# Introduction:

The goal with human trafficking survivors is to ensure their repatriation and reintegration by both the state and non-state actors. However, the process that a trafficking victim, particularly the child trafficking victims, go through throughout their journey until being rescued is something which makes them habituated towards the life they were once compelled to start. The traffickers forcefully use different kinds of seductive and drugs to make the victims numb and engage in frequent physical intimacy, sexual violence, forced pregnancy, etc. [**Crisp et al., 2024**]. Due to both psychological and physical exploitation of the traffickers, the victims sometimes develop complications that triggers their eye-hand coordination capability, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), difficulties to concentrate, and self-perception among others [**Crisp et al., 2024**]. Consequently, the child trafficking survivors struggle to restart their normal life once being rescued or escaped from this life. Sometimes, the limited educational qualifications and livelihood options [**Rosy, 2016**] also hinders their repatriation journey. In addition to these, they reject their rehabilitation process due to the unacceptance from their near and dear ones. Considering these factors, this study is aimed to explore how the girl children from Bangladesh are being trafficked, factors that triggers them to be involved as sex workers, pornography, consume drugs, and the feasibility for the rescued victims to return back to a normal life.

## 1.1 Objective of the research:

The overall objective of this research is to assess the impediments to child trafficking victim reintegration in Bangladesh through a victim centric perspective.

This paper is designed incorporating narrative literature review on the study objectives as well as theoretical explanation, the methodology used for data collection, findings and discussions presenting the enablers of girl child trafficking, existing policies and initiatives for the survivors and disablers for the survivors to reintegrate, recommendations and conclusion.

# Literature Review:

Trafficking from Bangladesh has been common for several decades. Only according to the 2024 Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report: Bangladesh, prepared by the government of Bangladesh (GOB) on trafficking in persons, there have been 1,210 trafficking victims, where 210 were sex trafficking victims, 795 were victims of forced labor, and 205 victims belongs to an unspecified form of trafficking cases identified only between March 2023 – April 2024. However, the actual total number of trafficking victims are 10 times more than the government reported total cases since there was no clear guideline on trafficking case identification until December 2023. The Ministry of Home Affairs (MOHA) under the former government has introduced victim identification guidelines for police and border officials only at the end of last year [**USDOS, 2024**].

There are diversified reasons behind trafficking from Bangladesh which are sometimes due to voluntary migration. The causes expand over socio-economic factors such as poverty, unemployment, unequal rights, social stigmas, climate change, natural disasters etc. In terms of the profile of the trafficking victims, women, girls (particularly children and adolescents), are mostly trafficked for commercial sexual exploitation, and boys or men are the target of forced labour/ modern slavery, and organ smuggling. Traffickers in Bangladesh have also distinguished profiles from individual level to organized criminal groups and opportunistic traffickers that take advantage of random trafficking cases once in a while [**United Nations, 2022**]. Limited evidence was found in the literature regarding how the girl child becomes the victims of trafficking.

Sexual exploitation is not only common for the girl trafficking victims but for the boys and men also. Furthermore, apart from the traditional traffickers, a number of garment factories have also acted as recruiters and indirectly as traffickers for modern slavery from Bangladesh. Evidently, parents have sold their children in exchange of money as a result of poverty and hunger. As the easy route for these trafficking cases, common borders with India (24 among the 64 districts of Bangladesh) are mostly used as well as water and airways. Women and children from Jessore and Satkhira are mostly vulnerable to trafficking from Bangladesh. Resettling of these trafficking victims, particularly the women and girls are extremely difficult considering the social stigmas. Infectious diseases such as HIV is another common struggle of the trafficking survivors while reintegrating in the society [**Amin, 2011**].

On May 2024, a framework titled Framework of Bangladesh National Referral Mechanism (NRM) was launched by the Public Security Division of the Ministry of Home Affairs (MoHA). The objective of this framework is to support the trafficking victims in Dhaka with protection and relevant assistance. The National Anti-Human Trafficking Authority of Bangladesh is responsible to manage the operations of this framework **[Antara, 2024].**

While there is no database yet that provides a clear indication on the total trafficking victims and survivors, MoHA, with the support of United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), has initiated an online database collection and reporting mechanism to document the TIP cases. The Global Action against Trafficking in Persons and the Smuggling of Migrants - Bangladesh (GLO.ACT - Bangladesh) as well as European Union and International Organization for Migration (IOM) have been also supporting the GoB to combat the human trafficking and improve the identification, referral and protection mechanism for trafficking cases **[Hasan, 2024].**

Alongside the gaps in documentation process regarding the trafficking victims, the reintegration related activities have a lot of scopes to be improved further. Victims’ centric approaches, trauma informed aftercare and rehabilitation services are missing in the existing initiatives by various organizations. Moreover, re-victimisation process also needs to be taken under consideration [**GFEMS, 2023**]. Overall, there are not enough literatures that articulates the factors that discourages the trafficking survivors to reintegrate in the society.

## 2.1 Theoretical Explorations:

***Structural Functional Theory***

This theory suggests that every part of the society is responsible to maintain the balance for securing stability of people’s lives. This balance disrupts as soon as any of these components in the society cannot function properly or struggle to cooperate with any social change. This state forces the society to prioritise between the changed situation and the previous condition [**Meshelemiah et al., 2019**]. Often, the society fails to accept the changes and adapt to the changed situation of the trafficking victims. Thus, the struggles and sufferings of the survivors make them irrelevant with the mainstream social values and eventually, they are rejected by their own community. Eventually, this condition increase difficulties for the trafficking survivors while readjusting in the society.

***Labeling Theory***

This theory emerged in 1960s and 1970s to explain the impact of labelling any individual with criminality that promotes social stigma and marginalise as well as force an individual to doubt their selves and psychologically vulnerable [**Meshelemiah et al. 2019**]. This theory is closely connected to the trafficking victims as they are often considered being involved labelled as sex workers and drug addicted [**Kaul, 2020**], irrespective of their actual vulnerabilities. The vulnerabilities of the trafficking victims become an identity for them even after they return. This theory indicates that the survivors’ reintegration journey can be severely affected through labelling.

Yet, very little evidence or no literatures have emphasized on the dynamics of reintegration policies, facilities, and social behaviour that discourage the trafficking victims to repatriate in their own community. The existing initiatives taken by the global, national and local bodies working for the trafficking victims have also several gaps to be fully effective in this regard. Taking all these into account, this study has explored both the enabling factors that enhance trafficking risks and the disablers for effective reintegration of the child trafficking victims.

# Methodology:

Narrative literature review was conducted to understand the trafficking dynamics from Bangladesh, and available policies and support services. Based on the gaps identified in the literature review, the study has incorporated three **core research questions** to achieve the research objectives are given below:

* **Question 1:** What are the factors triggering child trafficking from Bangladesh and the consequences of the victims?
* **Question 2:** What are the initiatives and support services available to combat human trafficking from Bangladesh?
* **Question 3:** What are the disablers for trafficking survivors to integrate?

Considering the data gap in the literatures on the challenges with reintegration of girl trafficking victims, this research was conducted following a qualitative method of data collection to capture the voice of trafficking victims, their parents/caregivers, and other relevant stakeholders to validate their arguments. The respondents of the study were selected in a manner that supports in triangulating the findings.

The study was conducted in Satkhira and Jashore District of Bangladesh. For qualitative data collection, desk review of available secondary literatures, In-depth Interview (IDI) of 6 rescued child (girl) trafficking victims (who were also sex workers) and a total 10 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with shelter centre in charge (02), parents of the trafficking victims (06), and NGO representatives (02) was conducted. The trafficking survivors were selected through snowball sampling approach from the information provided by the NGO representatives and shelter centres from both the study areas.

This research has selected the trafficking survivors who have either escaped or rescued between the year 2020 and 2024. There was no ethical approval obtained for this study due to limited fund for this. Nevertheless, the author has an online training certificate on Research Ethics from the World Health Organisation (WHO). Besides, the research methods and respondents were selected following international ethical guidelines as well as the study ensured verbal consent from all the respondents for data collection.

## *3.1 Limitations of the study:*

This study has a few limitations considering several challenges. The limitations are presented below:

1. The study was conducted from only two border areas of Bangladesh and incorporated a small sample of the trafficking survivors followed by snowball sampling process considering the limited fund and time for this study.
2. The study could not incorporate any government officials’ participation due to the political instability and regime change in the country.
3. The study only explored the findings from girl child trafficking survivors and the insights from the boy survivors are not assessed in this.

# FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

## *4.1 Factors Triggering Child Trafficking from Bangladesh and the Consequences of the Victims*

***Triggering factors for child trafficking***

Young girls from rural areas of Bangladesh, who are less exposed to outside world, often get distracted and dream for a fantasy world seeing the luxurious lifestyles shown in different movies, social media posts and other printed media. Findings from this study also support this as most of the trafficking cases occur while the girl victims are still at their early age and are unaware of the real-life challenges. The current age of these respondents indicates that the survivors were mostly trafficked during their adolescent age (under 19 years) according to the WHO.

Four of the victims are currently only 18 years old, and a two of them are as young as 14 years old. This implies that they were trafficked at the very early stage of their puberty. Besides, the study participants/ trafficking survivors mostly belong to poor socio-economic background families as their maximum household expenditure is BDT 27300 and minimum is BDT 5000 only. Thus, it is quite natural by these adolescent girls to look for a solvent life for their future.

Additionally, a significant portion of the survivors shared about their interest to become a Bollywood heroine or model which has developed within them through watching television and social media posts from Facebook, Instagram, YouTube etc. prior to fall into the trap of their traffickers. In fact, not only do they have the urge of being famous but also the girls wish to achieve this popularity overnight as they expect to be praised for their beauty, dancing and singing skills. Consequently, traffickers could easily influence them to get married or to connect them with film industry by making false promises about their dreams. Considering the societal norms in Bangladesh, love marriages generally get disapproved by their families and hence, the girls decided to elope with the guy for pursuing their dream of becoming movie heroine, model, etc. Eventually, they became a victim of trafficking and ended up in brothels, dancing clubs and/or pornography businesses.

***Consequences of the victims***

A significant amount of the girl trafficking victims of Bangladesh are brought to the brothels of India while some also reach Thailand, UAE and other middle east countries for commercial sexual exploitation (as sex workers and/or porn actors), as informed by an NGO representative working in this sector. The survivors further shared that young and beautiful girls are widely demanded with higher fees and sent to the elite places like luxurious hotels in Dubai of UAE. In the beginning, most of the victims get involved in such work forcefully, and their agents make them use drugs, and other sedatives while dealing with customers. Interestingly, a few of the survivors also shared about their willingness to such work from the beginning upon their fascinations generated from watching the adult movies. Irrespective of their attitude towards this profession, they have to continue being involved in such activities and taking drugs until they are being rescued.

While some survivors managed to elope from this torture, others had to only wait until they are tracked by any legal or responsible authorities. The organizations that work for tracking the trafficking victims, often look out for ways to rescue them from various countries using their collaboration with international networks and in reference to various international treaties and bilateral agreements, as stated by the NGO representatives. The NGO representatives further informed that the rescue process is normally lengthy and complex considering the laws and regulations of different countries. Despite all these challenges, the government of Bangladesh, with the support of existing non-governmental organizations, have been successfully involved in rescue operations for the trafficking victims, as and when identified.

## *4.2 Initiatives and Support Services to Combat Trafficking from Bangladesh*

In order to understand the disablers for successful reintegration of child trafficking victims, at first it is crucial to understand the initiatives and support services available in Bangladesh for the trafficking survivors.

***Initiatives of the government***

The government of Bangladesh has initiated several rigorous processes as a part of its response mechanism for trafficking and these includes:

* formulating laws, policies, action plan, guidelines etc.[[1]](#footnote-1) for trafficking response mechanism that emphasize on prevention, protection, rescue, repatriation, rehabilitation and reintegration of the trafficking victims in the society;
* international collaboration through variousMoU and Agreements[[2]](#footnote-2) with the countries (specially the neighbouring countries: India) where most trafficking cases are occurring;
* tracking down victims and rescuing with the usage of technology, government and non-government organizations etc.;
* Assistance to victims in foreign countries with the support of embassies, rescuing and deporting to home country;
* Establishment of rehabilitation centres by both government and non-government organizations for the psychological counselling, health service and reintegration process;
* Providing financial support to arrange immediate needs such as medications, nutritious foods, clothes etc.).

***Initiatives and support services of non-government authorities***

Alongside the GoB, there are a number of non-governmental international, national and local organizations that have been complementing and collaborating with the government initiatives and activities. Among them, international donor or organizations e.g. United States Agency for International Development (USAID), IOM, Winrock International, Justice and Care, Save the Children, Caritas Bangladesh, ECPAT; and national organizations such as: BRAC, WARBE Development Foundation; local organizations working in Jessore and Satkhira area: Rights Jessore, Sohay, are few of the remarkable ones that have been working to reduce trafficking and supporting the victims. Significant level of effort is also observed by the United States Department of State (USDOS) through their funding for different projects to address trafficking related challenges for the last few decades.

Both the government authorities and NGOs generally prioritise raising awareness of the safe migration process, risks and effects of trafficking, rescue related support, shelter centre operations, psychosocial support for the trafficking victims, reintegration and alternative livelihood related assistance etc., as identified through the literature review. The Ministry of Expatriates’ Welfare and Overseas Employment (MoEWOE) has setup a help desk at the airport to provide financial assistance and relevant information to the female migrants and trafficking victims. Beside these, the GoB has drafted a “National Reintegration Policy for Migrants” in 2022 which is yet to be finalized. Notably, this draft is particularly focused on the returnee migrants and has no particular policies in planned considering the needs of the girls and women trafficking victims. However, this draft policy promoted the collaboration with various international and national organization for effective repatriation process.

A number of development projects have been already implemented by various donors and INGOs in cooperation with the government and non-governmental organizations to provide reintegration support for the trafficking survivors. Alongside the organizations, different community groups are also engaged to provide services for the victims. The reintegration support services from these various stakeholders include: Shelter homes with food, accommodation; health service (psychological counselling as well), life skills and technical skills training, financial support for small income generating activities (IGAs).

A glimpse on the existing services for reintegration of trafficking victims is presented below in table 1:

Table 1: Support and services for reintegration of trafficking victims in Bangladesh

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Donors/ INGOs** | **National Organisations** | **Services** |
| * USAID * UNODC * United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) * IOM * Winrock International * Justice & Care | * BRAC * TMSS * YPSA | * Shelter (food and accommodation), * Health Services (including psychological counselling), * Training on Income Generating Activities (IGA), * Support with small business setup etc. |
| UCEP | Technical Training |
| * Government District Legal Aid Committee * Bangladesh Society for the Enforcement of Human Rights (BSEHR), * Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST) * Ain o Shalish Kendra (ASK) | Counselling and Legal Aid |
| Community groups:   * Community Based Organizations (CBOs) * Youth groups, * Counter Trafficking Committees (CTCs) etc. | * Awareness raising, * Identification of victims and connecting with relevant authorities etc. |

The coverage areas of these organizations are all over Bangladesh with particular attention on the districts adjacent to border areas such as Jashore, Satkhira, Cox’s Bazar and others. Although such robust programs have been in practice for effective reintegration process, the study identified multiple gaps that hinders the process and discourage the survivors to restart their previous life.

## *4.3 Impediments to Child Trafficking Survivors’ for Reintegration*

Taking into consideration of the existing policies and support services for the trafficking victims, the study has further explored the obstacles for the child trafficking survivors for reintegration. According to the trafficking survivors, the general challenges they encountered during their reintegration process include the followings but not limited to these only:

* The survivors were not accepted well at their community,
* They could not go out and mix freely with others,
* They felt depressed,
* They were not even welcomed by their own family at their own home, and
* They have mentioned about not having any money to survive.

Apart from these, the study has also identified several other facets that acted as a barrier to effective reintegration of the child trafficking survivors in Bangladesh. These are:

**Shelter Centre**

The preliminary requirement for trafficking survivor’s reintegration is shelter centres with adequate facilities. This refers to the capacity and resources for providing initial necessary services for the rescued victims. The study found that there are multiple police operated shelter centres for women and child victims in the eight divisions of Bangladesh, and six other centres operated under Department of Social Service (DSS) that have arrangements of both short-term and provide long-term shelter, medical services, psychological care, education and vocational training. At least 232 victims were referred to government shelters for health care, legal services, shelter, vocational training, and other services only within 1 year (2023-2024), according to a USDOS report in 2024. Despite all these available shelter centres, practices are completely opposite with the trafficking survivors.

The first challenge in this regard is the trafficking survivors require a court order to access the government services and shelter. Besides, the government has yet not initiated any proper documentation system to record the trafficking survivors, as indicated in the literature review section. In addition to these, the government shelter house does not have specialized services for the women and girl sex trafficking victims. At the same time, the parents and relatives tend to bring the survivors at home within a few days after being rescued and the family members are usually unaware of the initial medical treatment and psychological counselling that the survivors’ needs. Although the shelter centres are guided to keep the trafficking victims for at least 3 to 30 days[[3]](#footnote-3), the study respondents shared that they have returned to their home within a few days without receiving any psychological counselling or other basic needs at the shelter centre. In addition to these, the shelter centre staffs shared that they cannot force the rescued victims to stay at their centres for longer term due to inadequate resources. As a result, none of the survivors expressed their satisfaction about the shelter centres they were sent.

***Social Stigmas***

Apart from the discouraging shelter centre services, several victims have to deal with initial shock and rejections from their own family, relatives, and community. The study participants involved families that did not accept the victims initially and the victims had to remain at the shelter centres for extended period which imposed significant impact on the survivors, both psychologically and socially. Their parents reported of being worried about several factors before bringing the victims from the shelter centres. For example, their families were worried about their social status, risks of various infectious diseases like HIV, and added economic burden with the returned family member. While the parents reflected on these reasons, they also shared their helplessness with the scenario. Such experiences developed severe disrespect and doubts on the family bondage of the survivors, and consequently, they developed a sense of non-belongingness with their families. One of the survivors informed during the interview that –

***“After I returned neither my parents, family members, relatives nor my neighbours, society was ready to accept me. It was also difficult for me to find someone for marrying or start a new life. My parents had to hide the fact about me being trafficked and only then they could manage a groom. However, that marriage also did not work. Even after the receiving a massive amount of dowry, my husband has beaten me to a level that made my life a miserable one.”***

This finding clearly indicates that despite being a victim of unfortunate incidents, the trafficking survivors are not accepted in their own family or in their community to restart where they left off.

***Education, Skill Development and Livelihood options***

For reintegration purpose, resuming education could act as a good solution for the trafficking survivors. However, the number of survivors who could actually start over their education are very few considering the socio-economic background of their families. Five (05) of the survivors could not resume their education even after 2-3 years of their repatriation. Only one (01) of them could do so among the survivors interviewed for this study. This implies that majority of the trafficking victims could not yet start their normal life.

Moreover, none of the respondents have received any skill development or livelihood support from any non-government organizations in their areas. This made their lives further vulnerable and brought an insecure future for them. According to the parents of the survivors, hiding the whole incident of trafficking and then marrying them off is the only solution. Whereas, the NGO representatives shared that domestic violence related issues are common in case the in-laws learn about the trafficking history of the survivors. This clearly indicates that the trafficking survivors need to be self-reliant with the support of continued education, skill development and livelihood scopes for their sustainable reintegration.

***Addictions***

Drug addiction and active sex life of the trafficking victims is the last but not the least remarkable disabler pertaining to their reintegration process. Working for several years as sex workers and consuming drugs, the girls became addicted towards these and could not get over this addiction even after years of returning. Many a times, the survivors struggle tremendously to recover from their drug addiction. Besides, they mentioned about increased sexual desire as a result of consuming the drugs continuously for several years. Since the survivors are not allowed to physically intimate with anyone while in the shelter centre, it makes them aggressive and sometimes they resort to homosexuality while staying at the centre.

The shelter centre in-charge shared similar viewpoints on this and shared their struggle with the survivors that come to their centre. Often, they have to lock the survivors in a room for several days as they become violent to the caregivers and staffs during their regular drug intake times of the day. Besides, the shelter centre staffs also reported of the survivors being sexually over active and become intimated with other female survivors. Remarkably, the staffs of the shelter centre further shared about some survivors who became asexual as a result of their experiences after being trafficked. Such adverse effects have not only made it hard for the survivors to reintegrate in the society but also destroyed their reproduction capacity.

Thus, the sufferings of the child trafficking survivors have not ended even after being freed from the traffickers. The reintegration initiatives and support services offered by various bodies will not sustain until these gaps are fixed and chances of re-trafficking will increase. Hence, it is utterly important to address these issues in order to establish a sustainable restoration system for the child trafficking survivors in Bangladesh.

# Conclusion and Recommendations:

In conclusion, Bangladesh has been extremely vocal and active in operations regarding the various trafficking dynamics such as prevention, protection and prosecution for several decades now with the support of diversified development organization, particularly USAID and USDOS. However, the key enabling points of trafficking such as poverty, ambitions, lack of knowledge and awareness on trafficking risks are difficult to address within short-term. While the concentration of the available initiatives is largely circled around the rescued and repatriation related activities, it is high time to address the gaps within the rehabilitation arrangements for the trafficking survivors, particularly for the girls whose whole life are lying ahead.

Taking into consideration of the limitations with shelter centres, social stigmas and addiction related issues, robust systematic approaches are required to be implemented by the government as well as the other actors working in this arena. The government and non-government bodies can further identify other associated challenges that required to ensure the effectiveness of their initiatives through further assessments on the issues presented in this study.

## *5.1 Recommendations:*

Based on the study findings, a number of recommendations is generated to reduce the gaps in existing initiatives with reintegration of the child trafficking survivors. These are:

1. The literature review findings point to the gap with proper records and documentation on the trafficking survivors which creates further challenge to track them and arrange appropriate supports for them. Hence, the GoB should prioritize preparing a district wise database of trafficking victims, followed by the police reports, and track the survivors in align with this. In order to further provide relevant solutions and reintegration services for their effective rehabilitation, follow-up services on the rescued victims need to be implemented considering the timeframe of their rescue. This will also reduce re-victimization process.
2. The GoB need to implement strict policies for the shelter centres regarding their services for the trafficking survivors. Priorities should be given on the days of mandatory stay to ensure adequate health and psychological support to the victims before they are handed over to their families. Additionally, adequate health workers need to be engaged in the shelter centres to address the addition related challenges of the survivors. Furthermore, the counselling service at the shelter centre need to involve both the victims and their family members to minimise the social stigmas and ease the rehabilitation process.
3. In order to address the gaps with continued education, skill development and livelihood related support for the sustainable reintegration of the trafficking survivors, the non-government organizations can collaborate with the government to a great extent for identifying and locating the survivors. The available organizations should also further increase their relevant reintegration services for the trafficking survivors.
4. Finally, the victim’s family and community play a crucial role to support them with restarting their normal life. To facilitate this, appropriate measures on social awareness raising programs are highly crucial involving diversified stakeholders. For instance, the educational institutions, community-based organizations (CBOs) and religious leaders can be engaged to disseminate messages on the risks of trafficking, reporting mechanism for trafficking cases, available shelter centres and relevant facilities for trafficking survivors.

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