



# Promoting Child Rights



## Slum children: Whither safety?

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IN the blinding midday sunlight, the yard looked like a murky swampland overflowing with rubbish.

As the daze slowly dimmed, the children came into view over a dozen of them playing on the dingy surface covered with all manners of litters that sat uncollected.

Some boys played with marbles beside a huge pile of rubbish. Several other children chased each other around leaving behind tiny footprints on raw sewage sitting stagnant on the ground.

A little boy sat in a corner trying to blow air into a filthy piece of condom. And a little girl darted around with a piece of burning polystyrene foam, the kind that produces an extremely toxic exhaust when burnt.

These are the children of Shobha Kutir a slum near the Rayer Bazar Shaheed Intellectual Monument in the suburb of Mohammadpur. Most of them malnourished facing poverty and suppressing this or that disease in absence of medical facility.

The slum is home to some 300 families who cannot afford to stay anywhere else.

Most of the residents work as labourers or in garments factories, and have little time to keep an eye on their children.

"Here, it's hard to keep track of the children... where they are... what are they doing," said a bed-headed and moony Mohammad

Selim, who had just come out of a wood-bamboo shack.

The thirty-three-year-old day labourer spent the entire night loading and unloading construction materials from lorries.

Mohammad Selim, his wife and four children live in a tiny wooden shanty in the Shobha Kutir slum.

It has high levels of unemployment and diseases such as malaria and typhoid are common. Toilets are scarce at the slum with one for every dozen of families. The toilets offer little sanitation and even less privacy.

"It's a shanty with just a small room, and we have to pay Tk 1,400 per month for that," he said, "anything better than this would cost over Tk 2,800."

However, in the brighter side, there are municipal facilities like electricity and water.

"But there is no gas. So we use dry leaves and wood to cook," he said.

Rashida Khatoon was seen preparing lunch for her family on a clay stove beside her tiny tenement.

"I share this stove with some other families," she said, as she washed some three/four Koi fish in a small clay pot and ignited fire in the stove.

"Cooking is difficult when it rains as the clay gets all wet and muddy. But we have to make it do as there is no other option."

Few paces from the stove lay a small toilet beside a bathing space.

The toilet had a half broken door, and a middle-aged man clearly visible inside. The sound of him

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urinating was as evident as the gag-inducing stench that came from there.

According to Selim, around a dozen families use the same toilet. It leads to a lot of inconvenience and squabble between the different families.

Most of the slum residents, including Selim, moved here from villages in hope for a better life and with dreams of better future.

Selim moved into the slum in 2007. His former house in the Netrokona district was sold to pay the medical bills for his ailing father.

"Money was hard to come by, but life was better [in village]. I used to work as a labourer in other people's lands," said Selim.

"But the lands tend to remain submerged in the village for half of the year. So I came here for money."

According to Selim, money is easier to come by in the city. And it makes up for the worse environment and living conditions compared to the villages.

Even better, his children have easier access to education here.

"My eldest son reads in class five," he said.

The ten-year-old used to go to a school in the slum, which was run by two "ladies".

"They used to teach in a small room inside the slum," Selim said. "But then they left and my son was without any school."

His son now goes to a school, which is somewhere to the east from the slum. He could not remember the name or the location of the school.

Selim is aware that government has made education up to class eight completely free. He wants the three other children, two of them daughters and another son, to go to school as well.

However, not many children in the slum go to school.

Six-year-old Ruma, for one, spends most of her day playing with her friends.

She likes to play with clay and listen to the radio in a nearby makeshift hotel when she is not helping her mother with household chores.

"I live with my mother and father, little sister, aunty and two cousins." Ruma pushed back her short black plaits, and smiled nervously showing off her teeth visibly excited with the sudden attention.

Ruma said the house she lives in is small. It cannot hold back the heavy monsoon rain, it is "really hot" inside and there are "too many mosquitoes".

The slum has many problems, but illegal activities are not one of them, Selim claimed.

"Sometimes we get thugs, drunkards and druggies. But not always,"

he said.

As Selim spoke, heavy lorries and other vehicles whooshed past by the road next to the slum.

"Its pretty dangerous in there," Selim said nodding towards the road.

A lot of people were killed in accidents on that road. Many of them were children, he said.

According to the slum dwellers, simple chores such as bringing water from a municipal tap on the other side of the road, travelling to and from home or simply playing outside the house become a matter of life and death for these people because it often involves crossing the road.

Funbanu Akhter has been staying in the slum for six months and her tiny tenement faces the road from the western corner of the slum. She used to work at a garments factory until her health forced her to stay at home.

Three years ago, she lost her teenage son when he was walking along the road.

"He had just finished saying his prayers at the nearby mosque and was coming back home when a fast bus knocked him down. He was just 14."

Now she is constantly worried about her other children and does not let them out of her sight for even a moment.

They are also children. They also rear aspirations like other children living elsewhere do. But they are deprived of even the basic rights because of being slum dwellers.

## 'Inter-ministerial initiative needed for overall improvement of children'

Dr. Shirin Sharmin Chaudhury, State Minister for Women and Children Affairs, talks to The Daily Star



remain out of the realm of education, while some start but drop out at primary level. The drop out rate among the slum children is alarming.

Replying to a question on government's initiatives to check the drop out rate, she said the government has introduced stipend for the female students along with free education, but these cannot draw more slum children to school. They show a sort of aversion to go to school and their parents are also show reluctance with excuse of poverty.

Claiming the slum children and street children as same, the government has launched a project to give financial aid to encourage them for primary education.

Under this project, a total of 500 street children across the country are paid Tk 1,500 monthly to meet their education cost and the major condition of receiving the aid is to attend school regularly. But this project is not focused on urban slum children.

The government has taken it as a pilot initiative. On the basis of its success, the project will be expanded later.

Besides, another project styled Early Learning for Child Development (ELCD) has been taken up under which around 8,500 centres have been established across the country to provide pre-primary schooling to the children aged between 1 to 6.

This project gives the

opportunities to the children to learn through amusement. Slum and street children are also included in this project.

Another project styled 'Amar Shishu' is being run by social welfare ministry's children rehabilitation activities. But it mainly focuses on Sidr and Aila-affected children.

"We are working to give different sorts of facilities to the underprivileged children through Shishu Bikash Kendra in different spots across the country," the state minister said.

Another project in collaboration with Ahsania Mission remains on the card to rehabilitate around 10,000 children in Panchagar. Huge number of street children from the Dhaka city will be transferred there.

These initiatives have been taken as a special attention to the underprivileged children.

No special initiative has been taken to develop the sanitation system and health care system for women and children in urban slum from her ministry, said Sharmin.

"LGRD ministry sometimes conducts some sanitation activities in slum. We have a plan to launch programme jointly with development partners on health and sanitation of slum children and women," she said.

Talking about security of the slum children, she said her ministry has undertaken two projects. One is to rehabilitate the drug-addicted slum chil-

dren and the second to develop the female children that includes protecting them from sexual harassment and early-marriage.

If the lifestyle of slum dwellers can be improved, the rights of the slum children will automatically be protected because deprivation from rights are closely linked with poverty.

Talking about their rehabilitation, she said the government should think focusing on two options. Incorporating them in the urban development and returning them to rural areas.

If employment opportunities can be ensured in rural areas for them, it will be easy to rehabilitate them in village. Rest of them should be included in urban development policy.

Through projects like 'Ghore Fera Karmoshuchi' and 'Ekti Bari, Ekti Khamar' the government encourages people to return to village. Most of the government policies formulated focusing on the development of rural area and agriculture.

In addition to that, development of information technology and communication system can be a significant technique for rehabilitating the slum dwellers in rural area. That is why, different ministries should work jointly to meet the goal.

Above all, rehabilitation of slum children depends on the success of massive plan for poverty reduction, she maintained.

## 'Government should ensure fundamental rights of every child'

Professor Nazrul Islam, Chairman, Centre for Urban Studies, talks to The Daily Star



SLUM children, who make up a huge chunk of Dhaka's child population, continue to be deprived of almost all basic rights and facilities enjoyed by children of affluent families, said noted urban expert Prof Nazrul Islam.

Proper food, clothing, healthcare, education and accommodation are the five fundamental citizen rights and a must for proper growth of any child. Without these, the tens of thousands of children living in the slums would not be able to flourish their latent talents, which could go on to weaken the nation, he maintained.

"For these reasons, it is not uncommon for slum children to lose their ethical values and become involved in anti-social activities like peddling drugs in an early age," said the chairman of Centre for Urban Studies (CUS).

The same children might grow up to be criminals, or become involved in other illegal activities, he said, which is tragic as they could become great assets for the country

with education and some guidance.

Prof Nazrul Islam, also the former chairman of University Grants Commission, believes it is essential to give urban slum dwellers an opportunity to lead a better life to ensure a better future for their children.

"This is because the families are usually supposed to provide the children with all the basic facilities, and most slum dwellings cannot give these facilities to their children," he said.

When the families cannot provide that to their children, the responsibility directly falls upon the government.

"In fact it is the constitutional responsibility of the Bangladesh government to ensure the fundamental rights of every child."

However, the government is doing next to nothing when it comes to develop or improve the lives in slums, he said.

According to Prof Nazrul Islam, slum dwellers have been neglected from all forms of urban and social development policies.

Even Detailed Area Plan (DAP), Dhaka's much-hyped master plan, has no mention of slum dwellers even though they make up a huge portion of Dhaka's population.

"During the period of the liberation war, there were plans to divide

Dhaka into separate segments among people from different income groups," he said.

"The whole Mirpur area was supposed to be allocated for the poorer portion of Dhaka's population. It is Dhaka's largest area and was allocated for who were possibly the largest segment of the population."

However, the plan was never implemented. And the urban plans that followed later gave no attention to the urban poor.

"Urban plans are supposed to divide the land allocation of the city into different sectors education, health, commercial, parks etc," he said.

The authorities must first decide what they want to do with the existing division in the social class systems. It needs to be decided that whether these divisions would be kept, enhanced or removed.

For example, Prof Nazrul Islam says, currently we have the upper class, middle class and the lower class in simple terms. Therefore, we need to see that the city has facilities for all three classes.

"Dhaka's master plan

keeps in mind the needs of the upper class and the middle class. It shows where there would be Gulshan, where there would be Baridhara, where would be Purbachal and where Uttara," he said.

"But where would be the housing for the poor? There is no mention of that in the master plan."

This is an indicator of the negligence towards the urban poor including the slum dwellers and their children.

"The government is supposed to take it upon itself to take care of the children whose families are not able to take care of them," said Prof Nazrul Islam.

"It usually seeks helps from family members, non-government organisations or foreign organisations to give basic facilities to children."

However, the little that are being done by either the government or NGOs, are not reaching the slum children the way that are supposed to.

"As a result, we are being deprived of a treasure trove of talents that could have flourished in these children," he said.

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Readers are welcome to send their feedback by e-mail to: shahu\_madan@yahoo.com