

## The Status, Challenges, and Expectations of Homeless People in Ethiopia: A Case Study of Bahir Dar

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### Abstract:

*People spending night on streets, under open sky or some un-owned covered public or commercial spaces in the night is a common feature of cities and fast growing towns of the poor countries in Africa. The demand for urban housing accelerates with the burgeoning urban population due to a very high increasing rate of rural-urban migration. Extreme poverty is a factor that leads to homelessness. These urban homeless spent their life in misery and also affect the urban environment badly. The present study is based on the empirical data obtained from a survey conducted in Bahir Dar town of Ethiopia. The field survey tools like questionnaire, focus group discussion and interview were employed to generate the primary data. Random sampling technique was employed for the questionnaire survey. Secondary data was also the obtained from various sources. The collected data was statistically analysed. The study assessed the demographic description, physical appearance, educational status, social life, their family background and the reason for homelessness, health, source of income, responsibility of the society towards them, their problems and their expectations from the government.*

**Key words:** Homeless, Street dwellers, Urban Poor, Bahir Dar, Ethiopia

## **Introduction**

Homelessness describes the condition of people without a regular dwelling. Maybe at a first sight this doesn't seem to be a big problem but in fact homelessness is becoming a common phenomenon across the globe. An estimated 100 million people worldwide were homeless in 2005. Africa in general and Ethiopia in particular (being among the poorest country) faces this problem, which leads to a number of people who find their shelter in temporary accommodation. Children, old or young, who lack a fixed place due to lack of money to afford a shelter, thrive in open parks, motors, bus or train stations, abandoned buildings, market streets, camping grounds or road sides. Defining one common term for these phenomena is itself a big problem. Shelterless is not accepted by most of them, nor homeless; rather they prefer to call themselves houseless; 'street people' poses strict limitations by limiting this activity only up to the streets (may be largely confined over there) and leaving out the other place of shelters.

The scope of this term is also full of variations according to the perception of the countries and organizations. As per the United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2004), the homeless are those households which are without a shelter that would fall within the scope of living quarters. They carry their few possessions with them, sleeping in the streets, in doorways or on piers, or in another space, on a more or less random basis. Canadian Homelessness Research Network (2014) gives a comprehensive definition and classification: Homelessness describes a range of housing and shelter circumstances, with people being without any shelter at one end, and being insecurely housed at the other. Homelessness encompasses a range of physical living situations, organized here in a *typology* which includes 1) Unsheltered, or absolutely homeless and living on the streets or in places not intended for human habitation; 2) Emergency Sheltered, including those staying in overnight shelters for people who are homeless, as

well as shelters for those impacted by family violence; 3) Provisionally accommodated, referring to those whose accommodation is temporary or lacks security of tenure, and finally, 4) At risk of Homelessness, referring to people who are not homeless, but whose current economic and/or housing situation is precarious or does not meet public health and safety standards. It should be noted that for many people homelessness is not a static state but rather a fluid experience, where one's shelter circumstances and options may shift and change quite dramatically and with frequency. The present study is focused on the first category of homeless people, mentioned as "unsheltered, or absolutely homeless" in Bahir Dar town.

Increasing Rural-urban migration is a common phenomenon throughout the globe but it is largely pronounced in the African context. Rapidly increasing rural population and deterioration of natural resources have brought the rural resources under such pressure that in most of the cases it is unable to carry further the load of burgeoning population- the outcome is migration towards urban centers. It is the common situation of Africa as a whole, and particularly of Ethiopia. Along with food and clothing, housing is also a basic necessity for humans. Housing has both economical and social significance. These migrants manage food and cloth but shelter becomes a big challenge. A permanent shelter is necessary as it provides a conducive environment for an individual or family to live and grow, and be a part of the society. It is also a must for the healthy urban environment.

The demand for housing is high as the urbanisation is on increase. The gap between urbanisation and housing increases with the population growth. Homelessness is a serious problem observed across Ethiopia. This is occurring due to the inflow of population to urban centers like Bahir Dar, in search of employment or commodities for a living.

Bahir Dar is capital of 'Amhara National Region State',

one among the nine national regions of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (East Africa) and one of the fastest growing city of Ethiopia (BMC-2012). Being the capital of the state and a big tourist and religious center, it has a big potential to attract a huge number of rural population from the surrounding areas including poor, disabled, uncared oldies, unemployed youth and children. They work as shoe shine boys, washing cars, sell lottery tickets, magazines, or newspapers, carry goods, peddle cigarettes or chewing gum and begging. These people are then developing the problems of addiction to drugs, alcohol, delinquency and thus affecting the environment of the town.

The children and youth living on the streets suffer from poor health, malnutrition, physical violence, psychological trauma, and the hostility of the public. They enter adulthood with little education, training or means of supporting themselves other than what they have learned from the hardships of street life (David F. 2014).

## **Methodology**

Descriptive research design using survey method was employed for the study. In lack of any reliable data of the number and distribution of the homeless population in the town, a reconnaissance survey was conducted to identify the places where homeless people are spending their night. It was observed during reconnaissance that they are not scattered everywhere in the town. Most of the residential kebeles were almost free of them. May be because of the night guards of the kebeles, they were largely confined to Kebele 5 and 6, around the St Georges church, the bus station, the commercial area of the town and around the streets where most of the night clubs are located.

Five such clusters were purposively selected, depending upon the larger number of the homeless population. Fifty five

individuals were surveyed giving proportionate representation to their age and sex. A questionnaire with open and close ended questions was developed and pre-tested before survey. Four focus group discussions were conducted, two among the homeless groups and two among the house dwellers, specially adjoints to the homeless concentration sites. Eight resource persons from concerned departments (5) and social activities (3) were interviewed using semi structured questionnaire.

The secondary information was collected from the concern government departments, library of Bahir Dar University and from some NGO working in the area. The collected data were subjected to data analysis using descriptive statistical techniques.

## **Results and Discussion**

The data obtained by the survey were analysed and discussed hereunder:

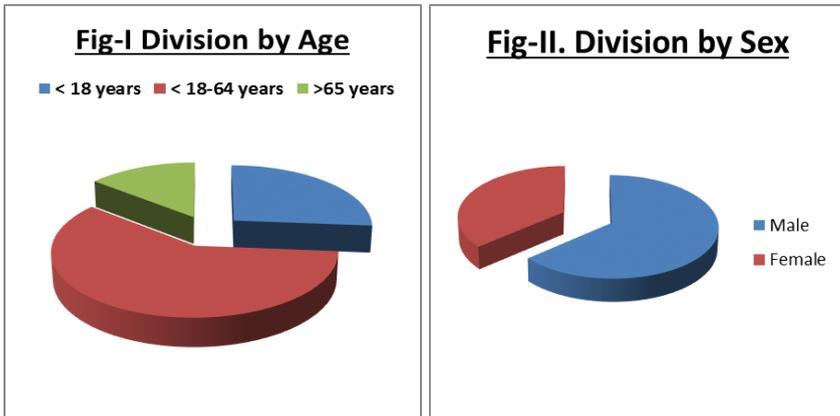
### **1). The Personal Profile**

The personal profile of homeless population in Bahir dar is described in Tables 1, 2 and 3. The profile took two attributes only viz., age division, sex structure physical appearance.

**1.1) Division of homeless by age:** There was an observable variation that showed that people between the age group of 18-60 were contributing for more than the half population of the homeless people. Children less than 18 years of age were responsible for almost the one-third population. The lesser population of the oldies was due to the early deaths of these people due to ill nourishment, lack of care and diseases.

**1.2) Division of homeless by sex:** Male population was almost double than the female population. Most of the females were older ladies or those who are unable to work. The general perception regarding lesser homeless females was that the

younger ladies and girls easily get jobs in unorganized labour sector of the town, especially at the restaurants, bars, nightclubs and as domestic servants and so some shelter at their work place. In case of children and young males the struggle is a bit difficult.



**1.3) Physical appearance of homeless people:** The general perception of the physical appearance of the homeless people specially beggars and petty workers is that they are physically handicapped or too weak to work and earn their bread; but it was not largely true. It groped a wide range of people with varied range of physiographic reasons to become homeless.

**Table 3: Physical appearance of homeless people**

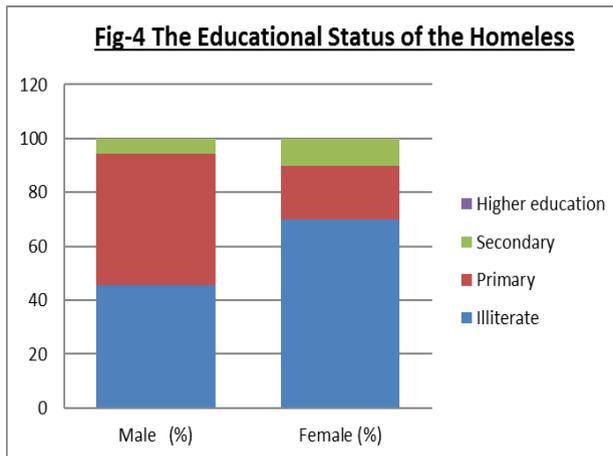
Physical appearance	Number	Percent
Handicapped	12	21.8
Normal (19 to 59 years)	18	32.72
Old (>59 Years)	9	16.36
Children (< 19 Years)	16	29.09
Total	55	100

The study found that there are more physically normal homeless who might have left home searching for jobs. The people were found begging around churches and street, were visually disabled or differently abled. It was also observed that among the old homeless population, most of them came here as

uncared oldies at their home. Table 3 shows that the largest chunk of the people are either normal middle aged people ranging from 19 to 59 years or children below 19 years. The people under normal category seem to be normal with all their limbs in normal working conditions but most of them were weak and suffering with some disease. It was also observed that most of the children were physically normal.

## 2). Educational status of homeless people

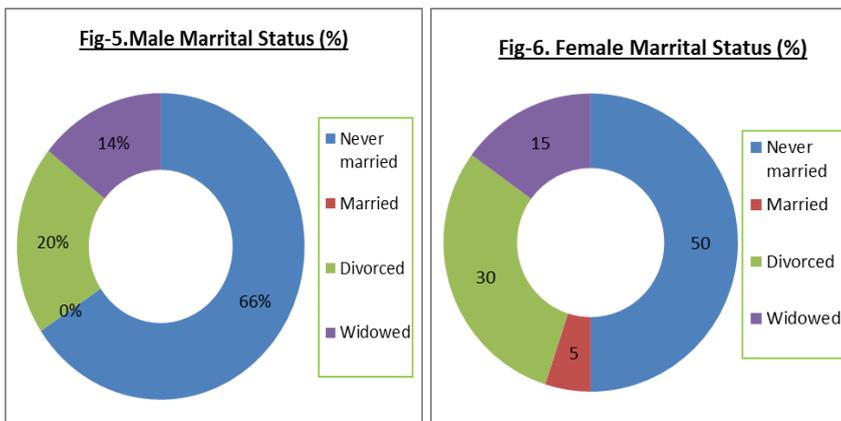
A general perception about homeless people is that they are poor, illiterate people. For the study area the following question also hit to mind- 'If it is a chunk of illiterate people?' The answer is negative, the situation being a bit different, though it applies to the majority of them. More than half of the homeless population was found to be illiterate. This might have hindered them for good job access or family values.



Being homeless at a young age might also have hindered from acquiring a higher education for those who have the basic knowledge of writing and reading or having primary or secondary education. It was also observed that even youngsters have no urge for getting education; rather they were more concerned for job and livelihood. They were not aware of any

such facility of night schools run by Government or NGOs. In net shell getting education and further getting job seems to them as a very long path or a luxury which is beyond their capacity, suitable only for the children of capable families. Their viewpoint seems to be justified: when there is no security for today how can they think of tomorrow?

**3). Socio-economic status of homeless people:** Human beings are social animals and need to live in a society, within a family or in association with fellow beings.



**3.1) Marital status of homeless:** The homelessness may also hinder them from being in a family or forming a family; or not having or out of family may be the cause of their homelessness. Their penury could be reflected by the Table 5 that three out of five never married; not because they didn't want to get married but in fact they were never economically capable enough for getting married. Even most of those who got married ended up with divorce or became widowed. Though we can't establish a strong empirical co-relation between their poverty and their state of being divorced or widowed, it was clearly stated by the respondents and resource persons that their poverty and homelessness have a major role in it. Resource persons and group discussions revealed that even poor but healthy un-

diseased hardworking young women may have a hope to get a spouse, largely mismatched to their age but thus they may get out of homelessness and start a settled life; for a homeless male the chances are quite poor and so they are left unmarried. The US Conference of Mayors (2005) has also reported that most homeless adults are single males compared to females.

**3.2) The familial status of the homeless people:** One common notion that homeless, especially beggars are the people with no family background, or having no family at all, was countered during the field survey. Almost one out of five was having both parents, may be they are quite poor and/or quite old. The most pathetic part was that almost half of them were having sons and daughters who are not taking care of them. Here one point is interesting that certain males and females were having siblings without marriage but had spent their time as a couple with a certain level of social acceptance. Most of them reported that their children are not ready to carry their burden or if they want it is very pathetic to live with their son/daughter in-laws. It seems no one want to stay away from his or her family but it happens either because the family doesn't want to own them or it was so disgraceful to stay with them that they put their life to streets than to their so called home. The death of spouse or divorce was the cause for some of the homeless. Most of the youngsters were either orphans or coming from very poor families, for them it is something than nothing.

**Table 6: The familial status of the homeless people**

<b>Families alive</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Father	15	27.27
Mother	17	30.90
Both	11	20.00
Son	23	41.80
Daughter	25	45.45
<b>Families died</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Father	40	72.70
Mother	38	69.09
Both	34	61.80

**3.3) The property at their native village:** The people being homeless at their migrated place doesn't mean that they were having no property back at their native village. It is true for more than half, for the rest the story is different. 52.7 per cent reported no property at all back to their villages.

**Table 7: Property of homeless people at their native village**

property	number	Percent
House	14	25.45
Land	8	14.54
Animal	1	1.8
House and land	3	5.45
No property	29	52.7
Total	55	100

But almost half of them possess belongings in their village. Almost one fourth were having houses, one out of seven was having land and more than 5 percent were having both house and land. Then the major question is why people leave their villages, families and bound to live a measurable life on the streets in a new city. Answers were varied ranging from the family conflicts to the lethal disease. Some of the oldies reported that their family members forced them to leave the house and handed over to the church. Some of them refused to talk on the issue, their grim face and moist eyes were enough to tell their apathy.

**4). Reasons for Homelessness:** Homelessness is a complex phenomenon in which variety of people from diverse socio-economic background, migrate to a centre with varied expectations; the reason for it is a hard question to answer, because a lot of them don't know why exactly they came here.

**4.1) Major causes of homelessness, the 'Push Factor' at the place of migration:** The major cause for homelessness in the study area was poverty as reported by 56.36 percent respondents. Poverty itself has different dimensions here. They

define poverty as landlessness or very small land or the fertility of soil has gone to support the growing family or drought, and sometimes the combination of these two or more situations. The middle aged and younger boys were the victims of such problem. Death of spouse and disagreement with the family, especially with the sons and daughters in law; and the endless conflict between the husband and wife was the prime cause reported by the old aged and handicapped people. Parent death was the major cause for the children.

**Table 8: Major causes of homelessness; The Push factor at place of starting**

Causes	Number	Percent
Poverty	31	56.36
Parent death	7	12.7
Disagreement with family	12	21.8
No job	5	9.09
Total	55	100

**4.2) Determinant of destination: the ‘Pull Factors’ at Destination.** Why Bahir Dar? - was the major concern of the researcher. Interestingly all respondents were not coming from nearby area.

**Table 9: Main reasons for homeless people to come to Bahir dar**

Reason	Number	Percent
Big religious centres	13	23.63
In search of job	26	47.27
Nearness to Bahir dar town	16	29.09
Total	55	100

There were other options of growing big towns like Gonder and Debra Markos or smaller towns near their village, yet they preferred Bahir Dar. No doubt nearness to their place of migration is important as responded by almost one third of the respondents, but was not the prime pull factor. For half it was a promising city for job as the fast growing economy, a lot of

construction work, being a state capital and big tourist attraction there were big opportunities in fast growing service sector, especially for the uneducated, unskilled migrant labours. One major pull factor for Bahir Dar is that it is a big religious centre for the Orthodox Christians having a lot many prominent monasteries in the islands of lake Tana and around the city. Why had not they migrated to the only big city and capital of country Addis Ababa. Respondents said-it is very far, very big, very expensive, multi cultural and multi ethnic and off course very cold. Bahir Dar on the other hand is a moderate in all terms expense, climate, and distance and very close to their culture, religion and ethnicity.

**4.3) The duration in Bahir Dar as Homeless:** In certain cases homelessness is supposed to be a temporary phenomenon, when a new person come to the town and till he gets some shelter, he survives as a shelter-less. But present study ignored such cases and concentrated only on the homeless for a longer time (more than 6 months). The purpose for such preclusions is to get the facts about those persons who are more or less permanent homeless and accepted it as their destine; or by the time some miracle takes place in their life. Longer stay as homeless shows the acuteness of the problem. Table 10 shows that two out of five have been homeless for the last 3-5 years. It is the crowd of youth above 18 years, most of them have come here as a children less than 18 years, in search of job. Presently they have a petty work on regular basis, the situation is better than in their first year in town yet they don't hope for a home. 27.27 percent have been homeless for the last 2 years and are mainly the children below or slightly above 18 years. Life is tough and struggle is hard for them, first and last priority for them is survival. More than one third are homeless for more than 5 years, they are the older people, accepted their destiny and left their to God, most of them are beggars and mostly live around the Church especially the St. Giorgis Church.

**Table 10: For how long they are as homeless in Bahir Dar town**

Year	Number	Percent
< 2 years	15	27.27
3-5 years	22	40
5-10 years	13	23.6
> 10 years	5	9.09
Total	55	100

### 5). Homelessness and Health

The life conditions have a strong impact on the health status. The food availability is the prime concern that is associated with good and healthy living. Being homeless and earning a meagre amount makes the people challenge for getting sufficient food to keep themselves healthy. It is reflected in their apparent physic. By appearance the youngsters seems hale and hearty but the middle and old aged people seem to be in a poor state of health, however this physical appearance is not the exact manifestation of their health conditions. In fact most of them are suffering with some serious disease. TB is the prime disease among them followed by HIV/AIDS. TB is an outcome of their lifestyle. Use of wood and charcoal and consumption of raw meat and non-boiled milk has been reported by the scholars as the major cause of TB. In the case of the aged, they were HIV positive or suffering with AIDS before they reached here; in many case it was their root cause of migration also. For youngsters it was more an accidental, the new children in town, especially girls are more prone to unsecured sex, knowingly or un-knowingly. Cancer and sexual diseases were also reported by the homeless people in the study area. Only 27.27 per cent reported that they are not suffering with any disease; but chances of their unawareness to their disease or hiding the facts cannot be overruled.

**Table 11: Health status and diseases among the homeless people.**

Disease	Number	Percent
HIV/AIDS	10	18.18
Other sexually transmitted disease	4	7.27

Cancer	8	14.54
TB	13	23.63
Healthy/ Normal	15	27.27
Other	5	9.09
Total	55	100

They reported that they are occasionally checked by the volunteers of NGOs and sometimes they are also getting medicine but not on regular basis.

### 6). The challenges of Homelessness:

The people are facing different situations as they are homeless and even though being part of the society they receive negligible attention. Only few are getting help from Government and NGOs, from churches or individuals who help them. Access to shelter is the prime challenge reported by all, followed by lack of enough food. Disease is the basic important challenge. Experts say their conditions on the streets make them more vulnerable for disease and their economic status doesn't permit to afford any treatment. Though Bahir Dar is supposed to be extremely peaceful and secured town yet the exploitations by local goons are a big problem especially for the youngsters. Addiction of alcohol and chat (a local herb with stimulative effect) is a growing problem with children and youth.

**Table 11. Challenges faced by the homeless people**

Challenges	Number	Percent
Lack of enough food	40	72.7
No shelter	55	100
Diseases	33	60
Problems by the local goons	15	
Alcohol and Chat addiction	12	21.8

### V). The Expectations of Homelessness with Respect to their Age (group).

At last the homeless persons were asked for their expectations

from government, society and NGOs. The response was interesting and showed some variations with respect to their age. The expectations varied among different age groups.

Age Group / Expectation	Shelter	Food and cloth	Health Medical	Educa-tion	Assured Job	Social acceptance	Protection From street goons	Community Recreations
>19 Years	17 (100)	17 (100)	17 (100)	13	17	10	15	17
19 to 60 Y	28 (100)	28 (100)	28 (100)	9	19	20	0	12
>60 Years	10 (100)	10 (100)	10 (100)	0	2	10	0	0
Over All	55 (100)	55 (100)	55 (100)	22	38	40	15	29

## Summary and Conclusion

The present study concludes with the following prominent findings. The majority of the homeless population is either of working age group or children below 18 years. Females form more than one third of the population, the majority of them are middle or older age groups. By appearance almost half of them are either handicapped or of oldies. More than half of them are illiterate, mostly the youngsters are having some primary education. Unfortunately it is a bunch of people (98%) who are bachelors/ never married, divorced, widowed. The primary 'push factors' for leaving their villages are poverty followed by family death and disagreement with family, and hope of job served as the prime pull factor for Bahir Dar. It was interesting to note that lot of them are having property and family behind in their village, which most of them did not shown any inclination. In addition to being homeless they face the problem of scarcity of food and are easily prone to diseases. Due to different difficulties that come across in their daily life some are also leaning towards the unsociable behaviours. It was observed that majority of them have considered homelessness as their destiny, as 4 out of 5 were living in the same situation for at least last three years. Another grim aspect of their life is that

almost 3/4<sup>th</sup> are suffering with some serious disease like TB, HIV/AIDS or cancer. Shelter food and disease are their prime challenges and all of them have expectations for them. Besides this, the youngsters also have expectations of social acceptance, education, assurance of job and protection from local goons.

### **Recommendations:**

In the light of above findings, the study gives the following recommendations:

The Federal Government, State Government, NGOs and local Church should work out a plan of action for the creation of shelters to the homeless people of city.

All homeless people should register at Bahir Dar Maniple Corporation and should get all benefits, delivered by the BMC.

BMC/ State government should open an employment bureau for all workers at unorganized sector to provide and register the job of the homeless, especially the children and females, so that their exploitation by the employers could be checked, and they could be helped to get the bare minimum salary/payment to survive.

State government or NGOs should take initiative to start night schools/ vocational training centers.

A grievance cell should be established for them at the police station especially where their concentration in maximum.

An awareness and counseling center cum recreation centre is needed for the youth homeless where they can get awareness for possible threats for health, bad impacts of liquor-smoking-chat-adultery etc., and social challenges. It will also guide to plan their future life, as it is also expressed by David F. as Drop-In-Centers.

Bank or NGOs should start micro saving and micro financing schemes for them.

Social organizations specially the Churches could play a

major role in creating a positive attitude of society towards them.

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## Appendix

**Table 1: Division of homeless people by the age**

Age	< 18 years	18-60 years	>60 years	Total
Number	17	28	10	55
Percent	30.91	50.91	18.18	100

**Table 2 : Sex structure of homeless people**

Sex	Number	Per cent
Male	35	63.6
Female	20	36.36
Total	35	100

**Table 4: The Educational status of the homeless people**

Educational status	M	%	F	%	Total	Percent
Illiterate	16	45.7	14	70	30	54.54
Primary	17	48.6	4	20	21	38.18
Secondary	2	5.7	2	10	4	7.27
Higher education	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total	35	100	20	100	55	100

**Table 5: Marital status of homeless population**

Marital status	M	%	F	%	Total	Percent
Never married	23	65.7	10	50	33	60
Married	-	-	1	5	1	1.8
Divorced	7	20	6	30	13	23.6
Widowed	5	14.28	3	15	8	14.54
Total	35	100	20	100	55	100