

# Child labour in Bangladesh

## KEY STATISTICS

Working children, aged 5-17	7.4 million		
Working children, aged 5-14	4.7 million		
Child labourers (according to definition, below), aged 5-17	3.2 million		
Children engaged in hazardous labour, aged 5-17	1.3 million		
Child domestic workers <sup>1</sup>	421,000		
Percentage of children (aged 5-14) engaged in child labour (2006) <sup>2</sup>	National	Slum	Tribal
	12.8	19.1	17.6

<sup>1</sup> International Labour Organisation (ILO), *Baseline Survey on Child Domestic Labour in Bangladesh, 2006*

<sup>2</sup> BBS/ UNICEF, *Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2006, October 2007*

All other statistics from Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, *Report on National Child Labour Survey, 2002-2003*

## Background

Social norms and economic realities mean that child labour is widely accepted and very common in Bangladesh. Many families rely on the income generated by their children for survival, so child labour is often highly valued. Additionally, employers often prefer to employ children because they are cheaper and considered to be more compliant and obedient than adults.

When children are forced to work, they are often denied their rights to education, leisure and play. They are also exposed to situations that make them vulnerable to trafficking, abuse, violence and exploitation. Millions of children are reported not to attend school, however estimates vary. Among children aged 5-14, about five million, are economically active. "Child labour" is a narrower concept than "working children". According to the International Labour Organisation definition (right), there are about 3.2 million child labourers in Bangladesh<sup>1</sup>.

Certain groups of children are more likely to work than others, for instance boys comprise about three-quarters of all working children. In slums almost one in five children aged 5-14 are child labourers, and of these, only 25 per cent attend school<sup>2</sup>. Rapid urbanisation means that more children will move into urban slums and be compelled to

### What is child labour?

Child labour is work that exceeds a minimum number of hours, depending on the age of a child and on the type of work. Such work is considered harmful to the child and should therefore be eliminated.

- Ages 5-11: At least one hour of economic work or 28 hours of domestic work per week.
- Ages 12-14: At least 14 hours of economic work or 28 hours of domestic work per week.
- Ages 15-17: At least 43 hours of economic or domestic work per week.

<sup>1</sup> Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, *Report on National Child Labour Survey, 2002-2003*

<sup>2</sup> BBS/ UNICEF, *Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2006, October 2007*

work. Child employment rates increase with age, but even about two per cent of five-year-olds and three per cent of six-year-olds work<sup>3</sup>.

Child labour is a visible part of everyday life in Bangladesh: young children serve at roadside tea stalls, and weave between cars selling goods to motorists. Other children work in jobs that are hidden from view, such as domestic work, which makes monitoring and regulation difficult. On average, children work 28 hours a week and earn 222 taka (3.3 USD) a week<sup>4</sup>.

Many of the jobs that children in Bangladesh perform are considered ‘hazardous’, and put their physical and mental development at risk. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child expressed concern in 2009 that many Bangladeshi children continue to work in five of the worst forms of child labour, namely welding, auto workshops, road transport, battery recharging and tobacco factories<sup>5</sup>. The Committee also raised concerns about the lack of mechanisms to enforce child labour laws or monitor working conditions, and insufficient public awareness about the negative effects of child labour.

## ISSUES

UNICEF is not opposed to all work that children may perform. Children’s paid and unpaid work can make a positive contribution to child development, as long as it does not interfere with health or wellbeing, or prevent education or leisure activities. However, child labour (as defined in the box, above), is work that deprives children of a childhood; work that affects children’s health and education; and work that may lead to further exploitation and abuse.

### Legal protection

Bangladesh enacted the Labour Act in 2006, which includes a chapter on child labour. This new law prohibits employment of children under 14 years of age, as well as prohibiting hazardous forms of child labour for persons under age 18. However, children who are aged 12 and above may be engaged in “light work” that does not pose a risk to their mental and physical development and does not interfere with their education. The law does not provide a strong enforcement mechanism for the child labour provisions. Additionally, the vast majority of children (93 per cent) work in the informal sector<sup>6</sup> which makes enforcement of the relevant legislation challenging.

The Ministry of Labour and Employment has recently adopted a National Child Labour Elimination Policy 2010, which provides a framework to eradicate all forms of child labour by 2015. UNICEF was one of many stakeholders to provide feedback on this policy. Its aims include: withdrawing children from hazardous jobs; improving income generating opportunities for parents so they’re not so reliant on child income; offering incentives for working children to attend school; enacting laws and improving law enforcement to eliminate child labour. A Child Labour Unit has been established as part of this policy, which will have responsibilities including collecting and disseminating data relating to child labour.

According to this policy, the criteria for defining hazardous work for children includes: working more than five hours a day; work that creates undue pressure on physical and psychological wellbeing and development; work without pay; work where the child becomes the victim of torture or exploitation or has no opportunity for leisure.

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<sup>3</sup> UNICEF, ILO, World Bank Group, *Understanding Children’s Work in Bangladesh*, June 2009 (unpublished)

<sup>4</sup> Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, *Report on National Child Labour Survey, 2002-2003*

<sup>5</sup> *Concluding observations of the Committee on the Rights of the Child: Bangladesh*, June 2009

<sup>6</sup> *Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, Report on National Child Labour Survey, 2002-2003*

### Child labour and education

According to the new National Education Policy, education is free and compulsory up to grade eight, however it is estimated that more than one million children have never been to school. Many children drop out of the education system before completing primary school and begin working. Most working children cite an inability to bear educational expenses as the main reason for not attending school, because there are many indirect costs such as transport and uniforms. Limitations within the education system such as poor teaching quality and a high teacher-student ratio may also discourage children from completing school. Additionally, children living in slums often move frequently due to evictions, civic unrest and employment instability, further exacerbating dropout rates.

Many child labourers miss out on their right to education because they do not have the time to go to school or to study. Data show that working hours are negatively correlated with school attendance<sup>7</sup>. About half of all child labourers do not attend school at all, and among child domestic workers only 11 per cent attend school<sup>8</sup>. As a result, working children get stuck in low paying, low-skilled jobs, thereby perpetuating the cycle of poverty.



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### Abuse, exploitation and violence

Working children, particularly those in 'hidden' jobs such as domestic labour, are at risk of abuse and exploitation. One-quarter of all working children reported that they had been physically punished at their workplaces, according to a 2008 children's opinion poll<sup>9</sup>.

Bangladesh's 421,000 child domestic workers (three-quarters are girls) face particular vulnerabilities because they work behind closed doors. Almost all child domestic workers work seven days a week and 90 per cent sleep at their employer's home<sup>10</sup>, meaning that they are completely dependent on their employers and often have restrictions on their mobility and freedom. About 60 per cent report some kind of abuse during their work, such as scolding or slapping. Levels of exploitation are also extremely high, as indicated by the fact that more than half receive no wage at all (they instead receive benefits such as accommodation, food and clothing – further reinforcing dependency on their employer).

Hundreds of thousands of Bangladeshi children work in hazardous jobs. These are jobs that have been identified by the ILO to expose children to hazards including: physical, psychological or sexual abuse; excessive work hours; an unhealthy environment. For instance, 3,400 children work in brick/ stone breaking for the construction industry<sup>11</sup>. A

<sup>7</sup> UNICEF, ILO, World Bank Group, *Understanding Children's Work in Bangladesh*, June 2009 (unpublished)

<sup>8</sup> ILO, *Baseline Survey on Child Domestic Labour in Bangladesh*, 2006

<sup>9</sup> UNICEF, *Opinions of Children of Bangladesh on Corporal Punishment*, November 2008

<sup>10</sup> ILO, *Baseline Survey on Child Domestic Labour in Bangladesh*, 2006

<sup>11</sup> ILO and BBS, *Baseline Survey for Determining Hazardous Child Labour Sectors in Bangladesh*, 2005.

survey of these child workers found that almost all had some sort of respiratory problem and were not provided with any safety gear or protection from brick dust<sup>12</sup>. Other child workers in hazardous jobs include 123,000 children working as rickshaw pullers, 153,000 children working in restaurants or tea stalls, and 56,000 working in carpentry<sup>13</sup>.

### Trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation

Working children often live away from their families in situations where they are exposed to violence, abuse and economic exploitation. Their vulnerable situation puts them at risk of trafficking as they seek a better life for themselves. A rapid assessment of commercially sexually exploited children showed that half worked in other sectors before being lured into sex work. Additionally, more than half had been forced or trafficked into the industry, lured by false promises of jobs or marriage. The life of a child sex worker is one of violence, exploitation and physical and psychological health problems. The majority are depressed and three-quarters of the child sex workers were ill in the three months before the rapid assessment survey, many with sexually transmitted diseases. In the 3-12 months prior to the survey, one-quarter of the children were beaten, and another quarter were raped<sup>14</sup>.

## ACTION

To protect children from child labour, UNICEF undertakes initiatives to promote child protection systems at national and grassroots levels, including legislative reform, creating access to services through institutional capacity building and evidence-based advocacy.

### Providing access to education

UNICEF works with the Government of Bangladesh to establish learning centres in urban areas where there are high concentrations of working children, through a project called Basic Education for Hard to Reach Urban Working Children (BEHTRUWC). Classes last for 2.5 hours a day, six days a week, so that children can continue to support their families while fulfilling their right to education. These learning centres provide basic education in Bangla, English, Social Science and Maths, as well as life-skills education on topics including negotiation skills, interpersonal relationships, critical thinking and decision making. Students are aged 10-14, and work at least seven hours a week.

The basic education course runs for 40 months and comprises five learning cycles of eight months. Children work and study in small groups, sometimes according to their skill level and sometimes by random selection to encourage peer-to-peer learning. Children also benefit from the opportunity to socialize with other students, and teachers who use interactive rather than punitive teaching techniques.

Following the completion of three learning cycles, some working children aged 13 and 14 have the opportunity to receive livelihood skills training while completing the basic education course. This training can be in the private sector, export-oriented businesses, family businesses or apprenticeships. It aims to allow children to move into safer employment and earn a better income, to improve the quality of life for them and their families. This programme contributes to national efforts to eliminate the worst forms of child labour in Bangladesh.

### Changing social norms

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<sup>12</sup> ILO, *Bangladesh Baseline Survey on Child Labour Situation in Construction Industry in Narayanganj and Munshiganj Districts*, 2005.

<sup>13</sup> ILO and BBS, *Baseline Survey for Determining Hazardous Child Labour Sectors in Bangladesh*, 2005.

<sup>14</sup> UNICEF Bangladesh and INCIDIN, *Rapid Assessment: Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children and Adolescents in Bangladesh*, 2008

UNICEF works to change the social acceptability of child labour in Bangladesh. To coincide with World Day Against Child Labour on June 12 2010, UNICEF Bangladesh will launch a campaign against child labour. The aims of the campaign are:

- To raise awareness that child labour is unacceptable among children aged under 14;
- To ensure that parents and employers are guaranteeing the rights of working children above age 14.

The campaign will disseminate messages about child labour using communication channels such as: interactive popular theatre; posters and leaflets; TV and radio announcements; a theme song; school debate competitions on child labour; a music competition for working children.

UNICEF's projects also include ongoing advocacy, communication and social mobilisation activities which aim to change social norms regarding child labour. Awareness raising sessions are held for learning centre management committees, comprising parents, guardians and employers, on issues including education, child rights, child labour and hazardous work. Traditional communication channels such as school debates and interactive popular theatre are also used on a regular basis to promote this social norm change.



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### **Strengthening legal protection against child labour**

The process of replacing the 1974 Children Act with a new act is in its final stages. The 1974 law as well as the new draft provides penalties for engaging children in child labour. UNICEF is also supporting the development of the National Children Policy 2010, which includes specific policies to protect children from child labour.

UNICEF has been advocating for the creation of a Children's Code, in order to harmonise domestic legislation with the Convention on the Rights of the Child including Article 32 on child labour. UNICEF has also been working with the Ministry of Social Welfare and other ministries and NGOs to undertake mapping and assessment of Bangladesh's child

protection system. Based on this, a Child Protection Policy will be developed, including child labour aspects.

The Government adopted the new Births and Deaths Registration Act in 2004, which makes birth registration compulsory for everyone in Bangladesh. It has also adopted a Universal Birth Registration Strategy which aims to register everyone by the end of 2010. UNICEF has also undertaken substantial work to improve birth registration rates and has emphasised the use of birth certificates as a child protection tool, for instance to prove minimum age for employment in specific sectors.

### **Providing services to working children**

As part of the Protecting Children at Risk (PCAR) project, social workers provide outreach to children working on the street and encourage them to use non-formal education and other services such as drop-in centres. Social workers also provide targeted outreach services to children working in 'invisible' locations such as small factories or homes, to prevent abuse and exploitation. They hold discussions with employers, encouraging them to create safer conditions for children and to allow children to attend school and take time off to recuperate from their workplace. In a number of cases, children are enrolled in public schools. Social workers also provide referrals for services including income-generating activities for parents so they are not so reliant on their child's income.

UNICEF-supported drop-in centres provide children at risk with various psychosocial services such as referrals to legal aid, support for family reintegration and shelter. They also provide free psychotherapy and para-counselling for children who have been affected by abuse, drug use or exploitation, such as those involved in commercial sex work. Referrals to vocational training and life-skills training are also available at drop in centres. The training courses include instruction in particular trades and personal development sessions on topics such as communication, critical thinking, self-esteem and negotiation.

### **Building the capacity of child-protection workers**

Through the same project, UNICEF works to strengthen the capacity of those in contact with vulnerable children such as social workers, police, teachers and families. Many people working as social workers for the Government or NGOs are not trained professionals. UNICEF is providing technical assistance and resources to the Department of Social Services to develop on-the-job social work training. A two-tier theoretical and practical training course has been developed and is currently being piloted. UNICEF is also supporting 'training of trainers' for master trainers so they can train social workers at field level. Some of these social workers will be providing the services described above to working children.

### **Social protection for vulnerable children**

Natural disasters such as cyclones and floods are unfortunately a part of life in Bangladesh. After emergencies, children are much more likely to have to work to support themselves and their family.

Children who became orphaned or vulnerable following 2007's Cyclone Sidr are being assisted through a pilot project called *Amader Shishu* (Our Children). The project, which was developed jointly with the Department of Social Services, provides guardians of orphans with a monthly cash transfer of 1500 taka (22 USD). The cash support is conditional on the fact that children: must not be married before age 18; must attend school on a regular basis; and must not be engaged in hazardous or worst forms of child labour. Local government social workers have been trained to provide case management including referral to services. There are plans to scale up this pilot initiative in urban areas.

## IMPACT

### Providing basic education

Under the BEHTRUWC project, more than 6,600 learning centres have been established in the six divisional cities of Bangladesh, providing basic education and life skills training to 166,150 urban working children (60 per cent girls). Of these students, 20,000 children aged 13+ will receive livelihood training, increasing their odds of achieving a better job and breaking the poverty cycle.

During the first phase of the project, between 1997 and 2004, some, 346,000 urban working children (50 per cent girls) aged from 8 to 14 received a two-year basic education course, equivalent to grade three of government primary education. Dropout rates were very low and 1000 of the graduates received livelihood skills training on a pilot basis.

### Protecting children at risk

In 2009, about 8000 children benefitted from the PCAR interventions in 68 open air schools, 18 drop-in centres and 3 emergency night shelters, out of which:

- 6,900 children completed the six month course on non-formal education
- 6,200 children received life skills training
- 2,900 children used drop-in centre services including emergency night shelters
- 820 children received vocational/skills training
- 631 children were placed with jobs and/or self employed
- 476 children received needs-based psychosocial support
- 241 children were reintegrated with their families or communities
- 47 children received legal aid support.

An informal survey conducted by social workers in Dhaka identified more than 4000 children working in more than 1000 types of hazardous workshops/ factories. Social workers have met with the factory owners to sensitise them on child rights and child labour issues.

### Providing social protection for vulnerable children

- A total of 2,100 orphans and vulnerable children living in areas affected by Cyclone Sidr were verified and selected to receive a cash transfer of 1,500 taka (22 USD) each month

### Capacity building of child-protection workers

- 473 social workers received basic social service training and 350 social workers received professional social service training
- 150 social workers were trained on case management
- 30 social workers and 30 police were trained on interviewing skills
- 120 child protection workers were trained on life skills education

### Strengthening legal reform

- The process to harmonize the Children Act 1974 with international legal standards is ongoing.
- Birth registration rates have increased significantly: from 10 per cent in 2004 to 54 per cent in 2009. The Birth Registration Information System continues to be developed.
- Technical support to draft child protection policy and child protection code is ongoing.
- The National Child Labour Elimination Policy 2010 has recently been adopted.

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