

# Are Girls Running away from Home to Escape Maltreatment? Evidence from the Girls of a Rehabilitation Centre in Bangladesh

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p><i>Article history:</i> Date of Submission: 14-07-2024 Date of Acceptance: 21-09-2025 Date of Publication: 24-03-2026</p> <hr/> <p><i>Keywords:</i></p> <p>Child maltreatment, child victim, running away from home, child protection, social rehabilitation, social reintegration, and justice system.</p>	<p><i>The increasing number of girls running away from home in Bangladesh is a major concern now and in need of critical attention. Applying the intersectionality theory, this article aimed to explore the research question: what are the factors influencing the decision of adolescent girls to run away from home, and what is the impact of running away from home in Bangladesh. Findings suggest that due to various intersecting individual and structural factors girls ran away from home or workplace as a part of their coping mechanism to escape abuse and neglect. The lack of holistic child protection in the country has left these girls unprotected and exposed to a range of risks, such as sexual exploitation, human trafficking, lack of access to education, and deprivation of the right to freedom. The findings from this study are likely to add new knowledge regarding the issues and may lead to preventative interventions for victims of family abuse and neglect. Importantly, their coping strategies to escape maltreatment are criminalized within the justice system when they are sent to a 'closed' institution for rehabilitation, where they hardly have full access to their rights (e.g., education, freedom, and others). It is argued that the girls are running away from home for different intersecting factors and systems of oppression that interact to shape the experiences of runaway girls within the justice system of Bangladesh. This study strongly recommends the proper execution and implementation of the existing legal and institutional framework for the protection of the girls who eventually 'come in contact with the law' under the justice system as victims.</i></p>

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## Introduction

Children are regarded as the driving force and future leaders of any country, and they need proper care and protection to grow up in a safe and supportive environment. Maltreatment of children is a serious child rights issue. There are various forms of child maltreatment, many of which often go unrecognized and unidentified, limiting opportunities for effective support. Running away from home, a place meant to provide safety and comfort, is a traumatic event with lasting negative effects (Pearson et al., 2017). Child maltreatment is highly prevalent in Bangladesh, with approximately 678,000 victims facing challenges in accessing justice (UNICEF, 2025). Millions of children are subjected to violence, abuse, and exploitation, often by their parents or caregivers. According to UNICEF (2023), nine out of ten children in Bangladesh have experienced maltreatment from caregivers, including their parents. In a patriarchal society like Bangladesh, social norms grant power and authority predominantly to fathers, and girls are more vulnerable to abuse and neglect compared to boys. The government of Bangladesh must take immediate and coordinated action to ensure the care and protection of all children (Rahman, 2023). Therefore, this is an urgent issue that demands attention to safeguard children, especially girls, from all forms of abuse and neglect.

Adolescents often run away from home to escape maltreatment. Running away is both a consequence of abuse and a risk factor for engaging in delinquent behaviour (Chesney-Lind, 2001; Bender, 2010). Studies show that, globally, adolescents run away due to experiences of abuse and neglect, family disorganization, home instability, and poor relationships with parents (Raval, Raval & Raj, 2010). In recent decades, the issue of children running away from home has become a serious human rights concern in Bangladesh, as in many other countries. In this context, it is crucial to explore the factors contributing to this problem to ensure the care and protection of children, particularly girls, who are often more vulnerable.

Scholarships on female adolescent runaways have considered this as a public health and social issue (Lurgain and Eyber, 2019). In Bangladesh, female adolescent runaways are studied from a migration problem perspective. Most studies have been conducted on street children, and some scholars (Conticini & Hulme, 2007; Hai, 2014) have studied adolescent runaways from a street migration perspective. However, there have been few studies conducted on girls who run away from home. The running away of children is studied primarily through two lenses: poverty and family dysfunction, and the cause is actually three heads of a 'Hydra monster': poverty, abuse, and family disorganization, and their interactions (Reza, 2016). In a patriarchal society like Bangladesh, it is important to look at how maltreatment against girls leads them to run away from home and migrate to the street with uncertainty and puts them at further risk. In this context, adolescent girls' runaways seem to be ignored, and this gap will be filled by gaining insight into the experiences of the adolescents who run away from home and eventually come under the justice system. Applying the intersectionality lens, this article aimed to

understand the what are main factors influencing the decision of adolescent girls to run away from home with the specific objectives to know who are those girls, to explore what are impacts of running away in their life, and to explore to what extent their rights are being protected under the justice system and create their unique experiences of oppression and privilege within the system.

### **Girls' Runaways from Home in Bangladesh**

There is no reliable recent data regarding the number of children, particularly girls, who run away from home and live on the street in Bangladesh. According to UNICEF (2023), over 3.4 million children in Bangladesh are living on the streets without parental care, and 18% of them are girls, which is increasing alarmingly. 'Survey on Street Children 2022' was conducted with support from UNICEF Bangladesh and the Department of Social Services, which found that over 60 percent of street children moved to the street to escape maltreatment at home (The Daily Star, April 11, 2023). Children run away from home and migrate to the streets due to high levels of abuse, and they are exposed to even more abuse and violence when they are on the streets (Kaiser & Sinanan, 2020). According to UNICEF (2025), 82.9% percent street children are subjected to different forms of maltreatment, violence and exploitation, and abuse. The majority of Bangladeshi adolescent girls face different forms of violence, maltreatment, and multiple threats to their bodily autonomy and integrity when they are on street (Presler-Marshall and Stavropoulou, 2017). When the girls who run away in Bangladesh are treated as 'street children' or 'street girls,' this is a clear indication that the maltreatment towards them is not recognized, not reported, and not treated. It is difficult to address this issue since it is masked by other issues, such as delinquency, school dysfunction, and running away from home.

Bangladesh is aiming to achieve the SDGs by 2030, reducing gender inequality and gender discrimination. The treatment of girls in the juvenile justice system raises human rights concerns, particularly when they are sent to a close institution for non-criminal offenses (e.g., running away from home) and face gender-based discrimination (Dey, 2023). In his context, this study can contribute to filling the contextual, conceptual, and methodological research gaps.

### **Conceptual Framework: Child Maltreatment, Running away, Victimization, and Intersectionality**

Child maltreatment is a global problem with serious life-long consequences. Maltreatment occurs when a parent or another person legally responsible for the care of a child harms a child or places a child in imminent danger of harm by failing to exercise the minimum degree of care in providing the child with any of the following: food, clothing, shelter, education, or medical care when financially able to do so. The World Health Organization-WHO (2022) defines child maltreatment as:

All types of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect, negligence, and commercial or other exploitation, which result in actual or potential harm to the child's health, survival, development, or dignity.

Children, particularly girls, are subjected to maltreatment in many societies. Running away is one of the most common status offenses committed by girls (Wachira et al., 2015). Exposure to maltreatment led the girls to run away and be exposed to further risk of abuse. After running away from home, adolescents face many challenges. Risk of re-victimization appears higher for children with prior victimization records when they run away from home and move to the streets (Whitbeck, Hoyt & Ackley, 1997). Street children are globally recognized as being particularly at risk of maltreatment and violence (Pinheiro, 2006). For example, Wachira et al. (2015) found that girls are victims of various types of violence, particularly sexual abuse. It is not uncommon that their sufferings become doubled when they run away from home to escape abuse and do not receive any protection or services immediately after running away.

Indeed, despite decades of efforts aimed at eliminating abuse and violence against adolescent girls remains the norm in the context of Bangladesh. Children, particularly girls, face more violence than boys before migration to the streets as well as while being on the streets (Conticini & Hulme, 2007; Dey, 2015). In this context, girls are sent to a closed institution or detained under the justice system for being a victim of an offense or non-criminal offenses (Dey, 2023). It is not uncommon for girls to 'come in contact with the law' for being in the street or for being a victim of an offense when they are in the street.

Intersectionality is a theoretical framework developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 as a way to help explain the oppression of African-American women. It emphasizes that various social categories like gender, race, class, and disability intersect to shape a person's experience of maltreatment. Running away from home is a crucial decision is a crucial decision for girls in a patriarchal society. There are various intersecting factors: child maltreatment, gender discrimination, gendered expectations, social pressures, and the search for autonomy, which intersect and interplay behind their running away from home.

Intersectionality is a lens to highlight how different factors intersect to create either risk or protection of children (Notté, Özcan, & Nyamu, 2025). Nadan, Spilsbury, & Korbin (2015) suggest applying the intersectionality framework to address the issue of child maltreatment and to understand intersecting factors like gender, race, and class. This study has applied intersectional lens to analysis how their lived experience of girls is intersecting for various inspecting factors such as race, class, gender, and others, and these combine to create unique experiences of oppression for them and eventually when they are sent to a rehabilitation centre under the justice system these overlapping systems of discriminations or disadvantages also create unique experiences of oppression and privileges.

## Methodology

This study has applied a qualitative approach to explore the factors behind girls' running away from home and the impact of it on their lives. In order to investigate a comprehensive and well-defined knowledge base about girls running away from home in-depth interview method has been applied, and one-to-one interviews have been conducted to collect data from the participants. A case study design has been applied, where a rehabilitation centre has been selected. The Centre is a non-government centre that provides services with a mission to protect girls from exploitation, abuse, and human trafficking with an ultimate aim to rehabilitate them in the mainstream of society. The Centre is located in the Dhaka Metropolitan Area, which has been working for a long time with the adolescent girls who 'come in contact with the law' after running away from home. It provides basic primary education, vocational training in sewing and embroidery, and counselling. The study was conducted among adolescent girls who had run away from home and who had been sent to this rehabilitation centre under the justice system for protection, rehabilitation, and reintegration.

This study was conducted in January 2020, and at that time, the total population size was twenty-two. This study has considered all current inmates of this Centre as the population as they are the primary target participants of it. This study has considered the whole population and approached all of them to participate. All of them were approached by the researcher directly by explaining the purpose of the research and informing them that participation was not compulsory and there were no repercussions for non-participation. The participants had been recruited based on their willingness to participate and availability, followed by informed consent of their legal guardian, the Head of the Centre.

The interviews were conducted in the interview room of the Centre so that the participants feel comfortable participating, and the confidentiality of their given data can be maintained. The duration of the interview was approximately 30 to 45 minutes. All of them were approached to give their assent, followed by the consent of the Head of the Centre, as they were under his guidance. Initially, 11 inmates gave their assent to participate. During the interview session, one of them had withdrawn, and then 10 inmates were finally interviewed. In this study, a semi-structured interview schedule has been applied to collect data from the participants.

Analysis is a crucial part of the research. Thematic analysis is a widely used method in qualitative research that involves identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns or themes within qualitative data. Data analysis was conducted utilizing thematic analysis. To better understand this emerging theme, data has been coded and categorised. As a part of this analysis process, data has been coded, categorised, and finally generated themes. In this process, the six steps outlined by Creswell (2018) were followed: organizing and preparing the data, reading through all the data, coding the data, generating themes or categories, describing and interpreting

the themes, and presenting the findings using direct quotations. For example, under the broader themes of impacts and consequences of running away, the data has been coded as social and psychological impacts, and similarly, under the theme of social rehabilitation and social integration services, data has been coded as providing rehabilitation services and social reintegration programs, and so on. To analyse the data, it was first coded and then organized into broader themes to identify primary themes and sub-themes that reflect the experiences of girls who run away from home to escape maltreatment and are eventually sent to a close centre under the justice system for care and protection purposes. Finally, the collected narratives of the participants have been analysed thematically, applying intersectionality theory developed by black feminist scholar Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989.

### **Ethical Issues**

In this study, the ethical guidelines given by Miles, Huberman & Saldana (1994) were followed. A guarantee of confidentiality and anonymity was given to the authorities of the Rehabilitation and all the participants. It is an ethical responsibility for the researchers to protect the participants from potential risk(s). The name of the Centre has not been used in this research because the authority has not allowed the researchers to disclose the Centre's name to protect the girls from potential risks, and also because the researchers' identities might be revealed. In addition, this is the ethical obligation of the researcher to maintain confidentiality.

Participants are deemed to be susceptible to harm within the research process by virtue of psychological, legal, socio-economic, or age-related status. In order to obtain informed consent from the Head of the Centre, a letter was sent. After getting the permission, all inmates of the Centres were approached to participate. Those who had given their assent, followed by the consent of the Head of the Centre, were recruited as participants of this study. Before the interviews, verbal consent was taken from all participants, informing them of the aims and objectives of the study.

Interviews were conducted openly and respectfully, with participants free to terminate their involvement at any time. In order to ensure confidentiality, the interview was conducted in a one-to-one style where only the researchers and the participant were there. They were informed that if any of them feels discomfort and wants to withdraw, they can do so at any time. In order to ensure confidentiality of the participants and to protect them from potential harm, risk, and possibility of social stigmatization, they have been de-identified, and pseudonyms have been used in this study. Moreover, while interviewing, the researcher was reflexive enough to minimize the hierarchical power relation.

## Findings

### *Backgrounds of the girls*

Data from this study shows that the girls in the Centre belonged to the age group 11 to 18 years, had come from a range of family backgrounds, although the vast majority are from 'lower middle-class' families, mainly from rural areas, most of whom grew up in the countryside but moved to cities to work in domestic settings. They were living with either their family or with their employers before being sent to the Centre under the justice system. Fifteen-year-old Akhlima had done domestic work in different houses from when she was six years old, never attending school before coming to this Centre. She stated:

My father sent me to an unknown family without letting me know that he had sent me there as a domestic worker. My family never informed me that whom I called 'amma' (mother) was my stepmother.

Sixteen-year-old Bilkis and her mother had been living with her maternal grandparents after the death of her father. She reported that her mother got married again, and then she started living with one of her father's friends, an uncle, and later she returned to her parental grandparents' house when her uncle went overseas. She recounted:

I was attending school and learning dance at a dance school. I could not continue my training in dance when I returned to my grandparents, who were planning to arrange my marriage. My family is financially solvent enough, and my father has left much landed property. I would be the owner of this as his only daughter.

Regarding their parents' living status, three out of 10 reported that both of their parents had died, three had one parent, and four had both. Three of them reported that they had stepmothers immediately after the death of their mothers. In one such case, Rumana, who was living with her father and stepmother with three siblings, was sent to a domestic setting worker when her stepmother went overseas for a job. Rumana reported:

My mother died when I was very young. My father, addicted to drugs, never maintained our family expenditure. Most of the time, he stayed at the railway station. My stepmother decided to get separated from my father. Before going overseas, she sent me and my younger sister to Dhaka city as domestic workers, and the younger two to the countryside under the care of my grandparents.

Tasrun reported that both of her parents were alive, but she was living with her mother before coming to this Centre as her father divorced her mother and then her mother went overseas for a job. She added:

‘My mother wanted me to be admitted to school, but my father, who was not supportive enough, did not like it. Moreover, he was abusive towards my mother and me. Later, I was sent to this Centre as a victim.

Eighteen-year-old Khadiza had been cared for by my late stepmother when her own mother became mentally ill. According to her:

My father got married for the fourth time. After the death of his first wife, he married my mother, who became a mental patient and got lost. My stepmother, whom I loved so much, died, and my father got married again.

Only one inmate, a seventeen-year-old Hindu girl, Anamika, reported that she had lost both of her parents in an electric accident when she was only seven years old, and then she and her two siblings were under the care of her uncle and stepmother, who arranged her marriage with a much older Muslim man without her consent at her underage. According to her:

My father had been married twice. My husband was a bad man who was involved in human trafficking. He wanted to traffic me. He informed me that my family had sold me to him.

Many parents and stepparents(s) of the girls were involved in income-earning activities, such as farming, small business, work in a domestic setting, garment factory, or working overseas. Eighteen-year-old Sumaiya’s parents were workers who sent her as a domestic worker to Dhaka city when she was six years old instead of admitting her to school. According to her, ‘My father is a shopkeeper, and my mother works at a garment factory. They get money every month from my employer.’

It is evident from the above findings that girls were from different family, social, and economic backgrounds, whereas many of them did not get the opportunity to attend school as their parents or guardians sent them for domestic work to earn money as part of their families’ survival strategy. Moreover, many of them were under the care of stepparents or relatives after the death of their parent(s) led them away from educational institutions, and they did not feel interested in school. Most importantly, they were from a marginalized family background where many girls were deprived of their right to education, on one hand, and on the other hand, they are expected to provide financial support to their parents/families at such a young age.

### ***Factors behind Running away***

Data indicate that reasons given by the girls for running away from home and domestic setting are a variety of factors, including physical, mental, and sexual abuse, for protection from human trafficking, and escaping underage marriage. Moreover, the narratives of the participants show that they decided to do so,

influenced by emotions when they were subjected to maltreatment at the hands of their parents, family members, and/or employers, but all have run away secretly and alone. Out of ten participants, four ran away from their parents' home, five from their employers' home, and only one, who at first ran away from her own home and later from her employers' home. Moreover, they received 'rough behaviour,' negative labelling for silly mistakes, being forced into early marriage, excessive pressure for studies, over-control, and sexual abuse were the nature of violence faced by girls in their family life.

Bilkis ran away from home as her parental grandparents arranged her marriage when she was only fourteen years old. She reported that after the death of her father, her mother got married again, and then she was living with her father's friend for a few months before coming under the custody of her grandparents. She added:

None of my family members loved me. They continued perverse behaviour towards me. I felt upset.... I wanted to be a dancer, but all of my dreams were dashed to the ground when my father's friend left the country, and I returned to my grandparents, who stopped sending me to dance school. I didn't have any way but running away from home during the 'turmeric' program just one day before my marriage ceremony. I caught a bus and came to Dhaka city. I went to a police station and from there I was sent to this Centre as I was not interested in returning to my family.

Anamika informed that she had been 'feeling insecure' with her husband, who always forced her to have sex with him, abused her physically, and did not allow her to see her family members, adding further that she eloped from home to protect herself from her husband's exploitation. Anamika reported:

I wanted to report to the police about my husband's illegal activities. They beat me up. I think that he had a plan to traffic me. I went to Dhaka city to escape further abuse and torture. And then, I reported everything to the police. I stayed one night at the police station, and the following day I was sent to this Centre as a victim, as I didn't know the detailed address of my family.

Eighteen-year-old Taslima, involved in domestic work in different houses from when she was six years old, reported that one day she lost her first employer's address and came in contact with a man who recruited her as a domestic worker in her house. She added that she had run away from that employer's home as her employer abused (physically and sexually) and attempted to 'kill' her. She stated:

My employer who had been dealing with illegal drugs. One of his business partners was killed, and the police came to investigate the case. I was at the spot just before the murder, and I saw that my employer was fighting

with the man who was killed. My employer started feeling tension when the police came to his house for an investigation into the case. He started suspecting and torturing me to confirm that I would not share anything about this case with anybody else.

She further added:

... finally, he added sleeping pills to my milk. When I regained my senses, I found myself in the toilet, wrapped in a bed sheet. Fortunately, I was able to escape from there with the assistance of one of the relatives of that man.

Just another case: Khadiza reported that she felt upset as her father loved her elder brother and ‘neglected’ her for her poor academic results and did not provide her with support for doing better at school. She added that she decided to leave home as her uncle tried to abuse her sexually, and she was not getting proper love and affection from her family. She stated:

After running away from home. I was working as a domestic worker in Dhaka city. I fled from there as my employer had planned to traffic me across the borders.

The majority of the girls had run away from their family and domestic setting to escape physical, mental, and sexual abuse towards them by their parents (s), family members, and, of course, by their employers. The causes of their running away from home and workplace include lack of love and affection, forced underage marriage, negligence, feeling insecure to be trafficked or getting killed by their husbands or by their employers, marital dispute and separation of parents, and workplace abuse. It is clearly evident that the continuation of long-term maltreatment towards them had directed them to run away from home or domestic setting to escape maltreatment, to end further abuse towards them, to search for autonomy, to enjoy freedom, and to ‘feel secure’ from the over-controlled life that they had in their family and workplace, where they did not find themselves secure.

### ***Impacts and Consequences of Running Away***

Data shows that the girls had come in contact with strangers, been subjected to abuse, and were being trafficked immediately after running away from home or their employers’ house. They all eventually came ‘in contact with the law’ and under the custody of law enforcement agencies before being sent to the Centre. Out of 10, nine girls had experience of staying either in a police station, jail, detention centre, or Victim Support Centre (VSC) before coming to the Centre. The respondents had been staying at the Centre for different durations, and the range was one to seven years since they were sent there by the court to ensure their care and protection.

Eighteen-year-old Khaidiza had run away from home five times: first four times

from her parents' house and lastly from her employer's house, where she was working as a domestic worker, but her employer was basically a broker of a human trafficking gang. She reported that each time her family took her back home, but last time, she came in contact with a stranger who recruited her as a worker in a domestic setting, and finally, she escaped from there, realising that she would be trafficked. She stated:

My father would always compare my academic achievements with my brother's. I was not getting proper care and support from my family members just after the death of my stepmother, who loved me so much, which made me sad, and I ran away from home. Last time, I thought I would start in Dhaka city, and would manage a job, but I came in contact with a human trafficker on my way.

This shows the negative consequences and risks they face because of running away from home. She was subjected to revictimization for coming in close contact with a stranger. It clearly indicates that she was at risk of being in the street. She added:

My employer had prepared all necessary arrangements, such as my passport, identity card, and other necessary documents for selling me in exchange for money. Finally, I discovered the real fact when the security guard of that apartment made me aware of the conspiracy, and I succeeded in running away from there. While running away from there, I met a man who showed me the police station. I reported all the facts to the police, and I was sent to this centre from the court as a victim.

This clearly indicates the vulnerability of her when she comes in close contact with a stranger. However, eighteen-year-old Sumaiya was taken into the police custody when she was 11, as a suspect, when her employer's daughter threatened to help and forced her to run away with her (employer's daughter) immediately after the murder incident. After a long investigation, the court sent her to the Victim Support Centre as the court could not find any kind of involvement with the murder incident. She recounted that she had spent a long time at different institutions, which included Child Development Centre (CDC), Victim Support Centre, NGO-based rehabilitation centre, and finally, she had been sent to this Centre to get some skill training. Sumaiya reported:

She (the daughter of her employer) threatened me that she would either kill me or accuse me of the murder. I washed all the blood stains and did everything according to her instructions after the murder to save my life. I became traumatized when police physically abused me and forced me to confess the truth in the remand, as she blamed me to prove herself innocent.

This is clear from the above that running away from the workplace immediately after an offence had created a traumatic experience in the girl as a victim as well as

a ‘suspected offender’ until the blurred boundary of the victim-offender nexus had been marked under the justice system.

The respondents had been staying there for varying durations, ranging from one to seven years. All the girls of this Centre have to participate in educational and vocational training classes along with the daily household activities, such as preparing meals, cleaning. The majority of the girls who were interviewed reported ‘feeling happy’ compared to their previous life, as they are not being ‘tortured’ or ‘abused’ by *Anyane*, getting access to their basic human needs (e.g., food, clothes, education, and recreation) and receiving skill training programs offered by the Centre. In contrast, some of them stated that they felt imprisoned as they couldn’t move freely and go outside of the Centre. One such participant, Ruma, reported that she felt ‘bad’ when other inmates behaved roughly with her and used slang towards her. Similarly, Bilkis informed that she cried when she missed her family and recalls her previous life, although she had no interest in returning to her family. According to her, ‘Sometimes I feel like a jailbird here, especially during different festivals. I feel I am detained here.’ This is a clear indication that she hardly has any freedom because of being sent to the centre for protection purposes.

The inmates reported that in their current life, they had been experiencing fighting, bullying, and jealousy. Moreover, using slang, stealing, and destroying stuff were reported by the participants as some common problems they had been experiencing. Sabrina stated:

I didn’t like to work as a domestic worker as they behaved rudely and used to beat me. I feel happy to be here. I am getting education and training here. Everyone is nice here, although sometimes, inmates do quarrel with one another for silly matters, such as stealing or destroying cosmetics. Sometimes, I feel I am in a jail or a cage like a bird.

Girls are feeling better than in their previous life as they are no longer subjected to maltreatment, although they are experiencing bullying, such as applying slang, fighting, and jealousy. Bullying is reported as more tolerable to them than their previous maltreatment that they had experienced at the hands of their parents, guardians, and/or employers before coming to this Centre. However, it is also evident that since they have been sent to the Centre under the justice system and hardly have any freedom to be released from there without having a court order, they feel that they are in ‘jail’ like an ‘offender’ or in a ‘cage’ like a ‘bird.’

It is clear from the above that girls had come in contact with the law immediately after running away from their families and workplace. They were referred to this Centre as victims either by the police station, court, or Victim Support Centre, or from a legal aid NGO to get skill training and rehabilitation services to protect them. It is evident that running away from home and coming in contact with a stranger adds risk to their life. Since the law enforcement agencies intervened

and sent them to the Centre, it is evident that, to an extent, they were protected. However, it is clearly evident that the girls are still subjected to abuse at the hands of their peers in the Centre, and have limited opportunity for general education, as those who are in the community. In addition, they feel that they are in a 'cage' like a bird and have no freedom at all, which indicates the pain they experience due to their stay at the Centre.

### ***Available Social Rehabilitation and Social Integration Services***

The Centre had been offering them training and educational programs to develop their skills and reintegrate them to the mainstream of society. Data indicates that all the participants had been getting training on embroidery, block designing, sewing, tailoring, cutting, and fashion designing to develop their skills so that they can use this skill to earn money or be involved in income-generating activities when they return the society. Moreover, they were getting the opportunity to learn music or singing as an extracurricular activity. All of them reported that they felt secure, developed a new attitude towards their life, wanted to be self-sufficient and in this regard, the existing programs of the Centre, such as training programs, educational opportunities, counselling, recreational facilities, and above all, its good environment, were helping them to hope for their new future. Even a year-old Raisa reported:

I like to live here (the Centre) as it provides rehabilitation services for girls like me. I would not return to my stepmother. She would not accept me. I wish to lead my own life.

This is a clear indication that the girls have the fear of being stigmatised because of running away from home and coming into close contact with the justice system. This also indicates that the girls want to be independent and to take control of their own lives; however, they have the fear of being socially stigmatized and social denial for breaking the traditional gender norms. Another respondent reported:

I can play different kinds of sports here, such as table tennis, carrom, etc. I can enjoy my weekends also. I hope to be a beautician, and this organization will help me get further training in it.

This indicates that the centre is offering skill training programs that help the girls to think about their future career plans. Obviously, they have their future career aspiration as the provided training helps them be hopeful about their future.

When they were asked what they would do after their release from there, they responded that they would avail themselves of the rehabilitation services of it to reach their goals. It has been revealed that it has developed self-confidence among them through providing training and education, developing their skills, and changing their attitudes towards life, which has encouraged them to face their future challenges of life. One of the respondents recounted:

I have regular communication with my mother, who wants me to return to my family, but I want to complete all training programs to develop my skills to become self-sufficient. I hope this year the centre will offer a rehabilitation program and then I would live with her (mother)....!

This indicates that the offered skill training services have helped the girls to be confident to become self-reliant and self-independent to take control of their own lives. Similarly, other girls reported that they have a thorough future aspiration after being sent there and they expressed that they want to be a designer, doctor, service holder, garment worker, beautician, singer, and actress in the future. They expect to return to society when they turn 18 and reintegrate, as they have developed the confidence to earn their own livelihood. This confidence stems from the Centre's commitment to reintegrating and rehabilitating them into the mainstream of society. Several intersecting factors contribute to this process: skill training, reintegration support services, and efforts to build self-confidence and self-esteem among the girls, empowering them to take control of their own lives in a patriarchal society.

### **Discussion**

The goal of this study was to explore the backgrounds of adolescent girls who run away, the main factors influencing their decision to run away from home, to explore impact of running away on their lives, and to explore how girls are being protected under the justice system. According to the experiences of ten girls obtained through in-depth interviews, it was revealed that they were subjected to various forms of maltreatment, such as physical, psychological, and/or sexual abuse, as well as neglect, and were deprived of their rights, including access to education and freedom. These conditions led many of them to run away from home. This finding is supported by Bolger and Patterson (2001) and Dwyer and Miller (1990). Many of the girls had not received a primary education and, in many cases, were sent to work in domestic settings to earn money. Factors such as divorce, separation, the death of one or both parents, and the presence of a stepparent were identified as directly or indirectly contributing to the maltreatment they experienced at home or in the workplace. Conticini and Hulme (2007), in their study on Bangladesh, noted that children who run away from their families come from all economic backgrounds, though the majority are from poor households – a finding that aligns with the results of this study.

Findings revealed that many of the girls who ran away did so either from their families or from workplaces where they experienced maltreatment such as physical, mental, and sexual abuse and neglect by parents, family members, and/or employers. The decision to run away was influenced by various intersecting factors, including age, gender, family structure, abuse and neglect, frustration, and social class, are significantly contributed to running away from home.

In most cases, the girls sought to escape abusive environments and protect

themselves from further harm, as well as from broader social oppression and discrimination. Hammer, Finkelhor, and Sedlak (2002) argue that adolescents often run away from home to avoid further physical or sexual abuse. Similarly, Kurtz, Kurtz, and Jarvis (1991) describe running away as a strategy to escape sexual abuse and exploitation. Previous studies also indicate that factors such as domestic violence, family conflict, insecurity, neglect, and parental drug addiction contribute to the phenomenon of children running away from home (Sharlin & Mor-Barak, 1992). According to Reza (2016), in the context of Bangladesh, poverty, abuse, and family disorganization, along with the interaction among these factors, are the primary reasons children flee their homes, where they are often subjected to victimization. It is argued for greater attention to the role of culture and context to explore child maltreatment (Mersky et al. 2021), which is one of the main intersecting factors for their running away from home.

Chesney-Lind and Shelden (2013) argue that girls often run away from abusive environments as a coping mechanism – a means of surviving and escaping maltreatment. This aligns with the reasons reported by the Bangladeshi girls in this study. Similarly, Conticini and Hulme (2007) stated that street children in Bangladesh often leave their families due to experiences of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, violence, and excessive control. The findings of this study are consistent with those of Chesney-Lind (2001) and Conticini and Hulme (2007). It is clearly evident that various intersecting factors: gender, abuse, neglect, and others contribute to the decision of Bangladeshi girls to run away from either their families or workplaces. It can be argued that, in Bangladesh, running away is a form of resistance – a coping strategy used by girls to challenge interlocking systems of power that create and reinforce their oppression. These systems-rooted in factors such as sexism, classism, and social marginalization, intersect and reinforce one another, producing power dynamics that further marginalize these girls.

Much of the research on female status offenders highlights a strong link between running away from home and subsequent involvement in delinquent activities (Chesney-Lind, 2001). Bates and Swan (2020) also state that there is a connection between child abuse and delinquent behaviour. The findings of this study reveal that while many girls ran away from home to escape maltreatment, doing so also exposed them to new risks. Some of the girls came into contact with strangers, which increased their vulnerability to involvement in delinquent or unlawful activities. The study further reveals that these girls faced potential dangers such as further abuse, exploitation, threats to their lives, and the risk of being trafficked. However, none of them became involved in delinquent activities, as they were intercepted by law enforcement agencies, who intervened to ‘protect’ them and placed them in a rehabilitation Centre.

Running away from home being as a crime victim add suffering to girls when they ‘came in contact with the law’ and suspected of an offense and blamed – in this way

their coping strategies to escape maltreatment: abuse and neglect, are criminalized and they are re-victimized within the justice system through institutionalization and consequently punished for their attempts at survival when they are sent to a rehabilitation Centre which is 'closed' where they hardly have their right to freedom, education and others. Humphrey (2004) has argued that a lack of social welfare systems to respond to runaways has opened the door to allowing the child victims to be re-victimized through institutionalization, and in many cases, girls are punished for their attempts to survive. Wachira et al. (2015) argued that sexuality and gendered behaviours of girls are regulated by the court under the paternalistic justice system due to gender biases, and these biases become particularly harmful when they are used in dealing with runaway girls. It can be argued that detaching children from the social context sometimes can protect children from harmful traditional and societal practices; however, the way in which the girls are sent to the 'closed' rehabilitation centre reflects the judicial paternalism and gendered attributions of the justice system. It also indicates that the double standard of the justice system of Bangladesh, where the court feels a sense of responsibility to 'protect' girls and hardly any attention is paid to the maltreatment experiences by the girls in their families. This indicates the judicial paternalism, where justice systems governed by patriarchal norms treat girls differently, often more harshly or with moralistic protectionism. However, it has been revealed that the negative experiences perceived by them in their present life are 'tolerable' compared to those of maltreatments they had experienced from their previous life, although they treat the Centre as a 'jail' where they feel 'caged like a bird,' socially stigmatized and labelled as 'bad girl' or 'offender.'

### **Recommendations and Conclusions**

Bangladesh ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) in 1990. The government is committed to ending all sorts of maltreatment against children and to ensuring care and protection from all kinds of social oppression and discrimination within the family and society for their best interests. As a part of this commitment, it has introduced considerable legal initiatives to protect children from maltreatment. The Children Act, 2013 (amended in 2018) has clearly stated the provisions and legal mechanisms to protect them from all kinds of maltreatment towards children. The government and non-government organizations are offering services for them to ensure their mainstreaming in society and community. It requires ensuring girls' social protection and safety in all spheres of life, recognizing that they are subjected to oppression and discrimination, which create power dynamics that marginalize these girls and lead them to decide to run away from home. This responsibility primarily goes to their family, and then to society and finally to the State.

Running away from home and/ or workplace, which is supposed to be a safe and comforting haven, is a traumatic event that has numerous adverse effects. By focusing on the intersecting factors, ensuring their well-being and providing

rehabilitation and social reintegration services can play a pivotal role in ensuring the best interests of justice are involved girls who run away from home or workplace, as well as fostering gender equality. Child rights agenda can be used to address both child maltreatment and human rights issues in Bangladesh (White, 2002). Reza (2016) has suggested introducing alternative to family reintegration in cases of who run away from home to escape maltreatment. He also suggested for inclusion of punishment for those responsible for their abusive parenting. In order to ensure workplace rights of the children, it is necessary to ensure the implementation of the existing policy and introduce new policy. In this context, the best interests of children are not fully protected under the juvenile justice system (Dey, 2015; Sultana and Dey, 2020). Girls are subjected to maltreatment after running away from home, which is a violation of children's rights that needs serious attention. Conticini & Hulme (2007) have suggested focusing on reducing excessive control over, and abuse of children in their household by implementing the policy of Bangladesh to reduce the prevalence of runaways of children.

Girls are detained without addressing the root causes of their running away and giving them full protection within the justice system, which is challenging. Addressing this issue requires a holistic approach that includes government intervention, a community-based approach, and a collective commitment to protect the rights and well-being of the vulnerable girls who run away from home. From an intersectional perspective, the current study suggests that child maltreatment plays a significant role in girls running away from home. More importantly, the findings highlight key intersectional factors that contribute to girls' vulnerability, leading them to run away from home and eventually 'come into contact' with the justice system, where they are detained in closed institutions for care and protection. To uphold the best interests of girls, the Bangladeshi government must urgently address institutional practices within the juvenile justice system that reinforce gender inequality and discrimination (Dey, 2023). This study highly recommends the proper execution and implementation of the existing legal and institutional framework for the protection of the girls who run away from home as a coping mechanism to escape maltreatment: abuse and neglect, for various intersecting factors: individual and structural, and eventually come under the justice system.

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