Child Labour in Bidi Industries of Bangladesh: An Intensive Investigation

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Child labour in bidi industries has legally been banned in Bangladesh. Following the Section 32 of the UN Charter on Child Rights, ‘States Parties recognize the right of the child to be protected from economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child's education, or to be harmful to the child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development.’ Based on the Charter, the Government of Bangladesh has introduced a list of 38 hazardous jobs and banned children engagement with those tasks. Working at bidi and cigarette factory lies on the fourth position of the list. Besides, Bangladesh has ratified ILO Convention no 182 in 2001 that deals with the hazardous child labour. Since the rules and policies regarding child rights are not enforced properly, bidi factory owners are deploying children in different stages of hazardous tobacco processing and bidi production.

According to a study, there are 117\(^1\) bidi factories in Bangladesh and about 65,000 workers are occupie

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\(\text{1 Bidi in Bangladesh: Myths and Reality; The Bidi Production sector in Bangladesh}

\(\text{2 http://www.thefinancialexpress-bd.com/2014/03/30/26022 (Accessed 30 March 2014)}\)
Researchers and lobbyists disagree to publish the exact number of child workers in the factories. But research, media reports and investigations by Tobacco Industry Watch Team at bidi factories have found shocking scenarios. According to information, most of the children are aged from 4 - 12 years old and are engaged into different stages of bidi production process. After discussions with Haragaach bidi labour leaders and bidi factory workers it has been found that there are 35 bidi factories in the district which is 30% of all the bidi factories in the country and the number of bidi workers in the factories is about 40,000. Among the 40,000 labours, half of them are children (50%), among the remaining 20,000, there are 12,000 female (30%) and 8,000 males (20%). Among the children, 15,000 regularly or irregularly attend school and the rest do not attend at all. The children are unaware about the health hazards or about their uncertain future for working with the bidi factories. According to the locals, the boys and girls who work in the bidi factories cannot cross the primary education boundary and majority of them drop out when they are at the fifth grade. Similarly, discussions with bidi labourers and the journalists of Lalmonirhat reveals that there are nine bidi factories in the district, which is 7.7% of all the factories in the country and there are around 21,000 labourers engaged with the factories, and 70% (14,700) of them are children aging from 4 – 14 years. The validity of the information has been found through direct observations in some of the bidi factories of the region. Investigations have found that 60-70% is children in the factories, and the scenario is more alarming at domestic level as around 90 of the children are engaged with processing empty bidi shells or sticks.

Investigations have also found that usually children are engaged in the four stages of bidi production –

1. preparing empty bidi shells,
2. inserting chopped tobacco in to the shells,
3. closing the shell tops and
4. preparing bidi packets.

Among all the tasks, bidi researchers and lobbyists disagree to publish the exact number of child workers in the factories. But research, media reports and investigations by Tobacco Industry Watch Team at bidi factories have found shocking scenarios. According to information, most of the children are aged from 4 - 12 years old and are engaged into different stages of bidi production process. After discussions with Haragaach bidi labour leaders and bidi factory workers it has been found that there are 35 bidi factories in the district which is 30% of all the bidi factories in the country and the number of bidi workers in the factories is about 40,000. Among the 40,000 labours, half of them are children (50%), among the remaining 20,000, there are 12,000 female (30%) and 8,000 males (20%). Among the children, 15,000 regularly or irregularly attend school and the rest do not attend at all. The children are unaware about the health hazards or about their uncertain future for working with the bidi factories. According to the locals, the boys and girls who work in the bidi factories cannot cross the primary education boundary and majority of them drop out when they are at the fifth grade. Similarly, discussions with bidi labourers and the journalists of Lalmonirhat reveals that there are nine bidi factories in the district, which is 7.7% of all the factories in the country and there are around 21,000 labourers engaged with the factories, and 70% (14,700) of them are children aging from 4 – 14 years. The validity of the information has been found through direct observations in some of the bidi factories of the region. Investigations have found that 60-70% is children in the factories, and the scenario is more alarming at domestic level as around 90 of the children are engaged with processing empty bidi shells or sticks.

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and the remaining are in the factories. Usually children work in factories from 9am to 12am and make bidi shells from 4pm to 9pm at their residences. The bidi shells prepared at homes are taken to the factories to be inserted processed tobacco and packaging. Although the adults are responsible to prepare the packets, children are also found in participating in packaging. Payment for the children to prepare bidi shells is very poor. A child, if works at a factory from 4pm to 9pm, can make in average around 4,500 shells and they are paid only Tk 7.50 for per thousand shells. By the same way, a child from 8am to 12am can close on average around 5,000 shell tops and the wage is same for it –TK 7.50 for per thousand that means a child earns Tk 35 a day on average. Following the locals, in most of the factories there are 12 working days in a month, and accordingly a child can earns only Tk 420 in a month on average. However, considering the daily income it is only Tk 14 for a day.

The locals said that the children cannot get out the bidi processing trap once they are involved and most of the children turn into tobacco users. Children also suffer from malnutrition as they work in the unhealthy environments for years, use tobacco and do not get balanced meals. They face different diseases in the very beginning of their lives. Discussion with the child workers unveils that they suffer from frequent fevers and coughs are too common among them. They also suffer from headaches, abdominal problems, diarrhea, muscle pain etc. Besides, chronic bronchitis and asthma affected children are turning the worst sufferers for the unhealthy environment inside the bidi factories. A medical officer of Haragaach Government Hospital has acknowledging the issue said that half of the patients who come to the medical suffer from cold, coughs, fever and malnutrition. The medical
The earning scenario of the child labour households is horrific as selling their labour is their capital of income and even most of the households do not have any cultivable lands, livestock and even a small piece of homestead lands. Majority of the household members are engaged into bidi industry, and some of them are engaged as agriculture labourer, transport worker or petty traders. The households where child labourers for bidi factories live earn around TK 3000 on average. Meeting the costs of a household for a month with the scanty amount is almost similar to execute something impossible. Following the household income and expenditure survey (HIES 2010), a landless household earned Tk 11479 on average in 2010, it was Tk 7203, 5842 and 4366 in the year of 2005, 2000 and 1995/96 respectively.4 So, it is found that a landless household earned Tk 4366 around one

4 Report of the household income & expenditure survey 2010

and half decades ago and the average income of the bidi labourers is lower than that now.
During the past few years, the wage of all types of day laborers have increased significantly, but the wages of the bidi laborers have not been increased and even it might be reduced a bit in terms of real wages. Therefore, to cope with the income disparity, the households are deploying their children to work at bidi factories. Analysis of the daily wages of all the laborers in Bangladesh after the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) survey ‘Wage Rate of Working Poor in Bangladesh, 2009-10’ shows that the wages of the bidi and zarda workers is lowest than the any other sector in the country. The current wages scenario of child labourer working in the bidi factories is more terrible as they get only Tk 35 on average. The inhumane face of scanty wages to the children becomes clearer when the daily income distribution is calculated from the monthly average wage income. According to calculation it is only TK 14 a day. Is this enough for a child to meet his daily needs? Tobacco companies are exploiting them for their poverty and unawareness, and entrapping the innocent kids with the death-traps.

**Case 1: Dollar caught in deathtrap**

Dollar is a boy of about 14. The poor kid is entrapped by the bidi industry’s deathtrap. The malnourished boy lives with the other 5 household members at a small room beside Gafur Bidi factory in Haragaach. He studied in the first grade and could not continue it like the other bidi factory child labours. To support his family, he started working at Aziz Bidi Factory only when he was seven. At the factory he is responsible for inserting bidi shells with tobacco, closing the shell tops and bidi packaging. He works from 8am to 4pm. Besides, he is also engaged helping his mother and other family members at his

*Based on Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and Key Informant Interviews (KII) with bidi laborers at Haragach (Rangpur) and Khuniagach (Lalmonirhat).*
Dollar, who started helping his house to prepare empty bidi shells, is to be noted that the children who prepare shells are usually the younger ones aged from five to nine years old. Dollar said that once he was an associate of his father at the bidi factory and gradually turned into a bidi worker. But his father is no longer continuing the work. Majority of the children in Haragaach start helping their household in bidi processing as part of helping to their parents. Consequently they enter at the unhealthy bidi factories. Dollar has been working at the bidi factory for seven years. He works thrice a week and prepares 6000 bidi shells a day. He inserts tobacco into the shells, locks the bidi tops and packs the sticks. He earns Tk 143 for preparing 6000 sticks of bidi from the factory. His total share is Tk 103 and the rest Tk 40 is for making bidi shells by his household members (sister, mother and brother). Thereby, he earns Tk 309 on average in a week and Tk 1236 in a month. Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES 2010) data shows that the monthly average (per capita) income of a person was Tk 2553 in 2010, Tk 1485 was in 2005 and Tk 1128 was in 2000 and Tk 830 in 1995 – 96. The current earning of Dollar is less than the average per capita income of 2005 and slightly higher than 2000.

Rough and pre-matured facing Dollar has skinny limbs. His complexion turns fade with no mildness. He frequently falls sick, suffers from fever, muscle pain, diarrhea. Coughs and colds are his regular companion. In such cases, he does not go to doctor rather takes medications from the local drug stores. Even his family members are not worried over his sickness. They have coped up with the situation. Actually they need money more than anything to fill their hunger. So, they barely have any time to look over him. The premature body is being used as an earning source for his family. His father alone cannot bear all the expenses and they also do not own any croplands to grow food crops. His father said that the family is being maintained with the additional earnings of his son. Dollar has a plan to leave bidi

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5 Report of the household income & expenditure survey 2010
Dollar opines that there are around 14-15 thousand workers at Aziz bidi factory and around 7000-8000 of them are children (2/3 thousand boys and 5/6 thousand girls). But the locals said that 60/65 per cent workers of the factory are children. Following a research, 75,000 workers are engaged in 195 bidi factories across the country, and if half of the workers are children then there are 42,500 child workers are leading inhumane and hazardous lives like Dollar. Child labour is prohibited in the bidi factories. Since there is no application of the policies, a significant portion of the future cohort of the country is being destroyed by the death selling traps of the tobacco companies.

**Case 2: Bidi making chains Mukta**

Mukta is a nine years old girl living at the Saheb Para of Haragaach. Her father is a truck helper who earns Tk 2500 – 3000 monthly on average. The earning is barely enough to maintain the five-member household expenses. So, Mukta is to make bidi with her older sister and mother.

She started bidi making when she was seven years old and goes to the bidi factory in every Saturday and Monday with her mother. She works from 8am to 11am and locks around 5000 bidi shell tops. She gets Tk 7 for per thousand. She is an assistant of her mother. Her mother receives an order of preparing 18,000 bidis in a week and is to submit 9000 bidis on Wednesday and the remaining 9000 on Saturday. Her mother and sister makes 18,000 bidi shells in four days and fills tobacco in the shells, locks the tops and packaging is done when Mukta goes into the factory with her mother. Her mother receives Tk 330 for the 18,000 bidis altogether and she gets Tk 70 for her participation. She earns Tk 280 on average in a month. Although she is in her second grade, she is irregular to school. Moreover, she is becoming thin gradually and suffering from fever and coughs. At times she cannot attend school or the bidi factory for her sickness. When she was asked about how she felt in this job, she remained tight lipped. Might be the question was irrelevant to her or she is too familiar...
Case 3: Family shouldered on childhood

Eight years old Rokhsana is a child labour from Kalmatir para under Lalmonirhat district. She has been engaged with bidi shell preparation with her mother when she was five. Currently she works five or six days in a week. Her mother gets order to prepare 10,000 bidi shells in a week. She prepares 4000 and the rest is done by her mother. They get Tk 8 only for preparing per 1000 bidi shells. Rokhsana earns Tk 32 in a week on average and monthly is Tk 128. Her mother is a non-card holder of bidi factory. She works on a sub-contract from the card-holder workers. It is the rule of the locality that the workers who do not have cards will prepare bidi shells sitting at their residences under sub-contract arranged by the card-holder workers. Card holders get order to prepare 10-18 thousand bidi a day. But being it impossible for them under the tight timeline, they employ the non card-holders to make bidi shells. The card-holders supply the shell preparing materials and a deadline and collect the shells when done.

Rokhsana’s father is a day labourer. He does not have works round the year. He also does not have any croplands. His scanty income is inadequate to bear all the household expenses. So, he engaged his daughter in bidi making. Rokhsana’s mother, Sheuli Begum, said that most of the locals are engaged with

with the question that it is unnecessary for her to answer it. Whatever the fact is, such children are never unchained.
bidi production. Sheuli added that particularly people who do not have any croplands, wealth or helpless, are integrated with the hazardous bidi factory.

**Case 4: Shuki deprived of education**

Eleven years old Shuki attended school till her second grade. Now she is a regular worker of a bidi factory. She lives with her family at Beribandh (embankment) of Baniapara under Lalmonirhat district. Shuki wakes up at 5am to go at the bidi factory with her father and returns at 5pm. She is ordered to prepare 10,000 bidi a day and is paid Tk 240 altogether. She gets Tk 24 for per thousand bidi preparation. She is to spend Tk 80 to prepare one thousand bidi shells by sub-contract and she with her father receives Tk 160 which is their actual income. They work around 20 days a month on average and earn around Tk 3200 of which Tk 800 belongs to her. She goes to bidi factory five days in a week and locks around 5000 tops of bidi shells. She receives Tk 8 for per thousand. Her weekly average income is Tk 200 and Tk 800 monthly. It is to be noted that her income is more on average than any other children as she is privileged with five-day working opportunity and her skills to prepare bidi.

She was accompanied with her parents during the interview. Her parents are indifferent to the unhealthy bidi factory environment and her absence at school. Rather, their shining faces expressed satisfaction for the additional income of their daughter. Once they were a solvent family. But they are to live on the Beribandh area after they lost their belongings by river erosion. They also do not have any lands or livestock as well. It was difficult for her father to maintain the five-member family expenses alone. So, her father has engaged her with bidi factory. However, not only she had to stop schooling, her health is also weakening after she is engaged with bidi factory. In line with fever and coughs, she
developed eye sight problems. But being poor, she could not consult a doctor. When asked about how long she will work in the bidi factory, her father replied that all the earnings of Shuki have been being saved for her marriage in future. When Shuki was asked how she feels working in bidi factories, she remained silent as her parents were sitting next to her. Many of the children of the locality are spending their childhood in the hazardous environment of the bidi factories. The childhood that was supposed to be invested in sports and education, is being spent for maintaining their family.

**Case 5: Inside the Factory**

Acute sharp stench was filled in the air when we entered at a bidi factory. Hundreds of tender hands were carefully working on the floor of a storehouse like space and they even do not have time to look around for the deadlines of finishing their respective tasks. The air, heavily polluted and filled with tobacco powder and dusts, is flying across the room and it appeared that life span is decreasing with each breath. In such a situation, teams have been made consisting of 2-5 members sitting in a circle with bidi making materials. Usually household members are used to form teams. Even there are many children found sleeping on the floor aged from six months to four years amid extreme negligence. The children are bound stay at the factories for long hours until their mother complete their tasks. Tobacco dusts are entering into their mouth and nose which is a serious health threat for them but nobody seems worried about the issue. However, the factory authority is also callous and has finished their responsibilities by showing a signboard on the main entrance that
The temperature is around 39° Celsius which is almost similar to a heat wave. Hot weather pouring down through the tinned (CI) roof inside the factory and there is no ceiling or table fans found inside. So, most of them are wearing undershirts and even some are working on bare body to adjust with the weather and fill their daily quota. All on a sudden, a comparison between the malnourished, poverty-stricken children in the bidi factory and children living in modern and healthy environment hit the mind. It is the cruel reality of life. The children in the bidi factory were covered with tobacco dusts, their eyes dimmed and small, dried faces, boney bodies and limbs, absence of childish activities prevailing among them. Poverty has made them wasting their childhoods to bear their households for a little longer.

Despite having lots of queries in mind, there was lack scope to ask the questions to someone inside the bidi factory. We only observed and tried to realize the real condition of living of the children and their families with the meager income in exchange of the hardest labour. However, the authority of the bidi factory (one or two members who were present at the factory then) could not control over the team of seven to eight members including two local journalists. The images attached herein were taken very trickily by the team. We had to wait outside of the entrance to have some talks with the bidi workers as we had no other options left. Interviews were taken after their permission sitting by roadside or at
their respective residences. In Lalmonirhat, a three-
member team of bidi workers from a household,
where the mother was the team leader, was asked
that if there is only poverty to let people allow their
children to work in bidi factories. She precisely
replied that poverty is a fact but the bidi factory
owners also have some interest if child workers are
engaged into their factories. The bidi company
prefers thin fingers of the children as they could
quickly and perfectly prepare the bidi shells and
close the shell tops. Besides, children are available
and less demanding than the adult ones. Turning
emotional she said that her son, aged 10 years old,
had been working for past three years and her
daughter, aged eight, has been working for one and a
half years at the bidi factory. Her daughter suffers
from different diseases, particularly coughing. She
also said why the factory authority forbade us
strongly entering into a particular room because most
of the workers of the room are children. She was also
asked about the schooling of the children and how
that was possible. The question revealed a new face
of the factory authority. The factory owner become
active to admit the children in schools in the
beginning of a year and allows them leave from 9am
to 12am for attending classes. But after some days,
the rule becomes slacked and day-long bidi
preparation continues like the other days of the year.
Only a few children regularly attend school and this
is a deadly tactic by the factory owner. All the
children of the bidi factory are enrolled with school
but pass their time in the bidi factory by making
thousands of bidis!

Child labour inside the bidi factory is really
shocking. After visiting two factories in Haragaach,
and one in Khuniagaach under Lalmonirhat district, the six-member Tobacco Industry Watch BD team has come to an agreeable decision about the use of child labour in the bidi factories of the districts. After the team members’ opinion, over half of the bidi workers (60-65%) are children aging from 4–14. Observations, discussions with the bidi workers and analyzing the photos, the Tobacco Industry Watch BD team members have agreed about the ratio of child labour in the bidi factories. Since most of the children are malnourished, their actual age could not be known. But the Tobacco Industry Team evaluation is almost similar with the information gathered from the locals and secondary literatures on child labour. Whatever the statistics is, Tobacco Industry Watch BD wants the inhumane child labour on bidi factory to be stopped soon.