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March 2005

Online at <http://mpa.ub.uni-muenchen.de/8008/>

MPRA Paper No. 8008, posted 31. March 2008 07:02 UTC

Child Labour in Bangladesh: Trends, Patterns and Policy Options

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[Published in *Asian Profile*, Vol.34, No.6, December 2006, pp.593-608.]

ABSTRACT

This study examines the trends, patterns and policy options of child labour in Bangladesh particularly during the 1990s. The striking finding in the trend and incidence of child labour in Bangladesh is that while child labour is on a declining trend in other South Asian countries – India and Pakistan and in the world, it has been increasing in Bangladesh. This increasing trend in the incidence of child labour particularly focuses on the irrelevance or inadequacy of existing child labour laws in Bangladesh. This study suggests that a combination of policies would be appropriate for reducing child labour. These include employment generation schemes that lead to economic prosperity for the household, compulsory schooling for children, school enrolment subsidy, improving school infrastructure, the quality of education, flexibility in school schedules and adult literacy campaigns that increase community or social awareness, especially of the adult female.

1. Introduction

This study examines at the trends, patterns and policy options of child labour in Bangladesh particularly during the 1990s. The evidence suggests that although Bangladesh has gained an impressive growth over the last decade and the government has taken several initiatives to reduce child labour and increase school enrolment, the labour force participation rate of children aged 10 to 14 years increased to 39 per cent in 2000 from 21 per cent in 1981. Therefore, an analysis of the macroeconomic situation, such as the country's economic growth, the government's policy to reduce child labour, is especially important in a review of the trends in child labour in Bangladesh.

The plan of the paper is as follows. Section 2 provides a brief overview of Bangladesh economy. The magnitude and pattern of child labour are examined in Section 3. Children's participation in schooling and legal context of child labour in Bangladesh are discussed in Sections 4 and 5 respectively. Section 6 describes programmes and efforts to address child labour and promote schooling. Finally, Section 7 concludes and provides policy options.

2. A Brief Overview of the Bangladesh Economy

Bangladesh has experienced an impressive growth, an average of 5 per cent GDP growth per annum (World Bank and ADB 2002), during the 1990s. During this period, poverty has declined by about one per cent per year, reducing the population below poverty line from about 58.8 per cent in 1991 to 49.8 per cent in 2000.¹ The reduction in poverty is

¹ UNICEF. At a glance: Bangladesh: < <http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/bangladesh.html> > viewed on 1/12/2004.

not impressive in spite of this convincing growth rate (an economic growth of 5 per cent annually on average) because the magnitude of poverty remains high in terms of both absolute magnitude and as a percentage of the population. Also, the absolute level of per capita income (US\$360) still remains quite low in comparison with the South Asian average (US\$460) and the LDC average of US\$430 (Table 1).

The population of Bangladesh is predominantly rural, with almost 80 per cent of people living in 86,000 villages; however, urbanisation is growing at an annual rate of 4.6 per cent (UNICEF 2003), which is almost three times higher than the population growth rate (1.7). Poverty and unemployment in rural areas are mainly responsible for shifting the large number of people to cities in search of jobs. There is evidence that the poor in Bangladesh live mostly in rural areas and are engaged in agricultural activities.

Agriculture is the mainstay of the Bangladesh economy, despite the decline of agriculture's share in the GDP from 29.5 per cent in 1990 to about 22.7 per cent in 2002 (Table 2).² Within the decade of the 1990s, growth in the agricultural sector was slow, though this sector is the major sector of employment, with about 62 per cent of total employed people in 2000. Over the first half of the decade, from 1991–1995, growth in the agricultural sector stagnated with a rate of 1.6 per cent, then it revived sharply again with a rate of 4.9 per cent during 1995–2000. The decline in rural poverty was, however, lower (less than 1 per cent), during 1995–2000, compared to 1991–1995 (1.13 per cent

² The share of agriculture in GDP was 50 per cent in the 1970s.

per annum), though most of the poor people are engaged with agriculture (Rahman and Islam 2003).³

The service sector is the dominant sector in the Bangladesh economy. Nearly half of the GDP comes from this sector, and the contribution of the service sector to the GDP remains almost the same over the decade. The average rate of growth of services is 4.8 per cent during 1981–2000 (Table 3).

The growth in the industrial sector was spectacular during the 1990s. The share of industry in the GDP has increased by more than 54 per cent in 2002, compared to 1980 (Table 2). The manufacturing sector demonstrates a higher average growth rate, 8.2 per cent, in the first half of the 1990s, compared to the growth rate, 5.5 per cent, of the second half. The prolonged flood of 1998 may be the main reason for this slow growth in the second half.

³ Agricultural growth during the latter part of the nineties did not lead to a recovery of employment and wage rates; as a result, the rate of poverty decline was slow (Rahman and Islam 2003). Also, overall the rate of reduction in poverty was lower during 1996–2001 compared to 1991–1996, although the rate of GDP growth was higher during 1996–2001 compared to 1991–1996.

Table 1. International Comparisons of Selected Economic and Social Development Indicators of Bangladesh, 2002.

Indicator	Bangladesh	Average for	
		Average for South Asian Countries	Least Developed Countries
Per capita income (US dollars) ^x	360	460	430
Population (millions) ^x	135.7	1401	2495
Population growth rate (per cent) ^x	1.7	1.8	1.9
Urban population (percentage of total) ^x	26	28	30
Health			
Total fertility rate*	3.5	3.4	5.2
Life expectancy at birth*	61	63	49
Infant mortality rate (per 1,000 live births)*	51	70	99
Literacy and Education			
Adult male literacy rate (percentage of aged those 15 & older)"	49	66	62
Adult female literacy rate (percentage of aged those 15 & older)"	30	42	42
Net primary school enrolment"	89	72	64
Female as percentage of male primary (gross) enrolment"	101	82	87
Secondary school (gross) enrolment"	101	96.8	81.5
Female enrolment as percentage of male secondary (gross) enrolment"	104	74	83
Access to water and sanitation (percentage of population with access)			
Access to improved water source "	97	85	62
Access to sanitation"	48	34	44

^x indicates World Bank data for 2002; * refers to UNICEF data for 2002; " refers to UNICEF data for 2000.

Source: UNICEF (2003) and WDI Database, 2003.

Table 2. Structure of the Bangladesh Economy (percentage of GDP).

Share (per cent) in GDP at constant 1995–96 prices

Year	1980	1990	1995	2000	2002
Agriculture	33.2	29.5	26.0	25.6	22.7
Industry	17.1	20.8	24.3	25.7	26.4
Services	49.7	49.7	49.7	48.7	50.9
Total	100	100	100	100	100

Source: Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) 2000, 2001; Data for 2002 from World Bank: Bangladesh at a Glance.

Table 3. Sectoral Growth in Bangladesh (Average Annual Growth)

Per cent at constant 1995–96 prices

Year	1981–2000	1981–1990	1991–1995	1995–2000	2002
Agriculture	2.8	2.3	1.6	4.9	0.0
Industry	6.4	5.8	7.5	6.4	6.5
Services	4.8	3.7	4.1	4.8	5.4
GDP	4.3	3.8	4.4	5.2	4.4
Per capita GDP	2.3	1.6	2.4	3.6	2.6

Source: As for Table 2.

3. Incidence of Child Labour in Bangladesh

The incidence of child labour is not new in Bangladesh. It was prevalent mostly in the rural setting of Bangladesh as a normal socialisation process. In the agrarian society, children have worked and still work alongside their parents in the field or in the home as a process of household production under parental protection, but for the survival of the family. Child labour has been attached so deeply to rural life, year after year that it is

often regarded as something very natural and a legitimate practice; nobody thinks that it may have any adverse effect on a child's schooling and development; rather it is considered to some extent as a part of their education and socialisation.⁴

Cain (1977) first focused on children's work activity in rural Bangladesh. Cain specifically studied the economic contributions of children to the household economy and attempted to determine their productivity while living as subordinate members of their parents' household. He found that children in rural Bangladesh contribute to their family's income as early as five years of age. Khuda's (1991) study supported Cain's findings. Khuda examined the work input of children in rural Bangladesh based on primary data. The data gathered by Khuda showed that the school-going children worked about one-half the time, compared to non-schooling children. Both Cain and Khuda came to similar conclusions about the children's admission age to the household's activities. Male children become the net producers of the family at quite an early age (by the age of 12 years), and after the age of 15 years, their cumulative production exceeds their cumulative consumption (Cain 1977). This finding was substantiated by another survey (1977–78) by BIDS⁵, which reported that the rural children started their economically productive life from five years of age (cited in Salauddin 1981, p. 93).

⁴ Chauduri and Wilson (2000) also stated that rural and agricultural child labour was not the subject of debate or major concern in any western nations during the eighteenth or nineteenth century, although the agricultural sector had widespread use of child labour. Even the ILO's Charter of 1919 did not include child workers in agriculture as part of its prohibited employment sources. The child Labour Prohibitions and Regulation Act of UK (frequently amended in the 19th century) and their counterparts in countries of Europe and North America mainly focused at urban, industrial activities.

⁵ The Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies is a research institute.

However, child labour has become more visible in recent years, particularly because of the emergence of garment industry in Bangladesh during the 1980s, and the widespread use of child labour by this industry.⁶ The issue of child labour in Bangladesh became most discussed and debated in the early 1990s when the USA and other foreign buyers refused to import garments from Bangladesh as long as child labour was being used by this industry. During this time, in the formal sector, garment factories topped the list with the highest numbers of child labourers. The Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) was then compelled to sign the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU – a treaty between ILO, UNICEF and BGMEA) with ILO and UNICEF. However, as an impact of Harkin's Bill⁴, about 50,000 children were dismissed from garment factories immediately; later these dismissed children were found in more hazardous and exploitative occupations than the garment industry (Rahman et al. 1999).

Magnitude and Pattern of Child Labour Participation

The data on child labour and the pattern of their use in the labour force are not found to be well documented or regularly available. The Population Census (PC) and Labour Force Survey (LFS) are the two main sources of manpower statistics, but these do not

⁶ A study by Wiebecke and Rahman (1996) documented that garment factories increased from 250 factories in 1985 to 2,250 in 1995 in the major cities of Bangladesh. These garment factories created over one million job opportunities. Wiebecke and Rahman reported that of these one million workers, about 20 per cent had been estimated to be child workers (without specifying what cut-off age was used).

⁷ "The Child Labour Deterrent Act of 1993", tabled in USA Senate by Senator Tom Harkin.

provide accurate information about child labour as they set the standard of the age cut-off point at 10 years for labour force participation. Hence, information about the children between five and nine years is not available for certain years in Bangladesh.

The number of child worker aged 10–14 increased from 2.5 million in 1974 (according to 1974 PC) to 6.8 million in 1999–2000 (according to 1999–2000 LFS), an increase of 3.3 million child workers in twenty six years. The labour force participation rate for children aged 10–14 increased from 25.7 per cent in 1974 to around 39 per cent in 1999–2000 (Figure 1).

Table 4 provides the details of child population (aged 5–14 years), the child labour force and participation rate over the periods of 1983–2000. According to the 1983–84 LFS of Bangladesh, there were 23.8 million children (5–14 years), of whom around 3.8 million were found to be in the child labour force, that is, 15.9 per cent were economically active. However, the 1984–85 LFS revealed that the child labour participation rate was 13.3 per cent; this lower figure, compared to previous surveys indicates statistical illusion instead of the fact. During 1984–85 to 1995–96, the child population (aged 5–14 years) increased from 28.3 million to 34.5 million, an increase of 6.2 million children, whereas during this period, child labour increased by 2.7 million.

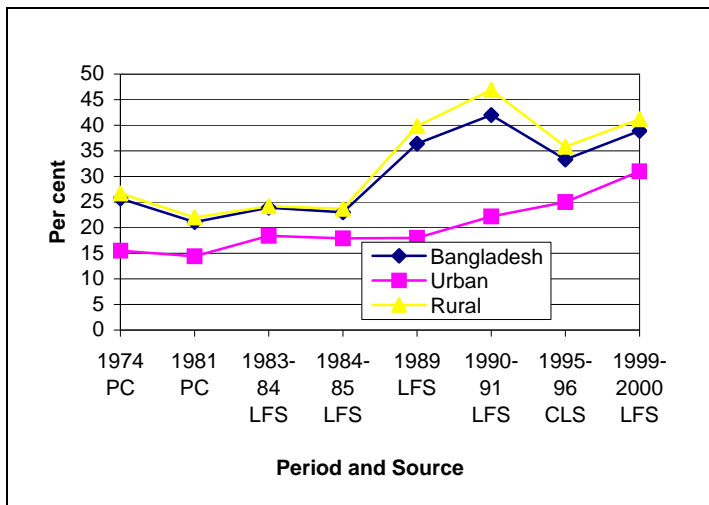
Table 4 Child Population and Labour Force Participation Aged 5–14 Years by Sex.

Source, Period and Age Group	Total Child Population 5–14 Years (000)			Child Labour Force 5–14 Years (000)			Child Labour Participation Rate			Child Labour as per cent of Total Labour Force
	Both Sex	Male	Female	Both Sex	Male	Female	Both Sex	Male	Female	Both Sex
1983–84 LFS										
Total	23812	14218	13594	3782	3108	674	15.9	21.8	4.9	13.3
05–09	14563	7369	7194	608	468	140	4.2	6.3	1.9	2.1
10–14	13249	6849	6400	3174	2640	534	23.9	38.5	8.3	11.1
1984–85 LFS										
Total	28316	14413	13903	3774	3098	676	13.3	21.5	4.7	12.8
05–09	14594	7387	7207	612	452	160	4.2	6.1	2.2	2.1
10–14	13722	7026	6696	3162	2646	516	23	37.8	7.7	10.7
1989 LFS										
Total	30971	16310	14661	5979	3537	2442	19.3	21.7	16.6	11.8
05–09	19301	10123	9177	1734	1006	728	9	9.9	7.9	3.4
10–14	11671	6187	5484	4245	2531	1714	36.4	40.9	31.3	8.4
1990–91 LFS										
Total	30633	16751	13882	5923	3844	2079	19.3	22.9	15	11.6
05–09	16913	8689	8224	166	118	48	1	1.4	0.6	0.3
10–14	13720	8062	5658	5757	3726	2031	42	46.2	35.9	11.2
1995–96 CLS										
Total	34455	17862	16593	6455	3856	2599	18.7	21.6	15.7	11.5
05–09	17398	8798	8600	778	440	338	4.5	5	3.9	1.4
10–14	17057	9064	7993	5677	3416	2261	33.3	37.7	28.3	10.1
1999–2000 LFS										
Total	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
05–09*	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
10–14	17439	9314	8125	6777	4029	2748	38.9	43.3	33.8	11.2

Source: Computed from BBS (1996: Table 7.8 and Table 7.11) and BBS (2002). Data for 1999-2000 come from BBS (2002). * Data for children aged 5-9 years are not available.

Child labour is more pronounced in rural areas than in urban areas, which is evident from Figure 1. According to the Population Census of 1974, the urban child labour participation rate accounted for 15.5 per cent in 1974, but this figure increased to 31 per cent in 1999–2000 for children aged 10–14 years as reported by the Labour Force Survey. Urban child labour almost doubled during the last twenty-six years. The urban child labour (10–14 years) participation rate has been increasing more rapidly than the rural child labour participation rate since 1989.

Figure 1. Child Labour Participation Rate, Aged 10–14 Years



Source: Computed from BBS (1996: Table7.11) and BBS (2002). Data for 1999–2000 come from BBS (2002).

Accordingly, Table 5 also shows a declining trend in the child labour participation rate in the agricultural sector and an increasing trend in the non-agricultural sector since 1990. The child labour participation rate, however, is still high in the agricultural sector, although Western concern about child labour concentrates on the plight of child labour in

the garment industry or in other export-oriented sectors of Bangladesh that absorb slightly over 8 per cent of the total child labour force. Agricultural child labour accounted for 64.2 per cent of total child labour (10–14 years), according to the 1999–2000 LFS, whereas non–agricultural child labour accounted for 35.8 per cent.

Table 5. Child Labour Participation (10–14 years) in Agricultural and Non-agricultural Sectors by Gender.

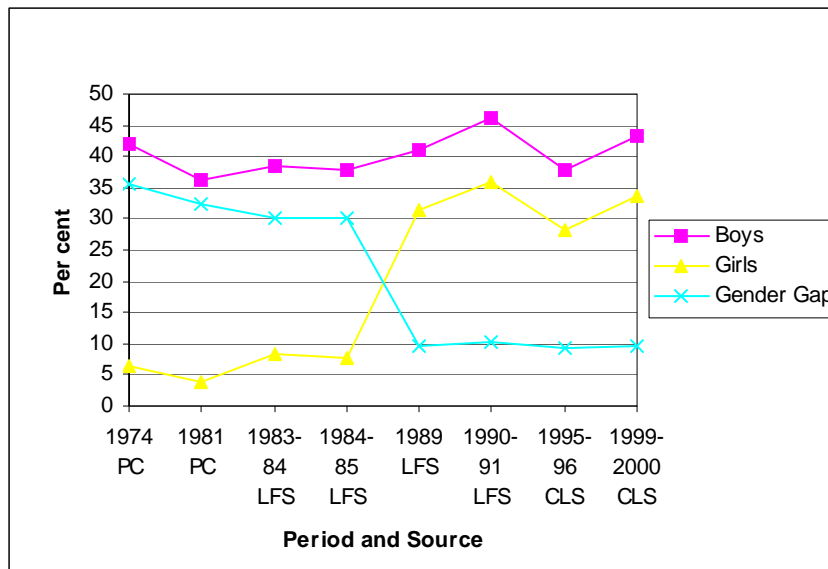
Period and Source	Agriculture			Non-agriculture		
	All	Boys	Girls	All	Boys	Girls
1983–84 LFS	64.1	97.6	2.4	35.9	58.3	41.7
1989 LFS	74.5	61.2	38.8	25.5	54.3	45.7
1990–91 LFS	75.1	58.4	38.8	24.9	84.5	15.5
1995–96 CLS	65.4	61.4	38.6	34.6	57.1	42.9
1999–2000 LFS	64.2	62.2	67.1	35.8	37.8	32.9

Source: Computed from BBS (1996:Table 7.14) and BBS (2002). Data for 1999–2000 come from BBS (2002).

Figure 2 presents the work participation rate of children (10–14) during 1974–2000 in Bangladesh by gender. The work participation of girls was substantially lower than that of boys. This may be because of under-reportation of girls’ participation in the labour market. There is lack of information about the girls’ participation in the labour market either because of the private nature of their work, or because formal statistics do not consider unpaid household work in the definition of child labour. Bangladesh is not an exception to this trend. The participation rate of boys was relatively very high, during

1974–1985, on average a 32 percentage point⁸ higher participation rate for boys than girls. A sharp decline in the gender gap in the child labour participation is, however, observed from 1989. The average gap between boys’ and girls’ participation rate came down to 9.7 percentage points⁹ during 1989–2000 from the 32 percentage points during 1974–85. The 1999–2000 LFS also revealed that the gender gap was declining both in the agricultural and non-agricultural sectors. The 1999–2000 LFS reported that about 67.1 per cent of girls and 62.2 per cent of boys were engaged in the agricultural sector, and, in the non-agricultural sector, the participation rate was 32.9 per cent and 37.8 per cent respectively.

Figure 2. Child Labour Participation (10–14) Rate by Gender.



Source: Computed from BBS (1996:Table 7.11) and BBS (2002). Data for 1999–2000 come from BBS (2002).

⁸ Calculated based on the gender gap in 1974PC, 1981PC, 1983-84 LFS and 1984-85 LFS.

⁹ Calculated based on the gender gap in 1989 LFS, 1990-91 LFS, 1995-96 CLS and 1999-2000 LFS.

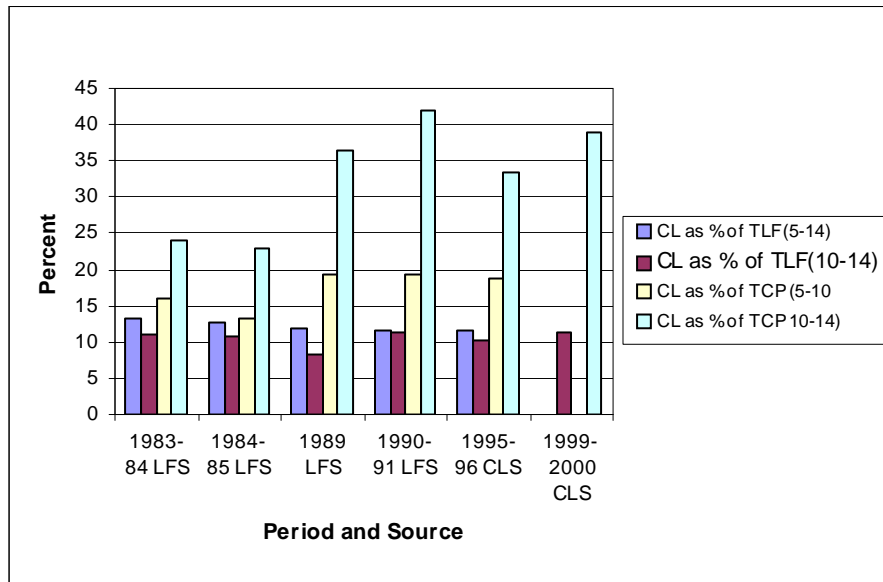
Child labour (5–14 years) constituted about 12 per cent of the total labour force during the last decade, and the child labour (5–14 years) participation rate also remained stable at around 19 per cent of the total child population (5–14 years) during 1989–1995 (see Table 4 and Figure 3). According to the latest Labour Force Survey of 1999–2000, the children aged 10–14 years constituted 11.3 per cent of the total labour force. The labour force participation rate for children aged 10–14 years, however, has been increasing since 1981 (Figures 1 and 3).¹⁰ The striking finding in the trend and incidence of child labour in Bangladesh is that while child labour is on a declining trend in other South Asian countries – India¹¹ and Pakistan¹² and in the world, it has been increasing in Bangladesh.

¹⁰ There may have some statistical illusion due to definitional variations of child labour (for example in 1989LFS and 1990-91 LFS).

¹¹ See, for example, Duraisamy (1997).

¹² See, for details, Hyder (1998).

Figure 3. Child Labour Participation Rate as Percentage of TLF and TCP *



* Data for children aged 5–9 years are not available for 1999–2000.

* CL = Child Labour; TLF = Total Labour Force; TCP = Total Child Population.

Source: Computed from BBS (1996:Table 7.8 and 7.10) and BBS (2002). Data for 1999–2000 come from BBS (2002).

4. Children’s Participation in Schooling in Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, formal education is mainly delivered by the government. However, a non-formal education system offered by NGOs also exists side-by-side, targeting the disadvantaged children and young adults. A privately owned early childhood development and care programme exists for the children of affluent families, aged between 3–5 years.

Formal education in Bangladesh, however, is divided into a five-year cycle of primary education, a five-year cycle of secondary education, two years of higher

secondary education and two-five years of higher education. The official age of entry into primary school is six years (according to the Primary Education Act, 1992), although many children attend school at the age of four or five years. Late entry into primary school is also very common in rural Bangladesh.¹³ In Bangladesh, primary education is compulsory for all children. The Government has established a universal primary education system to prevent children from early labour. According to the Bangladesh Primary School Act (1992), a child six years old must go to school. To make school attendance easier for the children of poor parents, tuition fees and textbooks are supplied free of cost for all children up to Grade 5 and up to Grade 8 for female children. An alternative subsidy programme, Food-for-Education, has also been implemented to help the destitute children and their parents.

Primary and Mass Education Division (PMED) statistics show that primary school enrolment increased by 47 per cent during last decade, from 12 million in 1990 to 17.6 million in 2000, and gross enrolment in 2000 was 96 per cent. PMED data also indicates that gross enrolment rates increased from 76 per cent in 1991 to 104 per cent in 1999–00 and completion rates increased from 40 per cent to 65 per cent over the same

¹³ According to the 2000 Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES), as quoted in WB and ADB (2002), about 90 per cent of children aged nine years were enrolled in school, but the figure was as low as 50 per cent for children aged six years. Because of late entry into school, about one out of four children aged 6-10 years were out of school. A sizeable fraction of the school-going aged children are enrolled in a grade behind their target age grade.

period (World Bank and ADB 2002, p. 45).¹⁴ Table 6 shows the primary school enrolment rate in Bangladesh in recent years, according to PMED estimates.

Table 6: Enrolment in Primary School (1995–2001)

Year	Total (in million)	Boys (per cent)	Girls (per cent)
1995	17.2	52.6	47.8
1996	17.5	52.8	47.6
1997	18	51.9	48.1
1998	18.3	52.1	47.8
1999	17.6	51.8	48.6
2000	17.6	51.3	48.7
2001	17.6	50.9	49.1

Source: Primary and Mass Education Division.

Table 6 indicates that in recent years the gender gap in primary school enrolment has been declining gradually in Bangladesh. According to PMED statistics in 1991, the girls/boys enrolment ratio was 45:55; it has increased to 51:49 in 2001. Survey-based estimates such as the latest Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) and Education Watch Household surveys further confirm that the gender gap in enrolment at the primary and secondary level has virtually disappeared (World Bank and ADB 2002). This indicates certainly that a remarkable progress has been made by Bangladesh, when other countries in the region, for example, India, Pakistan and Nepal, still have a significant gender gap in their school enrolment rates. Bangladesh has also managed to

¹⁴ The EIES data, however, report a moderate rise from 44 per cent in 1991-92 to 56 per cent in 2000 in the share of population aged 11-19 years that has completed grade 5.

enrol nearly equal proportions of rural and urban children during the 1990s (World Bank and ADB 2002). These achievements are particularly impressive despite the low levels of public spending on education, at around 2.2 per cent of GDP, compared to other countries in the region, for example, India 3.7 per cent, Sri Lanka 3.4 per cent (World Bank and ADB 2002, p. 44). Government spending on primary education has increased more than double in real terms between 1991 and 2000 (*ibid*)¹⁵. Primary education receives an overwhelming share, 45 per cent of the total education spending, and 27 per cent of total education spending goes to the poorest 40 per cent of the population (World Bank and ADB 2003).

In contrast to the impressive PMED statistics about school enrolments, the 2000 HIES indicates declining trends in the primary school enrolments as a percentage of the relevant age group during the last half of the 1990s. The 2000 HIES estimates show little or no improvement in school enrolments compared to 1995–96; one quarter of the age group 6–10 years, and one third of those 11–15 years old are currently not enrolled in school (Table 7). Estimates based on the other independent surveys also confirm that the Ministry records most likely overestimate the rise in enrolments in recent years (World Bank and ADB 2002).

¹⁵ Since independence in 1971, public education expenditure increased from 0.9 per cent of GDP to around 2.2 per cent (World Bank And ADB 2002).

Table 7: Percentage of Children Currently Enrolled in School by Age, Gender, and Region.

	Percentage of Children Aged 6–10 Years			Percentage of Children Aged 11–15 Years		
	National	Rural	Urban	National	Rural	Urban
Both Sexes						
2000HIES	75.1	75	76.2	65.3	64.9	66.7
1995–96 HES	80.1	80	80.5	63.7	63	67.3
Change	-5	-5	-4.3	1.6	1.9	-0.6
Male						
2000HIES	74	73.9	74.9	59.4	58.4	63.6
1995–96 HES	80.5	80.2	81.3	61.6	60.6	66.7
Change	-6.5	-6.3	-6.4	-2.2	-2.2	-3.1
Female						
2000HIES	76.4	76.1	77.5	71.5	72	69.7
1995–96 HES	79.7	79.7	79.8	66.3	65.8	67.9
Change	-3.3	-3.6	-2.3	5.3	6.2	-1.8

Source: 1995–96 HES Summary Report & 2000 HIES Preliminary Report, as quoted in World Bank and ADB (2002).

5. The Legal Context in Bangladesh

In terms of labour laws, the Constitution of Bangladesh (Article 23 and 34) and current legislative measures on child labour lay down that the State shall ensure the rights and the welfare of the child as embodied in the United Nations CRC. The constitution of Bangladesh prohibits all forms of forced labour and traffic in human beings. Accordingly it also prohibits the employment of children in factories, mines, or in any hazardous work. In addition, Bangladesh has also passed a compulsory Primary Education Act 1991 to eradicate illiteracy within the shortest possible period. Recently, the Government

of Bangladesh has taken an initiative to formulate a National Child Labour Policy; this task is now underway (CDP 2003).

The following section describes different child labour laws in Bangladesh.

5.1 National Child Labour Laws¹⁶

Although there are 25 special laws and ordinances in Bangladesh to protect and improve the status of children (US DOL 1994), there is a lack of harmony among laws that uniformly prohibit the employment of children or set a minimum age for employment. Therefore, under the existing laws the legal minimum age for admission into employment varies, according to sector, between 12 and 16 (US DOL 1994).

In 1993, the government of Bangladesh established a National Labour Commission to revise and harmonise labour laws. The then joint Secretary of the Labour Ministry of the Bangladesh government, as quoted in US DOL (1994), reported that the first draft of the recommendations of the National Labour Commission proposed to eliminate the inconsistencies regarding the minimum age for employment by defining a child as a person who has not completed his fourteenth year of age.

Current laws include The Employment of Children Act of 1938, The Factory Act of 1965, Shops and Establishments Act 1965, Children's Act 1974 and Children's Rules of 1976. The Employment of Children Act of 1938 prohibits children as young as 12 years from being employed in leather tanning workshops and in the production of carpets, cement, matches, and fireworks, among other items (US DOL 2002). According to this law (as amended in 1974) the minimum employment age for work in factories is 14 years; for work in mines and railways, the minimum age is 15 years (ibid). The Factory

¹⁶ The material in this section draws heavily on the various reports by US DOL.

Act of 1965 also prohibits the employment of children below the age of 14 in any factory. This law further adds that young workers (that is, children and adolescents) are only allowed to work a maximum of five hours day and only between the hours of 7 a.m. and 7 p.m.¹⁷ The penalty for violation of this Act (Article 44(1)) is a fine of 1000 taka¹⁸ (US DOL 1994).

The Children's Act of 1974 prohibits the employment of children less than 16 years of age in begging, and the exploitation of children in brothels US DOL (2003). The USA Embassy Dhaka (2000) as cited in US DOL (2002) reports that according to the Repression of Women and Children Prohibition Act of 2000, trafficking of women and children is an offence punishable by death or life imprisonment.

These laws, however, focus mainly on the employment of children in the factory, shop and establishment sectors ignoring the employment of children in the rural economy. Bangladesh's labour law does not make any reference to the problem of child labour in the agricultural sector, which absorbs almost 65 per cent of the total child labour force. Therefore, the agricultural sector, small-scale business informal sector and household employment are exempted from these laws. Thus, more than 80 per cent of the economic activity of children falls outside the protection of the labour code.

¹⁷ Country Reports on Human Rights Practices in 1993, (USA Department of State, February 1994) as cited in US DOL (1994).

¹⁸ 1 US Dollar = 60 Taka.

6. Programmes and Efforts to Address Child Labour and Promote Schooling

6.1 Child Labour Initiatives¹⁹

Bangladesh became a member of the International Labour Organisation's International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC) in 1994. Since then, 75 action programmes have been implemented, primarily targeting the worst forms of child labour through awareness raising, non-formal education, income-generating alternatives for families, and capacity building of partner organisations (ILO–IPEC 2000).

In July 1995, the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers' Association (BGMEA), the ILO, and UNICEF signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) aimed at eliminating child labour in the garment industry.²⁰ The MOU partners established a workplace monitoring system and social protection programme, including the provision of educational opportunities for children removed from work. As a result of this programme, the number of child workers in BGMEA factories has been significantly reduced from 43 per cent in 1995 to 3 per cent as of January 2001 (ILO–IPEC, 2001).

A second MOU was signed between the same parties on June 16, 2000, which, in addition to reaffirming the agreements of the first MOU, commits the parties to developing a long-term and sustainable response to monitoring child labour in the garment industry.²¹ In 2000, with funding from the USA Department of Labour, IPEC

¹⁹ This section relies heavily on US DOL Reports.

²⁰ For details about the first MOU see Wiebecke and Rahman (1996).

²¹ See, Geneva (2000).

initiated a project targeting child labour in five hazardous industries: bidis,²² construction, leather tanneries, production of matches, and child domestic service. Bangladesh is also one of three countries participating in the ILO–IPEC South Asia Sub-Regional Programme to combat trafficking in children for exploitative employment (US DOL 2002).

6.2. Educational Alternatives

In 1991, the Government of Bangladesh made primary education compulsory for all children between aged of the 6 and 10 years. In 1993, the Primary and Mass Education Division was established to make primary education compulsory for all, and in 1993, compulsory primary education programme was implemented all over the country. Therefore, a basic primary education is free in Bangladesh. The Government provides stipends to all rural girls for Grades 6–12.

In order to increase primary school enrolment, the government, in collaboration with the World Food Programme, implemented a Food-for-Education Programme since 1993. In the 2001–02 financial year, more than 2.1 million children from 18,262 schools benefited from this programme, which provides parents with wheat or rice in exchange for sending their children to school (US DOL 2002). In addition, a stipend programme began in April 2000 and was implemented in areas that were excluded from Food-for-Education Programme. Under this stipend programme, the government had been providing 25 taka (about 45 cents) a month to the mothers of poor children to send them

²² ‘Bidis’ refers to small, hand-rolled cigarettes.

to school (ibid). In the 2001–02 financial years more than 3.2 million children received stipends from this programme (ibid).

A Female Secondary School Assistance Project (FSSAP) was jointly initiated by the World Bank and the GOB in 1993, aiming at reducing gender disparity in secondary education (World Bank 2003).²³ The aim of FSSAP was to provide stipends and tuition to girl students from Grade 6 to Grade 10, that is, students of 11 to 15 years old.²⁴ Recently a special programme of providing cash assistance to primary school children has been launched instead of FFE Programme. Under this programme, poor students from the primary schools in the rural areas will be given monthly assistance at the rate of Tk. 100 for one child and Tk. 125 for more than one.²⁵ In order to enhance educational opportunities, particularly for the girls, the GOB has recently undertaken a programme to expand the existing female stipend programme from secondary level to the higher secondary level and to offer free tuition to girl students up to higher the secondary level and scholarships to meritorious girls.

According to PMED (1999), Bangladesh is a signatory to the World Declaration on Education for All (EFA), and as a follow-up, has a National Action Plan for EFA. The government also works with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) on the Basic

²³ The gender disparity in school attainment was high in Bangladesh. Bangladesh's literacy rate was 22 per cent for females in 1989, compared to 47 per cent for males (World Bank 2003). In 1990, the enrolment of girls in secondary schools was half of that of boys, with a female dropout rate of 65.9 per cent.

²⁴ The Stipend and Tuition Programme of FSSAP increased the enrolment of girls at secondary level from 442,000 in 1994 to over one million by 2001 (World Bank 2003). As a result, the gender gap was virtually disappeared. The ratio of the number of girls to that of boys enrolling for secondary education reversed, for example, the ratio changed from approximately 45:55 in 1994 to 55:45 in 2001 (ibid).

²⁵ TK = Taka, US\$1 = BD Taka 61 as of 11 March 2005.

Education for Hard to Reach Urban Children's Project, which provides two-years' basic literacy education to working children living in urban slums.²⁶ The government of Bangladesh has developed a plan to achieve literacy by the year 2006. Targeting this goal, a National Education Policy was adopted in 2000.

7. Conclusion and Policy Recommendation

This study examined at the trends, patterns and policy options of child labour in Bangladesh particularly during the 1990s. The rural-urban, agricultural-non-agricultural child labour and gender differentials in child labour are examined. This study revealed that child labour is more pronounced in rural areas than in urban areas. However, the urban child labour (10–14 years) participation rate has been increasing more rapidly than the rural child labour participation rate since 1989. Accordingly, a declining trend in the child labour participation rate in the agricultural sector and an increasing trend in the non-agricultural sector is observed since 1990. The child labour participation rate, however, is still high in the agricultural sector.

The labour force participation of girls was substantially lower than that of boys. A sharp decline in the gender gap in the child labour participation is, however, observed from 1989. The average gap between boys' and girls' participation rate came down to 9.7 percentage points during 1989–2000 from the 32 percentage points during 1974–85. The 1999–2000 LFS also revealed that the gender gap was declining both in the agricultural and non-agricultural sectors.

²⁶ United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). "Basic Education for Hard to Reach Urban Children: A Project of the Government of Bangladesh and UNICEF" UNICEF, Dhaka.

The findings of this study suggest that although Bangladesh has made remarkable progress in its GDP growth rate over the last decade, the child labour participation rate is still high in Bangladesh. In particular, during the last half of the decade (1995–2000), the GDP growth rate was high while the first child labour survey (CLS) 1995–96 reported that 6.58 million out of the 34.45 million children in the age group of 5–14 years, that is, 19 per cent of the total child population (5–14 years) were found to be economically active. The latest labour force survey 1999–2000 also documented that the labour force participation rate of children aged 10–14 was about 39 per cent.

During the last half of the decade, the primary school enrolment rate was impressive; the gender gap and regional gap in school enrolment have also declined substantially. Despite all of these convincing achievements, Bangladesh remains stuck in a “vicious cycle” with continuing high levels of child labour, while the incidence of child labour is declining in other countries in the region (for example, India and Pakistan) and in the world.

The concern with the use of child labour has been raised since the early 1990s in Bangladesh. Since then a considerable amount of effort has been made to address the issue of child labour. The international concern about child labour has been on the use of child labour in the commercial sector in Bangladesh; however, most of the employed children are in the agricultural sector, non-agricultural sector and household sector, and are mainly employed by their parents. All of the child labour legislations discussed in this study focuses on children employed in wage work in Bangladesh. These policies do not guarantee changing the local labour market in a way that will increase family income and will thus reduce child labour. Focusing on the demand side of child labour, existing

national and international policies highlight the prohibition of the employment of children. There is evidence that punitive measures either increase child labour or push the children into more hazardous jobs that are beyond the reach of labour laws (in the Bangladesh case, children have left garment factories for prostitution or work in stone quarries). Basu (2003) revealed that if firms are fined for the violation of labour laws this might actually increase child labour. This is because fines increase the cost of employing children, so that firms will only employ children if their wages are sufficiently low. Then, more children will be required to work to supplement the family income. But these policies are of limited relevance to the majority of rural households. In fact, the inadequacy of these policy measures has been reflected in the continuing high incidence of child labour in Bangladesh. Therefore, there is a dire need for appropriate policies to address the issue.

Policies targeted at improving school infrastructure, the quality of education, and reducing the cost of education provide the most effective way of reducing child labour. These policies could work better if combined with conditional cash/kind transfers to the households that send their children to school.²⁷

Educational reform is a more effective way to reduce child labour. Flexibility in school schedules would help the children who combine school and work to remain in school. Classes can be offered after work in order to allow the child to continue to earn an income while pursuing education. Also, school can be offered in two/three shifts throughout the day. This type of flexible school schedule allows children to combine work and school in a manner that is consistent with the requirement of their employment needs. However, lack of resources could be a great constraint for low-income countries.

²⁷ Initiatives such as Food-for-Education (FFE) in Bangladesh and Progreso in Mexico can work better.

Therefore, there is a dire need of international aid to the poor countries to eradicate child labour by ensuring school attendance for all children.

Economic development will undoubtedly resolve the problem of child labour, but the likelihood of anything else other than economic development being effective as a long-term solution to the widespread incidence of child labour is an open debate among international bodies, academics and policy-makers. A combination of policies would be appropriate for reducing child labour. These include employment generation schemes that lead to economic prosperity for the household, compulsory schooling for children, school enrolment subsidy, and adult literacy campaigns that increase community or social awareness, especially of the adult female.

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