

# **Children's views and definitions of harmful work:** implications for policies and practice



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# Contents

<b>Acknowledgements</b>	iv
<b>Part 1 Introduction</b>	01
1.1 Progress in Bangladesh for children in harmful work	01
1.2 Process of consulting children on harmful work	01
<b>Part 2 Children's views and definitions of harmful work</b>	03
2.1 What do children define as work?	03
2.2 Why do children say they work?	04
<i>How do children start working?</i>	
<i>Why is work acceptable?</i>	
<i>Contribution to household income and survival</i>	
<i>Coping with disaster and household crisis</i>	
<i>Children's future</i>	
2.3 How is work harmful?	07
<i>What do children like about work? Agency and recognition</i>	
<i>What do children dislike about work? Exploitation, violence and abuse</i>	
<b>Part 3 Implications for policies and practice</b>	09
3.1 Children's recommendations and the roles of various stakeholders	09
<i>Education</i>	
<i>Health</i>	
<i>Savings</i>	
<i>Employers will treat children fairly</i>	
<i>Government will have a policy, regulate children's work and provide adequate services</i>	
<i>Community level awareness and action</i>	
3.2 The approach of Save the Children UK	11
3.3 Towards an operational definition of harmful work	11
<b>Notes</b>	12

## Children's views and definitions of harmful work: implications for policies and practice

Save the Children UK Bangladesh Programme (SC UK)

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## Part 1 Introduction

Save the Children UK has worked over the past five years, through the Poverty and Working Children programme, with 1500 working children in three project areas in Kurigram and Khulna districts and Lalbagh in Dhaka district. From our project work and through purposive consultations with 380 children from these and other areas of the country, we have learned how children define harmful work, that is, work which is unacceptable to them and which adults should never engage children in doing. Their views give us clear guidance on how to develop policies and practical interventions that will stop the practice of engaging children in harmful work by ensuring children's best interests and supporting their rights to education, economic security and freedom from violence, abuse and exploitation.

This report uses direct quotes from children and consolidates the views children have shared with us over the past several years to point out implications for policies and practice.



Shehzad Noorani, SCUK

### 1.1 Progress in Bangladesh for children in harmful work

The government of Bangladesh has signed the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and has ratified relevant international conventions, including ILO Convention 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour (WFCL). The government has approved a project to prepare a Time Bound Programme (TBP) for the elimination of child labour. And recently, a national child labour survey of children aged 5-17 was conducted by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) in 2002-3 showing that there are 7.42 million working children, though this figure is widely accepted to be an underestimate. Notwithstanding, given that at least 7.42 million out of the nation's 42.4 million children aged 5-17 are working--or one in every six children are working--there is clearly a situation that requires attention from all levels of government and civil society to urgently determine what and how work is harmful to children and make a stop to this widespread practice.

### 1.2 Process of consulting children on harmful work

Between May 2000 and December 2004, SC UK facilitators collected the views of 380 children engaged in various activities and occupations in Kurigram, Khulna, Jamalpur, Comilla and Lalbagh in Dhaka. All facilitators were experienced in working with children and applying child participation approaches and were trained to ensure the protection of the children with whom they consulted. Ninety-five percent of the children consulted were involved in full time work in a variety of situations, and the remaining 5% either combined work and school, or were in school full-time. The children consulted were characterised by vulnerabilities such as: those who lost their family homes/assets as a result of river erosion; those who migrated from villages to cities with their parents in search of jobs; those who were engaged in household-based activities; those who were engaged in various production processes within family enterprises; and those who were engaged in informal sector work as wage labourers outside their homes. In addition to these consultations, 65 working children from Comilla and Dhaka participated in a qualitative study to verify the conclusions made during the consultations as well as to put forth proposals for solutions to the problems associated with harmful work.

## Children's views and definitions of harmful work

Before each consultation, facilitators spent time building rapport with the children's groups. They used various tools, such as focus group discussions, pairing, dialogue, mobility mapping, drawing, role play, theater for development, interactive discussion and semi-structured interviews to ensure children's participation was both meaningful and enjoyable. Facilitators gave careful attention to keeping children's attention and releasing their creativity. Facilitators prepared local and new games, magic, songs, jokes and other fun ways to build rapport as well as elicit discussion about a very serious issue. They were careful about the societal values and norms in dealing with the children, for example, by asking the views of girls and boys in separate groups when required, and ensured that consultations took place according to the children's preferences for timing, place and dates of consultation. As a result, children found the consultations to be a positive experience and wanted us to disseminate their views widely.

**“It is good to hear our own words; this was my first chance to speak my own words.”**

**“We talked all about our pains and hardships to you. Adults don't know about our pain. Now all the people will be able to know.”**

**“We want other children to have the opportunity to talk about their work, like we have.”**

**“I feel very, very nice now I am talking to you. Before I was very shy but now I feel good for expressing myself.”**

**Table: Place, age, sex, and activities of the children consulted**

Place	Context	Age range	Girls	Boys	Total	Activities in which children were engaged
Khulna	urban and rural	9-15	20	30	50	shrimp factory, fish depot, fish retail market, domestic work, welding, local hotel/restaurant, catching fish from the sea, earth cutting
Dhaka	urban	10-17	40	73	113	production of bangles, lipstick, pins, torch lights, hair clips, plastic shoes, imitation jewellery, shoe brushes; tin cutting, door-joint workshop, battery breaking, spray painting, paper flower making, carpentry, masonry
Kurigram	rural	8-16	80	70	150	bidi <sup>4</sup> factory, folding bidi papers at home, collecting cow dung, domestic work, welding, motor-cycle workshop, rickshaw pulling, pushcart pulling, agriculture day labour, metal workshop, hotel, tailoring, engine boat
Gazipur	urban	8-13	7	6	13	household work <sup>5</sup> full-time school
Jamalpur	rural	9-15	12	23	35	agriculture work, poultry rearing, tailoring, fishing, household work, pushcart pulling, earth work, plant nursery
Comilla	rural	11-15	5	14	19	petty trading, welding, bus assistance, conducting transport, bandage factory, rickshaw pulling, ice-cream factory, agriculture day labour, shop keeping, plant nursery, domestic work, tailoring, earth cutting
Total children		164	216	380		

## Part 2

## Children's views and definitions of harmful work

We have learned that children work because their families need the income, because they cannot access school and are abused by teachers or teased by peers when they do go. Moreover, going to school may not assure them a job in the future while their families need the income now. Children work because their parents are unemployed or underemployed due to a lack of economic opportunities and they work because social norms make it acceptable for children to work, even if it is harmful for the child.



Shehzad Noorani, SCUK

Children work under varying conditions in urban and rural areas, for domestic and export production, paid and unpaid, in the formal but overwhelmingly informal sector. Within any given sector or occupation, children say they carry out activities that do and do not harm their physical, mental and moral development.

This section presents the views of children in their own words defining work, why they work, and finally, what and how they consider work to be harmful.

### 2.1 What do children define as work?

Children define work as activities that:

- ensure food, clothing, medical and educational expenses
- protect them from hunger and abuse at home
- provide them future livelihood opportunities
- give them satisfaction and make their parents happy
- give them the pleasure of earning and freedom of choice to spend some of their own earnings, especially during annual festivals and to buy presents for friends such as kites and bangles
- prevent them from going astray
- do not allow for rest
- take long hours
- bring fear of death, accidents and physical and mental abuse
- are very monotonous and require physical and/or mental exertion

**“...activities which give us food, clothing and, sometimes, shelter” 10 year old girl, domestic worker, Dhaka**

**“Some activities have no value such as looking after siblings and doing household work” 12 year old girl, folds bidi paper at home, Kurigram**

**“Helping fathers in the agriculture field should be regarded as work” 13 year old boy, works with his father in the agriculture field, Jamalpur**

**“...an environment which gives opportunities to make friends and enjoy work together” 11 year old girl, works in imitation jewelry factory, Dhaka**

**“When I get money in exchange for doing something, only that is work. Activities which require maintaining time, regularity and responsibility should also be regarded as work” 15 year old girl, works in fish depot, Khulna**



**“I think helping ill and poor people should be regarded as work” 11 year old boy, works in plastic factory, Dhaka**

**“Women's work at household level is not work at all because it does not bring money” Boys' groups in Kurigram and Comilla**

**“Sleeping and playing are not work because sleeping gives rest and playing gives pleasure. How can it be work? It cannot be work, there is no pain” 15 year old boy, rickshaw puller, Jamalpur**

### 2.2 Why do children say they work?

#### *How do children start working?*

Many children cannot remember when and how they started working. From early childhood, as early as 4 years, girls watch and help mothers and older sisters work, learning skills and becoming engaged with work such as bidi folding, domestic work, and breaking bricks. Parents consider children over 12 years as *dangor* or capable of working.

Gono Unnayan Kendra (GUK)



Most of the children said that they did not come to their current work of their own choice. In most cases children are asked to do a particular job by adult male guardians, often by command, sometimes by request and encouragement. In other cases, children work of their own will and feel responsible for the family's and their own survival. Sometimes children follow peers who work. A few were brought to their current jobs by adult neighbours, as they were either fatherless or their fathers were ill and unable to earn. In urban areas, children have to produce a “reference” or “connection” with somebody the employer finds reliable in order to get a job.

**“My parents think I should work to earn money as I am older” 12 year old boy, petty business, Comilla**

**“I work because my mother told me to sell items in different places (as a mobile vendor) to earn some money. She prefers me to work rather than go to school, because I do not get money from school. So now, I do not go to school” 12 year old boy, hawker, Kurigram**

**“I have to work, otherwise my father will not allow me to eat” 13 year old boy, porter, Khulna**

**“I got the job in this plastic shoe factory because my father told my *ustad* (trainer) that I would always listen to him, that I only needed tiffin money, that I will learn to work quickly and that I am polite and easily manageable. He added that my *ustad* was free to beat my flesh if he felt necessary, but my bones should be kept in tact for my father” 16 year old boy, works in shoe factory, Dhaka**

**“My mother and father told me not to go to school because school provides Taka 100 in a month, but my work provides me Taka 50 daily” 15 year old boy, works in shoe factory, Dhaka**

**“I am lucky, I can earn money I did not need any education or training to make shoe brushes at home we work together with my mother” 12 year old girl, makes shoe brushes at home, Dhaka**



### *Why is work acceptable?*

Children become involved in work for three main reasons: to contribute to household income and survival; to cope with disasters and household crises; and to gain a better future given limited opportunities and alternatives. For these reasons, engaging children in work, even if it is harmful for a child's longer term physical, mental or moral development, is seen as necessary in the immediate term and, therefore, accepted and expected by parents and wider society including children themselves.



Shehzad Noorani, SCUK

### *Contribution to household income and survival*

When a household is poor, children, particularly older ones, are compelled to contribute to supporting what are often large families. Due to under- and un-employment and low wages, parents' incomes are insufficient and too irregular to run the household. Insufficient income combined with lack of assets or savings also means money is needed with immediacy. However, the economic dependence of a specific family on children's work varies widely, ranging from partial to total dependency on children when adults are absent or incapacitated. Sometimes, a son is the only person considered 'able' in the family to earn.

**“My work involves washing bricks, making a solution of concrete and carrying up heavy loads for building construction. I have not found a single good aspect to my work, and there is a high chance of a serious accident. I do it because I can earn money most days to run our large family and I feel good for making a contribution”** 15 year old boy, works in construction sites, Comilla

**“I like my 'piling' work, though many people do not like it because of the risk of accidents. I work for 9 hours and can earn a lot, which I can give to my mother to run the family”** 16 year old boy, works in different occupations, Kurigram

**“I know that Primary School is free but one needs to buy paper and pencils, pay fees and bear the expenses of a private tutor which my parents cannot manage. What should I do in the community? I had to take mother's basket on my head and go out doing vending work in different villages. I walk at least a few miles each day, leaving in the morning and coming back in the afternoon”** 13 year old boy, mobile vendor, Kurigram

**“The hardships of the poor do not affect the body--if we do not do hard work, then how will we manage rice for our stomachs?”** 12 year old boy, welding factory, Kurigram

**“It is absolutely necessary to work for me. I cannot think of what would happen if I did not work. Had I not gotten a job, I could not secure even a single meal a day, let alone manage clothes, medicine and other necessities!”** 14 year old homeless girl, domestic worker, Dhaka

**“Here in our area, young people are considered *sheana* (mature) and do what adults do”** 14 year old girl, tailor, Jamalpur

### *Coping with disaster and household crisis*

Crises such as family breakdown and family violence push children to try earn money for their own survival and that of family members. As seen above, if a father dies or abandons the mother, children may be insecure at home while the mother goes out to earn money. As such, single mothers sometimes feel more secure keeping children at a workplace than at home. Annual disasters such as floods, land erosion, drought, *mona*, and cold waves also push children to work.

**“It is important to work otherwise how can we survive? I am fatherless. Who will bear the expenses of my younger brother?”** 11 year old boy, Dhaka

**“What shall I do if I do not work? I am the only person to earn, because my father left my mother**

Shehzad Noorani, SCUK



two years back and my mother is sick and cannot manage to work. I have two other small brothers, we have to eat food otherwise we will not survive” 14 year old boy, works in bidi factory, Kurigram

“Even if I become sick, I have to work, otherwise who will give me food? My mother only sells spinach and earns very little and my father died” 12 year old boy, works in welding shop, Dhaka

“When the floods came, my parents had no work, so my father went to Dhaka to search for a job and I was sent to work in a metal factory to earn money” boy, Kurigram

### *Children's future*

Parents' lack of trust in schooling as a means to getting jobs in the future, lack of access and affordability of schools, and the high chances of their children being unable to complete even primary school mean that involving children in work is seen as a better option for a child's future than education. Parents and children alike believe that early involvement in work and gradual 'apprenticeship' can give children a secure future. Moreover, parents would rather that children work than roam around idly and risk getting involved in illegal activities that could be detrimental to a child's future.

“My mother told me, if I work from my childhood, I will acquire skills and learn the work thoroughly, so my work experience will help me to get better job in future to contribute to my family, and take care of myself” 11 year old girl, works in fish depot, Khulna

“My father asked me, 'what benefit will it bring to the family if I become educated? It is very difficult for even an educated person to find a job, especially from a poor community' and also said that I will be faster and more efficient if I can get involved with a job from my childhood. This can be beneficial for me to survive in the future, and moreover, it is getting more and more difficult to find a job with each passing day” 15 year old boy, works in a metal workshop, Kurigram

“I am working in a beauty parlour for the past one year, though I do not get any salary. But I am happy because I learnt the skills and hope I will be able to move from here to another parlour soon and negotiate a salary there.” 14 year old girl, works in a beauty parlour, Dhaka

“If I learn this work, I can start a shop. If there is a shop, I can earn my living from that.” 17 year old boy, welding shop, Comilla

“When we do not have work, we are idle nobody likes idle people parents and other people do not consider them good boys” 13 year old boy, Dhaka

“What shall we do, if we do not work? We have nothing to do in our locality no place in school, parents beat us if we play the whole day, is it not better to work?” 13 year old boy, works in blacksmith shop, Kurigram

“If we were not engaged with the work that we do now, we would have to be on the street and would engage in dangerous anti-social activities like pick pocketing, we would be used by the political parties if we had nothing to do in the community” Group of working boys, Dhaka

“If we sit idle at home, parents beat and scold us, and at the work place, employers beat and scold us. We have no alternative no happiness” 15 year old boy, assistant bus conductor, Comilla

“I cannot continue my schooling as I have to work for 6-7 hours and there is no school arrangements for those of us who work for a long time” girl, works in a shoe factory, Dhaka

## 2.3 How is work harmful?

When work negatively affects a child's physical development as a result of hazards, and/or their mental and moral development through exploitation, abuse and violence, it is harmful. Children find situations in which they do not have agency and control over their own lives, when they do not feel recognised and appreciated, and when they feel exploited and abused, harmful. These feelings apply not just to work but reflect a general denial of children's rights.



Shehzad Noorani, SCUK

*What do children like about work? Agency and recognition*

- Earning money
- Large earnings even if work involves risk
- Using their own money, even if it is a little, to entertain friends, buy kites, bangles ribbons, banana
- Making new friends in the work place
- Enjoying the company of friends in the work place
- Feeling appreciated by parents
- Helping family with cash and labour

**“I become happy when different professionals come to our workshop on their motorbikes and talk nicely I feel proud to come into connection with them because they are from the upper class” 11 year old boy, works in motorcycle workshop, Kurigram**

**“I become so happy when I can spend my money buying lipstick and chocolate” 12 year old girl, works in Lipstick factory, Dhaka**

**“I feel proud that I can help my family especially since my father is sick and my mother earns very little. My mother says I am a good boy” 15 year old boy, works in fish processing, Khulna**

**“I love meeting other friends to make bidi folds, otherwise it would not possible to see them every day because as I become older, my mother prevents me from going out except for work” girl, folds bidi, Kurigram**

*What do children dislike about work? Exploitation, violence and abuse*

- Long hours at work, which hamper schooling and playing and make them tired
- Doing extra, or overtime, work without pay
- Compulsory overtime work
- Forced to work overnight
- Working every day without any leave
- No wages
- Low and irregular payment of wages
- Beating, abusive words and behaviour and sexual abuse by employers and supervisors
- No connection between themselves and home
- No freedom

## Children's views and definitions of harmful work

Nobody listens to their views

False accusations

Penalty for minor mistakes

Fear of accidents

Job insecurity

Physical risks of cuts, burns, fractures and diseases from, e.g. using toxic substances and carrying heavy loads

Damp, dark, dirty, very hot or very cold work place environment

Exposure to sun and rain

No toilet facilities

**"I feel exhausted when I have to stay awake when people are sick and have to work the following day from 6 in the morning to 11 at night" 14 year old girl, domestic worker, Lalbagh**

**"I feel suffocated from tobacco dust caused by the bidi work" 12 year old boy, works in Bidi factory, Kurigram**

**"I am a rickshaw puller, but after a few years I will lose my strength and capabilities like my father. After a certain age, I will not be able to walk, just like my father and I will not be able to pull a rickshaw. Treatment will not work for this difficulty" 16 year old boy, rickshaw puller, Jamalpur**

**"When I go for fishing work on a contract basis in the rivers inside the Sundarban forest, I stay separated from my family for weeks together. I feel sad and lonely. As I am small, I have to work all the time I cook and serve food. I used to fear crocodiles, tigers, and snakes, but now I am used to it" 14 year old boy, Khulna**

**"When I ask for my wages, my *ustad* tells me to go to his house when his wife is not at home to collect my wages. I am afraid, so I did not go to his house and did not get my wages" 15 year old girl, Dhaka**

Shehzad Noorani, SCUk





## Part 3 Implications for policies and practice

### 3.1 Children's recommendations and the roles of various stakeholders

Children have made recommendations in the areas shown below to improve their situation and stop their involvement in harmful work.

#### *Education*

- access to quality education that ensures getting employment opportunities in future
- school hours which allow children to combine work if necessary
- vocational training, which will give them choices and bargaining power with employers
- education that is free of cost
- more schools in the rural areas



Henriette

**"I work in this welding workshop now. Before, my family had a business and I learned oral accounting from my mother, but many people used to take materials from me on credit and told me to write their names in a 'loan registrar notebook.' I felt embarrassed to reveal that I could not write, so many of them did not pay me back and gradually I lost the business. Why don't you arrange schooling for us?" (Kurigram)**

**"We want to learn counting, reading and writing employers give us a lower price as we cannot count big sums and cannot write them down" (Khulna)**

#### *Health*

- access to health services that are nearby

**"Generally, we hide our sickness from the *ustad* because they tell us to go home and deduct wages if we are sick. They do not provide us with medicine" 11 year old boy, works in torch light factory, Lalbagh**

#### *Savings*

- facility for accumulating savings with easy access

**"I am so happy now that I can contribute the savings from my earnings that I keep with the Solidarity Children's Savings Programme for when any family members fall sick--we could not think of treatment for anybody before this. I also buy pencils and notebooks for school from my savings" 12 year old girl, collects cow dung, Kurigram**

#### *Employers will treat children fairly*

- wages should be given properly and regularly
- no verbal and physical abuse
- owners should keep an close eye on the activities of the supervisors so that supervisors do not take unfair advantage of children
- compensation from employers in case of any injury or death
- immediate treatment in case of accident
- first aid should be available

## Children's views and definitions of harmful work

apprenticeship period should not be prolonged  
time off, with no deduction of wages, to attend school  
protective gear for hazardous work  
weekly leave

**“Please tell my *ustad* not to beat me, and not to cut my wages when a piece of gold which I did not take gets lost” boy, works in goldsmith shop, Kurigram**

**“We want regular and proper wages, we want government holidays” boy, works in *kbola* (open space for fish handling), Khulna**

**“We do the same work as adults in the agricultural field, but get less wages than adults” 15 year old boy, agricultural labourer, Jamalpur**

**“I did not like it when my employer cut my wages for not coming to work when I had a high fever but I cannot say this to my employer. If he tells me not to come from tomorrow, then what will happen?” girl, works in bangle factory, Lalbagh**

**“Please tell *ustads* to teach us the “skills” of the job within a short period of time” groups of children from Lalbagh, Kurigram and Comilla**

*Government will have a policy, regulate children's work and provide adequate services*

give effort and attention to improving working conditions including rest and recreation opportunities for children  
prepare a policy for children who work  
ensure the access to health and education  
ensure each and every industry is closed on the government holidays  
strict regulations to avoiding accidents in factories  
ensure adequate leave and weekly holiday for child workers  
ensure compensation if any serious accident occurs  
provide interest free loans to parents so that children and their families can start their own businesses  
ensure proper wages are paid  
set up factories in under-developed areas so that parents get more regular employment opportunities

**"Why doesn't government establish some good factories here in Kurigram and then we will get good jobs rather pushing carts, filling tobacco in bidi, working in welding, collecting cow dung, working with acid in blacksmith shops, pulling rickshaws, plying boats in a rough river, and working with pesticides in agriculture fields from dawn to dusk?" group of children, Kurigram**

*Community level awareness and action*

Community people, including parents, should be aware about children's work and stop harmful work in their community



## 3.2 The approach of Save the Children UK

Save the Children UK believes that only a comprehensive attack by all duty bearers working in the different sectors and at the different levels (community, regional and national) will enable children to escape from harmful work. We feel that all stakeholders need to work in coordination, through a shared understanding of the situation of children and their involvement in harmful work. This report attempts to provide such an understanding directly from the voices of children who are in the best position to do so.

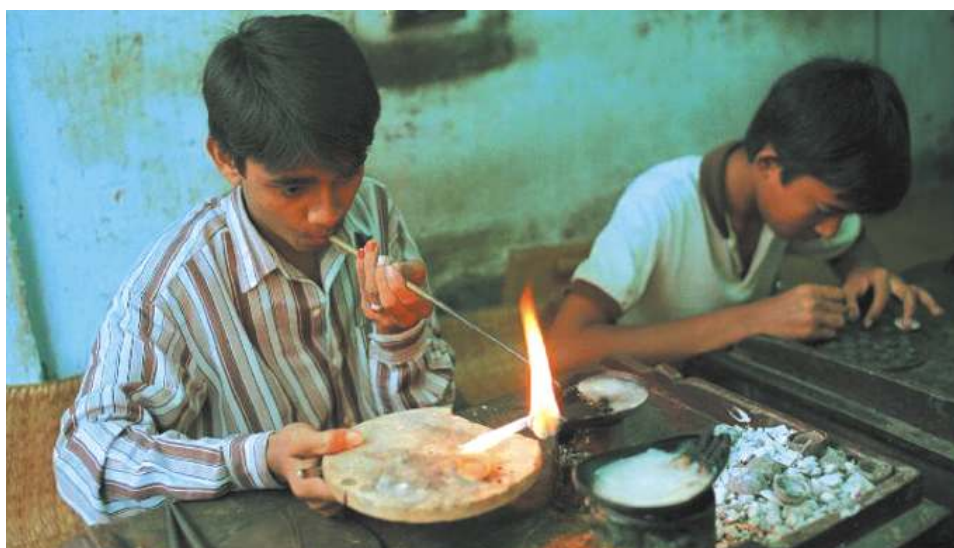
Based on these views expressed by children, SC UK has been working in three project areas in Kurigram, Khulna and Lalbagh with our partner NGOs, Solidarity and Prodipan, with the objective that communities and poor households are better able to protect children from harmful work. This work will continue under a new country strategy beginning 2005 with a three pronged approach addressing children's education and protection and household economic security. We will aim to support quality education provision for working children; mobilise communities and national stakeholders, particularly employers and their associations, to stop violence, abuse and exploitation of children in the workplace and in the broader communities; and advocate for household economic security so that households are not dependant on contributions from children's work.

## 3.3 Towards an operational definition of harmful work

Based on analysis of the views of children, SC UK has set up an operational definition of what constitutes harmful work:

- if children have to work long hours so that they cannot attend school, that is, over 5 hours for children under 13 or over 8 hours for children under 18
- if children do not get paid for their work, or if wages are paid irregularly or promised and not paid, or if wages are below Taka 15 or the equivalent of one meal for children working under 5 hours and two meals for children working over 5 hours
- if employers subject children to physical, sexual and verbal abuse in the workplace
- if employers provide no basic facilities, such as leave, breaks and conditions for health, hygiene and safety
- if the work is dangerous and leads to illness in the short and long-term

Considering these elements, SC UK will measure improvements at community level of the prevalence of children in harmful work over the next five years. Other stakeholders involved in programmes to stop children's involvement in harmful work could also use this operational definition to indicate prevalence of children in harmful work in their working areas, and this could be done at a national level as well. Use of common indicators for harmful work based on the views of children will enable stakeholders to pinpoint the keys elements of work that children find harmful and realistically work towards and measure improvements in them.



Shehzad Noorani, SCUK

### Notes

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1. The Save the Children UK Child Protection Policy (CPP) is available on request from the publisher.
2. A child is defined in this document as any person below the age of 18.
3. In line with the SC UK CPP mentioned in footnote 1 above.
4. Hand rolled cigarette.
5. Note that household work refers to work within one's own home as compared to domestic work which refers to work in the home of an employer.
6. Age 13 is taken as the age up to which children are expected to be compulsorily engaged in primary school.
7. Taka 15 is equivalent to a quarter of one US dollar (or 25 cents).