

THE SITUATION OF CHILD LABOR IN BANGLADESH: A STUDY OF SYLHET CITY

Mohammad Jahirul Hoque*
Chowdhury Abdullah Al - Hossienie**
Chowdhury Abdullah Al - Baki***

Abstract

Children are the greatest treasure of the country, and that all efforts should be taken to ensure their protection, participation, welfare and development. But still children of Bangladesh are the most disadvantaged group of the country. Bangladesh possess a enormous number of child labor. This paper is an attempt to explore into the present situation of child labor in Sylhet city. As children are considered the future of the nation so it is very much relevant to study about a section of children who engaged their lives in income generating activities at the pre mature age. In this study survey method has been applied to collect the field data and the data were analyzed on tabular format. The findings of the study is not satisfactory. To improve the situation government and relevant organizations should take immediate measures.

Key Words: Child Labor, Poverty, Rights of Children, Basic Needs and Education.

Introduction

Child labor is simply the most rigorous form of child exploitation and child abuse in the world today. In any society, working children, as a socio-economic group, happens to be the most disadvantaged of all since "they are forced to work for a living, sacrificing their childhood

* Assistant Professor, Department of Political Studies, Shahjalal University of Science & Technology, Sylhet, Bangladesh.

** M.S.S Student, Department of Public Administration, Shahjalal University of Science & Technology, Sylhet, Bangladesh.

M.S.S. Student, Department of Economics, Shahjalal University of Science & Technology, Sylhet, Bangladesh.

as well as their future for bare survival of self and family" (Masum, 1999). Today, as individual well being increasingly depends on literacy, numeracy and intellectual competence, a child working is in fact a future denied.

A large number of children of our country go through deprivation and neglect and experience disadvantages at critical period of their physical and mental development. Child labor is one such area. Children who have to undertake monotonous, strenuous, harmful and unduly prolonged tasks grow up prematurely and sadly. Instead of leading a carefree existence with their friends and enjoying the happiest days of their lives, the working children have to undergo long hours of tiresome work.

Child labor is a worldwide socioeconomic problem and it is divided into two main areas, i.e. rural and urban. Near about 400 million children are involved in the working field throughout the world, and 90% of them are found in the developing countries. Child labor in Bangladesh is widespread and increasing at a faster rate. According to a Bangladesh Government Labor Force Survey, in January, 1996, of the 34.5 million children aged 5-14, 6.5 million were labor, and 1.9 million aged 5 to 9 also constituted 12 % of the total labor force (BBS, 1992). In a developing country like Bangladesh, the urban child labor is increasing fast. In spite of this, the number of child labor in rural areas is great deal higher than that of urban areas. According to the ILO Report (1996), 9 in every 10 of the total child labor are in rural areas, of which most of them are involved in agro-sector. In the urban areas, most of the child laborers are involved in industrial and service sectors, such as, transport, commerce, domestic service, garment industry and many other informal sectors.

One of the main causes of child labor is poverty. Extreme poverty in many families forces parents to put their children to work instead of sending them to school (Salaudhin, 1981: 85). The government or the parents or the guardians cannot fulfill children's basic needs, cannot help them to get admitted in the school towards making good human resources. Attesting this view, most of the studies indicate that the economic pressure is the important feature which forces the children to earn by working inside the home (Mia, 1970: 79). In the context of this situation, the child labor of the developing countries, such as Bangladesh continues to be increased.

It is observed that the increase child labor in Bangladesh has been alarming in the recent years due to poverty. The working conditions of the child laborers in all sectors are so much painful having insufficient facilities and they are not organized for their rights as workers. The

child labor in various sectors is subject to physical and sexual abuse by the employers. Most of them work at unskilled jobs and do not attend school; it is the violation of Convention on the Rights of the Child as to the employment of the children.

Defining the terms ‘Child’ and ‘Child Labor’

Many child labor professional feel it necessary to have a formal definition of the word child. But it is not easy to develop a universally accepted definition of the word ‘Child’ because it is complicated by numerous factors such as racial and climatic factors which affect physical and mental maturity, social norms and practice, socio economic conditions; educational system and the relevant legal context of the country. It is important to note that in certain socio-cultural contexts the children become mature sooner than in some other cultures.

According to the International Labor Organization (ILO) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, a child means every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier (CRC, 1989).

The concept of ‘child’ has been given varied definitions by different Acts and statutes in force in Bangladesh. The Children Act of 1933 regards a person below the age of 15 years as a child. The Employment of Children Act of 1938 prohibits the employment of children below 12 years in regular jobs. The Bengal Vagrancy Act 1943 considers a person below the age of 14 years as a child. Under the Primary Education (Compulsory) Act of 1990, education is compulsory for children aged 6 to 10. The National Children Policy adopted in 1994 applies only to children under the age of 14.

Child labor is done by any working child who is under the age specified by law. The word, “work” means full time commercial work to sustain self or add to the family income. Child labor is a hazard to a Child’s mental, physical, social, educational, emotional and spiritual development. Broadly any child who is employed in activities to feed self and family is being subjected to ‘child labor’. The Encyclopedia of Britannica defined child labor as employment of children under specific legal age (Encyclopedia Britannica, 1948: 839). Child labor is usually defined as participation in gainful activities by children between the ages of 5 to 18 years. Children of the age of 18 years involving work places are called the child labor though the ILO convention, 1973 states that the completion of the 14 year is the minimum requirement in the least developed countries (Salaudin, 1981: 85).

Objectives of the Study

The broad objective of the research is to explore the present situation of child labor of Sylhet City. The specific objectives are:

- a. The causes behind child labor.
- b. The situation of child rights at present.
- c. To investigate the violations of the rights of child laborers and related problems.

Causes of Child Labor

The causes behind child laborers are so many in numbers. All the reasons can be categorized into two. These are as follows:

a. Push Factors

Push factors are those which push children’s to be labor. There are many kind of push factors. Which are described briefly here:

Poverty

Poverty is the single most important factor responsible for the prevalence of child labor in the country. About 55 million people live below the poverty line in Bangladesh. Poor households badly need the money that their children earn. They commonly contribute around 20-25 percent of family income. Since poor households spend the bulk of their income on food, the earnings of working children are critical to their survival.

Parents’ perceptions greatly influence their children’s participation in the labor force. The education system of the country in general does not provide poor, disadvantaged children with any immediate prospects of better jobs or higher levels of income. The curriculum, followed in schools, is hardly perceived to be capable of meeting the practical needs of poor families. Naturally, poor parents fail to appreciate the long-term value of education, and instead opt for the short-term economic gains of child labor. In many cases, the male children of the household are expected to help the father in the field and the female children the mother with the household work. Moreover, parents consider their children’s employment in certain occupations like in the engineering workshop as a rare opportunity to learn employable skills. To them, it is an alternative education with much more practical value than the traditional primary education.

Even though the government launched the Compulsory Primary Education Programme all over the country since January 1993,

education remains very expensive for a poor family, which is expected to bear the costs of uniform and transportation. In some areas of the country the expenditure on primary level students represents one-third of the entire income of a typical poor family, though most families have more than one child of the school-going age. Many children are, therefore, forced to work to pay for their own education.

Emergencies often contribute to an increase in the supply of child labor. Bangladesh happens to be a land of chronic natural calamities. Floods, cyclones and riverbank erosion leave many people homeless and helpless every year. Low-income families have little margin to cope with any such disaster. They also find it very difficult to deal with the distress resulting from abandonment or divorce, or the injury and illness of an adult member of the household. As a result, trapped early in the world of work, children of such families become the worst victims of any kind of disaster, natural or man-made.

Family Structure

Family structure plays a vital role in creation of child laborers. Especially the children of broken families run the risk of becoming child laborers. From field work it is observed that about fifty percent of the child laborers are from broken families. Here broken family means the family of the children's where one or both of the parents are not alive or not living with the family or if mother or father is alive he or she has married again and in the new family the former children are not expected anymore. To escape from this type of crisis the children are compelled to work.

Parent's Educational Status

Parental educational status also influences the percentage of child labor. Due to lack of education the parents do not use any contraceptive and therefore cannot control the number of their children. As a result the number of family members increases rapidly. If the parents fail to provide food and clothing they push their children to work. Sometimes the parents think a child as an advantage as he or she will work to provide them extra money. Accordingly, they do not use contraceptives.

Rural to Urban Migration

Migration from rural to urban areas leads to creation of child labors. To find work, many families migrate from different rural areas to urban areas. It is believed that, better work facilities are available in urban areas. The migrated families push their children to work on account of school.

b. Pull Factors

As like as push factors there some pull factors which demands children's work. The lower cost of employing child workers and the irreplaceable skills provided by them are often cited to explain the demand for child labor. Although there is validity in the first argument, the second does not hold water. In all the industries that rely heavily on child labor, most of the tasks performed by children are also performed by adults working side by side with them. Clearly, children do not have irreplaceable skills. The other factors, responsible for the demand for child labor, seem to be non-economic. Employers are tempted to hire child labor because children are much less aware of their rights and most unlikely to get organized in trade unions. They are also more trustworthy, more willing to take orders and do monotonous work, and less likely to be absent from work. Children's lower absentee rate is immensely valuable to employers in the informal sector where workers are employed on a daily basis and the employers must ensure the presence of a full contingent of workers each day.

Methodology

In this research data were collected from various sources. The child laborers of the research area were the primary sources of data collection. Three locations of the city were selected for this study. These were "Kin Bridge", "Natun Bridge" and "Railway Station". All of these areas are under Sylhet Kotwali Thana (police station) in Sylhet city. The data were collected from twenty six (26) respondents by direct interview by applying questionnaire survey method. The simple random sampling procedure has been used for selecting the respondents. A semi-structured questionnaire was used for data collection. At this stage utmost attempt was applied to become intimate with child laborers through gossiping, exchanging greetings, general discussions etc. At the same time wide observation was made. Attempt was made to gain an overall idea about the working condition, economic condition, social, cultural and environmental condition. Considering the nature and types of respondents both qualitative and quantitative procedures of data collection procedure were applied. At every stage of the selection of respondents, priority was given on the objectives of the study.

Different newspapers, periodicals, research works, scientific and social research journals (UNICEF, ILO etc.) were taken as secondary sources of information. These were considered as indirect or secondary sources in the research work. In fact, some pieces of information were used in determining the nature of the social problem of the current research.

In this study, tabular analysis technique has been followed to illustrate the overall situation of child labor. Tabulated data were analyzed by using average, sum, percentage etc. with the help of software packages namely MS word and MS Excel.

Findings

The findings of the study have been presented here. The nature and situation of the of child labor have been analyzed and discussed in tabular format to get the clear picture of child labor in Sylhet city.

Occupational Description

Major occupation of the child labor of these area includes rickshaw

Clothing of child	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1 set of clothe	8	30.77
2 set of clothes	14	53.85
More than 2 set of clothes	4	15.38
Total	26	100.00

puller/pusher, shoe polisher, candy and cigarette seller, news paper seller and many other works. Occupational description of the respondents are given below:

Table-1: Occupational Description of Child Laborers

Occupational Description	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Porter (Coolie)	8	30.77
<i>Vhangari</i> (splinter/waste collectors and processors)	5	19.23
Tea Seller	2	7.69
Begging	2	7.69
Sweeper	2	7.69
Rickshaw puller /pusher	3	11.54
Hawker	1	3.85
Shoe Shine Boy	2	7.69

News Paper Seller	1	3.85
Total	26	100

Source: Primary data

The data table indicates that among the respondents majority (30.77%) were porter which was followed by *Vhangari* (splinter/waste collectors and processors) (19.23%) and rickshaw puller/pusher (11.54%). Equal number of respondents (7.69%) were from tea seller, beggar, sweeper and shoe shine boys. Only 3.85% respondents were from hawker and news paper seller.

Basic Needs

As a human being every person has some basic needs which are badly needed to lead life properly. According to our constitution and cultural context these basic needs are food, cloth, dwelling place, education and health care service.

Access to Food

Food which is the first basic need is necessary to live on. The child laborers can not effort food all times. The average food takings list is given below:

Clothing

From the starting of creation, human beings are using clothes to protect them from adverse environment and from shyness, nowadays people use fashionable clothes also. Though clothes have many types of utility but the child laborers use clothes to protect him from the shyness. Because of poverty the child laborers cannot manage those types of clothes which are necessary protect him from adverse environmental effect (such as, during winter they cannot use clothes needed to protect from over coldness) and for fashion. If somebody can manage, the quality and number of clothes are so limited.

Daily Food Intake	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1 Time/Day	12	46.15
2 Times/Day	11	42.31
3 Time/day	3	11.54
Total	26	100.00

Study shows that twenty six child laborers only

4 persons (15.38%) have more than two set of clothes, 14 (53.85%)

children have two set of clothes and 8 (30.77%) children have no extra cloth. Which prove that the basic needs of clothing are not fulfilled among the child laborers of the research area.

Education

Everyone has the right to get education. Education is inversely related to child labor. Which means, if the number of school going children increase, the number of child laborers decrease but the school going children should be provided proper instruments and guidance needed for proper education. The educational status of child laborers are given below:

Educational Status of Child Laborers (Boys)

Level of Education	Age (Years)			
	5-9	10-14	15-18	TOTAL
No Schooling	0	1	2	3
Can Sign Only	2	2	1	5
Religious Education	2	1	1	4
Schooling-Primary Level (Incomplete)	0	1	2	3
Schooling-Primary Level (Complete)	0	0	0	0
Total	4	5	6	15

Source: Primary data

Educational Status of Child Laborers (Girls)

Level of Education	Age (Years)			
	5-9	10-14	15-18	TOTAL
No Schooling	0	0	2	2
Can Sign Only	1	1	0	2
Religious Education	2	2	2	6
Schooling-Primary Level (incomplete)	0	0	1	1
Schooling-Primary Level (Complete)	0	0	0	0
Total	3	3	5	11

Source: Primary data

Under the Primary Education (Compulsory) Act of 1991, education has been made compulsory for children aged 6 to 10. But the real picture shows opposite image. Among 26 boys and girls there was not a single person who has completed primary education. Though there are primary schools near their dwelling places.

Pattern of Smoking Habit

They also find pleasures in smoking. Generally they take *bidi* or cigarette and sometime ganja, which are harmful to health.

The Pattern of Smoking Habit

Pattern of Smoking Habit	Frequency	Percentage (%)
<i>Bidi</i> / cigarette	11	42.31
Ganja	4	15.38
Non Smoker	11	42.31
Total	26	100.00

Source: Primary Data

According to fieldwork in the research area 42.31% child laborers smoke cigarette or *bidi*, and the same ratio do not smoke and 15.38% child workers take *bidi*/ cigarette and ganja also. Which means alarming number (57.69%) of child laborers smoke for which they will sufferer.

Shelter and Sanitation

The Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh refers to the right of shelter and sanitation, though it is not particularly focused on children. The necessity of shelter and sanitation is unavoidable. But most of the child laborers have no shelter. Many of the child laborers are guardians less. Some research findings show that most of the child laborers are guardian less and shelter less. So, they are the victims of immoral activities.

The situation of shelter & sanitation

Shelter/Sanitation	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Have	12	46.15
Have Not	14	53.85
Total	26	100.00

Source: Primary data

As the most of the child laborers (53.85%) stay at railway platform or in street they do not get the sanitation facility. Lack of access to adequate sanitary facilities forced child laborers to defecate in the open. And the effect of that work is harmful to the environment.

Income

Most of the child laborers involve in temporary work. So their income is not fixed all the time. The earning is also an important factors of one's status. Among the child laborers, the *coolie* earn in average of 250/- per week, the *vhangari* (splinter/waste collectors and processors) earns maximum 300/- per week, the *tea sellers* earn in average of 500/- per week, the *beggars* earn in average of 200/- per week, the *sweeper* earn 1000/- per month, the *rickshaw puller* earn in average of 120/- per day, the *hawkers* earn in average of 450/- per week, the *shoe shine boys* earn in average of 100/- per day and *newspaper seller* benefit in average of 100/- per day. Thus the income has shown that most of the child laborers are economically in vulnerable situation.

Health Care

Standards of medical care are often extremely low due to a shortage of doctors and medical staff. The picture of research area is lower than that. Which is available in the statement of a child labor. He states "*khaite e paina aber chikitsa (where food is inadequate, there Medicare is dream)*".

Entertainment

There is no option of better entertainment of child laborers. Most child laborers pass their time at street or railway platform. Most child laborers watch Bangle movie, which is their best tool of entertainment.

Hidden Factors

Previous discussions about child laborers are not sufficient to show the real situation of child laborers. There are some hidden factors faced by child laborers such as, sexual abuse, trafficking, torturing by different bodies and many other problems.

Sexual Abuse

Most of the child laborers are sexually abused. Male or female does not matter. The female child laborers who have to stay at street are sexually tortured by the male workers. On the other side the male child workers are sodomized by the drug addicts at night. A child labor stated this problem as "*at night drug addicts sodomize us.*" These types of sexual abuse and many other tortures are faced by child laborers.

Physically Torture

The child laborers are not only sexually abused but also tortured by different bodies. As most of them have no house, they sleep at railway platform. Generally railway guards don't disturb them, sometimes want bribes. But if any officer comes to visit railway station, the guards don't give the laborers to sleep at platform. If child laborers sleep there the guards physically torture them.

Recommendations and Conclusion

Child labor is a sheer reality in Bangladesh. Children are engaged in hazardous jobs, working under most unhygienic conditions. Yet the existing socio-economic conditions do not permit absolute elimination of child labor overnight. The elimination of child labor from one particular area may terminate in an increase in child labor in another. Moreover, it is not possible to force the child workers to attend full-time schools since the lost income is important to the survival of their families. To reduce child labor the child laborers should be rehabilitated properly where it will be assured that the rights of the child will not be violated anymore. To improve the situation action oriented programs are needed. The following recommendations can be take into consideration to improve the situation.

- a. Take initiatives to increase income of those families.
- b. Ensure proper education of the children to earn skills that will help them earn a living.
- c. Introduce social welfare services that will help children and families survive crises, such as disease, or loss of home and shelter.
- d. Control of fertility so that families are not burdened by children.

Some educators and social scientists believe that one of the most important ways to help child workers is to ask their opinions, and involve them in constructing 'solutions' to their own problems.

Under these circumstances the government should immediately come forward to formulate a comprehensive National Plan of Action, aimed at gradual elimination of child labor from the country.

References

- Ahmed, A. & Quasem, M. A. (1991).** *Child Labor in Bangladesh*, Lund University, Sweden.
- BBS (1992).** *Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics*, p- xiii.
- CRC. (1989).** *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, Article 1, 20 November 1989.
- Encyclopedia Britannica. (1948).** *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Vol-2, p- 839.
- Grant, P. (1993).** *All for Children*. UNICEF, New Delhi.
- Guendelman, S. & Samuels, S. (2002).** *Differential Access and Utilization of Health Services by Immigrant and Native-born Children in Working Poor Families in California*, J Health Care.
- Khair, Sumaiya (2005).** *Child Labour in Bangladesh; A Forward Looking Policy Study*, International Labor Office, Geneva.
- Masum, M. (1999).** *UCEP-Bangladesh: A Model for Integrated Human Resources Development for the Working Children*. UCEP-Bangladesh.
- Mia, Ahmadullah. (1970).** *Child Labor In Dhaka City*. Institute of Social Welfare and Research, University of Dhaka, p-79.
- Salaudhin, Khaleda. (1981).** *Aspects of Child Labor in Bangladesh*. In “Disadvantaged Children in Bangladesh-some reflection” Women for Women, Dhaka. P-85.
- Salmon, Claire (2005).** *Child Labor in Bangladesh: Are Children the Last Economic Resource of the Household?* In *Journal of Developing Societies*, Vol. 21, No. 1-2, pp. 33-54 DOI: 10.1177/0169796X05053066, University of Savoie, France.