

A helping hand for floating sex workers

CITY CORRESPONDENT

Tania (not her real name), a 16-year-old girl involved in floating sex trade, finds a respite from her hazardous job when she comes to a drop-in centre at Segunbagicha.

"I enjoy being here as I can take rest, see movies and also draw pictures," said the girl showing the picture of a house she drew at the centre.

Tania has been coming to the drop-in centre for more than a year. Some other girls involved in floating sex trade also come to the centre funded by Save the Children Sweden-Denmark and run by INCIDIN Bangladesh.

The centre established under the "Misplaced Childhood Project" remains open from 8:00am to 5:00pm except Friday.

Girls engaged in floating sex trade are mostly found in the areas of Baitul Mukarram, Stadium, Osmani Udyan, Gulistan, Kakrail, Paltan, Fakirerpool, Motijheel, Arambagh, Kamlapur Railway Station and Ramna Park. "We receive girls mostly from these areas," said Md Aminul Islam Mukul, project coordinator of INCIDIN.

The centre can accommodate only 20 girls due to paucity of space and logistics. However, it creates links with other NGOs to provide more support, if

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necessary.

The girls roam around throughout the night and come to the centre early in the morning. They have shower at the centre and can wash their clothes using a washing machine. They are allowed to take a nap at the centre.

The girls pay Tk 10 to 15 every morning for food. They also watch movies twice a week.

Offering medical services is one of the major assistances to the girls. A doctor is available on Saturdays and Tuesdays.

Along with the direct medical service, the centre also does referral service when needed. It refer girls to Marie Stopes Clinic

and to the hospital of Nari Moitree, another NGO. Treatment for sexually transmitted diseases is the most sought after help for the girls.

Recently the centre has arranged free HIV-AIDS test for these girls in collaboration with Confidential Approach to Aids Prevention (CAAP). However, no positive case of HIV was found among the tested girls.

The centre also provides them with non-formal education. "This is not a formal academic teaching but all we desire to do is to enable them to count, to write their own name and to read few necessary words," said Laila Kamal, in-

charge of the centre.

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Most of these girls have a "husband" -- local muscleman whom they use for protection on the street. These so-called husbands also work as pimp. Their marriages are not registered. They marry at shrines in presence of witnesses.

The pimps do a brisk business with these girls by protecting them on the streets and giving them an identity, said Laila Kamal. "These girls need an identity and the name of husband when they go to visit a doctor."

When asked, the centre authorities said it has no direct rehabilitation programme for these girls. However, they have linkages with different NGOs including Bangladesh National Women Lawyers Association (BNWLA), Dhaka Ahsania Mission (DAM) who performs the task of mainstreaming these girls. Also legal assistance is given through BNWLA and Ain O Salis Kendra (ASK).

Road safety remains elusive

NOVERA DEEPIA

Insufficient signs on city roads and highways to guide drivers on the streets are a cause for the increasing number of accidents, observed speakers at a seminar on "Road Safety: Traffic Signs and Management" at Sarak Bhaban recently.

Other reasons, speakers pointed out were the unsystematic traffic conditions on the roads. Road signs depicting speed limits are hardly visible along the streets.

A research report by the World Health Organisation (WHO) stated that there had been 3,334 deaths in road accidents in Bangladesh last year was presented in the seminar. Among them 48 percent deaths were of pedestrians and 60.5 percent accidents involved heavy vehicles like buses and trucks.

ARM Anwar Hossain, chief engineer, Roads and Highways Department, said: "We have a unit that works in the city and the highways, from where road safety manuals are produced and distributed. Unfortunately the budget for these projects is very low. We have urged the government to increase the allocation as our mission is to stop deaths caused by accidents."

Faruq Aziz, traffic engineering division, Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) said: "We only implement decisions taken by the special committee on road safety. We have no power to make or change decisions."

"We have installed many road signs with speed control and



manually.

One more reason for probable accidents at night is the non-observance of the electronic traffic signals.

A Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) high official, preferring anonymity, said: "The traffic police controls the traffic manually in certain emergencies like power cuts, when VIPs commute, heavy traffic jams and the failure of electronic signals."

At intersections in Badda, Dhanmondi, Tejgaon and Mirpur many traffic signals are not functioning and the traffic police are left with no alternative but to control the large volume of traffic manually.

Another high DCC official said: "We implement the development work given to us by the Dhaka Urban Transport Project (DUTP). Because of the frequent power cuts, problems appear in the signals. When the electricity supply is not sufficient we use UPS or generators. This is an expensive solution."

Dhanmondi resident Sharmeen Sultana said: "Drivers are not properly trained to abide by traffic rules. They are desperate to be the first and the fastest."

"Many drivers who have a tendency to break traffic rules are the very ones who do not possess a valid and genuine driving license. If any action is to be implemented, more than 90 percent of the drivers in the city will have to be punished for breaking traffic rules," said Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) sources.

Non-compliance of road signs cause frequent accidents on high roads.

speed limits in the university area and continue to install and maintain the road signs and other necessary equipment on the other roads. Our problem is in preserving these signs. Street urchins and drug addicts steal these signs and sell them off," he added.

DCC sources said 30 speed detectors imported in 2004 were never installed on the roads. These machines are lying in the DCC store. Their expiry dates are

not very far, the sources said. However, engineers and other high officials of DCC have refused to talk about the speed detectors.

Aranya Islam, a BBA student from Dhaka University, said: "Drivers usually don't speed during rush hours, but at night and on holidays private cars and other vehicles, especially trucks and buses drive at high speeds. I have not seen any speed limit sign on the highway."

Faruq Aziz also blamed the traffic police because they themselves do not follow traffic rules and control the traffic

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12x2