

Destitute children and initiatives for their welfare in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

A large number of children are destitute in Bangladesh. They suffer severely from malnutrition, under weight and drink unsafe water. They are never enrolled in school. About 0.68 million children live in the street in Bangladesh and they are involved in child labour such as domestic works, agriculture, vehicle helper, garments workers, shoe polisher, construction helper, carpenters, hawkers etc. They are also engaged in *bidi* factory, match factory, transport sectors, brick-field, dyeing factory, tannery factory and printing press sectors and they are totally deprived from healthy environment. Even a large number of them are involved in different types of crime such as stealing, snatching, smuggling, pilfering prostitution etc. No doubt this is very much unexpected situation for the children who are the future leader of the nation. So there are responsibilities for the concerned authorities of Bangladesh to rescue these destitute children from their miseries and also to ensure their rights.

Keywords: Destitute children, Child welfare, National Child Labour Survey, Convention of child rights

Introduction

Children are considered as one of the most important target groups in social work. So, the 'child rights' is one of the most important issues for the social workers. In Bangladesh a large number of children are deprived of their rights declared by the UNCRC. Most of them are parentless, homeless, shelterless and passing their daily lives with miserable conditions. They are deprived of education, healthcare, nutrition, habitation and other basic human needs. Millions of children die every year of under weight, pneumonia, diarrhoea, tetanus, birth hazards, lime and other diseases. Besides a large number of children are also attacked with blindness for lack of vitamin A. About 40% children drop out before completion of primary level education and most of them get involved in child labour. They are engaged in agricultural activities and help their mothers in domestic work in rural areas and

work as small vehicle helpers, garments workers, assistants in brick field, shoe polishers, construction workers, sex workers, carpenters, tannery workers, hawkers etc. in the urban areas. They become detached from their parents, guardian and fall into insecurity. Some of them later on get involved in crimes these children are totally deprived of their rights declared by the UNCRC. To ensure the rights of the children they should have easy access to healthcare, food, safe water, secure shelter, social, economic and religious activities. But in spite of being a member of UN, Bangladesh Government cannot fulfill the obligations contained in the child rights of 1989 for establishing rights of children due to constraints of resources and socio-economic and political limitations. There is no doubt that the conditions of these children bring out a challenge to the national child policy of the government. These deprived children are defined as destitute children. In fact, the pervasiveness of different types of deprivation of this large number of children is very much unexpected. But in our country there is no available statistical information or statement for understanding and measuring the pervasiveness of their deprivation level. Among these studies, Alam et al. (2008) determined the effects of some selected factors on child labour due to poverty in Dinajpur district, Bangladesh. Again, Mamun et al. (2008) indentified some key factors on health complications of child labourers during work in Rongpur district, Bangladesh. But there is no available literature that indicates the impact of these immeasurable miseries. In this circumstance it has been tried to identify the degree of miseries and its impact on the national development initiatives. And also has been tried to indicate the responsibilities of the concern authority. This study is a content analysis and necessary information were collected from different looks, journals, reports etc.

Existing situation of the destitute children

The government of Bangladesh as a signatory to the Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989 of the United Nations (UN) in 1990 is committed legally to fulfill the fundamental rights of children. Despite many limitations, the government is working on priority basis to ensure the rights of children. The priority sectors are birth registration, education for all, prevention of child trafficking, protection of children born in brothels, eliminating child labour, healthy environment, children health, intellectual disability, reduction of suffering of children in custody and protection of children from HIV/AIDS etc. In this regard Mondal et al. (2014) identified the childhood disabilities and child protection for the children with disabilities including those at-risk of sexual abuse and exploitation in Rajshahi City, Bangladesh.

These issues are discussed below comparatively:

Birth registration

In Bangladesh *Union Parishad* at rural areas and *Paurosova* at urban areas are the authorized bodies for children's birth registration. According to the survey report of Bangladesh National Women Lawyers Association (BNWLA) at present, about 12% of total children after birth are registered in the country (BSAF, 2003:24). It was only 3% in accordance with the survey conducted in 1997 (Chowdhury and Rahim, 1997).

Child health malnutrition and child mortality

A total of 11 million children below 5 year die due to malnutrition all over the world every year. The death rate of children below 5 was 144 in Bangladesh in 1990. It was controlled and the rate reduced to 77 in 2003 (BSAF, 2003: 86). According to an another report, the severe malnutrition rate of children below 5 year was 68% in 1995-96 and 58% children aged between 6 months to 6 years were under weight. Consequently, the normal growth rate of 51% is being hampered and of 24% is being hampered severely (GOB, 1996). According to government statistics, about 70% children below 5 year are the victims of malnutrition. Of them, 11% are the worst victim of malnutrition. One child out of 7 dies before 5 days of birth in Bangladesh (GOB, 1998:170). Another study shows that at present, the rate of severe under weight is 3%, which was 13.1% in 1990 (BSAF, 2003:88). The rate of diarrhea-affected children below 5 year came down at 5% in 2003, which was 12% in 1990. On the way of making Polio Free Bangladesh, at present, 97% children have come under the programs of polio vaccination, which was 77% in 1990 (BSAF, 2003:88).

Healthy environment

In rural and urban areas, a large number of children are deprived of getting healthy environment especially children of slums are suffering from different types of diseases due to environmental pollution. They use polluted water for bath and other home works. According to a study, a total of 91% people in urban areas use safe water while the rate in rural areas is 63%. Majority of the population do not have the facilities for sanitary latrine. In rural areas, the rate of usage of sanitary latrine is 39% only and the rate in urban areas is 87% while the rate in slums areas is 67% only (BBS and UNICEF, 1996-97).

It is to be noted here that it is found in different research studies, there are ten million people in Dhaka city. Of them, 50% population lives in slum areas. So, a huge number of populations are living in the slum areas through out the country. This is why; these people are compelled to live in polluted environment such as air pollution, water pollution, sound pollution and so on. Children involved in labour are the victims of such polluted environment. Children engaged in *bidi* factory,

match factory, transport sectors, brick-field, dyeing factory, tannery factory and printing press sectors are the direct victims of such polluted environment.

Disabled children

According to WHO report, about 10% of total populations of Bangladesh are the victim of physical disability, hearing impairment, intellectual disability, visual impairment and speech and communication disorder. It is thought that ignorance and wrong beliefs, scarce of resources and lack of proper initiatives are responsible behind such disabilities. It is very difficult to say the exact figure of disabled children in Bangladesh. But according to a survey conducted on 10 thousand children, 1.6% children are the victims of disability. Of them, the figures of disability were more in the intellectual disability category followed by visual impairment and epilepsy.

Education for all

According to official statistics, though 86% children enroll their name with the educational institutions, 40% children drop out before completion of primary education (GOB, 1998: 171). Another statistics show that out of 17.50 million, a total children of six to ten years old about 0.25 million (14%) cannot get opportunity to enroll their names with schools and they get involved in child labour.

According to a study finding, attendance of students at schools is declined and the rate of drop out is increased if the standards of teaching methods are declined. A total of 38% male and 37% female children drop out due to the low quality of teaching method in our country (BSAF, 2003:34). According to the study report, a total of 81% male and 84 % female children enrolled their names at the schools (BSAF, 2003:34). It is to be noted here that the rate of enrolment of both male and female children was 79% in 1996 (UNICEF, 1997:80).

Street children

There is no exact figure of such children in the country. But according to some surveys conducted on divisional towns and districts, reports reveal that the figure of street children is not so small. According to a government's survey report, there are 4, 45,266 street children at the six metropolitan cities of the country (GOB, 2005:10). This was conducted in cooperation of the UNDP in 2001. According to another survey reports conducted by BIDS on 11 big towns of the country in 2004, there are a total of 4, 29, 813 street children. Of them, 3, 89, 892 children (90.7%) are of 6 divisional towns and 39, 921 children (9.3%) were of 5 district towns (Chowdhury, 2005:15). According to the BIDS report, the total figure of street children would be 6,82,882 children throughout the country. It is to be noted here

that such types of children of different cities in the country are undergoing much hardship in their day to day life. They are also compelled to engage various in types of crimes particularly, snatching, smuggling, pilfering, prostitution, stealing and so on. These street children are deprived of their rights. Out of 0.675 million children 31% are literate, 19% can only write their names and 37% can read and write (GOB, 2004: 27). According to a study conducted by BIDS, there are about 4,29,813 street children at the six divisional cities in Bangladesh. Of them 2,49,200 (58.8%) are at Dhaka city, 55,856 (12.7%) are at Chittagong, 20,426 (4.7%) at Rajshahi, 41,474 (9.5%) and Khulna, 9,771 (2.2%) at Barisal and 13,165 (1.4%) at Sylhet City (Sabur, 2005: 7).

Child labour

According to a study report, about 12% of the total labour forces of the registered industries are children in Bangladesh. The number of child labour would definitely be more in the unregistered industries. According to a survey, about 0.675 million children are working as child labour in different cities (Ali, 2004: 12) and of them about 4,45,226 are working in the six divisional cities (GOB, 2005: 10). According to government statistics published in December 1992, there were 3,25,660 child labour in the country. Of them 64,172 were garments labour, 12,802 were *bidi* factory labour, 1,11,225 were at food industry (Hotel, Restaurant etc.) labour and 99,810 were transport sector labour (Alam, 1997: 5). According to a research study on child labour conducted at national level in 1996, about 60,300 children who are in between 4 – 15 years are engaged as labour. Instead of going to school they are working in different industries. If the figure of child labour who are going to school is included, the total number of child labour will be more than that. 83% child labour who do not go to school are in village areas and the number of female and male of them is almost same (BBS: 2004). According to ILO and UNICEF report, 47.93% child labour of Bangladesh never went to schools before and 42.73% who went to school dropped out and were engaged in child labour (Pelto, 1997: 104). This child labour are engaged in agricultural activities and help their mothers in domestic work in rural areas and work as small vehicle helpers, garments workers, assistants in brick field, shoe polishers, construction workers, sex workers, carpenters, tannery workers, hawkers etc. in the urban areas.

Child trafficking

According to official records of the Ministry of Home Affairs and district administration, about 708 women and children were the victims of trafficking during the last four years. Of them, 470 were rescued. Generally, male child aged between 2 years to 12 years are trafficked for “camel joki” in the Middle East and female child aged on an average 16 years are trafficked and sold for prostitution at the brothels of India and Pakistan (BSAF, 2003:48). But another study reveals

different scenario regarding trafficking, kidnapping and missing. According to the statistics of Centre for Women and Child Studies (CWES), a total of 3514 children were kidnapped or reported missing during the period January 2000 to June 2003. Of them, 1109 children were kidnapped and the rest were missing and among them, 641 kidnapped children were rescued and only 35 of missing children were also rescued from different parts of the country. On the other hand, among the missing children, 1209 were male and 1196 were female children and among the kidnapped children, 412 were male and 784 were female. It is to be noted here that during that period, 967 children were trafficked. Of them, 510 were male and 457 were female children. Another report shows that among the kidnapped children (1109), a total of 732 were from rural and 255 were of urban areas. Among the trafficked children, 339 were of rural and 331 were of urban areas (BSAF, 2003:50-51). This seems to be violation of child rights and a challenge to implement the CRC.

Suffering of children in custody

There are a number children suffering in various prisons in the country and many are held in police custody waiting for trial. The number of such children is not so small. According to a report, there were more than 300 children kept in various jails and custody of the country (Khan, 1996). Another report shows at least 1200 children were kept in jails through out the country in 2003 (BSAF, 2003:43)

Plight of brothel children

A number of children are born at brothels every year in Bangladesh. According to UNICEF report, a total of 10,000 girls are engaged in prostitution. They are at the age between 12 to 17 years old. According to another report, there are 18 registered brothels in the country and now about 25-35 thousands prostitutes and their child stay there. Besides, there are floating prostitutes and the figure including child will be not less than 0.10 million. Police administration of Bangladesh thinks there are about 15 to 20 thousands female children engaged in prostitution as floating (BSAF, 2003:56). So the children born at the brothels are to face various types of circumstances and unhealthy situation from their babyhood.

Children affected with HIV/AIDS

Attack by HIV/AIDS on children is a panic for the children of Bangladesh. According to a report of the “National AIDS/STD programs (NASP), about 91% adolescent youth of Bangladesh have no idea about sexually transmitted infection diseases. As a result, about 50% adolescent is under risk of the HIV/AIDS.

Initiatives by government and non-government organizations

The government of Bangladesh has taken many initiatives and programs for the welfare of these destitute children. As a result, Bangladesh government ratified the CRC on September 2, 1990 and later, the government adopted the National Child Policy in 1994. Moreover, under the Article 44 of CRC, the government of Bangladesh is committed to submit report to the 'Committee on the Rights of the Child' about the progress of the programs and initiatives taken by the government for the implementation of rights of children. The government of Bangladesh has already submitted its reports in this regard. In addition, it has reflected in the 5th five year plan (1997-2002) about the execution of children rights set by in the world summit on children. It is also specified in the 5th five-year plan about 'National Plan for Action (1997-2002) and Decade for Female Children.' Through these programs, the government has taken necessary steps for the protection of life of children and to ensure their growth. The strategies undertaken in these programs are included: execution of programs successfully through co-operation with government, NGOs and non-government initiatives. For this, two-way strategies have been taken. The first strategy included monitoring the targets of adopted planned projects, data collection and preservation and exhibition and adoption of pilot projects. These activities would be performed under the direct supervision of the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs. The second strategy is adoption of direct steps for the various development targets for the children. For this, the ministries and departments involved with child related issues have been proposed to execute programs taken for the welfare of children. These ministries and departments include: Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Planning, Local Government and Engineering Department, Public Health and Engineering Department and Primary and Mass Education Department. It is to be noted here that 10 ministries have been included in the committee on the execution of CRC which is leading the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs. The main objective of the committee is to monitor the situation of children in the country. *Jatiyo Shishu Parishad* (National Child Council) is the highest authority for making and adopting policies for the development of children (GOB, 2000: 9-10.) Despite adoption of National Child Policy, a large number of children have been yet deprived of education, healthcare, nutrition, habitation and other basic needs for shortage of resources.

We know that a number of government and non-government organizations are working for the welfare of the destitute children in Bangladesh. Particularly, the organizations and institutions like *Shishu Paribar*, *Shishu Sadan*, PHT Centre, *Diba Kalin Shishu Jotno Kendro* (Day Care Centre), Maternity and Child Health Care Centre, *Chhotomoni Nibas* (Baby Home), Save Home, Drop-in Centre, Juvenile Development Centre, ERPH, *Shishu Academy* etc. are working for the welfare of the destitute children in the government level. On the other hand,

many international, national, local and regional organizations and institutions like UNICEF, ILO, UNESCO, WHO, FAO, Red Crescent Society, World Vision, EDM, CARE, Save the Children, SOS-Shishu Palli, UCEP, BRAC, ASD, ACD, TDC, *Fulkuri Ashore*, *Chader Hat*, *Nizera Kori*, *Khela Ghar*, *Kachi Kachar Mela*, *Bangladesh Shishu Adhikar Forum*, *Operazeo Bangladesh* etc. are operating various types of programs for the welfare of such children in the country over the years. The Christian Missionary Schools and Hostels, *Lillah Boarding* attached with *Alia and Qawmi Madrasahs* are also working for the same purposes.

The States signatory to the CRC is committed to fulfill and establish the rights of children within their respective territory. The government of Bangladesh is also committed to fulfill the Articles of CRC. The government in cooperation with national and international organizations has been implementing various projects and programs for the welfare of children. Besides a number of research organizations are working in the research field and publishing their reports.

Discussion

The destitute children are totally deprived of their rights declared by the UNCRC. To ensure the rights of the children they should have easy access to healthcare, food, safe water, secure shelter, social, economic and religious activities. But, in spite of being a member of UN, Bangladesh Government cannot fulfill the obligations contained in the child rights of 1989 for establishing rights of children due to constraints of resources and socio-economic and political limitations. 20% of total population is living in urban areas and a large number of them are living under the poverty line. They are miserably poor. Children of these miserable poor families are deprived of basic needs. The children grow up with negligence. Female children of urban areas are also exploited and face repression more (GOB, 1998: 170). According to the child recruitment Act 1938, recruitment of children under 12 years of age is absolutely banned at tobacco factories. According to Motor Vehicle Law 1939, recruitment of children under 20 years is banned at transport sector and according to the Factory Law 1965, recruitment of children under 14 years of age is banned at industries (Hossain, 1989: 113).

According to a report published by the government in 1996, about 6.60 million children are engaged in child labour during the period. The children were at the age between 5 years to 14 years. The percentage of the child labour was 19.10%, which was 18.3% of total children of Bangladesh (GOB, 1996:26). A research report published by *Bangladesh Shishu Adhikar Forum* (BSAF), quoting “International Labour Organization (ILO)” shows about 4.85 million children aged between 10 years to 14 years in Bangladesh are engaged in economic activities. Of them, 2.3 million are female children and 2.55 million male children. The percentage of child labour aged between 10 to 14 years is 28% (BSAF, 2003:68).

Quoting UNICEF, *Bangladesh Shishu Adhikar Forum* (BSAF) in its report (1999) noted that there were about 0.225 million female children engaged in domestic labour in Dhaka city. Of them, 90% were aged between 9 to 16 years (BSAF, 1999:47). Two surveys were conducted in cooperation with ILO on child labour engaged in *bidi* and match factories. According to the survey report, a total of 21, 217 children were working at *bidi* factories in Rangpur, Kushtia and Tangail in 2004. Of them, 11, 561 (54.49%) were male children and 9,656 (45.51%) female children. They worked at the worst form of working environment (Karim, *et al*, 2004:35). According to another survey reports (2005) about 855 child labours were engaged at match factories in Dhaka and Narayanganj areas. Of them, 427 (49.94%) were male children and 428 (50.06%) were female children. Similarly, some 653 child labours were working at match factories in Chittagong and Bandarban districts, which was 44% of total labour. Of them, 44.50% were male children and 55.50% were female children (Chowdhury *et al*, 2005:13-15).

On the other hand, National Child Labour Survey quoting BBS statistics reveal that a total of child labour aged between 5-17 years are 3.20 million. Of them, 2.50 million are male and the rest is female. The survey was conducted during 2002-2003 period (Khair, 2004:01). These children are deprived of getting education, one of the fundamental rights. This is strong violation of the rights of children and all types of conventions as well as rules and regulations. These children are engaged in tannery, chemical industry, transport sector, work-shops, ship-breaking, dyeing factory, shopping mall, shrimp and hatchery and such 200 types of occupations. Of these occupations, 39 occupations are very risk-prone and they are to work there for 8 to 10 hours but get wages half of an adult labour.

Conclusion

The government of Bangladesh is committed to meet the basic rights of its citizens as Bangladesh is constitutionally a welfare-oriented State. Apart, the government is also committed to implement the CRC, as Bangladesh is one of the 22-countries which supported the CRC at the time of inception (Siddique, 2004). Moreover, the government has taken various types of programs for children for ensuring safe shelter, healthy environment, nutrient food, education, recreation, unhampered growth and right to express opinion freely. To achieve the objectives, the government has set up administrative arrangement under various ministries, departments and institutions. These include: the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs, Department of Social Service of the Ministry of Social Welfare, the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education and the Ministry of Health and Family welfare etc. The government is implementing the children welfare oriented programs in cooperation with non-government national and international organizations like UNICEF, ILO, UNDP, UNESCO, WHO, FAO, Red Crescent

Society, Save the Children, EDM, SOS-*Shishu Pally*, World Vision of Bangladesh etc.

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