

Review article

The consequence of urban street children's lifestyle on their health status

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Around 3.5 percent of the population migrates internally every year in Bangladesh. There are two major drivers behind this reality. People move to urban centres after losing village homes and livelihoods following disasters fuelled by climate change. They also come to the city seeking employments created by the rapid growth of the garment industry. A large proportion of migrants from villages end up in urban slums. Dhaka city has more than 5,000 slums inhabited by an estimated four million people.¹

A sea of tattered structure serves as home to thousands of poor families living in Bangladesh. Struggling to survive day to day, many children and their parents are garbage sorters. They search through fresh garbage heaps to collect resalable items for their existence. The problems of the slum children are universal. They are the part of the social tragedy; as economy grows, poverty, loss of traditional values, domestic violence, physical and mental abuse becomes more and more common.²

Urban areas offer great potential to secure children's rights and accelerate progress towards the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Cities attract and generate wealth, jobs and investment, and are therefore associated with economic development. The more urban a country, the more likely it is to have higher incomes and stronger institutions. Children in urban areas are often better off than their rural counterparts thanks to higher standards of health, protection, education and sanitation. But urban advances have been uneven, and millions of children in marginalized urban settings confront daily challenges and deprivations of their rights.³

It is obvious from study that general poverty lies at the center of the increasing number of street children and street life makes the children vulnerable to a variety of problems including ill health.⁴

The urban population is rapidly expanding because of mass population migration to cities for a possible better life. The cities and towns are also expanding but the sheer volume of people compromises the ability of the city to meet their basic needs. A large proportion of the migrating population ends up residing in slums in inhuman conditions. As a result, urban poverty and hunger are increasing in developing countries like Bangladesh. Lack of basic amenities like safe drinking water, proper housing, drainage and excreta disposal make this population vulnerable to infectious diseases which further compromises the nutrition of those living

in the slums.⁵

It is projected that half of the Bangladeshi population will live in urban areas by 2020 and nearly one third of this urban population will be slum dwellers. The ongoing process of rapid urbanization has deleterious effects on health and nutrition and social problems especially for the children.⁶

The presence of children living on the slum has elicited emotive public concern, been given considerable media coverage, and in the late twentieth century, has been a matter of priority for national and international child welfare organizations. There is a worldwide growing concern about the slum children.⁷

Researches of the worldwide problem have sought to explain the root causes of this phenomenon, have summarized the identifying characteristics of slum children worldwide, and have documented the dire consequences of a slum lifestyle for children's health and development.⁸

The poor sanitary condition in the crowded urban neighborhoods and the inadequate waste disposal was favorable for the spread of infectious diseases like tuberculosis, pneumonia, and diarrhea. It is also evident that death rate among households of poor children in Latin America, Africa and Asia was exponentially higher than in the Western Europe households or in the United States of America. It is also suggested that policy making must bring into consideration the health factor to curb the grave effects on health caused by urbanization.⁹

The slums of the cities of most developing countries has become the home for children accompanied by adults and leading an aimless existence, living by what they can obtain from hands-out, waste collecting, doing menial jobs, or by the way of stealing.¹⁰

Substance abuse, commercial sex, and other form of illegal and antisocial activities are common, resulting in regular conflicts with law. Exploiting by drug cartels, prostitution rings and similar illegal network is common.¹¹

The problem has reached a situation where "children in especially difficult circumstances have come to be listed among the priorities for action at the World Summit for Children. Programs aimed at slum children have moved progressively from the domain of charitable activities to social and health services.¹²

There is a growing international concern regarding problem of the rising numbers of slum children in urban areas, mostly within the developing world. This has

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translated into the increasing number of governmental and non-governmental organizations through the world whose main activity is to help alleviate the plight of slum children. They are seen to lack primary socialization and modeling framework of the family that thought to foster healthy growth and development. As such they are seen to be developmentally at risk.¹³

The term slum children itself has almost disappeared from the welfare and analytic literature, which now uses different appellations to refer to slum children and other underprivileged groups. Children themselves, of course, are still on the streets, easily visible in the great majority of urban centers. What has been called the global or “worldwide phenomenon of slum children” has neither vanished from sight nor effectively has been solved. However, current perspectives tend not to demarcate slum children so radically from other poor children in urban centers or to conceptualize the homeless in isolation from other groups of children facing adversely. Welfare agencies now talk of “urban children at risk”, which conceptualizes slum children as one of a number of groups most at risk and requiring urgent attention.¹⁴

Slum children constitute a marginalized group in most societies. They do not have what society considers appropriate relationships with major institutions of childhood such as family, education and health. The Encyclopedia of Public Health defines marginalized groups as, ‘To be marginalized is to be placed in the margins, and thus excluded from the privilege and power found at the center’. Latin observes that “‘Marginality’ is so thoroughly demeaning, for economic well-being, for human dignity, as well as for physical security. Marginal groups can always be identified by members of dominant society, and will face irrevocable discrimination.”¹⁵

The continuous exposure, to harsh environments and the nature of their lifestyles make them vulnerable to substance abuse and this threatens their mental, physical, social and spiritual wellbeing.¹² In many regions, most of these children are confronted with discrimination and view health and social services with suspicion. They live a transitory lifestyle and are vulnerable to inadequate nutrition, physical injuries, substance use, and health problems including sexual and reproductive health problems. These factors reduce the effectiveness of interventions that target slum children.¹⁶

Large groups of children unsupervised by adults have appeared in almost every country during some part of history. Most are found in large, urban areas of developing countries. The problem has worsened across the globe in recent years. Several related economic, social and political factors have been linked with the phenomenon of slum children. Land reform, population growth, drought, rural to urban migration, economic

recession, unemployment, poverty, and violence have all been implicated.¹⁷

The term “Street children” came under general use after the United Nations year of the child 1979.¹⁵ Before this the street children were referred s homeless and abandoned, or runaways. Most definitions of slum children concentrate on just two characteristics: presence on the slum and contact with the family. The most common definition of a street child or youth is “any girl or boy who has not reached adulthood, for whom the street (in the broadest sense of the word, including unoccupied dwellings, wasteland, etc.) has become her or his habitual abode and/or sources of livelihood, and who is inadequately protected, supervised or directed by responsible adults” (Inter-NGO, 1985). This definition was formulated by Inter-NGOs in Switzerland in 1983.¹⁸ Children on the slum: “Home based” children who spend much of the day on the street but have some family support and usually return home at night. Children of the street: “Street based” children who spend most of the days and nights on the street and are functionally without family support. The UNICEF definition was developed with Latin America in mind, where studies suggest that 80% to 90% of slum children have some contact with their family. It may be inappropriate for some countries like India, where often whole families remain on the street.¹⁹

As consequences of where and how the children are forced to live, many health hazards are a fact of life for street children. Findings food for is a constant source of struggle for street children, eat scavenged food such as vegetables from open air stalls, and eggs, bread, and meat discarded by restaurants. Consequently, they suffer from many intestinal ailments that can lead to death.²⁰

Street children are often found in busy places such as railway stations, bus stations, in front of film or night clubs, with no adult supervision, sleeping in half-destroyed houses, abandoned basements, under bridges and in open air. To survive they have been seen to roam the streets of urban areas begging and looking for jobs in order to obtain food and other basic necessities. They usual work in poor conditions, dangerous to their health, and starve some days. Therefore, street children survive on the streets through conventional and unconventional ways such as rubbish picking, shoe shining, flower selling, petty crimes, drug abuse, begging, panhandling, prostitution, petty theft; and drug trafficking. They also develop passive and aggressive attitudes, replacing their families with street gangs and experiencing social, sexual, physical and emotional abuse.²¹

The United Nations has been attributed as estimating the population of slum children worldwide at 150 million, with the number rising daily. These young people are

more appropriately known as community children, s they are the offspring of our communal world. Ranging in age from three to eighteen, about 40% of those are homeless as a percentage of world population, unprecedented in the history of civilization. The other 60% work on the slum to support their families. They are unable to attend school and are considered to live in “especially difficult circumstances”. Increasingly, these children are the defenseless victims of brutal violence, sexual exploitation, abject neglect, chemical addiction, and human rights violation.²²

Slum children are the children of the poorest people of Bangladesh. They live, grow up and work on the margins of the society in a state of neglect and deprivation. They lack protection, education, affection, care and proper guidance from adults.²³

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