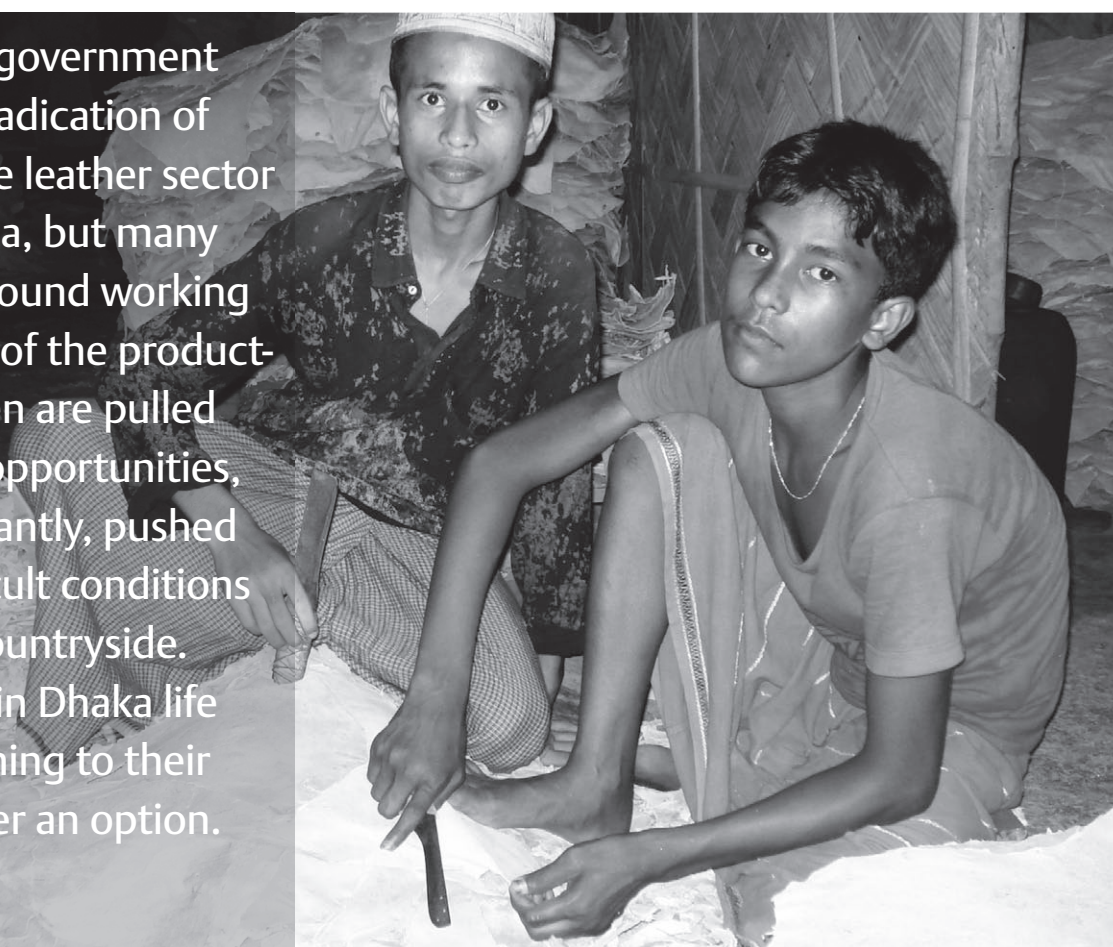


## 10 The Study

## Leather gloves and tiny fingers

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

Anna Ensing



*"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 iron the leather to dry it and make it flat. I work from 8am to 5pm and earn 2000 taka (€20) per month. After work I go to my cousin's house. I pay them 1300 taka each month to live in their house with three meals a day. I also send some money to my family". (Antu, 13, working in one of Dhaka's leather tanneries)*

ABOUT 64 PER CENT OF CHILD LABOURERS in the world are in Asia. Bangladesh has more than five million working children, and has, second only to India, the most children between five and 14 years old working in South Asia. (ILO 2006, 2009; Lieten 2009)

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

#### Leather production in Bangladesh

The Government of Bangladesh has identified the leather industry as one of the 'highest priority sectors' because of its contribution to export and employment (ILO-IPEC 2007). Unfortunately, child labour is very much present in the leather sector. In 2007, ILO-IPEC counted approximately 260 children in leather tanneries, 3040 children in shoe factories and 320 children in the production of other leather products (ILO-IPEC 2007). In 2008, after several interventions, we still found several children, from 8 years old upwards, involved in a wide variety of activities throughout the production chain. Leather is produced by tanning and the final products of the process are manufactured into leather products. Children are mostly found in small-scale units producing for the domestic market, but they are also found working at home, producing outsourced work for factories, selling the finished products or in the processing of waste materials.

#### Who are the child labourers?

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

A majority of the working children migrated from the countryside as a consequence of push factors. In the rural area, the children's families experience economic problems, often due to

debts or loss of land. Poverty, in combination with social problems, is the usual reason for moving away from the countryside to start a new life in the capital city. A father's second marriage is also often a reason to migrate.

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

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

#### Living at work

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

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

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

#### Reasons for work

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

A second relevant explanation 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 they have dropped out. In particular, the increase in costs when advancing from primary to secondary education

is a reason for parents to pull their children out of school. As a 16-year-old boy explained: 'The person with whom I arrived in Dhaka said 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.'

There are also pull factors that explain why children work in the leather industry. Big companies generally do not employ children directly, because of the need for skilled labour and quality products and because inspections are most likely to take place in their enterprises. Small and informal companies, however, do employ children. These entrepreneurs are not necessarily merciless exploiters of cheap and docile labour. Many originate from poor families themselves, some have even been child labourers. After years of low paid work, they have managed to save and make a small investment to set up their own business. Because of the low investments and production costs, their products are of relatively poor quality and only sold for the domestic market. They employ child labourers for social considerations, but at the same time, the economic benefit of hiring children instead of adults is quite substantial.

Some children work at home with their parents where, for example, they manufacture leather gloves. In these cases, the businessmen who give the parents a contract often have no knowledge of who exactly is doing the work. It is an example of subcontracting within the family. The reason parents involve their children in 'helping them', as they call it, is that they get paid per unit and the child's help increases the family income.

#### Working conditions

The working conditions of children vary per production stage and specific activity. In general, children work long days and have assisting tasks. Working schedules in tanneries and factories can be 14 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Work in a tannery leaves most children little time to play, or to travel to their parents in the villages. Most children don't use gloves, boots or masks and come into direct contact with chemicals and hazardous waste produced in the tannery (Gain 1998; Karim 2005). Children involved in toggling work outdoors and are much less affected by chemicals. The harsh aspects of this particular task are mostly related to the stooped position they must maintain during work, and exposure to the elements. In small-scale and informal manufacturing units, children work on the floor in crowded rooms. The room is often also the sleeping place. The children involved in working with waste materials burn and dry the discarded leather, which causes lots of smoke and produces an awful smell. The smoke affects children's lungs and burning leather releases harmful chemicals (K. Kolomaznika et al. 2008). By contrast, the children working at home do so under relatively good conditions. Most children in the sector never see a doctor and tend to trivialise their health problems.

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

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