

# Children in slums: Living in inhumane conditions

ANKA MALIK

"I used to attend school regularly until one fine day my whole house was burnt down and I realised that the whole of Korail Basti was on fire. After that incident, I moved to another slum in Mirpur and now I work at a factory nearby. Most of the time after I am done with work, I meet my friends and inhale solution (also known as 'dandy', a common street drug in Dhaka)," shares Aliyah, a 10-year-old.

become rickshaw-pullers."

Aliyah's story is not an uncommon one. She is just another dweller in one of the 5,000 slums in Dhaka city. And just like her, most of the children in slums live in inhumane conditions. These children lack access to basic education and proper nutrition. On top of that, the chaos of life in slums makes it difficult for children to grow up in a healthy manner.

According to a study by icddr,b on children aged between 6-14 years, about 14.1 percent boys

International Bangladesh.

"About 8-10 households share one common bathroom and it becomes nearly impossible for me to use the washroom when I urgently need to. Currently, my older brother, Rahim, is suffering from diarrhoea and he barely gets any chance to use the washroom, and that leaves him with no choice but to use the drains nearby," Aliyah mentions.

According to a survey by Institute of Health Economics, University of Dhaka, two-thirds of slum households reported suffering from disease for up to 15 days in the three-month survey period. One-fifth of these households even reported to being ill for 31 days and more. Despite of this, their health care expenditure

more and then got used to it. I got exposed to drugs when I was five. I started smoking *biri*, and then ended up using solution."

Girls in slums feel unsafe most of the time as they are prone to experiencing sexual harassment and rape.

"It is difficult for a girl to grow up in such an environment. Most girls of the age 10-14 lack access to proper washrooms which violates their right to privacy. Such situations make girls more vulnerable to sexual harassment and rape. Not only girl children but male children too are vulnerable," Reefat says.

Although Aliyah has been a sufferer at such a young age, she is still hopeful for a brighter future. She says she wants to start school again. To help children like Aliyah, BRAC is establishing 2,000 single classrooms which will support the education of approximately 62,000 children.

"Back when I used to live in Korail, there was a school by BRAC but right now I am unsure if there is a school in Mirpur. If I can study at night and work during the day, I will definitely join school again," Aliyah says.

"There is an absence of focus on children when it comes to urban planning. The environment should be child-friendly so that children can grow up healthily," says Reefat.

"One of the reasons why there are no proper slum-dedicated projects by the government is because there is a fear that people from the rural areas will migrate to Dhaka," says Akter Mahmud, Vice President, Bangladesh Institute of Planners.

Where is the silver lining to this detrimental situation of children living in slums?

Children living in the informal settlements are no different than normal children with the wish of growing up in proper environment.

"It's not like slum dwellers do not have the ability to pay rent. They do. So if there were a project on rental housing as per their affordability, it would help ensure security and safety of the people, especially the children," Akter shares.

Currently, due to the absence of public providers, there remains a strong intervention of NGOs in case of health and education. A study by The World Bank shows about 27 percent of the slums have NGO operated school, providing quality education, and 20 percent of the slums have NGO operated clinics providing health care services to the underprivileged. Reefat says, "We work on Early Child Development to ensure children's healthy growth and access to basic necessities."

Akter Mahmud says, "If both private and public sectors come together, the problem of informal settlements can be improved. It can stand as a business model and it would benefit the whole city."



PHOTO: RASHED SUMON

Dhaka is the most densely populated city of Bangladesh. According to the slum census 2014, about 646,000 people live in slums. This large population brings along with it a huge problem of accommodation and low living standards. The conditions are inhumane and harsh for the residents of urban slums. Children in slums are in a vulnerable situation as their living conditions are deteriorating by the day.

Aliyah further shares, "I left school when I was in grade two and never was able to go back to studying. I have two brothers and two sisters and with my parents we live in a one-room tin-shed in a slum in Mirpur. All of my friends either work in factories, or sell stickers on the streets, or

and 8.9 percent girls do not have any schooling background at all. And the ones who do receive a little bit of schooling leave it at a young age and start working, much like the case of Aliyah.

A study conducted by Theirworld, a global children's charity organisation, shows that children living in slums work for about 64 hours a week, of whom many work in the textile industry.

"It is a different scenario in slums, unlike that of rural settlements. Both parents stay out for work and children are left unattended. They lack basic schooling, nutrition and other necessities," says Reefat Bin Sattar, Director, Program Development and Quality, Save the Children

during that time was not high. This is because 82.4 percent of the slum dwellers did not obtain health care from modern health facilities. Studies also show that some of the residents had not vaccinated their children at all.

Most of the children dwelling in slums are infected with serious water-borne diseases, and it is mainly because of the lack of access to fresh and clean water.

"Usually, there are a lot of people entering and exiting our house. Once a man entered when I was alone with my two younger siblings, and he claimed to know my father. But that became one of the most devastating experiences of my life. He sexually abused me and threatened to kill me if I spoke about it to anyone. When I tried telling my mother, she shut me down saying it was quite normal," Aliyah says with a heavy heart. "But that was only one such experience. I have faced

## A silent cry for help

*The drowning epidemic among children*

ARSHAE AHMED & NIHAD NOWSHER

Partho, 8, went missing for two days in early November until his body was found at the shore of a river in his village, Aburkandi, Chandpur. He was last seen playing with his mates who all went back to their homes after dusk; only Partho did not return. Later, it was discovered that he died by slipping and drowning and none of his friends were aware of the situation. As daunting as it may seem, such scenarios are widespread across Bangladesh.

According to a report by International Drowning Research Centre Bangladesh (IDRC-B), drowning is the leading cause of death among children aged 1 to 17 in Bangladesh, with at least 18,000 deaths per year, killing approximately 50 children every day; children aged 1 to 4 are at increased risk of drowning. The report further states that water bodies such as ponds and ditches are abundant in Bangladesh and many essential activities such as bathing, cooking, agriculture, etc., heavily involve working near water bodies, mostly in rural areas. Also, children of various age groups tend to play near water bodies. Such practices naturally increase the likelihood of death of children by drowning. Moreover, for children aged five and under, over 80 percent of fatal drowning incidents occur in closed vessels, ditches and ponds, usually less than 20 metres away from their homes. Whilst for children over five, drowning occurs farther away from their homes, usually when swimming without adult supervision.

Esha Husain, Partnership Lead, Synergos Consulting Services, shares, "Drowning is the leading cause of death for children aged 1-4 which happens within 20 metres of home, more so in rural areas, when children are left unsupervised, as their mothers are busy with household chores or are away from work."

To tackle the crisis, drowning prevention activities are increasing in Bangladesh, with support from organisations such as Philanthropies Initiative to Prevent Drowning, UNICEF in Bangladesh, Save the Children International Bangladesh, Bangladesh Early

Childhood Development Network, IDRC-B, to name a few.

Esha adds, "Daycares can cater to a gamut of child care and development needs, including early learning, health, nutritional development, early screening of disability, among others. Currently, most of the early childhood care or daycare centres in the country are implemented by non-government agencies. However, due to the decreasing trend of external donor funds, a lot of sectors including child development and care run the risk of fund crunch." Esha further states, "The development practitioners envisage that in a middle-income country such as ours, the government investment in the child care sector need to increase and pilots or experiments on integrated child care services should be initiated by the public sector before wider mainstreaming. The child care practitioners are waiting with bated breath for the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs to approve the Day Care Act which will necessitate and open doors for innovative interventions in both the public and private sectors."

IDRC-B suggests that the traditional first aid practices when a child drowns include laying down the child's body in a straight position and rubbing it with ashes or salt as it helps absorb water and provides warmth to the body. Foods such as rotten banana leaves, uncooked eggs and arum stems can also be fed to make the child puke out the water.

In 2016, Bloomberg Philanthropies supported daycare centres across seven sub-districts, known as "Anchals", where an "Anchal Ma" is appointed to take care of children when their parents are away for other work, as a part of a research study to see if this initiative can help reduce drowning of children. The initiative successfully made a lasting impact, preventing drowning of more than 70,000 children aged 1 to 4, besides providing training for social and cognitive development. Support from the government is needed currently to take this initiative forward.

Currently, Royal National Lifeboats Institution (RNLI) along with Center for Injury Prevention and Research Bangladesh (CIPRB) and the

George Institute for Global Health have launched Project BHASHA, which is working to reduce the rate of drowning in Barishal division, where the drowning epidemic is three times higher. They are providing SwimSafe lessons and *Anchal* to communities in Barishal. This helps children remain engaged in playing and learning as a part of pre-school preparation, while their parents are away, thereby reducing cases of drowning.

Esha states, "A National Drowning Prevention

Strategy is still awaiting approval from the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare. Also, news reporting on drowning incidence is in small letters. Similarly, number of initiatives on drowning prevention is not significant compared to its scale. Increased awareness, incentives for organisations willing to help, contribution of the government and aligned guidelines are all elements which are essential in rectifying this grave concern of child drowning in Bangladesh."



PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN