



## **RESEARCH AND EVIDENCE PAPER 9**

# **QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF 405 LIFE STORIES FROM CHILDREN WORKING IN THE WORST FORMS OF CHILD LABOUR IN BANGLADESH**

Mariah Cannon, Jiniya Afroze, Danny Burns, Mushtari Muhsina, Afrin Aktar, Azmi Akter, Ali Azman, Khandaker Reaz Hossain, Surojit Kundu, Shona Macleod, A.K.M. Maksud, Sukanta Paul, Md. Rasel, Anna Raw, Sayma Sayed, Mashrique Sayem, Nusrat Sharmin, Tanzila Tabassum, Forhad Uddin and Asif Zabed

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## **ABOUT THIS RESEARCH AND EVIDENCE PAPER**

The CLARISSA (Child Labour: Action-Research-Innovation in South and South-Eastern Asia) programme is a five-year, action research consortium generating evidence-informed, innovative solutions by children to avoid hazardous, exploitative labour in Bangladesh and Nepal. This paper is based on a qualitative analysis of 405 life stories collected from child labourers in Bangladesh working in the worst forms of child labour in the leather sector or living in leather sector neighbourhoods. Our analysis of their stories provides a rich picture, from children's perspectives, of the drivers of child labour, views of child labour, working conditions, and their lives outside of work. The paper also explores the complexity, nuance, and interaction within these themes, drawing on and highlighting the diversity of experience articulated in the stories.

**This paper contains material of a highly sensitive nature including accounts of sexual, physical, and mental abuse, and other forms of violence, as well as accounts of exploitative and hazardous working conditions which may be triggering.**

**Child Labour: Action-Research-Innovation in South and South-Eastern Asia (CLARISSA)** is a consortium of organisations committed to building a participatory evidence base and generating innovative solutions to the worst forms of child labour in Bangladesh and Nepal.

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# ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

**CNG** compressed natural gas

**ILO** International Labour Organization

**IDS** Institute of Development Studies

**WFCL** worst forms of child labour

## ASSESSING THE QUALITY OF CLARISSA'S EVIDENCE IN THIS REPORT

The Child Labour: Action-Research-Innovation in South and South-Eastern Asia (CLARISSA) programme is committed to producing high-quality research, and to explaining the robustness and credibility of the methods that underpin the production of evidence. CLARISSA has developed criteria to assess the quality of its evidence along four dimensions: representativeness, triangulation, transparency, and new knowledge.

A summary of these dimensions is included in Table 1. A separate report describes the difference in a 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 assessment for each dimension (CLARISSA 2023). Nine researchers across two countries and five institutions gathered for one and a half hours to discuss the quality of evidence in this report in relation to the research design, process, insights, and analysis. Table 1 documents their assessments and the reasoning behind each assessment.

Dimension	1	2	3	4	5	Reasoning behind the assessment
<b>Representativeness</b> Representativeness covers the extent to which the experiences of those affected by the issue are central in the evidence that is presented. This includes how critical actors have participated in the different parts of the process that has generated the evidence (design, data gathering, analysis, presenting) and how the nuance of their experiences and perspectives is expressed in the evidence claims.			●			<b>CLARISSA researchers have assessed this report as 3.5 for representativeness.</b> The data sample included stories from over 400 children with different characteristics. Their stories are central to the thematic analysis. The evidence in the report clearly represents these different individuals' viewpoints through the use of multiple excerpts which sometimes contradict one another, thus highlighting a range of experience.  Although children were involved in some of the story collection, they were not involved in the design of the method, this analysis of the life stories, nor have they validated the results. CLARISSA researchers conducted the thematic coding and analysis.

**Table 1: Quality of evidence in this paper**

Dimension	1	2	3	4	5	Reasoning behind the assessment
<p><b>Triangulation</b> Triangulation helps ensure a degree of consistency and bias control. Given that all sources of evidence have some degree of bias, it is important researchers have sought multiple perspectives from different stakeholders, corroboration across multiple data sources, and/or triangulation across different studies and tools to check for consistency of findings.</p> <p><b>‘Multiple data sources’</b> refers to the person(s) who provided the evidence.</p> <p><b>‘Multiple lines of evidence’</b> refers to different methods by which data is generated.</p>			●			<p><b>CLARISSA researchers assessed this report as 2.75 for triangulation.</b> Evidence was provided from multiple data sources (child labourers from different neighbourhoods, sectors, and of different ages and genders) within one constituent group (child labourers). Since there are over 400 children and young people in the sample, we can assume a high level of variation across the stories.</p> <p>This report does not include the perspectives of other stakeholders (such as business owners). The focus of this research was on child labourers, so it was important that a range of perspectives from the varied sub-groups was sought (the perspectives of other stakeholders are included in other CLARISSA publications).</p> <p>The evidence base was generated from a single line of evidence (life stories). The study did not invite children to validate the qualitative analysis of the life stories.</p> <p>We have not graded triangulation as a 3 because although the stories represent a diverse group of child labourers, the analysis did not systematically compare differences across groups and therefore does not triangulate findings across these groups.</p>
<p><b>Transparency</b> Transparency entails that we know as much as possible about where the evidence comes from, who collected it, and how it was collected. For this, some details should be provided on what the sources of data are, the methods used, results achieved, and any key limitations in the data or conclusions.</p>					●	<p><b>CLARISSA researchers assessed this report as 5 for transparency.</b> The methodology section provides detailed information on the sources of evidence and data collection method. The choices and adaptations that were made to the research design and data collection are also clearly explained. The ‘Limitations’ section outlines data limitations. The data is recoverable to CLARISSA team members. Direct quotes are used extensively throughout the paper to illustrate the findings, and these are attributed to individual and recoverable life stories. Example life stories have been included on the CLARISSA website.</p>

**Table 1: Quality of evidence in this paper**

Dimension	1	2	3	4	5	Reasoning behind the assessment
<p><b>New knowledge</b> The methods that we use in CLARISSA aim to uncover new insights and underlying patterns in the system. We aim to gather evidence on patterns that we, or other stakeholders, are aware of, but for which there is less evidence or which does not currently exist as 'common' knowledge in 'the field'.</p>			●			<p><b>CLARISSA researchers assessed this report as 3.75 for new knowledge.</b> There is significant new and substantive evidence on issues that are already known about in 'the field' of urban child labour in Bangladesh. The new evidence provides greater weight to existing evidence given the number of stories included in the analysis. There are some new insights into the dynamics of urban child labour which add nuance but do not present unexplored themes.</p> <p>The evidence does not highlight new insights and underlying patterns hitherto relatively or completely unexplored.</p> <p>The evidence does not allow the issue to be reframed or reconceptualised.</p>

Source: Authors' own. Created using project data.

*Section 1:*

# **INTRODUCTION**



# 1 INTRODUCTION

This paper is based on a qualitative analysis of 405 life stories collected from working children in four urban neighbourhoods in Bangladesh. These were all collected in locations where there is a high prevalence of work in the leather sector: Hazaribagh, Hemayetpur, Lalbagh, and Bhairab. Hazaribagh and Lalbagh are densely populated urban neighbourhoods southwest of Dhaka; Hemayetpur is a small city about 20km directly west of Dhaka where many leather processes have been relocated by government mandate; and Bhairab is a small city about 80km northeast of Dhaka. Two-thirds of the stories were collected from children who were working directly in the leather sector. The other stories were collected from children working in other jobs in leather-prevalent neighbourhoods, such as in garment factories, embroidery, domestic work, and waste-picking.

Underpinning this paper is a thematic qualitative analysis carried out by researchers at IDS and the CLARISSA country team in Bangladesh. Stories were thematically coded using Dedoose software and then themes were collectively analysed by the research team. This has allowed us to draw out the rich detail of the narratives, uncovering more of the micro-level detail and nuance within the themes. The objective of this qualitative analysis was to build a stronger knowledge base on pathways into child labour and the lived experience of child labour.

The findings are divided into four sections, each with multiple chapters. The sections are:

- **3.1 Drivers of child labour;**
- **3.2 Views of child labour;**
- **3.3 Children's work; and**
- **3.4 Life outside work.**

Many of the themes outlined in this paper are interrelated with multidimensional causalities. For example, school dropout leads to children entering work, and children entering work leads to school dropout. Health crises

can lead to poverty, but poverty can also lead to health crises, and so on. The analysis carried out surfaced the complexity underpinning these causalities. Some themes stand alone, and others are integrated into bigger themes. For example, health and education could be chapters on their own, but we have integrated them into section 3.1 on **'Drivers of child labour'** to show the high degree of entwining.

While some of the findings will be well known to researchers working on child labour in Bangladesh, this study offers an authoritative corroboration (a) because of the high number of detailed life stories (405) and (b) because the life stories, or narratives, were not elicited with leading questions but instead organically reveal the things that the storytellers wanted to say of their own volition. These stories also provide a great deal of detail on some aspects of the leather sector and the neighbourhoods in which leather sector work is strongly prevalent, which is not widely available in current research.

We recognise that this report is long and includes many quotes, beyond the number in a typical research report, but we believe that the detail and nuance are essential components of children's experiences and are worth preserving. The **'Findings'** section of this paper includes extensive excerpts from the life stories to show the range of children's experiences related to each theme, to allow children to express their perceptions and experiences in their own words, to show the different ways in which children experienced the same issues, and to underscore the weight of the empirical evidence produced through the collection of 405 children's life stories. We suggest that readers read the entire report to better understand the complexity and nuance of working children's lives in Bangladesh, but we have also included a conclusion to each of the four 'Findings' sections which can be read to gain a summary understanding of what each section includes. The Contents page also includes links to each of the sections to help with navigation through the paper.

*Section 2:*

**METHODOLOGY AND  
ANALYTIC DESIGN**

## 2 METHODOLOGY AND ANALYTIC DESIGN

This work was carried out on a database of life stories collected in 2020 and 2021. Children were asked to tell a researcher or a peer the story of their life. We used prompt questions rather than a set of predefined questions. This encouraged the children to talk about the things that were important to them. Stories were written up in Bangla by the story collectors. For the purposes of this analysis, stories were then translated into English. Stories were uploaded into the qualitative analysis software Dedoose. Dedoose was selected because of its functionality to work collaboratively on the same project across teams in different organisations and on different operating systems. A small team took a random sample of stories and read them while inductively coding. After each team member had coded their stories, the team came together and built an agreed set of codes, comparing similarities and differences across their individual code trees. Next, codes were tested through a pilot process to ensure that there was a collective understanding of the meaning of each code, and that (a) all key issues were represented within the coding structure, while (b) not having too many codes which would make the analysis unwieldy. Finally, the full sample of stories was randomly divided between the team. The team then coded all 405 of the stories. There were regular meetings between the coding team to address any issues in the process. Once coded, the themes and thematic relationships which were mostly strongly represented in the data were selected for discussion in a whole team collective analysis which took place in person in Bangladesh.

During the collective analysis workshop, each participant received coded extracts focused on specific themes. They were tasked with three main objectives: 1) identify elements that are new and surprising, and different from the prevailing community narratives; 2) explore areas that can deepen our understanding of things we already know; and 3) identify things that are useful to know for facilitating positive changes. The participants kept notes on Post-It notes in these areas and then collectively discussed this in small groups. Later, these were

discussed in the broader group, which helped deepen the issues collectively.

This collective analysis underpinned the final write-up, which was carried out by the four authors of this paper who took all the excerpts under each theme, and conducted a comprehensive analysis, integrating the collective analysis into their writing. The final edited version was pulled together by the IDS research team and was validated by the CLARISSA Bangladesh country team.

### 2.1 THE STORIES

The 405 life stories were collected from working children between 2020 and 2021 (Table 2). Of the total, 301 stories were collected by adult researchers and 104 stories were collected by children from their peers (following a training workshop). During the collection process, key demographic data was collected from the child storytellers. This included age, gender, neighbourhood of residence (including sub-neighbourhoods), religion, ethnicity, disability status, highest level of education, employment status, employment sector, and job within employment sector. Of the total, 208 stories were collected from boys and 197 stories were from girls. Two hundred and sixty-seven of the stories were collected from children working in the leather industry, 137 of whom were boys and 130 of whom were girls. Children also worked in various jobs related to the garment industry, embroidery, domestic work, and hospitality, amongst other varied occupations, which ranged from flower-selling to car mechanics.

Most of the stories (n=342) were collected in Hazaribagh (in the sublocations of Balurmath, Bashgari, Bashir Market, Bhairab Bazar, and Gojmohol), and the rest were collected from Bhairab (n=35), Hemayetpur (n=24), and Lalbagh (n=4). The age spread across the stories ranges from 8–18 years old, with over half the children between the ages of 14–17 years old.

**Table 2: Demographics of the storytellers**

Particulars		Hazaribagh	Hemayetpur	Lalbagh	Bhairab	Total
Total children		342	24	4	35	405
Sex of the children	Male	156	20	4	28	208
	Female	186	4	0	7	197
Marital status	Married	20	1	0	0	21
	Unmarried	321	23	4	35	383
	Separated	1	0	0	0	1
Employment status	Employed	335	23	3	35	396
	Unemployed	7	1	1	0	9
Disability	Person with a disability	2	0	0	1	3
Age range	8–12 years	36	1	0	0	37
	13–17 years	306	23	4	35	368

Source: Sayem *et al.* (2022)

Of the total, 402 children identified as Muslim, one as Hindu, and two children did not state their religion. All children identified as Bengali. One child (girl, 17) was divorced; one child was separated (girl, 17); 21 children were married (girls, n=18, aged 15–17; boys n=3, aged 14–17); and the rest of the children were unmarried. Only three children self-identified as living with a disability, though the stories indicate that this might significantly underestimate the number of children with a disability in this data set.

## 2.2 LIMITATIONS

### 2.2.1 Demographic disaggregation

Our analysis began thematically, aiming to present the intricate, diverse, and complex nature of children's experiences and perceptions within emergent themes. We specifically focused on exploring the nuances across children's narratives to highlight complexity and plural perspectives rather than only concentrating on or emphasising the predominant experiences and/or perspectives. However, in pursuing this objective, we were unable to conduct an exhaustive comparison across demographic categories. Initially, we chose not to sort quotes by demographics to focus our thematic analysis

on highlighting differences rather than similarities. This approach, however, made it difficult to draw conclusions based on any single characteristic later in the analysis due to the storytellers' wide range of intersecting characteristics, many of which were not included in the demographic data and only accessible through a full readthrough of the story – such as household composition, migration status, or level of family debt. Therefore, in our analysis, we centre **what children say as being important** in their narratives when possible. Nonetheless, when a child explicitly mentions a demographic characteristic, we acknowledge and reflect on it in our analysis.

For example, one of the more common demographic characteristics mentioned in the stories and the most accessible (due to it being binary) in our demographic data is gender. We recognise that boys and girls in these neighbourhoods have different experiences because of their gender, and we have attempted to represent this as clearly as possible in our analysis when gender is specifically evoked in the narratives. Similarly, where excerpts in a certain theme or of a specific experience within a theme are only represented by one gender, we also include this as part of our analysis.

Similarly, while there were differences in experience at different ages, this was difficult to disaggregate and code for, as many of the children's stories spanned ages from nine to 18 years. We know the age of the storyteller now, but not all of the experiences that they describe have ages ascribed to them. Within the narrative, the storyteller may say their age to describe a particular experience but often they do not. Consequently, we let the quotes speak for themselves regarding age.

## 2.2.2 Language and translation

All stories have been translated into English before being put into Dedoose and coded. This means that the analysis is on translated text rather than the original, which may have made some excerpts more vulnerable to misinterpretation. For example, a word translated as 'uncle' can have multiple meanings – being a blood relative or a male figure well known to the family. Similarly, a word translated as 'harassed' might mean teased in one circumstance and sexual abuse in another. The translation 'tortured' can sometimes mean verbal abuse.

## 2.2.3 Scope

Just as with other qualitative data, it should be noted that a story is not an objective account of the child's life. It represents (a) what they wanted to tell us, (b) how they saw their history, and (c) what they saw as priorities on that day. They might have told a different story of their lives with different things prioritised on a different day.

Furthermore, the iterative collective thematic coding process produced 85 parent codes and 58 child codes. It was not possible to analyse every set of excerpts, and so we decided to analyse the themes which appeared in the greatest numbers of stories, with the recognition that some nuance might be lost. The size of the data set and the number of themes also attributes to the length of this paper.

## 2.2.4 Disability inclusion

Our data set of 405 life stories does not adequately represent children with disabilities. This limitation is addressed in more depth in our learning note on the life story collection process in Bangladesh: *Learning from*

*Life Story Collection and Analysis with Children who Work in the Leather Sector in Bangladesh* (Sayem *et al.* 2022).

## 2.2.5 Causal versus thematic analysis

This analysis should be considered as a companion analysis to a previous CLARISSA participatory collective analysis carried out by children themselves of the same stories: *Life Stories From Children Working in Bangladesh's Leather Sector and its Neighbourhoods: Told and Analysed by Children* (Sayem *et al.* 2023). These different analyses should be seen as complementary – each drawing out different forms of knowledge, in different ways, for different purposes. These two processes have used the same data but have used different analytical methodologies and comprised a different analysis team. The children's analysis was primarily a causal analysis undertaken by children which identified factors in each of the stories and their causes and consequences. This allowed child participants to see the interconnections between factors and to imagine where interventions could be made to change the dynamics that they saw. The objective of the children's participatory analysis was to understand the dynamics of the systems that impacted on them, to change those dynamics. The children's analysis was part of a longer process of establishing and informing children's action research groups based on the themes they identified as most important to them.

## 2.2.6 Methodological learning

The researchers and children involved in the life story collection had never used the method before. Although they all received training on the method and conducted piloting exercises which were reviewed by lead researchers in the team, not all the stories conform entirely with the intended format. As discussed earlier, life stories are meant to capture what storytellers decide is important in their lives and in this way differ significantly from interviews based on structured or semi-structured questionnaires which predetermine what themes respondents will answer. Despite efforts to avoid question-answer formats, some of the stories are still structured this way, which will have introduced some bias to these stories.

*Section 3:*

**FINDINGS**

## 3 FINDINGS

### 3.1 DRIVERS OF CHILD LABOUR

This section explores the complex drivers of child labour from the perspective of the 405 children who told their stories. The reasons children gave for entering work were varied and complex, though many stated that poverty was a major component of children and their families' decision. While many studies have shown that one of the primary predictors of child labour in Bangladesh is extreme poverty (see Amin, Quayes and Rives (2004) and Salmon (2005)), others have also argued that economic factors alone cannot predict child labour (Delap 2001; Hoque 2023). These stories provide a nuanced and contextualised account of how family poverty combines with children's perceptions of family responsibility, community and family perceptions of children's 'idleness', children's experiences of education, and so forth, to create push and pull factors which facilitate children's pathways into worst forms of child labour.

First, we look at the role of health, land ownership, and migration with regard to children's families' poverty. Next, we examine children's experiences of education, particularly the reasons they give for leaving school. Finally, we investigate some of the underlying beliefs and cultural norms which contribute to children's sense of family responsibility and perceptions of 'idleness' elicited in discussions of drivers of children's work.

#### 3.1.1 Extreme poverty

While many specific causes of financial crisis are revealed through the life stories, ranging from environmental events, alcoholism, health crises, Covid-19 lockdown, and so forth, it is typically a combination of these, each compounding the others, that forces families and their children into extreme poverty. The following story excerpt illustrates how these multiple financial pressures build upon one another and eventually lead to a child engaging in work:

*We have so much debt because my father used to gamble. He borrowed 2 lakh taka<sup>1</sup> from my*

*maternal grandmother to gamble. He wasted all of it. My sister had a disease. To treat her, we had to spend 3 to 4 lakh taka on her. We still have 1 lakh taka to be repaid. My sister got married at an early age, because of her blood, and some kind of disease. We had a debt of 5 to 6 lakh taka... My mother works in other households and earns about 3,000 taka. We do our grocery shopping with that money. My maternal grandmother sends rice and lentils from our hometown. My father doesn't stay at home, he stays at the garage and gambles there... That is why we are hurt, and we started working.*  
(GUC\_CLSC\_021, girl, 13)

How families spend the income that children earn points to the essential role children's work plays in helping families survive. Children described handing over all the money they earn to their parents to cover household basics: rent, groceries, and loan repayments.

Many of the stories describe the child either paying for rent or for rent arrears. Most of the children seem to be earning between 2,500 and 4,000 BDT (US\$22–37) per month. Rent for the families is a similar amount – around 3,000–3,500 taka.

*My salary is 3,500 taka only; the entire amount is spent to pay for house rent. The house rent is 3,500 taka. Besides, we have to spend on grocery items and pay the debt. At the end of this expenditure, we have nothing in hand.*  
(GUC\_SC\_047, girl, 17)

*I give [my salary] to my mother to pay the home rent.*  
(TDH\_NH\_157, girl, 16)

*I can support myself and my mother works in other houses. She covers the grocery expenses with her money, and I pay rent with my salary.*  
(GUC\_SC\_072, girl, 17)

The implication is that for a lot of families, their ability to pay their rent and afford food depends on their children working.

1 Taka refers to the Bangladeshi taka (BDT), the currency in Bangladesh. One BDT is equivalent to US\$0.0090. One lakh is BDT 100,000, so 2 lakh taka is BDT 200,000 or US\$1,809. Throughout the rest of the paper, we will leave the currency in BDT. Some helpful conversions: BDT 1,000 = US\$9.05; 1 lakh BDT = US\$905; BDT 111 = US\$1. In the story, the child recounts that her father gambled away US\$1,809, her sister's medical bills came to between US\$2,714 and US\$3,619, and that her mother only earns US\$27.14 a month. Based on these figures, it is clear that the family are in significant financial distress.

### Health crises

This section draws together evidence from the children's life stories related to the impacts of illness, accidents, and early death in the family. Health is one of the most cited drivers of financial crisis in the stories. Children are pushed into work due to loss of household income when parents or siblings are ill and cannot work, or because money is needed to pay for medical treatment. Usually, both happen at the same time. Many children also recounted how their families were forced to take out loans in response to health crises.

While ill health has a significant impact on the ability to work, work itself is often the cause of ill health. One child explains the effects of tanning chemicals when proper safety equipment is not used:

*When cowhide is treated with lime, the hair on it falls off gradually. It gets hot when water is poured over it. When my father carried lime, it used to fall on his feet. His feet got eaten up by it. Just like acid, lime destroys whatever it touches.*  
(GUC\_SC\_017, boy, 17)

Along with illnesses, some jobs lead to accidents requiring medical treatment, such as described by this child:

*My brother broke his hand while working. His hand is still broken. Now my father and I are supporting my mother and brother with great difficulty. My brother is bedridden for almost one month with a broken hand. He can't work. We are bearing their expenses with great difficulty.*  
(TDH\_SC\_065, boy, 16)

Accidents appear to be common: 'My younger brother had accidents 3–4 times at Beridbadh' (GUC\_SC\_026, boy, 15).

In these two excerpts, ill health is directly linked to work; however, it is also reasonable to assume that when people talk about more acute conditions such as kidney failure, there is a high chance that this is also a result of the work they have been doing. Chemicals, especially chromium, used for tanning leather affect the respiratory system (Rastogi, Pandey and Tripathi 2008; Abdel Rasoul *et al.* 2017), cause skin diseases (Rabbani *et al.* 2021), damage DNA (Dubey, Verma and Kumar 2022), and lead to hearing loss (Gu *et al.* 2022); machinery causes accidents; tiredness and lack of sleep have long-term effects on the body (Liew and Aung 2021), and working for extended periods of time in high temperatures leads

to kidney problems (Nerbass *et al.* 2017), and so on. Furthermore, these physical stressors, combined with malnutrition and poor living conditions due to poverty, make people more vulnerable to sickness and ill-being.

It is not only the individual in an individual workplace that is of concern. Health also impacts at an environmental level. Hazaribagh, where many of the stories were collected, was listed as the fifth most toxic location on the planet (Bernhardt and Gysi 2013: 19). Unlike other places on the list, such as Chernobyl, Hazaribagh remains a densely populated residential urban neighbourhood. The concentration of informal leather works in this district no doubt makes a significant contribution to poor health. This means that just walking down the street poses a health risk that is layered on top of all the other health risks. A study in Hazaribagh found that 'both the workers and neighbouring residents were found to be excessively exposed ( $P < 0.05$ ) to chromium compared with the investigated control group of people living in a distant village area which had no industrial establishments' (Hasan *et al.* 2019). Children are particularly susceptible to these environmental (Sly and Carpenter 2012) and occupational hazards (Ahmed and Ray 2014; Landrigan and Miodovnik 2011).

The stories mention many illnesses, including eye cataracts, liver and kidney failure, gall bladder problems, diabetes, cancer, bone decay, injuries to limbs, heart disease, respiratory problems, and so on. Accidents include car and motorbike accidents, personal attacks, accidents at work, and even falling out of a tree. Although there was a diversity of health issues, a common outcome was the inability to work, high treatment costs, and a reliance on children to support their families.

Illness is everywhere, and for many families it is not just a single illness they have to cope with but the compounding effects of multiple illnesses:

*My aunt stays at home. She is sick and my uncle works at a poor salary. I don't have parents. They are not alive. They died when I was very young. They were sick.*  
(TDH\_SC\_112, girl, 15)

*My mother was sick and hospitalised. She had a serious illness, which she still has. I had to get her treated. I didn't work back then; I studied. My father had had an accident earlier, so there was nobody*



*to take care of us... That's when I started working.*  
(TDH\_NH\_135, girl, 16)

*My mother has diabetes, and my father has heart disease. It takes a lot of medicine to buy for them every day. They can't do any work... Because of much pressure in the family, I had trouble studying. Then one of my aunts told me to work from home.*  
(GUC\_CLSC\_036, girl, 14).

These multiple health pressures have extreme consequences for families and reveal the limited strategies they have for survival, such as support from extended family and children joining work.

#### Loss of income, medical expenses, and debt

For families living in poverty, the consequences of illness and accidents can be financially catastrophic and can lead to the inability to meet basic needs. Small decreases in a family's monthly income can make the family budget unviable:

*When my father was sick one time, he sent my brother to work. His income was 1,500 taka and the house rent was 4,000 taka. It was not enough, so my father would work hard with his sick body, he would give at the end of the month, and we couldn't eat well every day. The food of one day would go on for two to three days. If there was an egg or something, we eat that.*  
(GUC\_CLSC\_024, boy, 13)

Even though the brother and father were working, the decrease in the father's work output, due to his illness, meant that financial crisis ensued. The income outlined above translates to around US\$13.66 per month or about US\$0.46 a day (US\$0.15 per individual) for a household of at least three, well below the international poverty line of US\$2.15 per individual.

Families also lose entire livelihood mechanisms to address acute medical costs:

*My father had a grocery shop. But he sold it after my mother had an accident. Her legs and the belly skin were entirely burned.*  
(GUC\_NH\_039, girl, 16)

With the loss of their main source of income, this family is now more vulnerable to future economic shocks.

Given limited options, families must make impossible trade-offs in the face of illness. This family prioritised meeting their household living expenses over the eye treatment of their father, thus leading to further impoverishment, as the father cannot work:

*My father has a problem with his eyes, then he used to drive a CNG,<sup>2</sup> he can't see far because of his eye problem. He can't work for that reason and my mother used to work in other households. They told her not to go any more because of Covid-19. Now she has been looking for a job and can't find one... He has cataracts in his eyes... once, a long time ago, I bought glasses for him. He could see with the glasses on, but when they broke, his eyes started disturbing him like before. Whatever I get I spend it on the family. That is why I can't take my father to the doctors for treatment. Because we struggle to pay rent and cover the monthly expense.*  
(TDH\_NH\_162, girl, 14)

As the previous and subsequent stories show, medical treatment is expensive compared to family income and often necessitates that children begin working to cover this additional cost:

*My father... fell sick and remained at home for the next ten days. We had to spend 200–500 taka on his medicines daily. Now we spend 1,500 taka on his medicines every week. That's why I have been working since 2008. My salary was 500 taka back then. Over time, it has increased to 7,000–8,000 taka. Even then, my salary is not enough for us. We used to live in our village. We came to Dhaka because we were heavily indebted with interest-based loans. That's how our situation became like this.*  
(TDH\_SC\_107, girl, 14)

*Many problems have arisen since my father's accident. We had to spend a lot of money for his treatment. We had to borrow money as well... 20,000 taka, as everyone said that my father wouldn't live.*  
(GUC\_CLSC\_007, girl, 16)

*My brothers... need 10,000 taka medicine... The doctor says it's epilepsy disease, brain and psychological problem. One of them had it from four years old, another one had a mental illness from 16 years old. It can be managed. It is a bit*

2 CNG stands for compressed natural gas and is an abbreviation commonly used to refer to auto-rickshaws which use the fuel.

*difficult though. I stay without eating... if I leave work everything will stop in my family. I am looking after two of my brothers. It will be very difficult to survive.*  
(GUC\_SC\_073, boy, 17)

In one story, the family's income is so low they can only afford part of the medicine needed:

*A few days back, I did not have the money to buy her medicines, so I took 100 taka loan from my employer and gave it to my mother. She could only buy one pack of medicine with that. The doctor asked, 'You take two packs every time. Why are you taking just one now?' My mother said that we do not have money to buy two packs and we will take two packs next month.*  
(GUC\_CLSC\_013, girl, 13)

The cost of 100 taka (US\$0.91) medicine is prohibitive for this family, demonstrating how comparatively expensive medicine is for them.

Given the expense of medical treatment, it is not surprising that many children and their families must take loans to cover costs:

*My mother was sick. We had to borrow a large amount for her medical treatment. We have a loan of 20,000–25,000 taka. We have to repay this. My mother had a liver problem. Then she also had a lung problem.*  
(TDH\_CLSC\_230, girl, 15)

Even when a family can get back to work after short-term illness, they do so with the burden of debt:

*My father was injured by an accident. We fell into debt for his treatment. Then we came to Dhaka from the village. Now my father drives a rickshaw, and my mother works as a house maid. I also do a job.*  
(GUC\_CLSC\_031, boy, age not given)

The story which follows is typical and demonstrates the burden of medical debt that families experience. While they were able to meet their basic needs before illness, their loan repayments have made it impossible to afford rent and food:

*When I was hospitalised, we had to borrow money again. Now my husband is paying these off. This month, we have to pay 4,000 taka [in repayments] and rent of 2,500 taka. There goes 6,500 taka. We have to buy groceries – rice, potatoes, and onions. All of our money will run out on these. There is no*

*way of spending more on food. That's how our days are. We had no groceries at home today. My brother gave us some curry, and his wife gave us some fish which I have cooked. There is nothing to cook tomorrow, only lentils and mashed potatoes.*  
(TDH\_SC\_004, girl, 17)

Families are also taking moderately high loans for routine operations such as caesarean births and cataract operations and for short-term conditions such as broken limbs.

*He had an eye cataract, and a lot of money was needed for his operation. We had to take a lot of loans.*  
(TDH\_SC\_108, boy, 14)

*My son was born after caesarean surgery. We spent a lot of money at that time. My father gave me all of it. My father's situation is not that good, so he had to borrow. My father has a three lakh taka loan.*  
(GUC\_NH\_031, girl, 17)

*My father broke his leg in an accident, and we had to lend some money for the treatment. I used to repay the loan every month a bit from my salary. If my salary was 3,000 taka, I would keep 1,000 and give the rest.*  
(TDH\_SC\_111, boy, 17)

In the following story, all the land and assets of the family are sold to pay for medical expenses, and they still incur massive debts:

*We had to give him [father] chemotherapy and radiotherapy for cancer. We had to sell everything we owned. We had land which was sold at 21 lakh taka. We spent 1.5 lakh taka for each of the therapies and used that money for this. One therapy consists of three cycles, and we have given him 15 of those. The radiotherapy costs even more. Each of the radiotherapy is 3,000 taka and we had given him 30; now we are in a lot of debt.*  
(GUC\_NH\_011, boy, 17)

If the health problem is relatively serious, then the amounts borrowed can be very high – 50,000–60,000 taka (US\$455–546). This is about five times a family's monthly income. In some cases, the stories talked about loans of 3–4 lakh (US\$2,732–3,642).

Loans were sourced from a variety of lenders, including children's employers:

*I had taken some loans from my employer at the factory but telling him about my father's sickness]... I took 20,000 taka, but it was not enough actually. Five thousand was used just for the rent, 10,000 taka was spent for my father, and the rest, 5,000, was used for food.*  
(GUC\_SC\_038, boy, 17)

Even when families decide to pay for medical treatment, it doesn't always work, leaving them with huge loans and no progress: 'Around 10,000 taka we spend for the treatment of that doctor but there was no solution' (GUC\_SC\_031, boy, no age given).

Problems which trigger children entering work are often compounding. We described earlier the problem of multiple illnesses, but other factors, such as environmental hazards, unsuccessful business ventures, and family separation, also compound the problems:

*We lost everything by river surge [cyclone]. Later, there was no place to stay there. Moreover, my brother was sick, and my father had to borrow about 3 lakhs for his treatment. That's why we left for Dhaka.*  
(TDH\_NH\_179, boy, 14)

*I started doing that job due to my mother's illness. If my mother hadn't fallen sick, if my brother hadn't stolen money and fled, if my father hadn't faced loss in his business, then I would be in school right now.*  
(GUC\_SC\_001, girl, 15)

These complex problems lead to families having to balance trade-offs and make difficult decisions. In the following story, there is a trade-off between paying medical loans and rent:

*I borrowed 10,000 taka from someone. I have bought medicine for my mother with that money. I am clearing that debt right now and paying the house rent... The landlord shouts at us for that issue which is why I am in much tension.*  
(GUC\_CLSC\_025, girl, 15)

In another story, the trade-offs are between who gets the medical treatment when the family can only afford to borrow for one:

*My mother had some physical problems, and she had her operation from Dhaka Medical. My father... had stones in his kidney. These were needed to be taken out by doing an operation. We had to take loans for his operation as well.*

*My father had first, and then my mother had her operation done after four to five years.*  
(GUC\_NH\_020, boy, 16)

This family still has loans amounting to 30,000 taka to pay after many years of making repayments.

While in most of the stories people seek help in paying for medical treatment wherever they can get it, there are some for whom the shame of asking for money is too much:

*My brother had water in his lungs, and it took 2 lakhs for his operation. We had to borrow from our uncles and everyone else. We asked for a donation at my father's factory. One of the people from that factory called my mother, and my brother picked up the phone, but didn't say hello, and that man continued saying, 'I will take donations from everyone for your son but make sure he doesn't know anything about this.' My brother started crying listening to this, and when my mother asked and why he was crying, he said, 'I will die but I will never ask anyone for money'... My mother started crying as well and called that man and said, 'We don't need your money.' Then our uncles took loan and instalments and spent money.*  
(GUC\_SC\_034, girl, 15)

While the previous excerpt describes the shame felt in needing to borrow money, the effects of illness are more complex than just financial consequences. The death of a mother feels particularly difficult for this child, not just because of the burden of income generation but also because of the sudden loss of care:

*I don't live with him [father] as I don't know whether he will remarry and if that stepmother would tolerate me. It doesn't feel so sad if one's father dies, but it hurts a lot when someone's mother dies. A person becomes an orphan when their mother dies. There is no one to take care of me.*  
(GUC\_CLSC\_026, girl, 13)

Children also cited health crises and medical costs as a factor in ceasing their education and thus their career aspirations. Because of the financial crisis that follows illness, accidents, and death, many children give up studying to work once their parents become ill:

*I had a lot of interest in studying, but I gave way. My parents were very sick. They couldn't manage my study cost. What could I do then? I can earn taka 200 daily. With that, my father buys*

*the market items. Also, he must buy medicine. We are working to feed our parents now.*  
(TDH\_SC\_72, girl, 17)

*What plan can I have, I couldn't study because of my father's illness, I feel bad for this reason. If I studied, my life would have been better. We could've stayed in a big house with everyone if I could continue studying. If I could work in an office, I could stay in peace with everyone else in a flat. I couldn't do that because of my father's illness.*  
(GUC\_SC\_074, boy, 17)

The following quotation highlights the financial burden and the deteriorating health conditions of both the father and mother, which influenced the girl's choice to prioritise her family's wellbeing over her own education:

*I realised later that if I continue my studies, it would become too tough for my parents to do all the work by themselves. They had to work too hard. One of the teachers at my school asked me why I was leaving studies as I had been a good student. I shared everything with ma'am and told her that it is not possible for me to continue. Everyone asked me if I had gone mad. A person cannot do anything without education today. Anyway, so I started to work with my parents then. And this was the start of my life. I said to my parents that I had a wish to study. My father said to me in the morning, 'How would this family survive if you want to study?' Actually, the problem was with my father as he was sick, and it was not possible for my mother to handle everything on her own. That is why I left my studies and have been working since then... She was suffering from bone erosion. Her bones were wearing down gradually... Then I started working and my mother died after two months. She was actually very sick as she was suffering from heart disease.*  
(TDH\_SC\_097, girl, 17)

It is not solely the lack of money itself which stopped children studying, it was also the worry which inhibits their ability to learn. In one of the stories, a child says his father had been ill for six months and exams were near but that he wasn't capable of studying: 'I couldn't sit for my exams and my "concentration" on studies was gone as well'  
(GUC\_SC\_033, boy, 17).

#### Care responsibilities due to family ill health

Not only does illness increase the likelihood of children going into paid work, but it also leads to an increased

burden of work in the household. If a parent is ill, a child may be doing the housework and caring for younger siblings, as well as his or her own paid work:

*My mother has grown old. I don't think she will live for long. She has stones in her gall bladder and had to go through an operation. She cannot work well. That is why I give time to my father's work and my friends' work too. I have to cook at home as well.*  
(GUC\_SC\_033, boy, 17)

*In my grandmother's family, there were two girls; both of them got married. Who will look after my grandmother now? I live with my grandmother alone. My grandmother is sick. Who will look after her? There is no one other than me... I saw that my grandmother had... some disease, then after saving four to five months' salary, I treated my grandmother.*  
(GUC\_CLSC\_022, girl, 12)

In the previous story, a child worked to pay for the medical treatment of her grandmother and simultaneously provided care for her.

#### Covid-19 and its effects on finances

The Covid-19 global pandemic, as declared by the World Health Organization on 11 March 2020 (BBC News 2020), affected families and children around the world. However, people living in low- and middle-income countries were more severely affected, both in terms of their health and their economic wellbeing. Particularly affected were those living in informal urban settlements due to high non-food expenditure, such as rent. One study found that '59 per cent of urban slum dwellers who were vulnerable non-poor before the pandemic were now below the poverty line' in March 2021, thus creating a population of 'new poor' in Bangladesh, with families who were not previously considered poor falling into a poverty trap (Rahman *et al.* 2022). Within one month of the WHO declaration on the Covid-19 pandemic, the head of the Leathergoods and Footwear Manufacturers & Exporters Association of Bangladesh stated that US\$316 million in work orders had been cancelled. This had a devastating effect on small- and medium-sized enterprises, many of the employers of families of children, and children themselves (Chakma 2020).

For many families, this meant there was no – or very little – income during this period:

*We had savings of 20,000 taka when Covid-19 came about. None of us had any work during that time. We survived off that 20,000 taka, but it wasn't enough.*

*We had to borrow money to survive. I was idle for three to four months. Then I started working again.*  
(GUC\_SC\_014, boy, 17)

For some families, their only way to survive was to be given food directly by relatives and/or to take loans: 'When Covid-19 came about because there was no other way of surviving – we had nothing – they took debts, which probably amounted to 15–17,000 taka' (TDH\_CLSC\_195, girl, 16). There are many stories which indicate loans of 10–20,000 taka (about two to four months' rent which corresponds to the period of factory closures) taken by families to tide them over. Other families took loans of around 40–50,000 taka (corresponding more closely to families' expected income and outgoings during that same period).

*I have accumulated unpaid rent of 30–35,000 taka during Covid-19. The building will be demolished in January. I have to clear the pending rent by December. What to do? The landlord has to take the rent... I don't know how we'll get 30,000 taka. Instalments/loans are also hard to come by now. Some money can be earned by driving auto rickshaw at night. We have to manage food! So we eat by buying on credit.*  
(TDH\_SC\_004, girl, 17)

*We had a lot of trouble during the lockdown. We were indebted a huge amount. We have to repay this every month. My eldest brother is a carpenter, and the youngest brother works as a tempo [an automobile] helper. With all our money we are surviving. The eldest brother has not got enough work. He can work 15 days a month. The youngest brother has not fixed his salary as well. If the trip is good, he can bring 200/300 takas daily. My salary is 3,500 taka only.*  
(GUC\_SC\_047, girl, 17)

As the previous story shows, the debts accrued during lockdown push families deeper into poverty. Even with all three children in the family working, the family struggles to recover to pre-lockdown finances. Families which were previously indebted struggled more during lockdown as they were unable to take out additional loans:

*There was no rice to cook for the house. The rest of the rice had to be brought from a shop on credit. The shopkeeper did not want to give, but I requested him again and again. I grabbed his leg. Then he agreed to give. At the time of lockdown, I asked money from many people, but they refused me as I couldn't pay*

*the previous loan, they didn't lend me money.*  
(GUC\_SC\_053, boy, 10)

Along with the difficulty in obtaining loans, the previous stories reveal that families primarily took loans out to pay for essentials, such as rent and food.

Many families seemed to survive eating only rice and lentils during this period, typically only once a day:

*We passed days where we had to eat rice with lentils. And we had loans of 30–40,000 taka.*  
(GUC\_CLSC\_027, girl, 16)

*Sometimes we had lentils, or mashed potatoes or leaf vegetables. We ate one meal and went hungry the next.*  
(GUC\_SC\_014, boy, 17)

*We went hungry on many days. We survived amid great difficulty when Covid-19 came about. All of us stayed at home during that time. Nobody hired any of us and we weren't allowed to leave our home. How could we work? Whatever debts were taken were taken to buy food. We didn't borrow money for anything else. We paid our rent gradually.*  
(GUC\_NH\_010, girl, 17)

Even after restrictions lifted, children spoke about the challenges of post-pandemic industry and supply chain effects, such as lower numbers of work orders, which continued to affect their ability to earn a living:

*After this Covid-19 pandemic, the work is not going well. There is not much work. It is a sad situation. Overall, we are in despair. Suppose if we work for one month (we work in production) we don't get a proper wage. After the Covid-19, everywhere, as in the whole leather site, is lacking in the workflow. For that reason, the company is losing market share, business is going down, consequently our workflow is worsening.*  
(TDH\_SC\_084, girl, 17)

For families who took out loans during lockdown, the difficulty of paying back their debt is made even more challenging by the stagnation of the economies in which they work.

#### **Land ownership as an economic buffer**

In some stories, land is revealed to be an important family commodity which is bought, sold, and lost. The children's stories had few positive accounts of land ownership. Instead, most children recounted instances of land loss,

usually due to economic shocks, but also related to family dispute, village conflict, and lack of education. Their resulting landlessness led to further impoverishment as they were then left with no economic buffer. As the next section on **'Migration due to family poverty'** explores, many of these families move to Dhaka once they become landless.

The most common economic shocks which result in land sales are **Health crises** (as discussed earlier) which incur huge medical expenses and loss of income:

*We had to get my father treated. We had to sell off land in our village for that. We had eight decimals of land back then, out of which we sold three decimals.*  
(GUC\_SC\_006, boy, 17)

*My father used to pull a rickshaw, my father had an accident... We had to spend money on him. Almost 3–4 lakh. We had three rickshaws, we sold them for my father, we sold our home and everything else, and then we came to Dhaka.*  
(TDH\_CLSC\_220, girl, 16)

*His kidneys failed. He was going through dialysis. He was actually sick for eight years. Then he died. We sold everything, our land, big trees, and everything to be able to afford the treatment for him. That is why it is becoming very tough for us to manage now. We could do something if we still had those land or trees, we could manage somehow.*  
(TDH\_SC\_096, girl, 17)

Despite huge investments, including the sale of land, sick or injured family members do not always recover, leaving families without income earners or assets: 'We sold our land and spent a lot of money for her treatment, but she never recovered' (TDH\_SC\_083, boy, 16).

Other economic shocks included unpredictable environmental events, dowry costs, addiction, and gambling.

*They lost their land as well as everything in a river erosion.*  
(TDH\_SC\_73, girl, 16)

*The fact is that we had to marry all my sisters off with this or that. Either we had to give them money or any product. But what can be done? My parents have done their duty, and all that we had, land and*

*other, was used because of the marriage purposes.*  
(GUC\_SC\_035, boy, 16)

*My brother stole 2 lakh taka from his workplace and fled. My brother used to pray the five daily prayers earlier, but he got into bad company and became addicted. He went astray. My father had to sell of 30 decimals of land in his village to pay the 2 lakh fine to his former business partner.*  
(GUC\_SC\_001, girl, 15)

*He used to gamble... When I was a child... He took money to gamble and then he gave away his land... Then we came to Dhaka... and then after a few days they put me to work with my cousin.*  
(GUC\_SC\_039, boy, 15)

Sometimes children talked about their family losing their land because of family conflict within the village:

*I have uncles in the village. They don't help us either. Moreover, they do not have any pity for us. They want to seize all the land we have. We told them clearly that we won't give up the ground. That land is our father's memory... They need the land for their sons who want to build a house on that land. They gave us a threat and pressured us to leave that land.*  
(TDH\_CLSC\_230, girl, 15)

Other children talked about neighbours trying different methods to remove them from their land:

*If a dog dies, people drag the dead body in front of our house, so that we get out of the place. I have dug the grave for the dog myself binding cloth over my mouth because we couldn't live with the stench.*  
(TDH\_SC\_061, girl, 16)

*My family is ordinary, we don't have much power. We live a simple life. We try to be good with everyone. Those people, they have a lot, their brothers, their uncles as well. Since they have wealth, they have power. Then after the fight they took two pieces of our land forcibly. They have even raised their hand on my brother. Since I only had one brother, we used to be in constant fear for his life. So, we sent him away for a few days. Then we stayed there. They kept on threatening us. They said if we don't go away, they would beat us as well. We were scared.*  
(TDH\_SC\_046, girl, 17)

Children testified to their family members selling their land for a poor price because they did not have the education to know its true worth and hence they are cheated:

*Grandma didn't understand that much.  
She only got 800 taka after the sale.  
(GUC\_SC\_045, boy, 14)*

*My father did not read as well. Therefore,  
he didn't get his share of land and property  
from my grandfather. My uncles cheated  
him. I heard this from my mother.  
(GUC\_SC\_044, boy, 15)*

On the other hand, some families aspire to use the income earned working in Dhaka to buy land and property in their village so that they can move back. Unfortunately, this can also lead to unmanageable debt, as described in this child's story:

*My parents are trying to buy a piece of land in the village. The land is worth 1 lakh and 50,000 taka. My parents received a loan of 20,000 taka from which we have to pay as instalments. It costs taka 1,200 per month. We have another loan from my uncle. My mother has also taken money from her grandmother. With all of these loans, we have paid 80,000 taka for buying the land. We have to pay the rest of the money soon.  
(GUC\_SC\_050, girl, 13)*

While land is a safety net for families experiencing economic crisis, it is not renewable. Once sold, it is difficult, if not impossible, to recover. Furthermore, landless families have fewer options for food and housing and therefore become further indebted due to these additional costs. Without land to tend or earn an income from, many of these families migrate to Dhaka seeking employment opportunities.

### **Migration due to family poverty**

In this section, we look at reasons behind rural to urban migration, how families move, and some of the consequences of migration. Reasons for rural to urban migration were primarily economic. Children explained that once their families experienced financial crisis, they moved to Dhaka seeking higher incomes as a means to repay loans or because there were more job opportunities in Dhaka for the whole family. Once in Dhaka, many children began working. While most children began working immediately as it was the purpose of their move, others explained that it became a necessity once they arrived.

Poverty and economic crises trigger loans, which in turn trigger a need for children to work. These crises can be triggered by natural events such as flooding or the

Covid-19 pandemic, family crises, illness, or death, as well as cultural and social pressures, like paying dowries or family break-up which leaves women as head of the household:

*We borrowed money when my father got ill.  
We came to Dhaka due to those debt.  
(TDH\_CLSC\_197, boy, 15)*

*My father died in an accident when I was only two and a half years old. My mother had a poor income in the village; therefore, we came to Dhaka in search of a better life.  
(GUC\_NH\_035, girl, 11)*

*We didn't have any house. My father was indebted. He sold everything and came to Dhaka.  
(GUC\_CLSC\_006, girl, 16)*

*We needed 21,000–22,000 taka for the [van] battery. That's why we came to Dhaka. We sold off the van and came to Dhaka with the sales proceeds. The van was sold off for 11,000–12,000 taka. Then we came to Dhaka and rented a home. My father started pulling a rickshaw.  
(TDH\_CLSC\_197, boy, 15)*

The financial consequences of family break-up were another factor contributing to migration, as demonstrated in the following excerpts:

*My father has remarried, and he doesn't take care of mother any more. That is why I have to come to Dhaka.  
(GUC\_NH\_014, boy, 14)*

*We used to live in our village nine years back and our father used to love us very much. Then he started to talk with a girl suddenly. Then he married that girl and brought her to our village. So my mother moved to Dhaka. Then we started living and working here.  
(TDH\_SC\_109, girl, 14)*

In the previous two excerpts, and the following one, one interesting observation is the way in which gender dynamics contribute to migration. In the village, girls and women have fewer opportunities to access paid work than they do in Dhaka. When explaining why her family moved to Dhaka, one child said,

*Girls don't work. I studied up to class 5. I was free for many days. I would have to pay for studying in class 6 and buy books as well. We needed a lot of money to continue my education, so my father*

*told me that however much I had studied was enough, and that I should stay at home from then and work with my mother... My father couldn't work alone. There were six of us, or seven of us when we counted him. The rest of us didn't work. Somebody suggested that we move to Dhaka so that we could work and get by. That's why we moved to Dhaka.* (GUC\_NH\_010, girl, 17)

This excerpt suggests that there are more employment opportunities in Dhaka for the entire family, including for children, women, and girls.

Crises for the family are also triggered by pressure to respond to gendered cultural norms. Marriage and the practice of paying dowries led to debt:

*My family was in debt after two of my older sisters were married off. In addition, there was less work in the village. Therefore, we came to Dhaka in search of money... [around one and a half lakh debts]. I felt happy at the time, but now I don't feel good.* (TDH\_NH\_167, boy, 16)

*We somehow married them off by taking these loans but then we fell into a lot of difficulties. Then my parents asked me to come to Dhaka. They said, 'We will try to do something here in the village and you go and see if you can do something in Dhaka'.* (TDH\_CLSC\_205, boy, 14)

Once they've moved to Dhaka, many families find themselves in at least as much poverty as what they left behind in their villages due to high costs of living. Furthermore, work opportunities in the neighbourhoods to which they migrate are some of the most hazardous.

Typically, children who come to Dhaka are either brought by their parents to work or sent to stay and work with relatives who are already there: 'My parents brought me to Dhaka to put me to work' (GUC\_CLSC\_007, girl, 16). When moving to Dhaka, families tend to arrive and stay near other family members: 'My parents were living in Dhaka, so I came here with them. My maternal grandparents as well as my paternal uncle and his wife live here. Everyone lives here so we came to Dhaka' (TDH\_SC\_006, boy, 16). Often, one family member comes first and then others join: 'My father came to Dhaka many years ago before we came here' (GUC\_NH\_038, girl, 12). Occasionally, even young children are sent to the city on their own: 'I don't like to stay far away from home. My mother asks me "Don't you

like it?" I say "No". Then she says to stay one more year... after my father's death there is too much difficulty' (TDH\_SC\_047, boy, 11). This child's migration and separation from family is due to economic need in the household after the death of his father.

While most moved to the city out of necessity, some children said that they preferred living in the city to living in their village for the opportunities it provides, including expendable income, opportunities to learn skills, and the ability to support other family members:

*I came because it was a habit for me to work. That is why I didn't want to stay in my village. If I go home for one day now, I don't feel like staying there. I want to come to Dhaka. I go there for four days, and I come back on the fifth. I am used to living in Dhaka.* (GUC\_SC\_032, boy, 17)

*I wanted to go to Dhaka and learn to work.* (TDH\_NH\_176, boy, 12)

*I like it here more. I am working here and earning money. I can buy clothes. My parents are doing well too. We have to suffer more in the village. We had to cook at our grandmother's house and had to take loans. That is why we had to come here, and we are better here.* (TDH\_NH\_138, girl, 16)

Some children even make enough money to send back to their families:

*My family is in trouble. We are four brothers and three sisters. I am staying with my sister. I am also working. My two younger brothers are working. My older brother lives in his in-law's house. He doesn't pay anything to our family. The second eldest brother earns a little money and can't maintain the family. He said he couldn't feed me. So my mother sent me to Dhaka. Now I am working and sending money to my mother in the village. My mother does all of the necessary food shopping with that every month.* (TDH\_CLSC\_230, girl, 15)

However, for many, migration just replaces one set of problems with another:

*We lived in my grandfather's house. Then my father came to Dhaka and put me to work. I am still working on a lower salary. If we can eat one day, we have to starve another day. That's all.* (TDH\_SC\_029, girl, 15)



*When we came to Dhaka I saw that life was different here. If you don't work, you can't eat.*  
(TDH\_CLSC\_242, boy, 17)

Also, for many children, the move to Dhaka marks the break from education:

*Then we all came to Dhaka. I didn't study after that.*  
(GUC\_SC\_054, boy, 15)

*I couldn't sit for my exams because I came to Dhaka from my village.*  
(TDH\_SC\_024, girl, 15)

*After that I came back to Dhaka. My education didn't continue due to constant change of places.*  
(TDH\_SC\_119, boy, 15)

Migration to the city because of poverty and financial crisis in the village is common to the families of most workers in Hazaribagh. Often, what they find is worse than what they left behind, but with little or no work in the village, they have no choice but to do whatever work they can in the city.

### 3.1.2 Experiences of education

This section explores the reasons children give for not studying and their experiences of education. Different push and pull factors which cause children to leave education mainly fall under two categories: direct reasons for educational abandonment (the need to start work) and contributing factors which accumulate and exacerbate the direct causes for discontinuing education (bullying).

School absence was often associated with a child's entry into work. If a family could not afford to send a child to school, they often also needed the additional income provided by children's work. Furthermore, if a child did not attend school for any reason, even those not related to family finances, attitudes towards children's idleness (as explored in the section on '**Perceptions of idleness**') often meant that children felt that they should work.

Children cited several primary causes for leaving school. These causes included family financial pressures, a lack of willingness on the part of the child and/or on the part of the parent, a lack of institutional support, and community pressure to stop studying. Each cause had influencing factors – such as abusive teachers, learning difficulties, and migration.

### Attitudes around schooling

Children's stories paint a complicated mix of attitudes related to education. Their stories highlight tensions between conflicting perceptions of the value of education and the acceptance and support of child labour – with belief in (or dismissal of) the importance of education challenging (or supporting) child labour. These attitudes simultaneously interact with ideas around family responsibility, further complicating children's and families' decision-making around schooling.

In many cases, entry into child labour does exclude children from further educational pursuits, but work and education are not always mutually exclusive. For a few, work allows them to continue their education or support the education of their siblings.

Although her mother did not want her to start working, child TDH\_NH\_151 realised that her mother would not be able to afford to pay for her education if she did not. This led her to start working to support her own lessons and to reduce her mother's burdens:

*My mother's condition is miserable, so I told her that I will be working. She told me, you don't need to work. I am working, and you stay at home. I have to pay for my Arabic studies. Three months payment is due. My mother is unable to pay them back. I am working so that I can give the 200 taka to fully pay the fee on the 10th of the month. My mother won't have to pay for it... My mother said you don't have to work. You are young. But she is not able to pay for my Arabic studies. My mother said she will pay for it this month. Later we had to buy groceries, pay house rent, my sister's medicine, and my mother's medicine, etc.*  
(TDH\_NH\_151, girl, 12)

Another 14-year-old girl decided to start working to pay for her education expenses when she realised that the family income was insufficient to pay for her tuition fees and those of her siblings. She believed that if her parents paid for her studies, they wouldn't be able to afford her younger siblings' education as well. Even though she has made the choice to start working, she says,

*Some people say it's not right to work at my age. Nobody wants to work at this age. Nobody works at this age... People said, 'Nobody works at such a young age. Why are you working? Continue studying as your whole life is in front of you. If you study further, or if you study till class 9/10, then you can give private tuition to children at your*

*home. I told them that they were right, but I had to consider my situation and my problems.*  
(GUC\_SC\_011, girl, 15)

Even though she experiences outside pressure to continue her education and accepts that it would be better for her to study, she also recognises that given her circumstances, education is not an option.

Another girl recounted facing similar societal pressures when she had to drop out of school and start working at a young age, around 10 or 11 years old. She left school as their family was unable to pay for the annual school fees. However, this brought social stigma towards her family, with people criticising her parents for not being 'good parents' as they could not conform to the societal expectations of providing education for their child. Despite efforts to change her life through hard work, the child expresses struggles and limitations in breaking free from the cycle of poverty: 'I am trying to change my life, but I can't. I am currently working hard' (TDH\_SC\_27, girl, 14). This highlights disjuncture between societal expectations and economic realities which disrupt the educational trajectory of children, underscoring the systemic challenges faced by marginalised young people which limit choice.

Sometimes, parents' support of their child's education (in the hope that they will earn more in the future if they are educated) creates a counterproductive financial burden on the family. Child TDH\_SC\_114 explains that in response to his mother's wish for him to achieve success and bring happiness and financial stability to the family, the family took loans to support his education, but the additional financial burden of the loans compelled him to seek employment.

*The main reason is that my two brothers have been working since their childhood and they could not study. So my mother had a wish that I will be big some day and I will do a very good job. She thought I could keep her in happiness and peace. But nothing happened because of our financial problems. A lot of money was spent to make me educated. I could not bear that. They used to take a lot of loans from people. They took it for me. For my studies. My brothers used to work. There were some instalments, all the money that my brothers earned would go in the instalments. My mother did not have money for my studies. She used to take loans for my studies which I did not like any more. That is why I started working... I did not know*

*how life is, how it is to earn money before starting to work, I just used to lead my life normally. Now I understand everything after I started working.*  
(TDH\_SC\_114, boy, 17)

Another story represents a vastly different perspective. A 16-year-old girl reported that when her academic result was poor (because her family couldn't afford private tuition), her mother said to her,

*Quit studying and start working. Our household is in poverty, and education costs money. Where will I get so much money? Instead, if you work, you can bring some money into the household. You have failed two subjects because you're not interested in studies. So there's no need for you to study.*  
(GUC\_SC\_005, girl, 16)

Despite her mother's claim that she wasn't interested in studying, she says 'I loved studying'. Both stories demonstrate an assumption that the child will contribute financially to the family, whether immediately or in the future.

Some parents do not expect education to have any benefit and therefore pressure their children to start work early so that they can step onto the employment ladder. This is often combined with societal expectations for a child to take responsibility for the family in difficult times. This child has conflicting emotions regarding education and work: she wishes to work and to study:

*I feel like going to work. But I can't, it is really difficult for me. And I want to study. Everybody has a wish. I told my father that I will study till college. Then I will do a job. But my father tells me there is no need to study any more. I have an aunt. She lives with us, she has leg aches, so she stays with us. Even she tells me, 'What are you going to do with your education!?' Work.'*  
(TDH\_NH\_152, girl, 13)

It is not only parents and adult relatives who believe that education has limited benefits; children themselves sometimes expressed similar sentiments:

*Nowadays, there is no profit in being an employee after studying for a long time. Those who have invested their time in study for ten years have not benefited. Again, people have to bribe to get a job. In contrast, there is much profit in business. Therefore, I hoped to start a business from a young age.*  
(TDH\_CLSC\_235, young man, 18)

While outside the scope of this paper to discuss, this young man's opinion points to perceptions of limited labour opportunities in these neighbourhoods.

Gender norms also play a role in whether a child is encouraged to continue studying. The following story from a 13-year-old girl highlights how traditional practices influence her parent's decision-making regarding education. She says,

*I didn't have to work at that time [when she used to go to school]. That is why I was great. But now I have to work, so I don't like it... But I can't study now, my mother won't let me... What will happen if I study now, that's why... Because [my mother thinks] girls have to work after marriage to survive, so what is the point of studying?*  
(GUC\_CLSC\_026, girl, 13)

When asked about her future aspirations, she said, 'I wanted to become a doctor. Now I don't any more.' At the age of 13, her mother has already decided that there is no benefit to this child's education and no prospect for her beyond marriage and work.

These excerpts, and others like them, demonstrate that education is perceived as a means to an end – future income – rather than an intrinsic right of children. Furthermore, this view of education contributes to decisions which weigh the immediate benefit of a child's salary against the child's future income-earning potential but which does not consider any other non-monetary benefit of children's engagement in education, nor the risks associated with work.

Finally, children highlighted the fact that it is not only financial factors that make it difficult to get back into education once you have left:

*I can't even if I want now... I can't because I have grown up now. I feel shy.*  
(GUC\_SC\_061, boy, 17)

As the last excerpt shows, some children leave school due to acute financial pressures in the household and then do not feel like they can return to school once the situation has resolved because they are too old.

While this section on 'Attitudes around schooling' covered the complex thoughts and feelings children had towards education, the following sections examine the most prevalent reasons children stated for leaving school. These reasons are influenced by attitudes but not entirely

determined by them and demonstrate that choices are made from constrained options.

### Financial pressures

For the poorest families who struggle to have enough for their basic needs, school fees are often unaffordable. Not only are children excluded due to their inability to pay, but they also experience abuse and bullying as a result. The following excerpts provide specific and varied examples of how children experience their inability to pay for school:

*My teachers scold me a lot for my unpaid school fees... My mother uses my income to run our household. The place where I have to pay my fees doesn't accept monthly payments. They have asked me to pay 3,500 taka in one instalment.*  
(TDH\_CLSC\_189, girl, 17)

*I had a strong wish to study. I had a sharp brain too. But I couldn't. I tried to study for one year, but nobody helped me. I went to the madrasa, but I couldn't give the admission fees which is why the teachers there threw me away.*  
(GUC\_SC\_029, boy, 17)

*It was tough for my father to pay for the education for the three of us. That's because my younger brother was in class 5, I was in class 8, and my older brother was in class 10. It wasn't possible to arrange so much money. So my father told me to get ready to work.*  
(GUC\_CLSC\_009, boy, 17)

*Then I paid with the money I took from my uncle. I kept running my education this way. I went to the teachers too. They would tell me; don't you have a conscience? How can we reduce so much money? They told me many things. Sometimes I would take my parents with me. But it was not possible to reduce the school fee. In class 9, my school fee was 1,400 taka; my mother gave me 300 taka. Then I went to the madam to give money, there was a girl with me who went to give the fee, she gave 1,400 taka, I gave 300 taka. The madam thanked the girl and told me in front of her that you will keep giving like this, you have started this from class 6! I told her that ma'am we are poor. How will we give so much money? Then she said, yes, of course, you are poor. You only need to pay 1,400 taka per year, you become poor for that reason. She told me so many things. I was upset. Then I asked*

*her, will you not take this 300 taka? She denied.*  
(TDH\_SC\_061, girl, 16)

Despite children's desires to study and their attempts to convince schools to make an exception for them, an inability to pay school fees is a significant determinant of children's departure from education. Furthermore, the schools are not flexible in their payment arrangements, which disadvantages children who cannot afford a lump sum payment.

Though it is not well explored in the children's life stories, there appears to be a lack of government-run educational institutions in children's neighbourhoods or a lack of access for the child storytellers due to the high numbers of children citing needing to pay school fees which they wouldn't need to do in a government-run school. From these stories, we know that children face lots of pressure from school for payment, and therefore we can assume that those are private schools. Only one excerpt directly mentioned the benefit of attending a government school:

*Life was very nice. I never got admitted to coaching. I just read myself. There was no money for coaching. I always studied in a government school, but I didn't get a chance in a government school in class 6. That's why I had to get admitted to a private school. You know the private schools ask for a lot of money. A lot of money had been spent when I got admitted there. They took 2,550 taka for the admission, and the tuition fee was 350 taka monthly. But suddenly my mother got sick. I could not sit for the test exam later due to a financial crisis.*  
(GUC\_SC\_047, girl, 17)

This child's story compares the experience of attending a government school versus a private school. It is unclear why the child did not attend government school after year 6, although it is likely due to insufficient spaces in the local government school. However, by changing to a private school, the family could then not cover the cost of tuition and exams.

While some children cannot afford the expenses related to attending school, other children stated leaving school to join work to address economic pressures at home:

*I loved to study... Our expenses could not be borne by my mother's salary. Though my father bore the expense, still we faced hardship. As it's very hard to live in Dhaka City like giving the rent, food costs, etcetera. Then due to my stubbornness, I*

*thought I won't study further; rather, I will work.*  
(TDH\_NH\_150, girl, 17)

*My mother told me to quit the study... There was a financial crisis. We were indebted to many people. It was almost one and a half lakh takas... We are trying to repay the rest of the money by working.*  
(TDH\_CLSC\_244, girl, 16)

*When I was going to school, my parents were taking me to school. At that time, I got hit by a private car and my waist broke. Then they operated. We had a large amount of debt. Then I couldn't study in school because of the loan.*  
(GUC\_NH\_030, boy, 16)

The last excerpt points to the role family health and the cost of medical treatment play in children's educational attainment. When adult family members become ill and cannot work, younger members of the household take responsibility for financial provision and even when it is the child who is injured, he/she helps to pay back the debts at the cost of their education.

However, education and work are not always mutually exclusive in these children's lives. In fact, in some cases, starting to work is how a child maintains access to education:

*My income is used to pay all of my school-related expenses. After paying those, I hand over my remaining income to my mother. She knows how she spends that.*  
(TDH\_CLSC\_189, girl, 17)

*[Yes, I spend my salary to study.] I buy paper, notebook, and a pen. Also, when I go to school I spend money on tiffin period... I leave the rest of the money with my aunt. She sends it to my mother in the village.*  
(TDH\_SC\_030, boy, 16)

Another girl recognised the cumulative effect of unpaid rent, loans, and mounting poverty in her family and realised that she could alleviate some of the pressure on her parents if she started working. While the family is still grappling with debts despite the addition of her salary, she remains determined to continue her education:

*If I continued to be a burden on them, then our household wouldn't be able to survive, and our poverty and debts would worsen, right?... I thought that if I burdened my parents, then our unpaid rent*

*and poverty would keep snowballing. We had to stand on our own feet in the midst of those problems. I realised that it wouldn't do to always pressurise my parents. So I conceived the idea of working and discussed it with my parents, and they told me to go ahead. So I joined a job with my friend and saw that it was okay. We still haven't repaid our debts completely. We are trying to pay off our debt, but I am also trying to continue studying besides working. I haven't stopped my education. I won't stop my education. I will study in addition to working.*  
(TDH\_CLSC\_182, girl, 15)

### **Lack of children's willingness to continue with school**

For various reasons, children stated that they decided to leave school because they did not enjoy it and no longer wanted to continue. As shown by the following excerpts, some children simply stated that they preferred working and spending time with friends over going to school. While most of these examples were from boys, several girls also shared similar feelings:

*I couldn't study because of my bad company... My parents pressured me to read, but I didn't. I just go around randomly with my friends.*  
(GUC\_SC\_055, boy, 17)

*I didn't like studying that much. I would have had fun if I didn't study at all. I would run away from school.*  
(TDH\_SC\_080, boy, 15)

*I didn't like it [studying].*  
(TDH\_SC\_71, girl, 15)

*I stopped going to school because I didn't like going there. I didn't like going early in the morning. That's why I learnt to work.*  
(TDH\_NH\_012, boy, 17)

*And I said I will work, and I don't like to study. I work now.*  
(TDH\_SC\_85, girl, 14)

*My friends wouldn't let me attend the exam. They used to tell me if I didn't go that day, nothing would happen. Come with us today and we will play. I play then... I don't like to study any more, and I want to work in the motorcycle repairing place. I want to become a mechanic.*  
(GUC\_NH\_033, boy, 15)

In several stories, the stress of studying caused children to leave school:

*But studies used to give me a lot of pressure. My family would give me pressure as well, they wouldn't let me get out of the house. I couldn't roam around or play; everyone would tell me to study all the time... Then when they wanted to admit me after I passed the eighth grade, I told them that I would not... They tried to make me understand, even beat me, but I told them I will not study any more, even if they kill me.*  
(GUC\_NH\_018, boy, 16)

*I didn't like waking up at dawn to go to school. There was no time for breakfast, and we got off at 5.00pm from school. I felt trapped. I didn't like that. I used to skip school regularly with friends, and play with them... While doing those, I lost interest in school.*  
(TDH\_SC\_010, boy, 15)

These excerpts show children making their own decision to leave school when they dislike studying. Even when they have support from their parents, they decide not to attend. The pull of play, work, and friends seems to be enough to stop these children from attending and demonstrates children's agency in these situations.

### **School conditions**

The most cited factors outside of financial limitations which influenced children's school experiences and decision to leave school related to teacher abuse, bullying from peers, and lack of academic support.

#### **Abuse in schools**

Some children decided they would stop studying after abusive treatment from their teachers. This abuse was primarily brought on by poor academic performance or inability to buy school materials or pay school fees:

*Yes, when I was little, I couldn't study. Then my teachers would beat me. They would keep me holding my ears. In this way I have come here. I would go to my friend after school, and I would see how he is working. In this way, I started working.*  
(GUC\_SC\_027, boy, 17)

*If I didn't read properly, the masters would beat me a lot. I studied there for two years and then I escaped.*  
(GUC\_SC\_048, boy, 9)

*I was admitted to a primary school. After the result of one examination, a teacher insulted*

*me, and then I stopped going there.*  
(TDH\_SC\_046, girl, 17)

In these cases, children are held responsible for their school performance, regardless of their age, and punished when they do not do well. These excerpts demonstrate a lack of understanding and compassion for children with learning difficulties and a tendency to blame and punish the child rather than provide necessary support.

Furthermore, children who couldn't buy school supplies or pay for school fees stated that their teachers would humiliate them in front of their classmates.

*My father couldn't pay the school fees. School fees remained unpaid. Then the schoolteachers scolded a lot. Then I would get insulted in front of my friends. I feel bad. The teachers kept telling me about the school fees in front of everyone, that is why I left school.*  
(TDH\_CLSC\_229, girl, 16)

*One of my schoolteachers insulted me a lot because I didn't have books in the class. I couldn't pay my tuition fee properly. Therefore, he made fun of me. I cried inside the class and instantly decided that I wouldn't study there any more.*  
(GUC\_SC\_044, boy, 15)

The environment of physical and verbal abuse demonstrates a lack of support for children lacking adequate financial resources. There does not seem to be an effort on the part of the schools to keep children enrolled or to compassionately address funding issues.

Cases of abuse were also common in madrasas (Islamic schools):

*I had left my madrasa out of anger... One day, I was chewing on Center Fruit<sup>3</sup>... I was beaten up for that... he kicked me 10–12 times... Then I left the madrasa.*  
(GUC\_SC\_002, boy, 17)

*I didn't like studying at the madrasa... I used to study without any break. I started studying in the morning. If I talked to anyone, they hit me. Afterwards, I left the madrasa.*  
(TDH\_SC\_117, boy, 17)

*My hujur [teacher] used to beat me. I did not like him; he used to beat me a lot... I mean I used*

*to cheat on my studies. When I was attentive in my studies, my hujur loved me a lot, then I doubt he started to beat me when I started to cheat... I could not tolerate this at all.*  
(TDH\_NH\_137, boy, 14)

Children even spoke about being exploited at the madrasa:

*The madrasa didn't give us meals. The head teacher of the madrasa used to send us places to collect money for food. All of us went to collect money. Some boys went to X, while others went to Y. I was sent along with another boy. Some of the boys went to section A. That's how they used to send the boys to beg... Everything was bad. If we were a little late in waking up, we were hit with a stick.*  
(TDH\_NH\_132, boy, 13)

One of the children explained how he escaped physical punishment at a madrasa by becoming involved in work. Though there was pressure from his family members to rejoin the madrasa, he felt he couldn't tell them about the abuse he experienced there, so instead he began working to avoid physical abuse and possible negative influences from boys in his neighbourhood:

*My family members yelled at me after I left the madrasa. When my paternal grandfather passed away, I conducted his funeral prayer. After that, my uncle told me to study at the madrasa again. I refused to do so. He asked me why. I told him I didn't like it. I didn't tell anyone that my teacher had hit me as that would create problems. I haven't spoken about it to anyone, not even my parents. I haven't told anyone. My parents told me that I should work since I haven't studied. I thought to myself that the road in [Gojmohol], there are boys there who take drugs. That's why I started working at the glove factory.*  
(GUC\_SC\_002, boy, 17)

These examples of teachers abusing students, whether at government, private, or religious institutions, demonstrate a lack of institutional oversight and safeguarding at places of learning and education.

### Bullying

Bullying was also a problem faced by some children – occasionally exacerbated by poor economic conditions.

3 Center Fruit is a popular brand of chewing gum in Bangladesh. It is considered very rude to chew gum in front of your elders.

Along with adult inaction, these experiences contributed to children leaving school:

*There was a boy in school who used to beat me. I couldn't say anything to him because when I did, his older brother also beat me. My teachers didn't say anything to them either because the school was built by their family on their land. The boys used to beat me. Some of the children at school hated me. They beat me and said, 'Poor people! You don't have any money. You don't have this and that. Why do you even come to school?'.... Many days passed by like this. I didn't say anything. Gradually, I stopped going to school. Then I came here to work.*  
(GUC\_NH\_004, girl, 11)

*Everyone used to tease me at school saying about my parents. I didn't go for this any more. My father got married again after my mother died and then he left us. It made me feel bad... My classmates used to make fun of me saying that my father left us and married again.*  
(GUC\_SC\_052, girl, 11)

*I was scolded a lot at my school because I didn't have a geometry box. I used to borrow it from others. They used to say, 'You're a beggar. You don't even have a geometry box.'*  
(TDH\_CLSC\_192, girl, 13)

*In addition, there were two or three girls at school who harassed me. They used to scold me for no reason. They were made the captains of our class. They used to misbehave with me for no reason. I used to feel very hurt as a result. That's why I left school.*  
(TDH\_CLSC\_191, girl, 15)

While the reasons behind bullying were varied – from poverty to unpopularity – the results were the same in that children who were bullied decided to leave school.

#### Lack of academic support

As previously mentioned, children with poor performance in school don't receive the support they need, and as the following cases show, this can lead to being excluded from school:

*I used to like going to school... I troubled to understand studies... I used to fail a lot, which is*

*why... my name was cut off from the school.*  
(TDH\_SC\_106, boy, 16)

*Then I couldn't do anything, they would make me write and let me go. They would ask me to write, and I could not, and I could not show anything. Then they would let me go.*  
(TDH\_NH\_136, boy, 15)

While we cannot be sure of the reasons behind these children's poor school performance, it is possible that they suffered from learning disabilities, which went unrecognised and unsupported.

**The Covid-19 pandemic and its effects on education**  
One pattern which emerged from the life stories, likely due to the time of their collection, was children's entry into work due to school closures and economic hardship associated with the Covid-19 pandemic. As we discuss in the section '**Perceptions of idleness**', there is a strong preference to avoid idleness in children in these neighbourhoods. As such, children who were not attending school were driven to other occupations, such as paid work.

Furthermore, economic disruption due to the Covid-19 pandemic meant that many families struggled to meet basic needs during this period and depended on children's income:

*I used to study at G's school, but I don't go there any more. The school shut down due to Covid-19. I started working five months ago. I have never worked before. I started working after the Covid-19 started. I work with hand gloves. As school was shut, my mother told me to start working instead of roaming around with other boys and going astray in the process. She said it would keep me physically fit. Moreover, our financial condition was bad back then. I felt that I should work. So I started working.*  
(TDH\_SC\_007, boy, 15)

*The school was also closed due to the Covid-19 pandemic. So my father told me to work.*  
(GUC\_SC\_057, boy, 12)

*Schools were shut due to lockdown. Our debts increased due to Covid-19, so my mother told me to work.*  
(TDH\_SC\_023, girl, 14)

In some cases, both children and their parents wish for the child to study, and children have good experiences

at school, but due to economic hardship, they cannot continue their studies:

*At the time of the Covid-19 pandemic, there was an economic crisis in our family. We suffered a lot then. My father couldn't earn money to feed us, to avail the study cost.*  
(TDH\_SC\_027, girl, 14)

This child and her family worked to overcome multiple barriers to education, but Covid-19-related economic stresses were too much for her family and eventually contributed to the child's departure from education and entry into work.

The combination of school closures and increasing financial strain on families has meant that many children began working during the pandemic. Now that schools have reopened, not all children have the desire or ability to return.

### 3.1.3 Cultural norms influencing child labour

#### Perceptions of family responsibility

Many of the children's narratives illustrate that there is an internalised desire among children to be productive and helpful members of their families when the family is experiencing financial pressure. The children express a strong inclination to contribute and alleviate their parents' burdens, recognising that their actions can make a tangible difference in their family's wellbeing despite the negative consequences for them as individuals. In the next excerpt, the child rationalises his decision to become involved in work by stating the difficulty of balancing expenses such as food, rent, and loan repayments. He reveals the detailed knowledge that children in this position possess on the costs of running a household and the restraints of their families. Feeling responsibility towards his family, he takes on employment to bridge the gap in household expenses and income:

*My father drives a CNG and earns 500–600 taka daily. With these earnings, will he buy food, pay rent, or repay loan instalments? Thinking about that, I started working. I thought it would help my father. I thought that I could pay rent and repay loans with my income, while he paid for food. That's why I started working, and also because I wanted to pay for my own expenses. When I didn't work, my father used to give me pocket money of 10, 20, or 50 taka, but how long could I make do with that? That's why I*

*am working. Now I hand over my earnings to my mother, and she gives me 500–600 taka as pocket money. That's why I started working – to help with household expenses and also to pay for myself. My father doesn't earn much, only 600/700 taka per day, which is not enough to pay for food, rent, and my younger brother's pocket money. So I thought of working and paying for household expenses instead of roaming around. So I started working. When I used to return home after hanging out with friends all day, my parents would ask me how long I would continue roaming around and told me that I should start working. I told them I wouldn't work, but after a few days, I realised it would help my father if I worked. My father went to work every day, which must have been difficult. I thought that if I worked, it would benefit my father and me as well. So, I started working. My mother doesn't work, and my father's lone income isn't enough to run the household well. So I decided to start working.*  
(TDH\_SC\_010, boy, 15)

Child TDH\_SC\_010's sense of responsibility develops over time. His decision to start working was influenced by a deep understanding of his family's financial situation as well as intimations from his parents. His choices and rationalising demonstrate the complexity of decision-making for children, who often must contend with multiple competing norms and expectations as well as personal aspirations.

While the decision to leave education and begin working is difficult, a child's salary can have a transformative effect on a family's wellbeing. Though GUC\_SC\_064's father was not supportive of his decision, he chose to start working anyway. His father used to drive a rented vehicle; however, since GUC\_SC\_064 started earning and supporting his family, they were able to save enough to buy their own vehicle, significantly improving their financial condition:

*It was bad when my father used to drive a rented vehicle. He couldn't manage alone. The money he earned was not enough. We couldn't study like that. Then my father said don't work, study. But how can the family run that way? That is why I joined work. I learnt the work afterwards. It has been almost one year I am working. I saved money later and then bought him a vehicle. Now we are better than before. My father drives the vehicle; when my factory is closed, I drive the vehicle at that time. I don't have much earning. My family survives with*



*great difficulty. I am working since my childhood, that is my pain. I couldn't study. When my father used to work alone, he drove a rented vehicle, he would eat once and couldn't eat the other time. After that, I joined work. He used to get 100/200 taka if there was work; if there was no work, he used to take some from home and pay. The one who rents the vehicle (he pays him a sum including the rent fee). Then I joined the work and learnt it, now I am working and earning, after buying the car I am driving it now... When I didn't work, that time I used to stay at home. When I used to study in the school many times, I went without eating. My madam and sir asked me, won't you study any more? I told them no sir, I won't study any more. The teacher said I will bear your fees, I told him, no, I have to work, then I came home, and my father asked me why won't you go to school? I told him I won't go to school any more; I will learn shoe work. (GUC\_SC\_064, boy, 16)*

Because of the child's decision to work, the entire family is in a much more stable financial situation, but the child still feels 'pain' for having to start work at such a young age and forego his education. For this child, his decision to start working was a difficult choice between studying without eating or eating without studying.

Like GUC\_SC\_064, another girl is encouraged to study by her parents but decides instead to work to avoid further difficulty in the family:

*She told me to study. She said that my father and she would educate me despite their hardships. But considering my household's condition, I realised that if I studied, we would face further difficulties. We would face financial hardships. Where would my mother arrange so much money from? My father can't work. That's why I work, even though my mother scolds me for that. (TDH\_CLSC\_192, girl, 13)*

Children's strong sense of responsibility towards alleviating their family's 'suffering' compels them to start working. When asked if anyone has asked him to join work, a 17-year-old boy replied, 'No, no one from my family asked me to [work], I have taken this decision by myself. I cannot bear their suffering any more, that is why I have come here [to Dhaka] alone' (TDH\_SC\_114 boy, 17). This child's reason for working is repeated across many of the children's stories.

When her father left, one girl (TDH\_SC\_090) saw that her mother had to work hard to even manage food for the family and occasionally had to resort to asking others for money to buy food. When her mother was unable to pay the money back, the child listened to others' rebukes. Seeing her mother suffer, the daughter decided on her own to start working:

*I work because I have to pay rent and pay people from whom we take loans when we don't have food... My mother did not want me to work at first as I was very young... My mother works too hard, she has to ask for food from other people... That is why I thought I should start working... I have thought of all these by myself. I told my mother to put me to work somewhere as it was not possible to manage any more. My mother asked me how I can work and where she can put me to work. Then I started looking for a job and joined here after some time. (TDH\_SC\_090, girl, 17)*

Child TDH\_NH\_138 faces a similar situation. Despite her parents' efforts to protect their child, the 16-year-old girl understands the reality of her circumstances in which her family has food only on the days in which her father can find work. Though her parents didn't want her to work, she realised that by working she could reduce the burden of her parents and contribute to a higher standard of living for all of them. She reasons that as the older child it is her responsibility to contribute to the family:

*My parents moved to Dhaka under everyone's suggestion, but they would not allow us to work. They loved us a lot from our childhood... I have this dream of doing a good job after completing my studies, but we are poor, and the poor do not have that luck to have such an education. Now I am working... My brother is very young, I am the older one, I will have to end my parents' sufferings. I will work and lessen their troubles. (TDH\_NH\_138, girl, 16)*

Another child expressed his intention to be helpful to his parents during the pandemic when the family was suffering due to reduced income. He stated that seeing his parents' financial struggles he realised that 'if I can be of any benefit to my family that it will be good' (TDH\_SC\_062, boy, 17).

When a 14-year-old boy observed that his family was facing financial difficulties due to their income dropping from 18,000 taka to 14,000 taka per month because his father could only find work for three or four days

a month during the pandemic, he decided to work: 'I have to work to support the family' (GUC\_SC\_045, boy, 14). His response reveals the impact of the pandemic on vulnerable families and the reasons why some children feel that they 'have' to work. The response also highlights the challenges faced by low-income families who are already barely meeting their basic needs and the role of child labour in filling the income gap, particularly in the context of economic shocks such as the Covid-19 pandemic.

Even when their parents are unsupportive and abusive, children still feel the need to contribute to their upkeep, such as GUC\_CLSC\_001 who was thrown out of her home by her mother and her older sister for enrolling on a course. Her other sister and brother-in-law then offered her a place to stay so that she could continue to study. When she started earning, she wanted to give some of her salary to her mother. Her sister was furious at this decision and reminded her that her mother once rejected her. However, the girl still wanted to support her mother, acknowledging that her mother, for better or worse, is still her mother. This showcases her sense of filial duty despite past conflict:

*My sister replied, 'Don't you remember what Mother did to you? She threw the two of you out in your childhood. She didn't stop to think where you would go, what you would do, and what you would eat. She didn't think about these things. How can you think about her?' I said, 'Good or bad, Mother is my mother.'* (GUC\_CLSC\_001, girl, 17)

Another girl who was abused and rejected by her family for being born a girl shared the same sense of resigned responsibility:

*We are three sisters. I am the youngest of all. When it was the time of my birth, my mother thought I would be a boy. But I was born as a girl. My father became very angry. My mother wasn't happy either. Therefore, they didn't take care of me so much. We live in this place for 20 years. All the people here know how I have been raised. I heard from people that my parents didn't like me. They didn't expect me. Also, my skin colour was a bit dark. My mother wouldn't feed me her breast milk. Sometimes she bathed me with hot water so that I would die quickly. Then my aunt reared me for some years. My older sisters were much prettier. They had got many caresses. Still, now they don't*

*behave me well. I grew up with a lot of hardships since my childhood. Sometimes I used to think that I would run away and make my own life with my income... Parents suffer much after their child. Now I should take care of them by earning.* (BNG\_LS\_TDH\_CLSC\_239, girl, 16)

Despite her mistreatment, she still thinks she has a responsibility to take care of her parents.

Narratives also illustrate children's financial foresight. They acknowledge that even though their parents are currently meeting the family's needs, their parents will not be able to sustain the burden of hard physical work for long. Children reason that as their parents get gradually older, they will need to take over income-earning responsibilities:

*[Father] pulled a van for 15 years; how long can he do that?... He kept pulling the van for 16 years. He can't any more. He took a small vehicle; he drives that now. I have a little sister. She keeps crying that she might not even pass class 5! Then he supported her education till class 5. Anyways, if I want to support my family, I have to come here. Then I rented this house. Now I go to the shoe factory.* (TDH\_SC\_061, girl, 16)

A 14-year-old boy shared a similar reflection on his ageing father: 'We have a large amount of debt, and my father is getting old. Driving a manual rickshaw with one or two passengers is very hard. I decided to start working instead of being idle' (TDH\_NH\_134, boy, 14).

As the stories above show, children's income is primarily spent on supporting their families. Any income they keep for themselves as 'pocket money' is usually a very small amount and used to purchase inexpensive items:

*I take 20/30 taka. They need to pay rent, eat food, and buy groceries.* (TDH\_NH\_140, girl, 16)

*I work. I told my parents to repay one loan with my income and to repay the weekly instalments of another loan with my father's income. While repaying these, we will eat frugally... they tell me to hand over my income to them after keeping 500 taka for myself.* (TDH\_SC\_076, boy, 14)

*Sometimes I keep some money and buy my clothes. They pay house rent, buy some food market items for home, and buy my sister something.* (TDH\_SC\_36, boy, 12)

*I have girly expenses ... I buy makeup,  
buy cosmetics, buy hair oils, etc.  
(TDH\_SC\_51, girl, 16)*

Children prioritise their family's needs over their own desires, recognising the limitations of their spending:

*My salary is only 4,000 taka per month; with  
that I have to support my family. If I buy a  
cell phone that is worth 10,000 taka, I will  
have to spend two month's salary on this.  
Then who will pay the rent of the house?  
(TDH\_CLSC\_238, boy, 17)*

### Family pressure

While the stories above demonstrate children's internalised sense of responsibility, in other cases, parents and other family members push, coerce, and force children into work based on the belief that children should support their families. Children's narratives show that children in these situations have little power to go against their parents. Furthermore, they often do not question whether they should work or not and instead accept their parents' decisions without argument.

Though child GUC\_SC\_066 was happy living with his grandparents and attending school in his village, his mother decided to move to Dhaka after a family argument. Despite promises that he would be able to attend school in Dhaka, he was never enrolled. Furthermore, his father forces him to work and physically abuses him when he does not hand over his earnings:

*If my father asks for my money, I don't want to agree.  
That time, he raises his hands on me even. Every  
day, I struggle a lot at work. I find it very difficult. If  
I don't give him money, he beats me... I studied in  
school then my grandmother and mother had some  
issues, then my grandmother didn't want to keep  
me any more. I can't study in the village; how will  
I study in Dhaka? It takes a lot of money to study  
here. I have studied till class 5 in my hometown  
and came here, I didn't study any more... When I  
was in the village, I used to study. I mean, it was  
great with my grandparents, things went well at that  
time. I was happy. My mother said something to my  
grandmother, then we came here... I came to Dhaka  
to get admitted to a school; later my parents were  
insisting a lot that I have to start working, then I did.  
(GUC\_SC\_066, boy, 17)*

This story demonstrates how little control some children have over their own lives and the decision to join work.

Other children, like the child in the following excerpt, readily accept without argument their parents' request to start working, believing that it is a necessity:

*My father and mother told me. They said we have  
problems, so you can't study any more. Then I said  
'Okay, so be it.' I should start working now and I did.  
(TDH\_SC\_082, boy, 14)*

Older siblings also play a role in facilitating children's entry into work. A 15-year-old boy started working when he was ten to address rising debt in his family. It was his brother and his parents who got him into work. He says,

*We were in serious debt, so he [brother] thought if  
I could work, then the debt could be decreased...  
I was not at the age of working at that time, I  
was in the third grade... I didn't want to work,  
but then I realised we have to pay rent, there are  
a lot of loans, and we have to eat as well... My  
parents took the decision of putting me to work.  
(GUC\_SC\_026, boy, 15)*

While it was not his decision to join work at such a young age, he felt that he had to because of the family's debts and expenses.

Other children, while not forced to work, are coerced to do so by their parents:

*I started working seeing my parent's suffering...  
They used to cry. Then I thought to myself that  
something must be done, so I started working... My  
parents used to cry... They would say their sons do  
not work and stuff like this. So I told them I will work.  
(TDH\_SC\_093, boy, 17)*

In the most extreme cases, parents involve their children in bonded labour. Although this is not a common occurrence in the life stories, the severity of this behaviour is worth noting:

*While I was studying, my father used to visit  
that place sometimes. One day, my employer  
told my father to make me work there. Then  
my father forcibly took me there. My employer  
took me in on a five-year contract... It means  
I can't leave the place for five years.  
(TDH\_NH\_131, Balurmath, boy, 13)*

This story is an example of the far end of the spectrum of how children are perceived by their families. While in most cases, children are asked by their parents or decide on their own, given the family circumstances, to join work,

in this story, a child is forced into bonded labour, a type of slavery. It is unlikely that he receives any benefit from the work he does; instead, he is treated as property by his father.

#### Gender and birth order in family responsibilities

When speaking of family responsibility, most children do not explicitly cite their gender as a factor, with most boys and girls expressing a sense of duty and a desire to support their families regardless of gender. However, for the few children that did explicitly mention gender, there exists a difference in how responsibility was interpreted. Boys more often expressed feeling that their contributions were obligatory, while girls wanted to show (and prove) that even as a girl they could support the family.

In the following excerpt, a boy expresses his belief that his gender determines that he must work:

*Since I was born as a boy, I have to work. However, it doesn't always feel good to work. I have a hobby to go for a walk or to do something entertaining, but I can't. Nobody will feed me if I don't work. As I was born into a poor family in Bangladesh, I must work to eat.*  
(TDH\_CLSC\_235, young man, 18)

The young man uses 'have to' and 'must' to indicate the inescapable obligation he feels towards his family.

Another boy also shares that as the oldest son remaining in the household, his parents expect him to support the family:

*My older brother has married, and he takes care of his own family. I am the only son of this family now, so my parents have some expectations from me, that I will do something and take care of them.*  
(GUC\_SC\_033, boy, 17)

In contrast, one girl expresses that she likes being able to support her family, but doesn't think that it is a necessity based on her gender:

*No, it was my own wish. My parents were suffering which I couldn't see any more. Girls cannot do much at their father's home. The boys can earn outside their homes, but girls cannot do that... I thought of buying this [sewing] machine so that I can earn some money from home. And my parents will also see that their daughter is earning and how much is the labour. My family would be a bit developed.*  
(TDH\_NH\_145, girl, 15)

Other girls shared that their parents didn't want them to work as the eldest daughter:

*If I don't work, the family won't survive. And I don't [want] my family to struggle or my mother to become sad. My mother said that 'You were the eldest daughter, you don't need to work.' But I told her that 'I can't see you struggle.' Then I started working.*  
(GUC\_CLSC\_029, girl, 16)

*When we came to Dhaka, my father told me, 'Study in spite of your difficulties. I will pay for it however I can. You are my eldest daughter. Study even if it is difficult for you.' However, I don't want to do that as I don't want to impose any hardship on my parents, considering that I am their eldest child. My father has many debts. I was also sick.*  
(TDH\_CLSC\_193, girl, 13)

For girls, norms related to children's responsibilities, especially that of the oldest, to their families are challenged by gender norms and traditional practices. On one hand, girls traditionally marry young and move into their husband's household. On the other hand, many girls develop a strong sense of family responsibility and want to contribute to their own families and relieve their hardships.

In the following extract, one girl's desire to work and support her family is clearly self-motivated and against the wishes of their parents. While she wants to work and economically support her parents, they do not believe she should contribute to the family, and instead want her to have an advantageous marriage. Unfortunately, in this case, she is not able to support her family or achieve happiness in marriage:

*My parents never wanted me to work; I was the one who was looking for a job as my parents were suffering a lot, so I thought if I could be of any help. I tried a lot, but they never allowed me to work; they would say I will get all my happiness when I will be married and will be living with my husband. I wanted to work, but they married me off. Everyone was convincing me for marriage, so I agreed.*

*I did not want to marry. Then my parents made me understand that I had no use in that family. So it will be better if I get married, so that I can get happiness in that family. So I agreed to the marriage. I wished to study more, but I agreed to whatever my parents asked. I thought if my luck would be good my husband would do a job and we will manage like this.*

*But my luck was not good, and I was married off to a poor family again.*

*Sometimes I think if I were a boy, I could do something. My life is a failure because of being a girl. If I were a boy, I could work and take care of them [her parents]. I could keep them happy and remain happy myself as well. My life has become a failure being a girl... I do not want to live any more... If Allah would forgive me if I would end my life, I would have done that a long time ago. (TDH\_SC\_092, girl, 17)*

This girl's story shows that she has internalised the idea that she is useless to her own family because of her gender. She laments being born a girl and sadly has considered suicide.

Occasionally, there were positive results of girls avoiding marriage through work – although not without trade-offs. Unlike the previous child, some girls managed to convince their families that they were better employed than married.

*When I was in class 8 and used to study, my family, especially my father, wanted to give me away in marriage. My father was very sick, and a lot of money was spent, about four lakhs to treat him. So he said that he wouldn't afford my education and would give me a marriage. He chose a groom for me. That boy was bad. I failed to convince my father, so I ran away to my aunt's home. My aunt used to pay for my education then. After many encounters with my family, I finally stopped going to school and got into this job. After that, my father didn't force me into marriage, since I was giving money to the family. The school was closed since the lockdown. It has been almost two years. Still, now I want to study. But if I tell this to my father, he will say that he can't afford this. He doesn't love me much. (TDH\_CLSC\_239, girl, 16)*

While this child was able to escape an unwanted early marriage through financially contributing to her family, she still had to sacrifice her education.

Another girl (GUC\_SC\_012) is also able to avoid early marriage by arguing the benefit of her staying with the family and working. Luckily, she can combine education and work:

*It was very difficult to run our household. I have a younger brother. It was difficult to continue both of*

*our education at that time. My mother wanted to get me married off, but I refused as that would've been bad for our household. That's why I wanted to study and work at the same time. So I study half the time and work the other half. Our landlady helps us a lot. When I got promoted to class 9, she talked to my school and arranged free tuition for me, so that I could continue my studies. Now I study in class 9. My father doesn't want me to work at my age, but he also can't pay our household expenses. (GUC\_SC\_012, Hazaribagh, girl, 14)*

Girls' reasons for beginning to work illustrate the contradictory and influential role that social norms play in driving child labour. Traditional practices of early marriage are challenged by girls' insistence on contributing to family finances. While girls use their newfound importance to the family to avoid undesired marriages, they sacrifice other aspirations such as continued schooling.

The responsibility that girls feel towards their families is not limited to income generation. Girls also express feelings of responsibility towards their younger siblings. Even if their parents encourage them to continue their education, they choose to drop out of school and take over the caring duties as well as financially supporting their siblings through education:

*I like both studying and working. But what can I do now? I won't study in a school. I will work. She has said that she will enrol me at a school for studying, but I can't do it. Who will look after the two of them [her siblings]? I can earn money and use it when we face any problem. (TDH\_CLSC\_191, girl, 15)*

*I could not go because of a family problem. After my mother left, I also had to do the household chores. My younger brother was only one year old. I had to look after him all the time. (GUC\_SC\_58, girl, 16)*

Only two of the 209 boys who told their story mention having to undertake household chores, such as washing dishes, while a quarter of the 196 girl storytellers explicitly mention care responsibilities.

#### *Father's responsibility*

Children's views on the role of the father in the family demonstrate a strong belief that the adult male of the household should be the primary income provider. These views further relate to norms on gender and household roles. In a society with strong gender discrimination,

the lack of a father has significant consequences for families and children, who take on the mantle of family responsibility. In several stories, children blamed their father's absence for their entry into child labour. Reasons for absence included family abandonment, illness, and death.

In the following excerpt, the child remarks that he began work at nine years old. In this story, he claims that it was his own decision to start work but that his family's suffering was caused by his father's abandonment:

*My father left me when I was five years old. He never came back. My mother suffered a lot, but she taught me up to class 6. I could not see my mother's suffering any more. I started working at the age of nine. When I was nine, I started working and I used to help my mother at work. My mother used to suffer a lot and I could not see her suffering sitting at home, that is why I started my own work... He [father] was married to my mother and then he married someone else and left. He never came back.* (TDH\_SC\_094, boy, 17)

The child says his decision was a response to his mother's 'suffering' and never refers to his own suffering, again demonstrating how children are influenced by their feelings of responsibility to their families over and beyond their individual needs.

Another child calls his father a 'bad person' for his lack of contribution to the family:

*My father is a bad person. He comes home two days in a row, then he goes away. He doesn't come back. He doesn't buy groceries or contribute money properly to our household. That's why, due to financial constraints, my mother couldn't educate me properly. She told me, 'Start working.' My father also said, 'Start working. We don't have any money. We can't educate you.' He doesn't come home every day. He escapes from here. He doesn't go very far; he remains inside Dhaka after escaping from us. When he comes home for two days in a row, he doesn't come for the next three days. I don't know where he stays during that time. He doesn't inform us before leaving. My father always hits and scolds me. He hits me when I forget to fetch whatever he wants. Once he hit me when I made a*

*mistake while buying vegetables from the market.* (GUC\_SC\_008, boy, 12)

The absence of consistent financial support from the father, coupled with their dire circumstances, leaves this child and his mother in a vulnerable position in which the child is compelled to work. This pattern of fathers' neglect is repeated by other children. While fathers fail to support the family, the children and their mothers are still responsible for paying for the debts and upkeep of their fathers, which in some cases is more difficult than complete abandonment:

*My father used to eat at shops on credit. We used to clear his bills. We also used to repay our debt. We had a large amount of debt which we paid off slowly. Even then it was very difficult. Our household was run by combining my mother's income with my income.* (TDH\_CLSC\_188, girl, 14)

*My father doesn't give us any money for groceries now. I use my own money. To buy groceries and feed my siblings. I cook for them. I am responsible for taking care of two of them. My father doesn't do anything. He never buys clothes for us. I have to buy everything with my own money. He only comes here to eat and then leaves. We had to go without food at times when he didn't buy groceries. When we were young, and my mother was around, she used to give us money for groceries. I had to bear many hardships due to him.* (TDH\_CLSC\_191, girl, 15)

In a similar situation, another child reflected on how her father's lack of responsibility towards his family led her to drop out of school and start working. It was not possible for her mother to run the family with only her income; therefore, the child decided to leave school and start working so that she could contribute to the family's wellbeing:

*I wished I could study, but I had to start working because my father doesn't work. I had to quit studying. I attribute this to my father. If my father had worked and earned money, he could've paid for my education. I could've studied then. I started working because my father doesn't work, and my mother's income is not enough for all of our expenses. I work so that my family doesn't face any trouble. We can eat properly now, and I have a younger brother. I couldn't continue studying*

*but at least I can read. I dearly wish to educate my younger brother as far as he wants to study. I have to continue working; otherwise, I won't be able to fulfil my wish. I won't quit; I will keep working.*  
(GUC\_SC\_011, girl, 15)

Death of a father creates similarly difficult circumstances for families:

*When my mother runs out of rice where she lives, I request my employer for some money and give it to my mother. My employer adjusts that amount with my salary. When I go to sleep at night, I think to myself that we wouldn't have faced so many hardships if my father were alive. When my father was sick, he asked my mother, 'Didn't she want to study? Why have you put her to work?' My mother replied, 'We don't have any rice at home. If she doesn't work, how will we run our household?' She was right. My brothers were little. How could my mother go to work?'  
(GUC\_CLSC\_002, girl, 12)*

*If only I could study a bit! I can't do that because my father isn't alive. As my brothers are little, my mother can't do any work. I am the one who has to work. I will be paid only if I work; otherwise, I won't be paid. That's why I cry a lot... We couldn't afford to eat after my father passed away. Now I am able to eat after working and facing many hardships.  
(GUC\_NH\_004, girl, 11)*

These excerpts demonstrate the role that absent fathers play in driving child labour. When fathers are absent or fail to take up financial responsibility for the family, children often start work to address the income gap. While the loss of either parents' income, mother or father, will be difficult for a family, it is more often the lack of a father's income which sets families on a path towards child labour. This is likely due to social norms regarding women's work and the types of work that are available to women in these neighbourhoods, which are generally lower paid than the jobs available to men.

### **Perceptions of idleness**

Previous qualitative studies on the cultural factors driving child labour in urban Bangladesh (Delap 2001; Hoque 2023) argue that parental attitudes towards idleness push children into work. The children's life stories support these conclusions and strengthen them by providing evidence from the perspective of children whose narratives indicate a strong societal aversion to idleness in children. Idleness is seen, from the perspective of the

children, as a contributor to children engaging in other negative behaviours – such as 'roaming' (hanging or wandering around), chatting, and/or getting into mischief. Additionally, children share that children who are idle are perceived as wasting time which should be used more productively. So if a child finishes compulsory, free primary school by age 11, and is not able to work formally until 16, they are left in legal and cultural limbo. They explain in their stories that in their communities, it is not seen as acceptable or safe for them to play or do nothing, and therefore work is seen as a solution. These views seem ubiquitous throughout the children's communities and are shared by parents, children, peers, and adults. They therefore create strong push factors which contribute to children's engagement in work.

A 17-year-old girl states that her brothers have been working since they were seven or eight. When asked if she likes the fact that her brother works, she responded,

*I don't like it, but I also like it. If he doesn't work, he might go astray. Many boys roam around on the streets, but my brother never skips going to work. He's sleeping now as he has worked a night shift... He works properly, doesn't skip going to work, and doesn't chit-chat. If he hadn't worked since his childhood, he would've chatted.  
(TDH\_SC\_017, girl, 17)*

This child's explanation of why she likes that her brother works indicates how norms surrounding idleness have been internalised by children and function to overcome some children's aversion to children's work. Furthermore, by working, the children reinforce the status quo preference for engagement in child labour over idleness.

Children also internalise beliefs regarding idleness to explain their own decisions: 'I used to be very naughty, and my father used to get a lot of complaints regarding me. That is why I took a job by myself' (TDH\_SC\_115, boy, 13). Another child, when asked why he joined work replied that 'What else can I do? I was getting fat sitting idle' (TDH\_SC\_063, boy, 17). Children consider the dangers of being idle to outweigh those related to children's work. Other children also felt that being idle was akin to being purposeless. A 13-year-old boy states that 'I like it because I hate roaming around in the house without any purpose... Don't I have to earn and feed my parents? ... Children younger than me are working; my cousins and many other children are working' (TDH\_NH\_147, boy 13). He further justifies his work by noting the prevalence of other child labourers – demonstrating the positive reinforcement effect. Another child who decided to join

work on his own, when asked why he was working, simply replied: 'I went to work for a personal reason. I went to work to make some money so that I might contribute to my father, without sitting idle at home' (TDH\_NH\_164, boy, 15). This pervasive sentiment is encapsulated in the words of this 13-year-old girl:

*Yes, it is hard [to work], but what to do? We are in poverty; it is better to work than sit idle.*

(GUC\_CLSC\_021, girl, 13)

Another child justifies working to fulfil her responsibility as the oldest child and to combat idleness:

*As I was the eldest daughter of my family and hadn't any brother to support us, so I thought I should do something for the family. Then I got to work. I didn't want to let all the pressure on my father... I just told my father how long I would stay idle at home. Since I was not studying any more, I should do a job to support the family. Then he said that I didn't need to do a job. But, if I wished so, I could do that. There was no pressure from my parents. They agreed so that I could run my expenses.*

(TDH\_NH\_168, Hazaribagh, girl, 15)

Child GUC\_NH\_003's narrative also illustrates the multifaceted interplay of parental perceptions on children's use of time and children's sense of responsibility towards their family:

*My mother told me to work if I didn't study. Since I didn't study, instead of chatting and roaming around, I took up work. That is the right thing to do. My siblings study. I want them to study well. I was sent to work because I didn't study. My father used to get angry when I didn't go to work.*

(GUC\_NH\_003, boy, 15)

Additionally, even when parents do not push their children into work, other members of the social group outside of the family can exert pressure on the family to send the child to work. One of the children stated that while he was sitting idle for a few days, one of his father's acquaintances visited them and seeing him sitting idle asked his father to send him into work. The acquaintance said 'What is the point of sitting at home, it's better if you work' (TDH\_CLSC\_207, boy, 11). These community perceptions are further explored in the section on '**Labour intermediaries**' which looks at how children who are not seeking work are still pulled into employment.

Furthermore, when children are engaged in activities which are not considered 'productive', such as playing

and spending time with friends, they are thought to be 'wasting' their time. One teenager said:

*I used to go to school and when school ended, I came back home, ate, roamed around, and played with friends. I liked studying, but I didn't do it much. Instead, I made mischief. I was idle my first six years in Dhaka. I used to roam around and make mischief. One day, my maternal aunt took me along with her as I was simply wasting my time. It has been four years that I have been working since then... She knew that I used to roam around, so she talked to my parents and brought me here. My mother works at a garments factory, and my father pulls a rickshaw. My parents sent me to work because, otherwise, I used to make mischief. We weren't impoverished, poverty is not the reason I started working. They sent me to school after coming here, but I didn't go. I didn't like it. What to do!*

(TDH\_SC\_006, boy, 16)

Unlike many of the situations of other children, this child does not have to work due to poverty. Instead, he is encouraged to work so that he does not 'roam around and make mischief'. His story underscores the power of social attitudes in driving child labour in the absence of economic necessity.

Societal pressure for children to avoid idleness is so pervasive throughout the children's communities that it can contribute to feelings of family shame. One child expressed his particular concern that

*If I roam about and eat without working, then people will speak ill of me. They will say that I roam around only. My father would be embarrassed if I roamed around only while everyone else's son worked. That's why my father wants me to study – so that people know that I am engaged in studies.*

(GUC\_NH\_007, boy, 15)

This excerpt shows perceptions of idleness do not only function at the family and individual level but also at the community level. Children's public performances of studying (or working) are important to maintaining respect for a family within a community. They also function to reinforce the status quo.

### 3.1.4 Drivers of child labour: conclusion

This chapter explored some of the drivers of child labour as perceived by the children. While poverty was often the immediate cause of children working, the underlying



reasons for poverty were more complex. Economic shocks in the form of health crises, death, natural disasters, family breakdown, and the Covid-19 pandemic led families to take loans and sell valuable non-renewable assets, such as land and businesses for medical treatment and to cover the cost of necessities such as food and rent. With reduced income and higher costs associated with loan repayments, families and children made difficult choices, including migrating from rural areas to urban Dhaka in search of better opportunities. Escalating economic and care pressures pushed children into work, often once other livelihood strategies had been exhausted.

The diverse ways in which children transition between education and work demonstrate that these two occupations are not rigidly separate nor always causally linked. While many children had to leave school once they began working, work was not always the cause of children's departure from education. In fact, sometimes work allowed children to continue their education when they would have had to otherwise leave. Children's inability to meet school fees, negative behaviour from teachers and other students, learning difficulties, the draw of work and independent income, and the value (or lack thereof) placed on education all contributed to children's and their families' decisions regarding schooling. These factors often intersected in children's lives, complicating feelings related to education and work.

Cultural norms relating to family responsibility and perceptions of idleness further contributed to children's entry into work. By joining work and paying for household necessities like rent and food, children view themselves as acting upon the responsibility they owe to their families. Children viewed their salary contributions as a way to actively contribute to their family's wellbeing and alleviate the hardship and suffering experienced by all members of the household, including themselves. The degree to which children felt responsible varied between children, with key differences emerging based on gender and birth order, with a tendency towards the oldest male taking the brunt of responsibility, particularly in the absence of an adult male head of household. However, this did not prevent girls from feeling responsible or being held responsible. In some cases, girls leveraged their economic contributions to their families as a method for avoiding early marriage, thus highlighting the interaction of conflicting cultural norms and traditional practices.

Children who are not in education or work, regardless of the cause, are at risk of being perceived as 'idle'. In some

cases, idleness itself is seen as a negative behaviour, as children could or should instead be contributing to their family's wellbeing. In other cases, disapproval of idleness stemmed from the belief that children, particularly boys, would engage or be drawn into the antisocial behaviour of other people in their neighbourhoods. Girls, on the other hand, were perceived to be at risk if they were home alone, and instead it was believed that they would be safer in a chaperoned workplace. These perceptions were often internalised and functioned to reinforce expectations and behaviours relating to the practice of child labour.

## 3.2 VIEWS OF CHILD LABOUR

This section looks at some of the contrasting views on children's work that were revealed in children's life stories. As all the stories were told by children, these views are interpreted through the lens of the children. First, we look at how children feel about the work they do, and we consider employers' feelings regarding child labour through their behaviour towards working children.

### 3.2.1 Children's views on child labour

Children hold complex views of their own work. When asked directly if children should work, children's responses varied. Some felt positive, others negative. Most felt that it was simply a necessity.

#### Positive feelings about work

Some children express feeling good about work. Many explain that this is because they can contribute to their family and household income. Their satisfaction in contributing makes them happy to do hard work. While this is closely associated with **perceptions of family responsibility**, which is explored in a subsection of 3.1.3 on 'Cultural norms influencing child labour', this section, 3.2.1, looks primarily at how children feel about their work, while section 3.1, '**Drivers of child labour**' explored why children work.

*Even though I had many troubles, I feel good. Many people tell me, you are very thoughtful for a girl, you are supporting your own family. You don't let your mother work. This is something a man can't even manage to do at times, but you can.*  
(TDH\_SC\_084, girl, 17)

*I send [my salary] to my home. I keep some for myself... I give it to my parents; I feel good.*  
(TDH\_SC\_043, boy, 14)

*I was very happy to earn 2,000 taka for the first time in my life. I gave the money to my mother. It was the first time I had ever given her any money. It was a different kind of happiness. I still give her money when I get my salary.*  
(GUC\_SC\_010, boy, 16)

*I used to like studying before, I like it now too... But it is not possible for me to study any more... I mean I can manage my family a bit better now. I will feel troubled if I would have to leave my job, I am comfortable now... That is why I think like that... I am happy. I can do anything; buy anything now, so I am happy.*  
(TDH\_SC\_112, girl, 15)

Children's ability to provide for their families makes them feel good, happy, and comfortable. These emotions stem from children's satisfaction in being able to contribute and provide for their families.

Children's narratives also show the interlinkages between earning money and children's sense of empowerment and independence. When asked if she feels good earning money, a 17-year-old girl responds positively noting that 'I can help my mother. She does not have to listen to others. The landlord does not come here and ask why we have not paid our rent' (TDH\_SC\_090, girl, 17). She feels a sense of accomplishment by supporting her mother and freeing her from the pressure of unpaid rent. She also states that if she can enhance her skills through training, then she would prefer to do home-based work because of the independence it affords. She says

*If I can work from home and earn some money, then nobody would tell me anything. For example, I would not have to listen to anything for getting late at the office or if I make any mistake. I will be working at home, so I can rectify my mistakes on my own, which I cannot do if I work at an office. So isn't it the best if I get training at home?*  
(TDH\_SC\_090, girl, 17)

However, not all children experience their sense of responsibility as a positive; others feel trapped and unhappy viewing the care of their families as an unwelcome, if necessary, burden.

### **Negative feelings about work**

Some children were unequivocally against children working, such as this child: 'It's not okay to put children to work, they should be educated instead' (TDH\_SC\_117,

boy, 17). However, even when children express negative feelings towards work, many explain that they must work for the wellbeing of their family. One child distinguished between parents sending their children to work, which he thought was wrong, and children seeking work on their own – like himself, which he thought was acceptable: 'This is our problem that parents send us to work. But my father didn't. I went there by myself' (TDH\_NH\_164, boy, 15). Another child underscores that it was his choice to work: 'No parents want their child to work, they want their children to become very big someday. So the decision of working was my own. I have taken this decision seeing the condition of my family' (GUC\_SC\_038, boy, 17).

While children chose to work, they also express that they believe that they have no other options:

*I think that children of my age shouldn't work... Our situation will worsen a great deal if I stop working. We won't be able to buy groceries or eat. I have to work very hard. I pay rent with my income, and my mother buys food with hers. We should go somewhere to study. We have no money and we're impoverished.*  
(GUC\_SC\_008, boy, 12)

*I did not feel like going to work waking up so early in the morning. My duty was so early in the morning and then there was the smell of chemicals, so I got to come home late. I would feel restless, but I had to work because of my problems... I thought that I had started working for my mother. If I leave it now, we have to listen to people once again, but if I tolerate a little, then we would not have to. That is why I suffered.*  
(TDH\_SC\_090, girl, 17)

*How will my family survive if I give up?*  
[Impressions of sadness in her eyes]... I want. However, it is not possible. I do it with difficulty.  
(TDH\_SC\_068, boy, 17)

*They scold those who can't work properly, it causes problems, that's why they scold... I feel like leaving the work... Then I have to keep working seeing my parents' misery.*  
(TDH\_CLSC\_219, girl, 14)

*I feel bad, but there is nothing to do. Now I have to work hard to run the family. I have to see the family. If I only think about myself and run my stomach alone, will it be fair? My mother kept me in her womb for ten months and ten days. My father*

*gave me a chance of birth. I have three younger siblings who depend on me for everything.*  
(GUC\_SC\_055, boy, 17)

Children's decisions to work despite the adverse conditions, including abuse from employers, evidence a strong sense of responsibility and duty towards their families. They believe that if they don't work, their families will not have enough to eat or that their families will be miserable. This is counter to many other settings in which children are not only seen as dependent on their parents but also unable to make decisions for themselves, yet alone the rest of their family.

### **Trade-offs**

While some children share their satisfaction in their ability to support their families, it is not without a modicum of regret for the opportunities lost by their decision to work. Children expressed negative feelings about the consequences of starting to work, principally that they had to leave education. Although they wish to go back to studying, many believe it will not be possible for them as they need to continue working and contributing financially to their family:

*I liked going to school. I wanted to do something good. Now I am working. Work life is too difficult... It doesn't feel well to work. But if I don't do it, how will my family survive?*  
(TDH\_SC\_076, boy, 14)

*I didn't sit for the exam in class 7 because my parents couldn't pay the tuition fees. I didn't go for coaching, so it wasn't possible to pass the exam. Therefore, I gave up. I had a great desire to study, but I couldn't. Then I started working. Even I told my parents that I desired to study after coming back from work. However, they said that there was no need to study any more. I feel worse when I see my friends going to school. I still have kept my books, notebooks, school uniform reserved. When I see these, I remember those days when I used to have a lot of fun with my friends in the school.*  
(GUC\_SC\_056, girl, 16)

*I don't like it. I wanted to study. But I am not studying. I went to work. I am not being able to do much; I couldn't study much because of money. I came to work. Then I don't like it. I feel sad seeing my parents suffer. We couldn't survive, so I came to work.*  
(TDH\_SC\_060, girl, 15)

*What happens if I don't feel well or not!  
There are younger siblings in my family.  
How they'll survive if I don't work?... I wish  
I can go to school as well as work.*  
(TDH\_SC\_042, boy, 14)

While joining work solves families' immediate financial difficulties, not attending school has knock-on effects for children. Throughout the 405 life stories, there are several examples of children feeling socially isolated and diminished due to their lack of education:

*My parents are getting a little help because of my job...The bad thing is that my study has been ruined for the job. I can't talk smartly to people. Therefore, they call me a fool. It feels so bad then.*  
(TDH\_NH\_179, boy, 14)

Recognising the importance of education, one child provides for his brother at the cost of his own education:

*I wish to get him [brother] educated instead of making him work... Isn't working difficult?  
Let him study. I won't put him to work.*  
(TDH\_NH\_130, boy, 14)

In the following excerpt, one boy shares the complexity of his feelings about work. He would prefer to study but decided to work due to adverse circumstances in his family. He explains that working is his duty because of the care received by his mother and that it is better than the alternative of his family experiencing scarcity:

*Yes, I felt very good about the fact I could help my mother. I was feeling very good thinking about this. On the other hand, I was feeling very sad that I could not continue my education. I was thinking that I am not able to continue my studies... My mother is the one who fed me and took care of me which is why I help her.*  
(TDH\_SC\_094, boy, 17)

Another 17-year-old boy sees his decision to leave school as a necessity, saying he 'had to quit studying due to poverty', but also one that has cost him any hope of achieving future aspirations. Furthermore, he states that families like his are without any external or social support and that they must be self-reliant to survive:

*My father's heart problems came to light suddenly, that's why my education stopped. Earlier, my parents used to pay for my education... I feel bad. Why*

*wouldn't I? Anyone will feel bad if their education stops midway. My education was in an ongoing state. If I could study, my lifestyle would have changed... I had to quit studying and start working with leather due to poverty. If I had continued studying, I could have had a good job. I could have become an officer, sir, or a doctor. I can't become any of those now. How can I? I can't become any of those due to shortage of money. Everybody values money, and they ask for money first. How can I arrange money? I can't arrange it without my father. I give whatever I earn to my parents or use it to eat and get by. Now my mother lives abroad and I talk to her when she calls me once a week. What else can I do? There is nothing else to do. We have to survive. Nobody will care if we go hungry.* (GUC\_SC\_018, boy, 17)

The father's illness becomes a crucial catalyst, which disrupts the family's financial stability and pushes the child into work. When the child leaves school, he has to shift his priorities away from future aspirations of becoming an 'officer, sir, or a doctor' to fulfil his family's immediate needs. He explains that he does not feel he has a choice, which illustrates how children's pathways are shaped by their structural conditions despite value given to education.

Some children resign themselves to a life of poverty once they leave school:

*I wanted to be a doctor when I used to study, but I couldn't be that any more. I couldn't fulfil my dreams because of financial problems... This is why I didn't continue my studies any more; instead, I started working so that I could help my family. We are poor, education is not for us... I feel very bad. I had such a strong wish to become a doctor. Are the dreams of the poor ever fulfilled?* (GUC\_SC\_024, boy, 13)

*What is the point of dreaming? These will never come true.* (TDH\_SC\_101, girl, 14)

*I dreamt of being self-sufficient by studying well. To do a good government job, but since I couldn't study, so couldn't find a job in a good company. I have to work in small factories; do the illiterate have any value in society? They are*

*not valued, so I don't have any dream, even if I had a dream, I can't fulfil it. So I don't dream.* (TDH\_CLSC\_217, girl, 16)

*The meaning of life is zero... life is a battle... the biggest failure is to be born into a poor family.* (TDH\_SC\_084, girl, 17)

These excerpts highlight the struggles and hardships that these children experience in their daily lives and the disadvantage they are born into, which in turn dictates their own ability to aspire to a better life.

### 3.2.2 Children's perspectives on employers' views of child labour

Children's reports of employer attitudes towards child labour varied widely across the narratives.<sup>4</sup> Children shared a range of experiences: from their inability to find work due to employers' reluctance to hire children to the ways in which employers take advantage of the children they employ. In the latter case, employers are revealed as mistreating children through financial exploitation and physical and verbal abuse, while justifying their behaviour by arguing that children should be grateful for any work, given others' refusal to hire them.

Children stated that in some workplaces, their age was a barrier to securing employment as business owners and managers did not want to be caught hiring children. Although mentioned infrequently in the stories, in some regulated factories, employers do follow child labour laws and refrain from employing children. A 15-year-old boy stated the following:

*Then one day, they informed me that they couldn't allow me to work any longer due to the pressure of government labour law. There is a restriction not to hire people in the factory under the age of 18. That's why they dismissed my name from the job. They paid me the full month's salary, though I worked only 15 days.* (TDH\_SC\_041, boy, 15)

While his employers were willing to hire the child originally knowing his age, once there was legal pressure on them, they opted to let him go. Although this means that this particular factory is now child labour-free, the child is still working, now at a reduced income: he states that at his new job 'the salary is less' (TDH\_SC\_041, boy,

4 For more on employer behaviour, see section 3.3.2 Experiences at work.

15). Unfortunately, in this situation, instead of the law protecting children, as it is meant to, it has led to worse outcomes for the child.

Another child recalls the time when she first started working, at a very early age (around ten years old) in leather goods' manufacturing. She was rejected by various employers due to her age and size: 'They would not want to take me as I was very small. They said I was too young to work', but she continued to seek work, stating that 'I did not stop and continued trying' because her father was sick with typhoid fever and could not work. She was eventually able to find a job when a labour intermediary intervened and explained to the employer that her father was sick:

*The person who took me there left and they called K – and told her that I was very young, and they could not take me. Then she told that man about me and said that I have come to work because of a lot of problems at home and that my father was sick. Then they hired me. Actually no, at first, they stood me up and the manager there said I was too small. Then they said I had gone to work because of my father's sickness. They did not want to hire at first, but finally they did.*  
(TDH\_SC\_107, girl, 14)

This story illustrates the conflicting norms and realities of child labour and children's lives. While some employers are initially against hiring young children, they can be seen to eventually be persuaded by arguments that they are helping the child and his or her family. In this scenario, the employer might be perceived by others (and themselves) as doing something good, counter to a narrative that all employers of children are exploitative. Examples like this could be seen as highlighting a great need for social support structures, so that child labour is not the only option for families or employers in crisis.

Other life stories, however, reveal that not all employers hire children with the aim of assisting them. Some storytellers believe that they hire children to purposefully take advantage of them:

*There are probably benefits of hiring children. There are other hand glove factories over here, where some workers are even younger than me. Higher salaries are paid to those who are older... Children can be made to work more at lower salaries when compared to adults. So it's more profitable to hire them. Children don't understand much; they work*

*fast when they are told to – they don't work slowly. Adults work at their own pace. When adults are told to work fast, they retort, but children don't retort out of fear. They are afraid of being sworn at.*  
(GUC\_SC\_006, boy, 17)

*It's a small company, so it doesn't want to pay. Those who are older than me are paid 15,000/18,000/25,000 taka or a maximum of 35,000 taka. I am the youngest one. That's why I am paid less. They think that it's okay to pay me less because I am younger than the others.*  
(GUC\_SC\_019, boy, 17)

*My employer knew that he could get away with paying me 1,500 taka to work as a helper, but if he hired someone older, he would have to pay more. He used to pay the older workers 6,000–7,000 taka, and he paid me 1,500 taka and made me fetch tea. That's why employers look for young boys to work as helpers.*  
(GUC\_SC\_009, boy, 14)

*If an adult had done my job, my employer would have had to pay a salary of 4,000–5,000 taka. I feel angry at times. I feel bad. They hire such young boys! I work very fast. They pressurise us – that's why we work fast. My employer has said that if we don't work well, he won't pay us, or he will retain a percentage of our salaries. That's why we work fast and request him not to retain any of our money with promises of working properly.*  
(GUC\_SC\_008, boy, 12)

These narratives expose the economic incentives that drive employers to hire children. Given the miniscule margins that many informal businesses in these neighbourhoods are operating under, it is not surprising that owners and managers utilise child labour to reduce production costs, especially when they can pay children as little as a fifth of the salary of an adult. Furthermore, as stated by child GUC\_SC\_006 and child GUC\_SC\_008, children's age, inexperience, and lower social status mean that it is easier for employers to intimidate them to increase their productivity.

In the following story, a child explains that her employer justifies his mistreatment of and condescension towards children through the guise of generosity, belittling child workers by telling them how lucky they are to at least have a job:

*If we talk to each other while working in that place, they shout at us. They say, 'Why are you talking so much. We are giving you a good salary. You know you are too small to earn that amount. This is your good luck. Nobody will hire you to work elsewhere. I have hired you since you are poor.' They tell us in this way.* (TDH\_SC\_039, girl, 15)

This calculated manipulation takes advantage of vulnerable children by reminding them that their employment options are limited and further demonstrates that there is a conflicting spectrum of norms regarding children's work: norms which when played against one another create worse conditions for children. Due to government regulations against child labour, more formal and registered businesses which likely comply with other government regulations regarding employee safety and fair wages do not employ children. This necessitates that children who work, work in unregulated and potentially dangerous businesses. It also means that children have limited options for employment and therefore tend to remain in exploitative and abusive situations for fear that they will not be able to obtain work elsewhere. Their vulnerability and desperation are capitalised upon by some employers to pay children less and to treat them poorly. Children's perception of limited opportunities for work ensured that they would stay with abusive employers rather than face the uncertainty of unemployment.

### **3.2.3 Views on child labour: conclusion**

This section delves into the intricate and often conflicting feelings children have about working. Children express a mix of satisfaction in contributing financially and alleviating their family's hardships, and regret over limited future options beyond low-paid labour due to their departure from education and resulting lack of qualifications. Others shared their sense of empowerment and independence gained from their ability to work and support themselves and their families. Many viewed child labour as an inevitable consequence of poverty.

The narratives also shed light on children's perspectives of employers' views on child labour – these range from empathy to exploitation for financial gain. The manipulation of vulnerable children by certain employers underscores the limited employment options for children which push them into unregulated and potentially hazardous work environments. Due to regulations against child labour in formal businesses, children found

that some employers would not risk hiring them, and so children resorted to accepting any job they could access. This led some to find themselves trapped in exploitative situations which they hesitate to leave because of limited alternatives and fear of unemployment.

This complex interplay of emotions highlights the challenges children face in balancing personal aspirations, such as education and good work, and family responsibilities within a context of vulnerability and societal expectations.

## **3.3 CHILDREN'S WORK**

This section delves into children's experiences of work. First, we explore the way children find work and who facilitates their pathways into specific workplaces. Then we look at what children say about their experiences at work, both negative and positive. The next section explores how children learn at work and who they learn from. Finally, the last section covers children's movement between jobs, their motivations, and the limited ways in which they exercise their agency through their labour.

### **3.3.1 Labour intermediaries**

Many of the children report finding work on their own; however, some utilise labour intermediaries. (For the purpose of this paper, we are considering a labour intermediary to be a person who helps a child find work – we have included anyone who facilitates, finds, or recruits a child into employment.) The following section looks at different types of labour intermediaries, as they appear in children's stories, how they interact with children, and some of the reoccurring themes which emerge in the ways in which children find work.

#### **Types of intermediaries**

As with other forms of labour recruitment, such as migration to the Middle East, employer and employee relationships and work opportunities are often brokered through social networks (Rahman 2012). While in more formal arrangements, there are several actors and institutions (such as recruitment agencies and government departments) which coordinate, in the case of child labour in the neighbourhoods studied, the networks are intimate and with few degrees of separation. Labour intermediaries mentioned by the child storytellers in Bangladesh were almost always known to the child before they facilitated the child's employment. Children's narratives reveal that labour intermediaries were mostly

close family members, such as parents and siblings, friends, neighbourhood acquaintances, other relatives, or even teachers. Less frequently, unknown community members recruited children into work.

### Family

Many children explained that family members helped them locate and secure work close to home, sometimes into the same business as themselves. Since children's income is primarily going towards supporting their family, these connections are not surprising. They also demonstrate the close relationships between home and work life for these children:

*Seeing the crisis in our family, my grandmother put me to work in that place. The factory employer was well known to her.*  
(TDH\_SC\_039, girl, 15)

*My neighbour used to work here as a supervisor. My mother asked him once if he could get me a job. The next day, he brought me along and took me to the lineman, who taught me ironing.*  
(TDH\_SC\_007, boy, 15)

*Then we shifted here. We were newcomers. My mother started to work in the tannery. Later I joined her.*  
(TDH\_SC\_068, boy, 17)

*My mother entered [the job] first. Then she was replaced by me.*  
(GUC\_NH\_040, girl, 10)

*My mother has been doing this work since she came to Dhaka. So I started working with my mother and have been working since.*  
(TDH\_SC\_101, girl, 14)

The previous excerpts suggest that newcomers to Dhaka have small networks which might then necessitate that families work in the same locations. The importance of these networks, and their consequences, is seen on a larger scale through rural to urban migration. Extended family members play a particularly important role in children's migration from villages to urban centres. While migration has been examined more comprehensively in the subsection on migration in section 3.1.1 '**Extreme poverty**', in the excerpts relating to labour intermediaries, migration to urban centres for work is often facilitated by family members. In these cases, migration frequently results from a family's poor economic condition in the village which necessitates that a family member look for

work elsewhere. When explaining how he migrated to Dhaka, one child stated, 'I came through my maternal grandfather' (TDH\_CLSC\_212, boy, 14). Other children told similar stories:

*Two days after his [father's] burial, we wondered what would happen to us and how we would run our household, considering that we didn't have much money. Then I was sent with my maternal aunt [to Dhaka]. She put me to work at a home.*  
(GUC\_NH\_004, girl, 11)

*We, there, where we lived in our hometown, there was an uncle. They knew about our financial problems, our family issues, they told us to come here. I couldn't work in my hometown; I can do something here to survive... feeding my siblings, I could do that. I couldn't be there. They told us to come here, they managed it for us, I mean.*  
(TDH\_CLSC\_228, girl, 16)

All three children above speak about their financial difficulties and inability to find work in their villages. In this situation, it is their extended family members with connections in Dhaka who help them to relocate and secure employment. Family serves as an essential form of labour intermediation. However, when family is unable to provide support, children rely on other close acquaintances – such as friends and neighbours.

### Friends

Children testify to enjoying working with their friends and many describe becoming inspired to work by watching their friends:

*I used to see my friends working and I used to like seeing them work actually. They are getting a salary by working and they are living well, that is why I started working, that's it... I saw them working hard and used to think if I could work hard someday.*  
(GUC\_SC\_027, boy, 17)

As such, children reach out to their friends to help them find work:

*We had difficulty arranging food. Nobody had any work. I mean none of my family members had any work. One of my friends used to work. I told him about my situation, and he got me a job. That's when I started working.*  
(GUC\_NH\_007, boy, 15)

*I came here through a friend of mine. Then they made me work in the tannery. I worked*

*there for a good three to four years.*  
(GUC\_SC\_061, boy, 17)

*No, not by myself. I have a friend whose condition was just like ours. But her father is a drug addict and does not manage their family, her mother maintains the family. She first told me about joining this factory.*  
(TDH\_NH\_148, girl, 16)

*Some other girls used to work, I told them... I asked them if their factories would hire people, they said yes so I went there... They introduced me to the main person there and I started working the next day.*  
(TDH\_SC\_112, girl, 15)

Having found work through friends, children benefit from having colleagues that they like. For example, one child says: 'There are many kids like me working there. It feels good to work with them. I can talk to them while working' (TDH\_SC\_34, girl, 14). The company of peers seems particularly important to children who have left school and no longer have an opportunity to interact with children their own age.

#### Village and neighbourhood connections

When family members are unable to connect children to work opportunities in Dhaka, families rely on village networks and acquaintances to help them secure work outside of their immediate geography and social circles. As explored later in section 3.4.2 on '**Neighbourhoods**', this networking creates communities which are closely linked through geography and economy:

*After coming to Dhaka, we started living in Gojmohol area. One of my mother's cousins has been living here for a long time. She told my mother to live in this area so that she could find us jobs.*  
(GUC\_SC\_003, girl, 17)

*People from my village live here and I moved here willingly. I like it here... Many people live here. I asked them to bring me with them, so they brought me here.*  
(TDH\_SC\_043, boy, 17)

*I have some relatives here, I contacted them. I even communicated with them from my village over the phone. So he has a friend and he talked to him about him. I got the job through him.*  
(TDH\_SC\_114, boy, 17)

*An older native brother of my village [brought me into this work]. He talked to the factory about me. No one in my house still knows where I work. I told*

*everyone that I was doing an assistant job at an office. If my mother knew it, she would cry a lot.*  
(GUC\_SC\_044, boy, 15)

It is worth noting that in the 405 life stories, there are no examples of girls travelling alone from villages to Dhaka. Only boys tell of migrating to Dhaka on their own.

In their search for work, some children testify to relying on known labour intermediaries even across large distances. As a result, and as the four previous excerpts show, members of villages tend to relocate to the same neighbourhood due to their connections and their mutual assistance. They also end up working in the same places. While there are examples in other programmes (Cannon and Oosterhoff 2021) of people being taken by strangers from their villages to work in bonded labour in cotton mills or other large factories, this does not appear in the 405 life stories collected from children by CLARISSA in Bangladesh. Rather than serving as labour intermediaries to benefit financially, the CLARISSA examples depict intermediaries as helpful acquaintances, assisting family, neighbours, and friends without aiming for personal gain.

This pattern of mutual assistance is also evidenced within neighbourhoods. Neighbours help children find jobs and offer them work:

*How I got into work! I asked if there were any more workers needed in the factory. They said that they needed more. Thus I got the job. A familiar neighbour woman took me to the factory.*  
(TDH\_SC\_035, girl, 13)

*Then my neighbour aunt asked me if I would want to work to support my sick parents. Then I agreed and the aunt used to give me the work to do at home. I also study besides working.*  
(GUC\_CLSC\_036, girl, 14)

*I used to work as a housemaid and then I came to Dhaka. Later, I had a neighbour aunt who gave me the housemaid job here.*  
(GUC\_CLSC\_041, girl, 15)

*Then Auntie told me to work at her factory, and I did accordingly. Johura Auntie and I lived in the same building; that's how I knew her. She noticed that I was unable to find a job, so she hired me.*  
(GUC\_SC\_009, boy, 14)

*My neighbouring people who used to do the woodwork call me to do that job. I mean, they needed more workers at that time. Since I was staying idly at*



*home, I thought it would be better to go with them.*  
(TDH\_SC\_040, boy, 16)

These types of interactions highlight the informality of the work available to these children. Employment is dependent on having connections and is also limited by these connections.

### Teachers

Interestingly, there were two separate examples in the life stories of teachers assisting children to find work. In the first case, a teacher helps a student find work which allows the child to continue her education alongside employment and therefore prevents the child from leaving education all together:

*When I was in school, I told my teachers that I want to do this work, I want to help my family. Then my teacher told me that he knows a factory where I could work and study alongside. You can go to school when it closes. Then after the office, you can return home. Then my teacher took me to the factory. We would call our boss uncle, there were two of them. We called them uncle. They told us that they would pay us 1,000 taka. We protested saying how can you pay only 1,000 taka for eight hours of labour? It is difficult to do so much work and you are offering us only 1,000 taka. Then I thought that let it be, I could at least go to school.*  
(TDH\_NH\_165, girl, 16)

Although the child manages to continue with her education, she is pressured into accepting worse working conditions so that she can also attend school. She recognises that she is being underpaid for her hours of work but decides to accept the low wage because of the flexibility and her lack of other viable options.

Another child (GUC\_NH\_003, boy, 15) stopped his education during the Covid-19 lockdown. While classes were suspended, the child looked for work and a schoolteacher – assumed to be the storyteller's, although it is unclear – introduced him to a shop owner who gave him a job. Now that he is working, he says that he does not have a desire to return to school when they reopen.

### Unknown intermediaries

The last type of labour intermediary – that of an unknown person – was the least common in the stories. Unlike known acquaintances, unknown labour intermediaries make a profit from helping others find work.

*I used to go to different offices and garments searching for a job. One day, I met with a*

*brother. He made a deal that he would help me get a career in garments. He demanded half of my first-month salary in exchange. I agreed and paid him. This was how I got the job.*  
(GUC\_NH\_036, girl, 16)

*The woman who had taken me to work at that home had taken money for it from the lady of the household. The lady asked us for that instead of asking the woman who had taken money from her. I had worked for free at her place.*  
(GUC\_NH\_010, girl, 17)

Employers also seek child labourers directly. Initial contact between children and employers in these cases predates a child's search for employment. In the three following excerpts, the children are identified as being available for work because they are in the home, not at school, or not already employed elsewhere – further indicating a belief that children should not be idle:

*One day I was sitting at home and my employer came and took my father and seeing me he said, he is sitting, so why don't you put him to work as well? Then they put me to work.*  
(TDH\_CLSC\_207, boy, 11)

*The owner of the company came to our home and told my father to put me to work, as I was spending my time roaming around idly. Then my father put me to work.*  
(GUC\_SC\_020, boy, 17)

*I have studied till class 5. Then I didn't study further. I was playing around, then someone asked me, 'Will you work?' I didn't know that if I start working, I won't be able to study any more... No, he didn't tell me that, he asked my mother if she would send me to work.*  
(GUC\_SC\_069, boy, 14)

In these three excerpts, the children recount the employers asking their parents if the child can work, rather than asking the child if he would like to work. In these cases, especially the last excerpt, it seems as though the child would prefer not to work. However, this desire is superseded by their parent's choices.

### Role of the intermediary in overcoming age barriers

Apart from connecting children with job opportunities, intermediaries play an important role in facilitating a child's entrance into the workforce. In some of the stories, children explain that employers were initially hesitant to offer them employment because of their age. However, once an intermediary speaks on behalf of the child and

explains their situation, the employer acquiesces to hire the child:

*When I went, they don't let any other child work at such an early age. Since a familiar person took me there to work, so they took me in.*  
(TDH\_SC\_053, girl, 17)

*People say many things, like I shouldn't be given a job at such a young age. I started working three to four years ago. Our landlady told somebody to get me a job... I went along with others, as well as on my own. I used to address the ladies of the households I went to as 'Aunties', and say, 'Aunty, will you please give a small job, if not at your place, then at someone else's?' They asked me, 'Why will you work at this age?' This was a reasonable question to ask. I used to reply, 'Because I am in trouble.' They used to refuse to give me any job due to my age, and they said many other things to me as well... Aunty's brother saw our hardship. So he tried very hard to get me a job. He saw that the factory I work at now was close to my home as well as my school. I could go to work from school. That's why he told people at the factory to hire me.*  
(GUC\_SC\_012, girl, 14)

*Then they took me to the factory. Then sir told him she is young, she can't work. Then my brother told him, even if she was young, she had struggled a lot. She is poor. Then after knowing about it all, he took my papers and I started to work.*  
(TDH\_SC\_060, girl, 15)

These excerpts show that a young child seeking work on their own is unlikely to be successful due to their age. However, when they have the support of an intermediary, they are hired. Their employment appears to be dependent on their need to work – in both cases, the intermediary argues for employing the child because of their 'hardship' or because they are 'poor'.

In these situations, it is unclear whether children are not hired due to an employer's belief that they cannot perform the task well or because the employer thinks that they shouldn't be working due to their age. In the following excerpt, the child's age is clearly seen as an indication that they will not have the necessary skills and/or ability:

*I talked with a supervisor there. I asked him if they would hire people and they said yes. Then I asked if they would take me, and they said I*

*was too young. I told them I can do anything if they teach me, can young people not work? Then they took and taught me for some days. Now I am habituated with working all these.*  
(TDH\_SC\_090, girl, 17)

Regardless of the employers' initial hesitation to employ a child, in these situations, they do eventually agree.

The excerpts in this section demonstrate two overarching themes: the importance of social networks and the continued normalisation of child labour. As other parts of the children's life stories have shown, most child labour is not forced, either by family or by outsiders. Instead, children and their families make the choice to join employment due to their poverty. Since work is a child's choice (albeit among limited alternatives), it isn't surprising that contact with labour intermediaries is often initiated by children themselves. Given the mostly informal nature of the work, and the illegality of child labour, relationships between children and intermediaries are necessarily informal and more personal than professional. Proximity to the child – geographically or relationally – tends to determine these relationships. Parents, siblings, and extended family as well as friends and neighbours make up most labour intermediaries. The stories rarely include vignettes of strangers making connections between children and employment. The proximity of these relationships also dictates the opportunities which are available to children – it is a case of **who** you know rather than **what** you know. Therefore, if children live in a neighbourhood with other poor people who have low-paying jobs, it is more likely that they will also find low-wage informal employment. Similarly, if their family members work in low-wage employment, it is likely that children will follow their parents into low-paying jobs, especially if there is a practice around children replacing their parents when their parents can no longer work. These relationships reinforce intergenerational cycles of poverty and geographic, location-based pockets of poverty.

### 3.3.2 Experiences at work

Although many of the children who told their life story started working due to adverse circumstances in their homes, rather than completely by choice, they still have conflicting feelings about their workplaces, the work environment, their employers, and their colleagues. What is most evident throughout the data set of stories is a diversity of experiences and differences in how children

experience their workplaces.<sup>5</sup> These stories also evidence how the type of work undertaken by these children is hazardous and among the worst forms of child labour as described by ILO Recommendation No. 190 which defines hazardous work as

*work which exposes children to physical, psychological or sexual abuse; work underground, underwater, at dangerous heights or in confined spaces; work with dangerous machinery, equipment and tools or carrying heavy loads; exposure to hazardous substances, agents or processes, or to temperatures, noise levels or vibrations damaging to health; work for long hours, night work, and unreasonable confinement to the premises of the employer.* (ILO 1999)

### Negative work experiences

Most children's feelings towards work are expressed as negative. Negative experiences were shaped by physical pain and discomfort caused by work duties and the working environment; long hours combined with confinement; sexual harassment; verbal and physical abuse from colleagues, managers, and employers; and a general lack of freedom or choice in their employment. Children's working environments are also those of adults, but risks for children are greater given their size, developing bodies, and comparatively low social status.

### Hazardous tasks

Tasks which do not seem difficult or particularly taxing become painful for children due to long hours of repetitive movements. For example, cutting a pair of leather gloves is fairly easy; however, when the action is repeated 1,000 times a single day, six days a week for many years, this simple action can become extremely difficult. Given the volume of gloves that are cut in a day, it is not surprising that accidents are frequently described in the stories: 'The pair of scissors I work with is very sharp, and my hands get cut when they get touched by the scissors. Last month, my hands bled after getting cut' (GUC\_SC\_008, boy, 12). Other activities are difficult because they are not suitable for growing bodies or small bodies – for example, lifting heavy loads. Boys working in a variety of jobs describe in their narratives instances in which they have had to carry weight on their shoulders, causing them pain:

*When we have to lift a lot of products at a time, it hurts our shoulders.*

(GUC\_SC\_40, boy, 17)

*When I have to take heavy goods on my head to carry them on the roof, I feel pain.*

(TDH\_SC\_31, boy, 13)

*Then I have to carry a leather roll from the ground floor. In one roll, there is 25kg leather.*

*One person can carry ten in total. They don't give me the time to rest. That's why I feel bad.*

(GUC\_CLSC\_023, boy, 16)

Even when children are not undertaking physically demanding work, they experience aches and pains due to standing for long hours. As with carrying heavy loads, prolonged time standing occurs in a variety of workplaces, as the following excerpts demonstrate:

*We have to work by standing. It seems awkward to me. How can I work all day standing? The hands and feet become too much sore. I have to work all day standing where you are standing.*

(TDH\_SC\_27, girl, 14)

*I have to be on my feet all day. My legs hurt because of this.*

(TDH\_NH\_148, girl, 16)

*I worked there standing up all day long. I used to scissor 7–8 bundles of pockets in an hour. There were 60–70 pieces of pockets in one bundle. My hands used to swell up from working. I couldn't do anything else with my hands. I couldn't eat with my hands. My younger sister used to feed me at that time. I had enrolled her at school because I felt bad for her.*

(GUC\_CLSC\_001, girl, 17)

As we can see from these excerpts, the tasks that children undertake in their work put them at a high risk for injury and discomfort, which in turn affects how they feel about their work. While certain tasks undertaken by children are not hazardous, they become so when repeated for many hours and in dangerous environments, as explored more deeply in the following section.

<sup>5</sup> This section is an analysis of two intersecting themes: feelings about work and work environment; and feelings about work and employer behaviour. There were over 500 excerpts from 400 stories which addressed children's feelings about work. Given the volume of data which was coded under this theme, we have chosen to look more in-depth at the most common code co-occurrences: feelings about work and work environment, which had nearly 90 excerpts, and feelings about work and employer behaviour, which also had just under 90 excerpts.

### Hazardous environments

Along with the tasks that children undertake, the working environment itself poses serious risks which compound the challenges of children's work. A common complaint from the children in their life stories is that their working environments can be extremely loud due to the operation of heavy machinery:

*Everything is good here, just the sound of the machine bothers me a lot. I don't feel like working.*  
(GUC\_SC\_022, girl, 15)

*I also have headaches because of the sound there. I didn't want to work, I had to do it.*  
(GUC\_CLSC\_017, girl, 14)

*The place is too much noise. I work all day but can't eat rice peacefully at home. There is no money to buy enough food.*  
(GUC\_SC\_053, boy, 10)

*I don't like the noise of the machine.*  
(TDH\_SC\_31, boy, 13)

Along with excessive noise, many of the children's workplaces are permeated with strong smells from various chemicals used in different leather processing steps:

*At first, when I started working, that time there was an intense leather odour. I didn't have much hair on my head, it was tiny, I shaved my hair... It was reeking. At first, I cried a lot to my mother that I would not do the work.*  
(TDH\_SC\_84, girl, 17)

*It used to smell, I didn't like it. Pasting has a smell, colour has one too... We had to working wearing a mask.*  
(TDH\_SC\_090, girl, 17)

*I used to get a lot of smell. I could not bear it for two months. But now it does not smell so much.*  
(TDH\_SC\_091, girl, 17)

*I just felt a little unwell because of the bad smell. The smell inside the tannery is worse. I can't explain how bad the leather smells... I have habituated now.*  
(TDH\_SC\_030, boy, 16)

*My workplace smells badly of rawhide. I hate that smell. When the smell gets into my clothes, I change my clothes after returning home.*  
(GUC\_SC\_007, girl, 11)

Children stay in jobs out of necessity, despite such odours. Other children said they gradually became accustomed to the smells. Children normalise the conditions of their work, like child TDH\_SC\_030, who does not have words to describe the foul smell of the tannery but admits to being used to the smell now. Or child TDH\_SC\_91 who says they could not 'bear' the smell but now thinks 'It does not smell so much'.

Another frequent complaint from children regarding their working environment is their exposure to the sun for long periods of the day. Traditionally, leather is dried outdoors and requires bright sunshine. Several children described working under the sun and their dislike of it. Much of this work takes place in the Balurmath area of Hazaribagh.

*I face problems while working in the sun... My face gets burned.*  
(TDH\_SC\_87, boy, 15)

*There are many sad stories about my work. I have to work the whole day under the sun. It is really tough. When the products get heated under the sun, it feels very hard to move them. I have no other option really; I have to do this for my parents.*  
(TDH\_SC\_97, girl, 17)

*I don't like working or standing under the sun, but there is nothing to do. When the sun shines very bright, we work fast. We finish our work. We can't finish our work when the sun doesn't shine. We can only work when the sun shines... I dislike being under the sun, but I can't work without it.*  
(GUC\_SC\_017, boy, 17)

Workplaces also tend to be unclean and poorly maintained, creating risk of injury:

*The conditions of the floors is not good at all. There is filth, water, and it is very slippery. We slip often and hurt our hands and legs.*  
(GUC\_SC\_40, boy, 17)

*The factory is not so clean and there is a lot of dirt and smell.*  
(GUC\_SC\_047, girl, 17)

Overall, these excerpts paint a picture of a work environment that is not conducive to wellbeing for anyone, especially children.

The stories illustrate that there appear to be few, if any, options for these children to find employment which is not hazardous. As the next child explains, many of the

jobs he has undertaken in his short life have involved harmful conditions:

First, he works with chemicals and carries heavy loads up and down stairs:

*Initially, I had to work with chemicals. I had to take the leather to the roof of the factory for drying. The roof top was on the second floor. It took 20–22 minutes for the leather to dry, and 10–15 minutes to bring it down. I had to go and check on the progress of drying at times. Since I was engrossed in working, the job didn't seem too painful to me. I never slipped on the stairs while carrying the leather up or down. I used to do milling with my feet after the leather had dried.*

Next, he works for long hours in the sun:

*Working under the sun was difficult. I didn't have to carry heavy loads – the company gave me small amounts of goods to carry. The company is good and knows us well.*

Later in his job, he works with dangerous tools with no safety equipment, leading to multiple injuries:

*There were risks involved in working with sharp tools; I cut my hands multiple times. I don't remember how many times I cut my hands. My hands used to have marks over them from holding scissors. I don't have those marks any more; I used to have marks over all five of my fingers earlier. Once, I cut my finger while working with scissors.*

In the leather-milling process, he spent hours each day stamping leather mixed with water, soda, acid, and other chemicals with his bare feet to soften the leather:

*The bottom of my feet had gotten red from working on milling. My feet used to ache from stepping over the leather. The skin on my feet had peeled at that time. I had to step over leather for a long time as it was dry. It took me more than 30 minutes to finish milling 20 pairs of goods. I had to finish milling 100 pairs. I had to work with batches of 20 pairs. It took even longer when the leather was thick. The skin on my feet used to shed 3–4 times a month. I got used to it, so it didn't happen much.*

In another job, he worked with industrial glue, again without any protective equipment:

*Other than that, I used to do pasting. At first, I hated the smell, but I got used to it while working with glue*

*on my hands. I didn't mind the smell afterwards. The environment I worked in was such that I didn't mind the smell.*

When the work itself was not hazardous, he struggled with the crowded working conditions:

*I hated it when there were too many people around. Four to five people used to work in a room.*

In addition to all the other hazards related to the jobs he performs, the factory environment itself is unsafe – full of noxious fumes, excessive noise, and extreme heat:

*Two to three times a month, the factory smells of gases. The gases come from machines. Sometimes the gas comes from coasting. When machines are turned on, their motors release a gas.*

*These days, machines don't make a lot of noise; they used to do so in the past. Previously, Fook machines were used, which made a lot of noise. Now JUKI machines are used, which make less noise.*

*My workplace gets hot, but I've gotten used to it. There are two stoves at each of the two sides of my workplace.*

(GUC\_SC\_006, boy, 17)

In the seven years that this child has been working, he has been exposed to many hazards, such as tanning chemicals, glue, excessive heat, sun, noise, machine gases, etc. and he has undertaken numerous dangerous tasks such as carrying heavy loads up and down stairs, using sharp tools, milling leather with his feet, applying glue with no protective equipment, and working in cramped conditions, among others.

#### Hazardous schedules

The children whose life stories were collected work long days with very few and short breaks. Many of the children work around 12 hours a day and get one day (or half a day) of leave on Friday. In some cases, children do not get any days off:

*From 8.00am to 8.00pm... From 1.00pm. They let us go at 1.00pm for one hour. We have to go back within 2.00pm... Sometimes, I have to work till 10.00pm when there is a lot of work pressure... I have a holiday on Fridays.*

(TDH\_SC\_86, boy, 17)

*[From] 8.00am to 5.00pm. When I worked overtime, I had to work till 9.00pm, 10.00pm, 10.30pm, or even 11.00pm. When I got off at 5.00pm, I used to go*

*home and work on belts, shoes, and money bags.*  
(GUC\_SC\_011, girl, 15)

*Out of the 12 hours I worked, I spent two hours at home. Back then, I didn't realise how difficult working ten hours was. Physically difficult. My body, hands, feet, and head ached. I came back late at night, at 10.00pm. I had to wake up early. I couldn't sleep enough.*  
(TDH\_SC\_011, girl, 15)

*We don't even get any weekends in the public holidays. For example, our factory was open on 16th December, the national Victory Day. We get off only for three days during Eid. If I don't come back to work in three days, the weekend is counted as absent. Then my salary will decrease. The work generally ends at 8.00pm. But if there is work pressure, we have to work overtime at night.*  
(GUC\_SC\_044, boy, 15)

Despite children's already extensive schedules, many of the children regularly work overtime:

*When there is overtime, they don't give the break. I come back at 9.00pm or 7.00pm and sleep after eating early. I don't roam around much that time or watch TV. If I do overtime, I get sleepier.*  
(TDH\_SC\_53, girl, 17)

*There's overtime at times; at other times, there isn't... The work is painful, but I like being around everyone. Fridays are off days.*  
(TDH\_NH\_130, boy, 14)

*If I do overtime, I have to return at night. I get lonely at night, I mean, it gets difficult for me at night... On the road, there are no lights at times, so it is difficult for me to commute. I come together with others if I don't do the overtime. There was no such incident, still, I feel afraid to come. Most of the time, I work from 8.00am to 5.00pm, and if I do the overtime, it gets 9.00pm to 10.00pm.*  
(GUC\_SC\_076, girl, 16)

Many children express that these long schedules are exhausting and often leave them with little to no time or energy to pursue any recreational activities:

*I cannot play or talk with my friends now; I have to stay at work the whole day.*  
(TDH\_CLSC\_207, boy, 11)

When I come back at 5.00pm, I can take a rest after taking a shower. But when I come back at 10.00pm, I do not feel like doing anything at all, I just go to sleep.  
(TDH\_NH\_143, girl, 16)

These children's long working hours not only exclude them from other activities but also lead to children feeling trapped and socially isolated. Two children even referred to working as like being stuck in jail:

*Being stuck in one place all day feels like being jailed. We have to stay put all day. I don't like it, but I have to take the pain.*  
(TDH\_NH\_130, boy, 14)

*I used to feel very bad before working in a factory, it felt like I was trapped in a jail. I did not feel good working for eight hours. I could not go outside, could not have tea, or anything. I could not meet anybody, I just had to sit inside the building.*  
(TDH\_SC\_111, boy, 17)

*That was the first time in my life I stood somewhere till 5.00 pm. I had never been stuck at one place like that before. I used to go to school and roam around. I felt trapped on my first day of work. Then I went back home at 5.00pm. After that day, I slowly started feeling good.*  
(TDH\_SC\_007, boy, 15)

*I do not hate going to work, but I feel bad at night, that's it. I have to sit alone till 10.00pm. I feel bad, as in, I am all alone there, that's why... I told my parents, my uncle, and also my employer. Now they let me leave a bit earlier, like 8.30pm or 9.00pm.*  
(TDH\_SC\_115, boy, 13)

*I don't like this kind of encaged job... I don't like working outside, but I liked working at the factory. However, I had to wake up early and get there by 8.00am and remain stuck at the factory the whole day... we had to stay all day, it was painful. The work itself wasn't difficult and the environment was good.*  
(TDH\_SC\_011, girl, 15)

For these children, confinement to a monotonous environment can make a job that doesn't appear negative become so. In this case, it is not the environment of the work but rather the working conditions which make this child's job challenging.

In some of the more extreme cases, children's conditions of confinement are akin to slavery:

*The only bad thing was that they never let me go out of the house. They would always keep me inside, locking the door when they went out.*

(GUC\_NH\_039, girl, 16)

*I like to visit my village frequently, and that factory didn't give me that leave.*

(TDH\_NH\_167, boy, 16)

The relentlessness of long hours at work is a worst form of child labour. Children return home exhausted and have neither time nor energy to meet with friends and play and socialise. This is often worse for many of the girls who describe spending the very small time they have outside of work undertaking unpaid work in the household.

### Workplace relationships

The previous section illustrated children's work environments: smells, noises, hazards. The next section explores the interpersonal relationships which affect children's working lives.

### Physical abuse

Many children's narratives reveal employer abuse in the workplace and children's lack of options to seek redress:

*They used to scold and slap me sometimes if I would make any mistakes.*

(GUC\_NH\_039, female, 16)

*Suddenly, two plates fell from my hand and a plate broke. A waiter saw this and slapped me. I gave a complaint to the GM [general manager], but he never did the justice. He didn't say anything to the waiters. Because he thought that the waiters are difficult to find out for the restaurant.*

(TDH\_CLSC\_238, boy, 17)

One girl describes how her school provided information on child abuse and encouraged them to report any instances of it, as well as instances of child marriage, but that when faced with child abuse in her workplace, she is unable to report it:

*When we entered the factory, we witnessed child abuse. They beat the children before they can protest or if they speak out saying I didn't do this work, they say no, you did. Then if I say to my boss, I didn't do this work, he comes to beat me at that time. Then I told him that it is not right that you hurt children and make them work. If these children didn't work, your factory wouldn't run... Since I told*

*that, they insulted me by bringing up my parents.*

(TDH\_NH\_165, girl, 16)

When she speaks out against abuse in the workplace, she is rebuffed, but keeps her job. Although she considers making a complaint against her boss to her school, she refrains as she believes that there will be no possible positive outcome. She reasons that parents send their children to work out of necessity and therefore have few, if any, alternative options.

This child's experience highlights how children often have limited spaces and opportunities to report abuse and receive a meaningful response. Children compromise their agency while adhering to subordination and exploitation. Life stories suggest that without systemic mechanisms to address child abuse in workplaces, teaching children in school to recognise abuse and report it is tokenistic and might in fact expose children to more abuse.

### Verbal abuse

Abuse is often recounted by children as primarily taking the form of verbal 'scolding' and debasement. Both boys and girls reported this, but it surfaced in girl's narratives more frequently:

*They scold me but they never laid their hands on me. And they never cursed too. They scold me sometimes and tell me to do the work properly.*

(TDH\_CLSC\_209, boy, 17)

*They behave badly with me... They swear at me.*

(GUC\_NH\_002, girl, 13)

*He shouts at me if there is a delay at work or I talk more with my colleague.*

(TDH\_NH\_167, boy, 16)

Children remark that they feel powerless to do anything about the verbal abuse they experience, as they need to stay in their jobs:

*If I make any mistake, they scold me a lot, sometimes they insult me, but what to do, I have to keep doing by hearing those insults.*

(TDH\_CLSC\_217, girl, 16)

*He scolds me when my output is low. He curses my parents. Even then, I continue working there because I have to. We are helpless in front of them. We can't run our households if we don't work.*

(GUC\_CLSC\_008, girl, 16)

*If I can't do it as per expectation, he will scold me. Then I feel bad. Sometimes I cry after hearing his words. However, there is nothing to do. I have to work to eat.*

(TDH\_SC\_28, girl, 15)

While scolding greatly upsets some of the children, others seemed to find it acceptable or to be expected when they make mistakes:

*When I do my job properly, he says, 'Good.' When I can't do it properly, he sends someone to show me how it should be done. He tells someone, 'Show that girl how to do it.' Obviously when I do a bad job, he uses harsh language on me... He says, 'Why are you working like that?' He scolds me like that.*

(TDH\_CLSC\_186, girl, 17)

Similarly, children explain that the supervisor is 'supposed' to apprehend the child if he/she makes a mistake:

*Yes, they are supposed to scold for that... The supervisor scolds me.*

(GUC\_CLSC\_027, girl, 16)

*It is normal to scold a little while working. I don't think much about it.*

(TDH\_SC\_016, girl, 16)

One girl justifies (and defends) the verbal abuse from her manager, stating that it is part of his responsibility:

*What can they do, really? They are actually responsible for us. If we make any mistake, the company will come and ask them about it. That is why they scold us... What will I think about it? The employers scold them and say that they have kept them in order to observe us and to make everything done by us properly. They scold him by saying that he was not kept just to take his salary at the end of the month but to identify our mistakes. That is why he scolded us.*

(TDH\_SC\_112, girl, 15)

There are trickle-down hierarchies of verbal chastisement in the workplace. The child forgives the manager's abusive behaviour by explaining that the manager will only be reprimanded by the employer if he/she does not in turn reprimand the workers below them. In this way, the child accepts verbal abuse because it is normalised and expected behaviour from higher up. This excerpt demonstrates that not only is verbal abuse condoned

in the workplace but it is also expected. This creates an environment in which children are regularly shouted at.

However, not all children share this perspective. Others believe that the role of the employer should be teaching the child skills, not scolding them:

*The employer is not good there, is actually very bad. Some would show us how to do any work, but he doesn't do that, instead he scolds us. He says, 'Hey, how have you done this? Can't you do anything properly?' He even slaps some people.*

(GUC\_SC\_026, boy, 15)

#### *Sexual harassment*

Some girls testify to experiencing sexual harassment inside and in the periphery of their workplace. No boys reported sexual abuse; however, lack of disclosure does not mean that boys are not abused but only that they do not report it:

*Now I work, although I do not want to as the boys there pass very bad comments.*

(GUC\_CLSC\_017, girl, 14)

*They even touch inappropriately whenever they get a chance. I mean, this has never happened to me, but I have seen this happen to other girls. But they have cursed me a lot.*

(TDH\_SC\_102, girl, 14)

*Then I took them and worked there for many days. Then I saw that the man tried to touch me inappropriately, then I left it.*

(TDH\_NH\_165, female, 16)

*There are some bad boys in the factory. They often use slang to the girls... I mean, they gossip dirty. The boy workers bully us when they get any chance to do that.*

(TDH\_SC\_27, girl, 14)

*The major problem is the bad boys standing on the street. As we have to pass the way, we have to hear a lot of bad comments.*

(GUC\_SC\_047, girl, 17)

#### *Lack of respect*

Children's narratives highlight that they are at a particular disadvantage in their workplaces because of the types of jobs that they do and their age, which determines their relative social standing. They describe acutely feeling disrespect – and their lack of power to retaliate:



*I do the job of cleaning the plate and glasses at a food shop (small restaurant). It's the **lowest position there**. Everyone there, especially waiters, put their hands on my body. I keep quiet. If I say something, I will lose my job. I'm going through such a situation in my life.*  
(TDH\_CLSC\_238, boy, 17)

*When the quality of our work becomes bad, he says that we don't do a good job, and the gloves are not straight. But the gloves are sewn that way and it's not our fault. The gloves are cut and sewn in a curved way. We only straighten those, but our employer blames us. He doesn't blame the person who sews the gloves, because that person is old, and my employer can't fight with him/her. He is afraid of his older workers and doesn't pressurise them. He pressurises us because we're little. The older workers work a lot and on time. We are young, so he pressurises us if we're a little late. When he pressurises the machine men, they start shouting at him.*  
(GUC\_SC\_008, boy, 12)

*I am not respected at my workplace because I am not educated. If I had studied, everyone would have respected me. I could have learnt if somebody had taught me... I would have been respected more if I had studied... I am scolded and yelled at a lot over there. I am not respected.*  
(GUC\_CLSC\_007, girl, 16)

*They tortured me and didn't value me because I am young... The elders didn't work, and they kept ordering me and hitting me.*  
(TDH\_NH\_121, boy, 15)

Even when they are treated well by their colleagues, children share that they are disappointed by the lack of respect they receive for the work they do:

*It's small job that is not respectable. My job is not respectable. I want to do respectable work... I get affection due to my young age, but that's not the same as getting respect.*  
(TDH\_CLSC\_195, girl, 16)

Power differentials, played out through respect, are shown to make work more unpleasant for children – they are treated with abuse because of their relative 'lower' position in the workplace and society, and their word is not given the same weight of that of an adult:

*I liked this work on the first day, but he beat me after. When I complained about him to another officer, he denied and said that he did not beat me. But he confessed it to that uncle. There were many girls who said that he is not good. He lied. He said that he did not slap me.*  
(TDH\_SC\_098, girl, 14)

In many of the children's stories, they share their frustration at the lack of recognition they receive for the immense responsibilities and huge volume of work that they undertake. Despite performing the same (or harder) activities as people much older than them, they are not treated as equals; instead they are constantly discriminated against solely because of their age.

#### Constrained agency

Along with the challenging circumstances that children encounter while working, from abuse to disrespect, most are limited in their ability to affect change in their situation. While some children do have the ability to leave work after experiencing mistreatment (see section 3.3.4 on '**Employment changes**'), that is not the norm. Most stay in their workplaces, continuing to experience abuse and resignedly accept it as part of their jobs:

*I don't get the courage. If I do, they won't keep me in the work. That is why I can't speak. I tell them whatever they give, fine, I should keep working. I have to support my family somehow.*  
(GUC\_NH\_030, boy, 16)

*I didn't say anything about this to my employer. When someone says something to him, he gets angry. One day, I saw him slapping a girl. I don't know why he hit her, but I fear him a lot since that day. That's why I didn't dare to ask him about my unpaid salary.*  
(GUC\_SC\_007, girl, 11)

*That uncle there beats a lot, do you know? Everyone from there beats me actually. Every day. I had to suffer a lot to work there. Cursing, scolding, I do not like these any more. But I must work. They use a lot of bad words; beat me a lot as well. They curse too much, like all the time.*  
(TDH\_SC\_102, girl, 14)

*Their treatment is good but the owner tortures me almost... He treats me poorly, I feel bad... I don't plan to leave work now, because I have nothing else to do, I have to do something to eat, I have*

*to look after my three siblings and parents.*  
(TDH\_CLSC\_222, girl, 11)

In the excerpt above, the child is only 11 years old, and yet she feels the responsibility of providing for her entire family and therefore will not leave her job even though her employer 'tortures' her. Her story, and those like it, exemplify the weight of responsibility that children carry and how this responsibility leads to exacerbating negative work experiences. Without alternative pathways to decent employment or power to effect change, these children will continue to believe that they have no choice but to accept abuse and hazards where they work.

### Positive work experiences

While many children who gave their life stories spoke about their negative experiences in the workplace, there were some occasions in which children also shared positive experiences. These examples shed light on some of the factors which make child labour feel less arduous for children. Children talk about friendships with colleagues, access to services, kind employers, and the ability to learn and gain skills on the job.

#### Friendship

For children who are not attending school and therefore missing the company of children their age and opportunities to socialise, co-workers can be important contributors to shaping their positive experiences at work:

*I like most passing time with my girl colleagues. It's a happy time to hang out with a good friend. We do laugh and make jokes together.*  
(TDH\_SC\_027, girl, 14)

*I would ask people for friendship as we all worked together. In this way, I got acquainted with everyone, now I have fun working in the factory.*  
(TDH\_SC\_011, boy, 17)

*The only good thing in the workplace is that there is a friend of mine whom I can talk to and make some fun with. I feel better then.*  
(GUC\_SC\_050, girl, 13)

*I work and joke around with everyone. I don't remember the occasional pains of my job at that time.*  
(TDH\_SC\_054, boy, 15)

Colleagues, especially those of a similar age, also help to train new child employees and to assist children when they need help:

*Good as in everyone behaves well and nobody misbehaves with me. If anyone sees me in trouble, they help me... For instance, sometimes my hands get hurt and red, then they offer to help and do my work.*  
(TDH\_SC\_109, girl, 14)

*I like this job because the work I do seems easy to me. Of course, there are a few difficulties... My colleagues who are of my age help me a lot.*  
(TDH\_SC\_034, girl, 14)

The above quotes underscore how impactful friendships at work can be for children. Even though their jobs are challenging, being able to relax and socialise with colleagues alleviates some of their hardships.

#### Provision of services

Workplace benefits, albeit informal, are another factor in children's perception of their jobs. For children who are struggling to afford food, even receiving meals and a food allowance to take home makes a big difference in how they experience their work and employers.

Child GUC\_CLSC\_022's employer provided her with rice and vegetables and paid for her rent during the Covid-19 lockdown. Because of this, she says, 'Yes, I still work in that house. The madam is great there. I go there sometimes and work' (GUC\_CLSC\_022, girl, 17).

Another child appreciates the flexibility of being able to combine work and study: 'In this place they adored me. They let me study. They treat me like their own' (TDH\_SC\_043, boy, 17).

Other children benefit from being able to take low-interest loans from their employers:

*I had taken some loans from my employer at the factory, by telling him about my father. It was a little after lockdown, not during that time... Well, my employer respected me in this matter, and he didn't take much. He took back the money slowly, cut off from my salary.*  
(GUC\_SC\_038, boy, 17)

Similarly, children can also take advances on their salaries to assist in more difficult months: 'Yes. Sometimes, my employer pays me in advance when my family runs out of rice and lentils. She gives me 500–1,000 taka when I explain my family's situation to her. She adjusts that amount with my salary'.  
(GUC\_NH\_004, girl, 11)

An employer's kindness and these services, while minimal, can help to make work less arduous for some of the children.

Occasionally, children mention simple pleasures which made their work experiences better for them, such as being able to listen to music. When talking about what he liked about his work, a 13-year-old said: 'I mean, I like many things. I can work sitting down and listening to music' (TDH\_SC\_59, boy, 13).

#### Hypothetical good work

Similar to the observation of the above child regarding simple pleasures, the following excerpt indicates what most workplaces lack by hypothesising what could make them better. One child describes what her workplace would be like if she were in charge:

*I would keep drinking water, and also washrooms. Then boys and girls will have to maintain good behaviour, so that everyone feels comfortable working. If I give them work worth 5 taka, but they return me with 4 taka, still I would have to give them that 5 taka. Also, I come home working very hard at 10.00pm; not everyone can do that. They should be given facilities; they should be given the opportunity to leave at 5.00pm or 7.00pm. I have to understand their comforts and discomforts. They can share their problems with me so that I can cooperate with them. All these facilities should be given.*  
(TDH\_SC\_090, girl, 17)

Her dreams are modest, demonstrating the small changes which employers could make to improve their workplaces for all their staff, including children. She hopes for basic amenities, freedom from harassment, empathy, and a reasonable schedule.

The range of children's work experiences indicates that work for all employees in these workplaces can be dangerous and challenging, but that being a child makes the experience worse due to the disrespect and abuse they experience as well as the opportunities that they are missing while working – such as socialising, playing, and studying. Furthermore, their lower social status as children makes them more vulnerable to abuse and the harmful work environment.

### 3.3.3 Learning new things and vocational training

Apart from formal education in schools and skill centres, many children spoke about the types of informal vocational training they received on the job.

#### Types of skills learnt

The scoping of children in the worst forms of child labour (WFCL) in the leather sector of Bangladesh conducted in May–August 2020 by the CLARISSA programme found that children were in WFCL throughout the leather supply chain. We found evidence of WFCL in almost all processes, that is, 103 out of 107 processes (96 per cent) along the supply chain – from animal slaughter and flaying, to tanning processes and manufacturing of leather products (Maksud *et al.* 2021).<sup>6</sup> The extent of children's work is also evidenced here, in their remarks on learning leather processing skills. Children reported that they learn many types of leather work such as cutting leather, machine operation, shoe work, bag work, belt work, pasting, sewing, sole work, leather drying, leather dyeing, and so on:

*My mother did the cutting. I learnt it from her.*  
(TDH\_CLSC\_194, girl, 13)

*I will work here until I learn how to operate the machine.*  
(GUC\_NH\_36, girl, 16)

*I work at a leather factory. Shoes are cut and passed on to me, then I put pasting on those. I clip threads... The supervisors at the factory taught me.*  
(GUC\_SC\_024, girl, 15)

*He taught me to operate the machine himself, like a teacher teaches a student. I couldn't have learnt if he hadn't taught me.*  
(TDH\_SC\_118, boy, 14)

The other types of skills children mentioned learning included tailoring, electric work, driving, internet setting, jewellery work, making food products, business operations, mobile phone servicing, chicken preparation, car mechanics, and so on. There was more variety in the jobs that boys reported learning, as can be seen by the following excerpts. Girls primarily shared learning

6 The scoping report is available to read here at [Mapping of Children Engaged in the Worst Forms of Child Labour in the Supply Chain of the Leather Industry in Bangladesh](#).

about sewing and tailoring work and certain types of leather work:

*I have learnt to sew from my mother.*  
(GUC\_CLSC\_032, girl, 16)

*I learn to work... Motors, water motors, and fans, enclosed fans. We do various types of work on all types of fans.*  
(GUC\_NH\_003, boy, 15)

*To drive the covered van... I learnt the first few days, then I drive by myself now.*  
(TDH\_NH\_155, boy, 17)

*From working at my current workplace, I know where things are bought and sold and what happens where.*  
(TDH\_SC\_010, boy, 15)

*I am only learning now... Mobile works, servicing of all categories. For example, if there is any problem with the mobile then servicing, then flash work, I mean, every kind of problem mobile can have, I am learning those works.*  
(TDH\_NH\_156, boy, 15)

*I learn how to fix AC [air conditioning], microwave, and fridge.*  
(TDH\_NH\_176, boy, 12)

*He had taught me how to dress a chicken or how to price one. He also taught me accounting.*  
(TDH\_NH\_137, boy, 14)

The breadth of these different skills shows that children are present in all business sectors of these neighbourhoods and that they are taking on a variety of roles and positions within their workplace. Their work is not limited to simple, easy tasks, and in many cases, they undertake highly skilled work.

Besides learning hard skills, children also reported their interest in learning some soft, personal skills, like how to talk and behave, how to be honest, and so on: 'I have always observed how everybody talks and behaves. I learnt most of the things from this place. There is nothing more to learn in this place. I learnt everything I needed to from that food factory' (TDH\_SC\_046, girl, 17).

Motivation behind learning skills varied. Mostly, children spoke about learning skills on the job to be employable or to move up in their work, such as this child: 'If I become an operator, my salary will be increased. Then I will be

able to earn more money' (GUC\_NH\_036, girl, 16), but others also spoke about avoiding the negative behaviour of their employers as a strong motivator.

#### **How children learn and who they learn from**

Children reported that they mainly learn by watching and doing. Formal training was rarely mentioned:

*I watched them working, you know I hadn't studied that much, but I can work if they show me one day or at most two days.*  
(TDH\_SC\_084, girl, 17)

*I would have to watch how they did the job. I watched the others regularly and they taught me.*  
(TDH\_SC\_007, boy, 15)

*I learnt these tasks by watching others for six months when I first joined here.*  
(TDH\_NH\_0167, boy, 16)

*A helper was expected to learn by watching an operator. Helpers had to watch how to attach [bobbin] cases, how to stitch by hand, etc. Learning to do this by watching took one to two years... Helpers make many kinds of mistakes. They learn by watching.*  
(TDH\_SC\_012, girl, 16)

*I can do all kinds of work by the grace of Allah. I have learnt by observing.*  
(TDH\_SC\_094, boy, 17)

Children evidence their motivation to gain new skills by describing how they created their own opportunities for learning:

*I would clear my task first, then if anybody went to the washroom, I would sit in their machines. Then I worked. I learnt by watching and observing. Then I would show them my work and take feedback. They would approve.*  
(TDH\_SC\_85, girl, 14)

*I learnt it by myself, also from aunties who worked in front of me, where I worked initially. I was moved from that place to another one. I would sew the belts. One person would sew the belts. I would cut the extra things from there. When they would go to the bathroom, it was empty, they would ask me to sit there and learn. The leftover foam and belt, I*

*used to sew them to keep the machine running.*  
(TDH\_SC\_53, girl, 17)

Though most of the children reported that they learn by watching and seeing for themselves, they also mentioned other people who guide them, inspire them, and show them new skills. The following excerpts show that many children learn new things from their close family members and so illustrate a pattern of knowledge transfer from one generation to the next, suggesting that children in their neighbourhoods are likely to follow in the same employment pathways as their parents, particularly if their education is informal and work based rather than in schools:

*My mother showed me how to do this. She explained how to cut the clothes, design, and operate the sewing machine.*  
(TDH\_NH\_178, girl, 14)

*I have learnt all these by going along with my father. I go and do this when I get free time from the internet job. I can make shoes, money bags, and belts.*  
(GUC\_NH\_019, boy, 15)

*When you pin the nail and straighten it, the folds are made proper... I did not understand at first... I had an older sister and an aunt, they taught me.*  
(TDH\_SC\_101, girl, 14)

*Then I went to my sister's husband in Chittagong to learn tailoring work. I stayed there for almost one year, then I came back.*  
(TDH\_SC\_065, boy, 16)

Children reported that factory owners, managers, and colleagues also have a very important role in teaching different kinds of work:

*Those who worked beside me, they taught me. The manager never teaches, but he will appoint people from someplace else if he needs. There is no guarantee who he will bring and from where. So you have to learn from the person beside you.*  
(TDH\_NH\_148, girl, 16)

*He taught me the placement of dice for cutting. If it is placed the wrong way, it won't work. Then one day, he told me to do it on my own. I started cutting slowly. At the leather shop, I used to do cutting. Here, my boss used to stand behind me and point out if I cut something the wrong way. Later, he taught me how to run the*

*machine. He learnt this from somebody else. Now somebody else will learn from me.*  
(TDH\_SC\_118, boy, 14)

*The senior staff in that place taught me. After being learnt, I did it myself. Then I could operate the machine as well.*  
(TDH\_SC\_041, boy, 15)

*But if I did something slightly wrong, people who used to work beside me would guide me. The supervisor would tell me to observe and learn for two months.*  
(TDH\_SC\_091, girl, 17)

Although it was less common in the stories, some children reported needing to pay for lessons:

*Then someone agreed but she wanted 3,000 taka from me. Then I went to my teacher and said that I have this strong wish. Then she said, learn from me. I don't have a relationship of money with you, first you learn.*  
(GUC\_SC\_022, girl, 15)

*He is my friend's older brother... He teaches me in exchange of money... 7,000 taka... Everything related to driving.*  
(GUC\_CLSC\_009, boy, 17)

However, not everyone was eager to help children learn; in some cases, higher skilled employees refused to teach children:

*The operators didn't want to teach work. I mean, they didn't want to teach the machine sewing work. Then I have learnt secretly. Everyone would go to eat; I would learn a bit in that time.*  
(TDH\_SC\_084, girl, 17)

Along with variation in how and from whom children learn, the type of skills they learnt required a range of time – anywhere from is two to three days to six to seven years:

*They showed me for one week and then I started doing the work on my own.*  
(TDH\_SC\_112, girl, 15)

*I work at a leather factory. Shoes are cut and passed on to me, then I put pasting on those. I clip threads... It takes three to four months to learn.*  
(TDH\_SC\_024, girl, 15)

*The sole work. It took me one year to learn the work from there. I took one-year time from him.*  
(GUC\_SC\_064, boy, 16)

*I can make chains, anklets, bracelets, bangles, and many other things... learn all of that in one year.*  
(TDH\_NH\_131, boy, 13)

Factors which determined time requirements included children's motivation, ability, complexity of the skill, and employers' willingness:

*Those who are talented, they can learn the work faster.*  
(GUC\_SC\_62, boy, 16)

*A helper was expected to learn by watching an operator. Learning to do this by watching took one to two years. It took me three to four months. Brainy helpers learn fast; those with smaller brains take longer to become an operator, like one and a half to two years.*  
(TDH\_SC\_012, girl, 16)

Interestingly, children reported that some employers do not want to immediately upskill children; instead, they delay training. It is not clear if this is because they do not trust the children's ability or if they do not want to create a situation in which their employees would demand higher pay or find work elsewhere. Unfortunately, the narratives did not provide more detail on children's perspectives of employer motivations for delaying teaching:

*Electric work... fix the fan, light, and TV... No, my employer doesn't let me do this. He says that I am still young. He will teach me these after two to three years.*  
(TDH\_NH\_166, boy, 13)

*It was difficult for me to work as a helper. Many operators used to give me orders, I felt bad. Working there for nine months as a helper, I learnt the work, but I didn't get a machine. I got the machine after working nine months as a helper.*  
(TDH\_SC\_053, girl, 17)

### **Benefit of learning new things**

Most of the children stated that they want to learn new skills to increase their salary and get promoted. Learning new skills also makes children feel more confident:

*If I learn the job properly, I will earn 10,000–20,000 taka per month. My employer is cheating me now. If I had more work experience or if I were working at a big company, I could've earned more.*  
(GUC\_SC\_019, boy, 17)

*Yes, and if you can learn to work more, then your salary can be increased. I can only operate one machine, that's why my salary is 6,500 taka, but there are senior operators too who can operate all the machines and their salary is 8,000 taka.*  
(TDH\_NH\_150, girl, 17)

*There are many benefits if I can learn this work. I have learnt this work, and my salary has been raised to 15,000 taka, and it will increase even more gradually. The future is good in this job.*  
(GUC\_SC\_026, boy, 15)

*If I learn the operators' work, then you know every work is not in a similar status. Like helping around and doing errands is low in status. And if I learn the machine work and move to another place, my salary will increase. That is the reason.*  
(TDH\_SC\_084, girl, 17)

Many of the children who work do not have the opportunity to go to school. Therefore, being able to learn new skills on the job is important for them to be able to progress in their careers which ensures that they will be able to secure better employment in the future.

### **Payment during learning period**

Informality in skill transfer and training was reflected in drastic variance in payment for children who were learning: some receiving no payment for over a year, others just receiving nominal sums, and others receiving full wages while they learnt:

*That time was bad. I joined the work. I mean I was working with someone else; he didn't give me money. He only took me in to teach me.*  
(GUC\_SC\_064, boy, 16)

*I am learning the work here, but they don't give me money... For almost one year.*  
(GUC\_SC\_077, boy, 12)

*There is a shoe factory there. It's in the alley next to ours. I learnt by doing it. I used to do binai<sup>7</sup> work. Binai work can be done with leather as*

<sup>7</sup> Sewing leather pieces together during production, likely related to shoes, wallets, or handbags.

*well. They paid me 40 or 60 taka per piece.*  
(TDH\_SC\_019, girl, 13)

*Then I got this job on our rooftop. I've been working here for many years – two to three years now. At first, Miraj and others used to toggle cowhide under the sun. I was learning to peel cowhide at that time, so I worked for free. Then I learnt to do it and started working contractually.*  
(GUC\_SC\_017, boy, 17)

*Yes, for a long time. Then the employers check and observe and then they start giving salary... Some would require three years, some would four. Those who can work well are then given a salary.*  
(TDH\_NH\_141, girl, 16)

The work that children do in these neighbourhoods does not necessarily require high levels of formal education; however, that is not to say that they are not highly specialised nor do not require years of training and experience. These stories show a general trajectory of children beginning work in low-skilled and low-paid positions and through their own motivation and initiative teaching themselves or seeking opportunities to learn new skills and improve their employability. Because experience, rather than formal education, determines work opportunities and salaries in these types of jobs, it is unsurprising that some children see little benefit in continued education.

### 3.3.4 Employment changes

The previous section ('3.3.3 Learning new skills and vocational training') provided examples of children learning skills which allowed them to seek better employment opportunities. Children also changed jobs for multiple other reasons, particularly those related to children's feelings about work and their negative experiences. Unfortunately, not all children have the freedom to seek new employment when they do not like their working conditions. Many children spoke about needing to work to buy food or assist paying their family's rent. These children feel that they cannot leave a job unless they have another job already confirmed. This means that many children stay in jobs they dislike for fear of missing rental payments or going hungry. It also means that employers who recognise their employees' vulnerability have no incentive to improve the working conditions of children.

### Salary

The most common reason children gave for changing their employment was seeking a higher salary. Given that the majority of the children who told their stories work out of necessity due to their family's extreme poverty, wages comprise a significant (if not the most important) determinant of their employment choices. The amount, but also the consistency of pay, was extremely important to children:

*Suppose they gave me money today, then they will say they will give me tomorrow and then tomorrow they won't. That is why I left that job.*  
(TDH\_NH\_140, girl, 16)

*They didn't pay us properly. Sometimes, when I asked them for money, they told me, 'Alright. Come back at that time.' When I went back at the specified time, they said, 'Not now. Come back at another time.' They used to do this. That's why I quit that job and started working at... tannery.*  
(GUC\_SC\_003, girl, 17)

*I worked here for a few months, but I didn't get paid properly at the end of the month. How will I support my family if I get a salary late? Therefore, I quit and switched to the recent one. I get paid properly there.*  
(TDH\_CLSC\_239, girl, 16)

Having a dependable and predictable salary is clearly important to children and makes sense that it would be a priority determinant for job satisfaction, given that children's wages are usually spent on reoccurring monthly costs, such as rent, loan repayments, and household basics, and families are surviving without any financial buffer. Without a reliable and consistent source of income, children and their families are unable to pay these expenses on time.

In addition to a dependable payment schedule, children also sought jobs with higher wages. While some types of work offered opportunities for promotion and gradual salary increases, others came with a salary cap. One child explains his thought process candidly. He says that he will stay in his current job until he reaches a salary ceiling, at which point he will move into another line of work:

*My salary is 6,000 taka. I got 1,500 taka in the first month, then they made 3,000 taka, and it gradually became 6,000 taka. I guess [it can go until] 10,000/11,000 taka. It will not increase after that. I might leave this job before that. I am*

*thinking about going in the transport line.*  
(GUC\_SC\_039, boy, 15)

Yet these opportunities for promotion are not equal – there are fewer for girls than for boys:

*No. I have to do the same things in the tannery forever. There is no opportunity to get promoted. The salary will only increase a bit every year if I work here for longer. Actually, girl workers have fewer options to learn here. On the other hand, boy workers have many things to learn in the tannery.*  
(TDH\_SC\_73, girl, 16)

With few opportunities for promotion within a workplace, some children decide to leave and find work in which the salary is higher: 'I did not get much salary working on that machine, which is why I joined at a new place to increase my salary' (TDH\_SC\_095, girl, 16). These children's reasoned decisions to remain in a job or seek new employment demonstrates their agency and ability to navigate their limited options.

#### **Workload and schedule**

Children and their families seek balance between wages and workload. As the previous section ('Salary') shows, a higher salary is often the reason for changing jobs. However, children do not always stay in a job with a higher salary if there are negative trade-offs in workload:

*I left it because I didn't like it, there was too much work, there was no timetable. If I go to work at 8.00am, I don't feel like working after 8.00pm. So when I go there at 8.00am, I have to work till 12.00am or 1.00am. Then I left work.*  
(GUC\_SC\_073, boy, 17)

Of particular concern to the children was having to work late into the evening: 'That job has to be worked till 12.30am or 1.00am, and that's not possible for me' (GUC\_NH\_006, girl, 12) and 'I did not like it because I had to work until 11.00pm/12.00am there' (TDH\_SC\_110, boy, 13).

Related to working late, children also stated that they left jobs in which they did not have enough breaks throughout the workday or when they were stuck in one location:

*I didn't like to sit and work, it was just cutting the thread and picking materials, I don't like it, so I started dye work. Here the food is more, money is more. I get to roam*

*around as well. This is better for me.*  
(TDH\_SC\_083, boy, 16)

and 'They didn't give me off-day on Fridays, or half days off, and there was no fixed lunch time. Because of these hassles, I didn't work there for long. I quit after 10–12 days' (TDH\_SC\_010, boy, 15).

#### **Injury**

Although children accept many hardships in their workplaces, one of the reasons given for leaving a job was injury or fear of injury. Small injuries and daily discomfort were often accepted as part of the job, but major injury, especially those which caused permanent harm – such as loss of a limb – was not:

*I said to my mother that I got injured... So my mother was adamant that I must leave that job.*  
(TDH\_SC\_86, boy, 17)

*But after I had completed two and a half years and there was some time left to complete three years, the boy lost his finger. Then again, when it was 15 days left for me to complete three years, someone else lost four of his fingers. So I completed 20 days, and then I did not go there to work again. I started a new job.*  
(TDH\_SC\_094, boy, 17)

*When they painted, I would cough, and blood would come out of my mouth... After leaving the work, there was no more bleeding. It would happen when I coughed.*  
(TDH\_SC\_050, boy, 14)

Interestingly, children are aware of major and immediate harm they encounter in their workplaces but do not talk about the long-term risks of the work they do. Lack of protective equipment, exposure to sounds, noxious chemicals, and harmful substances have significant (and negative) consequences on the health of people who are exposed daily to these hazards. However, as the section 3.3.2 on '**Experiences at work**' shows, these do not cause children to leave their job or feature in their narratives as reasons for leaving work. This is likely because they do not recognise the risks that these hazards pose. Understandably, the risk of losing a finger or coughing blood is immediate and obvious, while the nerve damage caused by long-term exposure to harmful chemicals is less confronting and less of an immediate danger compared to hunger or homelessness.



### Interpersonal relationships

Given the long hours children spend in working and the proportion of their days which are spent at work, it is unsurprising that the people who children encounter in their workplace greatly determine how they feel about work and the choices they make about employment.

The second most common reason children gave for leaving their jobs was verbal and physical abuse from their employers and colleagues:

*I mean, they used to make me angry on purpose. They often bully me and mock me. So I frequently got involved in quarrelling with them. I didn't like their way of a joke. Therefore, I declare to quit my job.*  
(TDH\_SC\_040, boy, 16)

*A few days later, one of my uncle's friends started working there, and he swore at and kicked me when I made a mistake one day. I lost interest in working there from that day. My uncle wasn't present when the incident happened. When he came back later, he asked me what had happened. I told him the whole story and quit.*  
(TDH\_SC\_010, boy, 15)

*I left the factory because he used to yell at and misbehave with me. He would yell if I was a little late in completing my work. If I couldn't do the job, I should've been taught. I don't like being sworn at. For example, I once saw two workers being hit at a bread factory. Keys were thrown at the gatekeeper, and hot bread was also thrown. After seeing this, I left that bakery. I realised that they could hit me too. Then they halted my payment. I don't like bad behaviour. I didn't go back there.*  
(TDH\_SC\_003, boy, 16)

*I can somehow work well. But the boss used to beat me, his behaviour was not good. That is why I left.*  
(GUC\_NH\_003, boy, 15)

*The manager beat me, which is why I left that job.*  
(TDH\_SC\_110, boy, 13)

*The GM Sir of that place swears at people badly. That's why I quit that job.*  
(GUC\_NH\_006, girl, 12)

*The GM sir's behaviour is horrible, he used to insult. That is the reason I came here leaving that work.*  
(GUC\_NH\_026, girl, 16)

*At my previous workplace, everybody yelled at me, and I was paid 4,000 taka. I quit that place and started working elsewhere. I am paid 4,000 taka over here as well, but my new employer is good.*  
(GUC\_CLSC\_010, girl, 16)

Not only do these excerpts further demonstrate the ubiquitous nature of abuse in the workplace discussed earlier but also demonstrates how it affects children's employment choices. While certain aspects of the work may be unpleasant, children do not find them as intolerable as insults, bullying, and swearing. Other behaviour that children find unsupportable is sexual harassment. As expected, this was only reported by girls, though it is likely that boys also experienced sexual harassment if to a lesser extent:

*I left it because the sir, if he had someone over and if I was alone, and he called me, what would I do? His office room was separate. The window wasn't there, if someone called from inside it was not audible from the outside. So, if any incident took place.*  
(TDH\_NH\_165, girl, 16)

*I mean, he would make me press and massage his hand and legs, would give me wrong signals. He would open his clothes to do that. Then I told these things to my mother. I didn't tell at first, but when he started doing too much, was trying to come closer, I told my mother. Then my mother said, let it be, you don't need to go. I would rather die at home without eating.*  
(GUC\_SC\_072, girl, 17)

In these situations, girl children are harassed by their male employers or supervisors, men with significantly more power and influence. Instead of seeking support at their place of work, the girls decide to quit their jobs to escape the harassment, probably because they feel that leaving is the only viable solution. Sexual harassment also occurred during girls' commutes. Although they were free from harassment in their workplaces, this antisocial behaviour affected their willingness to attend the workplace:

*Then I had left another job due to some problem... I mean boys would disturb me... They would catcall in the middle of the road. I was scared of any kind*

*of incident. Since I was doing a job, I felt nervous.*  
(TDH\_SC\_046, girl, 17)

Girls' subjection to harassment is indicative of wider social norms of gender inequality.

### 3.3.5 Children's work: conclusion

Children's narratives show that labour intermediaries play an important role in helping children locate and secure work opportunities. Intermediaries typically had close social ties with the children, through kin relations or neighbourhood proximity. Connecting children to workplaces was done as a favour and rarely entailed any material benefit to the intermediary. Crucially, intermediaries were able to convince employers to overcome their reluctance to hire children, particularly young children. The close social and geographic relationship between children and labour intermediaries likely contributes to maintaining neighbourhood pockets of poverty as opportunities for high-paying jobs are limited in these areas.

Once in work, children reported a broad spectrum of experiences. Their descriptions of their work duties, environments, and schedules illustrate how these characteristics combine to create the worst forms of child labour. Jobs which on the surface seem innocuous are harmful and hazardous due to long hours and dangerous environments. Workplace abuse, exploitation, and derision cause further distress. However, children also spoke about the positive aspects of their work, such as the friendships they maintained with colleagues and the support they received from employers.

While at work, children took advantage of the opportunity to learn new skills. Training was typically informal and ad hoc but accelerated children's employment trajectories. Although on-the-job skill development supported children in advancing within their current sector, there were limited training opportunities available for them to transition into jobs in other industries or into more formal employment.

Skill acquisition contributed to decisions to change jobs within their sector in search of higher salaries, but children also chose to leave jobs where they experienced abuse, feared injury, or worked excessive hours. However, not all children felt that they could change their jobs without first securing new employment due to the necessity of their salaries for maintaining their families. This limited agency highlights the precarity of the lives of these children and their families, in which a few weeks

without work means that the family goes without food or cannot pay rent.

## 3.4 LIFE OUTSIDE WORK

While much of this paper has been dedicated to examining children's work from drivers, pathways, and experiences, their lives extend much further. This section looks at what children say about the time they spend outside of work and the neighbourhoods in which they live.

### 3.4.1 How children spend their free time

This section explores how children spend the time they have outside of work, study, and household tasks but simultaneously shows how work schedules and the physical demands of their jobs left little time or energy for recreation.

Constraints, such as poverty, composition of their neighbourhoods, and gender norms, shape the few recreational and social activities available to these children. The activities that they do undertake are typically divided by gender. Boys shared that they tend to socialise outside with friends, while girls explained that they tend to stay inside and help with household duties. Furthermore, the stories suggest that all these activities take place within the same neighbourhoods where children work and live.

Boys typically hang out and play sports with their friends, colleagues, and peers. They also spend time playing on mobile phones:

*I get one Friday off every 2 weeks... I play cricket [with] the bhaias from the factory on my off-day.*  
(TDH\_SC\_007, boy, 15)

*I work till 10.00pm–11.00pm then go back home... I want to play. I play on Friday... Football, I play cricket as well. I play with friends at my home.*  
(TDH\_SC\_050, boy, 14)

*Friday is a holiday... I pray my Jumma prayers, play and hang out with others, that's it... I usually stay with them after coming from work, up to 7.00pm. Then I come back home and sleep.*  
(TDH\_SC\_094, boy, 17)

Boys' choice of recreational activities underscores the age of these young workers. They still value and enjoy spending time playing games with friends and peers.

In only one case did a boy mention providing care to another family member: 'I work till 5.00pm. Then I return home, wash my hands and face. After that, I have to take care of my little brother. I play some sports with him' (GUC\_SC\_79, boy, 12). However, this care is still in the context of play and recreation, not household chores.

Unlike boys, girls rarely have time for social activities which do not take place in the home. Instead, the time that they do not spend working or attending school is spent completing household chores and helping other members of the family with their work. They rarely leave the home:

*That day, I stay at home, I work with my parents... I help my mother, do chores... Yes, I do [want to play]... My mother has work pressure, so I help my mother, and sometimes I play.*  
(TDH\_CLSC\_219, girl, 14)

*I go home and help my mother with cooking... I used to play earlier. Now that I have grown up, people will speak ill of me if I play. That's why I don't play... Because I have grown up and I am a girl. If I get out on the streets, boys and other people will see me. They will speak ill of me. They will say that this girl always spends time on the streets. That's why I don't play.*  
(GUC\_SC\_013, girl, 13)

*Gossiping with friends is fine as long as it's done at home. Who doesn't like roaming about? Everyone does. I can't roam about because I go to work in the morning and help out at home after coming back, since my little sister creates disturbance. I don't roam about, and I don't want to. I don't wish to roam here and there.*  
(TDH\_CLSC\_195, girl, 16)

*I wake up and sweep the floors. Then I wake my sisters up and make them brush their teeth and get ready. Then my mother feeds us breakfast and goes to work. I cook and tell my sisters to shower. Then I get ready. I tutor them in the evening. My mother cooks in the evening and I help her. Then I sit down. I don't go out.*  
(TDH\_NH\_127, girl, 17)

*Sometimes we came home very late, at 9.00pm or 9.30pm. By the time I freshened up, the time was 10.00pm to 10.30pm. Then after resting, eating, and helping Ammu with chores... My brother used to do some chores with me earlier. Now he doesn't*

*do it any more. He goes out to play, he doesn't stay inside much. He roams around with friends... There are men on the streets. Can we play just like that? They say bad things. They said something really bad to another girl in front of me the other day. They didn't say it to me, but does anyone like hearing these? There's no knowing who will say what when I step out, so it's best to stay home.*  
(TDH\_SC\_011, girl, 15)

How children of different genders spend their time outside of work and school is indicative of greater social norms. In comparison to boys their age, girls have significantly less time for themselves, instead spending more time helping with household chores. They also share that they do not readily leave their homes for fear of judgement from others or because they do not feel that it is safe in their neighbourhoods.

### 3.4.2 Neighbourhoods

Neighbourhoods affect children in a variety of ways, from their perceptions of safety to their recreational activities. Some of the experiences of neighbourhoods are generalised and experienced by most, such as living conditions, residents' socioeconomic class, and access to services, whereas others are gendered, highly localised, and specific to children, such as perceptions of safety, recreational opportunities, and neighbourly relationships.

#### Living environment

Children's stories illustrate neighbourhoods of closely situated living and working places – sometimes working in the same building where they sleep, bath, and prepare food. In most of the buildings in the neighbourhoods, there are factories or informal earning activities ongoing:

*There is a factory inside the house where I live... It's in the alley next to ours.*  
(TDH\_SC\_019, girl, 13)

*There is a leather factory in our neighbourhood, I would work there.*  
(GUC\_CLSC\_018, boy, 16)

*The factory is in the neighbourhood where everything else is.*  
(GUC\_SC\_032, boy, 17)

Furthermore, living spaces are crowded and cooking and toilet facilities are lacking. Often, one building will house many households and each room will contain an entire family:

*The room is big enough. We, six members, live there... About 10–12 rooms are there next to us... There are two pairs of toilets and bathrooms, one for women and the other is for men. We, all the families of the house, have to share these... The factory is in front of my house.*  
(GUC\_SC\_041, girl, 16)

*Initially, we lived in a house in the adjacent alley for seven years. We lived in the other place for two months. The house wasn't well lit or airy as it was on the ground floor. Now we live on the fourth floor.*  
(TDH\_SC\_011, girl, 15)

Conflicts over use of shared facilities are increasing as the neighbour population continues to increase without simultaneous investment in infrastructure. Children recounted not being able to regularly bath or prepare food due to a lack of sufficient facilities for the building population:

*I can't take a bath after coming from my job. I have to leave without taking a bath many times. We can't cook because of the stove; I have to leave without eating. These problems keep occurring.*  
(TDH\_CLSC\_229, girl, 16)

*In that area, there are only conflicts. Before, there were fewer people. Now the population has increased, so there is more conflict.*  
(TDH\_SC\_085, girl, 14)

Along with cramped and under-serviced living conditions, there is a lack of provision of basic services:

*The situation is good but not that good, there is no school. There is no doctor's chamber, I mean medical, not medical school there. Then when it is the rainy season, the road gets blocked by knee-length water. To go to work at that time is pretty difficult... Because of the rain... It is not that good.*  
(TDH\_CLSC\_229, girl, 16)

Increasing population densities, combined with poor infrastructure, creates stressful and dangerous living conditions for children and their families.

### **Urban neighbourhoods versus villages**

Children have their own judgements about their neighbourhoods. The following excerpts, which compare village conditions to those in urbanised

areas, demonstrate that some children do not see their neighbourhoods as good places to live and would prefer to return to their villages:

*My hometown has fresh air and a peaceful environment. It is nice there... There is more chaos [here]. I don't like this.*  
(TDH\_SC\_082, boy, 14)

*Here, there are buildings everywhere; there's nowhere to play. Everything feels enclosed.*  
(TDH\_SC\_009, girl, 15)

Children also spoke about the social connections in the villages which they have had to leave. Their stories suggest that they have been unable to build strong social ties in Dhaka:

*I like to stay in my hometown more. Everyone is there, my maternal uncle, aunt, everyone. I like there, they don't come here that much, I don't want to return if I go to my village... I don't like here... My heart goes back to our hometown, but what do I do? I can't live there, that is why I came back.*  
(TDH\_NH\_151, girl, 12)

*I recall my childhood in our village. I had a friend there whom I miss. We used to play and be cheerful. Our village is in Noakhali. Mom didn't work there. There is no rule there that allows women to work. I don't understand these things. We moved to Gojmohol over there.*  
(TDH\_SC\_011, girl, 15)

Children also note marked differences in characteristics between neighbourhood children and children who migrate from villages, in which familiarity and shared neighbourhood identity protects children from negative peer interactions:

*It is different from the village... boys are engaged in eve-teasing<sup>8</sup> here. I don't like all these. So isn't the village better than here? The bad boys are weird; they say different types of things. I cannot pay attention to them!... but the boys in the village are good.*  
(TDH\_SC\_101, girl, 14)

*I don't hang out with anyone. I don't have any friends here. We are from the village, and*

8 Eve-teasing is a phrase used in South Asia to describe verbal sexual harassment in a public place.

*they are local. That's why we don't match.*  
(TDH\_NH\_179, boy, 14)

*After that, we moved here and started to live in rent.  
People talk a lot about us. We don't react since we  
are not local here and have no home of our own.*  
(TDH\_SC\_028, girl, 15)

In only one case, a child said that he preferred Dhaka to his village:

*I like Dhaka better... I have friends in  
Dhaka, in village [Z], I have none. Everyone  
sleeps after evening. I don't like it.*  
(TDH\_SC\_094, boy, 17)

### **Gendered experiences of the neighbourhood**

The excerpts from the stories show that girls' and women's household composition and movements outside the home are highly scrutinised in their neighbourhoods. Storytellers shared their neighbours' negative responses to female-headed households, women and girls engaged in income-earning activities, and women and girls who move through their neighbourhoods after evening.

Neighbours' behaviour towards girls changes depending on the time of day in which they interact – being friendly during the day and judgemental and suspicious in the evening. Girls are subjected to questioning on their whereabouts and are not believed when they respond. This surveillance and policing of females is unique to girls as boys do not report similar experiences:

*When I worked overtime, I had to work till 9.00am,  
10.00am, 10:30am, or even 11:00pm. When I got  
off at 5:00pm, I used to go home and work on belts,  
shoes, and money bags. I walked on the streets the  
same way I came here. When somebody recognised  
me, he/she talked to me and asked how I was. When  
I returned from work after working overtime, many  
people asked me where I had been so late at night.  
I used to feel very bad about that, considering that I  
had gone to work. They used to insinuate something  
vulgar when they asked where I was going or where  
I was returning from, and where I had been. I used  
to feel very bad. Not everyone believed me when I  
told them about my work. They asked me what my  
job was that I had to work so late into the night.*  
(GUC\_SC\_011, 15, girl)

*My parents used to take me to school before, but I  
move alone now as I work... [Boys say things], but*

*I don't pay any heed. My concern is my family.*  
(TDH\_CLSC\_198, girl, 16)

*When we go out on the road, many people say many  
things, they slander, girls face eve-teasers, but we  
can't do anything, we have to get out to work.*  
(TDH\_CLSC\_217, girl, 16)

While this treatment of girls may not be restricted to only these neighbourhoods, it is likely more common in these spaces because girls are having to work outside the home and at odd hours and therefore are more exposed to surveillance. Furthermore, girls are less likely to be accompanied by adult family members, either because they are working, sick at home, absent, or living apart from family.

Female-headed households, and by extension, the girls who live in these families, are also discriminated against for lack of male guardians/ escorts:

*My mother was struggling a lot to bear all the  
expenses with only her income, so we moved to  
the [J] area. That area is actually not so good, and  
the rent was very less there at that time. The people  
from that neighbourhood used to say very bad  
things about us as there was no boy member in our  
family; we were just three women living together, no  
older brother or no brother. Then they defamed us  
in many ways and married my mother off. Then they  
separated me from there against my mother's will.*  
(TDH\_NH\_150, girl, 17)

In this case, the mother was forcibly remarried to comply with cultural norms and her children taken away from her. The storyteller believes this was the fault of the neighbours' prejudice against an unfamiliar family.

Prejudice against unmarried girls who are living without their parents can even escalate to sexual abuse and force individuals to relocate:

*There are many problems we are passing through.  
Many people talk a lot of bad words about me,  
for I have no parents and I am living alone. There  
was a neighbour who harassed me several times.  
Once he gave me a bad proposal to sleep with  
him... That person touched my body and told me  
to marry him. He said if I married him, he would  
give up his wife and children. I didn't agree with  
his proposal... people started to talk about my  
character, therefore we had to leave the place too.*  
(GUC\_SC\_47, girl, 17)

Lastly, one child believes that her negative experiences as a girl are exacerbated by the poverty in her neighbourhood. She associates neighbours' behaviour with jealousy derived from need and directly relates this to the gender discrimination she experiences:

*They can't tolerate each other's wellbeing. They envy each other because this is a slum. If this had been a good area, people would have wished each other well. What should I do? People say nasty things. Sometimes I get marriage proposals from men who were previously married and who have children. I was also married earlier and have a child. When the suitors' families ask if I would marry their son, the people around me say nasty things about me. They say that I am not a good girl.*  
(GUC\_NH\_001, girl, 15)

Given the reaction to girls travelling through their neighbourhoods alone, it is unsurprising that girls avoid leaving their homes. Their desire to stay inside or chaperoned is also augmented by their perception of neighbourhoods being unsafe for them. They fear both physical injury through road accidents and sexually motivated crimes, such as trafficking:

*I do not go outside, I do not like it... There are various reasons. There are many people who are involved in girl trafficking. Many accidents occur on the roads as well. That is why it is better for us girls to stay inside and refrain ourselves from doing these activities.*  
(TDH\_NH\_143, 16, girl)

Girls without parents to accompany them to school rely on their friends and friends' parents for safety:

*I was safe at home... I feel very afraid [on road]... I feel like somebody will kidnap me or I will have an accident. I feel very afraid when I see people... my friends used to go to school. I told them I was afraid to go to school alone. They used to go with their parents, and they used to come to me and take me along.*  
(TDH\_CLSC\_192, girl, 13)

Girls link their sense of acceptance and safety in their communities to neighbours' familiarity with them. Those who have migrated or recently moved into their neighbourhood feel that they are held with more suspicion than they were in their places of origin:

*No, as I have lived in this area since my childhood, people view me positively. But when I go far away,*

*I can't move about freely because everyone's gaze is not the same. That's the reason. I move about decently, so nobody has said anything notable to me till date. I mean, nobody has said anything dirty to me, or eve-teased me in any way.*  
(TDH\_CLSC\_195, 16, girl)

*No matter what, it's better to be with an acquaintance than to be alone in an area.*  
(TDH\_SC\_038, girl, 11)

Even when girls try to report negative behaviour, they are blamed instead: 'If we complained about that guy, people would say it's our fault. People are not good at this locality. They just blame girls for everything' (GUC\_SC\_047, girl, 17).

These quotes evidence how girls recognise and respond to their gendered neighbourhood experiences, adapting their behaviour when they can, and accepting their discrimination when they cannot. Girls in these neighbourhoods seem to be disproportionately exposed due to their need to deviate from standard cultural practices: they work and travel alone.

Although moving through their neighbourhoods is particularly challenging for girls, boys must navigate their own negative encounters. However, in contrast to the girls, who spoke more about reputation damage and verbal harassment, boys primarily expressed feeling afraid of physical violence from their peers or having fear of negative influences:

*Everyone in this neighbourhood is scared of them!... everyone calls them big brothers. If someone says any bad words about them, they beat him. He is beating him... They beat us, so children like us are scared of them... they just punched me.*  
(TDH\_NH\_140, girl, 16)

*The area is not safe... The boys often fight in the area. Then they do some wrong things... They take drugs and drink. It is better to leave the area.*  
(TDH\_CLSC\_231, boy, 14)

*The children from this neighbourhood are involved in drugs and other bad habits. My parents and I do not like all these.*  
(TDH\_SC\_105, boy, 17)

*They have drugs, and they are not good. I will get spoiled if I mingle with them, because of this reason.*  
(TDH\_SC\_113, boy, 16)

Along with persecution from neighbourhood 'gangs', boys are also in danger of becoming involved in these groups themselves. As the following excerpts show, associating with these groups can expose boys to violence, drugs, and alcohol, though few boys were open about participating in gang activity or taking drugs:

*I have some friends who do if they see any wrong, somebody wronging them. Suppose in your area you have your gang, we have our gang from our area, if there are some arguments you will bring forth yours, we will bring ours.*  
(TDH\_SC\_048, boy, 14)

*The reason to stop was this. I used to take drugs. With my friends. The friends I had in my area, with them.*  
(GUC\_SC\_062, boy, 16)

Citing negative exposure, children choose to avoid their peers or are encouraged by their families to stay at home. This limits their range of extracurricular activities:

*My mother doesn't let me go anywhere. Now I have to listen to what she says... They [The children around here] have many bad habits and often involve in fighting.*  
(TDH\_SC\_037, boy, 13)

*I do nothing. I just watch TV and stay at home. I don't go around with friends. The children in this locality are not good. They smoke cigarettes, weed. If I accompany them, my father and uncle will chase me.*  
(TDH\_SC\_036, boy, 12)

When children do attempt to pursue outdoor recreational activities, they are in danger of disruption from other groups:

*The problem was that we went to play cricket on the field. Some people were sitting on the roof. So they interfered in our game. I mean, they joined us. We didn't know, now we were into the game, we kept playing. They will shoo us away from the field. They were playing and we were playing, some police came in the middle of it. We were playing and they started running away. We left the game and ran. The police caught us aggressively.*  
(GUC\_SC\_063, boy, 17)

As noted in section 3.1.3 and the subsection on '**Perceptions of idleness**', avoiding idleness through work is often related to a desire to avoid the negative influence of peers in children's neighbourhoods:

*Children living here are naughty. They walk around all day and do wicked things. Wandering around with them. Therefore, I started working.*  
(TDH\_SC\_077, boy, 17)

Only one girl mentioned negative perceptions of the girl peers in her neighbourhood. However, her distancing from these girls is also linked to her desire to avoid reputational damage for associating with them.

*The girls here are not so good, they talk behind people a lot. That is why; I do not talk much or leave my home much. They want me to go in the wrong direction, but I do not want that... I do not want anybody to speak bad about me.*  
(TDH\_NH\_145, girl, 15)

Noting the gendered differences of neighbourhood experiences, many girls and boys feel unsafe and/or uncomfortable outside their homes. Their feelings vary based on the time of day, who they are with, their relationships with their neighbours, and potential social stigma.

#### **Economic discrimination and support within neighbourhoods**

Just as gender contributed to how girls and boys are treated in their neighbourhoods, so does economic and social status. Less wealthy children are shunned and insulted by wealthier members of their neighbourhood and their peer groups. Children were acutely aware of this discrimination:

*When my siblings and I were young and unable to work, we faced many hardships. We couldn't eat properly. We went to people from door to door, but they used to call us names.*  
(TDH\_CLSC\_188, girl, 14)

*We have no happiness. Even if I go to play with my peers, they don't want to play with me... They say you are poor. You can't play with us. I hear a lot of bad things from time to time... Even their parents beat me if I play with them. Their parents also give complaints to my parents. Then my parents also beat me.*  
(GUC\_SC\_053, boy, 10)

*People assault us in many ways. We don't have a TV. If we go to a neighbour's home to watch TV, they say a lot. They say, 'Don't you have your own TV? Can't you watch it your*

*home? Why have you come to bother us?*  
(TDH\_SC\_75, boy, 14)

Some children have been left feeling as though there is no source of support for them in their communities: 'In Dhaka, nobody ever helps another person. They suffer a lot even now, there is no joy in our lives' (TDH\_NH\_138, girl, 16).

In neighbourhoods which contend with structural issues, such as lack of running water, poorly maintained roads, reduced access to sanitation, and high population densities, neighbours' hostile behaviour towards those who have less makes the lives of the poorest children situated in these places even more difficult.

However, there are also examples of mutual support and genuine charity between members of the same community. Some people in these areas help each other by lending money (interest-free), providing food, connecting them to work opportunities, and through flexibility in rent payments:

*Our landlord helped us a lot. We owed him three months' worth of rent; he didn't cause much trouble. He said that give me slowly when you can, you can give me slowly, no problem. So, it is there like that, then we told our neighbours and relatives. We told them... and they saw our pain. Then they helped us as days are not supposed to be spent like that... They helped us. There were many others around us, as we lived here for many years, they saw and helped us accordingly... There were people around our place, they helped us. Help as in they saw that we weren't being able to cook rice, were not surviving well. So they helped us that, you can take some rice from us to eat, take some curry from us.*  
(GUC\_SC\_072, girl, 17)

*My father had an accident five years ago, and I started working three years ago. In the two-year gap, there were times when we went without food for two to three days. We couldn't eat many times. Many of our neighbours helped us, many didn't.*  
(GUC\_SC\_012, girl, 14)

In one case, a family's relatives refused to help them, so an unrelated neighbour supported them instead:

*We asked for some help from my aunt who also lives here. She refused to help us and insulted*

*us. She was rich and proud of her wealth... Then there was a neighbouring aunt who helped us a lot. She paid our rent and gave us rice, pulses, and fuel to cook. We are still now grateful to her. My mother wanted to pay her back after getting the salary. But she refused to take it.*  
(TDH\_SC\_029, girl, 15)

Perhaps most outstanding in these excerpts are the examples of children supporting other children. They do this not for any financial or social gain but rather, out of kindness:

*There is an older Bhaia<sup>9</sup> who has passed his IA [grade 12] exams. He teaches me some things... I go to him, and he teaches me for half an hour. I study on the third floor of the building we live in. He gives me my notebooks... I am unable to spell any word. Bhaia teaches me for free. He is like an older brother to everyone in this area. He is very affectionate towards me.*  
(GUC\_SC\_017, boy, 17)

Another child who wanted to be enrolled in school enlisted the support of her neighbour and friend by asking her to pretend to be her sister as she was unable to find another guardian:

*She took me to her school and told a teacher, 'She is my younger sister. She wants to get enrolled here. Please enrol her.' The teacher asked her, 'Your younger sister? But you don't have any younger sister. Your older sisters go to college.' The girl said, 'She is my younger sister. I am her guardian. Please enrol her.' Since the girl and her two sisters had studied at that school, the teacher enrolled me... The girl who got me enrolled gave me her old school bag. I went to school with that bag.*  
(GUC\_CLSC\_001, girl, 17)

One child's kindness to her neighbourhood has secured further education for this child when her own family would not support her.

### 3.4.3 Life outside work: conclusion

Children's narratives reveal that life outside work, especially for children who do not go to school, is extremely limited. Restrictions on their free time and movement are imposed by the geographic elements of

9 Bhaia is a term used to address a boy/man; it means 'brother' but does not always refer to a relative.



their neighbourhoods; the proximity and overlap between home and work; and by the social relationships which exist in the neighbourhoods where these children live. Children living in the same neighbourhood have vastly different experiences due to factors such as gender, age, economic background, and length of residency.

Children's work, particularly hazardous children's work, leaves little surplus energy for recreation. Children rise early, work long hours in physically demanding roles and arrive home late in the evening. Typically, children reported having only half a day or one day off each week. Both boys and girls shared that they enjoyed socialising with their peers in their free time but that this time was limited. Children explained that they had household responsibilities including cooking, cleaning, and caring, which they prioritised over pursuing their own activities. These domestic responsibilities were more prevalent in girls' stories than in those of boys, with marked differences between siblings in the same family due to birth order and gender, with older girls taking on more household work than their brothers or younger siblings.

When children had the opportunity to go outside, they self-regulated their behaviour due to feeling uncomfortable or unsafe in their neighbourhoods. Girls explained that they felt social pressure to remain indoors for worry that they would be judged negatively by community members if they were seen outside. They also said that the harassing behaviour of men and boys in their neighbourhood made them feel unsafe. Boys also shared feeling uncomfortable outside their homes but attributed these feelings more to fear of antisocial behaviour of peers associated with gangs and drugs. Despite these concerns, boys spoke about playing sports and meeting friends outside, though in a more limited way than they would prefer. Girls rarely ventured outside other than to go to work or school, preferring to socialise within their households or seek entertainment through social media and online entertainment.

Given the lack of opportunities to spend time outside their homes, the children's living environments have significant impact on their lived experiences. Unfortunately, most of the children spoke about the difficulties arising from the buildings and rooms they live in. Buildings are crowded and lacking in basic and sufficient infrastructure, such as cooking facilities, washrooms, and bathrooms. These spaces are further polluted by the business activities which take place in and around the buildings, with factories and residential units in the same building.

The difficult conditions in their neighbourhoods and homes prompted children who had migrated to Dhaka from more rural areas to reflect on their lives before relocation. Through their comparisons of village life with their current situation in Dhaka, the children underscore the challenges they encounter in the city. They express nostalgia for the open spaces, fresh air, and opportunities to play in their villages, and they recount the friends and relatives they have left behind. Additionally, they share experiences of discrimination and isolation in Dhaka because they are 'not local here', further highlighting the difficulties they face in adapting to life in these neighbourhoods. These reflections indicate that migrant children in these neighbourhoods have limited local social connections, which likely exacerbate the other challenges they experience, such as the hostility of neighbours towards the poorest children.

In contrast, instances of mutual support and altruism within communities stand out. Some neighbours extend interest-free loans, provide food, facilitate job connections, and offer flexible rent arrangements to help struggling families. Acts of kindness are not limited to adults; children also exhibit compassion towards their peers. Examples include tutoring younger children for free, walking children to school when their parents aren't available, a friend posing as a sister to enrol a child in school when no guardian was available. These gestures of support within the community highlight the resilience and empathy present among children facing challenging circumstances.

*Section 4:*

# **CONCLUSION**

## 4 CONCLUSION

The 405 Bangladeshi children's life stories collected as part of the CLARISSA programme provide unique insight into the complexities of child labourers' lives. This report explores many of those complexities with the aim of better understanding the pathways into child labour, what makes child labour its worst form, and opportunities for future intervention.

This paper has been organised into thematic sections which assist in exploring the minute, complex, and often contrasting detail of multiple children's experiences and feelings but which create artificial distinctions between the themes. The reality of children's lives and life stories is that many of these themes intersect and interact with one another. A child who dislikes school and decides to drop out might also find that his work experiences cause him to long for school. The same child might also have circumstances in his home which mean that a return to school is not feasible as it would mean that his family could no longer afford rent or basic household goods. Ill health in the family might lead to the loss of a primary income earner, but a child's entry into work can also expose them to increased health risks with cascading economic consequences.

While education and work were not mutually exclusive, departure from education usually coincided with entry into work, and entry into work usually necessitated leaving school. However, children's educational experiences played a significant role in determining whether they stayed in school or not and therefore whether they entered work. Abuse and bullying affected children's willingness to stay in education. Lack of financial and academic support also forced children to leave or lose interest.

Given children's pathways to employment, they hold mixed feelings regarding work and employment. While they express contentment at being able to contribute to their families' wellbeing and alleviate some of the financial pressure, many regret the loss of education and time for recreation. Perceptions about the dangers of idleness also shaped children's views of work and those of their families, communities, and employers.

Due to the belief that children should not be idle, children who did not have to work but who were not in school found themselves working. Furthermore, children's own negative perceptions of their neighbourhoods and homes contributed to their desire to avoid idleness.

The work that most children do in these neighbourhoods is clearly hazardous due to their exposure to chemicals, long working hours, physically demanding tasks, and abuse. These stories also reveal that work which does not immediately appear hazardous can easily become so when performed by children. Furthermore, the absence of opportunities to play, socialise, and study compounds negative work experiences, particularly for girls who take on additional caring responsibilities in the home, leaving no time for the pursuit of any recreational activities. Children are additionally disadvantaged by their relatively lower social position in their communities and workplaces – they are paid less for the same work and made to do the least pleasant tasks which put them at increased risk of physical and emotional harm.

When children were not in work or school, their lives were primarily confined to the limited geography of their neighbourhoods and homes. Children described their homes as congested, with entire families sharing a single room and multiple families sharing insufficient and inadequate cooking and bathing facilities. However, escaping the home offered little reprieve in neighbourhoods which lacked spaces where children felt safe socialising and playing. Perceptions of safety were much worse for girls, who often chose not to leave their homes at all unless chaperoned, for fear of sexual harassment or negative community attitudes towards unchaperoned girls. Working girls suffered greater exposure to these negative consequences as they often had to return home late due to their work schedules.

Acknowledging that children's lives encompass more than the themes examined in this paper, we trust that our analysis has offered valuable insights into crucial aspects of their experiences, prioritising the voices and interpretations of the children themselves.

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**CLARISSA** works by co-developing with stakeholders practical options for children to avoid engagement in the worst forms of child labour in Bangladesh and Nepal.

The participatory processes which underpin the programme are designed to generate innovation from the ground which can sustainably improve the lives of children and their families.

The programme's outputs are similarly co-designed and collaboratively produced to enhance local ownership of the knowledge, and to ensure that our research uptake and engagement strategy is rooted in the direct experience of the people most affected on the ground.