

The Worst Forms of Child Labour in Asia

Main findings from Bangladesh and Nepal

IREWOC 2010



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This research was made possible by Plan Netherlands



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ISBN: 978-90-79078-24-0

IREWOC, the Foundation for International Research on Working Children, aims to generate theoretically informed research on various aspects of child labour and child rights, as well as to raise awareness and to motivate action around this complex issue.

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Acknowledgment

The research project Worst Forms of Child Labour in Asia was funded by Plan Netherlands. IREWOC is greatly thankful for all their support. Plan cannot be held responsible for the views expressed in this report or for the presentation of data.

IREWOC highly appreciates the local support it received from various persons and organisations in Nepal and Bangladesh; particularly the children who told us their stories and allowed us to base this analysis on their experience.

Introduction

Kristoffel Lieten

Two international conventions have been of the utmost importance when confronting the child labour phenomenon and belong to the most ratified ILO treaties ever: ILO Convention 138 (Minimum Age Convention) and ILO Convention 182 (Worst Forms Convention). Both conventions are the end result of protracted negotiations in which governments, trade unions and employer organisations from practically every country in the world were involved, and can thus surely be identified as a consensus of “the world community”.

The implementation of the conventions, however, continues to be their weakness. One of the reasons why implementation often fails is the disagreement about which sectors and which work should be regarded as child labour, or as a worst form of child labour. The research conducted by IREWOC in Bangladesh and Nepal, for its project on Worst Forms of Child Labour in Asia, studied a number of relevant labour sectors in which children are involved, and specific activities that they carry out.

ILO Conventions

In 1973 the ILO adopted its comprehensive Minimum Age Convention (No. 138) which requires states to design and apply national policies to ensure the effective abolition of all forms of child labour and to set the minimum age of employment at 14. ILO C138 is not a rigorous one-size-fits-all measure. Indeed, various age-specific, country-specific and sector-specific specifications (exceptions) are to be applied to the general rule that children should not work as labourers.

ILO C138 constructs three age categories. In the youngest category (6-12) work is prohibited, but individual countries can make exceptions for light work in family undertakings and work in the household, including domestic work. In the 13-14 age category, only light work is allowed, i.e. work outside school hours and not beyond the physical and mental ability of the child. 14 hours per week is regarded as the maximum labour time per week. In the category of adolescents (15 and above or after compulsory schooling), regular work is permissible, but not in sectors that could be harmful to health, such as the mining or the chemical industry. ILO C138 concedes that not all countries have the same level of economic and social development and that leniency should be applied when setting the minimum age of employment. Countries with a lower compulsory school age are permitted to opt for a lower age (12) at which light work is allowed, and the minimum age for full employment can be lowered accordingly to 14 (from 15).

In addition to the age concession, ILO C138 permits countries that have a poorly developed administration and economy to exclude certain sectors from this rule. However, sectors that cannot be excluded are mining, transport, construction, electricity, plantations and manufacturing. National legislation in many developing countries already make concessions for certain sectors and certain types of undertakings, e.g. with a small workforce and, even in the 6-11 age category, work in family undertakings; such practice is implicitly acknowledged, as long as it is not dangerous to the child and does not interfere with schooling. The convention, by including and recognising activities in the non-wage sector, goes a long way in covering the most important child labour segment, namely children who work within the family undertaking, such as the family farm. Most child labourers indeed work in agriculture and many others assist in artisanal work or small business within the family. Household labour remained unrecognised, however, until a new consensus emerged in 2009.

Despite the fairly liberal wording of ILO C138, many countries, particularly in South Asia, have decided not to ratify the convention: India, Bangladesh and Pakistan have not done so. Moreover, the effective abolition of all child labour, which the convention asks for, proves to be a difficult task. One complication, for example, is the ground reality that not all work done by children is child labour and that not all forms of child labour are equally harmful. Children do a variety of work in widely divergent conditions. The work takes place along a continuum, from possibly beneficial at one end of the continuum to harmful and even destructive at the other end.

Drawing a definite line between child labour that is intolerable and other forms of child work runs the danger of incorrectly condoning certain situations in which children are working. On the other hand, not drawing such a line may make the struggle against child labour more cumbersome. A frontal attack on all forms of work done by children may not be convincing, especially in conditions where governments, parents and children have a normative understanding that the work done by children is not injurious, is necessary for survival, and does not interfere with schooling. The ILO has followed such a realistic approach:

Whether or not particular forms of work can be called child labour depends on the child's age, the types of work performed, the conditions under which it is performed and the objectives pursued by individual countries. The answer varies from country to country, as well as among sectors within countries. [ILO 2002]

Much of the work done by children falls in the grey area between two extremes and at some point a line needs to be drawn. This was done by ILO Convention 182, adopted by the ILO in 1999. An ILO report stated: "Giving priority to combating the worst forms of child labour is simply a matter of doing first things first. It provides an entry point to promote and facilitate further action to attain the ultimate goal." [ILO 2002] ILO C182, also known as the Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, identifies two categories of *intolerable* forms of child labour:

- The *unconditional* worst forms, categories 1 to 4, include slave labour, prostitution, participants in armed conflicts and illicit traders.
- The *hazardous* forms, which are all sorts of work that expose children to danger and jeopardise their physical and moral health; it is work “which, by its nature or the circumstances in which it is carried out, is likely to harm the health, safety or morals of children.”

The Convention explicitly calls for immediate and effective measures to secure the prohibition and elimination of these worst forms as a matter of urgency. Because of their harmful nature both categories of work are prohibited for children under the age of 18 years of age.

Magnitude

Child labour remains a significant problem. Global figures, including the existing overestimations and underestimations, are a rough indication of the serious nature of this problem. Statistically, the available data has been improved over the years. The numbers suggest a steady decline, particularly in hazardous child labour [Lieten 2009:64-76].

Age		Working Children		Child Labourers		Children in Hazardous Work	
		2000	2004	2000	2004	2000	2004
5-17	No. (million)	351.9	317.4	245.5	217.7	170.5	126.3
	% of age group	23.0	20.3	16.0	13.9	11.1	8.1
	% change		-9.3		-11.3		-25.9
5-14	No. (million)	211.0	190.7	186.3	165.8	113.3	74.4
	% of age group	17.6	15.8	15.5	13.7	9.3	6.2
	% change		-9.6		-11.0		-33.2

Source: ILO as presented in [Lieten 2009:74].

In 1995, the number of child labourers between 5 and 14 years of age was fixed at 250 million. In 2000, the ILO used other sources and methods of research to arrive at a sum of approximately 210 million children. By 2004, the figure declined to 191 million [ILO 2006c]. In its global report on child labour, the ILO [2006b] announced that “the end of child labour is within reach”. The incidence of children aged 5-17 in the so-called “worst forms” of labour witnessed an even sharper decline. It dropped by 26% to 126 million. An even more perceptible change was seen in the age group 5-14: a 33% decrease [ILO 2006c]. Of all child labour in the world, 60% is stated to occur in Asia, 23% in Sub-Saharan Africa, 8% in Middle and Latin America and 6% in North Africa. In Sub-Saharan Africa, 26% of children

are reported to be active as child labourers; the participation rate is 19% in Asia, 5% in Latin America, 15% in North Africa and only 2% in developed countries. [ILO 2006c]

A need for qualitative data

Despite the fact that ILO C182 has been ratified by most countries (171 in March 2010¹), policies of governments and NGO's still do not systematically make the distinction between the worst forms of child labour and other forms of child work. An overview of child-centred NGOs suggests that the majority of NGOs are working with children who perform light tasks for only a few hours a day, and who are involved in activities that seem to have no lasting negative consequences on the mental and physical development of the child. Significantly fewer NGOs work with children who find themselves in the worst forms of child labour as defined by ILO C182 [Van den Berge et al. 2008].

The importance of ILO C182 is that it focuses on the most immediate and urgent task, which is a doable and uncontroversial task: to eliminate the worst forms of child labour. However, as reality shows, much child *work* that is not detrimental to the child's wellbeing, and can in fact be beneficial to the child's development, is considered by some to be child *labour*. This does not help the cause which seeks to rectify the most urgent cases. On the other hand, many activities that are most certainly detrimental to the child and its future, and most definitely fall within the definition of child *labour*, are justified with the common arguments of "social customs", "cultural patterns", "tradition" and "poverty". Considerable fine-tuning is needed and qualitative approaches are essential for understanding real conditions on the ground: "insight more than measurement; understanding more than models." [Skeldon 2000:25]

Child protection policy commonly aims to protect children from the following four situations or conditions: *exploitation*, *violence*, *abuse* and *neglect*. These different aspects need to be investigated when studying child labour. In the worst forms, children are forced to work long hours under unhealthy conditions, and usually receive very low wages; they work without social protection and are treated disrespectfully, thus lowering their self-esteem.

In spite of this international understanding on the relationship between the worst forms of child labour and child protection, specific data is lacking. The enormity of the problem warrants, and requires more empirical evidence. More research indeed needs to be done to identify not only the harm done to children, but also the specific needs of the children found in the worst forms of child labour. What type of protection do they need most?

This summary presents the findings of the IREWOC project on the Worst Forms of Child Labour in Nepal and Bangladesh. (Studies in Latin America have already been completed for this project (Bolivia, Peru and Guatemala).) The research documents the ground reality of child labourers and their families. The focus is on the living and working conditions of

¹ But not by India, which has one of the largest child labour forces in the world.

child labourers, thus also looking at the family context. Research questions include: how do the children themselves and their family members (or other community members) perceive the working conditions of the child labourers? What is the mechanism by which children end up as labourers? What are the consequences of the work children do, and what are their prospects? How do they perceive the role of education? By following the children intensively over a period of time, we explored the push and pull forces and came to better understand the conditions of child labour in these particular sectors, from the point of view of the children and their families.

The evidence should contribute to answering the question as to how a proactive policy can take shape. The opinions of the children and their parents are specifically taken into account when forming recommendations. Policies will have a better chance of implementation if the various mechanisms and justifications are taken into consideration.



Young brick kiln worker in Kathmandu

Worst Forms of Child Labour in Nepal: Three Urban Sectors

Afke De Groot

When the Government of Nepal initially selected seven sectors to be classified as worst forms of child labour [ILO/IPEC 2006], the brick kiln and the restaurant sectors were not included. Inevitably, there was a lot of critique on the limited scope of the seven sectors that were identified by the government. As a result, these and other sectors were included as worst forms of child labour in later documents, such as the National Master Plan on Child Labour (2004-2014)[Government of Nepal]. This research, based on living and working conditions that workers are exposed to, looks at the validity of this inclusion as worst forms. This article gives an overview of three sectors studied during 2008-2009 in the Kathmandu Valley: children working in brick kilns, children working as porters at markets, and children working in local restaurants and small tea-stalls. The selection of these sectors was made after consulting Nepalese child-centred NGOs and academics working in the field of child labour, and is based on their urban setting, accessibility, and the relative absence of other studies on these sectors as opposed to other well-researched sectors, such as children working in carpet factories. There had been a rapid assessment on the situation of child porters in the nineties as part of the ILO Time-Bound Programme [ILO/IPEC 2001]. The Kathmandu-based NGO CONCERN conducted surveys on other sectors including restaurant workers [CONCERN-Nepal 2003] and brick kiln workers [CONCERN-Nepal 2005].

Children working in brick kilns

The making of bricks consists of various stages. Most children are involved in the moulding and stacking of raw bricks. Some older children also help with the preparation of clay, an activity that requires a lot of power. Children are also found in the second stage of the brick-making process: carrying bricks to the chimney. These activities are obviously harmful for children and hazardous to their health. In addition, there are other, perhaps more hidden characteristics of the brick kiln sector that require us to critically examine the lives of children who are found at brick kiln premises, even when not overtly working.

Children working at the brick kilns can basically be divided into two groups. The first group consists of (older) children who have come individually or with friends with a clear purpose to earn money for themselves or for their household. The second, much larger group includes children who have come with parents or other family members. They vary in age, and include very young children who were required to join their parents who came to the

brick kiln purposefully to work, as they are not able to stay behind in the village, as well as children who came to assist the family by making bricks, or taking care of the household chores. Depending on the amount of work they are required to do, and the viewpoints of the parents, some of these children are able to attend school, if available near the brick kiln, while others are not.



Young boy working at the brick kiln

Children working 12 hours per day on moulding, stacking, and carrying bricks are visibly doing work that is physically harmful to their young bodies. However, the specific characteristics of the brick kiln sector lead us to conclude that these children actively involved in the brick-making process are not the only ones that should be considered to be in a “worst form of child labour”, as defined in ILO C182. Other children, who are perhaps only involved in household duties and maybe even attend school regularly, should not be excluded from the definition of “worst form”. Not only the nature of the work that the children do, but also the environment in which the children live, can have a harmful impact.

All these children live in self-made huts on barren soil made of raw bricks, which are covered with a tin plate serving as a roof. These houses provide no protection against the elements, and the same space is used for sleeping as well as for cooking. The quality of water available on the premises is extremely poor. Women and children fetch drinking water from residential areas near the kilns, but the polluted water from the kiln premises is used by people for bathing and cleaning dishes.

The dampness of the wet clay, exposure to dust and the smoke of the kilns, leads to coughs and other respiratory diseases. Children living and working on brick kiln premises furthermore run the risk of injuries as a result of falling bricks or other dangerous situations, as they usually walk barefoot and lack protective gear. Due to a lack of basic hygiene knowledge, children were found with exposed and untreated wounds. The climate, to which their housing arrangements provide no shelter, also leads to common diseases such as eye infections and fever. Diarrhoea is also common due to the polluted water and lack of nutritious food. Health facilities are lacking, except from incidental distributions of bandages and simple medicines such as painkillers.

Labour in the brick kiln sector is of an informal nature. There is no registration system, neither for adults nor for children living and working on the premises. Workers are usually hired through contractors (*naikes*), and since there thus is no direct contact between owners of the kiln and the workers, it is difficult to tackle the problem of child labour through the employers. Owners and supervisors are aware of Nepalese legislation on child labour, but they argue that children are joining their parents “as a helper”, and never “as a worker”. That children are found to be working is “the responsibility of the parents”. The supervisors claim to be incapable of interfering with this social practice.

The way labourers are recruited is an added complexity in the struggle against child labour. Households are visited in the village by *naikes*, who provide the head of a household with money in advance, usually around the festival season, which is also the agricultural lean season, when families are in need of extra money for celebrations or to pay off loans. The head of the household then needs extra workers in order to be able to make enough bricks for the advance to be repaid in a relatively short time. Parents of working children commonly expressed the need for the children to contribute in the production of bricks in order to be able to clear the debt, but children are also expected to contribute to the work in the household, which is common among poorer segments of Nepalese society.

Due to the perceived need for their children to work, it is difficult to reach these children with attempts to get them back in school. That difficulty also applies to older children who had probably already left primary school to make money in order to support themselves or contributing to the household’s income. But the very existence, or absence, of a school nearby may effectively counterbalance (or strengthen) the practice of utilising family child labour. Two NGO-run non-formal education centres were set-up at kiln sites. These initiatives were able to provide basic writing and numerical skills to a group of approximately twenty children, whose families were all working near the schools (both located on the same premises). A collaboration between local government schools located in nearby residential areas, a child-centred NGO and a cooperative brick-kiln owner seemed more effective, as the majority of children of this kiln, in particularly those who came with their parents to the city, were attending a formal school. However, these initiatives are unable to install educational facilities near all kiln premises, and fail to reach those children who came independently from their families and struggle to earn as much as they can. They are also unable to reach those who are required to work 10-12

hours a day, supporting their parents in their work in Kathmandu, which parents still perceive as more important than receiving a few hours of schooling every day. It should be noted that many children who came with their parents to Kathmandu in order to work, were said to have been enrolled in school in their villages of origin, and claimed to continue schooling upon their return to the village.

Children working as porters

Short-distance porters, including young boys carrying goods, can be found all over Kathmandu, but particularly at bus stations and at markets. This study focused on child porters at the Kalimati Fruit and Vegetable Market. Just like in the brick kiln sector, there is no direct link between management and (child) labourers, which impedes tackling the child labour problem. The market management, security officials and traders had very little knowledge of the realities of (child) porters' lives, with the exception of a few traders with whom porters had established connections over time. They furthermore did not seem to distinguish child porters from adult porters. In their perception, boys aged fourteen, for example, are not referred to as child porters.

Porters can find work at the market twenty-four hours a day. Traders do business between 4 a.m. and 8:30 p.m., requiring porters to carry loads for their customers. Fully-laden trucks arrive throughout the night and need to be offloaded. Porters are independent and free to decide their own hours. Younger porters work during the day, as offloading trucks during the night is heavier and requires some experience in carrying huge loads. Nepalese legislation prohibits children to carry more than 25 Kg [ILO/IPEC 2001], but the porters at the Kalimati market were found to carry much more than that, and children below fifteen were found carrying loads up to twice that amount. Most of the work is available during morning hours, and as children are paid per load or per trip, earnings vary per day.

During hours when work is unavailable some groups of porters were found hanging around the market with friends and performing various chores, such as assisting truck-drivers or traders to make a few extra rupees, while others headed out to various market areas or construction sites in Kathmandu to work as a porter. Thus, working hours and earnings vary and are also dependent on other factors such as the frequent *bandhas*, which prohibit the traffic into Kathmandu, including trucks trying to reach the market to deliver their goods.

Porters indicated they are, on average, able to make 200-250 Rupees (€2-€2.50) per day. Most of the work is done between 4 and 10 a.m., after which they leave the market to eat and to work at other locations, such as construction sites. Some of them return to the market later in the day in search of more work. Most of the porters have their dinner at 8 or 9 p.m., after which they go to sleep. As porters are free in deciding their own working hours, it is difficult to give exact working hours.

Unlike brick kiln workers, many child porters prefer their lives in Kathmandu to their lives in the villages. Most of the porters stay with friends and relatives from their village, either

on the market or in a small rented room the Kalimati area, and to a great extent have control over their earnings. But despite certain positive aspects that children mentioned about the work as porters, including its availability and flexibility due to the absence of owners and/or employers, living and working conditions of porters are extremely dismal. They have to carry heavy loads in a congested, dusty and heavily polluted environment, in which they are exposed to a number of health risks. They often walk barefoot, and have no more than a piece of jute rope to carry their loads, suspended from their foreheads. Some also use a back cushion to give some support. Carrying such loads, which are sometimes even heavier than their own body-weight, can lead to physical problems, and children reported painful legs, back pains and regular headaches. However, especially the younger porters did not seem to take into account the long-term consequences of their regular physical pains. In addition, children are exposed to the habit of smoking cigarettes, and, to a lesser extent, the use of alcohol and drugs.



Young porter carrying a heavy load - suspended from a strap tied across his forehead

Child porters come from poor families, and often have insufficient clothing to protect them during cold nights. Whereas some porters share a small, congested and poorly ventilated room with others in the market area, others have no shelter whatsoever and find a place at the market to sleep. Even though a child-centred NGO runs a small health centre in the area, particularly aimed at the child porters, not all porters were aware of its existence, and others instead preferred to “go home to take rest”. In addition to a

health centre, the NGO is also active in encouraging child porters to find their way back into school, and are very successful in doing so. Some porters, however, prefer to stay out of sight, probably out of fear of losing their recently gained freedom by leaving their village.

Like brick-kiln work, porter work is seasonal, and is often carried out complementary to agricultural work at home. By far the majority of child porters frequently visit their homes to visit their families, and to help out with (agricultural) work at home. This is an added reason why it is very difficult to reach the urban working children, as they do not stay in Kathmandu permanently. It is furthermore difficult to persuade the children to take part in programmes aimed to get them back into school, as these children have already taken the step to leave school in order to start work and, in case they do return to their villages, to earn enough money to take back home. Once being able to independently earn money, they've lost interest in education altogether, as they feel they would also lose their freedom. It should be noted, however, that porters who were in their twenties, and who had worked at the market for quite some time, started to express feelings of regret, and emphasised the importance of education for children. They felt the effects their work had on their bodies, and were worried about their future as labourers without any options.

Children working in small restaurants and tea stalls

Child labour in restaurants and tea-stalls is a very visible phenomenon. Children are present in most of the small tea-stalls and local restaurants (note that children are difficult to be found in the more expensive restaurants in tourist areas of Kathmandu). We can by and large categorise them in two groups. Whereas some have made up their own mind to come to the city to work, although influenced by older siblings and peers, others have been sent by parents or other influential adults. Even though girls are also found in this sector, most of the children are boys aged 11 years and older. Their main duties include serving tea and snacks to customers in the restaurants and/or to surrounding shops and offices, collecting and washing dishes, running small errands and keeping the restaurant premises clean. Cooking is generally left to experienced and skilled (young) adults rather than to the child workers, but children are asked to do preparatory work, such as making dough for dumplings, and cutting vegetables.

Working days are long for children, as these restaurants and tea-stalls open at 6 or 7 in the morning and close at 7 or 8 in the evening. Eateries located at bus stations and other central locations have even longer opening hours. Depending on the size of the restaurant, at some places children also have to work beyond opening hours, to prepare for the next day. They work on average twelve to fourteen hours per day, during which they get very little time off. Salaries vary, and the workers are provided with food at the restaurants they work.

Some children, who also live with the employer, are also occasionally provided with clothing for themselves and/or family members. In terms of working and living conditions children can be categorised in two groups. Whereas in smaller eateries the owner, often

himself originating from a remote area, has usually recruited a child worker from his village by making arrangement with his parents, at other larger eateries, children have found the working place through their social network of friends who were already working at the same eatery or in the same area. Jobs in sweetshops and local restaurants are easily available, as they employ a lot of staff, which do not tend to stay in one place for a very long time. Especially in the small eateries around the bus station children tend to change workplace relatively quickly, and working at one place for only a week is common.



A young restaurant worker - here he is washing dishes and cutlery

Due to a lack of a social network of friends and/or family nearby, children dependent on their employer are more at risk to be exploited at the workplace than others. Depending on the employer's mentality, they are more difficult to reach, as they are "hidden" from the outside world or introduced as sons or daughters when questions are asked. Children from the Terai² sometimes have the added disadvantage of not mastering the Nepalese

² The southern belt of Nepal: a plain with elevations ranging from sea level to 300 m.

language, as their local language, through which they also communicate with their employer is more similar to Hindi than to Nepali.

Living conditions depend on labour arrangements. Children who are personally recruited from the village by the employer usually live in the employer's household, where they are also provided with food; workers in larger eateries normally eat and sleep at the restaurant's premises. Here workers sleep together in a room adjoining the restaurant, if available, or else on tables used for customers during opening hours.

The children have few days off. Children who found employment independently are free to leave when they feel like doing so, and can try to find another employer. Others look forward to *Dashain* and *Tihar*, Nepal's most important festivals in the fall, which is the only time-off for most. During the festive season flocks of migrant labourers, including owners of small eateries, leave Kathmandu and head to their families in the villages to celebrate the festivities together. Most child workers do so as well, and use the opportunity to bring money and other goods home to their parents and siblings.

Just like porters, workers at restaurants who independently found employment, indicated certain benefits of the sector they work in. It is easily available, especially through an existing network of friends and relatives in the city. Secondly, they are provided with food and a place to sleep. This way they can save on living expenses, and they can earn their own money, which they are free to spend in whichever way they like. Their working conditions, however, are similar to the children who have been recruited by the employers: they work long hours for low wages and have to put up with dominating behaviour of fellow (adult-) workers. They work in small, congested, unhygienic and poorly ventilated spaces, and face dominating behaviour of customers as well. They also face dangers when using sharp knives with their small hands, in traffic when delivering orders of tea and snacks, and when picking up empty glasses from offices down the road.

Conclusion

The assessment of the impact on children should not only include the working conditions of the child labourers, but also the living conditions of children around the workplace. Sectors should be taken as a whole, regardless of the specific duties, because other children, who might not be considered to be working in a worst form because of the nature of their actual activities, are also exposed to similar hazardous conditions.

Workers rarely make a conscious decision to work in a particular sector, but end up working through an existing social network of friends and relatives already working in the sector, or due to a relationship between employers and contractors (*naikes*) with their parents. Their situation, including the perceived need and/or wish to earn money, does not allow them to consider long-term effects of their work on their physical condition.

Once the labourers are in their twenties they become more and more confronted with the physical impact of working at a young age. They start to regret dropping out of school. They start to worry about their future opportunities as a labourer, and start to

contemplate the need for good and continued education for their own children. When still young, however, the children are steadfast and proud about being able to contribute to their household's income by sending home money periodically, or making money for their own survival. They realise the importance of education, but most respondents were quick to add that schooling is more relevant for their younger siblings. Some of the workers are in fact working to pay for their siblings' education.

Child labourers have made a transition to a next phase in their life, in which there is no longer place for schooling. They justify the option they have chosen, or were made to choose, and they outwardly suppress any lingering doubts. They defend their position as a labourer, which some tend to view as a sign of agency; but for many of these child labourers this defence is actually a mental justification which keeps them going and helps them to deal with their situation. This makes it increasingly difficult to reach these children, and to encourage them to return back to school.

In the villages it was found that working children who passed the age of twelve years were considered fit to start working. However, norms have been changing fast and parents among the poorer segment of society are in fact inspired by other families, and wish likewise that their children have better opportunities in their future lives than they themselves ever had. Likewise, whereas adults in middle- and higher-class households employ children in their restaurants and households, they do everything they can to provide their own children of the same age with the best education they can offer them. They perpetuate social acceptance of child labour for the "children of the poor". Awareness of existing child labour legislation is not enough, as for example restaurant owners and brick-kiln owners justify the employment of children with the view that they provide a benefit to the children by providing them with work, as they would otherwise be "begging on the streets". According to them, not providing children with the opportunity to work would only victimise the children even more. This argument however perpetuates the cycle of poverty.



Young restaurant worker in Kathmandu - Here he is seen chopping vegetables

Working Children in Kathmandu: the Move to Urban Areas

Afke De Groot

The rural-urban migration is typical for most developing countries. The movement is caused by the perceived pull forces in the cities, the social and economic opportunities provided, but more so by the push forces of the villages, the extreme poverty and unemployment. Migration has a severe effect on children. The findings from the study in Kathmandu have confirmed that most child labourers are originally from (remote) rural areas. They have come to the city with family, peers or on their own account, and not only face the realities of work, but also the added challenges of living in an urban area. Many boys who work as porters or in the restaurant sector were found to have left their village on their own account, leaving their family behind. In addition, data gathered in villages in the Sindhuli district, from where many children had left for urban areas in search for employment, showed that many children, boys in particular, had made up their own mind to do so. This decision has been made within a context characterised by poverty, family crises and other factors, in which work seems to be the best of all options available to them. Their decision to go to work is thus heavily influenced by external factors, which leads to the question whether their decision to leave their village has been completely voluntarily, and thus whether it is indeed a matter of agency or in fact one of compulsion. Moreover, they are likely to have expectations of living in the city, which do not accurately reflect reality. This article primarily deals with the push and pull factors that motivate the move of children from rural areas to cities in search of work.

Places of origin

A majority of child labourers working in the worst forms of child labour in Kathmandu are migrant children. Many of them have come from districts bordering the Kathmandu Valley like Dhading, Nuwakot, Sindhupalchowk, Kavre, and Makwanpur, and other districts in Central-Nepal such as Sindhuli, Ramechhap and Gorkha. But they come from more remote areas as well. Children working in brick kilns, who predominantly came to Kathmandu along with family-members rather than alone, also hail from more remote districts such as Rolpa and Dang in West-Nepal. Many porters come from Western districts such as Rolpa, Dang, Rukum, and Pyuthan, but there is also a large group from the Eastern districts of Udaypur and Okaldhunga. Children are also recruited by their employers from their own village in more remote areas such as Butwal, Rupandehi and Gulmi in West-Nepal, Dhanusa and Jhapa in the Eastern Terai and Solukhumbu in the Eastern Mountains.

Once in the city, the character of the work is informal and, in the case of porter- and brick kiln- work, seasonal. Due to lack of a proper registration system of these labourers, there is no official demographic data on child workers available. Many restaurant owners hardly know from where their workers originate, let alone do they know anything about their background.

Finding work in Kathmandu

An important observation is that workers do not make a carefully considered decision to work in a particular sector. Instead, they find work through their social network, and follow the examples of relatives and peers. Children working in brick kilns often do not have a choice as they are merely joining their parents. The majority of the labourers (including younger ones) are recruited by contractors (*naikes*), and employed by kiln owners in order to find sufficient workers to keep the kiln running. Due to the harsh rural living conditions workers are lured by money, which is provided to them in advance, and which commits them to a certain kiln to work throughout the kiln season. This money is provided to the head of the family, who takes his own children or make arrangements with other family-members or neighbours to take other children from their village in order to meet their work requirements, repay the advances and earn some extra money. Children are not directly recruited by *naikes*, and kiln owners claim that they are not responsible if parents decide to employ their own children. However, as a result of local pressure to strictly implement existing child labour rules, some of them nowadays prohibit parents to bring school-aged children to the kiln, but this practice is rare.

Porters and the majority of restaurant workers find employment through their existing network of friends and relatives, who are already working in Kathmandu. Among porters it is interesting to observe that groups of workers originating from the same village or group of villages cluster together. These villages have known a long tradition of young men going to work as porters in Kathmandu, often to complement their agricultural work in the village. These types of workers, despite harsh working conditions, enjoy a relative amount of flexibility as they are not bound to one particular employer, and are able to leave their work if they find better work elsewhere. These workers, especially the porters around bus parks, are found to regularly change jobs. However, this flexibility and 'freedom' does not apply to all children. Indeed, there are also children who have been recruited directly from their village by tea-stall owners often originating from the same village. Depending on the workload, the living conditions and type of contract the employers have with the parents, some of these children can be considered bonded labourers. Because of the money that the employer has paid to the parents, children are not allowed to leave the employer. The lack of a social network in the city presents an added challenge, and results in children being totally dependent on the employer.

Why children leave the village

Various circumstances have pushed children to leave their village to work in Kathmandu. First of all, children tend to follow the existing trend in a village. They know the examples of groups of friends and relatives who already work in Kathmandu and who encourage others to join them in order to be able to make some money for themselves, or to support their relatives in the village. There are cases in which the family earnings are so low that an extra income from the city is an absolute necessity for survival, but some of these children may have opted to go to the city themselves and were never given the approval of their parents. In a number of cases the living conditions of their family in the village are such that there was no economic necessity to leave. The attraction of city life, and the romantic notions involved, stimulated them to do so.

Children are pulled by what they perceive as an attractive way of life in the city, without any parental rules or teachers telling them what to do, and with the additional benefit of being able to earn a little cash money. The perception people in rural areas have of life in the city is often romanticised by stories of people who have been there, supplemented by images from movies and series seen on television. Captured by curiosity, young people will join others when the opportunity arises. Many children are furthermore easily motivated by seeing the examples of others, in particular the behaviour of people who are close to them, such as fathers, older siblings, cousins, or neighbours.

In addition to this group of children, some children are forced to leave their village to work. This can be the case when their already poor situation is intensified due to sudden changes in the household such as illness or a death in the family, or an inability to provide food and care to all the children (normally in very large families). Children working in restaurants, who were directly recruited by their employers from their village, usually come from such families. Also, the disappearance of one or both of the parents can drastically change a child's life; so too can the remarrying of the guardian. Children of previous marriages often face abandonment or domestic violence, forcing them to run away from home. Alcohol abuse of the father is another big issue in many villages in Nepal, leading to an increasing burden for the children.

In addition to these dire family circumstances, there are other factors that push workers from the village. First of all, rural areas in Nepal do not provide sufficient alternative earning opportunities and so young men, rather than being unemployed and loitering around, are forced to leave the village in search of work in urban areas or even abroad. Although most child labourers are not from landless families, the land ownership is mostly insufficient to support and employ the entire household. Secondly, due to a failing education system in rural areas, children drop out of school and into other activities. This option comes easily to children in illiterate families, and/or communities that know a tradition of labour and where studying is not stimulated. Instead, the culture of labour is common and familiar to them. The argument was commonly heard, including among parents who were initially reluctant to allow children to move to the city, that whereas staying in the village would not benefit anyone in the household, in the city children would have the opportunity to earn money. Children then learn to accept their role as a

contributor to the household's economy. The ideology that child labour is proper for children belonging to the poorer segment of society is still tacitly accepted. Particularly among higher- and middle- class households where children all attend school, child labour among the poor is accepted, as it "is the only option for these poor children, as their parents cannot afford their food and schooling."

Furthermore, once the children gain access to financial means to buy their own food, new clothes, supporting their families or whichever way they choose to spend their money, it is difficult to convince them to return to school or return to the village. A point of no return has been reached. In addition, many of them have a great sense of responsibility towards their family and are stimulated by being able to contribute to their family's income, regardless the extent to which it is actually necessary. It should be noted, however, that not all children are able or willing to save money in order to give it to their parents. This very much depends on the circumstances in which they left home. Some, particularly the porters and restaurant workers, spend their earnings immediately on food and other living expenses, and also on cigarettes, or Nepalese movies in the cinema.

Many migrant workers do not spend the entire year in Kathmandu, as their help is also required at home during agricultural intensive seasons. The majority of migrant workers return during the festive season in the fall (*Dashain* and *Tihar*), but depending on the distance between Kathmandu and the villages of origin, many go home several times per year. Workers indicate that these homecoming visits are valuable for restoring family-relations, but also necessary for a rest, and thus beneficial for their health.

The attachment to the village, and the level of longing to go back, very much depends on the type of work they do. Child workers in brick kilns generally agree that they prefer the village environment to the brick kilns in the city, with most complaints being about the bad weather conditions (the cold nights during the winter and intolerable heat during daytime), the quality of (drinking) water and the polluted urban air. Children in restaurants and those working as porters on the other hand, in particular those who enjoy relative freedom in their working hours, do not regret their decision to leave the village and come to Kathmandu, despite harsh working conditions. They are able to get food and earn money, and it makes them feel proud to be independent.

Children's contribution to the household's income

Many children are encouraged to work and contribute to the household's income. The study, however, also documents that this is not always the case: whereas not all these children are absolutely required to contribute, other children, especially those in a bonded relationship with their employer, are not able to send money home. They are "one less to mouth to feed", but cannot effectively contribute to the household's income.

The perception of household members, who have remained in the village, of the contribution their children make is ambiguous. Some families proudly presented visible improvements they had been able to make since a son or daughter started earning, such as

the construction of a concrete roof for the house, or the ability to eat meat once in a while. Other parents had been disappointed with the contribution, and again others would prefer to call their children back once they discovered the realities of their children's life as a labourer in the city. This also shows that the decision of parents to allow or send their children to go to the city to work is often not well thought out, as they lack the knowledge to make a calculated decision. They are clueless about what is right and what is wrong for their children, and simply rely in copying what other villagers do or have done in the past. Community members, however, pointed out that due to an increasing number of villagers with (negative) experiences of working in the city, changes in terms of this awareness do take place, which is, for example, reflected in the increasing challenge brick kilns face to find sufficient labourers to work for them. The reality remains, however, that as long as there is no social security system providing people with a basic income, villagers have insufficient alternative income opportunities. In the case of many families, the structural constraints still prevail over a changing consciousness about a suitable childhood.

Conclusion

One characteristic of child labour is its migratory nature. Families who settled in the cities some time ago and who have become embedded in the urban social and economic structures, by and large manage to earn a livelihood and provide their children with a suitable childhood, including schooling. Child labour occurs mainly when families have moved to the city recently and are still seeking their place, or when they move in temporarily in search of employment during the lean agricultural season. This may take the form of contracted labour, e.g. in the brick kiln industry, in which case entire families move to an urban or semi-urban area and collectively engage in the production process. In other cases, children may have to move to the city on their own, either attracted by an existing labour employment network, as in the case of the restaurants, or just hoping for random employment, as in the case of porters.

One of the main challenges in tackling the child labour issue is the mobility of children in the wake of the rural-urban migration, which is quite often a seasonal migration. Even children reached by NGO initiatives tend to stay in Kathmandu only for a few months per year, and they can suddenly leave one place, making it difficult to track them down. Particularly if work is seasonal, the programmes aimed to remove children from harsh working conditions do not reach those children in the worst conditions. In addition, when children have been bartered, in exchange for an advance to the family back home in the village, they will be hidden by their relatives or employers and prevented to join any NGO-initiative. Programmes that require the children to give up work altogether and to return to school during a substantial part of the day have the added disadvantage that child labourers, even if they had free time to spend, have already developed a clear opinion that is not in favour of continuing schooling, and do not want to abandon the opportunity to earn money. A large group of working children in Kathmandu have indeed made their own decision to come to Kathmandu to work, rather than being sent by others. They have

done so in a context characterised by poverty. In the context they live in, their decision to work seems, in the short-term, to be the best option available to them.

Most observers isolate “poverty”, in its broadest sense, as the main factor causing child labour. However, in the villages from where many children have migrated, there are many other families who live in equally poor conditions, but who send their children to school rather than to work in the city. Consciousness about a suitable childhood has definitely been changing and there is still a lot to be gained when it comes to making people aware about the realities of living and working in the city. But, unless people have a realistic view of the challenges labourers have to face in urban areas, children will remain leaving their homes in search of money-making opportunities elsewhere, and end up working in hazardous conditions. The opportunities in the city, particularly in the capital, remain an attractive prospect for poor families and children of poor families. Once in the city, they often have to face the dire consequences.

Young, Poor and Female: a Triple Burden for Working Girls in the Homes and Streets of Dhaka

Anna Ensing

Worldwide, the participation of girls in the labour market in general and in hazardous work specifically is lower than that of boys [Buvinic et al. 2007]. Female children are more likely than boys to be less frequently employed in *economic* activity or to be attending school, but they are more likely to do household chores [ILO 2006c]. We studied working girls in Dhaka in three main groups: girls working in home-based industries; girls working informally outside the home; and girls working in formal industries. We documented their activities and the related hazards and studied the way working girls themselves perceive their situation.

A girl in Bangladesh

Girls find themselves, especially when compared to boys, in a disadvantageous situation regarding their health and in relation to physical and sexual violence. On the positive note, UNDP [2005] figures on enrolment rates confirm that Bangladesh has achieved equal access for boys and girls in primary and secondary education [Raynor et al. 2006]. The lowest enrolment rate and the lowest quality in primary schools is now recorded in urban slums [Cameron 2008: 1; UNB 2009].

It was estimated that almost two million girls were working (10% of the girl population), either in combination with school or not; 80% of the girl population attends school and does not work. The great majority of the working girls in Bangladesh live in rural areas (81%) and are involved in agricultural work (60%) [Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics 2003]. It should be kept in mind, though, that girls are often working in unpaid jobs at home and that their presence in the labour market is invisible [Blanchet 1996: 77]; statistics don't always depict a complete picture.

Home-based industries

The most common home-based industries are *karchupi* (bead and sequins work) and embroidery, which represented respectively 14% and 1% of girls in the informal sector [ILO/IPEC 2002: 29-30]. Other home-based jobs are the manufacturing of paper bags or paper flowers, the production of *agarbatti* (incense sticks), home-based manufacturing of *bidi* (cigarettes) [Blanchet 1996], or manufacturing leather gloves [Ensing 2009]. Home-based work is not normally a full-time occupation, and is also mostly temporary.

The Bangladeshi law does not prohibit children to work in home-based industries; an exception to ILO Convention 138 is made for “family and small-scale holdings producing for local consumption and not regularly employing hired workers” [ILO 1973]. The work is often considered to be part of the household chores. However, these family enterprises are frequently incorporated into larger production units through subcontracting. The subcontracting work, associated with the piece rate system, low payments and work at home, is usually done by women, adolescent girls and small children; an invisible and underpaid labour force [Blanchet 1996: 83, 87, 94; Mehrota & Biggeri 2004].



A young girls shows the sari she has produced at home

A ‘shock’, or misfortune, such as the loss of the family’s income earner through death or illness, can be the direct cause for children to start working. In cases of extreme poverty, girls are more likely to be employed at home, while boys work outside. The position of a

woman in Bangladesh is regulated by norms related to *purdah* (female seclusion), which, in practice, functions as a physical restriction on the mobility of women; it defines ‘the home’ as their proper place [Kabeer 1985]. Especially unmarried girls in their puberty, tend to be involved in activities that restrict them to the private sphere [see also Naved et al. 2007].

The girls themselves agree that “a safe job is a job at home”. Besides safety, status and respect also play a role; a girl doesn’t want to be considered as belonging to a dishonourable family. For society, the most important issue for a girl is a ‘good character’, which is best demonstrated by socially acceptable behaviour [Joseph 1997].

Household chores are often combined with work in home-based industries and also mentioned as a reason to work at home. Girls contribute more to the household than boys, and the older they are the more they contribute [Delap, E. 2000; 2001]. Hazards faced by working girls at home in Dhaka thus can’t be determined only by looking at the home-based industry they are engaged in, but should include the entire set of tasks carried out in the household.

In home-based industries, contracts are unreliable, girls work hard for little money and activities have some health risks. An ILO survey estimated that girls who work a full day in *karchupi* earn approximately 10 taka per day (0.10 Euro) [ILO/IPEC 2002: 24]. Most girls, however, agreed that “an independent job is better than to work for an employer. Then you are free and nobody bothers you.” Also working with relatives or friends is considered to be important. There are no fixed working hours, making a combination with school possible.

The girls complained very little about the physical effects of the work. Nevertheless, some mention was made of sore backs, mainly brought on by the position while working, or injuries to hands from working with needles and scissors. Girls making incense sticks also mentioned headaches and blisters.

Finally, work in home-based industries is often seen as a way of acquiring useful skills for the future and beneficial for marriage. Good men, according to the girls, prefer to marry a good girl: a girl who is quiet, shy, and who stays at home.

Working informally outside the home

We distinguished three main types of informal work outside the home that girls are involved in: scavenging, commercial activities and chipping bricks, although most girls actually do a bit of everything. Scavenging includes collecting waste from the streets to sell, collecting firewood (wooden sticks or paper) for own use, and collecting vegetables or rice from the market floor, to either sell or for one’s own consumption.³ Commercial activities include selling flowers, water, vegetables, ready-made food, or other items,

³ In this fieldwork no children were included who work as scavengers at the landfills. In the neighbourhoods selected for research, there are no landfills and girls pick waste from the street.

either in a fixed place or ambulatory. Girls also assist commercial vendors with washing vegetables at the market, bringing water to the rice mills, or wiping the floor in front of a shop. Some girls work on construction sites, where they chip bricks⁴. Lastly, some girls are involved in begging. In this research, however, we decided not to include begging as a work category. These activities require no experience; any girl can join.

Girls who are found working out in the public domain only do so because of extreme poverty, which makes most social norms redundant. Sending daughters to work outside the home is usually something parents only do when they have no other options; patriarchal institutions and *purdah* simply crumble. Household poverty is most present in migrant families, female-headed households and families with a high number of children in one family, especially a high number of girls. It is often the lack of an older son that makes a poor family decide to send a girl to work [White 1992: 36]. For orphan girls who live without relatives at all, working in the streets goes hand in hand with living on the streets. The girls on the street rarely attend school.



Young girl selling popcorn to passengers in passing cars

⁴ The rapid process of urbanisation in Dhaka in the last decades has resulted in a fast developing construction sector. This has led to more jobs in the building sector as well [Khaleda Salahuddin & Ishrat Shamim 1992: 57]. Especially women and children have been employed in the low skilled manual works such as brick chipping - this involves using a hammer to chip bricks into gravel.

All jobs on the street are poorly paid: around 20 taka (0.20 euro) a day. Most girls showed little concern for exactly how much they could earn; they are more interested in receiving a fair payment for their products and efforts. The majority of the girls hand their earnings over to their parents or caretakers. The exception to this is the girls who live on the streets and work for survival.

The girls involved in brick chipping suffer from sore limbs and blisters, and are exposed to the elements. Commercial activities are less harmful to the girls' physical health; although, trying to sell to people in cars can also be quite dangerous. Working with waste materials is harmful because the work is exhausting, girls can hurt themselves when they pick up sharp objects like glass, and as the children tend to eat from the streets, they can contract a number of illnesses.

Working on the streets is also emotionally draining because of the reactions from other people. Girls working in public are often criminalised because of the prejudices against them. The girls also complained of getting very dirty when working; people look at them with disgust and it damages their self-esteem. Adolescent girls are particularly concerned about their physical appearance, mainly because they know they should be getting married soon.

Girls working in public feel extremely exposed to aggression and violence. There is nobody to support or protect them. Girls are not just violated or abused by passers-by or employers, but also by police. Especially the girls who live without their parents wish for "good adults" to protect them.

Friends are important for the working girls and make work lighter. Street workers often work in groups, forming true friendships, trusting one another, and protecting each other when necessary.

When adolescent girls are not able to maintain their distance or privacy from male strangers, as is the case with girls working outside the home, they are likely to be confronted with sexual and mental harassment [see also S.F.Rashid & S.Michaud 2000]. Because of the age implications there are in fact very few girls above 14 working in public; only those adolescents whose situation is most extreme, and who perhaps have no family, will continue to work outside their homes.

The harassment can go further than verbal abuse. The girls become "spoiled" if they are touched by a man who is not their husband; they and their family lose their honour. More serious incidents include girls being sexually abused, kidnapped or even killed. Whether true or simply rumour, the stories circulate in the slums and scare the girls. The only way in which girls can prevent being bothered by men, is to work accompanied by a male relative.

Finally, a possible consequence of the problems that adolescent girls face on the streets is an early marriage. It is often seen as a solution to harassment on the street. A marriage is expected to offer financial protection for a woman, but also physical protection.

Working in formal industries

The growth of the Ready Made Garments (RMG) industries in Bangladesh in the '80s and '90s attracted large numbers of women, and girls in particular. Girls already start working as assistants before they turn 18. After some time, a girl can become an operator, who has more responsibility and works with machines.

Because of the relatively better pay and safety levels, girls generally find garment work a good choice of employment. Work in a garment factory, although not in a girl's home, is still considered to be inside work, and thus relatively safer than working in public. The safety particularly involves protection from indecent exposure to men.

It is known that working conditions in the factories, of especially women, are generally in contradiction with labour laws [see for example Nielsen 2005; AMRF Bangladesh & CCC The Netherlands 2009; Hearson 2009]. The working conditions of girls below 18 are often worse than general.

Girls between 14 and 18 are legally allowed to work in factories, but their working conditions are supposedly regulated. According to the National Factory Act, they can work for a maximum of 5 hours per day, and they cannot work between 7 pm and 7am [U.S. Department of State 1994; Blanchet 1996]. In practice, underage girls work the same amount of hours as adult women, but are often paid less.

A garments job is always fulltime and can therefore not be combined with education. Overtime is common and can extend the working day up to 14 hours or more. When girls first start to work in the factory they are just assistants, and earn the official minimum wage of 1662 taka per month. Often, though, underage girls are paid less. When a girl makes a promotion and becomes an operator the salary increases up to around 3000 taka per month (30 euro).

In addition to the long working days, the environment in most factories is not favourable for the girls' health. Several girls in garments complain about continuous headaches during work. Although work in garment factories is often claimed to be the safest job for a girl, there are nevertheless several reports of verbal abuse, physical punishments and sexual harassment.

Being a working girl

Poverty is considered to be the main problem for working girls, and the foremost reason for having to work. The girls argue that rich girls, contrary to poor working girls, can go to a good school, they can eat all they desire, they don't have to work at home, they don't need to leave their relatives at the countryside and they don't need to live in a slum. Furthermore, rich girls are not exposed to verbal abuse; they are more respected by their environment. Poverty thus forces girls into situations that conflict with society's gender roles, but also denies them protection from society's judgement.

In addition to being poor, working girls suffer because they are female. Males are favoured in Bangladeshi culture because daughters will get married and leave the house, while sons continue to benefit the family, bringing in an income and a wife [White 1992]. Girls have less freedom than boys and are more controlled by their families; they have to be more responsible and they are permitted less fun. Some argue that boys have more and better job opportunities than girls. Boys have to do much heavier and often hazardous work, and they are often beaten. But girls suffer more from sexual harassment and disrespect.

The third threat to these girls is their young age. They feel that adult and married women live better lives than young girls; they will not be bothered anymore, they will be respected by employers and other people and they can go outside without any problems. Being older and being married thus infers safety and less vulnerability.

Working girls in Dhaka are faced with a triple threat: they are young, poor and female. The three factors reinforce each other and result in the girls' extreme vulnerability.

Working girls in Dhaka, especially from 12 years onwards, have a great sense of responsibility for their own lives. They want to solve their problems and to bear their sorrows alone, without involving other people. They also make their own decisions such as joining NGO projects. However, there are also many decisions that the working girls cannot make for themselves. Girls start to work when their families need the support; they continue to work because they cannot solve and end the poverty of their families. Similarly, most girls choose to keep quiet when harassed out in public because raising their voice is a form of agency incongruent with the cultural norms for girls' behaviour, which would provoke worse reactions. Society's structural constraints clearly limit the girls' agency in these cases. The working girls in Dhaka may show agency, but the structures in which they find themselves determine for a great part to what extent they are able to progress in life.

When talking about the future, the working girls in Dhaka are generally positive, but they also remain realistic. The majority of the girls expect improvements in their lives once they grow older. In the future, the girls still see themselves as poor people, but with a job to sustain their living, and a husband to protect their social standing and honour. All the working girls agree that they would treat their future daughters well and offer them a better life than they have had.

Conclusion and recommendations

This study aimed to show how the class, age and gender of working girls in Dhaka are a triple burden and create extreme vulnerability. Their vulnerability results in poor working conditions, limited agency or bargaining power, and disrespect or harassment by their social environment. The girls involved in this study worked in home-based industries, out in the public domain, and in formal industries.

Home-based jobs are generally considered to be a good choice because it takes place in the safety of home, the working hours are flexible and not excessive, and there are relatively few health hazards. Home-based jobs need not in themselves be considered as hazardous labour, but since they are often combined with household chores, the real workload can only be determined when household chores are included. This is especially true for girls since they are, increasingly with age, held responsible for household chores.

It may not be possible to prevent all work at home by underage children, given the dramatic levels of poverty, but specific dangerous activities, such as incense stick making, should be banned from home-based industries. The provision of better infrastructure in the neighbourhood, e.g. water taps with running water or child care facilities, would already go a long way to decrease their overall workload (which always includes household chores).



Girls collecting rice from the market floor

Generally, girls in Bangladesh are considered to be adolescent from 11 years onwards and are expected to behave like women at the age of 15. Girls in adolescence are subject to traditional gender roles. This means that girls who work in the public domain are breaking the norm and are verbally punished and judged for it. Working on the streets, even in the most honourable activities like washing vegetables at the market, attract vicious remarks and physical threats, including sexual harassment. These girls cannot find protection anywhere.

Extreme family poverty, and most often rural poverty, is normally the root cause for young girls working, and especially for girls working out in the public domain. However, improving the situation of these working girls does not rely entirely on the development of labour laws and poverty reduction, important as they may be. Improvements must also take gender discrimination, and specifically girls' discrimination, into account.

Street children appear to benefit well from the shelters where they can find protection. But also outside the shelters and without the direct support of the facilitators, these girls should be ensured of protection from abuse. The streets need to be transformed from a place without justice into a public space with the same "rules" as in any private/formal workplace. Laws and policies, but also national security and justice system, would play a role in this transformation. Only then can the rights and safety of unmarried girls on the streets be guaranteed.

In formal industries, girls between 14 and 18 years old work the same long hours, and under the same conditions as adults, despite the legal regulations in place that dictate shorter hours. Overwork results in health problems, exhaustion and sadness. Moreover, they are continuously the subject of sexual disrespect, particularly verbal abuse. The working conditions in the factories, despite the legality of the work for adolescents, make this a form of hazardous child labour.

In formal industries, legislation is in place. Inspections in formal workplaces should be gender sensitive and pay special attention to the rights of female workers. Stricter measures should be in place to prevent excessive work hours and (sexual) harassment. The correct implementation of legislation, rather than a total ban on adolescent girls working, will foster better economic positions for the girls.

Working girls in Dhaka consider themselves disadvantaged and feel discriminated because of being poor, female, and young. The three factors reinforce each other. The working girls do have agency, but it is agency within a constraining framework. The girls have an especially strong degree of independence and sense of responsibility, which allows them to survive, physically and emotionally, despite the dire circumstances. The dire circumstances, however, cannot be changed by them. They face poverty on the one hand and cultural constraints on the other.

Legislative measures and practical support for all three groups of working girls should go hand in hand with more general policies and awareness raising about gender equality. Such policies and awareness would be able to increase the social value attributed to girls and make clear that adolescent girls have rights, including sexual safety. Meanwhile, support to girls' education remains highly necessary. Besides basic education, for adolescent girls, education in combination with professional skills training would be appreciated. Only then can the vicious cycle of female poverty be broken.



Young girl in Dhaka helps to collect mud and carry it home

Hazardous Child Labour in the Leather Sector of Dhaka, Bangladesh

Anna Ensing

The main objectives of this study was to identify all stages that together form the production chain of leather and to observe the involvement of children in these stages. We documented the working children's living and working conditions, outlined the main reasons for the children to be involved and looked at the impact of existing projects to combat child labour in this sector.

The context

The leather manufacturing enterprises produce leather items varying from footwear to belts, bags and wallets. Leather and leather products are principal export products and the sector provides a significant portion of employment in the country. The production of leather takes place in tanneries, most of which are concentrated in Hazaribagh, a district in the south west of Dhaka city. Child labour in the leather sector is a sensitive topic, considering the importance of leather for the national economy. The eradication of child labour has been put high on the agenda but despite this, still many children are found working in different parts of the production chain. The ILO-IPEC, in 2007, specified that approximately 260 children work in leather tanneries, 3040 children work in shoe factories and 320 children were working with leather products [ILO-IPEC 2007].

The production chain

Children are involved in a wide variety of activities directly or indirectly related to the leather industry and in the further treatment of its waste products. To understand the involvement of children it is necessary to dissect the chain.

Butchers and slaughterhouses around Dhaka sell the raw hides and skins to middlemen, who sell them to storehouses in Old Dhaka. Storehouse owners have their employees clean the hides and skins with water, remove the redundant flesh, trim the sides, and salt them to extract moisture. Tanners from Dhaka then visit the area to buy the salted hides and skins and transport them to their tannery.

Producing leather involves three main processes: preparatory, tanning and crusting. The skins go through different stages: from raw hide, to wet blue leather⁵, to crust leather⁶ and then finally finished leather [Gain 1998; UCIL 2004]. The large-scale tanneries, which are often mechanised and use chemicals imported from Europe, can produce all three stages of leather. Some artisanal tanneries are involved in producing only the initial wet blue stage of leather. Tanners without their own tannery or without the capacity for all production stages pay a fee to use someone else's tannery. Production chains are thus not always easy to follow since the final products can be made by several different tanners in several different places.

Finished leather is used for manufacturing. Leather manufacturers can be divided into large-scale and small-scale factories. Some products, such as leather gloves, are partially fabricated in people's homes. Large-scale factories tend to be export oriented, while small-scale factories sell mostly to the local market. Children are mostly found in small-scale factories, where monitoring and international influences are less evident.

Throughout the entire production chain, waste materials are discarded. Often, these are used in new production chains, in which children are also involved. Scraps of wet blue leather and crust leather are used for the production of *meatbone*, which is sold mainly as food for poultry and fish.⁷

Children's work

There is little participation of children in the supplying of hides and skins. In tanning, however, children are still observed working in many units in Hazaribagh. They are usually employed by independent tanners, i.e. tanners with a lease tannery. In some large-scale and exporting tanneries a child was occasionally seen working, but it was the exception rather than the rule.

Children in the wet blue stage mostly function as assistants to adult workers. For example, after liming, children lift the leather out of the pit with a pair of tongs. They transfer the pieces of leather to the drum and remove them again after the chemical processing. During the crust stage, children dry the leather, either inside the tannery or outside on the field. This is referred to as *toggling*.⁸ Children also trim the leather: they cut the uneven edges with a little knife. During the finishing stage in less mechanised tanneries children *dust* the finished leather, they paint the leather, and afterwards dry and sort them. In

⁵ Wet blue leather is also called chrome-tanned leather. Chromium discolours the hides blue, hence its name.

⁶ Crust leather is a hide or skin that is thinned, re-tanned and lubricated. It is the second stage of the leather production process.

⁷ Also known as Meat and Bone Meal, or MBM. MBM contains all types of animal parts that are discarded during rendering (food processing) or, in this case, tanning. It is added to animal feed to improve the nutritious content. The use of chrome-containing solid wastes for *meatbone* production, however, may cause serious health problems to the animals.

⁸ Toggling involves pegging hides to the ground so that they can dry.

addition, children in many tanneries offer “general assistance”: they prepare or buy tea, they are sent to the chemical shop when needed, or they function as messengers.

Leading leather manufacturing and exporting companies⁹ usually have their own tannery, factory and sale centres, and they are all eager to state that they comply with the international codes of conduct regarding environment and labour standards. However, through the method of subcontracting some exporting companies may unknowingly use child labour in their chain, either in the small workshops or in the household industry.

Children in small scale factories conduct various tasks related to the manual production process of shoes and leather goods. They draw patterns for gloves, cut the leather, and sew the parts together into the final product.

Children are often also involved in assisting the salesmen in the numerous shoe shops, markets and shopping centres. Their tasks include helping clients, getting shoes or other products from storage, but also keeping the shop clean, bringing tea for the salesman or his clients and doing the dishes after his lunch.

Finally, children work with waste materials. The production of *meatbone* involves adults and children from 13 years onwards, both men and women, although the latter are scarce. The job of the children is mainly to remove, with their hands or feet, the hard particles from the *meat* and wrap up the *meat* in bags.

Children’s background

The leather sector is a male dominated sector and also working children are predominantly boys. The only stage of the chain in which many girls are involved is in the manufacturing of shoes and gloves.

The age of the children in the production chain varies between workplaces and activities, but no children below 8 years old were found working¹⁰. Boys who work in tanneries are between 9 and 18 years old, although the majority is older than 12. Toggling is done by boys between 10 and 15 years old. In small factories, children work from 9 years onwards, but most of them, especially girls, are above 12. In home-based manufacturing, children start participating at a younger age; the youngest child we found was an 8-year-old boy. In shops, boys work as sales assistants from 9 years onwards. In the *meatbone* process workers are normally somewhat older than in other activities; they are usually 12 years and up.

⁹ The two most influential companies producing leather, footwear and leather goods in Bangladesh are APEX Adelchi and the multinational company BATA. Both outsource parts of their production to smaller tanneries.

¹⁰ The exact age of Bangladeshi children is difficult to know since most babies have not been registered at birth. Most children don’t know their exact age and neither do their parents. Quotes in this report use the age that was mentioned by the child him- or herself or his or her family. In some cases it is based on estimations of the researcher.

A great majority of the working children migrated from the countryside. Poverty in combination with social problems is often the reason to migrate to the city. Most boys and girls migrated with their families to Dhaka, but some boys migrated alone. The latter are expected to support themselves and to send some of their income to their families. These boys usually end up working in a tannery or a factory, where they can also find a place to sleep. Alternatively, the boys live with a relative or a village neighbour. In the migrant families the parents work, but children have to contribute to the household.

Living conditions

Hazaribagh is one of the most polluted areas in the world.¹¹ The inhabitants of Hazaribagh and surrounding areas are exposed to health hazards created by the tanning process and other stages of leather production. Boys who live in the tanneries are affected by the dangers of the industry 24 hours a day. Besides, boys who sleep at the workplace have no privacy; the rooms are always shared.

Generally, the working children tend to ignore and trivialise their health problems. Most migrant children, without family, have no official means of getting free health care¹². Most working children in the leather sector are thus denied their right to live in a healthy environment and their right to good health care.

In addition, many boys suffer from the fact that they have migrated. Their lives have changed radically from village life, living with a poor, but caring family, to a lonely working life in the city.

The majority of the working children in the leather sector do not receive any type of education. There is a group of children who have never attended school; a group of boys who have attended education at the *madrassa* (religious school), and children who have finished only primary education. The working children that do go to school seem to have a hard time combining education with work. In Hazaribagh, teachers of different schools mentioned poverty and the need to work as the main reasons for dropout. On the other hand, not all schools are receptive to working children. Working children, in already marginalised positions, are thus increasingly excluded. Another problem is that employers are not interested in supporting the working children in part-time education. Only children who make leather gloves at home can go to school, since they work for their parents with flexible working hours.

¹¹ In June 2008 the environmental magazine 'Ecologist' wrote in an article titled 'Hell for Leather' that Hazaribagh belonged to one of the 30 most polluted places on the planet.

http://www.theecologist.org/investigations/health/269813/hell_for_leather.html

http://www.theecologist.org/trial_investigations/314208/hell_for_leather.html

[Ecologist Film Unit 2008]

¹² The Smiling Sun Franchise Program is a clinic that does not ask for a *green card*, and so even children without a card can find free health care here.

Working conditions

Tanning

Working days in a tannery can last up to 14 hours. Although there is officially one free day, the children often work 7 days a week. Work in a tannery is always a fulltime job and most children have little time to play, or to travel to their parents in the villages. Especially children who migrated to Dhaka on their own, lack a personal network of people around them.



Young tannery workers rinsing chemicals from hides and soaking them in preparation for shaving

Spending many hours in a tannery is risky for one's health. Most children don't use gloves, boots or masks and are in direct contact with harmful chemicals and hazardous waste produced in the tannery. The work is also considered risky because of the accidents that can happen. Children, however, don't complain much about their conditions and learn to consider risks as "part of the job".

Children who work in tanneries are employed without any form of contract. Most children start working without any salary and there is no standard duration for this "apprenticeship". Salaries vary between 1000 and 2500 taka (ca. 10 - 25 euro) per month depending on age and experience.

Children involved in toggling, work outside and are much less affected by chemicals. The harsh aspects of this work are mostly related to weather conditions and the stooped position they must hold during work. They work with sharp pegs and hammers, without any gloves or protective footwear, and so many accidents involve injuries to hands and feet. The children who toggle are paid per unit: 20 or 30 taka per 100 dried pieces of leather. Working hours are not fixed and depend on the workload. A daily income is approximately 100 taka (ca. 1 euro) for a full working day.



Boys toggling - squatting and stooping for many hours each day

Manufacturing

Working in a large-scale shoe factory is considered to be a relatively good job by most employees, including children. Nevertheless, some conditions are in contradiction with international regulations; some factories already employ children at 13 years old. Although official working hours are from 8 am to 5 pm, overtime is rather common. Girls complained about the irregular payment and as in most jobs, they don't receive any type of contract.

Most children, however, work in the small-scale and informal manufacturing units, where conditions are even worse. These "factories" are no more than bare rooms in which people work on the floor. There are rare reports of physical punishments in the small factories. It

is worrisome that for many boys the factory is also the sleeping place, and that they are in the workplace almost 24 hours per day.

The children who manufacture gloves at home work in the relatively best conditions. They work fewer hours, their work can be combined with school, and they usually work with their parents or other familiar persons. It is normally the mother who is officially employed as a manufacturer; the children help but don't get paid.



Young boy cutting leather for gloves

Waste materials

The children involved in drying the meat for *meatbone* rarely take a day off work. However, since *meat* needs to dry in the sun, there is less work during the monsoon season. When it is dry and sunny it is very common for the workers to work from 6 in the morning to 6 in the evening. Children earn around 1800 taka for a full month's work. The workplace is usually full of smoke, and the smell is awful. Working in smoke affects children's lungs and burning leather releases harmful chemicals [K. Kolomaznika et al. 2008]. Most workers are, however, used to the smell and they more often complain about the soaring temperatures.

Sales

The boys who work in shoe shops start just before the shops open, around 10 in the morning, and stop working just after 8 in the evening, when shops close. Most shops are closed on Fridays, which is the workers' day off. The boys are not exposed to very dangerous conditions or heavy physical activities. The worst aspects of being an assistant salesman are the long working hours and the fact that this job cannot be combined with education. The salary of a child shop assistant ranges between 1000 and 2200 taka per month, depending on age and experience. A period of "apprenticeship" is common. Especially the boys who live in their employer's house don't earn a salary at the beginning.



Young assistants in a shoe shop

Why do children work in the leather sector?

Push factors

The first and most frequent reason children start to work is poverty. Rural poverty is widespread and may be aggravated by 'shocks', such as a family death or illness, which are often an immediate cause for children to start working. Children in the countryside or in urban areas are aware of their poverty and feel responsible for supporting their family.

A second factor is related to education. Children not only stop school because they work, but many also appear to start working because they have not been enrolled in education

or they have dropped out. Especially the increase in costs between primary and secondary education is a reason to stop education. When a boy is not doing well at school and does not take much interest, it is often the older relatives who send him to work in Dhaka. An additional explanation that some parents use to explain their children working is “the workplace as a safe environment”; it can function as an alternative to the street.

Pull factors

Big companies generally employ few children directly. In the first place because these companies produce high quality leather or leather products for export on a large-scale, and they therefore need better skilled labour. In the second place because machinery is used for production and children are generally less competent to manage machines. In the third place because the big exporting companies are aware of the negative image attached to child labour and inspections are most likely to take place in their enterprises.

Most small entrepreneurs have the opinion that work is the only alternative for the poor child. Many of them originate from poor families, and have even been child labourers themselves. After years of low paid work, they have managed to save and make a small investment to set up their own business. Because of the low investments and production cost, their products are of relatively poor quality and only sold in the domestic market. There is less money to invest in labour, there is less need for quality products and there is a strong demand for cheap products. Besides, there is hardly any inspection on child labour in these companies. The economic benefit of hiring children instead of adults is quite substantial. Also the availability of children is a factor that contributes indirectly to the continuity of child labour. In toggling the payment is so low that adults are not willing to do the job. Other jobs are considered to be typical for children because adults refuse to perform them, such as preparing tea or being a shop assistant. Finally, some employers of children use the “nimble finger argument” when they argue that children are more efficient in their job.

Some children work with their parents, for example in leather gloves manufacturing; their parents are contracted by a small businessman. In these cases, the businessmen have no knowledge about who exactly manufactures the gloves. It is an example of subcontracting within the family. Parents say that their children “help” them, rather than that they are working. The reason for involving them in work is that they get paid per unit and the child’s help increases the family income.

Regulations and inspections

The Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments is responsible for inspections. The Department, however, has some shortcomings, especially concerning inspection of child labour. It has a small staff, the state inspectors are generally known as corrupt functionaries who can be bribed easily, and while the inspections have a strong

focus on formal and export-oriented companies, most children work in informal workplaces producing for the local market.

A specific feature of the leather sector, making the situation even more difficult to control, is the system of subcontracting and its general informality. There are no national policies regarding small and micro entrepreneurs, and no tannery unions to influence policy. Since these industries are broken down into so many different types of specialised enterprises, it is easier to avoid labour laws. Child employers also blame unequal competition. Only worldwide labour standards would prevent them from defending child labour in the name of unfair international competition.

Interventions: successes and failures

Ever since Bangladesh signed ILO Convention 182 there have been a significant number of projects and programmes focussing, at least partly, on children working in the leather sector. The IPEC project “Preventing and Eliminating the Worst Forms of Child Labour in Selected Formal and Informal Sectors in Bangladesh”, which started in September 2000, addresses the leather tanneries as a worst form of child labour¹³. The Ministry of Labour and Employment in 2004 started the project “Eradication of Hazardous Child Labour in Bangladesh”¹⁴, which provides non-formal education for children working in hazardous activities in Dhaka City, including the tannery area (Ward 48 and 49) in Hazaribagh. A similar project is coordinated by the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education together with UNICEF, called: “Basic Education for Hard to Reach Urban Working Children”¹⁵. The target group includes working children, not necessarily active in hazardous conditions. Save the Children, within the programme Child Clubs, commenced a project in January 2008 that promotes participation and protagonism of working and non-working children.

An important conclusion concerning all government and NGO interventions is that the most vulnerable children are hardest to reach. Children also living in the workplace, for example, are not reached by any type of project. Others live with a relative or village neighbour, who in a way are a source of protection, but who also fence them off from the outside world. Not surprisingly, they are rarely reached and most of them are not even informed about the possibility of joining an NGO project. The majority of the NGOs don’t enter workplaces. Work in a factory or tannery is almost without exception a fulltime job

¹³ The specific project in the tannery area started in 2002 and was finished in 2004. The five sectors included in the general project were *bidi*, construction, leather tannery, matches and child domestic work. In 2005 the survey on child labour in tanneries, titled “Bangladesh Baseline Survey on Child Labour Situation in Leather Tannery Industries in Dhaka District” was published as a part of this project [Karim 2005].

¹⁴ This project is technically supported by the ILO. The first phase, which started in 2000 was funded by USAID; for the second phase, which started in 2004 and is still going on at the moment, funds only come from the Ministry of Labour and Employment. The project is expected to end in 2009 or 2011, depending on funding.

¹⁵ This project received financial and technical support from UNICEF, and financial support from Canadian CIDA and Swedish SIDA. The first phase ran from 1997 to 2004 and the second phase, which is going on at the moment, started in 2004 and will end in 2011.

and employers are not interested in employing a part-time worker and letting him disappear to attend classes. For those working in Dhaka without any family or relatives, a change in job would entail a loss of housing. For this group of children, NGOs haven't found the right solutions yet. The boys are difficult to reach, they have to earn money for the survival of their family and they are fenced off from outside influence by employers and relatives.

Furthermore, projects have difficulties with the eradication of hazardous child labour in the leather sector because, at the lower rung of the technological and economic scale, with low profits, low salaries and dramatically bad working conditions, hazardous conditions do not seem to be a hindrance to accepting employment. The new migrants in Dhaka do not have a choice but to take up any job available. Children are no exception. It is hard to reduce hazardous child labour in Dhaka when the flow of migrant children looking for work keeps on coming.

Recommendations

A preventive approach focussing on rural poverty reduction would be necessary to put an end to children from the countryside migrating to Dhaka for work. Pre-empting migration would especially protect children from leaving their families and living without protection in their unhealthy workplace.

Furthermore, children tend to start working when, for various reasons, they are not attending school. Without good education, work will continue to be considered a better alternative in a context of poverty. The fight against hazardous child labour in the city therefore starts with a struggle to improve universal primary education in the countryside, for both boys and girls.

Policies including support for small entrepreneurs conditioned with strict regulations would enable them to professionalise their business. Vocational training and official support to the development and implementation of new technologies will be required. But considering the competition in the global market, only the implementation of world wide labour standards would prevent them turning to child labour. External pressure, without first solving the internal complexities surrounding the leather sector, may aggravate rather than ease the problem.



Tannery work site - It is clear to see how wet the floors are, and how the boys unloading the drums stand up to their knees in water and chemicals.

A Risk Assessment of Child Labour in the Tanneries of Dhaka, Bangladesh

Mariette de Graaf

Children involved in Dhaka's leather industry are engaged in activities that are commonly believed to be dangerous to their health and development. This study therefore conducted an occupational hygiene risk assessment of the specific tasks children perform in this sector. Occupational health standards have, however, been developed for healthy male adults and are based on an evaluation of health effects after a 40 hour workweek and a working life of 40 years. These standards cannot simply be applied to children. In medicine the current approach is to adapt a dose according to weight, but in occupational health directives, no such standards have been set for children.

Scientifically, little is known about possible harmful health effects of work performed by children [De Waal 1996; Forastieri 1997; Fassa & Facchini 2000; O'Donnell et al. 2002]. When they work under the same conditions as adults, children are exposed to the same dangers, but it is expected that the effects may be greater in children because they differ anatomically, physiologically and psychologically from adults. The limited epidemiologic research that exists, suggests that children are more prone to accidents and that the lifting of heavy loads will lead to a greater effect on their musculoskeletal system. Children are also more sensitive for the effects of exposure to chemicals, noise, heat and ionizing radiation [Fassa & Facchini 2000]. Other factors that play a role are the greater need for sleep in children and their lower capacity to assess risks. The level of physical, physiological and mental development, determines the specific risk factors for children of any age. Effects on children in the short or long run will also strongly depend on the characteristics of the work [O'Donnell et al. 2002]. In addition, the general health status of the child is relevant: is the child healthy ('healthy worker effect') or unhealthy (for example, because of malnutrition) when he starts working [Levison & Murray-Close 2005].

Working children in the tanneries of Hazaribagh, Dhaka

The process in the Hazaribagh tanneries consists of different stages. The main stages are:

- The making of wet blue leather
- The making of crusted leather
- The making of finished leather
- The transport of the leather
- Toggling (pinning the prepared leather flat to the ground so it can dry)

Children can be involved in each stage and the following tasks were identified during this study [see also BILS 2000; Ensing 2009]:

- helping adults to wash raw leather with several chemicals
- working as a loader to transport the raw leather from one place to another
- trimming of leather with a small knife or with scissors
- cleaning finished leather
- painting leather
- collecting finished leather
- toggling
- work as support staff, like fetching tea or cleaning

Each stage is characterised by its own working conditions. In addition, the overall environment (machines, heat, noise, electricity, etc) adds to the risks found in all stages. The main risks involve exposure to chemicals and ergonomic stressors. Effects can be reversible or irreversible and emerge in the short or in the long run. The level of danger when exposed to chemicals is determined by the hazardousness of the substance, the concentration of the substance, the exposure time, the route of exposure (e.g. inhalation, skin contact, ingestion) and the protective measures (ventilation or use of protective equipment). The effects of ergonomic stressors are determined by the nature of the stressor (posture, load) and exposure time.

In a study of the occupational health effects on adult tannery workers in India, the workers suffered the following problems [Öry 1997]:

- Back problems: lumbar backache (15.5%)
- Respiratory problems: respiratory irritation (3.8%) and asthma (2.2%)
- Skin problems: contact dermatitis (2.6%) and chrome ulcers (2%)

The making of wet blue leather

The process of making wet blue leather is characterised by the broad assortment of chemicals used. Based on the information gained during this visit to the tanneries in Bangladesh¹⁶ and on available literature, I have evaluated the risks by using COSHH Essentials¹⁷, an instrument to assess the risks of the used chemicals.

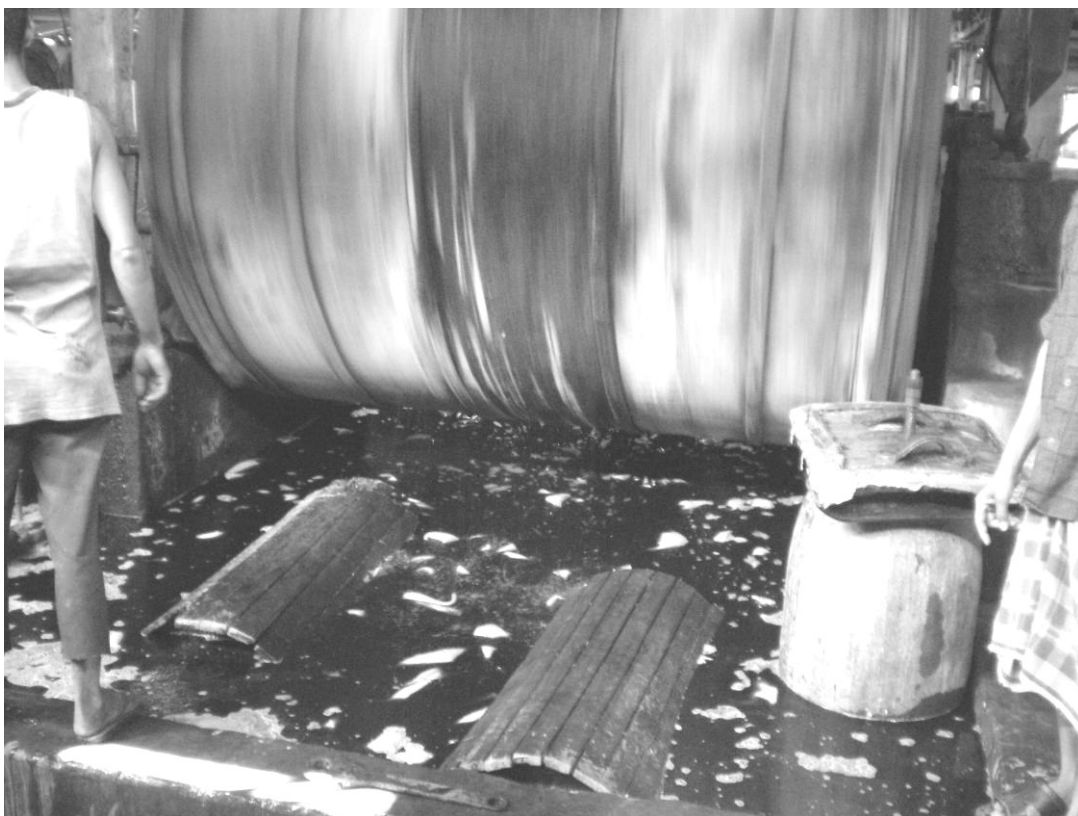
The making of wet blue leather is predominantly a wet process. Chemicals (0.5-5%) are mixed with large amounts of water (1-4 times the weight of the leather). The way in which the leather is treated with these mixtures differs between tanneries and the different phases in this stage.

¹⁶ I was able to conduct a general study of the health effects on children working in the tanneries in Bangladesh during October 2009. The study was made possible by the Dutch Occupational Hygiene Association NVvA.

¹⁷ <http://www.coshh-essentials.org.uk/>

The first operation in this process makes the leather resistant to bacteria and prepares it for tanning. In the smaller tanneries the leather is often treated in pits, inside or outside; in the medium-sized tanneries they mostly use drums. Evaluation of this process shows that in the process of shaving, liming, de-liming and pickling, the used chemicals can be categorised as hazardous.

The exposure to chemicals is medium or small during the stirring activities in the pit and the manual transport of the leather from the pit or drum to other locations. The stirring activities, which are done several times a day with a large bamboo stick, are too heavy for small children to perform, but adolescents have been seen to be involved. The unloading and transportation of treated leather is done by children, but only when the pieces of leather are small enough. Because the leather is wet, it is exceptionally heavy, and so the transportation is mostly done by adults. Children are thus unlikely, during this stage, to be exposed frequently or to a significant level.



Young tannery workers assigned to the drum. A concrete bath-like structure beneath the drum captures all liquids, including chemicals. The boys stand in the fluids for hours at a time when removing the skins from the drum.

Exposure is highest during the removal of the treated leather from the pit or drum, when large sections of the limbs are exposed to the mixture. During the field visits of this study, no children were seen emptying the drums, but earlier studies confirm that this does occur [see Ensing 2009]. When the drums are emptied workers end up standing in the mixture, often for several hours a week. Some workers use protective equipment like boots, aprons

and gloves, others don't. If the exposed body parts aren't washed thoroughly after exposure, the water will evaporate and the dissolved chemicals remain on the skin. Many of the used chemicals can cause (severe) burns and serious damage to eyes. A toxic effect can also occur if chemicals are ingested. Since most people in Bangladesh eat with their hands, ingestion of chemicals can easily happen if hands are not cleaned before eating.

During cleaning processes of the pit or when fluids come together, there is a possibility of the formation of toxic gasses, like hydrogen sulphide, ammonia gasses and chlorine. A few indicative measurements performed inside and outside near the open pits did not show concentrations in a range that is dangerous to health.

The concentrations measured in Dhaka were:

- hydrogen sulphide < 10% of the Dutch exposure limit
- chlorine < 10% of the Dutch exposure limit
- ammonia < 1% of the Dutch exposure limit

If we were to apply the method as used in medicine (dosage according to weight), and assume the weight of a child to be a minimum of 30 kg (about 10 years old) and the average weight of an adult to be 75 kg, then the levels found here would be considered relatively safe. However, it must be taken into account that only a small number of samples were taken, and other tanneries may show higher levels.

The second operation when making wet blue leather is the tanning process itself. The chemical used here (alkaline chromium sulphate), is not very hazardous. Sometimes adolescents help in this process, but no direct health risks are expected. In some tanneries the chromium sulphate is added to the pickling mixture and the same effects, as mentioned above, can be expected.

Sometimes children are sent to fetch small amounts of chemicals from the chemical shops. This is potentially a risky task, depending on the characteristics of the chemical and the way it is packed. Transportation of large quantities of chemicals or the collection of used chemicals from the bigger tanneries is done only by adults.

The making of crusted leather

In this stage the leather is dyed and softened (liquoring with oil). The chemicals used vary widely, depending on the desired colour or quality of the leather. When the chemicals are used in drums, people are mainly exposed after opening the drum and during the removal of the leather. Adolescents have been seen helping to remove the leather.

In some smaller tanneries, the dyeing takes place by manual spraying. This is done by skilled adults, but younger children are around and have been seen collecting the leather pieces and removing them to get dried elsewhere. When collecting the pieces the children are exposed to, and inhale, the sprayed dyes. Because the children are small, they are at spraying height. Small children were also seen sponging paint onto the leather. The route of exposure here is through direct skin contact. Being exposed to the spray of dye is much

more dangerous than sponging, since small particles in the air can be inhaled or affect the skin.

Dyes consist of several types of chemicals:

- The solvent: all the dyes (used in the drums and in spraying) are water-based, which implies that no serious effects are expected on the neurological system when exposed for multiple years;
- Pigments and filling substances: these may contain lead or chromate. In western countries these hazardous pigments are barely applied anymore. It is unknown if these are used in the leather process in the tanneries of Hazaribagh. It was not possible to make a clear conclusion about the health effects of the dyes. The dyes are made locally, and the vessels were not marked with their chemical make-up. Further research of the materials used will thus be necessary.



A young boy in a Dhaka tannery - Here he is seen sponging pieces of leather with dyes and other chemicals.

The making of finished leather

During this stage a finishing solution is applied by spraying or sponging. Children can also be involved in this process. The chemicals include dyes, but also binding and fixating chemicals. Sometimes thinner (an organic solvent) and preservatives are used, which can have harmful effects. The same considerations apply as in the case of the making of crust leather.

The transport of the leather

During the production process the leather is transported a number of times. The internal transportation of the wet leather is mainly done by adults because of the weight and slippery character of the wet hides and skins. Sometimes children are involved in the lifting and carrying of hides over small distances (meters). The skins are placed on the head and then thrown to the ground or on to a cart.



Young tannery worker carrying skins on his head

Young children were seen moving freshly painted leather to a place in the sun. They carried about 2-3 skins on their heads at a time, so the total weight was still small. But larger loads are also carried. A boy of about 13 years old was seen carrying 10 kg (about 50 skins of 0.2 kg each) on his head; a younger boy carried 20 skins of about 0.3 kg each.

No scientific literature was found on the effects of carrying such loads on the head, neither for adults nor for children. However, when loads are carried in the arms, held close to the body, a maximum load of about 20 kg is recommended for adults. So it may be expected that - when these children are frequently carrying loads like this - health problems may arise.

Sometimes children are involved in the transportation of bigger quantities of leather by bicycle. Older children have been seen pushing loaded bikes, whilst younger children

helped. Based on the available information, it is hard to make an evaluation. If the energy exerted for this activity is too intense, or if the frequency is too high, long-term negative effects on the health may arise.

Toggling

Children were often seen toggling. Pieces of wet blue, crusted or finished leather are stretched and nailed to the ground or to a wooden floor, so that they may dry. After a couple of hours the nails are removed by hand or with a device.

Toggling is performed whilst bent-over or squatting. These positions are very tiring when performed for a prolonged time. The toggling itself involves a repetitive action of the arm. Because the toggling can last a couple of hours at a time, health effects may be expected. Some of the boys, mainly the boys in the toggling fields, are paid by the number of skins they have toggled. Because of this, they may feel more pressured to work faster and take fewer breaks to take a necessary rest. Since the work is done outside or in the open field, climate may take its toll.

Environment

During the tanning process, machines are used for fleshing, shaving, plating, etc. Although children are not directly involved in operating the machines they are constantly in the vicinity and may be exposed to risks. Children are more prone to accidents because of their physical and mental level of development. Some of the machines produce noises above acceptable levels, but since the number of machines is generally low in places where children are working, it is not expected that children will suffer from hearing loss.

Older children (14 years and older) trim the leather with a knife or a pair of scissors. Cutting accidents do take place.

Sometimes children are asked to operate the electricity switches near the drums. The electricity switches are not always safely constructed and a dangerous situation may arise.

In some (parts of) tanneries, the floors can be very slippery because fluids are easily spilt during the unloading of the drums or the pits, or during transportation of the skins. Besides the danger of hurting oneself when slipping and falling, there is also the danger of direct skin contact with chemicals spilt on the floor. Since many children wear open shoes (slippers) or no shoes at all, skin contact occurs frequently.

Finally, it is important to note the long working hours of the children. In addition to all the potential dangers, a lack of rest during the day or sleep at night can have serious consequences for the body's ability to repair itself. This applies to adults, but is even more relevant for children. Moreover, the longer the work, the longer they are exposed to the various risks mentioned above.

Conclusions

The evaluation of the health risks of children is straightforward in the case of toggling. Here the postural aspect, the speed at which they have to work, the work pressure and the climate conditions, have a combined negative impact on the musculoskeletal system when the work is performed for too many hours per day, and for too many years.

In tanneries, the kind of activities a child performs varies strongly over time. There is no daily pattern, not even for adults, and children are asked to help where and whenever necessary. The hazards are therefore more difficult to define.

The use of chemicals is the most significant risk factor. Two situations can be distinguished:

- During the wet part of the process children are hardly involved, but the exposure still occurs indirectly (contact with spilt chemicals) or incidentally (when gasses are formed through chemical interaction).
- During the dry part of the process children can be directly exposed to a lot of chemicals during tasks such as leather collection and sponging. The main exposure routes are inhalation and skin contact. A risk assessment is hard to make, because the composition and/or the safety aspects of the mixtures is mostly unknown to the users, but it is to be expected that a number of chemicals may be harmful.

A few working conditions should also be considered as significant risk factors:

- Working in a hot environment, working for prolonged hours, and working for many years may contribute to a negative health impact.
- The safety of children is not guaranteed when they are working in the vicinity of machines and with instruments like knives and scissors, especially when floors are wet and electrical installations are unsafe.
- The older the children get, the more tasks they are given and the greater the risks they are confronted with. Physical strength and job experience are important factors that determine the working conditions and workload.

The main question is whether or not the activities carried out by children in leather production are dangerous from the perspective of risk evaluation. It can be concluded that the work of children in tanneries involves activities that are (potentially) harmful for children. However, a lot is still unknown about the exact work the children perform and means of evaluation are missing.

Evaluation methods are developed in the West. In the evaluation of the risks of working children in non-western countries, especially in tanneries, the following problems arise:

- Specific standards for children are lacking: the effects of different kinds of exposure, like chemicals, noise or ergonomic stressors, on children are unknown.
- The work is not performed according to a regular daily schedule. Tasks are irregular and therefore difficult to evaluate.

- The exposure to chemicals in tanneries is very complex. Especially in the stage of crust and finished leather a wide variety of chemicals is used. Often the exact name, composition or danger symbols are lacking. Some of the chemicals are reused and for many chemicals a toxicity evaluation has not yet taken place.
- Specific evaluation methods for the kind of work performed is lacking. For instance, little is known about the effects of carrying loads on the head or working in high ambient temperatures.

Risk assessments are a non-judgemental contribution to the knowledge about the effect of work on children. The yardstick is whether or not the set limits are crossed, although unfortunately no such set limits have yet been constructed for children. The risk assessment performed here is to be understood in its wider context, which includes the consideration of multiple other hazards involved in child labour. Issues, such as being separated from parents, power relations in work, no time to play, no access to education and the economics of child labour, are all to be considered when determining the urgency for the elimination of child labour.



Spraying chemicals and dyes onto the skins - Although younger workers are not directly involved in spraying, it is clear to see how contact with and inhalation of the sprays occur. No precautionary clothing or face masks are used.

Girl Domestic Labour in Dhaka: Exploitation and Humiliation

Nanna Baum

In recent years, socio-demographic characteristics of child domestic workers, as well as the working conditions to which they are exposed, have been written about extensively.¹⁸ According to an ILO study [2006a], Dhaka alone has close to 150.000 child domestic labourers, who were mostly girls. About 23% had started working before they turned 8, and 33% when aged 9-11 years. They all worked 7 days a week, and an average of 9 hours per day. More than half of these children were not receiving any wage. Only 11% were allowed to go to school. The ILO survey indicates a hard life from a very young age onwards, but an analysis that focuses only on factual working conditions, ignoring the ways in which the child is socially and emotionally treated inside the household, cannot fully explain the extent of the potential or actual damage to the child.

Existing research on the perceptions and emotions of child domestic workers, if undertaken, is commonly limited to one-time visits and questionnaires. This study is novel, as it went beyond the observation of factual conditions, and had extreme close contact with the child domestics. This study attempts to provide an in-depth illustration of a child domestic's suffering, which goes beyond superficial statistics. It reveals a picture of the typical work- and social deprivations inflicted by employers¹⁹.

Anthropological methods of data collection were used in order to gain insights directly from the source. The fieldwork conducted for this study took place in a secure semi-public space, outside the employers' apartments. "SUROVI" and PLAN facilitated the access to child domestic workers in 'educational centres' in Dhaka (Mohammadpur), where the children could spend a couple of hours every day. Lengthy and repeated interviews with 20 girls, in the age group 7 to 18, were carried out. A long research period of 5 months was

¹⁸ E.g. [Momen 1993; Hoque 1995; Rahman 1995; RCS 1999; SHOISHAB 1999, 2001; Khair 2004; UNICEF 2004]. An exception is the Phd Dissertation Child Domestic Workers in Dhaka: A Geographical Study of Discourses, Work, and Education by Kari Bolstad Jensen [Jensen 2007] and a field study conducted for the book *Lost Innocence, Stolen Childhoods* by Therese Blanchet [Blanchet 1996].

¹⁹ No appropriate term exists to characterise the person the child is working for and living with. Employer implies a formal work relationship, but to different degrees, this work relationship is intermingled with family relationships. The Bengali term *mallik* represents a hierarchical relationship that is, as in many semi-feudal systems, sometimes based on dependency. In this paper the term 'employer' is used in accordance with international terminations. However, the child domestic workers themselves refer to their 'employer' as relatives like aunt/uncle, grandmother/father, or sister/brother.

necessary to earn their trust, allowing us to gain a valuable understanding of child domestics' thought processes and perceptions.

Between “kajer meye” and daughter

The crucial distinction between domestic labour and other types of (child) labour is the lack of physical separation between the workplace and the living space. Especially those children who are live-in helpers or full-time (also referred to as *bhandha*²⁰) are very far away from their family, usually in rural districts. Children's service commonly begins when they are between six and nine years old, and girls, for various reasons, are often withdrawn again when they are 'grown-up' at approximately 15 years [UNICEF 2004:x]. Domestics carry out various tasks at all times of the day. The most common tasks involve cleaning, washing dishes, mopping the floor, and serving food. The pay is meagre, with an average monthly salary of Tk. 224 (euro 2.50) [Khair 2004:XIX]. Commonly, child domestics receive food, clothes and lodging, which is sometimes the principal benefit of the work. In addition to a huge workload and long hours with little reward, all forms of violence have been reported to be very common [Hoque 1995; Khair 2004; UNICEF 2004].

Child domestics' status within city households varies from quasi-family members (adopted children from less fortunate families) to bonded labourers. It is the complex nature of the bonds, and the ambiguous status, which renders any clear characterisation of child domestic labour near impossible. Yet, children's realities are often those of bonded labourers, rather than 'daughters'. They have a low status, come from a poor rural background and remain discriminated outsiders within the new urban (middle- or upper class) household [Pflug 2002:28]. Although, from an outsiders' perspective, their *kajer meye*²¹ status is more apparent, it is surprising to find that many children still feel like, or at least aspire to be, family members. Child domestic workers, it appears, do not merely strive for appreciation and a show of respect, but desire full participation in the family, based on love and affection. That is a direct or indirect promise given to them when they came to live and work in the household.

The very young and innocent children thus come to the household with high hopes, but then the behaviour and treatment towards them changes radically. It is a sad experience to be overwhelmed by the immense amount of work and the poor treatment, and this sentiment was echoed by many domestic workers, who feel betrayed (*mitthé*²²). After being contracted out to work and live within the four walls of the employer, whilst isolated from the parents, their vulnerability is unparalleled and emotional despair gets

²⁰ Literally: tied down

²¹ The Bengali terms “kajer meye” and “kajer chele” (lit.: working girl/boy) have a negative connotation in the Bengali society, similar to the word ‘slave’ in the American context. They refer to a second class human being and nobody likes to belong to this category. The middle-class employers also do not want to identify themselves as the “mallik of kajer meye”. Therefore it often is common to avoid this expression and avoid it by saying ‘I have a girl/boy in my house’ or ‘these girls/boys working in houses’.

²² Literally: strong lie

hold of them; it is the moment they become aware of their lack of control, as the following testimonies illustrate:

There, in my mother's house, I lived a respectable life... Really, this was the only place where I could feel myself (*ami jekhene amar moto*), where I felt like a human! And really, after leaving my mother's house, I don't remember any person who ever paid attention to me. I was always neglected (*onador*).

When I came to Dhaka, I never dreamed that I would become a *kajer meya* (servant). I always wanted to be a family member, a somewhat lower family member. I wanted to work for a *mallik* who said "No, she is like my daughter, she is not my *kajer meye* (*na se amer meya, kajer meya noy*)."

The woman told me: "If you want to eat something you have to do work!" My four new brothers and sisters always beat me and shout at me: "No, no, you are not like us. You cannot sit here in my mother's couch! You cannot sit at the table with us! Go to the kitchen! Don't touch our toys." They have different lives. They have never been servants, they have never suffered homelessness; they have no sorrows and experienced no harassment! But me? ... I suffer beating, burning, 'servant treatment', homelessness, and I am illiterate...and I became a servant. Am I worth anything (*amar ki dam ache*)?

Good food and clothes, I get both in this house. But if I had to choose, then it is more important to have people around who love me. I like my village most because there are many people who really like me. My aunt, uncle, everybody loves me.

Children's perception of the household work

While working conditions can undoubtedly be harmful to the child's physical health, studies have disproportionately emphasised these physical realities as the determining factor in a child's suffering, whilst neglecting the psychological impact. Although it should be reiterated that hours of work, difficulty of the work, meagre food supplies, etc., are unacceptable for a child, the children live in similar conditions in their rural households. What they do not necessarily experience at home, however, is the humiliating treatment received from their employers. Although the conditions in which children render their services are vastly different, a comparison of the working conditions and narratives revealed a consistency among the children: the degree of satisfaction is most influenced by the quality of status and interaction with the members of the household, rather than by the type or the difficulty of the work itself, as the following example illustrates.

Meena (9 years) has a heavy workload on a daily basis. However, she claimed to be entirely satisfied with her life in the city household. She thinks highly of her employers and does not question many of the hardships of her work. Those who consider themselves

'lucky with the employer' seldom feel stressed about what appears to be heavy, hazardous work.

Those children who feel excluded from the family, however, relate stronger feelings of discontent:

I don't mind staying up late at night; it's not problematic for me to not sleep, I'm used to it. But I'm frustrated the girl doesn't appreciate me for my services. I do lots of things for her, whatever she asks me to do. And even though I am doing all her work, she swears at me and disregards me. She never gives me any recognition, no matter how much I work for her.

Children's perceptions of the work benefits

Child domestic workers receive food, clothes and shelter for their services, and in most cases, little more. Economic exploitation is a serious concern of policy makers, who strive to ensure better living and working conditions for child domestic workers, but even if better conditions could be achieved, a system of abused childhood would remain intact.

Overall, the findings suggest that most of the child domestics seemed reasonably unconcerned about their low salaries and most of them did not seem to feel economically exploited. Children usually don't question the wages and labour arrangements, which are discussed between the parents and the employer. They also have a sense of responsibility towards their family and are willing to undergo some hardship to support them. As Rotna (15) said: "My employer never gives the money to me; they give it to my father, because he knows that my family is struggling because of poverty. It's good, because I would spend all the money and my father can use it better."

In addition to wanting to please and help their own families, the children also wish to please their 'new' family and to become part of the family. The self-deception induces them to put less weight on financial benefits: "This is my own house. Why should I take a salary?" (Meena, 9 years) For the child domestics, monetary rewards are less valuable than the experience of love and inclusion within the household, an experience which they, as children, keep longing for.

An expression of respect and love can be expressed through small gifts. Although most children do not care much about their low (or non-existent) monthly salary, they become distressed about not having any, or little, pocket money, small gifts and the hand-down of old clothes. Hoque [1995:107] describes these moments, when they are given extra benefits, as some of the happiest moments they experience. For the child domestic workers, these gifts make them feel respected as members of the households. It is fundamental to the feeling of belonging, for which the child aches.

Such small gifts usually do not offset the general feeling of deprivation. Their meals are in most cases certainly more nutritious than what they receive in the villages. However, the distribution of food and clothes is normally unequal. Being given leftovers (*jhuta muta*

khaowa) and being made to eat only after all other household members have taken their food, is often a great source of unhappiness for the children. It again emphasises their discrimination; as Hasi (13) said:

In the village everybody would get the same food. When I ate spoilt food in the village, the rest of the members also had this. When they had fresh warm food, I too took the same food. Maybe there was not enough food, and we had huge food problems, but we faced that problem equally.

The need for appreciation and inclusion was a generally expressed feeling. Those few children who are treated with equality are happier than others. Unfortunately, most of the children felt exclusion and humiliation and considered this as the worst aspect of their situation.

Children's perception of their treatment

The implications of physical and sexual abuse are known to the public and have been a concern for policy makers. In recent years, the impact of violence on the mental health of children and long-term consequences throughout their lives has been gaining recognition [Pineiro 2006].

Many child domestic workers are insulted, tortured, harassed, and raped. Discrimination and the low status within the household means that these children suffer from isolation and neglect, and explains their desperate desire to be loved by the employer. Child domestics were often heard saying: "I have no one who understands me", indicating that their sorrows go unheard and their joys not shared. The harmful consequences are reinforced by the lack of time-off from work and free time with others and thus time to forget. This form of emotional abuse has often been neglected and undervalued in political interventions.

Despite having survived life-threatening conditions and constant hunger in the village, they experience the lack of affection and discrimination in the city as more detrimental than anything else. Verbal abuse leaves its psychological marks, as one girl who had been repeatedly beaten said:

I can tell you, my previous *mallik* was really bad. He did bad swearing. He called me *shoytanar baccha*²³, *shuorer baccha*²⁴ and *chotoloker baccha*²⁵. When he swore like this I wanted to kill him. Whenever they beat me I just tolerate it. I am just sitting with my head down. I said nothing. But no one can tolerate this swearing by the name of the parents.

²³ literally: son of the devil

²⁴ literally: son of a pig

²⁵ literally: son of lower class people

The children differentiate between fair and unfair physical punishments. Some punitive measures can be accepted as suitable 'parental' behaviour: "Who loves me can also beat me" (Arif, 15). Physical violence is painful by itself, but the experience is much worse in combination with 'unfairness and embarrassment', like being beaten or being scolded in front of others:

The worst form of beating is being beaten in front of guests. I always suffered pain, I can cope with pain. When someone now slaps me, I just laugh out loud and say: "You think you can scare me by slapping?" But the guests thought that I didn't do my work properly and that the *mallik* has the right to beat me. But it wasn't like that. (Roxana 14 years)

Beatings and sexual abuse, was made worse when combined with unfairness, insecurity, and the disrespect for emotions. Child domestic workers are doubly betrayed by those who were meant to protect them. Roxana remembers the day of her rape as one of the worst experiences of her life. But even with this experience, it was not the physical act or the physical pain that she suffered from most; instead she remembers the unfairness of the *malikan* (the lady of the house):

They always burned my skin with the *khunti* (a big iron kitchen tool). I can cope with this pain. But I didn't do anything! Why does she beat me like this? If I get her, I'll just kill her! I don't know who between them is most guilty. But the woman is worse!

Existing policy interventions usually neglect the emotional aspects that constitute an important part of child domestics' quality of life. Implementing a minimum working age and a standard for working conditions, which may be effective in other fields of child labour, are insufficient to ensure enhanced well-being of (child) domestics in Bangladesh. Thus, formalising domestic labour through the introduction of legislation and the introduction of a regulated monthly salary is inadequate to ameliorate sufferings which are mostly emotional.

Child domestics feel deprived, but often do not know where to turn to for support or refuge and feel abandoned by everyone. Among the 20 child domestics in our sample, three children ran away from the city apartment, two girls developed abnormal behaviour and were scared of being alone, refused to talk or did not recognise their own parents after being withdrawn from the employer's household.

Conclusion

This study has explored the overall quality of life and the experience of child domestics in Dhaka, Bangladesh. In-depth qualitative research over a period of time was carried out among 20 working girls, who had left their homes in the village to work for relatively rich families in Dhaka. The arrangements had been negotiated by their parents. The girls had

entered their new lives with hope and excitement, expecting to become part of a new family, receiving care and respect in return for their devoted assistance in the household. But, the children quickly found themselves betrayed and humiliated in abusive situations.

The parents of child domestics receive the salary directly (if there is one); the child is provided with food, clothes and shelter, but is given little else. The children, however, showed little grievance with a lack of monetary or material benefits. They made it very clear that they would do their work gladly, to support their natal families, if they received respect and appreciation for their labour, and if they were cared for and included into their 'host' family. They had come to the city in the understanding that they had been accepted by families to come and live with them and go to school, in exchange for some work in the household.

When the tides turned and the children realised their true positions within the household, it was neither the physical punishments, nor the possible lack of material goods or even food, that upset them most; it was the discrimination, exclusion, disrespect, ingratitude, and other assaults on their emotional needs that truly hurt them. In addition, they were doubly betrayed when others in the household, or their own parents, failed to come to their defence.

Policy in the past has focused primarily on the physical well-being of these girls, rather than their mental well-being. In other words, the satisfaction of material needs, rather than emotional needs. This study has made clear that child domestic workers run a high risk of long-term mental health problems, regardless of their material and physical security (which would be poor even if they had stayed in their rural homes). For such children, the one and only response can be 'withdrawal'. The mental and emotional impact on the child domestic worker is at least as nefarious as the physical impact and the exploitative relationship.

The Supply of Girl Domestic: a Matter of Semi-Feudal Relations

*Nanna Baum*²⁶

In Bangladesh, child domestic labour has evolved from traditional and previously unchallenged social practices. It is not unusual for poor families with a large number of offspring to send a daughter to live in another house for a part of her upbringing. But, increasingly, domestic work is no longer a family arrangement to benefit the child's interests, but rather a commercialised labour praxis in an increasingly urban and capitalist society [Black 1997:2-3].

Today, child domestic labour constitutes a major segment of child labour. According to UNICEF [UNICEF 2004], 9% of the households in Dhaka employ a child; in Dhaka alone, more than 150.000 children, many as young as 6 years, are employed by a middle-class family, usually without much contact with the outside world, not even with the parents.²⁷ Of these child domestics, 92% live and work with their employers on a fulltime basis. They are restrained within the four walls of the household and are subject to the whims of the employer. The fact that the employer maintains access to the child's labour and body at all times, makes child domestic work a unique category of child labour. As a consequence, many domestics also perform dangerous tasks, or find themselves in exploitative work relationships, which endanger a child's physical and psychological health. The work often involves long hours, or work at night, or confining the child to the premises of the employer.

Despite the pervasiveness of the practice and the recent international exposure that the practice of child labour has received, there is little in-depth research on supply and recruitment mechanisms [Momen 1993; Hoque 1995; Rahman 1995; RCS 1999; SHOISHAB 1999, 2001; Khair 2004; UNICEF 2004]). Rather general motives, such as poverty, culture, and gender discrimination are commonly provided and accepted as explanations [see for example Blagbrough 2008]. However, an analysis that ignores the recruitment processes and the voices of parents and middlemen will not expose the multi-layered reality of the practice. The children have been separated from their rural background and have little

²⁶ The fieldwork was carried out together with Fatama Suvra, an anthropologist from Jahanginagar University; her involvement is greatly appreciated and her contribution to this paper has been crucial.

²⁷ Attempts have been made to come up with good estimates of the number of child domestic workers. According to the National Child Labour Survey of 2002-2003, carried out by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics [2003], the number of child domestic workers in Bangladesh is 155,883. UNICEF estimated that there were 131,965 child domestic workers in 2004, in Dhaka alone [UNICEF 2004].

contact with their families. In order to find out how they were recruited and how the separation is kept in place, the research was directed towards the recruitment areas.

The objective of the study was to understand both the overt and hidden reasons why parents cooperate in sending their children into domestic work, the expectations beforehand and the experience after the child went into service and the mechanism involved in the recruitment

The fieldwork took place in three different areas of Bangladesh. Villages were visited in the Dhaka district because of their close proximity to the city; in the north-eastern part of Bangladesh, considered one of the poorest areas in Bangladesh; and in the western part of Bangladesh near the Indian border, where child trafficking is relatively common. Altogether, in-depth interviews were held with relatives of six girl domestics. Moreover, interviews were held with six rural middlemen who supply children to Dhaka.

Supply mechanisms

Blood-relations connect urban households with rural families [White 1992:37] and a majority of child domestics are supplied through these links. Hoque [1995] estimated that about 50% of girl domestics originate from the employer's home village. In these cases, employers normally come from a rich, landowning village family and have had some kind of semi-feudal relation with the child's family. In the past they have likely assisted the poorer family in some way during a crisis by offering them work or other resources.

There are some indications, however, that the presence of a recruiting middleman, who is neither family of the employer nor the child, is becoming more common these days. Employers preferably seek help from a reputable arbitrator who can recruit from his immediate network. Approximately 30% of the girls are supplied through arbitrators, such as relatives, friends, and neighbours of the employer, whereby the girls' parents are not directly known to the employer [Hoque 1995:115]. Generally, employers like to be informed about the background of the child before recruiting them; they will rarely hire a child without having some kind of connection. Only 15% of girl domestics are recruited through less familiar contacts. These middlemen are normally considered to be influential and 'honourable' men in the village, either through landownership, or political and educational institutions, such as local governmental politicians, NGO workers, and school teachers. A village arbitrator can create a good social network with the employer by supplying a domestic worker. Thus, while there are no clear monetary benefits involved in recruitments (a maximum of 4000 taka), the middlemen gain a relationship with a wealthy and influential household.

Parents who supply their daughters into domestic work are normally portrayed as egotistical or even gullible. It is, however, important to understand that it is nearly impossible to recruit a child without the recruiter having a good reputation in the village. As one local village leader, and in this case recruiter, said: "The parents always believe me, because I am a TNO (Thana Nirbahi Executive Officer) woman. They believe that I will

never cause any harm to their child.” Middlemen are well-known to the child’s family and are convincing when they present moral and economic arguments. In addition, prior to recruitment and employment, the middleman will have likely provided relief to the poor family.

Middlemen approach parents who are not only dependent on them, but also regard them as honourable and trustworthy. In nearly all cases, the middlemen in the process are to some extent responsible for any transgressions of the child whilst employed. The middleman will convince the parents that the employers will care for the wellbeing of the poor family, and especially the girl. Middlemen will sometimes fabricate pleasant stories about the employers and convince the parents that the employer in Dhaka is very well-known, very good, extremely well-off, with good social standing and who will never act inappropriately with the girl.

Parents’ motivations for supplying their daughters

A common assumption is that parents are unable to properly care for their children because of poverty, and send them to Dhaka for a monthly salary or simply for the food and shelter provided [Rahman 1995:14]. This study identifies various motivations why parents enter into the agreement.

Rapport with “The Rich”

One of the major reasons for supplying a daughter to Dhaka is the strong desire of poor families to strengthen and build up the relation with a rich or influential family. Handing over responsibility for a daughter to trustworthy and respected people of a powerful household, reinforces the relationship. The parents hope that their daughters will become part of a family, and will be treated well. Unfortunately, the rich middlemen or employers often take advantage of this desire for strengthening the personal relationship, hoping for reciprocity.

Financial and Material Benefits

In rural areas, poverty creates a strong tendency to fall back on semi-feudal labour relations with a hope of improving the economic position and achieving upwards mobility [White 1992:37]. With the child used as a bargaining chip, the rich and powerful family can be approached in times of crisis for financial or material support. The type of support the poor people hope for, especially in times of crisis, include a parcel of land for cultivation, the permission to keep a larger amount of grain for themselves after the harvest, a marriage dowry, the payment of a medical treatment, or employment. The rich middlemen or employers take advantage of this desire and will use their knowledge of the parents’ wishes and make all the right promises to make the deal they want.

When parents are approached with fantastical promises, they choose to believe that a rich family will take in their daughter and give her a better life. In contrast to common ideas, poverty-stricken families do not send their daughters to Dhaka to reduce their expenditures or to earn an income, neither for the food and shelter provided. All case studies make it clear, in fact, that parents generally do not want to maintain a formal labour relationship based on a tough economic deal with the employer. They know that working for them without putting in high demands concerning salaries and working conditions will lead to more cordiality and support in case of need. Nevertheless, most parents receive some monthly payment (approximately 200tk to 400tk) and like to believe that this money was given to them out of compassion rather than as a wage in exchange for the child's labour. They see the work the child does as a favour returned, rather than labour that has to be reimbursed.

The interviewed families could generally survive with the little food available. They have become accustomed to live in poverty and at very low levels of subsistence. Nevertheless, when promises are made, the various family members start reacting in different ways, disagreeing on whether to accept the offer, conscious of the risks involved, and, as we noticed, this can often lead to disagreements and conflicts between spouses, or parents and their children.

Parental Emotions and Greediness

When it comes to domestic labour, many believe that child domestics come from careless and greedy guardians. However, in contrast to the general belief parents continue to worry and doubt their decision. They fear that their child will be beaten, will not get enough food, or will suffer under a huge workload. The communication with their daughter is usually extremely limited and the parents are highly anxious about their children's wellbeing in Dhaka [Hoque 1995:51].

Parents are commonly indecisive and in disagreement about what to do. They constantly consider the child's wellbeing against the hopes for better relations and future benefits. Unfortunately, no matter how much the parents weigh-up the pros and cons of sending their daughter to another family, they most often do so from an extremely weak bargaining position. Due to semi-feudal relations, the request from a rich family for a child can hardly be rejected without damaging the relationship.

Vulnerability of child domestic workers

In the process of negotiation between parents and employers, capitalist and semi-feudal labour relations are always involved and complicate the context of domestic work [see also: [Black 1997:2-3]. Unfortunately, capitalist labour exploitation is hidden behind the mask of lingering semi-feudal relations. The employer will often simulate informality and cordiality in order to 'please' the parents, but will take advantage of his power over the girl. Employers tend to feign a parental role and even if complaints reach the parents, the

employer convinces the parents that his words, rather than the words of the daughter, can be trusted.

If the arrangement ends parents will lose not only a financial supplement to their household, but also a valuable relation with an influential family, which could be vital in times of crisis. When an employer has agreed to arrange a marriage in the future, in some cases children may stay in an abusive household until the family's material needs are fulfilled. In some cases, when the employer has already given financial support to the parents, such as medical treatment or a loan, the parents and the daughter are pressured to fulfil the commitment they made, and the children thus remain trapped in the same abusive household for a long time. The parents will consciously or subconsciously turn a blind eye to their child's complaints. Many girls have internalised this dilemma; they continue to work in intolerable conditions and stay silent about their sufferings because they know that any complaints can lead to disastrous effects for themselves and their families.

Conclusion

The dynamics by which children enter the domestic services have been transformed. Child domestic labour is increasingly the outcome of capitalist labour relations based on semi-feudal dependency. The employers seek a reliable household worker in exchange for money. The rural families, however, hope for an improved living standard by ingratiating themselves with the wealthier family. Other than their daughters, they have little to offer the rich families in return.

Despite the significant material scarcity some families can suffer, not to mention the cycle of debts, parents do not give their children to Dhaka for merely a monthly salary or the food provided. Accepting poverty as the single explanation to rationalise the decision is therefore much too simplistic. Parents are aware of the risks involved. While parents care deeply for their children, they nevertheless uphold the illusion that this arrangement will bear future fruits for their children and themselves. Thereby, they constantly weigh-up the child's wellbeing against the hopes for better relations and future benefits. Thus, greediness sometimes arises because of deceptions, false beliefs about the relations, and disillusion about future upwards mobility.

Dependencies of the poor on the rich maintain the supply chain. All interviewed parents were aware of the possible 'physical' risks involved in sending their daughters to the city, such as trafficking, sexual abuse, overwork, starvation, and physical abuse. However, children entering domestic labour are not taken away by strangers. Recruiters are usually considered to be trustworthy by the parents and parents may assume that the risks to the girls are minimal. Therefore, campaigns that warn parents about trafficking are ineffective. An extension could be made to the already existing anti-trafficking campaigns to include warnings against the misuse of social hierarchies and abuse of power, despite this being a tall order, since it implies a direct confrontation with embedded class relations in the countryside. Awareness raising must target power holders, and thus

potential middlemen, such as NGO workers, LGOs (local government officials), school teachers, and landlords.

Parents often let their children enter domestic labour because of their concern about the future dowry of their daughters. Action needs to be implemented at a cultural level addressing marriage and the abolishment of dowry in rural areas.

An in-depth understanding of social networks and supply mechanisms, as well as the motivation of parents and middlemen, is crucial for socially embedded and successful political interventions. This research has identified strong dependency relations in rural areas, and contradicting ideas and expectations on the supply and demand sides.

Even though efforts by international and national NGOs to stop the supply of children as household workers have made headway, awareness has been one-sided: priority concerns raised in TV spots, radio, and other media, ignore the semi-feudal dependency relations of poor parents with middlemen and employers. The child remains the ultimate victim of this labour supply based on semi-feudal relations, which continue under the guise of reciprocity and cordiality.

Recommendations

The cases presented in this report all illustrate that poverty is a significant underlying cause of child labour and that a multi-faceted government intervention - in terms of economic development, educational provisions and social protection - is a fundamental precondition for any solution. However, the cases also show how the causes of and solutions to child labour are manifold and complex, and that policies for poverty eradication tend to, unfortunately, be too abstract and devoid of reality. More concrete measures are therefore required. However, these have proven to work well only under closely monitored and well-resourced circumstances.

Based on our research and analysis, and taking the above into account, we propose the following recommendations.

- 1. Poverty-oriented measures, particularly rural programmes aimed at the prevention of labour migration (of entire families or of children) from the villages to the cities.**
 - The solution in the struggle against child labour lies in addressing the root causes, which have to do with poverty. This requires a social protection system and alternative income generation programmes, such as food-for-work or rural employment guarantee programmes, targeting the most vulnerable families in particular.
 - Once these government-financed programmes have taken hold, civil society should ensure that the most vulnerable families benefit most (as happens with the Rural Labour Employment Guarantee Programme in India). Locally-embedded civil society organisations can monitor such programmes and see to it that they also function as a safety net for broken families and their children. This particular segment of the rural population is prone to opt for child labour as the only remaining solution to deprivation.
 - The improvement of the educational system in the villages is very much part of the solution. Village schools and slum schools are often at the tail end of the educational systems. They cater to the marginalised section of the population, a section that is presently felt to be redundant to the economy and thus not worthy of investments.

2. Rural-urban migration, a significant occurrence in many developing countries, is a major source of urban child labour and needs to be addressed.

- Awareness programmes, informing adults and children about the harsh realities in city slum life may make the difference, especially if younger children can be reached through peer campaigns and thus may decide against moving into the cities, ending up as porters, street traders, restaurant workers, and domestic workers.
- Awareness raising is not an easy job since many children, particularly in the case of domestic labour, are contracted through hierarchical structures of dominance and suffer from the conditions of bonded labour rather than from ignorance. We, however, have also concluded that parents and children are often unaware of the harsh reality behind the sweet promises and an information campaign may help to convince parents not to give in to the pressures put upon them by the village elite.

3. The policy focus should be on local measures rather than on international trade-related measures.

- Most sectors in which children work are not related to the export of goods or services. In the few existing cases though, for example in the leather industry in Bangladesh, the evidence of a direct relationship between child labour and export is questionable. Export-oriented measures, for both reasons, need to be treated with caution.
- It is obvious that international pressure, backed-up by the threat of a trade boycott, has reduced child labour in the formal industries. Where international attention has been quite intensive, child labour in the much vaster informal sector has remained unattended and continues on a large scale. Evidence suggests that workers, who have been removed from export-oriented sectors, now work in informal sectors. Furthermore the reduction of child labour in the formal industries has taken place in a qualified way. As the study on girls in the garment industry reveals, although girls below 14 have been removed from the factories, girls above that age are working under conditions that do not comply with ILO norms. Adolescent labour under harmful conditions and intolerable terms thus continues to be ignored. In this way, the formal garment industry, which also produces for export, is still very much involved with child labour.
- In addition, the attestation of child labour involvement is complicated by the intricacies of the relationship between the formal and the informal sectors, in which child labour is plenty. It will be difficult to attest, for example, if all exported leather gloves have been produced in formal factories, devoid of child labour, and that not a single glove has been purchased from the household industry, through subcontracting or otherwise. It will be even more difficult to establish that none of the raw materials or semi-finished products were produced without child labour.

- In the fight against child labour, export-oriented and non-export-oriented child labour should thus not be dealt with separately. For the implementation and monitoring of national legislation a much bigger inspectorate is necessary in addition to transparency of production chains.
- In this context, small entrepreneurs should be (financially) supported in order to be able to implement existing labour regulation within their enterprise. This is likely to reduce the demand for child labourers, and give an impulse to overall economical development of the country.

4. Facilitating the access to education and to vocational training for migrant children

- Schools often do not function properly and poor families, although convinced of the necessity of education, have a high incidence of dropout. In addition, the transition to secondary education is often blocked by the remoteness of schools, the direct fees and indirect expenses, and the social and cultural barriers. In addition to easing the barriers to education, improving educational quality (curricula, trained teachers, regular teaching, infrastructure and improved prospects of a decent job) will help to attract and retain children, in combination with providing incentives to keep children in school, such as school feeding programmes [see also: IREWOC 2007].
- All evidence suggests that once children have dropped out of school, for various reasons, it is cumbersome to get them back into the educational system. A focus on universal access to elementary education and lower secondary school are an indispensable component of the anti-child labour movement.
- The children of migrant families, particularly in cases of seasonal migration, will benefit from (in)formal schools in the vicinity. Some such initiatives have shown encouraging results, but they still suffer from the overlap of several small initiatives without much coordination.
- When children, for various reasons, have discontinued regular schooling, an informal school may be the alternative. Providing them some minimal form of education, leisure time and social contacts, as we noticed in the case of domestic labour and of children in the brick kilns, may offer a realistic way out.
- Furthermore, offering vocational training at an appropriate age, in which earning and learning are combined, can contribute to better future opportunities, and simultaneously enable them to continue to earn money, so as to fulfil the expectations of family, and their own desires.

5. Awareness programmes

- All countries have introduced comprehensive legislation against child labour. The implementation and effectiveness, however, leaves a lot to be desired. One

possible reason is the lack of political will. State responsibility needs to be addressed and development aid can help to improve the reach of the educational system and to prioritise public spending to ensure the delivery of social services to vulnerable households and hard-to-reach children.

- Government monitoring will also benefit from an enlargement and improvement of the (child) labour inspectorate, with a focus not only on the sectors that have been under (international) public scrutiny, such as the carpet industry and the garments industry, but on the entire informal sector as well. The position of girls specifically needs to be addressed, not only in the informal sector and in the households, but also in the formal industry, like the garment factories, where they continue to suffer from general labour and specific gender issues.
- NGO activities will be helpful and effective in raising awareness about child labour and gender issues, and thus in keeping government administration on the hooks.

6. More research and debate on the risks and harm of work

- It is important to understand where socialisation of children - in terms of education and light contributions to the household - ends, and where child labour starts. Many more studies will need to be undertaken in order to document how such labour damages the present and future interests of the child and of society. A much more comprehensive research agenda needs to be constructed.
- More research is needed on how labour conditions affect children specifically. Existing standards are applicable for adults, and fail to take into consideration the unique physical and mental traits of children at varying levels of development.
- In order to decide whether work (in particular for girls) is harmful or not, non-economic activities such as household work should also be included in the analysis. Household work requires a huge investment of time and energy; it doubles the workload of children. Improving infrastructure in the vicinity (water sources, child care) would relieve girls from much of their workload.
- In the assessment of the harm done to working children, the context (living conditions) in which children perform their work needs to be included. The non-working children (for example, siblings who are too young to be involved in child labour, but who are given household tasks) undergo the impairment caused by the environment in which their parents live and work. These non-working children are exposed to similar risks and dangers, and by becoming accustomed to this environment from an early age, they are more likely to start working themselves in similar conditions.
- The best interests of the child should be a leading principle. That principle implies that it is not always possible to (forcibly) remove the child from labour. This is a very intricate issue and more knowledge of best practices in such cases is required. The removal of the child may put the child and the survival of family members at risk; on the other hand the labour is harmful to the child. If no other means are available, and the child continues to work - e.g. the girls in the

garment factories, the children moving with their families to the brick kilns, the domestic labourers - what then are morally acceptable measures? Statements made from an ethical and political high ground - the complete eradication - or justified by an ideological defence of the right of the child to work, will not provide a realistic answer to real conditions.

After adopting Convention 182, the ILO called for the elimination of the Worst Forms by 2016. That target appears beyond the reach of the two countries studied in this report. However, the evidence collected should motivate a new momentum. More knowledge will help to strengthen the commitment and boost the world-wide movement aimed at the elimination of the Worst Forms, while at the same time, and in the same process, continue to fight all forms of child labour.

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