

Lives of Street-connected Children in Bangladesh

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Acronyms

<i>Mazar</i>	A Muslim shrine or enshrined tomb
<i>Bhangari</i>	Plastic, metal and paper scraps or left-over
<i>Bhangarir dokan</i>	Scrap shop
<i>Bhangariwala</i>	Owner of a scrap shop
<i>Tokkai</i>	Scrap picker
<i>Coolie</i>	Porter
<i>Bhabaghure</i>	Stroller, vagabond, homeless or floating person
<i>Bhabakhana</i>	Temporary shelter or residence for homeless people
<i>Lagoona</i>	A type of human hauler (mode of transport)
<i>Ganja</i>	Cannabis
<i>Dandy</i>	A solvent or glue used for shoes and leather
<i>Paijama</i>	A kind of Trouser
<i>Boro bhai</i>	Literally means elder brother. But for street-connected children it refers to a local influential political leader or activist
<i>Pongu</i>	A disabled person
<i>Madrasa</i>	A school where young people go to learn especially on Islamic religion.

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Abstract

Street connected children, children who live/or spend time on the streets, are a vulnerable group of considerable concern. The aim of this study is to gain a detail understanding about lives of children living and working in the streets of Dhaka, Bangladesh, to help develop an effective and informed intervention that can contribute to improved outcomes for this vulnerable group. In order to understand the overall situation and structural violence in which street connected children spend their lives, the study explored their (children) reasons for street migration, primary livelihood, daily struggles, vulnerabilities and other issues which are distinctively associated with street connected children. The study indicates a range of “push” and “pull” factors leading and keeping the children on the street. It also includes a detail analysis of the dimensions of challenges and risks experienced by children living in the streets and the meaning and significance of a shelter to them as well as the factors that draw and prevent them from joining street children shelter.

1. Introduction

1.1 Context

Bangladesh is home to around 42 million children aged 5-17 years, 32.2% of its total population (Ahmed *et al.* 2003). More than 400,000 children live in the streets of major cities of Bangladesh (de Benítez ST 2007). Dhaka city alone is home to nearly 249,200 street connected children (UNICEF 2009). Most street children are living in a situation of multifaceted vulnerability regarding their inaccessibility to basic socioeconomic amenities of life such as proper food and nutrition, permanent and safe shelter, access to safe drinking water, proper sanitation, sufficient clothes, medical facilities, education and training, family environment, etc. Surrounded by poverty and other hardships of life these street children are often engaged in different low waged as well as hazardous income earning activities. Moreover, according to research findings this group is often subjected to regular incidences of physical and sexual abuse, drug abuse and violence (Koehlmoos *et al.* 2009, Abdullah *et al.* 2014).

Not all street children are orphans and homeless. There is not yet an international agreement on the definition of 'street children.' The categorisation of street children as being 'of' or 'on' the streets became popular in the 1980s literature: the former term refers to 'street-living' children, the latter means children who work on the streets during the daytime and return home to their families at night or 'street-working' children (UNICEF 1986). The world of the street children cannot be distinguished by a simple division between 'home' and 'street' but rather with respect to numerous private and public 'domains' (Lucchini 1996). To capture diverse situations, experiences and fluidity of children's relationships to street, Criança (2007) defined 'street-children' as children for whom the street is a reference point and has a central role in their lives and who experience a combination of multiple deprivations and 'street-connectedness.' Therefore, in this paper we use the phrase 'street-connected children' as a synonym of 'street children.'

There are children who work on streets in day time and return back to their families at night, there are also children who migrated to cities to support their family back home. Many slum dwelling children spend most of their day time in public places like bazaars, terminals in the countryside, streets, interact with people from various backgrounds, work as apprentices and spend most of their waking hours away from their families. Thus, the term street-child is a complex phenomenon. As per our data there is prevalence of various kinds of street children in Dhaka city, the categories include:

1. Orphan children living in the streets;
2. Slum dwelling children who spend most of their day time playing or working in the street away from their home but return to their families at night.

3. Street children without guardian (lost, abandoned, eloped and separated): these children are separated from their families. In some cases children have a loose tie with the family. But most of these children do not live with their parents and live on their own. They earn their living by themselves and spend nights in public places such as streets, bus terminals, under/overpass, in private garages or in stairs of office buildings etc.
4. Street children with guardian: children under this category become street-connected due to their parent's migration to the street. This is one of the common consequences of rural-urban migration and slum eviction in Bangladesh.

Recognising the vulnerabilities of these children, BRAC initiated a pilot programme in May 2013 named "Urban Street Children Programme" under its urban poverty programme. The primary objective of this programme is to provide nurturing services to children living on the streets through its two main children centres located in Sadarghat and Mirpur and 16 other sub-centres located in adjacent areas of the main centres. Subsequent sections of this introductory chapter provide an overview of the Urban Street Children Programme along with the study objectives.

1.2 BRAC initiative to address the vulnerability

The main goal of BRAC Urban Street Children Programme (USCP) is to improve the lives of marginalised street connected children suffering from violence and other hardship through its various interventions like: literacy, life skills, livelihood, extra circular activities and psycho social support etc.

The BRAC urban street children programme is working with street connected children in the areas mentioned above. These children aged 6-15 years can be grouped into the following categories:

1. Street children without guardian (lost, abandoned, escaped, separated);
2. Slum dwelling working children who spent most of their time on street;
3. Children who got migrated to street with their guardian.

USCP has the following primary objectives:

1. Livelihood development of street children through job placement by giving them non-formal primary education and vocational training.
2. Building hope and confidence among these children by equipping them with knowledge and skill through life skill training and confidence/aspiration building training.

Basically, the USCP wants to equip these children with the means to govern themselves through self-expression, personal growth and professional development. In addition, the programme also seeks to transform them into well-balanced, empowered and productive member of society.

1.3 Study objective

Research and evaluation division has been an integral part of each and every BRAC innovation. BRAC has monitoring and evaluation built into each of its programme to assist its programme personnel with constant update about the effectiveness of the interventions. Thus, for an evidence based programme intervention evaluation of the pilot phase of USCP is necessary. Following this a baseline study was conducted in 2014 to aid in later evaluation of the programme. Thus, the objective of this report is to provide a detailed profile of the targeted street connected children from the baseline and also to compare them with other non targeted street children residing in the same area. This report mainly attempts to answer the following specific questions:

- What are the profiles of children living in street and shelter?
- What are the dimension of challenges and risks experienced by children living in the street?
- What is the meaning and significance of shelter to street connected children?
- What are the factors that draw and prevent them from joining a shelter?

2. Methodology

2.1 Methods

Qualitative techniques were used to understand the lives of street connected children. Fieldwork for the study was conducted from December 2013 to February 2014 in Mirpur-1 and Sadarghat. Data were collected through triangulation of in-depth interviews, case studies and focus group discussions.

In-depth interview (IDI) was the primary tool for collecting data from these children. All the interviews were conducted in an informal and open-ended manner, following a semi-structured interview checklist. For the key informant interviews (KII) a semi-structured checklist was developed. Day long participant observation based ethnographic accounts were also conducted both inside and outside the centre in Mirpur and Sadarghat in four separate days.

We contacted the responsible centre manager to set up a convenient time to meet the targeted children. To identify children for the comparison group, we applied the snowball method. Children in the centre mainly worked as a primary index case for locating children for the comparison group. In some cases programme staff also helped us to locate children for the comparison group.

To maintain data triangulation as well as to capture different perspectives on lives of street connected children, we also conducted interviews with some key actors who are in some way related to street-connected children. This aided us to see a broader picture of street-connected children and their relationships with different actors in the society. The selected key informants were various staff in the centres (i.e. centre manager, field organiser, care giver, teacher, cook, savings officer, job replacement programme organiser), parents, employers, etc.

2.2 Data collection process and preparation

Five Field Research Assistants trained in Anthropology was appointed for data collection. Prior to data collection the research assistants were trained in the use of PRA, RRA and other participatory research technique by an experienced facilitator.

2.3 Data management and analysis

The collected data were transcribed in Bengali by the research assistants. The first task was to translate the datasets into English and check for any type of discrepancy without interfering with the actual narrative to make it more appropriate for academic use. The next task was to identify the reoccurrence or common themes across the datasets for further analysis. In order to complete this process each of the transcripts

was thoroughly analysed using a thematic indexing system. Some of the reoccurring themes were substance abuse, violence, insecurity, daily survival struggles, past lives, future aspirations etc.

3. Characteristics of street connected children

3.1 Basic demographics

Data were collected from 36 (21 boys and 15 girls) street-connected children. We planned to keep the male-female ratio equal; however due to absence as well as reluctance of street connected girls in Sadarghat area to participate in the interview we could not survey the required number of girls in this area. Regarding age of the children we followed the segregation method used by the programme. We divided the study samples into two groups; one group with children aged 6-10 years and the other group with children aged 11-15. All the children we talked with were Muslims. The majority of children came from Barisal division, mostly from Barisal, Bhola, Barguna, Patuakhali, followed by Kishoreganj, Faridpur, Chandpur, Noakhali, Comilla, Chittagong, Gazipur, Mymensingh, Jessore, Saidpur and Rangpur districts. Two respondents in Mirpur informed us that they were born and brought up in Mirpur area. About fifty per cent of the respondent had exposure to formal schooling at the very basic level. Most of the children we interviewed were found to be engaged with various informal occupations: scrap collection, begging, pushing motor vans, etc.

3.2 Context of the study areas

Mirpur and Sadarghat were selected for the pilot study due to their size, location, high commercial activities and the fact that they serve as transit point to other towns and cities in Bangladesh. Significant numbers of street-connected children were found concentrated in both areas.

Hazrat Shah Ali *Mazar* in Mirpur-1 is the central place for earning, roaming and sleeping for a significant number of street-connected children of Mirpur area. Some of the older street boys (10+) work as day labourers at Mirpur-1 market just next to the *mazar*. *Mazar* committee prepares and distributes free lunch to economically marginal people who stay at *mazar* or visit *mazar* for food. Every Thursday dinner is also cooked at the *mazar* for poor and needy people. Moreover, as a sacred place, everyday many visitors come to the *mazar* premises from various parts of Bangladesh. This frequent gathering of people in the *mazar* premises, allows children with opportunity for begging and stealing. Thus, for the street children of Mirpur area the *mazar* has been a source of food, accommodation and livelihood. Moreover, Gabtoli Bus Terminal, one of the largest inter-district bus terminals in Dhaka, is also quite close to the *mazar* area. Thus, some street children staying at the *mazar* area work as assistants in public vehicles like bus and human haulers. Most of the street children of Mirpur area sleep at the *mazar* premises, some sleep under the foot-over

bridge and others the corridors of local shopping malls and local cinema halls. Table 3.1 below shows the dwelling places of our respondents from mirpur area:

Table 3.1 Dwelling places of the respondents in Mirpur area:

Places	Girls		Boys		Total	Percentage
	6-10	11-15	6-10	11-15		
Shah Ali <i>Mazar</i> , Mirpur-1	2	5	2	2	11	52.4
BRAC Children Centre	3	-	3	-	6	28.6
Shah Ali <i>Mazar</i> and under the foot-over bridge of Mirpur-1	-	-	-	3	3	14.3
Local slum (with family)	-	-	-	1	1	4.8
Total					21	

Sadargahat and its neighbourhoods have ferry terminal for facilitating communication mainly with many districts of Bangladesh. Based on this river front, different factories and wholesale markets have been established, making this area economically significant. Picking plastic, metal and paper scrap is a very common occupation for the street-connected children of this area. Moreover, Sadarghat ferry terminal provides various other work opportunities for street-connected children like (begging, carrying baggages of travelers, arranging passengers etc.). Most of the street children of Sadarghat area sleep either at the Sadarghat launch terminal or inside local scrap shops. Few of our respondents were found sleeping at NGO shelters and in local slums with their families. Table 3.2 below shows the dwelling places of the respondents of Sadarghat area:

Table 3.2 Dwelling places of the respondent of Sadarghat area

Occupation	Girls		Boys		Total	Percentage
	6-10	11-15	6-10	11-15		
Sadarghat Launch/Boat terminal	-	1	2	2	5	33.3
Local slum (with family)	2	2	-	-	4	26.7
Local Scrap shop (<i>Bhangarir doka</i> in Bengali)	-	-	2	1	3	20.0
NGO night centres in Sadarghat (other than BRAC centres)	-	-	1	1	2	13.3
Alternately sleeps between Local Scrap shop and Sadarghat Launch/Boat terminal	-	-	-	1	1	6.7
Total					15	

3.3 Reason behind ending up in the street

A dominant prevailing notion is that children end up on the streets due to poverty. Conticini and Hulme (2007) challenge this notion, arguing that domestic violence also plays a significant role in pushing children into the street. Findings from this study

indicate that poverty – understood in terms of material deprivation- as well as domestic violence are some of the larger range of both push and pull factors which result in children moving into a street.

Material insufficiency such as food, clothing and shelter is intensified through the deprivation of care and affection, pushing children to cross the boundary of home and family and to live their own life. Children in a street context have often dropped out of families where adults have failed to fulfill their material and emotional needs. Children in these families are sent to earn or leave their family in order to pursue a better life. Some of our respondents said that they send money to their family living in Dhaka or outside Dhaka. However, even if children don't share their income with their families, children working outside can still help the family members, as the adults do not need to bear any expenses for the working children. Even sometimes cooking for working children becomes needless, since most of them are able to source their own food. Thus, children eating and earning money on the street whether they bring home food and money or not, provide economic relief to their families; according to our findings this is a common scenario for low income families of Mirpur and Sadarghat.

There are other drivers that amplify the state of poverty and push children to cities and to the street. Many of these boys and girls are from female headed families losing their prime male earners of the family (meaning father/husband) due to divorce, abandonment or death. In south Asia and other parts of the world, among households based on any criteria, female-headed households tend to be the poorest. Female-headed households are more vulnerable to increased unemployment and reductions in social services from the state (Sen 1991, Chant 1997 & 2004, and Buvinić 1997). Similar scenario is seen in the case of street children of countries like Angola, Kenya and Ethiopia (Moberly 1999, Onyango *et al.* 1991 and Lalor 1999). Moreover, another prominent push factor is domestic violence and arguments with parents or step-parents and even corporal punishment. So, the situation gets worse for children when deprivation of care and affection is added with the insufficiency of basic material needs (food, clothing and shelter) and this mishmash pushes children to cross the boundary of home and family and to live their own life (Seymour 2012).

On the other hand, the street of Dhaka offers children various informal opportunities. Pull factors that came out of this include livelihood scope or opportunities to earn money, autonomy from adults and the freedom of street life. These findings are consistent with that of Blanchet (1996). To most street connected children, having some money in their hand, hanging out with friends, talking about any topic, roaming all over the city and even country, smoking cigarette and taking different drugs, playing video games, watching films, sleeping and waking up anytime are more rational than having proper clothes, food, shelter, education etc. They are even ignorant about the existing threats on the streets such as the likelihood of being abused (physically and sexually), kidnapped, infected with severe diseases or the possibility of jeopardizing their future perspectives. Table 3.3 lists the reasons for street migration of our respondents:

Table 3.3. Reasons behind Street Migration

Push and Pull Factors	Girls		Boys		Total	Percentage
	6-10	11-15	6-10	11-15		
Female headed households/Poverty	3	4	4	3	14	38.9
Broken family (Divorce, remarriage of both or either one of the parents)	3	2	3	2	10	27.8
Lost, abandoned, escaped, separated from parents or primary care giver		1	2	3	6	16.7
Dispute with family or primary caregiver	1			3	4	11.1
Domestic abuse		1	1		2	5.6
Total					36	

3.4 Street Livelihoods

The notion of livelihoods in relation to street connected children is contrary to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Childhood is seen as a period of nurturing and education within the family, school and society that builds a path for children's future career and lives. Unfortunately, all the street-connected children included in this study were deprived of these opportunities. Some street children even migrated to Dhaka in order to earn money for the family. Others had to be involved in an income-generating activity so that they could survive since they were far away from their family and there was no one who would pay for their food and shelter. Thus, livelihood becomes a must for most of the street-connected children to stand against all odds and survive in the streets of big cities.

Street-connected children's livelihood and its trajectory is a prominent factor in order to understand the streets and their connectivity with children. We draw a livelihood Table (Table 3.4) based on street connected children's age and gender.

Table 3.4 Street Livelihoods

Type of profession	Age range	Gender division	Usual working time and schedule		Average Income
			Day	Afternoon	
Begging	6-12	Both boys and girls	8 am–12 pm	3 pm – 6 pm	100 – 150 Tk. (daily)
Selling various commodities on street (i.e. flowers and candies)	6-12	Mainly girls, but also younger boys	9 am – 5 pm		100 – 150 Tk. (daily)
Carrying goods (Carrying baggage in bazaars and warehouses)	6-12	Predominantly boys	8 am – 12 pm	5 pm – 8 pm	100 – 150 Tk. (daily)
Collecting and selling Vegetables	6-12	Both boys and girls	5 am – 12 pm	–	100 – 150 Tk. (daily)
Selling drinking water	6-12	Both boys and girls	-	4 pm – 10 pm	200 – 300 Tk. (daily)
Working as a porter at Sadarghat Launch Terminal)	9-12	Predominantly boys	5 am – 10 am	4 pm – 10 pm	100 – 200 (daily)
Selling Newspapers	9-15	Predominantly boys	7 am – 1 am	-	70-80 Tk. (daily)
Scrap picking	6-15	Mostly boys, girls of 6-9 years old also do this	6 am – 10 am	3 pm – 6 am	200 – 300 Tk. (daily)
Scrap sorting	10 +	Mostly girls and women; boys who pick scraps also do this	9/10am – 4/5 pm (with a lunch break at 2 pm.)		1000-1500 Tk. (weekly)
Washing dishes in restaurants	9-15	Predominantly boys	2 am – 7 am	10 pm – 3 am	250-300 Tk. (daily)
Working as a waiter in restaurants	9-15	Predominantly boys	-	5 pm – 12 pm	150-200 Tk. (daily)
Pushing three-wheeler vans	12-15	Predominantly boys	9 am – 1 pm	3 pm – 9 pm	200 – 300 Tk. (daily)
“Helper” or Assisting in human hauler (known as Lagoona or Maxi)	12-15	Predominantly boys	7 am – 1 pm	4 pm – 11 pm	500 – 700 Tk. (daily)
“Helper” or Assisting in cargo trucks	9-15	Predominantly boys	One can get a single trip of 3-4 days a week		400 – 500 Tk. (per trip)
Pick-pocketing	15-15	Predominantly boys, but also done by older girls	n/a	n/a	2000 – 3000 Tk. (monthly)

From all the professions mentioned in Table 3.4, we can outline some significant features: Children are the primary and cheapest possible labour in trades like scrap collection, local transport and newspaper distribution. Nevertheless, in the face of economic deprivation most of these poverty stricken children are unable to bargain for fair wage. Besides, all these professions need no or very little academic qualification (especially knowledge of dealing with money) along with physical and mental fitness.

Among the jobs done by street-connected children, there are two kinds of job on the basis of the nature of employment.

- a. Employed by others
- b. relatively independent or self-employed

Most street children were found working under a specific person or party. Such job includes: working as a helper in human hauler, scrap picking, selling newspaper or drinking water, cleaning dishes in restaurants, waiter at roadside restaurants etc. In these jobs, children are usually given a fixed term wage.

Some street connected children work independently. This includes professions like begging, carrying goods, picking vegetables, pushing vans etc. Though there are no formal employers in these professions, sometimes children need informal affiliation with adults. As wages are not predetermined for these jobs, the amount of children's income fluctuates. Usually these jobs require no strict time schedule. However, there are some peak periods when children can earn comparatively more money through these non conventional jobs.

Most of these jobs give street connected children multifaceted freedom. As most of these are outdoor based, children can spend more time exploring public spheres. This gives children the connectivity to street and public spheres as well as freedom of being outside and enjoys the freedom of mobility. Moreover, some of these jobs even allow children to work in peer groups where children can roam together and have fun. The nature of these jobs plays an important role to develop intimacy and community among themselves. Thus, some of these professions give them freedom to develop their own world. However, these professions also undermine the potentials of the children, as none of these jobs requires children to be educated or help to develop any specific skills that could be an important stepping stone for a better career.

4. Violence and insecurity

Experiencing different type of abuse is common among street children. Due to working and living in streets and public spaces, these children are eventually exposed to various risks of the outside world. Regarding health and hygiene, street-connected children are always in a great risk as they work in dust, rain, sun; for collecting scraps they search into garbage cans and dump yards. Children who work in public vehicles and in busy streets (paperboys or flower girls) are always at odds of being injured or even killed. In case of picking scraps, collecting vegetables, carrying baggage, sometimes people allege children as thief due to the nature of their profession. Children are abused verbally as well as physically due to their work nature. Predominantly girls, but also boys fall victim of sexual abuse as they are exposed to public. This study has identified some common types of abuse faced by children in street on a regular basis.

4.1 Verbal abuse

Children are rebuked by their employers, peers, older children, passers-by for various reasons. Verbal abuse is a regular experience for the children who beg. Sometimes people refuse children to give money very rudely. Mostly they ask children to leave them alone in a very harsh way. One girl in the *mazar* expressed:

"Lots of people scold me every day"

Besides, some older beggars also behave badly with children using bad words, since they perceive these child beggars as their competitors. Similar things happen to children who work as porters in Sadarghat Launch terminal. Senior porters often try to dominate and demean them through continuous practice of scolding and rebuking. Some passengers also behave rudely, suspecting that children may steal or drop their baggage.

Children who are involved in other informal income earning activities like scrap collecting; cart pulling etc. also get rebuked by their employers regularly. While picking scraps from public places like bazaar, near to shopping malls, people, mostly shop-keepers scold them (children) in advance to avoid vandalism or stealing of goods from their store. Several scrap picker boys stated that in general people perceive them as a bunch of thieves. Nevertheless, few street connected children admitted that sometimes they really steal from shops. Children also get scolded by their employers for not doing their jobs properly. Drivers of human hauler often rebuke children if they are unable to gather passenger or make any mistake in calculating collected fare money at the end of the day. Scrap owners scold children badly if they make too much noise or quarrel and fight with each other. Some scrap owners verbally abuse children if they are caught sniffing dandy during work as dandy makes children numb and lethargic preventing them from being productive. On the other hand many of the scrap shop owners allow

children to smoke *ganja* and cigarette even inside their shop premises as these help children to be more energetic and speedy. One of our respondent mentioned that the owner of the scrap shop always tells them:

"Smoke ganja, I'll make sure that you guys don't get arrested, but if I ever catch you smoking dandy I'll just kick you out of my shop".

4.2 Physical abuse

Street-connected children are also at risk of being physically abused almost on a daily basis. A scrap picker (12) in Sadarghat area described,

"While picking scrap in front of shops or stores, we hear comments such as 'bunch of thieves', 'Dandy addicts', 'Ganja addicts' 'they intend to steal here, they should be beaten'. Sometimes they really beat us! We usually leave the place crying".

Punishing physically for burglary is a general trend among the people. Children who are caught red-handed while stealing are generally treated with physical punishment. In the wholesale vegetable market in Jatrabari, children who usually collect thrown away vegetable, sometimes steal fresh vegetable from the warehouse as fresh vegetables can be sold at a higher price than the rotten ones. If these children are caught red-handed, slapping along with verbal abuse is a regular treatment for them. People also punish them by tying them up with rope for a while. Even during the field research we found a boy accused of stealing (about 9-10 years old) tied up with a pole and crying. He was rebuked badly while being tied up and then released from there after a few hours.

4.3 Burglary

For majority of the children who sleep in public places like: *mazar*, terminal, streets, under the foot-over-bridges etc. night is not a peaceful time. Burglary is a major problem for these street dwelling children. Both adults and other children steal their money, blankets and cloths while sleeping. Even sometimes people forcefully snatch from street connected children. So, one of the reasons behind forming groups among children is to confront this kind of insecurity together. Mostly addicted men and women, poor and unemployed street dwellers, needy children steal from street-connected children. Most children who sleep in *mazar* and terminal pointed out this as one of the most vital problems of living in public places. One boy in Mirpur said he always wanted to finish up his daily earning due to the odds of getting robbed. One girl at the *mazar* in Mirpur-1; while explaining the reason behind her reluctance to take regular shower expressed:

"I have only one pajama (kind of pant for women). Once brought some pajamas from my home village, but they were all stolen from the mazar. If I had those, I would have bathed daily."

4.4 Sexual abuse

A study on 200 street-connected children in West Bengal and Bangladesh showed 70% of the total respondents had experienced sexual abuse while living on the street (Group Development 2006). According to Farouk (2005) girls become vulnerable to sexual abuse immediately after attaining puberty. Another study done by Sarma *et al.* (2001) showed that street-connected girls were at a greater risk of falling victims to sexual abuse and some street girls even go through this experience more than once. Our data also show that street-connected girls were much prone to sexual abuse and harassment. Most girls who experienced this form of abuse said that it was hard for them to remember how many times they had been abused sexually. Three respondents in Mirpur-1 informed about how they and other girls were approached and experienced varied forms of sexual harassment within the boundary of *mazar* by men of different ages and classes. Duli a 11 year old street connected girl stopped staying in *mazar* at night due to probable risk of sexual abuse. She said,

“Girls can be spoiled staying in the *mazar*”.

When we asked her why and how a girl could be spoiled, she answered,

“Usually men in the *mazar* lay besides girls who sleep there and keep touching them constantly with bad intention”.

Here perhaps the word “become spoiled/ bad” might be derived from her sense of insecurity of losing celibacy by sexual abuse and harassment. Blanchet (1996) said that street girls are always at risk of being labeled as spoiled by their mates and other people. People from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds and different ages approach street girls with bad intentions. It is not always low income people like beggars, labours, street vendors, rickshaw-pullers who ask for sex or rape these girls. Just at the end of our fieldwork, we met a girl in Mirpur centre who had transformed from a very jovial girl to a demoralised one after being kidnapped from Hazrat Shah Ali *Mazar* and raped by some young men at night. This is an example of how sexual abuse can affect children mentally.

In Sadarghat area, the girls we talked with did not experience any sexual abuse and harassment so far. It might be because most of them slept with their parents, at least with their mothers, did not spend their night in public places like park or Sadarghat terminal.

According to various researchers it was evident that mostly street girls were the victims of sexual abuse and harassment. Besides, majority of studies emphasised trafficking and sexual exploitation on women and girls. Available disaggregated data indicate a somewhat higher prevalence of sexual abuse and violence against girls than boys in Bangladesh (Breaking the Silence Group, Bangladesh 1997). But it does not mean that boys are not prone to any sort of sexual abuse and harassment. Rather social perception over boys can make them more vulnerable to these types of abuse

(Frederick 2009, Ali and Sarkar 2006). However, during our fieldwork we did not find or interacted with any street boy who was a direct victim of sexual abuse. But a 13 years old scrap picker boy from Sadarghat area told us how he was approached and harassed by a stranger on one occasion. One night, a middle aged man whom he never saw before called him in the Sadarghat Launch Terminal. That man took him to a quiet and shadowy place and asked him to take off his pant. As soon as the boy refused to do so, the man grabbed his hand and offered him money. However, the boy somehow was able to escape by biting that man's hand and ran away immediately from that place.

4.5 Police harassments

Being abused/harassed/maltreated by authorities especially by police is relatively frequent among the street-connected boys in Mirpur-1. As our study took place during the peak period of pre-election political turmoil of 2013-2014, we encountered many street-connected children who were harassed and even arrested by the law enforcement authorities. One such street children named Shurjo (13) was arrested during that time. Police arrested Shurjo from the *mazar* on false allegation of arson attack with other boys who were sleeping beside him. However, Shurjo was able to get out of jail with the help of one of his friend's father. Since coming back from jail Shurjo started to sleep under the foot over bridge of Mirpur-1 instead of the *mazar* premises in fear of getting arrested again. Some boys who used to sleep below the foot over bridge at Mirpur-1 also experienced such interrogation frequently since the starting of *hartal* (Strike) and *aborodh* (Blockade). One such boy stated,

"Police always harasses us while gathering Maal (scrap). At night police doesn't let us sleep"

Shumon (10) was forced to move from Kamalapur to Mirpur *mazar* as he was facing frequent police harassment in that particular area. Another boy named Razzak (14) shared that he was also arrested and taken to jail thrice. First time he was arrested for glue sniffing, but he was unsure why he was taken to jail subsequently.

To street connected children in Mirpur, *Bhoboghure Punorbashon Kendro* (Rehabilitation Centre for vagrants) popularly known as *Bhabokhana* is one of the most frightening phenomena. Some of our girl respondents express their deepest fear about being sent to *Bhabokhana*. One of our respondent shared that police sometimes randomly arrest street connected children from *mazar* and its adjoining areas and lock them inside the *Bhoboghure* for an extended period of time and torture them in various ways. To them *Bhabokhana* is nothing but a frightening urban legend. Perhaps they have exaggerated the notion about Rehabilitation centre for vagrant to create its image as a world of unknown, less freedom and less mobility in opposition to their real world of freedom, wider mobility and known.

5. Street family: On-street support networks

The notion of family is fully or partially absent for the street-connected children. Street-connected children who do not live with parents or relatives in many cases develop an alternative form of social unit or organisation among them. This can be termed as “street family” (Cottrell-Boyce 2010). Street connected children who live with parents partially belong to this kind of social unit. Motives for establishing this form of social network are following:

- Means of survival in terms of livelihood and safety measures
- Identity on the basis of profession and dwelling place
- Reciprocity
- Creating opportunities for each other

This social network among children is not homogenous and adult persons are also involved in these units. Usually street family among children can be formed on the basis of children’s profession, dwelling places, age, gender, prevalence of substance abuse etc. But all these factors also intersect with each other and various factors work together to form a unit of street-connected children.

5.1 Profession

Street-connected children’s professions can be a vital reference point for developing unity or group among them. In Sadarghat and its neighbourhood, every scrap shop employs children. On average 8-12 children work together in a scrap shops. Primarily street connected children come close to each other due to working together in a scrap shop. Children also attain an identity from the scrap shop. For example children are known and sometimes they introduce themselves as children from A’s scrap shop or children of B. Often, if the scrap shop owner is relatively older, children call him *Abba* or *Bupjaan* (Bengali word for father) and for younger owner they use *Bhai* (Bengali word for Brother). Most scrap shop owners provide children with mental and financial support and guidance. Rony, a scrap picker of 10 years of age said that his employer encourages him and his fellow co-workers to save 10-20 Tk. daily with him. In time of crisis, scrap shop owner often look out for children. A boy named Farhad informed once when he got severely sick his employer gave him money and sent him to his mother who lives in Comilla. Another example of how scrap owners aid children in times of crisis is the case of Raqib. Raqib was severely injured with hand bomb while picking scraps in Lalbag during the pre-election political turmoil of 2014. His employer not only took him to a hospital but also took initiatives to collect money for his treatment.

If any dispute and even fighting arise among children in the same shop or between children of two different scrap shops, owners play the role of mediator. Children often complain to their owners. So, at a glance, a scrap shop owner often plays the role of: security provider, problem solver, adviser, confidant and counselor etc.

The nature of work also influences the development of solidarity among street connected children. In the case of scrap picking, children go to collect scraps in a group of 3-4, mostly with their closest buddies. Intimacy can be developed by going to work together. This is common among scrap pickers in Sadarghat and Mirpur. This kind of intimacy can also be seen among the children who carry baggage at Sadarghat. There are groups of 4-5 boys who move together and offer passengers to carry their baggage. They keep an eye on other groups of children and compete to get the chance of carrying baggage. And these competitions among groups of children often cause dispute and fighting between the groups. So, solidarity and understanding among group members is much required to have the chance of earning money. Children who collect vegetable from warehouse also work together and intimacy grows among them.

5.2 Dwelling Places

Social units of street-connected children can also develop based on their places of dwelling. Dwelling places play an important role to sustain relations among children. In Mirpur-1, Hazrat Shah Ali *Mazar* and the foot over bridge are two common places where street-connected children sleep at night. *Mazar* and its neighbourhood, especially Mirpur-1 bazaar and its nearby places are those places where many street-connected children pass a considerable amount of time during the day.

Mazar plays a role as a junction for children who migrate or run-away from home. Children meet with other children, find friends and form groups. Our study shows that groups are formed with 3-5 closest friends. At night children usually sleep in a group. Every group has a designated place to sleep. So, forming and maintaining good terms among friends is necessary in order to ensure the possession of the place to sleep. This is how a unit of children is formed on the basis of places for sleeping. Similar group formation can be found among the children who sleep under the foot-over-bridge of Mirpur-1. So, solidarity among a group ensures places where they sleep together. A practice of using goods communally can be seen among these groups. For example, members of some of these groups share blankets and mats with each other. Some groups buy blankets, pillows and mats collectively. Other forms of reciprocity can also be seen among them. They share food, lend and borrow money among each other. Even one, who already has a job like carrying baggage in Mirpur-1 Bazaar or picking scraps, introduces the job to his other friends.

Similar sorts of group formation can be found among children who work as *coolies* and beggars at Sadarghat launch terminal. Many of these children sleep in the Sadarghat Launch Terminal at night. They also form a group with their closest friend and sleep together in a particular place. Also a group can be formed among children of different

professions based on sleeping together at Sadarghat. Like children in Mirpur area, children of Sadarghat also have identical types of reciprocity among group members.

5.3 Gender

Gender is a common factor that shapes our companionship and spheres. Street connected children are not beyond this phenomenon. Social units among children are also segregated based on their gender identity. This type of division is relatively common among street-connected children in Mirpur-1, as street-connected girls are more available in and around the *mazar* area. Even we found more girls at BRAC centre in Mirpur-1 than at the centre in Sadarghat. At the *mazar* girls unite among themselves. Generally, they beg within the boundary of the *mazar*. Some young boys who are yet to reach their adolescence also get included in the girls group. They share food, clothes and ornaments like bangles, hair clips and bands, borrow and lend money among themselves. But this does not mean that girls do not mix with boys. Every group of girls has good relation with some boys of their age or who are a bit older.

Sadarghat, is a more male dominated area mainly because of the nature of professions available in and around the area. Groups of boys are very much visible in this area as potters and scrap pickers. Street-connected girls can be seen around Sadarghat begging and selling candy or drinking water. We found two girls in Sadarghat who pick scraps along with their mothers. However, unlike Mirpur, in the Sadarghat area we were unable to locate any type of relation or network among girls.

5.4 Husband-wife, girlfriend-boyfriend relation

Most street connected children were found sexually active. Love affair between street boys and girls was more like replication of adult conjugal relationships. In many instances street boys and girls were found referring their partners as husband/wife. We also found boys and girls referring to their committed sexual partners as *premik/premika* (lover in Bengali). The gender roles between these street children couple were found quite similar to mainstream population. The boys in the relationship were found to play the role of provider by taking care of various necessity of his lover. One girl (15) shared that her *premik* (boyfriend) used to give her 10-20 Tk. as allowance every day. The boy also pampered her with new cloths, cosmetics like nail-polish, lip-stick, ornaments like bangles, hair band etc. occasionally. Another girl (11) we met in the Mirpur centre told us that she use to receive 30 Tk. every day from a boy whom she refers as *Bhai* (Brother in Bengali) but other girls informed that boy was more like a *premik* (lover) to her. The girl looked shy, but did not object. So, some street connected boys and girls are playing such roles which are commonly played by mature men and women in our society; where men are prime earners who take responsibility of women economically. But in cases of street children we are yet to know what role girls usually play in this kind of relationship. One girl emphasised on the economic gain of love affair. She stated,

"Here (in the mazar) usually all girls have lovers. I have one too. But I don't love him, I just pretend. I love to spend the money my lover gives me".

In Sadarghat, a street connected girl (14-15) told us that she stopped stealing (as her profession) after getting married with another street connected boy, as her “husband” told her to quit stealing. Moreover, the girl now no longer requires to work for living at all as her “husband” gives her daily allowance. Other children around her also mentioned about their marriage and in particular talked about the sweet the boy distributed after getting married. The centre manager in Mirpur centre also informed that the boy brought a box of sweets after getting married. So, the tendency of playing some roles (supporting girls financially) and following rituals like (distributing sweet among other children) that are generally practiced among adults can be seen among these children too. However, more research work is required to gain knowledge about longevity of such marriage and the status of sexual behaviour between street-connected boys and girls.

5.5 Age

A survey by the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (2003) showed that a little less than half of the street children (49.2%) were around the age group 10 years or less, while the remaining fell under the age group of 11-19 years. Age is an important consideration as it is responsible for making sub groups among a broader unit of children. In a scrap shop at Sadarghat, age based sub groups are visible among children. Units of younger scrap collectors are usually dominated by groups of older boys. At the same time older children also lookout for the younger ones. They share food with younger fellow workers, give loan to them also save them from abusive behaviour of other older children.

5.6 Bonding through drugs

A study that looked at the role of solvents in the lives of Kenyan street children found that, solvent works as platform for developing notion of the street family (Cottrell-Boyce 2010). Another study conducted by Sarma *et al.* (2011) not only found solvent but any drug that help to develop a fellow-feeling and bonding among children. Moreover, consuming drugs in groups is also economically feasible for these low-earning children. A street-connected boy named Razzak (14) said about consuming *dandy*,

We buy dandy worth 200-300 Tk. to share among our peers.

However, the notion of sharing drug among peers is not only about sharing the cost. A Girl in the *mazar* in Mirpur-1 told us that it is common among children to share drugs with one who did not have sufficient money.

It's their wish... how could they ignore if their best mate asked for!

Thus, alternative social units are developed among the street-connected children based on age, gender, profession and even habit of drugs. These demonstrate how these social organisations and networks help children to survive on the streets and in other harsh urban settings. But besides these organisations and networks, there are some

individuals and institutions that provide street-connected children various support informally which play useful role for these children. For example, Rony (10) at Sadarghat informed about a Chinese restaurant, he called *Nana* Chinese (nana means maternal grandfather in Bangla); every day at 10 am, rice and 1-2 curries were distributed among 50-60 poor children. Food was given in plastic bags. Similar information was given by another boy in Sadarghat named Farhad.

Tendency of saving money with a reliable person like shopkeepers, seniors, scrap shop owners were found among street-connected children. Children working in scrap shops were found saving their hard earn money with their scrap shop owners.

In Mirpur, a few boys informed about their good terms with members of different law enforcement agencies. Razzak (14) said he had good terms with a police informer who regularly visited the *mazar* area. Razzak claimed that he took assistance from that person in times of trouble like dispute with other groups of children or if other police caused any trouble. Another boy named Shurjo (13) proudly said that he had a very good relationship with many police officers. A girl named Duli (11) informed that she and other members of the group had good terms with some police officers who were in duty in the *mazar area*. One of the boy in her group also had a cell number of one of these police officers. She said,

"I know some police officers. They are good to me and treat me as their daughter. They would come immediately to rescue if I am in any type of trouble".

One respondent in a FGD with boys of 11-15 in Mirpur informed that a gatekeeper of the market where he and three of his bosom friends usually slept used to take care of them. He would give them good advice, ask them to bathe regularly and lead a decent life. Sometimes in need he would give them loans without any condition. This was one way support system in which the gatekeeper was the contributor and the children were the recipients. But the presence of 4-5 loyal and grateful children definitely strengthened the security measure of the market premises. Besides it lessened the work load and psychological stress of the gatekeeper.

Lack of care, affection and proper supervision within the family is significantly absent in the lives of most street-connected children. One primary need for street connected children is emotional support, sensible guidance and supervision. For this reason, owners of scrap shops informed us that they always try to handle these kids emotionally; and seldom scold them. Even staff in shelter homes for street connected children said that children want care and affection from adults and when they get that from someone, they become loyal and devoted to that person. This happens not only due to dysfunctionality in their families, but also due to existing stigmas about street connected children that make them ignored and ostracised by other people within the wider society. This is how the notion of *boro bhai* (Literally big brother) developed among street connected children; some senior person who does not ignore or hate them even though he has political power in the area - someone who seeks for them, loans them money when in need, rescues them from adverse situation such as

harassment, abuse etc. And these *boro bhais*, whom children meet in profession or in area, can manipulate emotionally-starved children effortlessly, which have been seen in the reaction of children during FGD at Sadarghat. So, emotional vacuum in children's life gives adults chances to manipulate or exploit street connected children as well to various extents.

6. Health and hygiene seeking behaviour

6.1 Health seeking behaviour

Infectious diseases like tuberculosis, polio and diarrhoea are most common amongst the street children as well as acute respiratory infections like fever, breathing difficulties and chest infections (Podymow *et al.* n.d.; NIPOORT 2009). As per our data street-connected children have limited knowledge about illnesses (i.e. causes, prevention, names etc). Most of them could only describe very vaguely the experience or symptoms of their illness. For instance a street connected boy named Razzak (14) said,

“Usually I suffer from fever and weakness. Sometimes I suffer from stomach ache... heartburn”

Like Razzak most of the boys and girls in Sadarghat and Mirpur-1 could only mention about symptoms of sickness. Feeling feverish, cold, itchy in different parts of their body, stomachache and headache, feeling heartburn, bloating, belching/burping are common experience of illness among the surveyed children.

All the illnesses they usually experience are the result of how they live. Reasons for cough and cold are due to living mainly in open places. Besides, most occupations available for children require them to be outside. Most of them cannot afford enough clothing to protect them from cold and windy weather. In places like Hazrat Shah Ali Mazar, under the Mirpur foot-over-bridge, Sadarghat Terminal, at night children may have roof over their head, but have no wall around them. So, they cannot protect themselves from cold wind. Children also do not own sufficient blankets. Some street-connected children regularly go to NGO based shelters at night during winter. But there are still a lot of children who have to sleep outside in the cold and freezing weather. Children living in scrap shops also suffer from cold and cough, though they live in a surrounded place. Most of the scrap shops are made of tins and bamboo made fences. There are some scrap shops that are too small to accommodate children inside. Thus, sometimes children sleep on the roofs of the shops covering them with blankets. Some children sleep on three-wheeler vans too with little chance of protecting them from cold and dust.

Seeking treatment for illness is not a prime priority for them unless it becomes intolerable. Shurjo (13), a street-connected boy confidently said, “we don’t need any treatment”. Most of the time, street children wait for their illness to cure naturally. Children only seek medical treatment.

If the illness causes immediate distress or persists for long period of time, they adopt some widely practiced initial care or treatment that do not cost money like pouring water in the head while feeling feverish.

Most of the children in Sadarghat and Mirpur-1 told us that usually they seek health treatment from shopkeeper of any local drug stores. Rony (10) said,

"If I tell shopkeeper in a drug store, 'I am feeling feverish, or feeling pain' he will give me necessary medicine".

Mostly children seek treatment by themselves, but sometimes if the children are rather younger or newcomer they ask their employers (Scrap shop owner) or senior co-workers (Baro Bhai) to know what they should do. In the case of Farhad (13) in Sadarghat, his employer, the scrap shop owner sent him back to his mother in Comilla, when he was suffering from high fever and told him to come back when he would feel better.

Some respondents in Mirpur-1 showed superstition about their illness. One such respondent said,

"I suffer from fever... sometimes I feel really weak. Feel stomachache... and feel like something is burning in my chest. Probably someone has cursed me."

Another girl in the *mazar* also told us that while suffering from jaundice her mother took her to an indigenous spiritual healer thinking that he will be able to cure her disease. Nevertheless not all children were found avoiding modern medicines.

Apart from one respondent in Mirpur none of our interviewed street children needed to visit hospital for any serious injury. The respondent who was taken to the National Institute of Traumatology and Orthopedic Rehabilitation (NITOR) commonly known as *pongu hospital* was a street-connected boy of 10/11 years from Mirpur. Three years ago he was hit by a human hauler near Mirpur-1 Bazaar. People from the bazaar took him to the hospital. He got hurt mainly on his head and was suffering from occasional pain on his head.

6.2 Hygiene

Status of hygiene among street connected children is very poor. Most of the street connected children we interviewed looked grubby with their unclean, ragged clothing, dirty uncombed hair, grimy teeth and shoeless dirty feet. Perhaps it is because of:

- Lack of basic knowledge on hygiene
- Absence of pressure from adults or peers on hygienic practices due to detachment from the family or from reluctant and unaware parent or guardian or peer group
- Unhygienic condition of dwelling and work places
- Financial hurdle that are making them incapable of buying soap, shampoo, etc.
- Being habituated with unhygienic living condition and practices

Some children, who went to school prior to their street connected life, had some basic idea about practices of hygiene. Though some children were able to show their knowledge on hand hygiene, children who were not attached to any sorts of educational institution or any other facilities were not at all found aware or concerned about any kind of hygienic practices.

But hygiene is not only about knowledge; rather it is mostly about implementation of the acquired knowledge and developing a hygienic life-style. Primarily family and later educational institutions teach and monitor whether children are learning and practicing hygiene properly or not. But this sort of monitoring is almost absent among the street-connected children. Parents are not conscious and those who are far away from their family are not monitored by peer groups and even by the adults they are attached to. Thus, it is really challenging to grow a sense of hygiene among these children.

Moreover, street-connected children cannot help but become dirty because of the nature of their livelihood and living condition (such as footpaths, under foot-over-bridge, terminal, vans, benches in parks or *mazar* compounds). Every scrap shops are filled with dirty scraps. On the other hand, all the other professions where street connected children are involved pushes them to work in some of the dirtiest public places like bazaars, streets, dustbins, and dump yards. Again, for maintaining proper hygiene people need things like proper houses with latrine, adequate clothing, soap, shampoo, toothbrush, nail-cutter, cotton-buds etc. that are difficult for street connected children to afford regularly. Besides, difference between girls and boys in Mirpur in terms of cleanliness and personal hygiene behaviour was very firm. Most girls looked cleaner than the boys, wore cleaner clothes, and even some were even seen wearing head bands, bangles and makeup (i.e. foundation, eyeliner, lipstick etc.). According to staff in the Mirpur centre, girls took shower more than the boys. In Sadarghat centre, some boys informed that apart from food and TV, they went to the centre regularly for taking a proper shower. Some said that they were aware about basic hygiene practices like hand washing, taking regular shower etc. and tried to practice them regularly.

7. Prevalence of substance abuse

Regarding both physical and mental health, one major concern about street-connect children is their tendency to substance abuse. Embleton *et al.* (2013) reviewed 27 studies on drug use among homeless children and showed that a homeless child is 60 per cent more likely to use drugs in his or her lifetime compared to a non-homeless child. As per our findings, factors like disturbing childhood memories and fragile family relations (separation of parents), autonomy from supervision of adults, availability of drugs, peer influence are some of the primary reasons for pulling and pushing children into drugs. The common drugs consumed by street-connected children in Mirpur-1 and Sadarghat are – Cigarette, *Ganja* (Cannabis), *Dandy* (glue for shoe and leather), *Gul* (blend of tobacco keeping in mouth), various types of relaxing or sleeping pills. Besides, one respondent in Mirpur-1 informed that he and his group mates sometimes smoked *Birani Masala* rolling it inside a paper, which helped them to cope with sleep deprivation. Most street-connected children go through various kinds of bitter experiences in their lifetime. Experiences like being abandoned by parents, abused in various forms in the past and in the street life, material and emotional deprivation result in various level of psychological disturbance and lured them towards substance abuse.

However some street-connected children informed us that they stopped taking drugs like *ganja* or *dandy* after 2-3 years. One boy (11-12) in Mirpur said,

"Now a day's I only occasionally smoke ganja. It's been a while since I minimized my drug consumption. At the moment I am particularly trying to avoid Dandy. Few days ago I learned that taking Dandy can cause harm to kidney and turn it into black."

So, children are somewhat aware of the consequences of drug abuse. Children usually acquire this knowledge from peers, senior brothers and various NGO staff working with street connected children. For instance, a boy in Sadarghat centre, stopped sniffing *dandy* and smoking *ganja*, after doctor told him what type of physical damage drug abuse can cause to human body. That doctor brought forward an example of a boy who died of drug addiction. He cited,

"What would be the gain of taking these (drugs) if these damages my life?"

So, proper information and counseling sometimes work for children.

We also found that a boy or girl can also get motivated to give up drugs under the influence of their lovers. One street connected boy in Mirpur and a street connected girl in Sadarghat stopped taking *dandy* to keep the word of their respective lovers. Thus emotional motivation from close one can also bring positive changes. On the other hand, a boy (14) in Mirpur told us that he stopped his habit of glue sniffing (*dandy*) after noticing few physical complexities like body ache especially in the chest and stomach

area, heartburn, headache. Then again, as per our data among the usual drugs consumed by street-connected children in Dhaka cigarette, *ganja* and dandy cause much lesser physical dependence than heroin, alcohol or phensidyl. Thus, these drugs are comparatively easier to avoid even after long term exposure. Thus, with little motivation and counseling these children can be assisted to overcome their addictions to these drugs.

8. Education and aspiration

8.1 Education

A study conducted by ICDDR,B on 493 street-children of Dhaka aged between 6-12 years found that 49% of the surveyed children never had access to proper education (Sarma *et al.* 2011). The poor status of education among street-connected children in Dhaka is also reflected in our findings. Table 4 presents the education status of our respondents.

Table 4. Status of education

Status of Education	Girls		Boys		Total	Percentage
	6-10	11-15	6-10	11-15		
Experienced formal schooling (primary level below class 5)	1	5	6	6	18	50.0
Never Been to School	5	2	3	4	14	38.9
Experienced other type of schooling (<i>madrasha</i> , non formal NGO schools etc.)	1	1	1	1	4	11.1
Total					36	

As mentioned in the Table, out of the 36 respondents total 18 had exposure to formal schooling at the very basic level. Different circumstances in these children's life forced them to discontinue their education. One of our female respondents who studied up to class 2 in a government primary school in Mirpur-1 told us that she had to discontinue her education as she needed to support her working mother with household chores. Another girl shared that her schooling was stopped at class four as her father moves from Dhaka to Barisal. After her mother's death her father got married to another woman and moved to Barisal where she was forced to live with her abusive step mother. Later she left Barisal and came to Dhaka to escape from her step mother's constant verbal and physical abuse. Another child in Sadarghat informed that he stopped his education after his father's sudden death. He migrated to Dhaka to support his family at home. Children's education can also discontinue if a marginal family moves to a bigger city, as most of the family members need to be involved in income generating activities in order for the family to survive. In case of Shihab (9) in Sadarghat area, schooling was stopped from the day his family migrated to Dhaka. Shihab who was previously a primarily school student in his native village now works in a scrap shop in Dhaka to support his family.

However, sometimes stepping into the street life also makes a child reluctant about education. To some children the freedom of street life can be much more appealing than sitting in class room listening, reading, and writing for hours.

The culture of corporal punishment in schools and *madrashas* is also responsible for children's dropout from school. We found two such cases: Abdul (10) stopped going to school from the very day he was beaten by his primary school teacher in his native village Char Kukri, Barisal. He was in class one then. His parents insisted him to go back to school. But he never felt the urge to return to school as he was traumatised by the incident. Similarly Imran (9/10) fled to Dhaka to escape constant rude behaviour and physical punishment of his *madrasha* teachers.

So, according to our findings, the key factors that cause discontinuity in children education are:

- Migration to street (with family or alone for various reasons)
- Financial hurdle
- Seduction of street-life (autonomy from adults, peer, games, drugs)
- Teachers' misconduct and abusive behaviour

8.2 Aspirations in street-connected children:

Despite all the hurdles and vulnerabilities of their lives in terms of livelihood, dwelling places, food and security etc. a significant portion of the interviewed street connected children shared their future aspirations with us. However, majority of these children showed more or less sensible future aspiration close to their current condition. Only a few relatively younger children showed higher aspiration regarding their future career and livelihood.

It is fascinating to note how these children are fully aware of their limitation and present condition. Most of the male children aspired either to progress to the next level of their existing occupation or switch to career that will ensure them economic security through regular wage and work opportunity. One of our male respondent currently working as a scrap picker told us that his aspiration in life is to find a job that will provide him a fixed weekly or monthly wage. Another boy a helper of a human hauler shared that he wants to become a driver of a human hauler in future. Thus, current job and existing opportunities can shape children's aspiration. On the other hand, another boy who also works as a helper in a human hauler expressed that he wants to shift to a less stressful occupation than his current job. Other than these few other street connected boys also expressed their aspiration to become self-employed or take up apprenticeship in local metal factories or car workshops etc.

Only a few of the male children who were relatively younger in age aspired for careers that would require them to pursue higher education. One such child expressed his desire to become a doctor. Another child with similar higher aspiration said that he wants to become a police officer in future as he gets attracted by the degree of authority a police officer possesses. Other than that two street boys expressed that they would want to finish their education and become a service holder. They wanted to be

educated in order to become eligible for any well salaried job. During the interview one of them said that he particularly avoids scraps picking as an occupation because he feels that it is shameful to be addressed as *tokkai* (scrap picker). It displayed his strong sense of self-esteem. Interestingly, all centre dwelling girls of 6-10 years expressed similar aspiration of becoming a readymade garments worker, except for one girl who wanted to become a car driver. The aspiration of girls to become a readymade garments worker revealed their knowledge of prevailing prospective jobs. Girls might have picked up this idea from their socioeconomic context.

So, from the above information of street-connected children in Mirpur and Sadarghat it is clear that considering aspiration children are not a homogenous group. It differs based on socioeconomic climate of places children roam and dwell, their gender and age. Some reflected potential jobs which are relatively available in their context; while some comments revealed children's vulnerable condition, especially related to their current livelihood and some shared their thought of pursuing better lives.

9. Roles of the centre and challenges

The seduction of living a life with freedom is one of the most challenging matters to deal with while trying to bring a structural change in the lives of street connected children, as many children have already learned to overlook the need of education, shelter, adults and “discipline” in life and to live an alternative life with freedom. This section covers the challenges faced by centre staff with regard to managing these children as well as the roles that the centre can play in the lives of street children.

Challenges regarding implementation of centre residential facility for older children:

Regarding insecurity and violence in the street, centres can be considered as the safest place available for street-connected children. Children in both centres also expressed the same opinion. But most of them did not want to spend much time in the centre apart from the usual time. There are several pull factors in like freedom, entertainment (hanging around with friends, playing games or video games) and opportunities of income that make the street life indispensable to children in spite of possible threats. Nevertheless, in special occasions centres turn into a safe shelter for street-connected children. For instance, during the pre-election political turmoil of 2013, some street-connected children of Sadarghat area who previously did not avail the night stay opportunity in BRAC centre, started spending their nights at the centre out of fear of getting arrested by police. Facility of staying in the centre at night is solely available for boys and girls aged 6-10 at the Mirpur centre. Older boys in Mirpur were relatively less interested in staying in the centre at night. According to the centre manager, once older girls were allowed to stay in the Mirpur centre. But problems arose when some girls did not return to the shelter in due time and few other girls frequently demanded to go back to the *mazar* in the middle of the night. After that this facility was discontinued. In Sadarghat, very few girls were regular in the centre. Those who came were not interested to spend the night in the centre. Similarly most boys in Sadarghat preferred sleeping in scrap shops or in launch terminal. Few boys informed that sometimes they sleep in other NGO based centres which are closer to Sadarghat launch terminal than the BRAC centre. Thus, proximity of centre from children’s working or roaming place is a factor that was considered by children to select a centre for night stay.

Challenges regarding job replacement: As discussed in earlier sections street connected children are involved with some of the most risky occupations of Dhaka city. Keeping this in mind Urban Street Children programme decided to provide relatively safer and formal jobs for street-connected children. Job replacement PO (Programme Organiser) has been employed to find out suitable jobs for children so that they can work in a safer environment. Boys in Mirpur were provided jobs in stores like showrooms, grocery stores, sweet shops as a helping hand. Girls were sent to beauty

parlor, tailor shops and different boutique shops. In Sadarghat, boys were sent to grocery stores and different small scale factories.

However, according to job replacement PO, drop-out rate from given jobs is very high among children in both areas. The most common causes behind the drop-out tendency among children from relatively conventional jobs like waiting in tables, working as an apprentice in a factory were due to: habits of working in free environment with flexible time schedule and under less supervision.

These free willingness of urban street children are issues that programme staff have to deal tactfully especially in the case of job replacement for street-connected children. Job replacement POs in both areas expressed that many children could not stay in their given job as they were not habituated to follow a strict work schedule. Some drop-out children opposed against working uninterruptedly. Besides, children could not enjoy autonomy from adults since they were under the continuous supervision of older persons.

Apart from unwillingness of children, many employers also showed lack of enthusiasm in hiring street-connected children. Some even sacked children. The reasons behind their behaviour or responses are stated below:

- They said that most children from the street were disobedient and hard to control.
- Some children were not punctual and had a habit of coming to work late.
- Some employers did not trust street-connected children and constantly suspected them for potential theft in their business establishment. Thus, they demanded for formal guarantee from BRAC to compensate them in cases of occurrence of such incidence.
- Some factory owner refused to employ children since children were not skilled enough.
- Usually children were paid daily in most of their previous street-based occupations. For this reason some children could not keep their patience till the end of the month or week for getting paid. So, they kept on asking their employers for payment in advance and even asked for loan which bothered many employers and made them agitated. For this reason many of the employers showed reluctance towards taking up more street children.

Roles of the Centre regarding health and hygiene facilities: Majority of the children expressed disappointment regarding the in-centre medical facilities. Children claimed that their expectation of getting frequent medical checkup and access to free medicines (for fever, stomachache, headache and itching) from the centre was not entirely fulfilled. The centre staff also admitted their weakness in this sector which needs to be improved considering that there is a higher prevalence of diseases among street-connected children.

On the other hand, in terms of hygiene practice and facilities centres are playing a very effective role. Majority of the participant children appreciated centre bathing and locker facilities. Children shared that they had hardly any chance of having a proper bath using soap outside in the street. Some children said that they brush their teeth regularly as they could keep their tooth brush safely in the centre's locker; otherwise their brushes would either get lost or stolen in the street. Moreover, majority of the participant children were found to acquire a minimum knowledge about hygiene. However, it is challenging for any street-connected children to maintain these hygiene behaviours in the street context. So, acquiring knowledge cannot always ensure implementation; it needs appropriate settings and necessary components in order to confirm proper application of knowledge.

In-street facilities for education and roles of the Centre and challenges: In NGO-based education programmes, street children are mainly given teaching on alphabets, numbers, how to write their own names and on some basic things. The main purpose of these NGO based schooling is to help street children regain their interest in education and give them some sort of a primary foundation to go to formal school. But talking with children as well as the programme staff we have come to know that children are drawn to the centre mainly to have food, watch TV, a sound place to rest and sleep. Thus, many scrap picking children in Kamalbagh did not liked to attend BRAC sub-centres that only provided basic education and life skill training, despite that the centre was near to their dwelling place. These children instead choose to go to other NGO run centres where the above facilities are available. So, only education may not attract children to a centre.

Very few children showed their interest in formal education. But some of them showed interest in learning technical skills like making candles, repairing machinery etc, things that can immediately contribute in earning. Because some were not quite certain of whether formal education could provide him/her a good job with good salary as quickly as they expected; whereas, others were simply unable to skip their jobs for formal schooling since they needed to survive and even needed to contribute to their family. Besides to street connected children, education is not as entertaining as watching cartoons on TV, playing video games, roaming with friends, experiencing *pin ink* (feeling after taking drugs). For children who enjoy freedom and maximum autonomy from adults, sitting quietly and listening for hours in a room is a challenging thing to do and something that can make them impatient very easily. Perhaps, this may be the reason why we witnessed chaos in the classes of two the centres we visited.

So, it can be stated that conventional ways of teaching cannot grow interest for education and education oriented aspiration among most street connected children, whereas, learning from centres was undermined due to absence of various facilities like monitoring, follow-up, sufficient tools, proper environment for practice, responsible adults. But the primary concern of this programme should be how the programme may bring back children's interest in education just as they showed their enthusiasm in watching TV or playing in-door games.

So far the pilot programme is playing an important role in the lives of street connected children. USCP is not only working as a provider of various material facilities, but is also functioning as a place where children can get care and attention from adults which is one of the most important missing factors of children's lives. Most of the participant children sounded very positive about BRAC children centre, children were particularly satisfied with the affectionate behaviour of the programme staff. There was no complain about any staff from the children side and we also observed how patiently staff was dealing with these children during our field work. Children in the centre seemed to pay attention to the staff members. Most of these children received us cordially from the very beginning of our field work. Boys and girls came forward and started to talk with us enthusiastically. Both the centre managers informed us that children had improved a lot in terms of behaviour. Earlier most children did not pay any attention and did whatever they liked to do, mostly quarreled and even fought with each other. However, as per the programme staff within a very short span of time children become more attentive to centre activities. But the question appeared if children could carry all these positive behavioural changes to their street or these changes are only when they are in the centre. As far as we studied them it can be stated that the context of street hardly allows these children to implement any positive learning from the centre. However, positive changes among children aged 6-10 in Mirpur seemed much sustainable as they did not need to go back to street lives. But still street-connected children's positive impression about staff is one of most potential components of this programme that should be sustained in future to influence the children positively. Now it is time to think further how this relation between children and staff can be utilised to improve children's lives, in a more effective way under the Urban Street Children Programme.

Conclusion

This study enabled us to better understand the lives of street connected children in terms of their living situation, thought process, values and attitude etc. The study has thoroughly illustrated the lives and struggles of street-connected children of Bangladesh. It has revealed the dimensions of challenges and risks experienced by children living in the streets.

By careful analyses and discussion of situation and various struggles of street children the study has shown that lives of these street children are significantly different from the mainstream population. The study has unveiled various exploitation and misuse faced by street children while living and working in the street. It also identified that lack of care, affection and proper supervision are significantly absent in the lives of most street-connected children. Therefore, apart from food, shelter and education one primary need for street connected children is emotional support and sensible guidance and supervision from a responsible adult and this is where USCP has potentiality of playing an active role.

However, it has also showed how the context of street averts children to implement any positive learning's from the shelter in their daily lives. Therefore, implementation of any intervention for improving the lives of street connected children is undoubtedly challenging for a single agency or organisation. Nevertheless, lives of this vulnerable group of children can endeavour to be improved by following a collaborative approach including various stakeholders who are closely connected with the children's day to day lives such as law enforcement authorities, employers of the children, social network and other government agencies responsible for children or vulnerable group along with various non-government organisations working with street connected children.

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