

"I want to keep working," says 16-year-old Akash.

"I want to be an engineer!" says little Sagor, just 12.

11-year-old Sajeeb, the youngest, wants to be in the garment's sector.

These are dreams. Dreams that no one knows if will ever come true, dreams that are yet to be complete, dreams that are very unlike yours or mine. These dreams are nurtured every day by these little boys. But do you want to know what's crushing these little dreams? These ambitions? These beautiful spirits?

Due to the harsh realities of life, society and poverty, Akash was sent to Dhaka when he was much younger, by his parents to earn. He has not yet reached the legal age to work. Yet, he loiters around the streets of Dhaka, sometimes ends up even outside of it, to earn whatever he can for himself and his family. "I didn't know what to do when I came here. I did whatever I could find to do, anything I might get paid for. Lastly, I landed on trash collecting," he says.

When we talk about child labour, we often forget the little ones doing odd jobs on the streets, who are also risking their lives everyday to earn some money for themselves and their families. Whether running around in

which, as we know, contributes to the number of children living/working on the streets. Many children live with their families, either on the streets or in slum houses. Other children live on their own because they have been orphaned or abandoned by their parents. Children also run away from their families or caregivers, fleeing poverty

DREAMS FROM THE STREETS

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PHOTO: MOHAMMAD PONIR HOSSAIN



the middle of the streets to sell flowers or collecting trash from the streets that we pollute so nonchalantly, they are sometimes run over, and often beaten by the public.

"At the end of the day, the Government and the society are the ones who are responsible for the treatment of children in the country," says Syed Sultanuddin, Assistant Executive Director, Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies.

According to a UNICEF report, increasing rural poverty and urban migration continue to swell the numbers of people living in urban slums and on the streets. Problems of rural unemployment, landlessness, river erosion, natural disaster, family conflict, and weak law and order have caused families to leave their homes in search of better prospects in the city, and still continue to do so,

and physical abuse, and end up living and working alone on the streets. Although no comprehensive statistics are available on the actual numbers, living conditions, needs and interests of children living on the streets, estimates show a continuing increase in the number of these children. Thousands of children on the streets of Bangladesh are being denied their rights, according to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

Many a times, Akash and his friends were beaten up by the public. "I am a trash collector, which requires me to pick things off of the streets. Very often, people mistake it for stealing and end up ganging up on me to beat me up. They do, very badly. Shagor once took a leftover sandwich left to rot, and was tied to a pole and beaten

up. We couldn't help," says Akash, in a horrifyingly normal voice.

Children who resort to living or working on the streets become predominantly exposed to abuse and exploitation. Even when and if these children end up living with their families, poverty and lack of service means that most parents are not able to provide appropriate care. These children, first and foremost, grow up without appropriate shelter, protection, education, health care, food, drinking water, security, recreation and guidance. Somehow 'shunned' from society, we often forget we are the ones who put them there.

"The child rights bodies must be aware of what is happening to these children on the streets. There are many schools in different upazilas for impoverished children to attend, but they also need skill development centres for future work, and also an alternate means of income for the family. Charity and spreading awareness help very little, as we can see. Any family willing to send their child to work must speak to the concerned authorities, like Child Right's Bodies, who will then ensure safety for the child," Sultanuddin says.

The UNICEF report also mentions that children who live on the street also increasingly become vulnerable to other forms of exploitation and frequently find themselves the victims of sexual abuse and at risk of HIV/AIDS

infection, physical torture, and trafficking. Extensive criminal networks make substantial profits by engaging children in commercial sex work, smuggling, stealing, and the distribution of drugs and weapons. Without appropriate care and continually struggling to survive, many children have no other option. "That's my biggest fear. I have had many friends here on the streets like me. They resorted to selling drugs and being addicted themselves. I don't want to be like them," says Akash. But what if, at some point, he has no other option for survival than to sell drugs? How will we ensure that Akash never has to be like them? How can we help Akash and those like him?

While the questions keep building up, there is, sadly, no answer yet. ■

HUMAN RIGHTS



The biggest news to come out this week was the presentation of the latest budget. In the off-chance people forget what the big deal about this budget was, MPs were seen holding up 10 fingers to symbolize that this was the 10th budget presented by our esteemed and highly-amazing Finance Minister; La Décima, as Real Madrid fans used to say last year during every sentence they would conceive. Newspapers and general people, true to form, exhausted synonyms of the word 'huge' to describe the latest budget, using words like "mega", "giant", "ginormous", "like my manhood" and so on. The Centre for Policy Dialogue on the other-hand opted for a backhanded smack-down by reminding everyone that this 3.4 trillion taka budget was again confined to the 14 percent of the overall economy, according to a bdnews24 report. In reality, the new budget, the greatest budget ever seen if reporters are to be believed, is 17.37 percent of the economy, while the current budget stood at 17.2 percent of the GDP. So, no, it isn't really all that 'mega'. What is mega about though, is how ambitious it is, which also isn't all that ambitious. Build a few bridges, spend more money on projects that have been delayed as per the norm and of course pour it all in the coffers of your FNFs. That's what democracy is all about; looking out for ALL your friends instead of a few.

But let's get to the meat of the matter. No one really cares about the budget because it is so hard to understand. For instance, according to Janes, 'the 2016-17 military expenditure includes BDT212.48 billion for "non-development" costs, which includes military salaries, maintenance costs, and operations and BDT4.06 billion for "development" costs including defence procurement,". Now, many of us were under the impression that military costs should be greater for procurement and less for salaries and what not, but turns out we will be spending 7% more on that this year and 5% less on irrelevant things like procurement because we need a 100 more cantonments with deer, right? On the plus side though, we already boast 11 helicopters and two submarines or something, so bring it on, whoever. The point is, we care about how the budget will help us and so far it doesn't seem to be helping us in anyway. More spending on healthcare and education is welcome of course, but I wonder if our Ministers have actually been to a government hospital as usually they are flying off to Singapore for even just a flu treatment. Those in charge of policies remain unaffected by them and this is perhaps why many of us are hesitant at their proposals. It's the US-funded agencies

THE BEEF WITH THE BUDGET



gimmick of providing laptops and internet to solve all of our flood and poverty-related problems; it doesn't work and that bothers us.

Of the 3.41 million taka, an estimated 2.43 million is expected to arrive from revenue from taxes. At this juncture we have the BGMEA, perched upon their illegally built structure, yelling how unfair it is to charge them like a whole 1 percent more in tax as that would totally mean the industry, as a whole, would shut down. For an industry that sees more cases of unpaid workers striking, to claim they aren't making money and lamenting their dire poverty while driving around in the latest cars is a little concerning. The second group of haters is of course the rich who believe that paying higher taxes would mean they would literally starve. Thank God for offshore accounts, right

rich guys? Then we have the 'non-existent' political party, according to our honourable Finance Minister, whose leader hasn't even biometrically registered her sim, so what on Earth are they complaining about?

The only people allowed to complain are the VAT payers. Forget the tax payers; of a 160 million only 1.2 million pay taxes, so clearly the revenue won't be coming from there. It will come via more expensive goods, higher call rates, more electricity bills, more money for breakfast, higher prices of biscuits and so on. Notice the lack of noise from the middle to lower income group. We are probably ok with the budget. We just ask that when you build a bridge for 100 crore in 4 years, do not take 8 years, hire incompetent builders and then tell us you need 500 crore for the same project. We also ask

that when someone tells you they have around seven billion takas in offshore accounts, you don't just shrug and let them go. We plead that the way you hound us for failing to pay our credit card bills every month is the same way you hound those who have defaulted on 300 crore takas or so of loans and then gone on to make a bank just to rub it in our face. We also ask you to restructure the government banks so they stop stealing money. We further ask that you start collecting taxes, stop with the VAT nonsense all the time and actually turn words to actions. The Bangladeshi people are tired and weary. Mega budget or stringy budget, please make a budget that allows us to not worry every time we go out to shop or turn on the air cooler, wondering how we will make up for this money spent. ■