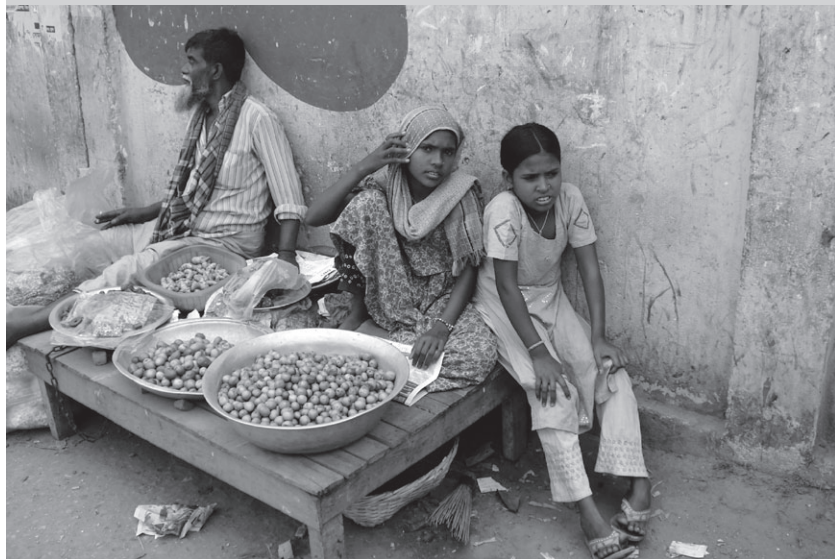


# Working girls in Dhaka, between public and private space

The participation of girls in the global labour market is lower than that of boys. As a consequence, there is a lack of qualitative data. Anna Ensing studied working girls in Dhaka, Bangladesh. She documented their activities and the related hazards and studied the way working girls themselves perceive their position in society. The research results make clear that working girls live with three disadvantages: they are poor, female and young. These three factors reinforce each other and determine the girls' position in society.

Anna Ensing



ACCORDING TO ESTIMATIONS from the International Labour Organization (ILO), female children are less frequently employed in economic activity but they are also less likely to be attending school and more likely to do household chores (ILO 2006; Buvinic et al. 2007). Most debates on child labour, however, have left the specific problems of the girl child unanswered. With the exception of prostitution and child domestics, research has tended to focus on male child labour.

In 2009, the Irewoc Foundation conducted an anthropological study on working girls in Dhaka, Bangladesh, to gain insights about their participation in the labour market and the consequences of this work.<sup>1</sup> The focus of the study was on three main groups: girls working in home-based industries; girls working in the public domain; and girls working in the formal industries.

The Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (2003) stated that, at the time of their survey, almost two million girls were working (10% of the girl population), either in combination with school or not. The great majority of the working girls in Bangladesh live in rural areas (81%) and are involved in agricultural work (60%). It should be kept in mind though, that girls often work in unpaid jobs at home and that their presence in the labour market is often invisible (Blanchet 1996:77); statistics don't always depict a complete picture (Lieten 2009:64-66). We therefore conducted an anthropological study in which girls' views and opinions were brought to the forefront. In two specific geographic areas of Dhaka –Kafrul and Mohakali –we studied the working girls in different settings.

## Home-based industries

Home-based jobs are considered a good choice because they take place in the safety of the home, the working hours are flexible and not excessive and there are relatively few health hazards. The most common home-based industries in Dhaka are karchupi (bead and sequins work) and embroidery, which represent, respectively, 14% and 1% of girls in the informal sector (ILO/IPEC 2002: 29-30).

Girls working in home-based industries in Dhaka work within a family undertaking and are not directly paid by a contractor. The work is often considered to be part of the household chores and thus is habitually condoned as a useful activity for girls. The Bangladeshi law allows children to work in these 'family

and small-scale holdings producing for local consumption and not regularly employing hired workers'.

Home-based jobs need not in themselves be considered hazardous labour, but they are often combined with household chores, usually the responsibility of women and girls. The real workload depends on the combination of work in home-based industries and household chores, which can in some cases be excessive and thus harmful for girls.

One of the main reasons why girls work is the difficult economic circumstances. A 'shock' or misfortune, such as the loss of the family's income earner, can be a direct cause for a child to start working. In cases of poverty, girls are more likely to be employed at home, while boys work outside.

Girls are mostly found working in the home because of cultural gender roles, which define the home as the proper place for women (Kabeer 1985). Especially unmarried pubescent girls tend to be involved in activities that restrict them to the private sphere (see also Naved et al. 2007). The girls agree that home is the best place for them, and that 'a safe job is a job at home'. In addition to safety, status and respect also play a role: an unmarried girl's presence in the public domain could threaten her and her family's honour. Society considers a 'good character' absolutely crucial for girls, which is best demonstrated by socially acceptable behaviour (Joseph 1997).

## Working in the public domain

Some girls, however, were nevertheless found working outside the home. We distinguished three main activities: scavenging, services at markets and chipping bricks, although most girls do a bit of everything. Working in the public domain can be explained by extreme poverty, which negates most social norms. Daughters will only be sent to work outside the home when parents have no alternatives. Thus, girls working outside their homes come from extremely poor families or they live without their (direct) family.

Working hours vary and are flexible for most street jobs but conditions are harsh and all jobs on the street are poorly paid. Brick chipping and waste collection are harmful to health and most other activities are exhausting. The girls complained of the dirt; people are disgusted by them and this damages their self-esteem. Adolescent girls are particularly concerned about their physical appearance, mainly because they know they should be getting married soon.

Girls working in the public domain face aggression and violence every day. Girls are not just harassed by passers-by or employers, but also by the police. The girls who live without family wish for 'good adults' to protect them, although working with friends can be helpful too. When adolescent girls are unable to maintain their distance or privacy from male strangers, as is the case with girls working in the public domain, they are likely to be confronted with sexual and mental harassment (see also S.F.Rashid & S.Michaud 2000). Because of their sexual vulnerability very few girls above 14 work in public spaces. If the girls are touched by a man who is not their husband they become 'spoiled'; they and their family may lose their honour. Girls can prevent harassment on the streets by working alongside a male relative, or by marrying early.

## Working in formal industries

The growth of the Ready Made Garments (RMG) industries in Bangladesh in the 1980s and 1990s attracted large numbers of women and girls. However, after threats of a boycott many thousands of the very young girls were fired (see Bissell 2004). Today, girls start working in the factories as assistants at 14 years old and progress into higher functions, such as operators. Girls generally approve of garment work because of the relatively good pay and safety measures.

However, the working conditions of women in particular are mostly in contravention of labour laws (see for example Nielsen 2005; AMRF Bangladesh & CCC The Netherlands 2009; Hearson 2009), and the working conditions of underage girls are often even worse. Girls between 14 and 18 are legally allowed to work in factories, but only for a maximum of five hours per day and not between seven pm and seven am. In practice, however, they work the same amount of hours as adult women. Because it is fulltime, a garments job cannot be combined with education. In addition, the factory environment is not favourable for the girls' health (headaches, backaches, etc.) and we also documented cases of verbal abuse, physical punishments and sexual harassment. Many of the girls are scared of their supervisors because of their abuse of power. Thus, despite the relative safety and freedom from domestic constraints, factory work is harmful for the health, morals and development of adolescent girls.

## The girls' view: three burdens

Poverty is considered to be the main problem for working girls and the foremost reason for having to work. The girls argue

that rich girls, contrary to poor working girls, can go to a good school, they can eat all they desire, they don't have to work at home, they don't need to leave their relatives in the countryside and they don't have to live in a slum. Furthermore, rich girls are not exposed to verbal abuse; they are more protected and respected by their environment.

In addition to being poor, working girls suffer because they are female. Males are favoured in Bangladeshi culture because daughters will be married and leave the home, while sons continue to bring benefits (income and a wife) to the family (White 1992). Girls have less freedom than boys and are more controlled by their families; they have to be more responsible and they are permitted less fun. Although working boys also suffer maltreatment, working girls endure more sexual harassment and disrespect.

The third threat to these girls is their young age. They feel that adult and married women live better lives than young girls; once married, they will not be bothered anymore, they will be respected by employers and other people and they can go outside without problems. Being older and being married implies safety and less vulnerability.

The three burdens reinforce each other: poverty forces girls into situations that conflict with gender roles and age norms but also denies them protection from society's judgement and abuse.

Working girls in Dhaka, especially from 12 years onwards, take great responsibility for their own lives. Within the constraints, they have agency. They want to solve their problems and bear their sorrows alone. However, there are also many decisions that the working girls cannot make for themselves. Girls start to work when their families need the support; they continue to work because they cannot solve and end the poverty of their families. Similarly, most girls choose to keep quiet when harassed out in public because raising their voice is a form of agency incongruent with the cultural norms for girls' behaviour, and this would provoke worse reactions. Society's structural constraints clearly limit the girls' agency in these cases.

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## Notes

1. See [www.irewoc.nl](http://www.irewoc.nl) for more studies on Bangladesh, Pakistan and Nepal. The research project was financed by Plan Netherlands.

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