



## Research article

# Poverty, violence, and family disorganization: Three “Hydras” and their role in children’s street movement in Bangladesh<sup>☆</sup>

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## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 6 November 2015  
 Received in revised form 22 January 2016  
 Accepted 6 April 2016  
 Available online 19 April 2016

## Keywords:

Abuse  
 Family disorganization  
 Leaving home  
 Poverty  
 Street children

## ABSTRACT

The increasing number of children running away from home in Bangladesh is a major concern, and in need of critical attention. This yearlong study explores why children leave home with a sample of street children in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Purposive sampling from three locations in Dhaka yielded a sample of 75 homeless children aged 10–17. For each participant, a 60–90 min in-depth qualitative interview was conducted multiple times. While the dominant explanations rely on poverty or abuse, the findings of this study reveal that the cause is actually three heads of a Hydra monster: poverty, abuse, and family disorganization and their interactions. It shows that the primary reasons for children breaking from their family are all interrelated. The findings from this study are likely to add knowledge regarding the issues and may lead to preventative interventions for street children and their families.

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The challenges of children’s street life in Bangladesh could be symbolized as a fight against Hydra – the many-headed water serpent of Greek mythology. If any of Hydra’s nine heads were cut-off, two would grow back. For street youth facing multi-faceted problems, solving one does nothing to decrease the likelihood that their plight will grow more complex and difficult to conquer. In Bangladesh, the struggles of street survival have been documented to some extent (Farid & Mostari, 2015; Reza, Das, & Ahmmed, 2005) but little attention has been paid to the circumstances that force youth out of their homes.

In general, children in Bangladesh suffer from the encounter with the many-headed Hydra of poverty, malnutrition, inadequate shelter, inadequate health care, etc. even before they take to the streets. The government of Bangladesh and international donor agencies have invested massively in social sectors and have made significant gains in social indices in the last two decades (World Bank, 2013). Despite this progress, children’s lives are far from secure. About 50% of all Bangladeshi children live in poverty and around 64%, 57% and 41% children respectively are deprived of sanitation facilities, nutrition, and proper shelter (UNICEF, 2009a, 2009b).

Moreover, the universal recognition that children are a distinct social group with common interests and entitled to human rights is hardly recognized within the country’s social and cultural traditions. Sometimes cultural traditions are contradictory and harmful for children. For example, many parents in Bangladesh oppose the idea of physical punishment for children, but in reality, a majority of Bangladeshi parents, in accordance with their own upbringing, regularly use physical and psychological violence to discipline children (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics [BBS] and United Nations Children’s Fund [UNICEF], 2015).

<sup>☆</sup> This research was partially supported by Armin Scheitacker of Germany and the Fahs Beck Foundation of New York, USA.

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Even though Bangladeshi children live under a bleak macro scenario where poverty, malnutrition, and abuse are extensive, there is dearth of knowledge about how these conditions play out within the households and factor in the decision of children to live on the street instead. This article investigates how poverty, abuse and family disorganization, and their interactions, help explain the motivation of children to escape their family circumstances.

## 1. Review of the literature

The size of the street child population in Bangladesh ranges from an estimated 600,000 to over a million (UNICEF, 2009a, 2009b). These varying estimates might be attributed to many factors including methods of estimation, and definitions of street children and their status as a hard-to-reach group. It is likely that the number of street children would be at the high end of this spectrum since the number of full-time child laborers (5–14 years) in Bangladesh exceeds 3.75 million (US Department of Labor, 2015) and many of them live without a family in the urban areas. Despite the lack of consensus over the size of street child population, there is hardly any debate over two issues: the number of street children is rapidly growing, and many of the street child population are indeed very young, some as young as five (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2015).

Why are these children trading their homes for the complex hardships of street life? In the West, a growing body of literature has identified a complex set of factors that explains why youth take to the streets. The first set of explanations focus on “individual-level factors” purporting that an individual’s actions are precipitating factors in street movement (Rosenthal, Mallett, & Myers, 2006). Many individual youths fail to comply with familial and societal expectations for various reasons. A youth’s cumulative failure might create stress in the family and trigger other unwanted incidents, forcing the youth out of the home. Unmet expectations are identified as poor educational achievements, deviant behavior, and substance abuse (Safyer, Thompson, Maccio, Zittel-Palamara, & Forehand, 2004; Thompson & Pollio, 2006; Tucker, Edelen, Ellickson, & Klein, 2011). Previous research has consistently found that US homeless youth are more likely to demonstrate delinquent behavior than their house-living counterparts (Heinze, Toro, & Urberg, 2004; McCarthy & Hagan, 1992), and delinquent behavior seems to increase once youth become immersed in street life (Kipke, Montgomery, Simon, & Iverson, 1997). Similarly, substance abuse is a contributing factor in youths’ street departure. For some youth, substance abuse is a coping mechanism to avoid family conflicts and for others substance use is a contributing factor that intensifies conflict within the family and ultimately brings separation from the family (Mallett, Rosenthal, & Keys, 2005; Thompson, Bender, Windsor, Cook, & Williams, 2010).

Beyond the individual, “family-level factors” suggest that negative family environments facilitate the movement of young people to the streets (Tyler, Cauce, & Whitbeck, 2004). Negative family environments have many facets: parental abuse, parental rejection, conflict with parents, and family breakdown (Ferguson, 2009; Gwadz, Nish, Leonard, & Strauss, 2007; MacLean, Embry, & Cauce, 1999; Maclean et al., 1999). Studies have reported that multi-type abuses are predictors of running away from home (Thrane, Hoyt, Whitbeck, & Yoder, 2006). Comparison studies found higher rates of physical, emotional and sexual abuse among homeless youth than their housed counterparts (Tyler & Bersani, 2008; Whitbeck & Hoyt, 1999). Moreover, lack of parental care and warmth, less parental monitoring, and a high level of parental rejections are strongly associated with running away from home (Farber, Kinast, Douglas McCoard, & Falkner, 1984; Mallett et al., 2005; Rosenthal et al., 2006).

Research from developing countries tends to view youths’ movement to the street primarily through two lenses: Poverty and family dysfunction. The “economic poverty hypothesis” asserts that chronic poverty often creates unbearable conditions at home for young children and exerts implicit and explicit pressure on family members to find economic means for survival (Ballet, Bhukuth, & Radja, 2013). Children migrate to the streets either voluntarily or involuntarily for their families’ and thus their own survival (Diversi, Filho, & Morelli, 1999; Ojanuga, 1990). In contrast, the “aberrant families hypothesis” asserts that negative family environments including conflict, violence, abandonment, and authoritarian behavior, contribute to weak and disintegrated ties among family members and facilitate eventual departure of children from the home (Aptekar, 1994; Ballet et al., 2013; Felsman, 1989).

Under these conditions, many families or individuals migrate to the urban centers (Kombarakaran, 2004), which are themselves economically depressed and thus offer very limited opportunities. Some families disintegrate under these conditions and children are forced to take to the streets (Bayat, 2000). Ethnic conflict and war also accelerates migration to urban centers where many of these children wind up living in the streets (Germann, 2006; Conticini & Hulme, 2007). In some African countries, HIV/AIDS infections result in orphaned children and child-headed households. Many child-headed households were able to survive through support from neighbors and the local community, but poverty and a sense of despair bring enormous stress and difficulties.

There are only a few studies available that focus on street children in Bangladesh and fewer that study why children leave home. The overarching narrative from this limited literature is that severe poverty is the dominant factor behind youths’ movement to the streets (Hai, 2014). When families live under constant economic crises, they may take desperate measures such as employing their children outside the home or pushing their children out of the home to generate income (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2003; Hai, 2014; Khatun & Jamil, 2013; Subarna, Biswas, Shikdar, & Hassan, 2014). The counter argument negates the poverty thesis and suggests that “children move out of households to live on the streets in Bangladesh not because of economic poverty . . . but because of domestic violence and the breakdown of trust in the adult members of their household” (Conticini & Hulme, 2007, p. 223). These conflicting narratives often ignore that both

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