



The gangs of Bangladesh: Exploring organized crime, street gangs and 'illicit child labourers' in Dhaka

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Abstract

This article presents a study of street children's involvement in organized crime in Bangladesh. It is based on an empirical case study conducted in Dhaka and draws on interviews with 22 street children, 80 interviews with criminal justice practitioners, NGO workers and community members and over three years of participant observation of the Bangladeshi criminal justice system and wider society. The article explains how street children work for 'mastaans', Bangladeshi organized crime bosses. These children are hired to carry weapons, sell drugs, collect extortion money, commit political violence and conduct contract killings. This article argues that these children are neither victims nor offenders; they are instead 'illicit labourers', doing what they can to survive on the streets.

Keywords

Bangladesh, child labour, gangs, organized crime, street children

Introduction

Criminologists argue that there are certain conditions that predispose a locality, whether it be a neighbourhood, city or country, to organized crime and gangs (Hagedorn, 2008). Bangladesh suffers from many of these conditions, notably a fragile state (Riaz, 2005), endemic poverty and pervasive slums (Lewis, 2012). The stability of the country is precarious; it is vulnerable to climate change and disasters, both natural and man-made (Van Schendel, 2009). So what does this mean for the involvement of street children in organized crime?

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There have been hardly any studies conducted in Bangladesh which explore gangs or organized crime. The reasons for this are unclear but the fact remains that while scholars have long debated gangs in the USA, and increasingly in other countries, this research offers the first robust empirical study of the gangs of Bangladesh. Because so little is known about organized crime in Bangladesh, there is no way to assess how these groups operate, the hierarchies that exist among them or the role children play in these criminal businesses. This article fills these lacunae.

During an extensive review of the literature, I discovered that children who become involved in armed conflict or criminal activity are commonly described as gang members, child soldiers or victims of exploitation. However, none of these terms sufficiently explain what happens to children in Dhaka. This article proposes an alternative view: street children, who operate at the bottom echelon of Bangladesh's organized crime groups, are 'illicit labourers'; that is, unskilled or semi-skilled workers in criminal enterprises. This article will consider why this proposition better explains the work children do and why they do it.

The first section of this article considers the relevant literature to this discussion of children's involvement in organized crime. The second section deliberates the methods used in this study. The third section discusses the research findings, including the types of crimes that street children are hired to commit and the backgrounds of these children's lives. The conclusion draws together the main arguments within this article and considers the implications of this research for policy, practice and future research.

Organized crime and gangs

Scholars have long debated the organization of crime. Mary McIntosh (1975: 7) was one of the first to do so in 1975 when she argued that 'crime is a collective activity' and that it is important to consider how criminals organize themselves and the crimes that they commit. But what makes the organization of crime so significant for this article? First, understanding criminal organizations in Bangladesh helps us to recognize how criminal groups operate. Second, it enables an understanding of the division of labour within these groups (McIntosh, 1975: 7). Lastly, it allows the development of a framework through which to understand how crime groups are managed, how gang members are ordered and how children are exploited.

The question of what constitutes organized crime has been highly contested over the years, and the violence these groups commit has dominated political and social rhetoric in many countries (Levi, 2012). Many academics argue that street-based gangs operate as the lower echelons of organized crime groups (Levitt and Venkatesh, 2000). In 2006, Hallsworth and Young proposed that group offending occurs in three distinctive clusters: peer groups; gangs; and organized crime. They argued that gangs often begin as peer groups but that some gangs become organized crime groups. This view is supported empirically in several studies in the United Kingdom (Densley, 2012; Harris et al., 2012), in Indonesia (Alcano, 2014) and South America (Rodgers and Baird, 2015).

While there is a general consensus that many gangs begin as peer groups involved in recreation few studies explore the specific involvement of street children in gangs or organized crime. However, some studies do reference 'gang-like' behaviour of street

children and the subcultures they form and develop (i.e. Awad, 2002). In Indonesia, Beazley (2003) argues that street children create their own subculture and develop their own norms, values and ways of surviving. In Cape Town a similar picture emerged from Hansson's (2003) study, which found that 'stroller' bands have distinct hierarchies and territories and a subculture that helps children survive on the streets. Heinonen (2011) argues that gangs in Ethiopia do not necessarily provide their members with consistent support, but children join and leave groups frequently. She argues that 'they are not a counter-culture or subculture but a distorted microcosm of Ethiopian society' (2011: 150).

Street children and child labour

Hundreds of thousands (possibly millions) of children live on the streets in Bangladesh (AUSAID, 2005) and according to the Bangladesh Police Force (2008) the numbers of street-involved children are set to rise to over 1.6 million by 2024. However, it is necessary to remain cautious. The term 'street child' is problematic for many reasons; children who live on the streets have different characteristics, backgrounds and personalities, their lives change and they grow up (Aptekar, 1988). Furthermore, some street children move from place to place while others remain in one location (Ennew and Swart-Kruger, 2003). To view street children as a homogenous group means that the unique needs they have may be missed and the realities of their lives misunderstood (Ennew and Swart-Kruger, 2003).¹

Considering the connections that children have on and with the streets is a useful way to conceptualize their lives and the problems they face (Thomas de Benitez, 2011). Thus this article uses the term 'street child' to describe young people with a range of 'street connections' (ibid.). The child participants of this study did live on the streets, in slums or in make-shift accommodation. However, they also spent a great deal of time 'off' the streets and at an organization. I thus propose that if the term street child is to be used, as it is in this article, then it must be done with a consideration of the nature of life on the streets, and the connections that children make while living there.

Work is a reality for millions of Bangladeshi children, particularly those who live on the streets (Ruwanpura and Roncolato, 2006). According to UNICEF (2010: 5) child labour includes: 'Work that exceeds a minimum number of hours, depending on the age of the child and on the type of work.' A number of children also work in jobs that exploit them. The International Labour Organization (ILO, 1999: 1) and The Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention 1999 (No. 182) define exploitative child labour as:

1. All forms of slavery/sale or trafficking of children, debt bondage and serfdom, forced or compulsory labour including forced or compulsory recruitment for use in armed conflict.
2. The use, procuring or offering a child for prostitution.
3. The use, planning or offering of a child for illicit activities, in particular for the production and trafficking of drugs defined in the relevant international treaties.
4. Work, which by its nature or the circumstances in which it is carried out, is likely to harm the health, safety or morals of children.²

However, while the ILO definition does mention the involvement of children in armed conflict it includes no reference to children who are hired to conduct specific activities of organized crime groups; something this article will argue is a serious omission.

A review of the literature reveals several things: first, violence is a predominant feature in the lives of street children (Thomas de Benitez, 2007). Second, there is a gap between knowledge of gangs, which comes from criminology, and street children discourse, which usually comes from development studies or anthropology. Lastly, despite the extent of available literature, more knowledge is needed. There is very little published about street children's views on gangs or organized crime, particularly in Bangladesh.

Data and methods

The fieldwork for this case study consisted of several components, broadly split into the following three phases.

Phase 1: Participant observation

I conducted a total of three years' worth of participant observation, most of which occurred while I worked for an international development organization in Dhaka which specializes in prison and police reform. This observation was essential to understanding the social, political, economic and cultural factors that provide the context to this study.

Phase 2: Interviews with adult practitioners

I carried out a total of 80 interviews (38 semi-structured and 42 unstructured) and two focus groups, the first with six participants and the second with five. The participants included police officers, senior prison officers, military security officers, paralegals, NGO workers, police and prison reform workers, journalists, diplomats and community members.

Phase 3: An embedded case study of street children and the organization that supports them

There were 22 children involved in this case study. There were 10 girls and 12 boys and their ages ranged from eight to 15. All were associated with an organization that provides holistic support to children that live on the streets. The organization delivers education and a variety of other services supporting the children's development, from food and clothing to art, social skills and basic counselling. All 22 children reside at the centre from Sunday to Thursday,³ returning home to the streets at the weekend. This system provides consistency and safety for the children, saves their parents (or guardians) precious money in accommodation and food costs and helps the organization to manage health and behavioural problems.

Consent was gained from all of the children. They were given a consent form and an information sheet. They spoke little English, so both forms were translated into Bengali. The children were not paid and were very keen to share their views on this subject.

Participant observation was carried out over 12 months, during which time I visited the organization on a weekly basis (January 2012 to January 2013). I carried out observation of the children, their relationships with one another and the organization. I also held parties and played games to get to know the children and to build trust and rapport between us.

Five workshops were then conducted with all 22 children. They were designed to be interactive, fun and young person-led and were used as a precursor to the formal interviews. I then carried out eight semi-structured group interviews with the children which focused specifically on gangs and organized crime. Group interviews were favoured over individual interviews to encourage children to discuss issues, gain confidence and challenge one another's opinions (Lewis, 1992). However, certain issues need to be overcome in group interviews, such as ensuring that each child has the time and space to express his or her own views and does not align themselves with others in the group (Lewis, 1992). I mitigated these issues by asking each child to answer a question and then asked them to discuss, as a group any differences in opinion. The small numbers in the interviews helped me to tackle these issues and I made sure that every participant had the chance to express their views.

Organized crime, violence and criminality were key themes discussed within the interviews. However, the questions were focused on explaining types of behaviour as opposed to revealing details of offences. I did not, for example, ask the children to disclose specifically their association with a *mastaan* group. I asked participants not to name any associates or people who may have been involved in previous offending or reveal any details of the offending of others. This resulted in discussions which focused on the children's perceptions of gangs and organized crime rather than on the children's individual stories and lives.

Research findings

The study considered the labels that Bangladeshis use to describe organized criminals, the '*mastaans*' and hierarchies that exist among these groups. I considered Hallsworth and Young's (2006) hierarchy of organized crime but propose a modified pyramid: organized crime in Dhaka operates via a hierarchy consisting of three main echelons. The first echelon is *mastaans*, Bangladesh's organized crime bosses. The second echelon is gangs who exist on the streets. The third level is street children, the illicit workers of these groups, who are involved in some of the worst forms of child labour.

The data demonstrated that *mastaan* groups operate criminal businesses with clearly defined roles, responsibilities and ways to earn and divide profits. Groups are headed by a *mastaan* who is supported by a right-hand man or assistant who controls the lower echelons of the crime group. Furthermore, *mastaans* operate in every slum in Dhaka; they control these poor areas and the people who live among them by extorting money, and in return providing slum-dwellers with access to basic services. *Mastaans* conduct their activities in collusion with politicians, who provide them with immunity. *Mastaans* give politicians a share of the extortion money and provide 'political muscle', threats, violence and intimidation on the streets to secure votes and muster political support. *Mastaans* use gangs to control areas of the city and vulnerable children operate the lowest

echelon of these groups. These children are hired to conduct political violence, 'grab' land, carry weapons, sell drugs, collect extortion money and commit murder.

Street children and vulnerability

The fieldwork data illustrated two main factors, both of which are essential in understanding why street children become the illicit labourers of mastaan groups: the children's vulnerability and their need to earn money to survive. The children in this study were particularly vulnerable and thus representative of many street children in Dhaka. Before their engagement with the centre most of the children lived in make-shift accommodation in slums or on the streets (and still return to these places at the weekend). In 2012 a report was produced by an American university⁴ as part of a review into the effectiveness of the organization. The 2012 report stated that before engaging with the organization the children rarely had adequate clothes and often missed meals. All of the children worked on the streets. They had never attended school and their families relied on their income to survive. The children's jobs included: recycling; street-selling; domestic service; and begging (Organization Report, 2012). Many of the children suffered from health problems, including skin disease, injuries resulting from traffic accidents, respiratory infections and hepatitis (Organization Report, 2012). Drug use and domestic violence were prevalent among their families and nearly half the young people reported regular physical abuse by a sibling, parent or guardian (Organization Report, 2012). The children also reported many instances of police brutality both in the Organization Report and this study. Sexual abuse was also described to be prevalent on the streets (Organization Report, 2012).

Peer groups

Street children often join or form groups with other street children because of the risks and vulnerability they face on the streets (Conticini, 2005). These groups offer solidarity and companionship and are necessary for survival. However, many of these children quickly become involved in criminality. Differentiating between groups that were involved in crime and those that were not proved difficult for the child interviewees, but they did feel that it was unlikely that crime is carried out alone.

In this instance, comparisons can be made with the 'adolescent peer groups' (Hallsworth and Young, 2006) discussed earlier; these children are adolescents, they have 'peers', they operate in groups and some are involved in low level offending. Analysis of the fieldwork data suggests that the types of crime that small groups of street children commit include pickpocketing and shoplifting. Young street children carry out robberies on pedestrians or on people riding in rickshaws. Children also fight with other children, either within their own group or with children from neighbouring areas. They take and sell drugs, such as *phensidyl*, an illegal painkiller, and locally made alcohol. These children have no direct relationship with gangs or mastaans.

Child labour

Street children also carry out crime because they are hired by mastaans and gang members to do so. They have roles, responsibilities and a boss. They are exploited and

are a commodity; they work for mastaans and are engaged in some of the worst forms of child labour. There are two main components necessary in order to understand street children's involvement in mastaan groups. First, the interviewees conceptualized involvement in crime groups as work for street children rather than crime. Second, mastaan groups have clearly defined structures, hierarchies, bosses and mechanisms for sharing profit. This means that the children who work for them believe themselves to be engaged in a business.

Perceptions of work. The interviewees were well informed about the practice of hiring children to commit crime; they described it as a normal and intrinsic part of Bangladeshi society. Children can be hired to work, which also means that criminals can hire children to carry out crime or violence for them. A community member explained further:

They are poor, this is their job. As they get older they look to see who is making the money and they see gang members earning money by selling drugs and because they need the money too, they will join. The street boys are very poor and hungry, they need to get money. They see selling drugs as their job.⁵

This shows that poverty draws young people in to crime and how crime is perceived. A strong theme to emerge from this study was that the participants conceptualized involvement with mastaan groups as work and made no mention of the fact that the work that street children are hired to do involves committing crime. The following quotation, from a young person explains how it is possible to rent a child to conduct a contract killing:

You can rent someone to kill someone else for you. You can hire a 10-year-old to kill someone for you! But it goes up, you can hire older children too. The age is not fixed, it's more dependent on how much you can pay them. But it is possible to just rent someone to kill, actually, it's really easy.⁶

Hiring someone to commit crime is relatively simple, but having money determines how easy this process is. Furthermore, the children involved in this study normalized this behaviour and explained that hiring children to conduct murder is part of life on the streets.

The structure of mastaan groups. The structure of mastaan groups relates closely to why the interviewees conceptualized crime as labour. Divisions of work mean that people within mastaan groups have roles and responsibilities that transfer all the way down to the streets and the children who live there. The children often have specific roles such as drug runner or weapon carrier. A young person explained further:

There is a boss, a group leader and there are jobs for people, like you are going to a market and you will steal this thing and you are going to a shop and steal this. The boys steal things and then give what they stole to their boss. This is their job; in this way they earn some money.⁷

Other participants spoke of how labour is divided which is often based on the age and abilities of the workers:

For fighting, mastaans use children eight to 15 years old. This is because these boys are so small. If these boys are caught and are punished and if they are beaten then they could die and

this is one of the reasons why the mastaans don't use them for killing. When the mastaans want someone to do something like stealing or murder they will use older boys because if someone tries to catch them and beat them they can run away fast and they can tolerate a beating much better than the younger boys.⁸

Furthermore, because mastaan groups operate as criminal businesses, they have structures to share profits and commission. A female aged 14, explained further:

They work together and when they get something or when they earn money they have to give it to their boss and then their boss gives them some commission. And then they share it within their group and this is the way they earn money.⁹

The fieldwork data demonstrated that the street children who work for mastaan groups always have a boss. One young person explained that children commit crime because 'they do it like a job, the boss orders them and they have to follow them. Just like a job.'¹⁰ The boss controls the group and is distinguished from other members because he often has weapons that he may use to threaten or control the group: 'the boss has the gun, the power. That's why the juniors obey him. That's why he is the boss.'¹¹ Younger members are often fearful of their boss:

They are scared. The boss makes them do things: he shows them the power and shows that he has the gun so they have to do what he says. The boys do their duty, they commit crime and they give the boss the money.¹²

Nevertheless, the fieldwork data also illustrated that some children actively choose to join gangs because of the earning potential these groups provide:

Boys do it to earn money, they don't sell flowers because it is more profitable to sell drugs, that is why the 15 to 18-year-old boys join bigger groups, then they make bigger plans for crime and earning money.¹³

In making these decisions, children demonstrate a degree of control over their lives, and consider which jobs are most likely to help them survive.

Street children for hire

This section considers the types of crime that mastaans hire children to commit. It begins with a discussion of land grabbing, and then moves on to deliberate street children's involvement in political violence. However, street children are also hired by mastaans to sell drugs, collect extortion money and commit contract killings so this section also explores the ways in which these offences occur and the role that street children play in these crimes.

Land grabbing. Bangladesh has struggled for years with land ownership conflicts (Feldman and Geisler, 2011). In many instances the term 'land grabbing' is used to describe 'involuntary land transfer' (Feldman and Geisler, 2011: 3) but land grabbing

is a contested term (Borras and Franco, 2010). However, Feldman and Geisler (2011) argue that whatever it is called, land grabs disproportionately affect the poor.

Land grabbing often occurs in slums where 'violent disputes over land result in eviction, arson, loss of property and lives' (Shafi, 2010: 138). This leads to a breakdown in security in these areas and affects poor people who struggle to protect their land (Shafi, 2010). Street children are often hired by mastaans to 'grab land' by occupying a piece of land to which they have no legal right. Young people, on the direct orders of mastaan bosses, literally occupy space in slums. They remain there until the landowner is forced to give the land up. This physical presence and threat of a mastaan means that people are often quickly coerced into relinquishing their land. The plot can then be sold or occupied by slum dwellers. One young person was particularly well informed about this practice:

Sometimes they hijack the land. Say a man has land and the documents are in his name then a mastaan will go to the man, with his group, and say 'give me the land otherwise we will beat you'. Then what is the man supposed to do? He has to give his land to them. If he refuses the mastaans use young street boys to stay on the land and fight for it. The mastaan always wins.¹⁴

Another participant, an adult, agreed and explained how land grabbing occurs:

If there is some land that I have purchased but I am not using the land they [the mastaans] can get the land forcefully and since I don't have power then I cannot get them out of my land. It is a huge business. They use street boys because it is easy. If the opposition is stronger and there is a killing while occupying the land it doesn't matter because they kill the street children, not the mastaans.¹⁵

This indicates the vulnerability of street children and the consequences of their involvement in land grabbing. Many discussions held about the worst forms of child labour highlight the importance of protecting children from work that harms them (The Hague Global Child Labour Conference, 2010). Street children face many risks when engaging in land grabbing because mastaans know that in the event of a dispute, it will be the children who will face the repercussions.

Political violence and 'hartals'. Bangladesh has a chaotic political situation and political parties often call 'hartals' (enforced political strikes) to bring the country to a standstill. Hartals are conducted for days and even weeks on end, include mass political rallies and a shutdown of public transport ('Violence marks Jamaat's Hartal', 2012). Hartals are widely feared among Bangladeshis because they repeatedly result in violence on the streets. It is common practice for people to stay at home during these demonstrations, rather than go into work or school, to avoid the unrest. The fieldwork data illustrated that street children are hired by mastaans to work on behalf of politicians to cause disturbance at political demonstrations, burn buses and throw bombs:

When there is a call of hartal then street children are hired because they can easily set fire to a bus, it doesn't matter to them. Because they are living by the rules of others, they don't have their own resources to live. They think there is no difference in going to jail or living on the streets.¹⁶

This quotation highlights that these children are a vulnerable, cheap and easily accessible labour force. It also demonstrates the predicament of these children and their state of mind by highlighting how prison is not a deterrent due to their living conditions on the streets. Furthermore, street children rarely have any specific association within politics, despite engaging in political violence as another participant explained:

They [the children] have no political ideology; they are the bottom of the criminal pyramid. They are often killed, taken to prison and because they have no direct political backing they are often sent to jail. Their motivation is purely monetary to survive. They are for sale, to the biggest bidder.¹⁷

This quotation outlines why it is important to conceptualize street children's involvement in *mastaan* groups as illicit labour, rather than crime. Vulnerable children need money to survive and one way to earn it is to become involved in political violence. There is no consideration for the rights or safety of these street children. A journalist aptly described these children as 'the pawns in the political situation'.¹⁸

Drug dealing. Bangladesh is an Islamic country and prohibits the use of alcohol. However, reports suggest that wine and spirits are produced illegally and that alcohol is abused (UNODC, 2005). Opium, heroin and cannabis are regularly consumed in Bangladesh but the abuse of pharmaceutical drugs, which often enter from India, pose the country's largest problem (UNODC, 2005). Analysis of the fieldwork data showed that *mastaan* groups play an important part in this drug market, smuggling drugs into the country and selling them on the streets.

Street children often act as drug dealers, sometimes for small groups, but more often as the runners for *mastaan* groups. One participant explained this in more depth:

A *mastaan* buys drugs at a wholesale rate and then he sells it. By doing this he earns huge money but it is boys aged 18 to 20 who do this, the smaller ones just help them, they just carry the drugs and the bigger ones sell them.¹⁹

In terms of the division of labour, it is common for gang members to hold different positions and have varying responsibilities related to selling drugs:

There are different roles for different people in the group: one is a supplier, one is a look out, one is for home deliveries. Now people don't want to go to the spots so they get drugs delivered to their homes. There are lots of altercations regarding distribution of profit.²⁰

The current study found that children's involvement in drug dealing is conceptualized, by many young people, as a job and a viable way to make money on the streets. Children act as the workers of crime groups, they sell drugs for a share of the profit. Their bosses are gang members, who act on behalf of *mastaans*.

Extortion and 'toll' collecting. *Mastaans* are involved in large-scale extortion where they exploit slum dwellers and force them to pay a 'toll' or 'tax'. Because the areas in which they carry out extortion are so large – slums with often millions of inhabitants – they hire

gangs and street children to collect the money for them, an example of one of the worst forms of child labour. The children were well informed about this practice as the following quotation explains:

There are so many sources of earning money. Mastaans collect money from stalls and stores, they collect tax, they say give me the money or you cannot open your shop; and if you don't give them money then you are not allowed to open your shop. There are so many hawkers, people selling things on the footpath, and they take money from all of them. In our word we call this 'chanda'. It's like a tax or a toll.

Researcher: Who do they collect the money for?

They collect the money for the big mastaan.²¹

The practice of toll collecting can occur within a structure of organized crime but the participants also gave other examples of how young people use it as a source of earning and as a way to control and exploit others. A young male participant provided an example of how this occurs:

A few days ago, I was near a pond which is close to where I live. In the pond there are many fish, so me and my friends went to catch them. After catching fish we always sell them. We were sitting on the road and boys kept coming to us and saying give me the money, give me the chanda.

Researcher: What is chanda?

Toll collecting, they are always collecting the tolls. It's like a rent. The mastaans say if you want to sit here you have to give me the rent. I didn't want to give them then rent so I just sat there and thought I won't give them money because it is mine. A few minutes later I saw the big boss who I know because he is from the same area as me. Every day I see him and give him the salute. The boss asked me: 'What's the matter?' and I told him that I was just sitting there and the boys asked me for chanda. The boss said to the mastaans, 'he is a nice boy, leave him alone' and the boys didn't take the money from me.²²

This quote is important for several reasons. First, it outlines how life in slums, on all levels, is controlled by criminality and that extortion impinges on every part of life. Second, it illustrates how having connections and influence can help a young person to navigate such situations and why these connections are necessary for survival and mobility on the streets.

Contract killings. The media have documented the rise of contract killings in Bangladesh. Newspapers allege that organized criminals use young gang members to commit murder for them as a way for older members to evade criminal prosecution (Khan and Shaon, 2014). The current study considered the role of mastaans in contract killings and how they conduct these acts. Analysis of the fieldwork data suggests that individuals hire street children to carry out revenge killings.²³ However, in many cases it is necessary for the hiring to be arranged via a local mastaan. A police officer explained: 'They do murder or ransom, they are hired killers; they kill on the instruction of their boss.'²⁴

One particularly worrying aspect of this research emerged during discussions held about child killers. Several participants used the term ‘chocolate boy’ to describe a child who is hired to commit murder. An interviewee explained further:

It is a 14 to 16-year-old, they have guns and are working for the mastaans, who will show them a picture. They will have a beautiful face and they will follow the person, to and from their work. They will be waiting at the victim’s home, but the victim will not be worried because they will have a smiling face and a smart shirt and tie. But they will take the gun and they will shoot and kill them. This is the chocolate boy.²⁵

The appearance of the child is important; as this quotation illustrates, the chocolate boy is a particular type of child killer who dresses and looks a certain way and helps lull the victim into a false sense of security by providing them with a gift, such as a box of chocolates. The child then shoots the victim. This is associated with Aptekar’s (1988: 47) argument that ‘smaller [street] children are often more economically productive than the older ones because younger children are seen as less threatening and because they have a “cute image”’. It is improbable that older mastaan group members could fulfil the role of a chocolate boy in the same way, as the victim would be more likely to react to their appearance and perceive them to be hostile. The example of the chocolate boy demonstrates how street children are hired because of their appearance, their age and demeanour thus showing how these children have unique characteristics, associated with age, which are exploited by mastaan bosses.

Actively seeking protection

This study was plagued with issues of moral agency. For example, if street children commit crime on behalf of mastaans, where does the culpability of these children lie? Are they victims, offenders or both? This study considered the ways in which mastaans actively recruit street children into their groups and coerce children into crime using the threat of violence. Mastaan groups also prevent street children from working in other jobs, leaving them immobile and unable to make choices about employment on the streets. This then encourages street children to engage in organized crime as a way to secure an income. Additionally, mastaans work in collusion with the police to recruit children by threatening young people with arrest; the young people are then forced to turn to mastaans for protection. Finally, the fieldwork data demonstrated that street children are often recruited into mastaan groups while incarcerated in one of Bangladesh’s three juvenile correctional centres or in adult jails. These centres and prisons fail to protect the rights of children and leave them vulnerable to the advances of mastaan group members. All of these examples contribute to a victim perspective and demonstrate how street children are coerced into organized crime. However, this victim lens does not explain the whole story of the child labourers of mastaan groups. While these children lack autonomy and control over their own lives they do exert some agency over the decisions they make, and at times these decisions involve committing crime.

Some children actively participate in gangs because of the earning potential these groups provide. The child interviewees explained that crime often pays more than other jobs and that income is paid more frequently, particularly compared to jobs, such as

selling flowers or chocolates on the streets. Additionally, mastaan groups use weapons and engage in disputes over territory and drugs which makes them comparable to many gangs around the world and demonstrates the often violent behaviour of their members.

So if street children who work on behalf of mastaan groups are neither victims nor offenders then how is it possible to understand the work that they do? What these children seek is protection, and their involvement with mastaans is primarily driven by their need to secure an income, build connections and ensure their survival on the streets.

Conclusion

Vulnerable children are hired to work within mastaan groups and are tasked to commit a variety of offences, including political violence, land grabbing, contract killings, drug dealing and extortion. The children interviewed perceived crime as work. Furthermore, the organization and structure of mastaan groups support the conceptualization of crime in this way: these groups have clearly structured hierarchies, a division of labour and ways to share profits and commission. Street children perceive that they are working within a business, albeit a criminal one.

The current ILO definition of the Worst Forms of Child Labour is inadequate because it fails to include a specific mention of children involved in this type of organized crime. This oversight means that vulnerable children and young people – possibly numbering millions – are not being protected. However, amending the ILO definition is only the first step. Children involved in organized crime must be made more visible in policy and legislation. Extensive reforms are needed to better protect street children. These reforms should ensure children's safety, protect their rights and guarantee their access to education. A crime prevention policy, closely aligned with the thinking and practice of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), could be developed in Bangladesh and incorporated into wider child protection policies and the new Children Act 2013. Furthermore, families should be supported to become more resilient against poverty. Recent reductions in the number of child workers worldwide suggest that it *is* possible to reduce child labour, but this requires policy changes, global commitment and a real understanding of the problems child workers face (ILO, 2013).

There is a lacuna between criminology and development studies. As a result, little is known about street children's involvement in organized crime. By expanding the boundaries of criminology to include concepts such as social protection and child labour, the understanding of organized crime can be significantly enhanced. Associations between these disciplines should be widely encouraged and collaboration ought to occur so that we can learn more about street children's involvement in crime and violence to better inform law, policy and practice.

Questions of moral agency remain unanswered. Children who operate at the lowest echelon of mastaan groups should be conceptualized as illicit labourers, but what happens if these children progress on to become gang members or mastaans themselves? The term labourer is only useful to describe young people on the fringes of mastaan groups, because it accurately describes the types of work that these children do (which is often menial, unskilled or semi-skilled and on the instruction of a boss). When the work becomes more skilled, young people stop being labourers and become gang members or

perhaps the skilled workers of a crime group. Where does the culpability for these young people lie? The focus must be on prevention to ensure that everything possible is done to prevent child labourers from becoming the mastaan bosses of the future and to halt the spread of organized crime.

The time is ripe to generate debate about street children's involvement in organized crime groups. In 2014, Kailash Satyarthi and Malala Yousafzai were each awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for their work on child labour in India and access to education, respectively. In the same year, the UN agreed a General Comment for street children (Thomas de Benitez, 2014). But there remains a great deal to be done to realize the rights of, and to provide proper protection for street children, particularly those who engage in organized crime. From an early age the lives of street children revolve around survival: finding shelter, food and protection from the harsh realities of life on the streets. They are denied their right to education and the work that they do affects their moral, social and physical development. The children who participated in this study are resilient, inventive, astute, intelligent and assertive. They have to be in order to survive. These qualities must be embraced and celebrated. But first we must do our duty as adults and protect them. They deserve the right to be children.

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Notes

1. For more a more detailed discussion of street children see Aptekar (1988, 1994); Ennew and Swart-Kruger (2003) and Thomas de Benitez (2007, 2011).
2. For more information about children involved in hazardous labour in Bangladesh see ILO (2006); Patwary et al. (2012); UNICEF (2010).
3. The Bangladeshi working week.
4. The name of the university and of the report have been intentionally excluded from this article to protect the anonymity of the participants and the organizations. Thus the report is referred to as Organization Report 2012 in the text.
5. Semi-structured interview 2.
6. Group interview (number 5) with the children.
7. Group interview (number 1) with the children.
8. Group interview (number 5) with the children.
9. Group interview (number 5) with the children.
10. Group interview (number 6) with the children.
11. Group interview (number 6) with the children.
12. Group interview (number 3) with the children.
13. Group interview (number 3) with the children.
14. Group interview (number 8) with the children.

15. Semi-structured interview 18.
16. Semi-structured interview 17 (case study of a man who lived on the streets as a child and was involved with a criminal gang).
17. Semi-structured interview 5.
18. Semi-structured interview 5.
19. Group interview (number 1) with the children.
20. Semi-structured interview 5.
21. Group interview (number 2) with the children.
22. Group interview (number 3) with the children.
23. Which is also reported in many newspaper articles into the subject. See 'Crime gangs grip city'.
24. Semi-structured interview 11.
25. Semi-structured interview 9.

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