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Understanding the Roles and Contributions of Charities to the Sustainable Development in Bangladesh: A Study on Street Children in Dhaka City

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Abstract

This study critically examines the contributions of charitable organizations toward the sustainable development of street children in Dhaka, Bangladesh, where the population has surged to an estimated 3.5 million. While Bangladesh has achieved middle-income status, this demographic remains largely excluded from the national development narrative. Using a mixed-method approach integrating stakeholder interviews, focus group discussions at major urban hubs, and a comprehensive literature review the research explores the "push" and "pull" factors driving children to the streets. The analysis identifies a significant "Identity Crisis," noting that 58% of street children lack birth registration, a condition the study defines as "Civil Death," which precludes access to formal education and healthcare. A critical evaluation of existing literature reveals systemic "Snapshot Bias" and a failure to address the emerging "Digital Invisibility" of marginalized youth. The findings suggest that while NGOs provide vital "Band-Aid" relief, the proliferation of the "Charity Model" may inadvertently allow the state to outsource its constitutional obligations. The study argues for a paradigm shift toward a "Rights-Based" model, recommending the reform of punitive legislation such as the Vagrant and Shelterless Persons Act 2011, the implementation of trauma-informed policing, and the creation of a unified national database. Ultimately, the research posits that sustainable development can only be achieved by integrating these "invisible" children into the legal and digital infrastructure of "Smart Bangladesh."

Keywords: Street children, Bangladesh, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), NGOs, Birth Registration, Urban Poverty, Social Capital.

Introduction

The phenomenon of street children in Bangladesh represents a significant social crisis that reflects deep-seated structural inequalities and a cycle of systemic neglect. These children, often forced onto the streets by extreme poverty, the breakdown of family units, or rapid rural-to-urban migration, constitute one of the most marginalized populations in the nation. While Bangladesh has transitioned into a middle-income country, the benefits of this growth have not been equitably distributed. Official estimates from 2015 placed the number of street children at 1.5 million, but recent 2024–2025 reports from UNICEF (2024) and human rights organizations suggest this figure has spiked to approximately 3.4 to 3.5 million, with over 400,000 residing in Dhaka alone (Dhaka Tribune, 2025; UNICEF, 2024).

These "dwellers of the street" are often invisible in policy-making, leading to a denial of the "right to have rights" because they lack basic legal documentation such as birth certificates. Their lives are defined by a chronic lack of access to stable shelter, formal education, and healthcare, leaving them susceptible to exploitation. This study investigates the multifaceted challenges faced by these children while identifying sustainable solutions that align with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and principles of social justice.

Research Methodology

This study employs a mixed-method approach that integrates qualitative and quantitative techniques to provide a holistic understanding of the issues affecting street children in Bangladesh. Primary data were gathered through structured interviews, surveys, and focus group discussions (FGDs) conducted at high-prevalence intercept points in Dhaka, such as Kamalapur Railway Station, Sadarghat River Port, and Victoria Park. To gain a deeper systemic perspective, key informant interviews (KIIs) were conducted with various stakeholders, including government officials, NGO workers, lawyers, and community leaders. Quantitative analysis focused on demographic trends, health status, and economic activities, utilizing standardized questionnaires and descriptive statistical methods to quantify gathered data. Qualitative data, captured through in-depth interviews and FGDs, focused on the lived experiences and "empathetic" primary data gathered from the stories of the children themselves. Secondary data were sourced from academic publications, governmental reports, and NGO documents to triangulate primary findings and enhance the reliability of the research. Ethical considerations were paramount, with researchers

undergoing training in empathetic interviewing and ensuring the confidentiality of the participants by using pseudonyms and altering photographs to protect identities.

Literature Review

Existing literature on street children in Bangladesh highlights a complex interplay of socio-economic and psychological factors. Nasrin and Rashed (2013) emphasize that rapid urbanization and poverty are the primary drivers forcing children into informal and hazardous labor sectors, such as scavenging and street vending. Their research found that a significant portion of street children engage in "rag-picking" (35.3%) and suffer from extreme educational deprivation, with 65.3% having no formal education whatsoever. Complementary to this, Chowdhury et al. (2017) explored health-related risk behaviors, revealing that over 87% of street children suffer from illnesses exacerbated by unhygienic living conditions and substance abuse, such as "Dandi" (glue-sniffing), used as a coping mechanism for hunger and hopelessness.

Nutritional studies by Hakim and Kamruzzaman (2015) in central Bangladesh further substantiate these vulnerabilities, finding that 66.67% of street children are underweight due to a lack of nutritional diversity and food insecurity. Beyond material needs, the social capital perspective offered by Conticini and Hulme (2006) suggests that the breakdown of trust and domestic violence are more significant "push" factors than economic poverty alone. Their research posits that children often choose the street as an adaptive choice to gain independence from oppressive domestic environments characterized by "onedgio bichar" or unfair violence. Finally, Rahman et al. (2024) provide a socio-legal analysis highlighting the "invisibility" of street children in policymaking, particularly the systemic failure to provide birth registration, which excludes them from mainstream development and protection frameworks.

The migration of children to the streets is rarely the result of a single event but is a cumulative process resulting from the failure of both the family and the state to provide a protective environment. Economic poverty remains a foundational driver, as approximately 31.5% of the Bangladeshi population lives below the poverty line, often with a purchasing power of less than \$1.90 USD per day. In such extreme conditions, families frequently view children as economic assets rather than individuals requiring protection, leading to children being sent to work in hazardous informal sectors or being forced to beg to supplement household income. Rural landlessness and the lack of income-generating opportunities in the countryside compel families

to migrate toward metropolitan hubs like Dhaka. However, the lack of absorbing capacity in these cities often leaves such families in overcrowded slums or on the pavements, where the transition from "children on the street" to "children of the street" occurs as familial bonds further disintegrate under the pressure of chronic deprivation (Conticini & Hulme, 2006).

Critical Analysis and Limitations of the Existing Literature

The academic discourse surrounding street children in Bangladesh has evolved significantly over the last two decades, moving from simple demographic surveys to more nuanced socio-legal and psychological explorations. However, a deep dive into the foundational texts—such as Nasrin and Rashed (2013), Chowdhury et al. (2017), and Conticini and Hulme (2006)—reveals several systemic limitations. These limitations can be categorized into four primary areas: methodological homogeneity, the "snapshot" bias, lack of intersectional depth, and the failure to address the "digital invisibility" of the modern era.

1. Methodological Homogeneity and the "Researcher Bias" : A primary limitation in the works of Nasrin and Rashed (2013) and Hakim and Kamruzzaman (2015) is the heavy reliance on structured, quantitative surveys administered in high-traffic areas like Kamalapur or Sadarghat. While these studies provide essential baseline data on rag-picking percentages and underweight status, they often suffer from "intercept bias."

By only interviewing children who are visible in major hubs, the literature systematically ignores "hidden" street children—those who reside in abandoned buildings, under-construction sites, or are kept in domestic servitude under street-like conditions. Furthermore, the power dynamic between a formal researcher and a marginalized child often leads to "social desirability bias," where children provide answers they believe will result in immediate aid or favor, rather than reflecting their actual lived realities. Most current literature fails to employ prolonged ethnographic immersion, which is necessary to break through these superficial narratives.

2. The Snapshot Bias: Lack of Longitudinal Data : Almost all available literature on Bangladeshi street children, including the seminal work by Chowdhury et al. (2017), consists of cross-sectional studies. They provide a "snapshot" of a child's life at one specific moment in time—usually during the winter or monsoon when NGOs are most active.

This lack of longitudinal tracking represents a massive gap in understanding the long-term efficacy of NGO interventions. For example, while the APON Foundation reports rescuing over 1,400

children, the literature does not sufficiently track these children five or ten years post-reintegration. We do not know if these "success stories" result in permanent exits from the street or if there is a "revolving door" phenomenon where children return to the street due to the same systemic failures (violence/poverty) that pushed them out initially. Without longitudinal data, the "Sustainable" in Sustainable Development Goals remains a theoretical aspiration rather than a proven outcome.

3. The Economic vs. Social Capital Binary : The debate between Conticini and Hulme (2006) and traditional poverty-centric narratives (like those in Nasrin & Rashed, 2013) has created a somewhat artificial binary. The literature tends to lean either toward "economic push" or "social violence push."

The limitation here is the failure to synthesize these into a Holistic Vulnerability Index. For a child in Dhaka, poverty is not just a lack of money; it is a catalyst for domestic violence. When a father loses his livelihood due to river erosion, the resulting stress often manifests as the "unfair violence" (onedgio bichar) that Conticini describes. Existing literature often analyzes these as separate variables rather than an interconnected feedback loop. By isolating these factors, current research fails to provide the government with a multi-pronged policy tool that addresses both micro-finance (economics) and family counseling (social capital) simultaneously.

4. Over-Emphasis on Health vs. Under-Emphasis on Legal Identity : Studies by Greksa et al. (2007) and Hakim and Kamruzzaman (2015) provide exhaustive data on stunting, BMI, and respiratory infections. While vital, this focus on the "biological body" of the child has come at the expense of analyzing the "legal body."

Until the recent work edited by Rahman et al. (2024), there was a glaring absence of critical legal analysis regarding the Vagrant and Shelterless Persons (Rehabilitation) Act 2011. Most literature describes street children as "victims," but fewer studies critically analyze the state's role as an "aggressor" through punitive legislation. There is a lack of detailed legal critique on how the lack of a birth certificate acts as a "Civil Death," where a child is biologically alive but legally non-existent. The literature needs to move from medicalizing the problem to politicizing the solution.

5. The "Digital Invisibility" Gap : In the decade since Nawaz (2011) and Nasrin and Rashed (2013) published their findings, the world has undergone a digital revolution. Bangladesh 2.0 is defined by smartphone penetration and digital governance. However, the literature on street children remains stuck in a pre-digital framework.

There is virtually no scholarly analysis on how the digital divide creates a new layer of marginalization. As the government moves toward digital birth registration and "Smart Bangladesh" initiatives, street children—who lack devices, internet, and electricity—are being pushed even further into the margins. The proposed BONDHON hub by Ishmam et al. (2017) is a rare exception, but even that study focuses on NGO management rather than the child's own digital literacy or the risks they face (such as online exploitation or the use of social media by traffickers). The "Role of Charities" must now be re-evaluated through the lens of digital inclusion, a topic currently ignored by mainstream literature.

6. Failure to Address Environmental Displacement : While Nawaz (2011) mentions natural disasters as a factor, there is a lack of critical research linking Climate Change to the specific demographics of Dhaka's street children. Bangladesh is one of the world's most climate-vulnerable nations, yet the literature does not sufficiently quantify how many "new" street children are "Climate Refugees."

Current studies treat "urban migration" as a generic event, failing to distinguish between those migrating for better opportunities and those forced out by permanent land loss. This is a critical limitation because the rehabilitation needs of a climate-displaced child (who may have no home to return to) are vastly different from those of a child who ran away from a domestic dispute in a stable home.

7. The Charity vs. Rights-Based Conflict : Much of the literature, especially NGO reports, tends to be self-congratulatory, focusing on "service delivery" (meals provided, blankets distributed). This creates a Service-Provision Bias.

The limitation here is that "Charity" is often a temporary "Band-Aid" that does not challenge the state's duty to provide. Scholarly work needs to critically evaluate whether the proliferation of charities is unintentionally allowing the government to "outsource" its constitutional responsibilities. Does the presence of a "One Taka Meal" reduce the political pressure on the government to fix the broken social safety net? This tension between the "Charity Model" and the "Rights Model" (as defined by the UNCRC) is under-theorized in the Bangladeshi context.

Role of Organizations for Street Children in Bangladesh: A Critical Analysis

Charitable and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) serve as the primary safety net for street children, filling the critical gaps left by inadequate state systems. However, a critical evaluation of

these interventions reveals a complex landscape of successes and systemic failures. While organizations are diligent in providing immediate relief, they often struggle against a tide of "legal invisibility" and "institutional apathy."

1. From Immediate Relief to Rights-Based Advocacy : Leading organizations have moved beyond simple "soup kitchen" models. The Local Education and Economic Development Organization (LEEDO) operates "Schools Under The Sky," providing informal education at railway stations (Hossain, 2025). Similarly, the APON Foundation's "Thikana Shelter Programme" and MASTUL Foundation's "School for Every Child" focus on long-term human development through psychological counseling and vocational training.

A groundbreaking shift occurred in 2024, when Sports for Hope and Independence (SHI) and ELCOP moved from service provision to legal advocacy. Recognizing that the lack of birth registration was the ultimate barrier to the SDGs, SHI filed a High Court writ petition. This led to a landmark judicial directive ordering the government to ensure birth certificates for all street children, regardless of their parental status (Rahman et al., 2024; High Court of Bangladesh, 2024). This represents a pivot from "charity" to "rights-based" action, forcing the state to recognize the child as a legal entity.

2. The Failure of Coverage and Coordination : Despite these efforts, the reach of NGOs remains alarmingly limited. Recent data from Caritas Bangladesh (2024) reveals that approximately 94% of street children remain excluded from the government's social safety net, and only 12% are covered by NGO programs (Asia News Network, 2024; YPSA, 2022). The primary failure of the "Charity Model" is its fragmentation. There is a lack of a unified national database, leading to "intercept overlap" where children at major hubs like Kamalapur receive redundant services from multiple NGOs, while those in smaller slums or peripheral areas are completely neglected. The proposed BONDHON Hub (Ishmam et al., 2017) aims to solve this through technological integration, but its implementation has been slow due to resource constraints among small-scale NGOs (Ishmam et al., 2017).

3. The "Apathy" of the Street: Why Shelters Often Fail : A major limitation highlighted in recent psychological studies is the "apathy" or resistance children feel toward formal rehabilitation. Studies from SciRP (2024) show that many children develop a high level of adaptability to street life, viewing the freedom of the street as preferable to the "bullying and abusive environment" found in some poorly managed or overcrowded state-run shelters.

During the winter of 2025–2026, reporters observed that even as temperatures dropped, many children shunned government-run tents at Kamalapur, citing a lack of trust in authorities and fear of arbitrary detention (Dhaka Tribune, 2026). This highlights a critical failure: organizations often provide the *physical* infrastructure (shelter/food) but fail to address the *mental trauma* and PTSD that make children distrustful of any four-walled institution (Dhaka Tribune, 2025).

Challenges to Sustainable Development for Street Children in Bangladesh

Sustainable development for street children is hindered by a multitude of systemic and environmental barriers that charities alone cannot dismantle.

- **The Identity Crisis:** 58% of street children lack birth certificates, and 71% do not even know their parents' NID numbers (Caritas Bangladesh, 2024). Without this "passport to society," they are ineligible for formal schooling, healthcare, or legal employment, effectively trapping them in a state of civil death.
- **The Mental Health Gap:** While NGOs focus on food and clothing, mental health remains "the untold crisis." 82.5% of Dhaka's street children suffer from severe mental trauma, yet few programs provide specialized psychotherapeutic support (Dhaka Tribune, 2025).
- **Criminalization of Poverty:** Under the Vagrant and Shelterless Persons Act 2011, children are often treated as "nuisances." 80% of children report being harassed or physically abused by law enforcement (ELCOP, 2024). This criminalization pushes children deeper into the underworld, where they are recruited by gangs for "Dandi" distribution or snatching.
- **Environmental Displacement:** Bangladesh's vulnerability to climate change ensures a constant influx of "new" street children. Floods and river erosion displace families from rural areas; when they arrive in Dhaka, the lack of urban safety nets forces the youngest members onto the streets to survive (Action for Social Development, 2024).

Sustainable development for street children is hindered by a multitude of systemic and environmental barriers. Poverty and economic inequality remain foundational challenges, as families in extreme poverty often prioritize immediate income over long-term education, forcing children into exploitative labor. Educational exclusion is rampant, with nearly 36% of street children never enrolling in school due to high costs, rigid schedules, and the lack of a stable home environment. This exclusion is further exacerbated by the lack of birth registration; without a birth certificate, children are legally "invisible" and ineligible for formal schooling, healthcare, and passports for international participation.

Furthermore, health and nutritional deficiencies, characterized by chronic stunting and high morbidity rates, compromise their development. Social exclusion and stigma are pervasive, as the general public and law enforcement often view street children as "nuisances" or "delinquents," leading to harassment and arbitrary detention under laws such as the Vagrant and Shelterless Persons (Rehabilitation) Act 2011. Weak institutional support and a lack of coordination between government agencies and NGOs lead to fragmented services that fail to address the root causes of street migration. Furthermore, these children are highly susceptible to environmental vulnerabilities, being the first to be displaced by natural disasters like floods, which destroy their makeshift shelters and disrupt their livelihoods.

Qualitative research indicates that the breakdown of social capital within the household is a critical determinant of street migration. A staggering 85% of street children originate from households with very low social capital, characterized by a lack of emotional support and trust (Conticini & Hulme, 2006). The decision to leave home is frequently a rational choice to escape "unfair violence" or *onedgio bichar*, which children distinguish from legitimate parental discipline. While physical punishment is socially tolerated in many contexts, unpredictable and unjust abuse—including physical torture and sexual violence—causes a total collapse of the child-adult relationship. For these children, the street represents a space of "freedom" and an adaptive response to seek the security and independence they were denied at home.

Recommendations for Addressing the Challenges

To address these challenges effectively, Bangladesh must adopt a comprehensive, multi-dimensional strategy that prioritizes the rights and welfare of street children. A fundamental recommendation is the implementation of universal birth registration through mass campaigns to ensure every child has a legal identity and access to state services. The education system must be reformed to include flexible schooling models, such as evening classes and mobile classrooms, that accommodate the working schedules of children who labor for survival. Charitable organizations and the government should collaborate to establish secure, child-friendly shelters and drop-in centers that provide holistic support, including nutrition, healthcare, and psychosocial counseling.

Law enforcement agencies require specialized training to transition from punitive to supportive interactions with street children, emphasizing de-escalation and trauma-informed care.

Furthermore, the juvenile justice system should be reformed by establishing separate children's courts in every district to prioritize rehabilitation and family reunification over punishment. Economic empowerment programs for families, such as vocational training and microfinance, are essential to address the root causes of street migration and prevent children from returning to the streets. Finally, a national action plan must be developed to harmonize the efforts of all stakeholders, ensuring that street children are integrated into the nation's mainstream development agenda.

Child migration to the street is like a tree whose roots have been loosened by a flood and whose soil has been depleted of nutrients. While the tree might still stand for a while, it is the force of a violent storm in the form of domestic abuse that finally topples it. Once uprooted, the tree is carried by the current of urbanization toward a vast, impersonal ocean of the street, where it can only survive by clinging to other pieces of driftwood rather than finding its way back to the stable ground it once knew. Think of street children as a collection of seeds that have fallen into the cracks of a concrete urban pavement. While most of society walks over them without noticing, charitable organizations act as diligent gardeners who bring small drops of water and soil to help these seeds survive in a harsh environment. However, for these seeds to grow into strong trees that contribute to the forest of the nation, the government must break up the concrete pavement through inclusive laws and documentation, allowing the roots to find the deep, nourishing soil of education and legal protection.

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