

THE LOST GIRLS

Trapped in a cycle of prostitution and poverty, the women and children living in one of Asia's largest brothels face unthinkable hardship. MiNDFOOD travels to Bangladesh to discover why they are now daring to hope for a brighter future.

Words by **Joanna Tovia** Photography by **Jeff Holt**



NO CHOICE

Riya was sold into the brothel at 12 years old. She has lived and worked in this room ever since.



Riya* was just 12 years old when she was sold to a brothel. Servicing men became Riya's only means of survival and, 15 years on, although her fear at being abandoned to this life of squalor and prostitution has faded into familiarity, she is still trying to escape.

"I wanted to go away from here but the landlady said no. Now this rented room is my business," she says. If she can just find a way to save money, she will leave, she says, and find a more respectable profession.

The rented room in which Riya lives and works is a windowless brick-and-corrugated iron shack measuring two by two metres. It has a rusty flap at the front propped open with a long stick. She closes it whenever she is entertaining a customer and raises it again when the job is done. Like the other 1500 women and girls who work here, the largest of 14 brothels in Bangladesh, her room faces a filthy narrow

alleyway, where flies clamour over spilled food and goat faeces, and rubbish collects in sodden, fetid piles. Men, women and children pick their way through garbage and sidestep water stagnating in open drains. They avert their eyes from the sight of naked toddlers meandering through the streets alone while their mothers work.

Witnessing the neglect of young children is one of the hardest aspects of the job for Save the Children project officer Sumona**, herself a mother. Being left to fend for themselves may be painful for the children, she says, but it is also difficult for their mothers, who are forced into sex work just to earn enough to live. "The children need their mother's love and affection but she has no other option," Sumona says. "It is a very painful situation for a mother to hear her child crying outside the room when she is attending to a customer, but she has no choice. We live in heaven compared with their situation."

The stench of rotting garbage is only faintly disguised by smoke billowing from small shops where men fry up flat bread and squat by makeshift stoves, adding spice to steaming curries. With so many people living in close quarters, it's noisy here, even during the day. Bengali chatter mixes with local music and tinny sounds blare from tiny televisions in open-sided shops where men and a few older women languish to pass the time. Sewing machines whir and clack as tailors work on new clothes the sex workers buy in the hope customers will choose their affections over another's.

One girl bends down on a wooden bench to paint her toenails, another picks lice out of a friend's hair. The sound of laughter is noticeably absent here and, apart from one teenage girl cuddling up to a man as she runs her fingers through his hair, no one is smiling.

Sadly, Riya will soon lose her appeal and making enough money to survive ▶

*NAME CHANGED TO PROTECT IDENTITY. **SURNAME WITHHELD ON REQUEST DUE TO PERSONAL SAFETY CONCERNS.



A MEANS OF SURVIVAL

Opposite: More than 250 children are forced to work as prostitutes in the brothel.

This page, clockwise: A mother and child make their way through the garbage-strewn streets; a girl paints her toenails to prepare for the evening ahead; a young girl awaits her next costumer.



will become far more difficult. Now 27, she is approaching the end of her career, as men seek out the services of younger, prettier sex workers. Saving enough money to leave is unlikely here, where most of the money the women make is spent on food, rent and supporting their children. They must also pay to use the toilet and washing facilities.

The women and girls trapped here know their reputation is tarnished, and the shame of what they endure from the men who use them can be overwhelming. Surviving one day at a time is all they can do and many dare not dream of a different tomorrow. Some dull the horror of being here through readily available drugs and alcohol; addictions are common.

There are 250 to 300 children working here as prostitutes, their fading youth still visible beneath garish eye make-up and brightly painted lips as they lean against doorways smoking cigarettes and wait for customers. As day turns to night, these streets will turn ugly as alcohol-soaked customers stream in, bright lights and loud music take over and sex and violence become one.

A LOST FUTURE

Many of the children working here were born here, forced into the sex trade by their mothers when her income starts to dwindle. Men pay an average 100 taka (\$1.20) for sex, and most ask to pay double for sex without a condom. The most in-demand sex workers – girls in their early teens – can earn up to 500tk per customer. They see up to 10 customers a night.

“It is my sin that I was born into this world,” says 16-year-old Maliha. Her mother’s earnings have dried up now that she has “become old”, so now it is up to Maliha to support her three younger siblings. “Sex work is a very hard job ... we have to work even if we feel sick or go through menstruation and I feel so helpless when the customers persuade me to have unprotected sex,” she says. “I am working hard and doing a shameless job to feed my siblings. I know that when they grow up they will say bad words about me. I know that no one will marry me and I do not have any future.”

The average age of girls entering the brothel from outside is 14. Some have been kidnapped by gangs and sold,



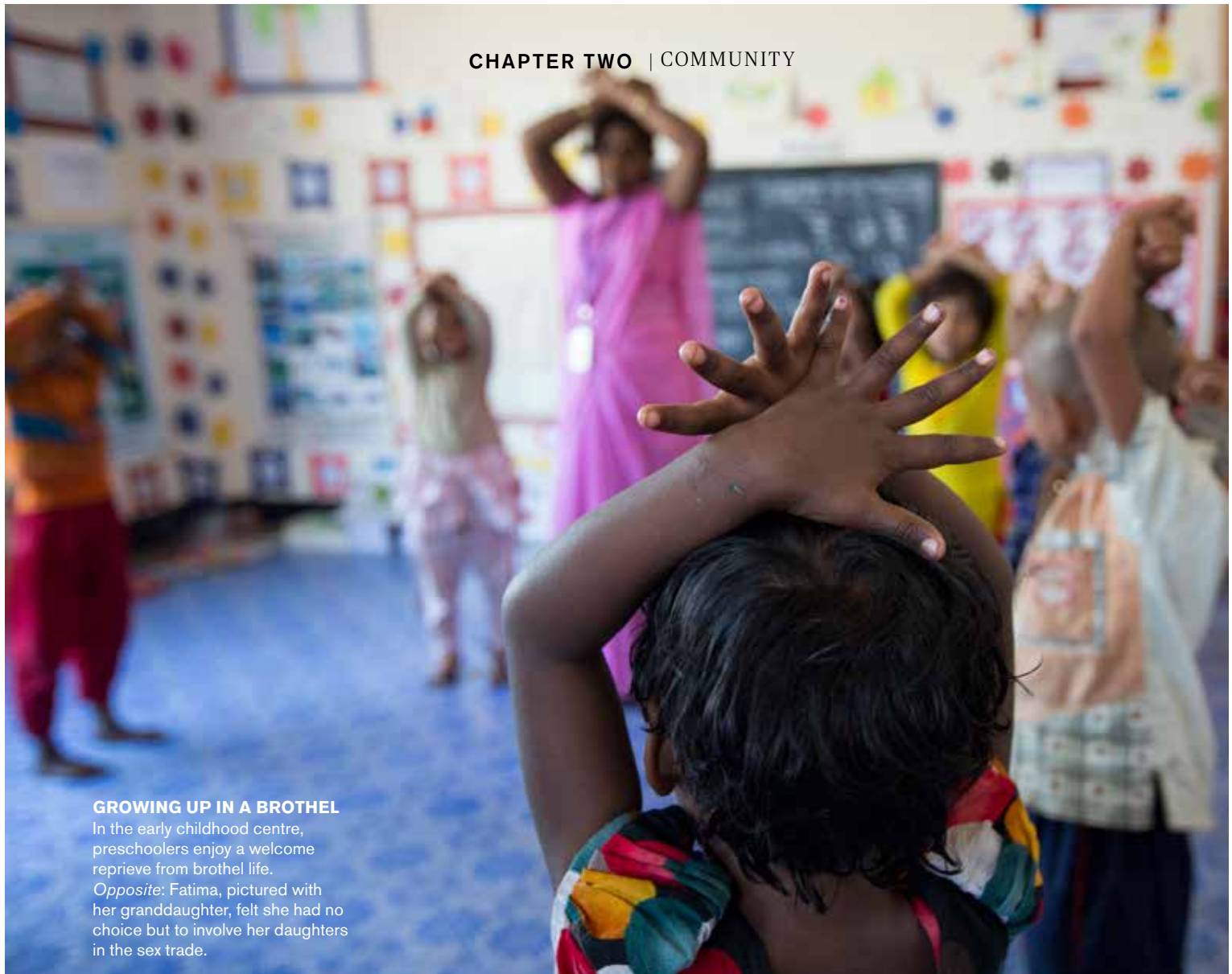
others have been lured here by boyfriends promising marriage or good jobs in garment factories. It is illegal for anyone under 18 to work in the sex industry, but *bariwalis* (landladies) in cahoots with lawyers and police have little trouble getting registration forms signed to falsify children’s ages. A bondage period that can last several years follows a girl’s arrival in the brothel, during which time all her takings go to the *bariwali* who bought her.

It is easy to vilify these women and forget that they too are doing what they can to survive. One *bariwali* I talk to, Fatima*, has been a sex worker for 30 years. She was married once, and escaped the profession for a time, but when her husband’s other wife found out about her, he agreed to leave Fatima and their five children. He gave her just 400tk and she says she had no choice but to return to brothel life. She used

the money to buy two rooms and bought five more rooms when he later gave her more money. One room serves as a dance bar at night; another is a shop. She lives in one room, and the three children still in the brothel live in the other rooms. A sex worker pays her 100tk a day to use the remaining room.

Fatima doesn’t look at me when she talks. My gaze follows hers down to the chipped orange nail polish on fingernails blackened with dirt. A set of keys is tied to one corner of her sari. When I ask about her daughters, she lifts another corner of her sari to wipe away the tears.

One daughter was lucky enough to escape the brothel in 1996 when Save the Children Australia set up a residential safe home to protect as many young girls in immediate danger as could be accommodated. That daughter is now



GROWING UP IN A BROTHEL

In the early childhood centre, preschoolers enjoy a welcome reprieve from brothel life.

Opposite: Fatima, pictured with her granddaughter, felt she had no choice but to involve her daughters in the sex trade.

at university and living in another community. Her other two daughters now entertain their own customers for money.

“I feel very sad but the situation is out of my control because earnings are so limited,” Fatima says. “I had no alternative options.”

She beams with pride as she hands me her phone to show me a picture of her “unspoilt” daughter and brightens further when I ask to visit Fatima’s home. There I meet her 27-year-old daughter Sumi*, who has an 18-month-old daughter and is pregnant again. When I arrive in the late afternoon, she is eating dinner in her room and preparing for another night’s work. Although her mother said she was 18 when Sumi entertained her first customer, through a translator Sumi tells me that she was just 13.

“I was afraid. He was a good man and he tried to get me to enjoy it, but I cried so

much that he left. He said he would come back when I started to enjoy it.”

And did he come back? “Yes, four or five times,” she says.

Asked if any men mistreat her, Sumi’s eyes fill with pain. “Some customers torture me and hit me around the face and eyes. I have to accept this treatment.”

SIGNS OF CHANGE

Like the wider Bangladeshi community, most sex workers living in the brothel dress modestly in colourful neck-to-ankle saris. The women keep as clean as they can, a task made easier when Save the Children installed fresh water pumps in the village, as well as a drainage system to redirect heavy monsoonal rains.

“You can’t imagine what it was like 20 years ago,” says Save the Children child protection program manager

Swmaranika**. As recently as 1996, when Save the Children Australia started its work in the brothel community, sex workers and their children were not allowed to wear shoes and were thrown into the river when they died. “We helped them understand this was not fair. We told them: ‘Why are you not entitled to wear shoes? You have every right!’”

Sex workers are now given proper burials and, now that they wear shoes, are harder to identify by their profession in outside communities.

Swmaranika is part of a team of dedicated Save the Children staff trying to improve the lives of women in the brothel, and the futures of their children. In 1997, Save the Children partnered with local non-government organisation Mukti Mohila Samity to establish an early childhood centre for three-to five-year-olds just



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INNOCENCE LOST
Fatima's daughter, Sumi, entertained her first customer at 13.

outside the brothel gates, where it is a relief to see children laughing, playing, singing and learning under the loving care of teachers. The teachers, former sex workers, are clothed in pink saris and offer these vulnerable children not only a reprieve from the streets they know as home but also a head start on their education – most can read and write by the time they start school.

Two hundred children attend the preschool from 9am-12pm, then head home until 3pm, when some go to an evening program Save the Children has set up to run during the brothel's busiest hours. Here, children are free to play or study until 9pm.

Children of all ages are exposed to the highly sexualised environment inside the brothel. With little else to do but roam the streets and hang around the train station or cemetery while their mothers work, children as young as eight are plied with drugs and alcohol and paid to dance for customers in bars. Men also pay them to buy illegal drugs and alcohol on their behalf. Young boys, as well as girls, are at risk of sexual abuse and with little to aspire to, many boys grow up to become pimps or drug addicts.

EDUCATION BRINGS HOPE

In the midst of so much despair, Save the Children is working hard to engage mothers and the wider community to protect children from harm, and a primary school set up with the help of child rights organisation Karmajibi Kalyan Sangstha is changing attitudes for the better.

According to Save the Children project manager Saiful**, the school's academic results are so good that parents from other communities now want their children to go there, too. The children of sex workers, once shunned and called *Zaraj* (bastard) in the streets, now face less discrimination as a result. "It's fantastic – in parent meetings, parents from the community and the brothel sit together, talk with each other and

become friends. The children all play together," he says.

Adolescents in the brothel now have access to livelihood training programs designed to equip them with vocational skills, internships and job placement opportunities that will allow them to earn a future income outside of sex work.

Within the brothel, Save the Children's 24-hour safe space operates as a drop-in centre for teenage girls in danger. Trained facilitators, themselves sex workers, offer counselling to the girls and report any cases of underage sex workers to a Child Protection Committee. In the past six months, 32 underage girls have been rescued and sent home.

Other facilitators have been trained to run groups for mothers to educate them on child rights and how they can protect their children from the risks of brothel life. Most mothers are illiterate and, with few positive experiences from their own parents to imitate, they are eager to learn new parenting skills. They nod in agreement and pay close attention to the illustrated book the facilitator holds up as she tells them about nutrition, why they should avoid being intimate with clients in front of their children and how to arm them against exploitation. Alma*, today's facilitator, says she feels empowered and honoured to see the women applying her lessons to their daily lives. "They are more caring as mothers now; they realise this is not the right place for their children."

As for the children, Saiful says it is common for them to reflect their daily lives through role playing games at school. "Before, one made herself a client, another a sex worker, another a landlady; now they pretend they are teachers or project officers," he says proudly. MF



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Visit us online to hear, in their own words, how children feel about life inside the brothel.

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The Lucky One



The smile on her young, untroubled face says it all. Sixteen-year-old Nahar* (pictured above, on right) knows she is one of the lucky ones. When she was six years old, her mother enrolled her in Save the Children's residential safe home where she shares a room with other girls, eats nutritious food, and is transported safely to and from school by rickshaw. Political science is her favourite subject and when she finishes school she plans to get a government job. "When I find a suitable job and earn money, I will take my mother with me and make her happy. We are safe and secure here ... we feel so happy."

The safe home's entrance gates are locked at night and a security guard patrols the compound's perimeter. "Our teachers are loving and caring and make me feel confident," she says.

Her mother visits once a week. Nahar clearly loves these visits with her mother and says she brings with her special food she has cooked and gives her advice on religion and good manners.

Of the 117 girls who have lived in the safe home since 1996, many have gone on to marry, get good jobs and go on to university. Only three have given in to family pressure and returned to the brothel.

To help Save the Children build a brighter future for children living in this Bangladesh brothel, visit savethechildren.org.au or call 1800 760 011 to make a donation.