

Sajjad Sharif

You all know that today is World Day Against Child Labour. We have gathered here to discuss the critical situation of child labour in the context of Bangladesh and to find out means to gradually overcome this issue which is a serious injustice on humanity. We all know and accept that child labour is a breach on humanity. However this realization is rather recent. People started to take note of this phenomenon only since last decade. Globally, the child labour situation is extremely grave, particularly in Africa and Asia, and especially in Bangladesh. If we want to have a child labour free Bangladesh then we have a long way to go. A lot of planning is required to undertake activities to eliminate child labour from Bangladesh. But for that we need to plan and implement programmes. We know that in Bangladesh an estimated 1.3 million children are engaged in hazardous work, and if we visualise the faces of these children then the situation is really frightening. What is most unfortunate is that these 1.3 million children have become lost in extreme neglect.

We have seen that the developed countries have successfully and quickly brought the child labour issue under control by utilising their wealth and other resources. On the other hand developing countries like Bangladesh have resource limitations as well as many other priorities. Besides we also lack foresightedness and proper planning that are needed to handle such a grave problem. It is simply untenable to achieve national development if we go on suppressing a large section of our citizens through child labour. We must give serious thought to this problem. We will have to find out what we can do about it and which course we should take and that is precisely why we have gathered here today. Let us first hear from the ILO's Director, Mr. Gopal Bhattacharya.

Gopal Bhattacharya

You are aware that the Government of Bangladesh ratified ILO Convention no.182 in 2001. This shows the Government's willingness to prevent and eliminate child labour. The Prime Minister has also shown seriousness regarding these issues as has everybody else. The ILO has been working on the prevention of child labour in Bangladesh since 1995 and over the years have gained much insight and learnings on the issue. We have identified that unless parents are not motivated on the importance of education they will continue to send their children to work. If the children can be engaged into education, especially in primary education, they will not want to leave their studies and in that case their parents will also not force them to go for work.

Any effective measure for preventing child labour should be a continuous process. Policy makers at all levels will have to be conscious of the long term negative effect of child labour. The ILO, with its experiences along with various social organizations, the employers, workers, the Government, civil society, NGOs and development activists are initiating a time bound program to prevent child labour. We hope we will be able to launch the program in January 2007. The European Union, DFID, the Embassies of the Netherlands, Denmark and Norway, USAID and other aid agencies are assisting us in our efforts to stop child labour.

Sajjad Sharif

Now we will take part in the main discussion with the aid of a Power Point presentation. I now request Mr Abdul Hai Mandal, Senior Research Fellow, BIDS to make his presentation.

Abdul Hai Mandal

We are aware that the United Nations Child Rights Convention was adopted in 1989 and it came into effect in 1990. The declaration speaks of four types of child rights—the right to survive, the right to develop, the right to save themselves from the harmful influence and exploitation and the right to take part in social life and familial culture. These rights have critical influences on the grooming of humanity as well as development of child labour situation. The principle focus of CRC is indiscriminate, highest facilities, widest rehabilitation and development opportunities and finally the participation of the children. Along with CRC, ILO Convention -138 also speaks of minimum ages and child labour. The main aim of the Convention -138 is development in the overall situation of child labour. But it would take time and that is where the problem lies as children cannot afford to wait for implementation of long-term plans for them to overcome this inhuman condition. Again it will encourage Worst Forms of Child Labour (WFCL) through steps adopted at the national and international level.

ILO Convention-182 is the fruit of this concern. Convention-182 is pledge bound in scripting the national working policy to end child labour. All types of labour have been included in the WFCL. Issues like engaging girl children into prostitution and pornography have also been mentioned here. It also states about pushing children towards drug abuse or using them as drug peddlers, which can prove disastrous for the children's health and life.

Now, let us take a close look at the child labour situation in Bangladesh. Article 17 of our constitution speaks of mandatory primary education for all children free of cost. Article 34.1 states about eliminating all sorts of imposed labour, especially child labour and demands that care be taken of the children's health if needed. The Bangladesh Government scripted CRC in 1991 and Convention-182 in 2001. Convention-138 is yet to be ratified. National Policy on Child Labour (draft) 2002 says child labour deprives the children of their basic rights and hinders their proper physical and mental growth. The short-term objectives of this policy are, firstly, preventing child labour within a certain period; secondly constituting a necessary framework for ending the child labour menace; and thirdly, saving the children from all sorts of exploitation. The long-term objective of the policy is eliminating all sorts of child labour. PRSP is against child labour and strictly denounces children's involvement in hazardous job. Its position is also clear on the issues like subjecting children to sexual harassment and drug peddling. The PRSP advocates an education system where working children will have scope to earn besides getting education.

The CRC identifies child labour as a serious problem and talks about special protection for children. It also sets some goals for preventing children from getting engaged in high risk jobs and stopping child labour. It is however not clear what the Government means by the first of the two programmes as it is yet to be announced officially.

The challenge is now before all of us to identify child labour as a national issue. Child labour is like misusing human resources that is merely half developed, which hampers national progress. Here, the concept of the policymakers also needs to be changed. They often fail to understand that child labour instead of helping reduce poverty actually impedes poverty alleviation.

It is becoming difficult to keep check on rising number of children getting engaged in work. Continuous inclusion of the children into the workforce and relatively poor achievement in disengaging or preventing children from work are the reasons for that. Besides, a large number of children are still engaged in high-risk jobs.

Shafiqur Rahman Majumdar

Since Mr. Gopal Bhattacharya joined as the Director of the ILO a lot of seminars and symposiums have been arranged on the issue of child labour. Many people say we have made great progress in this field. I believe this is all propaganda. Just make a visit to places like Rampura, Postogola, Demra, Tangi, Basabo, Mirpur and you will see the situation of child labour. A child has to carry weight that is almost equal to his own weight. All these initiatives you are talking about exist only on papers. There has also been little effort on the part of the government to redress this problem. It is not enough if only the civil society worries about the problem, the mass people will also have to be made conscious of this. Along with the civil society, the writers, the intellectuals, the teachers, the farmers, the labourers and people from all walks of life will also have to think how these working children can be brought into the school and how they can be provided with job-related education.

Sajjad Sharif

Now we will hear from the Secretary, Ministry of Labour and Employment, Mr. Syed Sujauddin Ahmed. The Government apart from its own projects on child labour is also involved with various projects with the ILO. Meanwhile, the National Child Labour Policy has already been drafted and we would request the Secretary to shed lights on the policy, which is going to be finalised soon.

Syed Sujauddin Ahmed

The Government has passed several laws regarding child labour. Whether these laws are being implemented or not is a different issue. We have disagreement about the ILO Convention -138 in one aspect, the age limit for children, which ILO sets at 18. The 18-year limit is not practical in Bangladesh's context. In many cases like in agriculture, 18 is too high. That is why the Government has not ratified the Convention. However we are hoping to reach a kind of understanding with ILO. The Child Labour Policy is in the final stage. We are expecting to send the draft to the parliament very soon.

As you know, children work mostly in the agriculture sector, the government has a food for education programme there. Presently the government perhaps gives money in this programme.

Prothom Alo – ILO Roundtable on the Occasion of the World Day Against Child labour, 12 June 2006

On 12th June 2006, the ILO and Prothom Alo jointly organised a roundtable discussion on "Child Labour and National Development" on the occasion of World Day Against Child Labour. High-level Government officials and representatives of various trade unions, employers' groups, civil society organisations and NGOs participated in the discussion. The following is a summary of the key issues discussed:



In the grassroots level the participation of children in the primary education is more than 85% now. But then there is dropout problem. Specially, after class-V the rate of dropout increases alarmingly and it happens mainly for economic reasons. One great achievement we have made in this area is that we have succeeded to eliminate child labour in the garment industry. But it was comparatively a safer sector for child worker. Our success in the real risky sectors like in the transport, welding, battery, bidi, ship breaking sector is very little. The problem is the issue of child labour is directly related to livelihood. Policies won't be of much help when one is hungry.

Syed Manzur Elahi

The export-oriented industry has been ridden of child labour, not just in the garment industry, but also in other sectors as well. I am directly involved with the leather industry. There we cannot engage children into work as it is a requirement of the export policy. We also have to display a notice regarding it. I can say that in the garment sector 70 to 80% child labour has been eliminated.

I was reading a news about an eight-year old child working in the bidi factory that his entire family depended on his earnings. You tell me what will you do in this case? So if there is no alternative and if poverty alleviation is not done then the situation becomes different. You all probably know that 100 to 150 years ago the condition of the western world was also similar. As they have been able to alleviate poverty this condition is no more prevailing there. So I have got suspicion regarding how much can be achieved applying the law.

The economists say that if there is GDP growth of more than 7% then with every 2% GDP growth 1% poverty alleviation occurs. If you can increase GDP rate then poverty will decrease. But how much the figures come in reality, I do not know about that. So as we have 1,300,000 to 1,400,000 child labours, what should be done with them is a great problem for both the government and the employers' part. Although in the formal sector the problem has been solved to a great extent but the informal sector remains a huge challenge.

Zafur Hasan

We don't know about the condition of the trade unions of our country properly. I think the general idea about it is either hazy or negative but not clear. In our country trade unions are regulated by the Industrial Relations Ordinance. The Ordinance specifically mentions the requirements and conditions for forming trade unions. Not only the child labour of the country, but the adult labour also can not form a trade union just if they wish to. This is a legal problem for trade unions. I want to say that overall as there is a negative attitude towards trade union the labourers are facing difficulties regarding this. Most of the child labours have come from labour families. The labourers have got their direct interest in this regard. Because the more child labour are engaged the more adult labour will face scarcity of work.

So if we can create an environment without child labour then it will be good for both the overall development of the country and also the families of the labourers. It is incorrect that we are doing nothing by trade union. You might have observed that we have combined 13 labour organisations and have developed BILS, Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies. Out of this we are running some informal schools and the output of this is great. We have decided to expand it.

Dr. Rushidan Islam Rahman

Our success is also great. For example during the period between 1991 to 2003 the rate of child labour decreased. In 1991 it was 19.3% and in 2003 it became 13.4%. It has decreased more in terms of girls than in terms of boys. In the formal sector child labour has decreased up to 40%. In the informal sector this is 23%. It is a bit tough to decrease it in the informal sector as they are spread out in different places.

Because of child labour literacy rate is decreasing. These children will turn into unskilled labourers when they grow up and they will not be aware about themselves. So, on the whole it will perpetuate poverty and hamper the achievement of targeted national development. And as a solution to this I will mention some specific things. For example if the children once give up studies and enter into occupation then it is almost impossible to train them up. So to stop child labour one great way is to engage them in school or in training. In order to do so those children who are not interested in general education should be enrolled in vocational training.

The training centres that are in the government sector, there many children can not enter because of education barriers. Arrangement has to be made so that they can participate in this sort of training under special consideration. At present the activities that ILO and other organisations have taken are appreciable and these will have to continue.

Sazzad Sharif

We will now go to Rasheda K Chowdhury. She is an activist of mass literacy movement. Education is a great way to remove child labour. To make them competent for future by making them skilled through education is a great concern and non-formal education has a major role in this regard. Rasheda K Chowdhury will talk about these things.

Rasheda K Chowdhury

In the beginning we should clarify one thing that in the context of our country it is probably not possible to stop all forms of child labour very soon. So we are giving emphasis on hazardous child labour. If I start with this then it may be easy to understand. About hazardous child labour I want to mention that we never raise the issue of small girls engaged in prostitution. You will not need to go

too far. If you just go to Daulatdia that you will see that so many 12 to 17 years old children are engaged in this work and are leading a miserable life. Neither the ILO nor the Government think or talk about them.

Our Secretary has said something which I do not agree with. Ms. Rushidan said that poverty is not the only reason for this. Education is necessary which is a basic need for a human being. I have seen that even the poor people also want their children to be educated. We have seen how much it has increased through the primary and mass education by the help of the Government. But we are not being able to stick to it. And it is not because of poverty. The schools are also not providing education properly. In the textbooks of class-I, 1,600 words have been used whereas texts meant for children of similar age group do not have more than 500 to 600 words in the developed countries.

If we expect a child studying in class-I will learn 1,600 words this is tantamount to torturing the child. Child labour is not the creation of poverty alone, there are many other factors at least in our country.

Selina Akhter

You certainly know that the Government has already prepared a comprehensive plan for poverty alleviation. The children's issues have also been included here with great significance. Matters related to the development, education, health of children are also included here. The child labour issue can be found under the titles "Protect against abuse, exploitation and violence". Some 16 goals have been included under these titles and matters related to child labour are there in almost all the goals. The ILO Convention-182 is also mentioned here significantly.

Shafiqul Islam

If you look at the series of features the Prothom Alo printed over the last few days you will find some important information, for example regarding the formal and informal sectors. We can easily identify the formal sectors but what about the informal sector where thousands of children are working? Have we been able to reach them?

Another point I would like to raise is that we are concentrating on the cities alone like Dhaka, Chittagong, Khulna. But if you go to Barisal you will see so many children are doing very risky jobs in places like the launch terminal. We have talked a lot about the ship breaking yard, especially about the terrible environment over there. But no one really talk about child labour there. I think we need to have a much broader approach and all of us will have to work together to tackle the problem of child labour.

Masud Ahmed

While the child labour problem needs to be solved, we will have to think about the children who live in the street. These children do work, which are often very hazardous, to earn their bread. They simply do not have any option left to them. Away from their families and no one to take care of them, they live a miserable life. We, through our ARISE project, at first provide secured accommodation for them. Then we try to make them leave the hazardous work and try to engage them in some alternative occupations that are relatively safer.

Abul Bashar

When ILO came forward with this issue they made an agreement to stop child labour in garments industry. Gradually it turned into a movement. Since then information as to how many children work in which sectors, and what can be done to rescue these children from work started to come up. People at present are much more aware of the child labour issue. Everybody says that poverty is responsible for child labour but poverty alone is not responsible. Motivation is also a big factor. We do not have that much poverty any more. Mass awareness is needed to end malice called child labour.

Md Abdul Jalil Mia

From the perspective of our country it will not be possible to stop child labour by the application of law alone. We made laws and regulations relating to children, but they stayed on papers and were not executed. Mr. Manzur Elahi said that the condition was same in the west about 100 years ago. He perhaps wanted to mean that it is mainly poverty that pushes children to work. Rasheda K Chowdhury however disagreed. I support her views. She is right when she said lack of awareness is mainly responsible for the ever-exasperating situation in case of child labour. So we must pay greater attention to this necessity.

Abul Haseeb Khan

We have been working with the help of funding from the Dutch Government to prevent hazardous child labour in the informal economy of Dhaka city for last 4 years. Specially the children and parents who are socially and economically vulnerable are our targets. We have gained some experiences in the midst of a lot of darkness. Our experience shows that 80% of the children that we have been working with have got relieved of this problem. Our experience is that if they can be inspired properly then it is possible. We will have to inspire everybody. In this case, if it is possible to bring development in social and personal relationship, then we can get emancipation from hazardous child labour. But we get scared when we find some very reverent people in important positions talking frustratingly about the whole issue. When they say, "it is not at all possible", they will not tell the right thing. It is possible to stop child labour but there will have to be a firm commitment for that.

Shamima Siddiky

It is already mentioned in today's discussion that children are forced to work because of poverty and are deprived from their right to education. As a result, the children who are never enrolled do not get the opportunity to acquire literacy, numeracy and life skills to become productive citizens and in turn cannot get out of the vicious circle of poverty. We all know that the child labour situation in Bangladesh is quite alarming. But we are hopeful because the

Bangladesh Government has recognised the problem and is taking actions for gradual elimination of child labour from the country. UNICEF has been providing technical and financial support to the Bangladesh Government to provide non-formal basic education to urban working children in six divisional cities through its Basic Education for Hard to Reach Urban Working Children Project. Several NGOs and development partners are also playing active role in addressing the issue.

Shamima Ahmed

The children of 6 to 9 years of age are not getting education. When I hear about lack of access I do not understand, because there is no scope to say that the existing number of schools cannot accommodate the children that are willing to get enrolled. There are 82,000 schools in the rural areas, of which 37,671 are government schools and 20,000 are non-registered government schools. So this is not true that getting access is a problem.

Anwarul Haq

Once I used to work for the City Corporation I found that all the City Corporations had a project called slum development. A lot of work used to be done in the infrastructure level, specially in education sector, under the project. I am talking about a time about 7 to 8 years back. Those projects are still going on. I think there should not be any problem regarding infrastructure facilities.

Actually, we will not be able to remove child labour completely. But, as it has been mentioned by Rasheda Chowdhury that if we can stop hazardous child labour then we will be able to be successful to a great extent. We will have to therefore focus on that. If the informal sector along with the formal one can be brought under this, then we will be able to get rid of child labour to a large extent. In non formal sector too a large population is being deprived of education facility. For this we had TLM program. Under this programme we saw how we can assimilate an illiterate boy into the mainstream education system. There are many child labourers who after getting up in the morning do not think of education, but think of earning their bread. So, to make non-formal education more effective, we can think of incorporating technical training into it.

MA Baset

There are about two crore and 24 lakh children between the 5-17 age group in the country. What will we do with them? 91,00,000 of those children do not go to school. To bring these 9,100,000 children to schools, to keep them occupied in the school or some other vocational training until he is 17 and then arrange jobs for them appear to be an almost impossible task. But then, a lot of people are working on it. All sorts of project are being taken up. But when it comes to numbers these are in thousands – 10,590 under 84 multipurpose centers, two lakh in a project that will last five years, which means 40,000 a year. We are talking in terms of thousands while there are lakhs of children who are involved in work. But then we must go on, even if our achievement comes in terms of thousands.

According to the ILO those aged under 18 are children. In Bangladesh's perspective, sometimes this is a problem. You see, in the garments sector, we provide a lot of jobs in the garment sectors. And if ILO allows to bring the age limit for children down to 15 instead of 18 we can employ a sizeable chunk of those between 15-18 age group into the garment sector. One great benefit of this arrangement will be a large number of those children (as ILO now defines) will then be able save themselves from hazardous jobs. Jobs in the garment factories are considered relatively safe.

Kazi Saifuddin Ahmed

I am sorry but I did not understand how the paper titled "Child Labour and National Development" presented here is related to today's topic. If this were discussed then it would be better. Many people say that nothing will be done applying law. But I do not believe it. Nothing can go on without law. It will not be possible to stop child labour with only advocacy and consciousness. But in the work that ILO is doing along with different NGOs is playing a vital role. The Ministry of Labour and Employment is also playing a key role by the steering committee in this regard. The other ministries like Ministry of Education, Ministry of Women and Children Affairs, Ministry of Social Welfare are also working. The consciousness level has developed in this regard.

Because of poverty it will not be possible to abolish child labour—is not right. We will have to try to eliminate poverty as well as to abolish child labour. It has been found that by the change of mentality of some of the people child labour was stopped. For this advocacy program must be kept in vogue. Along with it economic development is also necessary.

Asma Huda Bably

To eradicate child labour I want to talk about primary education. If we look at Dhaka city then we will see that there is very little number of primary schools. There are mostly kindergarten schools in this city. But the children who live in slums do not get opportunity to go to primary schools. There may be primary schools in the villages but there is no teacher training about how the students should be treated. These things will have to be taken into consideration. I am telling these things from my personal experience.

Kartik Chandra Mandal

In the beginning I was hearing that nothing will be achieved by the help of law because there are many laws which are not being effective. It seems as if there is a policy then it will be implemented. But this is not at all true that only if there is policy then it will be implemented. To implement policy, political accountability is necessary. It seems to me that there is lack of political accountability in our country. To make the politicians aware I would request the political leaders and parliament members to arrange this sort of programmes. There are steps in the formal sector but there is no monitoring mechanism for informal sector.

Discussants:

Syed Sujauddin Ahmed
Secretary, Ministry of Labour and Employment

Syed Manzur Elahi
President, Bangladesh Employers' Federation

Zafur Hasan
General Secretary, Jatiotabadi Shromik Dal

Gopal Bhattacharya
Director, International Labour Organisation, Dhaka

Abdul Hye Mondol
Senior Research Fellow, BIDS

Shafiqur Rahman Mazumder
President, Jatio Shromik Federation

Rasheda K. Chowdhury
Director, CAMPE

Dr. Rushidan Islam Rahman
Director, Research – BIDS

M. A. Baset
Director, BKMEA

Abul Haseeb Khan
Director, Resource Integration Center

Shafiqul Islam
Director, Program, Dhaka Ahsania Mission

Shamima Siddique
Project Officer, UNICEF Bangladesh

Abul Bashar
President, Jatio Shromik Federation

Kazi Saifuddin Ahmed
Labour Adviser, Bangladesh Employers' Federation

Anwarul Hoque
Deputy Secretary, Ministry of Labour and Employment

Md. Abdul Jalil Miah
Deputy Secretary, Ministry of Women and Children Affairs

Shamima Ahmed
Deputy Secretary, Ministry of Primary and Mass Education

Selina Akhter
Senior Assistant Chief, Planning Commission

Masud Ahmed
Project Director, ARISE

Kartik Chandra Mondol
Programme Manager, Manuser Jonno Foundation

Asma Huda Bably
Manobik Sahajoyi Songstha

Abdul Khalek
Deputy Director and TBP Coordinator, Directorate of Labour

Rafiqul Islam Sarker
Programme Officer, Save the Children UK

Moderator:

Sajjad Sharif
Deputy Editor, The Daily Prothom Alo

Abdul Khalek

In various discussions and in newspapers we generally identify poverty as the most prominent problem. This poverty hides all the other reasons. The person who presenting this paper today, he also has mentioned that poverty is not the only reason. Although poverty gives birth to child labour and child labour gives birth to poverty. But we know that there are many more reasons than this. Those reasons are under our limit. By the help of proper planning we can be able to solve the problem of hazardous child labour.

The issue of lack of awareness on the part of the parents has also come under discussion here. The job opportunities are also very limited. Now if a child knows that he won't get any job even after he completes his studies why would he bother to go to school? For a child this the better option is to get into the job right now. Again, a large number of students who have even completed studies up to Honours level, do not really learn anything. The only thing they achieve is the certificate. Consequently they are not getting any jobs after they finish their studies. This frustration not only affects the victim, but parents and children alike in the families also get frustrated over the matter. The scope of legal intervention is there but that too for child labour in the formal sector. It is there in the law that no child under 14 can work in the factories. But we are being able to do anything in the informal sector where about 95-96% of the working children are engaged.

Rafiqul Islam Sarker

Everybody here have been discussing that awareness raising is a key strategy to prevent child labour. This is indeed very true. We have so far been unable to highlight the child labour issue within the society. If you approach the father of a child labourer he will not consider it as a major problem. If you ask a child engaged in WFCL whether his work is hazardous he will say 'No'. Most people involved in engaging or working as child labourers do not consider it a problem as the effects of hazardous child labour are 'invisible'. Therefore, in order to overcome this problem we need to highlight child labour as a social problem. The EPI campaign has been very successful only because its necessity was well highlighted at the grassroots level. In the same way we must also highlight the fact that child labour hinders a child's mental, physical and social development.

Sajjad Sharif

We have almost reached the closing point of the discussion. Now I would request Mr Gopal Bhattacharya to make his concluding remarks in the light of today's discussion.

Gopal Bhattacharya

We will have to reconsider a few important aspects of the child labour issue. Ms. Rasheda K Chowdhury said that the focus should be narrowed down. I believe this is a very important point. In the ILO we are concentrating our focus on hazardous child labour.

The honourable Secretary said the Government has almost completed the task of framing the national child labour policy. The sooner it is done is better. The Labour Ministry however told me that it is not possible to finalise and approve the Child Labour Policy very quickly. But I believe it is not very important how many children are there. The problem is so massive that it requires involvement of all. The dropout problem also needs serious and immediate attention. Someone else said the private public partnership needs to be strengthened.

I mentioned a particular point in the very beginning. You will have to do everything that you feel like doing when you come across the wretched state the working children are in. Otherwise, we won't simply be able to attain the goal we have set. Again, we will have to seriously consider the proposals relating to child monitoring and child health.

Before concluding my speech I would like to mention one issue. One of the participants said in the context of Bangladesh a child's maximum age should be 15 while the ILO has set the ceiling at 18. But, at the same time the ILO has also mentioned the types of work 14-year olds can do. But if you are thinking of bringing in child labour into the formal sector by amending the law, I would say that will be imprudent on your part. We will have to change our approach. We will have to ensure everybody's participation.

Sajjad Sharif

We have had a very exciting discussion. A lot of important issues have been raised. A lot of good suggestions have also been made regarding what we can do about child labour and how. We will certainly pay attention to those suggestions. Finally I want to thank you all on the part of the ILO and Prothom Alo. Thank you.