



Promoting Child Rights



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GIRL CHILDREN IN SLUMS Simply vulnerable

SUSHMITA S PREETHA
NINE-year-old Papua does not know what her sexual and reproductive rights are or what the words "rape" or "sexual harassment" suggest. She does not even fully understand what it means to be touched inappropriately. But every night, she wakes up screaming from a nightmare: "Don't hurt me, please! Don't touch me!"

It took her mother six months to realise that her daughter's dreams were not the results of a childish fear of ghosts, but rather the manifestation of being sexually abused by their neighbours.

Her single mother, whose husband left three months after Papua was born, lives in a slum in Karwan Bazar and works as a temporary domestic worker. She has to leave her daughter at home by herself when she goes to work.

It was during those times that her daughter was raped by a man whom she calls "uncle" on multiple occasions and sexually assaulted countless other times.

For the vast majority of adolescent girls like Papua living in slums, violence is an unavoidable element of their existence be it at home, in the community or in relationships. They are often the worst victims of violence and sexual harassment in slums, triply marginalised because of their class, age and gender identities.

According to a baseline survey conducted by icddr and Population Council in the slums of Mohakhali, Mohammadpur and Jatrabari, 76% of the women and girls surveyed had endured physical or sexual abuse during the past 12 months, with 43% having suffered both physical and sexual abuse. An overwhelming number of cases of violence take place against adolescent girls, states the study.

Teenage girls and their parents in different slums in the capital argued

that gangsters and unruly boys in the slums pose constant threats to young girls, especially unmarried ones. Oftentimes, they are harassed on their way to and from work and school both physically and mentally.

"The streets and even our homes are not safe from their [the men's] threats. A local gangster who has a lot of connections used to taunt me all the time and even harassed me on multiple occasions, forcefully laying

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his hands on me," said Anjum Begum, a 16-year-old garment worker.

When Anjum told him she would go to the police if he doesn't stop, he threatened her with acid and

abduction. She was forced to leave the slum and move to a different area before he left her alone.

Many girls bear the harassments without voicing any resistance because if they complain, the com-

munity inevitably ends up blaming the girl for "inciting" such behaviours. There is also an acute shortage of support institutions that can give them social, psychological and legal help in dire situations.

"I was termed a 'bad' girl when I tried telling the influential people in the slums that local boys were threatening me. They said it's because I stay out late and 'free mix' with boys," said Jhorna. "I didn't

know who else to turn to, so I just shut up about it."

Families constantly worry about their young unmarried daughters' safety, and end up marrying them off at a very early age.

"What choice did I have but to marry her off? She was already attracting a lot of attention from boys in the neighbourhood. We don't have money to pay for dowry. Who will take her if her reputation is tarnished?" said Runa, a resident in Mohammadpur slum. As many as one-third of all girls in urban slums get married before the age of 15 years, about 31 percent are arranged marriages, states another research by icddr and Population Council.

Acute poverty, insecure living arrangements, frequent forced evictions, weak social network, absence of civic society institutions and poor public services contribute to the vulnerable status of girls in urban slums, states the research.

Girls also face violence if and when they are in relationships. Some even admitted to being cajoled and threatened into having relationships.

"I was having relations with a 31-year-old man, who forced himself upon me. When I tried to resist, he told me that it was my duty to make him happy and that he would tell everyone I was a prostitute if I refused," said a 17-year-old girl, who wishes to remain unnamed.

Fifteen-year-old Ranu, who admits to being sexually assaulted on a daily basis by her brother-in-law, said, "He tells me I owe him this because he lets me stay in his house."

In the absence of state support and systematic assistance from non-governmental organisations, girl children and adolescent girls continue to lead vulnerable lives, exposed to various forms of marginalizations from different actors.



Little scope to continue study

UPASHANA SALAM and HELEMUL ALAM

HUNGER rules over all other needs and this holds particularly true for adolescent girls living in Dhaka slums.

While many of us take our right to education for granted, young girls living in slums find it an "extravagance," which is better suited for those who can afford safe houses and clean food.

A Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS)-UNICEF study in 2010 reveals the education situation in urban slums is generally worse off than most of the low-performing rural areas.

For example, the proportion of pupils starting Grade 1 who reach Grade 5 is 48 per cent in slums against 79.8 per cent for the national average. The highest drop-out rate from primary school is also recorded in slum areas where it is six times higher than the national level.

Even for those who are enrolled, completion of the primary education cycle is a critical issue. Only 55% of children eventually reach Grade 5.

"I have to look after my three young siblings and work for a living. Receiving an education is a dream unfulfilled for me but hopefully my younger siblings will be able to get the education that I failed to get," said Shamima, a 15 year old, living in a Mohammadpur slum.

Her aspirations for her siblings seems far from being fulfilled, though, as two of her sisters, aged six and ten, stay at home, preferring to lend a hand in household works rather than spending the time in school.

When asked about this reluctance to send his daughters to school,

The fault does not just lie with the parents or surroundings, however. Schools and teachers also pay limited attention to slum children, assuming that they will leave school within a short while.



Shamima's father replied, "I can only afford to send one of my children to school and I'd rather prefer that it be my son."

Like him, many other parents living in the slum opine that daughters have to be married off at one point or the other and it's the son who looks after the family's needs.

"I wanted to continue my studies but my parents took me off school when I was in fifth grade because they couldn't afford it," said 14-year-old Shireen.

She now works as a part time domestic help, earning around Tk 2000, which goes as her contribution to household expenses.

Her predicament is shared by Sonia, living in a slum in Karwan Bazar, who used to work in a garments factory but is currently unemployed.

"I wanted to continue my study but due to my father's death 11 years back, I had to stop my education after class five," she said, adding that she will try her best not to repeat it with her brothers.

Parents also complain that school education doesn't merely require them paying the tuition fee.

"We have to pay for the uniform, school supplies and much more," said Taber Uddin, a day labourer and father of three, living in a slum in Bosilla.

He further added that he is barely able to pay for his family daily expenses, providing an education for his two sons and daughter remains out of question.

Apart from the issue of affordability, parents also refrain from sending their adolescent daughters to school in fear of hooligans teasing them on the way.

Sharmin, a lively ten-year old, goes to a school nearby but her mother is thinking of taking her off school in the next year.

"Even now, my daughter gets catcalls and is harassed by local thugs. I can't always leave her at school and pick her up. I know this will hurt at first but I see no other option if I want to ensure her safety," Sharmin's mother said.

The fault does not just lie with the parents or surroundings, however. Schools and teachers also pay limited attention to slum children, assuming that they will leave school within a short while.

"What use is it for us to dream big when we know that they won't come true? Our futures are considered insignificant by everyone starting from our parents, teachers and the society. We might as well contribute with money than by an education that will never come to use," stated 16-year Maisha, woefully.

Despicable deprivation

PANKAJ KARMAKAR

THE slum is no place for a girl to grow well. Residents lead a miserable life with little access to education, water, sanitation, health services, security and other urban facilities not to speak of a whole family sardine-packed in a tiny room.

Compared to adult slum dwellers, children are considered most vulnerable because they need extra care and facilities for their mental and physical growth.

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

With rapid growth of urbanisation a large number of rural population is heading for cities for sustenance. Almost all of them would find no other option but a slum to stay.

The report found that there are five areas of deprivation the slum children face. These are—access to improved water, access to improved sanitation, security of tenure, durability of housing and sufficient living area.

Most of the male slum dwellers earn their livelihoods working as rickshaw pullers, day labourers, transport workers or doing other sorts of informal jobs, while most of the females work as domestic help, construction worker, cook in road-side eateries etc.

Economic realities cause many families to rely on the income generated also by their children for survival. Many children have to give up their education at a very early stage of their lives and engage in works, even in hazardous jobs.

Daughters of working mothers engage in household chores and caring for youngsters. Visiting different slums in Dhaka, it was seen that children along with their families are living in very unhygienic and dirty environment with high risk of being infected with different severe diseases.

Due to lack of knowledge and being under constant financial constraint, their parents most often remain unaware about proper care of their children.

"I and my husband remain busy all the daylong with our jobs. We do not get time to take care of our children," said Sufia Begum who lives in Argargaon slum. Sufia works as cleaner at a private office and her husband Karim works as a bus helper.

Visiting the slum it was noticed children were playing on dirty and damp ground barefoot getting dusty and muddy themselves, some children were using the nearby drain at toilet, some were taking food with dirty hands.

"I wear sandal only when I go to school. My mother prohibits to wear sandal all the time as it may be damaged soon," said Kalam, an eight years old boy living in the slum.

Talking to The Daily Star most of the slum dwellers responded with grave dissatisfaction that despite being citizens of the country, they are deprived of the basic right to health and sanitation services.

"It seems that there is no treatment for poor people in Bangladesh. My three-year old boy suffered from severe fever for around 15 days last January. But I could not provide proper treatment to him due to financial crisis. I got help from neither any government body nor any NGO," said Rafiqul Islam, living in Dhaka's Rayerbazar slum.

"There is a single toilet for 15 families. There is no proper disposal or treatment system of human waste that pours into the nearby ditch," said slum dweller Rukhana.

Shortage of pure drinking water is one of the major problems for slum dwellers. Dhaka WASA is the only source of water for them, but the supply is very insufficient against demand.

"We get a few litres of water in the morning daily. We have to depend on that little amount for all the day long," said Selina, another inhabitant of the same slum.

Every child has the right to lead a normal and healthy life, but the poor children in Dhaka's urban slums are deprived of even the basic access to health, hygiene, education and leisure -- vital for their growth.



Privacy passed over

UPASHANA SALAM

POINTING towards an open space in front of her family's room, Khadija informs that this is where she takes her shower along with other women and girls of her slum.

The 15-year old Khadija lives with her family in a five-room slum house which they share with five other families in Bosilla.

Each room in this house is so small that it only has space to fit in a small shelf to accommodate the family's kitchen utensils, clothes and all other possessions.

There is not enough space to even lay down a small mattress on the floor and so all four members of Khadija's family, including her parents and older brother, have to share the only bed, cramping to make space for all of them to squeeze in.

"This is the life I've known since my birth," says Khadija, in a matter of fact manner.

"I am so used to this by now that I don't think I can adjust to a room of my own," she jokes.

Growing up in a crowded family with her parents and two siblings, Nasrin, another teenager of the same slum, says that she escapes to her cousin's house in another part of the town whenever she thinks she has had enough of the smothering nature of her overcrowded house.

And when, such slams are situated at the bottom of high rises, the room privacy just can't be conceived at all. It's all under the curious peek.

"It's the same in my cousin's place as well but at least I don't have to see the same faces again and again," she says.

At the vulnerable age of 14, Nasrin says that she sometimes thinks she will go crazy if she doesn't get out of this crowded atmosphere where every body is always aware about what the other person is up to.

The rickety tin-roofed house that the girl lives in stands on wooden planks

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that can easily give way to the dump yard below if enough attention is not paid.

There is a tiny washroom with only a squat toilet used by all 24 inhabitants of the slum.

A small hole in front of the washroom, serves as a toilet for small kids living in the slum.

"The toilet's in a despicable condition but we are not half as bothered about that as the complete lack of privacy that the girls and women face when taking a shower," said Tasnoor, a recently married 18-year old.

"We have to take a shower with all their clothes on so as to retain the little privacy that we can," she added.

Sharing the same bed with their father and brothers also serves as a source of embarrassment for the adolescent girls, who crave for a bit of space all to themselves.

"My husband and I often need some privacy to ourselves. We can ask the younger kids to get out of the room and play but it feels extremely awkward to say the same thing to our older daughter as we can't formulate it in a proper sentence," says Nasrin's mother.

The same problems are faced by girls of another slum behind the Martyred Intellectuals Memorial in Mohammadpur.

Here again the slum house has five rooms, each room being shared by an

entire family. The living condition in this slum, however, is somewhat better as the flooring is made of brick rather than unstable wooden planks.

Nevertheless, girls and women here also face the same problem of a shared toilet and the risk of people peeping in while they take their showers.

The shower room is just outside the toilet but it doesn't have any door to ensure privacy.

"We just hang a cloth from one end of the wall to another and ask some girl or woman to stand guard while we take a shower," said Urmi, a 15-year old.

Girls and women face particular problems during their menstruation as they are surrounded by prying eyes of men and can't ignore their household duties confronting their sanitation or medical needs.

"We often just sit still until all the men have gone off to work and then take a shower or clean ourselves. Our discomfort during this time can truly not be imagined," Urmi adds.

The age old cliché of walls having ears seems to hold true in these households where each room is divided by thin walls and curtains as doors.

"Whenever I have an argument with my mother or my parents talk in raised tones, our neighbours come rushing, wanting to know each and every detail."

While five-year old Othoi entertained everyone by reciting a nursery rhyme she learnt at school, her mother confessed to this correspondent that she is scared that as her daughter grows, she may want more space for herself but that currently seems beyond the means of the family.

"I fear that she will suffer silently and this will have an effect on her psychology.

"We do feel terrible that we aren't being able to give them the lifestyle and facilities that they truly deserve," she added.

Packed on pavement

AKRAM HOSEN

ALONG with hundreds of children who are being born and raised on the pavement along TNT Colony in Fakirapool, eight-year-old Monir and his little sister Fatima uses the open drains in the area for toilets.

Apparently, none of the children of more than 100 families living on the pavement are familiar with the concept of a sanitary latrine, let alone a decent toilet or a bathroom.

Monir smiled when asked if he feels embarrassment while using an open space for toilet. "I will use the toilets in Fakirapool when I grow up," he retorted. Monir was referring to a public toilet near Fakirapool intersection that his parents use.

The structures in which the children, their parents and sometimes grandparents live can hardly be called shanties. The "house" where Monir lives is actually a structure of polythene sheets supported by bamboo sticks. One end of the sheet is tied to the wall of TNT colony and the other end is attached to the pavement.

The height of these structures is so low that not even an average ten-years-old can stand straight inside them.

These abodes with no facilities of water, sanitation, or electricity pose a sharp contrast to the super market on the opposite side of the road. It looks as if the inhabitants of the pavements are living in a different century.

Rekha, a thirteen-years-old girl of the area is a student of class 3 in a government primary school. She is aware that she is a little too tall and over aged compared to her classmates. "But I don't care much about studying anyway, because I have to help my mother with the household chores and I will be working in a rich household as a domestic help pretty soon," she said.

Lines of buses can be seen parked along the pavement on any given day. "The bus drivers and their helpers leer at our girls and eye them all the time. But what choice have we got?" said an elderly woman who lives there with her children and grand children. Monir's mother Sofia has been living in the area for



15 years. Her landless peasant family migrated to the city from Barisal because of poverty and indebtedness. Her husband is a rickshaw puller.

"I know that our children do not have any hope of ever living a better life. I even wonder if they will make healthy grown ups," she said.

"I know that our children do not have any hope of ever living a better life. I even wonder if they will make healthy grown ups"

drove them to Dhaka. After losing every hope of survival in the villages they migrated to the city.

In turn, the city, like a giant outsourcing business, needs a virtually unlimited supply of cheap and unskilled labour. The stream of poor, homeless people into the city fulfills that demand. They are the reason why rickshaw pullers, chauffeurs, construction workers, kulis (porters), security guards, domestic helps and garment workers are always at hand, waiting to be hired. The urban middle class needs them.

Sofia informed that her children become particularly vulnerable when mobile court magistrates with policemen break down the structures they call their home. "We become absolutely helpless in those times. But we come back after several days and build the homes again."

In the Kafkaesque world they live in, the prospects for a better life for the poor children eludes them.