When it comes to having a child, temporary feelings of passion are often more important than planning for a family. When this passion fades, the future for the newborn child becomes uncertain. The father typically does not feel responsible for the children. As a result, the child misses out on the father's love and doesn't have a clear family identity.

“You're a man, and I'm a woman. We've been in a romantic relationship for many years, perhaps 10 or 12, during this time I become pregnant. However, after our relationship ended and we got separated, I noticed that he never acknowledged or showed interest in our child. He didn't provide any support

or guidance for the child's future. This has caused my child a lot of pain because every child deserves to have a father, but ours doesn't.” -FGD mother group

Here, children are sometimes eagerly anticipated and sometimes just a result of unexpected circumstances.

“The child wasn't planned; it just happened suddenly. She didn't understand how it happened. The person who is pregnant realizes that she's not ready for the child and considers not keeping it. Then she took medicines to abort it. Sometimes it works and sometimes doesn't”. -FGD mother group

Once again, an unplanned pregnancy becomes a significant obstacle for many sex workers who tried to leave the industry.

“My plan was to build a home and acquire a cow. This cow would provide for my younger sister, and my life would continue as usual. However, after everything seemed to be going well, I found out I was four months pregnant. Even on that time I sold all my belongings, to leave this place.” Female, 23

In addition to these factors, many sex workers become pregnant with the hope of having a daughter to support them financially in their old age.

“My mother makes me feel terrible. I used to live in a safe home where my mother didn't have to pay any money. But she brought me here and forced me into this situation.” -Female 22

Desire and love for a child

Among sex workers, the desire for children is driven by various motivations, such as expressing affection for a partner, embracing the joys of motherhood, and longing for a sense of family. The love of the sex worker for her desired child knows no bounds; she is willing to sacrifice all the happiness in her life and endure any pain to ensure the well-being of her child.

'Returning home, I was greeted by the familiar chaos once again. The pressure for me to marry has resurfaced, yet my child is still young. If I surrender to the pressure and marry, will I still have custody of my child? Will my life continue in this manner, marrying and bearing children? I've resolved that even if I have to live in brothel, I won't leave my children. Eventually, I came back to brothel. There seems to be no end to my struggles, but through it all, I've gained invaluable lessons from my daughter. Her well-being is my utmost priority; she knows nothing of the hardships I endure, only that she can live comfortably and move forward. My ultimate desire is for her to lead a good life with whomever she chooses to be with.' -Female, 20

Thinking about the future of their child, some individuals work in the brothel for a period but never bring their children to that environment.

"It's indescribable the pain, both mine and theirs, when someone keeps their child away, especially if the child is older. I keep pondering over the fact that my child was born regardless, but I don't want the wind or light of this place to touch my child. How cruel have I been to my little one?" -Female, 22

Out of fear of losing respect, many sex workers choose not to disclose their profession to their children. Consequently, the mother's workplace becomes a place of curiosity for their children. As a result, both the child and the mother suffer due to their separation.

"There are times, like every fifteen days and on weekends, when my child yearns for me to come home, and it breaks my heart. I can't stay for long because they know I work in the garment industry. Lately, my daughter has been asking, 'Mom, where do you work? In which section you work?'" -Female, 20

On the other hand, those who engage in sexual activity at a very young age have no initial interest in having a child, but over time they feel attracted to the child.

"Sardarani used to say that I will do ultrasound, if it is a girl, then I will not let you work anymore, you will be my daughter. And if it is a boy, then I will give it to someone else. At that time, I didn't fully grasp why. I thought to myself, maybe my Sardarni meant well. However, my perception changed when I witnessed a child being sold right in front of me. The poor girl cried incessantly and refused to eat for days. She suffered severe beatings. Witnessing such cruelty, I endured two days of beatings myself. The scars still linger, including one from a charger pin being inserted into my head. Back then, I didn't feel much concern, not even when the baby kicked in my stomach. I didn't fully understand the gravity of the situation. But now, the memories haunt me, and my worries have multiplied because of it." -Female, 19.

The struggles of a working mother

A mother becomes more vulnerable after conceiving her child compared to when the child reaches maturity, particularly in the case of male children. As there are no night shelter facilities for boys after five years, they have to stay with their mothers. At this point, the child begins to comprehend the mother's line of work to some extent, leading to various complications.

"You'll often find him wandering around and playing. However, if he sees me talking to any boy or a group of men, he'll start annoying me. He'll demand 10 or 20 taka if he sees me

heading into a room. One day, I've had to interrupt a customer during sex three times. In those moments, the customer ends up paying." -FGD mother group

Mothers in brothels often suffer from challenges as their sons mature. Cultural barriers prevent them from discussing their profession with their children. Consequently, the sons may only learn about the work of their mothers through gossip. Social distance compounds the issue, making it difficult for the mother to explain the context of her actions, leading to misunderstandings between mother and child. On the other hand, sons engaged in various NGO activities within the brothel community tend to accept their mother's work than others. Their reactions differ significantly from those of others in similar situations.

"My elder son understands and has received a lot of training in leadership. He was a member of child club. Due to which he can take care of where my mother lives and where we live. However, my younger son can't accept my profession. He insists that we should not remain here. Unfortunately, I cannot afford to purchase land or rent a house elsewhere. Despite seeking advice from various sources like KKS, Mukti Mahila Samity, and others, I am still unable to effectively communicate or change my son's perspective." -FGD mother group

Fathers' negligence

While the presence of both parents is crucial for the well-being of children, children of sex workers frequently lack the affection and support of their fathers. Often, these fathers feel no sense of obligation or connection to their children.

"Some fathers acknowledge their children, while many do not recognize their paternity. However, whether they accept the child or not holds little significance within the brothel setting. It's a reality that fathers seldom maintain relationships with their children here." -FGD mother group

When the child gets older, they try to talk to their father, but they can't. This makes the child feel sad and upset. They miss having their father around and feeling loved by him.

'My father doesn't call me, he doesn't answer my calls, and he doesn't even recognize me. I tell people about my father wherever I go. But one day, when I called him, he ended the call by saying 'it's a wrong number'. He didn't even speak to me. I feel like I can't talk to my father, I can't stay with him. It's really hard for me. Everyone else has their father around. That's why I feel so lonely and sad." -Female, 23

The father's lack of care and responsibility not only leaves the mother feeling helpless and vulnerable but also exposes the child to unnecessary risks.

"One day I came to know that my husband has sold our little boy for 5000 taka (Pound 35). Apa, I could not believe it, then it felt like the whole sky was falling on my head. It hurts so much. What should I do anyway? If I had two people with me, I could have gone and protested. How could you sell my child?" -Female, 21

Mothers' attitudes

Some mothers are willing to pay so that their daughters live with a family outside the brothel while some others mention that the cost is too high for them to afford. Consequently, these children remain at risk of being drawn into sex work and growing up in abusive environments. In such scenarios, the mother's lack of concern emerges as a significant risk factor for the child.

"Some mothers are a bit careless. I am also guardian and a mother, if I truly wish, my child will not remain here for long, she will be out in just two days. If I think, I will indulge myself in luxurious things; like eating chicken, wearing jewellery, and dancing. Then my daughter would continue to be surrounded by numerous customers. It's through staying here that she'll learn". -FGD mother group

Children raised by mothers in brothels are exposed to an unconventional environment that is distorting their understanding of their parents' relationship as they grow older.

"Even if I keep my children in the adjacent room, reserving one room for myself, my child may still enter my room occasionally, perhaps for food. Imagine if they were to witness an unknown person kissing me in that room. What would they learn from such an experience? I came here under various circumstances. After arrival, when I engage in intimate relations with another man who is not her father, wouldn't my daughter grasp the situation?"
-FGD mother group

Future aspirations for children

Many sex workers who have fallen victim to trafficking or deception and entered the sex industry dreams of a better future for their daughters. They do not wish to see their daughters follow the same path into sex work and instead aspire for them to lead fulfilling lives beyond the constraints of the industry.

"However, there is a need that I want to fulfil through my daughter. I aspire to realize this dream by enrolling her in Madrasa (Islamic school), later on I want her to study medicine. Once she completes her memorization of the Quran, I plan to enrol her in a school. Inshallah, this will happen soon before she turns 9."-Female, 20

Many sex workers think that if they are careful and vigilant about their children, they will grow up properly and will be able to engage in a decent profession in life.

"I have been harsh to my son. So, if I was a little softer today. My son would have been a bit naughty, if I allowed him to stay here (in brothel). Won't he become naughty?" -FGD mother group

3.7 Financial exploitation

Women who are already in sex work have shared their ordeals of being financially exploited. Several factors and individuals contribute to this situation, including house owners charging exorbitant rents within the brothel. A significant portion of this exploitation stems from middlemen or individuals with special connections whom each woman relies on. Despite earning considerable amounts, they are left with very little at the end of the month. Moreover, family members also play a role in financially exploiting these women. Starting with the story of how a houseowner exploited a participant financially, she shared.

"They asked me how much I pay for rent; I replied five hundred [per day], they then asked me do I keep the money with me, I said no I give it to the house owner, then they asked me to keep the money to myself, why do I pay so much, the rent is usually three hundred, from the next day when I earned, the house owner then called me and asked me to pay her."
-Female, 22

Sometimes Babus act as middlemen, bringing clients to the women, while also providing emotional support and fostering a familial bond. However, in some cases, the Babus deceive the young women financially. The following excerpt explains the complete sequence of events that the Babu makes to get financial benefits out of them, she says.

".. I did not know that the guy was married, and he had kids, when I got to know about this, I could not control myself. A girl would never want to divide or share her loved person with someone else... then he tells me that he does not have money, I need to give it to my family... I used to give him money out of love and used to provide for him all his necessities"- Female, 19

Coming to the stories of middleman, the ones who act as client finder for the woman and then charge a heavy commission from every client, that leads to the woman having very less money after work. One of the participants shared.

"If the client agrees to pay one thousand taka, then I must pay half of the payment to the middleman, on top of that I must pay rent"
– Female, 18

Lastly, the family members or in-laws of some young woman exploit them financially.

"My sister's mother-in-law used to keep all the money I used to earn, she did not send it to my mother, her son was a drug addict, she used to only give money to him and no one else"
– Female, 21

The dynamics of financial exploitation that young women face in the context of their involvement in sex work are multifaceted and complex. These dynamics are not limited to one specific group or individual but are perpetuated by a variety of stakeholders, including house owners, Babus, middlemen, and family members or in-laws. This exploitation manifests in various forms, such as inflated rent, deceptive financial demands from middlemen and Babus, and even outright confiscation of earnings by family members.

The narratives shared by the women interviewed provide a glimpse into the challenges they face in navigating a system that is designed to exploit their labour and agency. Despite their significant earnings from sex work, many of these women find themselves with little to no disposable income due to the financial demands placed upon them by various actors in their lives. This not only perpetuates their economic vulnerability but also reinforces their reliance on exploitative relationships and systems.

The houseowners within the brothel, a community who rents out rooms to sex workers and commonly known as Bariwali, often possess a perceived aura of control and authority over their tenants. However, delving deeper into their socioeconomic realities reveals a complex interplay between power dynamics and economic dependency. The findings from a FGD shed light on the intricate relationship between the Bariwalis' perceived control and their reliance on rental income to sustain their families. Contrary to the notion of absolute control, participants shared their struggles in maintaining financial stability without rental income. Many highlighted the precarious

nature of their economic circumstances, noting that alternative sources of income were often insufficient or unreliable. This vulnerability underscores the economic imperative of rental earnings for the Bariwalis, highlighting the intrinsic link between their livelihoods and tenancy arrangements.

"We've been through a lot in our lives. I've been here since I was just a child, like 10 or 12 years old. Life's been a struggle, especially making sure there's enough food for the family. Some of the other women, they managed to leave the brothel and start a new life with the money they earned. But I couldn't do that. My two sons, they got some training from the NGOs around here. The older one, he's in Dhaka now with his own family. He learned a lot about leadership and stuff from those trainings, which helped him understand why I'm still here. But my other son, he just doesn't get it. He's hanging out with the wrong crowd, getting into drugs, dropped out of school... It's tough. If I don't get the rent from my rooms, how am I supposed to take care of my family? There's barely enough to cover medicine and food, let alone save up to leave this place."
– Female, FGD with house owners

3.8 Experience outside brothel

Women and girls face challenges such as family violence when attempting to establish a life beyond the brothel, alongside social stigma directed at them. Additionally, constant sexual harassment adds pressure for girls commuting from home to school or work. Despite aspirations of creating a family outside the brothel, societal perceptions about women living in such environments often crush these hopes.

During the discussion on family violence, a woman was asked about whether she experienced physical abuse from her husband when she had a family outside the brothel. Her response shows her lack of agency in her in-law's house where she had no space to voice out her feelings or express her needs:

'I couldn't utter a single word; whenever I tried, I faced physical violence. Despite enduring such beatings, I had to return to my in-laws' house as my parents insisted on it.' - Female, 24

The women often face harassment from law enforcement agencies or service providers, which makes them apprehensive about relocating outside the brothel. Harassment is a serious obstacle for women attempting to establish a livelihood beyond the brothel. One participant shared their experience in this regard:

"The police took me and my husband and said that we were not married, then we showed them the marriage document, afterwards the police said that it was a fake document, because there was no address of mine on it, then after a while I showed them my birth certificate, the police wanted to arrest me." -Female, 24

Social stigma persisted for the women and girls residing near the brothel, as they shared the vicinity with individuals involved in sex work, including some of their family members.

"The boys in my area did not say anything, but boys from other area could judge me from the way I used to dress, but that is not a problem, they are going to pass bad comments anyway." - Female, 16

Similarly, a participant shared.

"No one from the outside wants to be our friend, they tell me you come from the brothel, why shall we be friends with you? I so wanted to be friends with them and play, but they don't interact with us... why they don't want to play with us? I feel bad about it." - Female

Thoughts and real-life experiences of a sex worker were:

"The way I move or go out here (brothel) I cannot go out the same way in my village, if I dress in a certain way, the people are surely going to point out I live in the brothel and do bad work, but I maintain this, I do not dress like this outside the brothel" – Female, 12

Lastly, another participant shared her experience of getting teased in the area, she said.

"It is not possible to stay at home the whole day, as I study and I have to go out, but whenever I go out the boys in my area tease me, nothing else." – Female, 17

3.9 Social relationship

Adolescent girls in the brothel predominantly spend their time with their mobile phones and peers due to limited access to the outside area.

In the complex social fabric of the brothel, the dynamics between bonded and non-bonded sex workers shape their relationships and interactions. Those who operate without obligations and enjoy freedom in their work often find themselves disconnected from the broader community outside the brothel's walls. They may have some level of autonomy but may still face limitations in connecting with individuals beyond their immediate surroundings. Conversely, bonded sex workers are constrained by their obligations and are typically confined to their rooms. Their interactions are primarily restricted to their fellow peers within the same household, who share similar obligations under the leadership of the Sardarni. This creates a tight-knit community within the brothel, but it also isolates them from external social connections.

"I do not talk to anyone who are out of my house. I only talk to the four girls who are living in our house and our house owner other than them I do not talk to anyone" – Female, 24

If any objection or refusal to work arises, the Sardarni inflicts severe beatings upon them, as detailed further in the section on violence. The relationship between the young women and their Sardarni mirrors that of a traditional master and slave. They are unable to speak freely with their peers in the presence of the Sardarni.

"Suppose we all are sitting in a place in the presence of Sardarni we would just say hi to each other. But when she leaves the room, she locks all of us in a room, then we could share our emotions and sorrows with others only at the time when she was not present. Whenever we sensed that she was coming we all became silent." -Female, 24

The narratives also illustrate the dynamics of the relationship between customers and sex workers. While some customers behave respectfully and treat the sex workers with dignity, others take the time to listen to their feelings, emotions, and ailments. Furthermore, some customers are understanding and accommodate the requests of the sex workers, including requests not to engage in rough sexual activity.

"Some customers want to keep the light on while having sex as they have more physical needs means they are abusive. ... abuse in a sense that he squeezes my body hardy, only I can feel the pain." – Female, 18

Some customers are not interested in using condoms during sex and influence the sex workers into physical relations without protection, which sometimes causes conflict between the sex worker and the customer.

"The customers do not always want to use condoms we force them to use them. There is no rule that using condoms is mandatory here. Some customers offer an extra 1000 to 2000 taka for not using condoms which are also accepted by some young women."
– Female, 24

Misuse of power and exploitation is also evident mostly by the local customers who does not pay after having sex. The use of drugs and Viagra among customers during sex are common which is also a reason for abuse and violence towards the sex workers.

As long as they are bound to their Sardarni, they will not get money except food and other necessary goods. To free themselves from the bonded labour, they take loans from house owners and work independently. In that case, until they repay the full amount, they must pay the house rent 1000 taka per day, and after repaying the loan the rent will be reduced to half 500 per day. In another way, they are again exploited by the house owners.

"The room rent is reduced to BDT 500, only after you repay the full amount. The house owners demand this way here." – Female, 19

There is no trustworthy relationship among their peer group. They used to be involved in conflict with their peer for various reasons.

"Here almost everyone is jealous of others and back bites a lot." - Female, 17

Conversations with local shopkeepers confirmed that sex workers remain bonded once they enter a brothel. They are treated as bonded laborers until they repay the amount for which they were deceitfully sold into the brothel. Thus, they are trapped in a cycle of loans and debts for the rest of their lives, forced to navigate the maze within the brothel.

"A sex worker is obligated to stay with the houseowner until she fully pays off her debt. She must pay a daily rent of three hundred taka to the houseowner and repay the initial bond amount provided by the houseowner. Regardless of her earnings, she must pay the rent daily and cover her daily expenses for food, clothing, and other necessities."
– FGD with Shopkeepers

3.10 Agency/negotiation

The agency of sex workers is shaped by their experiences and discretion, which play a pivotal role in their decision-making processes. After encountering deception or setbacks, they proceed with caution, drawing upon past experiences to anticipate potential outcomes of their actions.

"The in-laws said, give five lakh taka, then I'll accept everything (the marriage). Later I said, 'If I had given five lakh taka, there would have been no need for me to come here. If I had gotten married elsewhere, I would have gotten married there with five lakh taka. Why am I coming here? I won't give money, meaning I understood that he wouldn't keep me with him after getting the money. I won't keep any relationship with him (with the husband).'"
-Female, 24

They can demonstrate a keen ability to observe between truth and false assurances and demonstrate a nuanced understanding of interpersonal dynamics and the environment where they belong.

This excerpt highlights the decision-making process and agency exercised by sex workers as they navigate complex situations. Moreover, they advise others to be as honest as they do themselves.

"Yes, when the relationship started, I asked not to give false assurances. For false assurances, today my life is ruined."
-Female, 23

This excerpt conveys a profound message about the importance of honesty and the repercussions of false promises within relationships. The individual reflects on their own commitment to honesty, recognizing the destructive impact of deceitful assurances on their lives.

Partners of sex workers actively participate in convincing and managing clients, prioritizing financial gains over emotional considerations. However, there are contrasting instances where sex workers opt to maintain a clear boundary between their personal

relationships and professional endeavours. In these situations, they prefer to keep their partners at arm's length during work-related interactions, emphasizing the need to preserve emotional boundaries.

"I told my husband that when I'm out, he shouldn't be around the area. When I call, he should come, and he doesn't have the courage to enter inside."- Female, 23

Certain sex workers believe that confidence and competence are invaluable assets, regardless of whether they operate within the confines of a brothel or in other occupational settings. They express readiness to undertake diverse work roles, even considering a return to garment-related employment if necessary.

"If needed, I will work in garments again. I can do anything, if you teach me. And if you take an interview with me, I may not be able to pass the interview, but it will be beneficial if you teach me how to work. I have that kind of confidence inside me. Because I got 10, 15-thousand-taka salary in the places where I worked."-Female, 19

The excerpt expresses a willingness to undertake different types of work and highlight her ability to learn new skills and adapt, despite potential challenges.

Many adolescents who reside in brothels without having engaged in sexual activity believe that possessing confidence and courage serves as a shield against harm. They express the conviction that with bravery in their hearts, they can navigate their environment safely, regardless of the challenges they may encounter.

"If they have the courage to touch me. I always stay inside my house. Nothing will happen if you have the courage."-Female, 12

Sex workers do not tolerate when the limits of torture are raised to extremes, especially when one realizes that her emotions or love or existence are threatened.

At that time, she throws questions at the exploiter, trying to clarify her position with logic and reason.

"The Sardarni, teasingly says, "Oh, you've fallen in love, can't eat without him, can't even bathe without him. Ruined my girl!" I stay silent, tears streaming down my face... and if I listen more, my troubles will only worsen. Then she tells me, "Why aren't you eating rice? Eat your rice!" I just listen... Later she says, "Whatever, just go to your love." That's when I get angry. I ask her, "What is love? I call you mother, isn't that love for you? Do you love me?" Everyone tells me, "You're her bakri (literal meaning is goat, but here it denotes to bonded sex worker)." What a bakri! Am I grazing on grass? Is this the food you've given me? I'm furious, asking, "Why am I called a bakri? Why do people call you Sardarni? I call you mother; you call me daughter. So why, when I stand at my door, do they call me a bakri or call you the boss? Please explain the reason to me."-Female, 24

Evidence indicates that mistreating customers is strongly condemned within brothels. Sex workers strive to avoid any confrontations with customers unless there's a breach of the agreed terms. This is crucial to maintain a positive reputation among clients, as any conflict can tarnish their image and hinder their ability to attract new customers, requiring them to exert extra effort to rebuild trust.

Negotiation and decision-making skills

Sex workers who are good at checking facts, controlling their feelings, thinking about the future, and speaking up have a different way of making decisions and expressing their realities out compared to others. They usually use logic instead of emotions when making decisions. Furthermore, they assertively advocate for their own needs and objectives during negotiations. For example:

"I used to give money to the landlady. After being informed by those girls from the NGO, I decided not to give her any more money. Then the landlady came and asked how much money he paid, give it? Then I asked her why should I give you more money? Why should I

give you my hard-earned money? I will stand up for myself like the other girls. I am not going to be under anyone's control; I am working independently. Then they started shouting about it. Then she threatened me that she would go to the police and report me. Then I said if you go to the police, I will go too. What will you do if you tell the police that you want my earnings? She said, 50,000 taka was spent to get your license. After paying 50,000 taka, you move to another house. Then I asked who told you that it takes 50,000 thousand taka to get a license? I was told that it will cost 5000-6000 taka, or at most 10000-15000 thousand taka.'- Female, 22

Self-realization and problem-solving skills are important for sex workers. It helps them deal with things happening in the outside world as well as around them.

Sex workers often face mistreatment and abuse from the police, landlords, and people in their local community. This makes many sex workers feel scared and anxious. However, those who are brave and confident enough to stand up can thrive in this environment. Some sex workers have even spoken out against the unfair treatment they receive from locals, with support from the authorities.

"This happened to me too. For example, my landlord's nephew used to force me a lot. He was my man before, now he is not, but still he used to force me. I told the landlord, even after taking his guarantee, he used to beat me up a lot, after which I went to the police station and filed a GD against him." -Female, 21

Strategies for protection in brothel

The ability to negotiate and assert one's agency is crucial in the sex work industry. If a client attempts to engage in sexual activities that were not previously agreed upon, the sex worker typically voices their objection directly.

"I tell the customer, If I say you can't touch my body, then maybe he won't touch it. That's my freedom. I can decide whether or not to let him touch my body. Many customers try to negotiate, saying, 'I'll give you 500 takas, why won't you let me touch your body?' Then there's usually a small argument about it. I refuse, saying, 'I won't do this, brother. I don't like you' and I ask them to go away."
-Female, 19

The narratives of participants showcase the sex workers' experiences and assertiveness while negotiating with clients. They clearly delineate boundaries regarding sexual activities and emphasize the importance of mutual consent. The sex worker's readiness to firmly reject disrespectful behaviour underscores their sense of agency and self-respect.

Additionally, independent sex workers often opt to avoid clients who use drugs to enhance sexual arousal or prolong intercourse. This decision is made in order to safeguard their own health and overall well-being. Sex workers are cautious about sharing their phone numbers with customers from outside unless the customer is a regular.

"I used to share my number, but not anymore; it causes too much disturbance. There are many people who just call to bother. So, I no longer give it out for this purpose. I reserve it for my regular customers." -Female, 20

Many sex workers prioritize their health by using condoms during sexual intercourse. If a customer refuses to use a condom, the sex worker attempts to persuade them politely. However, if the customer persists in refusing, some sex workers may agree to work without a condom for a higher payment, while others refuse to engage with such customers altogether.

"No, we do not engage in sex without condoms, we do not. Even if they offer more money, they fail to recognize the high risk involved. Many customers express their dislike for condoms, but I have to explain to them that,

it's not just about you and me, but the potential transmission to your wife, which could devastate your entire family. I have nothing to lose, but your entire family could be affected if I contract an infection." -Female, 22

Sex workers refrain from engaging with villagers or locals in order to maintain their safety and security.

"We don't serve local customers; we only allow people from outside the area. We can't risk the safety of those who are local. Local people are not permitted to visit. We try to explain this to outsiders; if they understand, that's fine, but if they don't, then they must leave." -Female, 18

To make sure landlords take care of them or support them, sex workers sometimes don't pay their full rent or withhold rent. They do this because if they pay the full rent, landlords might not help them if they get hurt or sick.

To ensure the safety of girls who are not involved in sex work but reside within the brothel, mothers prohibit them from leaving their homes after evening hours or roaming around outside the school premises.

"My mother doesn't allow me to leave the room. I don't go out either. I only leave to attend this school or for private lessons. Otherwise, I stay inside the house."
- Female , 17

Negative experiences have created a certain level of agency among sex workers. It shows that those who have confidence and courage survive against adverse environment. People who stand up for themselves usually have better outcomes than those who don't. Sex workers can become more independent and empowered by learning from their negative experiences. This newfound strength is helpful in protecting themselves and building a safer future.

3.11 System actors

The system plays a critical role in ensuring safety, security, stability, justice, and well-being within any community or region. Key stakeholders such as administrative institutions (police), local government/political leaders, NGOs, and family support are essential in upholding these pillars of safety and security. Police and local political leaders are particularly important. There has been an observed improvement in their responsiveness over time, indicating progress in service delivery compared to previous years.

The police box establishment and response to the complaints immediately was a positive change to the system. As a result of the responsive behaviour, sex workers are now willing to share their concerns with the police. However, there are other issues that have to be addressed.

The findings underscore how sex workers become trapped in a web of exploitation orchestrated by various actors within the system. The agencies or individuals who are typically perceived as guardians of the community, were demanding bribes for facilitating registration and licensing procedures. This coercive financial burden pushed sex workers into bondage to their landlords.

NGOs are also playing an important role in this community and its system. The NGOs are working on health, education and other issues.

"I know the hotline number. If anyone forces me or locks me in the room, I will call the hotline. The NGO staff will come immediately to rescue with the support of the police. They often rescue those who call the hotline or inform verbally."-Female, 16

"It's been four years since I spent all my money on the person (Babu) I love. The NGO staff started to organize meetings with us. Through the meeting, I learned about future plans as I will not stay here forever. I have a future. From the meeting discussions I am motivated and aware of my future."-Female, 19

Family is also a significant part of the system and family plays a significant role in an individual, especially in the brothel community. Some sex workers are involved

in this profession intergenerationally. Those who did not have their family support to go to the school are now stuck in this profession.

"My mother could raise me keeping me in a safe home so I could study there and get a job, but she did not take the opportunity. No cost was required to keep me in a safe home. If she wanted my life could have been better than this brothel life. My mother destroyed my life."-Female, 19

3.12 Future plan, training, and recommendations

In this section, we will highlight the future aspirations and plans of both sex workers and their children residing within the brothel.

Women expressed a strong desire to leave the brothel and disassociate their children, especially daughters, from the sex work profession. They aspire to pursue alternative employment opportunities but often feel constrained by a lack of specialized skills and the necessity of earning money for survival. The girls aspire to pursue higher education and secure respectable employment to contribute positively to society and assist the disadvantaged. These aspirations can be categorized into several common themes, outlined below.

Willingness to return to the village and begin alternative work:

Some young women expressed that they want to return to their village and purchase some land and build a small home. There they will be able to engage in livestock and poultry farming or open a grocery shop. So, they may escape from the brothel and live with their family.

"My thought is that if I may save 50,000 taka from here, I will take a loan of 50,000 taka. With that money, I will build a small home and open a shop next to the home. I will tell my mother that there is no need to work anymore and just look after the shop. I will work at home, or I will work in the brick field to earn

our food. Then I will not have to do bad things (sex work) here, meanwhile, we will have a place and we may live well.” – Female, 19

“We have land, we have ducks and chickens in our home, and we will look after them. I’ll stay with my parents.” – Female 24

“I will start saving to make a space for me and my daughter. Whether I get back to my husband’s house or not, I will get out of the brothel, I will have a space to live. Maybe there I will not earn much but by doing small tasks we will earn our bread. We may do livestock farming or engage in online business.” – Female 24

Perspectives on their current work (sex work)

Almost all of them with a few exceptions want to leave sex work and engage in alternative profession. Even when the situation is very challenging, they dream of creating a different life for themselves and their children.

“I’m not going to do anything stupid like my mother. I will leave this place once and then if they (husband’s family) kick me out I’m not going to take my daughter back to this hell (brothel). I have a wish to build a house and a tea stall. I have learned sewing work and received a sewing machine also. I will bear the expense of my daughter’s education cost with my legal income; I will not pay for my daughter’s education fees with the earnings from this place (brothel).” – Female 23

Better future for their children

Several young women who have babies are concerned about their children’s future. They do not want their get involved with this profession, so they have plans to go outside of the brothel or keep their children outside so their children remain distant from the brothel.

“I told you how my mother’s life was here, how my life is here. I don’t want my daughter to enter this profession. I don’t want my daughter to live her life like mine. I want her to get married in a well-educated family. She may or may not get a job, she may live her life the way she wants, at least not to ruin her life like me. Life is so unpredictable; the daughter of a Judge becomes a prostitute, and the daughter of a prostitute may also become an advocate. I will try my best that she may stay away from my profession.” – Female 23

“Mom always says to try harder, she will send me out of here, so I must study well. Mom always says not to elope with someone, I am keeping you here so that you do not get involved in this work you should not follow my footsteps. You study, I will pay whatever expenses you need, you study and get a job so you may take me out.” – Female 16

Self-reflections

Few young women shared their personal reflections and changes in perspectives on living inside brothel.

“When I first arrived here, I felt like I had nothing in my life. I have no problem if I sell this body. But now it seems to me that this is not a life. It’s just decaying the body. I have visited my family many times earlier and I felt nothing different then. Recently I’ve been home for about three or four days. Now I can realize that the environment of home and brothel are not the same. This life (inside the brothel) is not a life at all. It’s a peaceful life at home even if I have no food for one time a day.” – Female 22

According to another woman,

“I think the past was the past, I think we should think about the present now. Some bad things may happen in the beginning, but it’s about what we’re doing now. Because what we do now will determine our future. So, we need to think about the present. It’s best to

think about the present and what we have, instead of thinking about the past. If I ever get an opportunity to leave the place I will not stay here.” – Female 17

Aspiration of girls

Gilrs mentioned their future plans of becoming a doctor, arm, pilot, nurse, and join army or police to serve the country and its helpless people.

“ It has been my childhood dream to be a Police Officer when I grow up. Mom knows. There are some police here who take no responsibility even if they see injustice, I will never do this. I’m not going to do that; I will not leave without resolving it. That’s why I want to be a Police Officer, which means I can stand against injustice.” – Female 17

Training

During the discussion about their future plan, the women mentioned several alternative work plans, which were mostly about farming and opening grocery shops. As they have plans to transition to other professions, there was a discussion on what types of skills they have. So far some of them have received sewing training and an individual woman tried to learn about beautification by herself.

“There was a skill development project from this NGO. At that time my academic examination was ongoing so I could not learn it effectively. After completing my examination, I learned it with extra time and then I have received a machine. Now I work on this machine sometime.” – Female, 16

“There was a sewing skills development project here. My fate did not allow me to continue my education. I decided to learn the skills so I could get a job in a garment factory. They said after completing the training they will help me get a job in a garments factory.” – Female 23

Another young woman shared how she missed the sewing training opportunity and the barrier she faced from her mother-in-law and her perspective on women’s work freedom.

“I was supposed to get the sewing training, but I couldn’t. I wanted to go to Dhaka and join the sewing training, but my mother-in-law did not agree. She said that what others (neighbours) will think if a housewife goes out and work!” – Female 19

None of the adolescent girls and young women wanted to stay inside the brothel. They have alternative work plans, but they do not have practical skills to switch to decent work. Although some of them received sewing training, they have no knowledge on small startups, entrepreneurship, income generating activities or farming.

The aspirations and hopes are evident from the community members who express gratitude for the support provided by various organizations within their area. They acknowledge that their own experiences lacked the resources and opportunities now available to their children through different NGO interventions. They collectively desire to see their children pursue different paths, aiming for a better future. They envision their children becoming better individuals, with access to education and other services. Ultimately, they wish to shield their children from the criticisms they themselves faced, hoping that the support they receive will pave the way for a brighter and more fulfilling life.

“The reality is that we didn’t have the opportunities that our children now have thanks to various organizations working within our community. We always hope that our children won’t have to go through what we did. We want them to become better people, and some of them are achieving that by taking advantage of the services offered by local NGOs. We dream that they, in turn, will raise their own children in a better way. We don’t want anyone to look down on our children because of who we are” – FGD with Babus







Recommendations

Based on our findings, we have several recommendations to address the drivers and risk factors associated with engaging in sex work for children living both within inside and outside of the brothels:

1. Targeted support for boys in brothels: Specific attention should be given to addressing risks for boys living in brothels, including providing education and life skills training, as well as establishing separate arrangements for their accommodation outside the brothel environment. This ensures their safety and holistic development.
2. Awareness campaigns for sex workers: Raise awareness among sex workers about the importance of protecting their children from the risky environment of brothels. Empowering sex workers with knowledge can help them take proactive measures to safeguard their children's well-being.
3. Creating a safe school environment: Sensitize schools around brothel areas to create a hassle-free and friendly environment for the education of children of sex workers. This includes implementing measures to prevent discrimination and ensure inclusive education for all children.
4. Accountability in education system: Implement systematic actions to address dropout rates, especially at the primary and secondary levels. This involves monitoring school attendance, holding teachers accountable for ensuring

children attend school regularly, and providing support mechanisms for struggling students.

5. Safeguarding measures in schools: Establish safeguarding focal points in all schools to provide support to children in vulnerable situations. Teachers should undergo training on safeguarding, child protection, and gender sensitivity to effectively fulfil this role.
6. Integration of life skills training: Incorporate life skills training into the school curriculum from primary to secondary levels. Teachers should receive training to deliver practical sessions that equip children with essential life skills for personal development and resilience.
7. Preventing child marriage: Focus efforts on preventing child marriage, particularly for young girls, at the grassroots level. Awareness campaigns and community interventions can help address this harmful practice and protect girls' rights.

8. Workplace safeguarding measures: Implement safeguarding focal points in all workplaces to ensure the safety of girls. These measures should include specific strategies tailored to each workplace environment to mitigate risks effectively.

9. Understanding the perspectives of the Sardarnis: Explore the perspectives and experiences of Sardarnis involved in sex work, aiming to gain a comprehensive understanding of their motivations, behaviours, and the dynamics of their interactions with sex workers.

By implementing these recommendations, we can work towards creating safer and more supportive environments for children living in and around brothels, reducing their vulnerability to exploitation and facilitating their holistic development.







Conclusion

This paper has been organized into different thematic sections, which assist in exploring the complex experiences and feelings of practicing sex workers and children at risk living in the brothel. Many of the experiences and drivers intersect and interact with one another. There is no single driver identified for engaging in sex work. Sometimes, multiple drivers act simultaneously, creating a complex scenario and requiring us to deal with many issues to tackle these drivers. A girl whose parents were separated and divorced stayed unattended due to poverty and violence, discontinuing her education. This lack of attention created several opportunities for exploitation from different social relations, including close relatives and family members. The same girl experienced early marriage and faced violence in her husband's house.

Separation from her husband left her vulnerable and led her to be defrauded and sold into the brothel.

For girls, the intergenerational aspects were stronger than anything else. Sex work seemed very normal to them because from a very young age, they were aware of their mother's or close family members' involvement in sex work. Although they did not like the brothel environment, they could not envision options beyond it. The research team identified two different childhoods: one for those who came from outside of the brothel and another for those whose childhoods were within the brothel, or the girls who are living in the brothel. The drivers and risks were also found to be different for these groups. However, for both groups, childhood is full of violence, deprivation, and exploitation.

The women have mixed feelings regarding sex work. Sex work provides them with freedom, economic solvency, and the power to take on family responsibilities. On the other hand, they feel a sense of oppression and consider it unethical. Both women and girls have the ambition to leave the brothel. The establishment of the Padma Bridge, which has resulted in fewer people in the brothel, is also a factor leading sex workers to seek other work as their income has decreased. The sex workers plan to invest in buying land, animal husbandry, and opening shops, among other ventures. All the girls emphasize the importance of continuing education.

The brothel environment is uncomfortable for both girls and young women. Sexual violence and exploitation are common experiences for girls at risk. Additionally, they do not approve of the sex work done by their close family members, including their mothers and sisters. However, they often justify their family members' involvement in sex work. The brothel environment is by no means suitable for children. From the FGDs, it is evident that boys have different experiences. Boys often engage in blackmailing their mothers and customers to obtain money from them from a very young age. They may also become involved in activities such as drug dealing, pimping, or serving as Babus. For the independent sex workers, the brothel environment has improved. Their rights and choices are now more preserved than before. They have the freedom to choose their customers and set boundaries on customer behaviour. However, the situation is different for sex workers who have been sold or trafficked. Their vulnerability is extreme

compared to those who entered the sex trade due to intergenerational impact. While they may have some family support and protection, such as having a guardian in the brothel or their mother guarding them during customer interactions, the initial experience for this group is harsh. They are often bound to someone and have little control over their lives and earnings. However, over time, they may gain more freedom and adapt to the environment. Overall, sex workers often feel safer in the brothel than in the outside world. They perceive the outside world and workplaces negatively, seeing them as exploitative. In the brothel, they can earn money with a certain degree of freedom. However, violence, drug use, and even murder are also common occurrences in their lives.

In the brothel, there is also financial exploitation by the Sardarni, the house owner, Babu, as well as the shopkeeper and tailor. Most of the sex workers could not save much money despite their income. They earn, but all the mentioned persons enjoy their lives with their money. Consequently, when the sex workers get older, their daughters need to continue the work to support them. Babus are an essential part of a sex worker's life. They willingly engage in relationships and bear all expenses solely for mental support. Conversely, Babus claim to be exploited by the sex workers, alleging that the sex workers tarnish their reputation.

Overall, this paper sheds light on the complex dynamics within brothel communities, highlighting the need for comprehensive support systems to address the multifaceted challenges faced by sex workers and girls alike.



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