

Child labour - is it a curse or a reality: Role of Government of Bangladesh and ILO in the elimination of child labour from dangerous industries in Bangladesh

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Abstract

Should child labour be considered a social curse or a reality? This inevitable debate has long been taking place in both the public and academic spheres. If child labour has become a curse, then who should be held responsible for creating this curse in society. On the other hand, if socio-economic, socio-cultural and socio-political aspects of marginalised states worldwide have become a reality, then why such a reality cannot dwindle has long been a fundamental question for policy-makers and capitalists in the world. Whether the extreme form of child labour in Bangladesh is due to the failure of the state's policy and administrative system, or a curse, is another academic discourse. The ILO officially started working in Bangladesh in 1972, and in the same year, Bangladesh ratified several ILO conventions, including a few fundamental conventions. The Bangladesh Government endorsed the "C182 - Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No. 182)" on 12 March 2001. However, since 2001, Bangladesh's child labour has not decreased significantly due to a lack of constructive and substantial policy from the Government of Bangladesh and the ILO. The fundamental question, therefore, for both the ILO and Bangladesh Government is whether there is the necessity to formulate a more constructive national policy to see the eradication of child labour in Bangladesh rather than considering it as a social curse.

Key words: Globalisation and neoliberalism, child labour, ILO, UNICEF, UN, Bangladesh Labour Act, BGMEA, collective bargaining, RMG, ethical business, COVID-19

Research aims and objectives

This article aims to review and evaluate the global child labour situation and Bangladesh as a case study to see if the Government of Bangladesh and the ILO have been succeeded in eradicating the worst forms of child labour in Bangladesh or any factors hindering their success.

Study design and methodology

This article has primarily been written from a range of secondary sources such as scholarly journal articles, newspapers, media coverage, published reports from the World Bank, IFC, Better Work Bangladesh, ILO and UNICEF.

Findings and contributions to knowledge

The investigation of this article shows that the Government of Bangladesh lacks political commitment to implement the national Labour Act and the ILO conventions. Most importantly, the ILO's piecemeal intervention strategy at the state and organisational level have created academic discourse on whether the ILO can see any significant results in the eradication of child labour in Bangladesh sooner or later.

Conclusions and recommendations

The political commitment of the Government of Bangladesh is essential for the respect and implementation of the ILO Convention (C182), while the enforcement of the national Labour Act is also the biggest challenge for the Government of Bangladesh. Therefore, consideration should also be given to formulating effective policies and intervention strategies of the Government of Bangladesh to control and reduce the worst child labour from the most dangerous industries in Bangladesh. However, without the genuine contribution of significant stakeholders of the Government of Bangladesh such as the ILO, the World Bank, ADB, the IMF, IFC, and national and international NGOs, and donor countries like Australia, Canada, the USA, the UK and the EU, the elimination of any child labour project would not be successful.

Any form of child labour is a social stigma. The exploitation of children should have been stopped yesterday; today is too late. Children are the future of the world - they need proper education, health care, and a conducive environment to make their bodies and minds build a sustainable tomorrow.

Child labour - is it a social curse or a reality? This fundamental question needs to be addressed more deeply to understand why child labour is still prevalent in the world. Child labour is not a curse; instead, it is a reality in some regions or countries of the world. The failure of most disadvantaged states, including the failed policies of international organisations in child labour eradication programs, has exacerbated the situation in the world. Therefore, the issue of child labour still needs extra careful consideration at the policy level, both locally and internationally, in order to find a solution to eradicate child labour in the world. At the outset, two essential questions that we need to address carefully in this article are (a) why child labour occurs and (b) how child labour can be abolished? Before I aim to answer these two fundamental questions in this article, it is also significantly important to know the definitions of child labour. According to Dayiolu Tayfur:

Child labourers constitute a group of working children who are either too young to work or are engaged in hazardous activities – that is, work that is potentially harmful to their physical, social, psychological or educational development (2013, p.1).

International Labour Organisation (ILO) has defined the term “child labour” which refers to work that:

- is mentally, physically, socially or morally dangerous and harmful to children; and/or
- interferes with their schooling by: depriving them of the opportunity to attend school; obliging them to leave school prematurely; or requiring them to attempt to combine school attendance with excessively long and heavy work (ILO, n.d.).

In Bangladesh, an extreme form of child labour is apparent in almost every informal sector, such as agriculture, construction, transportation and the Ready-Made Garment (RMG) industry (see Naeem, Shaikat & Ahmed, 2011; Ahmed & Ray, 2014; Bakkar, 2019; Henry, 2011; Beaubien, 2016; Lau & Chan, 2021; *The Diplomat*, 2021). Bangladesh ratified the ILO “C182 - Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No. 182)” on 12 March 2001 (ILO, C182). However, respecting and enforcing the ILO conventions and the national Labour Act have been a significant challenge for the Government of Bangladesh. As a result, child labourers are still employed in various informal sectors, and they often face death in hazardous factory fires (see Ahamed, 2013; *The Diplomat*, 2021). According to the 1996 Labour Force Survey conducted by the Government of Bangladesh, there are more than 6.3 million children between the ages of five and 14 who work for wages and who are not enrolled in school (see Douglas, Ferguson & Klett, 2004; Henry, 2011). Afrin (2021) published a report in *Dhaka Tribune*, a leading online newspaper revealing that: “Bangladesh fourth worst-hit country in the world in terms of [a] number of children affected by elevated blood lead level”. Now the question is how to wipe

out child labour in Bangladesh? Bangladesh Government has taken some strategies to eradicate child labourers, for example, by forming the Child Labor National Action plan in 2012, but its progress has not been satisfactory. Significantly, Bangladesh lacks an adequate data collection and storage system (centrally), which prevents researchers from finding out the genuine number of child labourers in Bangladesh. However, the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) survey report shows that as of 2015, the country had some 3.45 million active child labourers. There would be at least more than 4 million child labourers in Bangladesh now, from earlier estimates of BBS (Rezvi, 2017). Due to COVID-19, the percentage of child labourers might increase significantly over the next few years (see Ullah, 2021; ILO & UNICEF, 2021). Therefore, this article aims to reflect on the critical discussions that should provide a clear understanding of the facts that have determined child labour in the world and Bangladesh. The recommendation in this article might be fruitful for the Bangladesh Government, ILO and other countries to reduce the dangerous form of child labour in the future.

Critical theoretical discourse for child labour

The contemporary scholarship reflects upon various issues that considerably produce child labour in the world. For example, Lau and Chan (2021) argue that poverty should have been considered one of the significant causes of child labour. However, other factors, such as family size, geography, education, socio-economic and socio-cultural and global political economics, also play a crucial role in child exploitation and child labour worldwide (Lau & Chan, 2021). For example, most child labourers are engaged in the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and Asian, African and Sub-Saharan African belts due to the high rate of poverty in those countries (UNICEF, 2021). Scholars, e.g., Ullah and Amanullah (2021), argue that LDCs are seriously behind in capital accumulation than most western, European and other developed countries. In addition, LDCs have inadequate education systems, low regulation in the workplace, and socio-economic structural barriers etc. Thus, the fact that these disadvantaged states can deal with their socio-economic and other cultural and political problems that have long persisted in their countries should be given another important consideration by scholars and policy-makers worldwide. For example, scholars (Ullah & Amanullah, 2021) further argue that approximately 880 million people in 46 countries have contributed two per cent to the global GDP and one per cent to worldwide trade. Therefore, there is a compelling call for significant changes in politico-economic policies to reduce poverty and other socio-economic barriers and eliminate child labour from these countries (see Ullah & Amanullah, 2021; Lau & Chan, 2021).

Scholars, e.g., Ullah and Amanullah (2021) argue that Bangladesh is about to be ousted from the list of the LDCs by 2026 as the review Committee for Development Policy of the UN set some obligations to fulfil on 12 March 2018 despite Bangladesh's ongoing progress on socio-economic aspects in the last decade.

Graph One: Bangladesh's GDP from 2010 to 2020



Source: *Tradingeconomic.com*

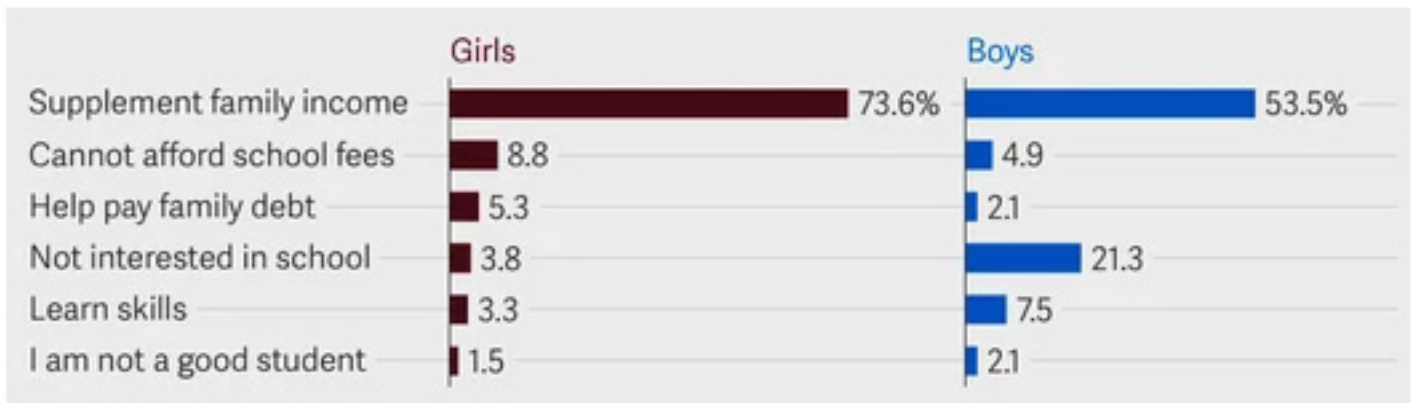
Bangladesh's economy is boosting because of the direct support of the informal sectors of the country. For example, Bangladesh's RMG industry's contribution to the national economy has been phenomenal over the last few decades (see Labowitz, 2016; Siddiqi, 2019; Rahman & Rahman, 2020; Ullah, 2021). The RMG industry's contribution to the national GDP would be approximately 13 per cent or more when it aims to make a profit of US\$50 billion within the next few years from its current US\$40 billion (see Haque & Gopalakrishnan, 2019; Ullah, 2021). However, scholars, e.g., Ashwin, Kabeer & Schuessler (2020), argue that global clothing brands are culprits and have connections with the Bangladeshi RMG traders who have the 'Porsches, Rolexes, and helicopters', while RMG workers are starving and fighting for their basic needs (see also Ullah, 2016; Ullah, 2021; IndustriALL Global Union, 2021).

Child labour in the RMG industry in Bangladesh dates back to the early days of the 1980s (Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, n.d; Islam & Akther, 2015). Due to the socio-economic and other social obstacles, a Bangladeshi girl or a boy at an early age when they should be at school and home may instead work in dangerous RMG and other informal industries. Children work long hours at minimum wages and sometimes without regular payment in the RMG and most informal sectors in Bangladesh (Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, n.d). Here we can find an example of Ms Kalpona Akter, a labour activist from Bangladesh, who was also child labour in Bangladesh's RMG sector for a while. In the early 1990s, Ms Akter started working in the RMG factory after her father's death when she was just 12 years old (see Human Rights Watch, 2016). However, Ms Akter, in several of her public speeches, acknowledged the reality and her awful experience as child labour and how child labourers

are brutally abused in the RMG industry in Bangladesh. Ms Akter's case reflects the actual child labour condition and how pitiful it was. Unfortunately, Bangladesh's current child labour conditions did not change much (see Lau & Chan, 2021). Ms Akter later fled the industry as a child labourer but began working as a union organiser to support RMG workers defending their fundamental rights in the RMG sector. Ms Akter is also the Bangladesh Center for Workers Solidarity founder and executive director and was awarded Human Rights Watch's Alison Des Forges Award for Extraordinary Activism in 2016 (see Human Rights Watch, 2016).

With approximately 170 million people and an estimated US\$325 billion GDP, Bangladesh has secured its 37th largest economic position globally. Graph One shows how Bangladesh's economy has grown steadily over the past decade.

Capitalists are always closely associated with the state and power, and workers are consistently devalued and exploited (see Harvey, 2007; Brown, 2018; Munck, 2010; Ullah, 2021). Capitalists do not consider workers as a supporting force in industrial relations which creates complex situations and often creates antagonistic relationships between employers and workers. On the other hand, trade unionism in Bangladesh is discouraged for attracting FDIs, which also weakens workers' power to organise collectively against any forms of exploitation (see Siddiqi, 2015; Ashraf & Prentice, 2019; Bair, Anner & Blasi, 2020). In the entire process, children are more exploited as they cannot raise voices or form trade unions to protect their basic rights. The sectoral and federation trade union bodies in Bangladesh are politically coloured and considerably failed to protect workers' rights in Bangladesh (see Ashraf & Prentice, 2019). In this case, as a guardian, the state must be proactive to safeguard children and child labour from any exploitation, but the question is, how can it be done?

Table One: The reasons for child labour in Bangladesh

Source: ADRA (2019)

A study result recently published in ADRA (2019) shows why child labour occurs in Bangladesh. The survey (ADRA, 2019) has shown the results based on six categories, and the top variable was related to poverty when most child respondents stated that their income had been a supplement to their families. So, poverty is again a dilemma to many of Bangladesh's children, who have often been compromised of their present and future by working hard in dangerous workplaces throughout the country for supplementing their families (see ADRA, 2019). After 50 years of Bangladesh's independence, it is hard to believe that abundant children still live in the streets of the capital city of Dhaka, where multi-billion-dollar business deals and transactions take place every day (Gilbert, 2018). Globalisation perhaps was a blessing for western and Bangladeshi capitalists (RMG traders) who are mainly responsible for an extreme form of child exploitation on top of poverty and other socio-economic and socio-cultural barriers in Bangladesh (see Saxena, 2019; Crinis, 2019; Siddiqi, 2019; Lau & Chan, 2021; Ullah, 2021).

On the other hand, contemporary scholarship suggests that the issue that needs to be seriously considered is whether the demand for child labour in the global supply chain has been reduced or is still increasing (see Crinis, 2019; Lau & Chan, 2021). The exploitation of child labour by international clothing brands like Nike, Adidas, Walmart in developing countries (Pakistan, Indonesia, Bangladesh) have been in the academic discourse for a long time (see Ahamed, 2013; Ullah, 2021). Multinationals come to low regulated countries to exploit workers and child labourers to pay low wages and often force them to work in unhealthy production hubs. If the global and local capitalists exploit children, then it is also essential to find a solution by capitalists who mainly use and exploit children mostly in impoverished countries. However, theoretically and practically, it would be a worthy dream to consider that child labour will be completely eradicated from this world soon, especially when the capitalist mode of production has been more potent in the world (see Harvey, 2007; Munck, 2010; Ullah, 2021). Hence, we can considerably say that poverty should not be considered only the issue for child labour in Bangladesh. Scholars should consider other important factors such as globalisation, which has lessened most developing countries' potentials and why these countries remain ineffective in formulating effective policies and strategies to eradicate child labour. Notably, scholars should also consider the capitalist mode of the production method, which perhaps would not end up child labour in this world. Thus, how capitalism can be better structured and how capitalists can spend more on their CSR budgets can also be a topic of discussion for the elimination of child labour in the world and Bangladesh. Nevertheless, another theoretical debate could be whether Bangladesh needs to develop a far-sighted plan to eradicate child labour with political commitment, which has been absent since the independence of Bangladesh in 1971.



Child labour in Bangladesh

Source: *The Daily Observer* (2015)

Literature

A brief history of child labour

When we mainly consider the modern form of child labour or slavery, we should not undermine the historical discourse on child labour, as it provides the background of child labour in the world. Historically, it is not well traced, but it can be assumed that from the very beginning of human history, child labour or child servant was common practice in society (see History. Com Editors, 2009). However, the industrial revolution made the situation for child labour worse. In the early centuries, business traders and factory owners began recruiting child labour in crowded and unsafe and unclean factories, where factory codes and the proper industrial Act were missing. Throughout the first half of the 1800s, the USA had recruited a considerably high number of child labourers in the handicraft and agricultural industry, when slavery was also a severe issue. Surprisingly, in 1900, almost 18 per cent or more of all American workers were under the age of 16 (see History. Com Editors, 2009). Harry McShane, a young American factory worker, was a prime example of a machine belt injury in a spring factory in May 1908. His arm was pulled close to his shoulder, and his right leg was broken. Unfortunately, he did not receive any compensation from the factory owner when he was only 16 years old, and the fate of many RMG workers in Bangladesh today is the same (Inspireeducation, n.d.). The fire at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory on 25 March, 1911 in Greenwich Village, Manhattan, New York City, was the deadliest industrial disaster in the history of America. Events such as the Harry McShane's accident and Triangle Shirtwaist Factory, saw the rise of the labour movement that brought occupational health and safety issues to the forefront of society (Kleeberg, 2003; Aldrich, 1997; Fishback & Kantor, 2007; Inspireeducation, n.d.). The timeline for child workers is:

- 1802: Children's working day is 12 hours
- 1819: Minimum work age is 9 in the cotton industry
- 1833: Minimum work age is 9 in all large factories. Children aged between 9 and 12 may only work 8 hours a day, and have 2 hours of compulsory education.
- 1842: Children may no longer work underground in mines
- 1847: Children's working day is 10 hours
- 1878: Minimum work age is 10
- 1901: Minimum work age is 12 (ACTUWORKSITE, n.d.).

The world is much more civilised now, but the question is whether the capitalists have changed their attitude towards child labour, perhaps not. Further elaboration and evidence from recent exploitation of child labour (see *The Diplomat*, 2021) create inevitable arguments as to whether the world is still ready to see a positive outcome in the child labour eradication program, especially in Bangladesh. Before we move into a discussion on global and Bangladesh's perspectives on child labour elimination, it is also imperative to know how the ILO evaluate its progress and success in the child labour elimination process in the last one hundred years (see ILO, n.d.).

The ILO as a labour organisation and its structure

The ILO, as a labour organisation, despite its limitations in enforcement and implementation of significant conventions in the member states, has played a role in critical historical junctures. The ILO has experienced the Great Depression, decolonisation, the creation of solidarity in Poland, the victory against apartheid in South Africa - and construct a moral and productive framework for a just globalisation today. Under the Treaty of Versailles after World War I, the ILO was founded in 1919 to reflect the belief that universal and long-lasting peace can only be achieved by ensuring social justice (see Helfer, 2006; Standing, 2008; Rodger et al., 2009; Henry, 2011). The ILO tripartite type of social dialogue approach is unique in the world. However, several scholars argue whether this tripartite intervention structure is effective enough to stop exploitation around the globe (see, e.g., Helfer, 2006; Standing, 2008; Rodgers et al., 2009). Beyond ILO's criticisms on its success at the state level on workers exploitation, its several conventions are the guideline for the state members to follow towards eliminating child labour or workers exploitation, and some are discussed below.

ILO's "declaration on fundamental principles and rights at work in 1998

The ILO's "*Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work*" was adopted by governments, multinational companies and labour right NGOs in 1998. "In line with the "Universal Declaration of Human Rights", ILO's "Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work it aimed for:

- (a) *freedom of association and the effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining;*
- (b) *the elimination of all forms of forced or compulsory labour;*
- (c) *the effective abolition of child labour; and*
- (d) *the elimination of discrimination in respect of employment and occupation (ILO, 1998).*

ILO's convention 182 on the worst forms of child labour, 1999

The ILO recommends the member states ratify, respect and enforce Convention 182 to eradicate child labour by following the five crucial recommendations that mainly creates the worst form of child labour, and they are:

- *Slavery or similar practices, such as the sale or trade of children or the use of children in debt bondage or serfdom;*
- *Obligatory or forced work, including the compulsory recruitment of children for use in armed conflicts;*
- *The recruitment, use or offer of a child for involvement in prostitution, pornographic material or pornographic shows;*
- *The use, recruitment or offer of a child for illicit activities, notably in the production or trafficking of drugs, as defined in the specific international treaties;*
- *Work which, by its very nature or the conditions in which it is undertaken, is likely to jeopardise the health, safety or morality of children (Humanium, n.d.).*

The overview of child labour from global perspectives

To get an accurate picture and estimates of global child labour is a challenging task because many developing countries do not keep a record of their actual number of child labour. According to UNICEF and ILO, by 10 June 2021 - the number of children in child labour worldwide had reached 160 million - an increase of 8.4 million children in the last four years - with millions more at risk due to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, UNICEF and ILO also warned we will see another 9 million children at work by 2022, due to the COVID-19 pandemic (UNICEF, 2021). Understandably, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the situation for child labour, but previous efforts have not been even conducive towards eliminating child labour worldwide (Henry, 2011; Ospina & Roser, 2016). In addition, without emergency mitigation step by step, the COVID-19 crisis is likely to push millions of more children into child labour.

Contemporary research shows some astonishing results that children aged 5 to 11 in child labour now account for more than half of the global child labour. Dangerous work for children aged 5 to 17 - defined as work that could harm their health, safety or morals - has increased from 65 million to 79 million in 2016 (UNICEF, 2021). Graph Two shows that the progress of child labour elimination was quite well followed until 2016, but after, the rate of child labour has started increasing again in the world. Nevertheless, Graph Three shows the world's child labour mainly occurs in rural areas rather than urban slums.

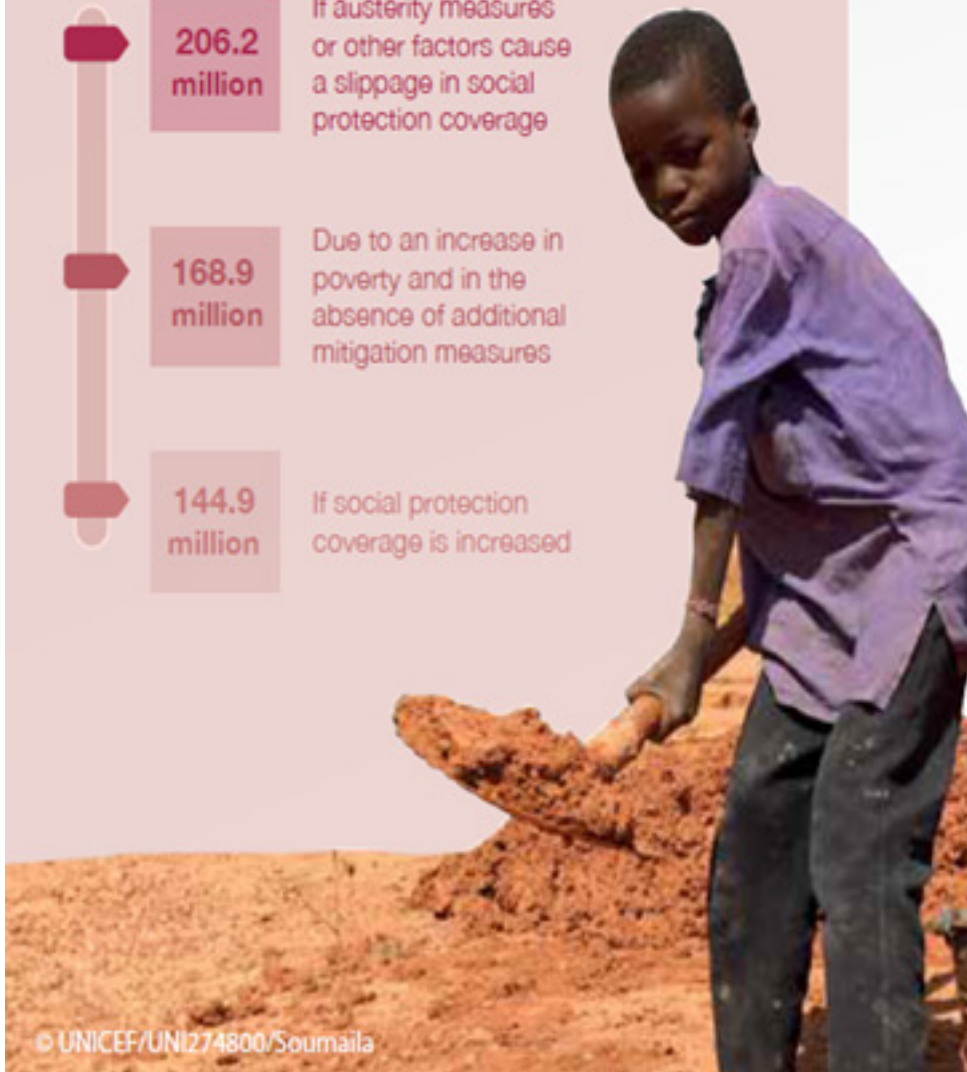


(Photo source: Humanium, n.d.)

Impact of COVID-19

Without mitigation measures, the number of children in child labour could rise from 160 million in 2020 to 168.9 million by the end of 2022

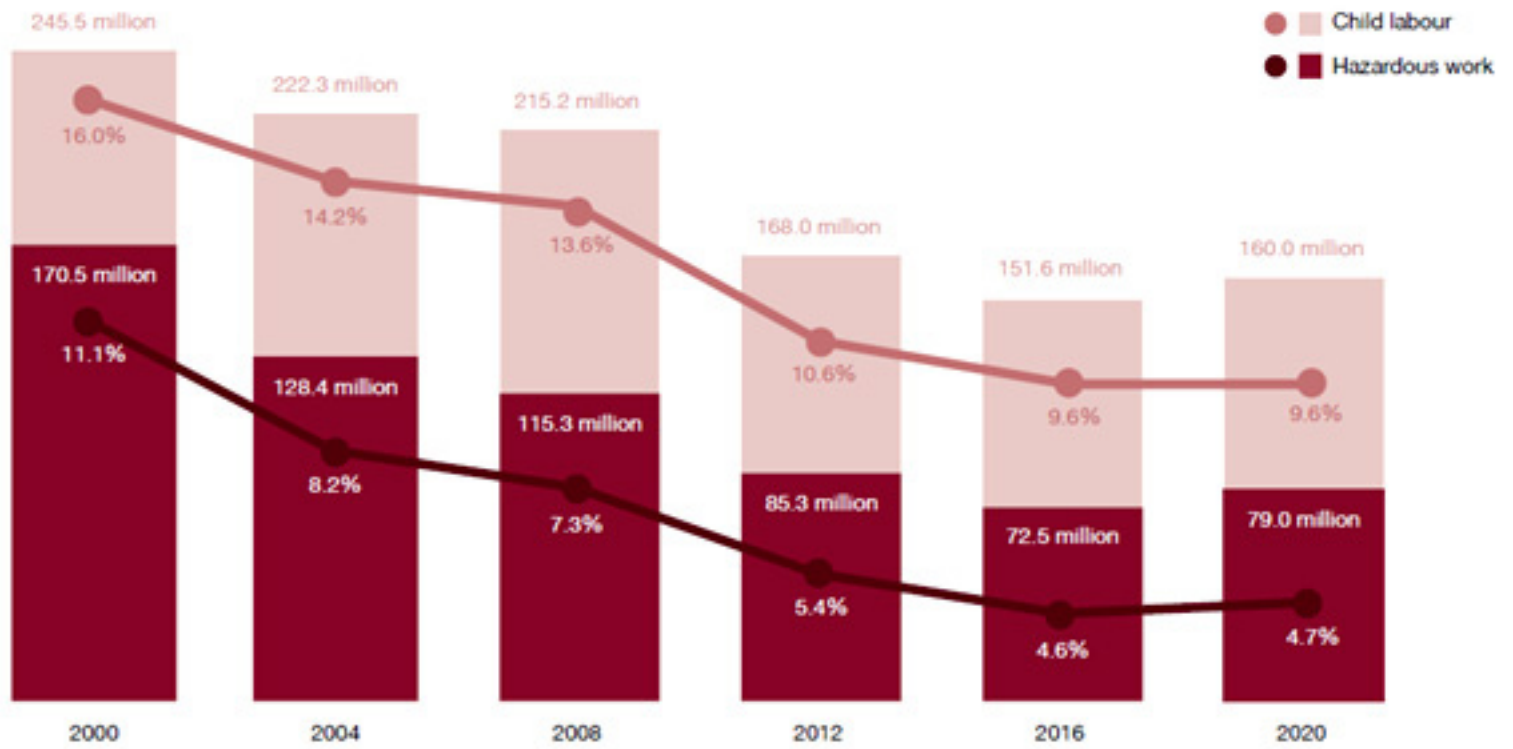
Number of children aged 5 to 17 years in child labour, projected to the end of 2022



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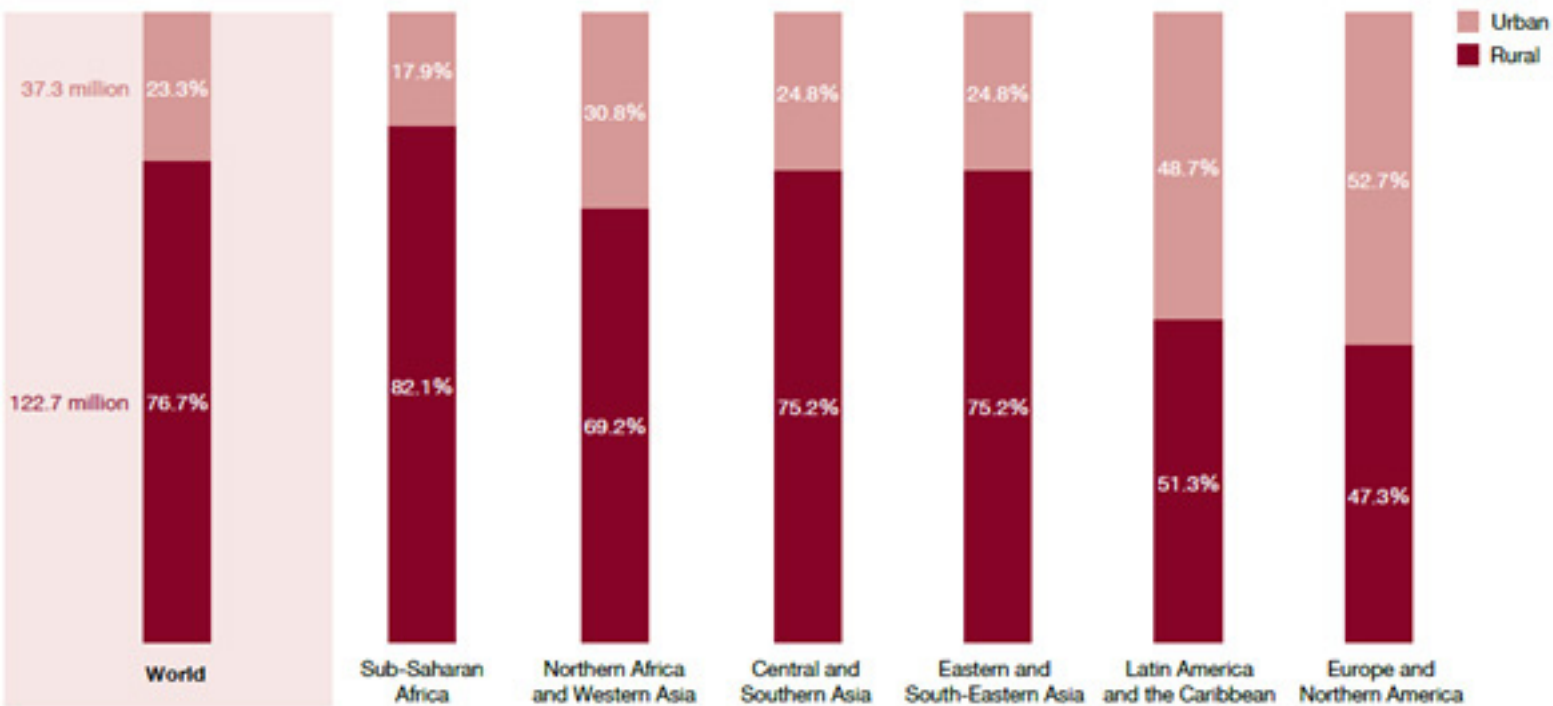
Source: ILO & UNICEF (2021).

Graph Two: The child labour elimination progress

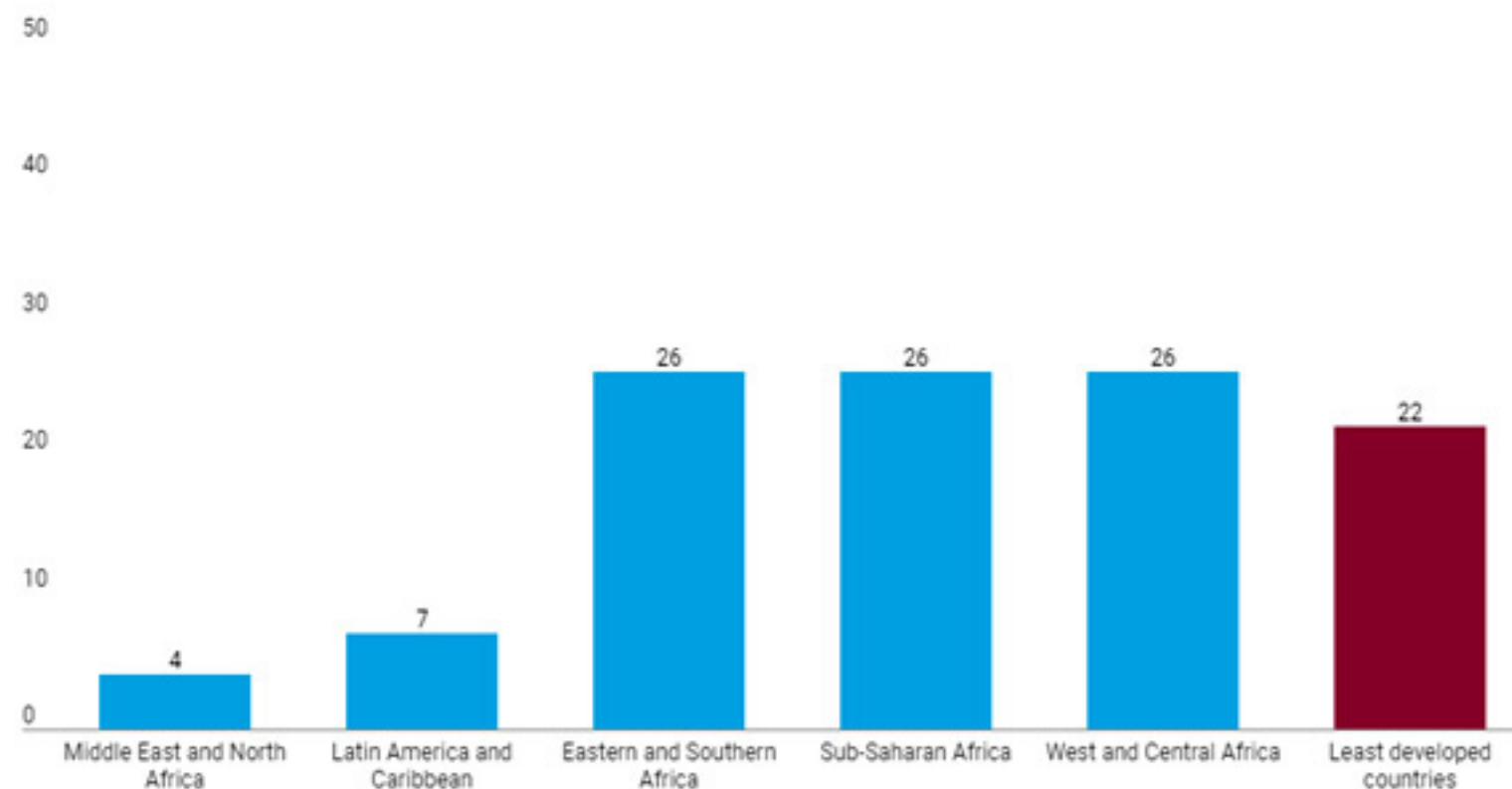


Source: ILO & UNICEF (2021).

Graph Three: Comparison statistics between urban and rural child workers in the world



Source: ILO & UNICEF (2021).

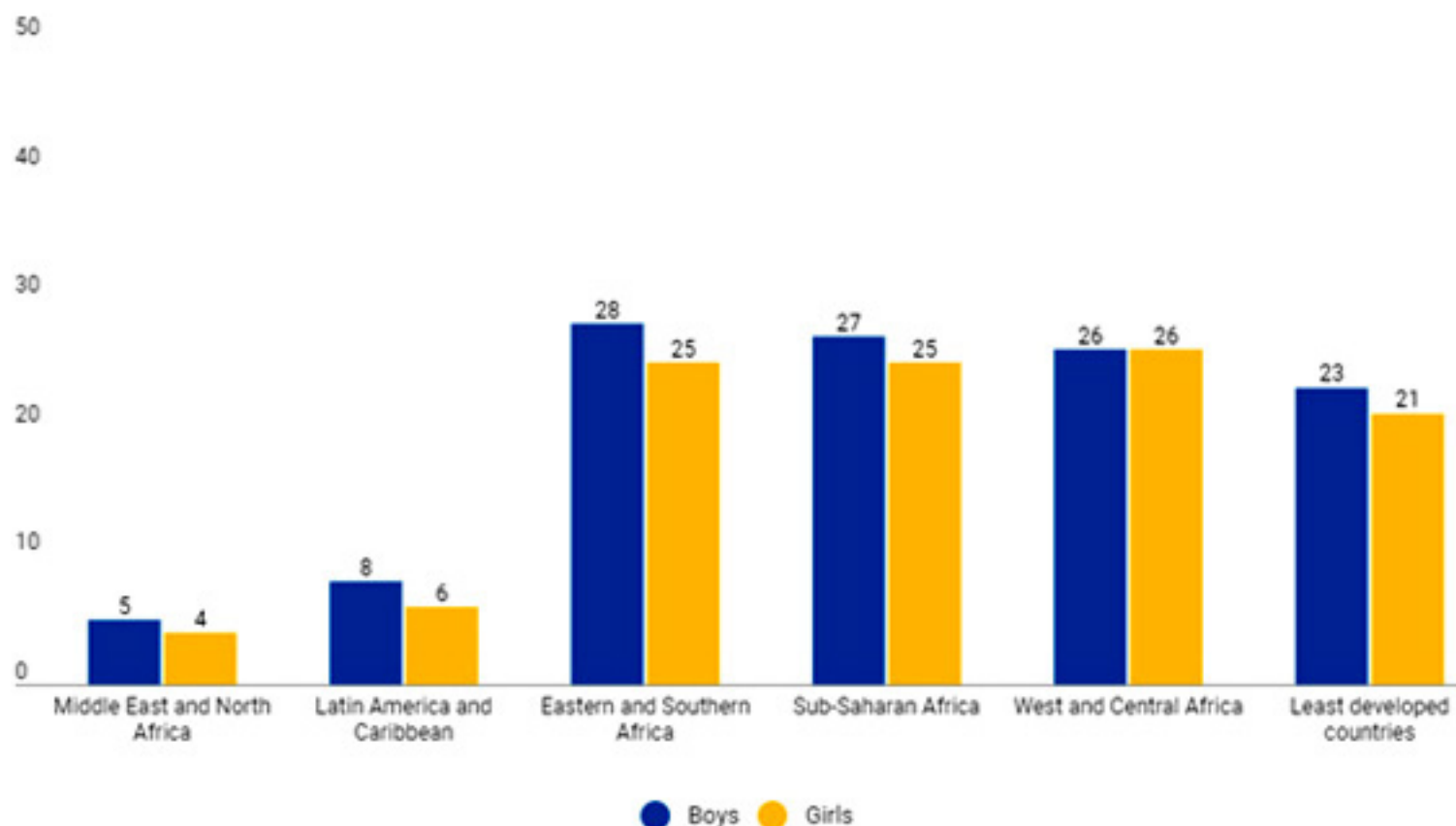
Graph Four: The regional child labour aged between 5 to 17

Source: UNICEF (2021) based on Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS), Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) and other national surveys, 2012-2019.⁽¹⁾

Graph Four shows the percentage of child labour based on the regions. Eastern and Southern Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, West and Central Africa, and LDCs (such as Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Cambodia) produce the larger scale of child labour (see, e.g., Naeem, Shaukat & Ahmed, 2011; Bakkar, 2019; UNICEF, 2021). The gender disparities research shows that both boys and girls are almost equally involved in child labour in these regions, despite

a slightly higher percentage of boys than girls in some regions (see UNICEF, 2021). Nevertheless, the study indicates that girls are primarily involved in most household services as unpaid child labour. Graph Five shows the percentage of boys and girls engaged in child labour aged between 5 to 17 in these regions.

(1) Notes: Regional estimates represent data from countries covering at least 50 per cent of the regional population of children aged 5 to 17. Data coverage was insufficient to calculate a global estimate and regional estimates for East Asia and the Pacific, Eastern Europe and Central Asia, North America, South Asia and Western Europe.

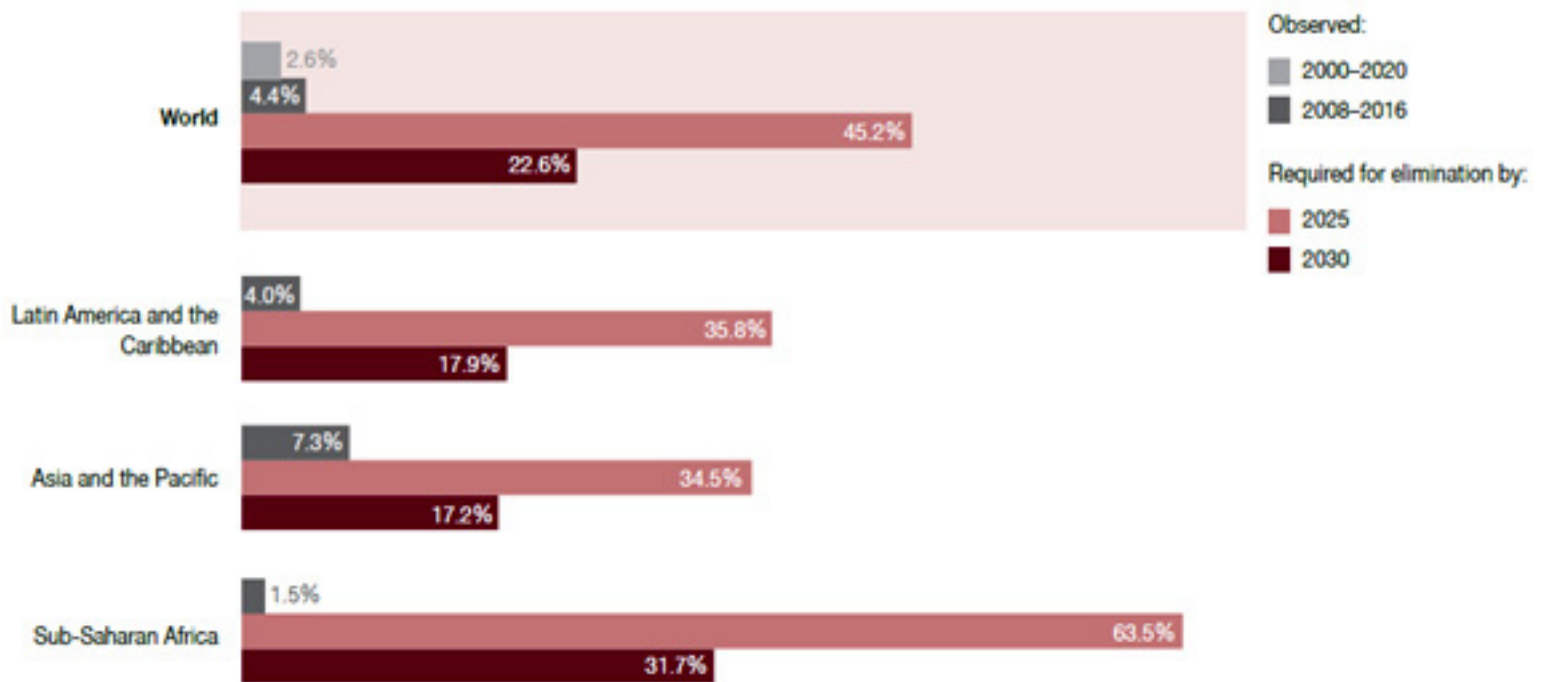
Graph Five: The regional child labour aged between 5 to 17 (boys & girls)

Source: UNICEF, 2021, based on Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS), Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) and other national surveys, 2012-2019.

Data from the National Household Survey are calculated based on the extrapolation of 2020 every four years from 2000, consistent with the child labour estimates produced. The new Numan uses a survey of more than 100 households to cover two-thirds of the world's children aged 5 to 17. What is said in the report is worrying. Global advances against child labour have stalled for the first time since we began producing two global estimates

decades ago (see ILO & UNICEF, 2021). Graph Six shows the actual picture of the current status of the child labour elimination project of SDG8 that has to be ended by 2030. Still, there is significant concern whether SDG 8 will be achieved by then due to COVID-19 and other socio-economic variers in the world (see ILO & UNICEF, 2021).

Graph Six The target to meet SDGs to eliminate child labour by 2030



Source: ILO & UNICEF (2021).

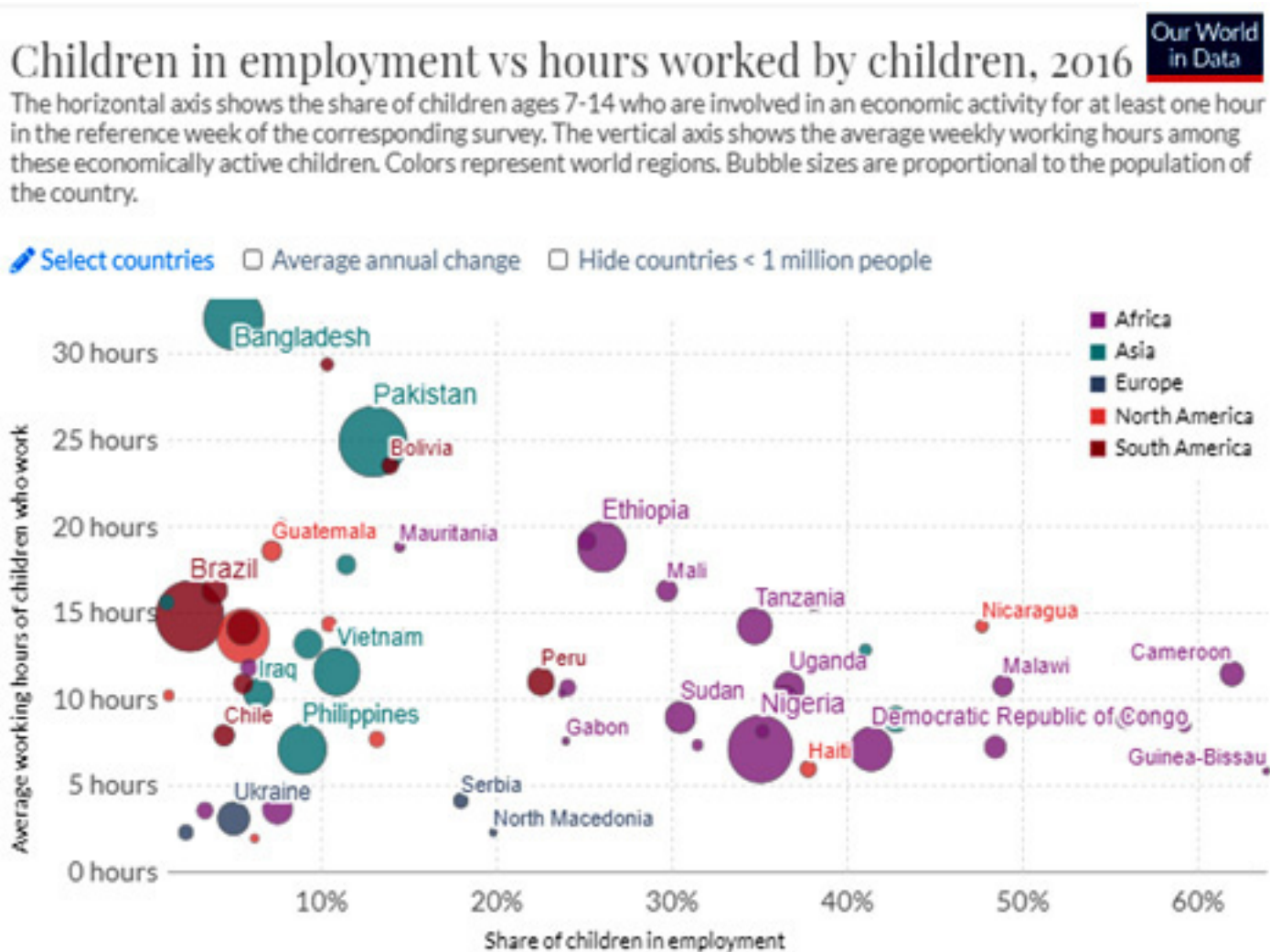
The overview of child labour from Bangladesh's perspectives

A few crucial facts about child labour in Bangladesh

- Currently, 4.3 percent of children (between the ages of 5 and 14) in Bangladesh engage in exploitative work to support their families. Statistics determine that not all Bangladeshi children attend school. Lack of education is frequently a barrier to higher-paying jobs.
- Eighty-three percent of child laborers work in rural areas. Since resources and jobs are more readily available in the city, children may seek employment in urban areas for low wages.
- Children are especially vulnerable to exploitation and therefore receive minimal compensation for their work.
- There are regulations on child labor in Bangladesh. The Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics informs the existing legislature which defines child laborers as those working between the ages of 5 and 14. In 2006, the Bangladeshi government outlawed work by children under the age of 14. Despite this, the number of child laborers has continued to rise in the past decade, given that most children work at small local businesses, factories or homes. The International Labor Organization (ILO) estimates that approximately 5 million children are full-time workers.
- Bangladesh also has the fourth-highest rate of child marriage in the world. While families rely on their children to work, many encourage their young daughters to marry due to being unable to support them. Reducing poverty is a promising start for addressing gender discrimination (Powell, 2019).

When the government of any state fails to provide basic needs for children, they go to work. In Bangladesh, many families have only one person to earn money, and children get jobs to help their families when a member of the family dies or suffers for a long time (see Ahamed, 2013; Lau & Chan, 2013). In addition, another significant obstacle to eliminating child labour in Bangladesh is the natural disasters that occur almost every year. Tsunamis, cyclones and floods are the main ones. When daily life collapses due to natural disasters like cyclones, it becomes difficult for many families to survive in the remote coastal areas of Bangladesh. So, families move to major cities of Bangladesh, mainly to the capital city Dhaka, where some jobs are available. However, due to the non-enforcement of the National Labour Act and the ILO convention, the industry in which children get jobs is not healthy and often suffers from catastrophic factory casualties. Recent research (RMG Bangladesh, 2021) exhibit children aged between seven to 17 work 12 to 14 hours, six days a week, in most unhealthy and dangerous industries such as leather. Children employed at the leather factories usually do all kinds of work, including animal slaughter, skinning, dyeing, waste disposal and manufacturing of leather products and by-products such as glue and meat (see RMG Bangladesh, 2021). Almost every informal economic sector in Bangladesh lack proper OHS regulation (see Ullah, 2021). Although children are often employed in unhealthy informal and non-regulated economic production houses, Bangladesh's domestic (household) work is also dangerous. Most underage children do not receive adequate wages, food and health care in household work in Bangladesh. Most importantly, underage children engaged in domestic work in Bangladesh are mentally and physically abused (see Chart Two of this article). They primarily work long hours day and night, revealing the worst forms of child labour considered modern slavery (see Ahmed, 2013; Beaubien, 2016; ILO & UNICEF, 2021; Hiba, Jentsch, & Zink, 2021).

Chart One: Children's working hours in the various destinations in the world and Bangladesh



Source: Ospina & Roser, 2016, cited in Our World in Data).

The London-based Overseas Development Institute surveyed about 3,000 families in the slums of Dhaka city. They found in the survey that children work full-time as young as 6 for 100 to 110 hours a week. On average, working children earn less than \$2 per day. So the London based survey report shows more working hours than the "Our World Data" in child labour in Bangladesh, and both surveys were conducted in 2016. In addition, the London based survey also found 13 per cent of young respondents aged below 13 works in the textile and clothing sector (Beaubien, 2016).

Bangladesh's commitment to ILO and UN conventions and labour standards

ILO, since 1972, has been working with the Government of Bangladesh following a social dialogue or tripartite approach to establish social justice and build a healthy work environment in Bangladesh, but results have not been satisfactory. The ILO has been significantly unable to persuade the Bangladesh Government to respect and enforce the ILO conventions that were already ratified, while the National Labour Act 2006 (amended in 2013) is not also well-enforced (see Human Rights Watch, 2013; Afrin, 2014; Rahman & Rahman, 2020).

From 1919 to date, 190 Conventions, 206 Recommendations, and six Protocols have been adopted by the ILO (see ILO, n.d.). Conventions like child labour elimination, forced labour, collective bargaining and freedom of association, minimum wage, gender discrimination, social security, working time, occupational health and safety are the few among so many other conventions that the ILO adopted, and its member states from time to time ratify those conventions and aim to respect and enforce their jurisdictions. However, due to changes like work and patterns globally, the ILO has modified some conventions and replaced older ones (see, e.g., Baccini & Koenig-Archibugi, 2014). The ILO aims to promote its Conventions and Recommendations by stating that:

An international legal framework on social standards ensures a level playing field in the global economy. It helps governments and employers to avoid the temptation of lowering labour standards in the belief that this could give them a greater comparative advantage in international trade... Because international labour standards are minimum standards adopted by governments and the social partners, it is in everyone's interest to see these rules applied across the board, so that those who do not put them into practice do not undermine the efforts of those who do (Baccini & Koenig-Archibugi, 2014, p. 447).

The above excerpt suggests that ILO's member states should adopt the Conventions and Recommendations that the ILO adopted since 1919 towards ensuring the international labour standards, which is crucial for workers and their families. The above quote also appeals to the member state to ratify the ILO Conventions and Recommendations so that other states can become motivated to ratify ILO's conventions and Recommendations (see Alli, 2008; Baccini & Koenig-Archibugi, 2014). However, despite this appeal from the ILO, not all states have yet ratified all ILO conventions. Scholars argue that it lacks the political will of the state governments or socio-economic or global political economy policy that might significantly hinder ratification of the ILO conventions (see also Rodgers et al., 2009; Ullah, 2020). Bangladesh, however, has ratified 35 ILO conventions altogether, which includes seven fundamental conventions. The fundamental convention that the Bangladesh Government has not still approved is "C138 - Minimum Age Convention, 1973 (No. 138)". Out of 35 Conventions ratified in different categories by Bangladesh since 1972, 30 are in force, one convention has been denounced, four instruments abrogated, and none have been ratified in the past 12 months.

Bangladesh Government is the signatory of the United Nations Human Rights Convention 1948, and in line with Article 23, Bangladesh is also the signatory of the 2011 UN Guiding Principles of Business and Human Rights, which require:

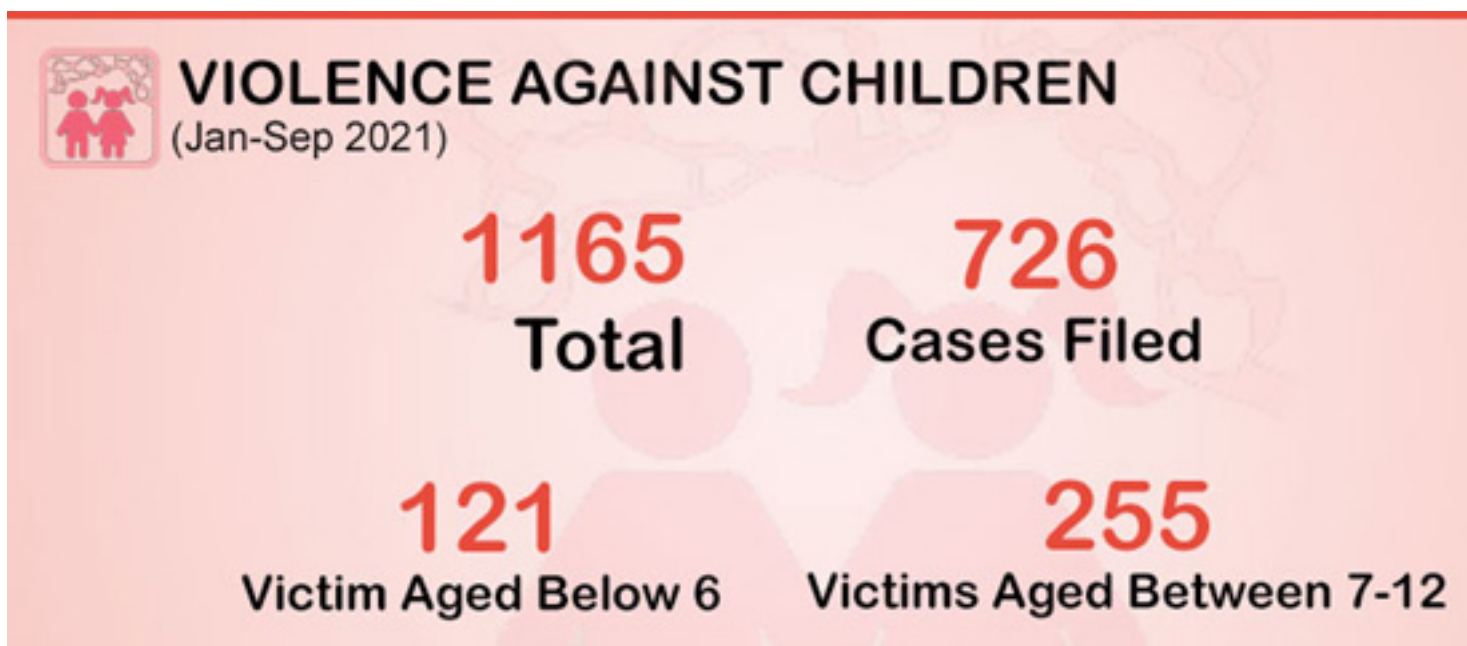
- (a) States' existing obligations to respect, protect and fulfil human rights and fundamental freedoms;
- (b) The role of business enterprises as specialised organs of society performing specialised functions, required to comply with all applicable laws and to respect human rights;

(c) The need for rights and obligations to be matched to appropriate and effective remedies when breached (UN Guiding Principles of Business and Human Rights, 2011, p. 1).

Most importantly, Bangladesh lacks respect and proper enforcement for the ILO and UN conventions that have already been ratified. For example, *The Diplomat* published a report stating that on 8 July 2021 afternoon, a fire broke out on the ground floor of the renowned Hashem Food & Beverages factory at Rugganj, an industrial district on the outskirts of Bangladesh's capital city. The reason for the fire was the illegal storage of chemicals and plastics. Hashem Food & Beverages factory fires killed at least 50 workers in which a number of under-aged and relatively young children were employed. According to *The Diplomat*, the age of some of these children were: (12), Takiya (14), Munna (14), Nazmul (15), Mahmud (15), Kompa (16), Himu (16), Ripon (17), and Taslima (17), in addition to many more (Anjum, 2021 cited in *The Diplomat*). So, what ILO, BGMEA, Bangladesh Government claim about child labour elimination in Bangladesh is inaccurate (see Ahamed, 2013; Lau & Chan, 2021; Hiba, Jentsch & Zink, 2021).

According to Ain o Shalish Kendro (ASK), a Bangladeshi legal aid organisation, noticed that between 2008 and 2011, 2709 cases were published in the national newspapers in Bangladesh on violence against domestic workers, including 729 children (cited in Rezvi, 2017). Chart Two reflects the statistics of violence on children between January and September 2021 in Bangladesh, which is more vigorous than the previous statistics, and this is alarming.

Chart Two: Violence against children between January and September 2021 in Bangladesh



Source: Ain o Shalish Kendro 2021

It is a fundamental question whether ratification of any ILO conventions is enough to stop any forms of exploitation, injuries and death of a worker in Bangladesh? Bangladesh Government has shown demotivation to respect the National Labour Act and the ILO conventions, and ILO is continuously being witnessed with all these things from time to time. However, scholars, e.g., Deva (2012), argues that the state must show political or social commitments to respect the UN conventions that were created to save humans from adverse calamities in the world.

Critical discussions with recommendations

Child labour has been a crime, and it has been prevalent in Bangladesh and elsewhere in the world for many decennaries. This is a severe social problem for Bangladesh and other countries because they do not follow the correct policies or intentionally violate the ILO conventions and national labour or child acts that impede the control of child labour. Scholars, e.g., Ospina and Roser (2016), argue that child labour is particularly problematic because it obstructs children's development significantly when interfering with schooling. But the question is, if the state and other social organisations fail to provide the essential benefits to children, what do they have to do for survival. In some states, as discussed earlier, mainly in impoverished countries, parents simply have no other options available but to allow their children to work to manage their lives and livelihoods (see ADRA, Islam & Akther, 2015; Ahmed & Ray 2014).

The global political-economic policy aimed to bring a new dogma on international trade since the 1980s by introducing neoliberalism through corporate globalisation. Scholars argue that it was a political agenda that vastly served capitalists rather than marginalised people worldwide (see Harvey, 2007; Munck, 2010; Ullah 2021, Hiba, Jentsch, & Zink, 2021). International organisations such as the World Bank and the IMF have played a significant role to make globalisation more potent and operative, but WTO and its free trade agreement between the member states was the turning point for the rapid expansion of globalisation in the world (Ullah, 2021) (see Harvey, 2007; Rahman, 2013; Ullah, 2021; Aked, 2021).

Globalisation has lessened ILO's effectiveness in its social programs, mainly in controlling workers' exploitation worldwide. However, scholars argue that the ILO, as a labour organisation, lacks enforcement power which is the major obstacle for this organisation to obtain any significant and constructive results on many issues such as workers exploitation etc. (see Standing, 2008; Rodgers et al., 2009). Nevertheless, ILO has created many international conventions and recommendations that are essential for the member state to follow and respect while enforcement is the final step. For example, Juan Somavia, the former ILO director General in 1919 introduced "*Decent Work*", which is defined as the "*convergence of four interdependent strategic objectives encompassing rights at work, employment, social protection, and social dialog*" (ILO, 1999, cited in Hiba, Jentsch & Zink, 2021, p. 148). ILO's "*Declaration on Social Justice for a Fair Globalisation*" was introduced in 2008, though it was too late. Again, in 2011, ILO announced "*Making Globalisation Socially Sustainable*". But the question that has been very fundamental now to ask ILO is whether globalisation has socially been sustainable or not. Global supply chains still hunt cheap corporate labour in low regulated countries and make robust profits

from workers' exploitation (see Harvey, 2007; Ullah, 2021) (see Alamgir & Banerjee, 2019; Rahman, 2019; Ullah, 2021). Thus, the fundamental question is whether the ILO is still strong enough to fight globalisation and capitalism. The ILO, as a UN body, can raise this issue vigorously in the UN session and should give states a highly decisive guideline to approve ILO conventions and respect and enforce nation's labour and child labour acts to control and eliminate child labour and exploitation. With the help of Western and EU countries, WTO can impose trade and quota sanctions on WTO member countries.

In 2020, Bangladesh made moderate progress in its efforts to eliminate the worst forms of child labour. The government has extended the implementation period of the National Action Plan for the Elimination of Child Labour from 2021 to 2025. The Ministry of Labour and Employment has also drafted an update on the list of dangerous jobs. In addition, the government has formed and funded seven anti-trafficking organisations in individual tribunals to handle human trafficking cases. Unfortunately, all these steps were not stopping the exploitation of children and child labour in Bangladesh. For example, eradicating underage prostitution, another common form of child labour, should also be a government priority in Bangladesh.

Bureau of International Labor Affairs (2020) published a report stating that forced child labour is still found in different informal economic sectors in Bangladesh. The National Child, Labour Survey report 2015 revealed that about 1.2 million children (see ILO, n.d.) are still trapped in their worst form in different informal sectors in Bangladesh. Bangladesh enacted the Labour Act in 2006, including a chapter on child labour with special clauses to stop child labour, but it has not been well enforced in Bangladesh (see Ahamed, 2013). The new Act prohibits the employment of children under the age of 14 and dangerous forms of child labour for persons under 18. However, children 12 years of age or older may engage in 'light work' that does not pose risks to their mental and physical development and interfere with their education. However, such provisions were written only in the Act and were rarely implemented in Bangladesh (see Afrin, 2014).

Scholars such as Ahamed (2013) and Lau and Chan (2021) still argue that Bangladesh is still a country where the worst forms of child labour are still apparent. Hence, the Bangladesh Government must take necessary and significant steps to stop child labour and ensure affordable children's attendance at school. In addition, the Bangladesh Government must establish a social security scheme to provide financial aid to families that need support to manage their livelihoods without sending their children to jobs.

Directions for future research

This article should be considered a guideline for conducting empirical research to investigate further the cause of extreme child labour in some sectors, e.g., scrap metal, leather, dry-fish, RMG, transportation and construction industries in Bangladesh. It is necessary to understand Bangladesh Government's and ILO's views when other crucial stakeholders are also to be conducted to know more specifically why child labour in Bangladesh is still considerably high and how it can be reduced.

Conclusions

The world community, mainly international organisations such as the ILO, WTO, IMF, the World Bank, ADB, IFC and national and international NGOs, should adopt a unified strategy to eradicate child labour in Bangladesh and other countries. Child labour needs to be strictly prohibited following trade sanctions on those states that place child labour seriously in hazardous industries. Nevertheless, state governments should be held accountable for safeguarding and securing a bright future for the new generation for their country and the world. Child labour is a stigma for the state and the capitalists, who are primarily responsible for producing the worst forms of child labour as modern slaves in the world. Child labour was man-made, so the problem should be solved by humans as well. Children are the nation's future leaders; their minds and bodies should substantially be built to face any adverse calamities in the world. Hence, parents, society, and mainly state governments' responsibility is very high on this matter. Above all, to protect children's rights, Bangladesh must implement the National Labour Act, the ILO and the UN conventions and adopt more effective strategies to work with other essential stakeholders to eradicate child labour in Bangladesh.

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