

WELLBEING OF CHILD DOMESTIC WORKERS IN URBAN BANGLADESH

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ABSTRACT

The present exploratory study was conducted to reveal and identify the perceptions of the Child Domestic Workers (CDWs) about their working life, the factors contributing to CDWs' wellbeing and ill-being, CDWs' and their employers' perception about each other and the perceptions of CDWs about the future opportunities they have in their lives. Through confidential in-depth interview with semi-structured open-ended questionnaire, data had been collected. The sample consisted of 30-girl and 20-boy CDWs (between 9 and 14 years of age) and their employers who reside in Dhaka city. The study revealed that the perceived wellbeing of the CDWs are mainly due to sufficient food, light work, leisure time, education, scope to play with the family kids and scope to talk to other domestic workers or family members. All of the respondents sometimes feel sad for living away from their families. Other causes of ill-being include being put under lock, no other job choice, very few holidays after long continuous service (for not less than six months), no scheduled work time, no source of mental support, etc. Low level of communication and knowledge gap between the employers and the CDWs were found in every instance. On the basis of the information and suggestion from both the employers and CDWs, possible future interventions to promote CDWs' wellbeing and to reduce their ill-being are discussed.

Keywords: Child Domestic Workers (CDWs), child right, Dhaka, leisure time.

INTRODUCTION

In the *Innocenti Digest* (May, 1999), 'child domestics' or 'domestic workers' are defined as children under the age of 18 who work in other people's households, doing domestic chores, caring for children and running errands among other tasks. The ILO Convention 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labor(1999) declares Child Domestic Labor (CDL) to be one of the worst forms of child labor. In Bangladesh, ILO Convention No.

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182 on Worst form of Child Labour was ratified in the year 2001, but limited action has been taken. Child domestic workers are found in almost every lower middle class to upper class household in Bangladesh. In Dhaka as many as 300,000 children work as domestics (Lhalungpa, 1998), although the actual number may never be known. But unfortunately, the issue of Child Domestic Labour (CDL) received focus only recently. No longer than the past two decades, this issue has gradually become discernible on international platforms whenever child right issues are discussed.

Different studies on child domestic workers focus on the causes of child domestic work, the hazardous effects of such work on health, childhood poverty, psycho-social impact of domestic work, violation of their rights, deprivation from education, etc. (Shoishab, 1995; Anti-Slavery International, 1996, 1999, 2000; ILO, 2000, 2001, 2002a, 2002b; Witwer, ILO-IPEC, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004; Woodhead, 2004, Hawamdeh & Spencer 2002, 2003).

All these studies consider domestic work to be the worst form of child labour and thus suggest elimination of domestic work for children. To different extents it is the reality as revealed through these studies. On the basis of these studies we take it for granted that nothing else but through ensuring the observation of the rights mentioned in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), persisting situation for the CDWs can be improved.

Bangladesh is passing through a developmental transition. The country is on its way toward development. Through the post-independence years it has gradually been recognized as the lead performer among the "least developed countries", and there has even been talk as to whether the country should still belong to the group of Least Developed Countries (LDCs) as the poorest among the developing world (Mujeri & Sen, 2002). In such a circumstance, different interventions are being introduced to ensure the way further toward development. Some of these are proved to be very effective and contributed to national development while others partially succeeded or proved to be inappropriate.

The Government of Bangladesh (GoB) was one of the first countries to sign and ratify the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989; in the year 1990. It was a necessary step toward national development and since the ratification of the UNCRC, the situation has improved to some extent, but the problems remain.

Alongside the government, many NGOs have done various campaigns and have undertaken different motivational programmes. They have tried to reach many possible segments of the society to make people realize the importance of ensuring rights of children and act accordingly. But the situation does not seem to have improved much to the expected line. The reality is such that among many causes of children's engagement as domestic workers, poverty is considered to be the most important. The poor children become the easy victim of the poverty trap. Some of the NGOs have tried to incorporate the issue in the total development or poverty reduction initiative; but still to get any significant result. Right now, it will be an impossible target to achieve if UNCRC is to be real for the all the children of Bangladesh. Since the scenario cannot be altered readily, the next possible initiative seems to be to bring better life for the CDWs. The present study is the first step toward that.

A paper from the University of Bath relates child rights rhetoric to the reality of poverty in Bangladesh (White, 2001). It reports on interviews and group discussions with thirteen agencies engaged in promoting child rights and sixty street and working children, in Dhaka and rural Bangladesh. Findings cast doubt on the critical assumption underlying the child's rights discourse, that children form a unitary group with common rights and interests (reported in, *id21 Research Highlight*: 11 March 2002). The present study, relying on this doubt about common interest of children, tries to reveal the case of CDWs in Dhaka city. Whether common factors are responsible for their wellbeing; in other words, if they have common interest?

Focus of this study is wellbeing of CDWs. Wellbeing is studied from many different perspectives by different theorists. But, the primary thrust of recent social science attention has been to stress the diversity of childhoods across cultural context, space and time, with an attempt to develop more child-centred forms of analysis (White, 2002). The present study is reflection of the perception of the CDWs themselves; thereby revealing their subjecting wellbeing.

The present study was conducted to explore and identify:

- 1) the perceptions of the Child Domestic Workers (CDWs) about their working life;
- 2) the factors contributing to CDWs' wellbeing;
- 3) the factors contributing to CDWs' ill-being;
- 4) CDWs and their employers' perception about each other; and
- 5) the perceptions of CDWs about the future opportunities they have in their lives.

METHOD

Participants and Procedure

The present study considered the situation of live-in child domestics; children who work full time in exchange for room, board, care, and sometimes remuneration. The sample consisted of 30-girl and 20-boy CDWs (aged between 9 and 14 years) who are working as CDWs for no less than six months and their employers who reside in Dhaka city. The CDWs were selected from middle class families owning no personal house in Dhaka city and having monthly family income below taka twenty five thousand.

Considering the difficulty of getting access to any unknown person's house, the employers had been selected with the help of the known persons of the researcher and three research assistants. A list of 80 possible middle class employers in Dhaka city was prepared, who meet the employer selection criteria. The known persons to the researcher and research assistants helped in collection of necessary information and preparation of the list. The researcher and the assistants went to collect data along with the known persons. The employers were requested to cooperate in the data collection from their CDWs and also to furnish their contents. They were told that the study was about the work life of the CDWs.

From among eighty employers, 58 could be convinced for the confidential in-depth

interview with their CDWs. Using semi-structured open-ended questionnaire data had been collected from both the CDWs and their employers. Among the fifty eight, eight CDWs could answer almost nothing. Thus finally, 50 CDWs and their employers became the respondents for the data that had been analyzed for the present study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study revealed that 44 (88%) of the CDWs are happy with their work. This finding is contradictory with the existing ideas about domestic work as the worst form of child labour. They on an average work for 16 hours a day. Of the total 50 respondents 6 could talk very less. It seemed that they have no one to talk to and not at all used to talk to a stranger, though the researchers tried to build rapport from the beginning.

The reasons behind the perceived wellbeing of the CDWs, explored during the interview, are represented in Table 1.

Table 1: Factors contributing Towards Perceived Wellbeing of the CDWs

Factors	Number (%) of CDWs
<i>Enough food</i>	46 (92%)
<i>Light work</i>	42 (84%)
<i>Leisure time</i>	42 (84%)
<i>Education</i>	32 (64%)
<i>Scope to play with the family kids</i>	32 (64%)
<i>Scope to talk to other domestic workers or family members</i>	32 (64%)

Enough food

Most of CDWs interviewed consider the food they get to be enough. The discrimination in food items is considered usual by them. For example, fruits, eggs, specially cooked food are not for them as they have perceived. Unlimited rice is the source of comfort, mentioned many of the respondents. A few also mentioned about the timing of having meals. For them, it is sometimes very late.

Light work

For the boy CDWs, the work is comfortable. Most of them get chance to go to the nearby shops and on their way can talk to people. Girl CDWs don't consider their work to be very hard. Many compared their present work to their past work at the village.

Leisure time

Most of the CDWs manage some leisure time. They either sleep or watch television programmes. Those who are allowed to meet other domestic workers take the opportunity.

Education

Some of them are taught by their employer or by the children of the employer. A few reported to go to school for the domestic workers in the community that are run by the NGOs.

Schooling is reported to be a very enjoyable experience. It is learning to read and write and having scope of interacting with others of the same community of domestic workers.

Scope to play with the family kids

These children come to work leaving parents and siblings in the village. Most of them seemed to be emotionally vulnerable. The kids of the employer are usually friendly to them and the scope to play with the family kids is a great way releasing down and depressing emotional state.

Scope to talk to other domestic workers or family members

None of these households were having more than one CDW. So, when during leisure or school schedule or (for boy CDWs) on the way to the shops, they get scope to talk to other domestic workers, they feel very happy to talk to and share their past and present experiences and future plans. In families, where there are elderly members or other members living, they feel comfortable to talk and share their feelings.

All of the respondents sometimes feel sad for living away from their families. Other causes of ill-being include the following in Table 2.

Table 2: Factors contributing Towards the perceived ill-being of the CDWs

Factors	Number and (%) of CDWs
<i>Put under lock</i>	24 (48%)
<i>No other job choice</i>	24 (48%)
<i>Very few holidays after long continuous service</i>	38 (76%)
<i>No scheduled work time</i>	42 (84%)
<i>No source of mental support</i>	15 (30%)

The factors contributing towards ill-being were difficult to reveal because most of them were happy with the facilities they were getting.

Communication and knowledge gap between the employers and the CDWs is found in every instance in terms of duties, responsibilities and rights. More than 50% of the employers were not happy to give them opportunities like schooling and their talking to other domestic workers. In Bengali they said these contribute to make the CDWs argumentative and disobedient. For the girl CDWs, security was stated to be the main cause of not allowing them to go out. Few employers mentioned that the situation was better earlier. These days they cannot behave the way they like with their CDWs as the neighbours are very aware. CDWs meet the other domestic workers and the neighbours come to know about the employer and how the employer behaves with the CDW. They mentioned about the impact of the television programmes. The CDWs know about their right from some programmes. For them, the neighbours are, as if, in competition to give freedom to their CDWs. Only 19 (38%) of the CDWs could say something about their future opportunities but none knew how to realize their dreams.

CONCLUSION

The information collected from both the employers and CDWs provide important insight about the possible future interventions to promote CDWs wellbeing and to reduce their ill-being. Changing the perception held by the employers that the CDWs are like slaves is essential. Reducing the employers' prejudices and discriminative behaviour may help CDWs get emotional support. One important observation during the study was that out of 80 listed employers, only 58 (72.5%) could be convinced for confidential interviewing of their CDWs. We know nothing about their vulnerability, exploitation, hardship and ill-being; they are the

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