

Child Labor in *Bidi* Factories: Current Situation in Bangladesh and Way Forward

Sushanta Kumar Singha^{1*}, Md. Bazlur Rahman², Syed Mahbubul Alam³, Ashiqul Islam Khan⁴

¹Special Correspondent, Jamuna Television, Bangladesh.

²Associate Professor, Department of Business Administration, Dhaka International University Dhaka, Bangladesh

³Secretary, Center for Law and Policy Affairs (CLPA), Dhaka, Bangladesh.

⁴Researcher, Tobacco Control and Research Cell (TCRC), Dhaka International University, Dhaka, Bangladesh

ABSTRACT

Bidi is one of the major tobacco products consumed in Bangladesh. There are around 65,000 workers in 117 *bidi* factories in the country and a significant portion of these workers are children. In this context, it is important to explore the child labor situation in *bidi* factories to highlight the need for regulating this harmful sector not only to control tobacco but also to ensure the children are protected from hazardous child labor in light of the prevailing laws and policies. This study attempts to gather evidences on child labor situation. A total of 160 child worker and 160 parents from four regions with higher concentration of *bidi* factories were surveyed. It is revealed that almost half of the child workers receive a payment of less than 30 Taka per day. This low wage rate was found as one of the influential factors making factory owners interested in employing child laborers. To stop the prevalence of child labor in *bidi* factories, enforcement of a strong policy with legislative bindings is necessary. Government support in form of safety net programs can be introduced.

Keywords: *Tobacco, Child Labor, Bidi, Tobacco products, Poverty, Low wage, Health hazards*

***Corresponding Author**

Sushanta Kumar Singha

Special Correspondent, Jamuna Television, Bangladesh



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INTRODUCTION

The adverse health impact of tobacco has been universally accepted. Working at a tobacco industry can also exert hazardous effect on health. *Bidi* is one of the major tobacco products consumed in Bangladesh with about 11.2 percent of the adult population using it for smoking. About 65,000 workers in 117 *bidi* factories in the country are producing 50,000 million sticks of *bidi* every year. Despite of the fact that Bangladesh upholds the worldwide consensus of eradicating child labor and ensuring education for all children[1-5], still about 12.8 percent of children between the age of 5 and 14 years are engaged in child labor[6].

The existing laws and policies in Bangladesh do not permit deploying children under 14 in the *bidi* factories. However, engagement of child laborers in the *bidi* factories continues unregulated. Children of the poor families start going to the factories with their parents at a very early age, in some cases, even at 6 years of age and most of these children do not go to schools[7]. They mainly do the work of sealing the *bidi* ends with soft hands.

In this context, this study explored the child labor situation in *bidi* factories and put light on the factors behind child labor in these factories of Bangladesh as well. Information on socio-economic and health status of children working in *bidi* factories was collected and it highlighted the need for regulating this harmful sector not only as a priority to control tobacco but also to ensure the children are protected from hazardous child labor in light of the prevailing laws and policies of the country.

METHODS

The mixed method study (quantitative and qualitative) was conducted in the districts of Rangpur, Kushtia, Tangail and Barisal of Bangladesh, which have the highest concentration of *bidi* factories in perspectives of Bangladesh. From the four districts nine (9) *bidi* factories were chosen purposively for data collection considering the demographic and regional variations. The factories the study has been conducted includes- Gafur Bidi, Ajj Bidi and Ansar Bidi from Rangpur; Nasir Bidi and Akij Bidi from Kushtia; Mohini Bidi, Haque Bidi and Montu Bidi from Tangail and Amrita Karikor Bidi of Barisal District.

A total number of 320 *bidi* workers interviewed by surveyed questionnaire, out of them 160 child laborers were surveyed from the sampled factories with 40 children from each of the 4 districts. And 160 parents/caregivers of those

160 children were also interviewed using a household survey questionnaire for knowing better information and understanding the income and health related issues.

The selection procedure of child respondents involved techniques like prior information on factory worker, snowball method, exploring existing report/resources on child labor in *bidi* factories, etc. In terms of sample selection, 40 children has been selected to draw statistical inference in every single unit or district. Despite this respondent selection method does not corroborate a random sampling technique that would not be feasible due to the diversity of the geographical areas and lack of background information about the selected children and their households, it can be expected that the sampled children represent the general features of the child laborers in Bangladesh to a significant extent. Thus, a total of 160 children (40 children from each of the 4 areas) under 14 years of age were surveyed with the questionnaire. For quality data collection, children having an age between 7 and 14 years were selected.

For qualitative part of the study, in-depth interviews were conducted among 16 senior workers has more than 15 years working experience of the *bidi* factories who were not included in the quantitative survey, 8 factory owners or management staff, and 4 local health practitioners' e.g. medical doctors from 4 districts where *bidi* factories are more.

Individual consent was obtained from survey respondents. During interview, all sorts of privacy of the respondents were maintain strictly, and confidentiality of data was ensured properly. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from Bangladesh Medical Research Council (BMRC).

RESULTS

Among the surveyed child laborers, 58% were boys and 42% were girls. Majority of the respondents (68%) were above 10 years of age. Besides, among the surveyed parents 55% were male and 45% were female. A vast majority of the parents of the child laborers (70%) in the *bidi* factories was found to be illiterate and about half of the households have monthly incomes of less than 5,000Taka per month which is close to the poverty threshold or poverty line defined by the World Bank in 2015[8].

Due to the legal restriction, children are not registered factory workers, but work with parents and sometimes alone beyond official records. About 28.9% children were found to be working for one or bellow one year. More than two fifth of the children who responded to the survey were working in *bidi* factories for 2 to 4 years. About 26% of the respondent children were working for 5 to 7 years. A mere 2.1% have found to work for more than 8 years. This leads to an interesting observation revealing that most of the children who are no more than 14 years of age have passed a significant number of years of their life working in a *bidi* factory. This is not only hazardous to their health but also refers to a condition that refrains them from obtaining formal education.

Number of working days of child labor in *bidi* factories was found to vary widely across the study areas. In Rangpur and Tangail, most of the child laborers work one or two days a week. On the other hand, in Kushtia almost every respondent was found to work six days a week. In Barisal, the majority of children work three days a week. Table 3 presents distribution of the surveyed children by number of weekly working days and district.

An overwhelming majority of the surveyed child (68%) works during the first half of the day, which is usually the school time. About a quarter of the working children work on the noon-afternoon shift. Although a very small portion, yet 5.8% of the surveyed child works in the factory at night.

Table 3 shows the distribution of children by the time of the day they work in the factories as per districts. In most cases, children work in shifts operated during morning-noon that coincides with school hours. Another large portion of children (22.5 to 42.5%) opined to work in Noon-Afternoon shifts. Some children in Rangpur (7.5%) and Barisal (20%) work during afternoon-night hours of the day.

Bidi laborers are among the least paid workers in Bangladesh and the child workers are paid even less than their adult counterparts are. The survey among the working children in *bidi* factories revealed that almost half of the surveyed child workers get a payment of less than 30 Taka per day and about 61.2% of the children get payments less than 50 Taka a day. Only one fifth of the surveyed child workers get paid above 100 Taka per day. Table 4 presents distribution of the child workers in *bidi* factories according to their wage rates and the decider regarding their expenditures of their income.

Despite of the health hazard and opportunity loss in terms of education, many families have or are compelled to have sent their children to work in *bidi* factories. Poverty is clearly the single largest factor associated with children working in the *bidi* factories. On the other hand, factory owners can pay less to a child laborer than an adult giving an edge on the

profit margin can. This has led to the fact that child labor is more preferable to the factory owners whenever the legislative enforcement is weak.

In a subtle manner, lack of awareness about the adverse health impact of working in *bidi* factories may also have contributed to the engagement of children as *bidi* factory workers. The survey found that 70% of the parents of the child laborers have no education. Given this fact, it could be easily perceived that these under-educated parents would not be able to adequately understand the long-term threat on their children's health.

Trade union was found to be an important factor limiting child labor in *bidi* factories. In-depth interviews revealed that because of the trade unions, labor wages for production of thousand *bidi*s higher in Tangail, which is higher compared to other areas of the country. As a result, in addition to the influence of trade unions, this has contributed to lower level of child engagement of *bidi* factories in Tangail region. However, in factories in rural areas, where trade union is absent or weak, have more child laborers than urban areas. On a different note, lack of law enforcement may aggravate the situation. If the duty bearers and law enforcement agencies remain insensitive to children's rights and fail to provide protection, the situation cannot be improved [15].

Current study found that about one fourth of the surveyed child workers of *bidi* factories are out of school – some have dropped out and others have never made it to a school. Though the rest three fourths of the children reported to go to schools, they could not study regularly. This is mostly because of the working hours at the factories where most of the children were found to work during the morning and noon shifts and working more than 6 hours a day (see Table 3). Moreover, the economic needs of the families have compelled them to trade their educational potential off against earning a living. It is doubtful that these children would ever make it back to the school and finish their education. Table 5 presents the level of education of the child workers and reasons behind not studying revealed by the survey.

It is universally accepted that working at a tobacco factory has both short-term and long-term chronic health impacts. This is particularly hazardous to the children who are more susceptible to respiratory and dermatological ailments in addition to the long-term risks of carcinogenesis. Unfortunately, none of the surveyed children was found to have used protective gears like masks or gloves for preventing themselves from the harmful dust and chemicals in *bidi* factories. More than 8 out of 10 child workers have reported to feel sick during their work in *bidi* factories (Table 6). The various types of sickness reported by them were presented in Table 6. More than half of the children who felt sick face headache and over a quarter of such children faced breathing problem.

The health hazard of the child *bidi* workers were also shared by the adult *bidi* workers and the parents in the interviews. The *bidi* factories do not provide any protective gears for the workers in general including the children. There are usually no facilities to provide health services from the factories in case of sickness of the child workers.

Qualitative assessment revealed that respiratory and dermatological problems are common in child laborers. Most of the children from poor families do not have access to nutritious food. Moreover, working at tobacco factories reduces hunger. As a result, they become weaker and sicker. In many cases, the factories do not have sufficient and hygienic toilet and drinking water supply.

The majority of the child *bidi* workers want to quit from the *bidi* factory work. In fact, more than three fourths of the surveyed child workers expressed their willingness to quit from the *bidi* factory work, as shown in Figure1. However, opportunities are extremely limited given the unchanged socio-economic factors that have pulled them in to the profession in the first place.

DISCUSSION

The child laborers at *bidi* factories generally come from poor families and it is the poverty of their families that push them to *bidi* work for supplementing family income. Number of child labor is increasing day by day since early 90's when it started in Bangladesh. Low wage rate and unavailability of adult workers at that low wage rate are important reasons for factory owners and managers behind employing child workers. Most of the working children are irregular in their studies or have already dropped out of schools. Unfavorable working hours is a major role player behind this. The child *bidi* workers face varying working conditions in various regions. However, they generally face unfavorable and hazardous working conditions. Almost every senior *bidi* worker who has worked for more than 15 years, and health professionals has reported such issues. The child *bidi* workers face negative effects of *bidi* work on their health. Most of the children working in the *bidi* factories face various types of sicknesses. Most of the *bidi* workers wish to quit their *bidi* factory employments, but the opportunities for quitting are very limited. It is challenging to set up alternative industries or other economic activities in these areas due to the influence and effects of the *bidi* factories. The owners have been trying to retain their workers and in a considerable number of cases, the workers willing to start new business or entrepreneurship other than production of *bidi*, get enforced to quit their job. Study found that number of child laborer is

limited in the *bidi* factories where trade union activities remain organized. Ironically, this is not the same scenario in the factories offering better wage and working conditions, but with no trade union.

CONCLUSION

Both the Constitution of Bangladesh and the Children's Act 1974 guarantee basic and fundamental human rights and Bangladesh's obligation under national and international law to protect and promote the rights and interests of children, the government needs to put forward a policy that would form the basis of legal regulation to stop child labor in the country. As outcome of several prevailing reasons, factory owners and managers are deploying child workers on a consistent basis, the existing laws and regulations to prevent child labor need to be strictly enforced especially in *bidi* factories. Attention needs to be paid on regular inspection by relevant authorities along with introduction of special mobile court in this regard for checking the presence of child workers. Provision of law enforcement and punishment must be practiced in appropriate cases. The government may introduce special social safety net programs for the poor community in areas with high concentration to *bidi* factories, paving the pathway towards creation of opportunities to supplement the family income that would otherwise be obtained through involvement of the children into *bidi* factories. Special and easily accessible loan facilities Government should be introducing special loan facilities to set up others industry for creating alternative jobs in those areas. It will reduce poverty of the targeted household that can bring a change their livelihood, which discourages to send their children to *bidi* factories for work. As most of the working children in *bidi* factories face health hazards, particularly the parents need to be aware of the adverse effects of working at *bidi* factories. Government, media, development partners and NGO-CSOs should work side by side to stop child labor at *bidi* factories. Detailed survey on *bidi* producing sector should be carried out to establish solid database of the *bidi* factories.

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