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## Reality of the Vicious Circle of Poor School Attendance in Bangladesh

Md. Abu Bakar Siddique.

Childhood is the most important and creative period of human beings. Parents can play a vital role in raising their children properly. Around the world a large number of children are in a miserable situation due to lack of parental appropriate care and social opportunities. Instead of going to school these children survive as a paid or unpaid labor force, which has a major impact on their physical and mental development. This scenario is especially intense in the developing countries in south Asia. Amartya sen-(2000) said, child labor is a distressing subject and barbarity of the children in the Indian sub-continent. In the case of Bangladesh, a large number of children have been identified in a grave situation in the labor force and are vulnerable. They are prevented from becoming productive citizens, which has a major impact on democratic society and economy. Excessive parental misguidance is the main cause of the rising number of vulnerable children who are deprived of education. Actually, this problem has existed in Bangladeshi society for a long time and is transmitted from generation to generation in a vicious circle. From this perspective, child labor and the prevention of children from going to school should be eliminated or else the number of productive citizen will be reduced.

Although there are several legislative laws against child labor with the aim of protecting child workers from exploitation by employers, the enforcement of these laws has been difficult because most of the children are working

in the informal sector. Ahmed and Quasem-(1991) said, compulsory primary education could be one of the effective instruments to eradicate the child labor problem. In respects, the Government of Bangladesh has implemented compulsory primary education since 1972, but the problem still exists. Primary education is compulsory for children but it is not compulsory for the parents, even though parental co-operation is an important factor for the success of compulsory primary education. Many scholars argue parental poverty and illiteracy is the main reason of child labor and poor school attendance in Bangladesh. In regards to this, many government and non-government organizations have come forward to take the initiative in rendering services for the parents. But in terms of the magnitude of the problem, situation and needs of parents, these services are not adequate. At this stage, it is essential to implement an extensive and effective program mediated parent consciousness, which will be able to remedy parental poverty and illiteracy as well as child labor and poor school attendance in Bangladesh.

### **Magnitude of the problem in Bangladesh perspective**

#### **Poor school attendance and government policy**

In Bangladesh primary education has been selected for 6-10 year old children, which is a 5 year course and free of cost. In spite of this facility, many children are out of school due to parental negligence and weakness of primary

education. Most of the non-schooling children's parents are poor and illiterate and they don't know the value of education. On the other hand, children's education is an important concern of the government, and the Bangladesh constitution adapted in 1972 spells out the obligation to provide universal education. In other words, it states the intention to build a modern society. But successive governments (and donors) have been slow to give priority to this sector. The 1981 census showed that the percentage of illiterate 5 years olds and above had actually regressed from 24.5 % in 1974 to 23.8% in 1981. With literacy rates already low, this gave cause for alarm.

From 1973 onwards, the performance of the Education Ministry has been notoriously poor. In the first five year plan (1973-1978) only 18.8% of the education budget was allocated to primary education, while only half of the amount was actually utilized. Similarly, the next five year plan (1980-1985) had to be scaled down because of the poor absorptive capacity of the ministry (Gustavsson-1990).

In 1991, the Bangladesh parliament ratified the compulsory primary education Act aiming to increase the enrollment of children in primary schools from 60% to 95% by the year 2000. In December 1993 in New Delhi, Bangladesh again renewed the pledge in a joint declaration signed by nine countries to achieve "Education For All". The aim is to retain 70% of the children for five years in schools, and to achieve an adult literacy rate of 62%.

This ambitious pledge has provoked a great deal of comment in the media, mainly because it seemed so unrealistic. The gap that needs to be filled to meet the goal is immense, if not impossible. There are many contradictory accounts of the state of affairs in primary educa-

tion, especially as the topic has become highly political. To give an idea of the enormous task the pledge entails, The Daily Star, 12 January 1994, reported that out of 16.7 million 6-10 year old children in the country, 9.8 million were enrolled in school, which represented 58% of the total number of children enrolled, 5.9 million dropped out and only 3.9 million children completed the whole five years of education. If these figures are reliable, it means that a mere 23% of children of primary school age complete the primary school cycle. The retention rate in Bangladesh primary school is one of the lowest in the world. Clearly, there are major problems with the state's educational services. Hope not complacency-1999 reveals that, in Bangladesh primary schools, the children enrollment rate is 77%, attendance rate is 62.5%, dropout rate is 27.3% and grade-5 completion rate is 35%. This completion rate is very approximate of government literacy rate (32.4%, 7 years old and above, census-1991). BBS-1998 report depicts that 44.5% of children leave the school due to parental financial problems, 28.6% children leave the school due to refusal of study, 2.9% children leave the school due to social custom, 0.8% of children are unable to study, work for wages 2.0%, participating in household activities 12.7% household work 6.3% and 2.2% of children leave the school due to other causes.

A relevant question rising in Bangladesh is whether "Education for All" is the result of genuine interest and commitment by the government, or a ploy to impress donor and the international community. Donors played an important role in leading the Government to strengthen primary education service; this may be seen as positive. On the other hand the need to impress donors on achievement is

not conducive to an honest assessment of problems, as the complexity of foreign donors themselves in the creation of delusion is not to be excluded. Seeing how little progress has been achieved, Mokammel-(1994) said, "education for all has greatly become a pledge without sincerity a simple bluff." On the other hand, the numerous NGOs are conducting literacy program for the poor children but they cannot realize universal primary education because they do not have the mandate or the resources to do so. Even NGOs are not always able to motivate parents and employers to send their children to school.

#### Non-schooling children and their situation

Usually, the non-schooling children are involved in various activities such as labor force, which is very intense both urban and rural areas of Bangladesh. According to the following survey (ILO-1996) findings highlight different aspects of non-schooling children's problems and situations in Bangladesh.

(a) The children were found to do almost all kinds of work that adults do. In the urban areas children were found to be involved in about 300 types of economic activities. In the rural (including tribal) areas the children were engaged in about 90 types of agricultural and non-agricultural activities. The

major categories of their work include sellers in shops, mobile vendors; factory workers in welding, automobile, lath and other forms of engineering workshops; carpenters, bakers, scavengers, child domestics, porter, brick or stone breaker, transport worker and different forms of agricultural work.

(b) About 65% of child workers were found to work for 9-14 hours a day. The minimum time for work is 4 hours a day, and workers of 10 have to work for a maximum 19 hours a day, while the average working time is 10 hours daily.

(c) There was no specific system of granting weekly or monthly leave in the informal sector. Many children were found to work even on weekly and national holidays. They got leave 2-3 times a year. In case of the self-employed children, about 70% did not take a day off from work unless it was very urgent.

(d) The average monthly income of self-employed children was Tk. 797 (\$ 19.93), while the average monthly income of the child workers employed in other sectors was Tk. 363 (\$ 9.05) and the average monthly income in the informal sector was Tk. 492 most cases weekly and daily payments were also made. There are a number of reasons for

Table-1. 6-10 years old child education situation.

Status of the children	Child population	Percentage of children's status
Total child population	16.7 million	—
School enrollment	12.8 million	77%
Not enrolled at all	3.9 million	23%
School attendance	8.00 million	62.5%
Never attend the school	4.8 million (out of total enrollment)	38%
Drop out	2.18 million (out of total attendance)	27.3%
Completion of grade-5	5.82 million (out of total children)	35%
Total out of school children	10.88 million (out of total children)	65%

Source:- Hope not complacency-1999.

poor salaries such as lack of guidelines for fixation of wage, regular flow of child workers and the exploitative nature of the employers.

- (e) As the child laborers were necessary for their families' overall survival, in most cases, the children were found to give their earnings to their families. While some of the children gave their entire earnings to their families, other kept a portion of their earnings for their own expenditure and savings. About 25% of the children were found to save money out of their earnings. The children wanted to save money for their future security. Some children wanted to invest their savings to start a small business. Some girls reported that they save money to bear the expense of their marriages. About 44% of the children kept the savings to themselves.
- (f) About 48% of the working children never attended school earlier. About 58% of the children who never attended school because of economic hardship and school dropout cases, expressed their interest in attending school.
- (g) About 67% working children live with their parents and 11% live with their employers and 6% live on their own. At night about 70% of working children sleep with their parents and 10% sleep in their employers' houses, 7% sleep in public places and face numerous problems like bad weather (rain, extreme cold), mosquito bites, torture by hooligans, night guards and police, and lack of necessary items for sleeping.
- (h) It was reported by 97% of working children that they receive treatment in case of sickness. Among them about 50% used to receive treatment in case of major and minor sickness. The parents paid for the cost of

treatment of 51% and in 23% case the employers paid.

- (i) As most of the urban child workers live in slums and most backward areas where basic utilities were not available, access to pure water for drinking, cooking, and for taking a shower was scarce for about 47% of the children and a similar number have no access to hygienic sanitation. The major reasons of lone migration of the working children were to earn money (76%), economic hardship (35%) and family conflict (divorce, abuse) (11%). The adult members migrated to the urban areas for getting employment (72%).
- (j) The relationship between the child workers and the employers covers a wide spectrum, ranging from very exploitative/abusive to very supportive and excellent. In most cases, the personal relationship between child workers and the employers was good. In some cases, the employers beat or rebuked the child (girl) domestics for their misconduct, breaking something, or for failure to do something. On the other hand, some employers were very supportive and nice to the working children.
- (k) About 27 types of economic activities were rated as hazardous for children. The main hazards were-exposure to flame, working with electricity, exposure to harmful chemical substances, gas, fume, dust, garbage, high-speed machinery, sharp equipment, extreme heat or old insufficient light, heavy loads, stressful working conditions and continuous working with ice and water.
- BBS report reveals 65% of children are involved in the labor force due to parental financial problems, 2.0% of children's parents don't want to go to school, 7.1% of children's parents/fathers are deceased and 21.7% other

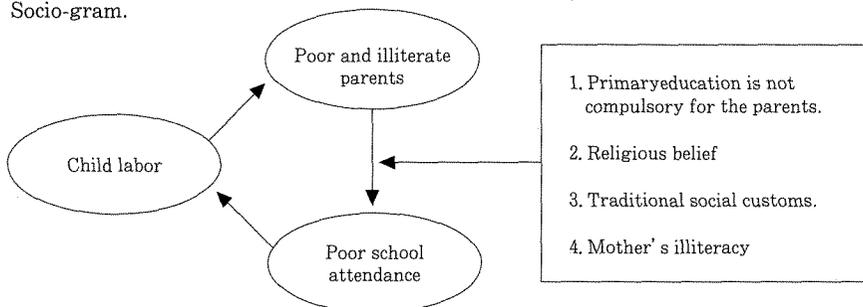
causes. The official statistics on the number of child labor employed at formal and non-formal sector are totally unreliable, providing estimates, which are considerably under reported. These official data hide more than they reveal and provide no information whatsoever on child labor. The collection of data on the number of children working in the formal and non-formal sector throughout Bangladesh and the condition under which they work would necessitate considerable field work by a reliable agency. Otherwise these children will remain invisible and the Government, the media and the general people may be led to believe that child labor is not an issue.

**Vicious circle of the problem**

In Bangladesh, about 88% people are Muslim, 11% Hindu and 1% Christian and Buddhist respectively (statistical year book-1998). According to religious belief (Muslim and Hindu), "children's heaven is exist beneath the lag of parents" (children can gain the heaven by parental serve) and this feeling compels the children to follow the parental order otherwise they will fall into a grim situation which will encourage the children into the labor force (especially poor families). In order to bring parental happiness the children also willingly come forward (fear of God punish) to provide old age security and supplement the income source of the family. Usually, the poor par-

ents expect their children's help to bring their family's economic solvency and the children are compelled to fulfill their parental desire. In addition, most of the poor parents are fostering their poverty and illiteracy by the practice of some traditional social customs such as, early marriage, multi marriage, non-acceptance of family planning, etc. The poor families' children contribute something for the family income and they are deprived of schooling and in fact, child labor is very often seen as the principal factor working behind the poor school attendance ratio. From the view points of the poor families children's school attendance is low and the parental benefit is high. In this circumstance most of the poor families children's education is hampered because most of the poor children are not able to attend the school and those children are unexpectedly adding to the numbers of illiterate people. In the course of time those illiterate children will be illiterate parents and they will repeat the same behavior as their parents. Consequently the same problem is continuing in Bangladeshi society as a vicious circle. Usually, since upper and middle class families' children are attending school and receiving higher education, they have no vicious circle. In addition, some of the lower class families children are also breaking the vicious circle and are going to school due to a change in the parental at-

Socio-gram.



titude.

## Methodology

### Process of data collections

This study is based on two kinds of data:-

1. Primary data:- This data has been conducted through two phases (1) School based and (2) Household (school catchments area) based. For the children's school attendance, I surveyed different kinds of households (upper, middle and lower).where I asked the parents and children about the education. A questionnaire sheet and tape recorder is the important evidence to keep the voice and particulars of the respondents
2. Secondary data:- This study is also based on secondary data, these are mainly books, research reports, journals and case study documents, which are available from Government office, NGOs and international organizations

### Area of the study

My study area is Naogaon district in Bangladesh, which is located in the northern part of the country and connected by Dhaka Naogaon highway. I surveyed 2 schools and its catchments areas where there were 10 households and 3 members of each household as father, mother and child. I also interviewed from 3

Government representatives, (education officer-1, school head teacher-2), which has shown by the table-2.

### Findings

#### The situation of child education (6-10 years old)

A dynamic parental role and the fulfillment of the children's basic needs are the effective initiatives of schooling for children. But most of poor children are deprived of their sufficient basic needs and parental encouragement, which compel the children to avoid the education. As a result, a large number of children are faced with a harsh reality and survive as labor force. Moreover, in almost all categories children are living together in an integral part of the community where the regular school children also live. Absolutely, these children are victims of their fate and always suffer with an inferiority complex. For example, Dholu (Town-1) is a non-schooling boy who is very interested to go to school but he has no good clothes and sometimes he passes day or night with hunger. Dholu's family members are 5 and they live in a small hut which is not favorable for an educational environment. On the other hand Dholu's parents never encourage him to go to school. In my research sample areas I surveyed 2 (two) Gov-

Table-2. Introduction of sample area and respondents.

Name of schools	School-No	Catchment areas	Areas-No	Number of household	Respondents status	Number of respondents
Gongaram pur Govt. primary school	School-1	Gopinath pur	village-1	2	Father	10
		Ramcharan pur	village-2	2	Mother	10
		Dimzaon	village-3	2	Child	10
Mohadev pur Govt. primary school	School-2	Mohadev pur	Town-1	4	Education officer	1
					School head teacher	2
Total	2	—	4	10	—	33

ernment schools and its catchment areas which also included the 4 (four) NGOs schools. I have tried to collect the data concerning the child education situation and schools achievement, which I have shown by the table-3

#### Government initiatives for the children

In order to improve the compulsory primary education program, the Government of Bangladesh has taken some initiatives for the children such as free text book distribution, and food for the education program and scholarship program. Undoubtedly, those are very good initiatives, but in spite of these efforts, many children are out of school. At this stage I contacted with the Thana Assistant Education Officer (ATEO)-2000 (Mohadev pur). He said the Government initiatives are available in this Thana. Free textbook distribution systems exist in all primary school at same level but Government incentive schemes do not exist in all the primary schools. Mohadev pur Thana has 10 Unions (At least 10 village=1 Union). 4 Unions have food for the

education program where the 40% children (each benefited school) can receive per month 15 k.g wheat/12 k.g rice in exchange for school attendance. Another 6 Unions have scholarship programs where the 40% children (each benefited school) can receive 20 Taka per month in exchange of school attendance. Consequently, 60% children are out of those programs ,probably those children have irregular school attendance, which I have shown by the table-4. On the other hand, two school's Head teachers-2000 (school-1&2) said, they are not able to distribute the textbook in proper time due to administrative complexity. The following causes discourage the children's education:-

1. Late distribution of free text books.
2. Lack of incentive (60% children) facilities
3. Parents prefer the children's willingness (some children don't like to study).
4. School is long distance from home.

#### NGOs efforts for the children

The NGOs effort is greatly conducive to promote the Government target of education for

Table-3. Child (6-10 years old) education and its situation in sample areas.

Status of children	Rural school				Urban school				Rural+Urban		
	Govt	NGO	Total	percent	Govt	NGO	Total	percent	Total	Average	percent
Total child	—	—	941	—	—	—	577	—	1518	759	—
Enrollment	431	90	521	55%	292	30	322	56%	843	421.5	55.5%
Dropout	181	45	226	43%	92	15	107	33%	333	166.5	38 %
Completion	250	45	295	31%	200	15	215	37%	510	255.5	34 %
Non-schooling	—	—	646	69%	—	—	362	63%	1008	504	66 %

Table-4. Government initiatives and its situation.

School	Total student	Government initiatives	Benefited student (percent)	Quantity of initiatives
School-1	431	Free textbook	100%	sufficient
		Scholarship	40%	20/Tk. per month (1 student)
School-2	292	Free textbook	100%	sufficient
		Food for education	40%	15 k.g wheat/12 k.g rice per month (1 student)

all. At this stage, BRAC (Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee) and Proshika has initiated the child education program for non-schooling and school dropout children. Almost all NGO's schools are rental houses, which are small huts with dirty environments. At first, the children enter school with joy, but after some days the attendance of students gradually reduce. Table-3 shows only 90 students are enrolled out of total non-schooling (510) children in the rural areas and only 30 students are enrolled out of total non-schooling (285) children in the urban areas. On the other hand, the completion rate is 50% and another 50% of children also drop out from the NGOs schools. Actually, there are some specific problem which discourage the children from schooling in the NGOs school, those are below:-

- (1) The school environment is not so good.
- (2) The incentive schemes do not exist .
- (3) The NGO's schools collect some money from the poor children.

#### **Parental attitude**

Parent's perceptions greatly influence their children's participation in the labor force in Bangladeshi poor families. Because most of the poor parents are illiterate and old fashioned, they feel that education is not more profitable than work and they are very indifferent about their children's bright future which also supports the parental view to prefer the children's help instead of education. In many cases, the male children of the household are expected to help the father in the field and the female children help the mother with the household work. Additionally, the patriarchal family system exists in Bangladeshi society, which makes a psychological impact on the married couple relationship because most of

the poor families' father's decision is respected rather than the mother's decision. Generally, the poor fathers expect their children's help to reduce their family burden because the father is responsible for maintaining his family's expense. For example, Kholil (village-1) is a small farmer and his son is working with his agricultural field instead of going to school. He is very pleased with his son because he is helping to reduce the family burden. On the other hand, Kolil's son (Rafiquel) is very interested to go to school and Kolil's wife Shaheer banu) is also interested in sending her son to school but in vain. Table-5 shows that most successful cases depend on the father's positive attitude.

#### **Government programs for the parents**

Many scholars discuss that, parental illiteracy and economic problems are the main cause of child labor and poor school attendance in Bangladesh. In order to remove parental poverty and illiteracy, the Government of Bangladesh has implemented some programs, such as income generation program, adult education program, etc. The Governmental programs are concerned with reaching their target and focus on general problems working with groups but parental illiteracy and poverty is the individual person's problem.. In the case of Bangladeshi poor parents, the mentality and capacity is very poor to minimize their problem. Consequently, the problem is still exists. For example, Asad (Village-1) is a poor man and he took a loan from a co-operative department to promote his financial condition by a small business. But after some days Asad spent that money in unproductive ways, now he is in the same condition as before. At this stage, the Government program is very active but Asad does not accept it earnestly.

Table-5. Parental attitude and their child education.

Study area		Parental economic status	Parental education- al status	Parental attitude				Child education
				Successful case		Unsuccessful case		
				Father	Mother	Father	Mother	
Rural	Village-1	Lower	Illiterate	—	—	Negative	Positive	Negative
		Lower	Illiterate	Positive	Positive	—	—	Positive
	Village-2	Lower	Illiterate	—	—	Negative	Positive	Negative
		Lower	Illiterate	Positive	Positive	—	—	Positive
	Village-3	Lower	Illiterate	—	—	Negative	Positive	Negative
		Lower	Illiterate	Positive	Positive	—	—	Positive
Urban	Town-1	Lower	Illiterate	Positive	Positive	—	—	Positive
		Lower	Illiterate	Positive	Positive	—	—	Positive
		Lower	Illiterate	—	—	Negative	Positive	Negative
		Lower	Illiterate	—	—	Negative	Positive	Negative

### NGOs program for the parents

Some NGOs (Grameen Bank, ASA, BRAC, Proshika etc) are trying to alleviate poverty and illiteracy of the poor people in the sample areas within their capacities.. They have executed the income generation activities by a micro credit program and adult education program, which are able to foster the social capital and give the simple knowledge of education to the poor and illiterate people in Bangladesh. The NGOs efforts are very conducive to fulfilling the Government target but many cases, they are unsuccessful due to the client's negligence. As for example, Rehana (village-2) took a loan from Grameen Bank and she gave it to her husband (Mostofa) for his small business but Mostofa did not use it for business purpose. Later on, Rehana was in a dangerous position because she was responsible for that loan. The Grameen Bank's effort is not bad but the person accepting the program may not be able to participate in a positive way.

### Conclusion

In Bangladesh, human capital formation through basic literacy has been greatly con-

strained by acute poverty and widespread child labor. The human capital reflects the low rate of literacy (32.4%) among the adults and the high proportion of children who do not complete primary schooling. The outcome of this study is based on information obtained through interviewing 10 non-schooling children, 10 fathers, 10 mothers and 3 government representatives in the sample areas of Bangladesh. Different methods and techniques have been administered to conduct this research work, which has been mentioned in different phases of this report. It has been found in the sample areas about 66% of children are out of school, which is a very approximate rate of nationals (65%). Usually these children are involved in the labor force and their parents are illiterate and poor and these parental life styles are controlled by some traditional social customs and behaviors from generation to generation in a vicious circle, which also fosters the parent's narrow mentality. This study addresses the expectation and situation of non-schooling children with specific reasons of how they are involved in the labor force. Most of the poor parents prefer their children's work over their education. Parental poverty and il-

literacy forces the children into the labor force. Some government and non-government organizations are very determined to remove the parental problem but in some cases they are unsuccessful and this study indicates the lack of parental consciousness. If this situation is allowed to continue, then child labor and poor school attendance will increase and as a result, their future will be uncertain. In these circumstances, the policy should be adopted to stop/reduce the problem by preventive measures. An effective policy should be adopted to overcome the situation of the children with curative measures provided by reducing the parental problem. In this situation the policies have been suggested for the reduction of child labor and poor school attendance as well as their overall welfare in connection with parental consciousness.

In order to make such an effective program, I need to investigate the different categories of lower class family's parental attitudes and the child education situation where schooling and non-schooling children are available.

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