



Impact of COVID-19 on child labour in South Asia

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8 June 2020

Question

What were the effects of previous epidemics/pandemics (or other crises, e.g. financial) on child labour in South Asia (or other regions)?

What is the emerging evidence/predictions on the effects of the current COVID-19 crisis on drivers, incidence and types of child labour in South Asia? Focus on the following six countries: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Nepal and Pakistan. Include where available disaggregated data by age, gender, rural/urban location, and region, as well as information about children with disabilities/caring for people with disabilities and migrant children.

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1. Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has not (to date) hit South Asia as badly in terms of infections and deaths as some other parts of the world (notably Europe). However, it is having a profound negative economic impact on the region. Experience of previous epidemics/financial crises suggests that the current crisis will lead to a rise in child labour across the developing world, including in South Asia. Loss of informal sector jobs, rising poverty and lack of social protection, coupled with widespread school closures, could force families to turn to child labour to survive. Children already working could face harsher conditions, with lower pay and longer hours. Agriculture and the garment industry are identified as two sectors that could see a rise in child labour, but otherwise there is a lack of disaggregated data.

This review drew on a mixture of academic papers, grey literature and media reports and blogs. Evidence on the impact of previous pandemics/crises on child labour in South Asia was limited, and hence the report looks at the Ebola epidemic in Africa and the global HIV/AIDS epidemic and global financial crisis of 2007/8. The literature details the pathways through which the current crisis could lead to increased child labour. However, precise data on impact on child labour is very limited, and does not disaggregate much by country, and even less by sector, gender or rural/urban location.

Key findings are as follows:

South Asia already has among the highest prevalence of child labour in the world, with an estimated 16.7 million (5–17 year-old) children engaged in child labour in South Asia (ILO, 2014). The negative impacts of child labour are seen in relation to children's health, their access to education, and their long-term prospects for getting out of poverty and having a decent standard of living.

While the full scale of the COVID-19 crisis in South Asia is still emerging, it is clear that the pandemic is having a significant negative impact on the region's economies.

- **Economic growth in the region** is expected to be 1.8%-2.8% in 2020, down from a predicted 6.3%, and in a worst case scenario, the entire region could face negative growth (World Bank, cited in Shaikh, 2020);
- **The very high proportion of workers in the informal economy** means South Asian countries are especially vulnerable to the economic and labour market shocks of the pandemic. **Predicted job losses** are: India 30-100 million jobs; Bangladesh 2.5-3 million jobs; Pakistan 4-18 million jobs (World Bank cited in Shaikh, 2020);
- Further negative economic effects of the COVID-19 crisis stem from **reduced remittances from migrant workers**. South Asia is heavily dependent on remittances.

The experience of previous epidemics/financial crises suggests that the Coronavirus pandemic will lead to a rise in child labour:

- **The Ebola epidemic in West Africa from 2014-2016** hit Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea especially hard. As well as the high death toll, the Ebola epidemic led to the reversal of development gains in the region, increased poverty and food insecurity, and halted livelihood activities. Large numbers of children were left vulnerable, and child labour (as well as child marriage) in affected areas increased. Children also reported doing more household chores, such as collecting firewood and fetching water.

- **The global HIV/AIDS epidemic in the 1980s and 1990s** led to reduced economic growth in heavily affected countries (notably in Africa), in turn impacting children and youth. Many experienced the loss of one or both parents and, in the absence of social protection, found themselves head of households and providers for siblings or a sick parent. Youth in HIV/AIDS affected households were widely reported to be dropping out of school and starting work when too young, too unskilled or too inexperienced.
- **The global financial crisis of 2007/8 had massive negative knock-on effects on developing countries' economies.** Studies in diverse countries found a **rise in child labour**, notably in agriculture and notably among girls (either working or taking on domestic responsibilities so their mothers could work).

The literature highlights the (potential) **pathways in which the current COVID-19 pandemic could lead to increased enslavement and child labour in the developing world, including in South Asia:**

- Loss of livelihoods and economic opportunities because of the crisis has **increased the supply of workers vulnerable to exploitation;**
- Employers have stronger incentives and perhaps **greater latitude for exploitation.** Those already in modern slavery could face harsher conditions;
- **Greater discrimination** against minorities and migrants could facilitate exploitation;
- **Anti-slavery organisations and activities have been disrupted;**
- **School closures and heightened financial pressures on families could fuel child labour as well as child marriage.** The longer the crisis goes on, the less chance of children returning to school – depriving them of opportunities for a better future.

Some literature was found on the likely impact of the crisis on child labour in individual countries in South Asia.

India:

- A large proportion of the workforce is in the **informal sector, where job losses are already huge.** This and the lack of adequate social protection could fuel child labour;
- In rural households, restrictions on movement will **reduce availability of agricultural labourers,** forcing farmers to use their children;
- Financial pressure on businesses and employers mean **children could be exploited as a source of cheap labour,** e.g. in the garment sector, in flour mills. Children already working could have to work longer hours and/or for lower wages;
- Recent **erosion of labour rights** in India has fuelled the increased use of unorganised labour, facilitating the use of child labour in the current crisis;
- **Mortality among parents** due to COVID-19 could force children to become breadwinners for their households. Orphaned children are also particularly vulnerable to trafficking;
- The **nationwide school closure** will disproportionately hamper the education of underprivileged children in government schools, with many ending up permanently out of school and in the workforce;
- India has tens of thousands of **street children,** whose vulnerability (e.g. to trafficking) will be greatly increased by loss of 'traditional' income opportunities (e.g. begging) coupled with loss of support from welfare organisations/NGOs.

Bangladesh:

- Bangladesh's **two major export sectors – garments and leather – have both been badly hit** by the crisis, contributing to massive job losses and drop in income, especially for those in informal work;
- Coupled with school closures, this will **fuel child labour** as well as **worsening conditions (lower pay, longer hours) for children in the informal sector**;
- **Children in street situations**, traditionally working as rubbish collectors, street vendors and engaged in begging, can no longer do so. Such vulnerable children could be pushed further into poverty and/or end up in more exploitative situations.

2. Context: child labour and COVID-19 in South Asia

Child labour in South Asia

Child labour remains a massive problem globally, and particularly in the South Asia region. The ILO report, *Global Estimates of Child Labour: Results and trends 2012–2016* (ILO, 2017), gives details of the scale and nature of the problem.¹ A total of 152 million children – 64 million girls and 88 million boys – are in child labour globally, accounting for almost one in 10 of all children worldwide. Nearly half of all those in child labour – 73 million children in absolute terms – are in hazardous work that directly endangers their health and safety.

With regard to regional variation, the second highest prevalence of child labour is found in the Asia-Pacific region (7.4%).² An earlier ILO study of child labour in South Asia (ILO, 2014), which drew on national survey data from seven countries, found that there were 16.7 million (5–17 year-old) children in child labour in South Asia, according to conservative estimates, and of these, 10.3 million were in the 5–14 years age range. It also found substantial variation in child labour estimates across the South Asian countries: in absolute terms, child labour for the 5–17 years age range was highest in India (5.8 million), followed by Bangladesh (5.0 million), Pakistan (3.4 million) (though these figures for Pakistan do not include children under 10 years of age), and Nepal (2 million). In relative terms, children in Nepal faced the highest risk of being in child labour in South Asia, with over one-quarter (26%) of all 5–17-year-olds engaged in child labour (largely in agriculture).

With regard to trends, global child labour has fallen consistently since 2000, showing that real advances are being made in tackling the problem, but progress slowed in the four-year period from 2012 to 2016 (ILO, 2017). Expressed in relative terms, the share of children in child labour fell by only one percentage point during 2012 to 2016, compared to three percentage points in the previous four-year period. The decline in hazardous work slowed in a similar fashion.

The negative impacts of child labour are seen in relation to children's health, their access to education, and their long-term prospects for getting out of poverty and having a decent standard of living. Child labour can expose children to hazards and abuse (verbal, physical and/or sexual) and be detrimental to physical and mental health. Child labour is frequently associated with educational marginalisation. For the 5–14 years age group, 32% of all those in child labour (36 million children) are out of school (ILO, 2017). Even the 68% able to attend school see their

¹ Unless otherwise stated, all figures in this section are from that report.

² Africa has the highest prevalence at 19.6%; it is also highest in absolute terms.

education suffer because of their involvement in child labour, performing worse than their non-working peers. Participation in child labour significantly hampers children's long-term prospects: as adults they are more likely to be unemployed/experience job insecurity and to work in hazardous conditions and/or have a low income. This makes them more likely to send their own children out to work, thereby continuing the child labour–poverty cycle into the next generation.

COVID-19 in South Asia

South Asia is amongst the most populous and least developed regions in the world, and is therefore considered highly vulnerable to any large outbreak of an infectious disease. However, the scale of the COVID-19 pandemic in South Asian countries has (to date) been far lower than some other parts of the world, notably Europe. The first country in South Asia to report a confirmed case was Nepal, which documented its first case on 24 January 2020, in a man who had returned from China on 5 January. As of 6 June 2020 figures for the six South Asian countries that are the focus of this review were as follows³:

- Afghanistan – 19,551 cases and 320 deaths
- Bangladesh – 63,026 cases and 846 deaths
- India – 239,644 cases and 6,672 deaths
- Myanmar – 236 cases and 6 deaths
- Nepal – 3,235 cases and 13 deaths
- Pakistan – 93,983 cases and 1,935 deaths

These figures compare to 284,868 cases and 40,465 deaths in the United Kingdom.⁴ It is important to note, however, that testing and other health system constraints mean actual numbers could be higher, and that the situation is ongoing, and numbers could rise sharply.

In response to the pandemic, countries in the region have had differing responses. Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Myanmar have implemented lockdowns while India and Nepal declared a countrywide lockdown. Countries have also instituted various levels of restrictions on international travel, with some countries completely sealing off their land borders and grounding most international flights.

Economic impact of COVID-19

Global impact

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) (2020: 2) sums up the overall economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic:

The crisis has already transformed into an economic and labour market shock, impacting not only supply (production of goods and services) but also demand (consumption and investment). Disruptions to production, initially in Asia, have now spread to supply chains across the world. All businesses, regardless of size, are facing serious challenges,

³ https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/?utm_campaign=homeAdUOA?Si%23countries [accessed 06/06/2020]

⁴ https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/?utm_campaign=homeAdUOA?Si%23countries [accessed 06/06/2020]

especially those in the aviation, tourism and hospitality industries, with a real threat of significant declines in revenue, insolvencies and job losses in specific sectors. Sustaining business operations will be particularly difficult for Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs). Following travel bans, border closures and quarantine measures, many workers cannot move to their places of work or carry out their jobs, which has knock-on effects on incomes, particularly for informal and casually employed workers.

Based on different scenarios (low, mid and high) for the impact of the pandemic, it predicts a rise in global unemployment of between 5.3 million (low scenario) to 13 million (mid) and 24.7 million (high) (ILO, 2020: 3). It also warns that working poverty⁵ will rise significantly, with estimates ranging from an additional 8.8 million people around the world in working poverty (low scenario) to 20.1 million (mid) and 35.0 million (high) (ILO, 2020: 5). However, it adds that these are estimates and that if low and middle income countries are affected to the same extent as developed countries, then the impact on working poverty will be much greater.

Cornia et al (2020: 8) echo this, noting that in developing countries, the knock-on impacts of lockdown in the developed countries will be much more serious—through declines in trade, shortages or increased prices of food and medical equipment and supplies. If exports are reduced or remittances and international aid are cut or diverted this will add to the financial pressures on governments and people.

Impact in South Asia

The World Bank has estimated the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on economic growth in the region: it predicts growth of between 1.8% and 2.8% in 2020, down from a predicted 6.3% just six months earlier, and in a worst-case scenario the entire region could face negative growth (cited in Shaikh, 2020). With regard to individual countries (World Bank, cited in Shaikh, 2020):

- Projections for India's economic growth have dropped from 6.1% to between 1.5% and 2.8% in the next fiscal year, with around 30-100 million Indians losing their jobs;
- GDP growth in Bangladesh is forecast to be 2-3% with around 2.5-3 million layoffs in the apparel sector alone;
- Pakistan is expected to see negative GDP growth by the end of the current fiscal year, with a possible loss of 4-18 million jobs.

Shaikh (2020) points out that in previous economic slowdowns in the region, the informal economy 'chugged along without encountering any major disruption' but claims this will be very difficult in the face of the current pandemic. She asserts that the high proportion of informal workers in South Asia makes those countries especially vulnerable to the economic and labour market shocks of the pandemic. The ILO (2018: 37) estimates that informal employment in South Asia accounts for 87.8% of total employment, falling slightly when agriculture is excluded to 77.6%. Figures for some individual countries are as follows (ILO, 2018: 88; Shaikh, 2020):

- India - almost 90% of the 500 million workers are in the informal sector, contributing to at least half of the national GDP;

⁵ Working poverty refers to a situation where families with at least one person in paid work have a household income that keeps them below an officially recognised poverty line.

- Bangladesh - over 85% (over 25 million people) of the labour force is informal, again contributing almost 50% of GDP;
- Pakistan - up to 72% of jobs outside agriculture are in the informal sector, contributing to one-third of GDP.

Informal workers will be disproportionately affected by the pandemic due to: loss of income; increased vulnerability to the virus itself coupled with reduced access to healthcare; lack of legal recognition and protection; and limited access to social protection (Shaikh, 2020). 'Many of these workers are likely to lose their jobs and face extreme poverty and food insecurity' (Shaikh, 2020).

Further negative economic effects of the COVID-19 crisis stem from reduced remittances from migrant workers. Across the world the amount of money sent by migrant workers to their home countries is expected to decrease by almost USD110 billion this year, due to increased unemployment stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic (Inman, 2020). Remittances help alleviate poverty in low and middle income countries, improve nutrition, are linked to higher spending on education, and reduce child labour in disadvantaged households. Hence, a fall in remittances will reduce families' ability to spend on these areas. South Asia is one of the regions with heavy dependence on remittances (Inman, 2020).

3. Impact of previous crises on child labour

Epidemics and pandemics devastate economies: estimated costs of past events include a loss of over USD 40 billion in productivity from the 2003 SARS epidemic and USD 45-55 billion cost of the 2009 H1N1 influenza pandemic (WHO, 2019: 13). The World Bank estimates that a global influenza pandemic akin to the scale and virulence of the one in 1918 would cost the modern economy USD 3 trillion, or up to 4.8% of gross domestic product (GDP); the cost would be 2.2% of GDP for even a moderately virulent influenza pandemic (WHO, 2019: 13). The effects of this would be felt disproportionately in low and middle income countries: models predict the annual cost of a global influenza pandemic would mean that South Asia's GDP would drop by 2% (USD 53 billion) (EPRS, 2020: 2).

One consequence of large-scale epidemics/pandemics or other financial crises is a rise in child labour, as families face job and income losses and come under financial pressure.

Evidence from past crises shows that when faced with unemployment and lower wages, poor families eat cheaper and less nutritious food, leading to weight loss and malnutrition, especially for young children and pregnant women. Fees for school, including the costs of textbooks, uniforms and transportation, become unaffordable for poorer families, forcing them to pull their children from class to join the workforce or support the household - seldom returning to school afterwards and effectively ending their chance of a formal education (UNICEF, 2009: 3).

The pathways by which such crises increase child labour are elaborated in the next section; detailed below are the impact of previous crises on child labour.

Ebola epidemic in West Africa 2014-16

The Ebola virus was first discovered in 1976, but the largest outbreak of the disease took place in West Africa between 2014 and 2016. Three countries in the region were hardest hit: Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone. The outbreak began in Guinea in March 2014 and then spread to other

countries. As of January 2016, there were 11,315 Ebola deaths: 4,809 in Liberia, 3,955 in Sierra Leone, and 2,536 in Guinea.⁶ There were also much smaller outbreaks in Nigeria and Mali, as well as some cases in the United States.

As well as the high death toll, the Ebola epidemic led to the reversal of development gains in the region, increased poverty and food insecurity, and halted livelihood activities. The economic and social impact of the West Africa Ebola outbreak caused an estimated USD 53 billion loss (WHO, 2019: 13). Incidence of poverty in affected countries was already high (49.8% in Guinea, 31.2% in Sierra Leone, 63.5% in Liberia) and was worsened by the outbreak (Korkoyah & Wreh, 2015: 13). Among participants in an assessment carried out in multiple counties of Liberia in early 2015:

nearly 65% of agricultural households believed that their harvest would be smaller this year than it had been in the previous year... Many people have not been able to engage in farming activities, travel to trade or do business, go to market or hunt animals. Many have lost gainful employment because of the crisis, leaving them jobless and idle (Korkoyah & Wreh, 2015: 13).

As of July 2015, the average pre-Ebola employment figure for males and females of 81.0% reported by respondents had fallen to an average of 43.7%, while the average pre-Ebola unemployment rate of 18.8% had tripled to 56.2% (Korkoyah & Wreh, 2015: 15). Large numbers of children were left in economically and socially unstable conditions by the death of one or both parents: as of end 2014, UNICEF had registered 4,128 children orphaned by Ebola in Liberia alone (Korkoyah & Wreh, 2015: 35). The closure of schools – in the case of Liberia, for nearly a whole academic year – denied children access to education and deepened their social vulnerability (Korkoyah & Wreh, 2015: 18). In the assessment of Ebola's impact in Liberia, the three counties reported to have the largest proportion of children orphaned by Ebola were also the counties where the practice of child marriage was reportedly most prevalent (Korkoyah & Wreh, 2015: 34). The study warned that, 'Without interventions to protect orphans, girls are at great risk of falling victim to sexual exploitation and abuse, while boys are likely to end up in hazardous work environments as child labourers or as street hawkers or petty thieves' (Korkoyah & Wreh, 2015: 34).

In March 2015, a number of child-centred NGOs/agencies carried out a Children's Ebola Recovery Assessment (CERA) in nine districts across Sierra Leone, reaching over 1,100 boys and girls (Save the Children et al, 2015: 1). The biggest issue of concern identified by them was the closure of schools. Across all nine districts, children reported a direct correlation between school closure and increases of child labour and exploitation, and described taking on new roles and responsibilities to supplement household income (Save the Children et al, 2015: 1). Findings with regard to child labour included (Save the Children et al, 2015: 17-18):

- 43% of 216 children in one exercise reported having to work to support their families. According to children, the combination of additional pressure on household income and school closure had resulted in increases in child labour;

⁶ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-28755033>

- Children spoke about the pressure of having to provide for their families: 'I lost my mother to Ebola and I am now the breadwinner...I struggle to feed my family' (girl aged 15-18);
- Girls reported being involved in petty trading or collecting firewood for sale to supplement family income. Boys reported being involved in mining and driving motorbikes between towns and, in urban areas, were also involved in petty trading;
- Children expressed concern about undertaking work that frightened them or made them feel insecure. This was most prevalent among girls who reported having to walk long distances to reach villages in which to trade, often in unfamiliar areas, and among girls feeling vulnerable and scared of abuse and sexual exploitation when travelling unaccompanied;
- There were reports of more transactional sex to cover basic needs among vulnerable girls, especially those affected by the loss of relatives to Ebola;
- Children also reported the physical pain they experienced when doing labour, such as from carrying heavy loads;
- In addition to income-generation activities to support the household income, children reported having to carry out more domestic chores than before, notably collecting water or firewood. They saw this as a consequence of schools being closed. In some cases the collection of water or firewood was done for other households and in exchange for money. Both sexes reported having to do more chores than they had pre-Ebola, although the workload for girls was still reported to be greater than for boys.

HIV/AIDS

A study by the ILO (2006) looked at the impact of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the 1980s and 1990s on children and youth. Economic growth in countries heavily affected by HIV/AIDS (mostly in Africa) was significantly reduced by the epidemic's effects on labour supply, productivity and investment: between 1992 and 2004 the 31 countries of Sub-Saharan Africa (with the highest prevalence of HIV/AIDS), for example, lost an average 0.7% of their economic growth each year (ILO, 2006: xi). This placed a greater economic burden on labour force participants and a greater social burden on adult household members, which in turn impacted children and youth. Many experienced the loss of one or both parents and, in the absence of social protection and in situations where extended families faced similar problems, young people found themselves head of households and providers for siblings or a sick parent (ILO, 2006: 44).

Youth in HIV/AIDS affected households were widely reported to be dropping out of school and starting work when too young, too unskilled or too inexperienced. 'Early entry into the labour force is now a recognised trend in many countries highly affected by the HIV/AIDS epidemic' (ILO, 2006: 46). The ILO estimated that 191 million children were working worldwide in 2004, of whom 74 million were performing hazardous work; this figure did not include those engaged in the worst forms of child labour (ILO, 2006: xii). The study found that large numbers of youth were working in the informal economy, which meant they did not have decent work; indeed, it notes that youth experienced among the worst conditions in the world of work (ILO, 2006: xiii).

Asian financial crisis 1997/99 and global financial crisis 2007/8

Stavrapoulou and Jones (2013: 32) detail the effects of the Asian financial crisis of 1997/99 on child labour in the region:

- In Indonesia, one in five poor households reported using child labour as a significant coping strategy, and an estimated 1.7 million children aged 10-14 were working in 1998.
- Some especially vulnerable children, predominantly adolescent girls, were forced into sex work, including in Laos where girls and young women became involved in commercial sex work to help their parents financially and to pay for their siblings' education.

The global financial crisis started building up in 2007 when a real estate bubble in the United States (followed by parts of Western Europe) collapsed, triggering multiple bank failures. In a very short period of time property values plummeted, pension funds shrank, and general consumer and producer confidence disappeared (World Bank, cited in Stavrapoulou & Jones, 2013: 12). The crisis spread swiftly from the US and Western Europe to developing countries across the globe. The latter were hit by: continuing reductions in demand among businesses, governments and households; falling commodity prices; fragile financial systems; high public deficits and debts; record levels of unemployment; and reduced foreign direct investment and remittances. At the household level, food and fuel prices were high and rising, while the job crisis limited incomes for millions (Stavrapoulou & Jones, 2013 13-14).

Stavrapoulou and Jones (2013: 33) identify similar effects on child labour from the global economic crisis of 2007/8 (and subsequent austerity measures) to those seen in the Asian financial crisis:

- In Nigeria, where child labour was already common, the crisis exacerbated the vulnerabilities of girls and young women from poor households, many of whom were forced to take paid work at the expense of their health and education, as 'without the efforts of children, parents cannot eat'. A strong gender bias meant girls in Nigeria were more likely to engage in child labour.
- Research revealed that in rural Nigeria, children as young as five were increasingly involved in farming, selling goods at markets or becoming apprentices to traders. This research also found a strong gender bias as food price hikes increased the likelihood of child labour among girls more than boys in those states less dependent on agriculture.
- With the onset of the global economic crisis, boys and girls aged 10-16 in El Salvador started dropping out of school and entering paid employment. Data on use of children's time revealed that not only did child labour increase, largely in urban areas, but the total work burden of child labourers was larger, and children were working longer hours.
- In Nicaragua, girls in urban areas were helping their mothers both with domestic work (taking over domestic responsibilities to free their mothers for wage labour) and in earning additional income.
- In Brazil and Ecuador, progress made in reducing child labour prior to the crisis slowed sharply.

4. Likely effects of COVID-19 on child labour in developing countries

Rise in modern slavery

Child labour is a form of modern slavery. Anti-Slavery International (ASI, 2020) identify five ways related to modern slavery and human trafficking in which the current COVID-19 pandemic is having a negative impact:

- *Those in slavery face new and increasing risks and abuse* – the crisis provides opportunities for some manufacturers to expand their operations using forced labour. Increased demand for personal protective equipment (PPE) has led to increased use of forced labour in their production in the United States, China and Malaysia. The crisis could also be leading to relaxation of rules about purchasing these products from suppliers who are suspected of forced labour. Higher risks of exploitation are also emerging in agriculture, a sector with already high rates of forced labour, as food production remains a global priority.
- *Economic disruption is increasing vulnerability to forced labour of poor individuals and communities to slavery* – loss of income due to lay-offs, lockdown, etc. coupled with lack of safety nets and adequate government support, can push families to take desperate measures for survival, including being exploited for cheap labour, taking on increased debt and becoming trapped in bonded labour, and child labour.
- *Worsening discrimination* – combating the pandemic includes taking measures to promote hygiene practices. Certain groups can be seen as ‘ritually impure’ in some societies, e.g. Dalits in India, or face prejudice on religious/linguistic grounds. The pandemic is likely to reinforce caste/racial prejudice towards them, and has the potential to be used as a basis for, and a justification of, slavery.
- *Increased risks for migrant workers* – Discrimination against other groups, such as migrants, could also increase vulnerability to modern slavery. Migrant workers face difficulties in accessing rights (including healthcare) and in returning home. With more to lose than other workers, they are more likely to be pushed into working for unscrupulous employers or agencies willing to exploit their vulnerability.
- *Anti-slavery efforts are being disrupted* – the lockdowns that have been imposed to slow the spread of COVID-19 have limited the work of anti-slavery organisations. Slavery eradication programmes which rely on community mobilisation are being severely disrupted. Grassroots organisations must restrict their activities, particularly those which require travel or community gatherings.

Cockayne and Smith (2020) also identify a number of ways in which the COVID-19 crisis increases vulnerability to enslavement (including child labour):

- *Increased supply of workers vulnerable to exploitation* – due to lockdown, closure of businesses, travel restrictions, etc. numbers of unemployed and working poor will rise. Poverty and financial crisis – amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic – are some of the major drivers of modern slavery.
- *Employers will have stronger incentives and perhaps greater latitude for exploitation* – global demand for medical supplies and equipment could lead to a relaxation of import restrictions on goods in critical supply chains. In the United States, for example, Customs and Border Protection have revoked a hold on the import of rubber gloves from a supplier suspected of using forced labour. In Thailand, there are reports of a surge in demand from manufacturers in medical supply chains for cheap labour, targeting vulnerable migrant workers.
- *Suspension of education means children will be more vulnerable to exploitation* – the closure of schools could lead to increased child labour as well as increased child marriage.

Rise in child labour

Human Rights Watch (HRW, 2020: 6) warns that the global economic downturn caused by the COVID-19 crisis will likely increase rates of child labour and child marriage. 'Research has shown that child labour is highly associated with financial shocks experienced by a family, such as illness, disability, or a parent's loss of employment. Many families do not have the credit or savings to withstand financial setbacks, including income loss, and without adequate governmental support, their children may be at higher risk of entering the workforce to help their families survive' (HRW, 2020: 6). De Hoop and Edmonds (2020) echo this, highlighting that: 'child labour will be an important coping mechanism for poor households experiencing COVID-related shocks'. They further warn that the consequences of the increase in child labour could last generations: such children are unlikely to stop working even if their economic situation improves, they will have less education and thus worse employment opportunities when they are adults, and they can suffer chronic health issues and mental stress (De Hoop & Edmonds, 2020).

Disrupted education leading to increased child labour

The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action (CPHA) point out that the pandemic is leading to increased numbers of children out of school and much greater financial pressures on families: 'This could push millions of children into child labour.... Already working children are likely to be more exposed to the virus (further increasing spread) and face higher risks to falling into worst forms of child labour (WFCL)' (Alliance for CPHA, 2020: 1). In a technical note on COVID-19 and child labour, the Alliance detail the risks and contributing factors for children at risk (see Table 1 below) and for children already engaged in child labour (see Table 2 below).

Watkins and Jameel (2020) caution that school closures could lead to some children permanently being taken out of education, and will widen inequalities. They highlight the impact on refugee children, notably Syrian and Rohingya children, as well as those in other areas of conflict such as Afghanistan and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). 'For children who are refugees, school closures threaten to remove one of the few escape routes out of poverty.... [they] now face the prospect of losing the education they need to build a better future' (Watkins & Jameel, 2020). This is echoed by Anti-Slavery International (ASI, 2020: 11): 'A disrupted education also has a negative impact in the longer term and can lead to further poverty and vulnerability'.

'Access to education protects all children from forced marriage and child labour. So, if schools are shut alongside falling family incomes, child marriage and child labour are expected to increase as families seek desperate means to survive' (ASI, 2020: 11). Girls are particularly at risk of child marriage because of school closures. Girls Not Brides explain, 'Schools protect girls. When schools shut the risks (of marriage) become very heightened' (Batha, 2020). World Vision (cited in Batha, 2020) predicts that four million girls are at risk of child marriage in the next two years because of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. 'Deepening poverty caused by the loss of livelihoods is likely to drive many families to marry off their daughters early' (World Vision cited in Batha, 2020).

Table 1: Child labour risks due to COVID-19 pandemic for children at risk

Risk of child labour	Contributing risk factors
<p>More children pushed into child labour/WFCL including commercial sexual exploitation to meet basic needs of their families.</p> <p>Children, especially girls, assuming greater responsibilities for family survival, taking longer hours in domestic and care duties.</p> <p>Lack of external workers places more responsibility on children to assist in family activities, including agriculture and homebased industries.</p> <p>Caregivers resort to negative survival strategies including child labour and child marriage.</p> <p>Child caretakers, especially girls, more exposed to risks of disease contraction by looking after sick relatives.</p>	<p>Closure of school, learning facilities and limited access to remote learning increase time at home.</p> <p>Reductions in family income due to death, illness, quarantine job loss.</p> <p>Reinforcement of traditional gender roles at home: increased role of girls in cleaning, cooking, and caregiving; increased pressure on boys to help their family with income generating activities.</p> <p>Weakened or overburdened governments unable to prevent exploitation in certain at-risk sectors.</p> <p>Essential services for children at risk of child labour are reduced and therefore basic needs are not met.</p> <p>Children in isolation do not see their peers and friends and are disconnected from other support networks.</p> <p>Family separation due to hospitalisation, quarantine, isolation, migration or death.</p> <p>Myths around COVID-19 that downplay the risks of the disease, especially for children.</p>

Source: Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action (2020: 2)

Table 2: Child labour risks due to COVID-19 pandemic for children already engaged in child labour

Risk of child labour	Contributing risk factors
<p>More hazardous working conditions (i.e., longer hours, more dangerous tasks or more harmful work circumstances) for children, particularly in agriculture.</p> <p>Risks of arrest, legal sanctions, fines and/or imprisonments of working children, as a result of violating social control orders.</p> <p>Increased psychosocial distress.</p> <p>Exposure to trafficking and all forms of violence including sexual violence, exploitation and abuse by actors in position of power.</p> <p>Greater exposure to contracting the disease.</p> <p>Increased risks of family separation and migration as parents and children search for work can further isolate children and/or expose them to new risks.</p> <p>Reduced likelihood of returning back to school after lockdown.</p>	<p>Working adolescents, especially in agriculture, who are involved in low-skilled, low-paid jobs typically do not have access to protective equipment or safety gear, medical care, sick leave or social protection.</p> <p>Loss of jobs or reduced hours in sectors or services that are no longer functioning.</p> <p>Closure of essential services for children in child labour (accelerated learning programs, schools, food, case management, psychosocial, health). Children living/working in the street, irregular migrants or refugees are especially at risk.</p> <p>Reduction in overall household income due to death, illness, quarantine measures or loss of jobs.</p> <p>Limited child labour oversight and/or regulations in sectors that provide essential services such as agriculture, food value chains, manufacturing and/or waste management.</p> <p>Limited inspection and law enforcement of formal and informal sector workplaces for child labour.</p> <p>Lack of hygiene practices or personal protective equipment in the workplace increasing hazardous conditions and risk of infection and/or transmission of the COVID-19 virus.</p>

Source: Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action (2020: 3)

Rising child labour in agriculture

Of the estimated 152 million children globally engaged in child labour, the majority (108 million) work in agriculture (ECLT, 2020). Agriculture includes both subsistence and commercial farming, and covers fishing, forestry, livestock herding and aquaculture (ECLT, 2020). COVID-19 is predicted to impact child labour in agriculture in a number of ways (ECLT, 2020):

- The seasonal nature of smallholder production and perishability of most agricultural products mean many families have a small timeframe in which to sell these and get the bulk of their annual income. Restrictions on movement and gathering because of the pandemic will reduce availability of traditional labour and force them to use their children.
- Smallholder farmers face increasing financial pressures as the pandemic continues, creating situations that could fuel child labour.

- Adults face higher risk of Coronavirus infection than children and are more likely to suffer negative health consequences: children could end up assuming greater responsibility for family survival.
- Children in rural areas are likely to be harder hit by school closures, e.g. limited/no access to radio, internet or electricity means they cannot continue their education through remote learning in the same way as their urban counterparts. Children at home all the time and not involved in learning are likely to be engaged in child labour.
- Reduced job opportunities in the informal sector will lead to a large supply of low-skill workers, which will suppress wages – increasing the likelihood of children being used for agricultural work.

The risks outlined above are illustrated by the cocoa sector. Moore (2020) warns that the use of child labour to grow cocoa in the Ivory Coast and Ghana could increase as a result of COVID-19. A report by the International Cocoa Initiative (2020) found that when household income or earning opportunities drop unexpectedly, child labour tends to increase. Virus-induced restrictions could lead to disruptions in the cocoa supply chain, causing economic distress among rural cocoa farmers (Moore, 2020). School closures mean children are out of school and therefore more likely to be engaged in harmful work (Moore, 2020). Moreover, cocoa farmers themselves face the risk of infection, which would affect their ability to work – their children would then have to take up (more) farm work for the family’s survival (Moore, 2020). It is also currently the mid-season harvesting period so need for labour is high (Peyton, 2020). Tackling child labour is made harder by the fact that NGOs such as the Thomas Reuters Foundation no longer have staff on the ground because of the pandemic, and shelters where rescued children would normally be taken have closed (Peyton, 2020).

5. Likely effects of COVID-19 on child labour in South Asia

This review was able to find country-specific information for India and Bangladesh on the likely effects of the pandemic on child labour. Information was found about negative economic impact of the COVID-19 crisis on other countries in the region, e.g. loss of garment sector jobs in Pakistan and Myanmar. There are predictions that Nepal’s economy will be badly hit by the impact of the pandemic on two major revenue sources: tourism which contributed 7.9% to Nepal’s GDP in 2018, and foreign worker remittances which contributed 28% (Gupta, 2020). But the review was unable to find anything specifically about COVID-19 and child labour in those countries.

India

Kundu (2020) identifies several ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic will lead to increased child labour in India:

- *Rising unemployment* – around 90% of India’s workforce is in the informal sector. As of early April 2020 the urban unemployment rate had already risen from 8.21% in mid-March to 30.9%. It is estimated that 400 million informal workers in India may not get back their livelihoods for a long period. Lacking adequate credit or savings to withstand financial shocks, and without adequate government support, these households will have no other option but to put their children into the workforce.

- *Consequences of imperfect labour market in agriculture* – the children of farmers and agricultural labourers in India are at even greater risk. As government restrictions to movement and gatherings have been imposed during harvesting and marketing time, in the absence of helping hands, children will be the fallback option to assist parents in the fields.
- *Greater risk for those already in child labour* – children aged 15-18 years engaged in hazardous work account for 62.8% of India's child labour workforce. Because of low production recently due to the pandemic, many state governments are in the process of extending working hours at factories from a maximum of 8 hours to 12 hours a day with a limited workforce. Such a provision, seen in the context of adolescent child workers, will mean more at lower wages, as children are the cheapest labour force.
- *Mortality leading to child labour* – deaths due to COVID-19 will inevitably leave many children without one or both parents or other caregivers. Orphaned children are particularly vulnerable to trafficking and other exploitation like forced begging, or child labour. In such families, there is also the likelihood of older children dropping out of school to support their younger siblings.
- *School closure* – As part of the lockdown, a nationwide school closure has taken place. An estimated 320 million students are affected, the bulk of these (86%) in primary and secondary school. While the government has recommended online teaching, most schools do not have the capacity to offer this. Hence the closure disproportionately affects children who already experience barriers to accessing education, or who are at higher risk of exclusion. Hence for many children, the COVID-19 crisis will mean limited or no education, or falling further behind their peers. This will induce a large number of children to discontinue their schooling even after 'normalcy' is restored; there is a high probability of many of these out of school children getting involved in child labour.

Street children in India have been especially badly hit by the COVID-19 crisis. According to Chetna, a Delhi-based charity, there are tens of thousands of such children in Indian cities and towns (cited in Pandey, 2020). While everyone has been told to go home during the lockdown, these children have nowhere to go. Because of the lockdown it is hard for charities to reach them and provide help.

A garment exporter in India explained the pressures on the industry that could lead to increased use of child labour (Vimal, cited in Praxis, 2020: 4): as work has decreased, contractors could accept orders at lower costs, and this would necessitate them using cheaper labour, notably children. A further factor is that a lot of workers have moved and some places such as flour factories and *daal* (lentil) mills are short of labour and could use children.

A News18 report (Nandy, 2020) highlights the economic hardship caused by migrant workers losing their jobs and moving back to their home villages where there are few prospects for them. It echoes the prediction of the increased use of cheap child labour (Nandy, 2020):

Child labour is cheap in normal times. In the event of massive dislocations and loss of jobs caused by Covid-19, children, especially those from rural India, will likely be employed by small and medium-sized business establishments in megacities and tier-II towns for dirt cheap wages or none at all.

The NGO Praxis (2020: 2) warn that the recent erosion of labour rights in India is fuelling increased 'casualization of labour', i.e. greater use of unorganised labour. In the context of the coronavirus pandemic this creates a pull factor for child labour – demand from companies for cheap, unorganised labour; the 'push factor' comes from parents needing extra income.

Bangladesh

Burns et al, (2020) highlight the effects of disruption of global supply chains and lockdown on Bangladesh, particularly on the garment sector and leather industry, and on those (around 87% of workers) in informal work. By late March 2020, over one million workers in Bangladesh had been laid off or temporarily suspended, and similar crises were being experienced by garment sector workers across South and Southeast Asia, including India and Myanmar (ASI, 2020: 6). As of early April, the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) stated that 1,082 factories had reported the loss of close to USD 3 billion as orders were cancelled or suspended (Nazalya, 2020). Nazalya (2020) highlights the increased risk of modern slavery in the garment sector across Southeast Asia, especially Bangladesh and Cambodia:

Asia's garment hubs already perform poorly across labour rights indices, with all rated high or extreme risk for forced labour, child labour and occupational health and safety. However, we expect an increase in these risks across the board as staff are laid off and livelihoods are threatened. As a result, laid-off workers are likely to turn to exploitative employment that increases the risks of forced labour. The chances of children entering the workforce will also rise exponentially, as families attempt to make up shortfalls in earnings.

After readymade garments, leather is one of the largest export sectors in Bangladesh: up to end April 2020, USD 3.18 billion export orders were cancelled or suspended, affecting 2.8 million workers through factory closures and lay-offs (Burns et al, 2020).

A survey in Bangladesh among people in urban slums and the rural poor found a more than 70% drop in income for people living in poverty since the start of the pandemic (Burns et al, 2020). This has led to widespread despair among those at the bottom of the supply chain: 'There is a general belief among many that the deaths from hunger will be much higher than those from coronavirus in Bangladesh' (Burns et al, 2020). This in turn heightens the risk of child labour, both for those currently in school being forced by school closure and economic hardship to take up work, and even more for those children already engaged in child labour:

Most of the families count on their children's income to run the family, a prolonged disruption is likely to jeopardise working children by lowering their pay rates and requiring them to work much longer hours, exposing them to risk of abuse and exploitation among others, and indeed to work with the risk of Covid-19 itself (Burns et al, 2020).

Burns et al (2020) conclude that the current actions of global companies (i.e. whether they cancel orders or honour them) could lead directly to massive increases in child labour and worsening conditions for children in the informal sector. They urge buyers in international supply chains to honour the orders they have made.

The Consortium for Street Children (CSC) describes the impact of the pandemic on children in street situations already engaged in labour in Bangladesh: 'working as waste collectors and street vendors [such children] cannot earn money anymore because no one is allowed outside on the streets [as a result of lockdown]. Children who beg on public transport vehicles, at water

terminals or stations, now do not have this opportunity' (CSC, 2020: 4). Vital opportunities for such children to access food (passengers would often donate food) and livelihoods have thus ceased (CSC, 2020). CSC warn that such vulnerable children could be pushed further into poverty and/or end up in more exploitative situations.

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Acknowledgements

We thank the following experts who voluntarily provided suggestions for relevant literature or other advice to the author to support the preparation of this report. The content of the report does not necessarily reflect the opinions of any of the experts consulted.

- Anusha Chandrasekharan, Praxis (India)
- Raju Ghimire, Voice of Children (Nepal)
- Shona Macleod, Consortium for Street Children (CSC)
- Ryna Sherazi, Anti-Slavery International

Suggested citation

Idris, I. (2020). *Impact of COVID-19 on child labour in South Asia*. K4D Helpdesk Report 819. Brighton, UK: Institute of Development Studies.

About this report

This report is based on twelve days of desk-based research. The K4D research helpdesk provides rapid syntheses of a selection of recent relevant literature and international expert thinking in response to specific questions relating to international development. For any enquiries, contact helpdesk@k4d.info.

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