

THE CHILDREN BEHIND THE BRANDS

From Aquafina to Zara

Plastic Bottle Recycling Chains and the Children They Exploit





**The Children Behind the Brands—From Aquafina to Zara: Plastic Bottle
Recycling Chains and the Children They Exploit**

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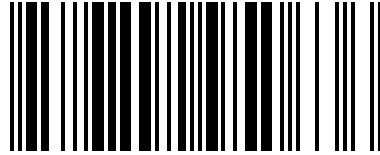
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Preface

I had observed children on the streets of Dhaka selling bottled drinks and collecting waste bottles for many years. However, it was only after I contributed to and watched the film “Green Foot Soldiers,” produced by Dr. Hasan Reza, Associate Professor at the Indiana University School of Social Work, that I became aware of the role these children play in recycling. I was curious to explore further: who produces the bottles these children sell and collect, and what happens to the waste after it is delivered to initial collection depots? I developed an interest in the connection between the children’s work and the well-known brands consumed daily by the public—many of which emphasise their use of recycled materials.

In December 2025, I took part in a sleep-out organised by Friends of Street Children Bangladesh, the small UK charity that I chair, together with LEEDO, our partner organisation in Dhaka, which has been working with children on the streets for over twenty years. The event was held on one of the bridges at the ferry terminal and aimed to raise funds for LEEDO’s open-air schools and transitional shelters for children surviving on the streets.

The sleep-out gave me the opportunity to speak with children who joined us before heading to their usual sleeping places nearby. I also spoke with two adults who supervised the children’s collection of bottles there. I found both the children and the adults very interested in sharing their life experiences. These conversations led me to realise that I could write a report based on these experiences and how they relate to recycling and products made from recycled plastic.

Obtaining information from the children and others at the ferry terminal and stations proved to be much easier than obtaining information from the manufacturers and the brands that form the plastic bottle recycling chain. None of the companies I contacted by email responded. Most producers have agreed brand protection guidelines that prohibit disclosure about the brands they supply to. Often, people working at the first points of collection did not know what happened to the recycled plastic once it had been turned into flakes. In one case, an employee at a factory was eager to be interviewed outside the factory gates because he was not officially allowed to provide information. Several organisations that provided information requested anonymity. It

was only possible to interview people by turning up at the gates of factories and at the offices of companies involved in the plastic bottle recycling chain. Most people then provided information, even if only through informal, passing comments. I also obtained information from company websites, some of which advertised the brands that they manufactured for.

I am extremely grateful to the following people who agreed to be interviewed to provide information for this report:

- Eleven children (five from the ferry terminal, four from Kamalapur Railway Station, and two from Airport Railway Station in Dhaka)
- One person selling bottled water at the ferry terminal
- One person selling bottled water and engaging children to assist at Kamalapur Railway Station
- Two people at the ferry terminal who supervise children collecting bottles and selling water from the pump
- Two people in Nimtoli, Dhaka, who collect and sell empty bottles
- Two shops collecting used bottles near Airport Railway Station in Dhaka
- Two large sites where waste bottles are collected and made into recycled PET (polyethylene terephthalate) flakes
- One organisation auditing for the Global Recycling Standard in Bangladesh
- A representative from the Bangladesh PET Flake Manufacturers and Exporters Association
- A representative from a factory that previously produced PSF from recycled PET flakes and now buys and sells PET flakes
- Representatives from two garment factories
- A representative from a company that produces PET resin of the recognised quality required for the production of new plastic drink bottles
- A representative from a shop in Nimtoli, Dhaka, that collects used plastic bottles and turns them into flakes and pellets used to produce local plastic goods
- A representative from a shop in Lalbagh that produces PET pellets used to manufacture plastic goods in Bangladesh
- A representative from a factory that purchases used bottles, turns them into PET flakes for export, and sells them to mills in Bangladesh producing polyester yarn and packaging materials
- Representatives from three offices of companies in Bangladesh producing PSF fibre with r-PET flakes

I am very grateful to LEEDO for their assistance during the production of this report. In particular, I would like to thank the Executive Director Forhad Hossain, who provided

valuable suggestions and encouragement; Rayhan Oran and Ksm Sohel Rana, who supported logistics and translation when I struggled to understand or hear some of the Bangla spoken by interviewees; Nazirul Islam Opu, whose clear understanding of the context at both stations and at the ferry terminal, and whose familiarity with many of the children and adults involved in bottle recycling, was invaluable; and Masud Mahatab, Shahela Khan Rimu, and Sowrov Sujon, all of whom work for LEEDO and introduced me to children at the ferry port and at Kamalapur Station. I am also grateful to Abul Kashem and Jesmin from LEEDO, who assisted with the initial interviews and explained the situation of the children at the ferry terminal to me.

Finally I would like to thank my publisher, Nagree, and Saif Osmani for the page layout and design.

The report is being made available free of charge online, and some free printed copies will also be distributed. We are asking everyone who reads the report—especially those from larger NGOs and companies involved in recycling—to donate generously to Friends of Street Children Bangladesh, so that we can continue supporting the work of LEEDO. We particularly encourage those who want to make a lasting difference to the lives of children surviving on the streets to consider making a regular donation by standing order.

This is the link for donations (one off and regular):
<https://www.peoplesfundraising.com/donation/friends-of-street-children-bangladesh>

This is the QR code:



When sold paper copies of the report cost a minimum of £10 plus post and packing where relevant.

Thank you for your support. Any feedback about the report can be provided through Friends of Street Children Bangladesh (registered UK charity number: 1171061) at friendsofscbd@gmail.com. Also, visit the website at www.streetchildrenbd.uk

Mike Sherriff

April 2026

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Refilled bottles for sale

CHAPTER 1

Introduction- The Pivotal Position of Children in Plastic Bottle Recycling Chains

The vision statement of LEEDO emphasises that all members of society should take responsibility for protecting children living on the streets and helping them build a brighter future. However, taking responsibility without being clear about their connection with these children, who struggle to survive in appalling conditions, is very difficult for most people.

So, what are the connections between children surviving on the streets of Dhaka and people throughout the world who rarely encounter them in their daily lives? This publication will explore some of these connections. These include a shared need for food, shelter and a place to live, as well as shared aspirations for a job that makes it possible to earn a living and contribute to society. It will especially highlight the hidden connections between consumers of everyday brands, such as drink and clothing brands, and the children who sell these goods and collect waste generated from their disposal, which is then reused, and recycled to make new products.

Child hawkers selling bottled drinks, and those collecting waste bottles, have a pivotal position in the plastic recycling chain that begins in the bottling factory and ends with consumer goods made from recycled plastic, including clothing, packaging, bottles made of recycled material, and simple plastic items such as plates and toys.

Around the world, almost 1 million plastic bottles are purchased every minute.[i] Bangladesh uses an estimated 3.15–3.84 billion single-use plastic bottles per year, of which about 674–822 million are recycled[ii]

Globally, the overall plastic recycling business was estimated to be worth USD 47–60 billion in 2025[iii]. Of this, USD 13–14 billion is estimated to be of the type of plastic used in plastic bottles (polyethylene terephthalate, known as PET).[iv]

Bangladesh exports a large proportion of the recycled PET flakes it produces (around 50,000 tonnes a year, valued at about \$30.22 million). These exports consist almost entirely of recycled PET flakes produced from single-use plastic bottles.

The main importers of PET flakes from Bangladesh are Asian markets, including China (historically the largest buyer), India, Vietnam, Malaysia, and South Korea, as well as various European destinations. Some recycled PET is retained in Bangladesh for emerging domestic uses, such as polyester staple fibre for the large garment industry and, in some cases, bottle-to-bottle recycled PET production.[v]

When recycled, plastic bottles become rPET (recycled PET), which is used in new beverage bottles (bottle-to-bottle recycling), food packaging, polyester fibres (e.g. clothing and carpets), strapping (e.g. for packages), and sheet products.

In Bangladesh, most new plastic bottles and the growing man-made fibre segment of the textile industry rely on non-recycled plastic or, in the case of textiles, imported r-PET fabric, primarily from Vietnam, China, and Taiwan.[vi] Although recycled polyethylene terephthalate (r-PET) from domestic and imported sources still accounts for a small proportion of the total plastic used in production processes, its use is increasing due to global fashion trends towards circularity (i.e. the use of recycled materials). This shift is being encouraged by market research companies such as Euromonitor International, which argues that “adopting circular design principles in packaging, which considers the entire life cycle of a product, including use and reuse, is one way for brands to address surplus waste at the outset and can assist recovery, recycling, and reuse in order to reduce the damaging impact of plastic waste in the environment”.[vii]

Globally, as this circular approach to plastic use is encouraged, over 20 million adults and children play a pivotal role as waste pickers, collecting roughly 60% of plastic gathered for recycling[viii]. In Bangladesh, many of the estimated 3.4 million children living in “street situations”[ix]—meaning they live on the streets, from the streets, or in conditions functionally equivalent to street life (e.g. without parental care or stable shelter)—are actively involved in this process. Colloquially referred to as “tokai”—a term often criticised for its stigmatising connotations—these children, who both sell bottles and later collect waste, are central to this process, yet rarely considered. This report focuses on their experiences and provides recommendations on how their situation could be improved.

Children have a pivotal role selling bottled water and collecting plastic waste





[i] Scarr, S. and Hernandez, M. (2019) Drowning in plastic: Visualising the world's addiction to plastic bottles. Reuters Graphics, 4 September.

[ii] Environment and Social Development Organization (2024) Single-use plastic consumption in Bangladesh.

[iii] Expert Market Research (2025) Recycled plastics market report and forecast 2025–2034. Available at: <https://www.expertmarketresearch.com/reports/recycled-plastics-market>;

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[vii] Reuters (2022) Drowning in plastic. Reuters Graphics. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/graphics/ENVIRONMENT-PLASTIC/0100B275155/index.html>

[viii] UNICEF (2024) Generation plastic: Unpacking the impact of plastic on children. November. UNICEF.

[ix] UNICEF (2024) Children living in street situations in Bangladesh. UNICEF.





Plastic bottles for recycling

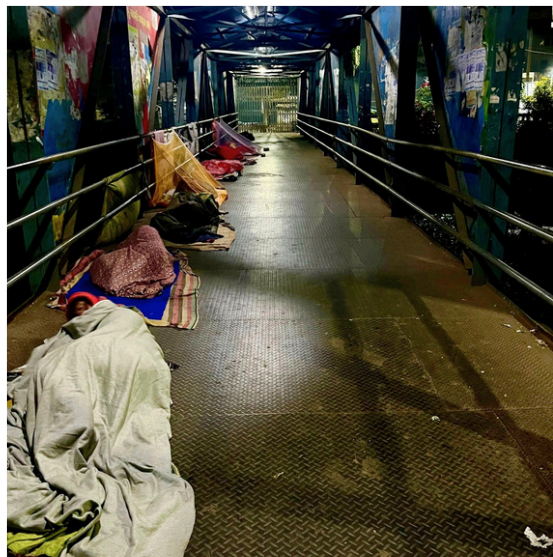
CHAPTER 2

The Children

Estimates of the number of children surviving on the streets of Dhaka vary widely, but the figure is likely to be at least 500,000[i]. Many of these children sell water in plastic bottles or collect empty bottles for reuse and recycling. They often combine this with other forms of work to earn enough to survive. Children carry bags for passengers, collect different types of waste, beg, and sell items such as food and simple consumer goods on the streets and in trains, ferries, and buses. Some are even recruited into prostitution.

Transport hubs such as ferry terminals and train or bus stations are the main places where children sell bottled water to passengers and collect the empty bottles as passengers disembark. At the ferry terminal alone, adults overseeing the children's bottle-collecting work estimate that around 100–125 children are involved. Children also sell water and collect bottles at rail and bus stations, markets, tourist areas, riverside locations, landfill sites, and waste collection points.

The children engaged in this work face some of the most difficult living conditions of any children in the world. Most have no parents or relatives to care for them. They must find money to buy food from begging, from philanthropic endeavours by the wider community, and from work that is casual and often hazardous. They sleep on the pavements, often under bridges or covered walkways such as those leading down to the ferries. Many use concrete pipes, tunnels or other covered empty spaces as a sleeping place.



Children sleeping at the ferry terminal

Most of the children have no birth certificate or National Identity Card, or if they once had one have lost it when they came to stay on the streets. This means that it is very difficult for them to get access to education or health facilities. Some may have attended school before arriving in Dhaka but subsequently have only taken part in outdoor schools organised on the pavements by Non-Government Organisations working with children, such as LEEDO in Dhaka.

Collecting plastic bottles exposes the children to multiple health risks. Collecting waste that is often part of rubbish tips containing many different types of organic and non-organic waste exposes children to accidents, toxic substances, and infections. Lifting large bags containing bottles can result in back problems. Getting proper treatment is almost impossible. Surviving in an environment which is polluted, cold in winter, and often wet in summer can result in respiratory problems. Poor quality food and erratic opportunities for eating can result in a weak immune system, fatigue, and malnutrition. Poor hygiene, with no proper washing facilities, can cause infectious diseases, illnesses such as hepatitis and diarrhoea, skin infections, and tooth decay.

Surviving on the margins of society, without the care from adults that most children receive, exposes children to risks including substance misuse, involvement in criminal activity as both perpetrators and victims, mental health problems, harassment, violence, sexual abuse, and in extreme cases, child trafficking.

[1] Dhaka Tribune 10 Jan 2026





Hafiza

Hafiza is 11 years old. When she was three, she travelled to Dhaka from Barisal, a city on the river about 70 miles to the south. She came with her father and baby brother by launch, a large passenger vessel used for river transport in Bangladesh. Her father brought the children to Dhaka after arguments with his wife. They lived in a slum at first, but eventually could no longer stay there.

Hafiza is now separated from her family. Her mother, brothers, and sisters later came to Dhaka, but she no longer sees them. She has been selling bottled water on the streets for two to three years and, when possible, also collects used bottles to sell for recycling. She sleeps on the platform at Kamalapur Railway Station with other girls, some older and some younger than her. Only girls stay on that platform. They are looked after by an older woman they refer to as the boss.

Hafiza works eight or nine hours a day and usually earns between 300 and 400 taka (about £2). Each day she collects one or two cases of bottled water from a local shop, earning about 40 taka per case. She also sells chocolates, fish, and other small items that she buys from nearby shops and resells at the station. By collecting and selling empty water bottles for recycling, she can earn 30 taka per kilogram. She uses her earnings to buy food, clothes, and hygiene products.

At the station, Hafiza receives food from organisations that distribute meals to the people staying there. During the day, LEEDO provides food to children who attend their school. In the evening, another organisation distributes meals that may include meat, egg, and rice. On days when no organisation provides food, Hafiza buys it from a street food counter using her own money. At times, she struggles to get enough to eat.

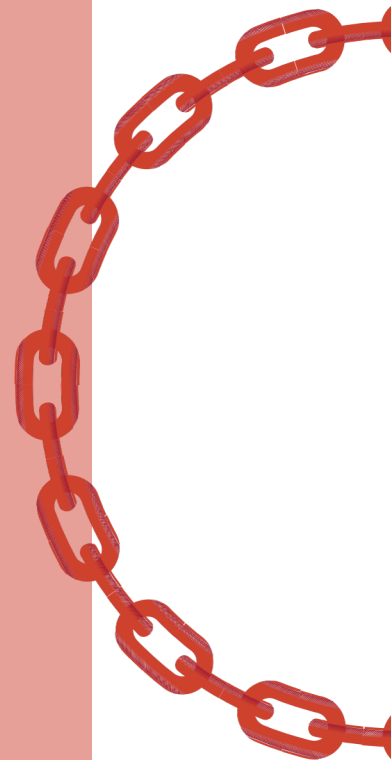
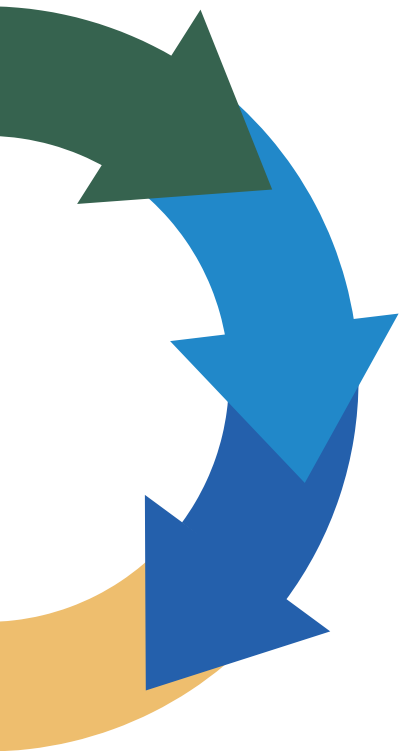
Hafiza stayed for three years at a shelter run by an NGO in Dhaka. During that time, she was admitted to a government primary school. She completed one year in class one but left before entering class two after arguments broke out among the children at the shelter. The staff scolded all the children, and Hafiza says she was beaten. She left the shelter and could no longer continue her schooling. At the station, Hafiza now attends the LEEDO open-air school.

On the street, Hafiza has experienced several health problems. She has suffered infections from sorting through garbage. On one occasion, while playing with friends on the roof of a train, she fell and was badly injured, with bruises on her face and a broken nose. LEEDO took her to the government hospital for treatment.

Hafiza is sometimes harassed by people at the station. Her relationships with shop owners are generally good, though problems arise from time to time. She also gets along well with the other girls, with only occasional arguments, usually about who likes which boy.



Hafiza hopes to get a good job in the future. Her dream is to become a doctor, but if that is not possible, she hopes to work in the garment industry.





Rabbi

Rabbi is 15 years old. He is originally from Mymensingh and came to Dhaka five years ago. He travelled by bus after leaving his family when his father married another woman who refused to care for him. His mother, father, and sister remain in Mymensingh. He does not have a birth certificate.

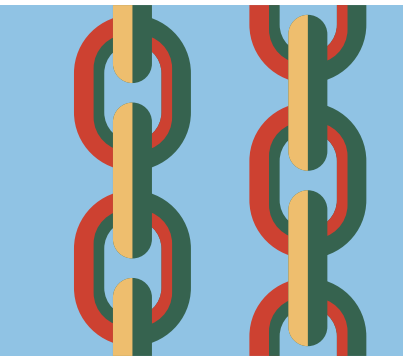
Rabbi used to collect plastic bottles around the station and received 30 taka per kilogram when he sold them for recycling. He did this for two years and typically collected about 5 kg per day, earning around 150 taka. His relationship with the buyer was poor because the buyer sometimes paid him less than he was owed.

Rabbi stopped collecting bottles because of health problems. He developed rashes and painful scabs on his body. He now begs and usually collects about 150 taka per day. With the money he earns, he buys food. If he can save a little more, he hopes to buy water to sell, but so far he has not had the opportunity to do so.

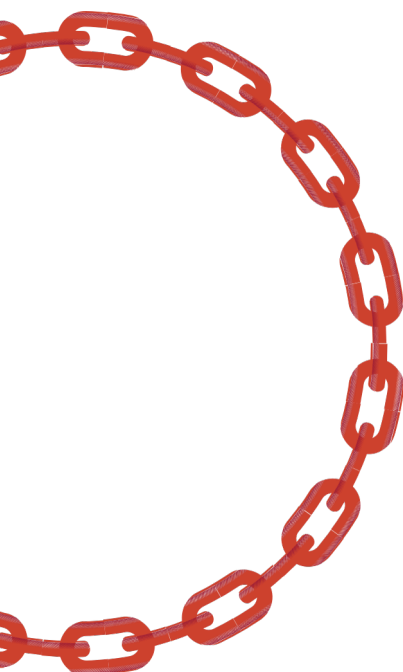
Rabbi sleeps on one of the platforms at the station. There is nobody looking after the children on this platform (i.e. a boss or mastan). Rabbi says he is not friends with the other children there.

On around 10 or 12 occasions, Rabbi has been arrested by the police for stealing. He says that when an incident occurs at the station, the police chase the children instead of searching the whole area. When they catch them, they beat them.

In the future, Rabbi hopes to study and get a good job. He wants to be able to buy better food, medicines, and clothing.



Rabbi at Kamalapur Railway Station, Dhaka





Yeamin

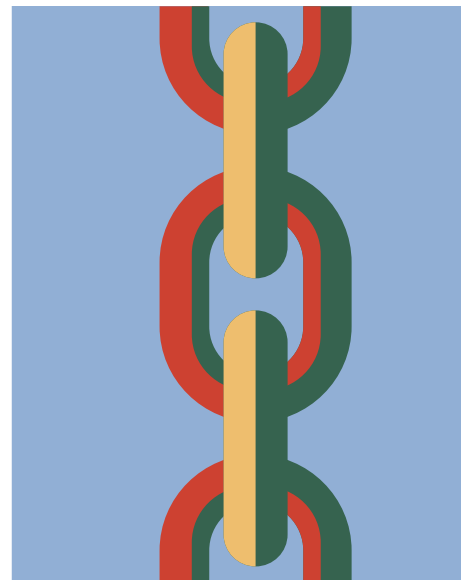
Yeamin is 12 years old. He has been collecting bottles at Sadarghat ferry terminal, where he also sleeps, for the past year. He once suffered a serious leg injury after falling down the stairs of a launch (a large passenger ship).

He came to the ferry terminal from Barisal, a city in the south of Bangladesh, travelling by launch after family arguments. He still visits Barisal every two to three months. His mother is a housewife, and his father works in a shop.

Yeamin gives the bottles he collects to a mastan (a local boss who controls the children working for him). The bottles that are in good condition are refilled with local pump water, while damaged bottles are sent to nearby recycling centres.



Yeamin with empty bottles





Drying plastic flakes

CHAPTER 3

The Sale of Drinks in Plastic Bottles

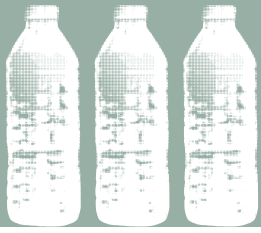
More than 50 brands of bottled water are sold in Bangladesh. These include international brands such as Coca-Cola's Kinley and PepsiCo's Aquafina, as well as national brands such as Pran, Mum (Partex Group), Fresh (Meghna Group), Easy, and Jibon (City Group). They are sold in shops of all sizes, including supermarkets, and some are sold by children on the street. Eventually, bottles from all these brands end up in waste collected from passenger ships, trains, buses, street litter, and garbage dumps. Some bottles are refilled with pump water and sold by children at the ferry terminal, as discussed in the next section of the report.

Bottled drinks begin their journey at bottling plants located across Bangladesh. Many are situated on the outskirts of Dhaka, such as in Narayanganj, while others operate in different parts of the country including Chittagong and Habiganj. From the plants, the drinks are transported to primary distributors, and all major brands have distributors near Dhaka. These distributors supply major wholesalers, who in turn supply secondary wholesalers. Small shops at transport hubs—such as the Dhaka ferry terminal and the main railway stations—buy their stock from these secondary wholesalers. Because secondary wholesalers usually carry only a limited number of brands, the same brands appear consistently in the shops at nearby transport hubs. These are the brands that are usually sold by children on trains, ferries, and at the stations and ferry ports.



Secondary wholesalers' packets of bottles waiting for distribution at Sadarghat ferry terminal





Masumbilla

At Dhaka ferry terminal and at the stations, many small shops sell bottled water such as the one run by Masumbilla. He is originally from Jessore in the far southwest of Bangladesh, where his family still live. He has been in Dhaka for five years and has sold bottled water from the same spot at the ferry terminal for the past two years. He buys water in cases from a wholesaler, who in turn obtains them from another company. He does not visit their office. The bottles are delivered by a three-wheeled cycle fitted with a sturdy flat platform for transporting goods. Masumbilla sells more than 20 cases a day. The brands he sells are Fresh and Pusti.



Md Masumbilla selling water at Sadarghat



Sadarghat-
bottles being
delivered for sale

Some shops at transport hubs sell cases of bottled water to children, who then sell the bottles at the station or terminal, or while travelling on trains and ferries. Many of the children who sell water also sell other items, such as sweets or fruit. To sell water, they usually need enough money to buy an initial case of bottles. If they do not have enough funds, selling bottled drinks becomes an unreliable source of income. Some children work with only one shop, while others buy bottles from several different shops.



Salman

Salman is 20 years old. He sells water from a small shop at Kamalapur railway station and hires children as part of his business. He has been selling water for one and a half years, having come to Dhaka from Comilla—just over 50 miles east of the city—two years ago.

Salman buys water from an office in South Kamalapur run by Saiful, a dealer for Pran. He sells three brands of bottled drinks: Muska, Sun, and Pran. Saiful collects the drinks from another warehouse and sends them to Salman by van—a three-wheeled cycle fitted with a flat platform for transporting goods.

Salman sells between 200 and 300 cases of water per day. He earns 5 taka from each large bottle he sells, buying them for 15 taka and selling them for 20. He hires 7–8 children to sell bottles for him, usually the same group. One child has been working with him for one and a half years, while most stay for about a year. They sell at the station and by travelling on the trains. Most are boys aged 14–15, and according to Salman, some of the boys who buy bottles from him have since set up shops of their own. He is proud that they began by purchasing bottles from him.



Water being delivered to Salman's shop

Children who sell sealed bottled water



Naim

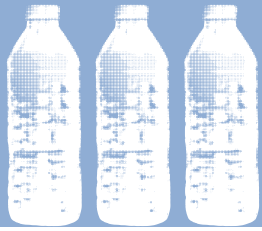
Naim is 16 years old and has lived at Kamalapur station in Dhaka for the past two years. He came to Dhaka alone from Mymensingh, a city about 65 miles north of the capital. In Mymensingh, he was under significant pressure because his parents insisted that he attend a madrassa, a school providing Islamic religious education. He studied there for two years but failed his exam, after which he dropped out and came to Dhaka. His father, mother, and sister still live in Mymensingh.

In Dhaka, Naim sells bottled drinks. He does not collect empty bottles for recycling. He sells water and juice, which he buys from a shop at the station. He earns about 500 taka (just over £3) per day by selling two or three cases of drinks on the platforms and on the trains. He makes a profit of 5 taka (just over 3p) from each bottle he sells. He boards any train at the station without knowing its destination, stays at the station where he arrives, and then returns to Dhaka on the next train.

Naim sleeps on one of the platforms at Dhaka station. He stays alone. He has good relations with other children at the station and mixes with them during the day. When he is in Dhaka, he attends the open-air school at the station run by LEEDO. He has not had any major accidents while selling water but has fallen occasionally. He sometimes takes younger boys to the hospital when they have a fever.



Naim selling bottled water



Jannat Aktar Morium

Morium is 14 years old and has lived in Dhaka since childhood. She was born in Jessore, where her mother, stepfather, and two younger brothers still live, over 100 miles southwest of Dhaka. Morion sometimes travels to Jessore by train. Her stepfather mistreats her, which is why she lives separately from her family. He does not want her.

Morion works as a hawker at the Airport Station. However, at present she does not have enough capital to buy water bottles to sell. She relies on passengers, local people, or organisations at the station to provide her with food. If no one helps her, she often goes without eating. She does not beg, nor does she collect empty bottles for reuse or recycling. When she has money, she sometimes buys food from a street stall at the station.

When she was working regularly as a hawker, Morium would buy cases of bottled water from a nearby shop and sell each bottle for 20 taka. The water was commercially bottled, not pump water. She also sold paan, popcorn, chips, biscuits, sweets, and cigarettes purchased from various shops. At that time, she earned around 400 to 500 taka per day.

On one occasion, Morium received 5,000 taka from an older boy at the station. She used this money to buy goods to sell and made a significant profit. However, when she later visited Jessore to see her sick mother, she gave all her savings to support her mother's treatment. After returning to Dhaka, she no longer had any capital to restart her business.

Morium sleeps on the station platform and in nearby areas. She stays with another girl who is 12 years old. No one looks after them. They eat rice, meat, chicken, and vegetables when available, depending on what they can obtain.

Morium has no regular access to healthcare or formal education. She suffers from skin rashes, colds, and fever. However, she attends a school on the platform run by LEEDO.

She maintains good relationships with the shopkeepers she buys goods from and with other children. When she first arrived at the airport station, she was harassed by other children, but this no longer happens.

Morium's dream is to become a doctor or to find work where she can serve humanity.



Jannat Aktar Morium



Mim

Mim is 10 years old and has been in Dhaka since she was very young. She does not know where she was born and has no birth certificate. Her father is sick, and her mother, who previously worked at the ferry terminal, no longer does so. She has a younger brother who collects bottles. Mim, her mother, father, and brother all stay at the ferry terminal.

Mim does not collect bottles. She sells factory-sealed bottled water for 40 taka per bottle, buying the bottles from various shops. A case of 14 bottles costs 175 taka, and she can sell between 5 and 10 cases a day. She has good relationships with the shop owners she buys from.

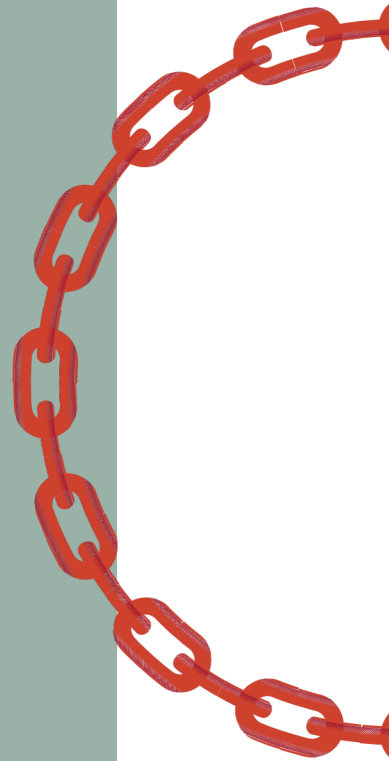
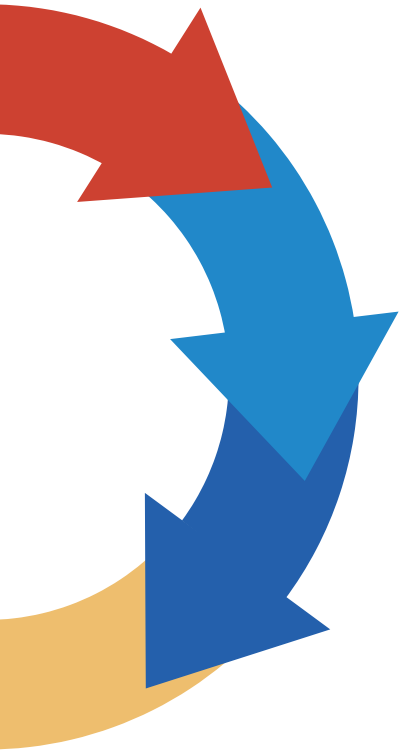
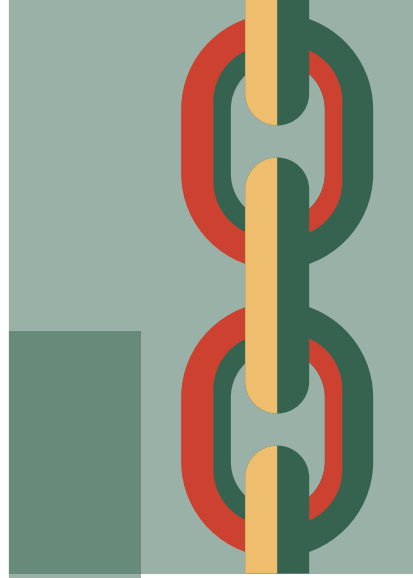
Mim studied up to class 1 at a nearby Government Primary School and now attends the LEEDO school at the terminal. In the future, she wants to continue her education and find a better job, for example as a police officer.

Her main problem at the terminal is that many boys harass her with inappropriate touching, but she says she is a very tough girl. In general, she has a good relationship with the other children. If she is sick, she goes to the nearest pharmacist for help.

Mim has relatives in Barisal, a city in the south of Bangladesh about 112 miles away and a 10-hour ferry journey. She visits about once a month, sometimes alone and sometimes with her parents, and stays with relatives there. She has also travelled to Bhola, a river island near Barisal, with her parents to visit her grandmother.



Mim standing on the bridge at the ferry terminal where she often sleeps





Washing r-PET flakes

CHAPTER 4

Bottle Collection and Reuse

At Sadarghat ferry terminal in Dhaka, plastic bottles that are in good condition are often reused, while only damaged bottles are sent for recycling.

Children collect empty bottles at the terminal, and as passengers disembark, they jump onto the launches to gather the bottles left on board.

Most, though not all, of the children involved in this work have a mastan or boss who supervises them. According to one mastan interviewed, there are 20 to 25 others in this role at Sadarghat. Each typically supervises about five children, although one individual was mentioned who oversaw around 30.

The children sort the bottles, separating the reusable ones and tying them into bundles of ten. Damaged bottles are set aside and sent for recycling. Bottles in good condition are refilled with water from the pump at the terminal, where the operator charges 2 taka for each refill. Once filled, the bottles are sold to passengers as they board the launches in the evening. Pump water can also be purchased on the launches during the journey.



Children sorting collected bottles at Sadarghat



Filling bottles with water for resale



Rita

Rita is one of the supervisors at Sadarghat who oversees children collecting bottles. She lives at the ferry ghat with her husband, her two sons aged 15 and 10, and her two-year-old daughter. Both sons sell water bottles. They studied in a madrasa for two years but are no longer attending. Rita's hometown is near Barisal in south-west Bangladesh, about 440 miles by launch from Dhaka, where she also owns a house.

Rita has lived in Dhaka since she was ten years old and has been selling bottled water for about ten years. At present, in addition to her sons, she has three other children working under her. They collect empty bottles and sell bottles filled with pump water. None of them attend school. The children Rita supervises usually stay for three to six months, and she notes that some children at the ferry terminal are unable to do this work.

For much of the time, Rita and the children she supervises stay on the launch while selling bottled water. When they are not on the launch, the children stay with her at Sadarghat. She sometimes takes them to the nearest hospital if they have health problems, and they also use the first-aid box at LEEDO's school. Rita believes that more centres where children can stay are needed. She says there are many drug-related problems at the terminal, including among very young children.

The number of bottles of pump water sold each day varies by season. In late spring, sales range from 200 to 300 bottles per day. Rita refills bottles of all brands with pump water and finds that Fresh and Pran are the most common. She sells broken bottles once she has about 15 kg, taking them to a shop near Dhaka Medical College Hospital, where she receives 36 taka per kilogram.



Rita and her son with refilled bottles for sale



Mohammed

Mohammed supervises five children who collect empty bottles and sell them after refilling them with pump water. The children receive 30 taka for every ten bottles they collect. All are boys of about 15 years old, including his younger brother.

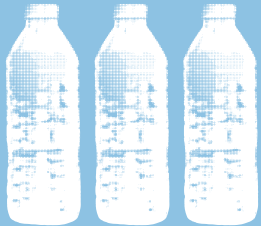
Mohammed reports having good relations with them. He lives nearby, and the children who work for him stay with him and receive their meals from him. He says they do not face problems. Some of the boys used to attend school but no longer do so. A few experience fevers, but he reports no issues with drug use.

Mohammed was born in Dhaka and studied at school up to class 6. Before he began collecting bottles and selling water, he was involved in politics. He started collecting bottles five years ago. He collects only bottles for reuse and recycling and does not have a shop. On average, he collects 200–300 empty bottles each day. In addition to selling pump water at the ferry terminal in the bottles the boys collect, he also buys used bottles from Nintoli, near Dhaka Medical College Hospital, fills them with water, and sells those as well.

Mohammed earns about 4,000 taka (around £25) per day from selling roughly 200 bottles of water. He receives 8 taka per piece for selling damaged empty bottles.

Most of the owners of the small businesses selling refilled bottles, like Mohammed, are men. Boys and girls work for them, though most are boys. Mohammed says he has friendly relations with the other people who collect bottles and sell water, although there is some competition among them.

In the future, Mohammed wants to expand his business. He hopes to open a shop and sell water under his own brand.

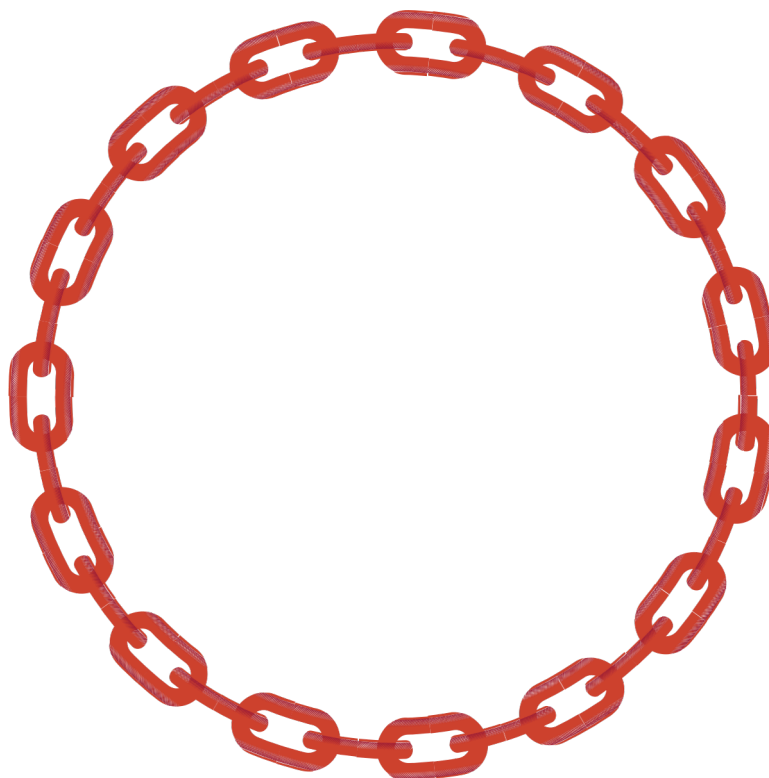


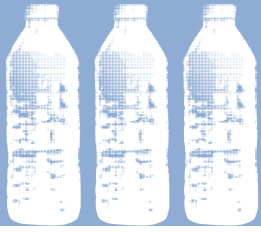
Abu Sattar

Apart from the bottles collected and reused at the ferry terminal, bottles are also collected and reused at Nimtoli (near Dhaka Medical College Hospital), about 2.5 miles from the terminal.

Abu Sattar, originally from Barisal, has lived in Dhaka for 48 years. He owns a shop that he has been running for about 30 years. He buys empty bottles from hawkers who collect them from restaurants, community centres, roads, and transport hubs. People working at the ferry terminal, such as Rita, also supply him with empty bottles when they have a surplus that is not needed for reselling water at the terminal.

He then sells the empty bottles to people who want to fill them with pump water, cooking oil, sugarcane juice, honey, or drinks produced by local beverage makers. He also sells many empty bottles for recycling. About 30% are reused and 70% go for flake production. He receives 40 taka per kilogram for bottles sold for flake production. For bottles reused, he gets 6 taka for a 2-litre bottle, 2 taka for a half-litre bottle, and 4–5 taka for a one-litre bottle. Abu Sattar says there are many shops like his in the area.





Md Kashfi

Md Kashfi is 18 years old and has been working at a shop in Nimtoli for six months. He is a student and continues his studies at a local college. He comes to the shop every day and works from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. The shop buys and sells many items obtained from hawkers, including old plastic bottles, glass bottles, and spray cans. They mainly sell the plastic bottles to a recycling company for flake production. Members of the public buy the glass bottles. The spray cans are sold to shops, filled with gas, and then used to refill cigarette lighters.



Nimtoli- waste bottles for recycling

Children who collect bottles for reuse



M. Arafat

Arafat is 10 years old. He studied up to class 2 in a government primary school in Patuakhali, where he was born. (Patuakhali is a district town in Barisal Division in the south of Bangladesh.)

He has been in Dhaka for about four years. He came because his stepmother used to beat him, and he no longer has contact with his family.

In Dhaka, Arafat stays inside the river ferry port at Sadarghat. He stays with Mohammed, described above, who is a type of boss or mastan overseeing the children who work under him. Arafat, Mohammed, and the other children often sleep on a nearby boat where empty bottles are sorted, or in other places inside the terminal. Arafat does not regularly travel on passenger ships to different towns; he stays at Sadarghat most of the time.

Arafat collects empty bottles. When passenger ships arrive at the terminal, he boards them to collect bottles left behind by passengers. He works alone rather than as part of a group. He does not collect bottles that cannot be refilled. Each day he earns 150–200 taka from selling bottles that have been filled with pump water. He only sells water from the pump and does not sell sealed factory-produced bottled water.

At the terminal, Mohammed looks after Arafat. Arafat says Mohammed is like an uncle, a brother, and a boss. Four other children work with him, and they all get on well together. Mohammed provides them with food bought from a nearby street-food stall. Every day Arafat has breakfast of paratha, dhal, and vegetables; lunch of rice and beef; and dinner of rice, alu bharta (spiced mashed potato with oil) and dhal.

Arafat's health is good, and he has not had any accidents. If he becomes sick, Mohammed gives him money for treatment and medicine.

In the future, Arafat would like to work at a street-food stall.



M. Arafat and Mohammed at Sadarghat



Imtiaj

Imtiaj is fourteen years old. He was born in Chittagong and came to Dhaka four or five years ago, alone and without a specific reason. Since then, he has not returned to Chittagong, where his three sisters and one brother still live.

In Chittagong, Imtiaj had a birth certificate, but he no longer has it. He attended a large government primary school and studied up to class 2.

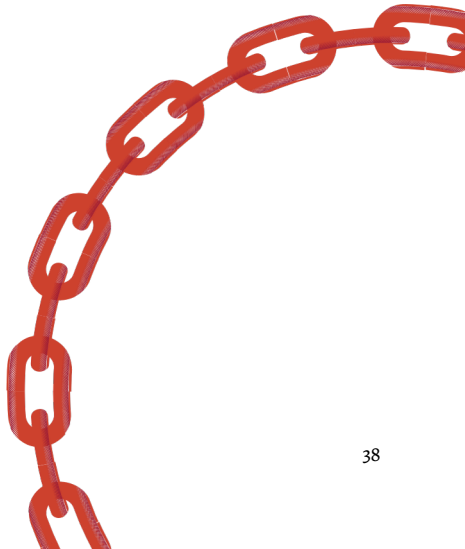
In Dhaka, he works at the ferry terminal and on the launches for about eleven hours a day. He collects 50–60 empty water bottles from passenger boats as they arrive at the terminal. The bottles are reused by filling them with pump water, and he earns around 200–300 taka a day by selling them. He also earns a small amount from selling damaged bottles to scrap centres.

Imtiaj says his customers can easily tell the difference between factory-sealed water and pump water, which is sold at half the price. He only sells water and nothing else. He works for a boss (mastan) at the ferry terminal, along with about thirty other boys. They generally get along, although there are occasional quarrels. The mastan provides them with food. Unlike many children working under a mastan, they do not sleep in the same place, even though they all stay at the terminal. Imtiaj describes the mastan as being like an older brother—he does not beat or scold him.

Imtiaj attends a centre for children on the other side of the river, where he receives some education. He also occasionally goes to the LEEDO school at the terminal. These centres support him when he has health problems, such as breathing difficulties from smoke, and when he was injured in a fire.

He has travelled to different places on the launches and especially likes Bhola, a river island in the southwest of Bangladesh, where he has friends. In the future, he hopes to find a better job.

Intiaj collecting bottles
on a launch





Tania

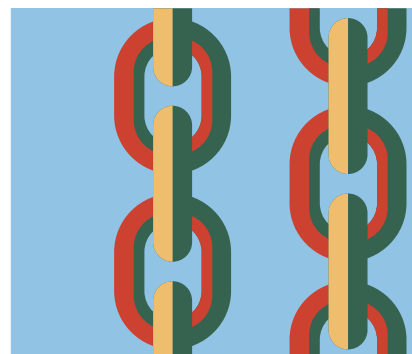
Tania is 14 years old. She was born in Dhaka at the Sadarghat ferry terminal, but she has no birth certificate. Her father died when she was seven. Her mother sells bottled water, and the family lives in a slum. Tania has two older brothers who work in garment factories. Her elder sister is married, and her younger sister is four years old.

Tania has been collecting bottles and selling water since early childhood. She does not do any other work. She collects bottles, refills them with pump water, and sells them for 20 taka each, selling about 30 bottles a day. She also collects 2–3 kg of damaged bottles daily, which she sells to the nearest waste shop for recycling at about 35 taka per kilogram. Tania does not work under a mastan. She gives all the money she earns to her mother to support the family.

At the ferry terminal, Tania faces harassment, and the guards sometimes beat her when she sleeps there. At night she occasionally develops a fever. She seeks help for health problems from a nearby pharmacy.

Tania has good relationships with other children at the terminal and with the people she sells waste plastic to. In the future, she wants to be a nurse or a doctor.

Tania at Sadarghat





Plastic flakes being put in sacks for sale

CHAPTER 5

Bottle Collection and Recycling

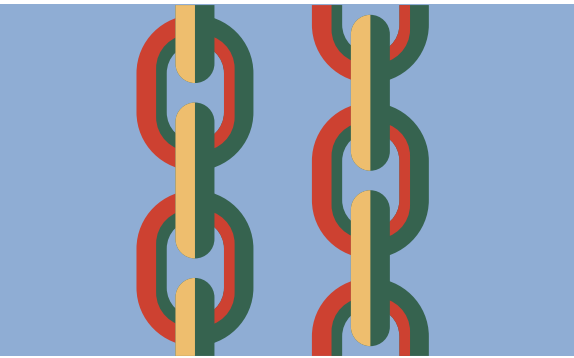
Children who collect empty plastic bottles on the street take these to the numerous shops located near the stations and in other parts of Dhaka, such as Nimtoli and Lalbagh. The mastans who supervise children reselling bottles containing pump water also take the damaged bottles that their children collect to these shops. From the shops, the bottles are taken to larger centres where they are made into r-PET (recycled polyethylene terephthalate) flakes and pellets. They begin a journey that can take them to many different countries and to be used in a wide range of products containing recycled plastic.



Ashraful Islam

Ashraful Islam, who is 60 years old, runs a plastic bottle collection shop. He started working there a few months ago. He sleeps at the shop. He is the only worker at the shop, which is owned by somebody who owns just one business and lives in a village outside Dhaka.

Each day, seven to eight people bring bottles they have collected to sell at Ashraful's shop. As well as bottles, they sell paper they have collected. They collect from the station, schools, streets, parks, bus stands, and various places nearby. Ashraful buys the bottles for 32 taka per kg and sells them for 35 taka per kg. He sells the bottles in Gazipur and Kamrapara to larger factories, but he does not know for sure what they do with them. He does some sorting of the bottles into different types of plastic, and he separates the caps before taking them to the factory for processing.



Ashraful Islam - bottle collection shop at the Airport Station



Siam, who is 16 years old, has been working at a bottle collection shop near the airport station for four years. The shop has been running for 25 years. It is owned by his uncle, who owns only this shop. He employs Siam to work there, and in future Siam hopes that he might become the owner. Siam works alone and stays in a residential colony in Dhaka. Before starting work, he studied to class 3 in a government primary school. He originally came from Noakhali and has been in Dhaka for four years.

About 50–60 people per week, including children, bring bottles that they have collected to sell at the shop. They collect their bottles from the street, the station, and other nearby places. Every day, Siam collects 60–80 kg. He sells the bottles in Tongi. He sells to one large bottle collection factory. There are other similar factories nearby.



Siam- bottle collection shop near airport station

The factories where the shops take waste plastic bottles process them into r-PET flakes. They remove any remaining caps and labels, then shred the bottles into small pieces, wash them thoroughly, and dry the clean fragments to produce uniform flakes. Some of these flakes are melted and filtered to form r-PET pellets or resin, while others are further processed into recycled polyester staple fibre (PSF) and recycled filament yarn. Most r-PET flakes produced in Bangladesh are sent by the large factories that make them to be converted into PSF and other textile-industry products. Some flakes are made into pellets and resin for use in plastic products, including food packaging.

PET Link

PET Link purchases green and clear waste PET bottles. They separate the bottles, remove the labels, and then crush, cut, wash, and dry the material to produce clean flakes. The company sells these PET flakes both locally and internationally. Their customers include manufacturers of bottles and jars, as well as producers of polyester staple fibre (PSF).



PET Link: sorting plastic, cutting, washing and packing

Muntaha Global Trading

Muntaha Global Trading, located in Demra near Narayanganj, collects plastic bottles from Kamalpur Railway Station and various other sources. They manufacture PET flakes for export, including to Vietnam and the USA. They also supply PET flakes to local companies that produce fibre for both export markets and domestic use.



Jayrul Islam

Jayrul Islam founded a garbage company in the 1980s in Nimtoli, Dhaka. Hawkers bring bottles and card to his shop for recycling, collecting them from Sadarghat ferry terminal, hotels, parks, the streets, and other nearby places. The bottles are then taken to a factory in Kamrangirchar, where they are broken into pieces and processed into pellets or flakes. These recycled plastics are used to make a range of products for the local market, including bowls, tumblers, mop buckets, jewellery, balls, and toys. The company does not export flakes.



Jaydul Islam at his shop



Ridoy

Ridoy works at a small factory in Lalbagh. He collects waste plastic from the ferry terminal waste collection shops. It is cut, washed, and turned into pellets. These pellets are sold to the RFL company, one of Bangladesh's largest manufacturing conglomerates, producing over 5,500 products across plastics, furniture, pipes, and consumer goods. RFL is also a major global exporter through brands such as RFL Houseware and Travello.



Ridoy at factory in Lalbagh

Most food packaging in Bangladesh is made from 100% imported virgin polymer with no recycled content. This is because producing r-PET that meets the standard for beverage bottles requires a far more demanding purification process than other r-PET applications. However, rising import costs, requirements from overseas beverage buyers to include recycled content, pressure to demonstrate environmental impact reductions, and the growing availability of food-grade r-PET resin in Bangladesh are all driving increased interest among beverage producers in using locally produced r-PET.

In Bangladesh, the BPCL company produces r-PET resin that is then used in bottles produced for brands such as Coca-Cola and Pepsi (for example, Kinley water). Akij Food & Beverage Ltd. (AFBL) currently uses its own food-grade r-PET to produce bottles containing 20–40% recycled content and aims to steadily increase this share. Both these companies obtain the empty bottles they use for recycling

from the same waste bottle collection sources as all the other companies that use r-PET in the production of recycled products in Bangladesh. One interviewee suggested that some companies may use locally produced r-PET that does not formally meet the standards required for food and beverage packaging to manufacture food and drink containers.

The dominant use of r-PET flakes originating from Bangladesh is the production of polyester fibre (PSF). PSF is widely used in apparel (sportswear, casual wear, outdoor wear), home textiles (carpets, curtains, cushions, upholstery), and industrial textiles (ropes, conveyor belts, and more). While some r-PET flakes are used domestically to produce PSF fibre, most are exported for PSF production overseas.

Bangladesh is one of the world's largest apparel producers and manufactures a range of other textiles, including home textiles. The sector remains overwhelmingly cotton-dominant, although global shifts in demand are increasing the importance of man-made fibres. Factories in Bangladesh typically import virgin PSF (produced from non-recycled PET) for use in their products, but brands are increasingly requiring higher levels of recycled content. r-PET flakes produced in Bangladesh are largely exported because the country has limited large-scale polymerisation and spinning capacity to use recycled PET for PSF production. Strong financial incentives for exporting PET flakes reinforce this pattern.

There are probably only six or seven companies producing PSF in Bangladesh from locally supplied r-PET. They were established in the late 2010s and early 2020s, especially when China reduced its imports of r-PET flakes from Bangladesh. These companies include Rashni Polyfibres Ltd, Maliha Polytex Fibre, and Mumanu Group. Their suppliers include one of the r-PET producers described above.

These companies supply some recycled polyester staple fibre to international buyers in countries such as Pakistan, India, and China. Some higher-grade PSF is supplied to local spinning mills, where it is used to produce yarn for both local and export-oriented garment manufacturing. Lower-grade material is typically used for applications such as coat padding, pillow filling, and the production of PSF-filled geobags. These geobags are used for purposes such as stabilising river embankments, mitigating flood impacts, and creating temporary barriers at construction sites.

In Bangladesh, one of the PSF producers visited had stopped producing higher-grade PSF because it could not meet the required technical standards. They all said that they had multiple suppliers of r-PET flakes from across Bangladesh. They supplied spinning mills and garment factories such as Square Group, DBL, and Zaber & Zuber. One mentioned that brands including American Eagle, IKEA, Next, Primark, and H&M contained PSF that they produced. This information is not publicly disclosed.

A significant share of the recycled PET flakes produced in Bangladesh is exported. Many of the exporting firms, including Muntaha Global Trading, are members of the Bangladesh Pet Flake

Manufacturing and Exporting Association (BPFMEA), which currently has 104 members. Membership provides a certificate that enables companies to access a government export subsidy, now set at 6% (previously 10%), which is added to the value received upon export. This subsidy creates a strong financial incentive to export PET flakes, reinforced by the comparatively higher costs and operational complexity involved in producing recycled-PET-based goods within Bangladesh.

Among BPFMEA members, roughly 80% of the PET flakes they produce are exported, while around 20% are sold within Bangladesh. Export destinations include China, India, Pakistan, Vietnam, Brazil, South Korea, the USA, Singapore, the UK, and Germany. Vietnam is currently the largest market, receiving about 70% of exports. Until 2018, China was the primary destination, but it sharply reduced PET flake imports from Bangladesh. Some flakes are now exported to China again, provided they are high quality and hot-washed. Today, around 20% of flakes go to China, compared with approximately 90% previously.

Only companies seeking to access the government's export subsidy tend to join BPFMEA. Many exporters are not members — possibly as many as 200 firms, including companies such as PET LINK. In addition, there are an estimated 400–500 companies that supply PET flakes exclusively to the local market.

All PET flakes exported from Bangladesh are produced from domestically collected plastic waste. The vast majority—around 95%—are made from discarded plastic bottles. Bangladesh exports an estimated 30–40 thousand metric tonnes of PET flakes each year, with a total value of roughly 150 million dollars.

Vietnam is one of the countries that import PET flakes from Bangladesh. While the specific Vietnamese companies importing from Bangladesh are not publicly disclosed, firms such as Hop Thanh Co. and Nam Vang Ha Nam manufacture polyester staple fibre (PSF) using imported PET flakes and supply both domestic and international markets. As in Bangladesh, PSF produced in Vietnam is spun into thread for the garment industry. Major global brands — including Nike, Adidas, H&M, and Zara — source garments from Vietnam, as well as from China, India, and other major importers of r-PET flakes from Bangladesh. One interviewee suggested that some r-PET flakes exported from Bangladesh may eventually return to the country in the form of processed PSF for use in the Bangladeshi textile sector.

Internationally, several certifiable standards exist to verify recycling practices, and many companies in Bangladesh are certified under these schemes. These standards ensure that claims about the use of recycled materials in manufactured goods are credible. The Global Recycled Standard (GRS) applies to any product containing at least 20% recycled content and provides full traceability back to the origin of the materials, including when they come from different countries. It also requires compliance with environmental, social, and chemical criteria at every production facility in the supply chain. This includes strict prohibitions on child labour and the exploitation of children.

Another international recycling standard is the Recycled Claim Standard (RCS), which focuses solely on the traceability of recycled materials and does not include environmental, social, or chemical requirements for production facilities. In Bangladesh, many garment factories supplying major international brands such as H&M, Zara (Inditex), and Next hold GRS certification. However, many factories including some listed as Primark suppliers are certified only under the RCS.

These certificates are intended to assure consumers that recycled materials are genuine and produced in line with defined ethical standards. However, they have important limitations. Most notably, they do not cover informal waste collectors. For GRS certification, assessment begins only once plastic enters a formal facility for sorting, washing, shredding, baling, or trading PET flakes. Even among these facilities— including those visited during this study — many are not GRS accredited, despite later supplying GRS-certified factories. Accredited factories may also mix flakes from multiple suppliers, some certified and others not. The risk of fake or misleading documentation further complicates the integrity of the GRS accreditation process. One of the PSF producers, who said that the PSF they produce is used by brands such as IKEA, Primark, and H&M, said of their suppliers of r-PET: “They do not have any certification. Even in some cases, they do not have any trading licence.”

The quality assurance systems used for recycled products do not extend far enough to cover the children who collect bottles. As a result, any goods manufactured with r-PET flakes may contain plastic originally gathered by children who are forced to work in order to survive. These children remain invisible within, and exploited by, the recycling supply chains that support global brands.

What some brands sourcing from Bangladesh — and from countries that import its r-PET flakes — say about their use of recycled polyester

The Adidas logo is displayed in a blue, sans-serif font. It is centered within a rectangular area that has a light green, marbled background. The logo consists of the word "Adidas" in its characteristic typeface.

“In 2025, 99% of all polyester used in our products was made from recycled content.....In 2024, we set ourselves a new, more ambitious target for recycled polyester: to transition from using recycled plastic bottles to using recycled textile waste as feedstock”.

<https://www.adidas-group.com/en/sustainability/planet/materials>



H and M

“Polyester is a very durable synthetic material that is derived from fossil fuels. We use it in some garments, such as performance materials in sportswear. Overall, 22% of the material we use is polyester. 99% of it is recycled.”

https://www2.hm.com/en_gb/sustainability-hm/envernonmental-inpact/materials.html?msocid=19d64b9b2cd66d9b1fae5fd12df16c7f

IKEA

“Twenty-five discarded, recycled PET-bottles are used to create the matte black surfaces on each KUNGSBACKA (kitchen) front.”

<https://www.ikea.com/bh/en/this-is-ikea/sustainable-everyday/only-recycled-or-renewable-based-plastic-in-ikea-products-by-2030-pubcb607171/?utm>

Nike

““Our recycled polyester is made from plastic bottles which are cleaned, shredded into flakes, converted into pellets, and then spun into a high-quality yarn”

<https://www.nike.com/sustainability/materials?msocid=19d64b9b2cd66d9b1fae5fd12df16c7f>

The Zara logo is displayed in a blue serif font against a light green, textured background.

“Nowadays, recycled polyester is mainly made from PET plastic waste. This is a type of plastic that is widely used in a variety of items, such as plastic bottles. Using recycled materials helps limit the production of virgin polyester fibre. It is certified to the Recycled Claim Standard (RCS), which verifies the recycled content and tracks it from source to final product.”

<https://www.zara.com/ww/en/embroidered-gauze-shirt-p00881013.html?v1=495712114>

Children, in addition to those previously described, who collect bottles for recycling



Mohammed Siam

Siam is 12 years old. He came to Dhaka from Mymensingh two years ago, travelling alone because of conflicts at home. His stepmother used to mistreat him. He has a brother and two sisters who still live in Mymensingh, but he no longer has contact with them. He does not have his birth certificate in Dhaka because it remains in his home district.

Siam used to collect empty water bottles on the platforms and around the station, but he no longer does this. Cleaners hired through private contractors now collect the bottles, and the railway authorities restrict children from doing so. In the past, Siam collected 5 to 6 kg of empty bottles per day and earned 30 taka per kg by selling them to a shop in Kamalapur.

Today Siam sells bottled water and juice on the streets. He sells popular brands such as Kinley, Pran, Jibon, Fresh and Muskan, which he buys in cases from local shops. He does not sell bottles that have been filled with pump water. He works 8 or 9 hours a day.

Siam sleeps on one of the station platforms with his friends. There are no older people looking after them. Organisations such as LEEDO come to the station and give them food. At other times he eats from a local street food stall, usually buying paratha and dal. He cannot afford anything else. He eats once a day in the evening, except when organisations provide food. With the money he earns, he can only afford food.

Lack of washing facilities at the station means that Siam has had infections. He must pay 20 taka to use public washing facilities. If he has any health problems, he goes to a local medical centre, and LEEDO also arranges for doctors to visit their open-air school.

Siam's relationships with other children at the station are good, although there are sometimes small arguments about food and where to sleep. His relationships with shopkeepers are also good, though disputes arise when shopkeepers give him less money than they should.

Siam did not go to school in Mymensingh. He has only attended the LEEDO open-air school. In the future, he wants to have a good job, such as becoming an engineer, and he would like to learn to drive so he can become a CNG driver. With more money, he says he could afford shoes and better clothes.



Mohammed Siam



Mohammed Hridoy Hasan

Hasan is 14 years old. He was born in Dhaka and has lived there all his life. His father is alive, but his mother has died. He has no contact with his father or any other relatives. He once had a brother, but he also died.

Hasan used to collect empty bottles at the airport railway station, but he no longer does this regularly. Now he earns money by carrying luggage for passengers. Sometimes he still collects empty bottles on trains. He has travelled by train to many stations across Bangladesh. He also sells bottled water on trains. The water comes from bottling factories, not from pumps.

Hasan buys bottled water from various shops, paying 280–290 taka for a case. He then sells the bottles to passengers or nearby tea stalls, making a profit of about 8 taka per bottle.

When he collects empty bottles, he earns around 30 taka for every 100 kg he brings to a local collection point. These bottles are later sold to a large factory in Tongi, near Dhaka.

Hasan sleeps at the airport station or on nearby streets. Sometimes he stays at Kamalapur station in central Dhaka or at other stations such as Rajshahi and Rangpur in the north of Bangladesh. He does whatever work he can find, including collecting bottles and carrying heavy loads. He does not beg because he dislikes it. On average, he earns between 100 and 150 taka per day.

He spends most of his money on food. He eats rice from local street stalls and sometimes buys meat, chicken, fish, and alu bharta.

After his mother died, his father remarried. His stepmother did not want him, so he could no longer live with his family. As a result, he came to live at the station, where no one looks after him. The other children there are like his brothers, and they stay together.

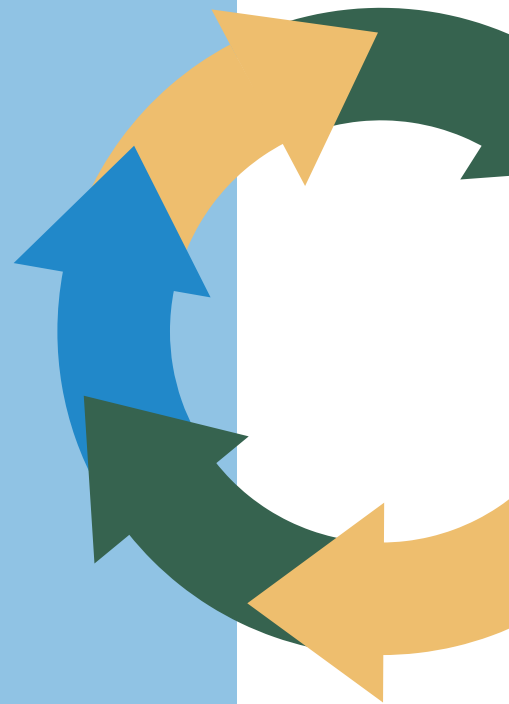
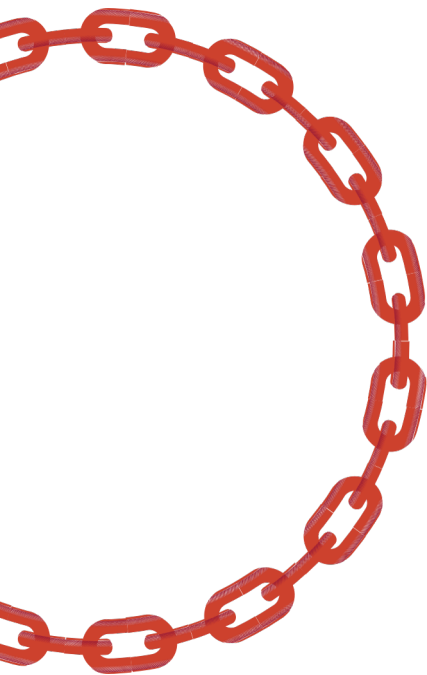
At times, Hasan feels cold at the station, and his body aches. He is often bitten by mosquitoes. Once, he had an accident when a rickshaw ran over his foot while he was sleeping on the street. Sometimes he smokes cigarettes and sniffs glue (Dandi), which he buys from shops at the station or nearby hardware stores.

His relationships with other children are generally good, although there are occasional arguments over sleeping spaces and work. He also has good relationships with the shop owners who buy bottles, as they weigh them fairly and pay the correct price.

In the future, Hasan hopes to find stable work, such as running a business. He would like to live in a flat and earn enough money to pay the rent. He does not want to spend the rest of his life living at the station.



Mohammed Hridoy Hasan





R-PET flakes

CHAPTER 6

Conclusion and Recommendations

The children portrayed in this report are living in conditions that no child should endure in the 21st century. They survive without basic care from parents or a recognised guardian, and without reliable access to food, shelter, health care, education or training. They are easily exploited and abused — financially, emotionally and sexually.

These children play a significant role in three multi-billion-dollar sectors of the global economy:

- The sale of beverages in plastic bottles (estimated at USD 256.2 billion)[i]
- The plastic recycling industry (estimated at USD 47–60 billion)[ii]
- The production of goods such as textiles, packaging and bottles that include r-PET (estimated at USD 12–17 billion)[iii]

These sectors are represented by well-known brands selling to consumers worldwide, creating a chain of connections between the brands, the public and children surviving on the streets.

Globally, numerous organisations and initiatives — including WRAP (Waste and Resources Action Programme), the Ellen MacArthur Foundation and the European Plastics Pact — promote the reduced use of virgin plastic in consumer products and increased use of recycled plastic. Yet none of them acknowledge or address the situation of children surviving on the street who collect much of the plastic that enters recycling streams. Certification schemes such as the Global Recycled Standard aim to assure consumers that recycled materials are authentic and ethically produced, but they too exclude the first stage of collection, where children are among the primary gatherers of waste plastic.

In the global labour movement, several organisations work to strengthen protections for workers across different industries. These include UNI Global Union, which describes itself as “pushing for a shift in power from multinational corporations to the cleaners, care workers...”, the IUF, which organises workers across the food chain, IndustriALL Global Union, the primary global union for the garment and textile sector, the Clean Clothes Campaign (CCC), an NGO focused on garment-worker rights, and the Fair Wear Foundation, which works with brands to improve factory labour conditions. Yet none of these organisations address the situation of children who sell bottled water on the street or collect waste that becomes raw material for industries such as textiles.

The main recommendation from this report is therefore that the position of children on the streets, working so that they can survive, should be recognised rather than ignored. As LEEDO argues in its vision statement, all members of society should take responsibility for protecting children living on the streets and helping them build a brighter future. Some organisations should take specific action:

- Advocates for increased recycling should acknowledge and address the situation faced by children who are part of the first link in the recycling chain
- Recycling certification standards should explicitly recognise and protect the children who work as collectors at the start of the recycling process
- Labour rights organisations should incorporate action to prevent the exploitation of children working on the streets in the sectors they cover
- Companies representing bottled drink brands should support programmes that improve the living conditions, health and education of children who sell bottled drinks and collect the waste generated. This includes using existing corporate social responsibility programmes, where no initiatives could currently be found that specifically help children on the street.
- Brands that use recycled plastic components such as r PET flakes and PSF should also support programmes to improve the position of children surviving on the street, including through corporate social responsibility initiatives. They should be explicit about the role these children play in the production of their brands and what they propose to do to improve their situation.
- UK trusts and foundations whose purpose includes relief of poverty overseas should give greater priority to relieving the position of children surviving on the streets.
- Governments and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that provide services to children should ensure that they reach and meet the needs of children on the streets.

Organisations that provide services to children, and manage facilities at places such as stations and ferry terminals where they stay, should:

- Take account of the different situations of children on the street when developing services and modernising facilities, including the different types of work they undertake in different locations.
- Develop services and modernise facilities in consultation with the children who will be affected.
- Recognise that some children frequently move to different parts of the country by train or ferry and ensure that services such as shelters and education provision take account of this mobility.
- Recognise that the priority for most children is to earn enough money to survive. Older children could be formally recognised for the work they do selling beverages and collecting waste bottles, with enhanced income, better and safer working conditions. This could include schemes that help children with the initial investment needed to buy goods to sell.

- Recognise that if existing informal ways of earning money are prevented by authorities, children may be forced into activities that place them at greater risk and are regarded as more anti-social — for example prostitution, criminal activity or begging.
- Ensure that if informal income earning arrangements become unviable — for example, if informal waste bottle collection at rail stations is replaced by formal contract workers — children can either be included in the new arrangements or supported with safe alternatives that allow them to survive.
- Develop local, community-based services that reduce the risk of children fleeing their families and communities to come to the streets of Dhaka.
- Provide opportunities such as training and accommodation options that enable children to move from survival on the streets into work and stable housing.
- Ensure that all children, including those surviving on the streets, have their rights recognised under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. This includes their rights to be heard, to birth registration, to food, shelter, protection, education and health care.

[i] Business Research Insights (2026) Beverage Plastic Bottle Market Size, Share, Growth, and Industry Analysis, Global Forecast to 2035. Available at: <https://www.businessresearchinsights.com>

[ii] Expert Market Research (2025) Recycled plastics market report and forecast 2025–2034. Available at: <https://www.expertmarketresearch.com/reports/recycled-plastics-market>;

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[iii] Business Research Insights (2023) Recycled PET (rPET) Market Size, Share, Growth, and Forecast 2023–2035. Available at: <https://www.businessresearchinsights.com>;

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- “In Different Experiences There are Different Perspectives” (Bangla). Nagree Publications. 2018.
- “The Time of British Empire: A Different Story: The Life of Amos Sherriff” (Bangla). Nagree Publications. 2022
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