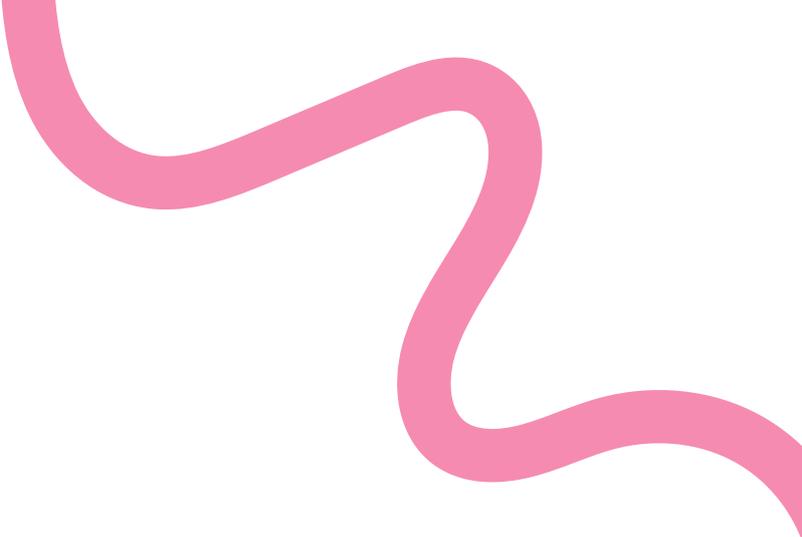




CHILDREN KNOW BETTER REPORT

BANGLADESH





This report was authored by the child leaders – **Sabit, Mitun, Sabitree, Sabiha, Sapla, Tamim, Aleya, Suhana, Shama, Afir, Dristy, Rabbi, Jabirul, Israt, Samad, Faisal, Laiba, Oishi, Sosema, Salauddin, Surjo, Shuvo, Shariyar, Alladi, Tusi** – who designed and carried out the entire research process. They identified the issues to be explored, developed and refined the research tools, collected evidence from their peers and communities, analysed the findings, and shaped the recommendations presented in this report.

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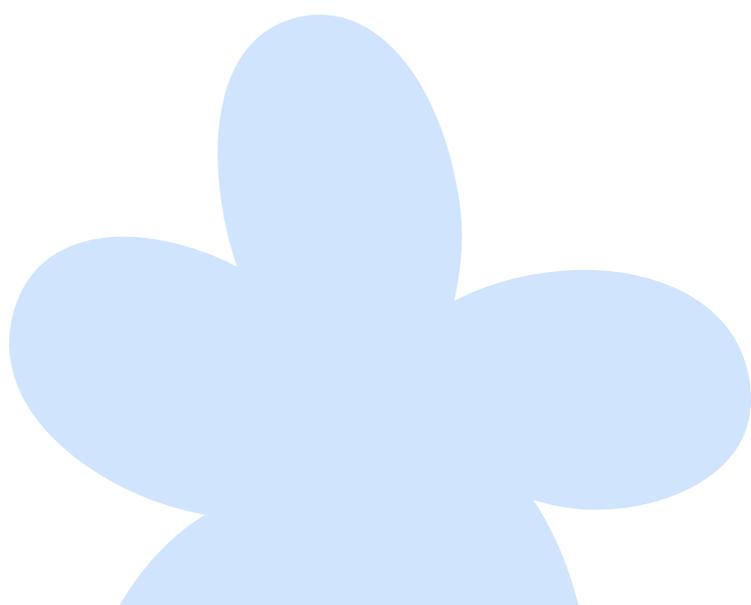
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INTRODUCTION

The *Children Know Better* project is a pioneering initiative led by ECPAT International, in partnership with Association for Community Development (ACD) in Bangladesh and Child Workers in Nepal Concerned Centre (CWIN) in Nepal. The project seeks to strengthen the role of children as change agents in efforts to prevent and respond to child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA). Rooted in the principle that children have the right to be heard in matters affecting them, the project empowers children and young people not only to share their perspectives but also to shape solutions and influence decision-makers at local, national, and global levels.

The baseline studies conducted in Bangladesh and Nepal confirmed both the urgency and relevance of this initiative. In Bangladesh, while child protection structures exist, they remain fragmented and under-resourced, with many children unaware of their rights or of safe channels to seek help. In Nepal, high levels of sexual violence, abuse, and harmful practices persist, with limited reporting due to stigma and lack of child-friendly mechanisms. Children interviewed highlighted barriers such as social taboos, victim-blaming, and weak referral pathways that leave survivors without adequate support. Across both countries, children consistently expressed the desire to be part of the solution – to learn, speak out, and advocate for safer communities.

Building on these findings, the *Children Know Better* project was designed to address critical gaps by:

- ✦ **Strengthening children's agency** through training and peer-to-peer capacity-development.
- ✦ **Conducting child-led research** to generate evidence from children's own perspectives on CSEA.
- ✦ **Facilitating participatory data analysis**, ensuring children validate and interpret the evidence.
- ✦ **Engaging decision-makers** through advocacy sessions where children present their findings and recommendations.

This report presents the outcomes of the child-led participatory research and analysis processes in Bangladesh, highlighting how children have not only articulated their lived realities but also advanced concrete solutions for preventing and addressing CSEA. It demonstrates that when provided with the right tools, protection, support and spaces, children are **powerful advocates who know better** what needs to change to make their world safer.

METHODOLOGY

The Children Know Better project was intentionally designed to be fully participatory and child-led, with children shaping every stage of the research and advocacy process. From the outset, child advocates in Bangladesh and Nepal defined the research questions, selected the data collection methods, and agreed on the sampling approaches. In Bangladesh, 25 children (14 girls and 11 boys aged 12-16) were voluntarily recruited through a participatory process to lead the work.

The project was implemented in Rajshahi district, covering both urban and rural areas in the northern part of the country. To provide support, ECPAT and ACD recruited 10 young adult peer educators (five male and five female) all below 25 years old. This decision - to engage young people rather than older adults, was deliberate, ensuring a peer-to-peer approach that aimed at minimizing generational barriers and stereotypes which could have undermined the spirit of child leadership.

Both the child leaders and peer educators received training on safeguarding, research ethics, sexuality and relationships education, communication and child-led advocacy, equipping them with the skills and confidence to take forward the research. As a result, the child researchers engaged 182 of their peers and 26 adult decision-makers across Rajshahi, including Godagari and Mohonpur sub-districts in their research process.

This participatory assessment of their lived realities led children to identify sexual harassment, child marriage, child labour, and cyberbullying as the most prevalent forms or drivers of sexual exploitation and abuse of children that they wished to explore further with their peers in Bangladesh. To investigate these issues, they opted for qualitative research methods including interviews with 29 peers, 22 peer-to-peer focus group discussions (FGDs) with 90 girls and 63 boys from 12 to 17 years old. They complemented these with 29 interviews with peers affected by child labour and early marriage. Children also identified the need to interview 26 adult decision makers and professionals, including law enforcement officials, government representatives, religious leaders, community leaders, transport workers in order to capture a full picture of the challenges and protective mechanisms in place within their communities.



FINDINGS, ANALYSIS AND IMPLICATIONS

FORMS OF EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE OF CHILDREN IN RAJSHAHI DISTRICT - BANGLADESH

During the research activities and the analysis conducted afterwards, the children participating were vocal about the risks of neglect, abuse and exploitation that they encounter in their daily lives, either faced by them directly or by friends and acquaintances that shared their experiences. Although children were not fully aware of legal frameworks, official definitions, technical language or conceptualisations around sexual violence, they clearly identified the actions and behaviours causing them harm, either to them directly or to their peers. Discussing these violent patterns, children did not only focus on sexual exploitation and abuse, but more broadly about forms of abuse and exploitation that they are subjected to frequently and that in some cases are intertwined with sexual violence or have the potential to increase the risk of it, extending their discussion to anything that impacts their physical and emotional integrity. The following sections will thus cover all the dimensions the children considered important.

Legal and Policy Provisions

Children Act, 2013:

- ★ Provides legal protection for children from abuse, neglect, and exploitation.
- ★ Established Child Welfare Boards and special procedures for child victims and witnesses.
- ★ According to the children act, the government established 102 children courts in districts level.

HOW CHILDREN DESCRIBE THEIR EXPERIENCES

Sexual exploitation and abuse of children

Sexual harassment and abuse

Children noted how one of the most present forms of sexual exploitation and abuse in their daily lives is related to sexual harassment: when asked to describe it, they mentioned acts and behaviours such as whistling, using offensive words, inappropriate touching, showing disrespect, grabbing a girl's hand or disturbing her. Interfering with a girl's clothing, such as pulling or touching her scarf, was also mentioned multiple times and appeared to be a rather sensitive topic



for the girls.¹ For some, sexual exploitation and abuse of children is “any act that is done against a girl’s permission”.² These definitions relate to the concept of consent, however, they were largely centred on girls’ experiences, confirming biases that see boys (and men) largely as responsible of harassment and abuse. In contrast, it is clear from the stories and concerns they shared that they do identify patterns of sexual abuse and exploitation towards boys as well, as addressed below, showing a need to mainstream broaden understandings to actually include the diverse experiences. In some cases, sexual exploitation and abuse was also linked to and justified by so-called “bad behaviours” and biological factors. For example, one boy suggested that those who harass girls on the street have “abnormal hormones” and that this explained their behaviour, a posture that eventually removes the responsibility from the author of the abuse placing it on aspects that cannot be controlled. Other groups identified how boys can also be subjected to harassment; those responsible of this being, according to boys, most often girls.³ While it is not confirmed

by other studies and statistics, it might be related to taboos around harassment or abuse committed by people of the same sex.⁴ This is not to discard however the feeling of discomfort shared by boys, since they indicate that deeper discussions around relationships and consent should take place to make them feel safer. It is important to note how some children initially did not know the meaning of the terms sexual abuse, harassment and exploitation, but once they were explained, all of them could recall either direct or indirect experiences with it,⁵ which gives a more complete picture of the extent of the phenomenon.

Children identified a wide range of perpetrators according to their experiences. These included peers, both boys and girls, with girls described as almost equally likely as boys to harass others, mostly through sexualized comments.⁶ Senior students were noted to harass juniors in schools and madrasas,⁷ sometimes through threats, and it was noted how it is most frequently older boys harassing younger boys.⁸ In situations where older boys harass younger girls, money and gifts were mentioned as ways of trying to force them into sexual intercourses.⁹ Shopkeepers and auto-rickshaw drivers were also cited among those responsible of sexual harassment and abuse.¹⁰ Very often children referred to family members as well, mentioning how some relatives may be involved in abuse, and in one case “torture on daughters”. Children also highlighted the responsibility of abusers’ parents or referred to peer influence as a contributing factor.¹¹

¹ FGD 21.

² FGD 22.

³ FGD 18.

⁴ See, among others: Rainn (n.d.). Children and teens: statistics; United States Sentencing Commission (2021). Quick Facts - Sexual Abuse Offenders; Women Refugee’s Commission (2020). Sexual Violence against Men and Boys in Conflict and Displacement: Findings from a Qualitative Study in Bangladesh, Italy, and Kenya; African Child Policy Forum (ACPF) & OAK Foundation (2019). Sexual Exploitation of Children in Africa - A Silent Emergency.

⁵ FGD 8.

⁶ FGD 10, 16

⁷ Madrasah is referred to institutions specially designed for Islamic education and culture.

⁸ FGD 1, 13.

⁹ FGD 20.

¹⁰ FGD 10.

¹¹ FGD 1.

Schools were identified as both sites of learning and spaces of risks. Children noted proximity between schools and locations linked to sexual exploitation, such as areas where prostitution occurs, including “dark alleys behind schools.” Schools as well were also sometimes considered unsafe, with examples of harassment or abuse by teachers and senior students, as outlined above.¹² Children attending madrasas noted similar risks within these institutions.¹³

Teachers, including female teachers, were frequently mentioned,¹⁴ with cases involving threats of poor marks or promises of good grades as a form of manipulation or coercion of children.¹⁵

During the discussions, children identified elements that can be defined as factors increasing the exposure to risk of sexual abuse and exploitation, or that contribute to abusive behaviours. For example, concerns about drug use emerged, noting that “drug-addicted boys are more likely to abuse”. At the same time, drugs were also mentioned to justify victim-blaming, with some suggesting that substance use by the victim contributed to situations of abuse. Children also highlighted several factors that increase risks of harassment and abuse, including disability, perceptions of weakness, child labour, being an orphan,¹⁶ and, in some cases, excessive involvement in online activities, a dimension that will be explored below.

The power differences were particularly emphasised by children: very often the survivor is identified as weak, a characteristic identified as leading to increased risk of being subject to sexual abuse and exploitation. This narrative, blaming abuse on vulnerabilities rather than the perpetrators’ behaviour



and use of power, manipulation or force, contributes to the idea that socially-defined “strong” individuals can not be subjected to sexual abuse and exploitation. The power differentials were found to be multifaceted - girls were sometimes stereotyped as ‘weak’, as if weakness was an inherent feminine trait. This perception also affects boys, who may refrain from disclosing abuse for fear of being perceived as weak. Children also frequently linked the notion of “weakness” to disabilities highlighting how children with disabilities are at very high risk of sexual exploitation and abuse, either because they are unable to disclose their experiences, or because of beliefs that “no one believes children with mental disabilities”.¹⁷

One group mentioned how sometimes “men hurt women to show their strength”, reflecting how children are fully aware of how normative expectations around gender, harmful models of masculinity and gender-performing behaviours have a direct influence on the risk of sexual exploitation and abuse.

Across discussions, children expressed as well many times that sexual harassment and abuse persist because of a general lack of awareness and action, with one group stating that “everyone’s ignorance is responsible”.¹⁸

¹² FGD 13.

¹³ FGD 18.

¹⁴ FGD 13, 10.

¹⁵ FGD 14, 10.

¹⁶ FGD 21, 17, 18, 14, 11, 9, 3.

¹⁷ FGD 10.

¹⁸ FGD 1.

Technology-facilitated abuse and exploitation

Children consistently raised concerns about abuse and exploitation taking place through technology. This was described as a significant and recurrent issue, appearing in forms such as offensive language, exposure to inappropriate content, the sending of unwanted pictures and videos, and blackmail through images. Children also mentioned the risks linked to uncontrolled use of applications and being added to online groups without their consent.

Children drew attention to another form of violence they are subjected to in their day-to-day lives, namely cyberbullying. They shared stories of harassment for one's physical appearance or for losing in online games, that caused psychological distress and in one case resulted in attempted suicide. This points to the pervasiveness of online exchanges in their experiences and their harmful potential when appropriate monitoring is not carried out.

Across discussions, children highlighted how platforms and apps such as TikTok, Telegram, WhatsApp, Likee, Messenger, Instagram, and Snapchat are spaces where episodes of abuse and exploitation occur frequently. They described how image manipulation and sharing can contribute to bullying and sexual exploitation through technologies, including the creation of "badly edited" or AI-generated images (especially of girls).¹⁹ These forms of online harassment were associated with feelings of humiliation, intimidation, and potential threats.²⁰

Legal and Policy Provisions

Pornography Control Act, 2012:

- ★ Prohibits production, distribution, and possession of sexual abuse and exploitation material of children.

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Act, 2006 & Digital Security Act, 2018 replaced as Cyber Security Act, 2023:

- ★ Criminalises online exploitation, cyber pornography, and technology-facilitated sexual abuse involving children.

HOW CHILDREN DESCRIBE THEIR EXPERIENCES

Some children even considered that technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse is currently more widespread than "offline" forms.²¹ They described strategies such as staging "fake love" stories used to convince girls to share intimate images,²² as well as "nasty comments" on girls' pictures,²³ and sending unsolicited explicit content.²⁴

Children also highlighted the way that boys replicate in physical spaces the behaviours and attitudes they observe online, particularly replicating them against girls.²⁵ Indeed, it is important to consider that many of the participants referred how proper sexual and relationships education is missing from their school curricula and within family's education as well, which pushes them to rely on media or peers in order to learn. However, they also consider that the exposure to content such as pornography could draw children to situations of risk.

¹⁹ FGD 22, 18, 12.

²⁰ FGD 19.

²¹ FGD 22.

²² FGD 21.

²³ FGD 18.

²⁴ FGD 5.

²⁵ FGD 18.

Child marriage

Children identified child marriage as one of the main forms of sexual exploitation and abuse in their area, underlining during several discussions its impact on their lives and showing how decisions around it exemplify the power dynamics that shape relationships between children and adults.

Legal and Policy Provisions

Child Marriage Restraint Act, 2017:

- ★ Establishes a Child Marriage Prevention Committee. Prohibits child marriages for children under the age of 18 years old. Under Article 19, child marriage may still be allowed if it is deemed to be “in the best interests of the child”.

National Plan of Action to End Child Marriage (2018–2030):

- ★ Aims to reduce vulnerabilities that contribute to exploitation and early marriage.

HOW CHILDREN DESCRIBE THEIR EXPERIENCES

According to children’s perceptions, child marriage is still strongly present in their lives and even increasing in informal and low-income settlements’ areas, as well as in rural and urban Muslim communities. While they noted that girls are more heavily affected, many stressed that boys are subjected to it as well.²⁶ They explained that parents often decide to marry off their children out of fear or stress of losing control over them, or because the children are not dedicating enough time and attention to their studies.

This could mean that marriage is often seen as a sort of measure that helps families lead their children towards a socially acceptable path, or one of the only accepted alternatives. Religious reasons were also mentioned, alongside drivers such as reducing the household burden, either because one child is no longer the family’s responsibility or because the financial proposal or dowry would support the family. Children pointed out that orphans are especially exposed to the risk of being married off.

External reasons and pressures were also mentioned as factors influencing this decision. In some cases, marriages can be obtained through threats, such as those of attacking the child with acid, or they can be forced after experiences of sexual abuse, in order to protect the family honour, “make amends” and avoid public stigma. Similarly, some children explained that it happens that boys who previously harassed girls sometimes proposed marriage to them,²⁷ and that child marriages can also be forced when intimate images are circulated online and used to pressure families.

Social expectations and community pressure were therefore presented as strong drivers of this phenomenon. Children’s lives, physical appearance and future possibilities seem to be matters that are to be discussed and influenced by the whole community: for example, according to children, parents may be told by neighbours that their daughter is “getting fat and is getting old”, or “has become bad” and should therefore be married urgently, otherwise it might not be possible later. Children reported that this kind of gossip about girls and the resulting concerns over their reputation push families to arrange early marriages.²⁸ Unlike sexual harassment, which children report as often being considered a scandal to be hidden, marriage seems to be described as an issue involving

²⁶ FGD 17.

²⁷ FGD 1.

²⁸ FGD 6, 1.



the whole community and therefore carrying additional pressure and visibility for children. These dynamics also extend to decisions concerning the interconnection of education and marriage when deciding children's future. It happens to girls that when they express a wish to continue studying rather than getting married, their parents immediately assume it's because they are already in a relationship with someone else. At the same time, other shared that the opposite can also be true: sometimes, when a girl does not want to continue studying, she might be married off as the only alternative. Such examples illustrate how children's voices are frequently disregarded in favour of assumptions or community expectations.

It is important to stress that, while child marriage seems to remain a commonly used and accepted practice within some communities (mostly rural, but not exclusively), this is perceived by children as a form of sexual abuse, in contrast to parents' and community members' perception of it as a necessary family strategy.

The risks associated with child marriage that children brought attention on were not limited to social and psychological impacts: children

mentioned that early marriage increases the risk of death during childbirth.²⁹

Other forms of abuse and exploitation

Child labour

Focusing on other forms of abuse and exploitation, children brought the issue of child labour into the conversation, considering it critical. They live it not only as a widespread problem for their peers, but also as an issue that is closely linked to risks of sexual exploitation and abuse.

Children explained that they got involved in child labour mainly to support their families financially, with some attributing their need to work to poverty.³⁰ Children also mentioned in some cases that they started to work because their families required them to do so, while a few described individual decisions or situations where relatives or acquaintances facilitated their entry into work.³¹ This reflects the pressures children face within family structures and the responsibilities they feel obliged to take on to contribute to their family's survival, where the needs of the household do not necessarily align with their own wellbeing or preferences.

²⁹ FGD 1.

³⁰ FGD 20.

³¹ FGD 20.



In these contexts, sometimes even extended family members and neighbours may have more influence over children's lives than the concerned children themselves.

Domestic work and working in business were presented by children as situations exposing to risk, as they described how porous are the boundaries between labour exploitation and sexual exploitation. For example, in the context of child labour in businesses, they shared anecdotes of how arriving late to work could result in abuse by the employer, and how working in shops is seen as a context exposing children to potential sexual exploitation by customers.

These examples show how economic vulnerability and children's subordinate position in both family structures and workplace dynamics increase their exposure to different types of exploitation.

FAMILY AND SOCIETAL NORMS

Family authority influenced by social norms and expectations and imposed decisions on children

Children placed significant emphasis on the role of family and in general of social expectations in shaping their lives. They described dynamics of control, disbelief, and social pressure considering them deeply connected to the risks of abuse and exploitation, and especially to the lack of adequate response to it. While families were

sometimes seen as protective, children also highlighted frequent situations in which adults' authority restricted their choices and options, leaving them without support, or exposed them to harm.

Discussions revealed rigid hierarchies within families, where adults hold power above children and use it to make decisions on their behalf with little consultation with the children concerned. This includes both the family of origin and, for those married, or with married siblings, the in-law family. Traditional norms give parents and in-laws strong control over children's lives, often deciding a child's fate with little input from the child. These norms leave children with little autonomy and can eventually push them into exploitative situations both at home and outside. For example, older relatives, fathers, and siblings were often identified as the ones deciding on issues such as child marriage. In-laws were mentioned as playing a significant role in children's lives; it is often described as a negative influence. In some cases children also referred to "irresponsibility" of their parents forcing them to work.

While in general this level of control is perceived as excessive in most areas of children's lives, at the same time parents are seen by children as absent from others, such as involvement in their education and their life at school or awareness of different kinds of risks, including those of sexual exploitation and abuse. However, despite the perceived absence, children tend to internalise and replicate the same biases and victim-blaming attitudes learnt from adults: for example, some children also consider that parents should have a stronger control over girls' appearance, with statements such as "family needs to make sure girls wear Islamic dress code to stay protected" or "[if] cloth[es] of girls aren't in proper way, [it means] parents don't educate enough". This shows how children internalise society's expectations around girls' appearance and more broadly about moral values, and the association between the way of dressing or behaving and

the risk of being subjected to sexual violence. A mix of excessive involvement of adults in children lives and their absence where they would be needed makes it easier for children to feel unsupported and to reproduce stereotypes in their interactions with peers, even if those social norms and expectations are often brought up as determining factors behind abuse and the decision of not disclosing it.

Disbelief, stigma and victim-blaming

Children also spoke frequently about how families respond when they decide to disclose abuse or try to make their own choices. In many cases, they are blamed, not believed, or silenced, reactions that lead children to not reporting, reinforcing violent cycles and underestimations of the phenomenon. As per their own words, *“children share about sexual abuse, but parents don’t believe them”*. More broadly, children noted that while their words are often not heard or not taken seriously, the rumours circulating about them are more likely to be believed and could even lead to punishment. Gossip appears to be *“roaming around”* and rumours on girls’ behaviour often lead parents to marry off their daughters as a way to silence or control them.³² However, alongside this, children indicated that a lack of parental guidance exists, and that moments and spaces for open, friendly relationships with their parents are very limited.³³ In that sense, they highlighted their desire and need for parents to be more involved in various protective aspects of their lives, including in supporting them when they face abuse and accessing justice processes, since children often feel unable to navigate these situations alone. In some cases, it is not even possible for them to access these services without the representation of their parents or caregivers.

One of the children shared in this regard the example of a helpline requiring the presence of a caregiver in order to provide support. The perceived absence of safe and trusting relationships within families is seen as leaving them more vulnerable to both abuse and the weight of societal pressures and assumptions.

Children showed stigma and victim-blaming as key factors shaping their experiences of abuse and exploitation but also their own perceptions of the drivers behind them. Girls, in particular, were often blamed for the harassment they’re subjected to, with repeated references to clothing choices,³⁴ or for sending pictures,³⁵ thus focusing on their responsibility instead of the perpetrators’. One example shared was one of a girl who reported abuse to her family but was told, *“why does this happen to you? it doesn’t happen to anyone else,”* and was left without support, considering it was her fault. Moreover, when adults around children do not directly blame them, they may instead implicitly normalise and reinforce harmful behaviours by presenting them as inevitable or natural, with statements such as *“sexual abuse happens because there are not enough women compared to men,”* or that if someone *“looks good”* or is *“beautiful,”* *“they will be sexually harassed”*.³⁶ One group noted that even teachers sometimes normalise harassment, saying things like *“it is normal for us to be victims of eve teasing because we are girls.”*³⁷ In some groups, children described how boys even referred to attractive girls as *“products”*. This pervasive tendency to blame victims appears to be deeply engrained into children’s collective perceptions of abuse and exploitation, with many suggesting that in some way survivors contributed to provoke a certain behaviour: a strong influence of parental attitude and prevailing societal

³² FGD 17.

³³ FGD 1.

³⁴ FGD 1, 3, 7, 8, 18.

³⁵ FGD 17.

³⁶ FGD 1.

³⁷ FGD 10.



norms leads to victim-blaming which children then internalize. This normalization of blame creates a climate of silence which in turn discourages children from disclosing, even to their peers.

Children also reflected on patterns of discussions “between genders” that focus on assigning guilt rather than seeking solutions. This tendency highlighted by children to reciprocal blaming between men and women, or boys and girls, for cases of sexual abuse and exploitation, is reflected in some perceptions around behaviour, where behaving “naughty” is automatically associated with sexual harassment, and where in general boys are allowed behaviours

that are deemed socially unacceptable for girls. This kind of attitudes reinforce fear and shame, with girls complaining that “we as women can’t even say it for fear of our dignity”³⁸ and of being disrespected.³⁹ Neighbours and society were reported to not react to children’s concerns or to sexual abuse and exploitation cases, blame victims and survivors or even threaten to ruin their honour.⁴⁰ Children described situations in which elders from their communities did not pay attention to their accounts of abuse, suggesting instead that it was the victim’s presence or behaviour that caused the harassment, and sometimes formulating final judgment without hearing neither the survivor or the offender. Religious beliefs and superstitions and social perceptions about sexuality were also mentioned by children as influencing how cases of abuse are handled, leading them to say that a general “development of thinking”, a fundamental societal change, is needed. As a consequence⁴¹ sexual exploitation and abuse and consequent victim-blaming often result in social isolation, as children don’t feel confident disclosing such things with adults and want to avoid judgment or negative attention. Peer relationships were⁴² perceived as safer spaces, possibly because power imbalances make children feel shy and inhibited in front of adults.

Public spaces and safety

Children’s perceptions on society and community also covered their perception of public spaces and the risk they can encounter there, connecting these to both general abuse and sexual exploitation and abuse of children. They discussed where children do not feel safe, sharing contrasting opinions on whether urban or rural contexts, cities or villages, are more exposed to risks. Some groups suggested

³⁸ FGD 5.

³⁹ FGD 11.

⁴⁰ FGD 1.

⁴¹ FGD 1.

⁴² FGD 1.

cities pose higher risks due to anonymity and exposure,⁴³ while others considered villages more hazardous,⁴⁴ particularly in relation to child marriage.⁴⁵ It is interesting to note one statement according to which “city boys taking advantage of village girls”, which could suggest a perception from children of power imbalances not only based on gender but based on area of origin, reflecting broader social hierarchies between cities and rural areas. Public areas or gatherings were also described as lacking protection. These included family events such as weddings,⁴⁶ touristy areas,⁴⁷ and marketplaces.⁴⁸ Routes to and from school were considered particularly risky, but transport in general often emerged as a concern, including travel by buses or rickshaws, situations for potential harassment and abuse.⁴⁹ In rural areas, ponds and water collection points were also identified as locations where boys might take inappropriate pictures,⁵⁰ making it potentially risky for children even to carry out basic life activities.

Lack of accountability and impunity

Children pointed to social pressure and power imbalances as major obstacles to accountability when abuse occurs. They described how hierarchies within families and communities, together with power imbalances between children and adults, often protect perpetrators and silence survivors. Some explained that community members who are especially valued, such as uncles or sons-in-law,⁵¹ are rarely kept accountable for their

actions: this also applies to individuals that are not part of the family but are regarded with esteem and respect within the community, such as teachers.⁵²

The lack of visibility and justice for survivors not only depends on family and social roles, but, in large measure, on economic inequalities: individuals responsible for harassment, exploitation and abuse that have financial means are described by children as particularly protected from consequences. The children know cases of “rich” people that influence or corrupt judges,⁵³ as well as people with “good reputation”.⁵⁴ Moreover, children explained that “members of society usually try to cover [cases] up with money”. On the other hand, families’ honours imply that village leaders or influential community members insist on harassment cases to be resolved “secretly”, acting as “nothing happened”.⁵⁵

Even when children are believed: instead of being supported in demanding justice, victims and survivors are advised to just “stay away” from the person.⁵⁶

Children also noted how expectations related to gender shape community responses. When a boy misbehaves, the family “may scold him”, but when girls are survivors of sexual abuse or exploitation, they “are blamed by society” and “everyone in the village insists on getting [them] married”.⁵⁷

⁴³ FGD 18, 11, 10.

⁴⁴ FGD 14, 9, 6, 5.

⁴⁵ FGD 17.

⁴⁶ FGD 11.

⁴⁷ FGD 21.

⁴⁸ FGD 7, 11.

⁴⁹ FGD 18, 21, 13, 1, 8.

⁵⁰ FGD 21, 5.

⁵¹ FGD 18.

⁵² FGD 9.

⁵³ FGD 5.

⁵⁴ FGD 18.

⁵⁵ FGD 1.

⁵⁶ FGD 18.

⁵⁷ FGD 1, 18.





Such accounts show how hierarchies based on social roles, age and gender, together with economic conditions, combine to perpetuate impunity and silence victims.

CONSEQUENCES OF AND REACTIONS TO SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE OF CHILDREN

Children shared their experiences and feelings about the consequences of sexual exploitation and abuse, as well as the impact of families' and communities' attitudes towards such cases, showing a high level of awareness of the harmful effects of sexual exploitation and abuse. They talked about effects that were not only physical but also emotional, social, and in many cases with long-term impact, shaping their daily lives.

Some children referred to mental breakdowns or even extreme consequences such as attempted suicide, particularly when parents give punishments based on rumours or after intimate material has been shared.

Some girls highlighted how harassment impacts their daily choices and how they feel unsafe or uncomfortable in public spaces. One girl explained that she no longer feels able to work in comfortable clothes, as "boys look at her with disdain," so she wears a burqa instead. While such measures are meant to increase a sense of protection, they reinforce the association between the child's behaviour and exposure to harassment or violence, placing responsibility on girls and

reinforcing victim-blaming attitudes, as a consequence of what a victim does or reveals of herself. In general, girls shared that the risk of being harassed restricts their mobility and undermines their education, limiting their freedom of movement and school attendance.

Moreover, across discussions, girls described feelings of physical weakness after being inappropriately approached in crowded areas.

As we see, children can very clearly identify the fear, shame, stigma, and pain these experiences cause. In contrast with families and communities who tend to hide, minimize or excuse the harm. Some adults rationalize abuse as "normal" or "inevitable," while children themselves are acutely aware of the harm it inflicts.

This difference highlights the importance of listening to children's own voices and experiences. Their perspectives challenge the tendency of adults to downplay or hide exploitation, and they provide crucial insight into the real and lasting consequences of abuse.



These testimonies show how the impact of abuse extends beyond direct harm. For children, the consequences reinforced cycles of vulnerability and marginalisation.

PREVENTION MEASURES

Children described a range of ways in which risks of abuse and exploitation are or should be addressed, however, current measures appear to be sometimes limited or ineffective. They highlighted personal coping strategies, gaps in awareness and education, weaknesses in reporting mechanisms, the role of supportive adults, and the importance of children's own participation.

Some explained that they use self-protective strategies to reduce their exposure to harassment. For example, girls restrict themselves through clothing, as a way to protect themselves from risks of sexual harassment. Clothing was often described as a measure to "feel safe," reflecting the way responsibility for protection is placed on them, generating mechanisms that may not be sustainable or actually effective.

At the same time, children pointed out that there is a lack of education or awareness-raising on sexual exploitation and abuse's prevention. In addition to families and schools not addressing the topic, children reported that they do not see in their lives the effect of the initiatives the government promotes or the laws it enacts, for example in relation to child labour,⁵⁸ as well as generic misunderstanding among children and their caregivers about puberty and related changes. Campaigns and information activities in schools were described as largely absent, leaving children without guidance.

When cases of abuse occur, reporting channels were largely described as either unknown or ineffective. Some children were aware of the police and helpline 999,⁵⁹ but others noted that toll-free numbers were not functional or were not known widely.⁶⁰ They also highlighted problems in how reporting processes are handled, with one example of a child afraid to share information because many people were nearby while she spoke, not making the space appear as safe or private enough. More generally, reporting systems were seen as not prioritising children or not functional, such as complaint boxes in schools that are not actually used, and services provided after disclosure were not considered child-friendly, especially in cases where children do not feel ready or confident in involving relatives or caregivers in the process. So even when mechanisms exist, they are not tailored to children's needs, preventing them from using them because of the lack of trust and fear of repercussions.

Despite these challenges, children identified some sources of community support. Teachers, for instance, were mentioned as safe contact persons who could help children begin conversations with their parents about abuse or exploitation.⁶¹ This showed the potential for adults in positions of trust to help children feel comfortable disclosing.

Finally, most participants agreed that children should be involved in policymaking activities to prevent sexual exploitation and abuse⁶². Some referred to existing structures, such as *kishore-kishori* clubs and youth clubs run by the Department of Women Affairs, which address child marriage and sexual harassment⁶³

⁵⁸ FGD 2.

⁵⁹ FGD 3.

⁶⁰ FGD 5.

⁶¹ FGD 1.

⁶² FGD 22.

⁶³ FGD 11.

National Action Plan to Prevent Violence against Women and Children, 2018-2030:

- ★ Establish complaints committee for sexual harassment in all educational institutions according to the guidelines of High Court 2009.
- ★ Ensure legal advice through the National Helpline Centre for violence against women and children.
- ★ Ensure legal support by One-Stop Crisis Centres.⁶⁴
- ★ Establish campaigning about the existing services on women and children.
- ★ Put up poster and billboard on prevention of violence against women and children in all educational institutions.
- ★ Print the message "Call 109 (Toll free, 24 Hours Service) of National Helpline Centre at the time of violence for preventing violence against women and children" on the back page of textbooks to be published by National Curriculum and Textbook Board in every cohort.
- ★ Establish clear behaviour rules of transport sectors' staffs for ensuring safety of public transports.
- ★ Include the GPS tracking system at all vehicles.
- ★ Establish One-Stop Crisis Centre in every public and private medical college hospital.
- ★ Establish Victim Support Centre at every district.
- ★ Recruit at least one female police sub-inspector in every Police Station.
- ★ Launch the activities of adolescent clubs at every union.
- ★ Establish required number of surveillance cameras at the stations, educational institutions and public places.
- ★ Enhance the supervision in local level for child marriage prevention.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND NEXT STEPS

The following recommendations draw on both the research activities carried out by children and the participatory analysis workshop held in July 2025 where children led the thematic analysis and developed their recommendations. To facilitate follow-up, recommendations are organised by target groups and framed to be clear, pragmatic, and actionable, while keeping children's voices at the centre.

Government, Ministries and institutional bodies

Review laws' terminology and definitions in order to provide sounder protection for children.

Bangladesh has laws on acts of sexual violence, trafficking and pornography, but lacks a comprehensive legal definition of "child sexual exploitation" in line with international standards (e.g., Optional Protocol to the Convention of the Rights of the Child on Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography) and survivor-centric, trauma-informed terminology standards.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ From the Multi-sectorial Programme on Violence Against Women of the Ministry of Women and Children website: "The idea behind OCC is to provide all required services for a woman victim of violence in one place. The OCC provides health care, police assistance, DNA test, social services, legal assistance, psychological counselling and shelter service, etc."

⁶⁵ For a comprehensive analysis of terminology regarding sexual abuse and exploitation of children, see: Interagency Working Group on Sexual Exploitation. (2025). Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse.



Strengthen children's engagement in the development of laws, policies that affect them and in decision-making spaces.

Laws like the Children Act 2013 and Women and Children Repression Prevention Act 2000 (amendment in 2017) are strong on paper, but their enforcement should be reinforced: currently, weak investigation, case delays, and lack of child-friendly procedures in practice undermine their efficacy. Children highlighted the need to be directly involved in shaping the policies and laws that affect their lives. Government bodies should ensure actual implementation and effective functioning of existing structures and mechanisms for child participation, such as the existing children's parliament, or committees within the Department of Women and Children Affairs. These spaces must be safe, inclusive, and ensure measures to take children, including child victims and survivors' perspectives into account in decision-making processes.

Address legal gaps and lack of controls to prevent child marriage.

The Child Marriage Restraint Act 2017 allows exceptions to the prohibition of child marriage under "special circumstances"; this discrepancy between the national plan to prevent child marriage and the Act should be reviewed and addressed in order to guarantee comprehensive protection for children. Moreover, based on children's experiences, legislation should be revised to require the use of the National ID card for marriage registration, replacing birth certificates, which appear to be easier to falsify. Strict enforcement of this measure, combined with community-level awareness, could help reduce child marriage.

Strengthen awareness and access to services.

Authorities should ensure that children, families, and communities are aware of the existing support services, including national helplines (333, 109, 1098, and 999) and that these are functional, accessible, and are reflective of children's needs and views. This includes investing in public communication campaigns to increase their visibility, integrating information about them into school materials such as handbooks, placing visible reminders in public spaces such as markets, and transport hubs, and allocating economic and human resources in order to have them functioning 24/7.

Integrate prevention and adequate responses across institutions and sectors.

The Ministry of Education should embed content on sexual harassment and sexual exploitation and abuse of children into handbooks and curricula, ensuring that teachers are trained and supported to talk about these issues through a child rights perspective, in a child-friendly, contextually and culturally adapted manner. At the same time, children suggested how reducing or eliminating school fees and increasing financial support and incentive for education would make schooling a more viable option for economically vulnerable families as well, helping to prevent child labour and its close links to various forms of exploitation including sexual. Children also suggest that the Ministry of Justice should ensure that legal services are adequate and friendly towards boys survivors of sexual exploitation and abuse as well. Finally, the Ministry of Transport and Infrastructure should train public transport workers on child protection and create safe mechanisms for reporting abuse, such as roadside telephone booths.



Schools and Madrasas

Create safe and effective reporting mechanisms.

Schools and madrasas should establish or adequately implement child-friendly reporting systems, such as complaint boxes and committees, ensuring they are regularly monitored and trusted, or even handled, by students. Both these mechanisms and schools' spaces in general must provide children, and especially girls, privacy and protection, with teachers and school leadership being trained to respond appropriately and uphold accountability.

Raise awareness through participatory activities.

Awareness on sexual exploitation and abuse should be promoted through school-based initiatives like cultural programs, debate competitions, and child-led activities. These create safe spaces for dialogue, help reduce stigma, and encourage children to challenge harmful norms together.

Law enforcement and official reporting channels

Establish dedicated, child-friendly reporting offices within law enforcement units.

Specialised spaces should be created everywhere so children can safely report abuse and exploitation. Existing national emergency services must also be adapted to ensure they are accessible, confidential, and responsive to children's needs.

Strengthen police capacity and accountability.

Law enforcement officers should be part of the child protection committees. Police stations should have officers trained with child handling skills and trauma informed approaches. Children also said police officers should take sexual abuse and exploitation of children cases seriously and handle them with respect. Moreover, it is essential to promote and strengthen continuous training to challenge stigma and victim-blaming, reduce harmful practices, and improve trust with children and their families. In addition, cyber units should be established to respond promptly to technology-facilitated child sexual abuse and exploitation.

Address corruption within the justice system.

Strict measures are required to prevent bribery and corruption that hinder survivors' access to justice. Clear accountability mechanisms, independent monitoring, and sanctions for corrupt practices should be put in place.

Private sector engagement, including social networks and media platforms

Strengthen online safety and accountability.

Social media companies and internet providers should implement strict verification measures, such as linking accounts to the National ID system, to prevent fake profiles and misuse. They should also increase monitoring of harmful content and collaborate with authorities to report online sexual exploitation. In addition, they should allocate resources for online information campaigns to raise awareness among children, parents, and communities about the risks of online child sexual exploitation, safe online practices, and available reporting channels. Partnerships with child users and young creators could make these campaigns more accessible and relatable.

Encourage responsibility in public and commercial spaces.

Shopkeepers and other business owners should be encouraged and trained to identify and respond to risks of child sexual exploitation in their premises. Transport associations, including bus owners, should adopt clear safety rules, such as Codes of conduct and designated safe seating for girls.

Non-governmental organisations

Promote empowerment through inclusive activities.

Children suggested that non-governmental organisations should more systematically integrate women's and girls' empowerment into sports and cultural events, using these platforms to challenge gender stereotypes, build confidence, and create safety nets among children.

Offer support directly to children.

Instead of expecting survivors to seek help, organisations should proactively reach out to children in schools, communities, and in safe spaces, aiming to lower barriers for those who feel fear or shame, ensuring that they are not left isolated.

Ensure meaningful engagement with children.

Child rights forums and NGO-led initiatives should more systematically include the voices of various children, allowing them to shape programmes, advocacy, and awareness-raising activities. Structured opportunities for participation of children in all their diversity will make interventions more relevant and responsive to children's realities.



Parents, families and communities

Strengthen aware and supportive family environments.

Activities that help families foster a friendly and open home atmosphere where children have spaces to discuss personal issues with parents and feel safe to discuss uncomfortable issues or share experiences of abuse without fear of blame or punishment. Children even suggest that practical steps should be taken into account, such as preferring supervised computer use over unsupervised mobile phones, while guaranteeing children their right to privacy and ensure that the involvement of parents in children's lives that is not limited to control and supervision is crucial.

Strengthen cross cutting initiatives and participation in child protection.

Community members—including older siblings, neighbours, and village leaders—should integrate children's experiences and voices when taking a proactive role in discussing, preventing and responding to abuse. It is recommended to form children's groups as well as groups of relatives and local leaders, including shopkeepers, bus and rickshaw drivers and others community members that children identified as figures that are present during their day-to-day activities and that could play an active role as protectors. These groups should be open and receptive to the participation of children and their active contribution, creating safe spaces for dialogue and support, while also reinforcing accountability at the local level. Communities should as well establish community-based, child-informed reporting channels and rapid prevention and response mechanisms for issues like child marriage, including direct communication channels to police or local authorities. Children also recommended that in the Municipality/Councilor office/

Union Parishad office's committees, children's participation is needed where they can share their voices in the meetings. Children should be systematically involved alongside adults in awareness-raising initiatives, programme design, and policy planning, empowering them to become agents of change within their communities and to shape interventions along their lived realities and needs.

Support and strengthen links between formal and customary justice initiatives.

It is essential to investigate and transform the potential of informal settlements, shifting from an attitude of burying scandals and silencing survivors to a form of addressing abuse that is child-centred, sensitive to cultural and social contexts, aiming to justice and accountability. Children recommend customary and community-based mechanisms, such as encouraging families to take responsibility—for example, by informing the relatives of the author of abuse when cases occur instead of protecting their name—to complement formal justice systems and strengthen community ownership of protection strategies.

Promote peer-to-peer awareness and support.

Child-led groups can be supported to organise awareness-raising campaigns amongst peers and in communities including beyond their own, reducing the risk of bias that may arise between families or communities and their own children, and helping parents and community members take children's perspectives into account in decisions that concern them. Such initiatives can also create peer-to-peer support networks, where children encourage one another, share experiences, and work collectively on recommendations and solutions to challenges such as sexual exploitation and abuse, bullying or harassment.

CONCLUSION

We have learned through this process that children bring powerful voices and unique insights into their lived realities. Their perspectives shed light not only on the challenges they face, but also on the discrepancies between community norms and parenting practices on one side, and the harms experienced by children on the other. The findings also expose gaps between the protection that laws and mechanisms are meant to provide and the support that actually reaches children in practice.

This report will serve as a tool for children and others in Bangladesh to promote change and advocate for stronger responses to sexual exploitation and abuse. We call on decision-makers at all levels—from communities to national government—to engage systematically with children, ensuring that their voices help shape prevention and intervention efforts and contribute to building a more protective society.





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