



# Child labour in Bangladesh and India: A preliminary gender-based analysis

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**Working Paper**

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Understanding Children's Work (UCW) Programme

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As part of broader efforts towards durable solutions to child labour, the International Labour Organization (ILO), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and the World Bank initiated the interagency Understanding Children's Work (UCW) programme in December 2000. The programme is guided by the Oslo Agenda for Action, which laid out the priorities for the international community in the fight against child labour. Through a variety of data collection, research, and assessment activities, the UCW programme is broadly directed toward improving understanding of child labour, its causes and effects, how it can be measured, and effective policies for addressing it. For further information, see the programme website at [www.ucw-project.org](http://www.ucw-project.org).

This paper is part of the research carried out within UCW (Understanding Children's Work), a joint ILO, World Bank and UNICEF programme. The views expressed here are those of the authors' and should not be attributed to the ILO, the World Bank, UNICEF or any of these agencies' member countries.

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# **Child labour in Bangladesh and India: A preliminary gender-based analysis**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The study looks at differences by sex in key dimensions of the child labour phenomenon in Bangladesh and India – its extent, nature, and effect on education outcomes. It addresses what type of activity is more common among girls, and the extent to which girls' work experience differs from that of boys.

The study encompasses not only girls and boys at work in economic activity, but also those performing household chores in their own homes. The latter group of children, dominated by girls, is frequently overlooked in child labour statistics and in analyses of child labour. This can result in gender biases both in the understanding of child labour and in policies addressing it.

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## **CONTENTS**

1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
2. SEX DIFFERENTIALS IN WORK INVOLVEMENT .....	3
2.1 Children’s involvement in economic activity.....	3
2.2 Children’s involvement in non-economic activity .....	5
3. SEX DIFFERENTIALS IN THE NATURE AND IMPACT OF WORK .....	7
3.1 Children’s work characteristics .....	7
3.2 Intensity of children’s work.....	9
3.3 Educational consequences of children’s work.....	10
4. WORK IN DOMESTIC SERVICES .....	11

## 1. INTRODUCTION

1. This study examines the child labour phenomenon in Bangladesh and India from a gender perspective. It looks at differences by sex in key dimensions of the child labour phenomenon – its extent, nature, and effect on education outcomes and addresses what types of work are more common among girls, and the extent to which girls' work experience differs from that of boys.

2. The Bangladesh Labour Force Survey (LFS) and the India National Sample Survey (NSS) are the primary datasets used in this study. Both were national household surveys that collected information on children's work and related child and household variables<sup>1</sup>.

3. Among the key results emerging from the descriptive analysis are the following:

- Patterns of involvement in economic activity by sex differ in the two countries. In Bangladesh, boys are much more likely to be involved in economic activity. Involvement in economic activity is highest, and the gender gap is largest, in rural areas. In India, by contrast, gender considerations appear to play a relatively minor role in household decisions concerning child labour. Girls' economic activity rate approaches that of boys, especially in rural areas.
- In both countries, girls are more likely to be assigned responsibility for household chores: the proportion of girls in household chores substantially outstrips that of boys. This underscores the fact that the economic activity rate alone is a misleading indicator of girls' work involvement. Ignoring housework performed by girls in the household tends to underestimate the possible detrimental role of work on girls'.
- The fact that girls are less or equally involved in economic activity does not translate into their being more involved in school. Indeed in India, there is a significant enrolment gap favouring boys, while in Bangladesh school attendance is virtually the same for boys and girls.
- Boys' economic activity is heavily concentrated in the agriculture sector in Bangladesh, while girls' economic activity tends to be more heterogeneous, distributed across commerce, services, manufacturing as well as agriculture. There appears to be little specialisation by sex in children's economic activities in India. Both boys and girls work primarily in agriculture with work in commerce coming a distant second.

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<sup>1</sup> Different survey methods and questionnaire means that the results of the two surveys are not strictly comparable.

4. These findings indicate that girls' and boys' work is dissimilar, but do not indicate that girls face a lower risk of work involvement or that work poses a lower threat to girls' welfare. Girls appear to work as long hours as boys. Furthermore, work does not appear to have a greater affect on the ability of girls to attend school. In fact, in Bangladesh the opposite holds true, the attendance rate of working girls is higher than that of their male counterparts. In India, there are no large differences by sex in terms of ability of working children to attend school.
5. Descriptive statistics we present in this study fail to capture hidden and unregulated work sectors, where risk of exploitation is especially high and where girls frequently predominate. Girls working in domestic service, a common phenomenon in many Asian countries, are a case in point. The scant evidence available on these girls suggests that they face a number of serious health and developmental threats. In Bangladesh, for example, girls in domestic services work more than 50 hours a week and are less likely to attend school than girls working in other economic activity categories.

## 2. SEX DIFFERENTIALS IN WORK INVOLVEMENT

### 2.1 Children's involvement in economic activity

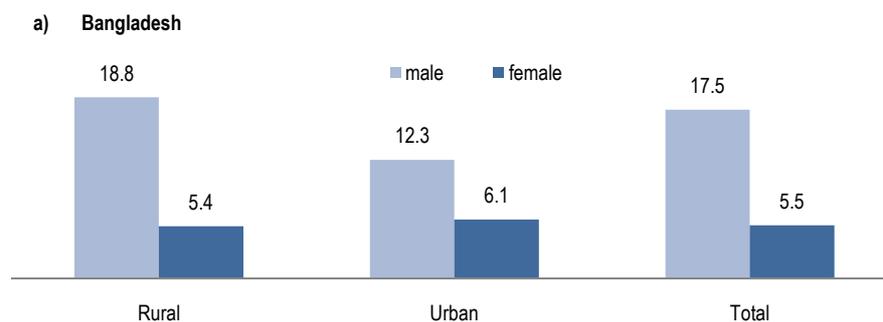
6. There are large sex-based disparities in children's involvement in economic activities<sup>2</sup> in Bangladesh, suggesting that gender plays an important role in decisions concerning children's work. As shown in Figure 1a, the proportion of 7-14 year-old boys in economic activity is three times that of similarly aged girls. The gender gap in child economic activity rates rises with age, from five percentage points for the 7-11 age group to 22 percentage points for the 12-14 age group, reflecting the different socially-dictated paths taken by boys and girls as they become of age.

7. These national figures disguise important differences by residence in Bangladesh. Child work is more common in rural compared to urban areas, especially for boys. The overall gender gap in economic activity rates appears to be primarily the result of boys' greater involvement in rural work; urban areas feature a smaller difference in involvement by sex.

8. In India, differences by sex in economic activity rates are relatively small. Girls and boys are at work in an economic activity in roughly equal proportion. Boys are more likely than girls to be involved in economic activities in urban areas while 7-14 year-old boys and girls work in almost equal proportion in rural areas (Figure 1b).

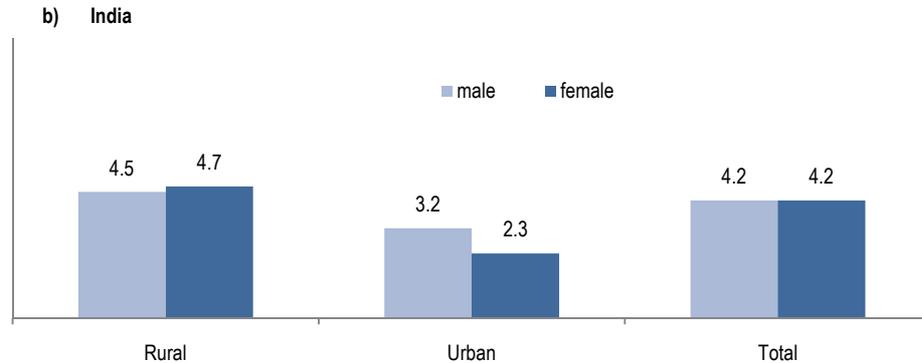
9. The fact that girls are less or equally involved in economic activity does not translate into their being more involved in school. Indeed in India, there is a significant enrolment gap favouring boys, while in Bangladesh school attendance is virtually the same for boys and girls aged 7-14 years.

Figure 1. Percentage of children in economic activity, 7-14 years age range, by sex and residence



<sup>2</sup> Economic activity is defined by the UN System of National Accounts as encompassing most productive activities, including unpaid and illegal work, work in the informal sector, and production of goods for own use. In line with the international definition of employment, one hour spent on economic activity during the reference week is sufficient for classifying a person (child or adult) as economically active during that week.

Figure 1. Percentage of children in economic activity, 7-14 years age range, by sex and residence



Source: UCW calculations based on Bangladesh Annual Labour Force Survey, 2005-2006 and India NSS 2004-2005.

10. School attendance is high but not yet universal in Bangladesh, with little difference by sex. 91 percent of 7-11 year-old girls and 90 percent of similarly aged boys are in school. School attendance, however, falls off to 80 percent for girls and 76 percent for boys in the 12-14 years age range (Figure 2a).

11. In India, girls lag behind boys in terms of school attendance. Among 7-11 year-old children, boys' attendance exceeds girls' by four percentage points, and among 12-14 year-old children, boys' attendance is ten percentage points higher than girls' (Figure 2b).

Figure 2. Children's school attendance, 7-14 years age range, by sex and age group

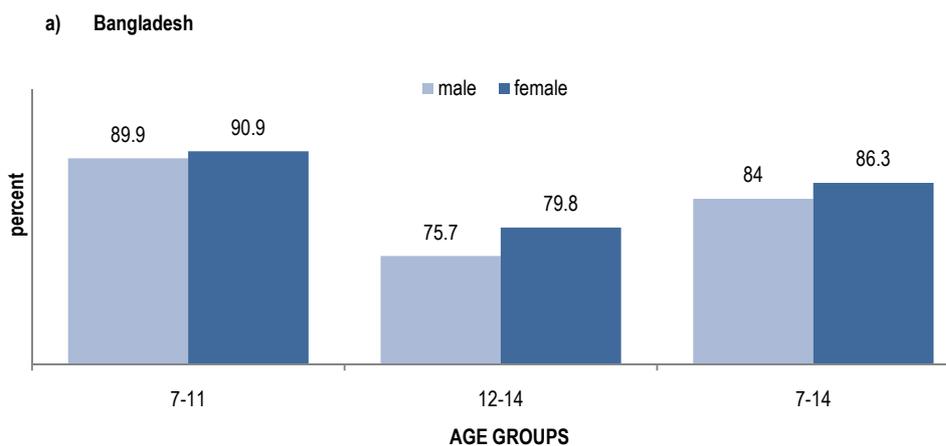
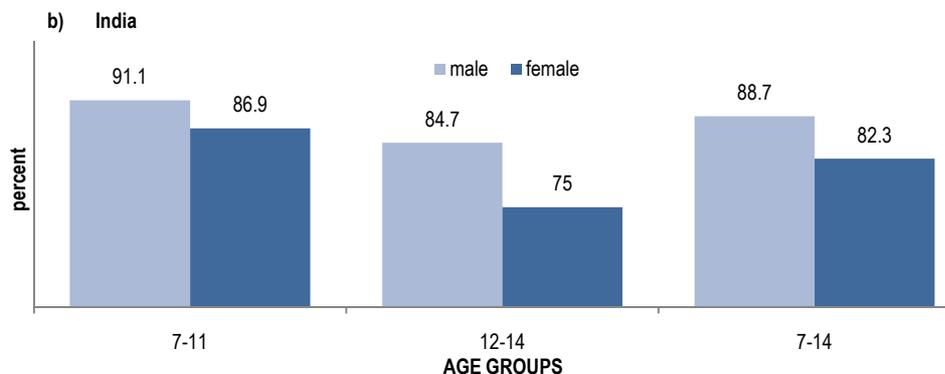


Figure 2. Children's school attendance, 7-14 years age range, by sex and age group



Source: UCW calculations based on Bangladesh Annual Labour Force Survey, 2005-2006 and India NSS 2004-2005

## 2.2 Children's involvement in non-economic activity

12. Children's work in economic activity provides only a partial picture of children's work involvement, as children can also be at work in household chores<sup>3</sup> such as fuel wood and water collection, cooking, child care, and shopping for their own household. Household chores can pose risks to children's health, and can affect children's ability to attend and benefit from schooling in the same ways as economic activity. Consideration of household chores is therefore also important to a general understanding of children's, and particularly girls', work. Households in both countries studied in this paper appear much more likely to assign responsibility for household chores to girls than to boys.

13. The Bangladesh survey offered information concerning household chores only for children not engaged in economic activity, and for this reason estimates presented below may understate girls' and boys' involvement in household chores. As shown in Figure 3a, the proportion of girls in household chores outstrips that of boys in Bangladesh. Among 7-11 year-olds, girls' involvement in household chores is almost two times that of boys, and among 12-14 year-olds, around three times that of boys.

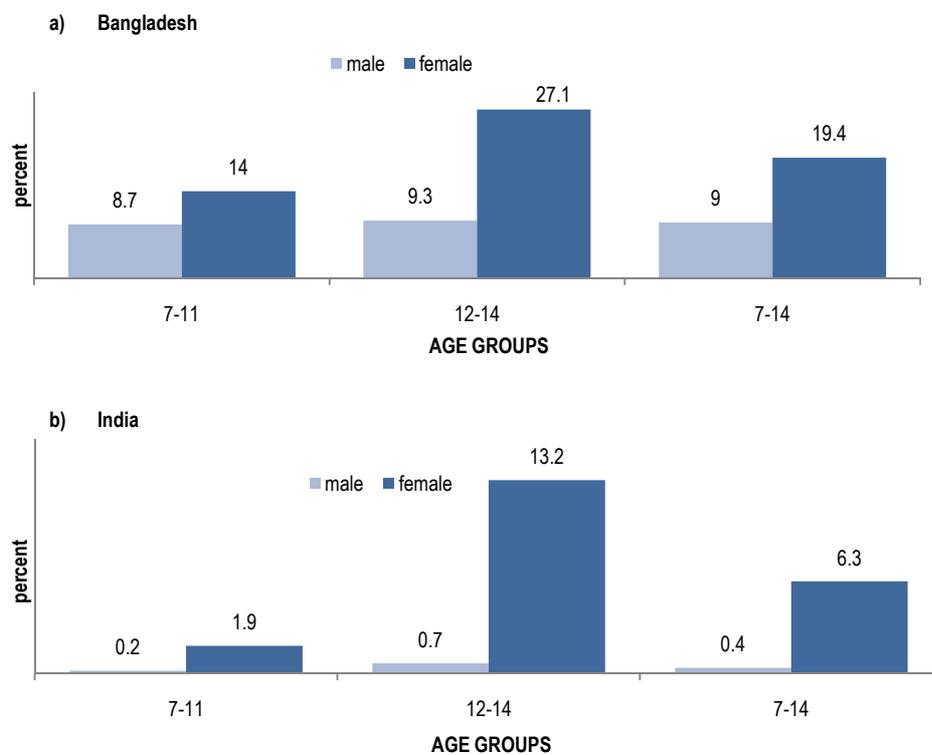
14. There is thus a clear pattern of specialisation by sex in children's work in Bangladesh: boys predominate in economic (income-generating) activities and girls in work activities related to the running of the household. This reflects the different social roles prescribed for boys and

<sup>3</sup> Household chores refer to work of a domestic nature performed by children in their own household. They include activities such as house cleaning, food preparation and child care. These activities are considered non-economic activities and therefore outside the 'production boundary', according to the UN System of National Accounts for measuring GDP.

girls. It also likely reflects the fact that boys and girls face different economic incentives and constraints regarding their time-use choices.

15. Similarly, in India, information on household chores is limited to children who report housework as their main activity between economic activity, housework and schooling. The proportion of girls in household chores exceeds that of boys in India (Figure 3b). The difference by sex substantially increases with age; among 12-14 year-olds, girl's involvement in household chores is over ten times that of boys.

Figure 3. Children's involvement in household chores, 7-14 years age range, by sex and age group



Source: UCW calculations based on Bangladesh Annual Labour Force Survey, 2005-2006 and India NSS 2004-2005

### 3. SEX DIFFERENTIALS IN THE NATURE AND IMPACT OF WORK

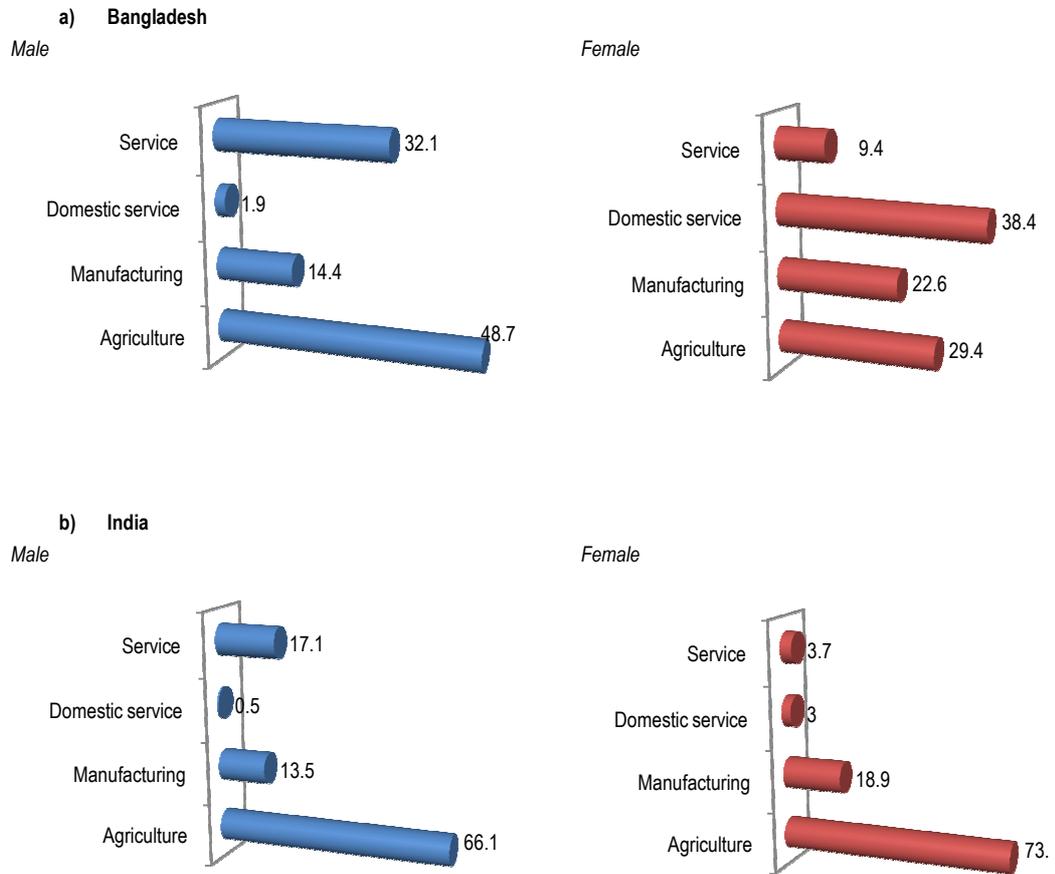
#### 3.1 Children's work characteristics

16. The survey did collect information on the sectors and modalities of economic activity performed by children in Bangladesh. However, it should be stressed that questions relating to work sector and modality are only asked to children who are working without attending school and thus offer only a very partial picture of work characteristics and how they may differ by sex. This information suggests that there is a considerable degree of specialisation by sex in the economic activities performed by children.

17. Agriculture is by far the most important sector for working boys, accounting for one of every two male child workers. The service and manufacturing sectors are second and third in terms of importance for working boys, accounting for 34 percent and 14 percent, respectively, of male child workers. Girls' work, on the other hand, is more heterogeneous, spread across services, agriculture and manufacturing. Included in the service sector are girl domestic servants working in private homes (38 percent of female working children), a group particularly vulnerable to abuse (Figure 4a).

18. Turning to the modality of employment (Figure 5a), boys work mostly in unpaid family work (38 percent) and paid employment (37 percent) with apprenticeship coming a distant third (11 percent) in terms of importance. For working girls, on the other hand, paid employment is common, accounting for four of every ten female working children, followed by domestic work and unpaid family work. The very different nature of girls' and boys' work in Bangladesh suggests that different policy approaches are needed to address this work.

Figure 4. Distribution of working children, 7-14 years age range, by work sector and sex

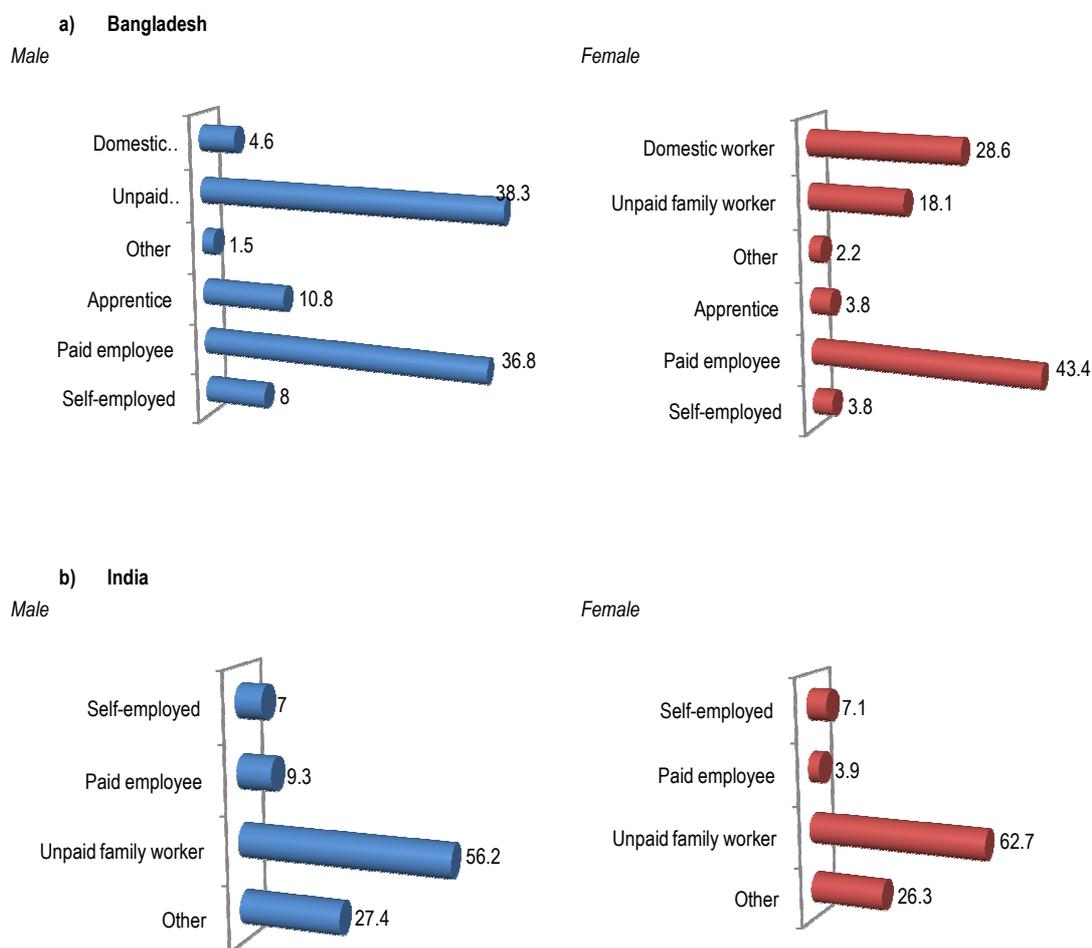


Source: UCW calculations based on Bangladesh Annual Labour Force Survey, 2005-2006 and India NSS 2004-2005

19. There appears to be little specialisation by sex in the type of activities performed by children in India. Girls' economic activity is heavily concentrated in the agriculture sector; farm work accounts for at least two of every three working girls (Figure 4b). Boys tend also to work in agriculture (almost 66 percent) with service activities and manufacturing coming a distant second and third in terms of importance (17 and 14 percent, respectively).

20. The family is the most important work setting for both boys and girls, but its relative importance by sex differs. Girls are much more likely than boys to work for their families, and much less likely than boys to work for wage (Figure 5b).

Figure 5. Distribution of working children, 7-14 years age range, by modality and sex



Source: UCW calculations based on Bangladesh Annual Labour Force Survey, 2005-2006 and India NSS 2004-2005

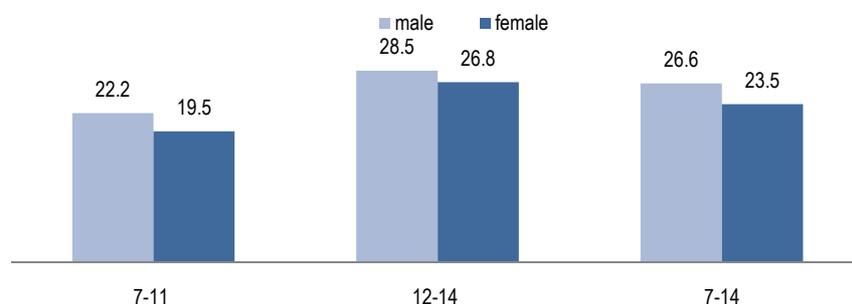
### 3.2 Intensity of children's work

21. Involvement in work is a relatively crude measure of the work burden faced by children because it does not capture work intensity, i.e., the time spent by children in work.<sup>4</sup> Working hours affect time available for schooling and leisure, and therefore children's current and future welfare. The time burden posed by economic activity is particularly heavy for children in Bangladesh. Unfortunately, information on the average weekly hours spent in economic activity is not available for India.

<sup>4</sup>As noted above, in line with the international definition of employment, children classified as economically active can work as little as one hour per week.

22. Are there differences by sex in the intensity of work performed by children in Bangladesh? Looking at economic activity, boys and girls appear to differ little in terms of the length of their working week (Figure 6). Boys put in more weekly hours in economic activity, but differences by sex in the intensity of work are very small. Weekly working hours increase with age for both boys and girls, but in roughly equal proportion. 7 to 11 year-old boys spend an average of two hours per week more on economic activities, and 12-14 year-old boys an average of one hour per week more, compared to similarly-aged girls.

Figure 6. Average weekly hours spent in economic activity, 7-14 years age range, by sex and age group



Source: UCW calculations based on Bangladesh Annual Labour Force Survey, 2005/2006.

### 3.3 Educational consequences of children's work

23. The educational consequences of work are perhaps one of the most important considerations in determining the degree to which this work constitutes child labour to be targeted for elimination. The preceding sections highlighted important differences by sex in the nature of children's work. Does this mean that the consequences of work on children's education also differ by sex? Data on school attendance collected by the survey datasets –allow at least a partial answer to this question.

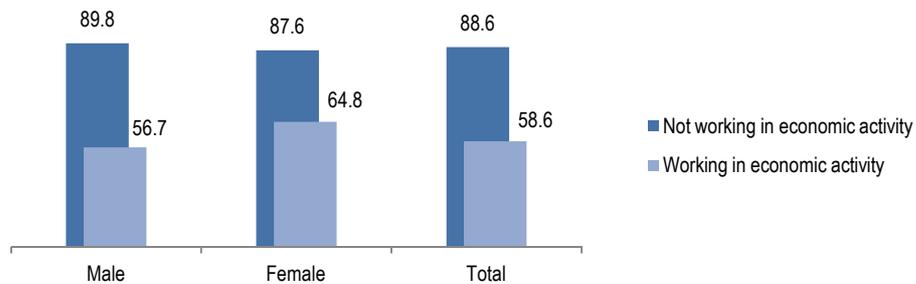
24. For both boys and girls, school attendance levels are, not surprisingly, negatively related to levels of involvement in economic activity. As shown in Figure 7, working children lag substantially behind non-working children in terms of school attendance.

25. Evidence from both countries does not suggest that work affects the ability of girls to attend school differently from that of boys. In fact, in Bangladesh the opposite holds true, the attendance rate of working girls is higher than that of their male counterparts. Among 7-14 year-old working children, girls' attendance exceeds boys' by eight percentage points. In

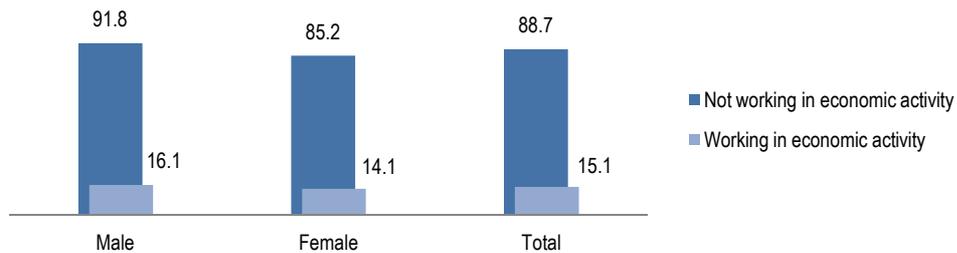
India, there are no large differences by sex in terms of the ability of working children to attend school.

Figure 7. School attendance rate, 7-14 years age range, by children's involvement in economic activity and age group

a) Bangladesh



b) India



Source: UCW calculations based on Bangladesh Annual Labour Force Survey, 2005-2006 and India NSS 2004-2005

26. It should be thus stressed, before concluding this section that the challenge in both countries does not specifically relate to the attendance of female working children, but rather to closing the attendance gap between working and non-working children generally. Work interferes both with children's ability to attend school and to perform effectively once there, underscoring the importance of child labour as a barrier to achieving Education for All.

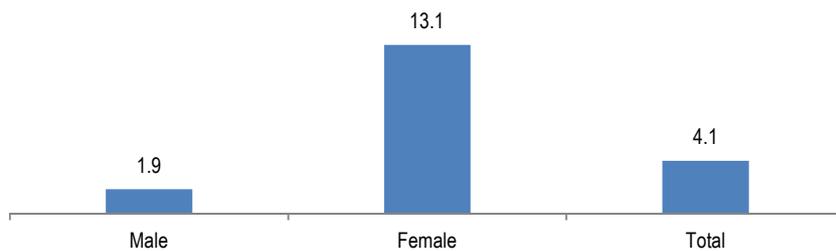
#### 4. WORK IN DOMESTIC SERVICES

27. Work in domestic service is a common phenomenon in many Asian countries, especially for girls. The scant evidence available on these girls suggests that they face a number of serious health and developmental threats. The data confirms that child domestic work is gender biased, mainly carried out by girls. In Bangladesh 13% of working girls aged 5-17 are involved in domestic work, compared to 2% of working boys. In India, 3% of economically active female children aged 7-17 are working as

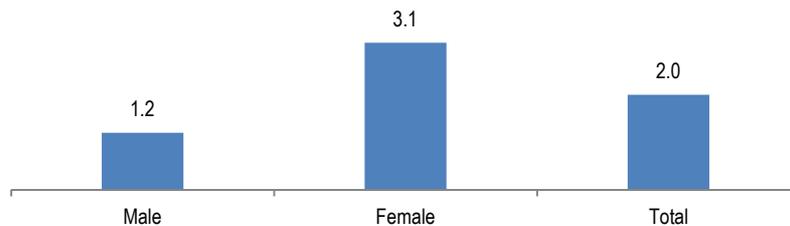
domestic servants against 1% of their male counterparts (Figure 8). Parents prefer to put girls into domestic service rather than boys, not only because household chores are traditionally seen as “women’s work”, but also because in some cases, the girls’ income helps to support the schooling of the brothers.

Figure 8. Children’s involvement in domestic work (% of economically active children), by sex

a) Bangladesh (5-17 years age range)



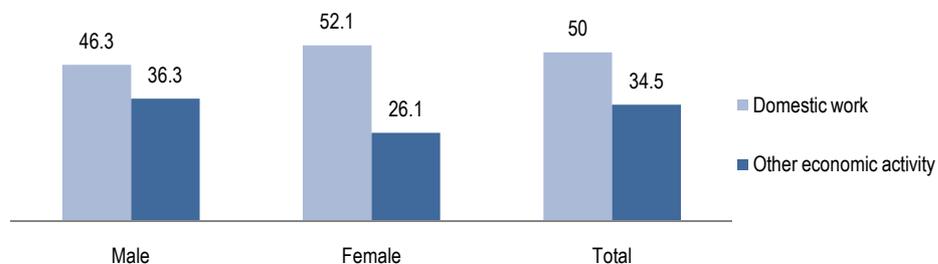
b) India (7-17 years age range)



Source: UCW calculations based on Bangladesh Annual Labour Force Survey, 2005-2006 and India NSS 2004-2005

28. It is important to highlight that children in domestic services often work very long hours (Figure 9). In Bangladesh, child domestic workers work 50 hours a week while children in other economic activities work on average 35 hours a week. Girl domestic workers put in much longer hours than girls working in other economic activity categories – 52 compared to 26 hours for the 5-17 years age group.

Figure 9. Average weekly hours spent in domestic work and other economic activity, 5-17 years age range, by sex

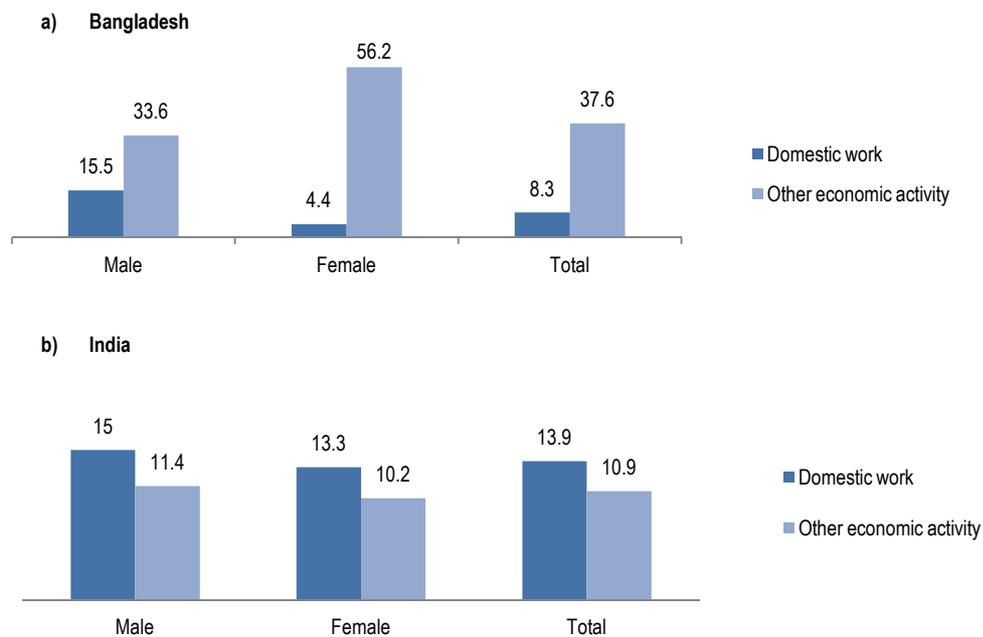


Source: UCW calculations based on Bangladesh Annual Labour Force Survey, 2005/2006.

29. Child domestic workers, due to the very time-consuming activity they carry out, are often not able to attend school and are too tired to study and do their homework; very little time is left for school after having completed the daily housework tasks. This supposedly is the reason why many are less likely to attend school and have a very low educational level.

30. Girl domestic workers are less likely to attend school than girls working in other economic activity categories. In Bangladesh, 4 percent of girl domestic workers attend school compared to 56 percent of girls in other economic activities. In India, on the other hand, there are no large differences in terms of the ability of child domestic workers to attend school.

Figure 10. School attendance rate, 5-17 years age range, by children's involvement in domestic work and sex



Source: UCW calculations based on Bangladesh Annual Labour Force Survey, 2005-2006 and India NSS 2004-2005