

Growing, groaning in confinement

Death of open space is not the main reason for girls' peerless life

DURDANA GHAS

Towrin looked through the window of her room. Some boys were playing cricket on a nearby street. She could hear their loud applause to one of the players when he hit a 'big six'.

Stifling a sigh she was back to her desk and started reading a textbook. When she finished reading after an hour the boys were still playing in the slanting rays of the afternoon sun.

But Towrin did not go outside. She turned on her personal computer, her friend in leisure.

This correspondent recently talked to Towrin, a student of class nine at Basabo.

"It is not like anyone has asked me not to go out playing. I used to play when I was a little girl. But I stopped going out when I sensed that I am grown up and other girls are also not going out."

"Despite all, I feel myself disadvantaged," she concluded.

Deena was playing a computer game in her room. Her ears were numbed with the hammering sound of piling in a nearby plot.

"There were some open spaces but all of those have been eaten up by big buildings in the last two years. Sometimes I play in the garage. But it does not feel like playing in an open field," she told this correspondent.

But scarce open space is not the main reason for the girls' confined life. It is mostly the lack of security for which parents press the girls to stay indoors.

"I can't let my daughter play outside. I know that she loves to play but whenever she goes out I have to provide someone else with her because I feel insecure," said Deena's mother.

"When she realises that I'm discouraging her from going out, gradually she loses interest and keeps herself confined to her room. Sometimes she doesn't want to go out even with me," she said.

Lack of community feeling is another reason. Many urban parents told Star City that they do not feel comfortable to let their children play with the neighbours' because they hardly know



Some suggestions and observations

According to a study, the main reasons cited by parents for absence of playing facilities are insecurity, increasing vehicular movement and serious dearth of space.

The target group of the study was well-off urban middleclass families in the Dhanmondi residential area.

"It was found that even if there were open spaces parents were not interested to send their children, especially girls, to play due to security reasons," said architect Rashed Bhuiyan, who conducted the study six months ago.

"The initial step to ensure security is to create a locality where children will have independent mobility and play with freedom," said Rashed.

To create locality, he suggested introducing dead ends in the roads where vehicular movement would be less than 2,000 per day.

Dr MSI Mullick, professor of child and adolescent psychiatry at

Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University, said if children do not have outdoor activity their social development is truncated and they do not learn how to act in different social situations.

In the absence of outdoor activity a child fails to cope with and handle social stress like bullying or quarrel with a friend, he said.

"As a result he or she grows up with low self-esteem, remains weak in decision making and lacks self confidence. Often he or she cannot express expectations, cannot defy or argue and fails to become assertive. All these things create a sense in the brain and we call this 'internalisation'," he said.

"In our country girls are often subjected to this because they are comparatively less socially exposed due to over anxiety and over protective attitude of the parents," said Dr Mullick.

"Parents think that peer interaction

is not important but this is a part of social learning. A child needs to belong to a group," he said.

Wahida Banu, chairperson, Bangladesh Shishu Odhikar Forum, said that confining girls to home is a traditional feature of urban middleclass families.

Middleclass families tend to 'control' their girls. Boys can enjoy the freedom of life but girls cannot. In most cases they even need permission to stroll in the neighbourhood.

"From my observation while working with educated middleclass girls I can say that many of them cannot speak, participate, opine or share freely because they are controlled by parents," said Banu, director programme of Aparajeyo-Bangladesh, a voluntary organisation.

"As a result they become introvert but the family takes pride in it," she said.

them.

"I won't feel comfortable if my daughter plays with our neighbours' children because I don't know the people living in my apartment. I don't even know how many children are there in this building," said a parent.

Saif Ul Haque, a parent of two girls at Khilgaon, said: "Most parents think there is no need for girls to go out. But what is their fault?"

Dr Sabir Ahmed, professor, Department of Architecture, Buet, said that unless safety is ensured urban parents are unlikely to let their children, especially girls, play freely outside their home.

"But it is difficult to find a place where they can play safely. The city planners hardly think about this issue," he said.

According to a study by Rashed Bhuiyan, an architect, creating a secure locality is the first step to ensure security and free mobility of children in the city.

Hamidul Islam Hillol, coordinator of a study on the negative sides of confined urban children, said girl children are getting very formal sporting facilities like those at the Sultana Kamal Sports Complex.

"But it is more important to ensure informal playing facilities for the girls which is very much absent in this city," he said.

According to the research done by the Working for Better Bangladesh Trust 67 percent children of Dhaka city do not have any playing facilities.

Asked if it is possible to create locality to ensure safety and free movement of children Tapan Kumar Nath, project director, Detailed Area Plan (DAP), said they did not thought of such an idea before. "As you have suggested, it [creating locality] can now be included in the plan," he said.

Asked about Dhaka City Corporation's role in providing children's playing facilities, Mayor Sadeque Hossain Khoka said they are trying to free the open places from the grip of encroachers.



A food festival began Sunday at hotel Westin Dhaka with a call to 'feed the body and nourish the soul' with authentic Thai cuisines prepared by chefs from Thailand. Along with delicious food a cultural troupe from Thailand is demonstrating the Thai way of life. The festival will continue till March 18 at restaurant Taste with dinner.

Dhanmondi residents for rescue of children's park

TAWFIQUE ALI

Dhanmondi residents want the illegally occupied park at road no-4 to remain open for children and vow to free it from the organisation using it exclusively.

A cricket academy has been occupying the children's park without permission from the authorities concerned and making money by renting it out for sports events.

Zeenat Islam Hafiz, a resident at road-4, demanded that the field must remain open for children of the locality. "We are ready to take any initiative to free the playground and bring it under community maintenance," she said.

"In fact, we are irritated with the kind of nuisance created at the playground particularly at nighttime," she said. "Chaos and hurly-burly of this sort in the name of sports during nighttime is unacceptable in a residential area."

She said her family bought a

residential plot there considering its location adjacent to the children's park in 1980. At that time, the park had a pleasant look, equipped with non-mechanised children rides like swings, see-saws and sleepers.

"My children used to play at the park," Zeenat said. "We are deprived of the right to use the park as it is being used exclusively by a sports organisation."

A town planner, Momtaz Shirin, who has been residing at Dhanmondi road-3 for the last 35 years, said that sports activities organised by the academy continue till late at night, which create nuisance for the residents of nearby houses.

"During 1960s and 70s, Dhanmondi residential area was like a paradise," Shirin said. "This was a children's park where I used to play during my school days. Local women too used to pass their afternoon leisure at this park."

Sharmin Akhtar, another resident of road-4 appealed for making sure that the field

remains open to children. "I have seen the playground occupied exclusively by a group ever since I started living in the area six years ago," she said.

What is most offensive is that the club arranges cricket match or practice even at night playing music at a high volume creating serious sound pollution, said Sharmin.

After a story was published on Star City on the park, someone allegedly threatened architect Iqbal Habib, a resident at Dhanmondi road-11/A and member secretary of Bangladesh Paribesh Anodolon (Bapa), over phone for his comments in the story.

"The caller threatened me with dire consequences for having talked to the media," Iqbal said. "I will lodge a diary with the police in this connection."

The said cricket academy took over the playground in the name of maintenance a couple of years back, restricting access of the general public.

Look before you take a walk

City fathers do not bother about the open manholes

RIZANUZZAMAN LASKAR

Kamrul Islam was out for a late evening stroll amid a severe power cut in Goran. It was 9:30pm and the patchy, potholed street was dark and empty below an overcast sky.

A thunder exploded with a flash of lightning as raindrops started falling. Kamrul looked at the sky as if to catch a glimmer of light. He increased his pace of walking as the raindrops became bigger.

Suddenly, Kamrul's leg missed the hard tarmac and landed inside what he felt like a deep hole. Almost half of his body sank inside the opening when the 38-year-old managed

to put a break putting his hands on both sides of his body.

Two young men came running from a nearby place and pulled him out of the manhole.

"It was so dark. As I was rushing, I did not notice the manhole. I was lucky that they (young men) came to my rescue," said Kamrul Islam.

He suffered injuries in hands, knee and ligament from the fall.

"Our city fathers have a tendency to not to wake up until something tragic happens. They should be held responsible as open manholes pose grave dangers to the pedestrians," said an aching Kamrul Islam.

Local residents alleged that the manhole has been lying

without a lid for over two weeks. And it is only one of the few thousand uncovered manholes in the city. Kamrul Islam is only one of the many unrecorded victims who have gone through such a terrible experience.

Open manholes can turn into a death trap for anybody anytime especially for children and old people.

Noorjahan, (4) slipped into a lidless manhole at Shahidnagar in Lalbagh area in the old town in October two years ago. The girl was playing on the street.

Onlookers tried to pull her out by using a plastic pipe. But little Noorjahan could not reach the other end of the pipe. She was swept away by sewage current.

Reportedly, that was the last that anyone saw her alive.

According to sources in the utility services, majority of these manhole covers are either stolen by petty thieves or left unreplaced after municipal works.

While neither Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) or Water and Sewerage Authority (Wasa) has records of the number of uncovered manholes, the number may as well be around ten thousand, unofficial sources said.

The authorities are not even aware of the total number of manholes in the city. After the covers are stolen, the manholes often remain open and unprotected for months. They move only after someone from the

neighbourhood lodges complaints.

"Even after we inform them, they take several weeks to install new covers," said Ahsanuddin, a resident of Farmgate who has open manhole right in front on his house and is having serious problems getting his car in or out of the garage.

Sources in the DCC said the time required for replacing a manhole cover is usually one or two weeks.

"Sometimes, the contractor who is supposed to supply the manhole covers takes longer time. And due to this delay, some manholes remain open for longer times," said a zonal engineer of DCC adding that around 8 to 10 covers get stolen from his zone each week.

Finding a permanent solution to the problem of 'missing' manhole lids has been quite a daunting task for the municipal officials.

"We are quite helpless in this issue. It is virtually impossible to put check points for each manhole," said an official at the engineering department of DCC.

With each of the metal manhole covers costing around TK 1,800 apart from installation charges, the authorities have to spend a huge amount of money every year to replace them.

Currently, the authorities are gradually replacing metal manhole covers with cement slabs to discourage thefts and reduce costs.

But it has been reported that use of cement slabs often creates inconveniences to commuters because utility men dig streets to remove slabs whenever they go for a repair or cleaning job.

The DCC officials said that although there is no specific department to look after the manholes, the zonal supervisors take care of the roads and alleys, and so the manholes in their respective areas.



The children's park at Dhanmondi road 4 is being used exclusively by a sports organisation.