

MIGRATION AND STREET CHILDREN IN BANGLADESH

Soniya Wazed^a

^a Institute of Applied Social Studies, University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham, United Kingdom

^a Corresponding author: soniya_du@yahoo.com

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Abstract: Children are the assets of a state. Unfortunately in many developing countries children involved in various economic activities due to overall for mere survival. The nature and extent of child labor differ from region to region; depending on the socioeconomic condition of a particular society in which the children live. The number of street children has been rising day by day in the capital of Bangladesh. Therefore, the phenomenon of street children developed a preference for development workers and policy makers in the most of developing countries. Many studies showed that thousands of street children all over in Bangladesh, primarily in the urban areas, work and live in the streets. These street children not only deprived of the most basic rights that citizens are guaranteed by the country but also have stopped expecting it. However, in recent years, in spite of the growing social problems in these communities and although some progress were made, there is still a lack of adequate information on the extent of the problem, and knowledge of its root causes.

In this paper, I will try to explore the processes of street migration with the interaction of both 'push' and 'pull' factors not only based on their economic necessities but also their livelihood strategies in street life. This paper will also addresses that high population density, poor quality of education, the conflicting relationships of the family such as polygamy and remarriage, patriarchy (male-headed household), natural calamities, lack of economic opportunities and violation of child rights are the determinant forces that 'pushing' children to carry on street life from their rural place to street life in Bangladesh. Most of the children of developing nations have deprived of their basic needs. Their deteriorating socioeconomic circumstances being push and pull in the nature of works that are actually dangerous for their physical and intellectual development. Subsequently, it also examines the difference between the push and pull factors of migration that impinge new challenges for street children.

Keywords: Children, migration, poverty, unemployment

I. BACKGROUND

Street children are tragically found in almost every country in the world. Amongst the world's one billion children suffering from deprivation of basic needs (Gordon, Nandy et al., 2003), these children are highly likely to experience 'absolute poverty' (Bartlett, Hart et al., 1999). Therefore, child labor is considering major social problems for developing countries throughout the worldwide. Although this problem is also found in developed world but the nature of child labor is different in developing countries from that of developed countries. Apart from that, this problem has become very acute in many developing countries like Bangladesh. In Bangladesh, child labor problem has been increasing at an alarming rate. The Technical Committee on National Child Labor Survey, 2002-2003, in Bangladesh, ranked the following five forms of child labor as *street children, child workers in battery re-charging, automobile sector, transport sector, and welding sector*. In 2002/03, the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) conducted the second National Child Labor Survey (NCLS)¹ by the Government of Bangladesh following the ratification of the International Labor Organization (ILO) Worst Forms of Child Labor Convention (No. 182) in the context of the commitments made by 1999. According to the survey, there are 4.9 million working children² — 14.2 per cent of the total 35.06 million children in the age group of 5-14 years.

According to Government/UNDP (2001) in Bangladesh the estimated number of street children is 445,226 (of which 75% are in Dhaka city); 53%

¹ A first study carried out in 1995/96 with the support of the ILO.

² This figure does not include economically active children who are unemployed.

boys, 47% girls (Sept 2001 survey). Street children have called as 'Tokai' (rag pickers) by the public. Average daily income of street children is approx. USD \$0.55³. But the recent official study by Appropriate Resources for Improving Street Children Environment (Arise, 2002) some 500,000 children are living on the streets in the country's main cities in Bangladesh and they has warned that the number of street children in the country is set to rise as the urban population grows by 9% a year. However, according to the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS) report in December 2004 a total number of street children in Bangladesh is 6, 74,178.

Many street children are orphans, or abandoned, or come from desperately poor families. They are part of a vast population of children worldwide who live in abject poverty and are particularly vulnerable to abuse. In Bangladesh, as in many developing countries, there is a widespread belief amongst the public, policymakers and social workers that children 'abandon' their families and migrate to the street because of economic poverty. However, some researcher argued that economic necessity is not only the cause of move to children in street. Aptekar (1988) found that children in street situations were emotionally intact in their intellectual functioning, and achieved high levels of self-management. It has argued that the process of street migration involves the interaction of both 'push' and 'pull' factors. This is because the emotional bond between children and parents or guardians and other household members can only be broken if the adult-child relation collapses (Veale, 1992). The push factor involves a force that acts to drive people away from a place and encourages a person to leave his or her current residence or intrinsic desires of the individual travelers such as the desire for escape, rest and relaxation, health and fitness, adventure, prestige, and social interaction. A pull factor is a feature or event that attracts a person to move to another area. In other words, children tend to maintain and protect the 'natural' status of being under the supervision of adults (usually parents) unless push factors weaken or damage the relationship (Masud Ali, Mustaque Ali et al., 1997), leading to the breaking of household ties. In this point of view, Conticini and Hulme (2006) explained that the parallel feeling of empowerment and freedom experienced when running away makes street life attractive. Issues such as the social bonding that children experience on the street, the formation of urban sub-cultures, and the evolution of their self-perception are of significance in understanding the attachment that

children develop to the street and the difficulties they face in reintegrating into their former households. These complex interactions of push and pull factors can keep or even entrap children on the street.

There has been an alarming rise in the number of street children in the major cities of Bangladesh. The increase has linked to recent figures released by the government, which show that the urban population of Bangladesh continues to grow, by around nine percent a year (ARISE: 2001). Thus, the phenomenon of street children has been a major concern for most areas of Dhaka city.

II. METHODOLOGY

This research was an exploratory in nature, based on primary and secondary data. The study involved both street boys and girls respondents of different age groups. Considering the nature and type of my research problem, a flexible methodology with combining several research techniques such as semi-structured interview schedule and field observation method have used to conduct this study. The street children have selected purposively but using typical case purposive sampling method from different areas of capital city of Dhaka in Bangladesh.

III. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The analysis of the main findings steps tries to unpack some of the processes involved immersing oneself and in reflecting on the data. Therefore, this approach is consistent with the qualitative paradigm by thematic analysis. Thematic analysis involves the identifying some major issues such as family background of the street children, their processes of migration, their coping strategy on street life.

The absolute and relative size of the population of children in Bangladesh is quite big as a share of the national population. The estimated total population in Bangladesh is 130 million (2001). Among them about 42 million (32.2% of total population) are 5-17 years old. According to the labor force survey conducted by BBS, 5.8 million children aged 10-14 years were working in Bangladesh in 1990 -91 and this constituted 11.3 percent of the labor force. All the studies conducted so far show that working children live in severe poverty and the number shows an increasing trend. Surveillance data gathered by UNICEF in 1995 show that one million labors are employed in garments industries of whom about 90 percent were female and 1 percent was children below age 14 years.

It was identified by the research participants that due to economic hardship street children cannot afford a good accommodation. Therefore most of respondents lived with their family in slum area of Dhaka city or workplaces. All the respondents who said that they

³ This report is taken from "A Civil Society Forum for South Asia on Promoting and Protecting the Rights of Street Children", 12- 14 December 2001, Colombo, Sri Lanka

were living in slum they mentioned that their family should need to pay their monthly rent which was in between 400 BD TK to 1000 BD TK (5.97US\$ to 14.92US\$ per month). One of the girl respondents explained that ***“In rainy reason we can’t sleep at night because our floor is always dived into water”***. It shows that the household conditions of the street were miserable. The houses, that is, rooms are too small and congested. Most of the households have no separate kitchen, veranda or yard. Cooking arrangements are mostly located outside of the rooms where they used shared kitchen. Some of the floors of the rooms are *pucka* (made by brick and cement) and rest *kutchra* (made by mud). Some parts of walls are of bricks, other parts of bamboo fences. The ceilings of the tin-roofs are covered with bamboo-sheets to protect from the heat of the sun and cold in winter. They shared their toilet with other slum people. But when they were in street they usually used the corner of road and sometimes they used also public toilet. As is result their living condition on such a slum environment was unhealthy and sanitary conditions were very poor and unhygienic.

According to a recent official study some 500,000 children are living on the streets in the country’s main cities (ARISE, 2001). It frames this analysis within broader discourses concerning the nature of poverty. In particular, it distinguishes between economic (income/consumption) and other dimensions of poverty and uses both objective and subjective assessments of poverty. The major objective of this study was to investigate the everyday life experiences of the street children (boys and girls) in Bangladesh which was related to their migration process or causes of migration on street life. In this study the findings appeared that street children were being pushed and pulled by various factors such as household poverty, family conflict, demands of the city life and violation of child rights etc.

Household poverty is considered one of the major reasons for moving in street life. In this situation one of the respondents said that ***“My father had a heart attacked two years ago. So he cannot work now. Doctor said he needs an operation for his treatment. After that I and my elder sister started to work and then my mother also joined in a local family as a maid servant. Now, our income is the only source of our family subsistence”***. The above statement clearly showed that the role household poverty was one of the major factors that children pushed on street life overwhelming majority of the children mentioned poverty. Moreover, poor families put pressure on their children to work. If children contribute to the family subsistence, the economic well being of the family might be improved.

There was another finding that revealed of violation of the girls child rights that was highlighted through the research. In this perspective one of the street girls mentioned that ***“my parents and all of my brothers worked and earned sufficient money for survive our life and I think we don’t need my income for surviving our life. However when I asked any question to my mother regarding this issue, she replied that we need to save our money for my marriage as a security purpose” (6 years girl)***. The above statements showed that lack of awareness of child rights parents violated to their children ignorantly.

As a researcher I found that some of the families send their girls children on street not because of their subsistence needs but because they want to improve their relative well being of the family. This tendency shows the lack of awareness of child rights⁴.

In this situation one of the street boy described that ***“My father left my mother and married twice. Then my mother married another man in our village. My stepfather and his family did not accept me and always beat me for nothing. Now I realized that may be they considered me as an abandoned child from my father” (10 years/ boy)***. It was also revealed from the above statements that sometimes children pushed to leave their home because of conflicting family relationship and choose the street life. Under such circumstances children loose their identity as children and decide to turn as earner. In support of the above argument children mentioned negative treatment of either of the step-parents, separation between parents, losses of parents etc. as reasons for their work.

To describe the above situation a street boy cited that ***“I lost my father when I was 7 years old. My mother didn’t mange our food because we hadn’t any economic and family support after the death of my father. My father’s family always tortured and rebuked my mother and also blamed her for the death of my father. Then one night my mother escaped from my father’s house with me and came here. Then first we started begging and after one year we saved some money and since then I am vending cigarette”***. From the above statements it was clearly reflects that family break-up and conflicts influenced

⁴ States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that the child is protected against all forms of discrimination or punishment on the basis of the status, activities, expressed opinions, or beliefs of the child’s parents, legal guardians, or family members (“Convention on the Rights of the Child”- Adopted and opened for signature, ratification and accession by General Assembly resolution 44/25 of 20 November 1989 entry into force 2 September 1990, in accordance with article 49. Part 1, Article 2).

child psychology to leave their family and house. In addition it is also a process of abusing child rights because every legal guardian is responsible for their child protection and care⁵.

It was also supported from the previous study where the researcher mentioned that the process of street migration involves the interaction of both 'push' and 'pull' factors, but the 'push' factors was associated with the emotional bond between children and parents or guardians and other household members can only be broken if the adult-child relation collapses (Veale, 1992). They are children who come from families where they feel emotionally, physically or sexually vulnerable and often end up living in streets; generally referred to as street children (Zakaria, 2004). In many families, one of the parents died and the rupture in the family structure places the children in great jeopardy. Children's stories in fact, often report of tension and difficulties with step-parents as being the main cause of their departure from home (Pelto, 1997)

High unemployment problem in rural areas pushed their family to migrate on city life. Dhaka, the capital city of Bangladesh is expected to become the sixth largest mega-city of the world by 2010, with a present population of already 12.3 million (UNCHS, 2001). City life is also an important factor that influenced children to the street life however this migration were initiated by their family. The findings appeared that some children have relatives such as uncle, aunt, grand-father etc, neighbors and friends who helped them in the process of migration and settlement in this capital city. It was also supported from one of the previous study where the author mentioned that the rapid increase in the number of landless families in rural areas together with other economic and social changes, have converged to push poverty-stricken families to urban areas to seek new ways of livelihood (Pelto, 1997).

In this study I found that rural-urban migration was one of the important reasons for children to move on the street life. Some respondents said that they were

⁵ States Parties undertake to ensure the child such protection and care as is necessary for his or her well-being, taking into account the rights and duties of his or her parents, legal guardians, or other individuals legally responsible for him or her, and, to this end, shall take all appropriate legislative and administrative measures. ("Convention on the Rights of the Child"- Adopted and opened for signature, ratification and accession by General Assembly resolution 44/25 of 20 November 1989 entry into force 2 September 1990, in accordance with article 49. Part 1, Article 3).

migrated because they were affected by flood and other natural disaster. Rural-urban migration of adults as well as children has been the major cause of this fast growth (Deshingkar and Grimm, 2005; Af-sar, 2000; Begum, 1999; Ahmed and Jasimuddin, 1996). It was also found from previous study where the researcher mentioned that a striking feature of the Bangladeshi workforce is that it includes 6.3 million children under the age of 14 (Narayan et al., 2002), most of whom have been migrating from rural villages to the capital city, either to escape from a violent and oppressive situation at home or to find employment opportunities more available in the city.

Migration is therefore viewed from a structural perspective as a product of income differentials and perceived earning opportunities between urban and rural areas (Lee, 1966; Lewis, 1982). According to one of the few specific studies existing on migration of children to Dhaka city (Ahmed and Jasimuddin, 1996), the migration of children to the capital is explained as the result of urban pull factors and rural push factors. This 'push-pull' theory, in our specific context, assumes that certain factors such as greater job opportunities, land availability and social and cultural freedom in the area of destination operate as factors 'pulling' individual and children to urban areas. On the other hand, high population density, poor quality of education, the rupture of family relationships, natural calamities, lack of economic opportunities and hence poverty, operate as determinant forces 'pushing' child migrants out of their rural original areas. This approach implies that individual rational actors decide to migrate because a cost-benefit calculation leads them to expect a positive net return (Massey et al., 1993).

A common strategy for poor families in rural areas for example, is to take children out of school during periods of economic strain and send them to the city to work as servants or apprentices (Deshingkar and Grimm, 2005). Sometimes, they also "feel proud of the money and they earn which gives them importance in the family" (Blanchet, 1996: 85). So we can say that the process of street migration involves the interaction of both 'push' and 'pull' factors from the society.

However there were different findings explained different reasons for moving children to street life such as- Aptekar (1988) found that children in street situations were emotionally intact in their intellectual functioning, and achieved high levels of self-management. Felsman (1989) found that 97 per cent of his sample of Colombian children in street situations had actively abandoned their households due to a non-conducive family environment. Further, street life helped in the development of children's resilience

and street living children had better mental health than their counterparts in families.

Veale (1992) compared children in street situations in Sudan and Ireland, considering their different backgrounds, social demographic characteristics and the processes of their street life involvement. In both cases, she found that street life was a rational choice when considering alternative options and risks.

Lugalla and Mbwambo (1999) found that Tanzanian street living children are highly organized in groups of peers who share resources, strategies, assets and care. According to Baker (2000), the street network of friendships can reduce the real and perceived feeling of vulnerability and social exclusion, and raise the well-being of children in street situations. Chawla (2002) reports that the interaction of children in street situations, within neighborhoods and street communities, is the keystone for understanding the growth of impressive ethical behaviors and that street life fosters the development of 'cultural richness'.

These empirical studies revealed that the importance of non-economic factors in children's decisions to migrate and stay on the streets and indicate that street life not only involves vulnerability processes but also processes of empowerment through which children exercise their personal agency and develop innovative coping behaviors. They were presented as 'robbed by humanity' (Tierney 1997), and their lives were thought to be characterized by a 'plundered childhood' (Siddiqui 1990) and a 'lost innocence' (Blanchet 1996).

According to Giani (2006) children in Bangladesh have always received scant attention in the migration process and this is probably due to the same reasons that kept women mostly invisible for a long time when dealing with migration patterns. In Bangladesh,

where a patriarchal, patrilineal and patrilocal social system prevails, female migrants in fact, have often been considered as 'passive movers' migrating in response to marriage or following the male head of the household (Kabeer, 2000; Afsar, 2003a). Similarly, children have not been considered as an independent constituency who gradually develop a sense of agency and autonomy, since parents and guardians are invested with extensive power and authority over their children (Blanchet, 1996). The majority of the literature on child labour and child migration portrays children as having little or no agency (cited in King, 2002), thus assuming they always migrate with parents or when they migrate alone, parents are the ones

who decide whether to send their children to urban areas to work or not.

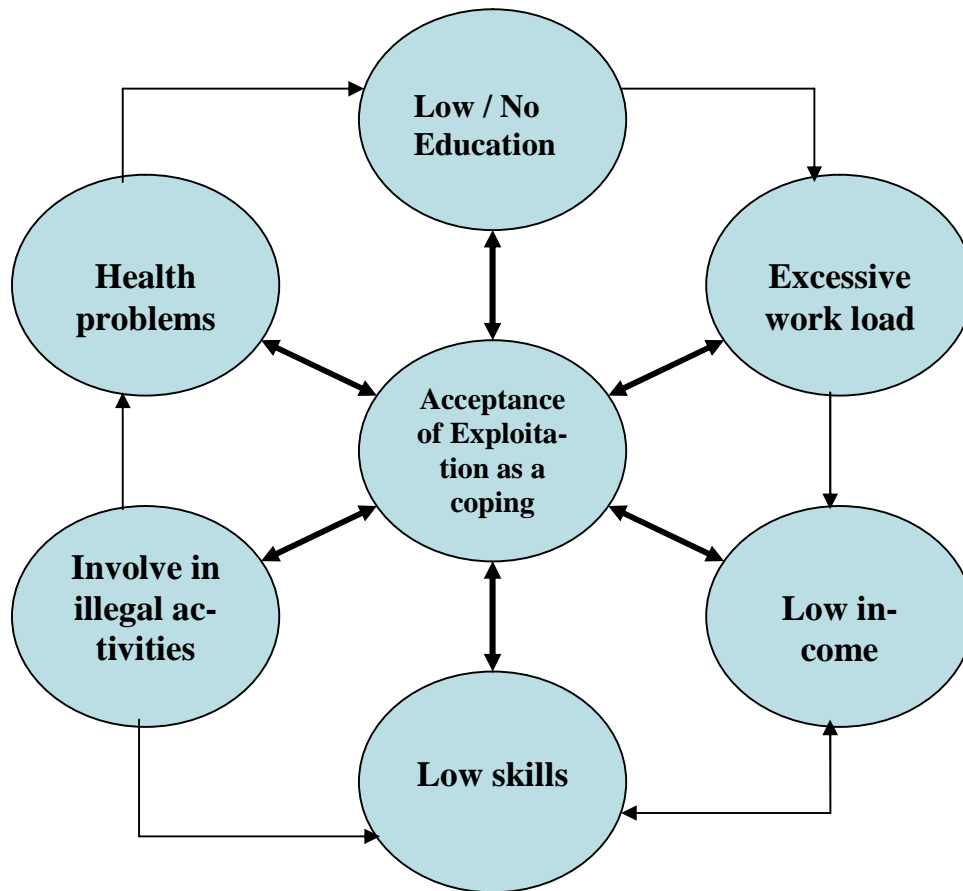
In that regards Conticini and Hulme (2006) described that the parallel feeling of empowerment and freedom experienced when running away makes street life attractive. Issues such as the social bonding that children experience on the street, the formation of urban sub-cultures, and the evolution of their self-perception are of significance in understanding the attachment that children develop to the street and the difficulties they face in reintegrating into their former households. These complex interactions of push and pull factors can keep or even entrap children on the street. But to a large extent they are subordinate to the initial breakdown of household ties which, makes these 'pull' factors of prime importance in understanding why migration occurs. Overall, the stress of economic poverty serves as a push factor, making migration more likely in Bangladesh, but they argued that it plays a secondary role in comparison to the role that social relationships play in the family and on the street.

The concept of child labor is associated with gross violation of children rights, however, contemplating accounts of children on employment, engagements, salary and other benefits it is easy to conclude that children are always faced a vicious cycle of exploitation. It starts immediately after being employed on street and continue as long as they are involved.

The above vicious cycle represent that when children accept the exportation it becomes connected their daily life experiences. The street children faced different types of violence regardless of their age, income, gender and work place. Humiliation and abuse are everyday experiences of street children. In this study all the respondent reported that they are subject to humiliation, abuse and violent behavior everyday.

The street children mentioned that they usually faced multiple types of violence that includes threat, intimidation, being blamed, thrown something, pushed, grabbed, slapped, kicked, hit with object, choked, pulled hair. All the respondents who have been exploited of such cruelty experienced multiple and repeated episode of violence. As a researcher I found that most common and frequent form of abuse was calling bad words, neglect and drive away etc. Calling bad words were very common. These words are so insulting and degrading for every human being. According to street children "***exploitation, violence is nothing for our life basically it is a normal part of our life***".

Vicious cycle of exploitation as an impact of the street life



It was revealed that street children were exasperated by local people and they usually humiliated on baseless excuses. In that regard one of street boy cited that *“many people abused us. I didn’t understand why? I think living on the street is our only offence”*. That means exploitation is a common occurrence for every street children but the nature is vary from street boys to street girls however the extent and reaction was same.

It is quite often found that street children were tempted to involve in laborious work in return of money. At the end of the day, they were refused to be paid off, threatened by their vendors. Then they were bound to settle down with a lower wage than promised earlier of the day. Vendors and service providers frequently exploited to the street children verbally and physically. Sometimes they were slapped, grabbed or drive away beating. Not only children were exploited by their employers, they were also by other people such as service-seekers, police, security guards, customers, fellow worker, strangers and also family members. Sales assistants were always under pressure not to make any mistake. Hotel and restaur-

ant workers always have to on their toes to perfectly serve their customer. However making mistakes in any job invite two types of punishment one initiated by the service seekers and the other by the employers. One of the respondents who worked as helper in a local food shop he explained that *“sometimes customers (especially local political leaders) slapped me because I am not able to serve their order on time”*. Another street boy (11 years) said that *“some customers complained that my tea is tasteless and make excuses not to pay. If I argue with them, they usually tortured me. In addition that everyday I need to pay 50 Tk. (0.75 US \$) as a bribe otherwise they cannot permit me sale by tea on the road”*.

In this study I found that the most awful thing was children were exploited frequently without any apparent reason. However, all street children mentioned that the extent of violence was quite often. But the nature of street girl’s exploitation was not similar to the street boys. The findings revealed that the street girls were victims of repeated attempt for sexual molestation by security guards and local people. Street girls were usually exploited verbally like call-

ing bad names (using local slang). Therefore, when a child enters on the street first, he or she involved with begging and after that they saved some money and start their work on street. In many circumstances, children are adept at analyzing their situation and making decisions for their own benefit. These include daily decisions on coping or survival techniques, as well as general assessments of their own best interests. Children may be living in abusive or otherwise unsuitable residential homes/shelters but find some aspects beneficial and on that basis may choose not to move onto, or back to, the street. Some children prefer their independence, including the freedom to make their own decisions and have control over their lives. Others may choose to escape situations of family poverty when they can get more food on the street, or more freedom to play games, or freedom to go to the cinema and video parlors when they have earned or begged enough money

IV. CONCLUSION

All over the world, children often turn to the streets in an attempt to resolve problems that arise from the social structures and situations in which they find themselves. The role played by violence within the household and the strength of the social bonds built by children on the street are too often ignored by commentators on this 'problem' in Bangladesh. This analysis indicates that policies and actions to reduce street migration by children in the country will need to drop the assumption that material poverty is the main cause and tackle the more contentious issues of emotional, physical and sexual violence.

The perception of street children held by the general public, policy makers and many social scientists in Bangladesh is filtered through, and conditioned by, a 'dominant narrative' (Roe, 1999) which posits that children are on the street because their parents or guardians cannot meet the household's basic material needs. These street children not only have been deprived of the most basic of rights that citizens are guaranteed but also have stopped expecting it, at the heart of the state, the capital. And their numbers are growing every day. The number of children on Dhaka's streets who don't have enough money to afford a good meal stood at no less than 200,000 in 2005 and is growing, according to a survey conducted by Plan Bangladesh, an international non-governmental organization.

From the above empirical discussion of the life experiences of street children in Dhaka, the capital city of Bangladesh, it can be argued that, the main reason for moving on street life is poverty which was influenced by both push and pull factors. The push and pull factors for moving on street mentioned from the respondents which was broadly identified to the poverty of Bangladesh. It was also found that high population

density, poor quality of education, the conflicting relationships of family like polygamy and remarriage, patriarchy (male-headed household) natural calamities, lack of economic opportunities, violation of child rights and hence poverty, operate as determinant forces 'pushing' children to move on street life from their rural original areas in Bangladesh. This approach implies that individual rational actors decide to migrate because a cost-benefit calculation leads them to expect a positive net return (Massey et al., 1993).

On the other hand it was also described by Cain (1977) that in Bangladesh children clearly has an economic value to their families since they contribute substantially to household welfare from a very early age which was pulled children to street life also. In this study it was found that greater job opportunities, demands of the city life operate as factors 'pulling' individual and children to urban areas hopes for better life. The findings also revealed that most of the children especially street girls dependent on their parents on the process of moving on street life and therefore they were involving with street based works in Dhaka city of Bangladesh.

In that context, Conticini and Hulme (2006) mentioned that children move out of households to live on the street in Bangladesh not mainly because of economic poverty (a lack of access to food, income and basic needs) but because of domestic violence and the breakdown of trust in the adult members of their household (and community). The policy implications of this finding are profound. Rather than trying to help children off the street, and assuming that economic growth and reduced income poverty will stem the flow of new children to the street, it suggests that policies to reduce street migration should focus on reducing the abuse of, and violence against children. Social policy, rather than economic policy, must take the lead. For Bangladesh society, this is an altogether less comfortable understanding of why children move to the street, and what needs to be done, than that provided by the dominant narrative.

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