

Basic Education for Urban Working Children

KEY STATISTICS

Basic data	
Child population 5-17 years	42.2 million
Population never enrolled in school ¹	1.5 million
<i>Economically active children (working one or more hours per day)</i>	7.4 million
Economically active children in urban areas	1.5 million
Child labourers (working 14 or more hours per week or in a hazardous job)	3.2 million
Children in hazardous work (includes those working 43 or more hours per week in any job)	1.3 million

¹Source: School Survey Report of PEDP II. All other statistics from the National Child Labour Survey 2002-2003.

BACKGROUND

41 per cent of the population of Bangladesh lives on less than \$1 US a day; and 84 per cent live on less than \$2 US a day². For this reason, millions of children across Bangladesh are forced to work, often in hazardous and low-waged jobs, to help support themselves and their families. Unequal distribution of resources, low family incomes and unemployment of parents and guardians means that many families depend on their children's earnings to survive.

Most working children cannot afford the time to attend regular schooling. Because these girls and boys do not have access to education, they become trapped in low-skilled, low-income jobs, which further push them into the vicious cycle of intergenerational poverty.

Working children are involved in many different types of work, often for little (or no) pay. Some children work within their own homes, engaged in domestic chores and small family businesses. Others work outside their homes, in small shops, factories, restaurants, tanneries, waste-dumps and on the streets. Most working children are employed for an average 8 to 12 hours a day.

Many occupations involve working in hazardous conditions that endanger the child's physical or mental health and moral development through unsafe environments, dangerous

² Human Development Report, UNDP, 2007

duties or overly-long working hours. Research indicates that children are involved in more than 400 types of work (200 for girls), with 47 of these identified as 'hazardous'.³ (Hazardous occupations include mining, construction, waste-picking, brick-chipping and domestic service.) Children also work under severe pressure from their employers or guardians.

ISSUES

Among working children, only 7 per cent are employed in the formal sector, where policing of ages, working conditions and salaries is even possible.⁴ Thanks to a range of local and international advocacy efforts, children engaged in producing goods for export, such as garments, are usually over 18 years of age in compliance with the laws of importing countries. However, according to the Labour Law of Bangladesh 2006, children need only be 14 years of age to work in informal and formal industries, including garments, provided that the working conditions meet certain criteria and children do not work more than 42 hours per week. Given that most working children do not have valid birth certificates, validating their ages is difficult.

The vast majority of working children - 93 per cent of them - are employed in the informal sector.⁵ Informal sector jobs include unregistered small factories and workshops, home-based businesses and domestic employment. (75 per cent of all workers in Bangladesh are employed in the informal sector.)⁶ In these conditions, child workers are outside the normal reach of labour controls, being isolated in the factories and households where they work. This isolation, frequently combined with the child's dependency on their employer, lays the ground for further abuse and exploitation from which it is difficult to protect them.

Child domestic labour is a widespread phenomenon in most cities of Bangladesh. The national estimate of child domestic workers stands at 421,426,⁷ although the number is probably much higher. Even according to the current figure, domestic work is the single largest hazardous child labour sector in the country. Long hours, low or no wages, poor food, isolation and hazards in the working environment can severely affect a child's physical and mental health. Child domestic workers are invisible because Bangladeshi culture frames domestic work as a "normal" practice, attributed primarily to females. (78 per cent of child domestic workers are girls.) Because these children are so easily and commonly overlooked, they become a high-risk group; they are frequently victims of exploitation, racial discrimination, mistreatment and sexual abuse.

The willingness of parents or guardians to provide children with the opportunity to learn is essential for children to be able to



© F. Zizola/UNICEF

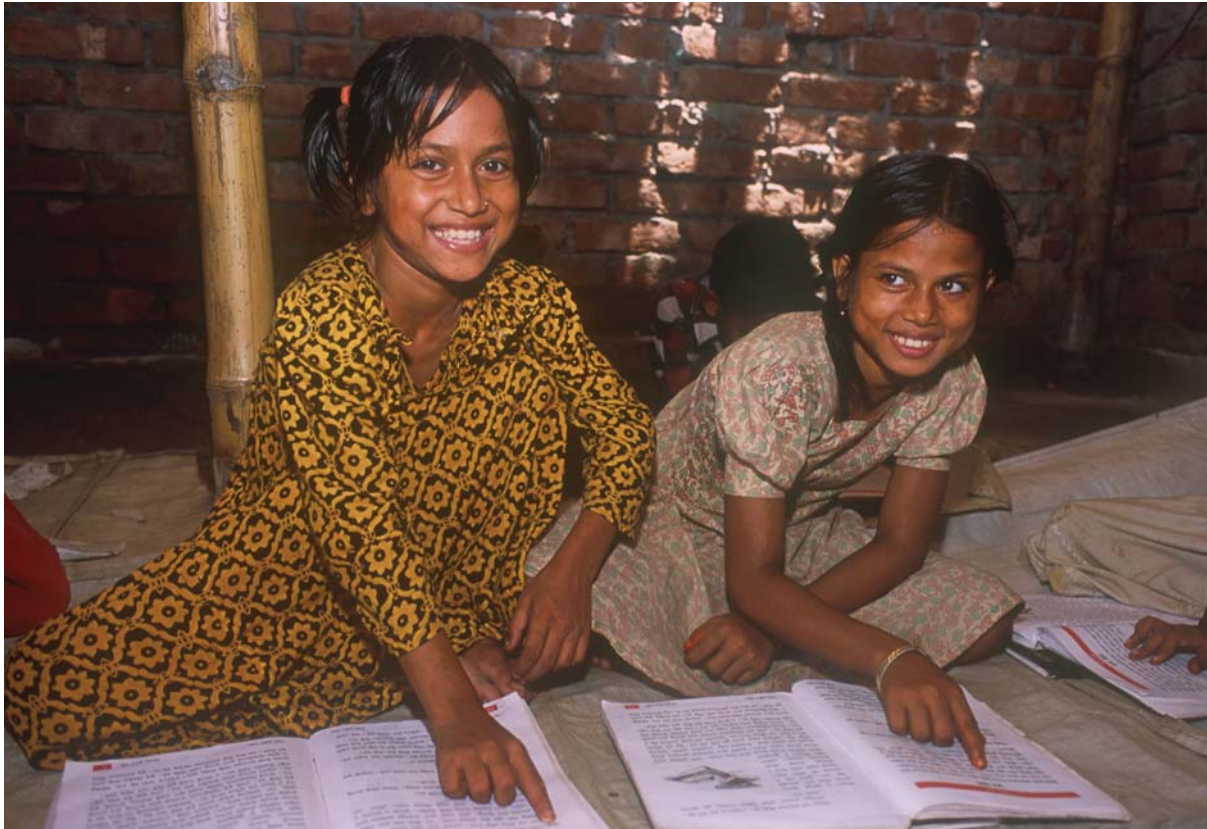
³ Hazardous tasks defined by UNICEF and the International Labour Organization (ILO).

⁴ *Situation of Child Labour in Bangladesh: Highlights from the National Child Labour Survey 2002-2003, 2005.*

⁵ *Situation of Child Labour in Bangladesh: Highlights from the National Child Labour Survey 2002-2003, 2005*

⁶ *National Child Labour Survey 2002-2003*

⁷ *ILO Baseline Survey on Child Domestic Labour in Bangladesh, 2006.*



© Naser Siddique/Image/UNICEF

attend school. The most common reason for a child not to be enrolled in school is an inability to bear educational expenses. The second most commonly cited reason is the child's participation in household economic activities.⁸

Inter-city and internal migration is common among people living in urban slums, home to most of Bangladesh's urban working children. Landlords often have no legal right to the slum land where they build houses, so evictions are common. Civic unrest and employment instability also causes families to migrate both within the city and across the country. These patterns make for high drop-out rates among those urban working children who manage to enroll in school.

ACTION

Together with the Government of Bangladesh, UNICEF runs a project called Basic Education for Hard to Reach Urban Working Children (BEHTRUWC). The Hard to Reach project establishes learning centers in urban areas that have large populations of working children. The school day is shortened to two and half hours, so that children can continue to work on either side of their classes. Employing the "earn-and-learn" approach ensures that children continue to make enough money to support their families while fulfilling their right to an education.

Children between the ages of 10 and 14, who are not attending any other educational institution and are working at least seven hours a week, are eligible for enrollment in the Hard to Reach centres. Social workers go door to door to speak with parents and employers about the importance of education. Both parents and employers must agree to

⁸ *National Child Labour Survey 2002-2003*



allow children to enroll, before they are able to attend.

Every child spends two and a half hours a day, six days a week, at a learning centre. During this time, working children get some respite from their hazardous occupations in an enjoyable environment. They learn basic literacy and numeracy skills and gain knowledge on life skills, healthcare, their rights, ways of identifying hazardous work and other issues relevant to their situation. The hours at the learning centre are regarded as a first step in discouraging working children from engaging in full-time, risky and exploitative occupations and encouraging them to seek safer alternatives and pursue their educations.

Based on an interactive teaching learning model, the basic education course runs for 40 months and comprises five learning cycles (each cycle a term of eight month). The children achieve competency in Bengali, Environment and Life Skills equivalent to grade five of the national curriculum; in Mathematics equivalent to grade three, and in English to a functional level. All learners acquire non-technical livelihood skills such as communication, negotiation, job searching and CV-writing skills as part of the Life Skills curriculum in cycles 4 and 5.

Children work and study in small groups, sometimes according to their skill level and sometimes by random selection to encourage peer-to-peer learning. This structure means that even if a student misses class for several days, he or she is able to receive sufficient help at an appropriate level from the teacher (and from other students) in order to catch up.

At the centres, children also get the opportunity to interact with other working children and benefit from peer support, while meeting adults who are neither punitive nor authoritarian. The interactive teaching and learning process reduces power differences between the teacher and the learner, helping children to gain self confidence.

Working adolescents (aged 13 and above) who have completed cycle III have the opportunity to receive marketable livelihood skills training alongside the basic education course. Acquiring livelihood skills improves children's employment opportunities, leading to enhanced economic status and living standards for the adolescents and their families. Children with improved livelihood skills find it easier to move into safer employment and to earn a decent income. This programme contributes to national efforts to eliminate the worst forms of child labour in Bangladesh.

The BEHTRUWC project implements various advocacy, communication and social mobilization activities at national and local levels to strengthen community support of the learning centers. In particular, these activities seek to inform the center management committees (CMCs) of each centre, which are made up of parents, guardians and employers, on issues related to education, child rights, child labour and hazardous work.

IMPACT

During the first phase of BEHTRUWC, from October 1997 to June 2004, 346,000 children aged from 8 to 14 in six divisional cities were provided with a two-year basic education course, which was equivalent to grade three of government primary education. (More than 50 per cent of the students were girls.) Attendance rates were encouraging: few students dropped out and many classes closed with more students than originally enrolled.

One thousand of the first phase BEHTRUWC graduates, aged 12 to 14 years, were provided with livelihood skills training on different trades in Dhaka, Sylhet and Barisal on a pilot basis. These graduates were helped to arrange self-employment and job placements, with follow-up assistance during the first six months.

The second phase of the project started in July 2004 and will continue until 2011. Under this phase, BEHTRUWC has opened 6,646 learning centres in the six major cities of Bangladesh: Dhaka, Chittagong, Khulna, Rajshahi, Sylhet and Barisal. These centres are providing life-skills based basic education to 166,150 urban working children. (60 per cent of the students are girls.) The first class of these students will graduate from the phase two schools in November 2009. About 20,000 of those children who complete cycle III during the second phase will have the opportunity to receive marketable livelihood skills training.

Overall, working children and adolescents have better access to their rights for education, protection, participation and development through the life-skill-based basic education and livelihood programmes of the BEHTRUWC programme. Accessing these rights empowers children to make decisions regarding their own futures and access a wider range of life options.