



SOUTH ASIA – Fact Sheet Children in labour and employment



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by Sherin R. Khan, Senior Specialist on Child Labour,
ILO Decent Work Technical Support Team for South Asia and Country Office for India, khans@ilo.org

Measuring Children's Work in South Asia: Perspectives from national household surveys,¹ the first ILO South Asia report on child labour and children in employment, provides an overview and insight into the nature and extent of child labour and children's employment and educational marginalization in the South Asian countries and region. It further highlights gaps in national statistical surveys and inconsistencies across countries, which limit the scope of the findings and analyses. The Report brings together recent available information (2005/06 to 2011/12) from national household surveys in seven of the eight South Asian countries (i.e. Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, the Maldives, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka).² For Afghanistan, a brief profile of child labour in the country has been compiled from various studies.

Key findings from the Report are highlighted below as are recommended policy measures and interventions.

Key findings

Child Labour

- There are 16.7 million (5-17 year old) children in *child labour* in South Asia, according to conservative estimates³, and of these 10.3 million are in the 5-14 year age range.
- The young, *5-11 year-old children*, make up about one-fifth of all child labourers in South Asia.
- Substantial variation in child labour estimates exists across the South Asian countries. In *absolute terms*, child labour for the 5-17 years age range is highest in India (5.8 million), followed by Bangladesh (5.0 million), Pakistan (3.4 million)⁴ and Nepal (2.0 million).
- *In relative terms*, children in Nepal face the highest *risk* of being in child labour than elsewhere in South Asia, with over one-quarter (26 per cent) of all 5-17 year-olds engaged in child labour.

Worldwide there are 264 million children in employment in the 5-17 years group. Among them, 168 million are child labourers, accounting for almost 11 per cent of 5-17 year old children.

About half of all child labourers, 85 million in absolute terms, are in hazardous work, which endangers their health, safety and moral development.

The Asia-Pacific region has the largest number of child labourers – 78 million (5-17 years group), with an incidence of 9 per cent (second highest after Sub-Saharan Africa at 21 per cent. Over half of the child labourers in Asia-Pacific, i.e. 48 million are in hazardous work.

Progress against child labour- Global estimates and trends 2000-2012 (ILO 2013)

¹ *Measuring Children's Work in South Asia: Perspectives from national household surveys* (ILO and UCW, 2014)

² Estimates are based on national statistics, using the ILO methodology as used for global estimates, which may not necessarily reflect child labour as defined by national legislation in each of the South Asia countries. For details on the methodology, see ILO-IPEC, *Making progress against child labour – Global estimates and trends 2000-2012*.– Geneva: ILO, 2013;

³ This sum excludes Afghanistan for which recent data is not available, and the Maldives, where information is only available for the children below the age of 15 years, and child labourers below the age of 10 years in Pakistan. The estimates are based on Child Activity Survey in Sri Lanka (2008-09); National Labour Force - Unemployment Survey in India (round 68); and Demographic and Health Survey (2009) in the Maldives

⁴ Figures for Pakistan exclude those aged less than 10 years.



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- Differences in survey methodologies and reference years, make it imperative that these country comparisons should be interpreted with caution.
- The national surveys capture estimates for *hazardous work* mainly, but other worst forms of child labour are also prevalent in the South Asia region.

Children in employment

Children in employment is a broader measure than child labour; it includes some child labour. Children's involvement in employment is common in many of the South Asian countries.

- Estimates put Bangladesh at 3.5 million 7-14 year-olds in employment, followed by India (3.3 million) and Nepal (2.1 million).
- In *relative terms*, Nepal has an especially high percentage of 7-14 year-olds (36 per cent), followed by Bangladesh (12 per cent) and Sri Lanka (11 per cent). Pakistan's available national statistics show 13 per cent (2.5 million) in employment for the age range 10-14 years.
- Involvement in employment *increases as children get older*, from below 4 per cent for 7 year-olds in all countries where data are available (with the notable high exception of Bhutan) to variations of over 20 per cent by the time they turn 17 years.
- A substantial share of employment of 15-17 year-olds is *hazardous in nature* – 75 per cent in Bangladesh, 72 per cent in Sri Lanka, 41 per cent in Pakistan, 30 per cent in Nepal, 20 per cent in India and 6 per cent in Bhutan.

Nature of children's employment

- *Agriculture* absorbs the highest percentage of children in employment in every South Asian country for which data is available, ranging from 46 per cent in Bangladesh to 94 per cent in Nepal.
- *Work within the family unit* accounts for the *largest share of children's employment* in most South Asian countries, with the exception of Bangladesh and the Maldives. The share of 7-14 year olds who work without wages within their own families ranges from 92 per cent in Nepal, 75 per cent in Pakistan, 66 per cent in Sri Lanka and 54 per cent each in Bhutan and India.

Educational marginalization and children's employment

- Each of the seven countries has a significant share of children who are reported "*inactive*", *i.e. neither in employment nor in school*.
- Children in employment are generally *less likely to attend school* than their non-working peers.
- *Work has a negative effect* on the education of the substantial numbers of children who combine school and work.
- *Out-of-school children* constitute a formidable challenge in the South Asia region. A total of over 24 million in the 7-14 years age group in three countries are out of school: India (12.3 million), in Pakistan (7.3 million) and in Bangladesh (4.5 million).



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Gender dimensions and children's employment and education

- Girls are particularly vulnerable to the negative impacts of child labour; and they constitute a majority of the children in some of the most dangerous forms of child labour, including forced and bonded labour, commercial sexual exploitation and domestic work outside of their home.
- Four South Asian countries have the *highest gender disparities globally*. Pakistan (82:100) and Afghanistan (71:100) have high disparities *at the expense of girls*; Bangladesh (94 boys: 100 girls), Nepal (92:100) have high disparities *at the expense of boys*.
- The activity status of children in South Asia differs considerably by gender. More boys are reported in employment in Bangladesh, India, and Sri Lanka and more girls in Bhutan, Maldives and Pakistan.
- Gender differences begin to emerge more clearly in the 15-17 years age range, driven by the different culturally-dictated paths that boys and girls take when leaving education. Specifically, a larger share of girls in this age range are reported “inactive” (i.e. out of school and out of employment) (Bhutan is an exception).
- Sectoral composition of South Asian children's employment shows variation by sex, although patterns are less clear across countries. In India, the share of girls in agriculture is much larger than boys, while in Bangladesh, the share of boys is much higher in agriculture.

Rural-urban outcomes in children's employment and education

South Asian statistics show the particular vulnerability and educational marginalization of rural children.

- Children in South Asia's rural areas are generally more likely to be employed and less likely to be in school. Among 15 to 17 year olds, rural children are more likely to be in employment than urban children in every South Asian country reporting data; a higher share of rural children are out of school in all but Sri Lanka for both the 7-14 and 15-17 year age ranges.
- Rural working children are heavily concentrated in agriculture and in family work.

Recommended Policy Measures and Interventions

- Reinforced efforts must be directed at addressing, through rights-based, proven and innovative approaches, child labour and children's work in the rural areas, particularly agriculture.
- Family work must not pose a burden and constraint to education.
- The situation of South Asian girls continues to call for special attention, but due attention needs to be focused on boys and third gender children (recognized in a number of South Asian countries) so they do not fall behind.
- Life cycle approach to employment and cross-generational consideration of impact of policies and action are important to ensure that transition to permissible and productive work is effective even for those who are not in schools; and that child labour policies and programmes do not have unintended adverse impact on youth and adults and vice versa.
- Occupational safety and health (in permissible work) and enforcement need enhanced attention, through policy measures and integrated action, particularly in the agriculture sector, to ensure children at permissible age for employment are not involved in hazardous work.



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- Research and action are needed to bring to light the significant numbers of children who are reported as ‘inactive’ because they are neither in education nor in employment.
- Further research and analysis are needed to fully understand the critical correlation between children’s participation in work and school, particularly when combining the two.
- South Asia, with four countries having the highest gender disparities globally, must reinforce efforts and resources to address gender disparities against girls and boys at the primary education level and take into consideration any special needs of third gender children.
- It is critical to increase public spending on basic education, making it inclusive and productive for all children, and reaching out to the hard-to-reach and out-of-school children, many of who are likely to be engaged in child labour or are at risk of being affected.
- Given the wide range of policy measures and actions that must materialize and correlate urgently if the child labour problem is to be addressed in a sustainable manner, a vigorous focus is called for on the Mainstreaming Strategy as the overarching approach, supported by specific targeted measures, led by governments, with involvement and collaboration of workers’ and employers’ organizations, civil society and other key stakeholders, including the children and communities.
- Child labour issues and concerns be included in programmes that can impact the lives of children and their families. Among these are social welfare and protection programmes, labour rights, child rights and labour market information systems.
- Adequate national systems of child labour statistics need to be developed and maintained.
- Data on children’s work and education monitoring should be correlated.
- A mechanism, such as a South Asia Technical Working Group on child labour, to be established at the SAARC level to facilitate conceptual and methodological coherence.
- On-going coordination be strengthened among agencies at the national and international levels as well at the South Asia regional level to ensure harmonization, consistency and necessary consolidation in interventions, concepts, tools and methodologies in design, implementation, analyses, utilization and the strengthening of the knowledge base on child labour and its contribution to the socio-economic development of the countries and region.

The Report was prepared by the ILO (Decent Work Technical Support Team for South Asia) and UCW⁵ and forms part of broader efforts by the ILO to build the evidence base and generate constructive debate on issues related to child labour.

Contact information

ILO - DWT⁶ for South Asia and Country Office for India
New Delhi, India
Tel: +91 11 4750 9200, Email: delhi@ilo.org

ILO – IPEC⁷/Fundamental Principles & Rights at Work Branch
Geneva, Switzerland
Tel: 41 22 799 8181, Email: ipec@ilo.org

⁵ UCW is an ILO-UNICEF-World Bank project on Understanding Children’s Work

⁶ DWT – ILO Decent Work Technical Support Team

⁷ IPEC – ILO’s International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour