

CHILD LABOUR IN BANGLADESH AND INDIA: A preliminary gender-based analysis¹

Objectives of the study²

The study looks at differences by sex in key dimensions of the child labour phenomenon in Bangladesh and India. It addresses what type of activity is more common among girls, and the extent to which girls' work experience differs from that of boys. The study encompasses girls and boys at work in economic activity as well as those performing household chores. The latter group of children, dominated by girls, is frequently overlooked in child labour statistics and in analyses of child labour. This can result in gender biases both in the understanding of child labour and in policies addressing it.

Children's involvement in economic activity

Data from **Bangladesh** suggests that gender plays an important role in decisions concerning children's work. The proportion of 7-14 year-old boys in economic activity is three times that of girls similarly aged (17.5% of male children are involved in economic activity, compared to 5.5% of female children in economic activity). The gender gap in child economic activity rates rises with age, from 5 percentage points for the 7-11 age group to 22 percentage points for 12-14 age group. Child work is more common in rural areas compared to urban areas, especially for boys. Urban areas feature a smaller difference in involvement by sex.

In **India**, boys and girls are at work in economic activity in roughly equal portion – in urban areas boys are more likely to be involved in economic activities while in rural areas boys and girls (age 7-14) work in almost equal proportion.

While in **India** there is a significant school enrolment gap favoring boys, in **Bangladesh** school attendance is virtually the same for boys and girls aged 7-14 years. In the latter, 91 per cent of 7-11 year-old girls and 90 percent of similarly aged boys are in school; and 80 per cent for girls and 76 percent for boys in the 12-14 years age range. In **India**, among 7-11 year old children, boys' attendance exceeds girls' by four percentage points, and among 12-14 year-olds, it exceeds 10 percentage points.

Children's involvement in non-economic activity

Non-economic activities are those that fall outside the "production boundary", according to the UN System of National Accounts for measuring GDP. This includes household chores, which can pose risks to the child's health and education. In **Bangladesh**, girls' involvement in household chores is almost two times that of boys among 7-11 year-olds, and, around three times that of boys among 12-14 year-olds. Similarly, in **India** there are more girls in household chores than boys and this difference substantially increases with age given that 12-14 year-old girls' involvement in household chores is over ten times that of boys.

Understanding Children's Work (UCW) - As part of broader efforts towards durable solutions to child labour, ILO, UNICEF, and the World Bank initiated the interagency UCW program in December 2000. The program is guided by the Oslo Agenda for Action, which laid out the priorities for the international community in the fight against child labour. Through a variety of data collection, research, and assessment activities, the UCW program is broadly directed toward improving understanding of child labour, its causes and effects, how it can be measured, and effective policies for addressing it. For further information, see the project website at www.ucw-project.org.

Children's work characteristics

Working boys and girls in Bangladesh

The survey indicated that agriculture is by far the most important sector for working boys, accounting for one of every two male child workers. The service and manufacturing sectors are second and third in terms of importance for working boys, accounting for 34 percent and 14 percent, respectively, of male child workers. Regarding employment, boys work mostly in unpaid family work and paid employment with apprenticeship at a distant third. Girls' work is more heterogeneous, spread across services, agriculture and manufacturing. This includes girls that are domestic servants working in private homes, a group particularly vulnerable to abuse. For girls paid employment is common, accounting for four of ten female working children, followed by domestic work and unpaid family work.

Working boys and girls in India

Boys tend to work in agriculture with services activities and manufacturing coming a distant second and third in terms of importance. Girls' economic activity is heavily concentrated in the agriculture sector; farm work accounts for at least two of every three working girls. Although, the family is the most important work setting for boys and girls, the latter are more likely than boys to work for their families, and much less likely than boys to work for wage.

Intensity of children's work (in Bangladesh)

Working hours affect time available for schooling and leisure, and therefore children's current and future welfare. The time burden posed by economic activity is particularly heavy for children in Bangladesh. Regarding economic activity, boys put in more weekly hours in economic activity, but differences by sex in the intensity of work are very small. Weekly working hours increase with age for boys and girls, but in roughly equal proportion. 7 to 11 year-old boys spend an average of two hours per week more on economic activities, and 12-14 year-old boys an average of one hour per week more, compare to similarly-aged girls.

Educational consequences of children's work

School attendance is high but not yet universal in both in India and in Bangladesh. In India girls lag behind boys in terms of school attendance: 82.3 percent of 7-14 year-old girls and 88.7 percent of boys are in school. In Bangladesh there is little difference by sex in school attendance. However, the gender gap increases with age: 91 percent of 7-11 year-old girls and 90 percent of similarly aged boys are in school. School attendance falls off to 80 percent for girls and 76 percent for boys in the 12-14 years age range.

For both boys and girls, school attendance levels are negatively related to levels of involvement in economic activity. Working children lag substantially behind non-working children in terms of school attendance. Evidence from both countries does not suggest that work affects the ability of girls to attend school differently from that of boys. In **Bangladesh** the attendance rate of working girls is higher than that of boys. Among 7-14 year-old working children, girls' attendance exceeds boys' by eight percentage points. In **India** there are no large differences by sex in terms of the ability of working children to attend school.

The biggest challenge remains to close the gap between working and non-working children generally as work interferes both with the child's ability to attend school and to perform

effectively once there, underscoring the importance of child labour as a barrier to achieving Education for All.

Work in domestic services

Work in domestic service is a common phenomenon, especially for girls. These girls face a number of serious health and developmental threats. Data confirms that this type of work is gender biased, mainly carried out by girls. In **Bangladesh** 13% of working girls aged 5-17 are involved in domestic work, compared to 2% of working boys. In **India**, 3% of economically active female children aged 7-17 are working as domestic servants against 1% of their male counterparts. Parents prefer to put girls into domestic service rather than boys, not only because household chores are traditionally seen as “women’s work”, but also because in some cases, the girls’ income helps to support the schooling of the brothers.

Children in domestic service often work very long hours. In **Bangladesh**, child domestic workers work 50 hours a week while in other economic activities work on average 35 hours a week. Girl domestic workers put in much longer hours than girls working in other economic activity categories – 52 compared to 26 hours for the 5-17 years age group. Due to the very-time consuming activity these children carry out, often they are not able to attend school and are too tired to study and do their homework; very little time is left for school after having completed the daily housework tasks. Girl domestic workers are less likely to attend school than girls working in other economic activity categories. In **Bangladesh**, 4 percent of girl domestic workers attend school compared to 56 percent of girls in other economic activities. In **India**, on the other hand, there are no large differences in terms of the ability of child domestic workers to attend school.

¹UCW, Child labour in Bangladesh and India: A preliminary gender-based analysis, Rome, April, 2009 (available at [website at www.ucw-project.org](http://www.ucw-project.org).)

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