

The Child Labour Situation in the Commercial and Construction Sectors in Bangladesh: An Empirical Study Based on Two Regions

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ABSTRACT: It is agreed universally that child labour always deprives the children from their basic rights of education and other potentialities of life; it affects their dignity and also at the same time, it is very much harmful to their physical and mental development. Yet, the employment of under-aged children has remained to be an important issue in many countries of the world, including Bangladesh. This research is an initiative to generate data on the child labour in Bangladesh, especially identifying them from the commercial and construction sectors of the country. It is reflected from our data that there is no major differentiation in the pattern of child labour in Rajshahi and Bogra, the two cities where the study was conducted; rather, the socio-cultural and economic features of the children in both these places remain to be almost similar. In the city areas, the children are sent to works, often being compelled by their family members, because of having tremendous socio-cultural and economic crisis. There is an indication that the children who can read and write must have gone to schools to begin their early courses, but they somehow had to discontinue by dislodging their ideas later, due to financial crisis.

INTRODUCTION

The participation of under-aged children as child labour in multifarious work-activities is a widespread phenomena throughout the world. Although, child labour is legally restricted in many countries of the world, yet the International Labor Organization (ILO) estimated that there were about 40 million children below 15 years of age who were engaged in paid employment in 1985; and in spite of repeated penalties declared by many nations, the number still remained at 34 million until 1988 (Jomo, '92). A recent ILO survey indicated that 73 million world's children are employed as an equivalent to 13 per cent of those aged 10 to 14 is another example of

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this issue (see ILO, '96). As we come to accept the fact that there are millions of under-aged children who are employed as potential labor-force throughout the world, the imposition of laws could not however, control the family employment when people find it an easy means to circumvent the regulations. It is therefore quite likely that the participation of the children from the low income families in both domestic and non-domestic sectors of production will continue to increase in future. And there is no doubt that this sort of patronization of child labor must have some detrimental effect on their schooling and of children's future socialization process.

In identifying the main causes of educational wastage in India, it emerged from a number of papers published recently (see Singh and Srivastava, 2007) that a large number of children are withdrawn from schools long before they could complete their elementary courses only because of the reason that they work either at home or in their family farm especially after nine years. A similar pattern has also been observed in Bangladesh where the main reasons of children's drop-out in primary education were identified in the fact that their parents and guardians were unable to bear their educational expenses in schools (for details see Karim, '95). And the research further confirmed that instead of sending them to schools, the parents send their children either have to earn their family subsistence or they be employed in multifarious works with their parents.

In peninsular Malaysia, we can apparently say that children's employment in the labour-force has appreciably been declined due to its rapid expansion of elementary education and the promotion of schooling facilities. Although there is a declining trend in child-employment in Malaysia, but it has not been totally eradicated as yet. In Turkey, a 1989 study indicated that 60 per cent of the workers involved in cotton cultivation were either 20 years old or younger in them (UNICEF, '97). The same study (UNICEF, '97) further reported that children are found to comprise one-fourth of all agricultural workers in Kenya. Whatever may be the situation, it is quite acceptable that the main reason for child employment in many parts of the world lies with the fact that most of the poor families in these countries are economically dependent on them. In one study, Karim ('95) found that economic factor is mainly responsible for the drop-out of children from schools; and eventually, it becomes the main reason for child labour in Bangladesh (Karim *et al.*, 2004; Karim, 2005). As these families urgently need their economic support, they become reluctant to go to schools. In spite of signing a formal MOU with the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturer Exporters Association (BGMEA) and the UNICEF and ILO offices in Dhaka during 1995, it is yet suspected that a huge number of the children still work in the manufacturing and construction sectors in different parts of the country. The children are also found to work in other sectors, as well. We

assume that their poverty-level situation compel them to do so.

The above discussion clearly suggests that the employment aspect of under-aged children has still remained to be an important issue in Bangladesh. And accordingly for that reason, this proposed research is an initiative to generate data on the child labour in Bangladesh by especially identifying them from the commercial and construction sectors of the country.

CHILD LABOUR

The Concept and Clarification

The concept of 'child labour' conjures up a particular image: we see children are chained to a rigorous work for their own economic survivability who performs a variety of works in widely divergent conditions. A decade ago, UNICEF determined that child labour is exploitative if it involves full time work of the children at an extremely early age; and also if it exerts excessive physical, social or psychological stresses (see UNICEF, '86). A 1987 survey in Dhaka city indicated that about 52 per cent child-labourers work seven to nine hours work-day and about 25 per cent work a ten to twelve hours work-day (see UNICEF, '87). Such statistics are simply the manifestation of the pervasive impact of poverty in Bangladesh.

Age limit for the child labor is a formal reflection of society's judgment about the children's involvement in work. In almost all the countries, an age-set is determined by formally restricting the children to work. The legal minimum age for all works in Egypt is 12; in the Philippines, it is 14; and in Hong Kong it has been fixed to age 15 years. Many countries are found to set the distinction of ages by separating them between light and hazardous work where, age 12 year has been earmarked for light-work, and children having ages between 16 to 18 has been set for hazardous work (Jo Boyden *et al.*, '98). Nevertheless, ILO establishes a general minimum age of 15 years for completing a compulsory schooling. Hence, a cut-off point of this age (i.e. age 15 year) may be regarded as an age limit to restrict child labor in many countries of the world. In Bangladesh, the minimum age for completing a primary education is 10, and it requires another three years to complete

the middle schooling. So accordingly, age 15 may be identified for restricting the child work in Bangladesh. The situation of child labor deserves more organized and systematic study in Bangladesh. There is a dearth of available information on this issue; and this paper thus, is an attempt to conceptualize child labour situation in Bangladesh.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES & STUDY AREA

The principal objectives of this study are designed to explore the child labor situation in the commercial and construction sectors in Bangladesh. More specifically, the objectives of the research are as follows: Firstly, the main purpose of this research is to identify the under-aged children working in the commercial and construction sectors in Bangladesh. investigation. The research will also identify the factors that contributed for their employment as child labour.

As indicated, this present research has been conducted in both the commercial and construction sectors of Rajshahi and Bogra city areas in the north-western part of Bangladesh. The main rationale for selecting these two areas of the country lies in the fact that both Rajshahi and Bogra represent two important urban locations having greater access to many important institutions with exposure to business and commerce. Rajshahi is the Divisional headquarter of northern region and Bogra is reputed to be the location of a few important industries and factories of northern Bangladesh.

DATA SOURCE

As part of the study plan, the research collected data from 500 sample children, taking 250 each, from Rajshahi and Bogra regions. It may be noted here that those sample were made available from different business organizations and commercial plants located in the two above-mentioned cities. As mentioned, the respondents in this research have been identified absolutely based on convenience random sample depending on the availability of the children in the surrounding study locale. As evidenced, a total of 500 children were chosen; of whom 250 were found in Rajshahi area, and the remaining 250 were taken from Bogra. The most positive aspect of this research is

that it included a large group of children in its sample-number.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL ASPECTS OF THE CHILDREN

This part of the paper describes the major findings of the research as evidenced in the survey showing the pattern of working environment in which the children are working and the type of work they perform as child-workers. We also provide here with the socio-economic and cultural background of the children as these are essentially relevant here for making a proper assessment of the whole situation of child labor in the study areas.

Age and Education: Age and education are two important variables as they have significant correlation in professionalizing the child labour situation. It also simultaneously tells us about the age at which the children usually enter into the paid employment. It further reflects about the criticality of the situation when the children are withdrawn from their schools to get involved in their work-activities. Based on the survey, the age data thus have been ranged from 7 to 17 years, where the majority of the children are found to agglomerate in between the age of 13 to 15 years. It shows clearly that out of 500 children in Rajshahi and Bogra, a total of 291 (58.2%) make their placement specifically in that category. But it is very much inquisitive to know that a very significant number of children (i.e. 149 or 29.8%) are the child-workers who started their working profession at an age of 7 through 12 years of age (see Table 1). This is very much alarming to make the situation vexed in further deterioration.

To learn about the educational background of the children, we have classified the respondents only in two broad categories showing their pattern of accessibility to education. There is a clear indication in the table (Table 1) that the majority of the children is 'non-lettered' and did not have any chance to go to schools. This is evidenced when we find that a total of 261 (52.2%) children are fully incapable in reading and writing. This is perhaps because of their economic hardship which they face in their families. A satisfactory analysis of occupational pattern is show in Table 1, providing information about the type of works the children are performing in various work

plants. It has been found that the under-aged children enter many work-activities as apprentice at the initial stage assisting their seniors. And for obvious reason, they do not usually make any choice of their profession rather they prefer to find out any type of job available to the. They work as welding helpers, motor mechanic helpers, restaurant and hotel attendants, shop assistants and also often work in the engineering farms. Many of them also work in the construction farms as will (Table 1).

Income of the Children: The children however, do not belong to any homogenous income-group; rather their earning is quite diversified. While entering the profession as appended, the children are allowed to receive any money for their services. After a few months, they are paid their salary which initially starts from Taka 500 a month. And the next phase of the earning begins from Taka 501/- to 1500/-. It is evident

from the table that with gaining of experiences, the income-range of the children also goes up. But it has been observed that the great majority of the children actually make an income between Tk. 500/- to 1500/- which seem to be quite bare minimum as compared to their services. A few experienced children however, have been in services between Tk. 1501/- and Tk. 3000/- a month which is more or less acceptable.

Family Earning Based on Parent's Income: We provide here some information on children's parent's income as it relates to the total family expenditure which is the reflective of the economic standing of a family. The income of the parents of surveyed children gives us a meaningful analysis in this research. We have broadly categorized the parents' income into four groups with an earmark of their economic status. These are: 'parents having no income at all' living below extreme poverty level, earner of less than Taka

TABLE 1
Socio-economic and demographic characteristics of the children

Socio Demographic Indicators	Study areas		
	Rajshahi N = 250 f (%)	Bogra N = 250 f (%)	Total (N=500) f (%)
<i>(a) Age of children</i>			
Up to 12 years of age	88 (35.20%)	61 (24.40%)	149 (29.80%)
13 to 15 years	131 (52.40%)	160 (64.00%)	291 (58.20%)
16 to 17 years	31 (12.40%)	29 (11.60%)	60 (12.60%)
<i>(b) Educational level of the children</i>			
Can sign their names	130 (52.00%)	141 (56.40%)	271 (54.20%)
Can read and write	120 (48.00%)	129 (43.60%)	229 (45.80%)
<i>(c) Pattern of works, the children are involved with</i>			
Welding helper	98 (39.20%)	47 (22.80%)	145 (29%)
Motor mechanics	42 (16.80%)	16 (6.40%)	58 (11.60%)
Restaurant attendants as table boy of kitchen works	38 (15.20%)	60 (24.00%)	98 (19.60%)
Working as helpers transport laborer and in fuel	14 (5.60%)	23 (9.20%)	37 (7.40%)
Shop assistants, helper to a painter, bicycle mechanic, book binder etc	19 (7.60%)	18 (7.20%)	37 (7.40%)
Working as helpers in workshops and as mechanics	14 (5.60%)	57 (22.80%)	71 (14.20%)
Constructions workers	25 (10.00%)	29 (11.60%)	54 (10.81%)
<i>(d) Income of the children</i>			
No penny at all(for apprentice)	6 (2.40%)	2 (0.80%)	8 (1.60%)
Up to Tk. 501/-	60 (24.00%)	38 (15.20%)	98 (19.60%)
Tk. 501/- – 1500/-	152 (68.80%)	162 (64.80%)	314 (62.80%)
Tk. 1501/- +	32 (12.80%)	48 (19.20%)	80 (16%)
<i>(e) Family income based on parent's earning</i>			
No income at all (extremely below poverty level)	18 (7.20%)	13 (5.20%)	31 (6.20%)
Less than Tk. 2000/- (very low income)	37 (14.80%)	46 (18.40%)	83 (16.60%)
Tk. 2001/- – 5000/- (low income)	129 (51.60%)	124 (49.60%)	253 (50.60%)
Tk. 5000/- + (middle income status)	66 (26.40%)	67 (26.80%)	133 (26.60%)

2000/- a month, who have been identified as low-income group; those parents whose earning falls within a range of Taka 2001/- and Taka 5000/- are identified as the middle-income group. And lastly, the earners of Taka 5000/- and above are termed as reasonably moderate income category. This grouping has been done keeping pace with the national average and income situation of the people in Bangladesh.

From our data, it has been found that a total of 31 (6.2%) parents do not have any income at all which seems to be quite logical that they are compelled to send their children for family subsistence. There are 83 (16.6%) parents whose income falls in the lowest income category. But it is interesting to note that a preponderant majority of the parents (i.e. 253 or 50.6%) belong to the middle income category. But as many as 133 (26.6%) parents earn more than Tk. 5000/- a month which has been regarded as reasonably moderate income grouping. The logical question comes to our mind having such situation why these parents are sending their children to work outside. We assume that they have big families containing too many children which become an economic burden for the whole family by squeezing the earning divided among many members.

Residential Status of the Respondents: Most of the children identified in this research are coming from the city areas or its surrounding locations. Out of a total 500 sample children identified from Rajshahi and Bogra cities, 367 (73.4%) have been staying in their respective city locations. The remaining 133 (26.6%) children came from other areas and nearby villages. This situation is not however the same in the case other research conducted in Dhaka city earlier (Karim, 2005).

Family Heads and their Income Types: Being a patriarchal society, the male individual of the family remains to be the dominant person as head of the household and also they are the principal earner. But due several factors, a few female-headed households are also found to be existed which become socially disadvantageous in terms of economic survival. Among the 500 children, 41 (8.2%) children have been identified from these families which are headed by women. Being women-head, it often becomes difficult for them to go for any employment outside house. And for that reason, they are to depend in the

children to subsist their families. Working environment and working hours of the children. With the above background information about the working children, we now turn back to the working environment and working hours of the children. If we look at the occupational data, we clearly find that the children perform many hazardous type of work which put them in a vulnerable situation in terms of their physical danger and health. Many of the children work for ten to twelve hours a day and do not even do not eat their proper meals for the whole day. A continuous starvation makes them dizzy and eventually decreases the tolerance level of the body from bio-physical point of view. After working for eight to ten hours on an average, the children usually get a break for one day in a week. This is however true for many construction farms, commercial plants and business sector. But a few organizations, hotels and restaurant keep their shops open for almost 18 hours a day, starting from early morning till mid-night, to maximize their income for the whole week. We have found a few (70 or 14%) of such children who work until mid-night and even in the weekend and holidays. The children are paid the same amount of money for these holidays and over-time works, which they usually receive for working in regular times. But according to international laws, the holiday payment is supposed to be double of the regular salary.

Extra Benefits beyond Salary: The children were asked to mention that as to what extra benefits they receive from their employers. Most of the respondents (363 or 72.6%) mentioned that they do not receive any other facilities or privileges. A few of the respondents' (137 or 27.4%) however, admitted that they are provided with a day time meal, as many of them, have to stay quite long working until night. We were very much specific to know as to whether the children are provided with any accommodation and/or are paid any money for medical treatment. We have found none having such privileges from their employer. Out of a total 500 children identified in this research, 207 (41.4%) admitted that they have had faced some kind of accident and sufferings during their working time. The results of the survey indicate that most common suffering is: pains, bleeding, electric shock, and burning. Apart from this, often victims feel pain in the abdomen, muscle and other

organs of the body which occurs due to their over-work and hard labor. A total of 113 (54.33%) children had such problems in the form of pain, while 60 (20.85%) had some sort of injury causing bleeding in different organs. A few children (21 or 10.10%) faced some electric shock at the time of their works which indicates that the children often perform many hazardous works. While the children perform many types of hazardous and laborious work, it is quite obvious that they will certainly face some kind of accidents and injuries. But many of such children do not receive any compensation for their accidents. Based on our evidences, we find that out of 208 victims, 91 (43.75%) admitted to having received some compensation from their employer, and remain 117 (56.25%) were not given any compensation.

Reasons for Working as Child Labor: It is very much essential to know the reasons of child labor and accordingly, we put this question directly to the working children as to why they are going for work at this early stage. Three major important reasons are expressed by the children. A preponderant majority of them (350 or 70%) identified poverty as the main reason which compelled the children to go for working at this stage. A sizeable number of children (81 or 16.2%) however expressed that they were reluctant to go to schools. Among the remaining children, 55 (11%) mentioned that they had started to work because of the reason that it helps them learn the technicalities of their professions at an early age. A very small segment of the children (14 or 2.8%) have identified a few peculiar factors for which they preferred working at this early age. Among those listed factors, we found that a few children became annoyed with their parents; some are overwhelmed to earn some money.

CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

In the foregoing sections, I have documented a situational description of the child labor, based on our field-data gathered from two cities named Rajshahi and Bogra located in the north western part of Bangladesh. A total of 500 children were identified by employing the convenience random sample, having an equal representation of 250 each, from two study areas. It is apparently reflected from our data that there is no major differentiation in the pattern of child labor

in these two cities, rather the features in both these places remain to be almost similar.

In the city areas, the children are sent to work, often being compelled by their family members, because of having tremendous socio-economic pressures and economic crisis. Many children come out of their houses for work at an early stage of their life and we have information that a few of them even begin their works at the age of seven. At the initial stage, they start as an apprentice, but as time passes on and as they grow older, they gain expertise to become professionals. As the children enter their profession at an early stage, so it is quite likely for them to remain out of schools being fully illiterate. And it has been proved when we find that the great majority of the children simply can sign their names which they have been taught in that way, and others however, can read and write. Thus there is an indication that the children who can read and write, must have gone to schools to begin early courses, but they somehow had to abandon this idea later due to financial crisis. Being discontinued from their studies, they start as child-labor performing their different work-activities in multifarious work-plants. In these work-plants, they get involved in a wide variety of activities such as welding helpers, motor mechanic helpers, restaurant attendants and so on. Whatever may be the occupation, each and every aspect of it, is full of risk and hazard.

In these work-places, the children perform very laborious jobs and works usually for more than ten hours a day and often remaining without food for the whole day. Although a few children are found to be provided with a day-meal, but their diet in this context, is very frugal, comprising only one item. It therefore keeps them unhealthy, and as a consequence many children suffer from malnutrition. While performing various types of laborious and risky jobs, they often face accidents and suffer from serious injuries. Most of the victim children as such do not receive any money for their treatment. Instead, they fail to continue in their works, which eventually put them in trouble. They are laid-off from their jobs without paying any legal compensation. The management immediately goes for new replacement as many hungry mouths are already on the queue for searching their jobs.

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