

# WHO OWNS DHAKA'S STREETS?

## The politics of eviction and survival

ISHTIAQ MOHAMMAD

Discussions around street vendors usually begin with accusations of "encroachment." But these lives and livelihoods need to be understood within the wider story of the informal economy and the way our cities are planned.

A study jointly conducted by Karmojibi Nari and FES Bangladesh has surveyed 768 informal sector workers across the country. This study has identified about 450 occupations in Bangladesh's informal sector. Most of the workers are engaged in retail and sales, and others in agriculture and livestock, food and beverage services, transport, and craft.

### An invisible backbone

The informal economy accounts for a major portion of Bangladesh's economy. The National Labour Force Survey of 2024 presents that about 84.07% of the workforce (59.68 million people approximately) were employed informally in 2023. A deeper look shows that women are especially part of the informal economy. Almost 95.96% of female workers were in informal employment, whereas this was 78.08% for male workers. Additionally, various studies estimate that this informal economy accounts for 40–43% of Bangladesh's GDP. As a result, when the eviction drives are happening, for whatever justified reason, this is not only about a small group of the country's population. Rather, this is dealing with a large chunk of the economic base of the country.

However, this phenomenon is not unique to developing countries. Even the most advanced economies host substantial informal work—sometimes hidden in subcontracting, platform gigs, unpaid (or casually paid) domestic work, and micro-entrepreneurship. ILO/WIEGO data show that about 15.9% of employment in "higher-income countries" is informal. This means the informal economy is not a leftover of



PHOTO: MAMUNOR RASHID

Roadside street shops are being destroyed under city corporation regulation.

"under development" but continues to operate across advanced societies.

This is especially significant in how we deal with vendors in Dhaka. They cannot be dismissed as mere "encroachers" to be removed, but must be recognised as citizens with basic rights. They are investing time and capital, paying informal rents and fees, and supporting households. When they are considered mere "encroachers", this invisibilises the economic aspects and strips off the minimal social protections they might access.

Globally, most cities regulate street vending rather than pursue outright eradication. This establishes it as an urban management problem. Brazil introduced its Micro-Entrepreneur (MEI) scheme back in 2009. This provides millions of micro-entrepreneurs with a simple registration path to access legal recognition and some formal benefits. Data from Brazil's

National Statistics Agency (IBGE) show that by 2022, 14.6 million individuals were registered. Indonesian cities such as Jakarta have also attempted to formalise street vending. This has treated it as an urban reality rather than an anomaly, and designed vendor bays as part of spatial plans. This has recognised vendors' role in city life while managing the flows and safety of citizens.

### What happened in Dhaka — and the way forward

In Bangladesh, in 2022, the Dhaka South City Corporation planned to designate parts of the city as red, yellow, and green zones to regulate vending. Two roads in the Gulistan area were marked red, and large-scale evictions followed. These ideas were used to justify eviction. However, no clear and participatory implementation, such as alternative spaces or transitional support,

was observed. These evictions continued in waves, often without any relocation plans.

Sajib (name changed for anonymity) sells momos from a small stall tucked inside a residential lane in eastern Dhaka. He used to sell from a stall on the main road near a local college. After the eviction drive in the neighbourhood, he moved inside an alley with a smaller, "easy-to-go" stall setup. Although his sales have reduced significantly, it still gives him some means to survive. "Now, fewer customers come to the stall due to the location — but those who do, they keep coming back." Sajib learnt how to make momos when he was staying with some Nepali chefs in Dhaka. His story reflects the learning, adaptation, and resilience shared by countless other vendors. Yet, it also reveals a deeper reality—the shift towards increasingly fragile livelihoods across the country. The plans of eviction or anything else must be inclusion, not erasure. Drawing from global practices, a few concrete steps could be taken:

can be introduced to give vendors a legal identity. This will give them basic rights, e.g. protection from arbitrary eviction, access to small loans, and training.

**Guaranteed transitional arrangements during clearances:** In places where clearance is unavoidable (due to safety or infrastructure), relocations must be time-staged and include temporary income support. In such cases, there should be provisions for credit to re-establish stock.

**Targeted social protection for women in informality:** As the majority of the female working population are tied to the informal economy, there should be linked registration for health coverage and maternity support.

**Tackle illicit extractive rents:** There should be measures to eliminate the unofficial fees vendors pay to middlemen or enforcement actors. Instead, small, transparent municipal fees should be introduced and utilised to cover sanitation, lighting, and waste collection.

**Eviction makes for an easy spectacle, but the real and lasting challenge lies in designing a Dhaka that acknowledges its invisible workforce as part of the city's social and economic fabric.**

**Transparent zoning and mapped vendor bays:** Clear and concise data on pedestrian flow should be collected, and on the basis of that, vendor bays can be positioned beside footpaths. Some pilot models already exist in other Asian cities that can be adapted.

**Simple registration method (micro-entrepreneur IDs):** A simple mobile or market registration system with a low fee and minimal technological interference

Eviction makes for an easy spectacle, but the real and lasting challenge lies in designing a Dhaka that acknowledges its invisible workforce as part of the city's social and economic fabric. A society that excludes its population is brittle, and one that dignifies its population builds resilience.

Ishtiaq Mohammad is a lecturer in the Department of Sociology at East West University, Dhaka.

# The hands that clean, the Harijans we refuse to see

Sumita Basfor of Sreemangal said, "Our stomachs often remain empty—not because we do not work hard, but because life is unfair. What hurts most is not only the hunger, but the humiliation of being treated as less than human."

MINTU DESHWARA

Her name is Rani, which literally means "queen". But her life could not be further from royalty. She lives in a ten-by-twelve-foot, single, damp room at the Harijan Colony in Moulvibazar's Kulaura Upazila. The room, and 199 others, are cluttered with kathas and pillows for sleeping, a rope strung across to hang clothes, and a stove in one corner. Even though the condition is unliveable, Rani Basfor is more concerned about what to cook and feed her family of five.

This is not an isolated case. It is the reality of the Harijan people across the country, who spend hours cleaning civilised cities and municipalities but are forced to live a life not suited to a civilised society.

Rekha Basfor of Moulvibazar's Sreemangal goes to work in the morning after drinking only a glass of water. "I don't have the luxury of having breakfast — a piece of bun and half a cup of tea costs about Tk 15, and my daily wage is Tk 33," she said. For the family, she often cooks only rice and sometimes mashed potatoes. Fish and meat are never part of her meals except on special occasions, when she



Scenes from the Harijan colony in Sylhet, where families live in cramped, unhygienic conditions with poor sanitation and limited access to basic facilities.

PHOTOS: SHEIKH NASIR

but a luxury to us."

According to the Bangladesh Harijan Oikya Parishad, the lowest municipal salaries are alarmingly low: Shariatpur pays Tk 3,000, Madaripur Tk 2,000, Kumarkhali Tk 1,800, Rajbari Tk 2,300, Akhaura Tk 1,500, Kustia Tk 2,700, Natore Tk 2,100, Bogura Tk 3,300, and Shanthar Tk 1,200. Sylhet City Corporation offers Tk 3,200 a month (up from Tk 2,200 last July), Sreemangal pays Tk 1,000 (previously Tk 550), while Kulaura provides the highest rate at Tk 3,800.

Sumita Basfor of Sreemangal said, "Our stomachs often remain empty—not because we do not work hard, but because life is unfair. What hurts most is not only the hunger, but the humiliation of being treated as less than human." Rani from Kulaura said, "When we go to hospitals, doctors don't examine us properly, considering us contaminated. Even during pregnancy, it's hard to secure proper treatment or safe delivery."

According to the book *Study on the Wages of Urban Cleaners*, published by Nagorik Uddog in January 2025, 75 percent of workers

do not receive protective equipment, and only 8 percent of workers have access to healthcare. The deprivation hits hardest among the children, as education remains out of reach for most of them. Shabitri, an eleven-year-old student, said she no longer wishes to attend school. "No one in my class wants to sit next to me, and they refuse to talk to me. It makes me feel like never going back again."

Pannalal Basfor, organising secretary of Bangladesh Harijan Oikya Parishad, said, "The British brought Harijans to this land over 200 years ago to work as sweepers. Even after two centuries, we are still excluded from being incorporated into the official system." He said that the Harijan community is estimated to number 1.5 million people, living in 124 colonies across 55 districts, and all of them face the same unfortunate conditions.

According to the book *Harijans of Bangladesh*, a study conducted by the Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD) in 2019 estimated that 95.52 percent of Harijan families depend on their work as cleaners,

78 percent of the families are in debt, and only 0.85 percent of the families are under the Social Safety Net Programme (SSNP).

Of the Harijans, only 21.83 percent complete primary education, 5.89 percent complete SSC, and less than 5 percent pass beyond HSC, giving them meagre scope for other forms of work.

A field-level survey by *The Daily Star* among 100 Harijans in four colonies in Moulvibazar found that 90 percent are in a debt trap and none has ever owned a piece of land. It finds that the average family size was six, with an average monthly income of Tk 4,500. Their daily diets rely on carbohydrates, with only occasional protein and rare intake of vegetables, fruits, or dairy. There is no change in diet for pregnant women.

According to the study *Harijan Communities in Bangladesh and SDG-11: A Critical Analysis* (published in May 2025), around 85 percent of Harijans live below the poverty line, where low income severely restricts their access to adequate food, proper

nutrition, and healthcare. Living conditions are equally alarming: only 22 percent of households have access to piped water, while 90 percent lack proper drainage systems, creating an environment that worsens disease and undermines nutritional security. Educational and social indicators also reflect deep marginalisation, with 68 percent of Harijans having limited access to education, 74 percent facing workplace harassment, 41 percent experiencing child marriage, and 55 percent reporting domestic violence.

Sagar Basfor, general secretary of the Bangladesh Harijan Rakkha Parishad's Sreemangal Upazila unit, said, "Many journalists, NGOs, and government officials come, capture photos, write stories or reports. They all promise everything, but nothing changes."

Md Shah Jahan, Deputy Director (Beggars, Harijans, Tea Workers and Hijras), Social Security Branch, Department of Social Services, said, "Now only two programmes are being run for Harijans — a scholarship for students and a monthly allowance of six hundred taka for people from the Harijan community above 50 years of age. However, these allocations are given subject to the availability of the budget. We distribute whatever allocation we get."

Supreme Court lawyer and rights activist Sara Hossain said Harijans should unite to achieve their rights and they should not be divided among themselves. A quota system should be maintained to protect the rights of the backward communities.

"To build a society without discrimination, the first task is to establish the rights, stability, and dignity of those who are most oppressed. This is the state's responsibility. The existing organisations working on the rights of Harijans must be organised to fulfil their righteous demands," said noted economist and activist Professor Anu Muhammad.

Mintu Deshwara is a journalist at *The Daily Star*.



manages to get some extra money from somewhere.

A Harijan seeking anonymity said that the "extra income" often refers to income from drug peddling, as many of them are being forced into the business to cover the increasing cost of living. Santa Basfor of Sreemangal said, "We cannot afford to put basic food on our table. Proper nutritional food, even some snacks, are nothing