

## **Street Children: Survival on the Extreme Margins of Human Life**

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**Abstract:** *This paper delves into how street children as a marginalized segment of urban populations survive on the extreme margins of human life. To elicit the survival patterns of street children, a cross-sectional study was conducted with a purposeful sample of 120 children aged from 12 to 16 years living at different points of the Sylhet metropolitan city located at the north-east part of Bangladesh. In-depth interview and observation techniques were applied to explore primary data from the street children. Findings reveal that street children did not have fixed places for sleeping at night but slept in places they felt pretty secured. They survive with the money they earned daily, and take food from the street food vendors or sometimes by stealing or begging food from hotels or restaurants. Their lives were full of struggles and oppressions, and they frequently experienced maltreatment, exploitation and violence by caregivers, shopkeepers, pedestrians and hawkers on the streets. The study drew out many excruciating data of abuses and humiliations regarding survival patterns of street children. In conclusion, remediation of social exclusions, exploitation and abuses in their lives requires the adoption of philanthropic measures.*

*Practitioners Messages:*

- *Number of street children in Sylhet city, Bangladesh is increasing day by day.*
- *They survive on the margins of social life and encounter many problems and difficulties in their daily life.*
- *Maltreatment is a part of their everyday life.*
- *They are largely excluded from the mainstream society and reportedly abused by caregivers, vagabonds, pedestrians, law enforcement agencies.*

**Keywords:** *Street Children, Survival Pattern, Social Exclusions, Abuse*

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### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Despite the differences in race, color, religion, and caste, all children without discrimination have the right to lead a life conducive to their physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development. This is why they need to secure the full spectrum of their rights and privileges both from the family and society. Considering the inevitability, the world community has prudently been implementing a set of plans and programs to guarantee their rights irrespective of all countries in the world. For example, United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) has accepted a resolution regarding the universal rights of children and adopted substantial programs in each society for their balanced growth and development, survival, incessant family protection and proper socialization (UNCRC, 2008; UNICEF, 2010). United Nations Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) (1986) has also launched efforts to maintain a family environment containing full of affection, love, care and

happiness for their harmonious development. In spite of that, evidence concedes that most of the children living in the least developed societies are underprivileged and the worst victims of overwhelming rural-urban poverty. Due to perpetuation of socioeconomic dearth, rapid urbanization, unemployment and underemployment, deterioration of moral values and improper care of household authority, a number of families are disintegrated; and many children are deprived of adequate family care and protection; and thereby, forced to live on the streets away from nursing, protection, supervision and direction of responsible adults of the family (Rahman and Rahman, 2013; UNICEF, 2002; Nangia, 1997; UNICEF, 1990). The phenomena of poor and vulnerable children across the least developed countries particularly in Asia, Africa and Latin America is a grim reminder of the failure of society to protect its future generations from serious consequences of the modern development (Chowdhury, 2002: 2-3). As estimated, three hundred million children worldwide are subjected to violence, exploitation and abuses perpetuated from the abject poverty of their forefathers, the trafficking of girls for prostitution, and the kidnapping of boys for guerrilla training. Millions of children survive without adequate family care, guidance and protection. However, for the establishment and welfare of society these children need to grow up in a sound and secure environment, ensure their rights and privileges and facilitate them to live with proper health, and mental, physical, moral and social well-being (Rahman and Rahman, 2013; UNICEF, 2010; UNICEF, 2002).

## 2. STREET CHILDREN IN BANGLADESH

Bangladesh as a developing country encounters many problems like over-population, scarcity of resources, unmet basic needs and inadequate social safety nets to protect its future generations. Millions of children in this country have a childhood that is starkly and brutally different from the ideals that were adopted in the Millennium Declaration 2000 as a blueprint for building a better world in the 21st century (Islam, 2013; UNICEF, 2010). They are deprived of the rights and privileges like proper food, nutrition, education, health and hygiene facilities in society. On the other hand, cities in Bangladesh are generally overcrowded with dense slums, squatter settlements and pavement dwellings (Sayeed, 2011; ARISE, 2001). Increasing rural poverty and corresponding urban migration continue to swell the numbers of people living in urban slums and on the streets. Problems in rural unemployment, landlessness, river erosion, natural disaster, family conflicts and weak law and order situations push rural families to leave their homes in search of better prospects in the urban centers. Although, this movement contributes to the ultimate survival means of many families, as a result of the increasing number of children are exposed to deprivation and abuse on the streets in urban areas (Chowdhury, 2002). While children who live on streets often encounter poor socio-economic conditions that push their next generations at the same way on streets with ancestral poverty and thereafter abuses.

In Bangladesh a number of children live with their families either on streets or in slum houses; orphaned or abandoned or socially excluded children are compelled to live on streets by their own capabilities because of not having any alternative. Many also run away from their families or caregivers to save them from the curse of extreme poverty and physical abuses and they consequently start living and working on the streets or in the premises of railway, bus and launch stations. Consequently, these children encounter a life surrounded by hardcore poverty and abuses perpetrated by passers-by or caregivers or police.

There are no comprehensive and reliable statistics on how many children are living on the streets in Bangladesh. Estimates predict a continuous increase of street children in almost all cities of Bangladesh (UNICEF, 2007). According to a baseline survey by Appropriate Resources for Improving Street Children's Environment (ARISE) in 2005, 679,728 street children (53% boys and 47% girls) were estimated at six major divisions in Bangladesh, of them, 249,200 in Dhaka, 55,856 in Chittagong, 20,426 in Rajshahi, 41,474 in Khulna, 9,771 in Barisal, and 13,165 in Sylhet division. An increase was also projected for a total of 1,144,754 street children in 2014 and 1,615,330 in 2024 (Rahman and Rahman, 2013); UNICEF, 2007; BIDS & UNDP, 2004; DSS & UNDP, 2001).

The phenomenal growth of street children particularly in metropolitan cities is one of the major concerns in Bangladesh. Children who are defined as street children are not born on streets. Harsh realities coerce them to survive on the streets with an array of social exclusions, and push them to working and having food by stealing, begging or other means that are ultimately the result of abandonment of their destiny on the streets (ARISE, 2001; Mannan, 2004; Hasan, 1990). Street

children seldom have access to basic services such as nutritious food, clean water, education, health care, and sanitation. They experience physical abuses ranged from minor bruises to severe fractures or death as a result of punching, beating, kicking, biting, shaking, throwing, stabbing, choking, hitting with a hand, stick, strap, or other object, and burning by their peers or caregivers or other persons (Hamid and Thampi, 2011; CWIG, 2013; ARISE, 1999). They are prone to sexual abuses like penetration for sexual intercourse or coitus, incest, rape, sodomy, indecent exposure, and exploitation by vagabonds, pedestrians, and other adults (UNICEF, 2007:3; CWIG, 2013). To make substantial profits, extensive criminal networks also engage these children in commercial sex work, smuggling, stealing, and the distribution of drugs and weapons to gangs. Following the hardship and abuse of life on the streets, many children suffer from trauma and psychosocial disorders. Street children are often abused or oppressed by police personnel who frequently beat and arrest them for vagrancy, and send them to prison or correction centers or safe homes or orphanages. Although these children receive an apparently better option to survive but they often lose contact with their families, are taken in environments that do not foster normal development and insufficient living standards and irregular monitoring mechanisms of those institutions actually increase their suffering and abuse. Societal people also stigmatize them for living on streets, condemn them for their activities on streets and devalue them if they have been in correctional institutions or orphanages. Thus, they grow up with the collection of distressing experiences in childhood which made them diffident, distrustful and indifferent to their future life (Rahman and Rahman, 2013; UNCRC, 2008; UNICEF, 2007; Reza et al., 2005; ARISE, 1999; Bellamy, 1996).

Bangladesh as one of the first signatories of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) periodically submits its report regarding child rights implementation to the CRC committee. Child development and rights as important goals have also been included in Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP). Besides, few government, non-government organizations and UNICEF are jointly working to render the services: outreach services and non-formal education, vocational and life skill training, shelter homes and its services, social integration, improvement of care standards and advocacy for social policy and legislative reform etc. to protect and assist street children. Despite these efforts, a large number of children are abused, exploited and neglected and often experience diverse forms of violence in family, schools and other institutions at community levels in Bangladesh (UNCRC, 2008; UNICEF, 2007 & 2010). These children must not be excluded but grow up within proper care and environment so that they can contribute to the sustainable development and welfare of the society. For this, appropriate policies and programs need to be adopted based on sufficient findings of the empirical studies. To mine primary data encouraged the researchers to conduct a study on the survival patterns of street children in Bangladesh.

### 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To investigate the survival patterns of street children, the present study followed Bowlby's attachment theory to examine whether the major propositions were associated with its findings (Rahman and Rahman, 2013). According to the key propositions of John Bowlby's 'Attachment Theory', attachment behaviours of human beings are indeed in lower forms of animal life that ensure survival of the species. Throughout an individual's lifetime, attachments provide connections to others, aid to the quest for identity, influence the nature of future relationships, and change the attachment focus and importance across the life cycle. The child's attachments in early years are usually focused towards the parents or parental figures that provide children emotional and physical security. These attachments shift towards the peer group in adolescence, and partners in adulthood. During the life cycle, loss of love and affection may have different effects upon individual members of the family, and styles of grieving and methods of coping may vary accordingly (Bunce and Rickards, 2004). In fact, quality relationships help children to become self-reliant, develop self-worth, better cope with frustration, envy and jealousy, and overcome common fears and worries. 'Attachment behaviour' helps children get into a close and protective relationship with their attachment figure when they experience anxieties. Attachment system builds a mechanism for seeking proximity to a caregiver for protection, food and social interaction. It also provides opportunities to learn how to make relationships with others, and adjust with the variations of environment. During the life cycle, individuals may develop anxiety which help them activate the attachment system which increases attachment behaviour in situations of anxiety and distress (Bunce and Rickards, 2004: 2-5).

## **4. DATA COLLECTION METHODS**

### **4.1. Population**

The children aged from 12-16 years regarded as informants of the study. According to Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS), 6033 street children live in *Sylhet Metropolitan* areas, of them, 4063 boys and 1970 girls (SSD & MOSW, 2004). These large numbers of mobile children are living at different points of the city sporadically. Due to difficulties of collect information on survival patterns and abuses of the street children the researchers curtailed the numbers on a representative basis. According to the objectives of the study, fourteen points of the city (study area) were plotted, and all street boys and girls from each plot were estimated as cluster of the study.

### **4.2. Sample Size**

A total of 120 out of 6033 children were finally picked up using cluster sampling technique. To elicit information regarding the survival patterns and abuses of street children, a cross-section study was conducted.

### **4.3. Data Collection Procedures**

Sample survey method, and in-depth interview and observation techniques were applied to collect both quantitative and qualitative data from the informants. A pre-tested, semi-structured interview schedule was used for data collection. Ten cases were deeply studied to dig out the facts of survival patterns of street children. All respondents were interrogated within the time frame of 6:30 pm to 12:00 am (Bangladesh time) because they used to spend this time with gossiping or playing. Opinion from the interviewers suggested that children liked and enjoyed face-to-face interview with curiosity. Children experiencing physical, sexual or emotional abuse were addressed passionately and a keen effort was taken for referrals to local child protection and counseling services. After necessary editing and tabulating, the collected data were analyzed by using descriptive statistical methods. Apart from the primary data; secondary data were also extracted from books, articles, journals, research reports, and newspapers in order to compare the situations of street children.

## **5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **5.1. Age and Gender**

The present study found that out of 120 street children living in the Sylhet metropolitan areas 78% percent were male and the rest 22% percent female. The premier number of the children was found at railway stations and Islamic saints' graveyard areas. Most of them (85%) belonged to the age group 12 to 14 years. Approximately 84 percent were from the Muslim and the rest from Hindu and indigenous communities.

### **5.2. Education**

Literacy rate was very poor among the street children. About 51% girls and 39% boys were illiterate or had no education. More than a half had primary education and completed any of the grades - I, II, III, IV and V. Street boys were found better positions than girls. Though both government and non-government organizations have been implementing several programs to provide primary education to the poor and vulnerable children living at the city for a long time, sampled street children were still backward and neglected in this case because of insufficiency, poor management quality and failures of the drop-out centers to bring them back from street lives. As a result, these children have already been exposed as a challenge for the government to gear up the national education rate.

### **5.3. Daily Activities**

Street children managed their daily livelihood by multiple social activities: rickshaw pushing (22%), begging from door to door (17%), pottering goods (16%), rag picking (13%), hotel labor (8%), tempo helper (7%) (an assistant of three wheelers vehicle), and tailors' assistant (7%). The rest 20% children engaged in occupations like hawking small goods, small business, welding assistant, and even in prostitution. Almost a quarter of the female children engaged with different types of sex related activities in prostitution which is a socially hated occupation in Bangladesh.

### **5.4. Income and Expenditure**

Street children could earn little money, rarely fed themselves thrice in a day, and led a life from hand to mouth with the amount of money earned daily by diverse activities. Their average income was very

poor in amount ( $X=43.33$  BDT). More than a half of the children could have earned daily 20-40 BDT followed by 33% with 41-60 BDT, and the rest with 61-100 BDT. Their daily expenditures were less ( $X=24.54$  BDT) than their income. The study findings added that although the street children had a little income, they used to save money for their family or younger brothers and sisters by spending less. The children who engaged in begging and pottering remarkably found to be the higher income earners whereas the low-income groups involved in rag picking, rickshaw pushing, hotel laboring and assisting in shops, etc.

### 5.5. Reasons of Being on Streets

Many reasons were found as to how and why those children were on the streets and designated themselves as street children. Hardcore poverty (19%), mother's or father's or parents' premature death (14%) and thereafter concomitant personal and family needs (7%) pushed them towards the streets. Bigamy of fathers, less care, negligence and inhuman tortures of the step mothers were responsible for leaving their homes. These incidences had frequently happened in those families where they could not feel free or safe by any means. Thus, the sampled children identified one or more than one cause behind the realities as to surviving on the streets (Rahman and Rahman, 2013: 54).

### 5.6. Lifestyles

The families of street children were very poor with a scarcity of wealth and resources and unable to fulfill basic necessities. They did not have a minimum financial capability to buy clothes, and no money to buy food daily. They had to live and sleep at the places where they used to see the open air, and they did not have adequate protection from the sun, rain, wind, dust and the germs of a polluted environment.

Street children managed to get foods either pure or rotten. Almost a half of them could take meals thrice a day but one-fourth reported to take just once (5%) or twice (20%) a day. It always depended on their abilities to earn and liberty to spend money. The quality of their meals was very poor in nutritional value and scanty in amount. They used to defecate in the open places. Only 25 percent could afford the public toilets. Few children could use bamboo-made *Kantcha* (*Soil and Bambo made*) toilets. About 64 percent of both sexes used the roadside and undesignated places for toilets.

Street children used to spend nights on those streets they thought petty safe. They could have slept with their friends mainly on the footpaths of streets, bus stand, *Majar* premise, and railway station. Both males and females were seen sleeping in these places. About 22% stated that they remained in groups sleeping at night with their bosom or inmate friends. Only 27% could sleep with their family members. Comparatively girls (38%) found more attachment with their families than boys (24%). In case of 23% of children, sleeping mates were 'different' such as employers, relatives, etc. at their slum houses.

Street children did not have any fixed source of recreation. The major sources of their recreation were: watching films in television and cinema hall, playing, listening to songs in cassettes recorders, and gossiping with friends. As observed during fieldwork in data collection, watching television in roadside shops and the cinema hall were the most common sources of their recreation. Both males and females could participate in those processes of recreation.

Although evidence shows that street children are often vulnerable to use drugs in their vagabond life, this study found few street children addicted to drugs. Most of the sampled children (71%) did not use drugs in their street lives. Those children who lived with drug user friends or had easy access to drugs or engaged in drug trafficking were likely to be drug users. Only 29% were involved with the drug users. Among the children of drug users groups, 74% smoked cigarettes but another 26% used ganja, cannabis, syrups prescribed for curing coughs, etc.

### 5.7. Health and Diseases

Most of the street children looked sick and tired with torn and dirty cloths. Many of them had been suffering from diverse health problems resulting from unsafe drinking water, unhygienic food intake, filthy cloths and poor sanitation due to inevitabilities of their vagrant lives. During the interview, about 78% of children reported that they had been suffering from diseases like skin disease (itching, eczema, corns and calluses, tinea versicolor, stasis dermatitis etc.) sexually transmitted diseases (Chlamydia, gonorrhea, herpes, syphilis, etc.), physical weaknesses and disabilities, stomach upset

and lose of motion. Only 22% were found without diseases. Most of them used to collect medicine from the roadside pharmacy, quacks, and homeopathic doctors. Though they had been suffering more or less from many health problems, they were not greatly worried about them. Rather they were found totally careless. It means they did not care or they had a disregard for their problems because they felt that they could do nothing about these problems (Rahman and Rahman, 2013).

### **5.8. Violation of Rights and Exploitation**

Children living on streets were particularly vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. Those who were living with their families, their parents were not in a position to provide them appropriate care due to extreme poverty. They had rather compelled to grow up on the survival margins without having appropriate accommodation and protection, proper foods, clothes, education, and health care, recreation and guidance. These children stumble upon a number of increased risks while working at various places of the city. Many of them used to work in hazardous and low-waged jobs in order to support themselves as well as their families. Evidence provides that street children in Bangladesh contribute on average between 20%-30% of the family income. Girls and boys who work but do not have access to education and become trapped in a cycle of low-skilled, low-income employment that further pushes them into the vicious cycle of intergenerational poverty. Children who live on the streets are also vulnerable to other forms of exploitation and frequently find themselves the victims of sexual abuse and at risk of HIV/AIDS infection, physical torture, and trafficking. Due to abuses by extensive criminal networks, inappropriate family care, no other option in childhood and continuous struggling to survive they are forced to engage in commercial sex work, smuggling, stealing, and the distribution of drugs and weapons and, thus, can make substantial profits to manage their uncertain street life (Rahman and Rahman, 2013; UNICEF, 2007).

### **5.9. Psycho-Social Problems**

Following the hardship and abuse of life on streets, many children were suffering from trauma and psycho-social disorders. They were often abused or oppressed by police personnel who frequently beat them, asked for bribes, took away their valuables, implicated them in false charges, arrested them for vagrancy and dropped them in prison or child development centers or custody homes or orphanages. Many of the children, thus, had lost contact with their families. This confinement or separation was in no way conducive to their normal development and made hurdles for their long-term integration within the community (Rahman and Rahman, 2013; UNICEF, 2007).

## **6. DISCUSSION**

The study was conducted in Sylhet metropolitan areas in Bangladesh. The researchers encountered many problems and limitations while conducting an empirical investigation. For example, validity was not tested; reliability was not measured by further study; the study included a small sample proportionate to population; only nonparametric tests were used to analyze data.

The study reveals that the lives of street children were full of anguish and uncertainty. Many children were separated or abandoned by their families, often forced to choose street life. Almost all children were deprived of getting chance to attend school. Those children who started to have primary education could not continue it. Many socio-economic problems like extreme poverty and unmet basic needs caused their dropping out of the school at an age when they need to learn how to build a life within the interconnectedness and complexity of problems in society, and to cope with society through various agents of the socialization process. They could earn a poor amount of money engaging in diverse activities. Majority of them did not have minimum economic support to fulfill their basic needs daily. They used to work on streets to earn money for themselves as well as to financially support their families. The reasons as to being on the streets were varied with socio-economic circumstances. Most street children were in search of a better living and livelihood. Not only scarcity of family needs or poverty but family problems such as torture of the step mothers, bigamy of father, mother or father or both parents' death pushed them to the streets (Rahman and Rahman, 2013: 54). They were sexually abused, physically tortured, and socially harassed on the streets. The quality of their daily meals was very poor in terms of nutrition. They lacked of permanent places and covered shelter for sleeping at night. They used to live mostly in dirty and unhygienic places. They could not access to hygienic sanitation and pure drinking water. Almost all children had been suffering from physical weakness and diseases like skin disease, STD, stomach upset, etc. They were unable to access minimum treatment let alone modern medical facilities. They did not have any

way to get recreation except watching films in cinema hall and television in roadside shop and playing with their counterparts. Many of them were found using drugs with their friends. They were also involved in carrying illegal drugs from one place to another to earn money. Most of the street children looked sick and tired. They looked worried because of the uncertainty of their livelihood, fear of police torture and arrest, and mental pressures of their street lives. They failed to bring changes in the existing survival patterns due to social stigma, negligence and indefinite income sources (Rahman and Rahman, 2013: 55-56).

Childhood has some socio-cultural and psychological aspects that play significant roles towards their growth and development in society. Therefore, considering the variations, different theories have been developed based on the needs, survival and development patterns of children. Major theories include the aspects of growth and development in childhood: personality development and learning, and cognitive development. An effort was taken whether major findings of this study support the centre-pieces of John Bowlby's Attachment Theory. According to the study, street children were deprived of the family care, affection, love and nursing. Their survival and behaviour patterns were indeed in lower forms as member of the society. Their attachment to the streets provided close connections with their counterparts, recognized their identity as street children, influenced their patterns of behaviour and relationship with others, and brought remarkable changes in the attachment focus and consequence across their childhood. Contrarily, due to lack of familial, physical and emotional security, they could not usually follow their parents' personality in early years like other children who were living within family environments. Their attachment to the streets shifted towards peer group and other street children in childhood. The loss of love, affection and security of the family brought variations in their styles of grieving and methods of coping with the streets accordingly. Inferior quality of life styles and relationship with same age groups made them aggressive, self-reliant, envious and jealous, and able to confront the common fears and worries of street lives. The attachment system taught them how to find mechanisms for self-protection, managing food in daily life and social interaction with others, though those survival approaches were not socially accepted. The environment of the streets did not provide them opportunities to learn the survival patterns that were socially sanctioned. The harsh realities compelled them to forget aversive behaviours in situations of anxiety and distress.

The attachment to their peers did not take the place of families in terms of emotional and tangible support or many of the street children were unable to make any attachment out of fear or distrust or competition for limited resources (e.g. food). They had both cooperation and competition among themselves. But many were still attached to their families and actually helped support other family members. In spite of some variations, the study collaborated with the significant findings of some previous studies. However, suffice it to say that 'Attachment Theory' is partially relevant, may be not as a whole, to analyse and predict the situation of 'Street Children' particularly in the context of Bangladesh.

## 7. CONCLUSION

The number of street children is increasing along with the increase of population in Bangladesh (BBS, 2003). They are more susceptible to be poor, illiterate, ill-healthy and unskilled labour. Survival patterns of these children are very pitiable and adversely affected by extreme poverty, lack of income sources, and societal negligence. They are deprived of family care and affection, inhumanly abused by different caregivers, counterparts and societal people, and discriminated in terms of internationally recognized child rights and privileges. Thus, behind the screen of so-called civilized society they are inhumanly abused (Chowdhury, 2002: 16) while surviving on the line of social exclusions what may be measurable, but unexplored, unresolved and untold yet. However, a small number of government, non-government and international organizations have already adopted many programs in order to incorporate them with mainstream communities. Apart from the initiatives, government needs to provide more socio-economic facilities: to create more shelter homes, resume proper education and training facilities, generate safety-net programs for their survival, and increase awareness among general people who treat them as abandon children (Rahman and Rahman, 2013: 59-60). Policies should ensure the rights and privileges of all street children considering the fact that they were not on the streets by choice but driven their harsh realities of improvised families.

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