

**Child Labor in Bangladesh Villages: Incidence,
Correlates and Implications**

Abdullahel Hadi

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Research and Evaluation Division, BRAC
Dhaka, Bangladesh

Abstract

The paper aims to improve our understanding about the prevalence and determinants of child labor in rural Bangladesh. Data for this study were obtained from 1995 sample survey of 3,809 eligible children aged 5 to 14 years in 150 villages. Findings reveal that about 42.5% of the children were in the labor force. Nearly half of the employed children were engaged in livestock raising, 22.2% in household activities, 2.7% in agricultural products. Children in labor were both abused and exploited as about 31.4% of working children reported that they were verbally assaulted, 4.2% beaten, 8.4% mentally tortured and 8.4% forced to work for long hours. School enrollment appears to be negatively associated with child labor. The probability of child to be a labor increases if his/her father is illiterate, land poor, and himself is a labor. The multivariate analysis reveals that children who have never been to or dropped out from school are 2.84 times more likely to enter into the labor force ($p < .001$) when age of children is controlled. When other factors such as parental years of schooling, household ownership of land, occupation of father are systematically added to the regression equation, the negative influence of school enrollment on child labor remains statistically significant ($p < .001$). The paper concludes that expanding public school network in the rural areas and making them attractive to children will bring a significant reduction of child labor.

Introduction

The rural economy of Bangladesh has remained predominantly agrarian one, with most people engaged in farming. The constraints to economic growth are severe and the opportunities for diversifying and expanding employment in the villages are limited. Income distribution among population has remained skewed and has not changed much since the 1960s. More than half of the labor force was employed in agriculture including livestock, fishery and forestry. The employed labor-force includes a large number of children. According to the 1983/84 Labor Force Survey, nearly 3.7 million or slightly over 13 percent of the total labor force were children (UNICEF, 1987). The proportion of child labor in 10-14 age group was even higher- nearly 25 percent. The proportion of child participation in labor force has consistently been increasing since independence and likely to increase even further as a result of pervasive poverty in the rural areas (UNICEF, 1987).

The situation of child labor, being a sensitive issue, and an indicator of human development, deserves to be monitored on a regular basis. The general impression about child labor situation in Bangladesh is that children are working with long workdays, low wages, and in hazardous and health threatening conditions. Elimination of child labor from the society is desirable, but poverty and other socio-economic conditions pose a serious obstacle in achieving the goal at this time. Although child labor has been prevailing in Bangladesh from the historic period, the problem has been receiving the attention of social scientists since the celebration of the International Year of the Child in 1979. The objective of this study is to improve our understanding the incidence and determinants of child labor in rural Bangladesh.

Methodology

Data used in this report came from a survey, launched in March 1995 in 150 villages located in the two districts of Bangladesh where BRAC has been operating a development monitoring system, known as Watch since mid 1980s. The sampling frame, consisted of all children of age between 5 and 14 years, has been the demographic registration system of Watch. A systematic random sampling technique was followed where one in every fifth household was selected. All eligible children in the selected Households were interviewed for this study. Nearly 80 percent of all sampled children were successfully interviewed.

Findings and Discussion

The economic condition among the majority of the households in the study area has been largely of the subsistence type based primarily on agricultural activities. The children in the labor force were employed in such types of activities as livestock raising, paddy husking, small trading, cooking, cleaning, washing, etc. Such a labor intensive mode of employment continued for generations in villages.

Table 1. Percent of children in the labor force by amount of hours worked and sex

Hours Worked	Sex		Total
	Boy	Girl	
Any Hour	45.9	38.7	42.5
Two +	28.2	28.0	28.1
Three +	17.6	16.9	17.3
Four +	10.8	10.0	10.4
Five +	6.0	5.4	5.7
Six +	4.0	2.6	3.3
Seven +	3.1	1.9	2.5
Eight +	1.7	0.7	1.2
Mean	3.6	3.7	3.66

**Significant at $p < .01$

According to the definition of child labor adopted by the BBS (1992) (ie, persons in the labor force who are 14 years old or less), about 42.5 percent of the children were in the labor force in the study area during the survey. Table 1 shows the change of the proportion of children in the labor force by amount of hours worked and sex. Relatively few children worked for longer hours. As have seen, while 28.1 percent of children spent two hours or more a day, the proportion of children reduced to only 1.2 percent children who were fully involved in the labor force. More male than female children was generally in the workforce in the study areas although the sex difference is statistically significant among children who worked for longer hours. On average, they worked for about 3.66 hours and their working hours increased as they grow older.

Although the proportion of children in the labor force was very high (42.5%), relatively a smaller proportion of young children was in work force. Figure 1 indicates that the entry to work force had a positive and linear association with age of children. No statistically significant sex variation on age-child labor relationship is discernible.

Figure 2 shows, as found in other studies (Kanbargi and Kulkarni, 1985) an inverse association between child labor and schooling of children ($p < 0.5$). The relationship was more pronounced among boys than girls. The reasons of such an association could be many. Time use in workplace may be more demanding than attending school or parents may not be capable of keeping their children in school because of extra costs of education incurred (Srikantan, 1985).

Table 2. Percent of children in the labor by type of work and sex

Type of Work	Sex		Total
	Boy	Girl	
Agricultural production	21.2	1.7	12.7
Agri processing	4.4	0.8	2.8
Livestock raising	61.8	28.8	47.4
Poultry raising	1.0	15.1	7.1
Servant-Cooking	1.2	47.5	22.2
Shop keeper	2.2	0.2	1.3
Small trading	0.8	0.2	0.5
Others	7.5	3.6	5.8

Children were often drafted to help the household activities of poor families. Boys were usually engaged in agriculture and take care of animals while girls helped in cooking and taking care of children. Of the children in the labor force, nearly half of them were engaged primarily in the livestock raising (47.4%) followed by serving as maid or servant (22.2%) (Table 2). While the livestock raising was higher (61.8%) among boys than girls, preparing food, as on the other hand, appeared almost exclusively as female job. Nearly 12.7 percent were involved in agricultural production and a smaller proportion in processing agricultural products (2.8%). It appears that sex variation in agricultural activities was very wide and a very small proportion of girls was involved in the agricultural field. Children were also involved in small trading in village shops, although their proportion was small and insignificant. Such involvement is expected to continue so long as the household income becomes adequate to maintain a reasonable standard of living.

Table 3. Percent of children in the labor force by work environment and sex

Work Environment	Sex		Total
	Boy	Girl	
Partial payment	3.3	1.0	2.3
Physical assault	5.0	3.2	4.2
Verbal assault	34.9	26.9	31.4
Over work	4.3	2.0	3.3
Mental torture	7.9	9.1	8.4
Untimely work	2.0	0.7	1.7
Others	7.2	3.7	5.7

Not all children were fortunate to work in pleasant atmosphere particularly who worked for others although it is widely delivered that child labor in rural areas is not exploitative.

accept it as a means of acquiring the necessary skills that develops the confidence, self respect and personality of young workers and prepare them to take over the responsibility from elders (Kanbargi, 1991). In Table 3, working children were distributed by the nature of working condition. Verbal assault (31.4%) and girls (26.9%). About 4.2 percent of working children reported that they were physically assaulted and 8.4 percent complained to be mentally tortured. Over work (8.4%) and partial payment of salary (2.3%) were also reported. Sex variation by working condition suggests that boys were generally more abused than girls in the study areas. These findings have important policy implications because the potential for exploitation can have far reaching consequences on the overall growth and development of children.

Table 4. Percent of children in the labor force by work and sex

Place of work	Sex		Total
	Boy	Girl	
Own home	69.9	94.4	80.5
Own agri farm	9.4	0.9	5.7
Other house	3.0	1.5	2.3
Other's agri land	2.9	0.4	1.8
Factory	1.0	0.5	0.8
Shop	1.4	0.2	0.9
Grazing field	10.4	1.8	6.7
Others	2.0	0.3	1.3

Most of the children worked at home (80.5%) and less than 5 percent of girls were involved in activities outside own home (Table 4). The workplace for boys, on the other hand, was distributed widely in such centers as grazing field (10.4%), agricultural land (12.4%), and others' house as servant (3%), and rural industries (1%).

Table 5. Percent of children (10-14 years) in the labor force by age and sex

Age	Sex		Total
	Boy	Girl	
All	39.2	40.4	39.7
Age of Child			
10	26.1	28.4	27.1
11	30.4	37.7	33.8
12	40.3	40.3	40.3
13	46.6	43.0	44.9
14	55.6	54.4	55.0

As only a smaller proportion of young children was in the labor force, the children aged 10-14 years were considered in analyzing the demographic and socio-economic differentials of child labor in rural Bangladesh (BBS, 1992). Table 6 identifies the correlates and locates the segments of the households where child labor proliferated. Nearly 40 percent of children aged 10-14 were in the work force. No significant sex variation in labor force participation was reported. As seen earlier, participation rose with the increase of age of children ($p < .01$). Again, sex variation in age-labor force relationship was minor.

Table 6. Percent of children (10-14 years) in the labor force by socioeconomic characteristics and sex

Socioeconomic Characteristics	Sex		Total
	Boy	Girl	
Education of Mother			
Illiterate	43.9	42.9	43.5
I - V	25.1	35.8	30.1
VJ +	19.0	23.6	21.2
Amount of Land			
Landless	42.8	44.5	43.6
1 - 199 d	40.4	40.1	40.3
200 + d	26.5	31.2	28.4
Occupation of Father			
Labor	45.8	44.4	45.2
Agriculture	36.6	40.5	38.4
Business	38.9	37.7	38.1
Service	26.7	25.3	26.1
Parents			
Both alive	38.9	39.9	39.3
Not both alive	42.7	47.7	45.0

Indicators of selected socioeconomic status such as education of mother and amount of land owned by the household appear to have important role whether the children should enter in the labor force. Table 6 shows that both the mothers' years of schooling and amount of land, as Cain (1977) also found, had significant negative association with child labor ($p < .01$). The assumption that the poorer and illiterate households, having little or no agricultural land, were forced to send their children to work for wages were also found elsewhere (Vemuri and Sastry, 1991). The pattern of relationship holds for both boys and girls although boys of higher socio-economic strata (such as highly educated or large land owning households) were significantly less likely to be in the labor force than the girls of the same socioeconomic categories. The Table 6 also suggests that the chance of a child to be a labor was higher (45.2%) if his or her father was also a labor than a child whose father was either a farmer or businessman (nearly

38%) or a service holder (26.1%). No sex variation appeared to play any role on the relationship between fathers' occupation and child labor. The children in Bangladesh have not only been suffering from poverty, health hazards, and poor access to education, but the children of single-parent households or orphans found themselves in more desperate situation to survive. The social norms call for the father's family to support orphans or when a child's mother dies, the father is responsible for supporting the children. But the pressure of poverty often leads the social norm to break down. Data indicates that the death of parents, particularly among poorer households, forced young children to be in the labor market. The impact of the demise of parents was more pronounced among girls than boys.

Conclusions and Implications

The child labor situation in Bangladesh, as discussed above, is another manifestation of the pervasive impact of poverty on rural life in Bangladesh. Research findings on the determinants of child labor would be of great help in taking appropriate policy measures to eliminate child labor. The analysis shows that the age and parental years of schooling largely explain the prevalence of child labor in rural areas. Although a significant proportion of boys is engaged in livestock raising and other agricultural production, it is still unknown whether making these activities redundant such as arranging community tending of animals or mechanization of agricultural work would make a significant reduction in child labor as found by Levy (1985).

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Table 4 (continued)

Item No.	Difficulty	Disc. Index	Biser-Corr.	Selected
55.	46	.72	.69	
56.	49	.47	.49	
57.	55	.74	.67	
58.	47	.78	.75	
59.	64	.72	.77	Yes
60.	51	.85	.84	Yes
61.	55	.71	.73	
62.	36	.39	.42	
63.	55	.76	.73	Yes
64.	43	.29	.31	
65.	53	.78	.71	
66.	65	.70	.71	
67.	47	.82	.76	
68.	33	.42	.30	
69.	55	.71	.67	Yes
70.	51	.54	.50	Yes
71.	55	.58	.61	
72.	56	.65	.58	Yes
73.	58	.82	.79	
74.	44	.72	.70	Yes
75.	50	.65	.62	
76.	55	.81	.80	Yes
77.	44	.45	.51	Yes
78.	51	.74	.73	
79.	41	.22	.26	
80.	38	.55	.56	Yes
81.	40	.73	.73	Yes

Table 4 (continued)

Item No.	Difficulty	Disc. Index	Bisc. Corr.	Selected
82.	41	.63	.62	
83.	41	.38	.42	
84.	57	.82	.68	
85.	47	.60	.56	Yes
86.	43	.53	.59	Yes
87.	41	.54	.53	Yes
88.	22	.04	-.05	
89.	38	.35	.40	
90.	41	.40	.46	Yes
91.	21	-.17	-.31	
92.	24	.37	.56	
93.	33	.49	.55	Yes

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