

The Situation of Female Child Domestic Servants in Urban Areas of Bangladesh: A Case Study

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Abstract *Engaging female child domestic servants by well-to-do families is a common phenomenon in Bangladesh, particularly in urban areas. On the basis of a survey, this paper highlights the factors that compel female children to undertake the work, the type of work, the female child workers have to do, and the opinion of parent/guardian and employers about these workers. The paper makes some plausible recommendations to civil society and policy makers for improvement in the situation of these female child domestic servants.*

Introduction

Social norms and economic realities mean that child labour is widely accepted and very common in Bangladesh. Many families rely on the income generated by their children for survival, so child labour is often highly valued. Additionally, employers often prefer to employ children because they are cheaper and considered to be more compliant and obedient than adults. When children are forced to work, they are often denied their rights to education, leisure and play. They are also exposed to situations that make them vulnerable to trafficking, abuse, violence and exploitation. Millions of children are reported not to attend school; however, estimates vary. Among children aged 5-14, about five million, are economically active. "Child labour" is a narrower concept than "working children". According to the International Labour Organisation (Child labour is work that exceeds a minimum number of hours, depending on the age of a child and on the type of work) definition, working children aged 5-17 are 7.4 million, working children aged 5-14 are 4.7 million, child labourers aged 5-17 are 3.2

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million, and 421,000 are child domestic workers in Bangladesh¹. Again BBS report shows there are about 3.2 million child labourers in Bangladesh².

Bangladesh ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1989. There are 54 articles in this chapter for the proper development of children in the context of family, society, economy and politics. The constitution of Bangladesh puts much emphasis on ensuring the rights of children. Article 15 of the constitution recognizes the provision for government help to destitute children as fundamental responsibility of the state. But child situation is not satisfactory. A large number of school- aged children are engaged in the organized and unorganized labour market. More or less they are deprived of their fundamental rights. In Bangladesh the use of child labour is gradually being recognized as a multidimensional social problem.

Kofi A. Annan, a former Secretary General of the United Nations in his statement said that “There is no trust more sacred than the one the world holds with children. There is no duty more important than ensuring that their rights are respected, that their welfare is protected, that their lives are free from fear and want, and that they grow up in peace”(The state of the world children -2000).

Up to what age a human being will be considered as child? There is difference of opinion in this regards. Child related laws of Bangladesh also shows different age limit in this respect. The International Labour Organization Convention-1973 prescribes that the completion of 14th year of age is the minimum requirement of admission of children to employment in least developed countries (ILO-1973). Even though child labour is legally prohibited in Bangladesh, yet it is officially recognized.

Ahmed and Quasem in their study “Child Labour in Bangladesh” conducted in four villages of Bangladesh show that children contribute 22% of total labour supply. Some boys work as much as the adults (261 man-days), but on average girls spend more time in productive work than boys (Ahmed and Quasem-1991).

Helen Rahman in her study-”Situation of child domestic servants” conducted on 224 child domestics from five residential areas of Dhaka city, identified the following crucial reasons for a child to become child domestic, when a child does not have parents or a relative to take care of him/her with the hope that their employers would help them to attain a better future through a better job or through marriage and to support their families economically (Rahman- 1992).

The case study of ten girl child domestics by Momen (1993) narrated patterns of exploitation of children in domestic service in Bangladesh. As the case studies reveal, the working condition of all the 10 respondent children were oppressive and these children were often subjected by unusually long working hour everyday,

16-17 hours, without adequate rest or breaks. The kind of task that they were to perform was not consistent with their age or physical abilities. At the same time it is rather frustrating to note that though the children were rendering a variety of services to their employers, they paid very low wages, as low as TK 50-150 per month. On the other hand, four of them stated that they were not paid any wages at all, but they worked on the basis of “pate-bhatey” literally meaning ‘work in exchange of food’ (Momen -1993).

In our case study ‘child domestics’ or ‘domestic workers’ are defined as children under the age of 15 who work in other people’s households, doing domestic chore, caring for baby and run on errands among other tasks. This case study focuses mainly on the life of child domestics i.e. who work full time in exchange for food, clothing, shelter and sometimes remuneration.

2. Rationale of the study

Domestic service is one of the world’s oldest occupation and one in which female children have traditionally played a part. Though the largest group of female child workers are employed as domestic workers, yet their exact information (daily life, working situation, working period, leisure, place of sleeping, delivered food, payment etc) is out of sight of the society. Their jobs are invisible and belong to the informal labour market, which is unregistered and does not show up in employment statistics. So in small scale we tried to represent the exact information associated with the child domestics. This study will help to assess the situation of female child domestic servants participating in urban areas of Bangladesh.

3. Objectives of the study

The main objective of the study is to identify the situation of female child domestic servants participating in urban areas of Bangladesh. The specific objectives are as follows:-

- To investigate the socio-economic background of the domestic servants.
- To study the factors which compel them to enter the domestic labour force at tender age.
- To know the service condition and working condition of these children.
- To study the life pattern, use of leisure, exploitation, aspiration, job satisfaction etc.

4. Methodology of the study

The study was conducted in Kushtia Town and covered female children who are employed as domestic workers. Forty-two randomly selected samples were interviewed from July to August -2010. Samples were selected from some areas

like Majampur, Courtpara, Thanapara, Kalishankarpur, Pearatala, Aruapara etc. Three sets of structured questionnaire were used to collect information. First one was at child level, to gather information about the work situations and daily lives of working children. The methodology emphasized listening to the children's personal stories. We asked them about their daily activities, their families, their earnings, and how they got their present employment. Second one was on children's parents and the last one was on current employers. Average, percentages, ratios, two-way frequency tables etc were utilized for the analysis.

5. Limitations

Though we attempted to make the study a comprehensive one but there may remain limitations as very small samples were surveyed. In addition, as the sample was randomly selected they might not have represented the information exactly about all the child domestic servants. In most of the cases, employers/housewives were present at the time of interview, which put a mental pressure on the respondents. In some cases, they insisted on answering the questions on behalf of the domestic servants.

6. Findings of the study

6(a) Socio-economic background of the households of female child domestic servants

Among surveyed female child domestic servants, 52.38 had parents, 23.81% had only mothers, and 16.67% had only fathers. Children who had both parents were not so helpless than who had none (Annex table: 1). The average size of the family was not so large and had similarity with the national average of Bangladesh, which was 5.6 persons per household. The average income of the family was comparatively very low. It was only Tk. 3650 per month (Table: 1). Perhaps it was the main reason for compelling their female children to start domestic work so early in life.

In addition to money wage they (domestic servants) are provided with food, clothing, and shelter and in some cases primary treatment.

Annex table: 2 shows the land holding status of the household of the female domestic servants. It shows that 42.86% of households have no lands and 54.76% had homestead only.

The literacy status of the heads of the household of the female domestic servants is shown in annex table: 3. It shows that only 12% of household heads are literate (Primary 10.60% and Secondary 1.40%). Those have knowledge of reading writing and numeric are considered here as literate. But the remaining 88% are

Table 1: Highlights of the survey

No.	Variables	Female Domestic Servants
1	Average age (years)	11.25
2	Average age at which they started domestic work(years)	9.20
3	Education (%)	
	(1) illiterate-	83.33
	(2) literate-(a) Primary	14.28
	(b) Secondary	2.38
4	School going children	9.52
5	Average family size	5.6
6	Major reasons for joining domestic work force so early in life-(%)	
	(1) Poverty-	64.10
	(2) Compelled by guardian-	17.00
	(3) Death / illness of guardian-	7.14
	(4) Father got second marriage and declined to bring up	4.76
	(5) No attitude for learning	0.00
	(6) Others	7.00
7	Average monthly earning (Tk)- (excluding food, cloth and shelter)	255.00
8	Average family income (Tk)-	3650.00
9	People with whom they live (%)	
	(a) Parents-	14.00
	(b) Employers-	79.00
	(c) Relatives-	7.00
	(d) Others-	-
10	Average contribution of domestic child worker to family income (%)	5.24
11	Average No. of working hours-	13.50
12	Availability of weekly holidays (%)	0
13	Dissatisfaction to wage paid (%)	85.72
14	Sleeping place (%)	
	(a) Floor at kitchen-	32.00
	(b) Floor at bedroom-	55.00
	(c) Corridor	9.00
	(d) Others-	4.00
15	Having Mosquito nets (%)	15.00

illiterate who are even unable to write their name. Note that, literate here means those who are able to read and write their name only.

Annex table: 4 provides the information about occupations of the household heads of the domestic servants. It shows that 38.10% (28.57 % Rickshaw/Van puller + 9.53% Small business) of the household heads are engaged in self-activities.

Again, 26.19% household heads are day labour (bidi worker, hotel workers, mason, carpenter etc) and 23.81% are engaged as domestic servants. The highest 28.57% of household heads are engaged as rickshaw van pullers. In maximum cases mother of the children worked as maidservants. The average monthly income of the household heads was not at all satisfactory.

6(b) Different aspects of child domestic servants

The survey highlights indicate that most of the female domestic servants entered the work force at tender age because of dire economic necessity. This is evident from the study of the economic background of the children and their guardians/parents. Here we found that on an average the female children entered the domestic work as early as 9.2 years. At present their average age is 11.25 years. The main reason is that earning is most important to survive in life.

Majority (83.33%) of the female domestic servants were unable to read and write, which meant that they had never been to school nor had been taught at home. Only 9.52% of the domestic servants reported that they were going to school. Here it is very important to mention that most of the school going domestic servants are the employee of university and college teachers.

Although domestic servants have to perform a variety of domestic task within the household but on an average 46% of them reported that they receive a monthly wage of only Tk. 255 per month. But the remaining 54% worked on the basis of "patebhatey" i.e. work in exchange of meals. At the time of interview most of them (78%) told that they are promised an Eid-bonus, which is not fixed. Besides these, an important information was found that a large number of female domestic servants (49%) were engaged with the condition that their employers would arrange their marriage when the time (marriageable age) comes.

This study gives us a fairly good picture of the working conditions of the domestic servants. Generally they have to get up early in the morning (78% before 6 a.m). Most of them brush their teeth with charcoal (63%) and tooth powder (25%) and the remaining 9% uses brush and toothpaste. After washing hands and mouth they have to wash pots and pans. Then they sweep the rooms and help the mistress in preparing breakfast. After preparing breakfast at 8-9 a.m they have to serve breakfast at the dining table for the whole family. We found that 47.53% female servants have to prepare breakfast by themselves but the remaining 52.47% have helped the mistress in preparing breakfast.

About 89% domestic servants told that they have to take breakfast after the completion of all family members, and after breakfast they have to assist the mistress in cooking

lunch. They find out stones from rice and prepare vegetables for cooking. Again they serve lunch for the whole family. After lunch they wash dishes and then eat themselves sitting in the kitchen floor and they sweep the rooms again. Some of them (29%) have to serve tea to the tutor. At 9-10 P.M they serve dinner to the family. Again they wash dishes, clean up everything and eat their own dinner. Then they go to sleep at 10-11 p.m. On an average they work 13-15 hours per day.

From our study it is seen that child domestic workers rarely have a place of their own to sleep. They sleep in any available space, such as kitchen floor (32%) or on the bedroom floor of their employer's children (52%) and even in the corridor. Although all the members of the employer's family use mosquito nets, the domestic servants rarely have any such net. In our study it is found that only 13% of the domestic servants have mosquito nets but the remaining 87% have not, which is clearly a violation of one of the children's rights set out in the CRC (United Nations convention on rights of the children) in 1989 to protect them from anything that is harmful to the children's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development.

Most of the domestic servants have no weekly holiday. Normally on the occasion of Eid-festival they get the opportunity of holidays to meet their parents/guardians and relatives. Watching TV is their only recreational media. In our study 72% respondents reported that they get the opportunity of watching TV, but 21% of them reported that they are deprived of this opportunity and the remaining 7% gave no response (Annex table—8).

Many of the respondents reported that they are locked in the house when the whole family goes somewhere for a few hours. This is a troubling case. If fire or any other problem arises in the room, they would not be able to escape. This was the obvious restriction on the children's personal freedom. This is also a violation of one of the rights of children, —"to freedom of association and to be protected from cruel inhuman degrading treatment", set out in the CRC in 1989.

In response to the question whether they were physically punished or not (in the form of slaps, hair pulling and other abuse), 30.95% respondents admitted that sometimes they were punished, 26.19% respondents said they were not punished, and the remaining 42.86% respondents had no response. Verbal abuse in the form of scolding was apparently common to them.

6(c) Parents/Guardians' views about female child domestic workers

The parents/guardians of the female child domestic servants reported that because of serious poverty they are forced to send their children out to work. In response

to the question why they place their children in domestic employment, we found multiple answers. A part of them (19%) reported that it was to gain a bit of income for the family, 21% of them reported that it was “for a better future” for the child; 16% reported that the main reason was the greater security for the children, which means both economic and social security i.e. security from social hazards of life. The answer of the remaining part (44%) was varied in nature.

The guardians of the domestic servants also reported that because of entering the work force at an early age their children did not get the opportunity to go to school. Thus their life is being spoilt as they are being deprived of education and hence they will have passed their whole life in misery. None of the guardians said that they compelled their children to work because they (child) had no attitude for learning i.e. each and every guardian feels the necessity of education of his or her children.

6(d) Opinion of the employers of female domestic workers

In response to the question why female children were employed as domestic servants, they (employers) stated that female children are more appropriate than the adult to do the domestic works. The employers reported that they were good workers and could do odd jobs. According to their opinion, major reasons for keeping female child labours as domestic servants are:-

- * The female children are comparatively more obedient.
- * They are cheaper to engage.
- * They are hard working.
- * It is easy to train them up.
- * They are better to help their mistress in domestic work.
- * They can look after their crawler child easily.
- * It is easier to provide accommodation facilities to them.

Most of the employers comment that poverty and too many children forced poor families to send their children to work. They also recommended that child labour should be controlled through creation of jobs for poor families, giving financial support to them by Government and spreading information regarding family planning and universal primary education. They also comment that the prevailing “Food for Education” program can play a vital role in reducing the child labour if it is adopted all over the country for a long period of time.

7. Conclusions and recommendations

The poor economic context of Bangladesh has pushed the female children of the poor families to become domestic servants. They are forced to engage in such work for their own survival and to support their families economically. Domestic

service is therefore one of the world's oldest occupation and one in which female children have traditionally played an important part. Within every household a wide variety of domestic tasks need to be undertaken: Cleaning, Laundry, Food preparation, Cooking, Shopping and looking after young children. Typically, there are no specified hours or tasks allocated to them. They do what their employers ask them to do, at any time of the day or night but they get the lowest status and poorest remuneration as compared to all occupations and exploited. On the whole, there is no fixed rate of wages for child labour in the unorganized sector. In a country where more than half of the population live below poverty line, the child labour has significant contribution to family income. Even if we desire, we cannot abolish child labour over night. But in this context it is essential to take an effective plan at national level to fix up their task, working hours and minimum wage level within a very short time.

Therefore we make the following recommendation for gradual improvement in the situation of female child domestic servants:

- * The state, society, parents and international agencies need to play complementary roles in eliminating child labour.
- * A comprehensive national policy on child care, protection and development should be imposed aiming at developing the children as human resource.
- * Domestic servants should be given 2-3 hours off in the middle of the day for School attendance and school hours should be adjusted accordingly.
- * Special community-based, door to door campaigns would be the most effective means for communicating with the households to convince them to allow their domestic servants time off for schooling.
- * They should be protected from economic exploitation and performing any work that interferes with her education or is harmful to her physical, mental, spiritual or social development.
- * They should be provided the freedom of expression and freedom of association.
- * They should have the right to maintain regular contact with their parents.
- * They should be protected from all forms of sexual exploitation and sexual abuse.
- * The goals for "SAARC DECADE OF THE GIRL CHILD" in South Asia should be implemented properly in Bangladesh.
- * Legal protection should be provided so that no employers can hire female child labour for heavy, unkind, and hazardous work, which may hamper their physical and mental health.

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Annex Table 1 : Status of Parents of the domestic servants (alive or dead)

Circumstances	No of domestic servants	Percentage (%)
Father and mother both are alive	22	52.38
Only mother is alive	10	23.81
Only father is alive	07	16.67
None is alive	03	7.14
Total	42	100

Annex Table 2 : Family land holding status of the domestic servants

	servants	
Have no land	18	42.86
Have homestead only	23	54.76
Have cultivable land & homestead	1	2.38
Total	42	100

Annex Table 3 : Literacy status of the heads of household of domestic servants

Literacy status	No of domestic servants	Percentage (%)
Literate	05	11.90
Illiterate	37	88.90
Total	42	100

Annex Table 4 : Occupation of heads of household of the domestic servants

Types of Occupation	No of domestic servants	Percentage (%)
Domestic Servants	10	23.81
Rickshaw/van-Pullers	12	28.57
Day labours	11	26.19
House wives	03	7.15
Small business (tea stall, vegetable shop etc)	04	9.53
Others	02	4.76
Total	42	100

Annex Table 5 : level of education of working Children

Level	No of domestic servants	Percentage (%)
0	35	83.33
I-V	06	14.28
VI and above	01	2.38
Total	42	99.99

Annex Table 6 : No. of brothers and sisters of the domestic servants

Number of Brothers/sisters	No of domestic servants	Percentage (%)
1	04	9.52
2	06	14.29
3	10	23.80
4	06	14.29
5	07	16.67
6	05	11.90
7 and above	04	9.53
Total	42	99.99

Annex Table 7: General happiness of domestic Servants

Variable	No of domestic servants	Percentage (%)
Very happy	00	00
Happy	09	21.43
Not Happy	26	61.90
No response	07	16.67
Total	42	100

* Since most of the cases, at the time of interview, the housewives were present, so the information about happiness may not be represented exactly.

Annex Table 8 : Opportunity to watch TV

Variables	No of domestic servants	Percentage (%)
Get opportunity	28	72
Do not get	9	21
No response	4	7
Total	42	100

Annex Table 9 : Physical Punishment*

Variable	No of domestic servants	Percentage (%)
Absence of Punishment	11	26.19
Presence of Punishment	13	30.95
No Response	18	42.86
Total	42	100.00

*We tried our best to collect exact information about physical punishment but, due to the presence of housewives, the information given by the domestic servants about their punishment may not be accurate.