



## Lived Experience, Coping Strategies and Social Network of Street-working Children

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### *Authors' contributions*

*This work was carried out in collaboration between both authors. Author SMN designed the study and wrote the protocol. Author AF managed the literature searches, performed the statistical analysis and wrote the first draft of the manuscript. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.*

### *Article Information*

DOI: 10.9734/SAJSSE/2020/v6i330168

#### Editor(s):

(1) Dr. Angel Paniagua Mazorra, Spanish Council for Scientific Research, Spain.

#### Reviewers:

(1) João Roberto Cavalcante, Rio de Janeiro State University, Brazil.

(2) Nguendo-Yongsi H. Blaise, University of Yaoundé II, Cameroon.

Complete Peer review History: <http://www.sdiarticle4.com/review-history/56985>

*Original Research Article*

**Received 08 March 2020**

**Accepted 13 May 2020**

**Published 27 May 2020**

### **ABSTRACT**

**Background:** Street children are exposed to the harshest of living experience. They start experiencing the cruelest form of life from an age when they are supposed to be raised amidst nothing but care and love.

**Aims:** This study attempts to understand the lived experience of street-working children, the daily challenges they face, their coping strategies, and the social network they maintain for a living.

**Methodology:** Using a quantitative, and to some extent, ethnographic method, a sample of 110 street-working children aged 5-15 years was drawn from Dhaka University campus and surrounding areas: Shahbag, New Market, Chankharpool and Ramna in Dhaka city. A structured questionnaire with a series of close-ended questions was used for interview schedules.

**Results:** Analysis of data revealed that most of the children came to Dhaka in pursuit of a better living standard. They are mostly engaged in flower, water or chocolate-selling. The amount of their daily earnings is very low and is hardly enough to manage three meals a day. Most of them sleep on the pavements and those places are not even fixed. They keep changing places depending on wherever they find a place. Sleeping on filthy places under open sky, no wonder they suffer from different skin diseases and are vulnerable to various other diseases. They live through continuous

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change of coping strategies. Their parents, siblings, relatives and peer groups are at the center of their social network relying on which they survive in the city.

**Conclusion:** To put it simply, sufferings of street-working children know no bounds. They fight much more hardship than we can even imagine from the outside.

*Keywords: Street-working children; lived experience; coping strategies; social network.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background

Children living in the street are an increasing phenomenon in developing countries. As in other developing countries, there has been a rise in street children population in the urban areas of Bangladesh. Street children all around the world are the most vulnerable and excluded in society. Their rights are continually violated. Life for street children is a painful experience [1]. In Bangladesh, Dhaka city has been facing this problem due to internal migration and search for work. Hence, it is nearly impossible to count the total number of children living on the streets [2]. According to the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS), the number of street children was 1.5 million in 2015 and it will reach to 1.56 million in 2024. However, there is no current official statistic of the actual number of children living on the streets. A major difficulty in estimating street child populations is that definitions of the term “street children” are contested and *‘Without an accepted definition of the term “street children”, it is not possible to determine their number accurately’* [3].

Children who live and work on the street are the most visible result of the increasing gap between the rich and the poor both in the North and the South. Yet they are not perceived in this way by the majority of the public or by governments, which prefer to ignore the reasons why children are trying to survive on the streets. Street children are seen by many as a nuisance; they are bothering passers-by trying to sell items, delivering services or begging for money; they are seen as competitors by adults who are involved in similar activities. A very small percentage of street children may be involved in petty crimes and these are highlighted in the media, together with other more serious crime stories, leading to a common feeling of insecurity on the streets among the middle and upper classes, who see themselves as potential victims and also see the street children as “bad” examples to their own children. The street children as perceived by the middle and upper

classes seem to be beyond any parental control and the freedom they seem to exhibit is seen as a threat to the upbringing of their own children [4]. In a country like Bangladesh, where proper upbringing of poor children is very much uncertain, holding a perception like this actually exacerbates the elimination of the little hope that these street children may be taken care of someday.

Continuous increase in the number of street children has developed a preference for development workers and policy makers in most of the developing countries. Many studies showed that thousands of street children are living throughout Bangladesh, primarily in the urban areas, working and living in the streets. These street children are not only deprived of the most basic rights that citizens are guaranteed by the country, but also have stopped expecting them. However, in recent years, in spite of the growing social problems in these communities and although some progress were made, there is still a lack of adequate information on the extent of the problem, and knowledge of its root causes [5]. The laws and policies regarding child labor, physical punishment, violence against girls, sexual exploitation, imprisonment of children with adults, trafficking, child marriage, and other aspects of child protection are routinely violated. In most cases, people are not aware of the laws and take these violence as common matters [6].

Children are widely considered as the hope of a nation. Bangladesh is one of the third-world countries burdened with a huge population in a small piece of land and many other problems closely related to one another. In a sense, the phenomenon “children living on the streets” can be interpreted as the direct outcome of those problems. The thing is what the country is currently doing to make headway must be taken forward by someone in future. Universally, children are expected to take that responsibility. But if they continue to live on the streets, how do we expect that would be possible? Therefore, looking at their condition and giving importance on how to get them out of such conditions has become an urgency.

## 1.2 Research Objectives

Dhaka University is situated at the heart of Dhaka city. Being a public university, the campus is open for all. Thus the presence of street children in the campus area is evident since long. There are lots of street children living in the DU campus, Shahbag, New Market, Chankharpool and Ramna, doing different income-generating activities. These children are deprived of their basic human rights and are living in severe poverty.

This study aims to find out several things associated with the lives of street-working children and their day-to-day living. Major objectives of this study are:

- i. To understand the living conditions of street-working children and their survival status,
- ii. To explore the nature of challenges these children face in their daily life,
- iii. To assess the increasing health risk they are continuously exposed to,
- iv. To examine the coping strategies they pursue, and
- v. To evaluate the social network they maintain.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Starting with the definition, who is a child? A child is an individual who is under the age of 18 years based on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989 and the ILO Convention on the Worst Forms of Child Labour, 1999 [7]. Although the term "Child" may have different definitions in different countries, the National Children Policy, 2011 of Bangladesh specified children's age as "all individuals under 18".

Now who are street children? The term "street children" is a cross-cultural term. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (1994),

A "street child" is any girl or boy for whom the street has become his or her habitual abode and/or source of livelihood, and who is inadequately protected, supervised or directed by responsible adults. They are either children on the street or children of the street.

However, there is a tendency to resist the use of the term in developed countries, and replace it with "runaways" (children who have run away, or left home or residential care) or simply homeless young people. Children grouped within the category of "street children" range in age from three to thirteen. About forty percent of these children are homeless, this is the largest percentage of homeless children in recorded history and it is growing. The remaining sixty percent work on the streets to support their families. They are unable to attend school because of financial and social constraints, and are considered to live in "especially difficult circumstances". Many of these children do not have access to proper shelter, food, or education. Street children are often defined as a "mobile population" and are considered to be "out of place" as many do not have a place to call their home. The idea that these children are "out of place" speaks of the societal oppression that these children face. The vulnerability of these children and their life circumstances cannot be properly summed up in the title of "street children" [8].

In Bangladesh, as in many developing countries, there is a widespread belief amongst the public, policymakers and social workers that children "abandon" their families and migrate to the street because of economic poverty. This dominant narrative posits that children whose basic material needs cannot be met within the household move to the street. It ignores and avoids the growing evidence that this is not the case. Unlike many studies, Conticini and Hulme [9] explored this argument through the analysis of detailed empirical research with children in Bangladesh. They found that social factors lie behind most street migration and, in particular, that moves to the street are closely associated with violence to, and abuse of, children within the household and local community. Wazed [5] attempted to explore the reasons of street migration with the interaction of both "push" and "pull" factors, not only based on their economic necessities, but also their livelihood strategies in street life. Her work addresses that high population density, poor quality of education, the conflicting relationships within the family such as polygamy and remarriage, patriarchy (male-headed household), natural calamities, lack of economic opportunities and violation of child rights are the determinant forces that are "pushing" children to carry on street life from their rural place to the urban street in Bangladesh.

BRAC (Building Resources Across Communities) Research and Evaluation Division carried out an exploratory cross-sectional survey on a sample of populations from 10 purposively selected areas of Dhaka city to gather information on the lives and livelihoods of street dwellers, using both quantitative and qualitative methods. Findings of their survey revealed that the street dwellers (driven by poverty and natural disasters) had to adopt a very precarious and humiliating life on the streets devoid of all basic amenities of life, under constant threat of eviction and harassment by the law-enforcing agencies and hoodlums. They were hard-working when considered in terms of working hours, but without proportionate return due to their involvement in low paying informal sector which is also irregular. They failed to improve their lot even after five or more years of street-living. According to those street children, housing, food and lack of jobs were the three most common problems for which they sought assistance [10].

Greksa et al. [11] assess the effect of street life on the growth and health status of poor children who live and work full-time on the streets of Dhaka (street children), independent of the effects of poverty. Their study was accomplished by comparing 142 street children with 150 poor children who live and work on the streets of Dhaka but who return to their families at night (slum children). Children between 7-14 years old were recruited at locales where street and slum children are typically found. Data revealed that the prevalence of disease symptoms tended to be slightly higher in street children than in slum children.

Farid and Mostari [12] explored the lives and livelihoods of the children living in street situation in Dhaka city highlighting their lifestyle, housing pattern, works and income, health status, food habit along with the recreational facilities they have. Moreover, their work also discloses the problems they regularly face, the social support they get together with their future orientation. It is found that being fully deprived of their basic human rights, street children suffer from and prone to various diseases like cold fever, stomach upset, skin diseases, water-borne diseases, headache, etc.

Using a multi-method approach, Kombarakaran [13] identified the stresses and coping strategies of street children. The results of his study suggest that children face several challenges in their search for food, safety, employment, shelter

and medical care. They commonly depend on their peers, non-governmental agencies, and their own resourcefulness to survive on the streets. While the majority use positive mechanisms to cope with their daily stresses, some children also employ maladaptive strategies such as using alcohol, drugs, and visiting prostitutes. His study also reveals that these “children of the street” are not entirely on their own but depend on various connections with substitute family members and/or their peers to cope with life. The stresses and coping strategies of the “children of the street” are similar to those of other street children who live with their families and work on the streets. He suggested that the agencies which work with street children might need to recognize these challenges and strengths to provide needed services to improve their condition.

However, most researches rarely examine the everyday caregiving environment of street children in Bangladesh or how they survive the illness and injury so common to their experience. To understand street children’s caregiving practices, Reza and Henly [14] conducted a qualitative project by purposively selecting 75 street children and asking them three primary questions: i. What is the nature of crisis children encounter on the street? ii. What are the ranges of informal caregiving practices? iii. What social network characteristics facilitate or complicate caregiving? Findings of their project suggest that street children encounter unprecedented dangers and experience frequent accidental injuries and repeated episodes of sickness. They rely mostly on social network members for a range of supports. Network members, primarily peers, help devise a treatment plan, accompany them to treatment centers, buy medicine and nurse sick youth. Network members bear most treatment, food and other expenses and usually do not expect immediate repayment. Street children offer support to close and weak network ties, however support is more intense for friends. Caregivers also struggle to balance their own life and work while engaged in caregiving practices with evidence of detrimental effects on friendship ties in some cases.

Different existing literatures have focused on different aspects of street children’s lives. “Street children” is not an exclusive feature of underdeveloped or developing countries. They are found in developed countries too. However, living condition of these children varies from country to country. In Bangladesh, they are

actually found in every districts. But the number is large in towns, larger in divisional cities and largest in Dhaka city. This study attempts to understand the lived experience, coping strategies and social network of a number of selected street-working children in the light of the reviewed literatures.

### **3. MATERIALS AND METHODS**

#### **3.1 Research Method**

Principally quantitative method, and to some extent, ethnographic method was used.

#### **3.2 Study Areas**

As in most developing countries, massive migration has occurred in the direction of the capital, Dhaka [15,16]. Dhaka is the largest city and the center of development activities in Bangladesh. Most people of Bangladesh consider Dhaka a place where one can change one's luck. Though sometimes they are forced to migrate, in general, many poor people voluntarily migrate to Dhaka in search of work. As Dhaka is the place where many of the garment factories and various small-medium-big industries are situated, this city attracts people from all over the country. However, keeping in mind of the researchers' accessibility, Dhaka University campus and surrounding areas such as Shahbag, New Market, Chankharpool and Ramna were chosen as study areas.

#### **3.3 Sampling**

The "work" that children do encompasses a diversity of activities whose boundaries are difficult to distinguish and their views vary considerably [17]. Therefore, purposive sampling was used to select 110 working children to participate in this study from a population of street-working children living in selected study areas.

#### **3.4 Data Collection Instruments**

The data were collected through interview schedules, using researcher-administered structured questionnaire containing a series of close-ended questions. The questions included in the questionnaire covered children's socio-demographic information, socio-economic status, living conditions, reasons for migration to Dhaka, etc. During questionnaire construction, due care

was given to issues such as use of easily understandable words, sequence of questions, appropriate skips between questions, etc. As the participants in this study are children and they don't speak English, the questionnaire was initially constructed in English and then translated into Bengali (their native language) for data collection. After the completion of data collection, the questionnaire was translated back into English again.

#### **3.5 Data Collection**

All the interviews were conducted by the researchers. It was mandatory that the researchers introduced themselves and explained the purpose of the study before collecting any information from the participants. Participants then had to indicate that their participation were voluntary. Though some children willfully participated, many children were reluctant to talk. But when the researchers bought what they used to sell, they were happy to talk. The researchers sincerely tried to conduct the interviews in such a way that facilitated the children to open up and let them express themselves in their own terms and at their own pace. Interviews lasted for 10-15 minutes or more depending on the child's wish.

#### **3.6 Data Analysis**

Each interview schedule was thoroughly rechecked, restructured, rectified and edited prior to data entry in order to find out whether any data were missing. Before processing data, coding was conducted to prepare for data analysis. The computer software, Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was installed to assist. After inputting data into the computer, another checking was conducted to find out any errors that might threaten the validity of measurement and cause misleading result. Using descriptive statistics, results were produced and presented through frequency table, bar charts and pie charts.

#### **3.7 Confidentiality and Privacy**

The participants were informed clearly that the information they would provide would be kept strictly confidential, only the researchers would have access to their provided information; that their information would be destroyed upon completion of data analysis. They were ensured that their names and any whereabouts wouldn't

be mentioned anywhere in the whole research process. Moreover, for the two photos used in this paper, essential permission was obtained from the children and their local guardians. Privacy during the interview process was safeguarded. The interview was held under conditions in which the children felt most comfortable in responding openly. The study registered oral consent from all interviewees. Any form of coercion of the study subjects was strictly avoided in either getting consent or interview.

## 4. RESULTS

### 4.1 Socio-demographic Profile

Out of 110 street children being interviewed for this study, 56 of them are female and the rest are male (Appendix). 55 of them fall in the age category 9 to 12 years old. The percentages of age categories, 5-8 and 13-15 years are 25.5 and 24.5 respectively.

Street children living in these areas are mostly engaged in flower, water or chocolate-selling and in some cases, no fixed work. Among the children in this study, 43.6% are flower-sellers (Fig. 1). Percentages of other categories such as water-selling, chocolate-selling and no fixed work are 20.0, 15.5 and 20.9 in order.

From these activities, their income per day ranges between Taka 100 and Taka 300. Though in reality it is evident for some children that there's actually no income at all after a whole day, no children of such were found among the participants of this study. Out of 110,

80 children earn Taka 100-150. Children who earn Taka 151-200, Taka 201-250 and Taka 251-300 are 17, 9 and 4 in number respectively (Fig. 2). As most of the children are under the age of 15, they can hardly use the earned money on their own. In 79.1% of cases, the money earned by them is taken away either by their parents or by those with whom they live. In some cases, they are bound to send a large share of the money to their parents if they don't live with them. Handful of cases in which they can spend the money the way they want are only because they don't live with their parents or any relatives and have no connection with them either.

### 4.2 Living Conditions

Street children concern to millions of deprived boys and girls who have adopted the street as their residence. They grow up where tranquility and physical and emotional stability are frequently threatened [18]. Fig. 3 shows that 61 out of 110 participants in this study used to sleep on pavements. The percentages of children living on foot over bridge, under trees and in abandoned buildings are 28.2, 11.8 and 4.5 in order. However, the place where they sleep one night may not be the same the next night. 66 among 110 children replied negatively when asked whether they sleep at the same place every night or not. As most of them have no fixed roof under which they can sleep daily, they keep changing places depending on wherever they find a place. Only 34 of the total participants replied that they sleep at a fixed place. However, all of them actually live with their parents or some relatives and have temporary roof to sleep under.

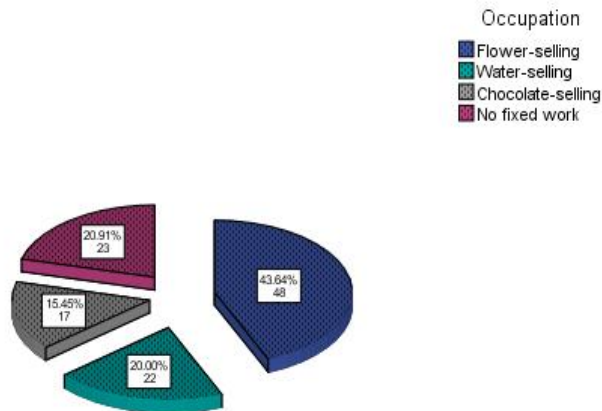


Fig. 1. Occupation of the children

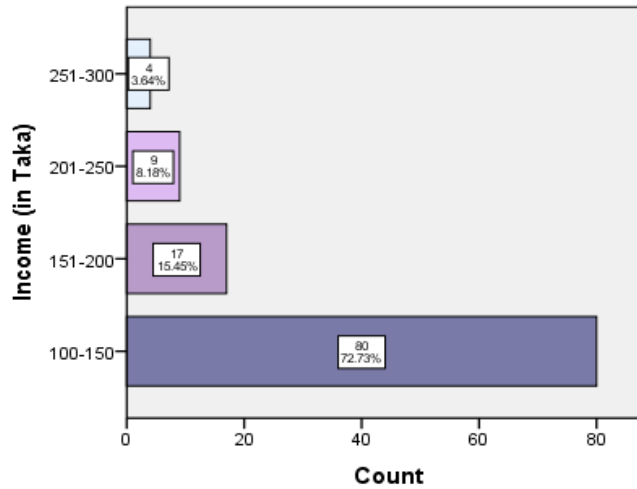


Fig. 2. Children's daily income

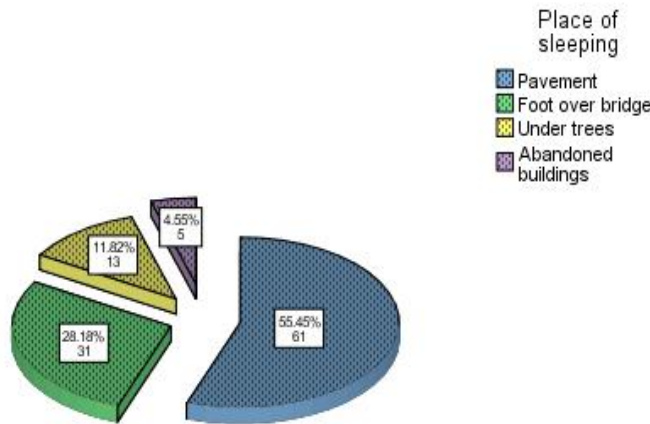


Fig. 3. Children's place of sleeping

Most of the participants in this study live with either one or both of their parents or with any of their relatives. The number of children who live with their parents and relatives are 64 and 27 respectively. Interestingly, even though they live with their parents or relatives, they don't live at a fixed place. They constantly keep changing places as a group. When they are displaced from one place, they shift to another. 11 children live with their siblings and another 8 live with people they are not related with (mostly with their peer-groups). 54.5% of the children haven't received any education and thus are unable to read or write. However, most of them are aged between 5 and 12 years. 23 children can write their name only while 18 children can just read. Only 9 children of them all are able to both read and write.

### 4.3 Meals and Clothing

As these children have no fixed earning, getting of meals thus isn't certain. According to them, they have to starve every now and then. 5 children confessed that they had slept hungry for even three consecutive nights once or twice. Percentages of sleeping hungry for two nights and one night are 18.2 and 70.9 respectively. It is evident that starving is quite familiar to most of them. Only 7 children have reported that they don't have to starve.

Street-working children lack proper clothes to wear. In most cases, they have only one set of clothes to wear daily. The scenario is even worse in winter. At times, managing winter clothes for themselves becomes a herculean task. Only 5

children were found in this study who said that they used to buy their winter clothes with their own income. Apart from them, most of the children actually manage such clothes either from their parents or from their relatives. Naturally, they are either over-sized or under-sized and obviously worn-out. Some children depend on donation from different charities.

#### 4.4 Recreation and Health

It is evident that the street children who usually don't have any income generation responsibilities get plenty of time for recreation, but working children merely get time for any organized recreations. They are too busy in earning their meals to engage in recreational activities. When asked about recreation, 90% of the children reported that they used to play for recreation. Others either gossip or watch television standing outside different shops. They hardly manage their day-to-day living. Therefore, in their words, recreation is sort of a luxury to them.

Sleeping on filthy places, it is quite natural they suffer from different diseases. They are generally exposed to dangerous and unhealthy conditions. They frequently suffer from a variety of illnesses. Fever is the most common illness among the street children [19]. When asked, 73 out of 110 children replied that apart from fever, they also suffer from different skin diseases.

#### 4.5 Reasons for Migration

Dhaka is the largest city of Bangladesh and one of the major cities of South Asia. It is the

financial, commercial, political and entertainment capital of the country. As of 2017, Dhaka accounts for 35 percent of GDP and about 32 percent of the total workforce. People choose to live in this city for the economic opportunities and benefits it provides. It stands as a center of attraction for people seeking work and prosperity.

However, the reasons of becoming a street child are varied and often multi-factorial [20]. The rapid increase in the number of landless families in rural areas together with other economic and social changes, have converged to push poverty-stricken families to urban areas to seek new ways of livelihood [21]. Most of the working children who participated in this study came to these areas from neighboring districts. When asked about the reasons why they migrated to Dhaka, 54.5% of them said that they came in pursuit of a better living standard. 11.8% of the participants were bound to migrate as river erosion had left them homeless. 28.2% of the children migrated because their respective parents wanted them to. Only 5.5% of the children migrated on their own wish (Fig. 4). Besides, usually there are many conspicuous causes behind the harsh curtain of their street life, such as overpopulation, family disintegration, unemployment, illiteracy, unplanned urbanization, landlessness, natural disasters, oppression of step father/mother, etc. [22].

61.8% of the participants have active contacts with their parents while 38.2% of the children have either no parents at all or have lost contact.

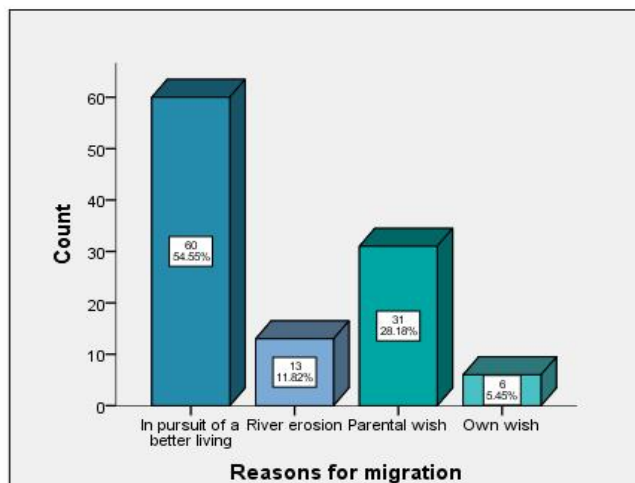


Fig. 4. Children's reasons for migration



## 5. DISCUSSION

Following a model developed by Abro [23], the children who participated in this study were classified based on three criteria: i. level of attachment with parents, ii. places where they live or spend most of the time, and iii. financial resources at hand to meet livelihood expenditure. Classifying children through these criteria has made it easier to determine their problems, conditions, needs and vulnerabilities. These criteria enable to identify following groups (Table 1) among the street children.

### 5.1 Migration to Dhaka

In Bangladesh, large-scale movement of the population has been a feature for a very long time; people have been moving internally, but the most striking form of mobility has indeed been from rural to urban areas [24]. According to their self-reports, most of the street-working children in this study came to Dhaka from rural areas of

nearby districts with either one or both of their parents, with relatives or with local neighbors. Many of them came alone. Reasons which forced these children to come to Dhaka are mainly poverty, lack of income generating activities, physical torture by parents, absence of guardians after the death of parents, step-mother's/step-father's torture, unwillingness to study, natural calamities (like flood, river erosion), etc. Many of the participants in this study said that they believed migration to be a way that would bring a solution to their respective problems. Many of them came to Dhaka either sitting on the roof of a bus or by other available vehicles at little or no cost at all. And almost none of them are willing to go back to their rural life anymore. Economic reasons are dominant in most cases because of which these children are pushed and pulled to migrate from their roots to Dhaka with a desire for a better living standard. These reasons are also applicable why they don't want to return back to their place of origin.

**Table 1. A classification of street children**

Categories	Sub-categories	In this study	
		Found	Not found
<b>A. Children living with parents; having good attachment with them</b>			
i.	Living on pavements (fixed place) with no income generation responsibility.	-	✓
ii.	Living on pavements (fixed place), but working at various places to earn for household expenditure.	✓	-
iii.	Having no fixed places to sleep; living on streets with parents; working with parents under their supervision and have a role in income generation.	✓	-
<b>B. Living in different workplaces; having strong relationship with parents</b>			
i.	Living in workplaces, but go to streets in search of daily food.	✓	-
ii.	Living in workplaces where they were sent by their parents for helping them out in family income.	✓	-
iii.	Earn by selling flowers, water or chocolates; having good relationship with parents.	✓	-
<b>C. Living on the streets; no/rare relationship with parents</b>			
i.	Left home due to broken families, domestic violence, hope of freedom, etc. and no/rare relationship with parents.	✓	-
ii.	Left home due to poverty, death of parents, being left by parents or don't like parents.	✓	-
iii.	Forced to leave home due to natural disasters; having no/rare relationship with parents.	✓	-
<b>D. Not working; wandering on the streets at day, go back to home at night; having good relationship with parents</b>			
i.	Wandering on streets; passing time here and there, go back to homes at night.	-	✓
ii.	Passing time in gossiping, drug abusing, gambling, etc.	-	✓

## 5.2 Lived Experience

Street-working children are exposed to the hardest of living experience. Experiences of them are largely different from any other people living in the same society. As a matter of fact, their experiences even vary from the street children who are not involved in work and thus have no earning responsibilities. Survival on the streets is very much difficult and they constantly fail to maintain any specific survival methods for a long period. There's no certainty that they'll be able to manage a meal at the end of the day. Clothes are scarce. They suffer from diseases frequently and cannot afford minimum treatment most of the time. They don't have opportunities to study and no regular recreation either.

### 5.2.1 Survival

In the study areas, most of the children sell flowers to survive, some are engaged in water or chocolate-selling. The daily income of these children varies. In some cases, some street children are too small to earn their bread. Still they are out there to earn. Moreover, most of them are bound to maintain and support their respective families with their little earnings. Most of them struggle the hardest for a mere subsistence. In addition, in a number of cases, they have to give a share of the earned money to local goons. If they fail to do so, all their little earnings are forcefully taken away.



**Photo 1. A street-working child (flower-seller) sleeping in the corridor of TSC, DU**

Most of the children eat rice once or twice a day usually, if they have money. As breakfast, they take puffed rice or a slice of bread/cake available at roadside tea-stalls. They used to eat at a very lower price in the roadside open sky restaurants situated on the footpaths. In those days when they fail to earn enough for managing a meal, they take thrown-away foods in the garbage by

hotels, community centers, city dwellers, etc. Most of the participants in this study said that they used to eat twice a day. However, for the majority of the street children, access to food is uncertain. In some cases, they have to spend the day with little or no food at all. They continuously face an acute hand-to-mouth existence.

### 5.2.2 Hygiene

Most of the children do not have more than one set of clothes which is actually torn, dirty, and under or over-sized. Girls have no choice except for wearing the same cloth even after bathing. The case is also true for the male children. They have to suffer a lot in winter due to lack of sweater, jacket or other warming clothes. Since most of the street children live on the pavements, sometimes they are forced to wear wet clothes in the rainy season as they lack more than one set of clothes.

Taking of shower by the street children living on pavements depends on the supplied water in these areas and on circumstances when they get a chance. However, such chances they get once or twice a week. For toilet purpose, they use different locations. Roadside places are used by the pavement dwellers early in the morning when not many people are around. In the nearby slum like areas, there is usually one slab toilet for 20 to 30 families. It is time consuming and often a source of causing chaos because of long queues to use toilet. The priority of slum goons is also evident. In public toilets, it costs Taka 2 to discharge urine and Taka 5 for releasing stool. Most of these children discharge urine in different places under open sky. Sometimes, they use toilets in mosque or nearby medical college hospital. Since it is difficult for girls under open sky due to shyness and security, they go to public toilets or nearby medical college hospital.

Most of the participants didn't evidently answer to the question whether they used to take drugs or not. Interestingly, some replied, "I don't, but some others do." According to their reports, those who are involved in substance abuse, glue sniffing is the most common practices among them. Glue sniffing among street children is common due to three main factors: it is relatively cheap; access is easy and legal; and the feeling of "high" (similar to alcohol intoxication) happens very quickly [25].

The street children are in physical, mental, social and spiritual health perils and they are between

the devil and the deep sea of different violence, abuse and other social discriminations [26]. They frequently suffer from different skin diseases. Besides, some common diseases prevalent among them are: cold fever, cough, sneezing, influenza, diarrhea, dysentery, headache, pain in stomach, defects in eyesight, etc. Furthermore, it is found that the deplorable living conditions of street children, with no obvious rights or way out, make them highly vulnerable to HIV/AIDS [27].



**Photo 2. Many street children in DU campus used to sleep at open places**

However, among the street children, the decision to seek medical advice depends mainly on two factors: gravity of the illness and financial situation. In all circumstances, the first and by far the most common initial response to an illness is an attempt at “self-medication”, using both homemade and commercially prepared remedies. In situations where ill health persists longer than a few days and immobilizes them, they seek health care [28]. During their sickness, their friends help them. They mostly depend on the treatment and other medical facilities provided by the outdoor services of nearby Dhaka Medical College Hospital every morning in a working day at almost no cost.

### **5.2.3 Education and recreation**

Most of the street children though that it was only lack of education for which their conditions were poor and they expected education with emphasis for changing their poor economic conditions [29]. Nevertheless, majority of the children who participated in this study are not school-going. Those who are school-going are mostly the beneficiaries of different Non-Governmental Organizations. Apart from them, almost all of the participants in this study lack any specific skills that may help them secure a decent living. However, most of them wish to study if they get financial support to maintain their living as they themselves have to earn their living. Some of the

street children can read, though they don't go to any formal school. They have learnt to read by attending in different mobile “street schools” which are run by many university students. Some of them can only write their name.

It is found that street children usually don't have any organized recreation [30]. Number of participants in this study mentioned that they had actually no time for games. Most of them told that they used to chat with their friends, while a few watched television standing outside different shops or played games such as football/cricket.

### **5.3 Coping Strategies**

The life of street children is full of tension, insecurity and struggle for survival. The surrounding environment of them is brutal and risky. They are engaged in work from early age and had to work long hours in exploitative circumstances [31]. They experience grief in different ways and use various coping strategies to deal with it, both adaptive and maladaptive. Their experience of grief is shaped by diverse socio-cultural and environmental factors, such as access to resources (economical as well social), social roles, relationships with significant others, religious beliefs and aspirations. Thus the physical as well as the social environment in which they live play a critical role in determining their experiences and coping strategies [32]. Everything they get in their life is achieved through the effectiveness of such strategies.

However, they are forced to continuously change these strategies in line with the condition they live in. For example, as most of the children are not involved in work that produces certain income, one may fail to manage a meal despite working a whole day. This can happen every other day. In those days, they don't decide instantly whether they'll starve or not. Rather, they try to manage a way. Either they beg for food from different nearby households or take thrown-away foods. Or one may get too sick to work and thus fail to earn a meal. In such cases, while some are taken care of by their respective parents or relatives, some take the help from their peer-groups. In any situations when they fail to succeed in a way, they adopt another to cope with. Depending on situations and needs, their coping strategies are adopted.

Although living on the streets is full of hardships, most children in this study reported that rather than sitting at home/street idly, they preferred to

cope with them. They face daily challenges to find work and manage food; additionally, in the cases of those children who have no fixed place to sleep, a safe place. They use several support systems to overcome these difficulties. Usually they receive supports from their friends or peer-groups.

Street children take enormous pride in earning their own money and in the fact that they are not dependent on anyone. A street child's work is strongly connected to his social identity and his feelings of self-worth and confidence [33]. Children in this study reported that they preferred self-employment for income generation. Though they face harassment by the police, municipal authorities and other adult competitors, they think:

“When I'm self-employed, I work when I want to and as long as I want. No one is there to give any orders. I don't have to give my share of income to any bosses. I earn and I spend. I'm on my own.”

#### 5.4 Social Network

The problems experienced by street children include: homelessness, exploitation, labor, abuse, health difficulties, coercion and control by adult gangs, conflict with the law, lack of education, etc. [34]. It is needless to say that the street children are the marginalized segment of the mainstream society. They are mostly excluded, ignored and deprived of their basic human rights. However, most of them said that they maintained good relationship and interaction with children of their same age categories. They have good interaction with whom they live.

The children used to stay in groups and share their happenings, daily experiences and feelings with each other. They used to make themselves updated with the information of different free feasts, political strikes, raids by police etc. The information of political strikes are important to them since they are paid by the political leaders to participate in the processions. They march in those processions holding the placards of political parties or do picketing. Since most of them used to live and sleep on different pavements, there are higher chances that they get caught by police for any occurrences in nearby marketplaces, locality or in political processions. If they get caught, sometimes they are detained in the police custody and are often subject to torture. Thus the information on raids

is also crucial to them which they get from their peers [35].

Out on the streets, street-working children struggle to earn their own meals. They strive to live on their own. But it never is that easy as it sounds. The daily challenges they face obstruct them to make a living. This is when they need a social network. It's true that the social network they usually maintain is not sufficient enough to assure them a better way of living. Nevertheless, it's one of the few means they can manage and they are happy with it. Most of the street-working children place this sort of social network at the heart of their survival strategy and feel that this helps.

#### 6. CONCLUSION

Children are the potential foundation for the future development of any country. Unfortunately, in Dhaka, we find a lot of street children living or working on the streets, although they are supposed to be at school for their own future as well as for their nation. These children could be teachers, doctors, engineers, lawyers, police officers, judges... but they are killing their and the country's future only for their survival due to poverty, family disintegration, abandonment, neglect and social unrest [36].

Most children are well aware of the ways they are perceived by the public. They experience harassment and contempt from passers-by and the police, as something which is inherent to their existence on the streets [37]. They don't even get half of the facilities a privileged child gets. On top of that, continuously facing neglectful behavior (which is very common in Bangladesh) from the privileged people around them may morally degrade them to the extent that they may become disenchanted with normal living and resort to crime or drug abuse which would eventually bring no good for a country like Bangladesh.

Every child is precious and thus deserves care like a privileged one gets. This study attempted to understand the lived experience of street-working children, the challenges they are faced with, the health risk they are exposed to, their coping strategies and the social network they maintain to survive. It is very much expected that no children will end up on the streets. Recently, the issue of child rights has globally gained an awful lot of attention that came in the form of international convention, summit, and global

action for children [12]. Different measures have been taken and different policies have already been formulated in Bangladesh. More importantly, there are certain existing provisions<sup>1</sup> in the Constitution of Bangladesh that directly address the rights of every child living in the state.

However, the interests of different players in this area are of course often diametrically opposed. This implies that all parties will have to be prepared to give and take - a process that needs to be economically viable and ultimately in the interests of the children who do not have the maturity to decide for themselves [39]. In addition, only taking measures, formulating policies and provisions may not be enough in actual sense. If so, there would be no children on the streets by now. Therefore, implementation of every measure should have to be made sure and people from all walks of life should come forward to turn the world equally livable for all children.

## 7. LIMITATIONS

The limitations of this study include: a major portion of data is reliant on participants' self-reports and may not be free from unintentional/intentional response biases or deliberate concealment, though researchers tried their utmost to eliminate such errors; limited time the researchers got as the study was actually conducted as a student research project. Besides, the study was conducted on just 110 street-working children and could not cover any broad areas. With more time and by including more participants from comprehensive areas, the researchers feel that better understandings might have been yielded.

## ETHICAL APPROVAL AND CONSENT

Prior to research, ethical approval was obtained from adhering Ethical Review Board. Voluntary

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<sup>1</sup>The Constitution of Bangladesh has provisions relevant to children's rights in its directive principles of state policy [Articles 15, 17 and 25(1)], the fundamental rights [Articles 27, 28(1)(2)(3)(4), 31, 32 and 39(1)(2)], and the power of judicial review [Articles 26(1)(2)]. Articles 27, 28 and 31 of the Constitution lay down the general principles regarding the protection of children from all forms of discrimination. The Constitution in these articles provide that all citizens being equal before the law and being entitled to equal protection, must be treated in accordance with law without any discrimination. The other laws relating to the protection and welfare of children in Bangladesh are not contained in a single statute; rather they can be found scattered over numerous laws and statutes [38].

participation of the study subjects was ensured. As most of the children were unable to read and write, consent was acquired before participation in the interviews.

## FUNDING

The study was entirely funded by the authors. The authors designed the study, conducted the interview schedules and collected, analyzed and interpreted the data.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors sincerely thank Zafrin Ahmed Liza for her friendly assistance in publishing this paper, Fatema Tuzzohora Sheela for taking the photos during the research period, all the participants in this study and the beloved friends who willingly helped in different phases of the study.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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## APPENDIX

## Participants' Profile

Characteristics	Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Sex	Female	56	50.9
	Male	54	49.1
Age (in years)	5-8	28	25.5
	9-12	55	50.0
	13-15	27	24.5
Occupation	Flower-selling	48	43.6
	Water-selling	22	20.0
	Chocolate-selling	17	15.5
	No fixed work	23	20.9
Income (in Taka)	100-150	80	72.7
	151-200	17	15.5
	201-250	9	8.2
	251-300	4	3.6
Utilizer of the earnings	Self	23	20.9
	Parents	61	55.5
	With whom they live	26	23.6
Place of sleeping	Pavement	61	55.5
	Foot over bridge	31	28.2
	Under trees	13	11.8
	Abandoned buildings	5	4.5
Same place every night?	Yes	34	30.9
	No	76	69.1
With whom?	Either one or both parents	64	58.2
	Siblings	11	10.0
	Relatives	27	24.5
	Others	8	7.3
Ability to read and write	No	60	54.5
	Can write name only	23	20.9
	Read	18	16.4
	Read and write	9	8.2
Sleeping hungry for	3 nights	5	4.5
	2 nights	20	18.2
	1 night	78	70.9
	No	7	6.4
Source of winter clothes	Parents	22	20.0
	Relatives	54	49.1
	Donation	29	26.4
	Own income	5	4.5
Recreational activities	Playing	90	81.8
	Gossiping	17	15.5
	Others	3	2.7
Suffering from skin diseases	Yes	73	66.4
	No	37	33.6
Reason for migration to Dhaka	In pursuit of better living	60	54.5
	River erosion	13	11.8
	Parental wish	31	28.2
	Own wish	6	5.5
Contact with parents	Yes	68	61.8
	No	42	38.2

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Peer-review history:  
The peer review history for this paper can be accessed here:  
<http://www.sdiarticle4.com/review-history/56985>