



## VOLUNTARY AUTONOMOUS CHILD MIGRATION: PERSPECTIVES FROM BANGLADESH

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## 1. Introduction

This paper is based upon findings from empirical research<sup>1</sup> that examine the case of child migrants and the context in which they migrate from their homes in search of a livelihood. Contrary to popular perceptions that children only move with their families, there is growing evidence of autonomous migration by children. 'Autonomous migration' in the present context should be understood to mean migration by children outside the company of their immediate families, that is, parents/guardians. Movement of children in the company of friends, relatives or neighbours is also construed as being within the ambit of autonomous migration. In other words, the paper examines the position of children who have voluntarily moved either by themselves (typically cases of runaways) or in the company of friends, neighbours and relatives.

Whereas ideas about children's dependence persist in different ways, the changing political and economic scenario of the country has induced a shift from the stereotypical understandings of childhood in Bangladesh. While children were traditionally construed as powerless entities, recent transitions in the socio-economic context have lent them greater visibility and independence whereby they are now able renegotiate their role from that of passive dependents to active decision-makers.

Therefore, although the needs of children may appear to be obvious from the perspective of adults, children may have their own perceptions of what they need and what is essentially in their best interests. Accordingly, when children move it is not always at the behest of adults but often on their own. Children may deliberately choose an autonomous existence away from home, working and earning independently.

This paper seeks to highlight the dynamics of migration by children independently of their immediate families and voluntarily, that is, of their own free will, without the application of any fear or force by families.

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<sup>1</sup> Conducted under a partnership between the Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU) at the University of Dhaka, Bangladesh and the Development Research Centre (DRC) on Migration, Globalisation and Poverty and coordinated by the Sussex Centre for Migration Research, University of Sussex, UK.

## **2. Methodology**

The study adopted both primary and secondary methods of investigation. The primary investigation involved field-based empirical research; the secondary investigation entailed a survey of existing literature on the subject. The field investigation was premised on a combination of formal and informal techniques. Given that the primary respondents in the study were children, a combination of methods was deemed essential with due regard to their inherent sensitivities. As such, although the fieldwork was conducted on the basis of a structured questionnaire, particular emphasis was placed on open-ended one-to-one in-depth interviews, participatory observation and focus group discussions.

The respondents, both children and parents, were chosen on the basis of purposive methods of sampling. Interviews were conducted with 105 children who had migrated from their homes by themselves and with 50 parents whose children had migrated to other places independently of their immediate families. The choice of such a sample size was not arbitrary but premised on the circumstances, scope and nature of the study. The study also includes in-depth case studies of another 15 child migrants.

Dhaka was selected as the location for interviewing children, as it is a major urban centre, which attracts child migrants in great numbers for work in various trades and services. Children were located at bus, launch and train terminals, in their places of work and in their residences in the slums.

## **3. Understanding Children's Lifeworlds in Bangladesh**

There is very little literature on childhood in Bangladesh and the South Asian region on the whole. The absence of the study of childhood in sociology and other relevant disciplines in this region is not so much on account of disinterest in children but due to the fact that children constitute an invisible group with muted voices. Children's virtual absence in relevant disciplines might be rooted in the same factors that excluded women from attention as a separate group; subsumed in domestic roles in male-

dominated societies, children were not customarily considered unique or as meriting special attention. While efforts to study histories of childhood from biographies and memoirs have only just begun to emerge, they are largely confined to stories of upper middle-class families of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>2</sup>

Work from an early age is an integral part of the socialisation process. In Bangladesh, rural households that subsist on agriculture are greatly reliant on their children, particularly boys, for assistance in the field and to maintain a stronghold on family assets. Where households are the key units of production, their survival depends on their ability to reproduce themselves and maintain their viability.<sup>3</sup> The demand for labour in both household production and household maintenance being high, the advantages of being able to draw on family labour are many.<sup>4</sup> The potential labour power of children, therefore, is significant for people in Bangladesh.

An examination of the overall participation rates of male and female children demonstrates that the sexual division of labour manifests itself fairly early in a child's life. Children learn to adjust their personality and skills to fit their anticipated roles.<sup>5</sup> Cultural factors often have an independent effect on sex roles and the consequent division of labour among children in the family. In many regions social traditions dictate and decide which job should be undertaken by boys and which, by girls. In certain circles, for example, customary norms ensure that boys are employed much more than girls, or when there is a desire to emulate the standards of specific social classes.<sup>6</sup>

Children of both sexes, therefore, play individual roles in complementing the family finances. It is believed that a prevalence of family farming and unemployment problems in non-farm sectors compels family members to assist the adult males of the family in income-generating activities. It has been argued that in such an economy, it becomes difficult to determine the sex specific participation rate or work categories, which shift constantly. Therefore, where families possess very

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<sup>2</sup> Malik, Shahdeen, *The Children Act, 1974. A Critical Commentary*, Save the Children UK (Dhaka), 2004, see pp. 12-14.

<sup>3</sup> Crehan, Kate, "Rural Households: Survival and Change" in Bernstein, Henry et al (eds.), *Rural Livelihoods. Crises and Responses*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1992, pp. 113-134, at p.113.

<sup>4</sup> Cain, Mead T., "The Household, Life Cycle and Economic Mobility in Rural Bangladesh" in *Population and Development Review*, Vol. 4, No.2, June, 1978, pp. 421-438, at p.426.

<sup>5</sup> Cain, 1977, *op.cit.*, p.212.

<sup>6</sup> Mendelievich, 1980, *op.cit.*, p.32.

few income generating assets, they deploy all available sources of labour to sustain the family.<sup>7</sup> Children, too, are utilised to satisfy the perceived needs of the family and kin group to which they belong.

Evidently, socio-cultural prescriptions have a significant role in shaping the lifeworlds of children across societies, as the consciousness and behaviour of people in a given society are determined to a large extent by social and cultural precepts. Accordingly, the diverging competencies and capacities associated with childhood in different societies are indeed numerous and often paradoxical to the extent where the globalised notion of childhood seems grossly inappropriate. For instance, whereas the Western concept of childhood requires a child to pass time in fun and frolic with school as an essential component for future development, for children in less developed non-Western societies, who are compelled to contribute to family subsistence, that option is not at all viable. In the circumstances, the notion that childhood is equal in character and duration for all children of the world is often untenable.

#### **4. Situating Children within the Migration Framework**

Children in the migration process have remained largely invisible in Bangladesh. This is particularly because children are not viewed as constituting an independent constituency meriting separate attention. Traditionally regarded as secondary, non-autonomous entities, children's position within the broader migrant population has thus remained unexplored. Child labour studies demonstrate that movement of children in search of a livelihood has increased over the years. While these studies underscore the situation of children from child labour perspectives, there is virtually no information on patterns of their migration.

While children's decision to move is influenced by a number of factors, it is normally seen as being conceived in response to both environmental conditions and personal convictions. The desire to travel to the city is augmented by severe economic conditions prevailing in rural villages on the one hand, and the lure of affluence in the cities, on the other. Children often have no perception of the

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<sup>7</sup> Khan, Salma, *The Fifty Percent Women in Development and Policy in Bangladesh*, University Press Ltd., 1988, pp.8-9.

realities of city life nor do they have any education or transferable skills that can be utilised; nevertheless, they are willing to migrate in search of a life that is different and in many ways better than the one they have been born into. Thus, just as expectations exist amongst adult migrants, children too, choose to migrate in an attempt to test their chances of working towards a better life.

Therefore, economic reasons alone cannot be relied on to explain migration by children—other equally important factors, such as social (family disputes, negligence, discrimination), physical (natural calamities like floods, river erosion, drought), psychological (attraction for city life) and demographic (age, sex, decision-making) factors may well encourage them to move. Many of the child migrants live and work in extremely poor conditions in the city. They often have no shelter, proper food or a steady job. Yet, they come pouring in. Admittedly, it is personal motivation that essentially pushes children to move; however, the business of relating this motivation to the expectation of child migrants is not an easy one since personal motivation continues to be an unknown element within migration research.<sup>8</sup>

Whereas macro determinants significantly influence an individual's decision to move, social networks are progressively being viewed as a crucial means for organising people's movements. Begum defines a social network as an informal mesh of affiliations existing within a fraternity of people who are related or tied by common bonds. She stresses that the concept of network can be best understood from existing affiliations in terms of blood relations, friends, neighbours, fellow townsfolk/villagers and people with a shared cultural and religious heritage and compares it to a structure of threads, cords or wires, knotted and secured at the crossings, crossing each other at certain intervals.<sup>9</sup>

According to social capital theory, migrant networks are made up of interpersonal ties that connect migrants, former migrants and non-migrants in places of origin and destination and thereby reduce the costs and risks associated with migration. Massey et al. state that in Asia previous generations of migrants not only impart valuable information and encouragement; they often pay for, arrange

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<sup>8</sup> Begum, Anwara, 1999, *op.cit.*, p. 64.

<sup>9</sup> Begum, Anwara, "Social Network in International Migration: A Framework for Analysis" in Abrar, C.R., *On the Margin. Refugees, Migrants and Minorities*, Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU), Dhaka, 2000, pp. 69-82, at pp. 69-70.

and make the passage easy for the new migrants. When a migrant arrives in the place of destination, networks consisting of kin, friends and the like at the receiving end offer valuable assistance in the adjustment process, especially in gaining access to housing and employment.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, whereas some children arrange their relocation on their own without any outside assistance, the majority of them prefer to migrate with the help of relatives, friends and neighbours who have already migrated. Networks not only link friends and kin but also involve employers and other actors. Nevertheless, family based social networks remain the single most important means for facilitating the movement of children who would otherwise find it difficult to migrate given prevalent socio-cultural ideologies of gender and kinship.

Children in Bangladesh share strong bonds not only with their immediate families but also with kin and members of the extended family. In rural villages it is normative even for unrelated individuals to become a part of the family network by virtue of a shared friendship spanning generations or simply by being a caring neighbour. Thus, the utility of interpersonal networks in the migration process cannot be over emphasised in discussing migration of children in Bangladesh.

#### *4.1 Socio-Economic Profile of Autonomous Child Migrants*

It is seen that children are prone to migrate in the early years of their lives. The prevalence is more marked in the 11-14 years age group. Discussions with respondents, both children and adults, revealed that male children are inclined to migrate earlier than their female counterparts. Traditionally girls are more likely than boys to live in close proximity of their families.

Migrant children generally come from large families. The propensity of having large families is often the result of illiteracy, social and religious biases and a preference for male descendants. These factors together effectively block the path for a planned family. It is found that in the calculus of costs and benefits that rural couples make in planning their families, girls are far outweighed by boys. Since any advantage accruing from sons may be offset by the loss incurred in paying hefty dowries for daughters, a pragmatic strategy for parents for mitigating this situation is by having numerous children.

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<sup>10</sup> Massey et al., *op.cit.* p.187.

Most of the families are headed by fathers in consonance with the patriarchal ideology that vests all powers in the male, whether father, husband or son. It is only where a woman is divorced, widowed or deserted does she head the family. Child migrants in the study belong to families where the mothers are predominantly housewives and the fathers are occupied in a variety of activities ranging from farming to plying rickshaws.

Migrant children have virtually no education. Apart from economic considerations, reluctance of parents to send their children to school and children's own disinterest in school is a major factor that circumscribes children's educational options. This stems largely from the skepticism of poor parents about the practical utilities of formal education. Moreover, where parents expect cash contributions from their offspring, time spent in school seem to deprive them of the badly needed supplementary income.

#### *4.2 Migration Patterns*

Economic impoverishment has accelerated rural-urban migration by children in recent years, irrespective of whether migration is seasonal or permanent. For most children and their families migration has emerged as a strategy for coping with economic exigencies. One of the fundamental motives for migration by children is to find work in urban areas. Accordingly, migrant children are found engaged in both formal and informal sectors, with the informal sector predominating given its fluidity compared to the formal sector. While rapid rural-urban migration flows contribute to the growth of child labour, the structure of the labour market determines the wage level and conditions of work. Thus, a combination of the negative push-factors of the sending area and the positive pull factors of the receiving area influence the migration patterns of children who move independently of their immediate families.

##### *4.2.1 Factors Instigating Child Migration*

Clearly poverty is a major factor influencing the decision of children to move away from home. In the absence of viable alternatives at home, children are increasingly seeking new opportunities



beyond their domestic sphere. Migration by children is also a strategic choice for most parents in the hope that children will eventually return home with money for the family. While economic imperatives certainly play a vital role in compelling poor children to leave home, there are other factors that may be just as important. For instance, death/absence of parents is frequently a reason why children leave home and seek a new life elsewhere. In such circumstances, the need to survive surpasses any sense of foreboding that a child may have about stepping into an alien environment. There is a strong propensity for boys to migrate following the death of the father. Given the patriarchal social structure it is only reasonable to expect that sons will take on the family responsibility in the absence of the father. Besides, abuse, neglect and maltreatment at home are other causes that instigate children's movement.

For some children, greater awareness of economic benefits of paid labour and the allure of consumer items is a primary force encouraging migration. There are yet others who are more organised in terms of material aspirations. Boys, for example, are more interested to save enough money to set up a business of their own. Boys are also more prone to yearn for consumer items like watches, bikes, radios and the like. In many cases, they view the ownership of such objects as indicative of their rising social status. For girls, jewellery and clothes hold a special allure. Some admittedly work to earn in order to assemble a decent dowry for their marriage.

Children, therefore, do possess the ability to perceive and aim for a better way of life independently of adult involvement. This negates the conventional perception that the poor in Bangladesh are by nature fatalistic; the responses of the children reveal a departure from the stereotypical assessment of poor people's outlook on their life. Hence, apart from financial necessity at a collective or family level, other considerations also operate at a personal level whereby children are motivated to leave home in search of a better way of life.

#### 4.2.2 Decision-Making and Migration

Investigation reveals that children's choice to migrate largely stems from group decisions, e.g., collective decisions by the family/kin. Except in cases where children run away from home for specific reasons, in most instances they migrate on the basis of a joint decision by the child and the

parents. This is similar to what Iversen terms as 'cooperative migration'. According to Iversen migration decisions may be classified as *cooperative* or *autonomous*. In his understanding, a strong autonomy indicates the unambiguous decision to leave home without any parental pressure and without any parental involvement in decision-making, employment or shelter arrangement. Cooperative migration, on the other hand, involves parental and household support in decision-making.<sup>11</sup>

However, in some cases children do decide to move despite the fact that they do not receive parental support. There are some who do not consider asking their parents, as they know that they will not be granted the permission to leave, if approached. There are yet others who consult their parents and on receiving half-hearted assent, choose to move anyway. This indicates children's ability to decide independently of adult involvement. This also demonstrates that children are motivated by personal considerations to seek a better way of life instead of always aiming for the collective good of the family. Generally speaking, whereas children indeed often move without their immediate families, they nevertheless do so with the blessings of their parents, except in a few cases where they abscond from home.

Thus, contrary to perceived notions that adults generally control children's lifeworlds, it is found that children too are active decision-makers who consciously opt to migrate from home. Evidently, aspirations for a comfortable life encourage these children to migrate, the general perception being that work for a few years will pave the way for a prosperous future for them. In many cases they are supported by parents/guardians who send their children away in the hope that after a few years of work in the city they will have landed a steady job and will sustain the family.

#### 4.2.3 Modes of Migration

It is established that children for the most part migrate in the company of friends, relatives or neighbours when they are not migrating in the company of their immediate families. In many instances the accompanying members are other migrants from the same village. It is found that

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<sup>11</sup> Iversen, Vegard, "Autonomy in Child Labor Migrants", *World Development*, Vol.30, No.5, 2002, pp.817-834, at p. 821.

children are generally not required to make any kind of payment to the friend/relative who brings them to the place of destination. This indicates that kinship and community solidarity continue to be strong as is manifest from the trust and confidence placed by both children and parents in their relatives and friends. Intermediaries like friends, relatives and neighbours therefore constitute an integral part of child migration process.

Evidently, children benefit immensely from interpersonal links that assist them in travelling, finding a shelter and often a job at the place of destination. Social networks comprising of friends, neighbours and relatives provide invaluable help to newly arrived child migrants in making physical and emotional adjustments to unfamiliar surroundings. While these children experience social, economic and cultural marginalisation in the destination, the presence of networks enables them to sustain themselves in an otherwise hostile environment.

## **5. Situation of Child migrants at Place of Destination**

When children arrive in the city, they are beset with countless problems that range from inability to find a decent place to stay, harassment and intimidation, to unfavourable working conditions and inequitable treatment at work. This section looks at various aspects of their experience in the urban nexus and analyses their impact on migrant children.

### *5.1 Living Conditions*

Child migrants are heavily reliant on the persons/intermediaries with whom they migrate in their attempts to find a niche for themselves in the destination. The place of their residence at the destination depends to a large extent on the kind of work they are involved with. For instance, those who live on the streets are engaged in vending, flower selling, working as transport assistants and so on. Porters and transport assistants are more inclined to sleep at the vehicle stations. The majority of the children who work in shops, like tea stalls, bakeries or grocery stores or work at domestic activities, live with their employers or the people who bring them to the destination. Child migrants who work in factories like tanneries, welding, electronics and other small scale enterprises like garages, carpentry and the like, live in slums either with relatives or on

rent. Very few children can afford to live in rented accommodation; those who do live in groups or clusters, as in hostels or messes.

It is obviously difficult for children living off the streets to have any real access to basic amenities like drinking water and sanitation. For many of them, the urban sewerage system or open spaces serve as toilets. For those of them who live in slums, the scenario is not all that different. They live in overcrowded shacks and use water from a public tap or a tube-well. Since supply of water is often sporadic and for very few hours, there is a general scarcity of water in all the slums. Private latrine and bathing facilities are virtually non-existent and whatever facility is available is used on a communal basis. This results in stagnant sewage that operates as a breeding ground for various diseases. During the monsoons the situation is undecipherable.

Despite this murky picture, slum inhabitants are remarkable in their organisation and sport their own brand of power. There exists amongst them a strong camaraderie that helps child migrants bond. While the likelihood of exposure to ill effects of slum life is high, in many ways children also benefit from it as slum dwellers often act as their protectors and a buffer against external oppression.

### *5.2 Job Opportunities and Working Conditions*

Given their age, experience and the fact that they lack practical skills, work in the informal sector is often the most viable option for migrant children. It is common for child migrants to secure their jobs either through personal initiatives or through friends or relatives. At times they simply appear at the doorstep of a shop or factory and request work. There are times when children are simply picked up and taken in when found drifting on the streets.

Children in the informal sector constitute an invisible workforce which engages in activities that range from small scale business enterprises to street vending, brick chipping, rag-picking and *bidi* making. Boys predominate in certain occupations like workshops, while girls feature prominently in domestic service. Children on the streets are susceptible to police violence and harassment by local hoodlums who try to utilise them for illegal and often immoral activities. Girls on the street

face risks of sexual exploitation, as their itinerant status is often misinterpreted to signify their 'availability' for anti-social activities.

Children's work in the informal sector does not come within the purview of any labour law currently in force. Consequently, the terms and conditions that are applicable to other forms of employment have no relevance to them. Devoid of legal regulation, child labour migrants are engaged without a contract of any sort. Consequently, their hours of work are not limited, standards on weekly rest are absent, wages are not fixed nor adequately paid, freedom of movement is curtailed and workplace duties and functions are not well defined. Child migrant workers do not have any days off during the week nor do they enjoy any regular holiday. They may be permitted to visit home once or twice a year on social and religious occasions. Whereas termination from service is often arbitrary, it is difficult for child migrants to leave the job of their own free will. Thus, child migrant workers occupy an extremely fragile position within the power hierarchy in the urban labour market which essentially divests them of the power to negotiate over their just dues.

### *5.3 Insecurities Faced by Child Migrants*

Child migrants experience different kinds of problems at the place of destination. Physical exhaustion results from tireless work and lack of proper rest. Where the work involves intrinsically hazardous processes such as harmful chemicals, substances and agents, children are more susceptible on account of their immaturity, causing irreversible damage leading to permanent disabilities. Their vulnerability is increased by the high incidence of malnutrition and under-nourishment that is a common phenomenon amongst the majority of migrant children. Confinement to unhygienic, unsafe and unhealthy conditions of work and exposure to workplace risks for interminable periods invariably lead to malnutrition, anaemia and fatigue. Since migrant child workers are unable to meet nutritional requirements and are prone to irregular eating habits, they are susceptible to various infectious diseases.

While minor ailments of child workers are normally attended to, the general tendency on the part of employers is to disregard children's physical discomforts. Home remedies, like a quick dose of analgesic medicine are the order of the day and options of rest during illness are also measured.

Illnesses that incur expensive treatment often result in the termination of the child from work.

Maltreatment by employers is common in the urban labour market. Children are generally subjected to verbal abuse by employers. Physical beating is also a common mode of punishment for mistakes made during work. There are allegations of sexual abuse. For the most part, children who face workplace abuse keep silent and do not protest against ill-treatment. Since in the majority of cases the perpetrator is an adult, children realise the futility of lodging complaints. If anything any attempt at protest is likely to be met with expulsion from their jobs.

For some children, the sources of abuse and maltreatment are more the policemen and other adults who frequent the streets rather than their employers. It is common for policemen on the beat to harass children and extort portions of their wages under threat of arrest on charges *inter alia* for loitering, engaging in anti-state activities, drug-dealing, stealing and picking pockets. Girl children are particularly vulnerable to sexual molestation; any resistance on their part invariably leads to incarceration on false charges of prostitution. Therefore, the safety and security of child labour migrants are routinely compromised in various ways.

#### *5.4 Impact of Migration*

The impact of migration on children is visible in a number of ways. For many of them the process has brought a change in their eating habits, in the way they dress and the manner in which they conduct themselves. Some of them appear street wise while changes in others, though muted, are nevertheless discernible. Many parents complain that migrant children often demonstrate attitudes that are alien to village culture. Sometimes they are arrogant in their behaviour and refuse to conform to local customs. This, according to them, is particularly true of girl child migrants, many of whom have become far too independent and unwilling to submit to local rites and traditions as a result of exposure to city life. This coincides with children's own views as they admit that the process has not only enabled them to earn a living but also instilled in them a great deal of confidence. They now feel that they can make informed decisions and take control of their own lives.

That children control their own lives is evidenced by the fact that in many instances child migrants have the use of their own wages. This is certainly a departure from the traditional practice whereby parents used their children's earnings. The reversal in roles is an indication that children are increasingly emerging as active agents of change. The extent of family dependence on their earnings is found to be moderate. Nonetheless, there is a propensity amongst child migrants to share their earnings with their families in an attempt to ease the poverty they live in. This stems from the customary notion that children have a moral obligation to their parents to help maintain the family.

### *5.5 Children's Perceptions of Work and Migration*

There is a general perception amongst child migrants that work is an integral part of the migration experience irrespective of the hardship encountered. They argue that they need to work in order to fulfill their aspirations that prompt them to leave home in the first place. In the circumstances, if their position in the labour market is not given due recognition, the likelihood of exploitation by unscrupulous employers/recruiters would increase manifold. Unless therefore, measures are taken to provide child labour migrants with some degree of bargaining power, their rights will forever remain unarticulated.

Children naturally traverse different emotional experiences from the time they leave home until they finally settle down in the destination. The transition is far from easy. Nevertheless, it is found that despite initial misgivings and a sense of homesickness, child migrants feel happy that they decided to move from their villages. As for the problems encountered during the move, they are regarded as unavoidable aspects of the migration experience. Evidently, material aspirations frequently override children's inhibitions and fear of potential risks during migration.

For some children, however, the process is a difficult one. Alienated from their families and familiar environment, they experience insecurity and marginalisation in intense ways. They long to go back home; at the same time they realise that they are not in any position to bargain over available options.

## 6. Policy Implications

Notwithstanding widespread migration in Bangladesh by both adults and children, there is no pragmatic policy measure to cope with the phenomenon. There is a clear lack in understanding of the dynamics of child labour migration in Bangladesh. Consequently, the issue has not received the attention of policy planners at any point of time. As it is, migration tends to be viewed as problematic in policy discourses; this, coupled with international pressure to eliminate child labour, has kept policymakers more focused on children in the labour market without so much as looking at how children get there in the first place. This is manifest in the virtual absence of policy and legal measures for the protection of child labour migrants and the recognition that these children are indeed entitled to certain rights.

Migration is by no means a new experience in Bangladesh. Rural-urban migration has been a consistent feature whereby rural populations flowed to cities in quest of a livelihood. Dhaka is a favourite haunt for most migrants, whether children or adults, due to its centrality and importance as a manufacturing, administrative and commercial centre. Consequently, the pace of rural-urban migration into Dhaka is unrelenting. Given the high density in urban population and corresponding strain on the environment and existing infrastructure, the government reaction to rural-urban migration flow is understandable. Nonetheless, it has been suggested that the trend is basically the result of rural policy failures and lack of urban management. Although rural development features prominently in the government's periodic five-year plans, actual progress always falls short of the targets. Consequently, the poor are forced to seek other viable ways of surviving. This implies that the overall environment that is created and perpetuated by policies and established by the government plays a critical role in conditioning migrants.<sup>12</sup>

The existing policy environment affects child labour migrants in two distinct ways. As migrants they are subjected to the same dilemmas that adults face in their quest for a better life away from their villages. As child workers they are faced with a restrictive legal environment that sets basic standards for admission to work/employment. Current debates surrounding child labour tend to

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<sup>12</sup> Begum, Anwara, *ibid.*, 1999, pp. 5-7.



criminalise children's work instead of taking the associated complexities into consideration. Certainly children should not be made to work in conditions that are detrimental to their health, safety and intellectual development. The question is whether prohibitive measures are necessarily the solution to a problem as endemic as child labour, particularly in a developing country like Bangladesh. Moreover, what may seem to policy makers and legislators to be right for children may be completely at odds with the perceptions of children themselves. Conversely, the kinds of work situations that policy interventions may deem as being problematic for children often represent precisely the search for a solution to other important problems that they face.<sup>13</sup>

Therefore, systemic exclusion of child labour migrants from legal and policy frameworks enhances their vulnerability to exploitation. If their position in the labour market is not given due recognition, their susceptibility to exploitation by unscrupulous employers/recruiters will increase. Unless measures are taken to provide child labour migrants with some degree of choice, autonomy and protection, they will continue to be deprived of their rights, particularly when they are engaged in low skilled, marginal, inadequately controlled sectors of the economy. In the absence of concrete legal and policy guidelines, problems regarding equitable wage rates, health, safety, and minimum standards in their workplaces will persist.

It is thus important for policymakers to recognise that child labour migration is often central to the livelihoods of families. Instead of viewing the process as a nuisance to the urban way of life, policies and laws should be developed to provide child labour migrants with an enabling environment whereby they can lead decent lives.

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<sup>13</sup> White, Benjamin, *Children, Work and 'Child Labour': Changing Responses to the Employment of Children*, Institute of Social Studies, The Hague, The Netherlands, 1994, p. 7.