

Dhaka: Child labourers working over 60 hours a week in the slums of Bangladesh - new report

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Child labourers in the slums of Dhaka are working on average 64 hours a week - many of them employed by the garments sector, according to a new report from the Overseas Development Institute.

In one of the largest surveys on child work and education conducted in Bangladesh, researchers found that 15% of 6-14-year-old children in Dhaka's slums were out of school and engaged in full time work. Average working hours were well beyond the 42-hour limit set by national legislation.

The report, 'Child labour and education - a survey of slum settlements in Dhaka', found that the garments sector accounted for two thirds of female working children within Dhaka's slums, raising serious concerns over garment exports and child labour.

In an interview, the manager of a garment factory revealed that while he was aware children aged 11-14 should not be working, he did not regard their employment as illegal. He also revealed employees regularly did not hold identification cards verifying their age.

Children cited the economic pressures facing their family as the main reason for entering the world of work. The report found that by the age of 14, almost half of the children living in the slums of Dhaka were working.

In contrast to earlier child labour surveys, the ODI research found that the vast majority of child labourers were out of school, with another 16 per cent of children neither working nor attending school.

Co-author Kevin Watkins said: 'Child labour represents a symptom of poverty and a cause of educational deprivation. It transmits poverty across generations, traps children in a cycle of poverty, and undermines national economic growth. What our survey found in Dhaka is a microcosm of a global problem that should be at the centre of the international agenda.'

'Children who leave education to go into low-paid work are unlikely to gather the skills and abilities needed to break the cycle of poverty across generations.'

Co-author Maria Quattri, Research Fellow at ODI, said: 'The children we spoke to wanted to be at school.'

'But poverty was driving parents to find jobs for their children, even though they could see that it would jeopardise their long-term future.'

Researchers also carried out a series of tests to measure basic literacy, numeracy and learning

skills. The findings point to very significant disadvantages associated with early entry into the world of work has on educational achievement.

Among the main findings of the report are:

- Child labour levels rise from around 8 per cent at the age of 10 to 45 per cent at the age of 14
- 36.1 per cent of boys and 34.6 per cent of girls reported experiencing extreme fatigue
- More than half of the children surveyed who started working between the ages of six and ten were unable to correctly identify more than three Bengali letters and almost two thirds were unable to read a single word correctly

The report sets out a list of recommendations to address child labour including:

- Raising the age of free and compulsory education from 10 to 14
- Increasing overall financing for education to 4-5% of GDP, with a greater emphasis on provision in slums
- Strengthening the regulatory environment for child labour and reducing the current threshold for 'hazardous work' from its current level of 42 hours
- Imposing more punitive fines on employers found to be employing under-age workers
- Reviewing inspection arrangements for the garment sector to ensure that factories comply with national laws

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Notes to editors

- The report's findings are based on the results of a survey of 2,700 slum households from a listing of 4,500 in Dhaka. The survey was developed and implemented by the BRAC Institute of Education Development, BRAC University and the ODI
- The survey is representative for a population of more than half a million people across eight Thanas in the Dhaka City Corporation
- Research published in 2011 by Understanding Children's Work found a large overlap between education and child labour, with just under 7% of 7-14 year olds engaged in both activities and 4.8% just in employment
- National legislation in Bangladesh sets 42 hours as the threshold for 'hazardous work'
- The Bangladeshi Labour Act of 2006 defines 14 as the minimum age of entry to employment, however from the age of 12 children are permitted to carry out 'light work' for up to 42 hours provided it does not interfere with their education

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