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**The Impediments to Child Trafficking Victim Reintegration in Bangladesh**

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**Abstract**

Child trafficking, particularly trafficking of adolescent girls, has been an alarming phenomenon in the border areas of Bangladesh considering the poor socio-economic status, limited education and erroneous social media usage of the habitants as well as inadequate social awareness raising initiatives by the government and other relevant actors. The child trafficking victims from Bangladesh usually end up being involved in sex working, dancing at clubs, modern slavery, organ and drug smuggling, among others in United Arab Emirates, India, Thailand and other luxurious countries. Such adverse lifestyle often makes the trafficking victims reluctant towards their normal life in case they are fortunate enough to be rescued. Diversified social stigma, habituation with drug addiction, loopholes in government policies, limited social acceptance and reintegration initiatives by the government and humanitarian organizations are some of the major disablers for the victims to restart their life after being rescued. The government as well as the development organizations need to revisit their policies and support services with the victim reintegration process to address these gaps and improve the rehabilitation journey of the trafficking victims.

**Keywords:** Human Trafficking, Trafficking Victims, Reintegration, Repatriation.

**1. Introduction**

Human trafficking victims are often considered to be repatriated and reintegrated after rescuing as a response mechanism of the state and non-state actors. However, the process that a child trafficking victim go through e.g. addictions, forced pregnancy, violence, etc. (Crisp et al., 2024) since the beginning of their exploitation until they are finally rescued, is something which makes them habituated towards the life they were once forced to start. They also 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). Besides, as a result of using different kinds of seductive, drugs and furthermore the habit of frequent physical intimacy, the rescued girls struggle to restart their normal life. Sometimes, they reject their rehabilitation process due to the unacceptance from their near and dear ones. Besides, the limited educational qualifications and livelihood options (Rosy, 2016) also hinders their repatriation journey. Considering these factors, this study presents a victim centric perspective on 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.

This paper is designed incorporating existing 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.

## **2. 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 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).

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).

### ***2.1. Structural Functional Theory***

This theory suggests that every parts 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). This indicates that even if one of the various components of the society does not accept the trafficking victims, they are bound to return to their former life or they will have to severely suffer while readjusting in the society.

### ***2.2. 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.

However, very little evidence or no literatures have emphasized on the factors that discourage the trafficking victims to reintegrate in the society and what hinders the effectiveness of the existing initiatives taken by the global, national and local bodies working for the trafficking victims. Taking this gap into account, this study has solely focused on identifying the factors that disables the willingness to reintegrate by the child trafficking victims.

## **3. Methodology**

Systematic literature review was conducted to understand the trafficking dynamics from Bangladesh, and available policies and support services. Considering the data gap in the literatures on the challenges with reintegration of girl trafficking victims, this research was conducted following a mixed method involving both quantitative and qualitative method of data collection to capture the voice of victims in quantitative form and other relevant stakeholders to validate their arguments. The respondents of the study were selected in a manner that supports in triangulating the findings.

For quantitative data, purposive sampling was adopted and survey of 51 child trafficking victims from Satkhira and Jashore District of Bangladesh was conducted. Additionally, In-depth Interview (IDI) of 5 rescued child trafficking victims (who were also sex workers) and 10 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with shelter centre in charge, parents of the trafficking

victims, and NGO representatives was conducted for qualitative data. All the data was collected ensuring verbal consent from the respondents.

The overall objective of this study is to understand the enablers of child trafficking from Jessore and Satkhira district of Bangladesh and disablers for the child trafficking survivors to reintegrate in the society.

### 3.1. Limitations of the study

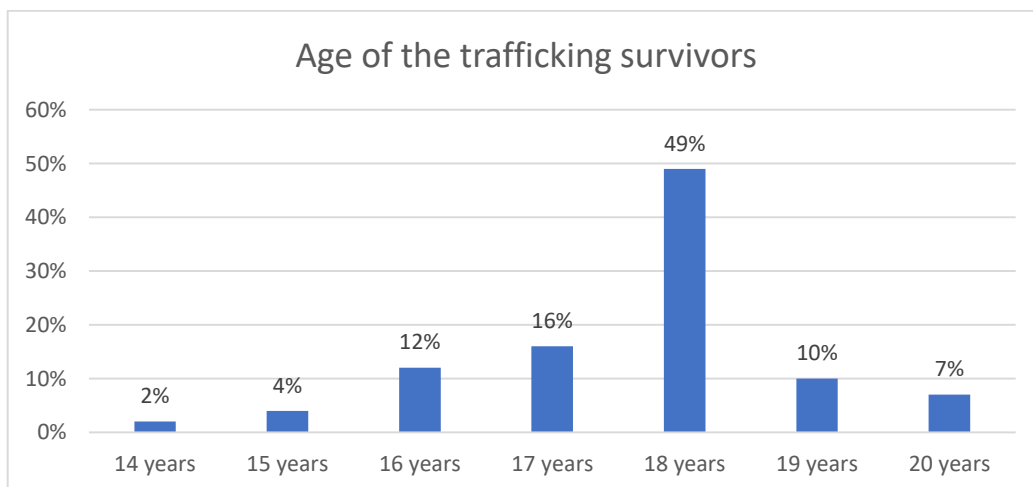
This study has a few limitations considering several challenges. The limitations are presented below:

1. The study was conducted from only two border areas of Bangladesh and incorporated a small sample for the quantitative survey 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 (Chowdury 2024, 2077).
3. There was no ethical approval obtained for this from any authorised body. Only verbal consent was ensured from all the respondents for data collection.

## 4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

### 4.1 Enablers of child trafficking from Bangladesh

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. This research has collected quantitative data from the trafficking survivors of Jessore (78%) and Satkhira (22%) who were rescued between the year 2020 and 2023. The current age of these respondents is given in **figure 1** which indicates that the survivors were mostly trafficked during their adolescent age (under 19 years) according to the World Health Organizations (WHO).



**Figure 1: Age of the trafficking survivors**

Majority (49%) of the victims are currently only 18 years old, and a few of them (2%) 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 to look for a splendid life for their future through the influence of globalization. It is crucial to mention here that a significant portion of the victims 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.

Along with the urge of being famous, the girls have a tendency to achieve this popularity overnight as they love to be praised for their beauty, dance and singing skills. Consequently, traffickers can easily influence them to get married by making false promises about their dreams. Such love marriages generally get disapproved by their families and often the girls decide to elope with the guy for pursuing their dream of becoming movie heroine, model, etc. Eventually, they become a victim of trafficking and end up in any brothels, dancing clubs and/or pornography businesses.

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 to work as sex workers and/or porn actors, as informed by the NGO representatives working in this sector. In addition to this, the victims 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 the porn 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 victims manage to elope from this torture, others have to only wait until they are tracked by any legal or responsible authorities. The organizations that work for the tracking 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. The rescue process is normally a 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.

The government of Bangladesh has initiated several rigorous process as a part of its response mechanism for trafficking and these includes: 1) formulating laws, policies, action

plan, guidelines etc.<sup>1</sup> for trafficking response mechanism that emphasize on prevention, protection, rescue, repatriation, rehabilitation and reintegration of the trafficking victims in the society; 2) international collaboration through various MoU and Agreements<sup>2</sup> with the countries (specially the neighbouring countries: India) where most trafficking cases are occurring; 3) tracking down victims and rescuing with the usage of technology, government and non-government organizations etc.; 4) Assistance to victims in foreign countries with the support of embassies, rescuing and deporting to home country; 5) Establishment of rehabilitation centres by both government and non-government organizations for the psychological counselling, health service and reintegration process; 6) Providing financial support to arrange immediate needs such as medications, nutritious foods, clothes etc.).

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 and non-government organizations 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. 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).

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<sup>1</sup> Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking Act (2012), Human Trafficking Victim and Crime Identification Guideline, National Plan of Action for Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking (2023-2025),

<sup>2</sup> For the trafficking victims, Bangladesh and India have initiated joint approach in response to reinforce the Rescue, Recovery, Repatriation, and Integration (RRRI) process.

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

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

Donors/ INGOs	National Organisations	Services
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• USAID</li> <li>• UNODC</li> <li>• United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)</li> <li>• IOM</li> <li>• Winrock International</li> <li>• Justice &amp; Care</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• BRAC</li> <li>• TMSS</li> <li>• YPSA</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shelter (food and accommodation),</li> <li>• Health Services (including psychological counselling),</li> <li>• Training on Income Generating Activities (IGA),</li> <li>• Support with small business setup etc.</li> </ul>
	UCEP	Technical Training
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Government District Legal Aid Committee</li> <li>• Bangladesh Society for the Enforcement of Human Rights (BSEHR),</li> <li>• Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST)</li> <li>• Ain o Shalish Kendra (ASK)</li> </ul>	Counselling and Legal Aid
	Community groups: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community Based Organizations (CBOs)</li> <li>• Youth groups,</li> <li>• Counter Trafficking Committees (CTCs) etc.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Awareness raising,</li> <li>• Identification of victims and connecting with relevant authorities etc.</li> </ul>

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 Disablers for trafficking survivors to reintegrate***

Taking into consideration of the existing policies and support services for the trafficking victims, the study has further explored the disablers to reintegrate.

The preliminary stage of reintegration is where shelter centres are required to provide 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 short-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. Furthermore, the shelter house under DSS/ Ministry of Social Welfare (MSW) provide long-term shelter. Despite all these available shelter centres, things happen quite differently in actual.

As shown in the **table 2**, 64% of the total respondents has returned to their home within a few days without receiving any psychological counselling at the shelter centre. Only 5% survivors spend 15 days at the shelter centre, 7% stayed for around a month, 7% stayed a few

months, 11% remained there for around six months and 6% took more than 3 years for returning to their families or homes from the shelter centre.

**Table 2: Time taken to return to the family of the trafficking victims**

<b>Time taken to return to family/caregiver from the shelter home</b>	<b>Jashore</b>	<b>Satkhira</b>	<b>Grand Total</b>
A few days	52%	11%	64%
A few months	2%	5%	7%
Around a month	0%	7%	7%
Around half a month	5%	0%	5%
Around six months	10%	2%	11%
More than 3 years	6%	0%	6%
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>75%</b>	<b>25%</b>	<b>100%</b>

The first challenge in this regard is the trafficking victims require a court order to access the government services and shelter. Furthermore, the government shelter house does not have specialized services for the women and girl sex trafficking victims. Nevertheless, the shelter centres are instructed to keep the trafficking victims for at least 30 days whereas, the parents and relatives have a tendency to bring them back within a few days after being rescued. In addition to these, the shelter centre staffs shared that they cannot force the rescued victims to stay at their centres for longer term. Besides, sometimes it is difficult to find the victim's families to inform about their return. The study findings shows that maximum respondent (94%= #48) from both the locations are currently residing at their home while only 6% (#3) of them are still living at the shelter home. Among these, 100% respondents from Satkhira are currently staying at their home and 92% respondents from Jessore are doing the same.

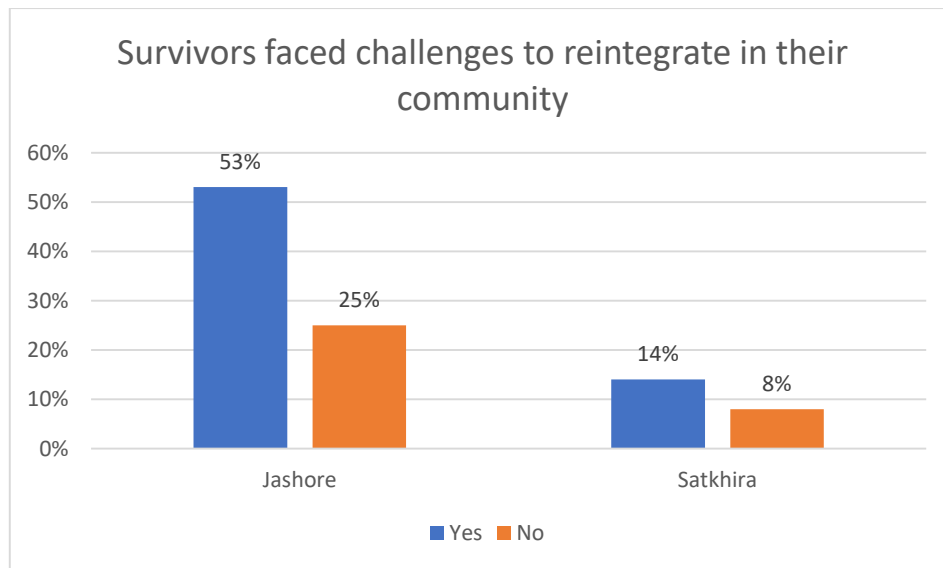
Apart from the above-mentioned aspects, several victims have to deal with initial shock and rejections from their own family, relatives, and community. The study participants involved families that did not accept the victims initially and the victims had to remain at the shelter centres for extended 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, various social stigmas, 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 victims 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*



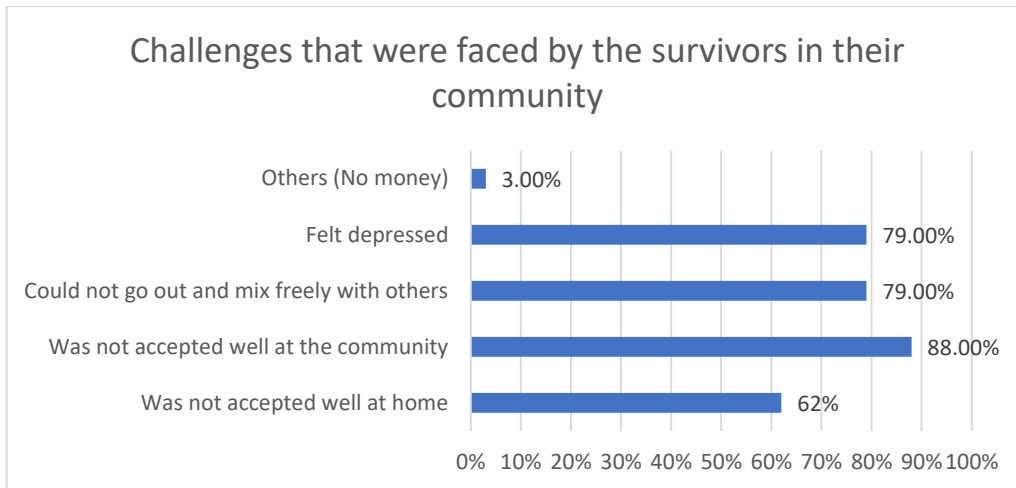
*new life. My parents had to hide the fact about me being trafficked and only then they could manage a groom. However, that marriage also did not work. Even after the receiving a massive amount of dowry, my husband has beaten me to a level that made my life a miserable one.”*

The challenges for the girl trafficking victims further detected in the community. According to the figure 3 given below, 53% of the girl victims from Jashore and 14% victims from Satkhira, total 67% of the respondents, shared that they struggled to reintegrate in their community. The struggles of the victims were also assessed in this study to understand the types of challenges they faced while reintegrating in their community.



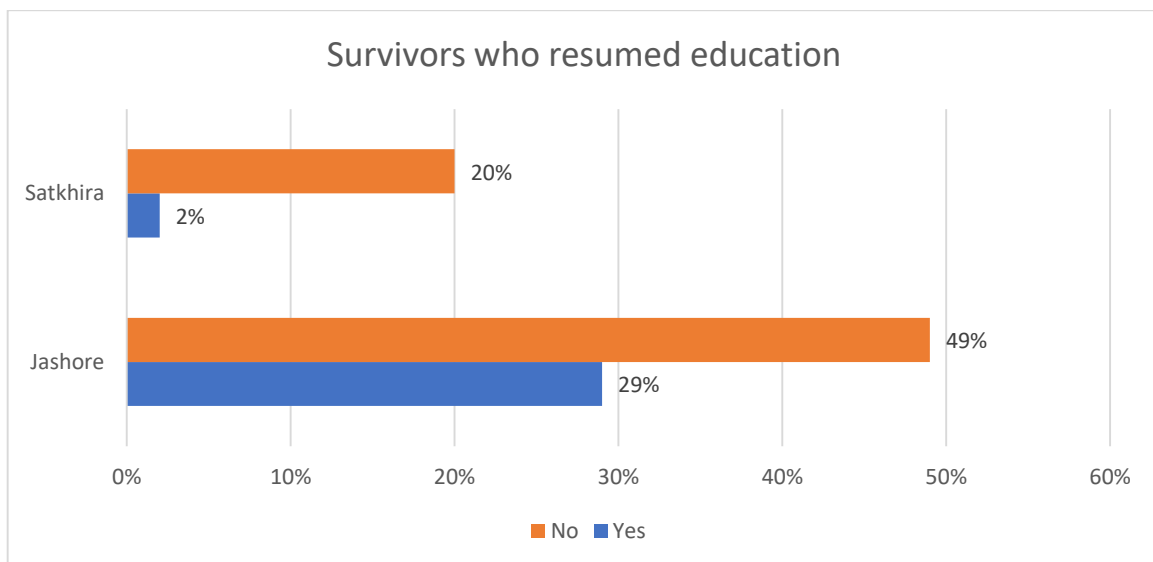
**Figure 2: Survivors who faced challenge to reintegrate in the community**

The **figure 4** below shows that 88% of the trafficking victims were not accepted well at their community, 79% of them could not go out and mix freely with others, 79% felt depressed, 62% was not even welcomed at their own home and only 3% have mentioned about not having any money to survive. 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.



**Figure 3: Challenges faced by the survivors in their community**

For reintegration purpose, resuming education could act as a good solution for the trafficking survivors. However, the number of survivors who could start over their education are very few considering the socio-economic background of their families. According to **figure 5** given below, 49% of the survivors from Jashore and 20% from Satkhira (total 69% of the respondents) could not resume their education even after 2-3 years of their repatriation. Only 31% of the total victims could do so among which 29% is from Jashore and only 2% is from Satkhira. This implies that more than half of the trafficking victims could not yet start their normal life.



**Figure 4: Survivors who resumed their education**

Drug addiction of the trafficking victims is the last but not the least remarkable disabler pertaining to the reintegration process of the trafficking victims. 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 returning. Many a times, the victims struggle tremendously to recover from their addiction. Besides, they have high sexual desire as a result of consuming the drugs continuously for several years. Since the victims are not allowed to physically intimate

with anyone while in the shelter centre, it makes them aggressive and sometimes they become homosexual 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 victims in a room for several days as they become violent to the caregivers and staffs during their habituated drug intake times of the day. Besides, they 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 victims who became asexual as a result of their experiences after being trafficked.

Thus, the girl trafficking victims are fighting with various challenges even after being freed from the traffickers. Until these struggles are not fixed, reintegration process will not sustain and chances of re-trafficking will increase. Hence, it is utterly important to address these gaps in order to guarantee sustainable restoration of the girl trafficking victims 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. However, the key enabling points of trafficking such as poverty, ambitions, lack of knowledge and awareness are yet largely unaddressed. While the concentration is largely circled around the rescued and repatriation related activities, it is high time to address the gaps with rehabilitation process of the trafficking survivors, particularly for the girls whose whole life are lying ahead. Robust systematic approaches are required to be implemented by the government as well as the other actors working in this arena to ensure an inclusive society. The government and non-government bodies can further identify the required approaches to ensure the effectiveness of their initiatives through further assessments on the issues presented in this study.

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

1. The study findings point to the gap with proper records and documentation on the trafficking victims which creates further challenge to track the survivors and arrange appropriate supports for them. Hence, the GoB should prioritize preparing a district wise database of trafficking victims to provide relevant solutions and reintegration services for their effective rehabilitation. Moreover, 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. Due to the flexibility in terms of initial stay of the victims at the shelter centres, the survivors are often deprived of adequate rehabilitation procedure. The GoB need to implement strict policies on the days of mandatory stay at the shelter centres to ensure adequate health and psychological support to the victims before they are handed over to their families. Furthermore, the counselling service at the shelter centre need to involve both the victims and their family members to ease the rehabilitation process.
3. Finally, the victim's family and community play a crucial role to support them with restarting their normal life. To ensure this, appropriate measures on social awareness raising programs are highly crucial involving community volunteer groups and religious leaders to facilitate these.

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