

## **Libraries for changing lives of the sex workers: a new approach for socially disadvantaged people in Bangladesh**

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### **Abstract**

*In Bangladesh sex workers (SWs) and their children are one of the most vulnerable and socially marginalized groups. There are very few organizations in Bangladesh who are serving for them to change their lives. Many GOs/NGOs are working just for harm reduction only. Concern Worldwide (one of the Irish-based International Organizations) has recently implemented a project namely "Jibon Paribortone Library" means "Library for Changing Lives" to support 1,000 sex workers through dedicated brothels-based libraries provided them with the opportunity to make their own choices for a better future. The main aim of setting a brothel-based digital library is to improve the quality of life of the sex workers and their children in a sustainable way through training and learning by the innovative approach of a library. The project realizes that as of today in Bangladesh the marginalized communities do not have access to a traditional library. This damages educational outcomes for many (Yunus, 2009). The author was appointed as Library Consultant of the project. It was an amazing experience that based on the demand of the Sex workers; the author had to collect and prepare the digital resources and different audio-visual aids and organize live skills training. After that he had to try for involving sex-workers with different IGAs (Income Generating Activities) by maintaining liaison with other organizations, community people, civil society people, policy makers and so on. He also had to work hard on changing public attitude as well. To motivate Sex workers for achieving social skills on different micro-professions (like garments work, tailoring, sewing hand fabrics, maid-labour, making clay stuffs, parlouring, making hand sweater, beautician, hair cutting, cooperatives, etc.) short video documentaries have been made and presented on different IGAs. As a result of skill training through digital libraries, 200 SWs fully changed their profession to tailoring, beauty parlour and bag making and 300 SWs have increased their sources of income from other trades. Thus brothel-based digital libraries have turned into integral part in the lives of the sex workers. The basic aim of the paper is to share the ideas on how a considerable number of sex-workers have been involved with different IGAs, how their children have been admitted in government and public schools during the last couple of years by the help of the brothel-based digital library services.*

**Keywords:** *Brothel-based libraries; Community Digital Libraries; Marginalized People; Disadvantaged People; Sex Workers*

## 1.0 Background of the Study

There are more than 150,000 sex workers in Bangladesh based either in brothels scattered throughout the country, or “floating” in major urban centres (BBS, 2009). Culturally conservative societal attitudes result in extremely negative perceptions regarding sex work. Sex workers are caught in a vicious cycle, rejected by their families and society, subjected to various forms of violence and exploitation, and subject to arrest and indefinite detention in government-run Vagrant Homes. They and their children are denied access to basic services such as health care and education, and are often denied the right to a proper burial, to wear shoes in public, or to use certain shops. They generally have limited control over their own finances and live in conditions of poverty, with much of their earnings handed over to landlords, brothel cashiers, local criminals (*mastaans*), pimps, or partners (*babus*). Most brothels are built on government-owned land. Floating sex workers are more vulnerable to violence and exploitation, and often have no fixed place to live.

The study has excluded the floating sex-workers and surveyed and intervened the project only on those sex-workers who lives in licensed brothel. Brothels in Bangladesh, which are usually located in urban slums, are large complexes of small rooms, where up to 1,000 SWs and their children live and work. This concept creates the opportunity to establish brothel based community digital libraries from where they will get information about their basic rights and their children would be encouraged to go to school. The project sought to empower sex workers and their children to learn and exercise their basic rights and gain access to services, in order to improve their quality of life in a sustainable way. As a result of skill training through brothel-based digital libraries the following outcomes have been achieved:

- Improved Access to Services,
- Increased awareness among sex workers regarding their basic rights and expanded life choices
- Sex worker organizations developed and strengthened
- Increased Community Participation and Societal Understanding

Thus brothel-based digital libraries have turned into integral part in the lives of the sex workers in Bangladesh.

## 2.0 Description of the Study

Traditional approach always brings as usual result in the context of poverty alleviation in Bangladesh which is not satisfactory. Keeping it in mind, CWW (CONCERN WORLDWIDE) thought to introduce a brothel-based community digital library approach by breaking the tradition. In poverty alleviation, they have more than 40 years’ experiences. It was a 2-year project (March 2007-February 2009) to address the needs of sex-workers of the country. The study has

discussed two brothels on 1, 000 beneficiaries which located at Dhaka and Faridpur district. The libraries were established in both locations by the project. Both were two-storied building on abandoned property of the Government used as vagrant homes for the sex-workers. In each homes, there was one recreational room (hall room- a large room located at the ground floor isolated from the living room) where at the day time, most of the children's of the sex-workers met for watching TV. Children, women and sometimes customers were used to visiting the library for pleasure if they get any chance to come. But sex-workers were always scared about their Sardarni (the female leader of the Sex-workers who control their schedule and force to sale sex with customers) as she always forces them to sale sex with customer. It has been observed that except sleeping time, most of the children preferred to stay in the recreation room for a long time. They were very much interested in watching Hindi movie, action film, Bengali action movie, etc., rather than others games and going to school. The project decided to utilize the hall room as a library.

### **3.0 Methodology**

The research team consisted of a library consultant (where the author worked) with a Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) expert of the project. Stakeholder mapping and analysis have been done successfully based on the project baseline. The methodology and tools were finalized through a participatory workshop attended by the research team, project beneficiaries and other stakeholders of the project. The study used a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods. This included a review of related literature, project proposal and annual reports of related organizations. The study has also reviewed and analyzed project data and M&E reports, and analyzed media coverage relating to sex workers. In addition, information was gathered from appreciative inquiry (AI), key informants (KI) in two of the project sites: Dhaka & Faridpur brothels. This included two -days visit to each project site to conduct group discussions with selected sex workers; group discussions with executive committee members of the Sex Workers Organizations (SWOs) and group discussions with local civil society representatives.

### **4.0 Steps towards Digital Library**

#### **4.1 Explore internal potentiality**

With a view to change the lives of the sex-workers through the brothel-based community digital library, it was the challenge to the author to introduce the research methodology by which sex-workers internal potentiality can be explored because it was the first task for the author to achieve project objective. The author formed different groups based on their age and organized workshop where they felt very comfortable to speak about themselves. At the beginning of the project, it was needed to introduce the project with the sex-workers. The study has applied appreciative inquiry method (AI) for hearing their voice in the form of a story and consulted several times with project personnel's, community

people, and sex-workers about the service pattern which helped them to change their lives.

In their story, they explained about their identity, level of education, reasons for existing situation, personal liking, unlinking, interest of works, skills, dream, ambition, future plan, etc. Most of the sex-workers expressed that getting education for their children is very important. As they have already spent their life within brothels and kept themselves scatted from the society, so in their life they have no any ambition, but they felt that education for their children can change the lives of their next generation. They also expressed that if they get any alternative works in the society, they would not stay in brothel for a second. Just for surviving per sex-worker need US\$ 5 per day on an average and they can earn it as each day they must have intercourse with four or five different men, for the price of around 100 taka, or US\$ 1.5, a time. And for most of the girls here, there is no monetary gain whatsoever: because most of the inmates (and it is, in many ways, like a prison) at Faridpur brothel or bonded sex workers, sold by their families to a *Sordarni* in return for two or three years in which she, the brothel mastans, can pocket all their earnings. Asha (one of the sex-workers in Faridpur brothel) means hope but she isn't very hopeful for her own future. "I don't think I'll ever get married or have children," she says. "No one will marry me. If they did they'd only keep me for two or three days, and then they'd sell me back." She is more streetwise than some of the other girls here, many of whom share a tragic dream that one day a knight in shining armour will arrive, to carry them off; then they will marry him, have his babies and love him forever. (Some of the girls here have thought they had found their knight; the many babies, conceived by girls who allowed men they thought would marry them in order to have condom-free sex, bear witness to that). "We wish to live from hand-to-mouth and want to change the profession and want to live like other people in the society", said another sex-worker Junu. When asked about the future plan, most of them did not have any. The exceptions were who have children. They are very much interested to send their children for schooling like others. Based on the story, the author has analyzed their dream with a view to explore their potentiality. By applying AI (appreciative Inquiry) method and consultation techniques, their needs have been assessed that helped to explore the sex-workers internal potentiality which will lead them for changing lives.

#### **4.2 Choice of micro professions**

Based on the statement of the sex-workers, plans have been developed in search of alternative livelihoods. Special emphasis has been given on best-suited live-skills training and selective dissemination of information (SDI) services for changing behavior and attitude. Service standards to involve all the sex-workers were also the priority task to the author. For attracting teenage sex-workers on different professions, some motivating lessons have been shared through videos and other AVMs (audio-visual materials) like TV, radio, illustrative materials, national text books, graphics, charts, cartoons, posters, playing equipment, etc.

These have boosted up them. The most of the teenage sex-workers have preferred 17 small professions and felt confident to involve themselves for chaining lives. But they eagerly desired practical training and necessary micro-credit to start the business/works from the project. These professions were as follows: garments works, tailoring, sewing hand fabrics, working as a cleaner in city corporation, working in day care centre, sales representative, cooking food, making handcrafts, maid-labour, making clay stuffs, parLOURing, making hand sweater, hair cutting, cooperatives, product promoter and maid servant. To stimulate the children, some educational videos namely Sisimpur (one of the popular Bengali cartoon for children) and schooling of river erosion affected children and pavement dwellers children, etc. were presented. These also inspired the children to go to school. They become interested to visit the library frequently for gathering knowledge. Thus, the need-based live-skills training and learning resources have been developed and some were gathered prepared for the project with a view to build the capacity on the aforesaid micro-professions and create interest among their children to go to school.

#### 4.3 Develop digital collections

It was full of audio-visual materials which prime motto is to create awareness among the sex-workers for changing lives through counseling and encouraging them for involving with different IGAs through training. All the audio and video documentaries have been prepared by the research team incorporating suggestions and opinions of the psychologist, doctors, religious leaders, elites of the civil society, community experts, legal experts and so on about the basic rights and encourage them for changing professions. The service pattern of this library was different than traditional one. Based on the demand of the target population, its collection was also different and extra ordinary. Most of the services provided here through AVMs. Some are through pictorial learning materials using illustrative reading materials for easy understanding of the beneficiaries. Service provided through AVMs are very effective than books and other printed materials. Keeping this in mind, the author was interested to start mind-mapping on writing script and preparing short video documentaries for involving them with different IGAs (Income Generating Activities). The language used as subtitles in these documentaries was in Bengali (Mother Language). Therefore, it was possible even for illiterate sex-workers to understand the videos very easily. The videos were edited by Sound and Vision (a professional Videographer) as there was a service contract with them. The finance and the technical support of making short documentaries were provided by the project whereas the research team (the author) was mainly responsible to research on digital resource development. Thus, the brothel based community library became accessible and attractive to all sex-workers and their children as well with its digital collections. Realizing their level of education, the author have adopted suitable approach to get the sex-workers connected with the digital library that included **formal training** through workshop, group meeting, practical demonstration of IGAs, short tour (just bring them out from the brothel for introducing and coping with the community and the

community people), cultural events, religious festival, picnic, spot visit, **inspirational activities** like indoor games competition, e.g., ludu, daba, keram, playing cards, etc., outdoor competition for their children, e.g., football match, cricket match etc. For example- On 17 March 2008, during the St. Patrick's Day (Irish National Day) Concern Worldwide (CWW) with its brothel based Community Digital Library project in Bangladesh organized a charity cricket match between the sex-workers children and the Irish Cricket Team where the Irish players presented cricket equipment to them as a gesture of solidarity during a visit to Bangladesh. The presentation of the equipment to the children of sex-workers is a fitting gesture that reflects the importance of equal opportunity in life-the right of all children. These children are heavily discriminated against in Bangladesh but CWW helps them access education and other social services through its library project. As library consultant, the author was the organiser of this event which covered by most of the national and international electronic and prints medias (<http://www.cricketeurope4.net/>).

The video documentary of this event was a good collection which preserves in the library as a digital reference resources. It is still encouraging sex-workers and their children to go ahead coping with the present society. It stimulates the children for going school. Frequently, library has been showing this video through its multimedia projector.

Besides the **inspirational activities**, author has developed different training e-Resources in local language and through CD-ROMs, the services were displayed. Some training modules have been revised for providing life skills training complemented by psychosocial support in reviewing existing life skills modules and adapted these to the specific context and needs of the sex-workers. Project people have also been trained up in these revised modules. These modules focused on enabling children to be self-responsible in ways that result in positive relationships with respect for others. The library project has helped children to develop positive assertiveness skills to protect themselves from drugs, violence, harassment, and other threats. Another module has been developed specifically on HIV/AIDS (human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immunodeficiency syndrome) as sex-workers were generally more exposed to the risk of becoming infected with HIV/AIDS. As another form of psychosocial support, the library project has piloted legal-aid assistance for those sex-workers who wanted to pursue their rights through the courts. This focused primarily on women's rights associated with crimes that have been committed against them, such as rape and physical abuse. Here, it is needed to mention that due to aforesaid reasons, these collections were not look like the traditional ones.

#### **4.4 Provide proactive information services**

During focus group discussion (FGD with the teenage sex-workers (age level=10-18), the study was experienced with a new horror which a drug is called Oradexon; a drug identical to one used to fatten cattle. This was being used

routinely in brothels throughout Bangladesh, by Surarnai's desperate to make the girls in their employ seem older and more attractive to clients. The pimps supplied the drug, which was very cheaply available but it is extremely dangerous for healthy young women. Taken by these girls, it impairs the kidneys, increases the blood pressure and interferes with normal hormone production. It also causes widespread oedema, or swelling, throughout the body. There are also severe problems with coming off the drug, because it's highly addictive. So if the girls stop taking it, they need a lot of help – they get bad stomach aches, they are sick, they get headaches. Concern Worldwide (CWW) with its library project started campaign against the drug. The project thought that stopping the supply chain would simply be too difficult. They launched campaign to educate the girls about the importance of condoms to stop HIV infection and importance of avoiding this drug for their sound health. To create awareness among the sex-workers, library project launched two basic anticipatory information services namely "sastho-e sampad (health is wealth) and "Jiboner janno tathho (information for life)" which contain information related to health and hygiene, population control, respect others, religious knowledge, social norms and values, dignity of labor, roles and responsibilities of a citizen, work in group, value of education, childcare, hand-wash, saving environment from pollution, cleanliness and other social issues.

#### **4.5 Transformation of lives**

The brothel based community digital library has created "can do" attitude among the sex-workers as poverty and society made them inferior from their childhood to mix and work with the community. But after watching some life skills videos, most of them were attracted on it and confidently acknowledged that they can do small trades. "How to be a small trader" was one of the short documentaries that covered practical demonstration of different micro-professional's experts on small trading. "Give us the opportunity, we will do it", said by most of the sex-workers after watching this video. The author then processed person to person best-suited training based on their interest and skills and engaged technical persons for practical demonstration. Project supplied needs-based learning resources and other logistics. Finally, they received vocational training for a short period. The duration of the training was varied upon 3 days/1 week/15 days depending on the learning capacity of the sex-workers. But the training session was a continuous process. After training, the capacity of the sex-workers has been assessed by the project M&E (monitoring & evaluation) team. Only the eligible sex-workers were selected for receiving non-refundable micro-credit from the project by which they could involve themselves with IGAs. Initially, the project people helped them to choose the working location. For example, one sex-worker has been trained up on women hair-cutting, the project helped her to involve with any beauty parlor shop where she could work on a contract basis. The contract, identity, and other security have been ensured by the project so that there was no any scope for the sex-workers to be untrustworthy to anyone in the society. Some videos were educational but funny to attract the children to go to school. The key messages of these videos

were everything is free in school including books, pens, khata (writing material), dries milk playing instruments and so on. They could not believe that all are free for them. Thus they become interested to go to school. Due to illiteracy, most of the sex-workers preferred visual materials instead of printed sources. Keeping it in mind, the author have designed different digital posters which conveyed messages about their rights, health and safety measures, food and nutrition issues, behavior change issues etc. For example, one wall poster for “No more drug” demonstrated issues on why it is harmful for health, another poster on “talking to your client to use condom” revealed that sex-workers has the right to protect their health from HIV/AIDS and other STD (Sexually Transmitted Diseases).

## **5.0 Project Achievement**

### **5.1 Improved access to services**

The author had to prepare inventory of health service providing agencies (government, NGOs, and others) near the brothel. Furthermore, the project people continuously updated the list. During final evaluation of the project, it has been found that 95% of the beneficiaries in two centres received medical services (consultancy, check-up, medicine, counseling, and others). These arrangements assisted them in accessing health services. Stakeholders in two research locations (Dhaka and Faridpur) unanimously agreed that sex workers' access to services has increased significantly as a result of project interventions. Access to immunization, routine health care, family planning services, STD/STI testing and treatment, and HIV/AIDS prevention has been secured in all project locations through linkages with local health clinics and NGO health service providers. Primary School enrolment rate of sex workers children have been increased by 37.5% which never thought before launching the library project. Increased enrolment rates were achieved by raising sex workers' awareness of the importance of educating their children. Access to legal aid also increased significantly through project interventions. CWW's library project have motivated two local Sex workers organizations namely Durjoy and Dream who have taken a strong public stance against under-age sex workers, and over the project period, 106 girls were removed from sex work and started small trades returning to their families and 20 girls have transferred to a government shelter home.

### **5.2 Increased awareness among sex workers regarding their basic rights and expanded life choices**

Significant numbers of sex workers in both locations were provided with training on human rights, child rights, legal rights, gender, health and HIV/AIDS awareness, life skills and behaviour change, and psycho-social counseling. Some concerns were raised about the quality and appropriateness of the training materials and training methods used. However, despite these shortcomings, sex workers who participated in the library project and took the training



demonstrated an increased awareness of their rights and entitlements, and felt more empowered to demand their rights. The project also provided 558 sex workers with skills training in sewing, candle making, shopping bag making, block boutique, driving, and computers, garments works, tailoring, cleaning, part-time worker in day care centre, sales representative, making handcrafts, making clay stuffs, parlouring, making hand sweater, hair cutting, cooperatives, product promoter etc. Of those who participated in training, 17% are fully involved in alternative livelihoods, and 30% are using the training to supplement their income from sex work.

### **5.3 Rapport building**

The library and implementing authority jointly arranged meeting with the community's people to raise their awareness and requested them to extend their support for bringing positive changes in the lives of the sex-workers. This collectively helped achieve the project objectives.

### **5.4 Sex worker organizations developed and strengthened**

During the course of the project, training was also provided to two local SWOs (Sex workers Organizations) executive committee members on advocacy and leadership. Through the library training all are now able to perform basic self-help activities for their members such as supporting children's education; intervening in cases of harassment, abuse and exploitation by police, mastans(local terror), babus (the pimps) and others.

Dramatic changes have been taken place in their lives as long as they engaged with IGAs. They are now much conscious about their rights and entitlements than before. Now, sex-workers are recognized as citizens of Bangladesh, fully entitled to the rights that other citizens receive. Following milestones have also been achieved by the brothel-based digital community library project:

- (1) Laws and policies are now established for protecting the rights of the sex workers;
- (2) They have legal recourse when treated unfairly;
- (3) They are getting shelter, work, and other supportive environment;
- (4) They are now aware about STD (sexually transmitted disease) prevention and treatment, risk to HIV & AIDS;
- (5) Group work skills have been cultivated.

The project has followed a multi-dimensional approach in its activities to deliver better training and information services so that the beneficiaries can have a better quality of human life and library has turned into integral part in their lives.

## 6.0 Future Directions

Concern Worldwide worked with socially disadvantaged people through an innovative approach of a community digital library which was highly regarded by all stakeholders. It is one of the pioneering organizations working with sex workers, and remains the only organization that has adopted a holistic, need-based approach to its work with sex workers. While other organizations have provided some capacity building support to SWOs, most are implementing discrete sectoral programmes (primarily relating to HIV/AIDS). Significant progress has been made over the project period, however, many challenges remain. Like all people, sex workers also have dreams. These people were born innocent like you or me but have lost their innocence almost before their childhood. Brothel-based community digital library has shown them the way of new life. But adopting an innovative library approach for poverty alleviation is a very challenging task as people do not prefer to go for a new approach beyond the traditional one (Ogunsola, 2011). Based on sex workers demand, the most realistic approach has been adopted for changing their lives. The paper has outlined the success and its lessons learnt would be a milestone for poverty alleviation strategy as well in Bangladesh, if government and NGOs (Non-Government Organizations) apply this for the sustainable development of other socially disadvantaged people.

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