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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Exploring the Employment Status of Urban Street Children in Cumilla City, Bangladesh

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Abstract: Employment plays a crucial role in human development, yet street children remain a significant challenge in many developing countries, such as Bangladesh. This study employs both qualitative and quantitative research methods, focusing on a primary survey conducted in specific districts of Bangladesh. The prevalent causes of children becoming street-dwelling are rooted in poverty, illiteracy, disease, and social injustice. The study specifically targets children who sleep on the streets, railway stations, bus stops, parks, religious sites, construction sites, cemeteries, and other large public areas. The main objective of this research is to explore the nature of labor among street children. Vulnerable children, particularly those who reside in public spaces, are the focal point of this study. A purposive sample of 20 children was selected from various areas in Comilla City for the survey. The findings reveal that the quality of life for these children is severely impacted by their lack of access to informal employment opportunities. The results indicate that homeless children endure precarious living conditions due to their involvement in the low-wage informal sector, leading to a cycle of poverty and vulnerability.

Keywords: Street Children, Education, Street Labor, Urban Area, Bangladesh.

1. Introduction

Bangladesh is a notable example of the extreme social and economic disparities that exist in many developing countries (Shamsuddoha, 2024). Poverty, illiteracy, and social exclusion are still big problems in the country, and they hit the most vulnerable groups the hardest, especially street children. These kids, who are usually between the ages of 5 and 16, often work and live on the streets with little or no help from their families. In Bangladesh, they are frequently called "Tokai." They spend most of their lives in public places, where they are exposed to many different risks and systemic neglect (Hossain M. M., 2023). Landlessness and economic hardship have led to an increase in the concentration of homeless people in cities. This has made things even worse for street children. (Omiyinka, 2009) says that a lot of these kids work in the informal economy, doing things like day labor, street vending, or working in small businesses or the service sector. Even though they work 30 to 40 hours a week, most of them make less than 1,000 taka (about \$10). Seventy-two percent of these kids can't read or write, which makes their future very limited (UNICEF, 2023). They often can't go to school regularly because they have to work, which makes them more likely to drop out of school early and makes it harder for them to learn the skills they need for formal jobs



(Mturi, 2003). Even though they are easy to see—sleeping in parks, hanging out near transportation hubs, or doing street-level work—people and policymakers still don't pay enough attention to them (Timmerman). According to (UNICEF, 2023), more than a million street children were living in Bangladesh as of 2022. Almost half of them lived in Dhaka. The Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS) says that about 450,000 street children in Dhaka don't have access to basic needs like food, education, and health care. These kids often have to live in dangerous places like train stations, sidewalks, and ferry terminals, where they can't get much help or protection. Despite laws against it, child labor is still common because enforcement is weak (Benítez, 2007). It's scary that the number of street kids is expected to grow from 979,728 to more than 1.6 million by 2024 (Istiaq, 2023). Comilla District, located about 100 kilometers southeast of Dhaka, illustrates these challenges at the regional level. Spanning an area of 3,085.17 square kilometers and comprising 17 upazilas, one city corporation, eight municipalities, and 185 unions (LGED, n.d.), Comilla has witnessed a growing population of street children. Over 500 such children are estimated to reside in key urban sites such as Dharmasagar Westside, Zilla School's South Gate, Town Hall Ground, and the PaduarBazar Over-bridge (Chowdhury, Street children intoxicated by Dandy in Cumilla, 2025). The number of children living on the streets is rapidly increasing (Easin & Das, 2025). Due to poverty, family breakdown, and a lack of educational opportunities, these kids are frequently deprived, and many of them turn to substance abuse, which makes them even more vulnerable. Urbanization and industrialization have exacerbated the exclusion of street children from essential services and job opportunities. Food insecurity, family dissolution, and the lack of effective support networks are contributing factors (Hossain & Alam, Socio-economic status of the street children in Bangladesh, 2016). Although there are government and non-governmental programs, they frequently lack sufficient funding and focus, making it difficult to address the various needs of this underprivileged population (Md T. Mia, 2021). Street children frequently engage in hazardous and exploitative forms of work—including vending, car washing, domestic service, and waste collection—while also being at risk of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse (Dabir, 2014). The absence of targeted interventions places these children at the margins of society, both socially and economically. Their ongoing marginalization endangers both their health and more general developmental results. We must immediately establish a specialized framework for education and employment that meets the particular needs of street children. A program like this could be a vital step in helping them reintegrate into society, improve their socioeconomic opportunities, and advance the development of the country. The purpose of this study is to suggest a thorough, situation-specific approach to education and employment for impoverished street children. It specifically aims to investigate the kinds of Labor Street children do, the socioeconomic effects of their labor, and the structural obstacles they encounter. The study will provide evidence-based suggestions to enhance their working conditions and general well-being in light of these discoveries.

2. Literature Review

Bangladeshi street children have been the subject of numerous studies, all of which have highlighted different facets of their existence, difficulties they face, and areas where they could do better. Some of the most important conclusions from renowned studies in the topic are summarized in this study. A 13-year-old day laborer feels immobile after an 8-hour shift, according to (Reza & Bromfield, 2019) analysis of the current situation of street children. This suggests that the physically taxing tasks of cleaning, moving dirt, and handling construction materials are inappropriate for children because they are expected to keep up with adults, which has a detrimental effect on their physical health.

Salokangas, (2010) highlights the possibility of socioeconomic possibilities, contending that street youth can develop into more responsible and productive members of society by means of educational opportunities. This point of view emphasizes how crucial it is to incorporate homeless children into official educational systems in order to enhance their long-term



financial situation.(Hossain & Alam, Socio-economic status of the street children in Bangladesh, 2016) identifies three major challenges faced by street children: inadequate housing, food insecurity, and the lack of stable employment opportunities. According to Hossain, many street children are compelled to take on hazardous work in exchange for basic necessities like food and shelter, further perpetuating their vulnerability.During their early years, children spend the majority of their time with their families. Parents play a crucial role in their child's early development as they are the primary caregivers from birth. According to (Alves, Gomes, Martins, & Almeida, 2017) study on the impact of early childhood education and care programs (ECEC), parents are the strongest predictor of developmental outcomes.(Dhaka Ahsania Mission, 2018) examines the dearth of educational opportunities for street children. Even though many street kids say they want to go to school, socioeconomic barriers keep them from doing so.

According to the "Street Children Survey," a thorough report published in 2022 by UNICEF and the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, street children in Bangladesh frequently face serious risks to their physical and mental health, poverty, violence, and illiteracy. Most of these kids start working early in life, putting in long hours for meager pay.De (2011) investigates government-led programs that offer food, shelter, and education to street children in an effort to rehabilitate them. He points out that many kids continue to miss out on these services in spite of their efforts. To improve their employability and guarantee stable livelihoods, he also highlights the necessity of vocational training programs(Bangladesh, 2019). It offers a comprehensive analysis of the current situation of street children, including their numbers, day-to-day challenges, and the administrative and societal responses to their predicament. The study draws attention to the structural problems that still impact this susceptible group.

In a broad context, (Panter-Brick, 2002)highlights that street children are active agents, and functional interventions recognize their participation rather than treating them as passive victims. Similarly, (Volpi)notes that street children live or work on the street with little adult protection, and programs by the World Bank and NGOs plan to support their education as well as welfare. (Sajeda Chowdhury, 2017)finds that family abuse and low parental income drive children to the different streets, where they form peer groups for protection as well as social support. Street children often remain close to familiar work and shelter areas, showing attachment to peers and a sense of security despite lacking family stability. Furthermore, (Lalor, 1999)states most of the street children are boys aged usually 10 to 14, while girls remain less visible due to household roles as well as safety concerns. Furthermore, they fall into unexpected situations in daily life. In the context of Bangladesh, (Zohir, Dutta, Rahman, & Khan, 2024)states in his paper that Bangladesh has made progress in reducing child labor and improving schooling through various kinds of social programs and educational initiatives, though street children remain highly vulnerable. (Rahman & Samadder, 2015)found that in her study of street connections with children in Bangladesh, mainly from impoverished rural backgrounds, they engage in informal work like begging as well as scrap collection for daily survival. Concentrated in areas such as Mirpur and Asadgarh, they face daily struggles with insecurity and violence as well as substance abuse. Moreover, (Hoque, 2023)notes that child labor remains a complicated and evolving issue shaped by culture and social and economic factors. Furthermore, despite its global attention, existing policies often overlook local community perspectives, leaving gaps in understanding as well as effective intervention. Similarly(Nur, 2024) found that street children in Bangladesh face poverty and abuse as well as various kinds of social exclusion, with girls especially exposed to exploitation and harassment. In Cox's Bazar, social and economic hardship and geographic risk further heighten their vulnerability to child abuse and violence. According to (Md. Salman Sohail, 2024)previous research highlights that Bangladesh falls into extreme vulnerability due to poverty and lack of valid protection. Despite existing studies, there remains a need to deeply explore their multidimensional challenges alongside systematic exploration. Finally, Previous

studies reveal that Bangladeshi street children face a different sort of abuse due to poverty and poor family conditions as well as inequality. However, little research has been done in local contexts like Comilla and Chittagong. This effective study by (Islam, Islam, & Akter, 2024) examines the causes and nature of violence against street children in these cities.

3. Research Method and Materials

Cresswell (2009) identified three main methods for conducting scientific research: quantitative, qualitative, and mixed approaches. This study employed a quantitative research method. Data were collected from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data were gathered through a survey method, targeting a purposive sample of 20 street children. A questionnaire survey was conducted to optimize available time. The case study methods also follow in this study. The selection of participants was based on their availability at the time of the interview. Secondary data were obtained from research reports, academic journals, books, and online resources. The research population consisted of street children, with a focus on those present in the selected areas. The selected areas for the interview of street children were Townhall Ground, Paduar Bazar Bishbrod, and Shasnagachha Bus Stand & Railway station. The data collected were systematically analyzed to assess the socio-economic conditions like labor involvement of the street children in the study.

4. Results and Discussion

The demographics of the respondents, including gender, age, education, Family size and earning member of family, are analyzed in Table 1. These factors significantly influence to understanding of vulnerability. The analysis covers specific providing a comprehensive overview of the participants.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of the Respondents

Category	Options	Percentage
Age	6-09	50%
	10-13	30%
	14-17	20%
Gender	Male	80%
	Female	20%
Birthplace	Rural	45%
	Urban	20%
	Slum	30%
	Don't know	5%
Family size	1-4 person	35%
	5-7 person	55%
	No family	10%
Education	Enrolled in School but Absent	80%
	Not Enrolled in School	20%
Earning member of family	Only one member	56%
	More than one member	10%
	No earning member	34%
Location of sleep at night	Under flyover	20%
	Vehicles	10%
	Station	60%
	Open field/ Ground	10%
Family Situation	Single father	25%
	Single mother	15%
	Separations of Parents	40%
	Death of Parents	20%

Source: Author's Computation (2025)

Table 1 shows the demographic profile of respondents, including gender, age, education, family situation, earning members, etc. In the study, 20 street children were asked questions, and 80% of them were boys. Most of them were between the ages of 6 and 9, and half of them were kids. About 80% of them were in school but missed classes because they couldn't



afford to go all the time. Forty percent of the answers said that their parents had split up, and fifty-five percent said that their finances were unstable because they had too many family members, a low income, or only one earner. Most street children sleep in shelters at train stations at night. The study highlights the challenges faced by street children and their families.

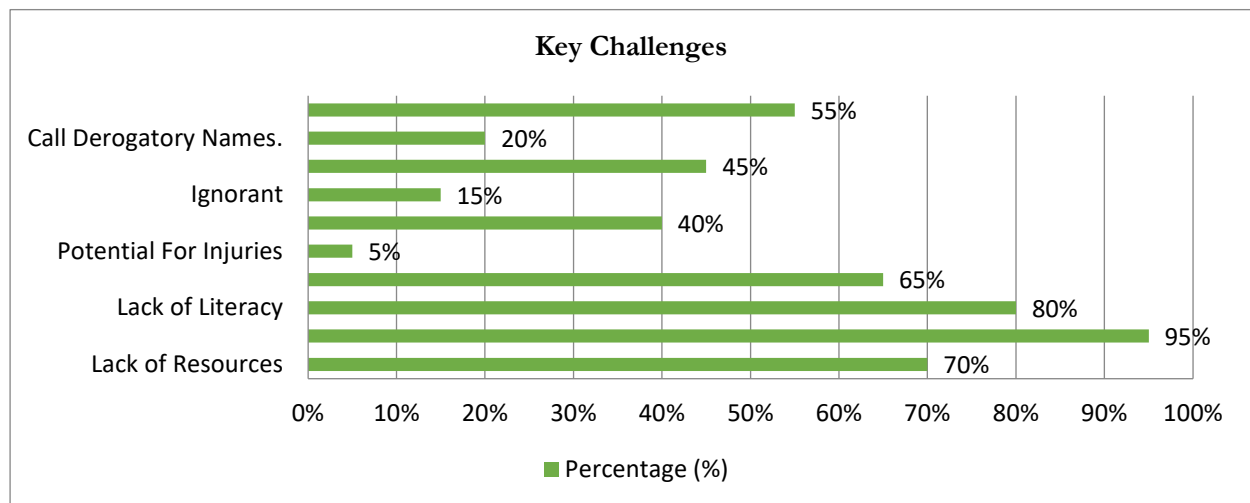
Table 2. Nature of Employment: Views of the Respondents

Category	Type of Work	Percentage
Waste collection	Collecting metal, plastic bottles, waste materials etc.	15%
Begging	Street begging ,asking for money in public spaces , donations from passersby	30%
Laboring	Offloading trucks, bailing clothes, cart pushing, brick work	25%
Cleaning	Markets, churches, sweeping streets	10%
Guides for Begging	Guides blind people to beg	10%
Hawker	Selling food, cigarettes or goods etc.	6%
Personal Services	Assisting, Tea serving, Water Supply etc.	4%

Source: Author's Computation (2025)

The 2 table shows that the nature of employment of the respondents. With 30% depending on street begging, requesting money in public places, and receiving donations from onlookers, begging is the most prevalent way to make ends meet. Additionally, 25% of respondents work in jobs that are managed by friends and social networking, including bricklaying, cart pushing, offloading ships, and bailing clothes. This group has access to physically demanding jobs. Ten percent also rely on cleaning and begging. Vending and waste collection are the least common, accounting for 5% of all jobs. The participants' high rates of informal, low-paying, and precarious employment are highlighted in the table, highlighting their financial vulnerability and restricted access to formal employment opportunities.

Figure 1. Facing Challenges by Work: Views from the Respondents Interviews



Source: Author's Computation (2025)

The given table illustrates the various difficulties individuals encounter in their work. Moreover, this survey was conducted among street children. One of the most common problems faced by street children is lack of resources, as well as lack of literacy, while extreme poverty and ignorance are pursued more closely, which indicates that many children lack essential knowledge about their rights. Furthermore, other issues reported by fewer respondents are still more vital, like violence-related incidents, risk of injuries, abuse and harassment, and being called derogatory names, long-term employment with low income etc..

Low-income: Most of the participants shared that their income is only barely enough for basic daily survival. As p2 p10 noted, my work is not for income, only for food, and my work is not ambitious for any sort of career. It is necessary for survival as well as the only way to ensure the next meals. This indicates that the absence of long-term financial planning or any kind of security among the respondents.

Called by Derogatory Names: Many respondents said that verbal humiliation is a recurring experience in daily life. P6 mentioned that most of the time I feel that I am not useful for anything. Such social labeling causes psychological harm as well as pushes them toward further isolation and invisibility in public.

Long-term Informal Work: The majority of respondents said that they stayed involved in long-term but unstable work without any formal arrangements. As p8 negotiated that, many times, I sleep in the shop and work, whether I get paid or not. Such behavior reveals the exploitative nature of their working environment.

Ignorance: Due to the educational deprivation, participants are unaware of job opportunities or their rights. For instance, p1 and p2 both said that I cannot read any job advertisement due to lacking my education. Their inability to access information keeps them excluded from the mainstream employment sector.

Abuse and Harassment: A significant number of participants stated that psychological abuse and neglect, as well as public humiliations, are part of their everyday experience. Among all, as P6 and P9 said, nobody is standing beside me; it is hard to believe myself. Many times, I face difficulties because of other people. This statement reveals that deep sense of fear and mistrust among the participants.

Risk of Physical Injury: Most of the time unsafe mobility and lack of awareness lead to frequent accidents and physical harm. p7 shared Due to my poor knowledge, in my daily movement it is risky. Moreover, increasing the chance of injuries. This emphasizes the need for safety training as well as a secure environment.

Lack of Skills: Several respondents said that they did not receive any type of training to enhance their lives. Among all, P2 and P6 pointed out that there was no training and no hope. This lack of competency leaves them trapped in a cycle of low-end, insecure jobs.

Lack of Literacy: Many respondents are unable to read or write, which has restricted their access to services and opportunities. For example, p1, p2, and p8 said that we could not read anything properly. This highlighted a core barrier to development and empowerment.

Extreme Poverty: The majority of participants said that poverty is the issue affecting all other aspects of their lives. Among all, P2 and P10 repeated that my work is not ambition or any sort of career; it is necessary for survival, as well as the only way to ensure the next meals. These narratives reflect deep-rooted deprivation.

Lack of Resources and Connectivity: Some respondents point out that they face obstacles due to infrastructure disconnectedness from services. Among all, P4, P5, and P7 said that poor connectivity cut off access to job markets. This isolation restricts their participation in development or livelihood opportunities.

The findings clearly disclose that street children face a wide range of harmful drawbacks in their existing workplace, with a lack of resources ultimately creating a negative effect in their lives as well as improvement.

Table 3. Reasons for Employment Challenges: Views from the FGD

The focus group discussion revealed a number of causes for the difficulties vulnerable individuals encounter when attempting to get employment. Illiteracy and the lack of employment information, application completion, and training program participation because of a lack of suitable abilities were the two primary problems. The women specifically claimed that early marriage or their traditional position

as women prevented them from attending education. Because they lacked formal qualifications, the great majority of individuals were unable to secure formal employment. The unfavorable physical and social conditions in which many of them resided were yet another significant obstacle. Poor transportation, hazardous roads, and the lack of childcare facilities were cited by residents in isolated or disaster-prone locations as the primary barriers to employment. Other than that, everything is quite normal, although some recent developments make it more difficult to find employment, such as the erratic weather and different environmental hazards like flooding or ruined roads. Due to their frequent inability to safely commute to work, women and people with disabilities have been disproportionately impacted. In a similar vein, the FGD emphasized the lack of support systems and social isolation. Participants with physical disabilities, widowhood, or family abandonment felt particularly inadequate due to the lack of emotional and logistical assistance. The majority said they have encountered discrimination and stigma in their communities, which also makes them less likely to use training programs or look for work. The study came to the conclusion that a complex combination of social, academic and environmental disadvantages accounts for these vulnerable populations' job difficulties.

4.1. Case Study of the Street Children

4.1.1. Case Study 1: Street Animals Accompany to Street Children: The Misery of Zubair



Zubair, an eight-year-old boy from Cumilla, is currently residing in a precarious circumstance as a result of his parents' divorce. His education has been suspended as a result of his circumstances, despite his attendance at pre-primary education. Begging or assisting local businesses, collecting water for the town, and conducting a variety of chores are all ways in which Zubair earns money. He maintains a robust relationship with street canines and devotes considerable time to them. Zubair is compensated with 100 taka for cleaning the municipal hall on a daily basis. His profits are used to purchase food for himself and to provide sustenance for his dogs, whom he regards as companions. He, however, is deprived of access to education, healthcare, security, or appropriate clothing. He cohabitates with 10-15 other street children who endure comparable challenges. He is exposed to the hazards of street life and street animals, and his living conditions are unhygienic and harmful. Zubair lacks fundamental necessities that many children take for granted, but he has no fear. Location: CumillaTawnhall, Bangladesh, 20.03.2025

4.1.2. Case Study 2: The Struggle & Difficult Living Circumstances of Massarof

Mr. Massarof, an eleven-year-old boy from a rural area, lives in Cumilla City alone with his family of seven. His mother works in a brick field, and his father drives a CNG. Despite having both parents alive, he becomes a beggar and child laborer. He completed class 3 at nine and works three hours a day at a brickfield, earning only 800 BDT per week. His living situation is difficult, as he is far from his family and has been homeless for two years. He faces daily challenges like access to clean water, healthy food, and clothing. Massarof believes that if non-governmental organizations and the government work together, future issues will be resolved. He believes that child labor and begging lead to dangerous circumstances and that the Bangladesh government should not help him.

4.1.3. Case Study 3: Sojib and His Hazardous Situations

Mr. Sojib, a 12-year-old street kid from a rural area in Cumilla, Bangladesh, has been begging for four years since arriving at the age of eight. He lives next to a street in Pauduar Bazar and has only completed class four. He works with a carpenter for three hours and begs all day, but his weekly income is insufficient to cover his basic needs. When he feels uneasy or lonely, he stays with his street dog, which makes him feel wealthy and energetic. Sojib believes that if government and non-governmental charitable organizations collaborate to assist homeless children, problems will be resolved. He believes that begging and child labor create hazardous situations and that the government of Bangladesh is doing everything to help him.

4.1.4. Case Study 4: *The Struggle of Nahid and His Alone Life*

Nahid, a fifteen-year-old boy come from Noakhali, grew up in poverty and begging on the streets. His family consists of his parents, a woodworker, and two married sisters. Nahid's father is unreliable, causing him to miss out on education due to financial crises. He lives with his parents in Tomson Bridge, Comilla City, where he often experiences poor experiences from wealthy individuals. Nahid earns at least 4000 BDT per month, but this is insufficient for his family, resulting in insufficient access to food, water, housing, and clothing. He has no friends and feels alone, as there are many drug-addicted street kids in their neighborhood. Nahid hopes that governmental and non-governmental organizations will support him and others in similar situations, but he doubts the government's support. He hopes that both governmental and non-governmental organizations will work together to support Nahid and others in similar situations.

5. Conclusion

A child's development depends a lot on having a supportive family, since kids can't tell right from wrong on their own. Sadly, a lot of street kids in Bangladesh have to work because their families are having a hard time making ends meet. Families with low incomes in many rural areas have a hard time meeting their basic needs. This often means that children have to work to help their families, which means they can't go to school. Because of this economic strain and poor family planning, children are not getting an education, especially girls who face extra discrimination because they are girls. People usually think of boys as the main breadwinners and girls as the ones who take care of the house. Because of this, boys get an education, but girls can't even get a basic education. A large part of the population is made up of street children, who are an important part of the country's workforce. But they can't grow up properly because they don't have the basic things they need, so they can't help the country grow and move forward. They are stuck in a cycle of poverty and deprivation because they haven't reached their full potential. It is very important to put the above suggestions first for the overall growth of these kids. The government, working with NGOs and the general public, needs to put in place effective programs that make sure street children grow up, go to school, and are safe. We can help street kids live productive lives and make a positive difference in the world by giving them access to education and basic needs. Many families are so poor that they have to send their kids to work, which is often dangerous and unfair. This study has shown that the work they do is often cruel, bad for their mental and physical growth, and puts their future at serious risk. So, it's very important that every child, even those who live on the street, gets an education. Not only does education help people grow as individuals, but it also helps the country as a whole. We can help street kids break the cycle of poverty, improve their lives, and make the country a better place by giving them the knowledge and skills they need.

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