

Child labour on the increase in Bangladesh

Nishanthi Priyangika
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A UN Childrens Fund report published in September has found that more than 6.3 million children under 14 are working in Bangladesh. Children are labouring as maids and servants, in garment factories and engineering workshops, in the construction sector, as bus or tempo (three-wheeler transport) helpers, in the beedi (a kind of hand-made cigarette) factories, as roadside restaurant workers and street vendors, and in tea plantations and other agricultural sectors.

According to UNICEF's *Asian Child Labour Report* (1999), there are some 40 industries in Bangladesh which use child labour, often under hazardous conditions and with little regard for health and safety. Children have been injured while engaged in underground mining, in maritime work and while operating or cleaning machinery in motion. Child workers are regularly exposed to dangerous levels of dust, gases, fumes, heat and noise. Muscular-skeletal and respiratory-related ailments are common among child labourers.

A study by Professor A.J Weeramunda of the University of Colombo found that virtually all of the 300 leather tanneries in Dhaka, the Bangladeshi capital, employed young boys. The study noted: "Children endure appalling conditions including exposure to corrosive chemicals and bacterial contamination from hides."

In addition to these identified areas, child prostitution is widespread. The *Atlas of South Asian Children and Women* (1996) reported: "Annually, around 4,500 Nepali girls are trafficked to India, and a similar number of Bangladeshi girls are trafficked to Pakistan". The 1994 UNICEF report gave similar figures and stated: "In 1994, 4,800 Bangladeshi girls were trafficked to Pakistan and India". Children are also being used to make pornographic films and in drug trafficking.

The January-March 1997 *Child Workers in Asia*

bulletin described the findings of a study conducted into the conditions and composition of one of the largest group of child labourers—household domestics.

"A large number of child domestics are working either without salary or no fixed salary. Lack of salary is compensated by commitment by the employers for better jobs in the future. The study shows that no lump sum amount of money was observed to have been paid to the child domestics when they went on home leave or when they had visitors (parents/other relatives) coming in from their rural homes to see them. The majority of child domestics receiving salaries earned less than \$US2.50 per month.

"In this study the majority of child domestics fell in the age group of 11 to 13 years, though there were other children as young as five to seven years employed as household workers. The majority of child domestics, irrespective of their gender, were unable to read and write. This means that they had never been to school, nor had been taught at home. Also the majority of family members of the girl child domestics were unable to read or write, whether they were the parents or the siblings.

"Violence ranges from verbal abuse to physical abuse and torture. The most common types of violence include calling names, shouting, complaining and finding faults, the use of insulting and filthy language, obscene words, beating, slapping, whipping, and being burnt with hot spoons or rods."

Fueling child labour is poverty and deprivation. The annual per capita income of Bangladesh is only \$US240. Out of a total population of 126 million, 52 million are under 18 years. Over 38 percent of the child population are not in primary schools. The female illiteracy rate is 74 percent. The 1997 Human Development Report stated that 537 out of every 1,000 Bangladeshi children die before reaching one year of age. The 1998 UNICEF report stated: "In Bangladesh,

over half of the children under five suffer moderate to severe stunting. In areas where iodine deficiency is a problem, many thousands of children suffer mental and physical disabilities.”

On September 26 the Bangladesh Minister of Labour and Manpower told a news conference that the “government has plans to eliminate child labour completely by 2005”. Earlier, in 1995, the Bangladeshi Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and UNICEF signed an agreement to “remove all child labourers from the garment sector”.

But the facts and figures speak otherwise. Child labour is not disappearing from Bangladesh but is on the increase. According to a 1989 labour force survey in Bangladesh, 6.1 million children aged between 5 and 14 were economically active. Now, the UNICEF survey indicates, the number has increased to 6.3 million, representing 30 percent of the child population in the same age group.

The ILO report *Child Labour in Asia* estimates that worldwide at least 120 million children between the ages of 5 and 14 work full-time. The number doubles to some 250 million when children for whom work is a secondary activity are included. Over 60 percent of the world's child labourers are living in Asia.



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