

ASHSHASH: For Men and Women Who Have Escaped Trafficking

NEWSLETTER

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Responds to Cyclone Amphan and COVID-19

Cyclone Amphan caused large-scale destruction as it devastated southwestern Bangladesh in May of this year. The deadly storm ripped apart thousands of homes, tore down trees, and washed away bridges. Satkhira, Jashore, and Khulna were the most affected areas of the five districts where the Ashshash project works. Prioritizing the emergency, Ashshash conducted a rapid needs assessment to evaluate the situation of survivors and responded to the crisis effectively.

According to the assessment, 79% of enrolled survivors were severely affected by the cyclone in the Khulna division. The combined impact of COVID-19 and Cyclone Amphan has made survivors extremely vulnerable. Some survivors were forced to live in waterlogged conditions with limited access to fresh water, food or income. The Ashshash project, funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and implemented by Winrock

International, immediately enrolled survivors to receive cash assistance. Survivors created a *bKash* account with the support of Ashshash's sub-partners. To date, 538 survivors affected by COVID-19, and 483 survivors affected by Cyclone Amphan, have received this emergency fund support. This effort is expected to minimize survivor anxiety, help reduce additional pressures and mitigate the financial impact of the crisis on survivors and their families.

Appreciating this financial assistance, a female survivor from Satkhira district shared, "I feel genuinely grateful that Ashshash has supported me financially in this crucial period. With this amount of money, I am managing the medical treatment of my parents, as well as bearing the expense of the daily essentials. Being unemployed, I was feeling extremely stressed. This support truly relieved my stress and is giving hope to survive."

Editorial: Our Priority is Meeting Emerging Needs of Survivors During the COVID-19 Crisis

While the world strives to end modern slavery and human trafficking, the COVID-19 pandemic has created new challenges and risks that may further thwart global efforts to end trafficking. Many experts have expressed their deepening concerns about the fallout of COVID-19, from shutdowns and business closures, to shut borders. The economic impact may drive more at-risk individuals into forced labor and, thereby, escalate human trafficking.

During this crisis, Ashshash is devoted to supporting its enrolled survivors. To address their emerging needs during this crucial period, Ashshash is providing support in a myriad of ways, such as cash assistance, insurance aid, psychosocial support via

tele-counseling and community and family counseling. In addition, Ashshash is emphasizing capacity the building of partners and relevant stakeholders utilizing virtual platforms. As part of observing the World Day Against Trafficking in Persons 2020, Ashshash undertook awareness-raising activities within communities, using alternative media tools and organized multiple virtual discussion sessions. Ashshash stands alongside survivors during these difficult times and will continue to adapt and innovate to deliver quality services for survivors and their families.

- Dipta Rakshit, Team Leader, Ashshash

Corona Insurance for Ashshash Survivors

Ashshash has offered its beneficiaries enrollment in the *Corona Insurance* program supported by Digital Healthcare Solutions (DHS), a social business of Grameen Telecom, previously known as Telenor Health. Ashshash partners registered more than 450 survivors to benefit from this insurance, that covers COVID-19 related expenses for survivors, free of cost. In case of COVID-19 infection, registered survivors will receive BDT 2,000 to cover COVID-19 positive cases and home isolation, BDT 5,000 upon hospitalization, and BDT 20,000 for life insurance. All registered survivors will receive a series of texts and content related to healthcare and COVID-19, as well as helpful advice on awareness and prevention, including the importance of hand washing and isolation as symptoms develop.

"I live in a family of eight members and we completely depend on a single individual's earnings. If we get infected by the virus, it is impossible for us to bear any expense of the treatment. This insurance coverage is minimizing my worries about the medical expense, if we, unfortunately, get infected by the virus." – A female survivor from Khulna District

Ashshash Beneficiaries Join in COVID-safe Skills Training

With the consent of the local government and in line with health guidelines, Ashshash's Training Service Provider, Mirpur Agricultural Workshop and Training School (MAWTS), commenced its economic empowerment activities for survivors in Kalaroa Upazila, Satkhira. A total of 106 survivors (25 women, and 81 men) fruitfully participated in a two-day needs assessment and enrollment session. 48 survivors expressed their interests in entrepreneurship training and enterprise development, and 58 survivors were eager to take skills training courses, i.e. Motorcycle Service Mechanics, Tailoring and Dress Making, Mobile Phone Servicing and Electrical House Wiring Technician etc. The Ashshash team, along with its

local Social Protection Partners (Agrogoti Sangstha and Centre for Women and Children Studies-CWCS), provided their complete support to MAWTS for successful completion of this activity. The needs assessment sessions helped survivors develop a clearer understanding about future career opportunities at the local and national levels and enabled them to create a plan for their economic development. Ms. Mousumi Jerin Kanta, UNO, Kalaroa Upazila inaugurated the session, while Team Leader Dipta Rakshit and the Ashshash team joined the program through a virtual platform.



Ashshash beneficiaries during a class of Tailoring and Dress Making course



Health guidelines were strictly followed during all the training sessions

Analysis to Adapt to the New Normal Situation: Assessment Reports Developed by Ashshash

Ashshash has developed a set of three reports to assess changes resulting from the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. These reports focused on the impact of COVID-19 on survivors, Ashshash's sub-partners, project activities, the Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) sector in Bangladesh, and the impact on the private sector. These assessments provide valuable findings and recommendations to inform Ashshash in optimally serving beneficiaries and building their social and economic resilience in this new normal situation. Some of the findings include, but are not necessarily limited to, the following:

- Gender inequality has largely increased in the community lately; specially, women have been facing violence at home due to financial crisis.

- 51% of survivors reported having no work, 38% with limited scope to work, and income. These survivors have been struggling to meet their daily needs and passing days in starvation, to some extent.
- The pandemic and lockdown measures have led to the disruption of education and closure of TVET institutions, threatening the continuity of skills development, including apprenticeships and internships programs. Considering survivors' level of education, internet connectivity and access, and digital literacy, Ashshash also faced challenges to start online skills training.

The reports identified risks and developed mitigation plans by highlighting alternative models and approaches to economic empowerment activities while analyzing the feasibility and suitability of supporting survivors to engage in these alternatives.

World Day Against Trafficking in Persons 2020: Raising Awareness among Communities During the Pandemic

On 30 July 2020, Ashshash's partners observed the World Day Against Trafficking in Persons (WDATIP) by emphasizing awareness raising in communities. Ashshash developed audio-visual materials to promote prevention of human trafficking and safe migration. Adhering to government restrictions on individual mobility and outdoor programming, partners live-streamed a folk song in selected areas and aired a puppet show on local cable channels maintaining social distance.

Virtual Discussions on WDATIP 2020 Organized by Ashshash Collective Effort Can Minimize Vulnerability of High-Risk Groups

As part of observing WDATIP 2020, Ashshash, in collaboration with the Daily Prothom Alo, organized a virtual discussion session entitled “Economic Integration and Empowerment of Vulnerable People: Challenges and Opportunities During and Post COVID-19”. The session focused on discussing sustainable economic reintegration of trafficking survivors, especially women survivors, and other vulnerable groups like returnee migrants. Her Excellency, Ms. Nathalie Chuard, the Ambassador-Designate of Switzerland in Bangladesh, as well as prominent figures from private and non-government organizations, joined as panelists for the session. Expert panelists opined that the effective initiatives from all actors can improve the lives of vulnerable

groups and minimize their vulnerability amid the pandemic.

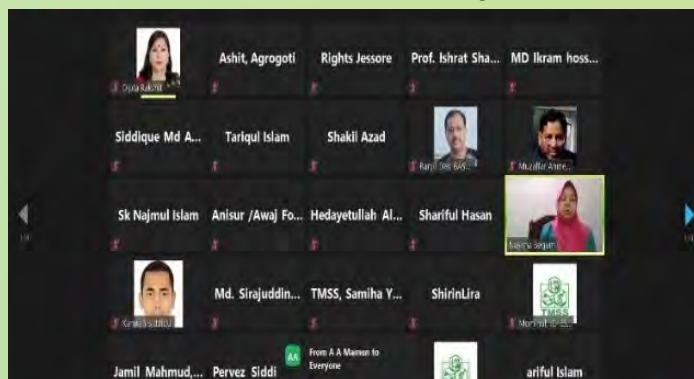


Coordination among the Actors Required to Curb Human Trafficking

On July 29, 2020, the Ashshash Project and BRAC Migration Program conducted a virtual discussion session entitled “Combating Human Trafficking: Scope and Challenges of Promoting Safe Migration and Protecting Trafficking Survivors”. The discussion endorsed the protection of survivors' rights and emphasized collective effort and actions from all bodies— including government, private sector, non-government, civil society organizations, national and international organizations— to curb human trafficking by recognizing the current context and vulnerabilities.

However, panelists opined that creating enough employment opportunities and developing skilled workforce in the country can significantly aid in the

battle against trafficking of labor migrants. Moreover, investment from government as well as private and non-government sector can be an effective initiative to address such issues like trafficking.



Prioritizing Skills Development for Youth: Webinar on World Youth Skills Day 2020

On July 15, 2020, the Ashshash Project, in collaboration with Future of Work Lab, a2i, organized a virtual webinar on “Skills for Resilient Youth: During and Post COVID-19” to observe World Youth Skills Day. Representatives from government agencies, development partners, UN agencies, national and international organizations, and local TVET institutes participated and shared their valuable views. The session emphasized on the importance of soft/life skills as well as psychosocial counseling for the youth during COVID-19 situation. Panelists also shared that online based skills development training can be a possible alternative during and post COVID-19 crisis. Discussions explored possible avenues and alternatives in economic empowerment to prepare and assist young beneficiaries to move towards sustainable economic reintegration, while navigating challenges during and post COVID-19.



Ashshash observed the World Youth Skills Day 2020 through organizing a webinar

CTIP Volunteers Convene to Support Survivors in the Community



One of the Ashshash's CTIP Activists sharing his opinion during the CTIP Activists Capacity Development Training.

Ashshash has formed Counter Trafficking in Persons (CTIP) activist groups in its five focused districts- Satkhira, Khulna, Jashore, Chattogram, and Cox's

Bazar. A total of 151 young individuals (70 women, and 81 men) and including CTC (Counter Trafficking Committee) members, ANIRBAN leaders, youth volunteers, community influencers, personnel from

Community Based Organizations (CBOs), and NGOs are working as a united force to fight human trafficking in their respective communities. They plan to undertake initiatives such as: protection of the survivors in the community, improving the attitude of community towards the survivors, creating linkage with service providers to support the survivors, as well as raise awareness against human trafficking. Partners previously identified these youth volunteers and coached them on their responsibilities as activists, based on the guidelines provided by Ashshash. Aminul Islam, a CTIP activist from Chattogram, thanked Ashshash and said, “It is a great opportunity for me to serve the vulnerable people in my community, especially people who have escaped trafficking. I want to thank Ashshash for creating such an opportunity for youths like me.”

Community Counseling: Changing Behaviors towards Survivors

While this has been a time of significant disruption to social and economical routines for everyone, Ashshash remains committed to supporting its beneficiaries and communities. To provide comprehensive behavioral health and prevention services to the community, Ashshash has been working continuously, counseling the community about appropriate approaches towards survivors, as well as providing them updated information and recommendations outlined by the WHO and the government regarding COVID-19. Ashshash partners have provided community counseling, maintaining social distancing and health guidelines. Moreover, partners are continuing counseling with small groups, consisting of 10-12 community members. In addition, counselors are focusing on changing the perspective

of the community towards survivors and ensuring that they become aware about trafficking, as well as showing respect to survivors. A few survivors shared that Ashshash is bringing behavioral change in the community, which has improved their condition in the society.

Ashshash's community counseling services in Kaliganj, Satkhira district.



'Gendered Poverty Exacerbates the Vulnerability of Women to Trafficking'

Ashshash has a special focus on women and children and believes in ensuring gender-responsive and socially inclusive interventions that benefit both men and women who have escaped trafficking. To that end, Ashshash conducted a gender assessment to understand the context of gendered and social vulnerabilities, the differential impact of human trafficking on men versus women, and their respective reintegration challenges. Significant assessment findings include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Gendered poverty (lack of viable employment opportunities, lack of control over financial resources, limited access to education and information, violence, and early marriage) can exacerbate the vulnerability of women and girls to trafficking;
- Women face more challenges, compared to men, in reaching the minimum education requirements to enter training programs for marketable trades;
- Women face difficulties in working for long periods, due to psychological trauma and family care responsibilities;
- Norms around masculinity challenge men's abilities to seek and accept help related to their trafficking experience; and
- Economic empowerment and livelihood services offered by NGOs and the government often challenge traditional mindsets about women's roles.

Based on the findings from the assessment, Ashshash has developed an action-plan to address these issues in the program.

A Survivor Story of Exploitation in Saudi Arabia

"I was brutally tortured and beaten so badly that I became sick. They were so ruthless that they didn't bother to provide me basic medical treatment or food. When I first arrived there, they locked me up in a room with no toilet. I starved three days in a row at that time."

promises to pay me BDT 20,000/month and unjustly paid me nothing. Instead, they viciously tortured me. I used to get only 2-3 hours a day of rest. My physical condition started to worsen so much that I was unable to work anymore. So, they sent me home."

After returning home, Sharifa was found to have contracted Hepatitis B. She couldn't afford the treatment. And worse, people in the community didn't accept her. She was tolerating the local bullies in silence. However, after enrolling in the Ashshash Project, her situation significantly improved. As she explained:

"I used to feel devastated, but Ashshash's counseling sessions boosted me up a lot. When I talk to the counselor, I can confide my distress and feel less burdened. Being an unemployed single parent, I want to do something for my daughter so that she can have a better future. I believe that the training from the Ashshash Project will change my current situation and bring an end to my sufferings."

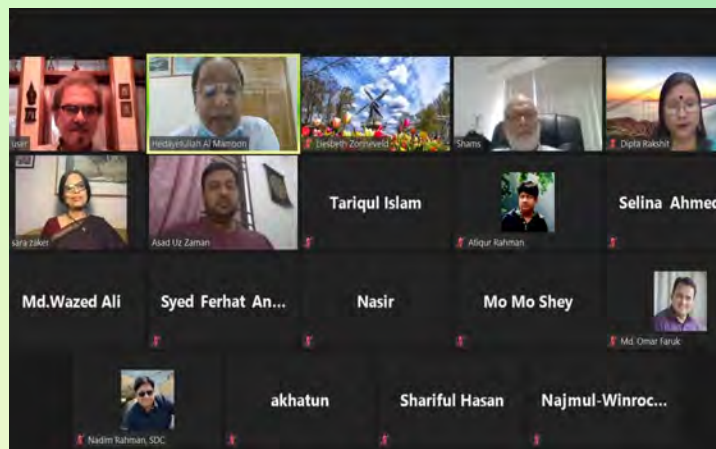
This is the statement of Sharifa Banu (alias), who was taken to Saudi Arabia and promised a job opportunity there. Being a divorced mother of a seven-year old daughter, her life was never easy. In December 2017, a local broker convinced her that he would arrange a job for her in Saudi Arabia. Sharifa borrowed BDT 100,000 from her father and paid the broker. When she arrived in Saudi Arabia, she was forced to hand over her passport and was taken to a house in a pickup van.

Sharifa went on: *"I tried to run away from that house several times but miserably failed. They broke their*

Ashshash Establishes a Project Steering Committee

On August 25, 2020, Ashshash hosted the first meeting of the Project Steering Committee (PSC), virtually. During the meeting, the Ashshash team shared project activities, initiatives taken amid the pandemic, and progress in project implementation to date. Members of the PSC provided their valuable feedback and suggestions to steer the activities, such as: realigning with the new timeframe, considering the pandemic; initiating soft skills training virtually; and exploring the possibilities of training and employment for the survivors in other sectors, such as healthcare giver, and health assistants/attendant, both in the city and local areas. They appreciated Ashshash's quick response and supportive initiatives for survivors during the COVID-19 crisis. The meeting was chaired by Mr. Hedayetullah Al Mamoon, NDC, Senior Secretary (Retired), Government of People's Republic

of Bangladesh and Chairman, Bangladesh NGO Foundation.



Ashshash's Process Shared in Asia CTIP Forum

In an effort to share knowledge and develop the capacity of CTIP practitioners at the field level by tapping into CTIP project experts, USAID's Asia CTIP project, implemented by Winrock International, organized a series of virtual capacity building sessions. The Ashshash team shared Ashshash's process and experiences in private sector engagement, tele-counseling support for survivors, and its survivor economic empowerment process. On May 19, 2020, Nasir Chowdhury, Private Sector Engagement Advisor of Ashshash, led a session on "Bangladesh Ashshash's PSE Experience". The objective of the session was to enhance the capacity of Winrock CTIP staff through learning from real-life PSE experience, especially in the countertrafficking context in Bangladesh and gaining inspiration from effective engagement with the private sector to develop shared value partnerships. Further, SK Najmul Islam, Psychosocial and Legal Services Manager of Ashshash presented a session

on tele-counseling, as part of the technical quarterly exchange call organized by Asia CTIP project on May 21, 2020. Najmul Islam talked about the tele-counseling implementation process and how the project has managed to provide counseling support remotely in its five working districts. Also, MD. Omar Faruk, Training and Employment Manager of Ashshash, ran a virtual session on "Ashshash Economic Empowerment Process" on June 30, 2020. Moreover, Omar Faruk briefed on the skilled workforce development process for human trafficking survivors through job market demandable vocational skills development training, entrepreneurship development training and support for wage and self-employment in local and national job markets, and community levels, ensuring the economic well-being of survivors in the Bangladeshi countertrafficking context.



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