



## REPORT ON

# STRENGTHENING COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES AND REDUCING KNOWLEDGE GAPS TO PREVENT TRAFFICKING OF WOMEN





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**PUBLISHED BY**

Share-Net Bangladesh

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## ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

CM	Child Marriage
CMRA	Child Marriage Restraint Act
CoP	Community of Practice
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
CSO	Civil Society Organization
DGFP	Directorate General of Family Planning
FSSSP	Female Secondary School Stipend Program
FWA	Family Welfare Assistant
KRC	Kishori Resource Centre
NGO	Non-Government Organization
RCT	Randomized Control Trials
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SNBD	Share-Net Bangladesh



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Human trafficking and migrant smuggling are global problems, usually involving transnational criminal networks that prey on vulnerable men, women, and children. Statistical analysis by the United Nations indicates a gradual increase in cases of human trafficking. The reason for this is likely to be a combination of increased trafficking activity and better capacity among authorities and NGOs to detect and report trafficking cases. Modern slavery is another word that can describe the methods adopted by the traffickers, which typically involves the use of force, fraud or coercion to get another person to provide labor or exploitative sex. The act, means and purpose are all important elements of the crime of trafficking in persons.

The socioeconomic fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated vulnerability to human trafficking as millions of people worldwide have been forced out of work or education. Violent conflict in Myanmar, Syria and Yemen has caused large-scale displacement of people including nearly a million Rohingya who fled from Myanmar to Bangladesh.

Women and children continue to be disproportionately affected by human trafficking. UN data shows that out of every ten victims of human trafficking, five are women and two are girls.

Human trafficking remains a major concern for Bangladesh. Although empirical data is not easy to get, it is estimated that around 20,000 Bangladeshi women and children are trafficked to India, Pakistan and the Middle East every year. The 2021 Trafficking in Persons Report by the US State Department placed Bangladesh in Tier 2 which means Bangladesh does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking but is making significant efforts to do so.

Recent high-profile cases of trafficking and people smuggling include the case of a member of parliament who allegedly bribed Kuwaiti officials to bring more than 20,000 Bangladeshis into Kuwait on work visas which mentioned a different job, and paid the workers significantly lower wages than promised, or none at all. Another case involved a TikTok influencer who used social media to lure and trap women. Anti-trafficking organizations have documented many cases of Bangladeshis trapped abroad in conditions close to modern slavery.

This study sought to identify information and knowledge gaps that act as push or pull factors in the trafficking of women, as well as gauge what communication strategies work and what does not work in the areas of trafficking prevention, protection, prosecution, and reintegration. It also includes recommendations for developing an effective communication strategy and information tools to prevent human trafficking among at-risk women.

The research was conducted using a mixed-method approach. Data was collected from survivors of human trafficking incidents and stakeholders involved in anti-trafficking efforts. Due to pandemic restrictions, all data collection was phone-based.

Quantitative data was collected via a survey using a structured questionnaire (N=52) over the telephone among female survivors from selected districts with high incidences of trafficking. To better understand, validate and contextualize the findings, the research team conducted 8 In-depth interviews (IDIs) with female survivors. In addition, 8 Key informant interviews (KIIs) with stakeholders at the district and national level were conducted to understand the contexts and patterns of trafficking and anti-trafficking measures. The quantitative data was collected using Kobo Toolbox and analyzed using STATA statistical software. Manual coding and word processors were used for organizing, coding, and thematic analysis of qualitative data.

The research uncovered significant gaps in knowledge and understanding that made women vulnerable to exploitation. One of the biggest impediments to anti-trafficking efforts is a lack of understanding of the issue. This study found a widespread lack of awareness among the at-risk women. But there appears to be a lack of understanding from the authorities and anti-trafficking organizations as well, especially regarding the best ways to communicate with vulnerable women.

Consistent with the general profile of trafficking survivors in Bangladesh, most of the respondents appeared to be from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. The majority had 5 to 10 years of schooling, although only 9.6% had completed the Secondary School Certificate or higher. A total of 53.85 %of respondents were unemployed at the time of their departure, and the majority of those that were working expressed discontent with their jobs before leaving the country. The findings underline the economic vulnerability of these women, which makes them susceptible to the approaches from traffickers and their agents.

Most of the participating women had negative experiences during their time abroad, ranging from ‘not very good’ (15%) to ‘very bad’ (71%). More than 80% of women say they have been subjected to physical, mental, or sexual exploitation abroad. Around 46% of women say they were forced to have sex without their consent, with 45% of this group saying a condom was not always used.

The study reveals a general lack of knowledge about sexual and reproductive health with about 71.15% of the respondents saying they don’t know what to do if they have menstrual-related problems. Those with a better knowledge of sexual and reproductive health are significantly more likely to report having negative experiences abroad ( $p < 0.05$ ). This may be a matter of increased awareness overall.

The vast majority (94.23%) of survey respondents said they were completely unaware that they might be exposed to abusive conditions when working abroad. Most said they had not received counter-trafficking information from the government or other sources prior to going abroad.

The majority of the women (77%) said counter-trafficking information was not easy to get and 71% said these messages are not visible enough in the community. Women with higher levels of education are significantly more likely to find the government's efforts lacking.

In the Key Informant Interviews, counter-trafficking organizations stressed the need to tailor communications and messaging to the target audience. Women's lack of mobility and limited access to resources often mean they are not able to access public-interest information as easily as men. The head of a USAID-supported counter-trafficking project said policymakers should try to change the profile of would-be migrants and concentrate on sending higher-skilled migrant workers to destination countries.

A senior police officer who is part of a counter-trafficking committee said it was important to include sexual education and counter-trafficking information in the school curriculum. A journalist involved in covering human trafficking said alternative livelihood opportunities should be created for at-risk women.

The report concludes that significant knowledge gaps exist among young Bangladeshi women targeted by human traffickers.

The report recommends increased investment in behavior change communication, interpersonal communication involving community influencers and the promotion of digital literacy and digital tools to build resilience to human trafficking.

Ultimately, the crime of human trafficking is rooted in issues of governance, rights and livelihoods. Poverty and lack of economic opportunity are the most significant factors that push Bangladeshi women into the clutches of human traffickers.

The Sustainable Development Goals specifically mention human trafficking in the targets of three goals: 5, 8, and 16, underlining that human trafficking is ultimately a sustainable development issue. Only an inclusive rights-based approach to development can defeat the scourge of human trafficking.



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## BACKGROUND

Many countries worldwide are reporting a rising number of human trafficking victims. Data collected by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2020) indicate that human traffickers have gradually increased their activities over the past few years. From a regional viewpoint, an increased number of trafficking victims were reported in Asia. The reasons behind these growing numbers are likely to be a combination of gradually increasing human trafficking incidences and better national capacity to identify, record and analyze trafficking data (UNODC, 2020).

The global upheaval caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has vastly increased vulnerabilities to trafficking (UNODC, 2021). The pandemic has left millions of women, men, and children around the world out of school, out of work, without social support and facing an uncertain future. Human trafficking networks typically prey on the marginalized and the impoverished. Migrant workers sent home after the outbreak of the pandemic are desperate to go abroad, increasing the likelihood that they will fall into the clutches of human traffickers and people smugglers.

Although human trafficking is a long-standing problem, still significant confusion exists regarding what exactly constitutes the definition of ‘trafficking’. The confusion occurs partly because of the complex changing nature of this crime, and its overlap with other forms of cross-border movements.



Human trafficking is defined by the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons as ‘the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation’ (United States Department of State, 2021a).

According to the Trafficking in Persons Report 2021, issued by the US Department of State, “trafficking in persons,” “human trafficking,” and “modern slavery” are terms that are interchangeably used to describe the crime by which traffickers exploit and gain profit by coercing or luring adults and children for sex or labor. Over 175 countries have endorsed or consented to the U.N. Trafficking In Persons Protocol which characterizes TIP and contains commitments to prevent and fight it. The main components of the crime of trafficking can be depicted utilizing a three-component structure that focuses on the human traffickers 1) acts; 2) means; and 3) purpose. Each of the three components is crucial to the resulting human trafficking violations. The U.S. perceives two primary types of TIP including:

- Sex trafficking: Sex trafficking involves the activities when the trafficker uses fraudulent ways to compel the victims into commercial sex activities. The sex trafficking crime can also be understood by the three components “acts,” “means,” and “purpose”.

- Forced labor: Labor trafficking is another term used for forced labor. It involves the activities when the traffickers use force or fraud to get the labor services from the victim.

Human trafficking has been observed to be increasing in South Asia. Men, women, and children are trafficked for labor, sexual exploitation, and forced marriages. Some victims are trafficked within the country, whereas most are trafficked internationally (UNODC, 2014). Human trafficking is a cause for concern in Bangladesh, where the pandemic, climate change and poverty continue to drive vulnerability. Women continue to be disproportionately affected by trafficking in persons. In 2018, for every ten victims detected globally, about five were adult women, and two were girls. (UNODC, 2021)

## **HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN BANGLADESH**

According to the report “2021 Trafficking in Persons Report: Bangladesh” by the U.S. Department of State, the Bangladesh government identified 6,866 potential trafficking victims in 2020, a significant increase from 585 in the previous year. However, victim support appeared to be inadequate (United States Department of State, 2021b).

Although empirical data is not easy to access , it is estimated that around 20,000 Bangladeshi women and children are trafficked to India, Pakistan and the Middle East every year (Khan, 2021).

Human traffickers are often well-connected and take advantage of legal loopholes and social trends to ensnare the victims. Recent high-profile cases of trafficking and people smuggling include the case of a member of parliament who allegedly bribed Kuwaiti officials to bring more than 20,000 Bangladeshis into Kuwait on work visas which mentioned a different job, and paid the workers significantly lower wages than promised, or none at all (UNODC, 2020). Another case involved a TikTok influencer who used social media to lure and trap women (United States Department of State, 2021b). Anti-trafficking organizations have documented many cases of Bangladeshis trapped abroad in conditions close to modern slavery.

Traffickers exploited the majority of victims identified through forced labor, although sexual exploitation also remained a major problem, according to the TIP Report 2021. In Vanuatu, in the past few years, over 100 Bangladeshi male forced labor victims were identified. The authorities got many complaints of nonpayment of wages from the 30,000 Bengali migrants working in Brunei. Out of 234,000 Bangladeshi workers in the Maldives, 69,000 reported elements of forced labor, including issues of passport retention, fraudulent recruitment, and nonpayment of wages. In Saudi Arabia, human traffickers exploited female domestic workers through labor trafficking. According to the same report, each month, nearly 200 workers, with the indicators of forced labor, return from Saudi Arabia to Bangladesh. The report further adds that over the past six years, the dead bodies of 473 Bengali domestic

workers were repatriated from the Middle East. Out of the 473, 63 were repatriated in 2020. This includes the dead body of a thirteen-year-old teenage girl sent to Saudi Arabia via a labor recruiter with a false passport. The traffickers in 2020 also used “COVID-19 free” areas to attract the victims (United States Department of State, 2021b).

Bangladeshi women and children are trafficked to Pakistan and India for forced labor and commercial sex (Chandran, 2016). Owners of brothels often coerce Bangladeshi women and young girls to take steroids to seduce their clients; those steroids have adverse effects on the human body. The steroids were also reported to be used on 90% of females aged 15-35 years in the brothels of Bangladesh (BBC, 2010).

The 2021 Trafficking In Person Report of the US State Department holds that Bangladesh has made strides in identifying victims and prosecuting traffickers, but still falls short of the minimum standards of trafficking elimination in some areas. In February 2012, Bangladesh’s government enacted an anti-trafficking law that addressed the gaps in legislation like the absence of a prohibition on men trafficking. A new anti-trafficking plan (2012-2014) was also developed by the government that included methods for implementing the new law. There was a rise in the number of prosecutions; however, there was a decrease in the number of convictions compared to the previous years (Chowdhury, n.d.).

In short, the government is trying to reduce the incidents of human trafficking and help the victims; however, the efforts are not enough. The government has room for improvement in its efforts to stop human trafficking and convict the offenders. There is also a need to strictly and evenly implement anti-trafficking laws to punish the fraudulent labor recruiters (Chowdhury, n.d.).

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The principal objectives of the research include:

- Identify the information and knowledge gaps that work as push or pull factors in the trafficking of women.
- Explore what communication strategies work and what does not work in trafficking prevention, protection, prosecution, and reintegration from survivors' experiences.
- Make appropriate recommendations to develop effective communication strategies and information tools to combat human trafficking among the women at risk

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## LITERATURE REVIEW

Because of the complexity of the phenomenon and the clandestine nature of the crime, empirical data about the depth and breadth of human trafficking is often difficult to come by. However, several pieces of research shed light on the vulnerability of Bangladeshi women to forced labor and sexual exploitation.

Chowdhury (2004) described the main trafficking route for South Asia-Gulf region as the Dhaka-Mumbai-Karachi-Dubai corridor. Like other parts of the world, females from Bangladesh (under 18 years) are trafficked and sold from villages for around \$1000 to the commercial sex industry. However, in Bangladesh, human trafficking is not only limited to commercial sex work, according to the research by Chowdhury. Additionally, 4-15 year-old children are trafficked for forced labor and to sell their body parts and organs such as kidneys. In the Gulf countries, these children often become “camel race jockeys” that result in fatal injuries and long-lasting mental trauma, although such incidents appear to have decreased in recent years. The statistics from Human Rights NGOs in Bangladesh shows that every month, 200-400 young women and children are trafficked from Bangladesh to India/Pakistan and then towards the Gulf countries. Furthermore, approximately 10,000-15,000 women and children are trafficked from Bangladesh to India. The traffickers lure the victims by giving them false promises of a better lifestyle, by force or by outright trade (sold by victim’s relatives).

The victims of trafficking frequently suffer from health problems like HIV/AIDS and mental stress. Complete elimination of human trafficking from Bangladesh is difficult if not impossible. However, the government of Bangladesh has to take strict measures to punish the traffickers and prevent human trafficking (Chowdurry, 2004).

The International Labor Organization (ILO, 2006) conducted an empirical study on the demand side of human trafficking in Asia (Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Indonesia). Commercial sex industry, domestic labor, organized begging and fireworks production were the sectors highlighted. The report only focused on the above mentioned five Asian countries. The data was gathered using structured interviews and focus group discussion from the workers in the sectors mentioned above. According to the results, the demand for commercial sex workers was mainly for adults aged 18-34 years, however, in some cases the clients even preferred children (15-17 years). The brother owners also preferred virgins in those 5 countries, the percentage of which varies - 55% in Nepal, 42% in Bangladesh, 23% in Pakistan, 8% in Indonesia and 2% in Sri Lanka.

Most cross-border trafficking flows around the world are limited within the same subregion or region. Accordingly, most victims detected in South America are citizens of other South American countries, with a limited flow originating from the Caribbean islands. Most victims detected in Europe are Europeans, but with significant flows originating from other regions, and so forth. Western and Southern Europe, the affluent countries of the Middle East and North America

are the only destinations with significant levels of detected victims trafficked from other regions. Data on repatriated victims confirm the broad pattern of trafficking being mainly confined within subregions. 101 Furthermore, repatriation data also reveal additional long-distance trafficking activity. South American citizens, for example, have been found to be trafficked to and repatriated from Europe, North America, East Asia and the Middle East. Victims from West, East and Southern Africa are also trafficked to and repatriated from the Middle East. Similarly, repatriation data show that victims from Central and South-Eastern Europe are also trafficked to and repatriated from Eastern Europe (UNODC, 2020).



*Map: Transregional flow of trafficking victims from Bangladesh to India and the Middle East (Source: UNODC)*

Poverty was the main reason that forced these victims into commercial sex. The domestic labor employees were males that worked in government and public sectors.



Employers from all the countries preferred someone clean and responsible, a person that was able to do household chores. Employers from Sri Lanka, Indonesia and Bangladesh preferred females above 18 years. On the contrary, child labor was preferred in Nepal. Majority of the domestic laborers were free to leave in theory but couldn't do it because of debt or retention of travel documents. Some of them were also forced to work on very low wages, whereas some simply endured the abuse in the hope of better earning opportunities (International Labour Organization, 2006).

A report by Sayantoni Datta (2018) found that over 50,000 women from Bangladesh are trafficked each year through India. Moreover, over the last decade over 500,000 women and children were illegally trafficked through India. According to data obtained from various NGO reports, the trafficking of women and children from Bangladesh to India has become a network of supply and demand on both sides of the borders. The Indian trafficking network demands young females from Bangladesh to work in brothels, dance bars, for prostitution, forced marriages and as domestic maids. The Bangladeshi agents target the women from poor families- the females from such households are an easy target for the touts due to pervasive poverty in the country. The touts mostly used Benapole border (south-west transit point) for human trafficking to India because the border is porous, thus making it easier for the traffickers to move people to India.

The victims and traffickers arrested by the Border Security Force (BSF) claimed that for each person the traffickers had to pay 200-400 takas to the Border Guards Bangladesh (BGB). Once across the border, trafficking victims were held captive at

the border villages before they were sent to different cities in India. The researcher suggested that vulnerable patches of the border must be fenced by the Bangladeshi authorities to stop trafficking (Datta, 2018).

Kawshar Jahan (2011) conducted research on the role of the government and NGOs on human trafficking prevention in the northern borders of Bangladesh. According to Kawshar, trafficking and sexual abuse are a nightmare for the women in the region. The government along with the NGOs are trying to Prevent, Protect, Rehabilitate and Reintegrate the trafficking victims and raise awareness among the population at risk. However, among these, prevention is the only efficient and vital way to reduce the risk of human trafficking. It was the effort of multiple NGOs in Bangladesh that highlighted the human trafficking crime and publicized it. The research suggested that NGOs must organize events to educate the public along with the youth, teachers, imams and social workers about the horrors of human trafficking. Networking among the NGOs is important; it is vital that the NGOs share common prevention messages with the public to reduce human trafficking. Furthermore, the government should take measures to eliminate poverty and illiteracy as a sustainable anti-trafficking measure. Women's empowerment is another method to combat human trafficking. The government should take measures to provide free education to girl children. In addition, the NGOs can take measures to help in income generation for the women. Lastly, the legal framework and the policies to punish the human traffickers should be strengthened to prevent human trafficking in Bangladesh (Jahan, 2011).

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## METHODOLOGY

The study followed a mixed-method approach to data collection, triangulation and analysis. Survey data and in-depth information were collected from the survivors themselves and from various stakeholders who played critical roles in implementing anti-trafficking interventions. The survey was conducted using a structured questionnaire (N=52 ) over the telephone among female survivors from selected districts with high incidences of trafficking.

The majority of respondents were randomly selected from members of the Anirban network- a trafficking survivors' network set up by the NGO Winrock International, as part of the USAID-funded anti-trafficking project Bangladesh Counter Trafficking in Persons Program (BCTIP). After an initial group of 36 respondents was selected, an additional 16 respondents were collected using the snowball method. Data was collected from the Rangpur, Rajshahi, Jessore, and Cox's Bazar regions, where Anirban has their survivors' groups.

Informed consent and 'do not harm' principles were observed at all stages of the interviews. The respondents were allowed to choose the time for the interview, and the interview was broken up into segments to allow them to do housework and personal chores.

All the interviewers were female, in order to make it easier for the respondents to discuss sexual and reproductive health matters and other personal issues.

The quantitative data was triangulated using qualitative research, consisting of In-depth Interviews (IDIs) and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs). To better understand, validate and contextualize the findings, the research team conducted 8 In-depth interviews (IDIs) with female survivors. In addition, 8 Key informant interviews (KIIs) with stakeholders at the district and national level were conducted to understand the contexts and patterns of trafficking and anti-trafficking measures. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, the IDIs and KIIs were also conducted over the phone.

The researchers used an inductive approach to the IDIs, beginning with open conversations, and then moving to detect themes and patterns in the responses. Throughout, the funnel approach and the saturation point concepts guided the flow of the in-depth interviews. The interviewers started with general, open-ended questions such as ‘describe the circumstances of how you went abroad’ and ‘did anyone accompany you?’ and ‘what was the situation at the destination?’. Then the interviewers probed deeper with more specific questions regarding the experiences and perceptions, based on the initial responses.

A rigorous desk review was conducted based on available publications focused on human trafficking in Bangladesh to complement the field-based data. Data collection tools were developed by reviewing available research publications, reports, guidelines, and literature.

Target Groups of respondents for the research are shown in the table below:

Components		Units
1.	Survey with females (N=52) age 18+	1
2.	In-depth Interviews (IDI) with female survivors, age 18+	8
3.	Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)	8
4.	Representatives from Counter-Trafficking Committee(CTC)	1
5.	Winrock FSTIP	2
6.	Local NGO/CSOs – Rights Jessore, Anirban	2
7.	Upazila/Union Chairman	1
8.	Local Journalist	1
9.	Community Member (teacher/social worker)	1

Table 1: Target Groups of respondents

## INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION CRITERIA

For the survey sample, researchers selected Bangladeshi women over 18 who had been transported from their place of residence by force, the threat of force, or through deception for the purpose of forced labor or sexual exploitation. The elements of act, means, and purpose of the offense of trafficking formed the basis for inclusion.

Anirban network members who had willingly migrated for work or for marriage purposes and returned without incident were excluded.

## **DATA COLLECTION/ANALYSIS**

The quantitative data were gathered using a survey with a sample size of 52 randomly drawn from human trafficking survivors in the selected districts in the Rangpur, Rajshahi, Jessore, and Cox’s Bazar regions. Due to pandemic restrictions, all interviews were conducted over the telephone in Bangladesh. The data was collected using Kobo Toolbox and analyzed using STATA statistical software. Manual coding and word processors were used for organizing, coding, and thematic analysis of qualitative data. All interviews were recorded and transcribed into Bengali.

## **THE RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS:**

“Women from low-income households, the majority of whom are poorly educated and unskilled, fall prey to traffickers and people smugglers. They have little or no knowledge of the working conditions in the destination country and are often abused physically and psychologically after going abroad. Many are forced to have unsafe sex with their employers or smugglers, exacerbated by their lack of sexual and reproductive health knowledge. The official awareness efforts are not sufficiently effective. The vulnerability of women can be reduced by finding better ways to communicate with them and by providing them with reliable information.”

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## FINDINGS

Based on the experiences and perceptions of survivors, this study sought to identify information and knowledge gaps that act as push or pull factors in the trafficking of women, as well as to gauge what communication strategies work and what does not work in the areas of trafficking prevention, protection, prosecution, and reintegration. It also includes recommendations for developing an effective communication strategy and information tools to prevent human trafficking among women in danger of being trafficked.

The results of the research are classified into two categories. The first part contains information on the demographic characteristics of respondents, and the second section explains the research results in the context of the hypothesis that was developed after a comprehensive analysis of the literature. Women from low-income backgrounds, women with limited education and skills, women with little or no knowledge of working conditions, coercion and deception, a lack of knowledge, and the government's efforts are just a few examples of the elements that were examined.

### RESPONDENT CHARACTERISTICS – SOCIAL CONDITIONS

The ages of the participants varied from 18 to 50, with the majority having completed 5 to 10 years of formal education. Even though some were illiterate and could not even write their names, this constituted just 2% of respondents. However, at the other end of the spectrum, only 9.6% had completed the Secondary School Certificate or higher. Around 62% were

married, 27% were divorced, separated, or widowed, and 11% had never been married. (Table 2). According to the study's findings, the average age at which girls got married is 15.91.

Value	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Age</b>		
16-25	15	28.85
26-35	26	50.00
36-45	9	17.31
46-55	2	3.85
<b>Education</b>		
5th Grade	27	51.92
Can sign only	10	19.23
8th Grade	9	17.31
HSC	3	5.77
SSC	2	3.85
Cannot Sign	1	1.92
<b>Marital Status</b>		
Married	32	62
Divorced/Separated/Widowed,	14	27
Never Married	6	11

*Table 2: Percentage and frequency distribution of Age, Education, and Marital status*



Respondents were asked about their income and employment status. The results revealed that half of them are not working or generating any money at the moment (Figure 1). Among the women still working, 13.46 % worked at home, 11.54 % worked in the tailoring industry, 5.77 % worked in business, 3.85% worked in handicrafts, and 1.92% worked in factories and poultry farms (Figure 2). One of the remaining 9.56% was employed by the Hope Foundation, an NGO; another non-governmental organization employed the other. One individual claimed to own a roadside restaurant selling street food like singara puri. Several women have shared their experiences of working as a cleaner and a tailor simultaneously, having received tailoring training from NGOs.

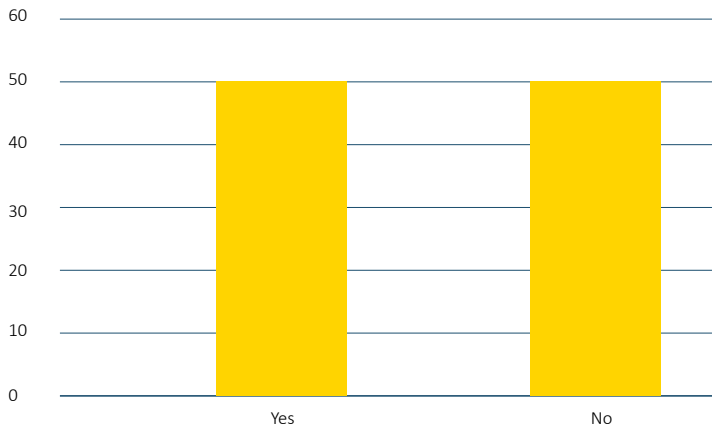


Figure 1: Proportion of women who are currently engaged in income-generating activities.

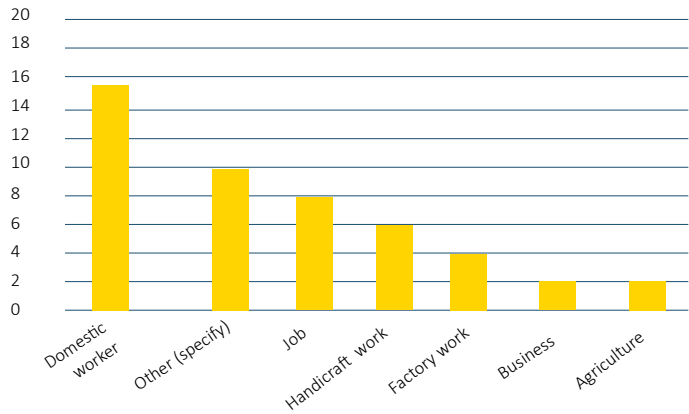


Figure 2: Women's current occupations.

Due to a lack of work prospects, a total of 25% of women had no source of income, and 11.54 %of women were suffering from health problems that prevented them from working. The remaining 11.54 %said they got engaged in household responsibilities and didn't have the time or family support to work. COVID, on the other hand, led to the loss of work for a large number of women (9.62%) (Figure 3).

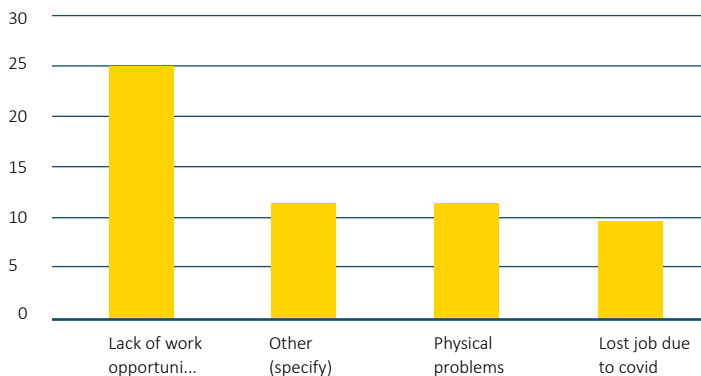


Figure 3: The reason for not engaging in any income-generating work currently.

A total of 53.85 %of respondents were unemployed at the time of their departure, and the majority of those that were working expressed discontent with their jobs before leaving the country (Table 3).

Value	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Were you engaged in any income-generating activity before you went abroad?</b>		
No	28	53.85
Yes	24	46.15
<b>Were you satisfied with the work?</b>		
No	14	26.92
Yes	10	19.23

Table 3: Percentage and Frequency distribution of women's work engagement and satisfaction before going abroad.

Value	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Were you forced to travel abroad by someone?</b>		
No	38	73.08
Yes	14	26.92
<b>Who forced you to travel abroad?</b>		
Agent	6	11
Others (friends)	6	11
Relatives	2	3
<b>Who accompanied you when you went abroad?</b>		
Alone	32	61
Others (friends and other knowing members)	14	26
Agent	12	23
Relatives	4	7
With husband	2	3

*Table 4: Percentage and frequency distribution of women who answered questions about coercion.*

When asked about their employment at the destination, 75% of respondents said that they were domestic workers in another country, with others stating that they work in prostitution, waitressing, and working in nurseries (see Table 5).

Value	Frequency	Percentage
<b>What was your occupation abroad?</b>		
Domestic Worker	39	75
Prostitution	6	11.54
Jobless	4	7.69
Waiter	1	1.92
Others	2	3.85

*Table 5: Occupation of the Respondents abroad.*

According to the demographic data, mostly women who were experiencing severe socioeconomic difficulties in Bangladesh have gone overseas. They are less qualified and do not have adequate digital literacy to call for assistance via email and other electronic means. They are not sufficiently aware of their rights and received little or no training from the government or NGOs before they went abroad. Only a minority of people who went overseas had someone to assist them in the first few days of their stay, but the vast majority must do everything independently.

### **FINDINGS: WOMEN FROM LOW-INCOME BACKGROUNDS**

Poverty is one of the primary reasons contributing to the growth of human trafficking. Poor living conditions in their home nations push many women to seek better opportunities in other countries. Human traffickers take advantage of the vulnerability of women who are desperate to go abroad at all

costs. Many women attempt to travel via recruiting agencies without first doing due diligence to determine if the agency is legitimate or not.

According to the findings of this survey, women go abroad to escape poverty and enhance their quality of life.

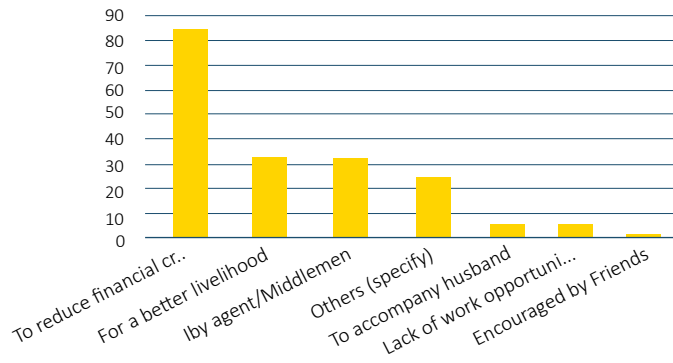


Figure 4: Reasons for going abroad.

During IDIs, many women said they were desperate to earn some money to support their children or to pay off debt. Lack of economic opportunity meant they saw going abroad ('bidesh') as the only way to earn some cash.

*"I had no money and couldn't support my three children by myself. So my brother and my brother-in-law advised me to go abroad. I knew nothing about the dangers."*

*- Woman, 29, Jessore*

Overall, demand for sexual services and cheap labor are pulling factors for the trafficking of women, while poverty is a major factor in pushing individuals into situations where they are susceptible to being exploited by traffickers. Despite anti-trafficking activity from law enforcement, individuals continue to migrate internally and internationally in search of better opportunities. It is clear therefore that combating trafficking needs to be linked to alternative livelihood strategies.

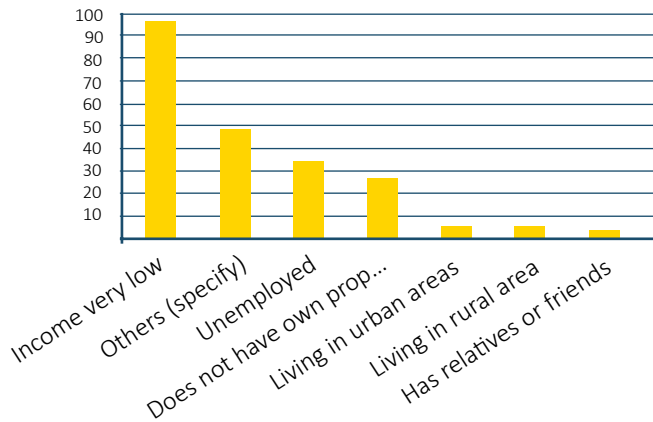


Figure 5: Other reasons for leaving the country.

## FINDINGS: POORLY EDUCATED AND UNSKILLED

The survey indicates that the trafficking of women is compounded even further by illiteracy and a lack of professional skills. There appears to be a direct correlation between the level of education and vulnerability to traffickers. Firstly, the data reveals that 80% of women who had no education reported being coerced into traveling overseas by agents. In contrast, all of the relatively educated females who traveled overseas appeared to do so with the assistance of other individuals, whom they revealed in an interview to be acquaintances, coworkers, and family members. They reported that they were deceived but still appeared to be in less dangerous conditions compared to those who had been forced abroad.

Who forced you to travel abroad?	No Education	Grade 5	Grade 8	SSC or Highschool
Agent	80%	40%		
Other	20%	20%	100%	100%
Relatives		40%		

*Table 6: Education level and forced to go abroad*

Second, education levels have a significant role in choosing a profession. According to the data, when comparing illiterate women to better-educated women, the majority of uneducated women were domestic workers (Table 7).



What was your occupation in abroad?	No Education	Grade 5	Grade 8	SSC or Highschool
Domestic Worker	72.7%	85.2%	66.7%	40%
Other	27.3%	14.8%	33.3%	60%

Table 7: Education level and occupation.

In contrast, there was no statistically significant difference between education levels when it comes to general living experience among the participants. Most women had negative experiences when traveling overseas (Table 8).

How was your overall experience of living abroad?	No Education	Grade 5	Grade 8	SSC or Highschool
Not very good	9%	19%	22%	
Somewhat good	18%	11%	11%	20%
Very bad	73%	70%	67%	80%

Table 8: Education level and the overall living experience.

Women with higher levels of education, on the other hand, were more likely to report experiencing physical, emotional, and sexual exploitation when living overseas. This is possibly due to increased awareness about human rights and laws among women with higher levels of education. (Table 9).

Have you been subjected to any physical, mental, or sexual exploitation in abroad?	No Education	Grade 5	Grade 8	SSC or Highschool
No	27%	22%	11%	
Yes	73%	78%	89%	100%

Table 9: Education level and the ratio of physical and sexual abuse.

According to the findings of this study, about 67.31% of women were rescued by the authorities or by a third party. Women with no education were more likely to be rescued. This indicates that women with some education had more agency and were able to negotiate or otherwise arrange their journey home. (Table 10).

Were you rescued by anyone or any authority?	No Education	Grade 5	Grade 8	SSC or Highschool
No	37%	26%	33%	60%
Yes	63%	74%	67%	40%

Table 10: Education level and rescued by anyone or any authority.

This study's findings indicate that there was no statistically significant difference in knowledge about sexual health, menstrual problems experienced, information on how to manage menstrual-related issues, the use of condoms, unconsented sex/sexual abuse, knowledge of HIV/AIDS, conception/pregnancy, among participants based on education levels.

*“Bangladesh should take steps to send skilled migrants abroad. It’s important to change the profile of the people who want to migrate. The policy should be to discourage illiterate and low-skilled people from going abroad to work in menial jobs. Women who are illiterate and living in poverty are more vulnerable to human traffickers.”*

*Liesbeth Zonneveld, Chief of Party  
USAID’s Fight Slavery and Trafficking-In-Persons (FS/  
TIP) Activity  
Winrock International*

## FINDINGS: LITTLE OR NO KNOWLEDGE OF THE WORKING CONDITIONS

The significant majority of those who answered the survey said they were utterly unaware that they might be exposed to any abusive conditions when working abroad. 94.23% of the survivors were not aware of the abusive situations abroad while 5.77% were aware of the risk. (Figure 6).

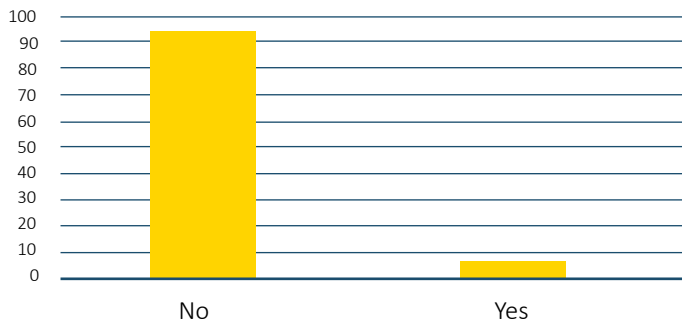


Figure 6: Awareness about the possibility of facing abusive situations abroad.

Some of the women aware of the risks had heard about it through friends, neighbors, or relatives, while others learned about it via television and non-governmental organizations, and one was made aware of it by her recruiting agent, among other sources.

*“The agent said he would send me to a good household in Dubai to cook and clean. But I knew nothing beyond that. The reality turned out very different for me.”*

*- Woman, 25, Rangpur*

## **FINDINGS: COERCION AND DECEPTION**

Only 26.9% of those who answered the survey stated they were forced to go overseas by agents, friends, or relatives. This underlines the pattern, supported by qualitative data, that most victims of trafficking in Bangladesh are lured by promises of high-paying jobs. This study shows, however, that once women were abroad there was a definite element of coercion. After going abroad, women were subjected to a wide range of coercive incidents and circumstances. For example, they did not receive adequate food and housing, did not receive their full salary, were forced to work longer hours, were frequently beaten, and did not receive a travel permit because their passports were seized by employers or traffickers. (Figure7).

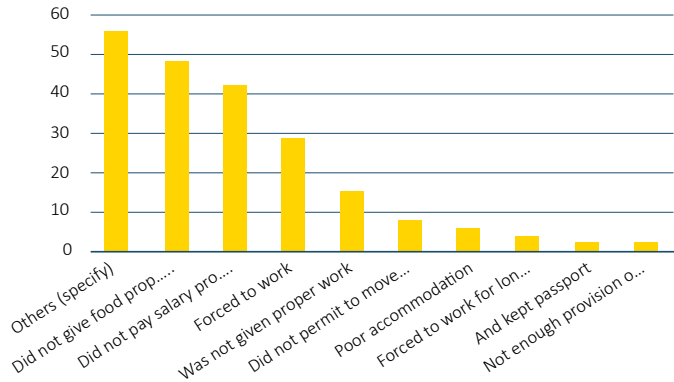


Figure 7: Unfair incidents.

The 55% of respondents who chose the ‘other’ option said that they were subjected to physical abuse, torture, or sexual abuse. Many who said that they were forced into prostitution provided specific details during the IDI. The vast majority of those who answered the survey claimed it was the worst event of their lives (Figure 8).

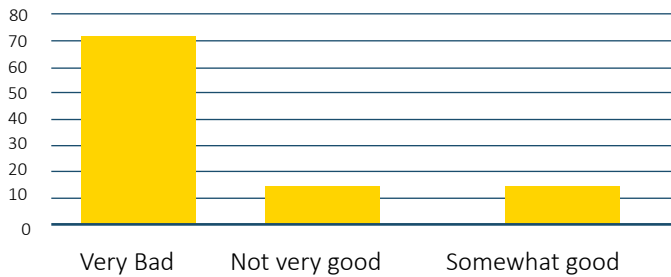


Figure 8: Respondents' overall experience of living abroad.

*“In our country, the number of working women is increasing. If there are financial inclusion and livelihoods opportunities, they will not look for work outside the country. Business leaders and non-governmental organizations, as well as the government, must step up.”*

*Journalist, Bangla Vision, Rangpur correspondent*

## FINDINGS: PHYSICAL AND SEXUAL ABUSE

The majority of respondents said they faced physical and sexual abuse abroad. Nearly half of the respondents reported being forced to have sex without their consent. (Figure 9). Of those that were forced into sexual activity, about half said a condom was not used.



Figure 9: Proportion of respondents who were forced to have sex with employers or traffickers

Several respondents said they had been pressured into prostitution in other countries. Others said they were forced to have sex with their employers. As stated above, 80.77% of respondents have been subjected to physical, mental, or sexual exploitation abroad (see Table 11).

Value	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Have you been subjected to any physical, mental, or sexual exploitation abroad?</b>		
Yes	42	80.77
No	10	19.23
<b>How were you exploited?</b>		
Physical abuse (Beating)	39	75
Mental abuse (screaming)	33	63.45
Sexual harassment	20	68.46
Other	4	7.69

*Table 11: Percentage and Frequency distribution of women subjected to any physical, mental, or sexual exploitation abroad and how they have been exploited.*

When asked to name specific instances, one woman said her employer had beaten her when she complained about low wages. Another lady was sexually exploited by a man who pretended to be her lover at first and then invited his pals to rape her when she refused to cooperate. One said the hot water caused her to burn. Another said that a person who sexually exploited her used to give her medicine to stop her from getting pregnant. Finally, another woman said that their supervisor required her to report to work even when she was unwell.

*“I had to work all day and then make him (employer) happy at night. On some nights he would come and stay with me as a husband and wife would. He didn’t use any protection. I was helpless. After three months, I couldn’t take it any longer. I told him I would run away and go to the police. Shortly after that, they put me on a plane to Bangladesh. But I returned with a lot of debt.”*

*Woman, 40, Rajshahi*

When questioned about the reason for their return from overseas, more than half of those surveyed said that they did so because they were subjected to physical and sexual assault.

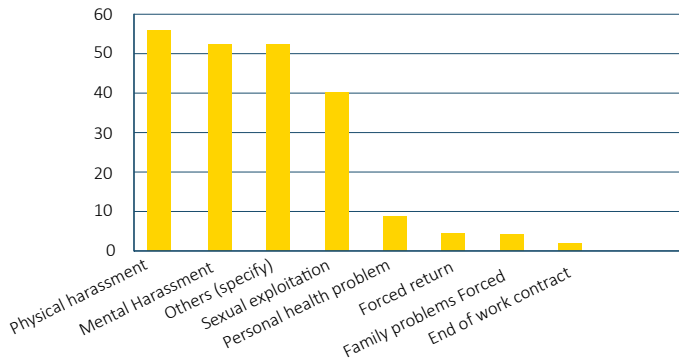


Figure 10: Reasons for returning.



The government rescued many; others were rescued by their relatives, family members, friends, and sympathetic people in the destination country. One said her husband threatened the agent, and then “he sent me back to Bangladesh”. Another woman said that a Bangladeshi agent had brought her to Bangladesh because she told him that she would give him money after she got back. One participant said that she gave 10 thousand takas to an agent. Then he brought her back to Bangladesh.

#### FINDINGS: Lack of Knowledge about Sexual and Reproductive Health

The study results reveal that about 71.15% of the respondents don't know how to manage menstrual-related problems, on the contrary, 26.92% knew about managing menstrual problems. (Figure 11)

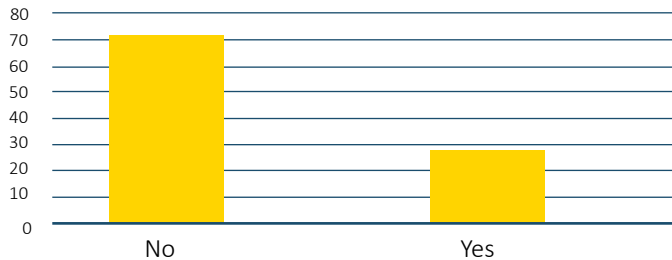


Figure 11: Women who knew how to manage menstrual problems.

Around 8% of the respondents became pregnant abroad during unprotected intercourse. In the destination country, 57.69% of the women reported being sexually inactive. Nearly half of those sexually active said that condoms were not used during the sexual encounters.

*“People used to say bad things (about me) after my return. I used to not go out of the house to avoid them. I used to lock myself in the room and cry.”*

*28-year-old woman, Cox’s Bazar*

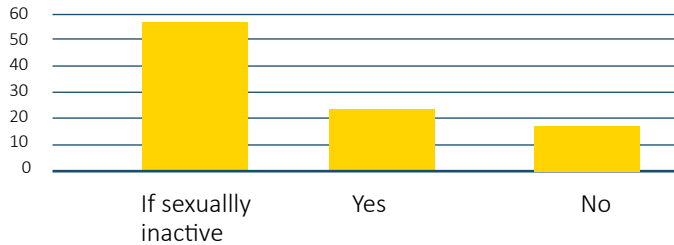


Figure 12: Use of condom during sexual encounters abroad.

When questioned whether or not they were aware of HIV/AIDS, around 11.54% of those who answered the survey had never heard of the illness or how it spreads. Similarly, 5.77% of females do not know about unsafe or protected sex. It appears to be a common misconception that HIV/AIDS is caused by mosquito bites (36%) and spread by coughing or sneezing (55%).

Value	Frequency	Percentage
<b>In abroad, when you had sex with someone, were condoms used every time?</b>		
(If sexually inactive)	30	57.69
Yes	12	23.08
No	10	19.23
<b>Have you ever conceived abroad?</b>		
No	18	34.62
Yes	4	7.96
<b>Have you ever heard of HIV/AIDS?</b>		
Yes	46	88.46
No	6	11.54
<b>Unsafe sex</b>		
Yes	43	82.69
Don't know	3	5.77
<b>HIV/AIDS transmit through Mosquito bites</b>		
No	20	38.46
Yes	19	36.54
Don't know	7	13.46
<b>HIV/AIDS transmitted through blood transfusion</b>		
Yes	38	73.08
Don't know	5	9.62
No	3	5.77

Table 12: Percentage and Frequency distribution of respondents' use of condoms, unwanted pregnancy, and knowledge about HIV/AIDS.

When they were asked, “Some women can have infections transmitted in their sexual organs, which can create pain, itchiness, sores, or unusual secretion. While you were abroad, have you ever faced such STI problems?” 28.85% of the respondents had STI symptoms, whereas 71.15% were free from STI problems.

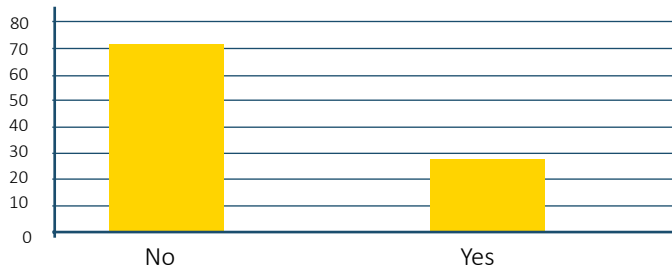


Figure 13: Women who faced STI problems.

They said they did not seek guidance or therapy because there wasn't any support, and a few stated that they didn't know where to go or were not authorized to do so because they did not have the necessary documentation.

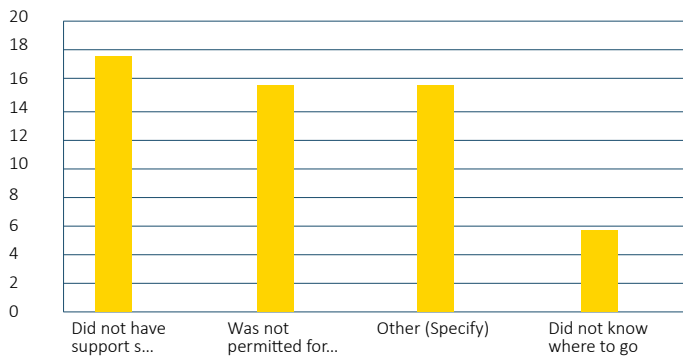


Figure 14: Reason women did not seek guidance or therapy.

Furthermore, the respondents were given some questions to test their knowledge about HIV/AIDS transmission. A total of 8 questions about HIV transmission were asked. Only 8% of respondents gave correct answers to all the questions. On the contrary, 12% of the respondents couldn't even give a single correct answer, which shows that they have zero knowledge about HIV and its transmission.

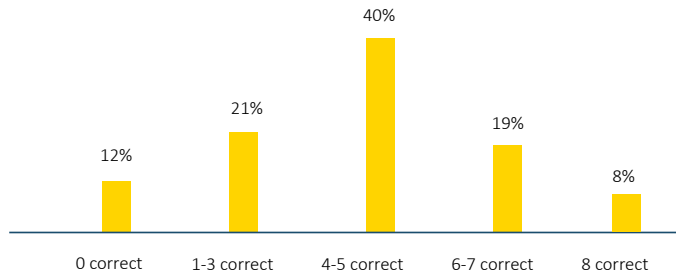


Figure 15: Correct answers about HIV transmission from the women.

*“In the school curriculum, there should be content on trafficking awareness and sex education. It’s available in other countries. Stigmatizing these subjects brings more mistakes.”*

*CID Officer, member of Counter-Trafficking Committee*

## **FINDINGS: LACK OF COUNTER-TRAFFICKING INFORMATION**

Around 77% of respondents feel that women cannot get counter-trafficking information easily. This is consistent with the percentage of respondents who disagree with the statement that existing counter-trafficking initiatives are adequate to prevent the trafficking of women. Similarly, a majority of women said that the awareness messages against trafficking are difficult to understand due to jargon and technical language. Also, most felt that the local agents of recruiting firms are not being appropriately monitored by the government to ensure safe migration. Approximately 38% of the women said that they had never heard about any of the activities of Counter-Trafficking Committees in their area.

Value	Frequency	Percentage
<b>The existing anti-trafficking projects are found useful for women to prevent trafficking.</b>		
Disagree	32	61.54
Strongly Disagree	8	15.38
Agree	6	11.54
Neutral	4	7.69
Strongly Agree	2	3.58
<b>The awareness massages against anti-trafficking are easy to understand</b>		
Disagree	26	50
Strongly Disagree	13	25
Agree	6	11.54
Neutral	4	7.69
Strongly Agree	3	5.77
<b>Local Agents are being monitored properly by the government to ensure safe migration</b>		
Disagree	29	55.77
Strongly Disagree	13	25
Agree	7	13.46
Neutral	2	3.85
<b>Heard about the activity of Counter-Trafficking Committees in our area</b>		
Yes	32	61.54
No	20	38.46

Table 13: Percentage and Frequency distribution of respondents' knowledge about anti-trafficking projects and their effectiveness.

The study shows that most women don't know where to go for information and help if they face any problems abroad. 63.46% of the women didn't know about the places that could help them in difficult situations, only 34.62% knew the places to go for help in problematic situations.

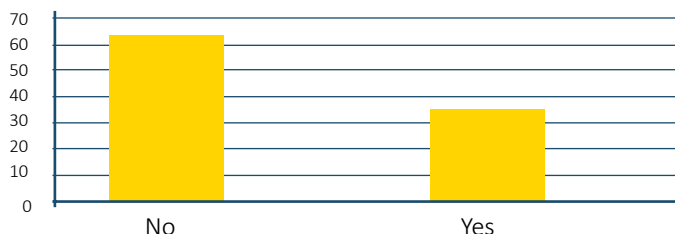


Figure 16: Do women know where to go for help if they face any problem abroad?

Respondents were also asked to suggest a few methods to increase awareness about trafficking before women leave home. The majority of the respondents 32% suggested involving community leaders, 30% suggested the involvement of parents or any other guardian, while 18% of the women suggested that proper training should be provided to the women before they leave for foreign countries. 10% of the women suggested that anti-trafficking campaigns should be conducted at schools and another 10% suggested that community awareness campaigns must be carried out to increase human trafficking awareness amongst the women before they leave for abroad



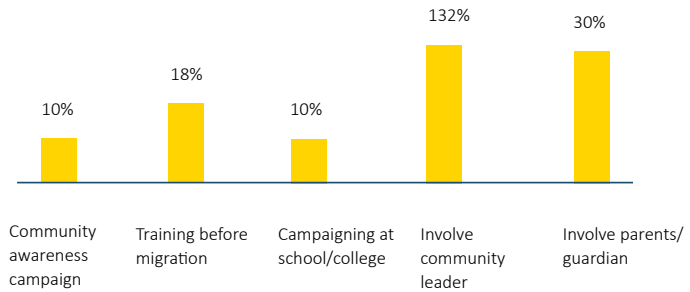


Figure 17: Suggested methods to increase awareness.

## FINDINGS: OFFICIAL EFFORTS

As mentioned in the previous section, a majority of women felt that the official anti-trafficking efforts were inadequate and a significant minority (38%) of the women said they were not aware of any activities of Counter-Trafficking Committees in their area. A few women said that the Bangladeshi government rescued them and helped them in returning home. Others pointed to the role of NGOs in the rescue. Also, some women showed their trust in the government and said that government officials could give them helpful information about the risk of human trafficking (even though almost none had received such information before going abroad). However, most respondents said that the government is not appropriately monitoring local agents to ensure safe migration.

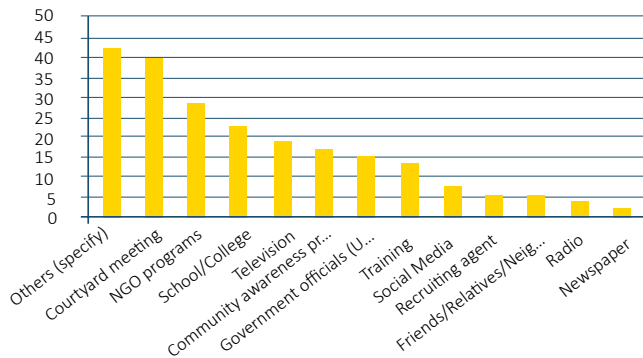


Figure 18: Sources where women could get helpful information about the risk of human trafficking.

The respondents were also asked if they received any anti-trafficking information from the government before going abroad. All of the respondents disagreed about receiving information or training from the government before going abroad.

## FINDINGS: TRUSTED CHANNELS OF INFORMATION

The study reveals the sources from which women could get useful information about the risk of human trafficking from the survivor's point of view (Figure 18). In varying degrees, people trust the information from Courtyard meetings, NGO programs, School/college, Television, Community awareness programs, Government officials, Training, Social Media, Recruiting agents, Friends/Relatives/Neighbors, Radio, and newspapers.

The survey indicates that the majority of the women preferred interpersonal communication such as face-to-face counselling, courtyard meetings, and through village elders and faith leaders. This may reflect the low levels of education which prevented them from getting information from other sources, such as newspapers and the Internet.

*“Women have less mobility and access to resources in our society. This contributes to the information gap and increases their vulnerability to trafficking. They are lured and pressured by people around them. We are often unable to reach them properly with much-needed information because of this gap.”*

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## KEY FINDINGS

The key findings of the survey are as follows:

Overall, the majority of women surveyed had negative experiences abroad including sexual exploitation.

- 81% of women say they have been subjected to physical, mental, or sexual exploitation abroad.
- 87% of women report 'not very good (15%), or even 'horrible' (71%) experiences living abroad.
- 26% of women say they were forced to travel abroad.
- 46% of women say they were forced to have sex without their consent, with 45% of sexually active women saying a condom was not always used.
- These problems seem to supersede the socio-economic status and education levels of women.
- However, those with a better knowledge of sexual matters (HIV and AIDS transmission) are significantly more likely to report having negative experiences abroad ( $p < 0.05$ ). This may be a matter of increased awareness.

**Overall, many women have low esteem for the official efforts to combat human**

**trafficking and indicate significant gaps in knowledge about trafficking risks.**

- 65% of women surveyed say they do not think most women know where to obtain information about human trafficking. Moreover, 77% of women say it is not easy to obtain such information; and 58% believe communities do not have easy access.
- Only 35% of women agree or strongly agree that the existing anti-trafficking projects are sufficiently helpful.
- Only 17% of women say counter-trafficking messages are easy to understand. 71% say these messages are not visible enough in the communities.

**Women with higher levels of education are significantly more likely to find the government's efforts lacking.**

- 21% of the surveyed women with an education level of grade 5 or lower find that the existing awareness messages about trafficking are easy to understand. This applies to only 7% of women with a grade 8 or higher education level.
- 37% of women with an education level of grade 5 or lower believe that community people have easy access to anti-trafficking information. In contrast, not one woman with an education level of grade 8 or higher believes that.
- 27% of the women with the lowest education level ('can read' and below) believe that anti-trafficking efforts are visible enough. This is 0% among the women with the highest education level (SSC or higher).

- 42% of women with an education level of grade 5 or lower believe most women know where to go for information and help concerning trafficking. In contrast, not one woman with an education level of SSC or higher believes that. Only 14% of respondents have completed grade 8 or higher.

**The awareness of the problems and counter-trafficking efforts appears to be higher among relatively educated women. Women with lower education levels also lacked SRHR knowledge.**

- 43% of women with an education level of grade 8 or higher say they have heard of Counter-Trafficking Committees, compared to 37% of women with an education level of grade 5 or lower.
- Only 12% of women answered seven or more questions about HIV transmission correctly. Women with higher education levels (grade 8 and above) were slightly more likely to answer seven or more questions correctly (14%) than those with lower education levels (grade 5 or below; 11%).
- 25% of women believe that an increased presence on social media could help increase overall awareness of the problems. 29% of women believe anti-trafficking messages are not (sufficiently) present on social media.

### **Poverty appears to be the main push factor that leads to women being trafficked.**

- More than 80% of women surveyed say they contacted or discussed going abroad with recruiters or agents to ease a financial crisis at home. A significant minority (more than 15%) said they contemplated going abroad because of marital abuse or divorce. More than 55% said the trip abroad was organized by a recruiting agent, contractor, or middleman (dalaal).
- Survivors face significant trauma and stigma after their return
- More than 60% of women who responded to the survey say they struggled with mental illness and financial hardship after their return to Bangladesh.
- More than 50% report being physically ill and facing stigma from the community. The trip was organized by relatives or family friends.

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## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Increase investment required to develop interpersonal communications, arrange courtyard meetings, and establish the mechanism of peer support using social networks and peer groups. Provide counter-trafficking information to women in a language they understand and from sources they trust. Community leaders and faith leaders can be recruited as community influencers.
- Improve pre-departure training for women by providing actionable information on sexual and reproductive health, fundamental human rights, and relevant laws in the destination country.
- Strengthen the reach of government agencies like BMET to provide proper information and training. Migrant workers should be given information about whom to contact if they face abusive situations abroad. Bangladeshi missions abroad should adopt a forward-leaning posture regarding assistance to women in distress.
- Deploy and popularize digital tools such as apps that women can operate on their phones. These should be simple to understand and pictorial, to accommodate those with low literacy. These digital tools can achieve wider reach much more easily compared to offline methods such as courtyard meetings.



- Design behavior changes communication initiatives to change high-risk behavior and the desperate tendency to go abroad at any cost.
- Include anti-trafficking information in the primary school curriculum.
- Forge government, NGO, civil society, and private sector partnerships to prevent human trafficking and support the reintegration of trafficking survivors.
- Increase monitoring of recruitment agencies and their local agents to ensure compliance with the law.
- Increase prosecution and conviction of human traffickers and people smugglers by encouraging sharing of information between government agencies and law enforcement both inside and between countries.
- Build the capacity of journalists and newsrooms to produce focused reporting on human trafficking issues with the aim of bridging information gaps and driving policy change. Focus on elevating the voices of survivors to put a human face to the scourge of human trafficking.
- Emphasize skills development and livelihood diversification to reduce the tendency to undertake unsafe migration. Focus policy and diplomacy on sending skilled migrants abroad.

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## CONCLUSION

This study sought to identify information and knowledge gaps that act as push or pull factors in the trafficking of Bangladeshi women. The research also aimed to pinpoint what communication strategies work and what does not in trafficking prevention, protection, prosecution, and reintegration, among other factors. It was based on the experiences of survivors and the perspectives of stakeholders at the local and national levels.

The research uncovered significant gaps in knowledge and understanding that made women vulnerable to exploitation. Most had no idea about what to expect in the destination country. The ignorance of labor laws and the language and culture in the destination country meant women were at the mercy of traffickers and unscrupulous employers.

The study revealed that the majority of participants had inadequate knowledge of sexual and reproductive health. Most had no knowledge of the solutions to menstrual problems or where to turn to in order to get assistance. Lack of knowledge of sexually transmitted diseases increased the vulnerability. Misconceptions such as mosquito bites spreading HIV appeared to be common among participants.

Low levels of education compounded the information gaps. Consistent with Bangladesh's pattern of sending low-skilled labor abroad, most of the trafficking survivors interviewed for this study were poorly educated. Only a small minority went to secondary school. The research revealed a direct correlation between education levels and awareness of human rights

violations.

According to the data, illiterate women are more likely to work as domestic workers than women who have had more formal education. The great majority of those who took part said they were in complete ignorance regarding the possibility of abusive conditions before traveling abroad.

Once abroad, the women found themselves in conditions of modern slavery. Criminal gangs and shady employers were fully prepared to take advantage of their vulnerability. Most respondents in the survey have been subjected to a broad range of abusive behaviors and circumstances. A few examples: they were not provided with adequate food and housing, did not receive their full salary, were compelled to work longer hours and did not receive a travel permit because their passports were confiscated by employers. The majority of women state that they have been the subject of physical abuse, torture, or sexual assault, with many additionally stating that they had been pressured into becoming prostitutes.

‘Helpless’ and ‘nowhere to turn’ were common phrases used by the women to describe their situation abroad. Since they did not have any knowledge of how to safely return home, they had to take severe risks to escape the bondage. The government saved some individuals, while others were rescued by relatives, family members, friends, and landowners who came to their assistance. In return for monetary remuneration, agents assisted many individuals to return home.

The nightmare did not end for many after their return, with debt, trauma, and stigma haunting them. For many of the respondents, the road to reintegration has been long and difficult. As they worked to regain their place in society, many decided to become anti-trafficking volunteers as part of a peer group dedicated to fighting human trafficking.

The search for solutions is complicated. Most respondents feel that current anti-trafficking programs are not adequate to prevent the trafficking of women and that anti-trafficking awareness messages are difficult to comprehend. They suggested more emphasis on interpersonal communication and courtyard meetings.

The perception is that the government is not properly monitoring recruiting agencies, local agents, or delays which allow traffickers to operate with a degree of impunity.

A number of medium and long-term initiatives can be taken to fill the information and communication gaps that lead to so many women falling prey to traffickers (discussed in the recommendations section).

Ultimately, the crime of human trafficking is rooted in issues of governance, rights, and livelihoods. Poverty and lack of economic opportunity, according to the findings of this research, are the most significant factors that push Bangladeshi women into the clutches of human traffickers. The great majority of victims are preyed upon by traffickers and people smugglers, who lure them with promises of a better life. Demand for cheap labor and sexual services create pull factors in India, Pakistan, the Middle East, and Southeast Asian countries. This vulnerability has been exacerbated due to the socioeconomic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Sustainable Development Goals specifically mention human trafficking in the targets of three goals: 5, 8, and 16, underlining that human trafficking is ultimately a sustainable development issue.

Promoting peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development will set us on the path to effectively combating the scourge of human trafficking.

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