

Supporting Effective Rehabilitation and Reintegration for Trafficking Survivors in Bangladesh and India

Context

Bangladesh is a major country of origin for trafficked persons in South Asia. Each year, an estimated 50,000 women and minors are trafficked across its porous border with India, another global trafficking hotspot.¹ Though governments in both countries have made considerable efforts to prevent and combat commercial sexual exploitation (CSE), critical implementation gaps remain, including investments in transnational referral mechanisms and victim-centered and trauma-informed protective measures for trafficking survivors.² The 2022 Trafficking in Persons report emphasized the need for standardized victim care and referral processes, expanded protective services for survivors, and improved capacity for service providers in Bangladesh. In India, the report highlighted shortcomings in state and national-level victim identification and referral processes as well as rehabilitation and compensation services for victims.

Intervention Models

Against this background, and with funding from the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad), GFEMS partnered with Justice & Care (J&C) and Seefar between 2020 and 2022 to improve the capacity of child welfare stakeholders and strengthen systems for survivor rehabilitation and reintegration in Bangladesh and India.

Providing trauma-informed aftercare and rehabilitation services to CSE survivors in Bangladesh

J&C piloted a comprehensive rehabilitation and reintegration project in Bangladesh between July 2020 and December 2021 focused on child and adult CSE victims repatriated from India, their families as well as key anti-trafficking stakeholders involved with repatriation, border communities, and aftercare service provision. The key program components included: (1) facilitating effective repatriation; (2) implementing holistic aftercare programs to provide individualized rehabilitative care services for survivors³; (3) strengthening the capacity of critical anti-trafficking stakeholders involved in repatriation and survivor welfare; and (4) supporting cross-agency and multi-national coordination and engagement on survivor care. Over the life of the project, J&C successfully repatriated 166 CSE victims to Bangladesh, provided intensive aftercare services to 146 trafficking survivors, and trained 411 private service care practitioners and local government officials on trauma-informed and victim-centered approaches and practices.

¹ Justice and Care estimates

² US Department of State, "Trafficking in Persons Report", 2022.

³ Aftercare services included medical care, psychosocial counselling, peer mentoring, life skills training, education support, vocational training, welfare entitlements, financial assistance for income-generating activities, in addition to intensive and on-going follow ups and welfare checks with survivors

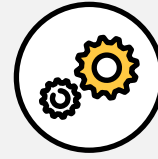
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Establishing holistic alternate livelihoods program for CSE survivors in India

Seefar implemented the Livelihoods Initiative for Transformation (LIFT) project in Mumbai and Kolkata between April 2020 and July 2022, aimed at building psychological resilience and increasing access to alternative and sustainable livelihoods among CSE survivors. LIFT comprised of (1) Adaptive counseling conducted in group settings using participatory approaches to enable survivors to understand and identify their social and emotional needs, and improve psychological resilience; (2) Confidence in action training focused on soft skills, nurturing confidence, and enabling survivors to plan proactively for their future; and (3) Skills development training to equip survivors with knowledge and training to pursue alternative careers and livelihoods aligned with their interests, including sessions on computer literacy, job readiness, website design, e-commerce platforms among others. During the project period, LIFT supported 259 CSE survivors, of whom, 218 participated in adaptive counseling, 207 received soft skills training, and 195 completed the vocational and skills development component.



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Key Learnings

Adherence to trauma-informed approaches in practice can effectively support survivor rehabilitation

The integration of trauma-informed approaches across all aspects of intervention delivery helped facilitate peer support, mutual self-help, and collaboration among survivors. Specifically, survivors highlighted the significance of the empathetic and patient attitudes of project implementers and service providers, the welcoming environment in which activities were conducted, as well as the emphasis on their physical and emotional safety. The key valued principles that emerged from qualitative interviews with participants and implementers across both J&C and LIFT projects included **safety, trustworthiness, empowerment, voice, and choice.**

The majority of survivors reported improvements in their mental health and well-being through participation in the program interventions. Eighty-seven percent of respondents from the J&C project experienced improved emotional well-being and reported that support received through the project helped them overcome their fears and negative thoughts, better control their emotions, feel motivated and enthusiastic to plan for the future, gain confidence in social interactions, and trust their own decision-making.

EIGHTY SEVEN PERCENT OF JUSTICE & CARE RESPONDENTS EXPERIENCED IMPROVED EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING THROUGH THE PROJECT.

87%

Similarly, 100% of LIFT respondents confirmed positive mental health outcomes following their participation in the program. Approximately 45% of survivors experienced improvements in their self-esteem and self-efficacy and reported an increased ability to share their feelings and concerns with family members, express their views in public, and resolve conflicts through communication rather than violence. The majority of interviewees also highlighted that the training and counseling support increased their ability to control their emotions and manage stress.

APPROXIMATELY 45% OF SURVIVORS EXPERIENCED IMPROVEMENTS IN THEIR SELF-ESTEEM AND SELF-EFFICACY THROUGH THE LIFT PROJECT

45%

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I learned much more than I had expected from this program. I had expected that we would be taught computers, but we were also taught how to talk to people and how to give interviews and to speak our minds without keeping everything to ourselves or being scared and not to demean anyone or insult anyone. I have learned a lot and have gotten my confidence back which I had lost. I used to give up, but now I try to do things even if I don't succeed.

LIFT project participant

Peer networks can be critical support systems for survivors receiving rehabilitation services

Insights from both projects underscored the importance of peer support networks for participants. J&C engaged “survivor champions” to provide mentorship support and guidance to program participants on an ongoing basis. The LIFT project designed the adaptive counseling and confidence in action training components of their program to be conducted in group settings in order to build cohort networks, facilitating trust-building, mutual self-help, and social cohesion among survivors through the experience of sharing, learning, working, and training together.

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I liked everything but there was one thing that I liked the most. It is that we cannot exist in isolation. All of us are tied to each other. We are like interconnected webs. I remember playing a game of webs where if we left a thread, we'd be separated. We'd be excluded. I really liked that.

LIFT project participant

Reintegration services can be more effective if they are survivor-centric and provide supplementary community support

In-depth interviews with project participants emphasized that the tailored and survivor-centric nature of the services they received was particularly meaningful and conducive to their reintegration journey. Survivors highlighted the importance of being able to determine for themselves the nature and type of support based on their individual needs and contexts. LIFT project participants underscored the importance of a range of options for vocational training and livelihood assistance to enable them to select options that were relevant and sustainable for themselves and their families. While the majority of respondents did not report any challenges with the training, approximately 20% identified obstacles including a lack of basic computer skills, difficulty accessing online classes during the COVID-19 pandemic, long distances to the training center, and language barriers. Reintegration programs focusing on these highly vulnerable groups should provide additional resources to support participants to navigate such issues.

Respondents further emphasized the need for comprehensive support beyond individual needs, focused on addressing family challenges and community attitudes. Fifty-three percent of J&C study participants reported that they or their family members received financial or material resources to support income-generating activities for their family unit as a whole.

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They gave me 5,000 takas to buy a goat to start my own business. They also gave 16,000 takas to buy a spray paint machine gun for painting work so that my husband could earn some money. They provided 10,000 takas to my mother to start a business to sell bangles.

J&C project participant, CSE survivor

Participant responses also pointed to the need to ensure sensitization of the community towards trafficking survivors as a crucial part of supporting survivor reintegration. While the majority of J&C project participants reported positive experiences when they returned to their families and communities, nearly 20% continued to face stigma and discrimination.

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They convinced family members but not the community people. We can do a lot of things like conducting meetings to stop child marriage, keep watch on borders to stop trafficking.

J&C project participant, CSE survivor

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It would be helpful if they can engage the guardians/parents of their young intervention participants, be it mothers or fathers and help them gain an understanding of the intervention activities and change their attitudes about girls working. Girls who want to go out and earn can then do something. If [the project] can do such activities for the guardians, it will be nice.

LIFT project participant

Recommendations

FOR CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS (CSOS)

CSOs should invest in trauma-informed programming for trafficking survivors

While the importance of survivor engagement and trauma-informed approaches is increasingly recognized, these practices are not yet widely operationalized in anti-trafficking projects in Bangladesh and India. The learnings highlighted earlier in this brief demonstrate the importance of integrating survivor-centric principles. CSOs should invest in victim-friendly environments that take into consideration survivors' emotional and mental safety, and develop programs that provide survivors with the time and space to express their needs and opinions while ensuring confidentiality and privacy. Programs should include the flexibility to adapt intervention strategies to shifting survivor priorities and ensure careful screening, selection, and orientation of external partners and service delivery agents.

Livelihoods programs should provide trafficking survivors with a range of options

Learnings from the J&C and LIFT projects highlight the importance of livelihood programs to provide an array of vocational training and skills development options aligned with the diverse aptitudes, needs, and aspirations of survivors. CSOs should also include components focused on transferable skills that can be adapted for multiple sectors to strengthen resilience to the ups and downs of the employment market. CSOs should engage and include the private sector, and local or national government where feasible, to actively support and integrate these programs to ensure sustainability and longevity of career opportunities for survivors.

Reintegration programs need to provide ongoing and holistic support over a longer term

Reintegration is not a linear or simple journey for survivors, but rather, one that involves several hurdles including trauma, mental and emotional health, and emotional challenges among others. Reintegration programs should plan for the provision of comprehensive longer-term support, including include efforts to sensitize communities against discrimination and stigmatization of trafficking survivors.

FOR GOVERNMENT

Governments should integrate trauma-informed and victim-centered care and support for trafficking victims

Efforts to ensure long-term reintegration and recovery of CSE victims and prevent their re-victimization remain limited in Bangladesh and India. Learnings from the J&C and LIFT projects demonstrate the perceived effectiveness of providing victim-centered, trauma-informed, and culturally competent care and support to CSE survivors. Governments should explore the feasibility of replicating or integrating these strategies in partnership with relevant central and state-level departments (for example, the Ministry of Home Affairs and Ministry of Social Welfare in both Bangladesh and India, the Ministry of Women and Child Development in India, Border Guards in Bangladesh) to strengthen and expand the provision of victim-sensitive care, enabling a greater number of survivors to benefit from these approaches.

Methods

Research to support this brief was conducted by Population Council with support from the Global Fund to End Modern Slavery (GFEMS) and the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad). Population Council conducted a qualitative study to understand participant perspectives on the relevance, quality, and effectiveness of the Justice & Care and Seefar LIFT interventions.

The study included in-depth interviews (IDIs) with adult female survivors who participated in the Justice & Care (N=49) and the LIFT (N=43) projects. The research team also conducted focus group discussions and interviews with community leaders, project staff, and other key stakeholders. To ensure the research was appropriately informed by survivor voices and perspectives, Population Council engaged trafficking survivors to provide review and input on the in-depth interview guide and proposed research approach. Survivors provided recommendations on revising the language, length, and content of questionnaires to minimize the risk of re-traumatization.