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Leveraging Education to End Child Labour

Lessons from India and Bangladesh



Executive summary

Key findings

Global progress in child labour reduction has stalled since 2016. In addition, the negative consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, recurrent extreme weather events and the cost-of-living crisis further threaten to slow or even reverse the progress made.

Of the several factors that contribute to a reduction in child labour, there is broad consensus that improving access to quality schooling plays a prominent role in preventing and reducing child labour. This report presents analysis of the interrelationships between schooling and child labour, focusing on Bangladesh and India, with the objective of highlighting how education can further contribute to accelerating progress in the elimination of child labour.

While accurate estimates of child labour prevalence and trends are difficult to obtain due to differences in the understanding and definitions of child labour across countries, as well as limitations in the available survey datasets, both Bangladesh and India have achieved significant declines in child labour and growth in primary and secondary school enrolment over the past two decades.

In Bangladesh, the National Child Labour Surveys indicate that the prevalence of child labour declined from 7.5 per cent to 4.4 per cent between 2003 and 2022. Children are mostly employed informally, enduring extended work hours, inadequate pay and unsafe conditions. A large proportion of children continue to work in agriculture, where earnings are low and work is labour-intensive and uncertain given the small size of farm holdings. Certain groups of children are more likely to combine schooling and work – for example, boys and children living in rural areas. Early marriage is another factor that can prevent children, especially girls, from continuing with their studies.

In India, specialized surveys to estimate child labour are not available. Analyses of data for 2018/19 reveal that 2 per cent of children aged 5–17 years were working in India. Children from the poorest households were over twice as likely to work only (without going to school), compared to those from the richest households. Additionally, they were four times more likely to neither attend school nor work. Boys had a higher likelihood of working only, while girls had a higher chance of neither attending school nor working.

Estimates obtained using data for 2018/19 further suggest a prevalence of child labour ranging from 0.7 per cent of all children aged 5–17 years, using the national definition, to 1.3 per cent of children, using the most comprehensive international definition.

Based on time use data for 2019, among children aged 6–17 years, girls spend significantly more time (134 minutes per a day) than boys (79 minutes) in unpaid domestic services and are about four times more likely than boys to undertake such activities.

A systematic review of evidence suggests that four sets of interventions – at the child level, household level, school level and systems level – hold promise for positive impacts on schooling and child labour outcomes. Key examples of effective or promising interventions are listed below:

- **Interventions focused on children:** Scholarships and vouchers, educational remittances and school feeding.
- **Interventions focused on households:** Cash transfers in support of children’s schooling and parental awareness programmes.
- **Interventions focused on schools and teachers:** Improving access to school at all levels, including pre-primary, providing school-based training to adolescents on child rights and the hazards related to child labour, remedial education and pedagogy improvements, technology and adaptations for distance learning, and teacher recruitment and incentives.
- **Interventions focused on communities and systems:** Compulsory universal education laws, removal of school fees, reforms extending the duration of the school day.

Recommendations

Four interconnected sets of policy and programmatic approaches are required, complemented by a set of priority areas for evidence generation.

- 1) Eliminate barriers to entry, retention, learning and completion at all levels of schooling:** Effective strategies encompass expanding school feeding programmes, eliminating fees, offering scholarships to older girls, investing in early childhood education and inclusive school infrastructure, providing free transportation, extending school days, implementing bridge schools for re-enrolment, enhancing teacher training and enforcing universal education laws.
- 2) Expand social protection programmes, favouring universal and unconditional approaches:** Effective interventions for combating child labour among disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds include expanding social protection through cash transfers to vulnerable families to increase school participation and reduce child labour, especially outside the home. Additionally, extending social protection to specific groups like migrant households and informal sector workers helps alleviate economic insecurity and reduce vulnerability to exploitation.
- 3) Focus strategically on ending child labour as a child rights, capabilities and protection issue:** This entails targeting high-risk sectors and regions with high rates of child labour and out-of-school children. Strengthening protection for children in street situations is crucial in both countries. Equally vital is adopting integrated approaches that tackle social and cultural norms perpetuating early marriage and girls’ unpaid domestic work while also raising awareness of the importance of schooling and the dangers of child labour.

4) Carefully consider the role of programme design features and monitor programme

impacts: This calls for: (i) ensuring monetary transfers and scholarships cover schooling costs and lost earnings from child labour; (ii) considering moderating factors, such as social norms on time use for boys and girls, as well as for younger and older children; (iii) establishing feedback loops for programme refinement; and (iv) monitoring programme effects via impact evaluations to optimize benefits and address unintended consequences.

5) Strengthen child labour data and research on child labour and their interlinkages with

education: This calls for: (i) conducting regular specialized child labour surveys; (ii) undertaking sensitivity assessments of child labour prevalence to diverse child labour definitions; (iii) supplementing national surveys with time use studies; (iv) evaluating impact variations across gender, age, locality, wealth and social norms; and (v) analysing long-term programme effects and cost-effectiveness regarding schooling and child labour outcomes.

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1. Introduction

Child labour is an affront to human dignity. It exacerbates social inequality and discrimination, and it retards human progress. Ending child labour is an integral component of the protection and promotion of child rights. Child labour not only violates children's rights by depriving them of their right to education, safety and leisure but also impedes their ability to realize their full potential and capabilities by trapping them in exploitative and often hazardous work environments, robbing them of opportunities for personal growth and development.

Addressing child labour presents a complex challenge, as the issue is determined by multiple causes, ranging from poverty and vulnerability to economic and health shocks, insufficient access to social protection or quality education, and gaps in countries' legislative frameworks, as well as social norms that dictate the use of children's time. Moreover, there is no universally agreed understanding of what constitutes harmful work for children (see Box 1 about defining child labour and related challenges).

Box 1: Defining and measuring child labour

Three international conventions provide the definition framework on child labour. These are: the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and two International Labour Organization (ILO) Conventions: the Convention on Minimum Age (No. 138) and the Convention on the Worst Forms of Child (No. 182).

Based on the above conventions, child labour is defined as any work that deprives children under 18 years of their childhood, potential and dignity, and is detrimental to their physical and/or mental development. This encompasses work that is mentally or morally dangerous, causes harm to children or interferes with their education.

Defining and measuring child labour involves considering factors such as age, working hours, sector of employment and working conditions. While international conventions and recommendations provide guidelines on these aspects, there is flexibility for countries to apply international standards, leading to variations in what is considered child labour across countries and regions.

Further, specific activities more often undertaken by girls – such as household chores – are frequently overlooked in survey data, which represents an additional challenge in obtaining accurate and comparable measures of child labour.

Significant global progress in reducing child labour has been achieved, however, over the past two decades. Several factors have contributed to this, including declines in poverty and expansion of social protection, improved access to school education, and shifts in cultural and social norms. These shifts have enabled children, and girls in particular, to exercise greater freedoms, pursue higher levels of education and better adult employment opportunities, and avoid early marriage. Also contributing to the reduction in child labour have been the introduction and enforcement of laws, regulations and programmes enhancing child protection, alongside conscious efforts to improve safety and wages in the labour market.

Despite a decline worldwide in the proportion of children aged 5–17 years in child labour, from 16 per cent in 2000 to 9.6 per cent in 2016, progress in child labour reduction has stalled between 2016 and 2020. At the start of 2020, an estimated 160 million children worldwide were engaged in child labour, with almost half, 79 million, in hazardous work. Additionally, the negative consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, recurrent extreme weather events, conflicts and the cost-of-living crisis further threaten to slow or even reverse the progress made.

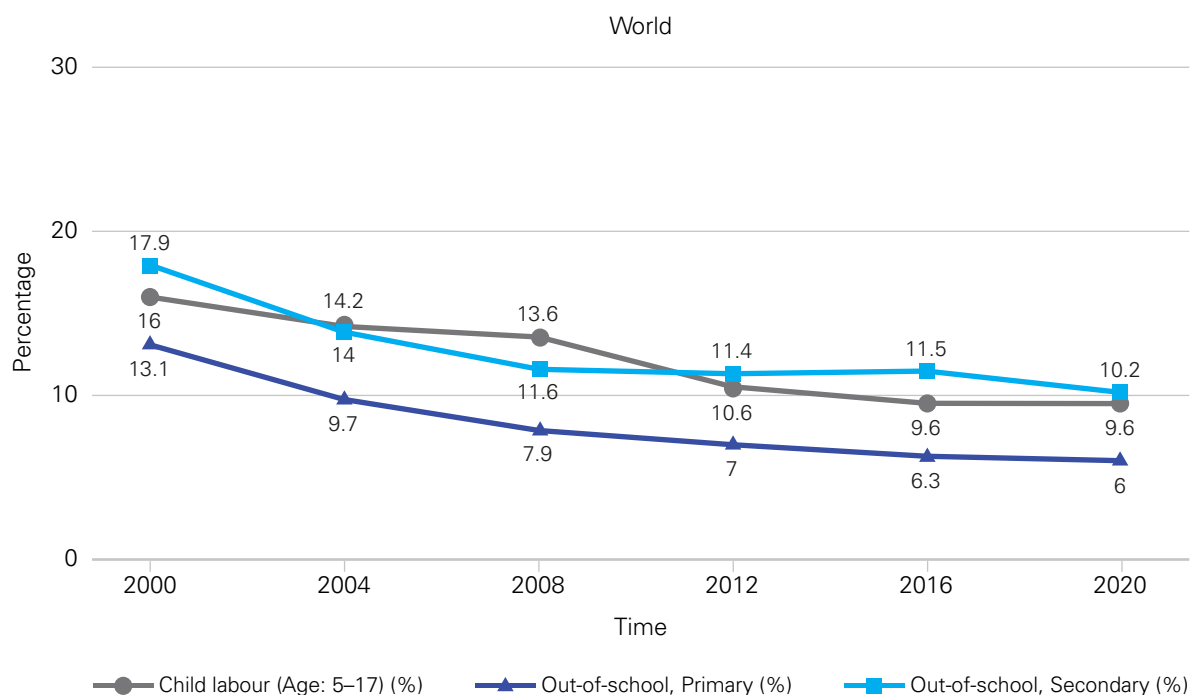
From a child rights perspective, engaging in work detracts children from vital activities, such as education and socialization, that are crucial for their development. Moreover, children lack the maturity to navigate the complexities of the adult working world and remain susceptible to exploitation, even within family structures. Premature involvement in labour can severely restrict children's future prospects, irrespective of whether it technically meets official definitions of 'child labour' set by governments and international bodies. Ultimately, the risk persists that time spent on work diminishes opportunities for learning and growth, impeding children's potential and well-being.

The negative relationship between child labour and education has been extensively documented. About one quarter of children aged 5–11 years and over a third of children aged 12–14 years who are in child labour are out of school.¹ There is broad consensus that improving access to quality schooling plays a prominent role in preventing and reducing child labour.²

Harnessing the role of education in addressing child labour requires ensuring that families have the means to invest in their children's schooling and demonstrating that the returns from such investments outweigh those from child labour. Universal access to quality education not only upholds the rights of all children but also disrupts the cycles of poverty and dependence on child labour across generations. Evidence supports the role of various types of strategies in boosting school enrolment and attendance while reducing school drop-out rates, such as: expanding access to early childhood development, care and pre-primary education programmes; introducing cash transfer programmes and in-kind transfer schemes, such as food for education; and reducing or eliminating direct and indirect schooling costs, including elimination of school fees, provision of free uniforms, textbooks and school transportation.³

Globally, the decline in the prevalence of child labour among children aged 5–17 years has gone hand in hand with a decline in the proportion of out-of-school children (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Global prevalence of child labour and out-of-school children in primary and secondary education (2000–2020)



Notes: For out-of-school children, trends are obtained by averaging country-level data for each year considered (2000, 2004, 2008, 2012, 2016, 2020). If data are missing in any of these years, the mean value of the preceding and following years is taken. Considering these 'year-adjusted' values, the number of countries equals 139 in 2000, 148 in 2004, 151 in 2008, 156 in 2012, 165 in 2016 and 136 in 2020.

Sources: International Labour Organization and United Nations Children's Fund, *Child Labour: Global estimates 2020, trends and the road forward*, ILO and UNICEF, New York, 2021. World Development Indicators for data on out-of-school children.

Decline in the prevalence of child labour has been accompanied by a steady increase in primary school completion rates. Yet, in many regions, progress in both child labour reduction and primary school completion is either slowing or stagnating. Exploring ways to strengthen the associations between education and child labour reduction can help to promote child-centred human development.⁴

Against this backdrop, this report focuses on the connection between children's education and child labour in two countries of South Asia: Bangladesh and India.⁵ Both countries have achieved significant declines in child labour and expansions in primary and secondary school enrolment over the past two decades. Both countries are poised for greater economic growth, but also have significant human development challenges remaining to deliver on this growth and its benefits, particularly for girls and women. Accelerating progress in ending child labour is, therefore, an important consideration at this point in time.

In both Bangladesh and India, there are laws and policies that have an impact on both child labour and schooling (see Box 2).

Box 2: Major laws and policies on child labour and schooling in India and Bangladesh

Bangladesh has ratified key conventions, such as the ILO Convention on the Worst Forms of Child Labour (No. 182) and the ILO Convention on Minimum Age (No. 138), showing its commitment to combating child labour. It recently adopted a revised National Plan of Action (2021–2025) to eliminate child labour, overseen by the National Child Labour Welfare Council. The country updated its list of hazardous child labour sectors and conducted national surveys in 2003, 2013 and 2022 to monitor child labour prevalence and characteristics. Additionally, Bangladesh implemented initiatives like the Female Stipend Programme (1982) and the Bangladesh Food for Education programme (1993) to promote universal schooling, supplemented by programmes like the Primary Education Stipend Programme (2003) and the Reaching Out-of-School Children (ROSC) programme (2008). The National Education Policy of 2010 (NEP2010) and the Education Sector Plan of 2020 (ESP2020) provided strategic frameworks for educational development.

The Government of **India** has demonstrated its commitment to combating child labour by ratifying ILO Conventions Nos 138 and 182, and introducing both the 1986 Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act and the 2016 Amendment Act, which completely prohibits children under 14 years from employment and bans adolescents (aged 14–18 years) from hazardous occupations. India has also implemented various initiatives to promote universal access to education nationwide. Among them are notably the passing of the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act of 2009, which ensures the right to education for all children up to 14 years of age, and the integration of the Mid-Day Meal Scheme into the National Food Security Act in 2013. Other more recent initiatives include the launch of DIKSHA (Digital Infrastructure for Knowledge Sharing) in 2017 to help achieve ‘One Nation, One Digital Platform’, and NISHTHA (National Initiative for School Heads’ and Teachers’ Holistic Advancement) in 2019/20, which is the world’s largest integrated teacher training programme for different stages of school education. Besides these, in alignment with the National Education Policy 2020, the Government of India launched the National Initiative for Proficiency in Reading with Understanding and Numeracy (NIPUN Bharat 2021) and the PM Schools for Rising India (PM SHRI 2022) for the upgrade of schools. Also released were the National Curriculum Framework for Foundational Stage in 2022 and the National Curriculum Framework for School Education in 2023.

However, enhancing education quality and learning remains a challenge in both countries. There are still differences in access to schooling between cities and rural areas, and inequalities due to class and gender. In India, discrimination based on caste makes it harder for some children to go to school. While there have been improvements in school infrastructure, teacher recruitment and training, assessment practices and pedagogy, girls, children with disabilities and those from marginalized groups often struggle to get an education and may face unfair treatment at school.

A renewed effort is therefore needed to realize the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) calling for the elimination of child labour, including its 'worst forms' by 2025.⁶ In both Bangladesh and India, as globally, more needs to be done to improve education quality and outcomes and to end child labour. In particular, there is scope to strengthen the link between child labour programmes and universalizing school education. Integrating strategies to bridge this gap could significantly enhance educational opportunities and effectively address child labour. This report identifies lessons from Bangladesh and India that can be instructive for other countries grappling with this twin challenge of improving quality education in schools and ending child labour.

2. Prevalence and patterns of child labour in Bangladesh and India

The ILO and UNICEF measure child labour based on age-specific weekly hour thresholds, the sector of work and working conditions (e.g., exposure to high temperatures, carrying heavy loads or other work-related hazards).⁷

However, countries have a margin of discretion in defining child labour, based on their specific economic circumstances and broader contexts. As a result, child labour definitions differ between India and Bangladesh, meaning that data on prevalence and patterns of child labour are not directly comparable between these two countries.

It is also the case that, in both countries, surveys intended for capturing economic activities more broadly do not adequately account for child labour, especially as pertains to child engagement in household chores. Moreover, the fluidity of different types of work and labour in a child's life may make invisible the true extent and nature of children's engagement in labour, as the lived experience of child labour typically defies the rigidity of categories of measurement and definitions.

Summarized below is the available evidence on the prevalence and patterns of child labour in Bangladesh and India.

2.1 Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, child work and child labour are measured through specific recurrent surveys, including the National Child Labour Survey (NCLS)⁸ and the UNICEF Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS).⁹ The definition and measurement approach used in these surveys closely follows ILO and UNICEF guidelines. Still, these national surveys use partially different definitions and measurement of child labour, which limits comparability across datasets. For example, the NCLS only considers economic activities, while the MICS considers both economic activities and household chores when measuring child work and child labour. As a result, child labour figures based on the NCLS may underestimate child labour, especially for girls who are more likely to be engaged in long hours of household chores. Further, different rounds of the NCLS use partially different thresholds for weekly hours when constructing measures of long hours of work by children, meaning that the different rounds are also not fully comparable over time.

With the above-mentioned limitations, the NCLS data spanning from 2003 to 2022 suggest a decline in child work and child labour (i.e., detrimental forms of work), both in terms of absolute numbers and prevalence (see Table 1). The number of working children in Bangladesh declined from 7.42 million in 2003 to 3.54 million in 2022, with a corresponding reduction in prevalence rates from 17.5 per cent to 8.9 per cent. The number of children in child labour declined from 3.18 million in 2003 to 1.78 million in 2022, with a corresponding reduction in prevalence from 7.5 per cent to 4.4 per cent.

Table 1: Number (million) and prevalence (percentage) of child labour in Bangladesh, 2003–2022

	2003			2013			2022		
	All	Boys	Girls	All	Boys	Girls	All	Boys	Girls
<i>Children in employment</i>									
Number (million)	7.42	5.47	1.95	3.45	2.10	1.35	3.54	2.73	0.80
%	17.5	24.1	9.9	8.7	10.2	7.1	8.9	13.2	4.2
<i>Child labour</i>									
Number (million)	3.18	2.46	0.72	1.69	0.95	0.75	1.78	1.37	0.40
%	7.5	10.8	3.6	4.3	4.6	3.9	4.4	6.6	2.1

Source: International Labour Organization and Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, *Report on National Child Labour Survey in Bangladesh*, ILO and BBS, Geneva and Dhaka, 2003; Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics and International Labour Organization, *Child Labour Survey, Bangladesh 2013*, BBS and ILO, Dhaka, 2015; Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics and International Labour Organization, *Provisional Report, National Child Labour Survey Bangladesh, NCLS 2022*, BBS and ILO, Dhaka, 2023.

However, child labour remains a significant issue, with a rate of 4.4 per cent when considering economic activities (NCLS 2022) and 6.8 per cent when also considering household chores (MICS 2019). Older children and males exhibit higher rates of child labour, while females are more likely to be engaged in long hours of household chores. Rural and urban areas show similar child labour prevalence. Out-of-school children are significantly more likely to be engaged in child labour compared to children attending school.

The prevalence of hazardous child labour has remained relatively steady at around 3 per cent, with a slight decline from 3.2 per cent in 2013 to 2.7 per cent in 2022 (corresponding to about one million children in 2022).¹⁰ Multiple studies in Bangladesh reveal that working conditions for child labourers are often hazardous. Most children are employed informally, enduring extended work hours, inadequate pay and unsafe conditions. Qualitative research conducted for this study revealed particularly harsh conditions of work for children employed in urban transportation, especially in the *lagoon* (light transport) sector.¹¹

“We do not have standard scheduled working hours. All the *lagoons* start functioning from 6 a.m. in the morning and continue until 10 p.m. at night. On average, we work around 12 to 14 hours a day for just 300–400 taka [US\$2.75–US\$3.66].”

– Boy, focus group discussion, Dhaka (Mohammadpur)

“Sometimes the passengers, who are not aware of the fare, misbehave with us and some even try to physically assault us. It is usually young males who initiate the assault by slapping. We sometimes also hit back against such an attack. Elderly people typically attack us verbally, but we don’t often say anything and try to tolerate it.”

– Boy, focus group discussion, Dhaka (Mohammadpur)

Children in street situations in Bangladesh often engage in the worst forms of child labour, enduring hazardous work conditions.¹² In urban areas, children often engage in activities like begging, collecting trash, domestic labour and other forms of day labour such as restaurant work. Begging is notably associated with disability, either as a result or a contributing factor. Additionally, for children living apart from their families, the risk of involvement in the so-called ‘worst forms of child labour other than hazardous work’, including sexual exploitation and criminal activities, is notably heightened.

2.2 India

This section summarizes estimates of child work and child labour in India, available for the periods 2011/12 and 2018/19.¹³

Considering child work, according to the Census of India 2011, 11.8 million children aged 5–17 years were main workers (i.e., working more than six months per year).¹⁴ Estimates derived from the Employment and Unemployment Survey (EUS) 2011/12 reveal that 12.9 million children aged 5–17 years were engaged in economic activities in the year preceding the survey. Analysis of the 2018/19 Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS 2018/19) reveals that 2 per cent of all children – close to 5 million children aged 5–17 years – were engaged in economic activity in India.¹⁵

Both the EUS 2011/12 and the PLFS 2018/19 reveal similar patterns of socioeconomic differentials in the work participation rates among children. The work participation rates among children aged 5–17 years tend to be higher for older children, and higher for boys rather than girls, although, as mentioned above, it is likely that estimates for girls do not accurately capture their work participation, as the measure of work does not include household chores. Similarly, the work participation rates among children aged 5–17 years tend to be higher among: (i) children residing in rural rather than urban areas; (ii) children from Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes rather than those belonging to other castes; (iii) Muslim children rather than those belonging to other religions; and (iv) children belonging to the poorest households.

Both surveys further point out that 50 per cent of child workers aged 5–17 years work within the family. Of the child workers who worked within the family, more than half (51–57 per cent) were engaged in growing non-perennial crops, which involves seasonal cultivation. Child workers who work outside the family were mostly employed in building construction and apparel manufacturing. Overall, approximately half of child workers (49–53 per cent) were working in the agricultural sector, where they were mostly engaged in growing non-perennial crops, such as cereals, leguminous crops, oil seeds, vegetables, roots and tubers, and fibre crops, as well as animal husbandry. A third of the child workers were working in the industrial sector, where they were mostly engaged in manufacturing (mainly in apparel, textiles and tobacco) and construction. Around 14–17 per cent of children were working in the service sector, which includes retail, and food and beverage services, among other occupations.

In terms of child labour, according to estimates derived by combining the EUS 2011/12 and the India Human Development Survey 2011/12, which included children working in hazardous industries as well as those working long hours in economic activities or household chores, close to 13.2 million children were in child labour, corresponding to 4 per cent of all children in the 5–17 age group.¹⁶

Using EUS 2011/12, the ILO estimated that 5.8 million children aged 5–17 years – corresponding to 1.9 per cent of children in this age group – were involved in designated hazardous industries and occupations.¹⁷

In 2018/19, the estimated number of children in child labour in India ranged from 1.8 million (0.7 per cent of all children aged 5–17 years) using the national definition, to 3.3 million (1.3 per cent of children) using the most comprehensive international definition. Drawing on India’s Time Use Survey 2019, which allows a granular description of activities done by children including household chores, another study found that about 7 per cent of children aged 6–17 years were in child labour in 2019.¹⁸

The evidence on child labour in India also indicates specific sectors where the phenomenon is found. These include domestic work performed by children outside their own household, agriculture, brick kilns, stone quarries, bidi rolling, production of silk sarees, leather and glass products, and silver jewellery, among others.¹⁹

In qualitative interviews conducted for this study, approximately half of the 17 adolescent girls and boys interviewed reported being aware of children’s engagement in hazardous work. Several respondents also spoke about the abusive conditions in which children work in specific sectors.

“They go outside and do it in Delhi, etc. In a glass factory. They are abused if they don’t work properly, I’ve heard from everyone. There are boxes of glass which are difficult to carry. They break if they fall and then they are beaten and abused. It is very hot there. They work 12 hours a day, but they don’t earn much.”

– Boy, 17 years, PSU 66, Bihar

“At brick kiln ... the temperature there is high because the bricks are made there. It is also hot, and it is made with hot coal, and it has to be taken out while it is hot, so it is dangerous. There is no security for them. They work the whole day; they get paid according to the number of bricks they make.”

– Ward member and cultivator, PSU 53, Bihar

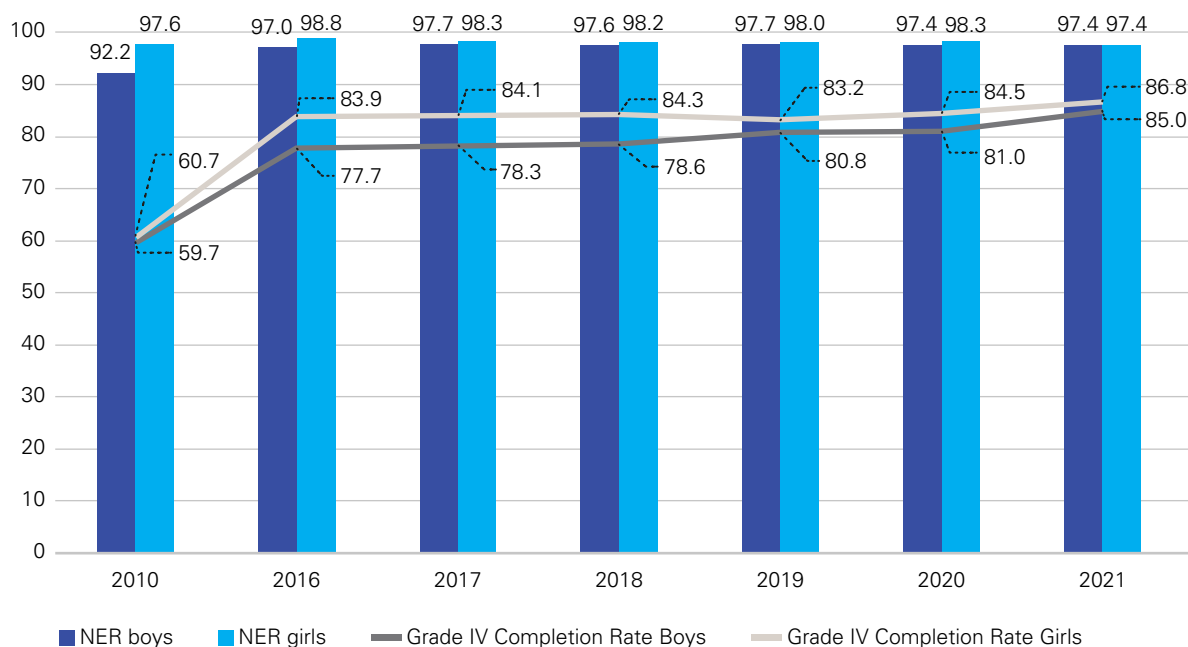
3. Education and child labour intersections

In both Bangladesh and India, the reduction in child labour has been accompanied by an increase in school enrolment. Though the association is strong, the interconnections are not always obvious.

3.1 Bangladesh

Primary school enrolment and completion rates, particularly for boys, in Bangladesh, increased significantly between 2010 and 2016. However, from 2016 to 2019, there was little change in these rates, with approximately 2 per cent of primary school-aged children remaining out of school and around 20 per cent not completing primary education by 2019. From 2020 to 2021, primary school enrolment slightly decreased for girls, compared to 2019. Gender disparities in enrolment and completion narrowed over time, but girls still exhibit higher rates (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Net enrolment rate and completion rate (Grades 1–5), Bangladesh, 2010–2021



Note: Net enrolment rate (NER): Enrolment of the official age group for a given level of education (Grades 1–5; aged 6–10 years in Bangladesh) expressed as a percentage of the corresponding population. Completion rate (Grades 1–5): Percentage of pupils enrolled in the first grade of primary education in a given school year who completed primary education at the required number of years.

Source: BANBEIS.²⁰

Between 2015 and 2019, there was an increase in children enrolled in primary non-formal education (NFE), alongside a decline in mainstream general education. The proportion of children in madrasah (Islamic theological) education rose slightly. Despite advancements in school participation, learning outcomes continue to lag due to various quality-related factors, such as resource shortages, inadequate teacher training, and curriculum and examination deficiencies.

Field insights from Bangladesh point to the possibility that Bangladesh’s progress in eliminating child labour could have been stalled by the loss of household earnings and the disruption to schooling due to the COVID-19 pandemic.²¹ The proportion of children combining work and schooling appears to have increased between 2013 and 2022, again possibly related to earning losses caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, which may make schooling less affordable for poor households.²² The ‘digital divide’ has exacerbated inequities, as children belonging to the poorest communities were prevented from participating in distance education and suffered significant learning losses, which was also due to insufficient access to technology.

Moreover, in Bangladesh, MICS 2019 revealed a significantly higher proportion of children combining schooling and work for specific groups of children, particularly in rural areas and more so among boys than girls (see Table 2).

Table 2: Prevalence of children engaged in economic activity in 2019, by school enrolment status, location, age group and gender

Schooling status	6–10 years		11–13 years		14–17 years	
	Rural					
	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys
Enrolled	5.99	8.67	9.93	21.78	11.56	34.31
Dropped out	2.02	12.02	20.77	39.95	19.84	68.18
Never enrolled	3.44	11.97	7.18	35.80	21.38	52.38
Urban						
Enrolled	2.1	3.06	3.62	9.83	5.92	17.18
Dropped out	6.70	6.42	42.00	49.36	38.03	66.49
Never enrolled	2.72	0.71	47.56	40.39	34.09	57.34

Note: Work includes all kinds of economic activities, carried out inside and outside the home. Those reporting engagement in household chores but not in any ‘economic activity’ are not included.

Source: Estimated from MICS 2019 data (Zohir, S., et al., *Intersections Between Child Labour and Schooling in Bangladesh: What we know from data and evidence*, Economic Research Group, Dhaka, and UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight, Florence, July 2024).

However, including household chores alongside economic activities would result in uncovering a significantly higher proportion of girls who are simultaneously working and enrolled in school across all age groups. The above table also revealed that only a small percentage of enrolled children were engaged in economic activities, with this proportion increasing with age and varying based on location and gender. Last, there is substantial variation by district in the extent to which children combine school and work. Districts where work opportunities are more easily available also have the highest number of adolescents combining schooling and work.

Combining work and schooling poses challenges. Indeed, children who work while attending school often do so outside school hours during a time which would be otherwise dedicated to learning, playing and resting. This can adversely affect children's health and academic performance, and lead to school dropout.

MICS data also allow exploration of child work prevalence among school dropouts and children who never enrolled in school. While a small percentage of younger dropouts engage in economic activity, this increases notably in middle and older age groups, especially for boys. Moreover, only a few children who never enrolled in school are currently working, except for boys aged 14–17 years, suggesting that, while there are various reasons for being out of school, it is unclear if the need to work is a primary factor.

Early marriage is another factor that can prevent girls from continuing with schooling and higher studies. About 51 per cent of Bangladeshi women who are now in their mid-20s were married before they turned 18 years old, and nearly 18 per cent were under 15 years of age.²³ Cultural norms and practices, such as early marriage and assigning girls domestic duties, tend to mutually reinforce each other and diminish the significance of girls' education. Such norms significantly affect girls' opportunities, autonomy and agency in determining their educational and career trajectories.

Early marriage and school dropout exhibit a clear positive correlation, with several potential mechanisms at play. One possibility is that the prospect of early marriage discourages girls from pursuing education. Alternatively, marriage may serve as a solution for girls who have dropped out due to other factors like poverty, rather than being the primary cause of their dropout. Qualitative interviews revealed that, while nearly all girls expressed a desire for education, household chores and the pressure of impending marriage often prevented school attendance.²⁴ An example from a girl focus group discussion is reported below.

“Even if I have the desire to study more, I cannot do so because I must do a lot of household chores at home. Whenever I will turn 18, my parents will become restless for marrying me off and will not even hear any no as my answer.”

– Girl, focus group discussion, Sirajganj

Some girls described taking on paid work to financially support their families as a means to delay marriage.

“I have started sewing because I do not want to get married soon. I think, if I am working at home and earning money, my parent won't ask me to get married soon.”

– Girl, focus group discussion, Sirajganj

“I was able to protect one of my poor friends from child marriage by giving her a job as a tailor. Her family wanted to marry her off due to poverty. So, when my friend started earning and supporting her family financially, they gave up the concept of her marriage at this early age.”

– Girl, focus group discussion, Sirajganj

3.2 India

In India, too, there is strong evidence showing a negative link between children's school attendance and their involvement in work.²⁵

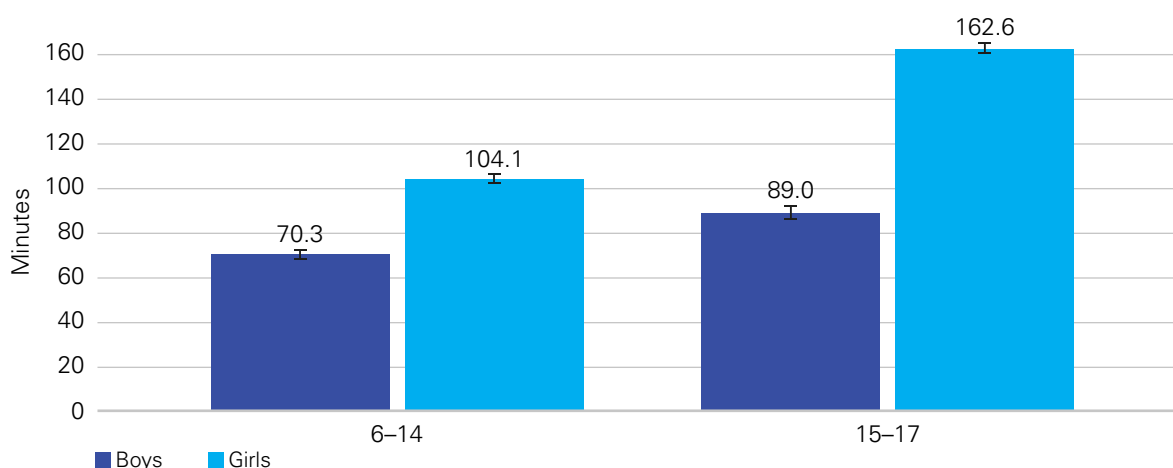
India's school education system has grown to become one of the largest in the world. By 2021/22, close to 265.2 million students were enrolled across the education system, from pre-primary to secondary, being taught by more than 9.5 million teachers in nearly 1.49 million schools.²⁶ The adjusted net enrolment rate²⁷ was 99.1 per cent at the primary level (Grades 1 to 5), 87.3 per cent at the upper primary level (Grades 6 to 8) and 64.7 per cent at the secondary level (Grades 9 and 10).²⁸ The school dropout rate in 2021/22 was 1.5 per cent at the primary level, 3 per cent at the upper primary level and 12.6 per cent at the secondary level.²⁹

The number of out-of-school children has declined substantially over time. According to the Census of India 2011, close to 38 million children aged 6–13 years were out of school.³⁰ An independent survey commissioned in 2014 by the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) estimated that the number of out-of-school children aged 6–13 years had declined from 13.46 million in 2005 to 6.06 million in 2014.³¹ More recent estimates of out-of-school children aged 6–17 years vary from 32.2 million in 2017/18³² to 27.2 million in 2021/22.³³ While not all out-of-school children can be considered to be in child work, it is likely that a significant proportion of older children could be working.

India's Time Use Survey 2019 was conducted to measure participation of men and women in paid and unpaid activities. The survey provides information on the time spent in unpaid caregiving activities, volunteer work or unpaid domestic service activities of the household members during the day before the interview. It also provides information on time spent on learning, socializing, leisure activities and self-care activities. Three critical findings emerge from an analysis of data for children aged 6–17 years:³⁴

- Girls are about four times more likely than boys to undertake unpaid domestic work. This holds both among younger children aged 6–14 years (with participation rates of 22.5 per cent for girls and 6.5 per cent for boys) and among older children aged 15–17 years (participation of 60 per cent for girls and 16 per cent for boys).
- In the 6–17 age group, girls spend significantly more time (134 minutes a day) than boys (79 minutes) in unpaid domestic services and unpaid caregiving services, with rural children spending more time (124 minutes) than urban children (107 minutes). Girls aged 6–17 years in both rural and urban settings spend significantly more time than boys on different unpaid domestic services such as 'food and meals management and preparation', 'cleaning and maintaining of own dwelling and surroundings', 'care and maintenance of textiles and footwear' and 'other unpaid domestic services for household members'.
- Gender differences in the amount of time spent in unpaid domestic services increase with age. Among children aged 6–14 years, girls spend about 50 per cent more time in unpaid domestic work compared to boys, while among older children aged 15–17 years girls spend about 80 per cent more time in unpaid domestic work compared to boys (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Time spent on unpaid domestic work, by age and gender, India, 2019



Note: Information on time use was collected covering a period of 24 hours, from 4 a.m. on the day before the interview to 4 a.m. on the day of the interview. Ninety per cent confidence interval represented as vertical lines.

Source: Government of India, *Time Use Survey 2019*, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, New Delhi, 2019.

Not surprisingly, more time spent by both boys and girls on unpaid domestic work reduces the time available to them for investing in learning activities such as formal education, homework, being tutored, course review, research and activities related to formal education, and additional study.

As per PLFS 2018/19, 93 per cent of children aged 6–17 years were attending school only, 0.4 per cent were combining school and work, 1.8 per cent were only working, and 4.8 per cent were neither in school nor working.³⁵ However, the distribution of children’s time by activity status is not consistent across surveys and remains an area for further research. For instance, although not comparable, according to the Population Council’s *Understanding the Lives of Adolescents and Young Adults (UDAYA)* survey of 15–19-year-olds in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh conducted in 2021, 17–25 per cent of boys and 12–15 per cent of girls combine school and work at 10 years of age.³⁶

Household economic status significantly influences child work status and the extent to which children combine schooling and work. In 2011/12, the EUS revealed a 12 percentage point difference in the prevalence of attending school only between children from the poorest and richest households (82 per cent versus 95 per cent). Similarly, children from the poorest households were more than twice as likely to work exclusively compared to those from the richest households. Moreover, children from the poorest households were four times more likely to attend neither school nor work. In 2018/19, although socioeconomically disadvantaged groups still had lower prevalence of children attending school only, the gap between the poorest and richest households narrowed to 7 percentage points (90 per cent versus 97 per cent).

In both EUS 2011/12 and PLFS 2018/19, the probability of working only was higher among boys than girls, while the probability of neither attending school nor working was higher among girls. Boys and girls had similar probabilities of being in school full time or combining school and work.

The likelihood of attending school only was higher for children whose mothers were literate, children who did not report witnessing parental violence and children who reported parental discussion

on day-to-day matters such as schooling. Children's activity status also varied according to their foundational skills, with children lacking numeracy and literacy skills being more likely to exclusively work.

While there is limited evidence assessing the causal relationship between work and schooling, descriptive analyses indicate that working children often lack literacy or have limited education, with the highest likelihood of work among those never enrolled, followed by dropouts.³⁷ Studies on the determinants of child schooling and work participation point to challenges such as household chores conflicting with girls' schooling and market work for boys, high schooling costs, and opportunity costs increasing market work for both genders.³⁸

Most of the children interviewed reported that combining schooling and work negatively impacted school attendance. Girls' perceptions about the impact of work on school performance were more consistently negative than those of the boys interviewed.³⁹

"I can't study properly. I try to finish my work before I go to school so that I don't face any difficulties. Sometimes I'd be late for school if I didn't get an auto on time for 15–20 minutes and so it affected my attendance."

– Girl, 15 years, Uttar Pradesh

"Some [children] start [working] since childhood because of lack of money. They go to school only twice or thrice a week. They work late till night and therefore, they are unable to get up in the morning."

– Boy, 17 years, PSU 104, Uttar Pradesh

"Children [who combine work with schooling] will not be present every day. They know less than those children who go to school daily."

– Girl, 15 years, PSU 20, Uttar Pradesh

Migration is another factor that affects both schooling and child labour. Some 450 million people were recorded as internal migrants in India in the 2011 Census, including 93 million migrant children.

The schooling and work experiences of children living in households affected by migration vary depending on whether the child moves along with the whole family, or stays in the origin household while other family members move. The decision to leave children behind may depend on family income, the nature of work at the destination and the type of migration (permanent or temporary). Those who migrate with the prospects of a well-paid job at the destination generally move with their family members; others leave their families behind. Permanent migrants typically take their family along with them.

In reference to child work, migration to urban areas proved a common theme, with children sent to cities to engage in factory work – including Delhi, Hyderabad, Jaipur, Meerut and Mumbai – as well as several neighbouring states, including Gujarat, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh and West Bengal.

“Some [children] go to Himachal Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh to work in factories. They are aged 10–12 years. They come from poor families. They work in companies, packaging medicines, running machines, etc. They might get hurt but they are from poor families. They earn 5,000 to 6,000 rupees.”

– Boy, 14 years, Uttar Pradesh

“When they leave school, [children] worked to make bangles. They go to Jaipur. Many children from our village have gone there, even children who are just 7–8 years old.”

– Girl, 17 years, Bihar

The schooling and work experiences of children who migrate with their family depend on age, family income, access to school and the environment at the destination. Migrant families who are better off typically enrol their children in school, often in private schools. Children from poorer families are more likely to work at the destination, as key informants report.

“Some children start domestic work as well as study. It depends on their family background and financial condition. Educated families will enrol their children in private schools. But chances of going to school are limited for most children.”

– Education state resource person, Uttar Pradesh

Similarly, schooling is more affected if parents work in specific sectors, such as brick kilns.

“Those who work in the brick kiln go to Jammu or Jaipur on a large scale because they get good money there. They go with their family and children. Nothing happens for the schooling of their children. Their schooling is neither done in Bareilly nor at the place where parents go to work. Brick kiln work is very temporary in nature and this work usually lasts for four to five months, it starts in October and ends in May–June. During this time, schooling of these children is completely affected, and children cannot study.”

– Assistant Labour Commissioner, Uttar Pradesh

Qualitative research conducted as part of this study also explored caregivers’ perceptions of child marriage. Most adult caregivers of children interviewed felt that, although child marriage is not common in their village and neighbourhood, it disrupted children’s schooling, particularly for girls. They also noted that boys may start working once married, while girls’ burden of household chores will increase with marriage.

“Schooling is discontinued after marriage ... Boys may study if they want to study, and those who don’t want to, start earning. Once a girl is married, she has to work more. Like my daughter-in-law has been working since she came here. She has to cook two meals for the day.”

– Father, Uttar Pradesh

4. COVID-19 and its implications for schooling and child labour

This section explores the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on child labour and schooling in India and Bangladesh, drawing from secondary data and primary qualitative studies conducted in both countries.

4.1 Bangladesh

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Government of Bangladesh enforced nationwide closures of educational institutions for a duration of 18 months and implemented remote learning methods to ensure continued education. The alternative education options included TV, radio programmes and online education. However, these initiatives primarily targeted older children (Grade 6 and above), and there was acknowledgement of unequal access to technology during their development. According to the *Survey on Children's Education in Bangladesh 2021* report conducted jointly by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics and UNICEF, schooling outcomes were severely affected, especially among the most vulnerable children, who lack access to the internet, television and necessary devices such as computers or smartphones.⁴⁰ Remote learning participation rates were lower for children in rural areas (15.9 per cent) compared to urban areas (28.7 per cent). The ability of children to meet the foundational four numerical skills (number reading, number discrimination, addition, and pattern recognition and completion) fell from 27.9 per cent in 2019 to 25.8 per cent in 2021.

Additionally, significant disparities were observed in participation in online learning across different regions, with the highest participation rates seen in Khulna and Dhaka (23.4 per cent and 23.1 per cent, respectively) and the lowest in Mymensingh (5.7 per cent). Furthermore, younger children faced greater challenges, with primary school students (13.1 per cent) participating less in remote classes compared to secondary students (20.3 per cent in lower secondary and 23.7 per cent in upper secondary).

According to a recent study, only 21 per cent of households reported their children participating in online or TV education, with significant discrepancies between rural and urban areas and between poor and non-poor households.⁴¹ Common reasons for non-attendance included unavailability of online classes, lack of access to technological devices, insufficient access to the internet and inability to afford internet connection. Interestingly, the unavailability of online classes was the most cited reason for non-attendance, rather than lack of devices or connectivity. This study also found that, of those who participated, less than one third found online classes effective.

To compensate, over half (51 per cent) of primary and secondary students continued their education through coaching centres and private tuition, despite these being less accessible to extremely poor households. Nearly all parents/guardians expressed intentions to send their children back to school once reopened, reflecting strong commitment to education. Unwillingness to resume education was rare – less than 3 per cent of households.

Further, qualitative data from 2022 found that almost all child participants reported that COVID-19 negatively impacted their schooling.⁴² Some children reported they started working during the pandemic, and the incidence of child marriage was reported to have increased.

Munira, a 14-year-old girl who lives with her younger sister and her mother on family-owned land, though enrolled in school, started working during the COVID-19 pandemic, knitting yarn at the home of a family friend. She sums up her plight as follows:

“It is not physically possible for me to attend classes regularly due to work. I cannot stop doing the work completely as well. Earning is necessary to lead the household.”

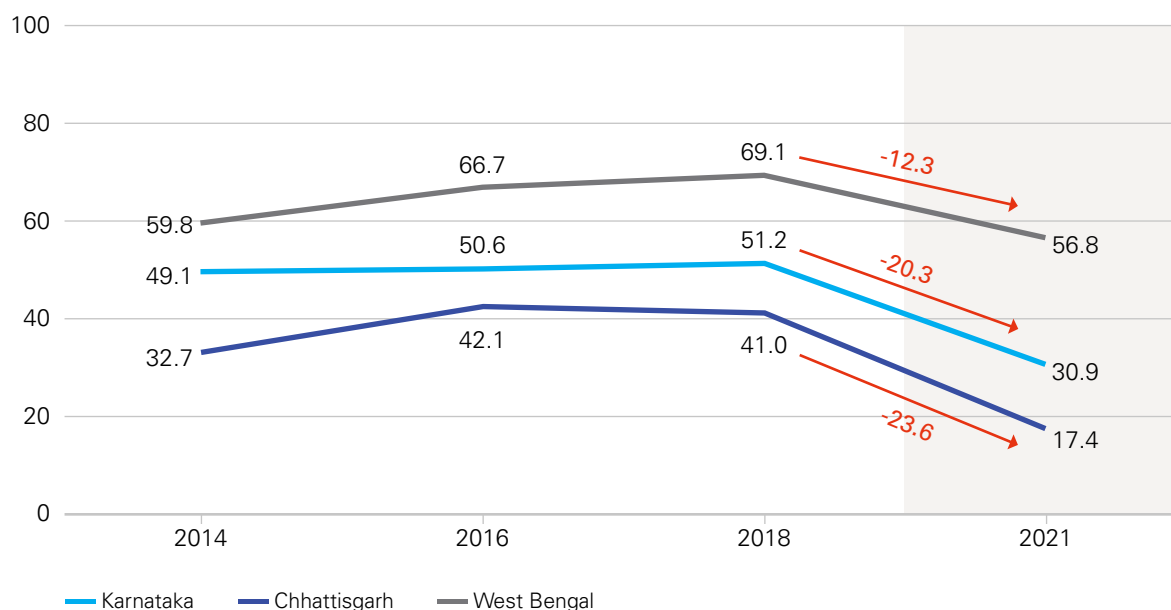
4.2 India

India was one of the first countries in the world to close its schools in 2020, as an emergency measure upon the outbreak of COVID-19, and virtual platforms were used to continue with children’s schooling. A growing body of evidence is clarifying the implications of the COVID-19 health and economic crises and related school closures for children’s schooling and work experiences.

According to a national survey conducted in September 2020 across rural areas of India, the proportion of children aged 6–10 years who were not enrolled in school increased from 1.8 to 5.3 per cent between 2018 and 2020. The proportion of children not enrolled in school also increased for children aged 11–14 years, although by a smaller amount. The increase in the prevalence of non-enrolled children was mostly due to a delay in school entry for young children as a result of school closures, rather than due to school dropout.⁴³ Nevertheless, this delay in enrolment, coupled with difficulties in accessing classes for enrolled students, translated to significant learning losses.

Field studies conducted by the Azim Premji Foundation in January 2021 on the loss of learning during the pandemic among children in public primary schools revealed that, on average, 92 per cent of children had lost at least one specific language ability from the previous year across all classes. Similarly, on average, 82 per cent of children had lost at least one specific mathematical ability from the previous year across all primary classes.⁴⁴ An analysis of the status of learning in three Indian states during the period 2014 to 2021 found that the reading level of children in primary grades remained stable or improved until 2018 but dropped between 2018 and 2021. For instance, the percentage of children in the second grade of primary school (Standard II) who were able to read a certain number of words or more dropped by 12.3 percentage points in West Bengal, and as much as 23.6 percentage points in Chhattisgarh (see Figure 4).⁴⁵

Figure 4: Percentage of children in Standard II who can read a certain number of words or more, by state, India, 2014–2021



Source: Annual Status of Education Report (ASER), *Status of Learning During the Pandemic: Evidence from 3 states in 2021*, ASER, 2022, <https://img.asercentre.org/docs/statusoflearning_22.04.pdf>.

The evidence clearly shows that inequities in educational access impeded the efficacy of remote education for groups of children who were already marginalized before the pandemic. Children in rural areas and enrolled in government school were at a disadvantage. While ownership of smartphones or TV significantly increased between 2018 and 2020, in 2020 about 44 per cent of children enrolled in rural government school still did not have access to a smartphone or TV.⁴⁶ Further, fewer girls than boys, younger students than older students, and government than private school students used technological tools such as WhatsApp and YouTube.⁴⁷

This quantitative analysis benefits from further qualitative perspectives from children and their families consulted during the period of this study.

Interviews with children revealed that the mode through which they continued their studies varied substantially by gender, with boys drawing on digital modes of learning alone or in combination with offline modes of learning, while girls largely reported relying on non-digital modes of learning.

“Through online classes, tuitions and self-study; my mother, sister and teacher helped.”

– Boy, 14 years, PSU 66, Bihar

“Studied from books and watched on YouTube, online coaching classes were going on. Many channels teach maths well on the YouTube and it helps a lot. If you do not understand anything in online classes, then you can also see it by searching the chapter on mobile.”

– Boy, 17 years, PSU 148, Bihar

“From the books. Half an hour or maybe an hour.”

– Girl, 12 years, PSU 21, Uttar Pradesh

“No, I don’t have a smartphone. I studied by myself and sometimes someone helps me when I ask them.”

– Girl, 14 years, PSU 148, Bihar

Children who took online classes described a number of challenges, including the lack of live interactions with their teachers and so not being able to answer any queries or clear up any doubts, issues with internet connectivity and accessing a family member’s phone, and the lack of a convenient studying environment at home.

“They used to explain in school. Now, they send a video or an image. The children have to understand on their own.”

– Boy, 17 years, PSU 103, Uttar Pradesh

“Face to face is different but here many a times there is a problem of internet. If one has not understood something, one can stand and ask that in the school, but here it cannot be done in the same way.”

– Boy, 17 years, PSU 104, Uttar Pradesh

“Like I can’t understand things like I did in school and there’s no recharge done on phones and sometimes my brother is unable to give me phone if he has gone out. Even when he is at home, it is difficult since he can’t make calls during that time.”

– Girl, 15 years, PSU 104, Uttar Pradesh

Children spoke of difficulties in learning without supervision, without a motivating force that may come in the form of teachers or peers; they spoke of disruptions to schedules and curricula resulting in fragmented learning. In many ways, children spoke of what we already know, namely that human connection is necessary to the well-being of children, including to their education. Several children, particularly boys, reported that they missed their school during the COVID-19 closures, and they hoped that schools would open again as soon as possible.

“Studies aren’t going on well and syllabus has not been completed and it has become difficult to go out of house. I miss school. Before this, I used to go to school, so it felt good. Now, it doesn’t feel good. The situation of my siblings is also the same as mine. They don’t feel good. They keep saying that when will our schools open?”

– Boy, 14 years, PSU 67, Bihar

Children also unanimously reported that they learned less during school closures. They attributed this to factors such as a lack of interaction with teachers, less time spent on learning, differences in the way teachers managed the classes, limited coverage of the syllabus in online classes, lack of fixed schedule for studying, lack of tests and examinations, and limited peer support in the learning process. Additionally, mental health problems, increased experience of violence, and economic stresses may have adversely affected learning outcomes.

UNICEF and other agencies have voiced concerns over the heightened risk of child labour in India due to the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent economic downturn.⁴⁸ The closure of nearly 1.5 million schools affected close to 247 million children, putting them at significant risk of entering child labour or unsafe migration.⁴⁹ The COVID-19 crisis is expected to have exacerbated child rights issues, particularly in impoverished households, where families were pushed into extreme poverty. Consequently, children faced increased vulnerability to dropping out of school, being coerced into labour, experiencing early marriage or falling prey to trafficking.

There are no systematic studies of the impacts of COVID-19 on child labour in India. However, a review of the emerging evidence on COVID-19 and child labour in South Asia suggested that the risk of child labour increased in India as a result of job losses in the informal sector, coupled with inadequate social protection, the reduced availability of agricultural labourers due to restrictions on movement, and financial pressure on employers increasing the likelihood of using children as a source of cheap labour, as well as orphanhood and school dropout.⁵⁰ The review also suggested that there was likely a deterioration in working conditions and wages for those children who were already working before the pandemic. In an online survey of representatives of 53 non-governmental organizations across India, most respondents reported a likely increase in child labour.⁵¹

In our qualitative research, most children who reported working had started working before the pandemic. Some participants, notably boys, indicated an increase in their involvement in domestic work (economic activities or household chores), attributed to the effects of lockdown.

“Earlier it was less but now it has increased. We get time, earlier I used to go to school and for coaching and didn’t get time but now I get more time.”

– Boy, 17 years, PSU 104, Uttar Pradesh

“I had started driving e-rikshaw. Half an hour to one hour previously. Now, I take the animal for grazing and my 3–4 hours passes in this work.”

– Boy, 17 years, PSU 147, Bihar

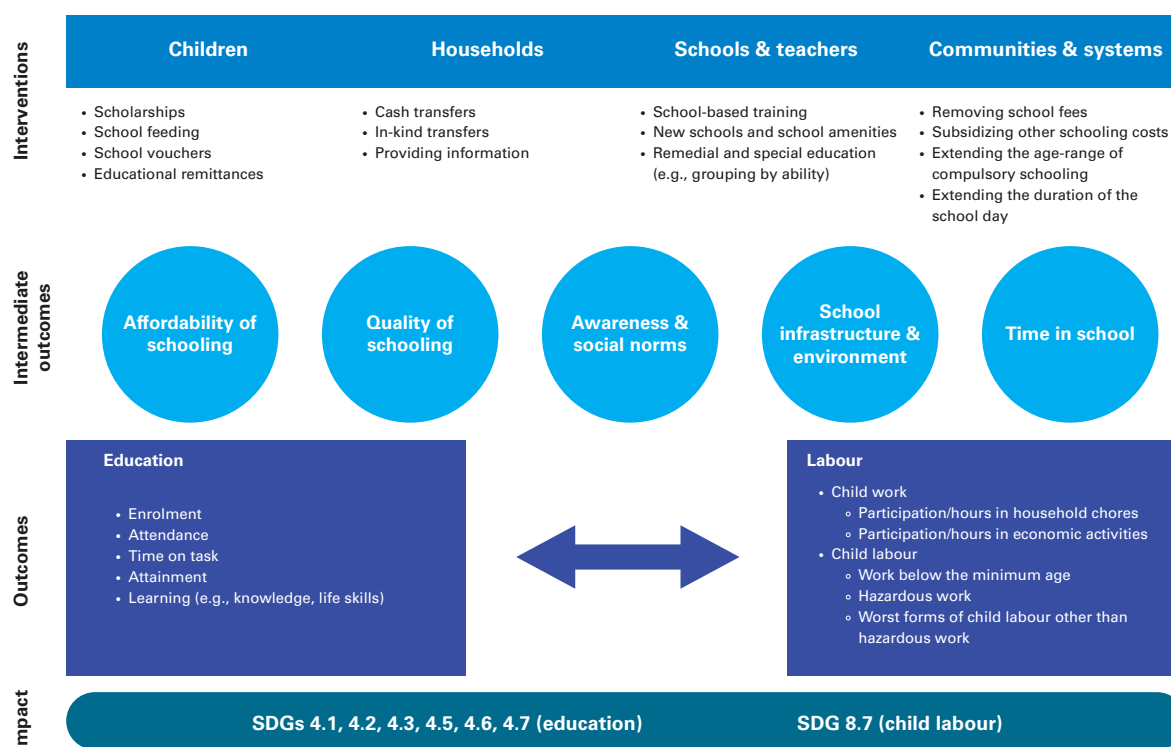
“Now I hardly study for ½ hours. Now I work more.”

– Girl, 14 years, PSU 148, Bihar

5. Educational policies and programmes that can support the elimination of child labour

Schooling and child labour outcomes are determined by a complex set of factors, operating at different levels, including at the child, household, school and systems levels.⁵² When analysing the impacts of educational policies and programmes, therefore, four categories of interventions are considered that operate at these four levels (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: A conceptual framework of educational interventions and their impact on child labour



Source: Adapted from Emezue, C., et al., *Child Work and Child Labour: The impact of educational policies and programmes in low- and middle-income countries*, UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight, Florence, 2023, <www.unicef.org/innocenti/reports/child-work-and-child-labour>.

Despite the positive associations between increased education participation and child labour reduction, studies assessing the effectiveness of education programmes in relation to reductions in child labour remain slim. Based on available evidence, findings by category of intervention are summarized below, referring first to the evidence in low- and middle-income countries, and then to the evidence in Bangladesh and India.

5.1 Interventions focused on children

Interventions focused on children include scholarships and vouchers, educational remittances and school feeding.

5.1.1 Scholarships, school voucher programmes and educational remittances

Merit-based scholarships and school vouchers for private secondary schooling have demonstrated effectiveness in improving children's schooling outcomes while reducing the opportunity cost associated with schooling. Educational remittances, on the other hand, did not significantly alter overall school attendance but did increase attendance at private schools and household expenditure on education, providing evidence that remittances for education can raise household income while motivating beneficiary households to contribute to schooling themselves.

While these programmes unequivocally improve schooling outcomes, their effects on children's involvement in economic activities vary. School vouchers and educational remittances notably decrease the likelihood of children working and the total weekly hours worked.⁵³ The design elements of programmes, particularly the transfer amounts (such as for scholarships and remittances), play a crucial role in determining their effects on labour and schooling outcomes. For instance, scholarships have been shown to be effective only when they exceeded a certain threshold or were combined with other transfers. Overall, for a transfer to be effective, it is important that it covers not only schooling costs, but also foregone earnings from child labour.

5.1.2 School feeding

The evidence on school feeding programmes clearly indicates beneficial impacts on schooling outcomes, including attendance, enrolment and academic performance, across various contexts and regions, such as sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia.⁵⁴

School feeding programmes generally have protective effects on children's economic engagement, although the decrease in work participation is typically less than the increase in school attendance. The evidence also indicates that child engagement in household chores is mostly unaffected by school feeding, which can be related to entrenched social norms that are unlikely to shift due to the programme.

School feeding programmes in both Bangladesh and India have had a positive impact on school enrolment, particularly among children from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, on school attendance, especially in lower grades, and on children's learning outcomes. However, the content and quality of meals are crucial factors.

In Bangladesh, school feeding was found to reduce child engagement in economic activities, although with a smaller impact compared to the increase in school participation.⁵⁵ Notably, the evidence reviews summarized here did not find any study rigorously assessing the child labour impact of school feeding in the context of India, where the Mid-Day Meal Scheme, the largest school feeding programme worldwide, is implemented.

In India, evaluations of meal scheme changes, such as shifting from take-home rations to cooked meals, have shown improvements in school attendance, particularly for girls and younger children.⁵⁶

This may be due to the proportionately larger subsidy provided to lower grades and the higher opportunity cost of sending older children, who are more likely engaged in productive labour, to school. Schools offering diverse menus and operating morning shifts (as opposed to afternoon shifts) also saw improved attendance rates.

5.1.3 Other interventions focused on children

Studies also emphasize the significance of addressing physical distance to schools. Evaluations of a bicycle scheme for girls in the state of Bihar, India, found it enabled them to complete secondary and higher secondary education, shifting attitudes towards girls' mobility and improving safety. The scheme was noted for its cost-effectiveness in increasing girls' enrolment compared to cash transfer programmes in South Asia.⁵⁷ While there is no specific assessment of child labour impacts, an analysis of employment impacts for females aged 12–35 years who were not in school at the time of the survey found that girls who benefited from the bicycle scheme were less likely to work for pay in agriculture. At the same time, there was no evidence that these girls took up any other work for pay outside the household. Further analysis by the authors suggests that this finding is related to a lack of job opportunities for educated girls and young women, as well as persistent social norms restricting girls' mobility. Indeed, women who benefited from the bicycle scheme were more likely to report not getting permission to work outside as a reason for not working.

5.2 Interventions focused on households and families

Interventions focused on households mostly include cash transfers, livelihood and microfinance support programmes, and parental awareness programmes.

5.2.1 Cash transfers

Cash transfers to families with children primarily affect children's schooling and labour outcomes through the income effect, which bolsters school participation and tends to reduce children's involvement in work, particularly outside the home. However, a portion of these transfers may be invested in household assets, inadvertently increasing the demand for child labour. Hence, careful programme design is crucial to prevent unintended consequences and maximize protective effects. Boys tend to reduce paid work outside the home more, while girls typically decrease involvement in household chores, though evidence on household chores is more limited. Few studies suggest that cash transfers may also mitigate the worst forms of child labour.⁵⁸ As noted above for scholarships, design features of the transfers, such as amount and frequency, are key to maximize protective impacts.

Cash transfers in Bangladesh and India to families with children have been shown to bolster school participation.

In Bangladesh, school enrolment and completion rates increased considerably between 1990 and 2018 and corresponded to a period when conditional cash transfer programmes and stipend programmes were launched. In 1994, Bangladesh introduced the Female Secondary School Stipend Programme, with the objective to improve schooling outcomes for rural girls. The evidence shows that girls who were eligible to receive the programme completed 1.2 additional years of schooling – that is, a 25 per cent increase over the mean. The programme also delayed marriage and

childbearing.⁵⁹ However, there is also evidence that children of lower socioeconomic status were less likely to participate in stipend programmes compared to children of higher socioeconomic status, which likely limited the impact of the programme on reducing economic inequities.⁶⁰

Data for Bangladesh show that, despite the cash transfers, dropout rates remained high, although there was a decline from 45.1 per cent dropout in 2009 to 18.6 per cent in 2018. Dropout rates for boys were found to be slightly higher than for girls.

In India, a study on the effectiveness of the Apni Beti Apni Dhan conditional cash transfer scheme found that beneficiary girls were 12 per cent more likely to complete Grade 8, and 19 per cent more likely to aspire to study beyond Grade 12, compared to non-beneficiaries.⁶¹

Our evidence review did not identify any studies rigorously identifying the causal impact of cash transfers on child labour outcomes in Bangladesh or India.

5.2.2 Livelihood and microfinance support programmes

Positive effects on school participation and completion can be expected from livelihood and microfinance support for impoverished households. In Jharkhand (India), mothers' participation in self-help groups led to increased school enrolment and reduced discontinuation after primary grades, attributed to positive peer influences.⁶² Conversely, a microfinance programme in Hyderabad showed no difference in school enrolment or household expenditure on schooling, potentially due to limited effectiveness in empowering women, thus impacting investments in children's education.⁶³

Mothers' participation in self-help groups does not seem to affect the total hours children worked, although children from participating households tended to work more frequently but for shorter durations and at home. Interventions that provide assets to extremely poor households do not appear to make a significant difference in children's time spent on schooling or work when compared with control groups.⁶⁴

5.2.3 Parental awareness programmes

Interventions focusing on increasing parental awareness of the relevance of schooling and the hazards related to child labour can counter the negative implications of social norms on time use which draw children into work. Considering the broader evidence base on low- and middle-income countries, in the context of Burkina Faso building household members' awareness of child rights was shown to contribute to reducing hazardous work.⁶⁵

In India, interventions improving awareness of the relevance of education and children's rights were shown to have mixed impacts on children's school participation and completion. An intervention informing and mentoring young women in India about employment opportunities in the business process outsourcing sector revealed that girls aged 6–17 years in villages were 5 per cent more likely to be enrolled in school after three years, indicating that parental awareness of opportunities can drive investment in daughters' education.⁶⁶ However, other studies on programmes providing information to parents about the social and economic gains from girls' education found mixed or no effects on school participation and completion.⁶⁷

Evidence regarding the impact of programmes improving parental awareness about child rights on learning outcomes is more consistently positive compared to that regarding their impact on school participation and completion. Though attribution is difficult, as the considered programmes include multiple components, cluster randomized trials from India show significantly higher test scores for children in intervention groups that combined parental engagement with remedial education by community volunteers.⁶⁸ Evidence also suggests that ensuring girls complete secondary education with basic competencies requires an enabling school environment, emphasizing the need for supply-side interventions targeting teachers and schools in addition to demand-side approaches.

5.3 Interventions focused on schools and teachers

Interventions focused on schools and teachers mostly include improving access to schools (e.g., building new schools or introducing pre-primary school services); providing school-based training to adolescents on child rights and the hazards related to child labour; remedial education and pedagogy improvements; technology and adaptations for distance learning; and teacher recruitment and incentives.

5.3.1 Improving access to school

Improving access to preschool significantly increases school participation, reducing the burden of household chores on older siblings, and thus offering indirect benefits.⁶⁹ Enhanced access to primary or middle school also deters child labour and promotes attendance, with effects varying by gender and school level.⁷⁰ Girls respond more to primary schools, while boys are more influenced by middle or secondary schools.

5.3.2 School-based life skills training or information sessions

Exposure to life skills education programmes is a promising approach to decrease school discontinuation rates. These programmes help girls in particular overcome social barriers to school attendance, preventing them from falling behind and losing interest in education. Additionally, such programmes can empower girls, giving them more control over their decision to stay in school.

School-based life skills sessions can thus alter perceptions of schooling's benefits, encouraging enrolment and social skill development.

In the context of India, life skills training decreased school dropout rates, primarily by providing socio-emotional support and enhancing the perceived value of school time for adolescent girls.⁷¹

However, the effectiveness of such programmes on school participation and completion can be influenced by programme delivery characteristics. For instance, programmes delivered by better-qualified outreach workers for longer durations and with greater intensity increased secondary school enrolment and completion rates, highlighting the importance of programme delivery in achieving desired outcomes.⁷²

The evidence, while limited, shows that impacts of school-based life skills training on children's economic activities and labour are either absent or inconsistent, with mixed effects across genders and locations.

Similarly, financial literacy training yields mixed results, potentially leading children to prioritize income-generating activities.

5.3.3 Remedial education and pedagogy improvements

Extensive evidence outlines effective strategies targeting teachers and schools to enhance learning outcomes. Studies emphasize the efficacy of remedial education and enhanced pedagogy in improving student performance. In India, initiatives like Pratham, a non-governmental organization that teaches students according to their ability level across several settings, and the Educate Girls intervention, in which trained volunteers delivered a child-centric curriculum to students in Grades 3 to 5, have demonstrated positive impacts on learning outcomes. Similarly, Room to Read's literacy programme and experiments employing synthetic phonics methods have shown notable improvements in student test scores.⁷³ Additionally, interventions providing Grade 5 and 6 teachers with pacing charts tailored to their school's curriculum, combined with student preparatory programmes, have yielded positive effects on learning in English and science when combined with other targeted student preparatory programmes.⁷⁴

However, our evidence review did not identify any study testing the implications of such programmes in terms of child labour outcomes.

5.3.4 Streamlined teacher recruitment and incentives

Research indicates that measures such as performance-based payments, incentives for teachers and hiring additional staff effectively enhance learning outcomes.⁷⁵ Monitoring teachers, coupled with straightforward financial incentives, has been found to significantly boost teacher attendance, leading to increased instructional time and improved student performance. Similarly, investing in performance-linked incentives for teachers may yield greater returns compared to unconditional spending on school inputs. These findings align with previous studies assessing the impact of school inputs. Additionally, continuous student evaluation by teachers may not necessarily enhance learning outcomes unless accompanied by changes in teaching practices.⁷⁶ The studies did not measure the effects of teacher recruitment and incentives on children's work.

5.4 Interventions focused on communities and systems

Community- and system-level educational interventions with the potential to affect children's work may include, for example, compulsory universal education laws, removal of school fees, school-based governance for efficient management of schools and community-based monitoring, among others.

5.4.1 Reducing schooling costs

The evidence regarding subsidies for schooling is limited, and no general conclusions can therefore be drawn. However, available studies found that policies providing subsidies had mixed effects on schooling and child labour outcomes, partly related to the role of social norms in relation to boys' and girls' schooling. For example, in China, the free compulsory schooling reform was found to have no effects on school enrolment for the combined sample of boys and girls, while it reduced household education expenditure allocated to girls.⁷⁷ The policy was found to reduce child labour, but only among boys.

In Ghana, the capitation grant was found to improve schooling outcomes, but had no effect on labour outcomes (impacts by gender were not assessed).⁷⁸

5.4.2 Extending the time spent in school

Studies from low- and middle-income countries have shown that compulsory schooling policies effectively reduced children's work participation.⁷⁹ Improving school quality, indicated by extended school days, increased children's time spent in school activities and reduced economic engagement.⁸⁰ Domestic work also declined, particularly for girls. However, these effects varied significantly by gender and region, reflecting prevailing gender norms and time allocation patterns.

Similarly, full-time schooling programmes, by extending the school day, reduce both work participation and hours spent working. These effects are primarily driven by increased time spent in school, with subsidized meals at full-time schools playing a minimal role in impacting outcomes.

In India, studies have assessed the effect of the enactment of the Right to Education Act, and school- and community-based monitoring of educational systems, including strengthening school management committees.

5.4.3 Engaging community members, including school management committees and school-based monitoring

Involving community members, such as school management committees, and implementing school-based monitoring can enhance children's school participation, completion rates and learning outcomes. For instance, an evaluation of Educate Girls' Development Impact Bond in India, which collaborated with school management committees to enhance school infrastructure, showed a 28 per cent increase in learning gains for students in intervention schools compared to control schools.⁸¹ Another intervention focused on school-based governance, like monitoring teachers' attendance with cameras and paying attendance-based salaries, increased instruction time by 30 per cent and improved students' test scores.⁸²

5.4.4 Summary

The review allowed the identification of a shortlist of common mechanisms and pathways of impact through which interventions in the education sector can influence child labour outcomes. These pathways include:

- **Income effect:** Programmes can reduce child labour through reducing schooling costs (e.g., by removing school fees) or providing monetary or in-kind transfers (e.g., cash transfers, scholarships or school feeding). As schooling becomes more affordable, school participation increases and child labour declines. However, generally the reduction in child labour is smaller than the increase in school participation. Further, where households also acquire productive assets (e.g., livestock) with the newly received resources, there is the risk that the demand for child labour increases, which calls for complementary sensitization interventions.⁸³
- **Protection from economic shocks:** Providing monetary or in-kind transfers can also reduce household need to resort to child labour as a coping strategy in the face of economic shocks.

- **Time in school:** Increasing the time spent by children in school, such as with broader schooling reforms increasing the years of compulsory education or extending the length of the school day, also proved effective in reducing child work.
- **Quality of education:** The evidence also shows that quality of schooling (e.g., relevance of the teaching curriculum) matters to ensure that the additional time in school translates into improved learning outcomes.
- **Improving school infrastructure:** This also proved beneficial, with the evidence showing that access to school at all levels, including pre-primary, matters for improving child labour outcomes.
- **Attitudinal shift:** Addressing attitudes towards schooling and gender norms was found to have weaker impacts on child labour, likely related to the fact that these norms can only be modified over a relatively long period.

Moreover, the review showed that impacts generally vary by gender, age and social norms related to child labour. Gender disparities in the allocation of household chores and other domestic work remain prevalent.

In addition, programme design features proved to be significant determinants of whether an educational programme influenced child labour outcomes. For example, scholarships and other cash transfers in support of education were found to be effective in reducing child labour only when the transfer amount was adequate – that is, enough to cover the costs of schooling and foregone earnings from child labour.

Finally, across various programme types, there is evidence that the beneficial impacts of the programme extend to children who are not strictly eligible for the programme. For example, expanding access to pre-primary education also benefits older siblings of school age, who can reduce their caregiving responsibilities.

While the above findings are supported by multiple studies in diverse contexts, overall, the evidence base on the impact of educational policies and programmes on child labour remains relatively limited. Additional research on the topic is required to expand our knowledge and better inform policy, including in the context of Bangladesh and India.

6. Priority actions to harness the role of education in the elimination of child labour in Bangladesh and India

Looking ahead, the world is facing several unforeseen and unpredictable polycrises, including conflicts, climate change and environmental degradation, rising economic inequalities, unequal access to resources, and social injustices that could lead to societal unrest and strained political systems.

Within this context, Bangladesh and India stand at a critical juncture. Bangladesh has a strong track record of growth and human development backed by a robust demographic dividend, strong ready-made garment exports, resilient remittance inflows and stable macroeconomic conditions. Bangladesh attained the lower-middle income status in 2015 and is on track to graduate from the United Nations' Least Developed Countries list in 2026.

India is on track to become the world's third-largest economy by 2027, surpassing Japan and Germany. India's economy has been remarkably resilient to the deteriorating external environment thanks to her large domestic market. The country's demographic advantage is likely to yield rich dividends. Three megatrends – global offshoring, digitalization and energy transition – are setting the scene for unprecedented economic growth.

However, both Bangladesh and India face similar human development challenges. Poverty remains widespread and entrenched. Inequalities of various kinds persist. Despite rapid recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, the economies face considerable challenges of creating jobs, making urbanization more sustainable, addressing vulnerability to climate change and natural disasters, building a skilled labour force, promoting livelihoods and economic security, strengthening public institutions, improving public accountability and deepening democracy.

Current developments and challenges in Bangladesh and India can exacerbate household vulnerabilities and the risk of relying on child labour as a source of income, with differential impacts of child labour on boys and girls. Girls may be particularly affected by this trend, as they are often expected to contribute to household work while also facing gender-specific vulnerabilities such as early marriage and lack of access to education. Urbanization may lead to increased migration to urban areas, where children, especially girls, are at higher risk of exploitation in informal sectors such as domestic work and unpaid economic activities. The vulnerability of children to climate change and natural disasters can further compound the risks of child labour. Additionally, institutional weaknesses, including gaps in education and child protection systems, may hinder efforts to address child labour effectively, leaving girls and boys without adequate support or recourse.

In both countries, a large proportion of the population are faced with low and uncertain incomes given the presence of a large informal sector. A large proportion of children continue to work in agriculture, where earnings are low and work is labour-intensive and uncertain given the small size of farm

holdings. Efforts to universalize social protection or generate decent jobs are not strong enough. High levels of youth unemployment (12.3 per cent in Bangladesh and 18 per cent in India in 2023) persist in both countries.⁸⁴

Women have made substantial gains in health, education and political representation in both Bangladesh and India. Women play a key role in Bangladesh's garment industry, the country's main export sector. Entrepreneurial ventures funded by microcredit loans have also boosted women's empowerment. In India, too, legal reforms as well as several government initiatives promoting education and economic opportunities for women had gone alongside an increase in female labour-force participation rates. However, deeply ingrained patriarchal norms have resisted these advancements, constraining women's freedom of movement, their visibility in public arenas, their sexual autonomy and their reproductive decision-making.

Inequalities in schooling of various kinds persist in both Bangladesh and India – with children belonging to socially and economically backward and marginalized communities facing the double burden of coping with school and also feeling the intense pressure of having to work. Both Bangladesh and India have the presence of a large private sector in school education where fees often impose financial strains on poor families. In Bangladesh in 2017, 24 per cent of children enrolled at the primary level and 94 per cent at the secondary level went to private schools. In India in 2020, private school enrolment was 45 per cent at the primary level and 51 per cent at the secondary level.⁸⁵

There is also the overall loss of learning because of COVID-19. Children face two types of losses: regression, or forgetting what they had learned in the previous class, and a lost opportunity to learn in the present class. This not only affects children's academic performance during their school years but also has long-term repercussions on their adult lives.

Children could well face the prospect of further disruptions in schooling and be forced to join the labour force unless effective and concerted actions are taken to further prevent and end child labour. Recognizing the deleterious impacts of work and labour on children's well-being and rights to learning, play and socialization is a first step to corrective policy actions.

The entry of digital technology companies into school education may make information and knowledge more accessible; however, the reliance on digital platforms could also exacerbate existing inequalities, as some students may lack skills to digest the information, and those who do not have access to reliable internet or appropriate devices may be left behind. There is also the risk of over-reliance on technology, potentially leading to decreased critical thinking skills and diminished interaction between students and teachers. Furthermore, the commercialization of education through digital platforms may prioritize profit over pedagogical effectiveness, potentially compromising the quality of education delivered. Moreover, the rapid evolution of technology (especially with the advent of artificial intelligence) adds to the uncertainty and the possibility of unintended outcomes.

An urgent revitalization of efforts to eradicate child labour is imperative to safeguard past achievements and accelerate progress. This effort must clearly acknowledge the powerful link between improved access to quality education and a decrease in child labour, including through strengthening policy synergies and investments and providing for coordination across relevant child-focused services.

Four interconnected sets of policy and programmatic approaches are required, complemented by a set of priority areas for evidence generation.⁸⁶

1. Eliminate barriers to entry, retention, learning and completion at all levels of schooling.

Based on the above evidence on the interlinkages between child labour and schooling, it is important to explicitly acknowledge the role of education as part of an effective strategy or action plan to address child labour. From a policy perspective, policies related to the elimination of child labour should include provisions of resources to strengthen the education sector. In the context of Bangladesh and India, renewed efforts and investments must be made to improve access, quality, inclusion and non-discrimination in schools.

Evidence from low- and middle-income countries showed that policies and programmes supporting education at all levels (children, households and families, schools and teachers, communities and systems) can also contribute to reducing children's work, if appropriately designed. Evidence from Bangladesh and India pointed in the same direction. Promising strategies include:

- Expanding school feeding programmes to support improvements in children's nutrition, enrolment and attendance rates, as well as overall academic performance.
- Providing scholarships to incentivize and support continued education, particularly for older girls.
- Investing in early childhood education and care facilities, which improve schooling outcomes for younger children and reduce caregiving responsibilities for older siblings.
- Investing in inclusive school infrastructure and gender-sensitive amenities such as toilets to ensure schools are conducive to learning for all children.
- Offering free transportation (e.g., bicycles) to remove logistical barriers to education and allow gradual shifts in social norms related to girls' mobility.
- Extending school days to ensure children spend more time in educational activities and less time on economic engagement.
- Providing targeted interventions like bridge schools to bring children who have dropped out, particularly older girls, back to school.
- Enforcing compulsory universal education laws and removing school fees.
- Investing in teacher training, hiring and incentives to improve pedagogy, lesson delivery and overall quality of education.

2. Expand social protection programmes, favouring universal and unconditional approaches.

The evidence described in this report consistently showed that child work and child labour are more prevalent among children from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds. In the context of India, this also connects to the role of caste as a further element increasing children's vulnerability to exploitation. This calls for:

- Expanding social protection, such as cash transfers to vulnerable families to bolster school participation and reduce children's involvement in work, particularly outside the home.
- Ensuring social protection coverage is extended to specific households and workers, such as migrant households (at destination) and workers in the informal sector, to mitigate economic insecurity and reduce vulnerability to exploitation.

3. Focus strategically on ending child labour as a child rights, capabilities and protection issue.

Ending child labour is an integral component of the protection and promotion of child rights and is essential for enhancing children's capabilities and ensuring their development of full human potentiality. This calls for:

- Focusing on eliminating child labour in specific risk sectors, especially in agriculture and informal sector manufacturing, where the largest proportion of children are employed. In Bangladesh, examples of priority sectors include the garment sector, the shoe sector, the leather sector and the *lagoona* (light transport) sector. In India, examples of high-risk sectors include domestic work outside the household, the production of bangles, glass products and leather products, and work in brick kilns or construction, among others.
- Focusing on geographic pockets with high rates of child labour and out-of-school children. In this regard, school dropout rates are relatively higher in regions where manufacturing and employment opportunities in other commercial activities are known to be high, as well as in relatively poorer and disadvantaged settings, in both countries.
- Strengthening child protection interventions for children in street situations who are particularly vulnerable to the worst forms of child labour in both Bangladesh and India.
- Adopting integrated approaches that recognize and address the role of social and cultural norms that perpetuate early marriage and the burden of unpaid domestic work for girls. In this regard, integrating awareness-raising and sensitization on the relevance of schooling and the hazards related to child labour can increase programme effectiveness in reducing child labour.

4. Carefully consider the role of programme design features and monitor programme impacts.

A general point which emerged across our analysis on the child labour impacts of various policies and programmes is that, beyond the type of programme, the specific design features and implementation modalities are key to determine programme effectiveness on child labour. Among others, this calls for:

- Ensuring that the amounts of any monetary transfer (e.g., cash transfers for households with children, or scholarships to children) are adequate to cover schooling costs and foregone earnings from child labour. This may include adjusting transfer size to the specific rural or urban contexts, as well as for inflation over time.
- Considering the role of moderating factors, such as social norms on time use for boys and girls, as well as for younger and older children. This implies that programme design features should be gender- and age-sensitive.
- Creating effective feedback loops to refine programme design and ensure that it delivers intended outcomes.
- Monitoring programme effects through impact evaluations, considering potentially unintended impacts and how the programme can be improved to maximize benefits.

5. Strengthen child labour data and research on child labour and its interlinkages with education.

Enhancing our understanding of child labour and child work through accurate data and robust research is vital for informing effective policies and interventions. This calls for:

- Conducting regular child labour surveys, gathering data on participation and time spent in different types of activities, including household chores, economic activities and exposure to work-related hazards, in accordance with international recommendations and guidelines.
- Assessing the sensitivity of child labour estimates to different definitions of child labour (e.g., international and national definitions of hazardous industries and occupations).
- Supplementing national child labour surveys with information from time use surveys, to obtain a more granular and gender-balanced perspective on children's work.
- When assessing impacts of educational policies and programmes, also consider estimating child labour impacts, to understand if the programmes contribute to the elimination of child labour. In this regard, evidence on the child labour impacts of educational policies and programmes is especially limited in Bangladesh and India.

- Assessing heterogeneity of impacts across key dimensions of gender, age, locality and household wealth, as well as contextual factors such as social norms. For India, robust data at the state level are key to having a clear and context-specific understanding of the prevalence of and patterns in child labour and schooling outcomes.
- Assessing long-term programme effects, as well as cost-effectiveness of various programmes in reference to schooling and child labour outcomes.
- Mapping critical pathways of impact, better exploring the linkages between improvements in child schooling and reduction in child labour.
- Adopting mixed-methods studies to better understand pathways of impact and the role of socio-cultural factors, as well as capture specific forms of child labour such as worst forms and child trafficking.
- Initiating studies on topics such as: the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and school closures on child labour outcomes; the influence of migration patterns on schooling access and pressures to work; and the factors influencing early marriage and girls' domestic work responsibilities.

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