The Bangladeshi government has placed the eradication of child labour in the leather sector high on its agenda, but many children are still found working in different parts of the production chain. Children are pulled by Dhaka by job opportunities, but more importantly, pushed by difficult conditions at home in the countryside. Once they arrive in Dhaka life is hard and returning to their village is no longer an option.


title: Leather gloves and tiny fingers

Anna Ensing

"I am from Nodhikhali and I migrated to Dhaka one year ago, together with my uncle and my cousin. I finished primary school in my village and then stopped. My uncle asked me if I wanted to work in Dhaka because I wasn’t doing anything. My father was ill, so I left. He died two months ago. My brother is a shoeing operator in this tannery and he arranged the job for me. My job is to help iron the leather to dry it and make it flat. I work from 8 am to 3 pm, 5 days a week. After work I go to my cousin’s house. I pay them 1300 taka each month to live in their house with three meals a day. I also send some money to my family.” (Antu, 13, working in one of Dhaka’s leather tanneries)

About 64 per cent of child labourers in the world are in Asia. Bangladesh has more than five million working children, and has, second only to India, the most children between five and 14 years old working in South Asia. (ILO 2006, 2009; Lielen 2009)

This study sought out the presence of child labour in the production chain of leather and leather goods in Bangladesh. The three-month research took place in 2008, in the tanneries of Hazaribagh and in the small factories all over Dhaka, in which leather is turned into shoes, bags and wallets. Observations were made on the living and work areas in factories, tanneries and people’s homes. Whenever possible, factory owners were interviewed about their employment of children, and parents about their children’s work. The main part of the research, which involved talking to as many children as possible, found working in several sub-sectors of the leather industry. Many of these children are never reached by existing interventions.

Leather production in Bangladesh

The Government of Bangladesh has identified the leather industry as one of the "highest priority sectors" because of its contribution to export and employment (ILO-IPEC 2007). Unfortunately, child labour is very much present in the sector. In 2007, ILO-IPEC counted 251 children in leather tanneries, 3040 children in shoe factories and 320 children in the production of other leather products (ILO-IPEC 2007). In 2008, after several interventions, we still found several children, from 8 years old upwards, involved in a wide variety of activities throughout the production chain. Leather is produced by tanneries and at final products of the process are manufactured into leather products. Children are mostly found in small-scale units producing for the domestic market, but they are also found working at home, producing outsourced work for factories, selling the finished products or in the processing of waste materials.

Who are the child labourers?

The leather industry is a male-dominated sector and working children are also predominantly boys. The only stage of the production chain in which girls are involved is in the manufacturing of shoes and gloves. The age of the children in the production chain varies between workplaces and activities, but most children in this sector are 12 years and older.

A majority of the working children migrated from the countryside as a consequence of push factors. In the rural area, the children’s families experience economic problems, often due to debts or loss of land. Poverty, in combination with social problems, is the usual reason for moving away from the countryside to start a new life in the capital city. A father’s second marriage is also often a reason to migrate.

Ten-year-old Shanto, was found toggling (pinning wet hides to the ground to stretch them flat whilst they dry) leather along the river at Hazaribagh. He migrated both his mother after his father had left them for a new wife. In Dhaka he, being the oldest son, started to work. I heard a similar story from 15-year-old Rupa. She was living in a little shack together with her mother in a slum area next to the river bank in Hazaribagh, which has become home to many new migrants. Her mother described their migration to Dhaka:

"We migrated from Rangpur, mainly because of poverty. Rupa is already 15, and people in the village say that we should marry her. But then we need to pay the dowry to the new husband. Rupa’s father is unemployed and the relationship with him is not so good. To avoid the dowry and the social problems in the village, I migrated with Rupa.”

As a 16-year-old boy the parents explained: ‘the person with whom I arrived in Dhaka said to me: ‘he is doing nothing in the village, shall I take him’? And my mother welcomed this because we neither studying nor earning money.

Living at work

Migrant families usually move from poverty to poverty. The boys are often working in low income jobs, such as richshaw pulling (fathers), garments or domestic (mothers). The income is often not sufficient for the entire household and children have to contribute. Other children have lost a parent, which results in a serious decrease in household income.

Some of the boys have migrated to Dhaka independently. They are expected to support themselves and also to send some of their income to their families. The boys usually end up working in a tannery or a factory since these workplaces also offer a place to sleep; some boys are able to live as a paying guest with a relative or a village neighbour. This is the case for ten-year-old Maman, who lives and works in a belt factory at the Banglalll garment factory. Maman is the only working child at the factory and describes his daily life as follows:

"My father, mother and brother are still in the village. I came to Dhaka with my uncle when I was very little. For the past two years I have been working in this factory with 12 other persons. We work from 10 in the morning to 12 in the night. We all sleep here, at the workplace, and take our food all together. I get 1000 taka a month.”

Reasons for work

The first and most frequent reason children give for having to work is poverty. Rural poverty is widespread and may be aggravated by ‘shocks’ (death or illness in the family), which are often an immediate cause for children to start working. Children are at the most risk when they move into urban areas, are aware of their poverty and feel responsible for supporting their family.

A second relevant explanation is related to education. Children not stop school because they work, but many also appear to start working because they have not been enrolled in education or they have dropped out. In particular, the increase in costs when advancing from primary to secondary education is a reason for parents to pull their children out of school. As a 16-year-old boy explained: ‘the person with whom I arrived in Dhaka said: ‘he is doing nothing in the village, shall I take him’? And my mother welcomed this because I was neither studying nor earning money.

There are also pull factors that explain why children work in the leather industry. Big companies generally do not employ children directly, because of the need for skilled labour and quality products and because inspections are most likely to take place in their enterprises. Small and informal companies, however, do employ children. These entrepreneurs are often necessarily merciless exploiters of cheap and docile labour.

Many originate from poor families themselves, some have even been child labourers. After years of low paid work, they have managed to save some money and set up their own business. Because of the low investments and production costs, their products are of relatively poor quality and only sold for the domestic market. They are often located in villages and do not have a work permit to set up their own business. By contrast, the children working at home do so under relatively good conditions. Most children in the sector never see a doctor and tend to trivialise their health problems.

Living conditions also affect the children’s health and well-being. Hazaribagh is one of the most polluted areas in Dhaka. The inhabitants are exposed to health hazards caused by the tanning process and other stages of leather production. Boys who also live at their worksite are affected 24 hours a day. More importantly, these boys have lost contact with their families, they have no leisure time and they don’t go to school. If they were to quit their job, they would also lose a place to live. Moreover, as long as they are responsible for their families in the countryside, returning home is not an option. Since there is no alternative work, most of these boys end up working in the leather sector until they are adults.

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