

Breaking The Cycle of Lost Innocence: An In-Depth Study on The Impact of Child Labor on Children in Bangladesh



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ABSTRACT: Child labor remains a critical issue in Bangladesh, where millions of children are deprived of their basic rights to education, safety, and a childhood free from exploitation. This paper aims to comprehensively examine the causes, consequences, and potential solutions to child labor in Bangladesh, with a particular focus on its socioeconomic impact. The primary objectives of this research are to identify the underlying factors contributing to child labor, analyze its effects on the lives of children, and propose actionable policy interventions to address the issue.

This study adopts a qualitative research approach using secondary data analysis to examine the issue of child labour in Bangladesh. Data is collected from a variety of sources, including government reports, international organizations, academic articles, media reports, and NGO publications. A qualitative content analysis method is then used to identify key themes, conduct comparative analysis with global case studies, and evaluate policy effectiveness.

The findings demonstrated culturally relevant socioeconomic effects of child labour measuring the physical & mental health impact to this group of child labourers as well as providing limited human capital ensuring they remain in a dark wheel of never being able to better their situation, rarely having the opportunity to attend any school and existing in a perpetual process of poverty. Child labor also contributes to the economic problem of the wider nation, including inequality and economic inefficiency.

Thus, it is concluded that to break the history of child labor in Bangladesh we need a multidimensional remedy starting with tighter enforcement of laws, better access to education and interdisciplinary poverty mitigation programs which should be taken place along with the International agencies and Organizations driving the need to protect the political economy of child labor.

KEYWORDS: Child Labour, In-depth Study, Socioeconomic Impact, Bangladesh.

INTRODUCTION

Child labor is one of the most widespread social problems in the world, perhaps more so in developing countries like Bangladesh. There are an estimated 5.6 million children in child labour (ILO, 2021; BBS, 2019) in Bangladesh, many of whom toil in hazardous conditions, being deprived of the elementary human rights such as right to education and right to a safe environment. Although Bangladesh has made significant improvements regarding child welfare, and has also achieved MDG targets on child labour, however, the issue of child labour continues to remain a systemic problem that threatens children's futures, the socio-economic fabric of the country and long-term development of the country (Choudhury, 2020; Sultana, 2021). The socioeconomic factors that fuel child labor in Bangladesh are multifaceted, representing a mix of poverty, educational deprivation, and inadequate avenues for social mobility (Ahad et al., 2021). As over 24% of the population in the country remains under the national poverty line (World Bank 2021), households depend on the income generated by child labor as one of the main sources of financial provider. This reliance of economy on children enhances the "vicious cycle of poverty" because the children working in hazardous conditions do not have access to education and vocational skills, hence they have limited economic prospects in the future as well (Hussain & Maskus, 2003). Moreover, absence of social protection systems who promote the endurance of this problem like affordable health care services and unemployment benefits remains to be evident (Siddique & Rahman, 2018; Gazi, 2021).

Additionally, the cultural and social practices of Bangladesh have made child labor a common practice in some sectors such as agriculture, textiles and domestic work. Children are employed in these sectors as they are regarded as traditional/legacy sectors where they are involved in informal economy without any contractual arrangement to normalize the practice of child labour (Chowdhury & Ahmad, 2018; Karim, 2020). The prevalence of child labor especially in rural areas is due to the unawareness of the negative impact of child labor because the community members do not interpret this occurrence as a violation of children rights (Kaur & Byard, 2021); Child labor in Bangladesh has long-term impacts on children and society as a whole. Child workers are more physically injured, malnourished, and exposed to toxic substances than other groups. (Caleo et al., 2024) Moreover, child labour has adverse effect on cognitive development as children working for long hours do not have enough time for studies (Keane

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et al., 2022). The impact of educational deprivation due to child labor, compounded by the lack of necessary skills for participation in the modern workforce, results in a downward spiral, as not only does the cycle of poverty continue, but also the nation's economic growth is jeopardized by a shortage of workforce needed to sustain growth (Hosen et al., 2010). Therefore, the socio-economic effects of child labor do not just confine to the child but also hinder the process of human capital and productivity and thereby national development (Rahman & Hoque, 2020).

Against this backdrop, Bangladesh has endeavored to address the issue of child labor through the implementation of various initiatives but their effectiveness has been hit or miss. There have been a number of laws passed by the government such as Labour Act 2006 and the National Child Labour Elimination Policy, focusing on increasing enforcement and social mobilization against child labour (ILO, 2021; Islam, 2020). Yet, the implementation of these policies is hampered by weak enforcement, lack of sufficient resources, and the resilient informal labor markets (Ghosh, 2020; Nahar, 2019). In addition, numerous international organizations, including the UN and ILO, have funded, advocated, and provided technical assistance to Bangladesh in its fight against child labor (UNICEF, 2019; ILO, 2020). However, in spite of these notable efforts, many formidable challenges still exist in the areas of quality education, social services, etc. which have greatly stood in the way of fully eradicating child labor in the country (Zickafoose et al., 2024). In this paper, I will analyse those specific factors and how they can be integrated into strategies against child labour in Bangladesh, thus preventing thousands of children from entering the vicious cycle.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study applies secondary data analysis on child labour situation of Bangladesh. This is made possible by the characteristics of secondary data which is essential for child labour research as it enables the synthesis of knowledge from existing trusted sources, eliminating the primary data constraint. A descriptive research design is utilized to explore existing knowledge related to the prevalence, causes and socio-economic impacts of child labour and to assess the you currently the effectiveness of existing policies and interventions. The data are collected from several references such as government reports, international organizations, academic articles, media reports, as well as NGO publications. This is followed by a qualitative content analysis identifying keywords, comparative analysis with case studies around the world, and a policy effectiveness analysis. The study is reliable and valid by choosing credible and relevant data sources and data period and also strictly follows ethical considerations to maintain academic integrity. Even with limitations such as absence of primary data and possible data discrepancies, this approach establishes a strong foundation for elucidating the dynamics of child labour in Bangladesh and guiding further policies.

FINDINGS

Child Labour In Bangladesh —The Horrifying Reality

It can not only be called a common but also a fat abiding reality of the Bangladeshi socioeconomic theatre as it prevents millions of children from having an education. These children are involved in harmful work, particularly, the garment sector, street vending, agriculture, domestic work, and brick kiln work. Despite national and international labour laws, the enforcement remains weak which continues to exploit vulnerable children. Those youth end up with little pay, long hours, and dangerous settings which also affects them physically and mentally. And because they are not formally employed, it becomes challenging to oversee decent working conditions and legal protection (ILO, 2023).

Child work is not only hard, but these child workers do not get the chance to become educated, giving them a poor future. Most child labourers either never go to school, or leave school at an early age trap, perpetuating the cycle of poverty and economic vulnerability (UNICEF, BBS, 2019). Moreover, numerous youths endure physical, verbal, and even trafficking, especially within domestic and informal employment. Thus Bangladesh suffers from child labour as a significant obstacle to sustainable development and a violation of the rights of children due to the weak enforcement of the law and socio-economic pressure.

Factors responsible for Child Labor in Bangladesh

Economic crisis, illiteracy, social values and law enforcement are responsible for Child Labour in Bangladesh. More than anything, poverty is still the main reason: there are millions of families who cannot put food on the table. Children work in garment factories, agriculture, domestic service, or construction to ensure that low-income households are able to make ends meet. In addition, the economic fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic and inflation has pushed even more children to the labour market. The primary education is free but nevertheless many children cannot go to school due to indirect costs (books, uniforms, transportation, etc.) and they therefore often have to quit school and have to work at an early age (Shahjahan et al., 2016).

At times, the reason behind child labour is not only economic, but a social and cultural dilemma as well. Except that in rural areas, children are expected to help the family earn an income. Gender based discrimination is a huge aspect of the issue, whereby girls are often used more in domestic work, which exposes them to exploitation and abuse. Although there are laws in place such as the Bangladesh Labour Act (2006) and the National Child Labour Elimination Policy (2010); enforcement is weak due to corruption, lack of monitoring, and especially the prevalence of the informal sector, where child labour is most frequently observed. These

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approaches, however, fall short due to lack of funding, poor coordination and weak enforcement mechanisms in government and NGO initiatives intended to fix the issue.

Child Labor and Economic Drivers

Partly, child labor in Bangladesh can be identified as economic vulnerability. Poor families regularly expect their children to work to be able to meet their livelihoods (Khan et al, 2020). The lack of financial security and poor social safety nets only further drives this dependence on child labor, ensuring it persists.

Moreover, the extensive informal sector in Bangladesh with limited regulatory surveillance further favours the entrenchment of child labour (Barkat & Karim, 2019). Since employers can employ child workers at lower wages and child workers are less likely to assert their right of labor, they become an attractive prospect for employers, who are further able to continue this ongoing cycle of child labor.

Effect on Educational System and Learning Skills

The results highlight that child labor negatively impacts educational attainments. Most of the child labourers either leave school or could not go there at all because of the economic and financial constraints of the family and necessity to support their families (Islam & Jahan, 2021). And even those who do go to school are often absent chronically, leading to poor academic outcomes and a greater risk of dropping out.

The lack of reading and writing skills has directly links with limited rights to education that prevents individuals from facing economic hardships, keeping the poor-poor and unskilled labor (Chowdhury et al., 2022). Without education and vocational training, the long-term effects are dire, as they are left to seek minimum wage and casual employment in adulthood, limiting their opportunities for upward social mobility.

Health and Mental Impact

Many child labourers work in dangerous places and suffer serious harm to their physical and mental health. According to various studies, children engaged in sectors like construction, agriculture, and tanneries are prone to respiratory diseases, malnutrition and injuries due to unsafe working conditions (Ibrahim et al., 2018).

Additionally, the psychological trauma that child labor leaves behind is immense. It exposes young workers to higher levels of anxiety, depression, and trauma from workplace violence and taking on too much responsibility at a young age (Ahmed, 2021). The mental health issues may prove to be lifelong, threatening their social development and emotional health.

The empowerment of teenage girls and another drawback of child labor fall under "Gender Dimensions of Child Labor."

When you analyse child labour from a gender perspective, it is seen that boys and girls do child labour differently. Males tend to work in heavy, informal sectors such as rickshaw pulling, construction, or factories while females mostly work in domestic labor and informal sectors (Kamruzzaman, 2018). Notably, even in terms of domestic work provides girls with the highest opportunities of neglect and abuse, due to minimal legal protection and social recognition.

Gender roles: Child labor also has an impact on future opportunities. Vocational skills acquisition is less accessible for girls working in domestic settings than for boys (Putnick & Bornstein, 2016) This leads to a continuous cycle where gender imbalances in employment and gender pay gaps carry into adulthood, perpetuating macro level labour market inequalities.

Bangladesh: Social and economic impact

Bangladesh — Long-Term Socio-Economic Effects The national economy that depends only on unskilled labour affects the productivity and growth of the country. Affordable access to education for families helps get them out of the cycle of poverty — as low-income families cannot afford to send their children to learn (World Bank, 2024).

In addition to economic impact, the social cost of child labor is huge as it contributes to more crimes, early marriage and transmitting poverty to the next generation (Islam, 2020). Neglecting the education and welfare of children tends to undermine the development of human capital over time, eroding the comparative advantage of the economy by which it can engage competitively with the rest of the world.

It needs to be a multi-layered and long term effort of investing in more law enforcement, better education and economic support for families more generally. Bangladesh will ultimately lose the battle for development and progress if the vicious cycle of child labor is not addressed immediately and in the right way (Patoari, 2020).

Consequences of Child Labour

In addition, child labor has widespread, disastrous long-term effects on a community, family, and individual. Though this new financial assistance may help to avoid a short-term crisis of people suddenly unable to pay for liveable housing in the coming months; it is the longer-term impact that will likely prove devastating. The most impacted by this are children who lose on the education front, which severely restricts their future prospects. Due to early school dropout which is very common among child labourers, they do not end up being able to get stable jobs with good pay as an adult. It adds to a cycle of generational poverty, where children of former labourers are also to work as a result of poverty. In the same vein, the absence of a well-educated climate continues to stymie the growth of the Bangladeshi economy — without skilled labour, industries which rely on it cannot flourish

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amidst a populace that lacks formal education and vocational training. These children live a life of poverty and low-skilled jobs, and cannot escape the vicious cycle of poverty that creates increased economic inequality within the country, without the schooling (Hoque, 2024).

In addition to education, child labour subjected children to intense physical and mental health risks. Thousands of kids are engaged in dangerous places like brick kilns, construction sites, garment factories, and agricultural fields, which involve exposure to toxic chemical, long hours of long working, and hazardous machines. It causes an array of issues such as respiratory diseases, malnutrition, physical injuries, and even life-long disabilities. The psychological impact is also worrisome, as children who are subjected to child labour endure exploitation, abuse and stress, which can be a source of anxiety, depression and low self-esteem (Thi et al., 2023). And that can hinder their emotional and social development, and can certainly lead to obstacles when trying to integrate back into society as functioning, healthy adults. With little access to reliable healthcare and support systems, their situation only worsens, and the impact of child labour becomes a significant barrier to the well-being of the children in Bangladesh.

Another serious implication of child labour is the greater risk of exploitation, including abuse and trafficking. As they are mostly engaged in unregulated and informal sectors, child labourers are among the most vulnerable with respect to physical violence, sexual exploitation and forced labour. Many employers exploit the children, forcing them to work long days for minimal pay and in horrific working conditions. Moreover, thousands of Bangladeshi children are victims of human trafficking, subjected to domestic child labour, prostitution, and other forms of modern slavery. This type of exploitation is also detrimental to society in the long run because former child labourers find it difficult to obtain legal work, which leads to a rise in criminality and a greater gap in the social class structure. Child labour remains a ban on millions of children who are denied the childhood they deserve and saps the strength of the nation socially and politically which requires stricter policies and intervention against the heinous practice.

Measures Taken by Government and NGOs to Eradicate Child Labour

A series of laws and policies have been introduced by the Government of Bangladesh to combat child labour with the target of eliminating it by 2025. National Child Labour Elimination Policy (2010): The most important policy includes an emphasis on removing children from hazardous work and longitudinal solution (through Education). The Bangladesh Labour Act (2006) also contains strong prohibitions on child labour from childhood granted children below the age of 14 will not be employed anywhere, and the children below the age of 18 will be prohibited from doing hazardous works. The Primary Education Stipend Programme (PESP) was introduced in 2005 with the aim of relieving the financial burden on low-income families and encouraging school attendance by providing them with financial assistance. In addition, Child Labour Monitoring System aids in the tracking and the potential of rescuing child workers involved in hazardous industries. Yet, the enforcement of such laws is still weak owing to corruption, lack of adequate monitoring, and loopholes in the legal framework which make it difficult to abolish child labour completely.

Apart from these governmental initiatives, the role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and international organization is significant in combating child labour in Bangladesh. Several leading organizations such as UNICEF, Save the Children, BRAC, and the International Labour Organization (ILO) are tirelessly working to rehabilitate and shelter, educate child labourers. They conduct awareness programs to sensitize families on the negative impact of child labour and provide skill training programmes to eliminate child labour and offer alternative means of livelihood. NGOs also campaign for tougher enforcement of child labour laws and more stringent legal protection. Yet millions of children still work in slave like conditions today, leaving a greater need for community involvement, law enforcement and funding for educational and rehabilitation programs which combat against the problem.

Despite all progress that has been made, extinguishment of child labour calls for not a single solution, but a solution that has to come from commanding action from the governmental level, NGOs involvement, and raising awareness at the local community level. Here, the government needs to strengthen monitoring mechanisms, enforce harsher sanctions for violations, and improve access to quality schooling to keep children out of the workforce and in the classroom. It is essential to provide them the basic necessity of good education and make sure we take the child labour problem by its roots at the very beginning by working jointly with the government, NGOs and the international bodies to give all the children in Bangladesh a fair opportunity for a better future.

DISCUSSION

The issue of child labour in Bangladesh presents a complex socio-economic challenge that requires a multi-faceted approach. The findings of the study highlight the entrenched nature of child labour, deeply rooted in poverty, lack of education, weak enforcement of labour laws, and socio-cultural norms. Despite national and international efforts to eradicate child labour, the practice remains widespread, particularly in informal sectors where regulatory oversight is minimal.

Economic instability remains the primary driver of child labour in Bangladesh. Families struggling to meet basic needs are compelled to send their children to work, often in hazardous conditions, to supplement household income. The COVID-19 pandemic and rising inflation have exacerbated this situation, forcing even more children into the workforce. Although the government provides free primary education, associated costs such as books, uniforms, and transportation still pose significant barriers for low-

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income families. As a result, many children drop out of school to contribute to their family's financial stability, perpetuating the cycle of poverty.

The findings also reveal the gendered dimension of child labour. Boys are commonly employed in physically demanding sectors such as construction and factories, whereas girls are more likely to be involved in domestic work, where they are particularly vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. The lack of vocational training and skill development opportunities further limits their future employment prospects, reinforcing long-term gender disparities in the labour market.

Furthermore, child labour has profound negative effects on children's education, health, and overall well-being. The disruption of education results in a lack of literacy and essential skills, reducing opportunities for upward social mobility and economic independence. Physically, many child labourers endure hazardous working conditions, leading to chronic illnesses, malnutrition, and severe injuries. Additionally, psychological impacts such as anxiety, depression, and trauma significantly affect their mental health and emotional development.

Although Bangladesh has implemented various legal frameworks, including the Bangladesh Labour Act (2006) and the National Child Labour Elimination Policy (2010), enforcement remains weak. Corruption, inadequate monitoring, and the vast presence of informal labour markets hinder efforts to eradicate child labour. Government initiatives such as the Primary Education Stipend Programme (PESP) and child labour monitoring systems aim to alleviate economic burdens and encourage school attendance, yet gaps in implementation persist.

NGOs and international organizations play a crucial role in addressing child labour through awareness campaigns, rehabilitation programs, and skill development initiatives. Organizations such as UNICEF, BRAC, and the International Labour Organization (ILO) provide shelter, education, and vocational training for affected children. However, limited resources and funding constraints pose significant challenges to sustaining these initiatives.

Ultimately, eradicating child labour in Bangladesh requires a collaborative approach involving government action, community engagement, and international support. Strengthening law enforcement, ensuring access to quality education, and providing economic assistance to vulnerable families are critical steps toward addressing this issue. Without decisive action, child labour will continue to hinder Bangladesh's progress toward sustainable development and equitable economic growth.

RECOMMENDATIONS ON ELIMINATING CHILD LABOUR

Getting rid of child labour in Bangladesh is not only a matter that needs to be handled by the government with curtains that involve international co-operation, but an area that needs to be addressed by the individuals in every corner of the country. These suggestions are aimed at tackling the systemic issues driving child labour and providing long-lasting methods to uphold the rights and well-being of children, and help families escape the cycle of poverty. Such strategies entail implementation of law enforcement, access to education, economic assistance to families, and awareness campaigns.

Resilient Law Enforcement

While there are multiple laws and policies created for ending child labour, insufficient enforcement is still the largest impediment to their effectiveness. More stringent enforcement mechanisms must be implemented for the protection of children.

Key Actions: Judicial Enforcement of Law: Regular inspections in industries, especially in sectors such as garment factories, agriculture, brick kilns, and domestic work can help in identifying child labourers and monitoring the enforcement of the law.

Centralized Database: A comprehensive child labour tracking system can provide authorities to monitor the violation and help in registering it.

Increase penalties for offenders: Businesses that hire children must be subjected to higher fines, closures, and imprisonment. Make employers more liable: Toughening penalties for employers who engage in child labour will be a strong message that such exploitative practices will not be tolerated.

Further bolster local law enforcement: By training local police and other government officials to identify, report, and intervene when they see signs of child labour, the local response system can be further strengthened.

If the laws are implemented more in its right spirits and culprits are punished severely, child labour could be decreased a lot in due course of time.

Increasing Accessibility in Education

To eliminate child labour, education is among the topmost weapons! The government and non-governmental organizations should focus on making education easily accessible, attractive and affordable for all children with more emphasis on disadvantaged families.

Key Actions: Introduce free school meals As not all families can afford the cost of education because of hidden costs like uniforms, books and transportation. Free meals at school would perhaps make parents more inclined to send the children to school instead of to work.

Assist low-income families financially: Government can give education stipends or funds directly to assist families and sort out the indirect cost of school fees.

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Enhance the education quality: Schools must provide quality education including vocational training to keep the students from dropping out. It would guarantee that children remain in school, and develop competencies that can lead to work.

Create community schools: Especially for those who live in distant areas or are working for agriculture, mobile schools or community based education programs can give flexible learning opportunities.

Access to education is empowering children and giving families the chance to escape the cycle of poverty long after the gates have closed and the lights have dimmed.

Families in Need and Fence Sitters

Economic hardship, the number one reason for child labour Many families in poverty depend on how much their kids could earn. Parents can be provided with economic support and opportunities through economic empowerment to reduce the need to work.

Key Actions: Microfinance programs: Providing microcredit or small loans to parents may help them start small businesses and increase their income to reduce the financial burden that leads to children being forced to work.

Vocational training programs: Training parents for better-paying and sustainable employment, especially for unskilled workers, would mean their dependence on their children's income would decrease (Usha et al.

Social protections: The government also should broaden social safety net programs, including child allowances or food assistance, to at-risk households. These programs will ease the financial burdens which lead children to work.

Subsidization of basic goods and services: The provision of subsidies for necessities like health, food and housing would relieve parents from depending on the income of their children.

Help families to economically empower themselves to work their way out of poverty so that their children can instead focus on their futures while leaving child labour behind.

Awareness Campaigns

Making people aware of the risks of child labour is one of the most vital aspects of any scheme to curb it. We must educate individuals and businesses about the detrimental impacts of child labour and the necessity of ethical labour practices.

Key Actions: Awareness campaigns: NGOs, civil society organizations, and the government should run awareness campaigns for the communities to educate them about how child labour harms children by affecting their health, education and overall well-being. Such campaigns must incorporate the local dialects and materials relevant to the rural populace in order to have the desired impact.

Individual campaigns for businesses: By promoting ethical business practices and utilizing certification programs like Fair Trade certification, businesses will be able to make better choices regarding their supply chains.

Working with media — the media is a powerful channel to raise awareness about child labour Awareness needs to be created in urban and rural areas through TV programs, documentaries, radio shows, and social media campaigns.

Mobilization campaigns targeting youths: trainings about circadian rhythm and obesity and impact on lifestyle and advocacy campaigns direct towards young individuals may have an impact on their partners and family.

Changing attitudes over child labour through advocacy campaigns will gradually bring about a cultural change in society with zero tolerance for child labour and a culture of respect for the rights of all children.

CONCLUSION

Child labour continues to be a major problem in Bangladesh, with millions of children trapped in a range of exploitative occupations, often in dangerous environments. The paper reviews the statistics, drivers, and impacts of child labour, highlighting that poverty, lack of education, social and cultural norms, and insufficient enforcement of the law are the primary drivers. But while this legal framework is respected, the enforcement mechanisms are weak, and as a result, child labour remains widespread in agriculture, garment manufacturing, domestic work, and street vending.

Child labour has disastrous consequences not only on the health and welfare of children but also on the continuation of the vicious poverty cycle. Working kids face malnourishment, abuse, and a loss of education, arbitrarily paring away options later in life. In addition to this, child labour is also a contributor to socio-economic inequality, preventing the development of both child and nation. Nonetheless, the government, NGOs, and international organizations have worked to mitigate this. Policies like the National Child Labour Elimination Policy (2010) and programmes such as education stipends and child labour monitoring systems are steps in the right direction for child labour eradication. Others — like UNICEF, Save the Children, and ILO — have also acted as advocates for children's rights and interventions paraphrasing; but direct.

However, these efforts continue to face tremendous hurdles in the fight against child labour. To solve child labour, we need to enforce laws, promote access to quality education and provide economic support to vulnerable families. Moreover, raising general awareness and changing the business practices in the interest of labour ethics will have people inclined more towards humanity, which will eventually pressure the corporates turning them as the social accountability towards eliminating child labour.

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