



## **RESEARCH AND EVIDENCE PAPER 5**

# **LIFE STORIES FROM CHILDREN WORKING IN BANGLADESH'S LEATHER SECTOR AND ITS NEIGHBOURHOODS: TOLD AND ANALYSED BY CHILDREN**

Mashrique Sayem, Sayma Sayed, A.K.M. Maksud, Khandaker Reaz Hossain,  
Jiniya Afroze, Danny Burns, Anna Raw and Elizabeth Hacker  
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## ABOUT THIS RESEARCH AND EVIDENCE PAPER

CLARISSA (Child Labour: Action-Research-Innovation in South and South-Eastern Asia) has a participatory and child-centred approach that supports children to gather evidence, analyse it themselves and generate solutions to the problems they identify. The life story collection and collective analysis processes supported children engaged in the worst forms of child labour in Bangladesh to share and analyse their life stories.

Over 400 life stories were collected from children who worked in the leather supply chain, or who lived and worked in leather sector neighbourhoods. Using causal mapping, 53 children who were engaged in or had experience of the worst forms of child labour collectively analysed the data. This resulted in children's life stories becoming the evidence base for revealing macro-level system dynamics that drive the worst forms of child labour.

This paper is a record of the children's analysis of the life stories and key themes they identified, which formed the basis of a series of seven child-led Participatory Action Research groups.

### Authors

Mashriq Sayem (Terre des hommes Bangladesh)  
Sayma Sayed (Grambangla Unnayan Committee)  
A.K.M. Maksud (Grambangla Unnayan Committee)  
Khandaker Reaz Hossain (Grambangla Unnayan Committee)  
Jiniya Afroze (Terre des hommes Bangladesh)  
Danny Burns (Institute of Development Studies)  
Anna Raw (Institute of Development Studies)  
Elizabeth Hacker (Independent Consultant)

### Reviewers

Barry Percy Smith (University of Huddersfield)  
Rushni Korishi (Abu Dharr Gifari College)

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**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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## NOTE ON THE TEXT

This report includes participatory research findings from the ground that will aid understanding about how we can end the worst forms of child labour. The words and

phrases used by research participants have not been changed; this ensures that we accurately reflect the information and insights provided by participants.



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

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 (Sayem *et al.* 2022).

Seven researchers across two countries and three institutions gathered for two hours to discuss the quality of evidence in this report in relation to the research design, process, insights, and analysis. Table 1 documents the assessments and the reasoning behind the assessment.

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

Dimension	1	2	3	4	5	Reasoning behind the assessment
<p><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 have generated the evidence (design, data gathering, analysis, presenting) and how the nuance of their experiences and perspectives is expressed in the evidence claims.</p>						<p><b>CLARISSA researchers have assessed this report as 4.5 for representativeness.</b> Life stories were gathered directly from over 400 children and children had high levels of agency in the research process, particularly in collectively analysing the evidence. While this process was initiated and facilitated by CLARISSA staff, some children took independent action in their personal and working lives as a result of their involvement. Although children expressed unique viewpoints during the collective analysis processes, these were not always captured in full during the documentation process, and therefore the viewpoints included in this report are more aggregated (combined) than unique. To score a 5 the documentation of collective analysis processes would have required further human resourcing.</p>
<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>CLARISSA researchers assessed this report as 4 for triangulation.</b> The evidence base for this report was over 400 life stories from working children, which constitutes multiple sources of evidence from one constituent group. This report does not include evidence from other stakeholders such as business owners who employ children or the families of working children. The evidence was analysed by 53 child analysts using multiple processes (outlined in section 2 of this report); 36 of these child analysts then revisited around 200 life stories analysed during collective analysis processes, in separate validation workshops, to test the emerging themes. The child analysts also tested themes for resonance with their peers and other community members.</p>

**Table 1: Quality of evidence in this paper (cont.)**

Dimension	1	2	3	4	5	Reasoning behind the assessment
<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 4.5 for transparency.</b> Sources of evidence and data collection methods, and how these were adapted, are clearly explained in sections 1 and 2 of this report. The report outlines the scope and limitations of the research clearly, and directs readers to accompanying and future publications, which use alternative methods to interrogate the research questions. The life stories are accessibly stored and managed in a database, making them recoverable to those who have permission to access them. Examples of how the life stories were used in analysis processes (e.g. causal analysis maps) are included in the report and example life stories have been included on the CLARISSA website.</p>
<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 4 for new knowledge.</b> The report evidences how the collective analysis generated substantive knowledge on the worst forms of child labour, which has a firm basis in children's lived realities of working in Bangladesh's leather sector and its neighbourhoods. The collective analysis processes highlighted the interlinkages between different factors that drive the worst forms of child labour (e.g. migration, disrupted family relations, family violence, and debt), revealing some of the underlying patterns that exacerbate and/or trigger financial crises that were previously unexplored.</p>

Source: Authors' own. Created using project data.

*Section 1:*

# **INTRODUCTION**



# 1 INTRODUCTION

Child Labour: Action-Research-Innovation in South and South-Eastern Asia (CLARISSA) is a consortium of organisations committed to building a strong evidence base and generating innovative solutions to the worst forms of child labour in Bangladesh and Nepal.<sup>1 2 3</sup>

CLARISSA adopts a participatory and child-centred approach that supports children<sup>4</sup> to gather evidence, analyse it themselves and generate solutions to the problems they identify (Burns, Apgar and Raw 2021). In Bangladesh, 404 life stories were collected from children working in the worst forms of child labour, either working in the leather supply chain, or living and working within leather sector neighbourhoods. The life stories were collectively analysed by 53 children who were engaged in or had experience of the worst forms of child labour. The collective analysis of the life stories allowed children to identify a set of themes that could become the basis for a child-led Participatory Action Research process.

The collective analysis approach is based on the principle that children need to be meaningfully involved to effectively shift the (often hidden) patterns that drive the worst forms of child labour. By analysing the life stories collectively, children could draw on and offer their own experiences and perspectives related to themes that emerged from the analysis process. Evidence could be probed, discussed and reflected on from multiple perspectives. The effects were two-fold: first, it enabled a robust analysis from which the child participants could identify effective points of intervention that informed a set of child-led Participatory Action Research groups; and secondly, it supported children to draw meaning from the evidence themselves, which helped them to build ownership of both the analysis and the Action Research process they went on to engage in (Burns 2021a).

This report describes the process that the children undertook to analyse their life stories; it identifies and

explores their core findings; and it tells the reader which Action Research groups they decided to initiate and why. The report draws on children's analysis of the individual stories, and the maps of relationships between factors they created. It outlines their workshop discussions about the major themes and relationships. The children's analysis is illustrated by themes and issues drawn from the original life stories.

## 1.1 BACKGROUND – LIFE STORY COLLECTION AND COLLECTIVE ANALYSIS

In Bangladesh, hazardous child labour is highly prevalent in the hidden and unregulated domains of informal workplaces that supply increasingly complex, multi-tiered supply chains in both global and domestic markets. Here, the worst forms of child labour are increasingly hidden and difficult to monitor.

The National Child Labour Survey 2013 estimated that there were 3.45 million working children in Bangladesh, including 1.28 million children engaging in hazardous labour (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics 2015). A more recent survey undertaken by CLARISSA in eight slums of Dhaka showed that almost 35 per cent of all the children living in these slum areas were engaged in the worst forms of child labour. Findings also showed that nearly 60 per cent of children engaged in the worst forms of child labour in these slums were directly or indirectly linked with the global supply chains of garment and leather products (Maksud *et al.* 2021).

Between October 2020 and August 2021, the Bangladesh CLARISSA team collected, or enabled the collection of, 404 life stories from children (aged 8–17 years old) engaged in the worst forms of child labour in four neighbourhoods: Hazaribagh and Lalbagh in the capital

- 1 **International Labour Organization Convention 182** details what comprises the worst forms of child labour (accessed 19 August 2022).
- 2 Action Research is a programming modality that combines evidence gathering and learning from action. It is designed to enable diverse groups to meet over a period of time to consider evidence and generate theories of change about interventions; plan and programme innovative solutions; test solutions in real time; and then evaluate them. In this way, Action Research groups act as engines of new innovation. These cycles of action and reflection continue until a robust model of action is developed, trialled and can be scaled (Burns *et al.* 2021).
- 3 CLARISSA is a civil society consortium led by the Institute of Development Studies, the world's leading global research organisation for development studies, together with Terre des hommes, ChildHope UK, and the Consortium for Street Children. In Bangladesh, CLARISSA is run by the Terre des hommes Foundation, in partnership with Grambangla Unnayan Committee and Dhaka Ahsania Mission, with support from the BRAC Institute of Governance and Development.
- 4 In line with the definition of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, CLARISSA uses the term 'children' to refer to those aged under 18. The children involved with the life story collection and analysis were aged 8–17 years old.

Dhaka, and two neighbourhoods outside of Dhaka, Hemayetpur and Bhairab. Within these neighbourhoods, 199 life stories were collected from children working in the leather supply chain. A further 205 life stories were collected from children living and working in leather sector neighbourhoods in Hazaribagh but not necessarily working in the leather sector; for example, working in the transport industry, or as domestic labourers, construction workers or street vendors. Of these 404 life stories, 104 were collected by children themselves, and 300 by adult researchers from the Bangladesh CLARISSA team.

The broad objective of the collective analysis of children's life stories was for children to explore and identify critical factors that act as drivers of the worst forms of child labour in both the leather supply chain and other sectors within the neighbourhoods of Hazaribagh, Lalbagh, Hemayetpur and Bhairab. Collective analysis enables meaning making from those actually affected by the issues being analysed (in this case, children engaged in the worst forms of child labour) and leads to the identification of the core themes that become the basis for cycles of Action Research. The collective analysis allowed the child participants to:

- **See repeated patterns that run across the different life stories.**
- **Identify causalities within life stories and how they relate to each other.**
- **Identify the diverse ways in which child labour impacts different children and families.**
- **Identify changes that have occurred that have led to a more positive trajectory for some children.**
- **Understand the critical issues that children would like to investigate and take action on in child-led Action Research groups and other participatory processes.**

## 1.2 OUTLINE OF THIS REPORT

This report has been prepared by the Bangladesh CLARISSA team but is based on the child participants' analysis of life stories collected from children engaged in the worst forms of child labour.

Section 1 of this report provides an overview of the programme and rationale for using participatory, child-led processes. Section 2 describes the different steps of the Bangladesh CLARISSA programme's life story collection and collective analysis processes. Section 3 outlines the key findings from the child participants' causal analysis of the life stories. Section 4 uses both evidence from the clustering exercise of key themes and causal maps child participants created during the collective analysis. Each theme is discussed in turn as it relates to either children working in other forms of child labour (in leather sector neighbourhoods) and/or children working in the leather sector. Section 5 explains the Action Research themes child participants identified following the collective analysis of the life stories. Section 6 summarises the key themes from the children's analysis.

This paper uses the terms 'life storyteller' to describe the children who provided their life stories, and 'child participant' to describe the children who participated in the four collective analysis workshops.

The collective analysis was facilitated by CLARISSA researchers from Terre des hommes and Grambangla Unnayan Committee. Both organisations used the same methodology when facilitating the children's collective analysis of life stories. The organisations have different cultures and emphases, and at times there were subtle differences in their approaches to facilitation. Differences in their approaches and the impact of these differences are signposted for readers where relevant.

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*Section 2:*

**COLLECTIVE ANALYSIS  
METHODOLOGY**

## 2 COLLECTIVE ANALYSIS METHODOLOGY

This section outlines the life story collection and collective analysis processes that went on to inform the design of seven child-led Participatory Action Research groups (three made up of children working in the leather sector and four of children working in other forms of child labour), which began between February and October 2022. It looks at the rationale and main features of each stage, and key ethical and safeguarding considerations.

The collective analysis processes child participants undertook are rooted in a Systemic Action Research methodology, which has been developed by CLARISSA programme director Danny Burns over the past two decades (Burns 2021a). A core part of the Systemic Action Research approach is a rigorous sense-making process, whereby evidence is gathered and collectively analysed. The collective analysis allows the meanings that emerge to be contested from different perspectives, providing an important foundation from which to take action (*ibid.*).

### 2.1 LIFE STORY COLLECTION

An evidence base was generated by collecting 404 life stories from children involved in the worst forms of child labour. The evidence base was partly collectively generated by children themselves, as explained below. The life stories method was used to build a picture of the dynamics that drive issues related to the worst forms of child labour, to understand children's pathways into the worst forms of child labour, and the relationship between different aspects of children's lives that explain why things happen. Children were asked to share their life stories, describing how they came to be involved in the worst forms of child labour and the conditions in which they were working. Life storytellers were encouraged to tell their own story in a way that was not structured or pre-determined by a researcher.

Questions were used to prompt children to tell their stories, which enabled them to speak about what was most important to *them*. Questions used during the life story collection included:

- **Tell me about your life and the most important things that have happened to you.**
- **Tell me about your childhood and all the things that led to you working in this place.**

- **Tell me about yourself.**
- **How do you see your future?**
- **Can you tell me what you worry about when you go to sleep at night?**
- **How have you been managing your life?**
- **How do you think you can improve your life in the future?**

These questions aimed to start a discussion, and life story collectors then followed up with clarifying and deepening questions according to the discussion.

#### 2.1.1 Selection of locations

Before the start of the life story collection process, CLARISSA Bangladesh conducted an exercise that mapped the worst forms of child labour in the leather

**Table 2: Key locations of worst forms of child labour**

Location	Work involving worst forms of child labour
Hazaribagh*	Hub for leather processing and leather goods production in Dhaka
Hemayetpur*	Newly established tannery estate on the outskirts of Dhaka
Bhairab*	Sub-district producing leather footwear for the local market
Maheshkhali	Hub for salt production
Jhalokathi	Centre for salt processing, where salt is processed, washed and crushed
Islambag/Lalbagh*	Hub for leather by-products
Gulistan/Fulbaria/Kaptan bazar	Hub for footwear markets
Matuail/Jatrabari	Solid waste dumpsite that also has packaging industries

Note: \* = selected as CLARISSA Bangladesh locations.  
Source: Authors' own. Created using project data.

supply chain (Maksud *et al.* 2021). This included interviews with 153 children working in the leather industry. Participant observation was carried out with 128 of these children.

Eight locations were identified (Table 2).

Of these eight locations, four became the focus for the CLARISSA Bangladesh programme: Hazaribagh, Lalbagh, Hemayetpur and Bhairab. Focusing on four locations allowed for more in-depth inquiry to take place and prevented resources from being too widely dispersed across a larger number of clusters. In addition, a small number of locations seemed sufficient to provide systemic insight into the dynamics of the worst forms of child labour more generally. Locations were selected on the basis of: (1) their significance in the leather supply chain (e.g. how many production units were located in the area, and the centrality of the type of processing taking place there to the leather supply chain); and (2) practical considerations (e.g. Jhalokathi and Maheshkhali would be logistically difficult to reach). In addition, Bhairab was prioritised because it presented an opportunity to learn about bonded labour, which is particularly prevalent in this area.

### 2.1.2 Life story collectors

Life stories were collected by children and adult researchers. A total of 18 life story collectors (aged 13–17), who were engaged in the worst forms of child labour themselves, collected 104 life stories from children who were also engaged in the worst forms of child labour. The original design for the life story collection involved adult researchers collecting all the life stories. However, children were included as life story collectors to deepen the participatory and child-centred nature of the process: children were able to engage with each stage of the process as genuine partners in understanding the issues they faced and finding solutions to them. In addition, this provided opportunities for children to develop their skills and confidence by becoming actively involved as story collectors in the life story collection process.

Children often felt more at ease when sharing their stories with their peers (particularly with those who shared a similar background), and rapport was felt to build faster between peers compared with adult researchers. In part, this was because child story collectors were involved in identifying storytellers, so collected stories from children they already knew. However, child storytellers could be

uncomfortable talking to a child story collector of the opposite sex. Researchers adjusted the arrangements for collecting life stories accordingly (Sayem *et al.* 2022).

Children collected 25 per cent of the life stories. The Covid-19 pandemic had less impact on the training of adult story collectors, who could be trained over time, through multiple workshops and training sessions conducted primarily online. Child story collectors required in-person and larger-scale workshops that could not be undertaken until government restrictions related to the pandemic were eased. A benefit of this delay was that adult researchers were able to gain insights into the life story collection approach, which they shared with child life story collectors once in-person trainings could be held. Following discussions with parents, extensive consent and safeguarding planning, a training for 19 child story collectors took place in March 2021.

During the life story collection process, both child story collectors and adult researchers took measures to reduce Covid-19-related risks. These included: only collecting stories when there were no government restrictions on movement; hiring spacious meeting areas in the locations where stories were collected to avoid close contact between story collectors and storytellers; and ensuring face coverings or a glass partition were in place during the story collection process.

The two main criteria for selecting life storytellers were: (1) participants should be aged 8–17 years old; and (2) participants should currently be or recently have been engaged in the worst forms of child labour (in either the leather or another sector) for at least one year. The CLARISSA Bangladesh team built rapport with the community; for example, through holding informal talks with influential people, such as slum managers, parents, religious leaders and other stakeholders, and with children who were engaged in the worst forms of child labour (*ibid.*). The process of rapport building differed in each location; for instance, in Bhairab and Hemayetpur, gatekeepers (e.g. slum managers and small factory owners) were used more frequently to find storytellers and to enable links with various people in the community. Life stories were collected by facilitators and documenters working in pairs. Child life story collectors were accompanied by one adult documenter from the CLARISSA team. Although an adult was always present, they played little to no role in the process except for documenting the life story.

### 2.1.3 Life story collection process and results

Children's preferences were prioritised in terms of where their life stories should be collected. Life stories were collected from quiet spaces within children's workplaces, in children's homes, at the CLARISSA meeting area set up within the Hazaribagh location and in open spaces in the community. Because all the participating children were working, life stories sometimes had to be collected in the evenings and even late at night. The storytellers' wellbeing was considered at each step of the process (see section 2.3).

Of the 404 life stories the child story collectors and adult researchers collected, 199 stories were from children working in the worst forms of child labour in the leather sector (in Hazaribagh, Lalbagh, Hemayetpur and Bhairab). They were involved in processing leather (e.g. soaking raw hides in chemicals, or liming and de-liming hides) or manufacturing leather goods (e.g. making products such as gloves, shoes and belts). A further 205 stories were collected from children who were engaged in hazardous and exploitative work in the leather sector neighbourhoods of Hazaribagh, but not necessarily working in the leather sector itself. Of the 205 life stories collected from this group, 152 were from children working as roadside vendors, mechanics, construction workers, garment workers, domestic workers, restaurant waiters, dress makers, delivery people, waste pickers and drivers (see section 3 for examples of critical factors found in life stories).

Overall, 51 per cent of the 404 life storytellers were male and 49 per cent were female; less than 10 per cent were aged 8–12 years old and more than 90 per cent were aged 13–17 years old.

## 2.2 COLLECTIVE ANALYSIS OF LIFE STORIES

There were two separate collective analysis processes – one analysing the life stories from children engaged in other forms of child labour (facilitated by Terre des hommes), and the other analysing stories from children working in the leather sector (facilitated by Grambangla Unnayan Committee).

The collective analysis was used to build a picture of the dynamics that were driving issues – in this case,

Figure 1: Child participants creating mini system maps



Source: CLARISSA Bangladesh.

to understand the pathways of children into the worst forms of child labour, and the varied circumstances they faced. The causal analysis aimed to understand what was happening, how and why. It aimed to surface the complexities of causality so participants could see the interrelationships between different aspects of their lives. The causal analysis enabled participants to see: how multiple factors could lead to the same outcome; how a single factor could lead to multiple outcomes; and how chains of causality could mean that it was possible to identify causes of different phenomena at multiple stages in children's life stories.

The analysis revealed how relatively minor factors could lead to significant consequences, especially as they combined with other factors. Participants were encouraged to think about where they could make interventions, and to think through what action they might take and for what reasons. This analysis, in turn, formed the foundation for multiple Action Research groups.

The collective analysis comprised three analysis processes: (1) the creation of mini system maps from the life stories, (2) the clustering of key themes, and (3) the integration of the mini system maps into large-scale big system maps.

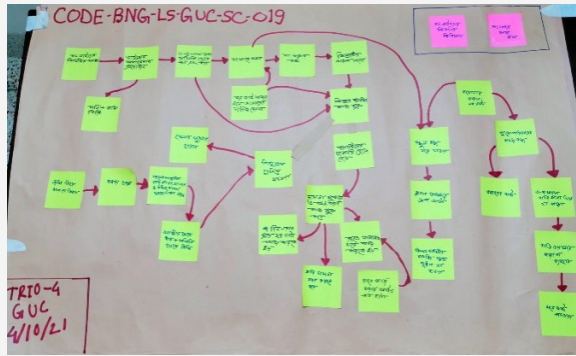
Child participants had a range of literacy levels, with some able to read at beginner level only. To accommodate this range, children worked in groups of three (trios). Within these small groups, child participants decided who would take the role of reading each story. In some cases, where none of the three group members were comfortable reading, the adult facilitators assisted with reading the life stories.

### 2.2.1 Developing mini system maps

A total of 53 children took part in six workshops to create 404 mini system maps from the life stories. Child participants were aged 13–18 years old, and included

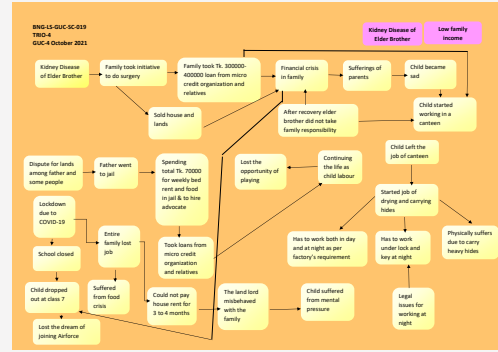
22 boys and 31 girls. Of the 53 child participants, 49 children had previously been either a life storyteller, a life story collector or both. The workshops took place in Hazaribagh, Bhairab, and Hemayetpur.

**Figure 2: Original mini system map from life story of a child working in the leather sector**



Source: CLARISSA Bangladesh.

**Figure 3: English translation of mini system map from a life story of a child working in the leather sector**



Source: Authors' own.

**Figure 4: Child participants carrying out clustering exercise**



Source: CLARISSA Bangladesh.



Working in their trios, the child participants identified essential 'factors' (events with causes and consequences) to understand how they causally related to one another. Child participants read the life stories, identified factors and connected them with arrows in mini system maps. They also identified the two most important themes in each story. The theme and a unique code for the relevant story were written on sticky notes (one for each theme). A facilitator was assigned to each trio to support them in analysing the life stories; for example, asking questions to help child participants think through the relationship between different factors. A documenter was also assigned to each trio to observe and document the process.

### 2.2.2 Clustering of key themes

Once the 404 mini system maps had been created, two workshops took place with 30 children (15 per workshop). All child participants had previously participated in one of the six mini system map workshops.

The next step in the collective analysis was for children working in their trios to identify the two main themes in a life story and write these on sticky notes (one sticky note per theme): this might be the most critical relationship between factors, or the key message that the story was portraying. The child participants then clustered themes together by calling out a theme on a sticky note and

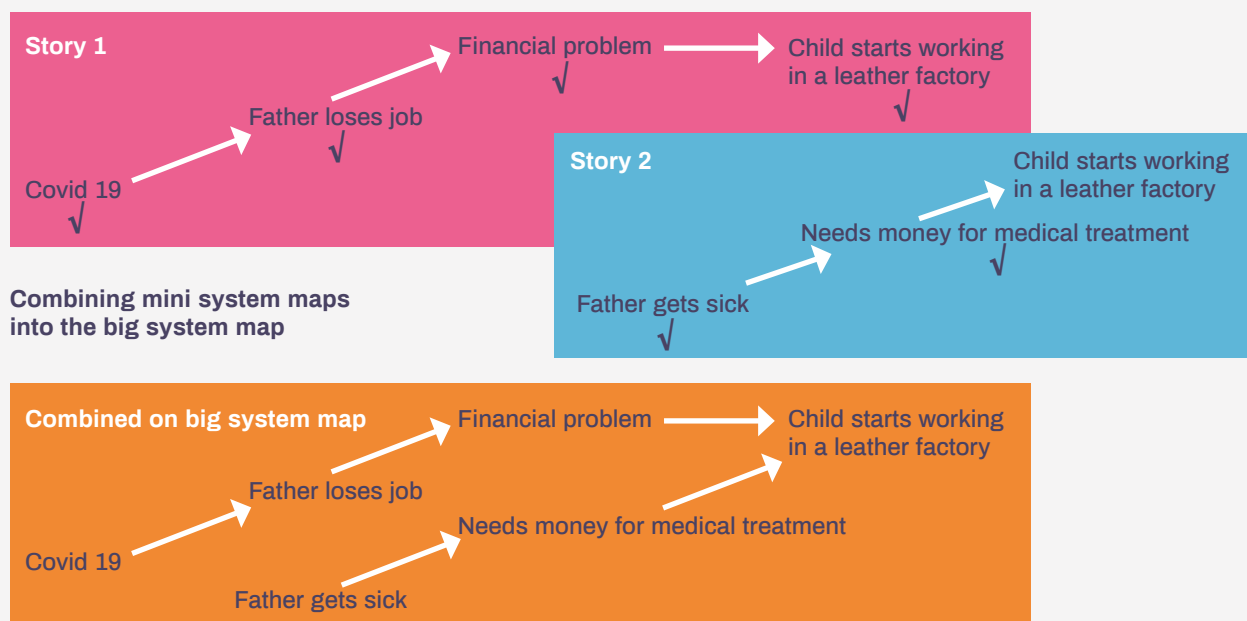
placing it on the wall. Facilitators then asked for other sticky notes that contained similar themes and the child participants grouped these together. When all the themes had been placed on the wall, the child participants drew lines around clusters of similar issues and gave each cluster a heading.

Sometimes children debated which themes were most important in the stories, particularly when there were lots of important issues within one story. In such cases, each member of the trio would discuss the different themes and then present their logic for prioritising a certain theme. Where children could not decide between two themes within their trios, the facilitator would ask different questions to assist their discussions and help the child participants think through their reasoning.

### 2.2.3 Creating big system maps

At each of the two workshops, following the clustering of key issues, the next step of the collective analysis involved child participants integrating the mini system maps into a very large map (one per workshop). The large maps, known as big system maps, were around 2 x 6 metres in length, and covered one whole wall of the workshop room. The maps allowed dominant patterns and system dynamics to be observed across a much larger number of life stories (around 200 stories per workshop).

Figure 5: Integrating two mini system maps into one single map



Source: Authors' own. Based on Burns (2021b).

Figure 5 shows how child participants integrated the mini system maps into big system map.

Child participants thickened connecting lines in proportion to the number of times this linkage was repeated in the life stories (Figure 6). This involved them checking back through the mini system maps to see how many times a certain linkage came up. The number of times the connecting lines were thickened was written next to each line. The approach to thickening the lines differed slightly between the first and second workshops. In the workshop analysing life stories from children engaged in other forms of child labour, child participants each checked an assigned number of stories for the number of times a linkage came up, then reported the number of linkages individually to the whole group. The number of linkages each child participant reported was then added up across the participants and recorded on the big system map.

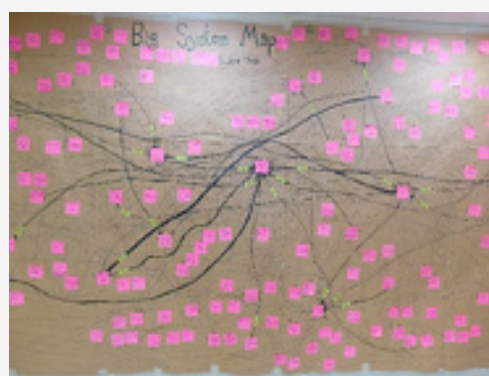
In the workshop analysing life stories from children working in the leather sector, facilitators adapted the approach based on their experience of the earlier workshop. In this workshop, child participants worked in their trios to check their assigned stories for linkages. The number of linkages found per trio were then combined across the whole group. This allowed for an additional step of verification because the linkages could be counted and checked in small groups – the three children in each trio could cross-check the linkages before feeding back to the wider group. As a result, the number of linkages between factors was often higher in the causal analysis children undertook of life stories from the leather sector (second workshop) than in the causal analysis of life stories from children engaged in other forms of child labour (first workshop).

Integrating the mini system maps into a big system map allowed child participants to gain a clear understanding of the drivers of the worst forms of child labour and to identify areas where actions taken by CLARISSA Action Research groups might have an effect.

#### 2.2.4 Action Research theme identification

Having finalised the big system maps, child participants reflected on the interconnected relationships between factors that led children to engage in the worst forms of child labour. The children then identified the themes they wanted to work on in Action Research groups (further discussed in section 5).

Figure 6: Developing big system map and thickening lines



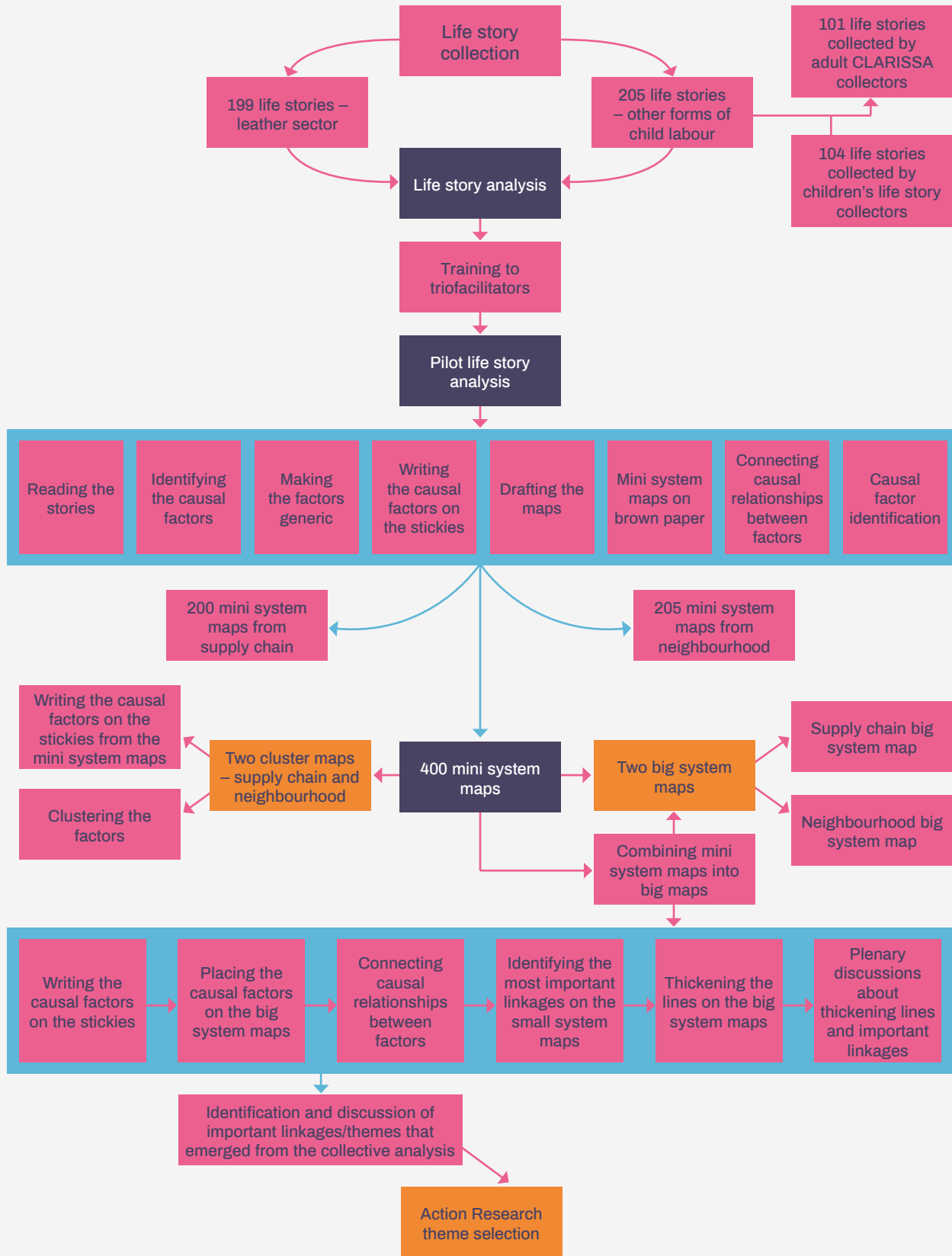
Source: CLARISSA Bangladesh.

**Table 3: Demographics of child participants**

Workshop	Date	No. of participants			Age (years)		No. of children participated again in the analysis workshops	Participants' location
		Total	Male	Female	12–14	15–18		
Small map workshop on neighbourhood life stories I	12–16 September 2021	17	3	14	5	12	0	Wider Hazaribagh
Small map workshop on neighbourhood life stories II	27–30 September 2021	18	3	15	4	14	10	Wider Hazaribagh
Small map workshop on neighbourhood life stories III	13 October 2021	3	0	3	0	3	2	Wider Hazaribagh
Small map workshop on supply chain life stories I	3–19 October 2021	12	2	10	0	12	0	Wider Hazaribagh
Small map workshop on supply chain life stories II	26–28 October 2021	6	6	0	0	6	0	Hemayetpur
Small map workshop on supply chain life stories III	10–12 November 2021	9	9	0	0	9	0	Bhairab
Large map narrative analysis workshop on neighbourhood	16–18 November 2021	15	2	13	3	12	15	Wider Hazaribagh
Large map narrative analysis workshop on supply chain	22–24 November 2021	15	5	10	0	15	15	Wider Hazaribagh

Source: Sayem *et al.* 2022. **CC BY 4.0.**

Figure 7: Life story collection and collective narrative analysis overview



Source: Authors' own. Created using project data.

Figure 8: Child participants reflecting on big system map to identify themes for Action Research stage



Source: CLARISSA Bangladesh.

## 2.3 ETHICS AND SAFEGUARDING

Ensuring that children could participate in the research without harm (intended or unintended) was crucial. All story collection and analysis activities were carried out in compliance with the CLARISSA programme 'Research Ethics Framework', which is submitted to the Institute of Development Studies Research Ethics Committee for review and approval on an annual basis. Prior to all activities taking place, the CLARISSA team's dedicated safeguarding lead in Bangladesh formulated risk assessment and risk mitigation plans, and both the implementing team and participating children were fully oriented on these.

Consent for children's involvement in all storytelling, story collection and story analysis activities was obtained from both the child and a parent or guardian. We made certain that children gave their active consent, which entailed: taking the time to explain the details of the work the children would do; explaining the research objectives; outlining any risks and benefits involved; and giving children the option of withdrawing their participation at any time. Children were compensated for their time for both the life story collection and life story analysis stages of the project.

Ensuring effective safeguarding and mental health and psychosocial support services was a fundamental pillar of all activities undertaken. The implementing team received training to prepare them to respond to children experiencing emotional reactions or trauma during any of the participatory processes (e.g. to provide immediate support, to help children to understand their feelings and act accordingly, to refer children to specialist support as needed, etc.).

As the host organisation, Terre des hommes had a contract with an external service provider to provide specialist support to any child who required psychosocial and mental health support. All data and other information participants provided is kept securely in password-protected computer files, or in dedicated and secured cabinets, and is anonymised if used in research reports or publications. The principle of 'do no harm' guided the reporting of and response to any specific safeguarding incidents or concerns.

## 2.4 SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

This paper focuses on the findings that emerged from the collective analysis undertaken by children working in Bangladesh's leather sector and its neighbourhoods. The sample size of over 400 stories is large for this type of qualitative method. The stories collected were sector and geographically specific, making them more representative of the lived experience of children in the programme's focal areas. During the collective analysis, a rigorous sense-making process allowed children to contest the data from different perspectives and ask relevant questions informed by their lived experience, making the analysis robust. Although children expressed unique viewpoints and debated the data during the collective analysis processes, it was challenging to capture these discussions in full at every stage of each of the workshops (although certain processes, such as the identification of Action Research themes, were documented in detail). The viewpoints included in this report, therefore, tend to be more aggregated than unique and the nuance of children's debates is not included verbatim.

The collective analysis processes included the clustering exercise and causal analysis. The clustering exercise

was designed to elicit key themes child participants thought were important in each life story. A limitation of the clustering exercise was that while it allowed for the categorisation of themes, it did not provide an in-depth analysis of the interlinkages between them. This was carried out during the causal analysis, which allowed child participants to understand the interconnections between factors such as poverty, migration, debt, and illness that drive child labour, and highlighted the varied consequences for children of engaging in hazardous work. The analysis allowed children to see the 'big picture', make sense of the system's dynamics and identify points of intervention for change.

Children had a high level of agency in the data collection and analysis of life stories, and in terms of deciding the focal themes for the Action Research groups. The causal analysis and Action Research theme identification took place over two workshops (one workshop with children from the leather sector and the other with children from leather sector neighbourhoods), and there was some overlap in the themes selected across the workshops. To ensure the Action Research groups explored a range of themes, the CLARISSA researchers excluded two themes ('child abuse' and 'workplace conditions') from the final seven themes children from leather sector neighbourhoods identified following the collective analysis, because these were the focus of Action Research groups of children from the leather sector (see section 5).

This paper is a record of the children's analysis of their life stories. All children working in the leather sector tested the emerging findings for resonance with different constituent groups such as their peers, families and community members. However, children engaged in other forms of child labour did not. Other CLARISSA research has specifically explored the perspectives of other actors across the system we are engaging with, such as business owners and parents. Further inquiry includes using methods such as work shadowing and semi-structured interviews to explore the mindsets, perceptions and strategies of business owners; geospatial mapping to explore neighbourhood dynamics within leather sector neighbourhoods; and ongoing cycles of Action Research in the child- and business owner-led Action Research groups.

CLARISSA researchers also undertook thematic qualitative analysis of the data. This approach allowed the detail and granularity of children's experiences to be explored. For example, while the causal analysis allowed

the interlinkages between working in the leather sector and injury and illness to be highlighted, the qualitative analysis allowed discussion of the detail of these experiences; and for the range of impacts – physical, psycho-emotional and financial – to be better understood. The qualitative life story analysis paper (Burns *et al.* forthcoming) includes an extensive number of quotes from life stories that detail children's experiences in their own words.

## 2.5 CHILDREN'S REFLECTIONS ON THE ANALYSIS PROCESS

Collective analysis of the life stories was a new experience for the child participants. Included below are reflections on the process by child participants who took part in the collective analysis workshops.

### 2.5.1 Children engaged in other forms of child labour (leather sector neighbourhoods)

- *I used to be very quiet. I didn't talk to anyone much, but after coming here I talked to many brothers and sisters, and now I can talk to many children. Life feels... a little better every day as I'm talking to everyone around me. I did not like to talk to anyone before. But in this workshop, I have made many friends. We laughed all day. Life feels good. (Female, aged 15.)*
- *You know that, usually, we don't go to any other place rather than our workplaces. In this case, what happened is that we were able to see a new place and do some work. So, it was a moment of happiness for us. Overall, my experience is good. (Male, aged 16.)*
- *I felt that my life and the life of that child mentioned in the story are the same. Our sorrows, or happiness, are all the same. The stories were a combination of happy and sad feelings. (Female, aged 15.)*

### 2.5.2 Children working in the leather supply chain

- *Participating in the CLARISSA workshops helped me understand the entire society, community and peers differently to some extent. Previously, everything was simple to me, but after*

*participating in workshops I found that everything is not so simple. There must be a cause behind every consequence. (Male, aged 17.)*

- *I didn't participate in this kind of workshop before. I enjoyed the process. After reading the stories, I realised that children who had come to this work were vulnerable. They didn't engage in work without any reason. (Male, aged 17.)*

- *I have learned a lot of things after participating in this workshop. Children who told their stories were the victims of the circumstances. Poverty was the major factor in their engagement in work. They should be in school but they are working due to an unwanted situation or event happening to them or with their family. Although those were sad stories, in our society it is very normal. (Male, aged 16.)*

*Section 3:*

**CAUSAL ANALYSIS  
FINDINGS**





### 3.1.2 Clustering of issues

The issues child participants felt were most critical can be seen from the clustering exercise undertaken for life stories of children working in other forms of child labour. After clustering the critical issues (see section 2), child participants identified a total of 17 themes, which are outlined in Table 4.

From these 17 themes, four broader patterns were identified during the workshop: (1) debt; (2) financial crisis; (3) impact of Covid-19; and (4) fathers' unwillingness to take responsibility for their families. In addition, child participants reported being surprised by the themes of: (1) child marriage; (2) parental illness; (3) parental accidents; (4) discontinuation of education; and (5) parental death (or death of a guardian). While child participants were aware of these factors in their own lives, they were surprised by the prevalence of these factors and the role they had in influencing the course of their lives.

### 3.1.3 Big system map

Child participants created the big system map from the 205 mini system maps from the leather sector neighbourhoods' life stories. The child participants identified around 50 linkages that were critical to working children's lives, which led to their engagement in other forms of child labour.

Table 5 shows the 26 most prevalent linkages from the big system map child participants created.

**Table 4: Themes identified from clustering exercise (children working in other forms of child labour)**

No.	Theme
1	Debt
2	Financial crisis
3	Illness of parent(s)
4	Impact of Covid-19
5	Parents' separation/family breakdown
6	Parent(s) had accident(s)
7	Death of parent(s)/guardian(s)
8	Fathers' unwillingness to take responsibility for families
9	Parental unemployment
10	Large families (economic pressure)
11	Mental and physical violence within families
12	Discontinuation of education
13	Migration
14	Child feeling responsible for supporting family
15	Child's willingness/desire to work
16	Peer pressure (to work)
17	Child marriage

Source: Authors' own. Created using project data.

**Figure 11: Big system map created from life stories of children working in other forms of child labour**



Source: CLARISSA Bangladesh.

**Table 5: Key linkages from big system map (children working in other forms of child labour)**

No.	Cause	Effect	Frequency*
1	Financial crisis	Child started working	58
2	Financial crisis	Child discontinued education	39
3	Medical issues	Debt	27
4	Financial crisis	Debt	27
5	Covid-19	Work crisis	26
6	Covid-19	Child discontinued education	23
7	Financial crisis	Shortage of food	14
8	Child started working	Child took on family's responsibilities	9
9	Child started working	Physical and mental abuse	9
10	Parents' separation	Child started working (father left family and child had to start working to support family)	8
11	Covid-19	Financial crisis	8
12	Illness of parent(s)	Financial crisis	7
13	Covid-19	Debt	7
14	Child discontinued education	Child started working	6
15	Illness of parent(s)	Child started working to earn money as main earner could no longer work	6
16	Moved to city/migrated	Child discontinued education	6
17	Debt	Mental stress	5
18	Family conflict	Child started working (father left family and child had to start working)	5
19	Family/parental pressure	Engaged in labour	5
20	Parents' separation	Debt (father left family and mother fell into debt)	4
21	Parents' separation	Mental stress	4
22	Father reluctant to take responsibility for family	Child started working	4
23	Debt	Child started working	4
24	Job crisis	Financial crisis	4
25	Food crisis	Debt	4
26	Child started working	Mental stress	4

Note: \* frequency refers to number of times linkage was recorded on big system map (from a total of 205 life stories).  
Source: Authors' own. Created using project data.

### 3.1.4 Child participants' reflections on the collective analysis process

During the workshop, child participants reported that when they started the clustering exercise, they thought that issues like debt or Covid-19 might emerge, but other issues, such as child marriage, were less anticipated. One female child participant commented:

*I didn't think initially that child marriage can force a child to enter into the worst forms of child labour. But I can now connect the dots.* (Female, aged 15.)

**Table 6: Themes identified from clustering exercise (children working in the leather sector)**

No.	Theme
1	Financial crisis
2	Covid-19 situation
3	Illness of family member(s)
4	Debt
5	Inattentiveness in study
6	Parents' separation/conflict
7	Second marriage of parent(s)
8	Death of family member(s)
9	Inability to continue studies
10	Parental pressure
11	Migration
12	Children's willingness to start working
13	Financial loss
14	Family member had accident
15	Gambling addiction
16	Parent(s) physically challenged
17	Father's irresponsible behaviour
18	Addiction (drugs/cannabis)
19	Natural disaster(s)
20	Child marriage
21	Disagreement with others related to land

Source: Authors' own. Created using project data.

Commenting on the most important themes they identified, one male child participant, age 16, noted the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic:

*I have a lot of friends who didn't work before Covid. But when Covid hit, the financial situation of their family got so bad, that their parents had no other way rather than send them to work. So, I think Covid had a great impact, and it can also be seen in the [clustering] exercise that we just did.* (Male, aged 16.)

The centrality of financial pressure, was noted by one female child participant, who also described a key cause of the financial strain:

*In all the stories that we have analysed, we have seen that the child has to work because of the financial pressure which [was] incurred from the debt of his/her parents. Hence, I think debt or financial crisis can be a big trend.* (Female, aged 17.)

When children were asked to reflect on the big system map, responses included:

- ***I think that the lines which have been thickened portray the biggest problem in life that a child faces.*** (Female, aged 16.)
- ***This map gives us an idea of the life of working children like us.*** (Male, aged 16.)
- ***Children getting deprived of their childhood should be considered a critical issue. Because every child deserves a childhood. A child getting deprived of his childhood strikes me the most.*** (Male, aged 16.)

## 3.2 LIFE STORIES OF CHILDREN WORKING IN THE LEATHER SECTOR

In the second collective analysis workshop, child participants analysed the life stories of children working in the worst forms of child labour in the leather sector.

### 3.2.1 Clustering of issues

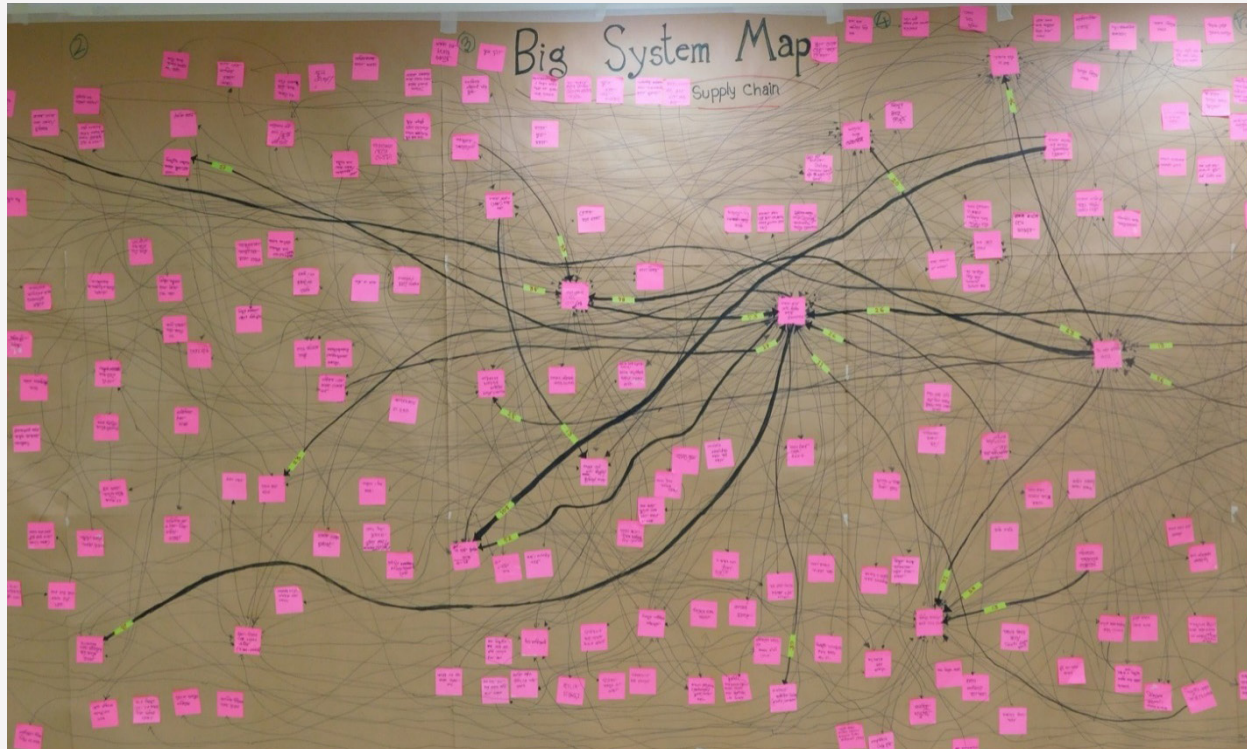
How frequently child participants felt these factors were the most important issues in the life stories can be seen from the clustering exercise undertaken in this workshop, whereby child participants identified 32 themes. Table 6 includes the 21 themes that were the most important issue in three or more of the children's life stories.

**Table 7: Key linkages from big system map (children working in the leather sector)**

No.	Cause	Effect	Frequency
1	Became a child labourer	Child had to work long hours	105
2	Financial crisis in family	Child discontinued education	98
3	Covid-19	Unemployment of child and family members	88
4	Child started working	Child financially contributed to family	81
5	Illness of family member(s)	Financial crisis in family	56
6	Child discontinued education	Child started working	53
7	Child started working	Child felt vulnerable or was vulnerable to accidents	48
8	Pressure of repaying debt	Child started working	48
9	Financial crisis in family	Migration to Dhaka	46
10	Covid-19	Child discontinued education	35
11	Inattentiveness/lack of interest in study	Child discontinued education	33
12	Financial crisis in family	Taking loans	31
13	Child started working	Physical abuse at workplace	30
14	Sickness of family member(s)	Taking loans	28
15	Child started working	Child became sick	27
16	Pressure from family member(s)	Child started working	27
17	Conjugal dispute/parents' separation	Child started working	26
18	Financial crisis in family	Child started working with the help of familiar people (i.e. people known to them)	25
19	Covid-19	Financial crisis	23
20	Hazardous job	Child changed job	20
21	Family member(s) had accident(s)	Taking loans	13
22	Leather processing work	Health hazards	13
23	Parents' separation/second marriage	Financial crisis in family	13
24	Child's interest/willingness to start working	Child started working	11
25	Corporal punishment by teachers	Child discontinued education	9
26	Child was unaccompanied at home	Child started working	6

Source: Authors' own. Created using project data.

Figure 12: Big system map created from life stories of children working in the leather sector



Source: CLARISSA Bangladesh.

### 3.2.2 Big system map

Child participants created the big system map from the 199 mini system maps from the leather sector life stories (Figure 12).

The child participants identified the major factors that were critical to working children's lives, which led to their engagement in the worst forms of child labour in the leather sector. The most important linkages are outlined in Table 7.

Figure 13: Linking causes and consequences of critical factors in children's life stories



Source: CLARISSA Bangladesh.

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*Section 4:*

**FINDINGS**



## 4 FINDINGS

During the collective analysis of children's life stories, hundreds of interlinked causal factors were identified, showing a complex web of relationships driving the worst forms of child labour. The cluster analysis helped to bring clarity to core issues and patterns that dominated the lives of children in the worst forms of child labour, while the big system maps the child participants created demonstrated the detailed causal pathways that built these patterns. The life stories revealed both how and why children entered into child labour, and what happened as a result of their engagement.

In the following section, the findings of the cluster analysis and big system map analysis are combined to ensure repetition is minimised. In addition, each theme is discussed in turn as it related to either children working in other forms of child labour (in leather sector neighbourhoods) and/or children working in the leather sector. This is indicated clearly throughout the section.

The child participants' analysis is illustrated by themes drawn from the original life stories, which the adult researchers have brought together.

### 4.1 MIGRATION TO DHAKA

Many children's life stories, in particular from children working in the leather sector, began with their parents' migration to Dhaka in response to rural poverty and/or transgressions of social norms.

The big system map developed by the child participants showed that family financial crisis was a cause for migrating to Dhaka in 46 of the 199 life stories from the leather sector. Children and families often had to leave their villages because they had lost their means of making an income. There were examples where families had lost their land or small shop and were left with no option except to migrate to Dhaka to look for opportunities for survival. Debt was a key reason for financial crisis. There were examples where fathers and/or other family members had borrowed money, but needed to migrate to Dhaka to look for opportunities to earn money to repay loans. Other than debt, there were three instances where disasters such as cyclones, flooding, and fire led families to migrate in search of work after losing all their assets: land and houses were washed away by tidal surges, and crops were lost due to cyclones.

The life stories revealed that families could also be driven to migrate to the capital due to difficult relationships. Specific examples included quarrels and feuds with neighbours and extended family members, and life storytellers' parents being disowned after eloping because their families objected to their marriage. Finally, health crises were also a driver of migration, as families migrated to access better medical treatment for sick family members.

Some children migrated to Dhaka without their families. Reasons included: being neglected following a parent's second marriage; being physically abused by parents; and leaving school (due to school closures or expulsion) and having nothing to do in their village.

Common to many of these stories of migration was encouragement from friends, relatives, and neighbours – who were already resident in Dhaka – to join them in the capital in their search for better opportunities. Children often went to Dhaka to join family members already residing there.

Life stories from children engaged in other forms of child labour showed that migration to urban centres in search of better earning opportunities was often perceived as a solution to debt. However, on migrating to Dhaka, families discovered they could only support their living expenses in the city if their children engaged in labour.

### 4.2 FINANCIAL CRISIS IN DHAKA

For both children working in the leather sector and children working in other forms of child labour, poverty was a major factor that led them to work. Child participants identified a range of causal factors that contributed to financial problems. Sometimes poverty was persistent – for example, because of the pressure of a large family – and sometimes it occurred as the result of crises, such as the loss of a job or the Covid-19 pandemic. Often, financial crises were indirect, with one factor leading to another: a small financial crisis could lead to the sale of land or taking loans, which in turn led to a larger-scale financial crisis. A number of stories spoke explicitly of food insecurity. The section below discusses key factors that led to families' financial insecurity.

#### 4.2.1 Families' social circumstances

For some children, problems did not result from a sudden crisis, but rather from the social circumstances of their family reaching tipping points that were unsustainable. An example of this is the financial burden of a large family, which both children working in the leather sector and children working in other forms of child labour identified as an issue. This was a particular problem where a small number of people were earning in the family.

Life stories from the leather sector revealed how the inability to maintain a large family's expenses on only one person's income (e.g. the mother's or father's) became critical when that family member stopped working. This could be because the father became too old to work or too old to work alone, or because a family member became ill or suffered an accident. The children's life stories included a range of illnesses family members – parents, siblings, grandparents, and the children themselves – had experienced: intellectual disability, kidney disease, tuberculosis, eye problems, fractured limbs, a broken chest bone, brain tumour, stroke, and lung disease. Another critical factor children noted was parents' disability or paralysis. A number of children reported that the main earners in their family became physically ill because of working long hours without food.

Illness in the family then became a major cause of financial hardship for several reasons. Firstly, even though some children said that after becoming physically ill their fathers would carry out income-generating activities from their home, illness often meant the main earner of the family could not work and earn regularly. For some, illness led to a downward spiral where the original illness triggered depression, anxiety, and mental health problems, which resulted in the parent being unable to work in the long term. Financial concerns and mental health could be closely linked, as highlighted in one child's life story, where the child's elder brother fled from the family with a large sum of money, resulting in their mother becoming ill. This less visible problem of mental illness and depression was evident in a number of life stories.

Secondly, when the main earner of the family became ill, the family could not always afford the required medical treatment. In some cases, this resulted in the family member failing to recover from the illness and dying. Other impacts included families being unable to cover rent and household expenses, and families becoming indebted or losing valued assets. Some children reported that their family had to buy medicine and groceries on credit from the local pharmacy and shops, while others had to sell

their land and/or homestead to cover medical costs. An additional impact of the burden of medical expenditure and illness was that some children had to leave school. Finally, there was an example where the father's paralysis resulted in the mother leaving the family, which further exacerbated the family's financial vulnerability.

#### 4.2.2 Loans, debt, and fraud

Child participants in both workshops found a strong causal relationship between families experiencing financial crises and taking loans, with 27 instances (from 205 life stories) found on the big system map analysing the life stories of children working in other forms of child labour, and 31 instances (from 199 life stories) found on the big system map analysing the life stories of children working in the leather sector.

Specific causes for taking loans or becoming indebted were also included on the big system maps. Sickness of family members or medical issues were a significant cause of taking loans. The big system maps showed 27 and 28 instances (for children in other forms of child labour and children working in the leather sector, respectively) where family members' medical issues led to debt or loans being taken. A further 13 children working in the leather sector had families who took loans due to family members being injured due to accidents. Loans were taken to pay for treatment and medicines.

The big system maps and life stories showed a range of other factors that led to children's families taking loans. For example, the big system map of children working in other forms of child labour showed that Covid-19, food crises, and separation of the child's parents led to debts. For children working in the leather sector, reasons for taking loans included: losses experienced in the family business; the excessive expense of purchasing land or constructing houses; dowry costs; costs of addiction and litigation; paying housing rent, and bridging the gap between low salaries and everyday expenses; and costs of family members' employment overseas. A number of children reported that the loan amounts increased because of compound interest rates.

Taking loans was a driver for children to engage in the worst forms of child labour. The big system map of children's life stories from the leather sector showed 48 instances (from 199 life stories) where children started working for leather product manufacturers to help their family to repay family loans or to pay monthly rent. The mini system maps from the leather sector

children's life stories showed that debt was taken from different microcredit organisations, non-governmental organisations and relatives. Salaries were also taken in advance from the workplace, which created obligations to employers: families had to pay extortionate rates of interest on the loans and experienced huge amounts of pressure to repay them.

Other impacts of taking loans the life stories revealed included fathers needing to flee their homes due to pressure from lenders to repay loans, and the need for families to sell their land and other assets to cope with the burden of loan repayments.

A number of children mentioned that they found work that paid them on a daily basis, so they could pay back loan instalments. Some said that they used others' national identity cards to prove they were old enough to work to earn money to repay loans.

Finally, some children's families were victims of fraud: a child working in the leather sector described how the money his family members saved with a cooperative was lost when the cooperative's authorities disappeared with their savings. As a result, the family faced a financial crisis, which forced the children to work in the leather sector. For others, fraud happened closer to home: in one life story, the child's brother ran away after stealing his employers' money, leading the family into financial crisis.

#### **4.2.3 Family members' inability or reluctance to take responsibility for the family**

In both workshops, child participants identified fathers' reluctance to take responsibility for the family as a cause of financial problems and the child needing to engage in child labour. Neglect was described as a father not providing for his children, refusing to pay for their education, and/or generally being responsible for causing economic turbulence. Reasons for this failure to take responsibility included fathers spending money on affairs with women who they were not married to, or on drug and gambling addictions. Some children working in the leather sector reported that their fathers had sold their land, homestead, and/or shop to cover the financial consequences of their addiction. The analysis of life stories from children working in other forms of child labour

also highlighted fathers' preferential treatment of sons rather than daughters as a factor in their unwillingness to take responsibility for their family, as well as fathers' unwillingness to work and fathers leaving the family after remarrying.

The cost of litigation also caused financial crises for some families, with some parents having to remortgage land due to payments for land litigation. A few children working in the leather sector mentioned that their fathers had been convicted by courts and imprisoned because of allegations of selling drugs or violent activities in relation to land ownership. In addition to losing a parent's earnings, families could be further burdened by the cost of looking after an imprisoned family member. One child reported their family paid approximately BDT 7,000 (US\$82) per month to cover the father's food and board in prison, as well as 'legal fees'<sup>5</sup>. Another child's father lost the rickshaw he rode, resulting in him having to pay a high penalty fee.

### **4.3 THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

The children's analysis of the life stories showed the multiple impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. Most prominent, was the causal relationship between the pandemic and unemployment. For children engaged in other forms of child labour, there were 26 instances (from 205 life stories) where the pandemic led to a work crisis, while for children engaged in the leather sector there were 88 instances (from 199 life stories) of the child and their family members becoming unemployed as workplaces were shut down. The impact of Covid-19 on families' finances, as a result of them becoming incomeless, was very evident in the children's analysis: there were 15 instances of families getting into debt or financial crisis due to Covid-19 from the stories of children in other forms of child labour, and 23 instances from children working in the leather sector.

The children's analysis of life stories from the leather sector revealed the varied coping strategies families used during the pandemic. These included migrating back to their villages; selling household furniture; and using any savings they had (which were then exhausted by the pandemic). Migrating to villages was not without difficulty – there were examples of children surviving by

5 In reality, these types of payments might have been bribes that had to be paid.

only eating 1–2 meals a day for 10–12 days due to the scarcity of food there. Some children reported that they could not pay housing rent for six months because of loss of income, which in some cases led to their parents being verbally or physically assaulted by their landlords.

Children from the leather sector said that government support was inadequate. One child reported they received only five kilos of rice from the government during the whole pandemic. Others said that they received food support for only 10–20 days within a three-month period. There were reports of local influencers unfairly procuring the government's relief materials during lockdown.

For both children from the leather sector and children engaged in other forms of child labour, the pandemic caused major disruption to their education. In relation to children leaving education due to Covid-19, the big system maps showed, respectively, 35 instances (from 199 life stories) among children working in the leather sector and 23 instances (from 205 life stories) among children engaged in other forms of child labour. In the workshop analysing the stories from children engaged in other forms of child labour, it was noted that school fees had to be paid despite schools being closed – as a result, many families sacrificed children's education. Children's stories from the leather sector showed that major causes for discontinuation of education were the extended closure of schools during lockdown<sup>6</sup> and children's migration back to their villages, which led them to leave educational institutions. Although schools started online learning platforms, students who did not have the necessary technology (e.g. a smartphone or laptop) and/or adequate internet connection could not access them.

Both the Covid-19 lockdowns and their economic consequences created drivers that resulted in some children starting work. Children engaged in other forms of child labour described how they started working for employers who were on the periphery of their homes – at the house owner's factory or a neighbour's workplace – to earn money to support their family during the pandemic. And the life stories of children from the leather sector revealed how, at the end of lockdown, children went to work in leather factories instead of returning to school; as the schools were closed for a long time, their family put pressure on them to find work instead of roaming around the community.

## 4.4 DISRUPTED FAMILY RELATIONS

### 4.4.1 Parents' separation

Analysis of the life stories of children engaged in other forms of child labour showed that the separation of children's parents was a causal factor in children entering the worst forms of child labour (there were eight linkages (from 205 life stories) between 'parents' separation' and '[child] engaged in labour' on the big system map). The separation of children's parents often led to the father leaving the family, with the remaining family members facing severe financial problems as a result. In need of additional income, mothers would either take loans and/or put their children into the workforce. Children whose parents separated sometimes had to go to live with extended family members (uncles, aunts or grandparents), which could result in increased pressure for the child to work to help support the extended family.

Similarly, the big system map developed from the life stories of children from the leather sector showed 26 instances (from 199 life stories) where children entered work because their parents separated. Financial crisis was again a consequence of parents' separation, with 13 instances recorded on the big system map. Life stories often referred to the father leaving home (e.g. 'father left', 'father ran away'). The importance of this issue can be observed in the clustering exercise, where parents' separation was identified as the most critical factor in 14 life stories (see Table 6).

The relationship between family violence and parental separation was observed in life stories from children engaged in other forms of child labour. As a result of intimate partner violence and/or arguments between parents, many children's mothers separated from their fathers and took the children elsewhere to live. As noted above, without an adult male in the household, children were more likely to begin work to support the family. Extramarital affairs were also evident in life stories as a cause of family breakdown. Breakdowns followed a similar trajectory, with parents separating and then children engaging in child labour.

The life stories from children from the leather sector showed that quarrels between their parents led to their separation and some children fled from their family because of the quarrels. In cases where a parent

6 Schools closed across Bangladesh from March 2020; they partially reopened for administrative tasks and exams in September 2021, but did not fully reopen until February 2022.

remarried, some children found they lacked parental support and care (e.g. because the father lived away from the home with their stepmother), and/or lacked support from other family members who were caring for them after their parents had left the family. In some instances, children almost starved because of food shortages that resulted from deteriorating relationships and neglect by family members. In addition, following their father's remarriage, some children became vulnerable to step-parents' abusive behaviour – added to the financial difficulties caused by the separation, this led some children to start work.

#### 4.4.2 Abuse by parents

When analysing the life stories of children working in other forms of child labour, child participants separated family violence into two forms: violence committed against the mother by the father (i.e. intimate partner violence, which is discussed above), and violence committed against the child by family members. A strong link was observed between family violence and fathers' use of drugs or gambling habits, and the subsequent impact on family resources. There were also instances of children experiencing violence at the hands of their parents if they did not want to work and being coerced into the worst forms of child labour. The experience of violence at home could also indirectly lead children to work, with a few examples where children ran away from home to escape being abused by their parents and ending up needing to support themselves by working.

Children from the leather sector also experienced abuse by family members (e.g. a 'mother's continuous misbehaviour with child' and 'beating by father and uncle'). There were examples of family members pressuring children to study, and children experiencing physical abuse for misbehaving or not studying properly. Violence could also be related to parents' need for children to work: several children reported they had to work because their fathers asked them for money so they could purchase land and other assets. One child reported that their father forcibly took the BDT 3,500 (US\$41) the child earned each month.

### 4.5 DISCONTINUATION OF EDUCATION

In both workshops, child participants found that discontinuation of education led to children entering employment (there were six instances from 205 life

stories of children working in other forms of child labour, and 53 instances from 199 life stories of children working in the leather sector). There were numerous reasons for discontinuing education, but both big system maps showed the strongest linkage was between financial crises and leaving education (39 instances for children working in other forms of child labour and 98 instances for children working in the leather sector). Child participants analysing life stories from children engaged in other forms of child labour found that discontinuing education and starting work was strongly linked with the need for older children in the family to take responsibility for supporting younger siblings and their education.

Life stories from the leather sector showed that many children's parents could no longer bear their educational expenses. Some parents prioritised their sons' education, which meant their daughters had to leave school. For others, families stopped paying school fees in response to family crises such as the death of the family's principal earner. Despite children's strong desire to continue their education, financial crises in their family made it impossible to purchase the required textbooks, uniforms and educational materials, or pay the required school fees. For example, in one life story the child needed BDT 10,000 (US\$100) to pay the 10th grade examination fee (to obtain a school leaving certificate). Their family did not pay the fees, resulting in the child having to discontinue their education.

In both workshops, the children's analysis revealed a strong causal relationship between Covid-19 and the discontinuation of education (23 instances from 205 life stories on the big system map for children engaged in other forms of child labour and 35 instances from 199 life stories for children engaged in the leather sector) (see section 4.3).

Leaving education was also linked with migration from rural to urban areas – there were six instances of this linkage recorded on the big system map from the life stories of children engaged in other forms of child labour. Several factors explain this relationship, including cultural barriers rural children faced entering an urban school for the first time, their unfamiliarity with a new academic curriculum, and the discrimination or stigma they experienced because of their poor economic status. Faced with these challenges, some children left education and started work. In addition, there were examples where, following their migration to Dhaka, both parents had to take up work. This in turn led to children discontinuing

education because their parents were not there to check whether they were attending school.

The influence of peers was also observed. There were 33 instances from 199 life stories of children working in the leather sector where children left school because they were not attentive in studying. Time spent gossiping with friends was a factor in there being little time to study in school. Feeling that their children were not studying adequately, family members pressured their children to find work to earn money. Some children discontinued education because of peer pressure, which not only encouraged them to leave school, but also to join the workforce. A number of children reported that they were unable to continue their education as a result of their addiction to drugs (begun due to the influence of their friends and peers). Some children reported fleeing from home because they wanted to leave school.

Experiencing bullying and abuse at school was also highlighted in both workshops. Corporal punishment by teachers was a cause of leaving school or the *madrassa* (institution for religious education). This could be as a result of being unprepared for class or because they did things the *huzur* (teacher) did not like (e.g. chewing gum while studying). Bullying and abuse by classmates or by peers outside of school was also experienced (e.g. sexual harassment of girls while travelling to and from school).

Other (less prevalent) factors identified that caused children to discontinue their education were the lack of schools in the locality, destruction of school buildings, and children's own physical illness.

However, it is also worth noting instances where children were supported to continue their education. There were examples where schoolteachers provided monetary support to students, and where teachers assisted students with their tuition fee arrangements so they could continue their education. In one life story, engaging in work allowed the storyteller to bear his educational expenses and continue his studies.

## 4.6 CHILD MARRIAGE

While there were relatively few stories about child marriage, during the clustering exercise in both workshops children highlighted the issue as critical, even if there was not always a direct relationship between child marriage and child labour. Child marriage predominantly related to girl children marrying early. In all of the life stories of child marriage from children engaged in other

forms of child labour, the child's family arranged the marriage in response to the family suffering persistent financial problems. There was a sense of child marriage meaning there would be 'one less mouth to feed'. Financial problems could result from the father leaving the family, which led to financial and security concerns. A mother might then have arranged the marriage of the eldest daughter in response to these concerns, to relieve some of the family's financial pressures and to try to ensure the daughter's safety.

Child marriage had many consequences. During the clustering exercise analysing stories from children engaged in other forms of child labour, child participants highlighted impacts of child marriage. Examples included instances where girls had to start working to support their husband's family (who they began living with following their marriage) or where girls were coerced to work by their husband and his family. In addition, they noted a relationship between child marriage and the deteriorating health condition of the child due to becoming pregnant at an early age. The big system map revealed the impact of child marriage on children's wellbeing – with child marriage linked to anxiety and feeling deprived of their childhood.

The life stories from the leather sector showed that some children married for romantic reasons (following a love affair). Because of a love affair at an early age, they were either expelled by school authorities or became inattentive at school and left. They then took up employment in the leather sector.

Girls could be impacted financially by child marriage. For example, in one story from the leather sector, the girl married without her parents' consent and faced financial difficulty as a result, eventually leading her to begin work. In another story, the girl's family had to pay a dowry for her sister's (early) marriage, the financial implications of which forced the girl to take up work in the leather sector. The additional financial needs some girls faced after becoming pregnant, or following divorce (due to physical and mental torture by their husbands and in-laws), also forced them to work.

## 4.7 IMPACTS OF CHILDREN'S DRUG ADDICTION

During the clustering exercise, child participants analysing life stories of children from the leather sector found drug addiction was a critical factor because children needed to earn money to fund their addiction. Drug addiction

(most commonly to cannabis) was often a result of associating with 'spoiled' friends. But the life stories revealed that family circumstances also had a causal effect. For example, in one life story, the child said that he was addicted to drugs because he had no parents. The death of a guardian could lead to a causal chain of factors that led children into the worst forms of child labour. For example, the life story of one child showed how following the death of their guardian, the child spent more time with their peers and became addicted to drugs. They began misbehaving at school, discontinued education, and then family members pressured them to start working.

Family members' addictions also indirectly impacted children: one child shared that his brother was addicted to drugs, which led the child to work to support the family, as well as his brother's drug expenses.

## 4.8 WHO DECIDES IF A CHILD WORKS?

### 4.8.1 Contributing to family finances

The children's analysis revealed that some children were pressured to work by their family. The big system maps showed 27 instances (from 199 life stories) of children from the leather sector being pressured to work by family members, while there were five instances (from 205 life stories) of family or parental pressure on children working in other forms of child labour (see also section 4.4.2).

Life stories from children from the leather sector showed that some children's fathers were unwilling to support them financially and asked the child to support themselves with their own earnings. Another factor was that parents compelled their children to work because they felt they were wasting their time gossiping with friends and peers.

Parents were not always directly involved in decisions related to engaging in work. Children could take these decisions, but their choices were structured around feelings of responsibility towards their family. Children reported needing to begin work because of their 'feelings for parents' or 'for helping family': they felt they had to start working in the leather sector because of the burden the family was carrying and the need to pay for family expenditures. The big system map from children working in the leather sector showed that 81 children (from 199 life stories from the leather sector) handed over their wages to their family (usually to the mother), helping them to support the family financially. Children reported earning a wage on a daily or monthly basis

(e.g. between BDT 1,500–10,000/USD\$15–\$100) or a piece rate basis (e.g. producing a dozen leather products secured payment of BDT 160/US\$1.50). Earnings enabled children to contribute to family expenses, pay their family's loan instalments and/or housing rent. For some, their earnings also enabled them to bear their own personal expenses or begin saving money. This had a positive psychological impact on some children, who expressed happiness at being able to pay for their family's expenditures.

Similarly, the big system map showed the link between children engaged in other forms of child labour beginning work and bearing responsibility for their families. Children often worked as a way to provide a subsidiary source of income for the family. When children contributed to their family's expenses, they often felt proud. The life stories from children engaged in other forms of child labour showed the relationship between children bearing family expenditures and receiving certain new privileges and freedoms, and/or being given a voice in family decision-making.

There were outlying examples of pressure by factory owners to work, but these were not common.

### 4.8.2 Children's own motivation for starting to work

Analysis of children's life stories from the leather sector showed that some children chose to work to make a better life for themselves. This was sometimes due to material aspirations – e.g. 'child's interest in dresses', 'child's interest in earning hard cash'. Some children were in need of pocket money during school time, so started working because their family could not afford to provide it. A number of children reported that they were working as unpaid apprentices to learn the skills they would need to get paid work.

Children's decision-making could also be based around their desire not to be at home. Feelings of loneliness and being uncared for (especially by their fathers) were the result of their parents' separation, or because their mothers had gone overseas as migrant workers. Some children felt uncomfortable staying at home alone. Children reported that they had nothing to do at home or felt lonely if they left their job. Having nothing to do was a contributing factor in leading some children to work, although for some this went against their parents' wishes. Peer pressure was also a factor that affected children's decisions around beginning work.

## 4.9 DISCRIMINATION, STIGMATISATION, AND SHAME

The life stories revealed how experiences of discrimination, stigmatisation, and shame, and the psychological toll of disrupted family relations and financial crises, could affect children's trajectories. The life stories revealed a number of reasons why children felt shame. These included: feeling discriminated against by neighbours and classmates due to their family's poor economic condition; feeling shame at being 'idle' with no work; being looked down on by their community because of the second marriage of their parent(s) or because their father lived separately; experiencing mental pressure because they owed large sums of money; and facing discrimination by landlords and other tenants.

While this is an area for further analysis, it is worth noting the role that shame and stigma played in causing families to leave their homes or neighbourhoods, sometimes exacerbating their financial vulnerability and requiring children to take up work to survive. For example, life stories from the leather sector showed how the shame of being poor led some families to migrate to Dhaka because their neighbours used to look down on them.

## 4.10 WORKING CONDITIONS

The children's analysis found that irrespective of what led a child to engage in the worst forms of child labour, after starting work they faced significant problems in their workplaces. For children in the leather sector, the big system map child participants created showed how their work was strongly linked with conditions associated with the worst forms of child labour, sometimes working overnight and in unsafe and unhealthy environments; out of 199 life stories, there were 48 instances where working made children vulnerable to accidents; and 13 instances where they were exposed to health hazards. Unsurprisingly, these conditions resulted in 27 instances where starting to work led to illness.

The life stories revealed the detail of children's working conditions: children worked with strong chemicals or

heavy machinery, or had to carry heavy leather on their heads and shoulders up multiple flights of stairs; children had to work overtime – up to 14 hours per day (some said sometimes up to 24 hours each day), six or seven days per week – for little or no money; and some children rarely left their workplace because their workloads were so high; some children were forced to work secretly behind locked doors (because it is illegal for children to work at night).

While some children's employers covered expenses for medical treatment for injuries suffered in the workplace, other children lacked the money to access treatment. Children were often not paid if they were absent due to work-related injuries (employers deducted absent days from children's salaries). Children became physically ill as a result of specific causes, such as injuries sustained at work and due to the general pressure of the workplace. Injuries could result in children having to leave their jobs, but often their ill health would continue after taking up work for a different employer.

In addition, child participants' analysis revealed the recurrent problem of abuse. Children had to endure different sorts of mental and physical abuse at their workplaces: there were 30 instances of children from the leather sector experiencing physical abuse in the workplace, and nine instances where children in other forms of child labour experienced physical and mental abuse (which included beating, scolding and name calling). Children were particularly vulnerable to these abuses because they *had* to work, so were forced to tolerate it. There were examples from the life stories where the abuse was so severe that the child was forced to change jobs. In all the life stories detailing abuse in the workplace, it was evident that the abuse was taking a toll on the physical and mental wellbeing of the children.

The life stories of children from the leather sector also showed the psychological impact of being engaged in work. Children reported that they suffered mental agony because they were unable to complete their education, and mourned the loss of their childhood.



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*Section 5:*

**ACTION RESEARCH  
ISSUE IDENTIFICATION  
PROCESS**

## 5 ACTION RESEARCH ISSUE IDENTIFICATION PROCESS

In both the collective analysis workshops, children developed the big system maps, then spent time reflecting on the interconnected relationships between factors that affect children's trajectories into, and their experiences of, the worst forms of child labour. Children discussed and debated which factors to focus on and eventually identified key themes they wanted to work on in the Action Research groups. Adult researchers facilitated discussions as children discussed the pros and cons of working on each identified theme, finally voting on which themes to focus on.

### 5.1 CHILDREN ENGAGED IN OTHER FORMS OF CHILD LABOUR

In the workshop analysing the life stories of children engaged in other forms of child labour, child participants prioritised themes by reflecting on the intensity of linkages on the big system map. The child participants discussed the themes and initially prioritised seven (through a process of voting for each theme):

- **Child marriage**
- **Family conflict and family violence**
- **Separation of parents and neglect of children**
- **Workplace conditions**
- **Child abuse**
- **Financial management, savings, and debts**
- **Creating more opportunities for education.**

The majority of themes child participants selected reflected the most prevalent chains of causality from the big system map. While child marriage was an issue affecting fewer children, child participants were passionate about the subject and enthusiastic about working on the issue. They explained that they witnessed child marriage often in their community and thought it

needed to be stopped, and that this would bring positive change to their community. In choosing themes for Action Research, as well as tackling the most prevalent themes, it is important to also tackle the themes that group members are passionate about taking action on and where they feel they can have an impact. This is why the theme of child marriage was prioritised.

Where factors were closely related, child participants later decided to merge some themes. For example, the theme of family conflict and violence was combined with the separation of parents and child neglect. The theme of workplace conditions and child abuse was not incorporated into an Action Research group because these themes were embedded into two of the groups formed by children working in the leather sector (see below). Furthermore, child abuse would also be explored with a separate Action Research group related to the 'thematic research' component of the CLARISSA programme.<sup>7</sup>

The four themes chosen to be the focus for four child-led Participatory Action Research groups with children engaged in other forms of child labour were:

- **Child marriage**
- **Family conflict and violence, family separation, and neglect of children**
- **Financial management, savings, and debt**
- **Creating more opportunities for education.**

Following the collective analysis workshop, child participants were invited to a follow-up session to decide which specific theme they were most interested to work on in an Action Research group. The child participants were then divided into their preferred groups. At the start of the Action Research process, each group revisited the mini system maps that related to their theme to validate and further reflect on the theme that they had prioritised during the collective analysis workshop.

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<sup>7</sup> The CLARISSA programme includes additional Action Research groups that did not originate from the collective analysis of life stories. For example, three Action Research groups related to research undertaken that used neighbourhood mapping and journey mapping. These groups focused on children's journeys to their workplaces, intersections between children's working lives and home lives, and social norms around 'push factors' leading children to work. Also, Action Research groups comprising business owners, which were established following qualitative research with business owners, were also operational in Hazaribagh, Hemayetpur and Bhairab.

## 5.2 CHILDREN WORKING IN THE LEATHER SECTOR

In the workshop analysing life stories from the leather sector, each trio identified between five and seven themes. One representative from each trio shared the themes one by one, while the other trios checked whether they had also identified the same themes. Child participants agreed that themes that were common across the five trios (such as 'long working hours') should be prioritised. Through a process of discussing the pros and cons of working on each theme, then voting on which themes should be taken forward, they identified 11 potential themes for the Action Research groups to focus on:

- **Long working hours**
- **Health hazards in the workplace**
- **Physical and mental abuse in the workplace**
- **Lack of workplace safety**
- **Parental pressure on children to work**
- **Pressure of repaying debt**
- **Drug addiction**
- **Child marriage**
- **Corporal punishment at school**
- **Inability to afford education**
- **Inability to afford the cost of health care.**

Following the collective analysis workshops, the children who went on to participate in the Action Research groups conducted an exercise to validate the 11 potential themes that had been selected. Some 36 child Action Research group participants revisited the mini system maps as they related to each potential theme, looking at the prevalence of the themes in the 199 mini system maps overall, and trying to understand the causes and consequences of each theme.

Following this, child participants discussed the 11 themes within their three specific Action Research groups (in Bhairab, Hemayetpur and Hazaribagh), focusing particularly on which theme to work on within the group. The 11 issues were discussed at length and voted on by each group to finalise their theme.

The three themes chosen to be the focus for three child-led Participatory Action Research groups from the leather sector were:

- **Life in the workplace (voted for by children in Hazaribagh)**

- **Workplace safety (voted for by children in Hemayetpur)**
- **Inability to bear educational costs (voted for by children in Bhairab).**

The themes 'Life in the workplace' and 'Workplace safety' reflected an amalgamation of themes initially identified by child participants; for example: long working hours, health hazards in the workplace, physical and mental abuse in the workplace, lack of workplace safety. Child participants chose not to base their theme on the specific factors that had emerged during the collective analysis (i.e. long working hours, health hazards, abuse) because these were seen as a fundamental and unavoidable part of their working lives that would be difficult to change directly.

The themes of child marriage, debt, parental pressure to work, and costs of health care were not taken forward. During the group discussions, children felt these issues were already the focus of NGO interventions and/or were too broad to be the focus of an Action Research process. It was decided that there would be no Action Research group focusing specifically on drugs or corporal punishment because children decided that these themes were a lower priority (e.g. because they were already the focus of NGO or government interventions).

Following the finalisation of the themes, the Action Research group participants checked for resonance more widely by discussing them with their friends, relatives and community members.

## 5.3 ACTION RESEARCH GROUP FORMATION

Seven child-led Participatory Action Research groups – three with children from the leather sector and four with children engaged in other forms of child labour – were set up between February and October 2022, based on the themes identified from the collective analysis of the life stories. Groups were established in particular locations to work on the issues identified during the narrative analysis stage. Activities of Action Research groups began by focusing on self-help and mutual aid activities – children were supported to use their own agency to shape their own lives and the lives of those around them. But their activities might go on to contribute to the development of local institutional solutions (including those of local non-governmental organisations, employers, etc.). Each child-led group began with a broad theme but was supported to generate more specific theories of change, then to plan and test innovative solutions in real

time, and then evaluate them. These Action Research groups were to continue until the end of September 2023 for them to be able to carry out their cycles of action and learning. In total, CLARISSA Bangladesh has supported 13 Action Research groups. The seven child-led Participatory Action Research groups formed from the collective analysis of life stories were based on the following themes: (1) child marriage; (2) family conflict and violence, family separation, and neglect of children; (3) financial management, savings, and debt; (4) creating more opportunities for education; (5) life in the workplace (which includes issues around long working hours, health and safety hazards in the workplace, physical and

mental abuse in the workplace); (6) lack of safety in the workplace; and (7) inability to bear the cost of education.

Additional CLARISSA Bangladesh Action Research groups included three groups formed of employers focusing on themes such as employer-employee relationships (in Hazaribagh and Hemayetpur), and the linkages between formal and informal business spheres (in Bhairab). Working children's relationship with their neighbourhoods is explored in two Action Research groups looking at children's journeys to their workplaces and their working environments. The final Action Research group looked at social norms around perceptions of idleness, which push children into work.

*Section 6:*

# **CONCLUSION**

## 6 CONCLUSION

This report presents the processes of child participants' analysis of 404 life stories from children working in the leather sector and in other forms of child labour in four locations in and around Dhaka. It explains the different steps the child participants undertook to analyse their life stories, demonstrating the ways they identified the causal relationships between the critical factors that drive children to work in hazardous environments and in dangerous conditions, and how these affect their lives. The report then elucidates the ways children identified and prioritised the themes for Participatory Action Research groups.

By presenting the processes of developing 404 mini system maps, two cluster maps and two big system maps, the report shows how a collective narrative analysis process enabled children to recognise the complex realities of their lives and helped them to identify the patterns that push and pull children into the worst forms of child labour.

The report also reinforces the importance of listening to children and learning from their life experiences to gain a deeper and more nuanced understanding of their lives. This process clearly demonstrated the capacity of working children – most of whom had a limited formal education – to carry out a complex systemic causal analysis. The mini system maps and big system maps were accurately constructed and led to in-depth analysis. This is important in understanding the potential capacity of children to carry out sophisticated research processes.

Children's reflections on the impact of participating in the collective analysis processes also point to how participation developed their own learning and self-esteem, and helped build their sense of agency as active citizens within their families and communities, for example:

- ***I used to think that I was the only one who was in pain, but now I realise that there are many more children like me. Before I didn't get along well with anyone, I wondered what would happen if I talked to anyone. But now I understand that if you listen to someone else, the problem of your own life can be solved. Everyone needs everyone. (Male, aged 17.)***
- ***Participating in the various activities of CLARISSA helped me see myself in a new way. I was very shy. I was not confident to talk with people. Now I***

***am confident enough to talk with others. I can see things from a different angle now. I have become less judgmental about people. I can say CLARISSA has given me a new life. (Female, aged 17.)***

The bottom-up participatory collective analysis process was followed by the setting up of seven child-led Action Research groups. Based on children's evidence, each Action Research group considered one core issue for their group, which they would work on for about a year to identify innovative solutions for safer and better kinds of work. Rather than formulating recommendations immediately after conducting the research, this approach allows child-led Action Research groups to explore interlinkages in detail. Children are able to generate detailed theories of change within the groups, then plan, develop and test their solutions *in situ*.

Breaking this down into two processes (one analysing the life stories of children engaged in other forms of child labour, and one analysing the life stories from children working in the leather sector) helped us to corroborate the findings. The two processes were facilitated by Terre des hommes and Grambangla Unnayan Committee, respectively. The organisations have different cultures and emphases in their work; they facilitated the processes in different ways and each worked with different children. That they came out with more or less the same findings in their analysis is an indication of the significance of these patterns.

With regard to the findings, perhaps the most significant was the participants' realisation of the complexity of children's life stories and how many factors were included on the big system maps. They discovered how many factors contributed to poverty and realised that these were not always such obvious causal factors as the loss of employment.

A striking pattern is that the life stories of many families of children working in the worst forms of child labour started with a downward spiral that began in their home villages and their migration to Dhaka. Arriving in Dhaka as migrants made them vulnerable to some of the worst forms of work.

Financial crises and high interest loans are undoubtedly at the heart of most decisions for the children to work. However, while they did not directly lead to the child starting work, there were factors that often exacerbated

an existing financial crisis or triggered a new one. Factors such as family violence, parental separation, child marriage, and drug or alcohol addiction often indirectly impacted children's pathways to work.

These factors were exacerbated by the lack of welfare support systems: the weakness of public sector service infrastructure (including government-provided education, welfare, health and social care support systems) was evident across many of the life stories. Numerous factors compounded each other and deepened financial crises – which means that bringing a child out of child labour involves solving multiple problems at the same time. This is a strong reason for focusing on the child and their family as opposed to any one particular issue that might be a cause of financial crisis.

One of the most striking findings was the impact of Covid-19, which radically affected families' economic situation. A very large number of stories described families' loss of employment due to Covid-19. The fact that this created an imperative for children to leave school to work, and/or to stop attending school as a direct result of lockdown, means that there is a new cadre of child workers who may not otherwise have found themselves in the worst forms of child labour. These children are unlikely ever to return to school. The reality, for almost all children, is that once you have left and you are earning money, then you will never return.

There are also a lot of factors that make children want to work. They can buy the things that they want; they can learn a trade; they can have a degree of autonomy over their own lives; they can feel pride in being able to help their family. For many, work is a much more fulfilling option than sitting in a school that is not teaching them anything.

It is also clear that once a child is engaged in the worst forms of child labour, their problems are compounded further. Long hours and hazardous conditions lead to accidents and sickness, and take their toll on people's mental and physical health. This can of course lead to further crisis in the family and result in other children having to work to meet the family's needs.

Children mostly take on work because of immediate economic necessity and their own desire to do something if they have discontinued education. Pressure can come from parents and peers, but there seems to be more or less no mention of brokers<sup>8</sup> and only a few examples of pressure from businesses. This suggests that tackling the issue of the worst forms of child labour lies more in resolving the social and economic circumstances of the family. Informal businesses struggling to make the smallest profit will inevitably employ children if asked to by the children themselves and their families.

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8 These are sometimes referred to as 'labour intermediaries' (i.e. individuals who act as a broker or agent to help children find work or move jobs).



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## REFERENCES

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**T** +44 (0) 1273 606261  
**E** [clarissa@ids.ac.uk](mailto:clarissa@ids.ac.uk)  
**W** [clarissa.global](http://clarissa.global)  
**T** @ChildLabourActn  
**F** #ChildLabourAction

**T** +44 (0) 1273 606261  
**E** [ids@ids.ac.uk](mailto:ids@ids.ac.uk)  
**W** [www.ids.ac.uk](http://www.ids.ac.uk)  
**T** @IDS\_UK  
**F** [facebook.com/idsuk](https://facebook.com/idsuk)

**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.