



The compound of training and rehabilitation centre in Barishal.



A group of girls heading towards a school inside the centre.



The young women attending class at the centre.

To be able to dream again

Survivors of torture, abuse get a second chance at training, rehabilitation centre in Barishal

The Department of Social Services started the rehabilitation centre for socially disadvantaged girls and women in the 2002-2003 fiscal year. The main purpose was to help them reintegrate into society by providing them protection, education, vocational training, mental development.

SUSHANTA GHOSH and MOHAMMAD JAMIL KHAN

At first glance it looks like a happy gathering of women and girls spanning ages from 15 to 50 years. We are greeted by this group of 30 and they welcome us with a song and dance routine. Their smiling faces, however, belie the trauma they have gone through and survived. Victims of torture or sexual violence, they now find some solace at the Training and Rehabilitation Centre for Socially Disadvantaged Women in Barishal.

Though they were once strangers, fate has brought them together. They are now a close-knit family; they sing, dance, cook and share their stories of joy and sorrow as they stitch beautiful patterns on Nakshi Kantha at the centre run by the Department of Social Services.

Shabana, (pseudonym) is the team leader of the group. She relates her story:

"I do not know who my parents are. I grew up in an orphanage in Chattogram. From there I stayed in the district's government children's home for 18 years,"



Many of the women and girls are being taught farming to help them reintegrate into society.

PHOTO: TITU DAS

"A person brought me to Dhaka from there as his daughter. But he used to torture me all the time. With the help of a family, I was rescued from there and they brought me to Barishal on September 7, 2019. But the houseowners used to beat me there with an iron rod."

Locals of the area, when they found out she was being tortured, informed the police who then sent her to the victim support centre. From there, Shabana was transferred to the rehab centre.

"I just want to learn how to make handicrafts and be able to earn my own living and be accepted in society," says Shabana, her eyes,

brimming with tears.

According to the Social Services officials, Shabana is quite talented; she can draw, dance, cook, and sew very well. Whenever any guests come on visits, Shabana leads the welcome dance. She has already earned around Tk 8,000 by sewing colourful Kantha.

Md Jasimuddin, a staff member of the centre, explains that they have been selling the Kanthas prepared by the girls and the earnings are deposited in the girls' accounts. The girls have earned over Tk 50,000 in the last year by selling various handicrafts.

Twenty-one-year-old Ferdous Ara,

(not her real name), grew up with her maternal uncle and aunt in the Sirajganj district. She never felt loved by her aunt who would physically torture her and give her only one meal a day. So, one day she decided to run away, marrying a bus driver in Dhaka.

Sadly, within a year, her husband died, and she left Dhaka for Barishal in search of work.

With no work and no money, Ferdous started foraging for food from dustbins. Noticing this, police sent her to the Centre.

That was three years ago. Ferdous is a much stronger person now; she wants to get married and start a new life.

Purnima, 18, (not her real name), was sold by her husband so that he could raise some gambling money. She too was rescued by police and sent to the Centre.

One of the Social Services officers says that the Centre has successfully rehabilitated around 271 girls and women in the last 20 years, out of whom 18 are now married and leading happy lives. The Centre provides the girls with training in handicrafts, beauty salon services, dance, singing, home management, cooking, as well as basic education.

But considering the trauma all these women and girls have endured, the Centre does not have any counselor.

According to the database, the Department of Social Services started the rehabilitation centre for socially disadvantaged girls and women in the 2002-2003 fiscal year. The main purpose was to help them reintegrate into society by providing them protection, education, vocational training, mental development.

Girls below 18 years old, who have been forced into sex work or have been victims of physical or sexual abuse are rescued and taken to the Centre.

Currently, there are four rehab centres in Faridpur, Kushtia, Barishal, and Sylhet— with a capacity for 100 individuals. Till November of 2023, the Centre has taken in 1,038 girls.

"Many of these girls (and women) are very smart and talented" says Sazzad Parvej, manager of the rehabilitation centre in Barishal. "We are trying to provide quality training so that these girls have opportunities to be employed in good professions," he adds.

The Centre has limitations, especially resources, but it has given these women and girls a sense of belonging and the ability to dream of establishing themselves in society, no matter what the odds are.



Though they were once strangers, fate has brought them together. These young women are now a close-knit family; they sing, draw, cook and share their stories of joy and sorrow at the centre run by the Department of Social Services.

Safe but not free

MOHAMMAD JAMIL KHAN and SUSHANTA GHOSH

For the last five years 19-year-old Sumona (pseudonym) has been living at the Training and Rehabilitation Centre for Socially Disadvantaged Women in Barishal. Although she is at the Centre because she was a victim of abuse, because of an outdated rule, she does not have the freedom to leave at her own will. She must either get married or employed, or be handed over to her family to be permitted to leave.

All she remembers is that she comes from Malonti village in Jashore.

Seven years ago, Sumona was working as a house help in Dhaka. But she ran away as the employer used to beat her over trivial reasons. She took a launch from Sadarghat and then reached Barishal where she found another job as a domestic worker. But again, she was physically abused.

Eventually, a woman took her to the victim support centre of Kotwali Police Station. Since then, the Centre, operated by the Department of Social Services, has been her residence.

"I want to go home. But I hardly recall any details about my guardians, and I am not married. Consequently, I am not permitted to leave," says Sumona.

Twenty-year-old Maloti

(pseudonym) who arrived at the Centre five years ago has a similar story. Coming from Muladi in Barishal, she also faced physical abuse while working as a domestic help and eventually ended up at the Centre. Despite police efforts to locate her guardians, they could not be found.

Expressing her desire for freedom, Maloti says, "Who wants to stay in captivity? There is no problem here, but I want to see the outside world and go home, but I have no option."

Rabeya Akter, the trainer at the rehabilitation centre, says that these young women cannot be released without proper rehabilitation or the presence of a legal guardian.

"The girls are trained in various trades like sewing, block design, and beauty parlour services. We are working towards arranging



The Training and Rehabilitation Centre for Socially Disadvantaged Women in Barishal.



Because of an outdated rule, the young women at the centre do not have the freedom to leave at their own will.

jobs for these girls as part of their rehabilitation, and once that is achieved, they can be released," she tells The Daily Star.

According to officials, these centres are run by the rules of the Department of Social Services,

which states that the victims can be released once they are rehabilitated, are married, or under the authority of legal guardians.

Once a girl is rehabilitated, a five-member committee led by the social services officer of the Centre,

and district administration, issue a recommendation for their release, according to officials.

Adv Fayeze Ul Haque Fayeze, the public prosecutor of the Barishal court, told The Daily Star, "All activities of women and children

are regulated by the Prevention of Oppression Against Women and Children Act 2003, and Children Act 2013."

The law states that women and child victims have to be kept in safe custody but they cannot be kept after the age of 18 years, he said, adding that if anyone commits a crime then they should be transferred to jail after that age.

"In this way, there is a deviation in the existing law, as the girls were kept in custody even after 18 years, and they are victims of crimes," he added.

Officials said out of 30 girls in the Centre, half of them are already over 18 years and so are adults.

Shah Sajeda, convener of the Sushasonee Jonno Nagorik (Sujan) in Barishal, suggests that there should be a maximum of a two-year timeframe for the training and rehabilitation so that the girls can reintegrate into society after the end of the training.

"In the absence of a proper law, the girls remain in the Centre for a long time, but there usually remains a timeframe for safe custody," he says.

Sazzad Parvej, manager of the rehabilitation centre, says, "It takes some time to arrange rehabilitation of the girls after the end of the training."

"If the stakeholders of the society, come forward then it will be easier for us," he added.