

Hazardous Child Labour in the Leather Sector of Dhaka, Bangladesh



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Foreword

Ten years ago, in 1999, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) adopted Convention 182, a new international human rights instrument to prioritise the elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour. According to Convention 182, two categories of worst forms of child labour exist:

- The **unconditional** worst forms of child labour include slave labour, prostitution and pornography, participants in armed conflicts and illicit traders.
- The **hazardous** worst forms of child labour include all sorts of work that expose children to danger and jeopardise their physical and moral health, and all forms of work conducted by any child under 18 years of age that equals or exceeds 43 hours a week.

The Convention explicitly calls for immediate and effective measures to secure the prohibition and elimination of these forms of child labour. The ratification of ILO Convention 182 by 169 countries shows the global political commitment to further improve the situation of working children in hazardous work.

Bangladesh signed Convention 182 in 2001. Additionally, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child was signed in 1989, demonstrating its commitment to the compliance with child rights. Unfortunately, the incidence of child labour in Bangladesh is still among the highest in the world. It is also worrisome that 41% of the child labourers are estimated to be working in hazardous forms of child labour.

The IREWOC Foundation has developed a programme of studying the reality of children who work in the hazardous forms of child labour. Studies have been carried out in Guatemala, Peru, Bolivia, Indonesia and Nepal, and further studies are planned in a number of African countries. In Bangladesh, child labour in the production of leather was selected for study. The leather sector, according to the ILO, is one of the most hazardous sectors children in Bangladesh are involved in. The study would provide an insight in the characteristics of hazardous child labour in general and in the leather sector specifically.

One of the main objectives of this IREWOC study, and which will be presented in this report, was to identify all stages that together form the production chain of leather - from raw hides to leather products - and to observe the involvement of children in these stages. Secondly, we aimed to document the working children's living and working conditions. Then, we intended to outline the main reasons for the children to be involved in this hazardous sector by taking into account the perspectives of children and their families as well as employers' points of view. The final part of this report looks at the impact of the various existing projects to combat child labour in this sector.

The fieldwork conducted for this study took place between June and September 2008. To contribute to the existing studies on the leather sector, which are mostly based on statistical and quantitative methodology, anthropological methods of data collection were used in order to directly gain insight from the source. Through observation and informal interviews, conditions and opinions of all actors were documented. We spoke to approximately 85 children working throughout the leather sector; with some we had a very brief talk, with others a long interview.

The main challenge during fieldwork was to cope with the respondents' lack of time and the lack of privacy while interviewing. We wanted to gain quality data from children without wasting their working time. Also, it was difficult to get honest and personal information from children at the workplace, but this was often the only place in which we could speak with them. Patience and

subtle ways of dealing with the issue were necessary to achieve the results, presented in this report.

To gain access to the field, and to be able to study the different projects in the field of child labour, we were thankfully helped by several local NGOs and international institutions. Special thanks are for the IPEC-ILO in Dhaka, the Ministry of Labour and Employment Bangladesh, UNICEF Bangladesh, and Save the Children Sweden Denmark in Bangladesh. Furthermore, the fieldwork would not have been possible without the help of my interpreter Javed Kaiser, who was a great support. Finally, we are most thankful to Plan Netherlands and Bangladesh, for financing and supporting this research.

The report is no way designed to insult the sector or the country, but to illustrate the seriousness of the work that still remains to be done and to provide insights with which appropriate policies can be further developed.

Anna Ensing

Amsterdam, January 2009

Chapter 1

Child Labour in Bangladesh

Despite a worldwide decline in child labour in the last years [ILO 2006], the child labour incidence in Bangladesh is still among the highest in Asia [Chaudri et al. 2004: 74]. Bangladesh has ratified ILO Convention 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour, and several governmental and non governmental institutes have been working on improving the situation of child labour. This chapter gives an overview of the most recent developments in the field.

1.1 Extent of child labour

Bangladesh, with 153.3 million people is one of the most densely populated countries in the world [UNDP 2008]. The majority of the people are very poor and 35% of the total population lives on less than one US dollar a day [Islam F. et al. 2007]. The absolute and relative size of the child population is quit big. UCW-project estimates reveal that Bangladesh had about 37 million children between 5 and 14 years old in 2006; they made up 24% of the total population [SIMPOC 2006].

The widespread poverty causes a situation in which many children are deprived of their basic rights, both in urban as well as in rural areas. Infant mortality in the countryside is particularly high, mostly due to malnutrition and a lack of health care, such as knowledge of immunization and safe birthing practices. Education is generally in a poor state [Khundher 2005]. The “Declaration of Compulsory Primary Education” in 1993 increased the proportion of children enrolled in primary education [Taher 2006: 204]; the Primary and Mass Education Division (PMED) statistics show that primary school enrolment increased from 12 million in 1990 to 17.6 million in 2000. Gross enrolment was 96% in 2000 [Khanam 2005: 16]. Yet, according to the latest UCW survey only 76.9% of the children in the age category 5-14 attends school [SIMPOC 2006].

There is ambiguity in the estimation of child labour in Bangladesh; they vary from 6 to 20 million [Islam F. et al. 2007: 3]. According to the National Child Labour Survey (NSCL 2002-03) conducted by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) in 2002 and 2003, the number of working children in the age 5-17 years old was 7.9 million¹, referring to children who did at least one hour per week in paid or unpaid work (17% of the child population in this age category). Among them were 3.4 million child labourers², i.e. they were younger than the minimum age required for the work they performed. The majority of the child labourers are boys [Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics 2003; ILO/IPEC 2004]. However, a Save the Children study claims that National statistics by BBS heavily underestimate the actual numbers, mainly because the survey did not include figures from several parts of the informal sector, which has a large number of child labourers [Islam F. et al. 2007: 3].

The negative relation with education is among the most unfortunate consequences of child labour. Child labourers have little time to attend school or to study. About 70% of the child labourers do not attend school, and 30% combine work and education. One out of two children not enrolled

¹ In some documents one speaks of 7.4 million working children. The BBS explains the distinction by setting the total number of economically active children at 7.9 million (usual status), against 7.4 million by current activity status.

² The BBS speaks of 3.4 million child labourers under the usual status, and 3.2 under the current activity status.

mentioned economic restrictions as the principal reason for not attending school [Islam F. et al. 2007]. Of the total child population, 5.1% only works, and doesn't go to school (Table 1). ILO-IPEC states that almost 50% of children in primary school drop out before they complete grade 5, and then are pulled towards work, continuously increasing the number of child labourers [ILO/IPEC 2004].

Table 1: Child activity breakdown

Age	Economic activity only	School only	Combining school and economic activity	Neither in school nor in economic activity
5-14	5.1%	68.5%	8.5%	17.9%

Source: [SIMPOC 2006]

Comparing the National Child Labour Survey in 2002-03 with the one conducted in 1995-96, statistics show a decline in child labour in Bangladesh. The proportion of working children in the total child population aged 5-14 years came down from 18.3% in 1995-96 to 14.2% in 2002-03. The decline was more rapid in rural areas than in urban areas, and faster among girls than boys [Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics 1997, 2003]. However, the two surveys have used different data collection methods and different definitions, reasons for which a realistic comparison between the two surveys is not possible.

In fact, the declining trend in child labour has been contradicted by other studies, which claim that in contrast to other countries in South Asia and in the world, child labour has been increasing in Bangladesh. Khanam argues that labour force participation rate of children aged 10 to 14 years increased from 21% in 1981 to 39% in 2000 [Khanam 2005: 2]. Statistics by SIMPOC confirm the increasing trend in recent years; these reveal a slight augmentation in children's involvement in economic activity³ from 13.4% in 2002-2003 to 13.6% in 2006 [SIMPOC 2003, 2006].

Another important observation is a shift of the working children from the agricultural sector to other sectors, such as the production and transport sector and the sales sector [Islam F. et al. 2007]. Still, most working children live in rural areas. The rural informal sector accounts for 93% of the working children in Bangladesh [Khundher 2005] and 57% of the child labourers work in the agricultural sector [Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics 2003]. However, according to various studies, most of the vulnerable working children are currently living and working in urban areas. They work in informal work sectors, where neither the family nor the law provide protection [Islam F. et al. 2007].

Approximately 1.3 million children in Bangladesh, or 41% of the child labourers, are working in hazardous forms of child labour [Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics 2003]. The hazardous conditions apply especially to boys [Khundher 2005] and the older the child, the more likely he is to be exposed to hazards at the workplace. Children between 12 and 14 years old make up 33% of this group, while the other 67% of the children in hazardous conditions are between 15 and 17 years old [ILO/IPEC 2004]. It is important to keep in mind, however, that the government of Bangladesh has, despite the ratification of Convention 182 in 2001, not yet prepared a national list of hazardous

³ Economic activity is a broad concept that encompasses most productive activities by children, including unpaid and illegal work, work in the informal sector, and production of goods for own use. "Working" does not include helping in the home, which is a noneconomic activity. Not all children's work is equivalent to child labour [SIMPOC 2006].

sectors or activities for children. The definition of hazardous work is therefore not very clear and statistics can vary between different sources.

1.2 Legislation on child labour and action programmes

Bangladesh joined the ILO in 1972 and ratified several conventions. Convention No. 138 concerning the minimum age for employment has not yet been ratified. However, Bangladesh ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989, and Convention No. 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour in 2001, demonstrating its commitment to the compliance with child rights and the elimination of hazardous child labour. Other significant conventions ratified by Bangladesh include the ILO Convention No. 29 on Forced Labour and Convention No. 105 on Abolition of Forced Labour [ILO/IPEC 2004].

Convention 182 states that ratifying countries should take immediate action to secure the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labour and determine the hazardous activities by national laws or regulations. In December 2001, the Bangladeshi government with support of ILO and other organisations started developing a national policy on child labour titled “elimination of child labour policy”, but as of yet, the policy has not been launched⁴.

The Constitution of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh ensures through different articles the basic needs and rights of children. Of special interest are Article 17 referring to the provision of free and compulsory education to all children, and Article 24 that prohibits all forms of forced labour [Taher 2006]. Compulsory labour is also an offence under the Penal Code 1860 [ILO/IPEC 2004]. Furthermore, the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs developed the National Plan of Action for Children, which is based on the UNCRC [Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh 2005].

A few national labour laws deal with the issue of child labour. They refer to minimum ages required for employment in specific sectors. According to these laws children below 14 years old are not allowed to work in factories, and adolescents’ work is regulated. Generally, the laws require that work by adolescents in factories is carried out during day hours and for a limited amount of hours [ILO/IPEC 2004; Taher 2006]. The Bangladesh Labour Code (2006) stipulates that no child (i.e. a person under 14 years of age) is allowed to be employed in any work and that no adolescent (i.e. a person between 15 and 17 years old) is allowed to be employed in hazardous work; a child between 12 and 14 years old may be employed in “light work” only [Government of Bangladesh 2006]. Additionally, the Employment of Children Act, 1938, prohibits children under 12 years to work in workshops where hazardous activities take place. The 18 specified activities include weaving, tanning and the manufacture of bidis, soap, carpets, matches, explosives and fireworks. Employers who repeatedly violate these restrictions face prison terms of up to 6 months. An exception is made in the case of family owned and family run workshops, which do not use outside hired labour [ILO/IPEC 2004].

Although the existence of the laws demonstrates a concern, they have some limitations that need to be addressed. In the first place, there is confusion about the exact meaning of the concept “child”. Several laws define children as persons under 12, 14, 15 or 16 years old. In general though, the government of Bangladesh and its relevant agencies define working children between 5 and 14 years old as child labourers [Ksfi & Jesmin 2002]. Secondly, the laws don’t cover all sectors of employment, especially not the informal sectors, although a vast majority of the child labourers are engaged in these sectors, even in hazardous working conditions [Taher 2006]. There is no single code or law dealing with this informal area [ILO/IPEC 2004]. Thirdly, age restrictions are not sufficiently adhered to due to a lack of a well-functioning birth registration system in the country

⁴ The information is based on an interview with ILO-IPEC functionaries in Dhaka, August 2008.

[Taher 2006]. Finally, the law requires children to attend school only up to age 10, leaving a gap between the end of compulsory schooling and the minimum working age that may result in children entering employment illegally [ILO/IPEC 2004].

Several programmes have been carried out to combat the problem of child labour, often in combination with the promotion of education. In the 1990s, the Primary and Mass Education Division and the Directorate of Non-Formal Education were set up. In 1993, the government and the World Food Program (WFP) initiated the Food for Education programme, to make primary education more attractive for poor children. These developments had, according to ILO/IPEC, a positive impact on education and child labour [ILO/IPEC 2004].

In 2000, the IPEC started its four year project “Preventing and Eliminating the Worst Forms of Child Labour in Selected Formal and Informal Sectors”. The project focussed on hazardous forms of child labour in five different informal sectors. Subsequently, in March 2001, ILO-IPEC started working on “Worst Forms of Child Labour in the Urban Informal Economy of Dhaka City”, a project resulting in a baseline survey on the topic. The preparatory phase of the National Time Bound Project was launched in 2004 and the actual project started in 2006. It is directed at technical support to the Government of Bangladesh in order to generate a framework for policy and direct action on child labour. The second phase of the project on the Informal Economy will be included as a component, focussing on regulation, monitoring and direct action.

The Ministry of Labour and Employment started, in 2004, the project “Eradication of Hazardous Child Labour in Bangladesh”, which is now in its second phase and technically supported by ILO. The project covers Dhaka and Chittagong Municipal Corporations and focuses on non-formal education and skills training for working children [ILO/IPEC 2004]. Similarly, the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education is, with UNICEF support, implementing the project “Basic Education for Hard To Reach Urban Working Children”, which will continue through 2011. Also here interventions include non-formal education and skills training for working children.

Chapter 2

Child Labour in the Leather Sector in Bangladesh

Although most child labour takes place in the informal sector, the leather sector forms an interesting exception as it belongs for a great part to the formal sector. Child labour is a sensitive topic, considering the importance of leather for the national economy. This research focuses on the leather sector in Dhaka. Despite the efforts of the government to declare the leather sector child labour free, still many children are found working in different parts of the production chain.

2.1 Leather sector in Bangladesh, the context

At the end of the 1980s, Bangladesh, in line with the global trade liberalisation that was promoted by international financial institutions, started the implementation of various market-oriented reforms. Export promotion schemes were an important part of these reforms, as was the privatisation of state-owned enterprises [Chowdhury Khan 2000]. Also the leather sector, which had been developed since the 1970s, was reformed and promoted as an export sector. Nowadays, leather and leather products are principal export products of Bangladesh and the sector provides a significant portion of employment in the country. It is estimated that around 700.000 people are directly or indirectly employed in leather and its sub-sectors [ILO-IPEC 2007]. The sector accounts for 3-4% of the total export earnings and, in 2005, 0.32% of the GDP [ILO-IPEC 2007]. The Government of Bangladesh has identified the leather industry as one of the “highest priority sectors” for its growth potential and its contribution to export diversification and employment generation [Rahman 2008]. The public attention to child labour is feared to have a negative impact on the industry. Tannery and factory owners, government, labourers and even NGOs are aware of this and treat the subject with care in order not to cause adverse publicity effects.

The production of leather takes place in tanneries, most of which are concentrated in Hazaribagh, a district in the south west of Dhaka city. The first tanneries were established in that area in 1947. The tanneries initially produced only leather for the local market. In 1965 Hazaribagh counted 30 tanneries; most were owned by businessmen from West Pakistan. After the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971, all tanneries were nationalised and the government formed the Bangladesh Tanneries Corporation (BTC), which owned 24 tanneries in 1972. Due to mismanagement and ensuing losses, the government decided to privatise the tanneries again in 1982 [Banglapedia; Gain 1998]. Today, Hazaribagh is still the major area for leather production. Out of more than 200 tanneries in Bangladesh, the great majority is located in the Hazaribagh area. In 2007, the Hazaribagh area processed 84% of the total supply of hides and skins. The tanning industry employs around 50.000 persons [UCIL 2004; ILO-IPEC 2007].

A World Bank survey carried out in 1993 revealed that 4% of the tanneries surveyed were large-scale tanneries with an annual production capacity of more than 5 million square feet each; 10% were medium size; 8% were light-medium size and 41% small size with an annual production capacity of 0.5 million square feet each or less. The remaining 37% consisted of “cottage based tanneries”, i.e. small-scaled without good machineries [Gain 1998:2]. Currently there are no such detailed numbers available, but the division between small and large-scale tanneries may not have changed. According to the Bangladesh Finished Leather, Leather Goods and Footwear Exporters’ Association

(BFLGFEA), more than 50 tanneries in Hazaribagh export their products, which implies they are relatively large-scale and well equipped. The remaining tanneries are rather small-scale or cottage-based; these produce leather primarily for the domestic market. According to a census realised for the German international cooperation enterprise GTZ in 2004, it appeared that more than 76% of the tanneries is solely export oriented. Around one fifth supplies to both local and foreign market. Only a very small percentage (4%) sells the entire production to the local manufacturers or markets [UCIL 2004]. However, only units with more than 15 people were included in the census. Since most leather for the domestic market comes from the small-scale and informal tanning businesses, the real number of small tanneries producing for the local market can be expected to be higher.

The leather manufacturing enterprises produce leather items varying from different types of footwear to belts, bags and wallets [Gain 1998]. Regarding footwear, there are currently about 25 mechanised and export oriented footwear enterprises in the country, mostly in and around Dhaka. At the same time, hundreds of small-scale and cottage-based units spread all over the country produce footwear. The leather goods (or non-footwear) manufacturing industry is less developed and operates mainly at the cottage level. There are 5 large and medium scaled leather goods manufacturing units in Bangladesh, compared to hundreds of cottage-based units⁵. Leather goods and footwear factories are found in several places in Dhaka, also in Hazaribagh. Some leather factories are part of a tannery, whereas others operate independently.

There are two principal associations for tannery owners: Bangladesh Tanners Association (BTA), established in 1964, and the Bangladesh Finished Leather, Leather Goods and Footwear Exporters' Association (BFLGFEA) since 1991. The goal of these associations is basically to represent its members and to promote, protect and safeguard their interests; they have more than 100 members each. Most of the large-scaled and export oriented manufacturers of footwear and leather goods are represented by the Leather Goods & Footwear Manufacturers & Exporters Association of Bangladesh (LFMEAB). This association split away from the BFLGFEA in 2003 and focuses especially on promoting relationships between local manufacturers and foreign buyers; it has 44 members. Furthermore, approximately 1500 tanners without their own tannery are united in the Bangladesh Leather and Leather Goods Manufacturer Cooperative Society Ltd. Corporation in Dhaka. These tanners use other people's tanneries and machineries to produce leather, mainly for the domestic market. Many small-scale manufacturers of footwear and leather goods in Dhaka belong to the Bangladesh Leather and Regin Goods and Shoe Manufacturer Association. For the labourers of tanneries, a labour union was established in 1965 with the aim to protect the rights of tannery workers. The union claims to represent 20.000 to 25.000 members who work in Hazaribagh's tanneries.

The wholesale market for leather is located at the Bangshall market, located in Old Dhaka. Locally produced footwear and leather goods are transported to most parts of the country. The purchasing power of people in Bangladesh, however, is low and the climate is not appropriate for leather garments, except for footwear. Consequently, the domestic market for leather and products in Bangladesh is relatively low: it accounts for only 20% of the total leather production [ILO-IPEC 2007].

The remaining 80% of the leather production is exported in the form of crust leather⁶, finished leather, and a small share of footwear and leather goods [UCIL 2004; ILO-IPEC 2007]. According to official figures of the Export Promotion Bureau (EPB) the export volume of Bangladeshi leather has been increasing, but the sector also faces difficulties. During the 1980s, export credits were widely

⁵ Numbers of factories are taken from the Bangladesh Finished Leather, Leather Goods Manufacturers' and Exporters' Association, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

⁶ See paragraph 3.1

available and many firms with little technical knowledge invested in leather. When in the 1990s the government stopped providing export subsidies for the production of wet blue leather, and prohibited the export of raw and wet blue leather⁷, these firms started losing money. At present, the majority exports are of finished leather. These producers have suffered price fluctuations in the world market, so much so that the price of finished leather was at times lower than the prices they had paid for the raw materials. In general, a lack of technical expertise results in difficulties to respond to international conditions [Chowdhury Khan 2000]. Recently, important increases have taken place in the footwear exports, to mainly Italy, Japan, Hong Kong, Spain, Germany, UK and USA. Leading exporters in this field are the multinational company BATA and the national APEX [UCIL 2004].

The production of leather is unfortunately accompanied by serious pollution of air, water and soil, which gravely affects the surrounding area as well as its inhabitants. None of the tanneries in Hazaribagh employ waste treatment. Plans are being made to shift the entire tannery industry to Savar, about 20 kilometres from Dhaka city, where a new leather industrial area including a communal waste treatment plant, will be developed [ILO-IPEC 2007]. Such plans, however, have been discussed for the past 10 years and the negotiation process between tannery owners and the Ministry of Industry is still ongoing. The goal to move the industry in 2010 has been put into doubt by several actors⁸.

2.2 Child labour in the Bangladeshi leather sector

Since the leather industry has been identified by the government as a priority sector for the country's economy, the eradication of child labour has been put high on the agenda. The three main associations of leather and leather products producers declare that "no child labour is employed in the leather sector". It furthermore states that this child labour is "actively monitored by ILO" and that "BFLLFEA coordinates and supervises the compliance issues" [BFLLFEA et al. 2008]. High-level officials involved in the sector are eager to declare that the leather industry is almost child labour free. The IPEC office in Dhaka, the Ministry of Labour, and several NGOs have been working in an attempt to eradicate child labour in the leather sector with a wide variety of projects.

Although Bangladesh does not have an official list of hazardous activities and sectors for children, several surveys include leather related activities on their list of hazardous work. In one of the latest surveys carried out by ILO about the urban informal sector, work in shoe factories and manufacturing leather products has been identified as hazardous [ILO/IPEC 2002]. An IPEC program starting in 2000 focussing on children working in the most intolerable conditions⁹ included leather tanneries as one of the five identified sectors [Karim 2005]. The Department of Labour, as part of its program on Eradicating Hazardous Child Labour, conducted a survey in 1995 and classified

⁷ The export of raw hides and wet blue leather was prohibited on the basis of respectively Bangladesh' Export Policies 1995-97 and 1997-2002. According to Bangladeshi authorities, the ban is established to keep up adequate domestic supply and to assist the development of the domestic leather industry [OECD 2005].

⁸ Especially the agreement on costs of the establishment of a waste treatment plant, and compensation for the tannery owners are issues of discussion. Several environmental groups have been actively involved in advocating against the pollution, but, as the activists argued "as soon as the tannery owners come up with export numbers, the government stops pressuring them" (interview with Syeda Rizwana Hasan, director BELA, June 2008). On November 30, 2008, the newspaper Daily Star in Bangladesh reported that: "European counties are set to pass new policies that will bar import of products from industries that pollute environment with harmful chemical agents and do not have individual or central effluent plant" [Parveen 2008].

⁹ The project was titled: "Preventing and Eliminating the Worst Forms of Child Labour in Selected Formal and Informal Sectors"

tannery work as hazardous for children [Massum 2002]. Bangladesh Shishu Adhikar Forum (BSAF) identified, during a survey in 2000, 67 hazardous activities, among which the work in tanneries. Work in shoe factories or other leather related activities were not included [BSAF 2002].

No clear data on the current extent of child labour in the complete leather industry is available. Some studies on different sub-sectors related to leather do, however, give an idea about the scope of the problem, but also indicate the need for more information on the subject.

In 2000 the Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies (BILS) estimated that around 1000 children between 7 and 14 years old were engaged in various jobs in tanneries [BILS 2000: 20]. The ILO-IPEC, in 2007, specified that approximately 260 children work in leather tanneries, 3040 children work in shoe factories and 320 children were working with leather products [ILO-IPEC 2007]. In 2001, the baseline study of the ILO project in the tanneries included 63 tanneries and found a total of 560 children working (all boys) [Karim 2005]. According to another survey by the ILO/IPEC on the Urban Informal Sectors of Dhaka City, not including tanneries, a total of 46 children were found to be manufacturing leather products, and 328 children working in shoe factories. The Hazaribagh area counted for a total of 243 children working in hazardous sectors [ILO/IPEC 2002]. According to the National Child Labour Survey (NCLS 2003) the numbers are even higher: 13,702 children between 5 and 17 years old are working in tanning and the dressing of leather, manufacturing footwear and leather goods [Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics 2003].

The present research shows that, despite the interventions, still many children are working in the production of leather and leather products. Many of them are not reached by any type of intervention. During the fieldwork, which covered only a small part of the sector, children were observed working in tanneries, shoe factories, the manufacturing of leather items or in other activities that are directly related to leather. However, we have not attempted to estimate the numbers. This study focuses on the qualitative data regarding child labour. It attempts to shed more light on the complete picture of the leather sector, the work of children, the consequences of their work, the views of the children, their families, the employers and other important actors involved.



Photo 1: the highly polluted environment of Hazaribagh's tannery area

Chapter 3

The Role of Children in Leather Production

A leather product, such as a bag, a belt or a pair of shoes, requires many steps in an elaborated production chain. With the treatment of leather or producing of leather products, waste material is created, which is often used for further processing. Children are involved in a wide variety of activities directly or indirectly related to the leather industry. To understand the involvement of children in certain activities and to be able to draw conclusions about a sector as “free of child labour” it is necessary to dissect the chain. Each stage in the process will be discussed, with a special focus on the involvement of children.

3.1 The production of leather, leather footwear and leather goods

Leather is created through the tanning of animal hides and skins. For the production of the first phase, wet blue leather¹⁰, raw animal hides and skins are needed. Almost all hides and skins (around 99%) are collected in Bangladesh. Only an insignificant volume of camel hide is imported from external sources, with South Africa as the major provider [UCIL 2004:22]. Leather produced in Bangladesh consists, in order of supply, of cow hides, goat skins, buffalo hides and sheep skins [ILO-IPEC 2007].

The hides and skins used for leather production are the by-products of meat production. Butchers and slaughterhouses around Dhaka, after slaughtering the animals, sell the raw hides and skins to middlemen. The middlemen transport the hides, often with the support of appointed rickshaw pullers, and sell them to storehouses in Old Dhaka. Storehouse owners usually have their employees clean the hides and skins with water, remove the redundant flesh, trim the sides, and salt them to extract moisture. The salted hides and skins are ready to be sold to tanneries. Tanners from Dhaka, or their employees, visit the area to check the products, bargain about the price and transport the hides and skins to their tannery.

3.1.1 Tanning

Producing leather involves three main processes: preparatory, tanning and crusting. The preparatory processes involve, among others, *unhairing*, *defleshing*, *salting*, *liming*, *deliming* etc. The tanning stage stabilises the protein of the raw materials into a product that will not putrefy. Then finally, the crusting process involves such activities as *thinning*, *lubrication*, *dyeing*, *drying*, *buffing* and *conditioning*. Throughout its production, the leather goes through different stages: from raw hide, to wet blue leather¹¹, to crust leather¹² and then finally finished leather.

Tanneries in Hazaribagh produce either wet blue leather, crust leather, or finished leather, and some tanneries produce all three types of leather. A distinction should be made between production

¹⁰ Wet Blue is the immediate product of chrome-tanning, which is the tanning method used in Dhaka.

¹¹ Wet blue leather is also called chrome-tanned leather. Chromium discolours the hides blue, hence its name.

¹² Crust leather is a hide or skin that is thinned, retanned and lubricated. It is the second stage of the leather production process.

in large-scale tanneries, which are often mechanised and export-oriented, and small-scale tanneries lacking modern technology and producing mostly for the domestic market. The former can produce all three stages of leather. Some artisanal tanneries are involved in producing only the initial wet blue stage of leather. Tanners without their own tannery or without the capacity for all production stages pay a fee to use someone else's tannery. Production chains are thus not always easy to follow since the final products can be made by several different tanners in several different places.

To make wet blue leather the salted hides and skins first need to be washed with water. Then the hides are *limed*: the hides are kept for a few days in a pit or a drum filled with water and lime (calcium oxide). Afterwards, in the *deliming* stage, the lime is removed from the leather, and the pH value of the hide is lowered by applying acids. The leather also goes into the drum for the chemical processes of *bating*, *pickling* and *tanning*. Each process involves a reaction with acids or other chemicals. The use of chromium sulphate and other chromium salts give a blue colour to the leather. The time in the drum varies between one hour and several days, depending on the specific process. After these steps, the leather is known as wet blue. It has been relieved of its hair, flesh and fat, it is resistant to bacteria and its structure has been strengthened [Gain 1998; UCIL 2004].

The crust process starts with *sammying*, *splitting* and *shaving*. In these steps the moisture is removed from the wet blue leather, the leather is split in an upper and a lower part¹³, and the rough parts are shaved smooth. Subsequently, the leather is put into the drum for various chemical reactions, to improve the durability and other qualities. In some cases the leather is also dyed. Then the leather must dry. This happens in a number of ways, depending mainly on the capacity and possibilities of the tannery. When available, a machine is used to dry the leather with heat and pressure. In some tanneries they hang the leather from the ceiling. In most low budget tanneries the leather is pegged to the roof or out in the fields, and left to dry in the sun. This is also called *toggling*. Highly mechanised tanneries also have the option to soften and smooth the leather with heat and pressure in special machines [Gain 1998].

During the last stage of leather processing, the final touches are applied; these depend on the tannery, but in professional tanneries it can involve *buffing* (to soften the leather), *dusting*, *ironing*, *glazing*, *plating* (for a smooth touch and shine) and *spraying* (to get the desired colour). The final result is a smooth, soft, bright and shiny piece of leather [UCIL 2004]. The low budget tanners do most of these steps manually or simply don't do them.

The tanning process differs a lot between tanneries. To begin with, the large-scale tanneries have the capacity to work with big pieces of leather of good quality, which generally come from the torso of the animal. After treatment with professional machines and chemicals, it can be exported. On the other hand, the small tanneries usually work with hides from the head of the animal, which is smaller and produces lower-quality leather. They lack machines and much of the work is done manually. Tanners with sufficient investment possibilities import chemicals from Europe. Small-scale tanners use the discarded chemicals from large-scale tanneries. The main danger of the work is that labourers are exposed to an uncertain mixture of chemical liquids, and safety measures vary between tanneries. While the professional tanneries do have some protective measures in place, the small tanneries offer no protection at all.

Tanneries in Hazaribagh can sell their products in three main ways. If they are qualified enough, they can export their crust or finished leather. If their quality or quantity is not sufficient, the leather is sold on the domestic market. These products usually go to the Bangshal wholesale market; the main place for leather commerce in Dhaka. The third way is to sell the leather directly to a factory. Some tanneries have direct relations with leather goods manufacturers or have their own (small) factory, either inside the tannery or elsewhere.

¹³ The lower, or *split*, part can be processed as suede.

3.1.2 Manufacturing

Local manufacturers can, like tanneries, roughly be divided into large-scale and small-scale factories. Small factories are numerous and are situated around the wholesale market, close to the tanneries in Hazaribagh, or near other commercial centres in the central part of Dhaka. Large-scale factories are located outside of the centre or even outside Dhaka. Some products, such as leather gloves, are partially fabricated in people's homes. Families receive the leather from the tannery or from middlemen and are paid to make the leather items at home.

The raw materials in large-scale footwear factories consist mostly of finished leather, mainly from Dhaka and sometimes from Chittagong. However, about 15% of the raw materials are imported from external sources; finished leather comes from Pakistan and China, whilst other raw materials, such as synthetic shoe soles, lining leather and in-sole leather, are imported from other Asian countries or from Italy. The raw materials needed for other leather goods, such as bags or wallets, are all found in Dhaka [UCIL 2004]. There is no available information about suppliers to small-scale factories for footwear or leather goods. However, considering their limited investments, it is fair to assume that most raw materials are bought locally.

As in the case of tanneries, in general, large-scale factories tend to be export oriented, while small-scale factories sell mostly to the local market (children are mostly found in small-scale factories). On the other hand, small-scale factories are often involved in the production of fake brand-name products. Although unrelated to the official designer factories, they label their products "Gucci", "Armani", "Diesel" or "Polo". These products often end up in other countries, but are unlikely to be included in official export numbers.

Leather factories either sell their products to local shops or export them. Two-thirds of the leather factories with more than 15 employees, produce leather or leather goods for export [UCIL 2004]. Relations between the firm and foreign importers are often direct, or via an intermediate institution. The countries that import most leather, leather goods and footwear from Bangladesh are Italy, Germany, Brazil, Singapore, China, Japan, Canada, Hong Kong, UK, and USA [ILO-IPEC 2007].

3.1.3 Waste materials and by-products

Throughout the entire production chain, waste materials are discarded. Often, these are used in new production chains, in which children are also involved.

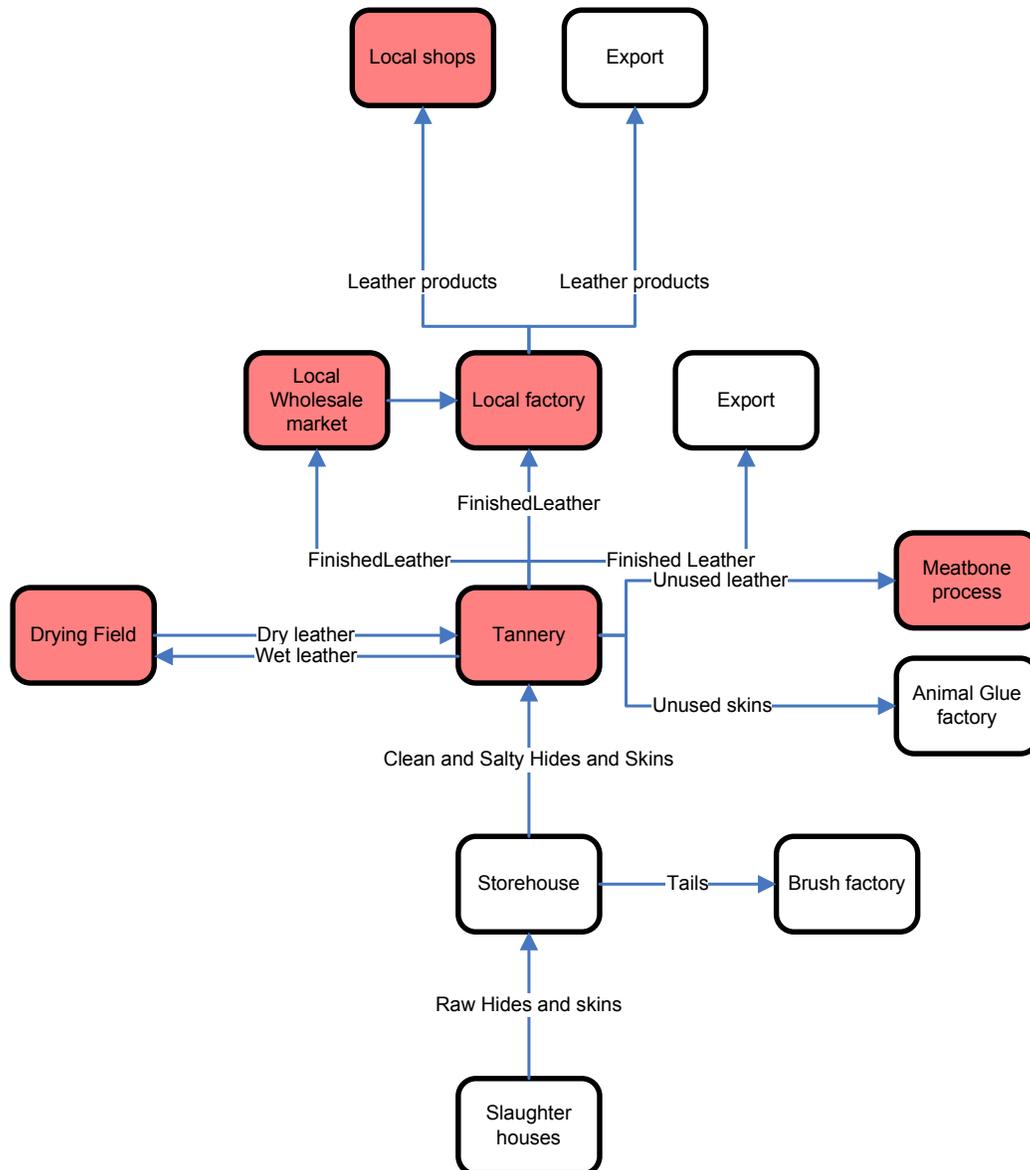
Waste materials are already created when raw hides are delivered to the tanneries. At the storehouses for raw hides and skins, we find people cutting off the animal tails. In specific factories, the hairs of these tails are washed, cut and used to make brushes, usually for shoe shining. Other pieces of hide and skin that are not good enough for tanning, such as the hide around the knees, the genitals or the feet, are used for the production of glue. To make glue, the pieces of hide and skin are boiled and filtered. The residual thick liquid, containing fats and proteins, is poured into trays and left outside to dry and cool. The resulting mass is sold to factories for further processing.

During the tanning stage, when the leather is shaved and trimmed, little pieces are discarded. These can be from wet blue leather, or from crust leather. Tannery owners usually sell the wet blue pieces for a low price, and give the finished leather pieces away. Both pieces are used for the production of *meatbone*, which is sold mainly as food for poultry and fish.¹⁴ The little pieces of wet

¹⁴ Also known as Meat and Bone Meal, or MBM. MBM contains all types of animal parts that are discarded during rendering (food processing) or, in this case, tanning. It is added to animal feed to improve the nutritious content.

blue leather are boiled in a small amount of water, until it becomes a wet black mass, and then left to dry completely. The pieces of finished leather are used as cheap fuel to boil the water. The dry black mass, or “the meat”, is ground and sold to a *meatbone* factory, where further processing with other ingredients takes place. *Meatbone* is used by the domestic market and is also exported. The use of chrome-containing solid wastes for *meatbone* production, however, may cause serious health problems for poultry [Hands On TV].

Diagram 1: the production chain of leather in Dhaka, and the involvement of children



Discarded pieces of finished leather are also used by poorer people for cooking, as it is a cheap fuel. Burning these materials is, however, very damaging for the health of people nearby, since the leather contains all types of hazardous chemicals.

Waste water from large-scale tanneries is usually reused by smaller tanners. The transport of the chemicals is done by adult workers, who carry it manually in barrels from one tannery to another. Since there is no waste treatment plan in Hazaribagh, chemicals, after reuse, end up down the public drain.

Diagram 1 shows the production chain of leather and leather products in Dhaka as this research observed it. There are certainly parts of the production chain missing¹⁵, but the diagram attempts to include the most important stages of leather production and to indicate in which stages of the chain children were found working (coloured red) and in which no (significant number of) children were found working (white). In the following paragraphs, I provide a more elaborate description of children's activities.

3.2 Child labour in the supply of raw materials

There is very little participation of children in the supplying of hides and skins. There are almost no children working at the animal market, in storehouses or in the transportation of hides and skins.



Photo 2: A boy cleans raw hides and skins in a storehouse

However, this situation changes during the religious festivals.¹⁶ The religious festivals result in an increased demand for meat and for new shoes. So during those periods there is more work in the slaughterhouses, more transport of hides and skins, and increased preparation of hides and skins in the storehouses for sale. Storehouse owners in Old Dhaka explained that in this period more children become involved in the process. During a visit to the area, one of them said:

¹⁵ To have a complete picture of the production chain it would be necessary to know the origin of every material used for production, such as all chemicals used in tanneries, and all parts of a shoe apart from the leather. We have, however, focused on the main stages and principal raw materials.

¹⁶ The Eid ul-Fitr is the Muslim holiday that marks the end of Ramadan. The other festival is Eid al-Adha, or the Festival of Sacrifice, approximately 70 days after the end of the month of Ramadan. During both celebrations, Muslims dress up in their best clothes and eat special food with friends and family. During the Eid al-Adha, those who can afford to do so sacrifice their favourite domestic animals which are mostly cows, goats or sheep.

At Eid day and the day after, between 1 and 1.5 million cow hides and more than 2 million goat hides arrive here. To prepare these with salt you need many people, as you can imagine. For 10 to 15 days, all the storehouses are stuffed with working people. Workers are between 15 and 50 years old. They earn less per hide than during the rest of the year, but they can prepare much more hides per day. Around Eid time young boys also come here to put salt on hides and skins. You can't count them, so many! Usually they are from Dhaka City or surroundings. They have relatives in the area that invite them to work here. Some don't have experience, then they just put salt and learn the job.

Children who work in the storehouses are always boys and are mostly around 15 and older. The storehouses are unpleasant places because of the abundant presence of raw animal hides and skins. In these dark spaces, bloody hides and skins are delivered by rickshaw and received with bare hands. The boys are involved in preparing the hides and skins with salt. According to a study conducted by the Bangladesh Shishu Adhikar Forum (BSAF) in 2002, children in Bangladesh are also involved in slaughtering animals [BSAF 2002, in: Massum 2002]. Nevertheless, during fieldwork, no children were observed working in the raw materials stage. The periods of the religious celebrations should be considered as exceptional.

3.3 Child Labour in Tanning

Tanning is a highly dangerous activity done in a very unhealthy environment. In Hazaribagh, the smell of the tanneries dominates the entire area. Inside the tanneries, the smell and general pollution is even worse. Despite local effort to eliminate child labour in tanneries, children are still observed working in many units in Hazaribagh. Children are most frequently employed by independent tanners, i.e. tanners without their own tannery, with a rather small-scale production. In these tanneries several tanners work at the same time and this informal structure allows visitors to enter relatively easy. Among the many working men, it is usual to see up to ten children between 10 and 18 years old working, depending on the size of the tannery, but adults are always in majority. The boys are observed working in the three main production stages of leather (wet blue, crust and finished), mostly in manual jobs. Also in some large-scale and exporting tanneries a child was occasionally seen working, although strict entrance rules made spontaneous visits in this type of tanneries more difficult.

The first stage of the tanning process produces the wet blue leather. Children in the wet blue stage mostly function as assistants; they take orders from adults and help them wherever needed. For example, after liming, children lift the leather out of the pit with a pair of tongs. They transfer the pieces of leather to the drum and remove them again after the chemical processing. If the drum is leaking liquids then children are the ones who have to stuff the openings with pieces of waste leather. Moving the leather around in this way (manually) can only be done with the smaller pieces of leather, since bigger ones are too heavy. It somewhat explains why children work only in the small-scale tanneries; these work with smaller and cheaper pieces of leather whereas most large-scale tanneries use machines to process large pieces of leather.

Children also have different tasks in the crust leather stage. Again, they don't work directly with machines, but assist in manual tasks. If the leather is not wet enough for shaving, a child puts water on the leather. A very common job for children is drying the leather, either on the roof or in any available spot inside the tannery, but more often outside on the field. Laying out the leather and pegging it to the ground is also referred to as *toggling*. The tanner usually employs an adult to dry the leather, who in his turn employs some children. On a sunny day, along the river banks close to the tannery area, dozens of children are seen toggling. They use a hammer and nails to peg the leather to the ground. When the pieces are dry, they take the nails out and collect the pieces. Children also trim the leather during its crust stage; they cut the uneven edges with a little knife to

improve the shape. Toggling and trimming are typical tasks for children and adults are hardly seen doing these tasks.

Finishing the leather mainly requires chemical reactions done in machines. However, children are also employed in this stage. In less mechanised tanneries they, for example, *dust* the finished leather with a simple cloth; the older children can be found painting the leather by hand. After painting, the pieces have to dry and also here children are involved in the same way as in the crust stage. Children also sort the finished pieces of leather by size or quality, to prepare them for sale.

Besides the activities that are directly related to the processes of leather production, children in many tanneries are involved in activities that could be described as “general assistance”. They prepare or buy tea for the adult labourers, they are sent to the chemical shop when something is lacking, or they function as messenger between adult employees in the tannery.



Photo 3: a boy in a tannery puts water on leather to prepare it for shaving

Children in fact perform a wide variety of activities in a tannery. One of the first children I spoke to was the eleven-year-old Salim. I saw him drying leather on the roof of one the “local” tanneries. During subsequent visits I noticed that he was always in that tannery, but he was always doing something different:

I have worked for 3 or 4 months in this tannery. I decided myself to work here, and my uncle helped me to get the job. Work is not that heavy for me. I work on the roof, drying and trimming the leather or downstairs with the drum. I put leather inside the drum, and help them take it out when needed; I assist the persons who work with the drum. I am young; they don't allow me to work alone in the drum. It is dangerous for me, so they teach me and after much experience they will let me go there. That work is heavier than what I do. I also bring the tea if they ask me. I earn 1200 taka per month.

Sometimes Salim would just talk to me without having to work. At one such a moment he said: “At the moment I do not have much work, because the employer is not here.” However, even when there was no work, he was always at the workplace, waiting for a new order from one of the adults. Although he mentioned his work to be light, he must be continuously available.

The production in “local” tanneries and export-oriented tanneries is not always clearly separated. Leading leather manufacturing and exporting companies¹⁷ usually have their own tannery, factory and sale centres, and they all comply with the international codes of conduct regarding environment and labour standards; child labour will, at least officially, not be tolerated. The export-oriented tannery owners are well aware of the negative image of child labour and the possible consequences for export. According to interviews with long-term workers, child labour in these tanneries has decreased, and in tanneries where child labour still exists, inspectors are carefully misled. A tannery worker once explained me how this works: “Once a team of foreign inspectors came, 1.5 years ago. Some people that look under 18 were brought outside of the tannery for a few hours.” Another way in which large tanneries can avoid being accused of child labour is to outsource part of the production process to other, often less professional tanneries, which are not certified. Most working children work for independent tanners in tanneries that lack good machines, good chemicals and safety measures. Although we could not directly observe the use of child labour in the chain of certified exporting companies, there is certainly child labour in some of the tanneries that take their orders. It thus seems that most child labour takes place in the informal economy¹⁸ and in the less visible work places, but that also some exporting companies may have used child labour in their chain.

3.4 Child labour in the production of leather goods and footwear

Walking through Hazaribagh, I once passed by a house and saw through the window a young boy drawing shapes of gloves. The door was open and gave access to four little rooms. In every room people worked on the production of leather items. In the first room, the boy was sitting alone on the floor, surrounded by little pieces of wet blue leather. He was twelve years old and had worked here for 1.5 years. In the second room I found four women and one of their sons, also sitting on the floor. This boy was ten; his job was to turn all the gloves they had just made inside-out. In the third room two adolescent boys were sewing gloves on a sewing machine. A twelve year old boy cut the threads from the gloves. In the last room I saw two boys of about twenty years old making leather vests, which, they told me, are used as protective clothing in construction. The employer wasn't present, but would come now and then to deliver new leather and to pay them, the women told me. The workers, including the children, got paid per unit, and the employer thus didn't need to check them continuously.

Most small-scale factories are organised differently. The production of shoes, belts or wallets requires more skills and children are therefore always supervised by adults. A shop owner in Mirpur¹⁹ once invited me to visit his factory. We walked through a long corridor, with on each side rooms full of workers. In “his” room, six men were working, among whom two young boys. Sumon was 11 and

¹⁷ The two most influential companies producing leather, footwear and leather goods in Bangladesh are APEX Adelchi and the multinational company BATA. Both outsource parts of their production to smaller tanneries.

¹⁸ The informal economy in this case refers to companies and factories with traditional and informal production methods, as compared to the factories with a modern management, modern production methods and a modern market. The informal tanneries and factories lack most regulation and monitoring, although some might be registered as a formal company. Most personnel is informally employed.

¹⁹ Mirpur is in the northeast of Dhaka; it belongs to section 10.

had just arrived one week before from the countryside. His cousin was teaching him how to make belts. In the same room, the 16 year old Arif was also working. He had arrived 4 years earlier in Dhaka, but had been working in this factory for just three months. It was clear that the older men supervised the younger ones. In such places, often one of them is appointed manager; the shop owner only appears occasionally.

Child labour in manufacturing predominantly takes place in the small-scale factories, or in people's homes. In these small factories it is common to see among the five to ten workers at least one, but usually more, children between 10 and 18 years old. Yet, adults are always in the majority. One large-scale and exporting shoe factory that was visited also employed children, mainly girls from 14 years onwards. As in the case of tanneries, it can generally be argued that large-scale factories tend to be export-oriented, while small-scale factories sell mostly to the local market. On the other hand, small-scale factories are often involved in production of fake brand-name products. They label their products "Gucci", "Armani", "Diesel" or "Polo". These products often may end up in other countries.

Children conduct various tasks related to the manual production process of shoes and leather goods. Leather goods include belts, wallets, bags and gloves. The children, for example, draw patterns for gloves, cut the leather, and sew the parts together into the final product. In most factories, children are expected to do a variety of activities from drawing to cutting, sewing, gluing, or sorting. All activities are performed by hand, except when a sewing machine is used, which is usually carried out by adolescents.

3.5 Child Labour in sales

Children are often involved in selling leather goods or footwear to the local market. Dhaka has numerous shoe shops, markets and shopping centres selling footwear and leather goods, where children assist the salesmen, who are often the manager or owner of the shop. Their tasks include helping clients, getting shoes or other products from storage, but also keeping the shop clean, bringing tea for the salesman or his clients and doing the dishes after his lunch.

When visiting the Bashundhara City market, a high class shopping mall in Dhaka, I saw boys between 10 and 16 working in most of the shoe shops. I could talk with them only when they left their shop for some tea, and asked them about their job. The eleven year old Zubayer commented:

I am from Barisal but now I live in Azimpur (a neighbourhood in central Dhaka) with my father, mother, and brother who is very little. I work here for 1 year now. Before, I was working in another shoe market, as an assistant. I was brought to this place by an older colleague from the first work place. I wash the floor, wash dishes after lunch, and I make tea.

Most other boys had similar assistant tasks. Additionally, some boys polish items before selling them, or make extra holes in belts when clients ask them to.

The Bangshal wholesale market also has shops or services related to leather products, such as iron buckles for belts or bags, shoe soles, or the ink to print brands onto the leather item. Children are also involved here. They, for example, prepare the print screen, which is used to print emblems onto bags or shoes; they coat the screen with chemicals and then wash it afterwards. They help to sell all types of related items, or do other assisting tasks such as transporting a small number of products from one shop to another. Finally, in Hazaribagh I met a boy working as an assistant in a shop that sells chemicals for the tanning process, and another boy in a shop for tools and machines that are needed in the tanneries. It is quite common to see children walking around selling tea and biscuits, sometimes also in the fields where the leather is laid out to dry.



Photo 4: A boy works as an assistant in a shoe shop

3.6 Child labour in work with waste materials and by-products

Children hardly ever work with waste materials from raw hides and skins. Cutting tails is normally done by adult workers. In a brush making factory in Lalbag (close to Hazaribagh) I once met a ten year old boy, packing the brushes and transporting them, but this was an exceptional case. In the production of animal glue, no children were observed as labourers. The fact that the process is not very labour intensive can partly be an explanation. To minimise labour costs though, women are often employed.

Children more often work with the waste materials from tanneries, to produce the so called *meat* for *meatbone*. *Meat* production is not that labour intensive. It only occurs in one specific area of Dhaka, the embankment of the river in Hazaribagh, and thus doesn't occur on a large-scale. The work involves adults and children from 13 years onwards, both men and women, although the latter are scarce. Children account for approximately one third of the workers.

Along the embankments, it is clear where *meat* is being produced; the process produces a thick smoke and a terrible smell. When I arrived at one of the fields full of black stuff, I saw Parvez, a thirteen year old boy. Parvez worked together with a friend; they were both barefoot so that they could feel the stones and other hard particles in the *meat* that had to be removed. They told me that they no longer notice the smell. I asked Parvez how children like him become involved with this work; he answered:

I think that more or less 300 boys work here on the river banks, in *meatbone* or drying leather. Girls don't work here, they are usually home. Children do the same work as adults, but a little less. Adults for example shovel the burnt meat and push the carts. It is hard for children.

Generally, the boiling of the leather is done by adults, but children sometimes assist with bringing water or other tasks. The job of the children is mainly to remove, with their hands or feet, the hard particles from the *meat*. After drying and cleaning, when it is ready for sale, they wrap up the *meat*

in bags. There is no clear division between adult and children's work, but the heaviest work and most responsible tasks are generally left for adults.

3.7 Conclusions

Throughout the production chain many children and adolescents appear to be conducting a wide variety of activities. The stages that involve a relatively large number of children and are directly related to the production of leather, include:

- The production of leather in the tanneries
- The manufacturing of leather items and footwear
- The sale of leather and leather items
- The processing of waste materials

The processing of leather in tanneries also includes the children who toggle the leather outside the tanneries. Although these children do not work in the tannery, they conduct outsourced activities. In fact, this toggling is one of the activities in which most children are involved. In the processing of waste materials, the main work is the production of *meatbone*.

Most children are working in small-scale and informal enterprises. These enterprises make relatively low quality products and produce predominantly for the local market. Large-scale enterprises produce better quality and tend to be export-oriented; they employ relatively few children. However, distinctions are not that clear-cut since the bigger factories also outsource much of their work to smaller factories or even home-based workers.

Chapter 4

Education and Living Conditions

Working children are not only deprived of their right to be free from economic exploitation, they are also denied several other important basic rights, such as the right to education, good health and recreation.

4.1 Who are the working children

The leather sector 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, although this is not an exclusively female activity. All other activities are only performed by boys.

The age of the children in the production chain varies between workplaces and activities, but no children below 8 years old were found working²⁰. Boys who work in tanneries are between 9 and 18 years old, although the majority is older than 12. Toggling leather outside the tanneries, which could be considered a different branch of the tannery work, is done by boys between 10 and 15 years old. In factories, children work from 9 years onwards, but also here, most of the working children, especially the girls, are older than 12. In home-based manufacturing, children start to participate at a younger age; the youngest child we found was an 8 year old boy who worked at home with his father in the manufacturing of gloves. Girls who work in a factory are usually older than 12 and work together with relatives or other known female persons. In shops boys work as sales assistants from 9 years onwards. Finally, in the *meatbone* process workers are normally somewhat older than in other activities; they are usually 12 years and beyond.

An important observation is that a great majority of the working children migrated from the countryside as a consequence of push factors. In the rural area, the children's families had or have economic problems, often due to a loss of land or debts. In one of the large-scale shoe factories I met the fifteen year old Rupa. I walked with her to one of the slum areas next to the river bank in Hazaribagh, where many new migrants live. She lived in a little shack together with her mother. Her mother explained their migration to Dhaka:

We migrated from Ronpur, 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. The relationship with him is not so good. To avoid the dowry and the social problems in the village, I migrated with Rupa.

Often poverty in combination with social problems is the explanation for moving away from the countryside and to start a new life in the capital city. Also a second marriage of the father is a motive to migrate. I met 10-year-old Shanto on a sunny day along the river banks, busy toggling leather:

²⁰ The exact age of Bangladeshi children is difficult to know since most babies have not been registered at birth. Most children don't know their exact age and neither do their parents. Quotes in this report use the age that was mentioned by the child him- or herself or his or her family. In some cases it is based on estimations of the researcher.

I live with my mother and my grandmother. My mother is a domestic worker here in Dhaka. I am the only child. My father is still living in Barisal; he left us because of his new wife. That's why my mother went with me to live in Dhaka. I have been working in the leather sector for 2 years. Since 2 months I am working in this place.

A distinction should be made between boys and girls who migrated with their families to Dhaka, and boys who migrated alone. Only boys migrate alone. Children who migrated alone are expected to support themselves and to also 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. This is, for example, the case with ten-year-old Mamun, who lives and works in a belt factory at the Bangshall market. Mamun is the only working child at his workplace and explained his daily life as follows:

I am from Brahmambaria. My father, mother and brother are still in the village. I came to Dhaka with my uncle when I was very little. Since two years I am working in this factory. I work here 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.

Alternatively, the boys live with a relative or a village neighbour, whom some also pay for food and shelter. Antu (13) explained how he ended up working in the tannery and living with his cousin in Hazaribagh:

I am from Noakhali, and I migrated to Dhaka one year ago, together with my uncle and 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 one month ago. My brother is a shaving operator in this tannery and he arranged the job for me. My job is to help ironing the leather to dry it and make it flat. I work from 8am to 5pm and earn 2000 taka per month. After work I wash myself here and then I go to my cousin's house. I pay them 1300 taka each month to live in their house with 3 meals a day. I also send some money to my family. One brother and one sister are still with my mother in my village. The last time I saw them was when my father died.

The migrant families usually move from poverty to poverty. The parents are often working in low income jobs, such as rickshaw pulling (fathers), garment workers or domestic workers (mothers). The income is often not sufficient for the entire household and children have to contribute. Other children have lost their father, which means a serious decrease in income for the household. The working children in the leather sector generally come from extremely poor families.

4.2 Living conditions and health

Pollution

Working children generally live close to their workplace. Hazaribagh, where many children live, unfortunately, is one of the most polluted areas in Dhaka, even in the world²¹. Due to the lack of effective waste treatment, a great part of the tanneries' waste ends up in the streets. Only two tanneries in Bangladesh, outside of Hazaribagh, have a waste treatment plant. Liquid waste accumulates in the low lying area of Hazaribagh; it seeps into the surrounding cropland, underground water reservoirs and eventually into the nearby Buriganga river, where it causes serious damage to fish and other species in the water [Gain 1998]. It is estimated that daily up to

²¹ In June 2008 the environmental magazine 'Ecologist' wrote in an article titled 'Hell of Leather' that Hazaribagh belonged to one of the 30 most polluted places on the planet. A short video about the environmental consequences in Hazaribagh can be seen at Ecologist TV: http://www.theecologist.org/pages/ecologist_media.asp?podcast_id=87

40,000 tonnes of tannery waste along with sewage flows into the river. The solid waste of tanneries is estimated to be 28,000 tonnes²² and leads to considerable chromium contamination. Tanneries, due to the use of chemicals, pollute not only water and soil, but also the air [Institute for Environment and Development Studies 2003].

The inhabitants of Hazaribagh and surrounding areas are exposed to health hazards created by the tanning process. Around the embankment huge slums with small and dilapidated houses have arisen. The people who live here are most exposed to the environmental pollution. They use the water for washing clothes and bathing. During the monsoon season, children swim in the newly-formed lakes despite the toxic materials they contain. The families often use discarded pieces of finished leather as fuel; it emits harmful vapours upon burning. The embankment is also the area in which most *meatbone* is produced, resulting in a continuous level of toxic vapours from the burning leather.

Children who live in another part of Hazaribagh are not necessarily better situated. Although housing can be of better standards, they are affected by the vicinity of the tanneries and the terrible smell, which gets worse during the monsoon season. Some inhabitants of Hazaribagh, including most children, are not aware of the health hazards. Children do often complain about the bad smell in the neighbourhood, but not about physical complaints or specific diseases. However, even those who are aware of the health risks, have few other alternatives. In the words of a man who works in Hazaribagh:

Health problems are not very grave here. But sometimes we feel bad because of the smell of tanneries in this neighbourhood. We also see that some gold jewellery of women gets discoloured. We also have skin problems, the skin colours with a dark shadow. We all become blacker in the face because of the tannery industry. Some people go to the Buriganga river to bath there and then their skin disease disappears. They think the river cures the problem, I don't know if it is true. A foreign researcher checked the water quality and it turned out to be bad. That's why the tanneries may be shifted to another place. Maybe there will not be enough opportunity for my work there, so I am thinking about a new job.

Boys who also live in the tanneries are affected by the dangers of the industry 24 hours a day. Despite the industrial processes, most tanneries lack proper ventilation, resulting in a very unhealthy work and living space. It is not uncommon to find a simple bed next to stored chemicals or piles of leather; the risks for accidents are high. After frequent visits to the Sabeer Tannery²³, one of the small-scale tanneries in Hazaribagh, I asked one of the boys to show me the sleeping places. He explained:

In this tannery there are 22 to 25 rooms. In every room there are usually two people sleeping. They all work in this tannery. Some of the employers also live here, but the ones who have family in Dhaka sleep at home. Sometimes more persons want to sleep in one room and then it is crowded. Behind this fence some chemicals are stored. Next to the rooms is the prayer room and next is the bathroom.

The "bathroom" consisted of an outdoor well with some plastic jugs.

The sleeping place of boys who live in factories is very similar. Although less industrial processes take place, there is usually a strong smell of leather and glue, and ventilation is lacking. The small workplace is, when work has finished, converted into a sleeping room, but mattresses or blankets

²² The relative amount of solid waste has decreased in the past few years due to the new activities related to waste materials, such as the production of *animal glue* and *meatbone*.

²³ To protect the identity of the workers and employers, Sabeer is an invented name.

are usually not available. Boys who sleep at the workplace have no privacy; the rooms are always shared with other workers.



Photo 10: A boy takes rest while working in a tannery

Mental health risks

In addition to the physical health risks, many of these boys suffer from the fact that they have migrated. Their lives have changed radically from village life living with a poor, but caring family, to a lonely working life in the city. The lack of their family is mentioned by many as a problem. This is illustrated by the words of thirteen-year-old Murad, a working boy in another small-scale tannery in Hazaribagh, who came to Dhaka only three months before.

I live with my uncle and his wife. I haven't been back to my village yet, because it is not possible after such a short time of work. I will go during the Eid time. I would like to see my family, I miss them very much.

When asked if it made him cry, he at first didn't answer. Then he said: "Yes, I cried when I arrived here. I have a younger sister, she is the youngest in my family, and I miss her very much. She is very much on my mind."

The same was true for Sumon (11), who works and lives in a small-scale shoe factory: "I want to leave this place; I don't like it here, because my family is in my village and I would like to be there." His colleague, also his cousin, added to this that he sometimes cries for his family while he is at the workplace. Some children also miss their village life in general, as compared to city life in Dhaka. Hassan (14) had at the time only started working in the tannery three days before, and had migrated from Mymensingh; he remarked: "Dhaka is ok, but I miss my village very much. Life is better in the village, the environment is better, and I can move wherever I want."

It was also apparent that life in a new family environment is not easy for the children. Murad for example said about this:

My uncle is good to me. He gives me 20 or 30 taka every day, because I am helping him. My uncle's wife doesn't love me. One day I went to eat lunch in their house and she didn't behave nicely with me, then I left the house. She doesn't like me and she uses bad words to me. I think she doesn't like that I am in her house.

Children who migrated alone thus lack a very important right: the right to live in an adequate familial environment.

Health facilities

In the tannery area (ward 48 Hazaribagh), there are three health clinics, but none of them is public, although the Dhaka City Corporation does in some cases monitor the clinics. The health facilities in Hazaribagh are mainly established and funded by external donors²⁴. The clinics provide primary health care, and some have a special focus on children and maternal care. According to the clinics, people have the tendency to wait a while before going to the doctor, and children rarely visit the doctor by themselves. The working children tend to ignore and trivialise their health problems; for example, they may comment on a headache: "When I started working I felt bad about the smell, but now I am fine with it" (Meethu, 13). Costs for consultations and basic treatments are low²⁵, and extremely poor people are cared for free of charge, through the use of the *green card*. This *green card* is issued to extremely poor families by doctors, but is not given to children who are alone. The *green card* holders are normally, according to one of the doctors, families with only one income-earner. Migrant children, without family in Dhaka, thus have no official means of getting free health care. Although doctors claim to provide free health care whenever they see it is necessary, a lack of a *green card* can function as a discouragement for children to visit a doctor.²⁶

Common health problems in the tannery area, as mentioned by the clinics, are respiratory problems, lung diseases such as pneumonia, and skin diseases, caused by the chemicals in the tanneries; tuberculosis, malnutrition, helminthiasis and other hygiene problems are due to poverty, poor sanitation, pollution in water drains and the scarcity of pure water.

A positive development is that one of the clinics has a doctor who gives special attention to tannery workers. The doctor considers the leather industry as a serious threat to people's health:

The pollution by the tanneries is a big problem, but people in this neighbourhood are adapted to it. They don't feel the bad smell anymore. But it certainly still affects them. The chemicals in the drain and especially the fumes of the chemicals harm people's vitality and eventually cause lung diseases. The entire community is under threat because of the chemicals (Medical officer, Smiling Sun Franchise Program).

Unfortunately children in this community are seriously overlooked. According to the clinic's official focus on tanneries, information is provided to representatives of tannery workers and employers on sanitation, family hygiene, and workplace safety. The representatives are supposed to communicate the information with other people in tanneries. According to the doctor, however, the employers are "often unreachable and busy; they are less interested in the meetings"²⁷. However, the independent tanners and small-scale tannery owners, who employ most children, are generally not

²⁴ For example, the Smiling Sun Franchise Program is financed by USAID; the Bangladesh Association for Prevention of Septic Abortion is funded by the World Bank and the IMF.

²⁵ For example, in the Smiling Sun Franchise Program, people have to pay a 20 taka (ca. 0.2 euro) registration fee once only; and 60 taka (ca. 0.6 euro) service charge for each visit to the doctor.

²⁶ The Smiling Sun Franchise Program is a clinic that does not ask for a *green card*, and so even children without a card can find free health care here.

²⁷ Interview with the doctor and medical officer of the Smiling Sun Franchise Program

reached by this programme, and the doctor appears to have less knowledge about health conditions in these tanneries, or about the presence of children in tanneries. He called the involvement of children between 12 and 16 years old “very unusual” and mentioned that most children instead work in the garment industry or in domestic work. Most working children in the leather sector thus do not receive any medical care. They are not only denied their right to live in a healthy environment, but also their right to good health care.

4.3 Education

Reasons for not attending school

The majority of the working children in the leather sector do not receive any type of education. The underlying reasons for not going to school vary and depend on the background of the children. There is a group of children who have never attended school; most of them were previously living in rural areas. Rupa (15) from Ronpur, for example, who now works in the large-scale shoe factory, has never been to school:

Nowadays I work fulltime and don't go to school. In my village I didn't work and didn't go to school either. I was helping my mother in the household tasks, such as cooking and cleaning the house.

Also the young shoe seller Shahin (14) never went to school. He now works as an assistant in a shoe shop, but has worked already for 6 years. He said he wasn't interested in school. When I asked him why, he answered: “Because I never went, so I don't know what it would be like.”

Instead of the regular school, some boys have attended education at the *madrassa* (religious school), where education is cheaper. There are also children, either from the villages or from Dhaka, who have finished only primary education. Due to the increased costs at the secondary level, they quit and started to work. An example is Nahar (14), who works in a small shoe factory in Hazaribagh and stopped her education after finishing primary level. She is, however, regretful and would like to go back to school again. She said:

This is my first job, I never worked before. Before I started working here I was studying. I finished the primary level. My family could not continue my education because of poverty. My father says he needs to pay more in secondary education and that's why he can't do it. I don't want to work here. I have a great desire to keep on studying and to become an educated person. I still hope that I can do it.

The last group of children includes those who, either from the countryside or from Dhaka, once studied, but quit because of the need to work. For children who lived in the villages, this was often the moment to move to Dhaka. Parvez (13) is an example of a boy who stopped his primary education because of pure economical motives. He now works in *meatbone* production:

I went to school in Dhaka until the 3rd class, and then I quit my education to start working. I live with my parents and one sister. My father and I are the only income earners in the family. I earn 2000 taka a month. My father is a fish seller at the market. My mother is housewife.

In general, like Parvez, most boys working in *meatbone* production, tanneries, or in shoe factories, work fulltime and don't go to school.

Combining work and school

The working children that do go to school seem to have a hard time combining education with work in the leather sector. There are several educational facilities in Hazaribagh, both public as well as private. In ward 48, we find three government and 17 private primary schools including NGO schools; three semi-government secondary schools; one private women medical college and one government Leather Technology College. Of course, in other wards and outside Hazaribagh, there are many more private and public schools. The Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) has several schools, also in Hazaribagh, designed for poor children. Recently, non-formal education classes for working children have been set up by a cooperation of government and NGOs²⁸. Usually, those schools are no option for working children in the leather sector; most children quit school when they start working in leather. In Hazaribagh, teachers of different schools mentioned poverty and the need to work as the main reasons for dropout. Dropout is most frequent in the 6th to 9th grade. Tannery work is mentioned as one of the most popular jobs for boys to leave school for.

Employers are generally not interested in supporting the working children in part time education. The shoe shop owner in Mirpur, who invited me to his factory, employed a thirteen year old boy in his shop. The boy's mother argued that she wanted to send her son to school, but that the employer didn't agree:

I wanted to send my son to school, and he wanted that as well. Before the boy worked here, he worked somewhere else, making scarves. At that time he studied at the primary level. He finished the 2nd class when he just started working here. After finishing 2nd class, when he learnt some mathematics, the employer said: "now you can stop his education". I asked him for permission to let the boy study more, but he said: "if you are interested in the working skills of your son, he can work here, if you are interested in education, you can take him away. Otherwise he won't come here on time and he will not dedicate enough time to his work. And why would I pay him then?" Sometimes the boy still asks me to send him to school, and I would like to, but I can't. We are very poor, and only the income of the others is not enough to survive.

The only working children who can also go to school are children who make leather gloves at home. Since these children don't have a direct employer, but work for their parents at home, working hours are flexible. Those working children rely mainly on NGO schools, which are usually free and have rather flexible hours. An example is Sabina (12), who manufactures gloves with her little brother in a neighbour's house. She explained how she is able to combine this work with school:

I study in the non-formal education school, I go there every day. I also work here with gloves. I draw the pattern and take the pieces of leather to people's houses where they get cut. In the morning I cook and start the drawing. At 1 p.m. I have lunch, and then I go to school from 2 to 5 in the afternoon. Then I take a rest and in the evening I work again, until 8 or 9 pm, depending on the amount of work. For drawing 1000 pieces of leather, I earn 25 taka. Me and my brother can make 500 or 1000 pieces a day.

In some exceptional cases, children who toggle the leather also go to school. The eleven year old Reza, who dries leather along the river banks, studies in the 4th class of an NGO school. He goes to school between 12 and 4 in the afternoon and works before and after school. He made it very clear, however, that the combination is sometimes difficult: "Sometimes my brother takes over my work, when I have to be at school. Because of my work, I do not always have enough time for my

²⁸ It concerns two different projects: one by the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education and supported by the UNICEF, and the other one by the Ministry of Labour and Employment supported by the ILO. In Chapter 6 we will elaborate more on these projects.

homework.” He didn’t reply when I asked if teachers complain about this, suggesting that this could indeed be the case. Instead he said: “The teachers know that I work, and there are more working boys like me.” Children who combine work and school thus are often positioned in a complex situation in which they feel pressure from both work and school.

Not all schools are receptive to working children. A BRAC school in Hazaribagh, despite its focus on poor children, does not encourage working children to enrol, because they are expected to become dropouts. A BRAC teacher in Hazaribagh mentioned: “We don’t encourage working children from the river embankment area here. If a child for example works with his father, he sometimes comes too late, or he doesn’t come every day, because of work.” Teachers are responsible for the graduation of an entire class; working children are likely to complicate this.

Unfortunately, this type of policy can indirectly lead to children working fulltime. In the Sabeer tannery, one of the many working boys, Ornob, is nine years old. He was still studying last year; now he works fulltime. He explained how the school policy had an influence on this:

When I arrived in Dhaka I also went to school. I finished class 2 of the BRAC school. But once I didn’t go for 2 or 3 days because I had to take care of my baby sister when my mother went to work. We are four children and I am the oldest. Then they said they didn’t allow me anymore.

Working children, in already marginalised positions, are increasingly excluded.

Some parents persist in getting their children some education and arrange private classes by a tutor in the evenings. This way, children can work fulltime during the day, and go to the private classes in the evenings. One boy, who manufactured gloves in a little factory in Hazaribagh, had experienced this:

I finished class 1 of the primary school. Then I started to work. The employer said: “If you want to work, you have to work, you cannot go to school and work; then you’ll lose concentration on your work”. So my mother decided to let me work and sent me to a teacher in the afternoons. After work I go there. In the teachers’ house there are other children, but they are all in school. I can read now and my handwriting is good (Mizan, 11).

Nevertheless, education for working children in the leather sector is difficult; most school policies are not adapted to working children and most employers are not willing to allow their child employees to follow education. Working children who do attend school have a double burden. The majority of the working children in the leather sector are simply denied the right to education.

4.4 Conclusion

The working children in the leather sector are mainly boys between 10 and 18 years old. Most of them have migrated from the countryside in search of a livelihood, and live now, either alone or with their family, in poor conditions in Dhaka. In addition to their poverty, children live in very unfavourable conditions, in a highly polluted area. Boys who migrated alone to Dhaka are especially vulnerable; their unhealthy workplace is often their living space, or else they live with unfamiliar relatives or strangers. Working children make almost no use of education and health services in their area. They are fairly invisible to health clinics, and due to several factors they are excluded from education; a long working day is the main reason. Working children in the leather sector thus don’t enjoy their right to education, good health, a healthy living environment and an adequate family environment.

Chapter 5

Working Conditions and Consequences

Working conditions determine for a great part the hazards of child labour. It is relevant to know the exact conditions, such as working hours, contact with dangerous substances or work with heavy machinery, protective measures, and climatic circumstances, under which children work. These are different for each stage in the production chain of leather, although there are also some general conditions that apply to all activities.

5.1 Working in a tannery

No free time

Work in a tannery is considered to be a very hard job, both for adults and children. Although children are active in mainly assistant jobs, the long hours at the workplace are heavy for them. Murad (13) for example said: "I like my job, but not too much. This work is very heavy sometimes, it depends on the work. Some days we have to work for a long time, without any break and that is too heavy for me."

Working in a tannery involves long hours, often without a break. Children need not be active all the time, but they have to be available and wait for orders by their elder colleagues or employers. Working days can last up to 14 hours. Although it is said that there is one free day a week, the children often work 7 days a week. Work in a tannery thus cannot be combined with education; it is always a fulltime job. In addition to this, the working hours in tanneries have consequences for children's leisure time. Most children have hardly time left to play, or to travel to their village and visit their parents.

In one of the tanneries, Ajom Mahmud (13) was selecting pieces of leather together with an older colleague. He had migrated 2 months before on his own, while his parents were still living in the countryside. He is now working fulltime in a tannery and has no free time:

Since two months I am living with my sister and her husband. The rest of my family is living in my village. I work in the tannery from 8am to 5 or 8 or sometimes 10 or 11 in the night, depending on the amount of work. I have no friends in this area. During work I can talk with the persons with whom I work. I know how to play football and cricket, but here in Dhaka I don't have time to play because I leave the house in the morning and stay at work until the night.

A similar story was told by Meethu (13), who migrated 8 months ago from Noakhali. When I visit the tannery in which he works, the smell of chemicals and raw hides was unbearable. However, Meethu spends entire days and nights there. He said:

When I started working I felt bad about the smell but now I am fine with it. Usually I am free after 5 p.m., then I can go to the field and play football, but it depends on the work. Today I can't, there is pressure for work. Sometimes I play on Mondays, which is my holiday. I am allowed to go to my village during holidays, but not always. In the last 8 months I didn't go there and I didn't see my parents. During the next Eid, I am sure that I can go. I

miss my family a lot. I would like to go to my village very much, but I haven't had the opportunity yet.

Especially children, who have migrated to Dhaka on their own, lack a personal network of people around them. Their social life is lived in the tannery. In some tanneries the work pressure is low, and children are allowed to play around. However, they spend most of their free time in the workplace among adult colleagues, assisting them wherever needed.

Health risks

Spending many hours in a tannery is very risky for one's health. Most children, just like other labourers, don't use gloves, boots or masks. They are thus in direct contact with harmful chemicals and hazardous waste produced in the tannery. Sulphuric acid, which is used in some tanneries, may cause permanent damage to the skin. Chemicals such as sodium sulphide may cause cancer after prolonged exposure [Gain 1998]. Other common diseases for tannery workers, according to a study on occupational health in tanneries, are: asthma, gastric, rheumatic fever, coughing, liver- lung- and stomach problems, all due to the use of harmful chemicals [BILS 2000]. Enterprises exporting to the EU have to comply with buyers' demand and avoid the use of toxic chemicals that can be harmful for the consumer. The small informal enterprises which produce only for the local market don't have to fulfil such requirements, and are most concerned about cheap production. Unless the uniform set of protection measures in professional tanneries, the use in the informal industry is not always standard. The temperature in tanneries is often so high, that wearing masks or gloves is uncomfortable. Consequently, they are only used in case of inspections. Some studies estimate that, as a result of exposure to the chemicals, the workers in Hazaribagh's tanneries, are not expected to live past the age 50 [Ecologist News Release 4 June 2008].



Photo 5: A boy working in a tannery; he is in direct contact with chemicals used during tanning

Children don't complain much about general health problems, only about the bad smell, especially when they just start working. The poor conditions in tanneries expose children to a very hazardous working environment and present high risks for their health, which, although they are not aware of them, will affect them later in life.

The work in a tannery is also considered risky, especially for children, because of the accidents that can happen. An adult tannery worker commented:

Recently a child broke his hand in a machine; he was unable to do anything and he was sent back to his village. Children run risks like this. It is a highly risky job for children. Sometimes machines are so high, and to reach the leather, they stand on a chair, but sometimes they fall down. Normally there are no good protection measures.

Accidents are common due to the informality, the poor technology and lacking safety measures. Most unsafe are the low budget tanneries, since they don't invest in good technology, maintenance or protection; these tanneries work with old machines and lack the professional education required for the work. Many independent tanners are, for example, not able to read well, which can lead to carelessness with the use of chemicals. Unfortunately, these are also the places where most children work. The young ex-tannery worker Mehedi (16) witnessed several accidents on the work floor:

One accident occurred a few months ago. One of my friends was working in the same tannery as I do, and he was very new in the sector. You know, the waste of hides can be very slippery. Those are put in a place close to the chemical area. My friend was walking through that place and he just slipped away because of the leftovers and fell down. He fell down in the chemicals. He managed to save his hand and part of the face, but the other part was burnt immediately, because these were "bangla acids". Good acids would have reacted later, but this is cheaper. He was sent to the hospital for 3 months. I was very scared by seeing this happen. I also heard about another accident. A boy that I know went on the roof to dry the leather. When he came back someone asked him to switch on the light. He had wet hands and he died because of an electric shock. He was only 17 years old.

Most people who have been working for some years in a tannery are able to report some accidents. The most serious accidents occur with machines or with acids. Children are normally not involved in those accidents. In tanneries where cheap chemicals are used, people have experienced heavy headaches or even fainting. Nowadays, however, most tanners use chemicals of better quality. Smaller accidents that happen to children are cutting their fingers when trimming the leather. This is not considered to be too grave. Masud (16) has been working in a tannery for two years. He trims the leather. He was asked if he ever cuts his fingers: "Yes, it happened so many times; not only to me, but also to the others." To the question what he does when he cuts himself he answers: "We don't go anywhere when this happens. With a small bandage it cures itself. Now we are skilled and it doesn't happen anymore."

Children also learn, through the general atmosphere in the tannery, not to complain and to consider risks as "part of the job". Mehedi (16), after witnessing the accidents, for example, mentioned: "My mother said I should not go to the drum area anymore. I know it is risky, but I have no other option." Many younger children are also convinced that they do less hazardous work than adults, like Salim (11), who said: "I am young, they don't allow me to work in the drum and those places; it is dangerous for me." Adult workers indeed take the heavier or more dangerous parts of work for their account, but children, because of their physical and mental being, run a higher health risk than adults.

Children are given very little information about the risks of tannery work. Very often, children from the countryside don't even know what a tannery is before they arrive in Dhaka. Most of them don't realise the dangers for their health that the job involves. Hassan (14) had been working in a tannery for only three days when I first met him. He migrated on his own from Mymensingh to Dhaka. He said:

Before I came here I didn't know what a tannery was or what the work would be like. I came here via a person in my village who also works here. Now I am only learning, looking, not really working. I am not tired at the end of the day because I don't work much. I have to learn the machines well, and after knowing well all of them it won't be dangerous to work here.

The children learn the job while working. Obviously, the lack of information increases the likelihood of accidents or other health problems.

Relation with employer

Children who work in tanneries are employed without any form of contract. Their salary, working hours and other conditions is determined by the employer. Most children start working without any salary. During this "apprenticeship" the employer determines his salary, which normally increases with time. There is, however, no standard duration for the apprenticeship and no standard rules regarding children's income. Salaries vary between 1000 and 2500 taka (ca. 10 - 25 euro) per month depending on age and experience. The children have often no idea about a fair salary, and accept any offer. In the Sabeer tannery in Hazaribagh, several independent tanners employ children, but no general rule exists about starting salaries. Ornob (9) started working a few days ago and says: "I don't earn yet, my salary is not yet fixed. The last days I worked from 8 in the morning to 4 in the afternoon. I don't know what would be a normal salary." Salim (11), who started 3 or 4 months ago for the same employer, got involved in the conversation, saying: "I earned immediately 700 taka when I started to work. After 1 month my salary increased to 1000 taka, and after 2 months it increased 200 taka more." Living in the tannery is usually for free, although the employer may adjust the salary of those who use a room. Food in most cases is paid by the workers themselves.

The relation with the employer varies from place to place, but by the children themselves it is often valued in relation to financial issues. Employers who pay well and on time are considered to be good people. As the young tannery worker Samir (16) argued: "the tannery owner is a good man. When I ask him to give me money in the middle of the month, he gives it." On the other hand, Salim (11) explained that "I changed tannery because in the former I had problems regarding the salary. They didn't pay me on time; sometimes even after two months."

In general, children find the relation with their colleagues important. Salman (15) who just started to work in a tannery said about his new job: "yes, the job is good, I am still learning, and the people are very cooperative." In other tanneries, children have quarrels amongst themselves, but never too serious. Rashed (15), for example, mentioned that "Sometimes we fight among the young boys, for example when they offend my family, or they tell me what to do. Then the adults have to intervene." Bad treatment by adult colleagues is for young workers a reason to shift workplace. The testimonies of two boys who work together in the same tannery illustrate this:

Before this, I worked in another tannery. There were many boys of my age. I did only trimming. Adults treated me badly; they shouted at me and ordered me about. Here I do many things: assisting the machine operator, drum, carrying, etc. The work is better and the people are better. That's why I shifted workplace (Rahmatullah, 16).

I have worked here for 6 months, and before I worked in another tannery for 1 year. I left because there was a man who treated me badly, and always swore at me. One day I had an argument with him and I left (Rohan, 15).

Since children generally assist adults and take orders, they are easily exposed to such treatment, especially when they have no relatives on the work floor to protect them.

Toggling

Toggling, or drying the leather by pegging it to the ground, is part of the production process of leather, but often takes place outside the tannery. Children involved in toggling, work outside and are much less affected by chemicals. The hard aspects of this work are mostly related to weather conditions and the position they must hold during work. Some children complain about backaches from their stooped positions, and also about the strong sun. Most of them do the work barefoot, and their hands are not protected by gloves. As they are working with sharp pegs, many accidents involve injuries to hands and feet. One day on the field, I asked the boys if they ever experienced pain because of work. Rodro (10) said: “I feel a bit of pain in my fingers and feet because of the pegs. Sometimes I cut my fingers. When there is a serious injury the contractor gives permission to go for medical care.” He added, however, that he didn’t consider the job as being too heavy: “I enjoy the work because it is not fulltime. It is only 6 hours; in the afternoon I play.” Another toggling boy, ten years old, had an infected eye. He said: “Three days ago I hit my eye with the wooden board [with which he hammers in the pegs]. It hurt and it got red.” He, however, didn’t go to the doctor, and expected it to be over soon. Some boys toggle recently-painted leather and feel the effects of the paint, which gets all over their bodies and faces, and its fumes.



Photo 6: A boy is pegging wet blue leather to the ground outside the tannery

The children who toggle are paid per unit: usually 20 or 30 taka per 100 dried pieces of leather. Working hours are not fixed and depend on the workload. Some children work from 5 am to 2 pm, others from 5 am to 5 pm or from 8 am to 5 pm. They don't rest much, since this would result in a lower salary. Most children have their lunch at home, after which they go back to work. On cloudy days during the rainy season the children do not risk any time off; they have to take the leather inside as soon as possible. When it rains there is less work because the leather cannot dry out on the fields. It means a loss of income. As the brothers Rasel (10) and Dulal (12) explained: "During rainy season there is nothing to do. We work 1 day and the other 5 or 6 days we hang around. We have no experience in other sectors so we can't work. That is a bit a problem." A typical daily income depends on the speed of the worker, but is approximately 100 taka (ca. 1 euro) for a full working day.

5.2 Manufacturing leather

The next production stage in the leather sector, in which children are found working, is the manufacturing stage. The workplace can be a factory, varying from large-scale, formal, export-oriented factories, to informal manufacturing units that involve only a few people, and can even be found in people's own homes.

Large-scale factories

Professional exporting factories, such as shoe factories, often have a certificate, which states that they comply with the most important environmental and labour laws. Not employing children under the minimum age for work is one of the requirements they must meet. The Bangladeshi law has set the minimum age to work in factories at 14, or 18 when it involves work with dangerous machines. Hazardous work is prohibited for children under 18, as defined by Convention 182 [ILO/IPEC 2004; Taher 2006]. Work in large-scale factories is generally less hazardous than work in the informal factories; working conditions are somewhat better. Nevertheless, some conditions are in contradiction with international regulations and those expected from the certifying board; for example, some factories employ boys and girls from 13 years onwards, but generally not younger.

The three girls Rupa (15), Neela (13) and Nodi (18) were working in one of the large-scale shoe factories in Hazaribagh, and could tell me about their working conditions. An indicator for the hazardous conditions is the long working day. Although official working hours are from 8 am to 5 pm, overtime was rather common for them.

We start working at 8 in the morning. Officially we work until 5, but if there is more work, we work longer. We have our lunch at home, and then go back to the factory. Sometimes we work until 3 in the night. If that happens we usually stay the night in the factory, and sleep there. In the early morning we go home, or we just stay at work and start to work again at 8 am. This happens around 2 or 3 times a week. The extra hours are paid until 3; we receive then 5 taka per hour.

On the other hand, they explained, the factory offers one fixed free day a week, which is rather exceptional in the sector. Children are normally kept away from the sewing machines, although they are relatively harmless; the machine work is done by more experienced adult workers. Nodi(18) talked about the working conditions:

We paste leather pieces with glue, or carry products from one place to another. We don't have fixed activities, it is always different. But we never work at the sewing machine. [...] If you are 10 minutes too late they don't let you in anymore. They cut your salary for 1 hour;

then you lose 5 taka. Also if you take holiday without warning in advance they cut your salary.

Neela (13) added:

The first day, the supervisor introduced me in this work. If I couldn't do it he would show me again. I was never punished in this place. If a person is not concentrated they warn you. If someone makes mistakes all the time, he will get punished. [...] Sometimes it happens that people cut themselves in the finger, with a needle for example. Then they go to the officers' room, to apply some antiseptic. If it is serious you get permission to leave to the doctor. Nothing ever happened to me, or any of us.

A complaint about working conditions in the factory is the irregular payment. As in most jobs, the girls don't receive any type of contract; their involvement is based on a verbal agreement. In general, however, working in a large-scale shoe factory is by most employees, including children, considered to be a relatively good job. As Nodi said: "My mother works in a *meatbone* factory. I don't want to work there because it smells bad. I prefer my job."

Small-scale factories

Most children work in the small-scale and informal manufacturing units, where conditions are worse. These "factories" are no more than bare rooms in which people work on the floor. The rooms are crowded and many consist of an extra floor, to be able to place more people. They have few modern machines, and mainly work manually, using manual tools. Working hours are very long: workdays of 14 hours are not rare. The Fridays are normally free, but if there is lots of work, people work anyway. The example of Akash (15), who has been working in a small factory for three years, illustrates the often harsh conditions. His factory was just a small room in Hazaribagh in which three people were working.

Sometimes if the leather is hard, I feel pain in my fingers. But I feel especially bad in my back and legs, because we have to sit for a long time with crossed legs. The first day I was taught how to sit. If I would bend down, the manager warns me severely. I should sit up so that I can endure the position longer. If you bend down your backbone will be bent for the rest of your life, that's why you have to sit straight. When I don't have any work, I remain seated for the practice.

The peak period for manufacturing shoes and other leather items is during Ramadan, because the demand for shoes is very high for Eid. The workload becomes heavier and children are made to work at night:

Before the Eid festival we work also during night. We work until the "sahari" (morning meal). After taking the food we go to sleep, and at 10 in the morning, we start working again. At "iftar" (evening meal) we eat and rest for 1.5 hours; then we start again until the "sahari". Sometimes we take dinner, sometimes not. This goes on for 45 days. It is very hard. We don't get a higher price per product, but earn more because we work more.

Employment in a small factory usually starts with a period of "apprenticeship". This period varies, but a few weeks or months is common. The apprenticeship can also last up to 3 years, as in the case of Akash: "last year I didn't earn yet, I was still learning. I think that after this Eid festival I will earn something because now I am more efficient." Afterwards, the salary is determined by the employer of the child, often also the owner of the factory. It ranges between 1500 and 3000 taka

per month. The salary in large-scale factories didn't appear to be higher for children than in the small factories, even though productivity is higher.

There are rare reports of physical punishments in the small factories. In a room next to Akash's workplace, an eighteen year old boy who had worked from a very young age in the belt factory explained: "When we started we had some problems; for example, when we wouldn't know something the instructor would beat us with a measuring rod, so that we would learn. I am now an experienced worker so now I also sometimes beat boys with a belt."

It is worrisome that for many boys, the factory is also the sleeping place, and that they are in the workplace almost 24 hours per day. This means that they cannot study, have little free or private time, and that they are frequently exposed to often immoral behaviour from adults and other boys without the correcting guidance of family or friends. Arif (16), the boy working in the belt factory in Mirpur, explained how alone he is:

I have been working here for three months, and I have been living in Dhaka for 4 years. Before, I was working in another factory. My father has died. The rest of my family is living in my village. I came to Dhaka to support my family. Here, we work every day from 9 am to 10 or 11 in the night. Sometimes we are free on Fridays, depending on the amount of work. I have some relatives in the area that I can visit then. I also have some friends that I know via work.



Photo 7: A boy works and lives in small belts making factory; he is still an apprentice.

As with the boys of the tannery, those living in the factories have very little free or private time, and their social life mostly takes place at work. On the other hand, for some children, especially girls, fellow workers are very important; they feel better working with familiar people. In a small shoe factory with 7 girls between 13 and 18 years old, it was mentioned that the female workers all feel like family:

Only two girls in this room are sisters. But now we all feel like cousins and nieces. We know each other because we live in the same house, but in different rooms. It is better to work with persons that you know. We feel fine to work with each other. With unknown persons we feel shy. If you don't know how to do the work, unknown persons will talk badly to you, but known persons will just show you how to do it.

Home factories

The manufacture of gloves is organised in a different way. Manufacturing takes place outside the tanneries, in small factory units, or at home. The manufacturers normally get paid according to their production. Working conditions are often somewhat better since the employer is not always present and people can talk or have a short break. Children who work in a glove factory can theoretically work half days and combine work with school, but these cases are exceptional. A fulltime day is from 8 in the morning to 6 in the evening. Mizan (11) for example, works fulltime in a manufacturing house, all by himself. He draws, cuts and piles up the leather gloves in a little stall on the road. He said:

It is fine working alone. I start at 8 in the morning and I leave at 5 or 5:30pm. I have to finish a certain amount, and then I leave. The owner of the stall comes here to close the place. I earn around 2000 taka per month, and it is not too busy. On Friday I don't work; I play outside.

The children who manufacture gloves at home work in the relatively best conditions. They work fewer hours, their work can be combined with school, and they usually work with their parents or other familiar persons. It is normally the mother who is officially employed as a manufacturer; the children help her when they can, but don't get paid. This is the case of Rasheda, an eleven year old girl in Hazaribagh. Her mother explained:

I have cut leather gloves for 7 years. Rasheda has helped for 4 or 5 years. This room is our house. We work on the floor. I have 5 children, Rasheda is the eldest. Also the second daughter helps sometimes with piling up the gloves. We have a verbal agreement with someone in the factory. We cut the leather, pile it up, count it, and bring it back. For 1000 gloves we get 40 taka. We can make 2000 or 2500 gloves per day. I work the entire day, Rasheda is in school and afterwards she works here from 2 to 5.

The negative part of this work is that the houses are normally very small, and the leather pieces are spread out all over the room. Rasheda's house consisted of one little room with only one bed. The dirt floor was scattered with wet blue leather, which still contains some untreated chemicals. This makes the living space of the children rather unhealthy. Their home is a workplace and the child's life is therefore oriented towards the working activity. Work at home also means that children have less leisure time. The spare time they have after studying and household tasks, is used to work.

5.3 Selling leather products

In Dhaka, many boys are seen working in shops, markets and shopping malls. Girls don't do this type of work. The boys start just before the shops open, around 10 in the morning, and stop working just after 8 in the evening, when shops close. Most shops are closed on Fridays, which is the workers' day off. The boys have various assistant tasks, but are not continuously busy. Many of them can be seen waiting in front of the shop to welcome new customers. In the meantime, they find ways to pass their time. Work as an assistant salesman, by most children, is considered a fine job. They mostly complain about a low salary and the long working hours.

The salary of a child shop assistant ranges between 1000 and 2200 taka per month, depending on age and experience. A period of “apprenticeship” is common. Especially the boys who live in their employer’s house don’t earn a salary from the beginning. In one of the shoe wholesale markets Liton (9) was found working as a shop assistant. The owner of the shop explained that he was not yet paying Liton a salary:

He has been working here for one day. He comes from the same village as I do, in Noakhali. I don’t pay him, because he just started! I give him food and shelter and sometimes I may also buy him clothes. He studied until class 2. His parents asked me to take him to Dhaka to do something, because he was not studying anymore. I know his parents because they were my neighbours. The boy assists me and observes how we work. When he has learned the job well enough he will earn.

Most assistant salesmen, however, live with their families in Dhaka, nearby the workplace. Most contacts with employers are made in the village of origin. It is noticeable that most boys working in one shopping mall, market or shopping area are all originally from the same region in the country.

The boys are not exposed to very dangerous conditions or heavy physical activities. Zubayer (11), who works in the high class shopping mall Bashundhara City market, also gets a bonus from his employer during the religious festivals. He is quite satisfied with his job.

I earn 1500 taka per month, but during the Eid I got a bonus of 6000 taka from the shop owner. The shop owner and the other working boys are fine people. The owner never beats me. After work I go home, I watch TV, wash myself, eat, and go to sleep. In the morning I shower and work from 10am to 8pm.

The worst aspects of being an assistant salesman are the long working hours and the fact that this job cannot be combined with education. The boys remain poorly educated and are limited to unskilled work.

5.4 Working with waste materials and by-products

Every day on the riverbanks in Hazaribagh you find people burning leather and drying the *meat*. The children and adults involved rarely take a day off work. However, since *meat* needs to dry in the sun, there is less work during the monsoon season. When it is dry and sunny it is very common for the workers to work 12 hours a day: from 6 in the morning to 6 in the evening. Some parts of the work involve carrying the bags with meat, and require physical strength. As a young worker argued: “all people here work very hard” (Rahman, 16).

As in most informal jobs, a child is accepted by means of a verbal agreement; he or she has no security about keeping his job and can get fired any day. Children earn around 1800 taka for a full month’s work; the monthly salary increases with age and men get paid more than women. Children get involved in this job through a relative or other contact. Parvez (13), who has been working for one year in a *meatbone* field, explains this as follows: “Children can start here through a contact. The manager needs a reference about the family. I work here for one year now, but I could get fired any moment, it all depends on the manager”.

The seventeen-year-old Soheli (17) is one of the workers on the river banks. He lives a 5 minute walk from the work site, in a very poor and contaminated slum. He got the job via his sister’s husband, who is the manager of the field in which he works. He said the following about his work:

I live with my sister and her husband. My mother is living in my village, in Noakhali. I have been working here for 8 years now. Most people earn between 2500 and 4500 taka per

month. When I started I earned 1500, now I earn almost 3300 because of my experience. When the rain comes there is less work; the *meat* cannot dry. Then, the manager sends me to pick up leather in tanneries.

The fields where *meat* is prepared are full of smoke, and the smell is awful. Working in smoke affects children's lungs and, additionally, the fumes are very harmful because during the tanning process chemicals remain in the leather,²⁹ but are released when the leather is heated or burned. When chrome tanned waste is burned, it can have serious consequences for human health; it also contains substances that promote cancer [K. Kolomaznika et al. 2008]. Most workers are, however, used to the smell and they more often complain about the soaring temperatures. Sohel (17) for example said: "Most difficult in this job is to work under the sun; that makes it harder than work as a rickshaw puller." The thirteen-year-old Parvez confirmed this by saying:

I don't feel bad about the smell, because I am used to it now. The hardest is to work in the burning sun and feel the heat. Some of the boys didn't want to work here any longer and left for work in tanneries, in garments or on a rickshaw.

Work with *meat* is usually performed by somewhat older children. Still, the working conditions are very hard for them. Not only is their health at risk during work time, but as they all live close to where they work, they are exposed to the hazardous fumes 24 hours a day.



Photo 8: A boy walks over burnt leather to prepare it for *meatbone*

²⁹ Leather that is produced by vegetable tanning would be less harmful, but in Hazaribagh, most tanneries use the chrome method. Chrome is very harmful, especially when released in the air.

5.5 Conclusion

Children are found working in hazardous conditions in all stages of the production chain, in the first place because of their working hours. They all exceed the maximum amount of hours as set by ILO Convention 182. In addition, work in tanneries or with waste materials, involves exposure to toxic substances, fumes and gases. All stages of the process, including work in manufacturing, result in physical complaints such as aches and exhaustion, or are likely to involve accidents. Work as an assistant salesman doesn't involve these health risks. Children who produce gloves at home have slightly better conditions than children in factories and the work is not necessarily hazardous. However, it is often carried out by children under the minimum age who should be protected from any type of work.

Besides the harm done to their physical health, almost all activities in the leather sector exclude working children from school, since they are performed on a fulltime basis. Many children are also denied their right to recreation and free time because of their work.

The children who are most at risk are those who also live at their workplace (tanneries or factories). These children are most at risk for the workplace hazards, are mostly alone, without family or relatives, lack any form of privacy, enjoy very little free time or forms of recreation, and are highly dependent on their employers. Due to the hazardous working and living conditions, the exact amount of working hours are not even relevant; even with few actual working hours the hazards affect them at all times.

Chapter 6

Why are Children Working in the Leather Sector?

One can analyse child labour from the demand side or from the supply side, i.e. through the employers' point of view, or rather from the point of view of the children and their families. In this analysis I try to combine both perspectives to explain the involvement of children in the production chain of leather. Attention is also given to improper regulations or inspections, and, finally, to the interventions aimed at reducing child labour in the leather sector, and the reasons for success and failure.

6.1 The perspective of children and their families

Zahir is 14 and he works as an assistant salesman at a shoe market in Dhaka. He was born, and still lives, in Old Town Dhaka. He explained his reasons for working rather than attending school as follows:

I am working here to support my family. One year ago my father had a road accident and was paralysed. My mother asked me to do something for the family, to stop school and to find a job. It is my family's wish that I work but I was also thinking that if I don't work we would not be able to survive in Dhaka. So I agreed. My mother asked the shop owner to give me an opportunity, because she knew him. Now I earn 1600 taka per month, my mother works in garments and with those incomes we run the family (Zahir, 14).

The first and most frequent reason children give to explain their involvement in the leather sector is poverty. To start with, there is rural poverty, which in Bangladesh is significant; about 20% of rural households live in extreme poverty and in 2000, more than half of the rural population was counted as poor [World Bank 2005; IFAD 2007]. In addition to their poor economic conditions, other factors such as natural disasters, the loss of land, long standing debts, illness or disease, divorce, or a combination contribute to families moving into the cities, but there also, in most cases, poverty conditions continue. Families may also be confronted with personal misfortune; such shocks to the system, such as illnesses or accidents, are often the immediate cause for children to start working [Bissell 2004: 273-274]. This is also relevant for urban children. Poverty in the countryside causes a continuous flow of poor families to the cities. Once in the city, these families lack, apart from the financial resources, the useful networks; this means that shocks can only be absorbed by the healthy adults, if any, and otherwise the children, who are forced to work in poorly paid jobs.

Children in the countryside or in urban areas are mostly aware of their poverty and feel responsible for supporting their family. Josim (17) works in a tannery and does not attribute his working to coercion by his parents. He said that child labour is not to be blamed on the parents, but that children decide to work themselves:

Sometimes poor families aren't able to provide their children with education. The family doesn't ask us to work, but I was aware myself that I had to work. I started to work when I was 9 years old. It was necessary. At that time I earned 700 taka, which was enough at that time. Now I earn 1800 taka; I use 1300 for my own expenses and 500 for my family.

Children in poor crisis-ridden families know about the hazards, and about the advantages of education, but they go along in taking the decision to engage in hazardous work in order to relieve the family's poverty. Scott (1976) speaks in this case of a "self exploitative coping strategy", as "children put themselves in exploitation environments, and they do so out of a sense of duty to the family" [Scott 1976 in: Bissell 2004]. Hassan (14), who works in a tannery, is a typical example of this. He somehow regrets being in the city, but considers his work as essential for the survival of his family back in the village:

I migrated alone from Mymansingh to Dhaka; my family is still there. I am the oldest son. My family consists of my father, my mother and 5 children. Two sisters are older than I am. My father is a farmer. It was my decision to come here to work. We are a big family, now I can support my family. Dhaka is fine, but I miss my village very much. Life is better in the village, the environment is better, and I can move wherever I want (Hassan, 14).

Dire poverty and the need to support the family are also confirmed by the National Child Labour Survey 2002-03 as a reason for child labour. The report states that "the most important reason for children working is to contribute to family income, which is true for both rural and urban areas. 69% of children fall in this category. This indicates the importance of working children in terms of their contribution to the livelihood of the family, helping them to escape from acute poverty" [Khundher 2005: xiii].

A second important explanation of child labour in the leather production chain is related to education. Children not only stop school because they work, but many also appear to start working because they have not been enrolled in education or because they, for various reasons, have dropped out. In this case, the failure in the attempt to get all children into school, as the compulsory schooling in Bangladesh prescribes, is partly a reason for child labour. The reasons for not attending school, given by children and their families, vary from cost related factors to "not liking school", "helping my mother in the household" or "I am not intelligent enough". Underlying such statements as "not liking school" is often the sobering fact that the quality of teaching is sub standard³⁰.

The reasons for non-enrolment have been reported in the National Child Labour Survey 2002-03. According to the survey, the most important reason for not going to school is inability to bear educational expenses. Other reasons are participation in household economic activity, poor performances in schools, and a very small percentage doesn't go to school because of the non-availability of schools [Khundher 2005: xii]. The cost of education for children in the leather sector is indeed another reason to start working. Especially the increase of costs from primary to secondary education is for parents a reason to stop education and send their children to school, as has already been discussed in paragraph 4.3.

Many parents in these cases send the child to work rather than keep it in school. By working, they argue, the child is able to support the family economically, and learn some useful skills. This reasoning is illustrated by an older cousin of Tori, age 11 years. The cousins work together in a small shoe factory in Mirpur.

Sumon has worked here for 1 week now, he is helping me. He came here via his uncle. His family decided to send him to Dhaka. His parents wanted him to study but he wasn't

³⁰ There are many more reasons for children not to be in school, and they are more complex than the ones mentioned by the children. This research has focused on children's work and the non-enrolment of children in school would require another study. IREWOC has published a report on the topic, titled "Education in Rural Areas. Obstacles and Relevance. Main findings from seven country studies." Bangladesh is included in the study.

interested. When he was at school, he wasn't studying. He didn't take it seriously; he was making fun at school. When he had a job in the village, his parents discovered that he sometimes escaped. So they found it better to send him to Dhaka.

This argument for leaving school and going to work is supported less by the working children themselves. When a child is not doing well at school and does not take much interest, it is often the older relatives who send him to work in Dhaka. Arif (16), who is working in the same shoe factory, explained how older relatives used the fact that he was not enrolled in education to send him to Dhaka. The "relative", who may be only a distinct relative, is possibly interested in finding a cheap and docile helping hand and, for personal reasons, is interested in getting the boy into the city. The person with whom I arrived in Dhaka said to my mother: "he is doing nothing in the village, shall I take him?" And my mother welcomed this because I was neither studying nor earning money. But I like the village more. Here I have to work a lot. (Arif, 16)

An additional explanation that some parents use to explain their children working is that "the workplace as a safe environment". Some parents are afraid that the child will get involved in bad practices such as fights or criminality; a workplace can function as an alternative to the street, as is explained by Zahid's mother. Zahid is 13 years old and works in a shoe shop. His mother mentioned the financial need of the family as the main reason for her child to work, but additionally, she said:

This is a safe place for my son. If he is not here, he will get in contact with bad boys. Some boys fight and then they get hurt. They make a mess in the camp area. I am not interested in any free days for my son. I feel safe if he is in the shop every day. Here I know he won't do anything wrong. It was not difficult to find work for him. The shop is close by our house. My son found the job and I agreed on it. It keeps him off the street.



Photo 9: A boy working in a small factory producing leather gloves

Finally, it is interesting to consider why the children end up working in the specific job in which they are involved. The determining factor in this case is the contacts that the child or the family has. Employers rarely employ a child without a “reference”. Most children found their job via a relative or a person in their village. This also explains why a workplace usually employs people from the same region or even village. In tanneries, for example, the majority of the workers are from Noakhali. At each shoe market or factory, one will find children from one region of the country. Due to the system of references it is difficult for children, but also for adults, to move into any odd job. This also means that once boys start working in the leather sector, they usually stay involved for the rest of their lives.

6.2 The perspective of employers

Employers of children are often seen as exploiters of cheap and docile child labour. However, their perspective on child labour, and their reasons to employ children are very important to include in the analysis. The picture turns out to be less black-and-white as often suggested. There are basically three types of employers: big entrepreneurs (owners of a tannery or factory), small businessmen (who work with few investments or only in one part of the production process), and self-employed parents, with the help of their children. All have their own specific reasons to involve children in the work. To understand the reasoning of employers, it is necessary to give a background of the workplaces and the way they function.

Big entrepreneurs

Interviews with big entrepreneurs, but also with adult labourers and children, have confirmed that the big companies generally employ few children directly. This is due to a combination of reasons. In the first place, these companies produce leather or leather products for export on a large-scale, which means that they need to produce large quantities of high quality products. In most modern tanneries and factories, machinery is used for production, and children are generally less competent to manage machines. In the second place, big entrepreneurs have enough money to invest in better paid and better skilled labour. Thirdly, the big exporting companies are very much aware of the negative image attached to child labour in the western world. Sooner or later, sometimes at close intervals, inspections by the state authorities or by private agencies are most likely to take place in their factories or tanneries, because of the importance that foreign institutions attach to “clean” export sectors. The use of children could thus have negative effects for their business. The Executive Director of a large-scale tannery in Hazaribagh explained, by means of a recent incident, how scandals can affect their market:

The German buyers don’t want to buy our leather anymore because they know the situation of the pollution and child labour in Hazaribagh; they don’t want to buy from those people anymore. The Germans don’t come themselves to check it, but they have their agents here, they check your business.

In the few cases that these big companies do use child labour it appears to bring economic benefit: children are cheaper than adults. The same Executive Director argued that he hadn’t employed children in his tannery because they weren’t fit for the work, but that otherwise it would be a good way to save some money. It is also interesting to notice that adolescents from 16 years onwards are usually not considered to be children:

In my tannery there are no children, for the same reason as there are no women: it is very hard work. How would they survive? Children can make leather wallets, or bags, but they can’t carry 20 kg from here to there the entire day. To work here you should be at least 16

or 17 years old. New workers always arrive via a reliable reference, but the workers in my tannery don't bring their children here. They know it wouldn't be possible. In Bangladesh children and women are paid less than adult men. Businessmen always try to do business for their profit, here and everywhere in the world. So if it is possible to work with children and women we do so, but it is not possible here. So we are losing money, paying salaries to the strong men.

Some employers, when justifying the involvement of children in their business, use the argument that they are actually helping the child. The large-scale shoe factory, in which we found girls such as Nodi, Rupa and Neela, is an example of a certified business in which children are found working. The factory produces shoes for export and the local market; the former go primarily to Italy. The manager uses the "support argument" to explain the presence of under-aged persons:

We have the ISO certificate, so we comply with all the labour rules. The ILO never came here, but the minimum age to work here is 18. Sometimes people ask me to employ their son or daughter, because they are so poor. Or for example when the parents died and the child is the only income earner of the family. I feel bad in those cases; I am also a human being. So then I usually accept the child. If I help him or her with an opportunity, I support the family.

In general, when child labour is involved in big companies, it is hidden as much as possible. There are ways to circumvent the rules and regulations, but on the other hand, there is also open resistance from big entrepreneurs against the anti-child labour lobby from western countries and institutions. In their eyes, western countries apply double standards: they want to buy cheap products, but accuse the producers of hiring cheap child labour. On top of that, they sell the chemicals necessary for leather production very expensively. In the words of the director and owner of a large-scale and export-oriented tannery:

The EU sells us chemicals for a high price, and then they want the leather almost for free. Now, since I cannot afford production under those conditions, I have to fire some people. They need to eat, so they will go into criminality, or send their children to work. If the EU wants to help, they should invest in our industries. Or they should give the government money for social services, because we don't have that here. This is a poor country, if you have 4 children and you are poor, children's work can support the family. Without poverty there wouldn't be child labour. The most important is work for adults, thus industries need to be supported.

Accordingly, he wasn't very positive about NGO practices with respect to child labour, as he said: "NGOs don't come to my tannery. They are not helpful for the industry, they create problems." Several businessmen argue that this struggle against child labour results in a vicious circle: industries have no chance to grow, and as a consequence, families and children stay poor.

Small-scale businessmen

The arguments of small entrepreneurs, like the independent tanners or owners of a small manufacturing business, are somewhat different. In the first place, also the small businessmen argue that poor children have no other option but to work. Employing the child is considered a support for his or her family. Hashib, an independent tanner and employer of children in Hazaribagh clarified his opinion on child labour by referring to his own background:

Most children come here because of poverty in the family. When I started to work, I was nine or ten years old. It was not my time to work yet; it was time to study and play. But we

had problems in the family. My father was a carpenter; he was not able to run the family alone. That's why I started to work. The boys here are in the same situation. We know that they don't have the right age for work, but they have no other alternative. If they are not accepted here, they would go somewhere else. I know it is not good, and personally I don't like it, but the family is very poor.

The fact that work is the only alternative is also a common opinion among businessmen in shoe factories or shops. Especially when the entrepreneur knows the family of the child personally, he feels that he has a social obligation to "help" the child.

In fact, it is important to consider the background of the small businessmen when analysing their reasons for employing children. Many of them originate from poor families, and have even been child labourers themselves. After many years of low paid work in the sector, they have managed to save and make a small investment to set up their own business. Because of their low investments and production cost, their products are of relatively poor quality and are only sold in the domestic market. The fact that children are more involved in this segment of the sector is not surprising. There is less money to invest in labour, there is less need for quality products and there is a strong demand for cheap products; in addition, there is hardly any inspection on child labour in the companies for the local market. As Barge et al. argued about informal industries with simple production technologies and little capital equipment: "there is easy entry into these industries, which in turn creates considerable competition. As a result, the bulk of owners of informal sector enterprises [...] remain poor and so have a strong incentive to use and exploit child labour [...]." [Sandhya Barge et al. 2004: 159-160].



Photo 8: Painting and drying leather on the roof of a tannery

The economic benefit of hiring children instead of adults is quite substantial: in a tannery, for example, whereas adults are paid between 3000 and 5000 taka per month, children get between 1000 and 2000. On the other hand, children do less productive work since they mostly “assist”. Mahmud, an independent tanner with a small business in the Sabeer Tannery, confirmed the economic benefit of employing children:

Children work for a small amount of money. When I am busy spraying, a child can take the leather to dry it in the sun. If I employ an adult I have to pay 3000 taka per month, but a young boy who does the same I can pay 1200 taka. So why should I pay more to the adult? It is rational in my business to employ a boy if he can do the same. An adult is employed for doing heavier things.

Small entrepreneurs have less money to invest, but the availability of children for work also makes it easy to keep on paying low wages. In “togglings” there is no difference between the production wage for a child or for an adult, but the payment is so low, that adults are not willing to do the job. Children, however, accept the low payments and the monotonous job and employers thus hire them. Children are less aware of their rights and accept exploitative conditions.

On the other hand, most employers recognise that children are not fit for the work. They see that the youngest boys think more about playing than about working. They also realise that work in a tannery or factory may be more dangerous for a child than other work. That is one reason why children will not be engaged for just any job. Some jobs are considered to be typical for children because adults wouldn’t do them, such as preparing tea or being a shop assistant. These jobs are next to unthinkable for an adult. Mahmud, for example, argued that every business “needs” to employ a child for certain activities:

In a small business a young boy is needed. When a client comes here to buy leather, a small boy is needed to buy snacks from outside. It is not possible to ask an adult to do this; adults don’t like to do this. That’s why it is important to employ a small boy.

The availability of children as cheap workers in specific jobs is also a factor that contributes indirectly to the continuity of child labour. In most cases, it is more common for children or their parents to ask an employer to hire the child, rather than the employer actively look for child labourers. This active employment seeking is, according to Bisell, a relatively new phenomenon in the formal sector urban employment in Bangladesh [Bisell 2004: 275].

Employers are also aware of the importance of education for children. Because of their relative economic prosperity, the businessmen have been able to improve their family’s economic conditions and send their own children to school. A good example is given by Tahsin, a contractor of drying leather in the field. He worked as a child and now that his situation has improved, he tries to make his son realise how important education is:

I work already for 22 years in this sector; I started when I was very young. Once I did what this boy is doing here: togglings. Now I am a contractor and have contacts with five tanneries. I have one son; he is 13 and studies in class 7. I involved him only one day in this work, when he didn’t want to study. I am working here because I don’t have enough education. So I asked my son: “do you prefer to work?” I brought him here on a very warm and sunny day. I showed him how hard the other children without education are working. After a few ours my son said: “ok, I am going to study”. I want to give good education to my son at any cost. I realize that I am suffering because of a lack of education. So I hope my son won’t come here ever again.

They argue that also for working children education is relevant, since it would improve their professional career, also in the leather industry, and increase their social status. A manager in a tannery argued:

I think a boy should start to work at 14, 15 or 16 years old. Before working he needs education. If he has some education he could read the labels of different types of chemicals. I don't have any education, so when I started I had to walk with a person to tell me the names, so it takes more time to learn the job.

Tahsin, however, as well as the manager, do employ other children. The reason for not giving the child labourers an opportunity to combine work with school is a combination between the self interest, since a part time worker is not convenient, and the idea that poor children have no other alternative than to work. It is argued that their conditions would not allow them to go to school anyway.

Finally, some employers of children use the "nimble finger argument" when they argue that children are more efficient in their job. A contractor of drying leather explained the involvement of children in his business by saying: "Children are efficient. Their hands are small; they can peg the pieces of leather very quickly to the ground."

One could make speculations about other factors that, from the point of view of employers, contribute to the employment of children in the leather sector. It seems plausible that children are convenient workers because they are reliable at a young age and are reliable in the long term: they can be trained from a young age and they will most likely stay for a long time. Bonded children, like the ones who live at the workplace, are never absent, as is also argued by Barge et al. [Sandhya Barge et al. 2004].

Parents

Some children work with their parents, for example in manufacturing leather gloves; their parents are contracted by a small businessman. In these cases, the businessmen have no knowledge about who exactly manufactures the gloves. It is an example of subcontracting within the family. Parents say that their children "help" them, rather than that they are working. The reason for involving them in work is that they get paid per unit. Any help from the children thus increases the income of the often poor families. Since children can still attend school, most parents don't consider this work as a negative influence for the child's development.

In Bangladeshi society, where child labour is a rather common feature, the fact that poor children are working is an almost accepted phenomenon. Even in high class shopping malls children work as assistants in shops; shop owners, but also other employers, appear to feel no shame about their choice to hire a child instead of an adult. Some researchers argue that this makes eradication of child labour even more difficult.

6.3 Regulations and inspections

The central coordinating agency for labour inspection, safety, health and working conditions is the Ministry of Labour. The Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments is responsible for inspections. The Department, however, has some shortcomings, especially where inspection of child labour in the leather sectors is concerned. The first shortcoming of the Department is the small staff: it has fewer than 100 inspectors for the entire country. This number is, by far, not in relation with the scope of the problem. In the second place, the state inspectors are generally known as corrupt functionaries who can be bribed easily. Employers of children get away quite easily by paying a small bribe. Managers of workplaces that had been inspected mentioned that inspectors

left without any problems, even though child labour was obviously present. Most companies, however, are never even inspected. Finally, as mentioned before, while the inspections have a strong focus on formal and export-oriented companies, most children work in informal workplaces producing for the local market. This is related to the importance of exports, and the importance which foreign importers attach to the subject of child labour. These three factors result in a situation in which there is very little pressure on respecting labour laws in the informal sector, including the laws concerning child labour.

A specific feature of the leather sector, making the situation even more difficult to control, is the system of subcontracting and its general informality. In one tannery, a total of 10 independent tanners can be found working. The actual owner of the tannery is rarely involved in production himself and only sublets his machines, which generates a reasonable income. The owner would strongly deny hiring children, since officially he has no employees at all. On the other hand, the informal tanners often work with fewer than five workers and are therefore not even considered to be factories that have to respect the labour law. In the words of the head of the Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments: “we inspect the formal sector, which means businesses with a trade license and with a minimum of five employees. A workshop with less than five labourers is not a company, it is a family business”. The Department is not responsible for the inspection of these types of enterprises. In fact, there are no policies at all regarding small and micro entrepreneurs. Many of the small units aren’t officially registered, and don’t maintain any record of their employees. Additionally, adult labourers in small and micro businesses are not members of labour unions. The union for tannery workers, which can sometimes have influence on the implementation of labour laws, is thus not present either. So, the workplaces in which most children are found working are the ones that are less regulated and rarely inspected.

The fragmented structure of the industry, in combination with a lack of policies regarding small entrepreneurs, results in very irresponsible behaviour of this group. A tannery owner in Hazaribagh, who rents his tannery out to independent tanners, explained how the current system of regulations and inspections does not prevent him from allowing child labour in his tannery.

Just before the Labour Day (May 1st) labour inspections are always carried out. They come here to check labour conditions in the tanneries. They see the children but they don’t do anything. They just make a report and leave. I don’t employ children directly, and I don’t care if the people in my tannery employ them or not.

Due to the extensive use of subcontracting, none of the actors involved take responsibility for the employment of children. Formal actors like tannery owners, although they do have knowledge about child labour in their branch, choose to pass on the responsibility to other actors, often in the informal sector or even at the family level. This phenomenon has been observed in many sectors other than leather, and as Barge concluded about the carpet, glass bangle and diamond industries in India: “since these industries are broken down into so many different types of specialized enterprises, it is easier to avoid labour laws and commitment to workers, to reduce labour and production costs” [Sandhya Barge et al. 2004: 159]

Child employers also blame state institutions for causing unequal competition. Many leather producing companies fear that investing in labour costs would involve a loss in competition and income, as long as not all companies are bound to act in the same way. The same tannery owner in Hazaribagh added to his statement about child labour:

But the government is crazy, they should inspect better. I would find other alternatives if children are really going to be prevented from working. If children wouldn’t be allowed in this area, I would be forced to ask adults, but if it is not prohibited in the entire tannery area, I wouldn’t agree, because then some people would employ children and earn more. If

everybody would do it, the system would change, and it would be better. But if government policies don't change, then the situation of child labour and pollution will go on like this.

Leather companies in Dhaka not only have to compete among themselves, but also in the world market. In Bangladesh, leather products from China are currently cheaper than the local products. Producers thus try to cut down on production costs as much as possible and only worldwide labour standards would prevent them from defending child labour in the name of unfair international competition.

6.4 Interventions: reasons for success and failure

Since Bangladesh signed ILO Convention 182 there have been a significant number of projects and programmes focussing, at least partly, on children working in the leather sector. Some have been part of a national program supported by the ILO, others were independent projects of NGOs or initiated by the Ministry. The overall impact of the projects is difficult to measure; in the first place because several projects are still going on, in the second place because there haven't been any surveys that compare recent data with data before the projects. However, based on information from project executers, participating children and other actors involved, it is possible to identify the difficulties that projects face in reaching children in hazardous work in the leather sector.

The IPEC project "Preventing and Eliminating the Worst Forms of Child Labour in Selected Formal and Informal Sectors in Bangladesh", which started in September 2000, addressed five sectors that were considered to be worst forms of child labour³¹. Work in leather tanneries in Hazaribagh was one of them. The project was executed by a local NGO. The Ministry of Labour and Employment in 2004 started the project "Eradication of Hazardous Child Labour in Bangladesh"³², which provides non-formal education for children working in hazardous activities in Dhaka City, including Ward 48 and 49 in Hazaribagh. In each neighbourhood, a local NGO is responsible for implementation and follow-up. A similar project is the one coordinated by the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education together with UNICEF, titled: "Basic Education for Hard to Reach Urban Working Children"³³. Also here, local NGOs provide non-formal education. The target group includes working children, not necessarily in hazardous conditions. Hazaribagh is included in the working area. A more recent program, with a quite distinct focus, is run by Save the Children. Within the programme Child Clubs, the local NGO SEEP commenced, in January 2008, the project "Voices from the Shadow" in and around Hazaribagh. Its main goal was to promote participation and protagonism of working and non-working children.

In addition to these NGOs, there are many NGOs that focus on micro-credit. Often the condition to receive a micro-credit is related to child labour; a mother for example gets a micro-credit if she sends her child to school instead of to work. These projects, however, work with the parents as a starting point and never focus on parents of children working in a specific sector.

³¹ The specific project in the tannery area started in 2002 and was finished in 2004. The five sectors included in the general project were *bidi*, construction, leather tannery, matches and child domestic work. In 2005 the survey on child labour in tanneries, titled "Bangladesh Baseline Survey on Child Labour Situation in Leather Tannery Industries in Dhaka District" was published as a part of this project [Karim 2005].

³² This project is technically supported by the ILO. The first phase, which started in 2000 was funded by USAID; for the second phase, which started in 2004 and is still going on at the moment, funds only come from the Ministry of Labour and Employment. The project is expected to end in 2009 or 2011, depending on funding.

³³ This project received financial and technical support from UNICEF, and financial support from Canadian CIDA and Swedish SIDA. The first phase ran from 1997 to 2004 and the second phase, which is going on at the moment, started in 2004 and will end in 2011.

An important conclusion concerning all NGO interventions is the fact that the most vulnerable children are hard to reach. This becomes, for example, obvious in the non-formal education classes of the projects run by the ministries. Children between 10 and 14 years old are invited to join informal education classes in either the morning or the afternoon. The project by the Ministry of Labour, unlike the project of Ministry of Education and UNICEF, offers a 75 taka stipend per month to participating children. Although the project designation suggests the inclusion of children who work in hazardous activities and who are hard to reach, the reality is slightly different. The only children in the classes, who actually work in the leather sector, are those who manufacture gloves, which is one of the easiest jobs in the sector. Besides, the great majority of the children live with their parents in Dhaka. The children do benefit from the project, since most of them did not attend school before and the enrolment in the projects also reduces their working day. On the other hand, working children who need to work fulltime can't join the classes.

The IPEC project focussed especially on children working in tanneries, but also here it appeared to be difficult to reach the most vulnerable boys. According to the NGO in charge of implementation, the project reached neither the children who live inside a tannery, nor the ones that really needed money for survival, which is the case of most young tannery workers. Among the 447 children that were surveyed, 70% was living in a tannery. The remaining 30% was living with relatives or a neighbour; parents were rarely present. The project aimed at bringing 5 to 12 year old children to the formal school and to provide non-formal education and skills training for 13 to 17 year olds. This strategy was only successful for a number of the children, none of which were those living at their workplace. Other difficulties with this strategy were the lack of support by tannery owners and the lack of work skills and proper references when youngsters tried to shift jobs away from the tannery.

The project run by Save the Children never pretended to reach the most vulnerable working children. In fact, it claims to invite all children interested to participate. It also doesn't seek directly to stop the children from working, but rather promotes improved working conditions. One main strategy to achieve this was to convince the employers of the children's rights. At the time of research, in the case of the leather sector, participants were a small group of young tannery workers between 16 and 20 years old. Some worked occasionally, but others worked fulltime in a tannery. To join the Club the youngsters had to ask permission from their employer. As a consequence, only boys with a "friendly" employer were able to participate. Also the living conditions of the boys were slightly better since they lived with their families in Dhaka. Notwithstanding the positive results for the children involved, this project, like all others, did not successfully reach children living in a tannery or a factory and children most exploited by their employer. It also didn't reach the youngest, and most vulnerable, tannery workers.

Children who live at the workplace are not reached by any type of project. Also the ones who live with a relative or neighbour are rarely reached. Most of them are not even informed about the possibility of joining a project. The majority of the NGOs don't enter workplaces; they usually don't get permission or haven't even tried.

The tendency to work with poor people, but not the poorest, is common among NGOs. The NGOs working with micro-credits often have difficulties reaching the most vulnerable women. During a visit to a group of women who had received micro-credits in Hazaribagh, it appeared that none of them was a widow or divorced mother. For children, to have both parents living with them is already quite a support, if you compare them to the young migrants from the countryside. The latter have to work fulltime for their survival. Besides this, work in a factory or tannery is almost without exception a fulltime job. The employer is not interested in employing a part time worker and since working days are so long and irregular it is very hard to participate in activities outside working hours. For those working in Dhaka without any family or relatives, a change in job would entail a loss of housing. Antu (13), a boy who works and lives in a tannery indeed mentioned:

I am from Noakhali, and I migrated to Dhaka one year ago, together with my uncle and cousin. I work from 8am to 5pm and earn 2000 taka per month. After work I wash myself here and then I go to my cousin's house. I pay them 1300 taka each month to live in their house with 3 meals a day. [...] From all the boys that work in this tannery, none is going to school. I never heard of any NGO here, I was never approached since I am working here.

For this group of children, NGOs haven't found the right solutions yet. The boys are difficult to reach, they have to earn money for the survival of their family and they are fenced off from outside influence by employers and relatives.

The projects are further complicated by the poorly regulated environment. The IPEC project, in cooperation with the tannery workers union, managed to set up a Memorandum of Understanding, which states that "no tannery industry can use any child labour in any part of the tanning process. Soon the entire tannery industry will be declared free of child labour." The MOU was signed by 50 tannery owners in 2004. The union committed itself to checking adherence to the memorandum. The fact that children are still working in tanneries, even in some tanneries that signed the MOU, can be explained by two main factors. In the first place, the memorandum was signed by tannery owners and not by the independent tanners that work in the tannery and employ most children. Second, the union has no presence or influence in the rather informally organised tanneries, in which most child labour takes place. The initiative has probably improved the situation in the professional tanneries, but not in others.

Individual projects have had their successes, but a poor coordination and exchange of information between the various project holders, decreases efficiency of the projects. Parallel projects are sometimes working at cross purposes and without much coordination between them. After the IPEC project (2002-2004) established, with a vision on sustainability, a Project Facilitating Committee (PFC) in the tannery area, the non-formal education project of the Ministry of Labour, in 2004, set up Centre Management Committees, with similar functions but without the involvement of the former established PFC. Also, the two projects by both ministries in the field of non-formal education, which have very similar goals and strategies, work independently in the same areas. As a consequence, many children are surveyed twice, and unsurprisingly, many also participate in both projects. Obviously, coordination would make actions more efficient and sustainable.

Finally, the conclusion that most children in the leather sector are migrants and that migration creates the most vulnerable situations, calls for a preventive approach. Projects have difficulties with eradication of hazardous child labour in the leather sector because most of the hazardous conditions are already created at arrival in Dhaka; they are by then very hard to reverse or change. It is hard to reduce child labour in Dhaka when the flow of migrant children looking for work keeps on coming. Thus eradication of hazardous child labour should involve preventive components for children in rural areas as well.

6.5 Conclusions

The presence of child labour in the leather sector is caused by a combination of pull and push factors. For children, the principal reason to get involved in the production of leather or leather products is poverty; most children originate from poor rural families, whose position is further attenuated by shocks to the system, such as debt, loss of land or illness. The children rarely attend school in their rural homes, for a number of reasons, which is motivation for the family and relatives to send them to work. Children work mostly for small entrepreneurs, who make use of simple and labour-intensive technologies and informal labour relations. The absence of good policies and failing inspections for small enterprises combined with a fragmented industry structure explain for a great part why those entrepreneurs are still working with children. All businessmen, big or

small, see child labour as an economic benefit for themselves, but also a survival strategy for the boys and their families. The big companies, however, use less child labour because they have higher investments, better quality products, and more inspections, greatly encouraged by the demands of the foreign market.

Several NGOs and state institutions have initiated projects to combat child labour in the leather sector. Child labour in the formal companies, which use modern technologies, seem to have decreased but, unfortunately, the interventions have hardly succeeded in including the most vulnerable children, i.e. the children who live at their workplace or with people other than their parents. The children in the most hazardous conditions are too hard to reach. Projects have great difficulties in helping them to fight back the many disadvantages they suffer from and which keep them in a vulnerable position: they have to earn for the survival of their families, they are bonded to the workplace and their welfare is subject to the whim of their immediate superiors.

Chapter 7

Conclusions: Hazardous Child Labour in the Leather Sector in Bangladesh

By and large, child labour in the world has declined significantly. The ILO report “Child labour Within Reach” documented an 11% decline in the incidence of child labour between 2000 and 2004. Especially child labour in its hazardous forms appears to be declining. The ratification of ILO Convention 182 by 169 countries shows the global commitment and political will to further improve the situation of working children in hazardous work. Foreign pressure, economic development, the active involvement of civil society organisations, a growing awareness and changing technologies can be identified among the factors that have been at play.

Bangladesh ratified Convention No 182 in 2001, and signed, already in 1989, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, demonstrating its commitment to the compliance with child rights. Unfortunately, the incidence of child labour in Bangladesh is still among the highest in the world. According to the National Child Labour Survey, conducted by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) in 2002 and 2003, the number of working children aged 5-17 years old was 7.9 million (17% of the child population in this age category), referring to children who did at least one hour per week in paid or unpaid work. Among them were 3.4 million child labourers, mostly boys, i.e. they were younger than the minimum age required for the work they performed.

Leather is an important product for the national economy of Bangladesh. It is an important export product and the sector contributes significantly to the GDP and to employment. Both are reasons as to why the government identified the leather industry as one of the highest priority sectors. The public outrage about child labour, especially in foreign countries importing Bangladeshi goods, is feared to have a negative impact on the prospects of the sector and so its eradication - at least officially and in export-oriented firms - is placed high on the agenda.

This study on Hazardous Child Labour in the Leather Sector in Dhaka provides an insight into the extent and characteristics of hazardous child labour in the various segments of this sector. The research has identified all stages that together make up the production chain of leather - from raw hides to leather products - and has documented the involvement of children in these stages. It reveals that, despite the public attention and the various initiatives, many children are still found working in different parts of the production chain, perhaps not so much in the export-oriented firms, but most definitely in the smaller units of the informal sector, where they are found producing low-quality goods with labour-intensive and low productive technologies for the local market.

Information has been collected about the working and living conditions of the children, and the main reasons for which they are (still) involved in the production chain of the leather sector. From the supply of raw hides and skins onwards to the fabrication of leather items and footwear, we have identified four principal stages in which children are found to be working.

The first stage is the production of leather, which takes place in tanneries. Children are involved in several manual tasks in the tanneries and work mostly as assistants to adults; they often have been hired in the villages where they come from. “Togglung”, or drying leather outside, is also part of the activities of this stage.

The second stage in which children are found to be working is the manufacturing of leather items and footwear. Children cut, glue and sew together pieces of leather in small workshops as well as in bigger factories.

In the third stage, after manufacturing, the products are either sold in local shops or to the international market. Most shops work with a young assistant, who attends to the clients, cleans the shop and does other assisting tasks.

The fourth stage that involves children is a residual activity, in which waste materials and by-products are processed. For example, a considerable number of children are involved in the highly hazardous production of *meat*, consisting of burned pieces of finished leather, which is used in fish and poultry food.

In general, most child labour is found in the small workshops that produce low quality products for the local market and which have informal labour relations, often even subletting the workshop or tannery out to tenant producers, or in the household industry, producing on a putting-out system (subcontracting). The big companies make less use of child labour because they have access to higher investments, require better quality products, and face more inspections. However, distinctions are not always that clear, since outsourcing by these enterprises also occasionally occurs.

Most working children are boys from age 10 onwards, although the specific age varies from activity to activity. Girls are only found working in the manufacturing of leather items and occasionally in *meatbone*. A significant number of the working children migrated from the countryside, and live now, either alone or with their families, in poor conditions in Dhaka. The tannery area is highly polluted, causing an unhealthy living environment for the working children who live in the area. Boys who migrated alone to Dhaka are especially vulnerable, since they don't have the support of their family and often live in the same unhealthy place as where they work. They usually are under the direct supervision (and control) of adults and find it near to impossible to break the commitment and move out to a different environment.

Working children make almost no use of education and health services in their area. They are fairly invisible for health clinics, and their work and poverty exclude them from education. Thus, most of these working children are denied their right, according to the CRC, to education, good health, a healthy living environment and an adequate familial environment.

Children in the leather sector work under hazardous working conditions, in the first place because of their long working hours, which by far exceed the maximum number of hours set by ILO C182, but also because work in tanneries or with waste materials, involves exposure to toxic substances, fumes and gases. The production environment and the production process make for an appalling place to work and live, causing physical harm, such as aches, exhaustion, or accidents. Some of the work is less strenuous, for example the work as shop assistant, but even then the working day is extremely long.

Almost all activities in the leather sector, except for producing leather products such as gloves at home and work under slightly better conditions, make children quit school, and additionally, many children are excluded from recreation and free time. The boys who live at the workplace face the most hazardous working conditions. They have practically no leisure time, no support from family or friends, they are dependent on their employer, unprotected from immoral behaviour and constantly exposed to health risks.

Several NGOs and government institutions have initiated projects to combat child labour in the leather sector. Unfortunately, despite obvious progress, they have rarely reached the most vulnerable children, such as the children who live at the workplace or without their family.

To improve the situation of working children in the leather sector, the main reasons for their involvement should be taken into account. One of the main reasons is the poverty of their families, often related to poverty in the countryside. A preventive approach focussing on rural poverty reduction would be necessary to put an end to children from the countryside migrating to Dhaka for work. Pre-empting migration would especially protect children from leaving their families and living without protection in their unhealthy workplace. Furthermore, children tend to start working when, for various reasons, they are not attending school. Reasons for not being enrolled vary, but quality of education and accessibility for all children is crucial to increase enrolment in schools and decrease labour participation of children. Without good education, work will continue to be considered a better alternative in a context of poverty.

From the perspective of the employers, child labour appears to have a clear economic benefit. Children work mostly for small entrepreneurs, who use simple and labour-intensive technologies and informal labour relations. These employers, often former child labourers themselves, see the employment of a child as a support to his family. The fragmented structure of the industry, in combination with a lack of policies regarding small entrepreneurs, also contributes to the continued presence of child labour in the informal economy. Policies including support for small entrepreneurs conditioned with strict regulations would enable them to professionalise their business. But considering the competition in the global market, only the implementation of world wide labour standards would prevent them turning to child labour. External pressure, without first solving the internal complexities surrounding the leather sector, may aggravate rather than ease the problem.

Resources

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