

WORLD DAY AGAINST CHILD LABOUR

Prolonged school closures to have repercussions on child protection

UNICEF Bangladesh's Chief of Child Protection, Natalie McCauley, speaks to Afia Jahin of The Daily Star about what drives child labour and how Bangladesh can combat—and eventually eliminate—it, in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic has undone a lot of progress towards ending child labour, globally. What can Bangladesh do to recover some of that progress?

We do have a lot of legislative measures in Bangladesh, but there still need to be reforms in terms of defining the age of the child that is consistent with the Children Act 2013 on the rights of the child. The labour law in 2006 focuses more on formal sectors, while children are mainly engaged in non-formal sectors, so that needs to be brought under the legal system. The government-issued circulars of engagement of children in hazardous labour lists 38 different categories of jobs involving hazardous labour. I think we need to simplify this system. There's also a huge gap in the child protection system and we need to strengthen the social service workforce so that families have access to social workers and can prevent the push and pull factors that lead these children into hazardous labour or to being on the streets.

Domestic labour of children is still widespread but often overlooked. What can be done to stop this form of child labour?

In the domestic sphere, it is mostly girls being employed and there is no regulatory framework to oppose this, because in this particular category of "domestic labour" there is no required minimum age, no fixed payment or working hours, and no union to protect these workers. These children also don't have access to education unless the employer takes initiative for it. Various studies have shown that this is a hazardous form of child labour and it is very risky for children. Many of these child domestic workers, particularly the girls, are experiencing high levels of violence, abuse and exploitation. If they are not compliant they face violence, including corporal punishment, sexual violence and even rape. The government has adopted the Domestic Worker Protection and Welfare Policy 2015, but it does not list it as hazardous work.

Many families send their children to domestic work, mostly due to poverty, but there is also a lack of awareness about the

impact on children of this work. We need to be doing much larger awareness campaigns, strengthening our social protection support (such as cash for families that are in certain levels of poverty), and we need to be ensuring that children are going to school. We also need to empower girls with life skills and other employability skills so that this is not their only option to get out of poverty. You can really understand why a family would think this is the best option because the assumption is that, in that environment, they will be protected. Awareness campaigns can make people understand that this has a lifelong impact on children and they do miss out on other skill sets that would enable them to help their families to get out of poverty. Otherwise, it creates a cycle where they just stay where they are, which is very dangerous.

What are the main challenges when it comes to implementing awareness campaigns about child labour and combatting it on a large scale?

I think we are lucky that there are government counterparts in Bangladesh that are really committed to the cause. UNICEF works with the Ministry of Social Welfare (MSW) and the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs (MOWCA) on strengthening the child protection and the social service systems. We are looking into how we can expand them, but it needs to be a national approach so that every location can have a social worker. At the moment, there are just over 3,500 government social workers and we need around 100,000 if we are going to reach about 68,000 villages across the country, where social/community workers can work at the grassroots levels to prevent much of the damage caused by hazardous child labour.

Unfortunately due to Covid-19, children have been out of school for a long time and it is easier now for them to be pushed into the workforce. I think being out of school for such a long time is going to have a really big impact on their protection, which we will have to deal with. We also need to make sure we have a child responsive social protection system for children who are very vulnerable. Their



Natalie McCauley

families are supposedly receiving cash grants, but we need to ensure that the most vulnerable families are getting them so their children are protected from being pushed into dangerous labour and can eventually go back to school.

Do you think the proposed FY2021-22 budget allocations put enough emphasis on protecting children from child labour?

It is never enough. In any country, this area is not funded to the extent that we would want. But the good thing is that it has at least been more prioritised with time, and it's really great progress that it has started to increase. People are starting to see that not supporting child protection will have long-term development impacts on the country. The outcomes for child labourers will be far more negative and this will cost the country a lot more money when they are in adulthood. The cost of that in percentage of the GDP is much higher than people would imagine. Child protection has to be more than social protection or cash transfer. We have to look at a more systemic approach on how to increase the social service workforce to physically work with families and communities to shift their thinking regarding child labour. However, the recent budget does

not reflect that. There has not been a massive increase in social workers, for example.

In view of the pandemic, how likely do you think it is that the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) target 8.7 of ending all forms of child labour by 2025 will be achieved?

I think it is definitely achievable in Bangladesh because there is a lot of commitment within the MSW and MOWCA towards these SDGs, and we are looking into how we can extend these systems down to the grassroots levels. At the moment, UNICEF has a partnership with the Department of Social Services to create evidence and formulate policies, strategies and legal measures to make the Children Act 2013 more effective, and this includes ensuring the Act has a budget attached to it as soon as possible. They are also very supportive in strengthening the social service workforce. Last year, social workers took over 180,000 calls on the child helpline, which is four times the number of calls they would usually take in a year. This was not only due to the support of UNICEF but also through the government's commitment to not let any child's call go unanswered. I feel very positive about Bangladesh achieving this target also because the government is always open to any creative solutions that we come up with. The child protection service hubs we put up on streets in various cities (with the DSS and MOWCA) last year attracted thousands of children, many of whom were reunited with their families and taken back home because they had access to help from social workers in the hubs.

What factors do you think drove child labour during the pandemic?

One of the main driving factors was that children were not in school and also did not have access to digital devices (and to online opportunities for education). A lot of people lost their jobs and families were struggling, so they would take any option to earn money and sometimes that would have to be through their children. I do think not having a child protection system that works at the grassroots levels impacts whether someone can intervene. Families resort to child labour due to desperation and not many options

being available to them. They are trying as hard as they can to survive and no one should judge them for that. I have been doing child protection for nearly 25 years now and I have never really met families that want to hurt their children. It's always because they don't know any better. They are always looking for options for survival for their children and for themselves. That is why the help of even one social worker, which does not cost a lot of money, can save a life or change a family's trajectory. What was very helpful during the lockdown was the government recognising these social workers as being essential, which allowed them to continue working during that time.

In general, what areas must Bangladesh work on first and foremost to eliminate the worst forms of child labour?

We have to first look into the industries that produce these kinds of labour. There needs to be a multi-sectoral approach, with the justice, social service and health systems involved. In Bangladesh, though people do not want to talk about it because of how horrifying it is, there is sexual exploitation and abuse of children in child labour. We have to create systems that can respond to this. We have to look at some of the jobs which are not traditionally in the lists of hazardous forms of child labour and try to minimise those as well. It comes down to awareness-building, having people understand the negative long-term impacts on children of child labour, and the need to have a child protection system that reaches the grassroots level—which we don't have here yet. The Children Act 2013 is a really important piece of legislation, but it doesn't have agreed rules or a budget attached to it yet, which has hindered its implementation. We're working with the government now to try and overcome that, which is essential in protecting children. But I really want it to go across that, I've worked in many countries around the world, and the government workers I've worked with here really are committed and they really care. So what we need to do now is to match that with a budget, and we can definitely change the world in the next few years.

Myanmar conflict may bring ethnic groups together



MOKBUL MORSHED AHMAD

WITH the February 2021

military coup, Myanmar once again hit global media headlines. While the military junta continues to clamp down on pro-democracy protestors and the country is wracked with conflict and unrest, how will the changing political situation affect the Rohingya community in Bangladesh and in Rakhine State in Myanmar?

More than one-third of Myanmar's population is composed of ethnic minorities, who inhabit a vast frontier where the country's natural resources are concentrated. They have staged periodic insurgencies against the military, which has ruled the country for most of the past six decades. The National League for Democracy (NLD) is the only nationally popular political force in Myanmar, but it has a recent history of turning a blind eye to the persecution of ethnic minorities, especially in Rakhine. Although the party won a landslide re-election in November 2020, more than one million members of ethnic minorities were disenfranchised during the vote. The British, who colonised what was then known as Burma, called the country "a zone of racial instability".

In Rakhine State, formerly known as Arakan State, there are two major ethnicities: Rakhine Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims. In 2014, it was estimated that 35.1 percent were Muslim Rohingyas and 63.3 percent were Buddhist, with the rest of the state's

population belonging to other religions. Conflict in the area is rooted in religious and social differentiation between the Rakhine Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims. Areas of Myanmar where the ethnic groups are a majority, such as Karen State, have not seen the level of religious conflict as in Rakhine, possibly due to the tipped scale—Karen State consists of 84.5 percent Buddhists and 9.5 percent Christians. Therefore, the insurgents' (in this case, the Karen National Liberation Army) major opposition is only the Myanmar government, not any other ethnic groups within the state. While the Rohingya are

fighting for their independence, the Rakhine Buddhists often support the Myanmar army's military operations. In other ethnic areas such as Shan, Kachin and Karen, the Myanmar military mostly conducts operations solo as the ethnic group they are fighting usually comprises a majority.

However, in the midst of all this ethnic conflict, a quiet transformation is under way—a growing acceptance of the nation's ethnic diversity, something that was notably absent during an earlier political transition. With the military's violence unleashed once again, some are acknowledging that

democracy cannot flourish without respecting the ethnic minorities who have endured decades of persecution. For the first time, the Karen National Union has received donations from the majority Bamar people for civilian victims of the Tatmadaw (as Myanmar's military regime is called).

Since the February coup, the Tatmadaw has been trying to present itself as committed to the return of the Rohingya from Bangladesh, possibly to deflect attention from the calls to hold it accountable for crimes against humanity, including genocide. Whatever the Tatmadaw's reasons may be, for the Rohingya, the direct implication of the coup is that their fate is now in the hands of the same military that has been their brutal oppressor for decades. It is important that the UN and Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) consider carefully what the current situation means for Rakhine State's ethnically diverse population, including the Rohingya.

The high risk of a return to violence in Rakhine State raises questions about the possible return of the Rohingya. Approximately one million are in Bangladesh, while half a million remain in Rakhine. Little has changed for the latter group—since 2017, neither the civilian government nor the Tatmadaw has addressed their dire situation. Enforced ethnic segregation, or apartheid—a crime against humanity—remains in place, and freedom of movement is highly restricted. It seems that the conditions for the return of the Rohingya in Bangladesh remain highly precarious, while the prospect of safe and sustainable voluntary return has declined significantly since the coup.

Protesters have crowded the streets throughout Myanmar in recent months in

an overwhelming rejection of the military's seizure of power. This current struggle is between the democratic aspirations of the majority—including ethnic minorities—and the army's desperate attempt to regain its shrinking authority and control during the country's transition to democracy, as a "guided democracy". It is these competing visions of democracy that are playing out on the streets of the country and both sides are preparing for a long battle.

However, the military junta has also dealt a death blow to developing democratic ideals and practices. It foresees a political future where the army is an integral part of the political setup—integrated into the power structure and administration along the lines of Thailand. In fact, the commander in chief sees Thailand as a model—with an important role for the army where their economic interests are protected, a self-sufficient economy, and a "democratic" outlook resisting leftist, socialist or communist leanings. For long, the Myanmar military has been pushing a concept of pluralist democracy with no interest group having the dominant role or power, allowing the army to continue to play a critical role. Part of the constitutional change that is likely to be enacted is proportional representation, so that they can have a proliferation of parties in parliament, with the military bloc holding 25 percent of the balance of power. While the army may have their plans, these will not be acceptable to the NLD, and even more likely to be totally rejected by the protesters on the streets.

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PHOTO: REUTERS

QUOTABLE Quote

PABLO PICASSO
(1881-1973)
Spanish painter

It takes a long time to become young.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Learn completely
- 7 Fight memento
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- 15 Solitary sort
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- 17 Took in
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- 5 At any time
- 6 Carmine
- 29 "Dragnet" grp.
- 33 Scrub
- 34 Very small
- 35 Sea dogs
- 36 Short pants
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- 38 Like some kicks
- 39 Some Eurasian deer
- 40 Did a garden chore
- 20 Allude
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- 23 Implement
- 24 Squashed circle
- 25 Pollux's twin
- 28 Tricks
- 30 Bitter
- 31 Lion group
- 32 Gave medicine to
- 34 Horse feature
- 36 Pasture grazer

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

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BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT