

Four lakh children on city streets vulnerable to abuse, exploitation

FAIZUL KHAN TANIM

Around 60 percent of more than four lakh street children in Dhaka are leading a vulnerable life as they are compelled to indulge in anti-social activities, according to studies conducted by a number of government and non-government agencies.

Drug traffickers use these children as carrier while political parties hire them for demonstrations, rallies and processions. They are often maltreated, physically abused and forced to take part in dangerous activities.

Labelled as *tokai* or *kangali*, these underprivileged children wander around the city streets, parks, bus terminals, kitchen markets and railway stations. Some of them work as porters and some as helpers of bus and tempo drivers.

However, the street children say they prefer begging, the easiest way to earn. This correspondent talked to 30 floating children, 22 of them said begging is the best option. The rest eight explained why selling candies, books or flowers are better choices.

Seven-year-old Rasul at Gulshan-1 intersection said: "Whole day income from begging can be as high as Tk 300. But you cannot make more than Tk 25 profit by selling 50 pieces of candy a day." So he thinks begging is better option.

Faruk is an orphan. When he was a baby, other beggars used to hire him from his guardians to earn more by begging. "I have become a beggar as people

ple around me told me that begging is the easiest means of earning," Faruk said.

Amzad of Karwan Bazar has a different story. He sells newspapers as his poor parents cannot afford to send him to school. "I need to make contribution to my family."

He earns Tk 120 by selling 60 newspapers a day. "Although the amount is small, it is more prestigious than begging," Amzad said.

Akbar, who also sells newspapers, said: "I used to beg before. But it was a bad experience for me. People sitting in their cars used to get very angry as I begged. Once a man slapped me and asked me to work, not to beg."

"What I am doing does not fetch enough money but still it is better," he said.

The government and non-government studies pointed out several categories of these floating children. Some of them just wander around the streets and some spend time doing various jobs and selling small things. They return home at night if they have a family, or spend the night on the streets.

The other categories include children who return to temporary shelters. And there are parentless children, who live 24 hours a day in the streets. These children are particularly vulnerable to abuse, crime and anti-social activities.

Most NGO activists say the city residents have a civic responsibility towards these street children and they should help them. One easy way of

helping these kids is to buy candies or books from them to encourage them.

The basic reasons for these children to come down to the streets were pointed out in a study "Appropriate Resources for Improving Children's Environment (ARISE)," a collaborative initiative of the Department of Social Services under the Ministry of Social Welfare and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

The reasons are extreme poverty in the rural area, con-

home and come to the cities if they lived in rural areas. Escaping from the harshness of life, these children lead an 'independent' life begging or wandering in the streets. A very few of them want to work.

Kakoli Chakravarty, community mobilisation and awareness raising specialist of ARISE, said the constraints these children face in their everyday life include hunger, no accommodation, no attention from family, unhealthy living environment and unemployment.



Most floating children like these live on footpaths where they easily become victims of physical exploitation (right) and a few of them earn their livelihood from city wastes (left).

sequences of broken families, strains of living as a child of single parent, family breakdown due to polygamy, neglect and cruelty by stepmother and violence or exploitation at home.

The above factors force the children to run away from

Many of these children indulge in anti-social activities. They are trained by the drug traffickers and criminals who use them. They learn slang such as *body taan* (stealing watch), *money taan* (money-bag snatching), *round* (pistol) and *chalk* (knife).



A number of NGOs are working to rehabilitate these destitute children. These include Aparajeyo Bangladesh, Population Services and Training Centre (PSTC), Padakkhep Manabik Unnayan Kendra, Samaj Paribartan Kendra (SPK) and Shoishab Bangla-

des. Wahida Banu, a director of Aparajeyo Bangladesh, said they help the street children, especially who are harassed and picked up by the police from the streets on minor charges.

"When we get the news of

such arrests, our field workers rush to the spot. Then we try to get them released with the help of our lawyers. We bring them to our shelter and give them food, education, clothing and mental support," she added.

Founder Director of SPK

advocate Eleza Rahi said they are also providing shelter, legal aid and job placement help for the destitute children. SPK has a number of drop-in centres (DIC), a shelter for the street children who are separated from their parents and families.



Commuters standing in a queue suffer from rains and scorching heat, in the absence of passenger sheds.

Ticket counters yet to be constructed

SULTANA RAHMAN

The Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) will set up 27 passenger sheds for Bangladesh Roads Transport Corporation (BRTC) buses in the city but no recommendation has been made for private bus companies, a DCC official said.

Hundreds of commuters have been facing difficulties with lack of ticket counters and passenger sheds since March this year when the DCC evicted 500 such counters along with sheds mostly set on footpaths. After the eviction, private bus owners demand alternative options for commuters.

We submitted our proposal four months back offering financial

support to put up passenger sheds. But authorities have not yet taken any action to overcome the situation," alleged Mahtab Uddin Chowdhury, joint convener of the Association of Bus Companies (ABC).

Around 1,800 buses of 36 companies had four to five ticket counters each on the 34 bus routes. At present tickets are sold under large umbrellas along the roads, while some companies sell tickets from counters in the city boarder areas like Mohammadpur, Savar and Tongi.

"With the lack of counters and sheds we burn in the scorching heat and get drenched in the pouring rains," said Habib, a commuter from Uttara.

It is alleged that inconsistency between the DCC authorities, communications ministry and the bus owners' associations has created the sufferings for commuters after the eviction of counters without having an alternative.

"We have asked for opinions of concerned experts -- the Dhaka Transport Coordination Board (DTCB) and DCC's traffic engineering division -- to establish the passengers' shed, but did not receive any response," said Abu Taleb, chief estate officer of DCC.

"The 27 passenger sheds for BRTC bus commuters are being examined. But it is certain that no ticket counters for private bus companies will be set up as these struc-

tures harm the beauty of the city," Taleb added.

Soon after the eviction, owners of bus companies met the concerned authorities several times to remedy the situation. A committee has been formed with the communication ministry, DCC and representatives from the bus companies to find a solution. Bus companies submitted a design proposal for ticket counters.

But no decision has yet been taken.

DCC officials said the ticket counters were evicted as they were illegally set up on footpaths, which created hazards to pedestrians and also destroyed the beauty of the city.

Be careful with media centres

IMRUL HASAN

Thousands of media centres have been established in the city without the approval of the Dhaka City Corporation (DCC). These institutions act as links between private tutors and students.

"Media centres do not even fall into any category of trade enlisted under the DCC rule book," said a high official of the trade licence department of DCC.

"There are 265 types of business but since media centres are not included in that list, they fall under serial 34 which makes it easier for them to obtain a trade licence. But these media centres never even try to acquire trade

licences in the fear that their trade and procedure of work may be investigated," he added.

"I have been running this business for 11 years. There has never been any need for getting a trade licence. Moreover, the DCC itself owns the market," said Shamim, the manager of Sheba Tutor's Home at Azimpur Super Market.

Maksud Anwar, the inspector of trade licence department of Zone 5 said that people seek permits to open coaching centres but not for media centres. "It is an illegal business. So we cannot issue a licence for it."

During the beginning, media centres were owned and run by an

In the beginning, media centres were owned and run by an educated group of people whose work procedure and customer services were efficient and ethical

educated group of people whose work procedure and customer services were efficient and ethical. But due to a boom in the business, more people started coming into the scene and opened up new centres with only one goal and that was to make money the easy way.

"I have lost around Tk 2000 that I had paid in advance along with an additional Tk 200 in membership fees at a media centre," said Abdul Kader, a victim of fraud.

"I was told that there was a perfect tutor's job for me and it would start from the beginning of the coming month. I paid the amount which was half of the supposed

first month's full payment," he added.

Once the money had been paid the media centre officials toyed around with Kader for two weeks. He later found out that the promised job never existed and one day he went to the media centre only to find its doors locked. The staff had also vanished.

"The general public should be cautious when dealing with media centres. It is advisable that they take their jobs and get paid in the first month. Only after receiving the salary should they pay the media centre," said Jahiruddin, the director of Buetic Media.



A staff of a media centre at Katabon waiting for clients.