



# An assessment of child protection in Bangladesh: How effective is NGO-led Child-Friendly Space?

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## ABSTRACT

Many underprivileged Bangladeshi children are vulnerable to child trafficking, abuse, and exploitation. Child-Friendly Space (CFS) is a semi-permanent house space where vulnerable children are given the support to have a safe environment to survive and thrive. The purpose of this study is to evaluate the role of CFS in providing a protective environment for the children in Bangladesh. A set of secondary and primary data was used to review child protection situation in Bangladesh, and to evaluate the effectiveness of the CFS within a community. An evaluation of child development among the children who attend in the CFS and who do not attend in the CFS was conducted. CFS was found to benefit vulnerable children and communities in terms of protective environment and child development. Children attending in the CFS had better performance at almost every child development indicator. At the community level, child labor decreased in the areas where CFS exists. To respond to the continuing threats of child insecurity, this study presents a set of recommendations for the sustainability of the CFS in the community.

## 1. Introduction

How to combat child trafficking, abuse, and exploitation is an interest of the government, program implementers, and researchers in Bangladesh. In order to enable a protective environment and reduce children's vulnerability, many humanitarian agencies and NGOs in Bangladesh run various child welfare projects. One intervention of the child welfare projects is Child-Friendly Space (CFS), which is a community space where children gather in the daytime—when their parents are at work—to get a protective support from the caregivers who facilitate the services in the CFS. In the CFS, children meet other children to play and interact; thereby, learn competencies to deal with the risk they face, be involved in some educational activities, and relax in a safe place (Ahmed, 2014; Rashid, 2012; World Vision, 2016a, 2016b; 2016c). The aim of this study is to assess the effectiveness of CFS in providing child protection and child development environment from the perspective of child rights situation in Bangladesh.

Child rights in Bangladesh are neither as standard as in the internationally accepted prescriptions nor are they equal for every child living in every community in Bangladesh. United Nations, by a Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), proposed a set of articles that simplified internationally operable guidelines to ensure child rights. According to CRC, everyone under 18 years regardless of their

race, religion, abilities, whatever they think or say, whatever type of family they come from have the rights stated on the CRC. While ratified some of the articles of CRC, Bangladesh also put reservations to some. Nevertheless, Government of Bangladesh enacted a number of laws and policies to safeguard woman, children and underprivileged people of the country. Yet, violence against children and woman is found in Bangladesh; sometimes, in the worst form of children trafficking, abuse or other forms of exploitation (Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK) (2012); Hoque, 2010; Islam, 2015; Rosy, 2013; Sarker & Panday, 2006; Shamim, 2010). The main reasons that people trapped in the violence are for poverty, lack of education and lack of information (Rosy, 2013; Shamim, 2010). Disaster vulnerability also causes marginalized people to be dragged into the victims of violence (Shamim, 2010). One more important cause is that Government of Bangladesh could not show 100% success in law enforcement against violence (Thomas, 2011). To address various causes and to improve child rights situation, government and non-government agencies have been working continuously in many forms, sometimes collaboratively and sometimes separately.

Child-Friendly Spaces are usually designed and operated in the midst of an emergency situation. However, the definition of 'emergency' in the context of war or disaster is different from that of trafficking and child abuse. The CFSs operated in Bangladesh are to

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respond to the trafficking and domestic violence; therefore, they require to be in operation for a relatively long time as long as the community is free of risk to trafficking and violence. Although some argue that CFS is usually a relatively short to medium term program response, and are very often operated from tents and/or temporary structures (Davis & Iltus, 2015); considering the vulnerability of the underprivileged children of Bangladesh, I examined if there are possible ways to sustain the CFS in Bangladesh with improved efficacy. Since the kind of emergency doesn't have a specific time of occurrence or duration; rather, it perpetuates amid the weakness of the community; effective means to fight the children vulnerability is worth looking for. Therefore, I examined if the existing CFSs have the standard services prescribed by the reputed humanitarian agencies.

In the child-friendly spaces, children's unique needs can be met by offering structured activities, games and informal education (World Vision, 2016a, 2016b; 2016c). According to Unicef, main principles of child friendly spaces are: 1) CFSs offer secure and safe environments for children, 2) they provide a stimulating and supportive environment for children, 3) they are built on existing structures and capacities within a community, 4) they use a participatory approach for the design and implementation, 5) they provide or support integrated program and service, and 6) they are inclusive and non-discriminatory (Davis & Iltus, 2015). CFSs benefit children by offering a safe place to play and the support they need to deal with grief and loss (World Vision, 2016a, 2016b; 2016c). According to World Vision CFSs provide supports like:

- Fun activities such as games, sports, singing, drama, and puppet-making
- Informal learning opportunities in reading, basic hygiene, and life lessons
- A chance for children to express their feelings of fear and loss through creative play, stories, and group interactions
- Distribution of things like lunch boxes, water bottles, books and drawing equipment to supplement the basic survival items
- Help to reunite separated children with their families
- Protection and referrals for orphans, abused children, and disabled children (children are referred to specialized services whenever possible)
- A chance for parents to go about their daily activities without worrying about their children's safety

World Vision Bangladesh runs CFS under a project named Child Safety Net Project (CSNP). The goal of CSNP is to reduce children's vulnerability to trafficking, abuse and exploitation, and increase rates of identification, rescue, rehabilitation, and reintegration of the survivors. CSNP has three major program areas: prevention, protection, and restoration under which it has various activities to support vulnerable and victimized children (World Vision, 2016a, 2016b; 2016c). This study is based on the 20 CFSs operated by World Vision Bangladesh in 25 upazillas of nine districts in the project areas where 775 children are receiving the services provided by the CFSs. These CFSs offer services to children of age group between three and twelve who mainly include children of day laborers, street children, school drop-out children, children of sex-workers, and unattended children. The children are given support in two groups. In one group there are children aged between 3 and 5 and in another group, children are in the age group between 6 and 12. The CFSs give support to the children every day except the weekends and holidays. There is a caregiver in every CFS who supervises the children to play, interact, and learn.

This study examines how much of the standard qualities are available in the CFSs that are operated by an NGO in Bangladesh. In the following sections, I will describe the context, a methodological approach to evaluate NGO project, findings from the survey data, and experts' recommendations on the ways to sustain the CFS.

## 2. Context: child rights and protection situation in Bangladesh

The protective environment for children in Bangladesh constitutes both formal and informal elements. The government of Bangladesh has adopted policies, laws, and regulations to address the needs of children. At the same time, children-focused organizations such as Unicef, World Vision, and other non-profit and community-based organizations are involved in working for promoting a protective environment for the children of Bangladesh.

Current laws and policies that ensure child rights and protective environment in Bangladesh are the National Children Policy 2011 and Child Act 2013. National Children Policy 2011 replaces the child policy of 1994 and reflects more clearly on the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (GoB, 1994, 2011). This policy focuses on providing standard services and ensuring equality in the matter of rights concerning education, health, nutrition, safety, and recreation for any children. Child Act 2013 replaces Child Act 1974 and it is also in line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). According to the act, there will be a Child Help Desk in every Police Station of Bangladesh which will be responsible for assisting the child victims and witnesses with legal instruments for their protection. Underprivileged children including the ones without a home will undergo with an assessment and are subject to re-integration with the parents, and in failure, they will be taken in community-based integration under the supervision of a legal guardian (GoB, 2013a; 2013b). If non-institutional forms of care are unavailable, the children will be raised in government approved child homes, like the CFSs. In taking care of children in the institutions, a minimum standard of care prescribed by the government will have to be adopted (GoB, 2013a; 2013b). On the other hand, National Education Policy of Bangladesh 2010 not only includes policies to ensure education for all but also suggests pre-primary schooling to prepare the children for school education. The curriculum for pre-primary schooling will be the activities that inspire children to learn and to go to the school and cultivate their finer senses; as well as, grooming the children to be tolerant to others (GoB, 2010a; 2010b). Taking care of children's growth and development is well addressed in the laws and policies of Bangladesh but yet there are many children who do not have the privilege to avoid poverty induced vulnerabilities like child labor or child trafficking.

Child labor is a special emphasis of the Government of Bangladesh. National Child Labor Elimination Policy 2010 aims at withdrawing children from all forms of child labor. The policy emphasizes involving parents of working children into income generating activities and also offering stipends for getting the children back to school (GoB, 2010a; 2010b). The policy extends special attention to children who are affected by disasters. Disaster Management Act 2012 of Bangladesh suggests taking programs that provide protection and risk reduction for the ultra-poor and underprivileged community. In connection to these, any non-governmental organization can take part in risk reduction (GoB, 2012a; 2012b).

The Constitution of Bangladesh provides an obligation to the state to prevent human trafficking. There are a number of statutes and policies that provide legal framework against human trafficking. The Human Trafficking Deterrence and Suppression Act 2012 is one where measures are prescribed to restrain the perpetrators. The act addresses all forms trafficking including the ones for prostitution, forced labor, sexual exploitation, and others (GoB, 2012a; 2012b). Currently, the Ministry of Home Affairs has been in the lead role of coordinating counter-trafficking activities. Other relevant ministries are also actively engaged in counter-trafficking activities and are extending their co-operation to the Ministry of Home Affairs. Ministry of Women and Children Affairs of Bangladesh has adopted an action plan called National Plan of Action to prevent Repression against Woman and Children 2013–2025 where counter trafficking has been given a significant importance (GoB, 2013a; 2013b). Moreover, there are various committees and sub-committees working under the Ministry of Home

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