

# Sexual Harassment and Health Consequences A Study on Street Girls in Dhaka

**G. M. Arifuzzaman\***

**Iqramun Nahar\*\***

## **Abstract**

The objective of the paper is to find out the health consequences of street girls in Dhaka city relating to sexual harassment. Street girls' life is risky and unsafe because of living in an open place, slum, udyan etc. They have no protection from offenses. In feminist methodological concern, women's issues are being analyzed deeply to find out facts, causes, and recommendation regarding the problem. This paper focused on labeling theory and complexity theory to reflect the concern of child abuse, child harassments etc connected to health or other consequences of society. The findings of the paper show that street girl child is victimized of sexual harassments by political persons, street boys, and street men, drug-addicts, some Police and Ansar members, among others. They suffer from unwanted pregnancy, and various sexually transmitted diseases such as gonorrhea, syphilis and so on, and considered as a risk group of HIV/AIDS victims. These sexual harassments and health consequences make them a vulnerable group in the society. This paper focuses on some strategies to remove these problems affecting the street girls and emphasizes on their protection from these offenses.

**Key words:** Experience, Health Consequences, Labeling, Sexual Harassments, Street Girls

## **Introduction**

Bangladesh is over-populated in terms of its area. Many people here live in open places streets, udyans, fields, slum areas and riverside or on embankments etc as they have no permanent residence.

Every year, many people come to Dhaka city from all around the country to find livelihood and better life. Many of them are forced to live in streets. According to ICCDRB (2009), "People migrate to the street mainly because of economic poverty and the street population in Dhaka city is known to face extortion, erratic unemployment, and exposure to violence and sexual harassments." Lack of money or income to rent a house is one of the main

---

\* G.M.Arifuzzaman, Research Associate, Centre for Genocide Studies, University of Dhaka & B.S.S; M.S.S, Department of Women & Gender Studies, University of Dhaka. Email: gmarif1990@gmail.com

\*\* Iqramun Nahar, B.S.S; M.S.S, Department of Women & Gender Studies, University of Dhaka. E-mail: happyiqra@gmail.com

reasons for women to live in the street. The street women are subject to unwanted physical contact, unwanted sexual advance, rude gesture, rape etc. (ICCDRB, 2009). Now, Dhaka is considered as one of the riskiest cities for the street people. The unwanted pregnancy or early pregnancy is common among the street women. At present, it is very difficult to find out the real number of street children in Bangladesh. In 2005, UNICEF in collaboration with Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS) gave an estimation of above 6,70,000 street children in Bangladesh, 36 percent of which living in Dhaka (Estimation of the Size of Street Children and their Projection for Major Urban Areas of Bangladesh, 2005). Among them, the street girl children are the most marginalized and exploited group. They have no power to make decision about their body. In Dhaka city, street girl children are seen in many open places such as udyans, streets, railway stations, riversides, terminals, slums, university areas etc. Their life is hard as well as unsafe having no strong protection from sexual abuse, drugs, crimes, prostitution etc. Sexual harassment is a common phenomenon affecting street girl child in Dhaka city. This creates a burden to their life, especially on their health. The purpose of the paper is to find out the causes of sexual harassment of street girl children and raise mass awareness that sexual harassment against street girls is illegal and a severe crime against society. This paper is significant for the health of street girl children as a special issue in human rights. The research on sexual harassment of street girl children also focuses on its impact on their health which is essential for the progress of Bangladesh through ensuring their safety. This research is divided into two phases. In the first phase, the experience and perception of street girl children and the causes of sexual harassment have been described. The second phase focuses on the health consequences of sexual harassments on the street girl children. This paper may help with developing a plan or policy to address the health-related problems of street girls in Dhaka city as well as in Bangladesh.

### **Review of Relevant Literatures**

The situation of street girls is an important factor in understanding the conception of the overall child rights scenario of Bangladesh. And it is particularly important to address the issue of sexual harassment of street girl children to get the real picture of the society. But not many works have been done in this respect. Most of the work involved the street women only. However, some of those works have provided useful insights while doing this research. Nasir, M & Fakhrul, H, S. (2007), in their article, "An Analysis of Problems Faced by the Street Children at Lahore", focused on vulnerabilities of street children in terms of harassment, residence problem, physical torture, embarrassing behavior and sexual abuse. They showed most of the victims were living in open places such as a shrine, parks, graveyard and waiting rooms at bus-stops except few who lived in rented room. Most of those children living in the street usually face various kinds of unwelcome situation, which pose a great risk for relatively grown up girl children. For economic reasons or family pressure they are forced to take part in activities that expose them to rape, and other forms of assaults etc. And the incidents of their physical or psychological abuses have been increasing every year in Lahore.

Asha, P. and Sandeep, K. (2012), in their article, "The Problem of Child Sexual Abuse in India" defines "Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) as a type of physical or psychological violation of a child with sexual objective, usually by a person who is in a position of trust or power in relation to the child". They focused on different kinds of child abuse such as physical, sexual and emotional as well as negligence to female child. The article suggests street children experience more physical and psychological trauma than others, given the amplified demand for younger child prostitutes, sex tourism etc, exposing them more to HIV/AIDS or other sexually transmitted diseases.

Kevin, L. (2003) in his article, "Child sexual abuse in sub-Saharan Africa", reasoned rapid social change, AIDS/HIV avoidance strategies and the patriarchal nature of society for most sexual abuses of children in Africa. In many of these cases, family members, relatives, neighbors and other known person are involved. These incidents are more in the areas of high prevalence of HIV/AIDS.

In the Shona of Zimbabwe, Armstrong, A. (1998) investigated 36 cases of child sexual abuse for his report "Consent and compensation: The sexual abuse of girls in Zimbabwe," in which he pointed at the family's role behind most occurrences of rape or other forms of sexual abuse as families force most victims not to speak out fearing social stigma. UNHCR and Save the Children-UK (2002) in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone published a report which says parentless children are more prone to sexual abuses in those settings. Also many men believe that having sex with a virgin would immune man from disease like AIDS.

## Methodology

This research uses feminist methodology using both quantitative and qualitative data. It is based on the experience and perception of street girl children. Quantitative research is important to know the total amount of street people and what the ratio between boys and girls are and how much street girl experience specific problems. Qualitative research is important to get hold of the accounts of street girl children about sexual harassment. A formal questionnaire survey has been conducted for the understanding of the issue. Most of the respondent of this research are street girl children and usually, they have no formal education. This paper also included case studies to exemplify the issue. The study has been conducted from August 2015- July 2016. A number of 20 respondents were interviewed. The interviews were conducted with an open-ended semi-structured questionnaire and checklist. This paper looks at both primary and secondary sources of data. Primary data have been collected from the selected population with purposive sampling. Books, Journals, Published and unpublished research reports, record or other document, websites through internet browsing have been used as secondary data sources. The study was conducted in Shurawardy Udyan area and Dhaka University area. This areas were selected for two reasons- firstly, the availability of street girl children and secondly, easy accessibility. Suhrawardy Udyan and Dhaka University are located under Shahbag police station in Dhaka. For ethical bindings, the research was carried out with utmost sensibility, maintaining privacy of respondents involved. So, real names of the respondent were not mentioned.

## Objectives

The main objective of this paper is to explore the health consequences sexual harassment on the of street girl children in Dhaka. Other objectives include:

- To analyze the reason behind girl children living in the streets
- To identify sexual harassments of them
- To identify the perpetrators
- To identify health consequences
- To make recommendations to eliminate the problems.

## Theoretical Tools

The research studies health consequence of sexual harassments of street girl children.

**Labeling theory** has emphasized on the removing of the stigma through getting help with family and community for protecting all children with public welfare activities. In favor of a broader humane conception of childhood, it should abandon the value laden catalogue of "The battered child syndrome", "Child abuse" and "Child negligence". For it should increase the sensitivity, timelines of medical services and practicing social work. It focused on increasing public awareness against the occurrence of child harassment and domestic violence. It also emphasis on the conventional wisdom relating to child abuse in minority groups, focusing involvement of individual and social activities in the time of occurrence.

**Complexity theory** has focused on the potential to understand new understanding about child abuse, child protection and child welfare being able to effective response in dealing with a range of human service practitioner concerns. Complexity theory offers useful concepts with which to analyze and understand complex adaptive systems. Byrne (1998) provides a definition of a complex adaptive system as being 'the domain between linearly determined order and indeterminate chaos' (1998:1) commenting on how this resonated with him as a social scientist interested in complex grouping that from society.

## Operational Definitions

**Street Girl Children:** According to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights (1994), "Street children are any girl or boy whom the street has become his or her habitual abode and/or source of livelihood and who is adequately protected, supervised or directed by responsible adults. They are either child on the street of children of the street"

**Sexual Harassment:** The United Nations General Recommendation 19 to "the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)" defines sexual harassment as, "Such unwelcome sexually determined behavior as physical contact and advances, sexually colored remarks, showing pornography and sexual demands, whether by words or actions. Such conduct can be humiliating and may constitute a health and safety problem; it is discriminatory when the woman has reasonable ground to believe that her objection would disadvantage her in connection with her employment, including recruitment or promotion, or when it creates a hostile working environment."

### Findings of the Paper

The respondents who were interviewed were randomly selected.

**Living Standard of Street Girls:** Street families use girl children in activities like begging, drug peddling, sex work, day labor etc to make an earning for their living. Almost all respondents living in Suhrawardy Udyan and Dhaka University area acknowledge such involvements of girl children.

**Educational Status:** Poverty bar them from education. Most of them have no formal education. We saw some voluntary organizations like Brikkho Maya, Sishu Odhikar Secchasebi Songgathon etc giving them informal education. Now, many of the respondents know how to read and write.

**Street Girls and the Studied Area:** The survey was conducted in Dhaka University and Suhrawardy Uddan areas. The selected area for conducting research where usually street girl children live were Shikha Chirontoni, Ansar camp area, Kali Mondir area, Chobir hat, Shaheed Minar, and TSC. There were other places too but time limitation was a major factor for selecting these areas. We estimated at least 250 street children live in these places. Among them, 50% are girl children (Source: from Respondents, 2015). 20 street girl children were interviewed while conducting the research.

**Sexual Harassments:** Street girl children are addressed with abusive languages. The respondents said they suffered sexual harassments in the forms of unwanted physical contact, touching, leering, a rude gesture, slap, bad tone, pushing forcibly for bodily contact etc while walking in the street, public places and especially at night or in the dark places.

#### Case Study 1

Banu (13), near Ansar camp of Suhrawardy Uddan, narrated about the sexual harassments, *"Police, street boys and political leaders are problematic for the street girl children. They often harass street girl child in the name of clearing the footpaths and public places free for common people. Police and political leaders have forced them for illegal contact with them. One day a policeman came to me at night and asked me for sex, but I didn't agree. As a result, he threatened and beat me. We have to tolerate theses illegal offers, rude gesture, beating etc. It harms very much the body and mind."*

Most of the respondents (aged 8-15) said they experienced such incidents.

#### Case study 2

Nazma (11), besides Chobir hat at Suhrawardy Uddan, explained how the sexual harassments are perpetrated. She explained, *"Very often we are harassed by the police, political person, street boys, drug-addicts, and rickshaw pullers and sometimes, by some students. They usually disturb us. Most of them demand sex but don't pay properly. One day, I was sleeping; a political leader came and told me to sleep with him. I didn't agree, he beat me and forced me to do sex. I had to sufferer from fever and pain in the whole body for five days."*

Many of the respondents alleged that men living in the streets such as rickshaw pullers, businessmen, politicals, police, Ansar and some floating people sexually harass them. Sometimes they force them to sexually engage with them. As a result, they get physically and psychologically traumatised.

**Sexual Harassments and Health consequences:** The study found health consequences like headache and pain in different parts of the body particularly in sexual organs from forced sexual activities. Sometimes they fall completely ill that they can't move. Sometimes they get sleeplessness that hampers their usual life. Also they get skin diseases from the other person's body. Eating disorders (weight loss or gain), etc are some of the consequences that the girl children suffer from too. STDs like gonorrhea, syphilis, unwanted pregnancy, stomach problem, malnutrition are the most prevalent consequences.. Sometimes, these girl children get injured being assaulted by men. Lack of proper treatment lingers these sufferings.

#### Case study 3

Nasima (14), living beside T.S.C (University of Dhaka), shared the experiences of her own life, she narrates, *"I have suffered from pain in my body for few days. A leader came to me for sex but I didn't agree. He beat me seriously. I bled. I couldn't sleep at night and had a headache, and pain in sexual organs. I could not go to doctor as I don't have money."*

**Street girl children's recommendations for removing the health problems:** Many respondents urged for government interventions to deal with the sexual harassments and health impacts they suffer.

#### Case study 4

Runa (13), lives at Shaheed Minar, said poverty and insecurity causes their vulnerability. *Many powerful people forced us to involve activities we are unwilling to do. We have no security and futures.*

Citing poverty as the main reason behind their situation respondents called for opportunities for their parents, education for themselves. They also emphasised on shelters and sanitary facilities and above all free treatment to overcome the sufferings.

#### Analysis of the findings

Sexual harassment is a common phenomenon affecting street girl children's health and life. The patriarchal and gendered society is not sensitized by their vulnerabilities.. Ensuring right of the children is crucial for the socio-economic development of the country. Street girls are labeled with various stigma. From the labeling theoretical perspective, street children are subject to negligence and abuse. In this patriarchal society, male members dominate over females. Even people of the marginal community try to sexually harass the street girls. Usually, they have no independence or right to voice their rights or protest sexual violence against them. This research found various forms of their deprivation such as

poverty, securities, lack of education etc responsible for their situation. Street girl children not only suffer sexual harassments but also various kinds of physical assaults and torture by men. Unwanted pregnancy, eating disorder, malnutrition, back pain, headache, organic pain, etc epidemic and skin diseases; bleeding, gonorrhea, syphilis are among the other consequences of sexual harassments they face. This is not a threat to them only but to human rights also. Child rape can be defined as forced sexual contact with street girls. Many accuses these girls of the antisocial and criminal activities, but it is important to understand their position and access in the society to understand their vulnerabilities and obligations. They are always considered as a sexual object. However a change in mindset is difficult in the patriarchal society.

This study reveals the ordeal of the street girl children, but the action against it is always difficult. The vulnerabilities of these children are worsened by the negligence within the family. Sometimes the male members of the family the girl belong are addicted to drugs. Also there is not much awareness regarding the menstrual health of the girls among the community. Lack of gender awareness and gender sensitivity are highly responsible for the sufferings of the street girls. This suffering is also connected with violation of human rights, basically the fundamental rights of street girls.

### **Concluding Remarks**

In the context of Bangladesh, sexual harassments of street girls is a matter of grave concern. They face multiple deprivation and negligence being the street girl. Firstly, children are the future of a nation. The state, society and family have to ensure their fundamental and basic rights. Street girls are not getting enough support from the state or even family. It is very essential to address the issue of sexual harassment of the street girls and take initiatives to mainstream them.

### **Recommendations**

Sexual harassments are a major threat to the street girls and their fundamental rights. To solve the problem, some recommendations are made as follows -

- The first and foremost strategy is to raise consciousness about the street child rights
- Rehabilitate street children with a safe living place and give them different facilities such as training, food protection etc
- State should take proper policy and law for removing the problems of street girls through the gender sensitivity lens.
- Street girl child should get the children's rights as well as citizen's rights and consider them as a human being media both electronic and print media should focus on child rights properly.
- Lessons on child rights should be included in the curriculum
- Their access to free medical and psychological treatment should be ensured

## References

- ARISE. (2005). Estimation of the Size of Street Children and their Projection for Major Urban Areas of Bangladesh commissioned to BIDS and Protection of Children Living on the Streets. UNICEF Bangladesh. Bangladesh: Dhaka
- Armstrong, A. (1998). Consent and Compensation: The Sexual Abuse of Girls in Zimbabwe. In W. Ncube (Ed.), *Law, Culture, Tradition and Children's Rights in Eastern and Southern Africa*. Aldershot: Ashgate Dartmouth. 129-149
- Asha, P., & Sandcep, K. (2012). The Problem of Child Sexual Abuse in India. *J Indian Acad Forensic Med*. Vol. 35, No. 2.
- Byrne, D. (1998). *Complexity and the Social Sciences*. London : Rutledge.
- Carolyn, M & Eli, H, N. (1982), " Prevention of Child Abuse: Theory, Myth, Practice. *Journal of Preventive Psychiatry*. Mary Ann Liberty, Inc. New York: New Rochelle. Volume 1, P 443-450
- Erlanger, II., S. (1974). Social Class Differences in Parents' Use of Physical Punishment. In Steinmetz, S., K., & Straus, M., A. (Ed.). *In Violence the Family*. New York: Dodd, Mead.
- Foundation for Research on Educational Planning and Development (FREPD). (2011). A Baseline Survey of Street Children in Bangladesh. The Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics. Bangladesh: Dhaka
- Kevin, L. (2003). Child sexual abuse in sub-Saharan Africa. Department of Social Sciences, Dublin Institute of Technology. Ireland: Dublin.
- Nasir, M. & Fakhrul, H., S. (2007). An Analysis of Problems Faced by the Street Children at Lahore. *International Journal of Asian Social Science Journal*. Volume 2 & 9, P. 1498-1507
- Street Children – Bangladesh.(2009). Children in Bangladesh. Street Children-Bangladesh. Bangladesh: Dhaka.
- United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). (1992). Committee on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women, General Recommendation 19. Switzerland: Geneva. Para18.
- United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. (1994). On the protection and promotion of the rights of children working and/or living on the street. Switzerland: Geneva
- UNHCR & SC-UK. (2002). The experience of street children in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone based on initial findings and recommendations. Switzerland: Geneva.



