



CHILDREN IN URBAN SLUM

They suffer conditions that beggar description

PANKAJ KARMAKAR

On a sunny morning when all the children accompanied by their parents were rushing to school, Hashi, an eight-year old girl-child, was collecting waste papers, dry leafs and wood pieces from the road side to help her mother who would burn those as fuel to cook.

She was walking barefoot along the street holding a bag by one hand, and picking up and putting the bits into the bag by the other.

This is not a single day scenario, rather the same is occurring regularly for over last two years.

"My mother has sent me here to collect these because all of my family members will have to starve if I do not," said Hashi with frightened eyes apprehending she might be scolded or beaten for committing the "offence".

Hashi, who is exposed to the harsh realities from the moment she was born, lives in a railway colony slum at Rajarbagh area of the capital Dhaka with mother and three other younger bothers and sisters aged between two and six.

Hashi's mother Marjina Begum said her husband had fled away around two years ago when their 4th baby was born. Since then she has been maintaining the five-member family through begging or working as domestic help.

Around 200 ultra-poor families live in the slum mostly coming from rural areas five to 10 years ago due to river erosion or employment crisis selling out all their rural properties whatever they had.

With rapid growth of urbanization, a large chunk of rural population started heading towards urban areas in search of employment and improved standard of life.

Currently around 41.7 million people are living in urban areas, 28 percent of the total population of Bangladesh, said a report titled 'The State of the World's Children-2012' by Unicef.

For millions of children, the urban experience is one of poverty and exclusion. They are facing severe hardship and challenging conditions unlike other urban children who are often included in development programmes.

In Bangladesh's urban slums most of the male residents work as labourers or in garments factories or pull rickshaw, while the female residents mostly work as sweeper or domestic help.

While it is generally believed that a large chunk of the country's child population lives in urban slums, there are no statistics to put a number on these children who are considered as the most vulnerable in the society.

Visiting spots and analysing data, it becomes clear that



Anik, 14, working in a workshop as a rod cutter. It is hazardous for children.

many children living in urban poverty are clearly disadvantaged and excluded from higher education, health services and other urban benefits enjoyed by their better-off peers.

The Unicef report found that there are five sorts of deprivations the slum children face. These are from -- access to improved water, access to improved sanitation, security of tenure, durability of housing and sufficient living area.

Entering into the slum, it was noticed that around a dozen children wearing half pant and in barefoot were playing with football in a damp space.

Two of them go to school, while others were not enrolled for reasons understood, moreover long distance of 'nearby' school.

"I cannot provide meal for three times to the children. How can I send them to school?" said Motahar Hossain, 35, a resident of the slum, who earns livelihood by pulling rickshaw.

Neither the government nor any NGO ever took any initiative to arrange for education of the children in the slum, said Motahar.

The Report says

Around 18 percent of children in slums attended secondary school in Bangladesh. But no data were available about the slum children's enrolment at primary level.

There are only around 15 to 20 toilets for 200 families in the slum. The toilets offer little sanitation and even less privacy.

Due to lack of drainage system, all the human discharges pour into a nearby bush and that is main reason for spread of different diseases like malaria and typhoid in the area.

Unsafe water, poor sanitation and unhygienic living condition claim many lives each year--an estimated 1.2million children die from diarrhoea alone across the world, said the Unicef report.

Many children in the slum use street-side drains to ease themselves because the small number of latrines are shared by large number of people and there is no special provision for children.

While children in cities may live close to health services, there is no guarantee for slum children to have access to those facilities.

Of every one thousand children born in the country, around 95 die before they reach the age of five at slums. On the basis of under-five mortality rate, Bangladesh is ranked 61st on the data available for more than 190 countries, said the report

An estimation from more than 60 countries found that while HIV infection rate had decreased in most countries, it had risen by more than 25 percent in Bangladesh along with six other countries. In Bangladesh 22 percent of infants are born with low birth weight, claims the report.

No formal services exists in slums (no doctors and nurses), but several health posts run by Brac are staffed with trained community health workers.

About scarcity of healthcare Humayun Miah, a resident of the slum said, "My two-year old daughter is suffering from fever for the last one

week. But I could not take him to hospital due to financial constraint. It requires huge money, if I go to hospital."

Children in Bangladesh face multidimensional forms of deprivation, violence, abuse and exploitation. It happens almost everywhere -- within family, in the street and community, at workplace and schools or any state and non-state institutions.

Trafficking is one of the major forms of child exploitation. Around 2.5 million people are in forced labour as a result of trafficking--22 to 50 percent of them are children, said the Unicef report.

In the reality of Bangladesh, it is difficult to abolish child labour from the country because of their extreme poverty. The government must establish alternative methods and policies to take care of the families that these children are supported financially.

The Unicef report also placed five-point recommendations to protect the rights of marginalized children.

Recommendations

Better understanding of the scale and nature of poverty and exclusion of the urban children;

- Identify and remove the barriers to inclusion;
- Ensure that urban planning, infrastructure development, service delivery and boarder efforts to reduce poverty and inequality meet the particular needs and priorities of children;
- Promote partnership between all levels of government and the urban poor, especially children and young people;
- Pool the resources and energies of international, national, municipal and community actors in support of efforts to ensure that marginalized and impoverished children enjoy their full rights.

RIZANUZZAMAN LASKAR

If as some say, a nation's future lies in its children, then where does that leave Bangladesh?

Experts say a large chunk of the country's children are living below the poverty line neglected, impoverished and invisible in development spectrum denied a proper childhood of joy, education, good health and care.

The result, they say, could be a legion of intellectually blunt, mentally and physically stunted and sickly children carrying lifelong handicaps that could potentially scuttle their futures and cripple the country's hopes to join the rank of developed world.

Even though children in towns and cities are considered a step ahead from their rural counterparts with better access to education, health and other facilities, the reality is very different, suggests a 2012 Unicef report.

"Broad averages show that results in the fields of child health and survival, education, protection or sanitation tend to be better in urban areas than those in rural areas," says The State of the World's Children 2012 report. "This conceals the fact that great inequalities are found within towns and cities."

"In most urban areas, great opportunities and great deprivation exist side by side."

This is especially true for the children living in low-income urban areas and slums in Bangladesh, as well as in any other part of the world.

While there are no official statistics to put a number on the children living in urban slums, one needs only to take a stroll in any Dhaka street to get a rough picture of the situation.

These children are deprived of almost all basic rights and facilities enjoyed by their peers from well-off families, experts say.

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, a situation which could go on to weaken the nation, they say.

Robbed of vital elements of development as children, they grow up intellectually behind, stunted and sickly inclined to remain backward in a world that is continually moving forward, they add.

While children in urban settings are believed to have an educational advantage, urban opportunities are not spread evenly, according to the

Interestingly, many of the slum dwelling parents, most of them not literate, do not even have a clear idea about what education is.

During a visit to a slum in Dhaka's Kamalapur area, a mother told this correspondent that her daughter "studies".

When asked where does her daughter study, she vaguely pointed out that the eight-year-old goes to a local Islamic teacher to learn Arabic in a "small room nearby".

But asked whether her daughter ever went to a proper primary or pre-primary school, the mother seemed confused and simply referred to her last answer.

Apart from schooling, urban children also live close to health services,

people because it often involves crossing the road.

Nutrition is another major issue among urban slum children. Their hunger is neither a temporary inconvenience nor a quick death sentence. Rather, it is a chronic, lifelong, irreversible handicap that scuppers their futures and cripples Bangladesh's hopes to join the rank of developed world.

Statistics say that 47 percent of the country's children are malnourished. Nearly one in every three children is stunted; 10-year-olds fail to top an adult's belt buckle. They are frequently sick: chronic weakness, diarrhoea and worse is standard for many toddlers.

Child labour, another critical

factor in urban slums, also remains alarmingly high a number that is also rising.

Official statistics say that as much as 13 percent of the country's children are forced to work to survive. While there are no statistics to prove the point, experts believe a huge chunk of the percentage live in low-income urban areas.

These children remain virtually invisible from any development programmes, projects and even any form of statistics, experts said.

Women and children affairs secretary Tariq-ul-Islam however refused to believe that they are invisible.

"Some development works are being undertaken for them though in a limited scale," he told The Daily

Star. According to Islam, the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs is giving special allowances to over 500 slum children in Dhaka for economic support and encouragement so they go to school.

Under the programme called 'Empowerment and Protection of Children', the children's parents receive TK 9,000 every six months with one condition their children need to go to schools.

The programme is currently active in Dhaka's old town area and in some parts of Teknaf and Cox's Bazar, and is expected to include 10,000 children by the end of this year, headed.

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Missing in the realm of development

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2012 Unicef report.

Bangladesh have improved its primary school attendance ratio in urban areas from 80.9 percent in 2006 to 83.9 percent in 2009. But dropout rates in secondary education still remain alarmingly high.

The State of the World's Children 2012 report suggests that a reason for the high dropout rates could be the struggle to meet the costs of schooling as the poorest families with school-going children end up spending a big chunk of their income for schooling.

"Even where schooling is free of charge, families can be burdened with the costs of uniform, books and supplies," the report said.

but there is no guarantee that they will have access to them.

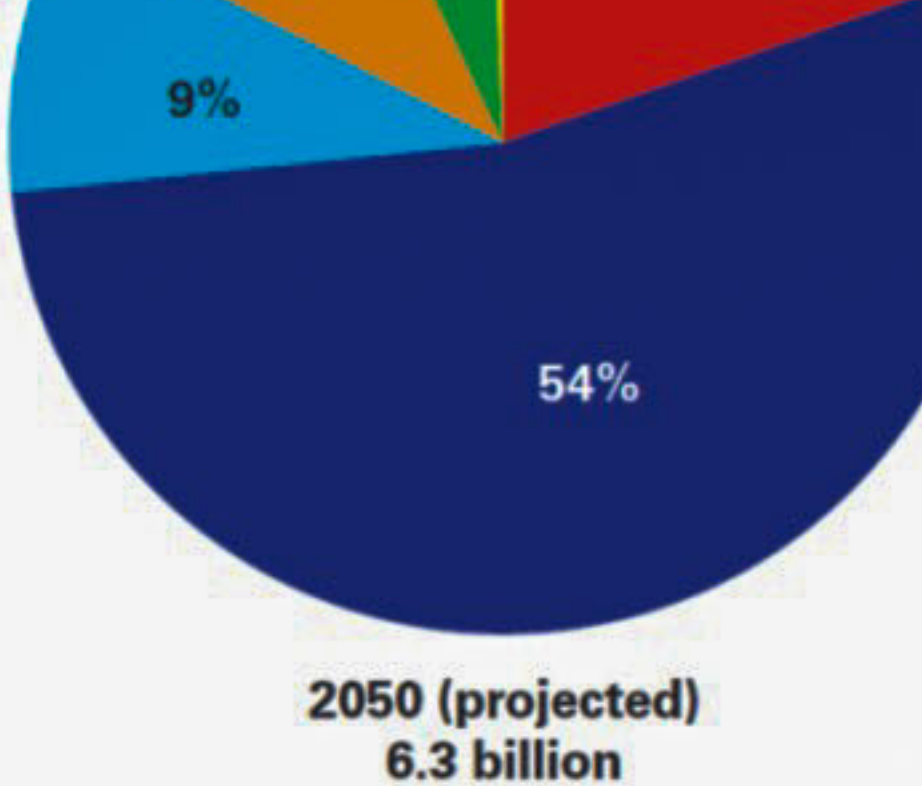
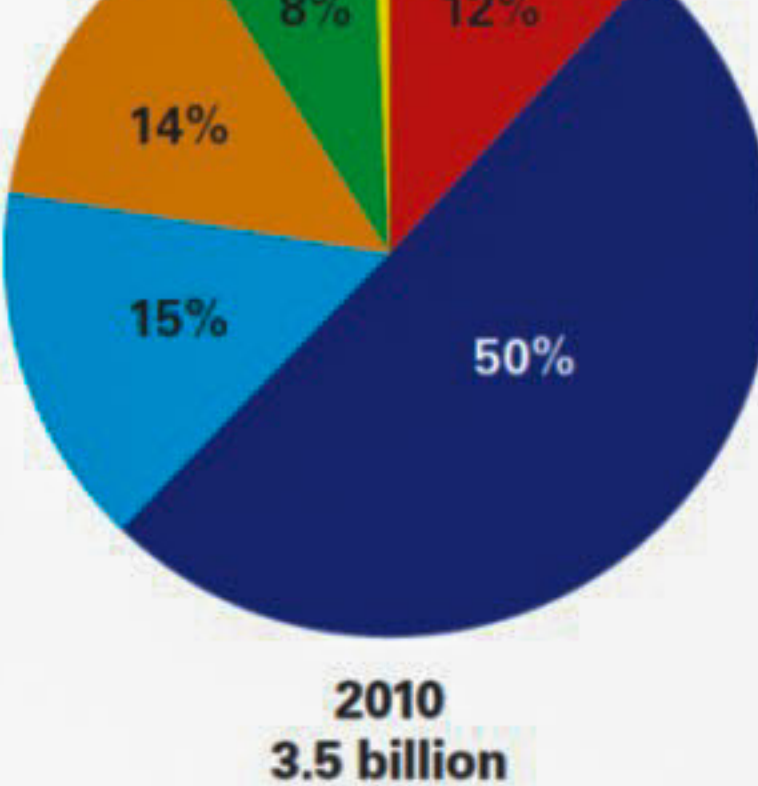
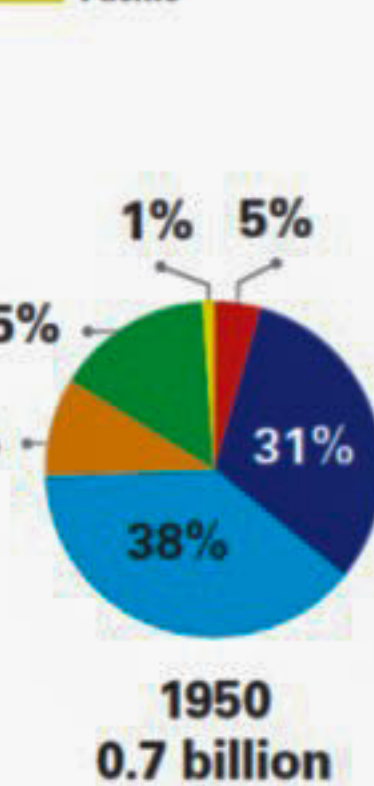
Experts say this is a key issue as children living in low-income urban areas are exposed to high risk of respiratory diseases and road-traffic injuries especially where safe playing and pedestrian spaces are scarce.

A case in point is Shobha Kutir, a slum near Dhaka's Rayer Bazar, where many residents including children have been killed on the busy road beside the slum.

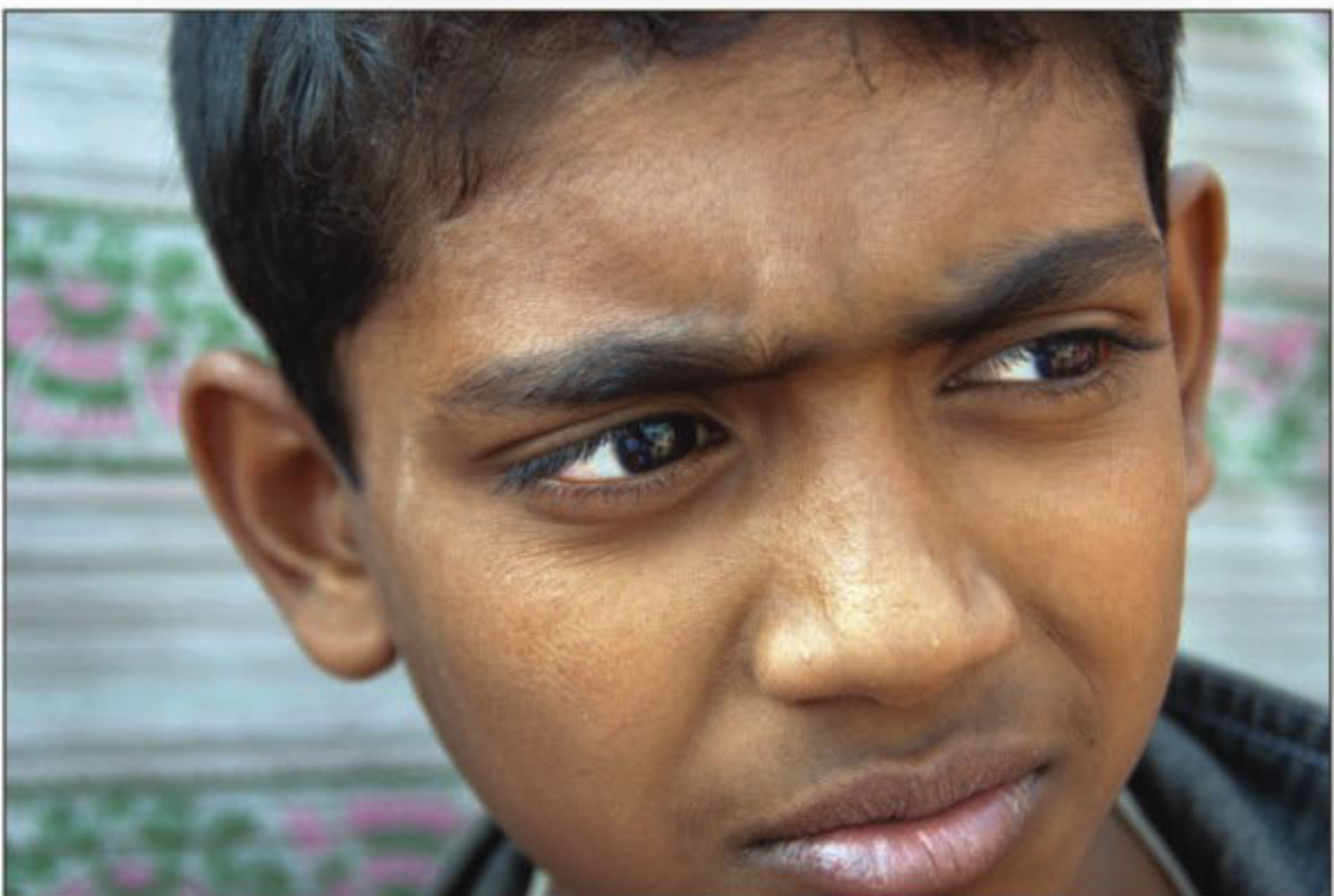
They say simple chores such as bringing water from a municipal tap on the other side of the road, travelling to and from home or simply playing outside the house become a matter of life and death for these

Urban populations growing fastest in Asia and Africa

World urban population 1950, 2010, 2050 (projected)



My life in an urban slum



My name is Parvez. I am 12 years old.

PHOTO: AHSAN KHAN



Like many other children, I live in a crowded slum such as this one in Dhaka city.

PHOTO: AHSAN KHAN



Right next to our house, they dump garbage each day, and there is also construction work going on.

PHOTO: AHSAN KHAN



In some slum houses 6-8 people live together in a 10 X10 feet space. We share a common hand pump, toilets and kitchen among all of us.

PHOTO: SHEHZAD NOORANI



Clean water is not easily accessible for us. It is particularly difficult for children to have access to it.

PHOTO: SHEHZAD NOORANI



Sometimes, when there is access to clean water, there are long queues for it.

PHOTO: SHEHZAD NOORANI



In many cases, there are no sanitary latrines. We use hanging latrines. The other day, a child fell through the latrine and got injured.

PHOTO: AHSAN KHAN



This mother has no bathroom to bathe her baby. She has only a dirty pond. This is unhygienic, and unhealthy.

PHOTO: MD. FOYSAI / DRIX



We face such dangers everyday where we live, and have to watch each step carefully.

PHOTO: SHEHZAD NOORANI



Constantly we face threats from eviction. Our house was bulldozed without warning. My sister has no job and there is not enough money for us to continue going to school.

PHOTO: AHSAN KHAN



Sumaiya, 9, feels violated every time she has to bathe outside. "There is no privacy there", she says.

PHOTO: AHSAN KHAN



There is no playground here, so Munni, 8, plays with dirt by sifting it through a net collected from waste. She has no real toys to plays with.

PHOTO: AHSAN KHAN