

# BANGLADESH

*Sanctioned by tradition and encouraged by dire economic necessity, child labour is a serious problem in Bangladesh. Employment of children under the age of 14 has been banned for decades but enforcement remains lax. The Bangladesh Department of Labour Statistics reckons the number of child labourers at about 3 million. Informed observers think the true number is much higher. Children work on the land, pedal rickshaws, and work as domestic servants and in textile mills and garment factories. Efforts to control child labour have been ineffective in large part because «child labour still constitutes a major income source for many families»*

## **The field study - garment manufacture**

This took place at a garment manufacturer in Dhaka, the capital, in collaboration with the Bangladesh Garment Workers' Federation. The factory employs 375 people. About 20% of them (i.e. 75) are child workers. Most of them are girls between the ages of ten and 14. They work from 8 am to 4.45 pm. Their days and hours worked are recorded on an attendance card. A skilled worker earns about 1,800 taka (\$40) a month; unskilled workers can expect 800-900 taka (\$20 - \$22) a month. Payments to child workers, however, are kept secret - it is up to the supervisor.

Legally prescribed workers' benefits are not provided after two years' service. Management says workers prefer to leave after two years so the question of benefits does not arise. Working conditions are sub-normal. Work-spaces are cramped. Ventilation and lighting are bad.

Child workers are resigned to their fate. They re-do their work at the request of the supervisor without protest. They were unwilling to talk to the investigators. When pressed, they complained of eye strain and threats from their supervisors that they might lose their jobs. Except for first aid, no medical service is provided; people seriously injured in accidents at work are given modest pay offs.

## **Like mother, like daughter**

The child-workers' parents usually come from the working class: artisans, tailors, factory and farm workers and hawkers. Some parents, mostly mothers, work in garment factories. About 12-15% of the workforce visited by the investigators were of the same family. Parents are often obliged by their poverty to get their

children to work in the same factory so that they contribute to the family's slender income while being under some parental supervision.

Workers often live close to their factory, often 20-300 metres away; if they lived far away they could not afford the cost of public transport. They often live in roughly made sheds with tin or thatched roofs. In many cases up to six people live in a one-room shed. Sanitary conditions are appalling.

Many homes are subject to the disastrous floods which regularly afflict Bangladesh. The floods destroy homes and spread malaria and diarrhoea. Children are given meagre meals, diminishing their chances of full mental and physical development.

## **No time for growth**

Adult workers are aware that the children need education and access to social services, but reality blocks them. They are tied to their jobs from day to night. They have to concentrate upon making ends meet. However, some people think it is in their interest not to encourage those children who have been to elementary school to seek further education. That would deprive them of a source of income.

This also suits the employers. They get access to child-workers (mostly girls) who are docile and quick with their fingers. They work uninterruptedly without complaint. But the company which allowed a visit by an investigator guiltily insisted on anonymity.

The unions see no way out. They think child labour in the textile industry will remain inevitable in Bangladesh as long

as the country is as poor as it is.

### **The field study - Exploitation by building firms**

Children are also exploited in Bangladesh's construction industry. They are employed especially in stone-breaking in the quarries on the outskirts of Dhaka. No serious statistics are available but about 30% of construction workers are reckoned to be children. Large numbers of construction workers are employed by sub-contractors, whose wages are much lower than those of the contractors.

The field study was conducted at building sites in the Narayanganj district, 12 kms (seven miles) from Dhaka. Children from the ages of seven to 16, of both sexes, were found working there. In one case the investigators found a five-year-old at work.

The child-workers are placed around heaps of stones, where they have to break 80-100 sq feet of stones per week, or ten sq feet a day. Sub-contracts last a week as a minimum, and workers earn about 40 taka a day. With that money they have to buy essential equipment: a hammer (costing about 80-85 taka); an umbrella (as a shield from the sun); a water-can (for drinking water); and rubber gloves (to protect their hands).

### **Eleven-hour working day**

The working day starts at 7 am and can continue, says the sub-contractor, until 10 pm if the stone-breakers (working on piece rates) have the energy to continue. Eye injuries, from flying stone chips, are frequent. No treatment apart from first aid is available. Asked why he did not demand it, a worker replied with resignation: "Allah will save us.

The sub-contractors do supply workers with one-room shacks. However these have no running water, electricity or ventilation. Unmarried people can live in separate huts. Latrines are rudimentary.

The employers say they are helping the workers by giving jobs to them and their children. Their approach, they say, is an "act of charity". "The workers are, they say, grateful. How else, ask the employers, would some of these men with their large families eke out a living?

The workers seem to be ignorant of family planning and are convinced that they should have large families - their "real assets" - in order to assure themselves of care and protection in old age. However, too many children too often creates an unbearable family burden.

The field study concludes that "the potential for trade union action in the building sector is bleak, due to the ignorance of the workers, the attitude of the employers (who often do not allow organisers to visit their sites) and the dismal conditions of life."

### **The Field study - Exploitation in commerce**

The field study covered the Dhaka Azimpur Government New Market, where the workforce of 1,398 includes 466 child workers, almost all of them boys. Disregarding the law which states that shops may open only for eight hours a day, many of the markets' 460 shops remain open for 12 hours.

Children are paid monthly. The lowest wage is 200 taka a month and the highest 400 taka. There is no medical insurance or social security. Employment is temporary; workers may be fired by employers whenever they like.

The field study concluded: "According to the Azimpur Government New Market Employees' Union, child labour is a reality that is hard to eradicate. Laws cannot do much in view of the grinding poverty that compels parents to send children to work>>.