



Abstract: Comprehensive Mixed-Method Research on Child Labor in the Dried Fish Sector in Cox's Bazar

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ABSTRACT

In 2019 Winrock International (Winrock) partnered with Sustainable Upliftment Initiative Trust (SUIT) to produce an independent research study on child labor (CL) and work conditions in the dried fish sector (DFS) in Cox's Bazar. The objective of the study is to help the Child Labor Improvements in Bangladesh (CLIMB) program and its stakeholders to understand the nature, consequences, and scale of the child labor issue in the dried fish sector. The study used a mixed-method approach, combining qualitative and quantitative techniques, to examine these issues.

The study estimates that there are 561 dried fish establishments (DFEs) in two subdistricts (*upazilas*) of Cox's Bazar including 14,366 workers, of which child workers account for 20%. The child worker population in the dried fish establishments is 72% female; most are aged 14–17 (59%), but a substantial proportion is under age 14 (41%). Some of the common tasks that children perform are sorting the fish by type and size, tying the fish together, hanging the fish on the fences for drying, and other tasks, such as unloading raw fish from boats, loading fish onto carts, pulling carts, as well as working at the retail level.

An estimated 78% of the child workers come from internal migrant families who moved to Cox's Bazar from other *upazilas*; many of these are seasonal migrants. Child workers in the dried fish establishments are for the most part out of school (75%); nearly one-fifth (18%) never attended school, and for those who did attend school, only 9% studied at the Grade VI level or above. The quantitative evidence suggests that the child workers' families live in sub-standard, precarious shelter, rarely own land, and lack basic household possessions.

According to the international definition of hazardous child labor, all of the children surveyed experience hazardous working conditions such as carrying a heavy weight (86%); working with sharp tools (53%); standing in water or mud (44%); climbing on unstable racks (32%); and exposure to hazardous chemicals (31%). Very few received protective gear from their employer (25% gloves and <10% waterproof boots, caps, umbrellas, or masks). The average working time was 10.3 hours per day, or approximately 72 hours per week. All children are exposed to direct sunlight, with approximately 53% working more than five hours a day under direct sunlight. Children frequently report suffering from illnesses and injuries including fever (89%), wounds/cuts (84%), back pains/muscle pains (82%), skin diseases (81%), chronic headache (81%) and others. Many of the child workers surveyed reported physical and verbal abuse on the job; approximately 29% reported being beaten while 59% reported witnessing a beating. About one in three girls (34%) reported sexual harassment on the job while 51% of girls and 41% of boys witnessed sexual harassment of other workers. The study considered a child to be in forced child labor if their parent obtained an advance from the employer or the child reported coercion such as not being able to quit due to fear of their employer, not receiving payment for previous work, or not receiving wages or other benefits that they were promised when they were employed. Using this definition, 23% of the children surveyed are considered to be in forced labor: 28% of boys and 19% of girls.

Family disruptions caused by parents' separation or the loss of a parent, usually the father, are a common cause for the children to join the dried fish establishments. Approximately 46% of the child workers' families are headed by their mother. However, case studies of families whose children do not work in the dried fish establishments, but are of similarly low socioeconomic status, reveal a different orientation towards longer-term goals and children's continued education. Families whose children work in the dried fish establishments sometimes concurred that the children's earnings do not contribute much to household income, but all conveyed that the "hidden" costs associated with school attendance (such as transportation, study materials and extra tutoring) made it prohibitive for them. Also, no government primary school is present in the area where the dried fish establishments are located.