

In Search of Alternatives: Child Migration for Work

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Situating children within the migration context

- Migration by children not a new phenomenon.
- Children move as dependents as well as independently.
- When they move independently, they are not necessarily forced to do so, as in trafficking.
- *Independent child migration* implies migration by children without their immediate families, i.e., parents/guardians, typically run away cases, or in the company of friends, neighbours & relatives.

Socio-eco background of child migrants

- Child migrants belong to families that are considerably large but with limited resources.
- The propensity to move is high amongst children in the 11-14 years age group.
- The percentage of male migrant children is higher than their female counterparts.
- Social relegation of girls to the domestic sphere ostensibly to protect them from adverse influences of the outside world.
- Low participation rate in school.
- In the cost-benefit analyses, parents are disinterested in children's education.

Reasons for leaving home

- Migration is a strategic choice for coping with economic exigencies.
- Poverty is often the single most reason that compels children to move.
- Besides, death/ absence of parents causes children to leave home to seek a livelihood.
- Strong propensity of migration by boys after the death of the father.
- Other factors: social (family disputes, negligence, discrimination), physical (natural calamities like floods, river erosion, drought), and demographic (age, sex, decision-making).

My parents divorced when I was 10 years old. I always felt that my mother did not like me as much as my other brothers. She always gave them preference over me in terms of food and affection. I felt neglected and left home in search of my father.

Reasons cont.

- Inadequate educational opportunities in rural areas. Deficiencies in infrastructure, location & services are major disincentives for children, particularly girls, to continue their education.
- Situation is compounded by parents' skepticism about the utilities of formal education.
- Poor parents view their children as assets in a strictly economic sense.
- Apart from associated costs, school deprives them of children's earnings.
- The economics of using children for earning cash weigh heavily against sending children to school.

Children's motives for migration

- Awareness of economic benefits of paid labour.
- Work by rural children in household & agricultural settings carried out without financial recompense; hence, urge to earn cash income is strong amongst children.
- Motives for migration cannot always be explained in purely economic terms: personal factors often influence move, e.g., allure & affluence of cities & material aspirations.

I was always keen to come to the city. I found city life attractive. Whenever I came across visitors from Dhaka in my village I used to stare at them and wish that I too could live in Dhaka. When the opportunity came to move to Dhaka I was ecstatic. At the beginning I had difficulty settling down. However, I am now accustomed to my new way of life. I am amazed at the pace of life in Dhaka.

Motives cont.

Jewellery & clothes hold special attraction for girls. Boys fancy consumer items like watches, bikes, radios and the like.

- For others, ownership of specific objects indicative of rising social status.
- Many children speak of saving to assemble a decent dowry for marriage or set up a small store or business.
- However, the business of relating personal motivation to the expectation of child migrants is not easy since the former continues to be relatively unknown within migration research.

Decision-making

- The business of deciding whether children shall leave home or not is not always straightforward.
- It is common for children to move on the basis of group decisions, e.g., collective/cooperative decisions involving family, kin and children themselves.
- However, evidence shows children decide to leave despite resistance by parents or half-hearted support.
- Some altogether dispense with seeking parental permission.
- Trends in decision-making demonstrate children's ability to make independent choices, without household support.

Migration process

- Social networks crucial for organising children's movements.
- Preponderance of children who migrate in the company of other migrants from the same village.
- Practice of demanding cash payments by accompanying individuals is rare; kinship & community solidarity forges basis for trust & confidence.
- Drawing on ties with relatives & friends with migration experience, children gain access to knowledge, assistance & resources that facilitate their movement.

Children's transition to city life: Situation on arrival

- Children's transition to city life involves complexities of various kinds.
- Difficulties in finding a place to live.
- Many initially live with accompanying members; others find places in city slums, or simply live on the streets.
- Children's place of residence varies according to their occupations:
 - Street vending, flower selling: live on streets.
 - Porters & transport assistants: vehicle stations.
 - Engaged in tea stalls, bakeries, grocery stores, domestic work: with employers or people who brought them to the city.
 - Work in tanneries, welding, electronics, garages & carpentry: slums either with relatives or on rent.
- Very few children can afford to live in rented accommodation.

Living conditions

- Deprived of basic amenities at the place of residence: scant water supply, inadequate sanitation.
- Children on the street use urban sewerage system or open spaces.
- Slums are overcrowded with dark interiors, very little light and air.
- Slum inhabitants use water from public tap or a tube-well, supply of water is sporadic, resulting in general scarcity of water.
- Private latrine and bathing facilities are virtually non-existent, available facility is used on a communal basis. T
- This results in stagnant sewage that operates as a breeding ground for various diseases.

Livelihood options: Work in the informal sector

- Earning an income being a priority, child migrants seek employment as soon as they arrive at the place of destination.
- Work in the informal sector is often the most viable option for migrant children.
- Given the dearth of suitable jobs in the urban labour economy, migrant children are not selective about their occupations & are content with joining whatever occupation they come across.

I was anxious about finding a job as the money my father gave was dwindling. I joined a group of boys who were engaged in loading/unloading goods from trucks for the market. I was on the verge of starvation when I stole a watermelon while unloading a supply truck. I ate it all on my own. I resorted to stealing other stuff for selling and using the money to buy food.

Livelihood options cont.

- Children engage in work that range from small scale business enterprises to street vending, brick chipping, rag-picking and bidi-making.
- Boys predominantly work in hotels, tea stalls, workshops, stores, carpentry, tanneries, welding factories and open markets.
- Girls are less visible in the labour market and are found to engage in gendered work, e.g., domestic work in private homes which is perceived as 'female work'.
- Girls also work in occupations requiring dexterity like sewing and embroidery, assembling electrical parts, rolling *bidis*
- Besides, girls engage in rag-picking, brick chipping, working in bangle and glass factories.

Conditions of work

- Unregulated work processes.
- Absence of employment contract, no clear delineation of functions.
- Unlimited working hours.
- No standards on weekly rest.
- Inadequate and irregular wages.
- Restricted mobility.
- Termination from job arbitrary, no option for children to leave work freely.
- Work involves harmful chemicals, substances & agents in unhygienic, unsafe & unhealthy conditions.
- Children particularly vulnerable to fatigue, wounds and other physical ailments.
- Migrant child workers are prone to irregular eating habits;
- Employers' disregard for children's physical discomforts.
- Treatments comprise ad hoc remedies.
- Time off from work during illness is measured.

Conditions of work: Wages

- Children preferred on account of financial advantage.
- Employers do not perceive children as a formal workforce, therefore proper wage payment not mandatory.
- No set wage structure: wages are determined in accordance with work processes.
 - Monthly payment when children are engaged in stores, shops, domestic work & small scale establishments.
 - Daily-basis payment when they work in rag-picking or brick chipping.
- Wages promised often not paid; children work overtime are not compensated.

I work at a printing press. I am not paid cash for my work; instead my employer provides me with food in exchange for my. I hope someday I will get cash payment. I will save enough to set up my own printing press.

Treatment at work

- Maltreatment by employers is commonplace.
- Verbal abuse of child migrants is widespread and physical beating is used on occasion to punish children for mistakes at work.
- Sexual abuse appears to be low ; however, given the complexities involved & the tendency to conceal such incidents, it is difficult to assess its actual prevalence.
- Child migrants also experience abuse & maltreatment at the hands of policemen & other adults who frequent the streets.
- Girls are particularly vulnerable to sexual molestation.
- Workplaces abuses go unchallenged: trade-off for financial autonomy.

Perception & impact of migration for work

- Child migrants experience a blend of emotions—curiosity, uncertainty, fear, anxiety, regret, a sense of adventure and freedom.
- Problems encountered during the move from home are regarded as unavoidable.
- By and large, child view their transition positively.
- They believe their move has, apart from providing with opportunities of earning an income, instilled in them confidence to make independent choices in life.

Despite the hardship I face I am happy with my current situation. My village had nothing to offer me. My parents badgered me with their endless nagging. They were always after me to go to school; I think that would be a waste of time. I am happy to be on my own, free to make my own decisions. I am in complete control of my life.

Impact cont.

- The impact of migration on children is visible in many ways:
 - Altered eating habits;
 - Dress codes;
 - Manner in which they conduct themselves:
 - many seemingly exude confidence;
 - some appear streetwise.
 - Children's new attitudes visibly affect views of parents'/caregivers:
 - attitudes alien to local culture;
 - arrogant in their behaviour;
 - they refuse to conform to local customs, particularly relevant for girls. too independent & unwilling to submit to local rites & traditions as a result of exposure to city life.

Impact cont.

- Communications with families are intermittent, restricted to exchanges via letters and relatives.

Home visits only on special occasion;

- Autonomous use of wages.
 - an indication of children emerging as active and independent agents of change.
- Notwithstanding, many children use their earnings to support their families.
- This is in keeping with the traditional practice of supplementing family finances.

Future research and policy implications

- Absence of pragmatic policy measure to cope with child migration.
- Migration tends to be viewed as problematic in policy discourses.
- Existing policy environment affects child labour migrants in two distinct ways:
 - As migrants they face similar dilemmas of adults in their search for a better life;
 - As child workers, they are faced with a restrictive legal environment that sets basic standards for admission to employment.

Current debates tend to criminalise child labour migrants instead of taking the associated complexities into consideration.

---Urgent need for in-depth research.



THANK YOU