

The Boys Left Behind: Where Public Policy has Failed to Prevent Child Labour in Bangladesh

Sheikh Tariquzzaman and Naomi Hossain

Abstract Poor boys have been left behind by public policy efforts to expand school access in Bangladesh – the same policies which have succeeded in attracting girls to school. This article draws on original research to explore the failure to tackle the exclusion of poor boys from school, arguing that paid work has become more attractive in a context in which education is of poor quality and there are no social sanctions against child labour. Recently there has been a shift of policy attention towards poor boys, amidst concerns about security, militancy and Islamic education. Given steady economic growth, poor boys may not necessarily inherit deeper poverty, but in the absence of state or social sanctions against child labour, they are likely to inherit a position at the lower end of the social scale.

1 Introduction

Public policy and changing attitudes interacted to successfully widen girls' access to education in Bangladesh over the last two decades, yet little progress has been made on reducing child labour.¹ Drawing on original research in Bangladesh, this article puts qualitative flesh on emerging national evidence that poor boys have been left behind by public policy efforts that have succeeded in attracting girls to school. The article explores why the returns from early entry into work remain significant for boys in a context in which education is accessible but of poor quality, and in which public policy and public attitudes tacitly endorse child labour as an acceptable response to poverty.

Child labour is treated here as a factor in the inheritance of a position at the lower end of the social scale, and, therefore, very likely of poverty. Yet there is little conclusive evidence of how poverty is transmitted through children's early entry into work, in Bangladesh or elsewhere.² Insights from agencies in the field suggest entering children into paid work may be a strategy *out* of the worst forms of deprivation into more moderate poverty,³ and that child labour may be associated with moderate rather than

extreme poverty. And poor children may have greater agency with respect to how they occupy their time than other children. A narrow definition of child labour is used here, to focus on work resulting in definably economic returns. This entails a focus on boys, as girls' work has historically been of less direct economic significance and has declined further over time, driven by rising school attendance, spiralling dowry costs and concerns about sexual abuse in domestic service. Rates of child marriage among Bangladeshi girls are among the highest in the world for which data are available (Amin *et al.* 2006), and defining marriage as a form of work would be to recognise that there are many more working girl children than figures conventionally suggest. However, this article focuses on the experience of poor boys, for whom work has meant a more complete exclusion from education than early marriage has entailed for their sisters.

Drawing on findings from original research in a rural and an urban area, the next section explores findings about the changing practice of child labour.⁴ The final section extrapolates from these findings to consider why public policy has failed to address child labour. The critical point

raised here is that while the combination of economic opportunity with poor education has been potent, neither state nor civil society have challenged the wide social acceptance of the practice of child labour.

2 The changing terms of child labour

2.1 The low returns from education

The 1990s saw a massive drive to expand access to the school system, through construction and teacher recruitment programmes, as well as new private, *madrassah* and NGO school provision. A pioneering set of public policy innovations was in the form of conditional food or cash assistance schemes, designed to offset the losses to poor households from children being in school instead of work. The small cash payments generated new interest in education among poor households, and may have changed attitudes towards the possibility of school. But recent evidence shows that in fact the impact on poor households has been modest, partly because few of the poorest actually benefit (Al-Samarrai 2008b). A scholarship for all (not only poor) secondary-school-going girls who meet attendance and performance criteria, and who also remain unmarried, in place since the early 1990s, has had a greater impact on girls' access, although the cash amounts are smaller.

While much hope is pinned on the possibility of poor children combining work with school, in practice, when children start to work to support poor households, this generally entails full withdrawal from school (see Amin *et al.* 2006). One factor is poor quality education provision and abysmally low attainments, particularly among the poor. Only half of the children starting school continue to the final year; at secondary level only one in five passes the junior secondary examination (Al-Samarrai 2008b). The non-poor are more likely to complete than the poor, and girls more likely than boys, but overall, most Bangladeshi children complete primary school age without attaining even basic literacy or numeracy (CAMPE 2005).

From the perspective of many poor children, unimaginative teaching and corporal punishment make school unappealing, while concerns about teacher absenteeism and competency, and short teaching contact hours persist. Children in the poorest households play decisive roles in household schooling decisions (BRAC/SCUK

2005), particularly in women-headed households, where parental authority may be less total. This may reflect the stronger need to have an educated male in women-headed households (see Al-Samarrai 2008a), but boys may also have greater agency with respect to schooling decisions where no adult men are present. Perhaps aware that gains from attending school are limited, nearly 40 per cent of poor children of primary-school-going age were not attending in 2005, compared to one quarter of the non-poor.⁵ And among the poorest, boys were increasingly more likely than girls to be excluded: in the first five years of the decade, the gender gap in enrolment among the poorest increased from one to seven percentage points (Al-Samarrai 2008a).

2.2 Age-segmented labour markets

Demand for child workers remains strong because of a high degree of age (and gender) segmentation in the labour market. Our research found that most working children aged between 6 and 18 were employed, rather than self-employed or working for the household enterprise. Of these, most boys were in the sales and service sectors, followed by manual labour; most employed girls were garment workers (all in the urban area) and somewhat fewer were domestic servants.

The demand for children's work persists because many jobs continue to be seen as work that only children can or should do. Key characteristics of children's labour that contribute to the persistence of age-segmented markets include the idea that some jobs are best done by small, agile bodies – the 'nimble fingers' claim. For example, children are preferred in metal workshops because they can work crouched inside the compartments and drawers of steel safes; in car-repair workshops because they can slip easily under a car; in ramshackle slum premises because their lighter weight makes it easier for them to climb up and repair fragile structures; and in restaurants, because they can dart easily in and around busy workspaces.

Children are also seen to be quick at picking up new skills, possibly reflecting higher literacy levels among children compared to adults, skills that are most relevant in retail and services, as well as the garments industry. At the higher-skilled end of the child labour market, they are taken on in apprentice-type roles:

One cannot work alone. I am a mechanic so I will need an assistant. Before becoming an expert mechanic one needs to work as an assistant. They need to learn from a very early age to become experts gradually. This is the advantage. When the child grows older he will also become an expert mechanic and keep an assistant to assist. This is how it goes on.
(Owner of a metal workshop)

Children are also preferred to do dirty, dangerous and menial tasks that adults balk at. This is one reason why children are still preferred as domestic servants and in low-intensity roles in service industries, for instance, to be kept available to wipe or fetch and carry – jobs that few adult men would be willing to accept, but which restrictions on interactions with men mean adult women must also avoid.⁶ Our research found that while no adults were involved in waste recycling, 54 shops in the urban community were running businesses based on children's waste-picking. Children are also preferred because they can be made to sleep on the premises, and therefore provide protection.

2.3 Livelihood insecurity

The debate about child labour in Bangladesh often recognises that employment can ground children with skills they can use in the labour market as adults. By contrast, our research identified a perception that apprentice-type arrangements were less common now. It seems unlikely there has been a net decline in the overall quality of children's employment – there has been a decline in the proportion of girls who work in the exploitative and low-skilled domestic service sector, for instance. But the intensity of the pressure to generate immediate returns, particularly for insecure poor urban households, did appear to outweigh a preference for deploying children in work where they might learn a trade or skill. One father noted that from the time he had sent his seven-year-old son into waste collecting or rag-picking work, the household had 'rid itself of its poverty'. In the rural community, pressures to generate instant cash income were somewhat less intense; the types of work in which boys were involved reflected longer-term calculations of the benefits. Nevertheless, this did not always mean work that was more beneficial for children in the long term. The physically debilitating work of rickshaw- and van-pulling, for example, was seen as good, steady work partly

because boys so employed could attract dowries of up to Tk30,000 (around US\$500).

2.4 Rising opportunity and children's bargaining power

Rapid economic diversification and growth since the 1990s have significantly altered the terms of children's work. Both rural and urban areas had experienced dramatic increases in the level and variety of children's employment. Urban employers noted a sharp rise in the numbers of retail and service outlets over the 15 years since the Dhaka slum had been established, most of which employ children; by contrast, children had mainly worked as domestics or boatmen in the past. More teenaged children were believed to be working in garment factories than had been the case 15 years ago, and slum children were also concentrated in the waste sector, rickshaw-pulling, battery workshops, poultry farms, rice mills, and shops. Rural employers perceived there to be more variety in children's work than in the past, with children, mainly boys, working as carpenters, tailors, restaurant and grocery workers, day labourers, transport and mechanical workshop assistants, and in home-based craft, brickfields and cold storage facilities. In short, children work almost everywhere there is economic activity.

An implication of this increased opportunity has been an improvement in the terms and conditions of children's employment. Poor parents would once have been satisfied with having placed their child somewhere they would be fed, relieving the household of the cost of doing so. They may also have learned a skill or gained a dowry when they married (in the case of girl domestic servants), so there was some hope of longer-term gains. In the present day, conditions have changed so that the type of work, salary and other benefits are now set out clearly before recruitment. A shopkeeper remarked, 'we talk to the parents before we hire the children – we tell them how much would the salary be and what extra benefits the child would get. Even after all this effort, children quit their jobs if they get a better offer.' As a result, it seems, of competition for child employees, contractual arrangements are now firmer, and more likely to involve immediate cash payments.

Increased opportunity means that children and their parents are better-placed to select

between jobs. New networks are established with the co-workers, customers, other employers and peers employed elsewhere through which children learn about new job opportunities. There has been a shift from what was in many cases, bonded labour, to a situation in which parents and children have more bargaining power over remuneration: parents sending their daughters into domestic service are now reported to require the dowry payment to be paid upfront.

The increase in opportunity also means children have new exit options. One 14-year-old boy in Nilphamari had changed his job seven times in a single year: starting off as a class III dropout, he became an assistant tailor, where he received no salary and was learning very little. After two months he went to another tailoring shop, where he was fed well but still frustrated in his attempts to learn tailoring. He then tried carpentry, but the lack of immediate financial rewards and his own lack of aptitude meant it was not a success. He then worked in a hot food shop, where his salary was irregular but he was fed well and received some tips. But he was beaten and rebuked for mistakes and was unhappy. He moved to a nursery, but he left after the first month, when the promised salary turned out to be less. He then tried being an assistant mason to a relative. He was initially paid Tk20 per day, but it quickly rose to Tk50. After some time his wages began to be irregular, and he decided it was time to work on his own. His seventh and final job was pulling a rickshaw van. He has to lease the van for Tk20 per day but he says he is much better off now, even though it is physically very strenuous.

2.5 Elite attitudes and the lack of social sanctions

What have not notably changed over the last two decades are attitudes towards the acceptability of child labour. The failure by government and civil society to send strong signals about the negative consequences and unacceptability of child labour has meant that there have been no new social costs to those who choose to employ children. There is some relevance to present-day Bangladesh for the arguments Myron Weiner (1990) made for 1980s' India: social acceptance of children's work, particularly the accepting perceptions of policy elites and the middle class are critical factors in the persistence of mass, routinised forms of child labour.

Weiner argued that Indian policy elite and middle-class perceptions of child labour were self-interested in their willingness to tolerate the practice, as employers of children, indirect beneficiaries of children's cheap and flexible labour, or because of how child labour is implicated in the maintenance of social distinctions and divisions such as caste hierarchies. The same arguments could not be easily made for Bangladesh, even though business and social class interests in the availability of child labour persist. Instead, policy elite and middle-class acceptance of the practice of child labour appear to be rooted in knowledge of and sympathy for the circumstances of poor households (see BRAC/SCUK 2005). The morally acceptable position within local and national elite discourse is that in the face of household poverty and food insecurity, it is inappropriate to take a strong stand against child labour: whereas poor children who do well at school should be encouraged to continue, for poor children who fail to thrive in school, early entry into work is a reasonable option. Early entry into work is also seen by some community and policy elites as protecting school dropouts from exposure to risky 'antisocial' behaviour, which may later spiral into criminality.

Debates around the recently passed Child Labour policy also highlighted the unwillingness of policy elites to challenge the practice. A senior government official argued publicly that it was impossible to eliminate child labour in the short term, because many families survive on their children's incomes. The Child Labour policy is correspondingly tentative on child labour, and is presented as a guideline towards the elimination of child labour that will contain a series of protection measures. Strikingly, moves to eradicate child labour in India have been criticised by NGO staff in Bangladesh as creating vulnerability for poor children.

The essence of this position is that poverty reduction, indeed eradication, is necessary for tackling child labour. Evidence suggests, however, that there are now many developed countries in which child labour was eradicated before poverty was significantly reduced, and that the reduction in the proportion of children working was an important element of gains in the overall level and quality of education, and therefore of the quality of the labour force. (Weiner (1990) cites

Germany, some of the American states, Scotland, Austria and Sweden, as well as Japan, Korea and Taiwan as all having introduced compulsory mass education at moments in their histories when poverty levels were still really high.) In Bangladesh, by contrast, a reasonably well-informed understanding of the constraints on poor households has meant accepting that they may choose to send their children to work early, under their severely constrained choices.

There is, undeniably, many strong reasons to believe that the relationship between poverty and child labour is not one of simple unidirectional causality. Child labour in Bangladesh is not usually the last resort of the very poorest, but a highly conventional and acceptable strategy of (moderate) poor households, in at least some of which there may be under-employed adults. Children work nowadays because there are opportunities for them to do so, and in doing so they may save their household the embarrassment of an adult male undertaking a demeaning job, or the shame of an adult woman having to work outside the home. There is undeniably an attitudinal difference at work here, in which it is possible to find very poor households which invest heavily in their children's education in the hope of a better future alongside less poor households in which the focus is on more immediate returns from working children (BRAC/SCUK 2005; on the quality–quantity trade-off, see Kabeer 2000). Households do not have to take into account society's disapproval or sanctions from education officials if their children fail to enrol or drop out early from school, as society does not disapprove of child labour in general, and education is still viewed as, at best, optional for the poor.

There is a definite gender dimension to the failures to impose strong social sanctions against child labour. Whereas donors and the international community have emphasised girls' education and rights, boys' education and rights as workers have enjoyed less attention. Girls' education has been promoted on maternalist grounds of their roles as mothers and care-givers, but there is a latent sense that education is less worthwhile for poor boys, in a context of high levels of unemployment among educated youth and concerns about political militancy. Early entry into work seems to be seen as absorbing and channelling some of the

frustrations and tensions of poor young men in directions society approves of.

3 Conclusions: why the boys have been left behind

This article has drawn together evidence that suggests that the persistence of child labour reflects less the persistence of poverty – which has declined – than other factors which have affected the terms and value of children's work. Our qualitative research findings were consistent with national statistics suggesting that girls and primary school-aged children are now less likely to be occupied with work than in the past, while for poor boys of secondary school age, work remains routine.

We aimed to explore why boys had been left behind by public policies to expand basic education access. A striking finding was that rising economic opportunity has given working children more options and bargaining power, helping to explain why households and children themselves often opt for the definite advantages of cash over the uncertain and unfamiliar prospects of formal education. The persistence of age-segmented labour markets highlights an area in which public policy has failed to regulate labour markets to protect children against harmful work. Government and civil society have also both failed to send strong signals against the practice of child labour. The research found no new social sanctions against the employment of children: nobody wishes to be accused of hurting the interests of poor children, or of punishing poor parents for decisions to send children to work. This is arguably the most moral position that can be taken in a context in which the family, rather than the state, remains the main guarantor of welfare, particularly in old age (see also Kabeer 2000).

Yet public policy succeeded in the arguably tougher challenge of transforming public attitudes towards girls' education: Bangladesh is one of few poor countries and the only poor Muslim countries in which more girls than boys are in basic education. The gender biases against boys have been noticed, and by 2008 new conditional assistance schemes were being piloted to attract poor boys to secondary school, along the lines of those successfully pioneered for girls. These may have been prompted in part by rising concern among donors and government

that the decline in enrolment among poor boys actually worsened in the 2000s. One suggestion has been that poor boys may have been increasingly drawn to unregistered *madrassahs*, many of which provide substantial support to poor children in the form of accommodation and other incentives to attend.⁷ Part of the motivation behind the discernible shift in policy attitudes towards poor boys may reflect fears that this shift has the potential to train a cohort of religious extremists.

In the absence of stronger state and social sanctions against children's work, significant numbers of children are likely to continue out of school and in harmful work. The political and moral difficulty of challenging such practices is that to do so is to challenge the rights of poor

parents to benefit from their children's current labour at the cost of investments in their future wellbeing. But, as Kabeer (2000) notes, while the wellbeing of poor households is linked to the wellbeing of their children, they are not identical. If economic opportunities for poor boys persist, it seems unlikely that the enhanced attractions of school will succeed in outweighing the benefits of early entry into work. Poor households may gradually become less poor, but in the absence of investment in the skills of their boys, will remain firmly fixed at the bottom of the social ladder. The public policy failure to tackle child labour looks set to ensure that the conditions for deeper inequality, if not necessarily absolute forms of poverty, are transmitted through the generations.

Notes

- 1 Poverty levels have declined modestly since the 1990s; around 40 per cent of the population is now classed as poor, and 25 per cent as extremely poor (BBS 2006). By the end of the 1990s, the school system had expanded to provide places for every primary-aged child, and gender parity had been achieved (CAMPE 1999). At secondary level, enrolment rose from 3 million to 11 million between 1990 and 2000, with enrolment rates higher for girls than boys throughout the 2000s (Al-Samarrai 2008a). The two rounds of the National Child Labour Survey defined child labour differently, making analysis of child labour trends difficult (BBS 2003). Evidence suggests, however, that child (aged 5–14 years) labour force participation declined by 4 per cent between 1995/6 and 2002/3, with most of the decline accounted for by rural areas and the decline in girl child labour (from 15 per cent to less than 9 per cent) (Ali 2006). Education trends support the idea of a growing gender gap: among the poorest, girls' enrolment was one percentage point higher than that of boys in 2000, rising to 7 per cent by 2005 (Al-Samarrai 2008a: 8). The poorest boys aged 11–15 are most likely to be out of school, and children more likely to be out of school if they are in richer areas, presumably because of the opportunities for child labour (*ibid.*: 3).
- 2 Globally, evidence on whether early entry into work leads to the inheritance of poverty is mixed and context-specific. For the poorest, children's work may represent survival or a route out of the most extreme poverty. But while there is little agreement about the long-term effects of children's work, there is some agreement that children's work limits their educational attainment (Harper *et al.* 2003; Bird 2007).
- 3 Discussions with Lamia Rashid (formerly Save the Children UK Bangladesh) and Imran Matin (BRAC Research and Evaluation Division). See also Kabeer (2004) and Ali (2006).
- 4 The study compared practices of child labour in two communities: a poor community in rural Nilphamari and a slum in Dhaka city. The emphasis was on exploring pressures for change in children's employment. Households and businesses were surveyed, and focus group discussions and non-participant observation methods were also used. The research took six months, involving repeated visits and interviews, conducted with the support of research groups involving the children themselves.
- 5 These figures refer to the Net Enrolment Ratio, or the proportion of children of school-going age enrolled, and excludes under- or over-aged children. This is considered a stronger indicator of how the education system is performing than the figures for total enrolment.
- 6 Delap (2001) notes that children's labour substitutes for women's work in Bangladesh, with women withdrawing from the labour force as soon as children are old enough to work.

7 An unpublished report circulated among government and donors in 2006 reviewed the evidence on enrolment, and concluded that some poor boys no longer enrolling in the formal school system for which official data is

available may instead have been enrolling in NGO schools (which mainly enrol girls) or unregistered *madrassahs*, about which no information is available.

References

- Ali, Z. (2006) *Do Child Labourers Come from the Poorest? Evidence from NCLS and 64-Village Census Plus*, PRCPB Working Paper 11, Dhaka: Programme for Research on Chronic Poverty in Bangladesh
- Al-Samarrai, S. (2008a) *Changes in Educational Attainment in Bangladesh, 2000–2005*, background paper for the World Bank Poverty Assessment, Dhaka: World Bank
- Al-Samarrai, S. (2008b) *The Education Sector in Bangladesh: Policy, Financing and Outcomes*, background paper for the World Bank Public Expenditure and Institutional Review, Dhaka: World Bank
- Amin, S.; Quayes, S. and Rives, J.M. (2006) 'Market Work and Household Work as Deterrents to Schooling in Bangladesh', *World Development* 34.7: 1271–86
- Amin, S.; Selim, N. and Kamal Waiz, N. (2006) *Causes and Consequences of Early Marriage in Bangladesh*, background report for Workshop on Programmes and Policies to Prevent Early Marriage, Dhaka: Population Council
- BBS (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics) (2006) *Preliminary Report on the Household and Income Expenditure Survey 2005*, Dhaka: Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics
- BBS (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics) (2003) *Report on National Child Labour Survey 2002–2003*, Dhaka: Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics
- Bird, K. (2007) *The Intergenerational Transmission of Poverty: An Overview*, CPRC Working Paper 99, Manchester: Chronic Poverty Research Centre
- BRAC and SCUK (Save the Children UK) (2005) *Inheriting Extreme Poverty: Household Aspirations, Community Attitudes and Childhood in Northern Bangladesh*, Dhaka: BRAC and Save the Children UK
- CAMPE (Campaign for Popular Education) (2005) *Education Watch 2003-4: Quality with Equity: The Primary Education Agenda*, Dhaka: Campaign for Popular Education
- CAMPE (Campaign for Popular Education) (1999) *Hope not Complacency: State of Primary Education in Bangladesh 1999*, Dhaka: Campaign for Popular Education/University Press
- Delap, E. (2001) 'Economic and Cultural Forces in the Child Labour Debate: Evidence from Urban Bangladesh', *Journal of Development Studies* 37.4: 1–22
- Harper, C.; Marcus, R. and Moore, K. (2003) 'Enduring Poverty and the Conditions of Childhood: Lifecourse and Intergenerational Poverty Transmissions', *World Development* 31.3: 535–54
- Kabeer, N. (2004) *Snakes, Ladders and Traps: Changing Lives and Livelihoods in Rural Bangladesh (1994–2001)*, CPRC Working Paper 50, Manchester: Chronic Poverty Research Centre
- Kabeer, N. (2000) 'Inter-generational Contracts, Demographic Transition and the "Quantity-Quality" Trade-off: Parents, Children and Investing in the Future', *Journal of International Development* 12: 463–82
- Weiner, M. (1990) *The Child and the State in India*, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press