Towards a Child-Friendly Society

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OVER five lakh children live on the streets in Bangladesh. They lack the security of a family and home, protection of the law and recognition from society. But what rights does even a "normal" child -- with a family and home, going to school (or, in many cases, work), apparently safe and secure -- actually have?

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), approved on November 20, 1989, is an international agreement, which articulates the human rights of children and the standards to which all governments must aspire in realising these rights for all children without discrimination of any kind. According to this agreement, children have the right to life, survival and development and the best interests of the child must be a primary consideration in all matters pertaining to children and their views considered in all such matters.



The 54 articles of the convention promise children, among other things, the right to education, equal treatment and the right to an opinion, emphasising on participation, provision and protection. They are based on the concept of the child as an active and contributing participant in society and cover the basic rights to survive and develop, including health care, food and clean water and education. They also deal with exploitation of children at work; physical, sexual and psychological abuse and discrimination and general mistreatment, making it a duty for parties to the Convention to protect and, where necessary, provide rehabilitation for children.

Every five years, the government presents a UNCRC Report and alternative reports are presented by non-governmental organisations (NGOs), pointing out the lapses in the government report and making their own recommendations. This year, Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF), which is working specifically on child rights with 12 partners who in turn work with 54 other partners throughout the country, has, after a yearlong exercise, drawn up an alternative report. The report, which was presented for discussion and recommendations at a seminar at the LGED Bhaban in Agargaon last week, focused on four thematic areas -- education, child labour, juvenile justice and special protection.

According to the report, there is a major problem regarding definition of the child, with discrepancies in the standard age for a child. Where the legal age is 18, the age of sexual consent is 16, which allows young girls to be exploited and forced into the sex trade without any legal implications for the exploiters. With regards to civil rights and freedom, many children do not have access to birth registration, resulting in the inaccuracy of their age. In terms of family environment and alternative healthcare, the government of Bangladesh, which signed the UNCRC treaty in 1990, holds reservations against adoption due to religious reasons.

In the area of education, though primary enrolment is currently at 90 percent, the retention rate is still low. This has been attributed to lack of proper school facilities