

To read the full article online click [here](#).

# One stitch at a time

[Farzana Nawaz](#)

The story of CUP and Basha bringing dignity, joy, and hope to discarded lives



The work Basha and CUP are doing, is epitomised by how people in Basha create jewellery from raw pellets

Photo- Courtesy

Three years ago Shilpi was living in Dhaka's Mirpur Mazar. At 14, she had just given birth to a child when her husband left her. Apparently, he also stole from local thugs in the area, and they exacted their revenge on Shilpi by beating, torturing, and raping her. After that horrific episode was over, Shilpi had to feed herself and her child by begging and prostitution in the area.

The story of Shilpi's misery however starts much earlier than that. At the age of eight she ran away from home to escape the severe beatings of her stepfather who didn't want the burden of an extra mouth to feed. She was lured to Dhaka by a neighbour with the promise of regular meals. But, like thousands of rootless children in the capital, she ended up at the Mirpur Mazar, one of the biggest hubs of trafficking and prostitution in the country.

Forced into prostitution as a child, Shilpi fell in with a gang of other child prostitutes who took drugs to help them cope. A few years later, she caught the eye of a young man who wanted to marry her, and promised her a new life, away from the streets.

However, those promises soon turned out to be heartbreakingly empty. A few months after leaving her to fend for herself and their newborn child, he came back. He swore that he had changed, and they tried for a fresh start as a family by renting a room in a slum. But her husband disappeared again a few months later with all her savings, and left her in debt to their slum landlord.

After that Shilpi had little option but to go back to a life of prostitution.

A little while later, Shilpi caught a break when she met a young woman at the slum who told her about a local NGO called CUP (Children's Uplift Programme), which helps women like Shilpi get off the streets and earn a better livelihood. Now Shilpi earns close to Tk7,000 per month sewing kanthas (quilts) at Basha, a social business affiliated with CUP. Her toddler plays nearby with a group of similarly aged children in a clean, brightly lit room filled with the noise of children's laughter and the bustle of women cutting, sewing, and transforming old saris into exquisite quilts and bedspreads sold at international markets.

Shilpi is one of the lucky ones.

### **The gaping holes in the social safety net for vulnerable women**

Estimates of the number of women engaged in sex work in Bangladesh range between 100,000–400,000 (the latter estimate is produced by the NGO, Sex Worker's Network of Bangladesh). Around 10,000-30,000 children are forced into the trade every year. Countless more women and children, who are not primarily engaged in sex trade, live on the streets and make a living through begging. There is little available to help protect them from exploitation by pimps and criminal gangs, or to enable them to find a way off the streets.

The usual response from authorities towards vulnerable women and children, is to treat them like criminals and lock them up in jail, vagrant homes or correction centres. Research shows that the fate of many of these women and children under government run facilities are just as bad if not worse, as when they were on the streets. For example, the police are accused of physically assaulting and sexually abusing sex workers since they regard them as desecrated women who are always sexually available.

Research by human rights groups, such as Human Rights Watch has found that things are no better in vagrant homes. There is evidence of male officials in state run vagrant homes sexually abusing the women in their care, and former sex workers are particularly vulnerable because of their perceived "fallen" nature. Moreover, there are also reports of physical and sexual abuse of inmates by other inmates.

The story of Mayna, another employee of Basha, who got separated from her parents when three years old and grew up in several of these vagrant homes, corroborates the research findings. She was routinely picked on and verbally and physically abused by older inmates at the homes and correction centres.

By the time she was a teenager and allowed to leave, she had no tangible skills that would allow her to make a decent living in the city.

In this context, the work of organisations like CUP is especially impressive.

## **The herculean task of getting women off the streets**

Located right next door to the trafficking hub, Mirpur Mazar, the CUP office is housed in a simple, unassuming red brick building. Director Hosneara Khatun, a mild-mannered, lovely woman, who has a long background in social work, showed me around the modest premises that is currently running the rehabilitation programme for around 33 women.

CUP's rehabilitation programme is targeted towards victims of sex trafficking, sex workers, and other street women such as beggars. The programme is comprehensive and it includes psychological counseling, morality training, physical exercise, a nine month long adult literacy programme, and vocational training, such as tailoring, handicrafts, sewing, etc.

Women are allowed to stay in the rehabilitation programme for up to two years, although a third year can be added for those who really need it.

During their training period, the women receive a stipend, which allows them to leave the streets and rent a home. CUP also provides support for the children of these women through daycare facilities, school preparation classes for children under five and support for older children to enroll in local schools.

There is also support available for women who are not enrolled in CUP's programme through a drop-in centre. Pregnant homeless mothers and children can receive preliminary medical care and free meals. CUP also runs an emergency night shelter for women in crisis and sponsors residential homes outside of Dhaka for at-risk young girls.

However, facilities alone are not enough to get women off the streets. Ms Khatun points to emotional trauma as one of the biggest challenges to CUP's work. Like Shilpi, many of these women have lived on the streets for years, sometimes from a very young age, and it's difficult to break old habits or to instill trust that a new way of life is possible.

To enable the transition, CUP requires the women to make a clean break with their former lives. In addition to providing food and the stipend, CUP also monitors the women closely until it is certain that they have successfully moved on to a new livelihood.

## **Employment is the key to making rehabilitation stick**

Finding a new source of income is a crucial component for the success of the rehabilitation programme. Because of the social stigma attached to sex work, there are hardly any employment options available to these women which would allow them to enter a "normal" life. This is where Basha, a partner of CUP comes in.

Basha Enterprises is a social business that opened its doors in May 2011 with 14 graduates from CUP. Located in the same building just upstairs from CUP, Basha produces traditional kanthas or quilts from recycled saris and jewellery that is sold in international markets. All the raw materials are sourced locally, and the production and marketing process is environmentally friendly and run according to fair trade principles.

Robin Seyfert, the founder and managing director of Basha, stresses the business principle that the products should be competitive in international markets based on their quality alone. The fact that Basha also has enormous social benefits is an added bonus for customers.

Building a business that provides international quality products while employing women who are still struggling with past trauma and the transition to a normal life, can certainly be a challenge. Basha has succeeded in doing this by building an environment of trust, and by providing ongoing counseling support, training and child-care services for the women.

The women earn a good salary, which is a powerful incentive for them to stay off the streets. The workers are paid a base daily rate, and then they earn per piece they produce. For many of these women this translates to a better-paid job with far more benefits than working in the garment sector. They also have the flexibility to take work home after business hours. When the company makes a profit it is distributed back to the production staff.

Most importantly, at Basha the women are treated with sensitivity. There is acknowledgement that even after transition to working life some of these women might continue to struggle with past trauma, and they are treated with due care and consideration. This has been a key component to the sustainability of Basha and the business has grown to employ more than triple the original number of women at three production centres in Bangladesh.

Basha is committed to further growth so that more employment opportunities can be created for vulnerable women. Ms Seyfert also expressed the desire to include the women more and more in the decision-making processes so that they can feel more ownership of the business.

### **Transforming the narrative of battered women**

The women I spoke to at Basha were proud of their work and the fact that the kanthas they sew and the jewellery they make are sold around the world. Most of these women are mothers, and they dream that their daughters and sons will grow up to get a good education. Some of the women even expressed the wish that their daughters would dedicate their lives to public service and help organisations such as CUP and Basha.

The struggle however is not over for all of them. Some of the women's home lives are still plagued by cruelty from husbands who continue to physically and emotionally abuse them. The fact that they feel unable to leave their abusive partners even after turning their lives around, shows how entrenched misogyny is in our society that puts women in such a vulnerable position in the first place.

However, CUP and Basha are built and run by extraordinary women who keep challenging the status quo and they are providing refuge and support to the courageous women who are slowly but surely making their way to a respectable, productive life.

Bilkis, a woman who has been with Basha for two years, and is now serving as a mentor to the other women at the Dhaka production centre, is reluctant to talk about her past. For her, the only part of her story that matters is that CUP and Basha have allowed her to make a fresh start towards a better life with dignity.

One can only hope that similar opportunities to start over will someday be available for the thousands of women and children who are still living and working on the streets of Bangladesh.

- See more at: <http://www.dhakatribune.com/long-form/2014/jun/03/one-stitch-time#sthash.zJBB730m.dpuf>