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RESEARCH ARTICLE

FORCED LABOUR IN BANGLADESH: A CASE STUDY OF CHILD DOMESTIC WORKERS IN CHITTAGONG.

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Abstract

In the age of human rights, it is quite surprising to think about forced labour or slavery-like practices. But, millions of people around the world are victims of forced labour and number is increasing quite significantly. In Bangladesh, thousands of children are working as domestic workers living inside the walls devoid of rights and privileges. In addition to this, often, they become victims of physical and mental harassment by their employers. There is no limited working hour for them with poor payment and other facilities. There is strict control over their movement inside and outside the house. Altogether, their life is dominated by employers and there is nothing they can do about it. Most of them are isolated from their families and have limited connections with them. All these situations indicate a strong case of forced labour and the response from the authority is not a strong one.

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Introduction:-

On 23 September 2013, an eleven years old girl, Aduri, was found in a dustbin in an unconscious state with severe physical wounds in Dhaka, Bangladesh. The girl worked as a domestic servant where her mistress tortured her on a daily basis accusing her of stealing money and ornaments. The mistress on several occasions tried to burn Aduri and kept her starving for slightest of mistakes (Talukdar & Das, 2017). This incident is one of the thousands happening in many parts of Bangladesh, especially in urban areas. According to the estimate of International Organization, among 421,000 child domestic workers three-quarters are girls. Most of the workers work seven days a week and 90% sleep at their employer's home (UNICEF, 2010). Due to impoverished socio-economic conditions, many families are compelled to send their children to work in urban areas as domestic workers. As they are, in most cases, isolated from their families, they are vulnerable to physical and mental violence along with intimidation and threats. In other words, most of the domestic workers, mainly child domestic workers, are victims of forced labour. Bangladesh has signed and ratified 33 ILO Conventions including the Convention No. 29 on Forced Labour, 1930 and Convention No. 105 on Abolition of Forced Labour, 1957 (Haque, 2013, p.397). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989 is also ratified by Bangladesh. Notwithstanding official commitment in preserving child rights at the workplace, thousands of domestic child workers are trapped into forced labour. Surprisingly, the workers have no idea about their condition and forced labour. As they are far from their families, their sufferings remain within the four walls of their workplaces. Thus, the specific objective of this study is to find out the indicators of forced labour among the child domestic workers in Chittagong, Bangladesh.

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Forced Labour and its indicators:-

ILO defines forced labour as work that is performed without the consent of the workers by threat or force. According to the ILO Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29) forced or compulsory as all work or service which is exacted from any person under the threat of a penalty and for which the person has not offered himself or herself voluntarily. Forced labour is also termed as *compulsory, unfree, modern slavery*. ILO estimates that there are about 21 billion men, women and children are trapped in forced labour, meaning they cannot leave their situation. Out of this 21 million people, 90% of them are exploited in the private economy and 44% of them internally or across borders. Forced labour generates approximately \$150.2 billion in profits annually. Asia is the region most affected by forced labour. ILO believes that more than 11 million victims are in Asia (ILO, 2014, p.13-17).

Forced labour is measured in terms of abuse of vulnerability, deception, restriction of movement, isolation, physical and sexual violence, intimidation and threats, retention of identity documents, withholding of wages, debt bondage, abusive work and living condition, excessive overtime. These indicators are originated from the ILO's Special action programme to Combat Forced (SAP-FL). The presence of a single indicator in a given situation may in some cases imply the existence of forced (ILO, 2012).

Methodology:-

As this study is exploratory in nature, both qualitative and quantitative research methods have been used for data collection, like- in-depth interviews. Primary data have been collected by interviewing child domestic workers and child rights specialists. For the purpose of the present study, a total of 40 child domestic workers was interviewed along with 5 specialists on child rights. Most of the workers are aged between 7-17 years. Khulshi area of Chittagong City Corporation, Bangladesh is selected as the study area due to the concentration of child domestic workers. Samples were selected using the purposive sampling technique. The study also used secondary sources for data, like-books, journal articles, newspapers, reports. Primary data collected through interviews have been compiled for qualitative and quantitative analysis. Qualitative data has been organized on the basis of categories of forced labour indicators. Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) has been used for analysing quantitative data.

Findings:-**Restriction of movement:-**

ILO claims that the restriction of movement in the workplace can be a strong indicator of forced labour. A worker is free to enter and exit in the workplace (ILO, 2012). But in most of the cases, domestic workers in Bangladesh cannot leave their work when they want to leave. Many employers even lock their domestic workers inside the house while going outside. The study finds (table 1) that a significant number (72.5%) of domestic child labours are often confined within the house and they can only go outside when their employers allow them to go.

Table 1:- Restriction of Movement

Variables	Frequency	Percent
Yes	29	72.5
No	11	27.5
Total	40	100.0

Because of this sort of situation, child domestic workers have to stay in their employers' house against their will. Lamia, an 11-year-old girl, was often tortured by her employers and wanted to flee away from there. But she could not do so because she was always locked inside the house. Her employers used to shave her head so that her hair would not fall on food (Tithi, 2018).

Isolation:-

In Bangladesh, child domestic workers live in isolation away from their families. As they have to work throughout the day and night in their employers' house, it is accepted that a child domestic worker would generally stay at his/her employer's house. Even the parents of child domestic workers feel that their children would be in a better situation if they stay at the employers' house. In such case, the parents need not to worry about the feeding, sheltering, education, health security and clothing of their children. At the same time, it would generate financial benefit for them. The study finds that 82.5% of child domestic workers are isolated from their family meaning they

stay at their employers' house 24/7. ILO indicates this sort of situation as a textbook case of forced labour (ILO, 2012).

Physical and psychological violence:-

Ain o Salish Kendra, a non-governmental human rights organization in Bangladesh, reports that 30 domestic workers committed suicide between 2013 and 2017. In many cases, it was found that murders of domestic workers were disguised as suicide. More often than not, child domestic workers are physically and mentally harassed for the slightest of mistakes. In 2015, Mahfuza Akhter Happy, an 11-year-old girl, accused Cricketer Shahadat Hossain and his wife Jesmin Jahan Nitto of physical torture (Chaity, 2017). This study finds that (figure 1) 47.5% of child domestic workers experience physical violence in their workplace. Not only that they are often threatened in multifarious ways, like- the withholding of wages, sacking from the jobs, starvation etc. Physical violence and threats are also strong indicators of forced labour.



Figure 2:- Physical violence

Wages and working hour:-

Comparing to other formal and informal job sectors, the wages of child domestic workers are very poor. The employers believe that as they are providing shelter and other fundamental support to child domestic workers. Hence, the wages of domestic workers need not to be handsome. Talking about working hour, a worker is supposed to work for 8 hours a day and should be eligible for overtime payment, if he/she works beyond the 8 hours mark. But child domestic workers work more than 8 hours a day without any overtime payment. The study finds that (figure2) 25% of respondents get BDT 2000 (\$35.84) every month as wages whereas 20% of workers get BDT 1500 and 17.5% get BDT 1000. Three child domestic workers earn only BDT 500 per month.

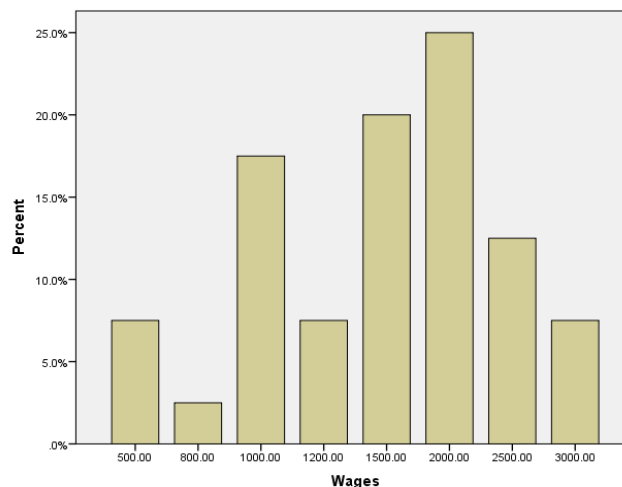


Figure 3:-wages of child domestic workers

Most of the time, the employers give money to the parents of the workers but not in the hands of workers. In some cases, the workers have no idea about their wages as their parents deal with it (Islam, Mahmud & Rahman, 2013: 27). Parents of child domestic workers visit the employer's house every month to collect the money as well as to see their children. Employers also use various mobile financial services, like- Bkash, to send money to the parents of their workers. In addition to this, if a worker wants to talk with his/her parents, he/ she needs to take permission from the employer and use their mobile phones. Their conversations with parents are generally very brief.

Annually, they are allowed to visit their parents for two/three times. Employers also push them to make a quick comeback from their visit and resume their regular work.

Again, child domestic workers have to work throughout day and night as they stay in their employers' residence. They barely get any time of their own and have very limited opportunity for entertainment. It is found that 65% of the child domestic workers start their day at 6 am, 27.5% wake up at 5 am and only 7.5% have the opportunity to get up from the bed at 7 am. Table 2 shows the working hour of child domestic workers. Most of them have to work beyond 16 hours a day which is literally inhumane.

Table 2:-Working hour.

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
12 hours	7	17.5
16 hours	10	25.0
16+ hours	23	57.5
Total	40	100.0

The study also finds that 32.5% of respondents are not happy with the working conditions in their employers' house. Most of them sleep either in the kitchenette or in front of the drawing room. There is no bed for them as they have to sleep on the floor. Some of them are suffering from various diseases like- asthma, pneumonia, cold flu etc. But their parents are probably expecting something good for their children in the employers' house. In worst cases, the parents have excepted the conditions in which their children are living and forced them to stay at the employers' house as they are generating financial benefits for them. They also believe that the god decided their fate in this manner and they should accept this destiny with a smiling face.

What lies ahead?:-

A similar study finds that child domestic workers want to have a secure future. Some workers do not have any hope or the future and they have no idea what they are going to do next. The age of the child domestic workers is a very crucial factor here as it affects children psychological development (Islam, Mahmud & Rahman, 2013). Looking into their families and their present situation most of them lose hope in their life. But there is a recent trend emerging among the child domestic workers and their families. The parents want to send their kids at an early age to work as domestic workers. There are several reasons for this decision. Firstly, this lifts off the financial burden from their shoulders. Secondly, they believe that their children would enjoy better facilities and learn household works. Thirdly, when their children aged between 14-16 years old, they tend to send their children to garments as this generates more financial support. So, clearly, these 7-8 years as domestic workers give them the opportunity to be physically and mentally fit for garments and other demanding jobs.

Again, when people recruit children as domestic workers, they pledge a lot of commitments to the parents of the children, including- education, entertainment, promise to give marriage etc. But all these promises, in many cases, turn out to be rhetoric to lure parents to send their children as domestic workers. Eventually, the child domestic workers, after working for several months, find a big gap between promise and reality. This is a serious blow for a young brain to sustain. Consequently, they lose all hopes in their life and accept their harsh reality.

Conclusion:-

Children are the future of society and they should be given every opportunity to utilize their potentialities. This seems to be a false promise when we take a close look at the child domestic workers in Bangladesh. The constitution of Bangladesh safeguards children from exploitative and hazardous economic activities to ensure mental, physical, moral and social development. Sadly, there is no law in Bangladesh protecting the rights of child domestic workers. The government has formulated the Domestic Workers Protection and Welfare Policy 2015 to minimize the suffering and repression of domestic workers. But the practice of engaging children in domestic work has been in practice for many decades and there is no decrease in the number of child domestic workers. Being a signatory party of several ILO conventions regarding the rights of children and workers, Bangladesh should do enough to improve the condition of domestic workers including child workers. Some observers consider it a modern form of slavery. In fact, it is no less than slavery. The poor socio-economic condition of many families in Bangladesh keeps this malpractice well alive in society. The increasing number of nuclear families is also increasing the demand for

domestic workers. The paper finds that child domestic workers in Bangladesh are strong candidates for forced labour.

Nowadays development is a buzz word in Bangladesh and everyone seems to be very optimistic about the future of Bangladesh as a development model. Bangladesh is well ahead in achieving several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). But keeping a portion of the society in darkness and malpractice cannot ensure sustainable development. Hence, a compact policy on the protection of children from hazardous and vulnerable jobs need to be implemented sooner than later. It is true that poor parents do not have the financial support to ensure the fundamental demands of their children. If the employers' keep their promises in providing all basic needs to their domestic workers, then this can be a viable option for thousands of child domestic workers to develop physically and mentally. Community-based awareness program and strict implementation of laws can protect children from all forms of exploitation.

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