



RESEARCH AND EVIDENCE PAPER 16

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A WORKING CHILD IN DHAKA, BANGLADESH: A SYNTHESIS OF 25 STORIES ABOUT CHILDREN'S DAYS

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ABOUT THIS RESEARCH AND EVIDENCE PAPER

This synthesis paper summarises patterns in the lived experience of 25 children in Hazaribagh, Dhaka who went about a typical day in their lives. Combining use of Global Positioning System (GPS) technology, a survey children completed via a mobile phone app, and ethnographic observations, children and adult researchers recorded locations, times of day, activities, and feelings.

The paper brings into view the challenges that children in worst forms of child labour navigate before, after, and between work. The findings illustrate how children live in small worlds with adult concerns. We are able to see the range of responsibilities that they take on to provide for their families, and the poor treatment they receive from parents, supervisors, and people in the community, as they navigate their days. This is a confusing and lonely social landscape with little free time to spend relaxing in the company of their peers. Children find little respite from the excessively long hours that they work, the hot conditions, and the repetitive work. Many of the children endure constant discomfort, pain, hunger, heightened risks of accidents, sexual harassment, and violence. Poor home and neighbourhood environments amplify the levels of tiredness and risk. Yet in the details of all the varied and layered abuses and challenges the children navigate, we find clues for small improvements that may make a big difference to their daily lives.

Of the 25 stories that inform this paper, 17 are published in English and Bengali with photographs and maps on the **Hard Labour website**.

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

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

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

BDT Bangladeshi taka

CLARISSA Child Labour: Action-Research-Innovation in South and South-Eastern Asia

GPS Global Positioning System

IDS Institute of Development Studies

NGO non-governmental organisation

US\$ US dollar

WFCL worst forms of child labour

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We are immensely grateful to the children and families in Dhaka who generously invited us into their daily lives to help generate insights into the detail of their experience. The children are not named as authors to protect their anonymity. We would like to extend thanks to Science Connect who built the base maps of the urban neighbourhoods that the children wanted to focus on and created the tooling that allowed the children to document their daily lives with ease.

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ASSESSING THE QUALITY OF CLARISSA'S EVIDENCE IN THIS PAPER

The 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 paper (CLARISSA 2023) describes

the difference in a 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 assessment for each dimension.

Three researchers from the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) gathered to discuss the quality of evidence in this paper 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>Representativeness Representativeness refers to the extent to which the voices of those affected by the issue are central in the evidence that is presented. This includes how critical actors have participated in the different parts of the process that has generated the evidence (design, data gathering, analysis, presenting) and how the nuance of their experiences and perspectives is expressed in the evidence claims.</p>				●		<p>CLARISSA researchers have assessed this paper as 4 for representativeness. The voice of children in worst forms of child labour (WFCL) is present in the findings and the children played an active role in the design, data gathering, and analysis. There is some researcher reflection and analysis, but the children led the researchers through their day and were part of the practical decision-making about the design, ethics, and safeguarding. They were also involved in analysis of their days.</p> <p>To score a 5 for representativeness, all the children would have been directly involved in the design conversation with technical experts about data visualisations, beyond technical orientations and feedbacks.</p>

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

Dimension	1	2	3	4	5	Reasoning behind the assessment
<p>Triangulation Triangulation helps ensure a degree of consistency and bias control. Given that all sources of evidence have some degree of bias, it is important that researchers 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> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Multiple data sources' refers to the person(s) who provided the evidence. • 'Multiple lines of evidence' refers to different methods by which data is generated. 			●			<p>CLARISSA researchers assessed this paper as 3 for triangulation. The children's experiences were triangulated with adult researcher observations and the adult's direct embodied experience of the neighbourhood environment and the nature of the work. The adult researchers were able to experience what it is like to cut leather and to be in hot and cramped conditions. In this sense, the findings were examined from two sources of data, i.e. the child and the adult researcher. The evidence claims were not triangulated with data derived from other methods in this paper.</p>
<p>Transparency 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>CLARISSA researchers assessed this paper as 5 for transparency. The paper is based on the stories of children's days, most of which are published on the Hard Labour website. All the stories are recoverable, along with the photographs and the GPS traces of the journeys.</p>
<p>New knowledge 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>CLARISSA researchers assessed this paper as 3.5 for new knowledge. This paper plugs a specific knowledge gap on spatial and temporal understandings of children's experiences in WFCL. Often research looks at children's experiences while at work, but this research looked at children's days end to end, and how the children navigate urban landscapes around work, revealing the cumulative nature of the stressors and challenges faced by them.</p> <p>The evidence supports conceptualisations of WFCL that are holistic and multidimensional, situating an understanding of hazardous work in the context of the rest of a child's life. The paper also generated a lot of experiential knowledge which provides extra depth in understanding issues including poor health, poor treatment at work, sexual harassment in the neighbourhood, etc.</p>

Source: Authors' own.

Section 1:

INTRODUCTION

1 INTRODUCTION

The CLARISSA (Child Labour: Action-Research-Innovation in South and South-Eastern Asia) research programme set out to understand how children experience urban neighbourhoods with a view to identifying points of intervention that may reduce worst forms of child labour (WFCL)¹ in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Understanding that human action is closely tied to the physical spaces in which it unfolds (Kytä *et al.* 2018) and that children interpret their environments in different ways to adults (Wilson *et al.* 2018), researchers were keen to uncover how children navigate urban slums to get to and from work, capturing the experiences they have at different times of the day.

The stories of children's days accompanying this paper record a single day in the lives of 25 children, most of whom do hazardous jobs. Each story shares a child's daily experiences and challenges, so researchers and policymakers can be more connected to the detail of what a day looks like for working children. Seventeen of the most comprehensive accounts of children's working days have been published on the Hard Labour website,² but all

25 children's days informed this paper. (All the children's names have been changed.)

The aim of this paper is to draw together some of the common experiences in the stories and highlight the importance of understanding not only the paid work that the children carry out, but the context within which that work is situated. The stories of children's days demonstrate that understanding the entirety of WFCL is contingent on seeing the life of a child holistically and systemically, as has been suggested in previous research (Sumberg and Sabates-Wheeler 2020; Prentice *et al.* 2018). By looking at the child's whole day, end to end, we see the interconnections between home life and work life, between their gender and wider social norms, and between the work they do and the environment they do it in. We begin to appreciate the cumulative hazards that children navigate in a single day and the sustained levels of stress and strain those in WFCL experience. In the interactions between the different domains and dimensions of a child's daily life, we potentially identify new points of intervention to reduce the harmful impacts of child work.

1 The ILO convention No. 182 definition of worst forms of child labour includes slavery, debt bondage, compulsory labour, armed conflict, child prostitution, hazardous labour, illicit activities, and any other work likely to damage the health, safety, and morals of children. Child labour can automatically become the worst form according to the sector – for example, the sex industry and other industries categorised as hazardous, including the leather industry. It is also possible for employment in any industry to become a worst form of child labour by virtue of the precarious nature of the work activity (e.g. use of dangerous chemicals, equipment), the conditions of work (e.g. long hours, exposure to abuse), and the impact of the work, including damage to physical and psychological health.

2 See [Hard Labour website](#).

Section 2:

METHODOLOGY

2 METHODOLOGY

2.1 A MIXED-METHODS DESIGN

To record a single day in the lives of 25 children, the CLARISSA programme used 'journey mapping', adapting previous mixed-method studies of children's everyday mobility in a city (Christensen *et al.* 2011). Working in a participatory way with the children, CLARISSA combined Geographical Positioning System (GPS) technology with a survey completed by the children via mobile phone and ethnographic observations, to spatially and temporally construct the movements and experiences of the 25 individuals.

Most of the stories about children's days³ comprise time at home, time on the way to and from work, and time at their workplaces. In a few of the stories, there was also time at school (both state schools and madrasas⁴ were attended), and for some 'hanging out' – usually in open spaces by the river or on rooftops; although for many children, and especially girls, there was no time to 'hang out' outside the home, and nor is it socially acceptable for them to do so. In most cases, the child's day recorded was typical of their days, and where it was different from a normal day the child pointed out those differences in reflection and analysis sessions.

A detailed account of the methodology is presented in a CLARISSA learning note (Bhattarai *et al.* 2024, forthcoming). In summary, each child was accompanied by a CLARISSA researcher, usually from the time that they got up in the morning, until the time that they went to bed. Sometimes the CLARISSA researcher was not allowed to accompany the child in the workplace, so met them directly afterwards, or in their lunch break. A piloting phase allowed researchers and children to practise with mobile technology to track movement and define survey categories to record activities and feelings of safety on the mobile device. The research team worked with a technology partner, Science Connect,⁵ to create base maps of our study area, design data entry forms, complete data quality checks, and design visualisation layers and filters to analyse children's activities and experiences alongside adult observations spatially and temporally. Children co-developed safeguarding plans

and were involved in the spatial analysis of their data, which entailed looking at traces of their journey on a digital map, with all the activities and experiences they recorded over the course of the day.

While the central data of this research was the child's day, their journey and their feelings, the lived experience of children was complemented by adult observations, which were also spatially plotted onto the digital maps. As outsiders to the child's lived experience, the researchers were able to take note of things that may have become normalised by the child. Perhaps more importantly, as it turned out, the researchers were able to experience the child's life in an embodied way, making note of how the heat, smells, and dark alleys made them feel.

2.2 WHO ARE THE CHILDREN AND WHY ARE THEY WORKING?

The CLARISSA children's research group members in Bangladesh were involved in randomly selecting children through purposive sampling. The sampling was purposive because the children were selected based on the relationship they had with the programme, their knowledge of their neighbourhood, and their engagement in WFCL. The research team also worked with a community mobiliser to identify potential children to include, before the team visited households to invite the children into the research. The team was purposive about sampling an approximately equal number of boys and girls, the majority of whom were directly involved in the leather industry in some way.

As intended, and congruent with the CLARISSA programme focus on Hazaribagh where the processing and manufacturing of leather is interwoven into the physical fabric of the neighbourhood, most of the children work in leather factories. The sample includes ten girls working in leather production. There are also stories from children in the neighbourhood working in tea shops, in the ready-made garment industry, on construction sites, and in other jobs (see Table 2). Any of these jobs are potentially hazardous:

3 See [Hard Labour website](#).

4 Madrasas are religious schools attended by Muslims.

5 See [Science Connect website](#).

He started working in a military shoemaking factory, where he used to carry heavy sacks of around 40kg, and this would often sprain his neck. He also sprayed chemicals on the shoes and that would make him sick, so he left the job. He worked at a rice shop, where he had to carry heavy sacks of rice from one point to the other. The dust also irritated his breathing.

(Researcher's account of Ashnir's work history)

Many of the children speak of beginning work at a young age. Often children are open about their age because child work is the norm in Hazaribagh, but Kakoli (age 13) points out the routine nature of children falsifying age documents to work in leather goods factories. Adib says that he worked from the age of eight and Sonju from the age of nine.

CLARISSA analysis of 405 life stories of children in Dhaka provides a detailed and nuanced account of all the reasons children work.⁶ To contextualise what we learned about children's days for this paper, we collected some biographical information about children including their age, gender, type of work, and the age they started working (Table 2, page 13). The table includes the pseudonyms and child IDs used in this paper, so the reader can look up biographical information to contextualise the quotes used here to illustrate common experiences. The Hard Labour website includes 17 of the most comprehensive accounts of children's days.⁷

The research team also inquired why the children are working. Many of them are providing for their families, sometimes as the main breadwinner, like Aftab and Anjuman (both age 13). Frequently, there is a point in the child's history when their family experienced economic crisis, because of rising debt levels. Manali (age 13) started working when her parents could not afford the US\$46 (BDT 5,353) to collect her report card from school. Aftab (age 13) explained how his school fees of US\$5.50 (BDT 640) were a financial burden too far. Many of the children had been working for two years since they left school during the Covid-19 pandemic (including Fahima, Raj, and Shakib). Rocky (age 12) also began work during the pandemic but was between jobs because he was injured in his last job; his mother had lined up his next position in a factory. Parental worry about idleness, which is in general culturally unacceptable, was also a factor influencing decisions to work. Marisha (age 14) explains

that she has to give her father her wages 'otherwise he will kick me out of the house'.

Most of the children give the money they earn to their parents for household bills and food. Some children are working to service medical debts, including Muntasir (age 16), whose father broke both legs after falling from the third floor of a building, and 13-year-old Chandra, who works because her mother was hit by a truck and broke her leg. Her father's job as a rickshaw driver does not earn enough to pay back the medical expenses. A minority of the children study alongside work, like Ashnir, but he reports chronic pain and feeling exhausted. Most children do not have the time in their days to study and work. Aadya works to pay for her younger sister's education.

2.3 ETHICS

The study was conducted in compliance with all human rights and ethical standards developed by the CLARISSA programme as per the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) ethical protocol. The risk mitigation planning work was supported by a CLARISSA safeguarding expert in partnership with children, community mobilisers, parents, and local connectors. A series of conversations and planning documents informed the research design, piloting, data collection, analysis, and writing phases. The process is discussed in detail in an accompanying process learning note (Bhattarai *et al.* 2024, forthcoming), but the main innovation was to make ethics and safeguarding a participatory exercise.

For example, in the design of the journey mapping, children were involved in thinking through potential risks and coming up with solutions. Through exploring the different technological solutions with children, the research team chose to use mobile phones as opposed to tablets as the phones would invite less curiosity in their neighbourhood contexts, where most people have a mobile phone. We became mobile-led in the apps we chose to support data collection. During a risk assessment session on data collection with mobile phones, children decided they did not want to carry the phone, so the methodology was adapted. Children were accompanied by CLARISSA research assistants to carry the phone and capture their feelings and observations. In further conversations with technical experts, the research

6 See the [CLARISSA website](#) for other papers.

7 See [Hard Labour website](#).

Table 2: Basic biographical information about the 25 children who took part in the CLARISSA study to record a single day in their lives

Name*	Age	Gender	Workplace	Role	Age started working
Sagir	14	Boy	Leather drying fields	Leather processing	Not known
Kibria	17	Boy	Tea stall	Street vending	14
Nuvana	16	Girl	Garments-producing NGO	Garment making	Not known
Kanta	15	Girl	Tea stall	Street vending	13
Aadya	15	Girl	Leather goods factory	Leather goods making	Not known
Adib	16	Boy	Varies	Casual labourer	8
Raj	16	Boy	Building site	Construction	14
Fahima	16	Girl	Leather goods factory	Leather goods making	14
Jacky	17	Boy	Leather goods factory	Leather goods making	13
Rina	14	Girl	Leather goods factory	Leather goods making	Not known
Rocky	12	Boy	Leather goods factory	Leather goods making	10
Aftab	13	Boy	Leather goods factory	Leather goods making	Not known
Manali	13	Girl	Leather goods factory	Leather goods making	Not known
Ramina	17	Girl	Leather goods factory	Leather goods making	Not known
Marisha	14	Girl	Leather goods factory	Leather goods making	13
Ashnir	15	Boy	Factory	Logo printing and packaging	12 or 13
Kakoli	13	Girl	Leather goods factory	Leather goods making	Not known
Asha	17	Girl	Leather goods factory	Leather goods making	13
Sonju	17	Boy	Leather goods factory	Leather goods making	9
Anjuman	13	Girl	Not currently working but has worked	Not currently working	10
Jhilik	16	Girl	Leather drying fields	Leather processing	11
Muntasir	16	Boy	Not working on this day but until recently was working in a leather factory	Leather processing	13
Shakib	17	Boy	Leather goods factory	Leather goods making	Not known
Shapla	13	Girl	Tea stall	Street vending	Not known
Chandra	13	Girl	Garments factory	Garment making	Not known

* The children's real names have not been used. NGO – non-governmental organisation.
Source: Authors' own.

team took the decision to differentiate the GPS tracker (which collected information about the child's location) from the data entry form (which collected information about the child's activities and feelings), so these data flows could not be put together by anyone who erroneously obtained the phone.

By openly discussing risks, the children were encouraged to make their own choices about what aspects of their day they captured. For example, if they felt it was unsafe to record their experiences while their employer was around, or while on public transport, they did not do so. Based on the feedback of the children who carried out piloting, we created a feature that children and adult researchers could use to retrospectively add a safety rating, a feeling, an observation, a voice note, or photograph. The decision to trade real-time data with a lower risk profile proved important, as most children made some use of the retrospective data entry feature.

We worked with each individual child to identify the day and the 12-hour period within their 24-hour day when it would be best for an adult researcher to accompany them. The children and adults came to agreements about when and where it was possible for an adult to accompany them. Often, for example, the adult researcher was not granted access to the workplace. They would wait at a nearby location and meet the child at lunchtime and at home time. If any risky places were identified on the child's projected route, then a male member of staff accompanied the girl and the female researcher for that portion of the journey. Both the adult researchers and the children had a list of emergency contacts they trusted, and members of the wider research team were in the locality to be on hand in

case of an issue. For some children, the presence of the researcher and adult attention was welcome – it eased their loneliness and added some novelty to their daily experience. For other children, the presence of the adult researcher was more difficult, and it took time for them to feel comfortable.

Data was visually represented on maps by our technical partner, Science Connect, on private servers. Codes were used in the data collection and analysis phases and pseudonyms were utilised in place of the children's real names in report writing. We edited out specific place names and workplace names and worked with an illustrator to capture each child's portrait and biography. The children answered some questions about their journey to analyse their own data, and this provided them with space to correct, deepen, or redact information they had added to the map during the data collection period. The children also worked in pairs to explore similarities and differences in their journeys, their experiences, and their feelings before discussing in plenary the main learnings from collective data points presented on a map of their neighbourhood. Researchers used the children's reflections on the maps and in the analysis workshops to co-author their contributions to the stories.

In the biggest departure from our initial conceptualisation, we primarily represented children's days temporally, not spatially, in the individual accounts on the Hard Labour website. The GPS tracking was too location-specific to ensure anonymisation, so we presented an illustrative journey on an illustrated map. The written account was constructed around the sequencing of activities and experiences children recorded, from when they woke up to when they went to bed.

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Section 3:

FINDINGS

3 FINDINGS

Each child's story reveals something about their home life, the neighbourhood they live in, and their work. Even though data about how children felt and why was personal to a particular child and specific to a place and time, some clear patterns from these situated experiences emerged across the story collection. This section explores the most commonly reported experiences that boys and girls reported as they went about their days.

3.1 HOME LIFE

3.1.1 Difficult living conditions

Most of the children that CLARISSA researchers accompanied for the day live in very small homes. Almost always, the home is an informal dwelling of one or two rooms. The children may share a single room with four or five adults (like Aftab and Ashnir), or live across two

rooms with eight adults (like Anjuman). Sometimes the whole family shares a bed.

Some children live in large buildings comprising small units or rooms. In one building that was described by Chandra there are 13 families living above, below, and alongside each other. This is not a high number, when compared to two of the residential buildings located in Hazaribagh that children and adult researchers wrote stories about.⁸ The floorplans show cramped living conditions in single room units that line narrow, dark corridors. Often the roof of the dwellings is made of tin with no windows, as in Muntasir's story, which makes the home incredibly hot. Asha and her family have no access to natural light or to a breeze and the lack of windows makes it difficult to spend time inside. Because of these environmental factors, the children often get little sleep and routinely comment on how tired they are as they go about their day. One child shares that his parent's intimate relationship bothers his sleep at night.

8 See [Hard Labour website](#).



Shakib moved into this two-bedroom single-storey tin house with his sister and parents during the pandemic. Shakib left school as his parents relocated to Dhaka and his father began work as a rickshaw puller.

Finding the time and space to properly rest is also challenging. For girls, the situation is worse, many of whom spend several hours at home cooking, fetching water, washing, and cleaning. This is before and after they complete a 10–12-hour day doing paid work.

3.1.2 Going to work hungry

The home environment also affects when and what children eat. Children often go about their days without food. Some of the children reported feeling hungry all day, and many were hungry all morning. When children went to work without food, it was often because facilities at home were lacking. In most cases, the buildings have one kitchen which is shared among multiple families. The researcher who accompanied Aadya during her day described four stoves shared between 35 families.



Aadya cooks using one of the four stoves that serve 35 families; with intermittent gas supplies, cooking is a daily challenge. The stoves are situated by the garage on the ground floor, so most families carry cooked food up and down stairs. In front of the stoves is standing wastewater, and behind the wall is a pile of leather.

Gas for cooking is frequently unavailable until the afternoon or evening. Sonju said that 'most days there is no cooking at home due to gas'. He has had no breakfast at home since he was eight or nine, and says he only eats leftovers or nothing at all for lunch. This means that the children work with little or no sustenance. Given the physical and mental demands of the work they perform, it seems improbable that their calorific intake is sufficient.

One account spoke of the stunting of a child as a result of malnutrition (Shapla). Marisha (age 14) says: 'I'm already feeling very weak and sick. Doctors have said that I have a weak heart. I also have a problem with my ears, my gums bleed, my blood pressure is low, and I always feel tired.'

3.1.3 Working from home

Many of the children live in the same buildings as their workplaces. The photographs accompanying the account for Aadya and Rocky show piles of leather and rubbish within centimetres of the cooking area. This is not unusual.

It is generally seen as culturally unacceptable for both boys and girls to be 'idle', to 'hang around', or to play. Children are seen by their parents as vulnerable to bad influences, including drug taking. By contrast, workplaces are perceived as 'safer' places to be, even when those workplaces are contaminating the home environment with chemicals and waste.

3.1.4 Feeling unsafe at home

The many homes that are in large buildings with multiple rooms have common kitchens and bathrooms which are not well cared for and are often filled with rubbish, leather waste, and overflowing wastewater. Open staircases were a common concern among children as they have to carry cooking pots up and down them and because people fall at night when there is no light. Poor housing conditions create stress for children, and this was particularly evident among boys who were able to spend time at the river and on rooftops with friends. They would talk about how 'fresh' the breeze is and how 'the mind feels better'.

Some of the children disclosed that they do not feel safe at home because of family violence. Kanta (age 15) describes her abusive parents, while Rocky (age 12) says that he does not like staying at home where he gets beaten by his father. On the day a CLARISSA researcher

joins Rocky, his face has lots of marks on it. His mother explains that his father beat him. Rocky says he cannot think about anything because his mood is 'off' and goes to a tea stall for breakfast; but he is afraid of going as he has had a problem with the children close by. Manali (age 13) also says she feels unsafe at home. Her parents do not talk to her, they scold her, and her father beats her when

he is drunk. Asha (age 17) wants to get married so that she can get away from her abusive family.

While boys have more freedom to leave the home to be with friends, the comments made by some girls in the journey mapping indicate that girls are particularly constrained. Parents fear that a girl will be victim of sexual advances if she is exposed to the external environment. Many of the girls are not allowed out, except for the journey to work which is likely to be less than a 15-minute walk away. Shapla says: 'I don't like to go anywhere as my mother doesn't allow it.'

The girls considered common bathrooms as dangerous. They described bathrooms and toilets having no doors, or with big holes in the floors and ceilings which allowed men to watch them.

I have to change in the washroom and there is a big hole in the wall. I feel so uncomfortable and sometimes I feel scared that someone is watching me. I try to be careful while changing... My house is unsafe for me. It is next to the road, and my toilet is unsafe... I don't enjoy the environment at home because I'm afraid that someone is always watching me.

(Anjuman, girl, 13)

The threat is amplified in buildings where families live alongside units that are rented out to unmarried men. For Aadya, home is experienced as the least safe place because of a nightclub on the rooftop 'where bad people come'.

3.1.5 Feeling lonely

The stories about children's days revealed how lonely and isolated they can feel. When children cannot talk to anyone at work or at home, they are deprived of any social interaction. One girl wrote that she was so happy that the researcher had collected her from school as she had watched others being collected by their guardians, but no one had ever collected her before. Kibria felt similarly: 'Everyday I come to work alone. Today I am feeling good to come with you.' Manali says: 'I don't like to be alone. If I had someone else to spend my time with then I think it would be less lonely. My parents don't talk to me properly. They scold me and beat me.'

With few safe places to be and with little time to go any place, time on TikTok and other social media becomes the focus for leisure time. Aadya says: 'I felt better when I went to buy a MB [memory] card to watch a drama on my



The bathroom in the building where Shapla lives is almost completely open.

phone while working.' Mobile phone internet data can cost more than BDT 500 (US\$4.50) per month, which puts a further burden on the child and their family to earn more income (Asha).

3.1.6 In summary

When we think about children working in WFCL, it is natural to think that long hours and hazardous work is the hardest part of their lives. But a spotlight on work misses the interlinking stressors the children navigate before and after work while at home, and – as we will see – on the journey to and from work.

3.2 THE NEIGHBOURHOOD, AND THE JOURNEY TO AND FROM WORK

3.2.1 Fearing harassment and violence

For many of the children, the journey to and from work is the scariest part of their day. This is particularly so for girls who fear sexual harassment, teasing, or being attacked by boys who have taken drugs. Many of the girls experienced teasing on their journeys and the adult researchers also experienced this at first hand. Asha reflects on her situation in relation to that of the researcher:

Apu,⁹ you appear to be educated and from a better family background than us. Whilst you were harassed, consider those of us who have to deal with this on a daily basis. Where can we go if all walking paths are equally unsafe for us?

(Asha, girl, 17)

Every time Jhilik goes out of her home, at least one boy will comment on her appearance. She also faces more targeted harassment and threats. A much older married man, who has a teenage child himself, has asked her parents if he can marry Jhilik. Since being refused he has been threatening Jhilik that he will forcefully marry her... In terms of her personal safety, the area closest to her home is the most dangerous place for Jhilik.

(Researcher accompanying Jhilik, written account)

Boys face a different challenge: the risk of being drawn into fights. The children said that there was a culture of fighting over very small things.

I feel unsafe all the time, it is because I meet a lot of people of my age and I do not know who has what intentions for me... boys can bully me and take my phone and belongings and I cannot say anything.

(Jacky, boy, 17)

Because of the risks of both sexual harassment and of fights, a number of children said that the safest way to travel was in mixed groups of boys and girls. Fights were less likely to happen when girls were present, and sexual harassment was less likely to occur when the girls were accompanied by boys.

3.2.2 Wary of traffic accidents

The children perceive the street to be a dangerous place, in a way that the workplace is not always. Danger lies in the traffic on the roads they cross and navigate:

I feel very unsafe while crossing the road, which I have to do every day for reaching my workplace... there is no divider, transports are coming from both directions, it's risky here. In the night, the bus runs so fast that it loses its control if anyone stands on or passes over the road... They run by whistling, pressing the horn for a long time.

(Raj, boy, 16)

The 5 tola goli [road] is not good. The people living near that road die in accidents. An old woman died there due to a bike accident recently. I get scared crossing that road.

(Rina, girl, 14)

When a CLARISSA research team spent time on one of the streets that the children recommended that we experience, we witnessed several accidents in the space of just a few hours, corroborating the dangers reported by the children.¹⁰

3.2.3 Fearing danger in the dark

Children also fear the streets that look and feel unsafe. Despite the dangers of the busier streets, Nuvana says that she travels through (and therefore crosses) busy

9 In Bangla, 'apu' is a term of endearment used to refer to an older sister, or sometimes a female cousin who is older than the speaker. It is a common term used in Bengali households to address and show affection towards an older female family member.
10 See [Hard Labour website](#).

roads because quiet roads are unsafe due to harassment. Her accompanying researcher observed her fears: 'She is frequently frightened by men making predatory comments to her.'

Physical infrastructure issues are also important; for example, one child points to the fact that the lane is unlit. Asha refers to one area she calls Khalpar as very dangerous for women and girls:

A girl was raped and murdered here. We along with many neighbours moved house to get away from that place.

(Asha, girl, 17)

On the road, there are many people who do not know me and who may hurt me... when there is light and lots of people around then it is safe. If there is no light and no one around, it is unsafe. It is also unsafe when a gang of boys gathers, especially

when there is no one else around. It is dangerous when roadside stores close at night.

(Chandra, girl, 13)

The darkness is dangerous.

(Fahima, girl, 16)

Another child says that a place of safety from the sun is also a place of danger. Some of the children said that they feared and ran from the ghosts on the street. Ramina says of travelling home in the dark: 'I was so scared even though my home is only two or three minutes away.'

Marisha is terrified to cross a high bamboo bridge. She shouts out from fear. Her fears are all encompassing:

Fear of being raped, kidnapped, or molested engulfs me all the time. Also, there are many dogs around, all barking. I'm very scared of dogs.

(Marisha, girl, 14)



Boys smoking cannabis. The water in the canal is heavily polluted.

Aadya's fear is triggered by a gruesome memory:

I got up early and got myself ready. I didn't sleep well. A girl committed suicide by hanging herself and I saw the body. I kept remembering the hanged girl and I was scared.

(Aadya, girl, 15)

3.2.4 Feeling unsafe around people

The social fabric of the neighbourhood is described as intrusive and unsupportive. Chandra says that 'here nobody supports anyone. They don't like seeing people happy'. The children are working in and around people who are taking drugs. Jhilik describes the neighbourhood as a very dangerous place full of drug dealers.

I feel scared to come to this street. I don't pass this road on my way home at night. Because bad boys hang out here and they take drugs and drink here. I could get mugged. So, I don't go through this road because I am very afraid. And I'm a little scared to be here now.

(Muntasir, boy, 16)



The rooftop of the building where Asha lives

3.2.5 Spending time with friends

Hanging out with friends is the only thing that most of the children say they enjoy during their day. But for many, work takes up so many waking hours that time with friends is impossible. When children do get an opportunity for leisure, the accounts of their days reveal how few places exist in the neighbourhood for children. There are few playgrounds, and their homes are not large enough for children to gather in. Sometimes the children report hanging out on building roofs or in toxic open spaces. Asha describes the toxic waters of the canal she passes: 'The water in the canal is so contaminated that it has turned black.' The rooftops were described as unsafe after 7pm, because there are no barriers and people do fall off, and many of the children are not free from work and responsibilities before 7pm.

3.2.6 In summary

What comes across most strongly from asking children how they feel as they go about their day is that the fear of the streets and fear in the home are both as important to their daily experience of life as the impact of the hazardous work that they do. They are rarely at ease and experience sustained levels of mental stress with little or no respite.

3.3 WORK

3.3.1 Managing the heat

Some of the youngest children in the study pin leather to the floor to be dried, their work carried out in the open sun. Sagir says: 'The heat of the sun is so high that it is beyond human endurance.' Photographs taken of him indicate that the children do not wear hats or any other protective clothing.

Despite the heat, across most locations, there are no facilities for drinking water, according to Nuvana. For the girls, drinking water is a problem as it makes them need the toilet and the bathrooms are not safe. For Jhilik, who dries leather in the hot sun, dehydration is a constant problem:

You need to drink water constantly if you work under the sun like me, but if I drink too much water, I will have to pee a lot. I cannot afford that, as I have to go home every time I need a bathroom break.

(Jhilik, girl, 16)



Without any protection from the sun, Sagir lays out leather to dry. He describes the heat as 'beyond human endurance'.

Often the bathrooms at work have neither a door nor lighting and girls said that they did not use the bathroom unless it was an emergency. Jhilik avoids drinking water to avoid going to the bathroom. In the night she wakes her mother because she is scared to go to the bathroom alone. Going to the toilet also takes time – time which the children are not afforded in their workday. As Rina points out, 'Forget water, we are not even given time to go to the bathroom.'

Inside the factories, children talk a lot about how hot, dizzy, and nauseous they feel while working, which are also common health problems reported by the local residents of Hazaribagh who live amongst the leather tanneries (Human Rights Watch 2012).

3.3.2 Working excessively long hours

While a lot of the children work an eight- or nine-hour day, half were working more than 11 hours a day, either six or seven days a week. Some children were working six days a week plus a half day on Friday. For example:

- **Aadya typically works 12–14 hours a day including household work: she cuts hand gloves 9am–5pm, then cooks a meal for her family, before helping her mother complete her glove cutting until 11pm.**
- **Raj works 11 hours a day on a seven-storey building site.**
- **Fahima works 8am–8pm, but often has to do overtime until 9pm or 10pm as well as the housework because her mother is sick.**
- **Rina works 8am–8pm six days a week but often works overtime until 3am and has no leisure time at all.**
- **Rocky works such long hours that he has no time for any leisure at all – he feels bad because he cannot play football and there is not even time for chat.**
- **Marisha typically works 13 hours a day with her overtime and has been doing overtime now for four weeks straight.**
- **Ramina officially works 9am–5pm, but does overtime every day until midnight or 2am. She works six days a week plus a half day on Friday.**



Boys working in a hand glove factory in Aftab's story

*I stay at the factory from almost dawn until midnight.
So, in a sense, this is my actual home, isn't it?*
(Ramina, girl, 17)

Children find the long work hours oppressive. Shakib says: 'I have been working there since 9am and now it is past 6pm. I am feeling like I have just left jail.'

Children find evening work unsafe:

*It is unsafe to do overtime at night if there are no
known persons around. Since there are less people
at work at that hour, and especially fewer females.
If there are girls, it makes me more comfortable.*
(Chandra, girl, 13)

Nuvana and Kanta work after dark, but they are frightened to travel on the journey for many of the reasons discussed in section 3.2.



Manali cuts leather with heavy scissors. The small shapes are difficult to cut and she must not stray outside the lines. She receives a one-hour break on 12-hour workdays. She gets blisters on her hands and her neck hurts. By the evening, she has a headache and cannot focus. She makes mistakes and repeatedly has to redo the work.

Long work hours amplify the risk of accidents and ill health in hazardous work environments. Even in our small number of accounts, lots of accidents were described. Nuvana tells of her mother falling on the stairs. Aftab's account describes how hot irons burn children's hands. He says that a single moment of being absent-minded can lead to injury or loss of a limb. A researcher reports watching a child's hands turn blue with pain after she had been hammering and cutting leather for a long time. Manali reports that she is nauseous, has belly ache, and her eyes are burning when she works with latex, and her skin turns black if she touches it. And while the latex is being applied, the fans are switched off to create an even stronger nauseous smell.

Ramina (age 17) does 'risky heavy work with cutting with scissors, and then working on the skiving machine where fingers can get cut off, and then the hammering'.

Getting a higher wage in the leather industry is dependent on learning new skills. But as Aftab (age 13) says, 'The higher the pay the higher the risk.'

*To work here I may cut my fingers or my hand. The
previous operator had an accident and cut himself,
so I was promoted from helper to machine operator.*
(Sonju, boy, 17)

Children report how their ability to work safely is affected by levels of tiredness and stress. Feeling hungry in the run-up to lunchtime is another aspect of children's experiences that they find distracting (e.g. Jacky, Aftab). Children report feeling refreshed and focused after breaks (e.g. Jhilik), and they reflect how nice it is for their body to rest over lunch. Many children (e.g. Fahima) do not enjoy the hot walk home for lunch, especially when they are tired and hungry. They also find it difficult to rest because they are worried about returning to work on time, so they do not get told off by supervisors.

3.3.3 The toll of repetitive work

Working the machines is tough. Rina (age 14) says: 'It is very hard and big people find it hard to operate this machine'. Manali is constantly experiencing pain from her work:

*Hitting the leather with the Lanka, I struggle to lift it
up. As I have to put extra pressure on a pin to make
a hole in the leather, my hands and my neck area is
hurting more than ever. And when I hit the leather,
a huge sound is made and my heartbeat goes up.
When it hits my hand, that area turns blue.*
(Manali, girl, 13)

Even apparently basic tasks such as using scissors can be extremely dangerous. Scissors that cut leather are not light. Aadya reports that she cuts her hand several times a month. It is clear that she suffers from repetitive strain from using heavy implements. The researcher accompanying her reported: 'It surprised me how hard cutting hand gloves is. I myself cut three pairs and my hand hurt. Sitting all day to cut 1,000 is very hard work.' Similarly, the researcher observing Manali said, 'When you watch, it seems like easy work but doing it myself I realised it is very difficult to cut leather'; also observing that the child had scars across her hands.

Repetition of routine tasks is characteristic of many jobs.

I only perform one task each day, which involves the making process. Sometimes my hand aches, and right now, I'm experiencing slight discomfort. This task consumes my entire focus... Despite occasionally feeling bored, I persevere without stopping. From 8am to 5pm, I dedicate myself entirely to this task.
(Kakoli, girl, 13)

Rocky (age 12) says: 'My body hurts every morning' as a result of gluing and cutting. The repetitive work takes place in the context of high heat levels and cramped work conditions. This is particularly the case during electricity load shedding – when there is no electricity for fans to cool workspaces.

Boredom is an issue for children, especially when doing repetitive tasks on their own for hours without a break. Ashnir says he takes tea and smokes cigarettes to help with the pain of tiredness. Sonju takes tea and marijuana to stop feeling bad. More generally, researchers were struck by how much tea boys drank to stay alert at work.

3.3.4 Lacking dignity

Children are treated poorly by adults at work. They are paid a lot less than adults even though they are expected to work at the same intensity and with similar responsibilities. Rina (age 14) works in a leather goods factory 12 hours a day, six days a week and she is owed money by her employer who does not pay her on time. Raj works for less than US\$5 (BDT 582) a day and feels the older men give him particularly onerous work, and he is frightened of having an accident. Shakib works long hours, six days a week for US\$74 (BDT 8,611) a month, but feels that since he has left school he has little choice but to get on with it rather than complain.

The supervisor is shouting at us, and it is making me feel nervous. It's too much pressure.
(Shakib, boy, 17)

Asha earns US\$73 (BDT 8,494) a month at a leather factory, which includes mandatory overtime until 9pm. Despite her commitment to work, Asha is aware that her father's health condition and mother's addiction mean the family is unable to save any money. She plans to marry a man she met online four months ago as a way out of her current situation.

There is often a direct inverse relationship in the data between work pressure increasing and children feeling worse. On the occasions when work is quiet, the children are bored and restless, but they are not stressed. More commonly, however, work pressure is high because new orders come in, mistakes are made, and the factory is understaffed. Rina describes her relationship with her supervisors: 'They behave very badly with us. If anyone makes mistakes at work, they yell at us and use bad language.' Manali is told off because she is talking to friends while working.

Many of the children endure constant pain and discomfort at work. Breaks are short and infrequent, providing little relief. Marisha (age 14) reports how her movements are continuously monitored by CCTV. She suffers aches and pains but is told off by a supervisor for not working hard enough if she walks around. Asha also works surrounded by cameras. In contrast, Aftab (aged 13) prefers to work on the ground floor of the factory because there is no manager or supervisor there, so the work is more relaxed and sociable.

The hostility and disrespect children experience at work takes away their dignity and erodes their resilience. Many children were still in their first jobs since they began work during the pandemic. Some, like Raj, did not have fixed work, either taking jobs in construction or in the leather industry, either cutting leather or treating it with chemicals. For those children who had been working for several years (e.g. Jacky), some had experienced a surprising number of jobs for their age, reflecting their efforts to seek better work.

3.3.5 The importance of friends at work

The thing that makes the biggest difference to the resilience of the children in these workplaces is the presence of friends and peers. One child said that he worked in the leather industry because he had felt

excluded by other adults in the construction industry, but that in the leather industry he was working with children of his own age. However, this does not mean children get much time to spend with friends. Kakoli's only opportunity for recreation is the hour she spends with colleagues at the cafeteria over lunch.

Some children work alone and some return home to eat. Kibria shares that he works in the tea shop precisely because he is surrounded by friends. For those children like Jacky who do not work with friends, towards lunchtime

and the end of the day thoughts turn to how much they are looking forward to seeing their peers (e.g. Asha, Sonju).

3.3.6 In summary

Children work long hours in appalling conditions that threaten their health. Some work in dark rooms with no air, others in intolerable sunlight. They are vulnerable to repetitive strain, and harm from chemicals, glue, and latex. The children work for a pittance and are treated with little or no respect. Their only respite is spending time with friends.

Section 4:

DISCUSSION

4 DISCUSSION

4.1 THE CHILDREN LIVE IN SMALL WORLDS

It is striking how few of the children work more than ten minutes away from their homes. Many lived just a few minutes away, or even in the same building as their work. As we have seen, this means that many children (especially girls) almost never move more than ten minutes from their homes (e.g. Ramina, Marisha). Often the use of social media platforms like TikTok and Facebook becomes the outside world.

I make TikTok videos sometimes. But I do not have much time to make them regularly. I also chat with my friends on Messenger, even though they live close by. I like to have fun with my sisters as well, but I feel tired after coming back from work. So I mostly sleep or watch Facebook posts.

(Jhilik, girl, 16)

It is very unusual for children to leave Hazaribagh unless they are going back to the village where they grew up. Girls rarely move around. Within their small worlds, hazardous child work is normal. As well as being a lonely experience, it can also be the only opportunity children get to be with peers, in an environment which offers them more relational safety than the streets and their homes.

All these children live with adult concerns. The researcher accompanying Shakib was struck by how much the minds of these young people are dominated by their family circumstances:

I was taken aback by how much of the conversation between Shakib and his friends, when they gathered after work, was about work, earnings, and their financial circumstances. I was shocked that this dominated their minds to such an extent, among a group of boys who ranged from 12–18 years of age.

(Researcher accompanying Shakib)

A job in the leather industry leaves little space for the children doing much else in their lives. They are poorly paid for their efforts, which results in the children feeling ambivalent about their role. They are providers for their

families, and are in positions of responsibility at work, which is valued but denies them aspects of childhood including schooling and play. Despite the responsibilities they take on, they are treated poorly by parents and supervisors precisely because they are children. This is a confusing and lonely social landscape to navigate.

4.2 NOTHING ABOUT HAZARIBAGH IS CHILD-FRIENDLY

Fear pervades the life of many of the children. It can come from dangers at home or work, or school or travelling the streets – sometimes all of these. Jacky says: 'I do not feel safe anywhere.' There is no respite or place of refuge for children living and working in Hazaribagh.

Everywhere is toxic. In 2013, Hazaribagh was ranked as one of the ten most toxic places on the planet (Bernhardt and Gysi 2013) because of the toxic waste from leather tanneries polluting the air, streams, ponds, and canals next to where people live. The children's stories show no signs of improvement:

We pass along a narrow road beside a canal. A strong smell is coming from the canal. The water is completely black. The waste from various leather-tanning factories ends up here, so there are many different chemicals in the water. There was also a lot of dirty garbage strewn around the road.

(Researcher accompanying Muntasir)

Children are not only exposed to toxins at work or when walking the neighbourhood, they live amid the chemicals and the leather hides, as work units on the bottom floor of buildings are navigated to reach home.

The streets are dangerous and there is no safe place to play and be a child. Girls are particularly affected, because there is only a small window between starting work and being too young to be sexually harassed by men. By the time the girls are aged 14 or 15, they fear not only the streets but also the corridors and bathrooms of their homes.

4.3 RETHINKING HAZARDOUS WORK

The amplification of risk resulting from the accumulation of environmental and work factors is not considered in the Bangladesh Labour Act 2006 (amended 2018). The Bangladesh government (like others) denotes certain industries as hazardous, but the use of general categorisations directs policy attention away from the interactions between work activities and work conditions that create dangers and amplify what is already described as WFCL.

While laying out leather to dry is not listed as hazardous work, a 13-year-old child working under the 40 degrees Celsius sun in a high-pressured and unsafe environment means she does not take water to counter her dehydration. Heat stress has been consistently linked to chronic health conditions, including kidney failure, and it is preventable with work practices that take care of people (Alayyannur and Ramdhan 2022).

Similarly, a child working with scissors to cut leather is not deemed to be doing hazardous work, but his or her tiredness at the end of a 12–14-hour day in combination with the cumulated fatigue resulting from working every day with insufficient calorie intake, as well as the onset of repetitive strain injuries, makes accidents more likely. If there are chemicals around their workstation, the children are exposed to them over long periods. If they are frightened because of constant scolding from supervisors, they are less likely to be able to concentrate – particularly hazardous when using dangerous tools. If the child works after dark, their journey back home is more frightening.

Extending beyond the workplace, the research also illustrates how poor home environments make work more dangerous for children. Children are working without food and lacking sleep because of cramped living conditions and insufficient cooking facilities. Home is not a place where children can de-stress and relax. For girls, it is a place of more work. If a child is also working two or three hours before and after work and has to sleep in a single room with multiple other people, their tiredness is radically increased, and the risks that they face are amplified. Interventions to mitigate WFCL need to understand and respond to the whole life context of the child. Through the child's eyes, workplace initiatives are unlikely to be sufficient in distinguishing between hazardous and non-hazardous work.

4.4 SMALL IMPROVEMENTS THAT WOULD MAKE A BIG DIFFERENCE

At work children feel better on a break, in the shade, and after eating food. Some small improvements to workplace conditions – such as providing children with regular breaks, water, places to rest, and regular snacks – would improve their levels of comfort, energy, and concentration, thus reducing the number of accidents.

Providing gloves for children in factories would limit the physical impact of the work on their bodies. Even hats for children working under the sun might make a small difference. Making sure children, especially girls, have access to private bathroom facilities, or are granted permission to go to the toilet in pairs, would make a positive difference to the experience of the working child. Similarly, on the occasions when girls and boys are treated with dignity by supervisors, it makes a big difference. The scolding and abusing of younger employees is a cultural norm. There are examples of business owners proactively treating children well because they recognise this relationship is important for loyalty. Clear information from government and NGOs about the importance of dignity in the workplace would help. The provision of reliable services – for example, gas and electricity – are also important and is an issue requiring attention by city government.

Some of the things that children are already doing to mitigate risks could be communicated more widely. For example, some children have figured out that travelling in mixed groups of boys and girls is safer. The threats to boys and girls are different, but when in a mixed group the threat of gang violence or sexual assault is minimised. This learning has been built from experience and it could be communicated more directly to younger children. Similarly, children in two CLARISSA Action Research groups looking at working conditions have modelled the use of safety equipment and feel both safer and more empowered (CLARISSA 2024c, 2024d). Another Action Research group of children have worked with private landlords to improve the safety of bathrooms, stairwells, and rooftops (CLARISSA 2024b).

The one thing that consistently makes a positive difference to the children's days is the friendship of peers. The children who felt most isolated in the workplace were the most vulnerable. More thought needs to go into how time for play and friendship can be supported and nurtured. One aspect of this is to support places where

children – girls and boys (separately or together) – can safely socialise outside of work. The provision of physical spaces can reinforce the importance of child wellbeing in a cultural fabric of a neighbourhood. The visual reminder that play and socialising is part of growing up enlarges children's worlds beyond work, creating a possibility that

safe leisure time becomes part of their daily lives. Where children did have good relationships with their parents, they experienced a positive home life, and one Action Research group of children looked at family negligence and violence (CLARISSA 2024a).

Section 5:

CONCLUSION

5 CONCLUSION

The details of the children's days reveal the emotional, relational, and physical demands that living and working in Hazaribagh creates for them. The cumulative and amplifying impact of home, work, and the neighbourhood on their lived experience was beyond what we as researchers could have conceptually conceived. To hear that a child works 12 or more hours a day in a hot and

loud environment is different to experiencing it. This work brings into view the challenges that same child navigates before, after, and between work. The details of the abuses reveal the possibility of small improvements that may make a big difference to the stress and strain the children are experiencing.

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CLARISSA works by co-developing with stakeholders practical options for children to avoid engagement in the worst forms of child labour in Bangladesh and Nepal.

The participatory processes which underpin the programme are designed to generate innovation from the ground which can sustainably improve the lives of children and their families.

The programme's outputs are similarly co-designed and collaboratively produced to enhance local ownership of the knowledge, and to ensure that our research uptake and engagement strategy is rooted in the direct experience of the people most affected on the ground.