



Migration and education:

Child migrants in Bangladesh

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Abstract

The paper examines the rural-urban migration patterns of children who move to Dhaka city, Bangladesh, either on their own or with their parents. It explores the consequences that the migration process driven by economic and social reasons has on children's education. The paper is based on a critical review of the available literature on child labour in Bangladesh and of academic studies on child labour migration. The findings of this work show that the inter-links between migration and education are more complex than the simple assumption that children's migration undermines their education and the literature suggests an ambivalent picture. However, poverty as well as the poor standards of education in the country, are strong arguments in explaining these linkages.

Introduction

This paper seeks to describe and discuss the internal migration patterns of children in Bangladesh who migrate from rural areas to the capital city of Dhaka and to explore the consequences that this mobility has on their scholarisation. It does not deal with migration for education but it rather tries to explain the effects and consequences that the migration process driven by economic and social reasons has on children's education.

In Bangladesh internal migration from rural to urban areas has become a livelihood strategy adopted by an increasing number of families who migrate to the capital city in search of better employment opportunities. Several studies (Deshingkar and Grimm, 2005; Narayan et al., 2002) also suggest that an increasing number of children every year migrate either permanently or seasonally to Dhaka city. They move on their own, in groups or with siblings in search of job opportunities available in the city or to escape from abusive and oppressive situations at home.

The issue of child migration has received scant attention in development discourses in Bangladesh

and the livelihood strategies that children and

their practical experience is simply too great for the children, often leading to child frustration and depression when they attend training on their rights.

Children and childhood in Bangladesh

The anthropologist Theres Blanchet (1996) attempts to capture the essence of childhood in Bangladesh society with her book 'Lost Innocence, Stolen Childhood'. She refers to the 'pollution' of children who entered the adult world at an early stage, mainly through work. She says that they are considered by the *samaj* (society) as 'spoiled' for being exposed to the adult world and therefore are not considered children anymore. Blanchet's work has partially been questioned by Bissell (2003) who argues that just the book title itself suggests a particular author's vision of childhood: the one that has been stolen. According to Bissell, Blanchet does not write about 'a different childhood' or 'Bangladeshi childhood' but about Bangladeshi children relative to the Child Rights Convention. She blames Blanchet of being writing for a Western audience thus giving "an interesting but in some way sensationalised picture of what it is like to be a child, particularly a poor child, in a culture which bears little or no resemblance to the middle-class culture in which the term flourished" (Bissell, 2003: 57). Similarly, White (2002) talks about a tendency of 'cultural imperialism' in development discourse and draws attention to a conceptualisation of childhood drawn from the West.

There is not a simple word or phrase to describe the concept of childhood in Bengali nor does there exist a specific age commonly accepted as the age of passage from being a child to an adult age. '*Shishu*' is the word commonly used by development agencies to translate the 'child' of 'child rights', but it normally refers only to infants and young children (Blanchet, 1996). However, other key elements, such as the experience the child has gained as well as physical and emotional development, in turn influenced by gender, make the difference between being considered a child or a grown-up being giving access to responsibilities in the society (White, 2002). Parents and children also manifest a lack of knowledge in reporting their age. They often refer to a range of time, usually within two or three years as proximity of their biological age. This is partially the result of an inefficient birth

children as active agents of change, a distinct constituency deserving separate attention.

Children as an economic asset

In Bangladesh, children clearly have an economic value to their families since they contribute substantially to household welfare from a very early age (Cain, 1977). The structure of the household, reinforced by the socio-economic conditions and the agrarian intensive labour market, promotes a perceived economic value attached to the new born, especially if male. The large family, traditionally hierarchically structured, rely on the perception that a child is an economic asset, able to provide an income and extra labour power, which can be controlled by the household through traditional attitudes of parental power and filial duty (Ghuznavi et al, 2001). Parents also agree that for the child, work is an opportunity to gain experience and the dignity necessary to achieve a recognised position in the society. In this regard, child work is therefore seen as an initiation into adulthood (Nieuwenhys, 1994).

Child employment could also be a strategy adopted by poor families to diversify their portfolio of activities thus reducing socio-economic vulnerability (Ahmad and Quasem, 1991). In addition, female children are taught from an early age to accomplish domestic chores within the household, duties that are considered to be good for safeguarding their reputation and finding a suitable husband (Blanchet, 1996). On the other hand, work for female children is especially important in delaying marriage and providing them with economic independence. As Zohir and Paul-Majumder (1996) point out in their studies on garment workers in Dhaka city, the recent trend of young girls aged 10-14 years, coming to the city from rural areas to seek work in the formal sector, is a major departure from the older social norms which see girls confined into domestic work.

Migration of children to Dhaka city

In Bangladesh, large-scale movement of the population has been a feature for a very long time; people have been moving internationally and internally, but the most striking form of mobility has indeed been from rural to urban areas (Deshingkar and Grimm, 2005). As in most developing countries, massive migration has occurred in the direction of the capital, Dhaka (Begum, 1999). The rapid increase in the number of landless families in rural areas together with other economic and social changes, have converged to push poverty-stricken

families to urban areas to seek new ways of livelihood (Pelto, 1997).

Dhaka, has to cope with the increasing pressure of population growing at a rate far beyond the ability of the economy to provide an adequate level of basic social services (Begum, 1999) and it is expected to become the sixth largest mega-city of the world by 2010, with a present population of already 12.3 million (UNCHS, 2001). Rural-urban migration of adults as well as children has been the major cause of this fast growth (Deshingkar and Grimm, 2005; Afsar, 2006). Families are moving from rural areas to urban areas to seek new ways of livelihood (Pelto, 1997).

migration portrays children as having little or no agency (cited in King, 2002), thus assuming they always migrate with parents or when they migrate alone, parents are the ones who decide whether to send their children to urban areas to work or not.

A number of other studies, however, (Iversan, 2002; Kielland et al., 2002; Punch, 2002) show evidence that the decision to migrate in order to take up paid work is often made by children themselves. Similarly, Kabeer (2003: 372) states that children, and in particular those coming from

coping with insecurity and economic hardship. A common strategy for poor families in rural areas for example, is to take children out of school during periods of economic strain and send them to the city to work as servants or apprentices (Deshingkar and Grimm, 2005). Children, who come from very poor families where everybody's work is essential for survival, generally see it as their responsibility to work and earn money. They usually do not criticise their parents for sending them to work since they perceive it as a duty they have to accomplish to contribute to their families' income. Sometimes, they also "feel proud of the money they earn which gives them importance in the family" (Blanchet, 1996: 85).

The advocacy literature (Pelto, 1997; Khan et al., 1997; Rahman, 1995; Paul-Majumder et al., 1993) on child labour in Bangladesh tends to present children's migration to Dhaka city as a compulsion to work. These studies are mainly concerned with children as labourers rather than as migrants. However some of them based on the collection of life histories, provide also information about the characteristics of child migration and the causes behind it. Sohid's story shows some of these patterns (12-year-old boy, sales helper in a clothes store, Dhanmondi Hawkers Market, Dhaka):

Sohid is from the village of Kurakhana in the Comilla district. His father farms a small plot of land. His father also cultivates other people's land as a sharecroppers. His mother is a housewife. He has one brother and two sisters. His brother works in a wholesale shop that sells eggs. His eldest sister is married. The younger sister lives with his parents and reads in class III. Sohid cannot read or write, but he can write his own name. His mother used to insist that he goes to school and even beat him for not going ... but he did not like the studies at all. When he was 11 years old his father sent him to Dhaka along with his cousin who owns a clothing shop. Sohid was given a job in his shop. His father was forced to send him to Dhaka due to poverty. Now he works full-time in his cousin's shop. He calls out to the customers, shows them different items, and bargains with them. [...] He likes the job and does not face any difficulty or hazard in the work place. His cousin treats him with affection and kindness. He stays with him in the Dhaka college staff quarter. He gives him food three times a day. In addition to that he gets 5 taka per day as pocket allowance and 200 taka as monthly salary. Sohid sends the 200 taka to his parents every month. In future he wants to open a shop like this for

himself. Sohid does not find time to play. At night he watches television with his sister in law and her children. He loves the drama. Sometimes he misses his mother. Then he takes leave and goes to the village to visit his family. During his stay at his village home his parents treat him well. Sohid's elder brother who stays in Dhaka sometimes visits him.

(Source: Pelto, 1997)

Sohid's story portrays the migration to Dhaka city as an opportunity to learn new things and as a relief from a home situation of scarcity. He stays with his cousin's family who provides him with food and accommodation as well as love and care. The job he is performing is not particularly hazardous and it was arranged by his family's members. Sohid keeps contacts with his family back in the village; he sends part of his salary to them and goes back to the village from time to time where he is always welcomed. These features show us how child migration patterns change according to the way the departure takes place, if there still is a trust relationship with the adults they left at home or not. Most of the children interviewed by Pelto (1997), employed in the informal sector, reported that they had found their job through a family connection or a sort of 'village connection'. That is, people who know them from the home village or district and have recommended them to the employers. According to a study on child workers in the informal sector in Dhaka, carried out by Radda Barnen (Karmaker et al., 1994), the majority of the child labour migrants working in engineering workshops, automobile and garage workshops and in small factories fall between the ages of 11 and 15.

A part from poverty and the absolute need for paid work, the high rate of unemployment in rural villages is another factor that has been mobilising an increasing number of people from rural to urban areas. On the other side, the acceleration of industrialisation such as the rapid growth of the garment industry, for example, has been attracting a large number of young adults, especially girls, who left their villages to move to Dhaka city (Zohir, 2001). This sector has been object of critique for employing children, and in particular girls aged 13 to 17 years old (Blanchet, 1996). According to several studies on garment workers in Bangladesh (Kabeer, 2000; Zohir et al., 1996; Paul-Majumder et al., 1993), these girls have some years of schooling and suit the garment industry's demand of unskilled labour. According to Zohir et al. (1996), the reason why more educated girls have a higher propensity

to migrate is that they are more aware of outside opportunities and are better able to benefit from them. Furthermore, they can earn relatively higher incomes in urban areas compared to rural settings.

In many cases, the decision to migrate to Dhaka to take up work in the garment factories happened after a negotiation with the family's members. Females aged above 12 are expected to observe *purdah* (literally veil or curtain) which refers to Islamic female seclusion and are discouraged from engaging in outdoor work (Ahsan, 1997: 56). Therefore, these girls had to persuade their parents or relatives that this paid work would represent a great opportunity to contribute to the family's income or to provide advantages to their own lives, without compromising their reputation and eventually their marriage prospects (Kabeer, 2000; Afsar, 2000; Naved et al. 2001). They often secured their job in the garment industry prior to migration to the city through social networks with relatives or siblings in the village who were already employed in this sector. Moreover, once migrated, "migrant female workers maintain close ties with their natal family and village of origin in order to ensure as much security as possible, especially in marriage" (Naved et al., 2001).

Alternative to school

The decision to migrate for work is sometimes taken as an alternative to school. This may happen in cases where the child has dropped out of school because of lack of interest, bad results or because of a difficult relationship with the teacher. This can be illustrated by the stories of Bashir and Ilias (11 year-old workers in Dhaka):

Bashir comes from the village of Choumohoni in the district of Noakhali. He has one brother and one sister, his father is a farmer back in his home village... Bashir studied up to class III in a school but then his mother died and his father remarried. He was no longer able to attend school regularly and was beaten by his teacher so he decided to leave with his elder brother.

Ilias comes from a village called Alinagar in Barisal. He studied up to class I in the village. They do not own any land to cultivate on. Ilias' father cultivates other people land and manages his family with the little income he receives. He was not interested in studying, besides he was not able to attend school regularly because of all the household chores....One day he got a serious thrashing from his teacher for not doing his school work. From that day he never went back to school.

His parents tried to convince him to go back but he would not listen to anyone. As a result his father got angry and sent him to Dhaka with his uncle to look for work.

(Source: Pelto, 1997)

As will be explained in more detail in the next section, the poor quality of education, the lack of interest in it, or teachers abusive behaviour are often mentioned by children as the main causes of school abandonment. Rural poor parents view children as an economic asset (Cain, 1977) and their attendance at school represents a deprivation of their earnings. Some parents cannot afford to send their children to school while others may be willing to sacrifice an extra income in order to provide education for their children. However, if they drop out of school for some of the reasons mentioned above, children cannot afford to be idle and they immediately have

might induce children to take the decision to choose the street life rather than the family's one. These children usually arrive in Dhaka alone, in small groups by bus, or by train and once at destination they often separate, following their own instinct for survival (Conticini, 2004). This is the most difficult stage of their pathway since they are often caught by a feeling of fear and loneliness (Seabrook, 2001). They are mainly found at parks, bus terminals, launch/boat terminals, market places, railways station, around big mosques etc. (Zakaria, 2005). Their patterns of adaptation to street life depend on their experiences, opportunities, personal characteristics, gender and other variables. Street children have to acquire survival skills and techniques to perform street jobs. They are often engaged in some sort of work which allows them to cope with the rigours of urban life. They are found to be garbage pickers, cigarette sellers, water suppliers for markets, newspaper hawkers, beggars and other similar sorts of activities (Sarwar, 1996).

The street children often experience violent situations which are more severe than the ones suffered at home; and, the same hostile environment that made them leave home in the first place might be reproduced in the street. It is often reported that children are threatened and

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Children migrating with one or both parents

As I have already mentioned above, migration of children does not always imply children moving autonomously and without the company of the parents, but also children moving with their families (Ahmed and Jasimuddin, 1996). Kabeer (2000), for example, in her analysis on women working in the garment sector, draws attention to an increasing number of young women in rural villages that, after having been left by their husband or due to the death of their spouse, deci

insanitary. There is a lack of adequate supplies of electricity, running water, paved roads and means of garbage disposal. The tin shelters are usually self constructed on and around public land, or they are rented from powerful people who have illegally occupied vacant public lands (Ullah et al., 1999). Governmental schools are often far from these settlements and over congested. Non-formal education programs are often run by NGOs, but the rate of attendance is often low and coupled with a high rate of drop-outs (Begum, 1999; Ullah et al., 1999; Paul-Majumder et al., 1996).

The state of the pavement dwellers can be described as even more deplorable since they survive in public places without any basic facilities. The majority of them are low skilled and illiterate. Their income is very low and they mainly rely on begging or occasional labour in the construction sector, or in other informal occupations. The decision to migrate is due to social reason combined with a strong economic need. The quest for more income in the city and the river erosion by floods were among the most frequent answers given by street dwellers for moving to Dhaka in Begum's (1999) analysis. Females also moved to the street if abandoned by their husbands or if for some reasons they had no other male member to look after them. Migrants on the street, in spite of the severity of their lives, once committed to the urban way of life, became convinced of benefits in the long term, and having little to return to, then opt for the poverty of the city rather than the poverty of the village (Begum, 1999: 21).

Links between migration and education

The aim of this section is to explore the link between migration and the education of children migrating either on their own, or with their parents. I will start by providing a brief overview of the education system in Bangladesh, focusing on primary and secondary education and on the co-existence of formal and informal systems. I will then explore the education of migrant children in the sending and receiving areas in order to trace the link between education or the lack of it, and patterns of child migration.

Migrant children's education is affected by a number of factors which depend directly or indirectly on their migration patterns. Sometimes, the reasons which induce children to migrate in the first place are also the ones that take them out of school in their home village. This is, for example, what happens when children drop out of the

schools they used to attend in their villages due to abusive teachers' behaviour, bad school performances, or simply disinterest, and they therefore migrate to the city in search of work as an alternative to school. Other times, it is the migration process itself and the search for work that becomes the main cause of school abandonment and reintegration into a scholastic system in the city rarely becomes a priority. However, the proliferation of education programs run by NGOs in Dhaka especially designed to include working and street children might also reach children who never attended school before and who now have the chance to do it.

While the education of children migrating alone is much more likely to be affected by time constraints due to their need for work, the education of children migrating with their families depends greatly on the family's adjustment to the urban way of life and on their migration patterns. Many poor and better-off people settled in Dhaka may send their children to school when the right facilities are in place, and they may see education as a pathway to the new job possibilities offered by the urban setting; however, the same is less true for the very poorest (Kabeer, 2003). For pavement dwellers or seasonal migrant workers for example, who face major fluctuations in income streams and try to minimise their exposure to risk, there may be little motivation to send their children to school (Begum, 1999). The education of children of migrant families is also very much affected by the quality of the programmes available for these children as shown by the case of slum dwellers.

Education system in Bangladesh

The Bangladeshi education system has been subject to several changes since the Independence war in 1971. The Compulsory Primary Education Act

years of secondary education (grades 6-10) and 2 years of higher secondary education (grades 11-12). Higher education comprises 2-5 years courses and beyond (Bangladesh Country Report, 1999).

Considerable progress has been made in promoting the enrolment rate in primary education, with special focus on the gender issues. Traditionally, girls tended to have a lower enrolment rate compared to their male counterpart but lately, following government efforts to reduce the gender gap, the situation seems to have reversed, with a net enrolment rate in primary education of 81% for boys and 84% for girls (BBS/Unicef, 2004). However, at least one third of those who enter primary education do not complete it, and those who do, take an average of over six years to complete the 5 year cycle. The drop-out rate shows a decreasing trend: in primary school for example it has fallen from 38 percent in 1994, to 33 percent in 2004, but there is still concern over the quality and the competency level of primary education, and over the low enrolment rate in secondary education (MDG, 2005). In fact, school enrolment rates fall drastically from primary to the secondary level, especially for girls. Only 8% of the age group of girls successfully complete the higher secondary cycle (BBS/Unicef, 2004).

The low learning achievement in basic education is one of the main problems in Bangladesh education. The crux of the issue is not whether children enrol

A number of studies have tried to explore the relation between work, poverty and school attendance. A quantitative study carried out by Ahmad and Quasem (1991) in four villages in Bangladesh, shows evidence that children's school enrolment depends on the modernisation of the village which in turn affects participation of children in economic activities within the family and in the

section, the majority of children migrating to Dhaka city are engaged in some sort of working activity. Some of them are involved in jobs all day long, such as those employed as domestic workers or shop takers, while others, especially if self employed, might have more chance for free time out of work.

The issue of child labour and education has been well analysed by several authors. A recent research (Kabeer et al., 2003) on this topic in India and Bangladesh, provides an holistic perspective on the apparent conflict that is posed between the economic needs of families and the right to education of their children. The research analyses in depth the correlation between poverty, child labour and poor educational outcomes. In the case of Bangladesh, at the national level, it was found that the greater progress in expanding primary education has been associated with a similar expansion in the incidence of child labour. This suggests that “the increased school attendance in Bangladesh has been combined with work rather than replacing it” (Kabeer, 2003: 356).

However, the efforts made by NGOs of developing, flexible, non-formal education programs especially designed to accommodate children's work and education have raised some questions regarding their educational achievements and well-being (Chowdury, 2003). According to Kabeer's (2003: 354) analysis of the literature in this regard, scholars closer to the idealist position believe that “offering non-formal education merely perpetuates both child labour, by allowing children to combine work and school, as well as social inequalities, by offering inferior forms of education to the children of the poor”. Conversely, scholars close to the realistic approach argue that a single formal system of education with no allowances for these circumstances, would force parents or children to choose between school and work with the consequent impoverishment of the forme1raisedoeqo 59.1shmi001 Tc023 ely878(r thee queoj).5(,)6(of TcIso su982 Tm)1.5s

relatives affects in some way their acceptance at school. UCEP's admission policy for example, states that the family must have been living in the area close to the school for a period of not less than two years and are expected to remain in the neighbourhood for the four years after the child is admitted. Children must also have a regular guardian, preferably parents (Tolfree, 1998). This admission policy is not unique of UCEP but is adopted by many other NGOs running education projects and it reflects the pressure that donors put on NGOs in order to have the minimum rate of dropouts.

As we can see from the above discussion the inter-link between education and patterns of child migration is complex and depends on a number of factors which are intertwined with the child labour discourse, especially when children move to the city on their own. For children migrating with their parents, the migration process may in some cases open up the enhancement of children's education

'double burden' implies for children educational achievements or for their well-being. Kabeer (2003) for example argues that the non-formal education system perpetuates social inequalities, by offering inferior forms of education to the children of the poor as well as encouraging child labour by allowing them to combine work and school.

To conclude, the inter-link between child migration and education is not clear-cut but it points to poverty and poor standard of education in the country.

Emphasizing the various ways in which children's migration influences their education and vice versa; thus acknowledging a complexity which goes way beyond the simple notion that migration threatens education; allows a deeper understanding of the different modes of interaction between child migration and education. Therefore, further research exploring the active roles of children in the migration process, particularly related to their education, is crucial for the development of well-tuned education projects and policies, which are not only relevant to the case of migrant children in Dhaka city, but for child migrants in other developing countries as well.

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