

Terre des hommes Magazine Courage

Bangladesh
**Being a child,
not a victim
of sexual
exploitation**

India
**An application
to prevent
abuse**







“When I was a child, I suffered discrimination, because I was a girl. That's where my will comes from to support girls and young women.”

Tanzila Tabassum, Capacity Development Specialist in Dhaka

Protecting young women and children from exploitation

When I was a child, I suffered discrimination because I was a girl. My brother had a lot of freedom: he could dress however he wanted, play outside, go anywhere. I couldn't. That's where my desire to support girls and young women in claiming the autonomy, freedom, and recognition that are rightfully theirs comes from. I feel very concerned about the future of the girls who live in Daulatdia, where discrimination and exclusion hit harder than anywhere else.

Here in Daulatdia, girls and boys grow up in a „brothel“ labyrinth of metal sheets, rancid smells and sidelong glances. The alleys are narrow, full of puddles and electric cables that hang like tired vines. Children of all ages are plunged into a terrible social reality: that of the sex market, open drug use and human trafficking. From birth, most of them live with their mothers, who have also been forced or obliged to engage in sex work to survive. Their fathers? Sometimes a ghost. Sometimes a passing customer. Sometimes a married man never to be seen again. In addition to this harmful environment - in terms of hygiene, health and safety - hundreds of children grow up here exposed to gestures, words and actions no child should be exposed to. 3,000 customers come and go day and night. Trafficking of all kinds, drugs, violence, noise and loud music make it almost impossible to sleep, read or study.

In such conditions, the emotional and psychological toll on children is immense. Their physical and mental balance is constantly at risk. As a woman and the mother of a 4-year-old girl, I am deeply touched by the stories you are about to read. And by the stigma these children endure, simply because they are associated with the „brothel“. They didn't choose to be born in this place. Yet they carry the weight of society's judgment. I feel particularly concerned by the fate of these girls, who as they grow up are often forced into sex work, as if their future was already written.

During my visits to the field, however, I have the great privilege to meet children like Joba, Dihan and Anisha. They dream of going to school. They dream of a future. They dream of something other than “survival”. They want a different life—for themselves and for their mothers. Although I was born and grew up in a privileged environment, I feel both helpless and profoundly determined when faced with these children deprived of their most fundamental rights. Through football, handball, traditional games, drawing and street theatre, these girls and boys finally have space to express themselves, open up and connect. They regain confidence. Through sports, arts, skills training and financial support, these girls and boys start to believe in themselves again. Thanks to you and your donations, we can offer them hope, and break this downward spiral of exploitation, silence and poverty.

Together, let's help them build a future with dignity.

Tanzila Tabassum

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Being a child, not a victim of sex work

Daulatdia, located 100 kilometres west of Dhaka, resembles a traditional village with its bustling alleyways full of women in colourful saris and children of all ages playing on the ground. At the crossroads of rail and river routes, this ghetto in the Rajbari district is in fact one of the largest brothels in the world, with thousands of people passing through every day and hundreds of children living there. Here, sex work is tolerated by the authorities and is the sole source of income for most single, women-led families. This is a glimpse into the daily life of these children and youth who, thanks to NGOs and associations, are protected from the dangers of the street and all forms of trafficking.



That afternoon, as the sweltering heat weighs down on humans and animals alike, the hustle and bustle of Daulatdia grows louder and louder. The sounds of life in the street, the blaring of music, the din of a dance bar, half-dressed children playing, but also fights breaking out, screams and insults shooting skywards. That low, heavy, grey sky that you can barely make out between the battered walls of tin houses stuck together in streets so narrow that barely one person can pass at a time. Danger, poverty and filth reign here. At night, the atmosphere becomes even more gloomy. With little or no lighting, the alleyways hint at menacing shadows, while stalls open at all hours of the day and night display their wares in bulk: multicoloured bags of sweets, shiny packets of crisps, clear plastic soda bottles—all sold at a premium compared to prices outside. Under the table, they sell contraband alcohol and harmful medicines, which unscrupulous traders exchange for a few dirty, crumpled banknotes.



On the streets of Daulatdia, sex workers, children, pimps, clients, dealers and traders live side by side 24 hours a day.

Did you know?

1,000



**children, young people
and their mother have benefitted
from our project against sexual
exploitation**

Not a place for a child to grow up

Sitting outside her small house near Daulatdia—built thanks to Terre des hommes' (Tdh) support—Anisha's mother casts a disillusioned eye towards the street that leads to the sinister alleyways of the brothel. Rubbish, papers and filth litter the floor, where starving cats roam and young children are left to fend for themselves.

"I don't want Anisha to end up like me, which is why I entrusted her to my sister. I want her to grow up in a safe place, to study and find a job; I want her to marry a good boy in a good home where she won't be mistreated or considered worthless."

Anisha's mother, in the large photo, on the left

With all she has been through, this 38-year-old woman looks exhausted. Her eyes are heavy with a sorrow that betrays long years of abuse and sexual exploitation. *"I don't want Anisha to end up like me, which is why I entrusted her to my sister. I want her to grow up in a safe place, to study and find a job; I want her to marry a good boy in a good home where she won't be mistreated or considered worthless"*, says this woman who, thanks to the support of Terre des hommes, is able to keep her daughter away from a life scarred

**"Mum, I'm going to study,
find a job and one day I'll get
you out of here!"**

Anisha's dearest wish, shared with Tdh



by abuse, drugs and disease.

Earning money and moving far away

Anisha, 16, is an only child. For the past six years she has lived on the outskirts of Daulatdia with her maternal grandmother and aunt. Born in the brothel, she experienced a traumatic and unstable childhood, marked by her biological father's abandonment before her birth. She grew up in a community plagued by harassment, drugs and poverty. *"I was 10 when I left the brothel. But I remember what it was like inside, how unsafe I felt."* Despite her stolen childhood and her mother's situation, Anisha tries to live a normal life: studying, cooking, helping with household chores, even though *"going to school is dangerous. Men stare at us, follow us, say things to us that no child should hear."*

Invited to take part in the Sports for Protection project, the young girl was given psychological support by Tdh local partner, Mukti Mohila Samity (MMS), to deal with trauma and build resilience. Through various activities such as sport, drawing and street theatre, Anisha has gained self-confidence and learned to manage her emotions.

She is the secretary of the Children's Club run by the same MMS association, which supports other young people. Taking her role very much to heart, she raises awareness on children's rights, fights against harassment, and helps registering new births and obtaining official papers. Thanks to the help of Terre des hommes, Anisha is fulfilling the promise she made to her mother: *"Mum, I'm going to study, find a job and one day I'll get you out of here!"*

Did you know?

2,000+

**children live inside
Daulatdia**



Finding freedom through football

What strikes us when we meet Shimanto, aged 17, is the gentleness of his gestures and the look in his



**Anisha and her friend take a break before their handball match
organised by Tdh in Daulatdia, Bangladesh.**



Sex work in Bangladesh

For over a century, sex work has been part of the social landscape. A legacy of the colonial era, and the consequence of poverty and gender inequality. *"Under British rule, red-light districts were institutionalised for soldiers and civil servants, laying the foundations for modern brothels,"* explains Jiniya, Jiniya Afroze, Tdh's Deputy Country Representative & Head of Programmes. *"Widespread poverty, natural disasters and the lack of job opportunities are driving people into sex work."*

Conditions are so difficult that most sex workers turn to drugs, self-harm or dissociation in an attempt to escape the reality of their lives in slavery. *"The stigma and marginalisation associated with sex work make reintegration almost impossible, trapping many women, and often their children, in this vicious circle for generations."* Sex work in Daulatdia, has become a normalised aspect of life. Tdh remains very active in Daulatdia, fighting daily this entrenched social reality, alongside few human rights activists and NGOs.

eyes, even though he has seen some terrible things: prison, ill-treatment, physical or emotional violence, inappropriate gestures and behaviour... *"This is no place for children. People yell, swear and fight. It's not safe, especially at night. And those of us who live here are considered unworthy. Unworthy of respect, friendship and a future."* When the professional football

student introduces us to his mum, the closeness between them is palpable and warms our hearts. As an active sex worker, this mother of three (two of whom live elsewhere) is also a Bariwali, which means that she owns her house and rents out rooms to other sex workers. She tells us that her son sleeps very badly at night: *"He talks in his sleep and is afraid of the dark"*.

Shimanto spent time in prison at the age of eight, during his mother's incarceration. Shimanto often shares tender moments with his mother, like cooking together in the street. *"When I joined the Sports for Protection sessions,"* says Shimanto, proudly wearing his red Sports for Protection T-shirt, *"I learnt to play football properly, without making mistakes or getting into fights. Before, we didn't know how to have fun. Now we know the rules."*

Tanzila, Capacity Development Specialist at Tdh, reflects on Shimanto's journey: *"His story shows us how sports gives these children a real breath of fresh air and a sense of freedom. You have to realise that they can't go out. In Daulatdia, their world often ends at a double bed in a windowless room overlooking a cramped street. Sanitation is minimal, toilets are shared, and clean water is scarce. Thanks to football, Shimanto can escape this stressful, confined environment. The chance to jump, run, play and meet other young people has become a matter of survival."*



Proudly wearing a red Sports for Protection T-shirt, Shimanto cooks with his mother outside their house.





With Tdh, hope at the end of the street

While girls here are mostly exposed to sex work from an early age, boys are faced with other dangers: trafficking, drug addiction, crime... As 17-year-old Jamal tells us, the things that go on inside the brothel are unimaginable to outsiders. *"Most parents don't care what becomes of their children. We grow up addicted and alone. Drugs are everywhere. Trafficking is everywhere. It's hard to be a good person in such a toxic environment."*

"Most parents don't care what becomes of their children. We grow up addicted and alone. Drugs are everywhere. Trafficking is everywhere. It's hard to be a good person in such a toxic environment."

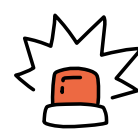


Jamal, 17 years old

Nevertheless, the young man is making his own way and vowed to set up his own business. Despite a slight handicap - Jamal was born with a deformed arm and hand - he has started going to school, which for a child from Daulatdia is a challenge. Teachers and peers constantly stigmatise and ridicule children from the brothel, even barring them from religious activities. Thankfully, Jamal started Terre des hommes' community programme, which offers team sports such as football and vocational training. As the sessions progressed, Jamal was able to express himself, build confidence and trust others: *"We played, we learned. I finally felt like I belonged."*

Did you know?

Up to



3,000

customers a day, 24/7

visit in Daulatdia



Portrait of Jamal and his mother in their home, at the heart of the Daulatdia sex work zone, Rajbari.

“Some mothers are slowly moving on to other sources of income, after receiving livelihood training and financial assistance.”

Jiniya Afroze, Tdh’s deputy country representative in Bangladesh

The combined efforts of authorities, NGOs and other organisations generate opportunities to find a way out. *“Some mothers are slowly moving on to other sources of income, after receiving livelihood training and financial assistance,”* says Jiniya Afroze, Tdh’s deputy representative in Bangladesh. *“Children have been able to go to school, with access to education and a more stable environment.”* However, leaving the brothel remains a complex process, often hampered by poverty, debt and social stigma. *“Maintaining a life outside Daulatdia requires ongoing support, economic independence and community reintegration, which many struggle to achieve without outside help.”* Change takes time. But it is possible thanks to a sense of solidarity that knows no borders.

Catherine Delaby



The gap between boys and girls is widening

In Daulatdia, there is a big difference in treatment between girls and boys. Boys are not exposed to sex work or trafficking, but from the age of 11-12, they find themselves involved in various forms of trafficking—they are often involved directly in trafficking young girls on behalf of pimps—or end up dealing drugs. *“Girls can be accommodated in safer homes outside brothels, but boys cannot. There is no structured support,”* explains Mashrique Sayem, Senior Documentation and Reporting Officer at Tdh. *“They are forced to live in Daulatdia because they have no other choice. Organisations are very concerned about girls, but with a few exceptions, no one cares about the boys who suffer, because they don’t have the same chances of getting out.”* His words highlight how gender-based disparities can fuel and increase the risks of vulnerability, exploitation and crime among boys. For Tdh, it is crucial to document and publicise this situation, but also to advocate for concrete changes, such as access to outdoor shelters for boys.



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A word with

Nahar, *Community coach at Mukti Mohila Samity*

In her twenties, Nahar is a community trainer with Mukti Mohila Samity, a local partner of Tdh in Daulatdia. The young woman has experienced the hell of sexual exploitation at close quarters, her mother being a former sex worker. Ever since she was a little girl, Nahar has always wanted to help others. She now runs Sports for Protection (S4P) sessions with children living in Daulatdia. This work is profoundly personal—intimately tied to her own journey.



“I organise sessions that include sports, games, street theatre and arts and crafts. Through these sessions, I teach them life skills such as respect, communication, teamwork, leadership and emotional management.”

Where did you live as a child?

I don't remember much of the brothel itself because I was sent to a shelter home at a very young age. But I do remember that when I lived there, I was kept indoors at all times because the environment was unhealthy and unsafe. My mother was forced into marriage at the age of nine and then after a few years trafficked into sex work. She did everything she could to protect me and keep me away from that world.

What challenges do children in Daulatdia face?

Life is marked by extreme poverty, overcrowding and chronic unsanitary conditions. Most families live in makeshift shelters with very poor access to sanitation and food. Education is also very limited, with many children dropping out of school. They fall victims to isolation, because classmates tend to exclude them. The adult and unhealthy nature of their living environment undermines their childhood. Some are left inside bedrooms while their mother is with a client. Medical care is restricted, and sex workers face serious health risks, including HIV and other STIs. The children also suffer from severe mental disorders. This matter is taboo, and their isolation prevents them from seeking adequate psychological support.

How do you support them?

As I myself come from this world—a world with no safe space or structured activity—I feel responsible and want to help them. I organise sessions that include sports, games, street theatre and arts and crafts. Through these sessions, I teach them life skills such as respect, communication, teamwork, leadership and emotional management.



What challenges did you face starting this work?

It wasn't easy at first. I was new, unsure of myself and scared. The children wouldn't listen to me, they fought, they didn't want to participate. I didn't know how to lead a group or how to teach life skills or livelihoods.

How did you overcome them?

With the support of a colleague, we train and mentor Community Coaches, experience gained over time, I began to build relationships with the children, paying particular attention to those who had trouble finding their place. I chose to talk to some of them one-on-one to build up a relationship of trust. The children now look forward to the sessions. They have opened up, expressed themselves, talked about their feelings and supported each other. It's not just a learning experience for them, it's a form of healing.

What is key to breaking this vicious cycle, in your opinion?

We need to help them leave this place for good. It doesn't matter what we teach them. If they return to the same environment, the risks are still there. It's also essential to involve the mothers and work with the community. I remember a young girl who came regularly and learned so much. One day she disappeared, and we never saw her again. I believe her mother wasn't supportive and gave up on her.



What are you most proud of?

The greatest success of this project is the transformation I see in the children's behaviour. They have finally found a place where they can trust each other, talk to each other, and dream of a future. A better life elsewhere. Many now dare to imagine a future outside the brothel. I've been through hardship too—but I made it. And I want them to know: yes, it is possible!

↙ In Daulatdia, in the MMS development centre, Nahar passes on her handicraft skills to young girls to empower them.





Every child in the world has the right to a childhood. It's that simple.

We aspire to a world where children's rights, as defined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, are always respected. A world where children can grow up safe from harm, and become the agents of change they wish to see in their lives.

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