

Rodgers, Dennis , ed. *Gang Lives: Global Portraits from the Streets and Beyond*. London New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2026. Bloomsbury Collections. Web. 9 Jul. 2026. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781350525092>>.

Accessed from: www.bloomsburycollections.com

Accessed on: Thu Jul 09 2026 13:19:41 British Summer Time

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Figure 10.1 Street-connected children in Dhaka, Bangladesh, 2015.

Photo by the chapter author.

Chapter 10

SHARIF'S STORY: FROM GANG MEMBER TO HUMAN RIGHTS WORKER IN BANGLADESH

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October 2022, London and Bangladesh

'Hello, can you hear me okay?', I say, echoing a customary greeting on Microsoft Teams. There is a pause, a blurring on the screen, and then Sharif's face comes into focus, behind him the reassuring background of his office in Dhaka. 'It's so great to see you,' I say, beaming. 'You too,' he replies, smiling – and just like that we return to our familiar and comfortable relationship as colleagues, although more friends now. It's been over eight years since we first met during my doctoral research, and we have spent hours discussing all sorts of issues, including Sharif's life and his human rights work. This is however a new phase of our discussions and one that constitutes a real privilege for me, as I now have the time and opportunity to explore and enquire about Sharif's life in more depth as part of the ERC GANGS project,¹ to ask the questions I didn't get the chance to ask previously, and to engage in reflective and often immersive listening, and to properly co-craft his life history. The bits of Sharif's story that I know already are enlightening and fascinating, raw and honest; it is with great anticipation that I approach this new phase of our research.

This chapter thus draws on a series of life history interviews that I carried out with Sharif via Teams in 2023, but also on prior discussions I had with him in Dhaka in 2015. I went to Dhaka to carry out research for my doctorate on street children's involvement in organized crime (Atkinson-Sheppard 2019). Elements of Sharif's life formed an important part of my doctoral research, but his contribution to my understanding of the topic of street children and organized crime involved much more than just collecting his life story. This is both because of Sharif's life on the streets as a child and his engagement with criminal groups, but also because of the life he lives now, as a human rights worker and an advocate for street children's rights. His experience and understanding are thus expansive but also

reflective; he is able to position himself as a real advocate of vulnerable children's lives because of his first-hand experience of living a similar life, and I have learnt enormously from him. In many ways, though, I have learnt even more from his strength, courage and resilience. He is one of the kindest, most thoughtful and humble people I have ever met, and hearing him speak and having the opportunity to revisit his story in more depth is one of the greatest privileges of my career.

'So ...', I say, somewhat tentatively, 'shall we start at the ... beginning?' We have discussed the GANGS project, the methodology and notion of life history interviewing, which, as argued by Mintz (1979), is a useful and tangible way to discuss and account for an individual's life and the key decision making within it. The reality of conducting such research, and moreover online, is however daunting. The mode of research and our decision to conduct the research online were driven primarily by practicalities. Sharif lives in Dhaka, and I now live in London, and because of a variety of other constraints, we decided to proceed with online interviews rather than to try and see each other in person. We conducted interviews on a weekly basis, doing so for several weeks until we reached a natural end point corresponding with the completion of Sharif's story, to date at least. It was unlikely that we could have spent the same amount of time face-to-face, and having meetings on a weekly basis also meant that the time between the meetings became an important time for reflection for me and decompression for Sharif. The ten hours of interviews that we carried out were also supported by thirteen written reflections that Sharif produced about his life. He also reviewed drafts of this chapter on several occasions, adding things that I had missed or clarifying events, dates and experiences.

The landscape of gangs

There have been lengthy discussions about the relationship between gangs and violence, leading to a somewhat fractured debate; some scholars consider gangs as informal and disorganized, focusing on the violence that gangs commit. Other scholars consider gangs via a more critical lens, reflecting on gangs as 'integral' social institutions (Brotherton 2015) and complex social groups (Brotherton and Barrios 2004), seeking to humanize gang members (Vigil 2003). Research into gangs is inherently global, with researchers having studied gangs in most countries around the world (Hagedorn 2008). However, to date, there is still limited research in South Asia, particularly in Bangladesh.

In this regard, Sharif's life history challenges many of the dominant themes of gang research. First, Sharif encourages us to consider the ways in which young people become involved in gangs. In opposition to a lot of existing research, Sharif did not come from a family embroiled in gang crime, nor did he come from a 'broken home'; he did not witness abuse among family members, and he did not grow up amongst criminal peers, rather he chose to leave his family home in the aftermath of war, a decision he hoped would help his family survive. For Sharif, affiliation with gangs in the streets was transitional – and necessary; without such affiliation he would have struggled to survive. Sharif's story also helps us to

understand the impact of war on children's lives, their families and their futures. The trauma Sharif experienced is complex, and desperately sad. Yet the effects of war and trauma are both under-researched topics with regard to the drivers for involvement in gangs and organized crime in South Asia. Extant research which connects war and gangs often does so via a lens which considers wars *on* gangs, political and social activities focused on detection, prevention and incarceration of gang members in an effort to tackle and reduce gang crime (Müller 2015). Far less research considers how war leads *to* gangs amid a backdrop of conflict, trauma, displacement and survival. This is particularly the case regarding Bangladesh. Certainly, very little has been written to date, for example, about the 1971 War of Independence in Bangladesh and its effects on children then and the lasting effects of the conflict on adults today, which is something that Sharif's story puts squarely in the spotlight. This chapter begins by providing some brief background about Bangladesh before tracing Sharif's life history and identifying its major twists and turns and turning points. It highlights the extreme adversity that he had to overcome and how he now uses his experiences to help others, including advocating for street children today, before offering some concluding thoughts about the significance of his trajectory.

Bangladesh

Bangladesh is a South Asian country that is amongst the poorest in the world. It is almost completely surrounded to the West and North by India and shares a small border with Myanmar to the East. It is one of the world's most populous countries with over 164 million citizens. Nearly a third of Bangladeshis live in cities, and the country is particularly vulnerable to climate change, man-made and natural disasters. It is also a relatively new country, only emerging as a nation following a war of independence with Pakistan in 1971. This war was related to the broader historical governance and conflict across the Indian subcontinent. India's independence from the British in 1947 led to the creation of Pakistan, following the partition of India into two separate countries. Pakistan was identified as a Muslim-majority state with two components, West Pakistan and East Pakistan. Tensions between East and West Pakistan were fraught, leading to the 1971 War of Independence that saw East Pakistan secede from Pakistan and become Bangladesh. The war resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people, including Sharif's father, an event that was foundational to determining Sharif's life trajectory, as the next section details.

War, conflict and the streets

Sharif was born in rural Bangladesh, in a large town, close to the border with India. His family was made up of his mother, father and seven siblings, five brothers and two sisters. Sharif spoke fondly about his early life and his childhood memories, explaining how his family was financially stable and happy. During the war and

its aftermath, everything changed, and Sharif and his family did all they could to survive. For Sharif this involved his father being killed, leaving home at fourteen, working as a 'Freedom Fighter',² being captured by the Pakistani army, travelling to India, unsuccessful entries into refugee camps, interrogation by the Indian police, coping with his sister's capture and rape by the military, desperate attempts to reunite the family and eventually living on the streets and becoming associated with criminal gangs. His story is thus complex and vast, embedded within a wider context of conflict and trauma, some of which is described here.

Sharif witnessed changes, in politics, in the news and within his community in the run-up to the 1971 war, but it was only when the Pakistani army advanced through Bangladesh, reaching his hometown one evening that he fully acknowledged the country was at war:

The Pakistan military occupied an air base close to my home. Their huge aircraft came one afternoon, we watched them land. It was terrifying. The military fired at houses creating panic. The next morning military convoys entered in the town. Around 600 people were killed on that first day, including my father. My father had a good job, and we had a very good life and suddenly, my father was dead, on one fine morning and that was it. We became beggars, from palace to hell.

The conflict went on for nine months. Sharif described how 'every day there was killing. And houses on fire, thousands of women were raped, including my sister. Whether the statistics is correct or not I don't know but they say that approximately 300,000 women were confined in the military camps and were raped thousands of times.'

At the start of the conflict and following the advice that his father had given them before his death, Sharif and his older brother left the family home:

My brother went to one house, and I went to another, I stayed with a woman who didn't have any children, but I knew her well, she always looked after us. My father told me to go there because her husband was a non-Bengali, she was a Bengali. It was well known at the time that the military would look kindly on non-Bengali citizens. So, my father thought this could help me survive. It did help. No non-Bengali or military even went to that house. They did go to my house though, they took everything, money, gold and they forced my family to leave the house. I stayed the night at the lady's house but then I left the house to try and find my family. That morning I saw dead bodies still on the ground. I saw my neighbours, Bengali neighbours, they were killed. I was looking for my father too, because I heard that my father had been killed by the military. But I never found him ... My brother came to find me, and we made a plan to leave the town, we didn't know what else to do. We managed to escape from the town, we went into nearby villages. There were dead bodies everywhere ... In 24 hours we had gone from having everything to having nothing at all. We couldn't even imagine what had happened. I remember feeling like my brain

wasn't working. From then on, we had to fight for our survival, we had to fight to escape the military, every day.

Sharif and his brother knew little about what happened to their family but realized they wouldn't survive if they stayed in their town. He explained how:

We travelled to a village about six or seven kilometres away and then went to India, we really didn't know what to do but felt that it would help to keep moving. We came back to Bangladesh when we received a letter from my mother. My mother believed that we were both alive and had faith that the letter would reach us. We did get it! We were so surprised to hear that the rest of our family were alive, we couldn't believe it ... During that time though my brother trained to become a Freedom Fighter, this meant that he was given free food. I was allowed to join too but not as a fighter, I was too young, instead I was an informer. I was 14 at the time. I agreed because daily survival was the most important thing to us, and a free meal was a big part of this. We left quite soon after though we were scared that we wouldn't be allowed to go, and we knew we had to find our family.

Our discussions revealed a transitional, frantic and desperate time, during which Sharif and his brother were struggling to survive and avoid persecution. Many families were broken apart, towns and villages were destroyed and thousands of people, including women, were captured by the Pakistani army. By this time Sharif's mother and his brothers and sisters had joined him in the village. They had very little money or access to food, so they relied on the kindness of the village members to provide them with food and shelter. Sharif described this time as a direct contrast to his previous life, one he spoke fondly of, associated with love, safety and contentment. In particular, he described how

I only had one single shirt, but it was torn in so many places. I had only one *lungi* but it was torn and I had to tie it together to keep it from falling down. Everything was uncertain. To earn a meal a day was survival. We didn't have any real plan, just to survive each day and get to the next one. That was our life then.

On one occasion Sharif was looking for an opportunity to go into the town to try and find food or work, and he explained how he hoped he might meet some of his father's old colleagues to see if they could help the family. However, while doing so, he was approached by two paramilitary officers with guns. Paramilitaries – who were linked to the Pakistani army – were widely feared in Bangladesh, and were 'on the lookout for Freedom Fighters, students and political leaders, prominent people. They often killed anyone, even if the person wasn't involved in any anti-Pakistani activities. They'd often go into villages and steal food like goats, cows, chickens, and vegetables, pointing their guns at the owners.' Sharif believed that the officers were suspicious of him, and because of this,

they took my shirt and told me to go behind a tea shop, they attempted to shoot me, they beat me and forced me to go with them into town. I was sure they were going to shoot me. Then they took me to a building of a doctor – a collaborator of the military – and locked me in a room, I could hear them discussing what they were going to do with me. But it was a Friday and I heard the call to prayer from the mosque and thankfully everyone hurried to go for Friday prayers. One of the iron bars on the window was broken. I escaped from there.

After his escape, Sharif returned to the village but did not say anything about his experience to his mother or family, because ‘they were all so afraid of being caught, they would feel pain for me but that was the reality of our life every day’.

The family continued their struggle for survival. The Bangladeshi army and Freedom Fighters started to retaliate against the Pakistani army, with support from the Indian army. During this time, the family contacted their paternal grandfather in southern Bangladesh, and he made the arduous journey to reach them and took Sharif’s mother and younger siblings back with him to a southern part of the country, amidst conflict, crossfire shootings, destroyed railways and decimated villages. Sharif and his brother decided to flee to India, to Kolkata, a journey that took them around twenty days. Sharif explained how he worked whenever he could but struggled with navigating the trip, epitomizing the vulnerability of two teenage boys travelling alone for the first time:

We knew so little, we had never been to India, never been alone even outside of own town, and we considered the Indians to be our enemy but actually they really helped us, they fed us and allowed us to use their buses and railways. Around 10 million people fled to India, it was a huge thing. We ended up going home in the end though, back to the village. We tried to stay at a refugee camp but because we didn’t have any family identification we were not allowed to stay. Some of the Indians couldn’t work out who we were, they thought we might have been spies for the Pakistani army, because of this we were also interrogated by the Indian police. We got away because of the letter from my mother though, we showed it to them, as a kind of evidence that we had been badly affected by the Pakistani military and had lost so much. It proved we were not the enemy.

The journey back to the village was an onerous one. There was little transport, so Sharif and his brother walked long stretches on foot. They also suffered the real and persistent threat of the paramilitary groups and the Freedom Fighters. Sharif was scared of misidentification (by the Freedom Fighters as a member of the Pakistani military or collaborator to Pakistani military) and there was also consistent threat of crossfire. He explained how ‘we were caught several times, between firing but finally we managed to reach our village’. Things continued to prove challenging for Sharif and his brother; they moved from house to house but were asked to leave by several members of his extended family and community. This was due to shortages of food but also social stigma: ‘the traditional village culture is not really supportive of widowers or their children when the blood

relationship is sundered [as was the case after his father was shot]'. Meanwhile, Sharif's mother felt that she had outstayed her welcome with her late husband's family and decided that she and her daughters needed to return home, journeying from south Bangladesh back to the north.

On reuniting in their old home, the family's first task was to find Sharif's sister, who had been separated from them during the war. The family had received a letter from her saying that she was working as a housemaid relatively close to their hometown. It took weeks, but Sharif finally found his sister:

When we found her she was so badly traumatised and in terrible health I couldn't recognise her. I was rushing from house to house calling her, trying to find her but then she shouted at me, followed me, but I didn't know it was her, she was shouting, screaming. When I found her, I started crying. I couldn't believe she was real ... She suffered so much at the hands of the Pakistani military, she was raped and beaten and many things we still don't know. She had lots of mental health issues, including schizophrenia. At the time the police helped us a lot, she had endured sexual abuse and was pregnant, but the police helped us to take her to the hospital and she had an abortion. She then stayed in the hospital for over six months but after that we brought her home. Thankfully she is happy now, she got married to a really good man, who knows about everything that happened to her. She has two kids now and they're all doing really well. We didn't tell anyone about it though because of the social stigma, her husband knows but her children don't, and I've never tried to talk about it because of the pain it might cause her. So, we always avoid the issue but it's always there.

Returning home was difficult for the family in many ways; not only were they trying to help Sharif's sister, but their house was ruined. It was challenging for the family to survive and this led to Sharif leaving the family home and living on the streets for a year. Sharif explained how his older brother acquired a job earning a meagre salary, and that this was the family's only revenue: 'Managing with that amount of money was hard, and it was huge pressure on him. You know, we were a good family, a good family, but the hardship we faced during and after the war broke us, it broke everything.' The pressures on Sharif's brother to provide for the family led to him to shout at Sharif, pleading that he too earn an income. Sharif explained how he tried every avenue he could think of to do so:

I was trying. I was looking, But I didn't know where to go, whom to go to ask. It really affected my mother, she felt such pressure to feed us, as her children, but she couldn't find out how to. She did all she could to pick the vegetables, but it was never enough. I was old enough to understand everything then, I felt it from my heart and at that time I felt like such a burden on my family. it was so uncertain, I didn't know how long the family would continue to bear me as a burden, it was unclear how and if I would find a job. It was so bad that at one stage I considered suicide. I thought about it about how the railway track

was not far from our home, there were so many trains coming and going and I thought I could jump in front of the train.

Sharif's desperation led to a pivotal decision in his life:

The reason I left my family is because my sister had a kind of social stigma, and my mother was a widow which was also socially unaccepted. I really had little other choice; my mother couldn't provide for us. It was the only choice I had ... One evening just before sunset I left the house; I didn't have any plan about where I would go. I was 15 at the time so I didn't know many people, but I knew where the train station was, so I travelled there, and I went to a railway tea stall. The stall was owned by my friend's father, and I was so hungry I begged him for a biscuit and a cup of tea, he laughed and then asked what I was going there. I explained I had left my family home, and you know what, he offered me a job right then ... You know the job really helped me; it gave me shelter [protection]. It prevented me from committing suicide. Right before that I was thinking about places to commit suicide but as soon as I got the job, you know, I forgot about it. Today I am alive and that job was my lifeline.

Sharif worked at the tea stall from 5.00 am to 12.00 midnight; he explained how the job was tiring and difficult, particularly in the heat of the Bangladeshi summer. However, he was happy to work because for the first time since the war, he felt as though he was able to provide for himself: 'It was a kind of satisfaction that I took responsibility for my own burden. My family at least got some relief. They didn't have to feed me, to think of my survival.'

Life on the streets, gangs, agency and survival

Life at the railway station was all-encompassing; Sharif described it as though he had been 'sucked into a fairground ride which wouldn't let me get off'. Sharif had to navigate survival, including accessing shelter, food and overcoming fear:

It was summer, it was really hot, the roof where I used to sleep was concrete. And it got really hot, even at night. I had one bed sheet and one pillow, and the bed sheet was very old. It was very difficult to sleep in this way, it was so hot, noisy, sometimes it rained, and I had to move under the roof, near to the tea stall and when it rained it was impossible to sleep ... At the beginning I was very afraid because I knew railway stations in Bangladesh are full of gang criminals, this is still true today. I was afraid in one way but I was safe because I didn't have even a single coin in my pocket so there was nothing they could ask of me.

Sharif also explained how he struggled with health issues: 'Lots of kids get sick on the streets. We were always suffering from some health problem; someone was sick every day. We were living in a dirty place with no way to keep clean. We ate food in very cheap, open places that were very dirty and drank open water.'

At the same time, Sharif's relationship with other children in similar situations was an important one, particularly from a survival perspective: 'There were lots of groups of street children. Most were abandoned by their families and didn't have anywhere to settle or to go home to. They were like me. We helped each other. But we didn't have our own shelter, we didn't have our own place to live, we didn't really have any decisions to make, or expect to survive.' The groups of street children also helped one another, providing support and solidarity:

The other boys understood me. They knew that I had hardships, like they did. They knew I must survive by myself. Even getting food every day was difficult. The boys, they understood this, and they gave me a new way to live which was sympathetic to me. We all had the same fate. Since we were sleeping on the same floor everyone felt like friends and everyone was keen to help each other.

However, the lack of autonomy led Sharif and his peers to be vulnerable to the advances of crime groups:

It is difficult to imagine how vulnerable it was really. Even if you want to keep yourself away from involvement in crime it is obviously difficult. You cannot really do it. A street boy like me could not decide; you didn't have anything to decide. There was nothing you could really control. When you are like this, you are subject to be controlled by others.

Association with gangs blurred the boundaries between support and coercion into criminal groups:

Two of the boys came to sleep with me, when they didn't have any other place to go or were not doing crime activities that night. They started convincing me to give up my job, because it's a hard job and it wasn't paid much money, so they said come and join us. They were friendly to me, and I felt like they were concerned about what I was doing at the time. I know they were a kind of criminal, but they were also human beings and they felt bad for me, they could see it was difficult for me. They said if I went with them for a night, it would only take three to four hours, and I would be paid well, much more than the tea stall, enough to survive for week.

Sharif described his involvement with criminal groups in a variety of ways, as a survival mechanism, as an opportunity for solidarity, but also as an experience which added to his extensive experiences of trauma: 'No one can talk about some of the things [involvement in crime]. No one could realise how bad it was at the beginning, and how much I have carried over in my next life from this experience, the guilt, the pain. It is really difficult for me to explain; really difficult for someone to understand.'

The nature of crime committed at the railway stations was organized and often had links with wider members of society, including politicians and the police.

There were clear hierarchies in place, and street children like Sharif often worked at the lowest echelon of these groups. The groups had leaders and subgroups:

It is the leader's job to get the boys together and then to share the responsibility of who will do what. There is a small leader of the group and then bigger bosses. The orders come from the older bosses. The number of older bosses depends on the part of town, say a part of the town has a leader and he has subgroups. But it depends how big the area is and how economically viable the area he is leading.

The main driver for crime at this time was money, embedded within the wider context of a country struggling with the aftermath of a war. Theft from trains was common, but criminal gangs also engaged in *dacoity* (violent armed robbery), burglary, property theft and trafficking of goods from India, as Sharif explained:

Many of the boys were involved in smuggling from India. It was easy for them to go to the border and purchase the goods. The money was provided by the leaders, and they each got a percentage. In every case the leader decided how much money we got out of each offence. Some of the groups were involved in snatching purses. Some were involved in snatching the luggage from running trains and gradually they stole ornaments, a watch from a person ...

Fighting between groups did occur, but not regularly. However, there were disputes between gangs, with Sharif explaining how this often related to tussles for leadership or power. In some instances, gangs collaborated with the police; a senior gang member might bribe the police to arrest another gang member to ensure they achieved the 'top spot' in the group. The 1975 ban on alcohol also led to an underground economy related to the brewing and selling of alcohol.

Soon after arriving at the railway station, Sharif became aware of a group of men involved in stealing goods delivered by the trains. He explained how

Generally, they came at about 10 or 11 at night, they were members of gangs, and they came to my tea stall. They drank tea and discussed their nightly activities. This is where they did their planning, they would have one man managing the goods, one going to the railway security and another going to the police. They usually slept on the top of the railway building close to me and before they went to sleep, they talked among themselves, they were similar ages to me, maybe older, but I became good friends with them.

In many ways, these young men became Sharif's support network. He explained how they were kind to him; they all shared similar experiences, including struggling to survive at the railway station. The relationship between the group and Sharif developed over time. He described how on many occasions they discussed their involvement in crime, their strategies and activities without really realizing that he was there. The activities of the group included what Sharif described as

Breaking into the goods wagon, they had a long piece of iron and used to this to break into the wagons containing wheat, rice and sugar. There were tonnes of goods within the wagon, but they need the gang to work together to steal the goods. They had a very good team, they put members in different places around the station, and there was also a leader, a commander.

According to Sharif, there were several such groups working the station, all of which had a clear hierarchy consisting of a leader who was the 'senior gang member, senior in age but also character, they were clever, they had to manage the police, politicians and everything'. The activities of these groups were 'planned, very planned operations, the gangs only had an hour to move the goods, when the police were not at the station, so they had to work quickly'. Sharif explained the state-crime collaboration in more depth: 'Generally in a country like Bangladesh political leaders are the most influential, they have the power, they have the most influence over society, they manage police officers, everything really, they get a share of money from them, from the gang.' There are also hierarchies in regard to the dissemination of profits, as Sharif explained: 'Most of the gang members are only getting food and small amounts of money, the lion's share goes to the leader, who then gives it to the political leader, the police and the railway security force.'

This was closely related to the notion of 'shelter' which Sharif explained to mean a form of protection (Atkinson-Sheppard 2017). Shelter here is related to the ways in which gangs are protected in society, including protection from criminal prosecution: 'Giving shelter means that the gangs have the influence to stop the police from arresting them. If they do get arrested, they will quickly send some of their friends to ensure they get bail and are able to leave court and begin working again.' Shelter is also provided to gang members in the form of money and access to wider society and means by which individuals can navigate social hierarchies, as Sharif explained:

The leaders don't live on the streets, they live in society, they give shelter [protection] to influential people. The leader is like a person in a circus, he commands everyone to play. He is not playing himself on the streets, rather he is playing on the back screen. Many of those leaders are socially accepted and they are known as committed to society, they do a lot for the society. People in society give them shelter [protection]. The leaders contribute in regard to religion and social responsibility. They are the contributor to the religious places like mosque, church, temple etc. Many of the temples are built by their funds, their financing. The leaders don't get arrested by the police, they are socially and religiously accepted. However, compared to what amount of money a leader is earning, he was contributing only a little to the religious establishments, most they keep for themselves.

This was particularly pertinent to Sharif while living on the streets. His associations with gangs provided Sharif with solidarity, support and a way to earn an income, essential for his survival. Furthermore, he explained,

if you disagree, they force you to do it anyway and if you refuse to do it then you have to leave the place permanently. This is difficult because to look for food everyday requires a place to stay. If you stay in one place at least you can try and earn money for food, moving around means you stay hungry.

He also described how

I felt like I escaped death so many times, but I realised that I didn't ever get a new life. This meant that I didn't fear anything. It's like, if a person survives an accident without injury and is happy to have a new life it means you fear your death, but I didn't have the chance to think and when you are not thinking you don't fear death. You don't have any fear. We lived on the streets, we slept through the monsoon, we had no toilet or drinking facilities; everything threatened our lives. To drink water was threatening, to live on the streets was threatening, to eat food was threatening. There is nothing more to fear.

These discussions highlight a level of suffering rarely discussed in gang research. There have been numerous considerations of poverty as a driver for crime (Merton 1938), but relatively little has been written about survival in its most acute form. Sharif's story helps us to understand the perspective of a child living alone on the streets, which is significant because today there are millions of street children around the world, many of whom are incredibly vulnerable, like Sharif, to the advances of gangs and organized crime. The focus and pressure of survival also meant that Sharif felt little in the way of guilt at the time:

These vulnerable kids, they do not have the chance to feel guilt. They barely have time to think. Now, as an adult all I do is think, think about today, tomorrow, think about what will happen to me and my family in five years' time. But when I lived on the streets I could barely even see tomorrow. All I could focus on was my survival. What other choice did I have?

The omnipresent issue of survival led Sharif to seek an opportunity to buy fuel from a gang (involved in fuel theft) and sell it at an increased price:

One day I took a kind container, and I purchased the fuel and travelled by train to Rangpur and then I sold the fuel, the money was very good, compared to what I paid for the fuel. The fuel was used for the buses and trucks. On the second or third day I was caught by the police. One officer came to the compartment, and he asked me what was in my bag, but I gave him some money as a bribe, I gave him maybe five *taka*, he was tough though and he took my bag away. I managed to escape from another part of the train. But then I heard later on that the police officer sold the bag of fuel and didn't take it to the police station.

This example provides an insight into one of the ways in which Sharif worked to earn money. It demonstrates corruption and reflects how street children use

opportunities to make money, either individually or as a group. Sharif explained that working with his group was usually more profitable than working alone, illustrative of the significance of state-crime collaboration discussed earlier.

This is similar to discussions of organized crime around the world (e.g. Hagedorn 2008), but also gangs and organized crime in Bangladesh today. My doctoral research mentioned previously considered the historical context of gangs in Bangladesh but was largely focused on the contemporary nature of organized crime. Sharif's story helps to provide context to this and to explore the development of crime in Bangladesh. However, it illustrates historical concurrence, not divergence. The themes in Sharif's story of vulnerability, work, survival and criminality were omnipresent in my contemporary study. The need for street children today to work to survive, many of whom do so in criminal gangs and as the 'illicit labourers' of criminal enterprises, is very similar to Sharif's experience in the 1970s. The influence of mastaans or organized crime bosses is more embedded and expansive now; however, the association between criminality and corrupt members of the state is still evident and as relevant now as it was then (Atkinson-Sheppard 2019). At the same time, Sharif's story humanizes this landscape, opening up the discussion about children like Sharif who come to the streets as a result of challenging and complex lives, struggle with survival and who are incredibly vulnerable to the advances of criminal groups.

Leaving the streets and a family reunited

Sharif's life on the streets became increasingly challenging; he grappled with his ubiquitous survival needs and threats from gangs and the police. Sharif continually thought of his family and wanted to return to them. This affected his interactions with the gang, as he explained: 'While I was living at the railway station, I always thought of my family and knew that if I fully devoted myself to gang crime, I could never return to them. But I didn't share this with the group, I didn't want to have any disagreement with them, otherwise I would not be able to survive at the station.' His desire to reunite with his family and the risks on the streets led Sharif to question his life at the station and led to his decision to leave the streets:

Fortunately, I have some kind of foresightedness, I knew there was a different type of life and things in the group became more and more difficult. Every day there was some kind of threat, from the police, or from the leader. I knew that if I want to leave the group then I must leave this place. And I did. Luckily, a man helped me. He had lost two children in the war [of 1971]; both had been killed by the military. He was so kind to me, and I started living with his family. He was a train driver. My background from my life before the streets meant that I always read lot, even when I was sheltering in the broken coaches, I read old newspapers. That was something which gave me insight onto a different kind of life.

This insight helped Sharif in many ways; it affected the ways in which he lived on the streets as well as his involvement in crime:

Because of my family background I was also slightly distanced from the other street children, my father's job had been a good one, he had been to India to study, my father was recognised as a contributor of the nation in the liberation war, in my town there is a plaque with his name, this gives me pride. My mother was special, she was always teaching us not to do wrong things. I didn't have quite the same mentality as the other street kids, but when they came to me, I was very nice to them, and they were generally very nice to me. I was forced to do that [crime] but actually I wasn't quite the same.

Sharif left the streets with the help of the train driver and his family. The process was complex and challenging and illustrative of the suffering that many people in Bangladesh were facing at the time. Sharif explained how the train driver lived close to his family home and that both 'families suffered similar pain'. He described how

My father was killed by the Pakistani Military, while the train driver's two sons were also killed by a collaborator of the Pakistani Military. Both of his elder sons were slaughtered. The train driver's wife was suffering from serious mental health issues. Their surviving sons were about the same age as me, I guess he wanted me to play the role of his dead sons and help look after his other children. I think this is why he was keen to help me. At the time, I really needed his help. I wanted to stay away from crime, but it was hard to avoid the gang, especially since I had to live at the station. They were aggressive. I didn't know what to do. But when the train driver started speaking to me, I thought, here is a chance. Guaranteed food and shelter and a way to escape and disconnect from the gang. The decision also helped me to find a way to reunite with my own family in future.

Life with the train driver's family was a welcome relief from living at the station. Sharif quickly began to play a prominent role in the family. He helped to look after the younger children. He described how he 'felt at peace mentally'. But that he also missed the gang, particularly their friendship and solidarity. He reflected on the close bonds he had with many of the gang members and the protection he was awarded from being part of the gang. He was also fearful of any ramifications of leaving the group. Yet it was his continued desire to reunite with his family that ensured that he remained at the train driver's house and did not return to the streets.

It took Sharif some time to find his family, as was common for many people in the aftermath of the war. The train driver's home provided him with the stability he needed to begin the search process, and eventually he was able to reunite with his family, support his sister and distance himself from criminal gangs. He worked, again at a tea stall, then as a tutor, and then at a bicycle

repair shop. Sharif was then re-admitted to his previous school and was able to complete his primary education. Later, he started working at a husking mill as an apprentice, and at the same time he was admitted into secondary education. Sharif struggled to attend college and could only do so once a month, but he studied during the evenings. He passed the final public examination and was admitted to a university. The university was 50 kilometres away from his hometown. Sharif took up boarding with a family close to the university. In exchange for two meals and housing, Sharif taught the family's two children maths and Bengali. During his time at university, Sharif applied for a job as a community health worker. After two years in this job, he was approached to work on a Danish-funded development project supporting the rights of children with disabilities. After this, he worked for a short time for the Bangladeshi government before becoming a human rights worker. Sharif now dedicates his life to helping marginalized populations, including street children. He is one of the most compassionate and driven people I have ever met and has changed the lives of many around him.

Concluding thoughts

Sharif's story is one of great courage, perseverance, serendipitous connections and ultimately, social survival. The way in which Sharif became involved in criminal groups challenges many of the dominant themes of 'gang research'. This discourse criminalizes and stereotypes young people, like Sharif, who come to the streets and crime in the aftermath of war, trauma and untold suffering. Sharif's story also helps us to recognize the vulnerability of street children, their lack of agency and autonomy and their need to survive. As Sharif explains: 'their lives are decided by others'. At the same time, Sharif, both through sheer force of will as well as the serendipitous kindness of strangers, managed to overcome this lack of agency, and it is perhaps this, more than anything else, that we should retain from the snapshot offered here of a life lived in a way that many of us will never know or experience. A life that most of us might think we would likely never survive, but which also gives us hope, insofar as it has a happy ending. While the social connections that Sharif made and encountered throughout his trajectory and lived experiences are definitely important, more important, I think, is the sheer strength of character and resilience of Sharif. In this respect, he continues to, and will continue to, inspire me and all of those around him, and I hope that this glimpse into his world will help to inspire many others too.

Notes

- 1 See <https://www.graduateinstitute.ch/research-centres/centre-conflict-development-peacebuilding/gangs-gangsters-and-ganglands-towards>.

- 2 The term 'Freedom Fighters' refers to the members of the Bangladeshi military, paramilitary and civilians who formed part of the resistance movement during the 1971 War of Independence.

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