

Inheriting extreme poverty: household aspirations, community attitudes and childhood in northern Bangladesh



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Or contact:

Programme Manager, Child Labour
Save the Children UK
Bangladesh Programme
House No. 9, Road No. 16
Gulshan-1, Dhaka
Bangladesh

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BRAC/Research and Evaluation Division (RED) and Save the Children UK Bangladesh Programme (SCUK)

Research team and acknowledgements

This report was prepared by Naomi Hossain of BRAC/RED based on research conducted by the author with Mahfuza Haque (Lulu), Rafiqul Islam Sarkar and Matiur Rahman of SC UK, and Raihana Karim and Laura Street of BRAC/RED. The research was made possible with the support of Lamia Rashid, Head of the SC UK Poverty and Working Children Programme, through funding from SC UK and the European Union. BRAC gratefully acknowledges support for its Challenging the Frontiers of Poverty Reduction: Targeting the Ultra Poor (TUP) programme from the UK Department for International Development (DFID), Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), the European Commission, NOVIB and the World Food Programme (WFP). Research assistance was provided by the staff of SC UK partner NGO, Solidarity, Romena Begum Koli, Amal Majumdar, Nazrul Islam, Ambia Khatun and Monal Mia, and Amal Pramanik of the TUP Programme in Rangpur. Thanks to Syed Suaib Ahmed and Swapan Deb Roy of RED. Many thanks to Professor Naila Kabeer, Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex, who guided the research and commented on earlier drafts. Thanks also for helpful comments and advice from Emily Delap, Imran Matin and participants of a research-in-progress workshop in Dhaka in February 2005.



Executive summary

This report presents findings of research into the influence of community institutions and actors on the inheritance of extreme poverty. The body of the report is in two parts. The first analyses patterns of work, school and marriage among the children of the ultra poor. Based on information about ultra poor households, including original research with two communities in northern Bangladesh in 2004, this study uses the concept of the 'inter-generational contract' to explore the context in which ultra poor households make decisions about their children. Based on a survey of community officials and leaders in the same areas of Rangpur and Kurigram districts, the second part of the report explores the scope for community institutions and actors to support action on childhood poverty. It presents findings about the extent of influence of these institutions and actors over household practices that contribute to the transmission of extreme poverty, deriving lessons about interventions that have worked, and why.

The key finding is that little progress has been made towards tackling the practice of and attitudes towards harmful child labour at the community level. Parents, children, and community leaders and officials all treat the early entrance of children into the world of work as the inevitable outcome of extreme household poverty. There is little awareness of the immediate risks and longer-term harmful consequences of children's work. By contrast, community actors and institutions are supportive of and play an active role in efforts to improve school participation among the poorest and to reduce the prevalence of early marriage. School participation is widely seen as important, including for the very poor and early marriage equally widely known to have negative consequences. But while school participation and the age at which girls marry are understood to have risen over the last decade, progress on child labour appears to have gone in the other direction: many community actors actually perceive there to have been a rise in child labour over the same period.

In practice, many ultra poor children do not attend school and most marry before age 18; but the direction of change is, nevertheless, positive. The ultra poor have been affected by the upsurge of demand for education, although poor school quality is a particularly important obstacle for this group: their school careers are typically fragmented and end in early dropout. Social and financial pressures to marry daughters early are strong, but increasingly balanced by changing societal norms promoting girls' schooling. In contrast, there is little normative pressure on poor households to retain poor boys in school: child labour is seen not so much as a necessary evil, as simply necessary. Overall, it seems that ultra poor households differ from others, including the moderate poor, in that they are less likely to have entered the 'quantity-quality transition'. This is the point in the demographic transition at which lower mortality and fertility rates contribute to alter the 'inter-generational contract' - the factors affecting how parents value and invest in their children, and what they expect in return. The problem is not only a matter of structural characteristics of extreme poverty, but also of how these are played out among norms and aspirations with respect to children.

Against this background, the report attempts to assess why there appears to have been more progress on schooling and early marriage than on harmful child labour. The contrast between these cases is instructive, as it highlights the underlying conditions and intervening factors that supported progress on some, and prevented movement on other, aspects of childhood poverty.

The first factor appears to be that stronger interests are - or, what may be more important, are felt to be - at stake. Interests of poor households in supplying child labour remain strong under current economic and social conditions. Ultra poor households suffer from multiple forms of deprivation social as well as economic - that interlock to prevent them from investing more fully in their children's futures. Instead, they depend on an early net contribution from children, particularly boys. While the fragmented and disrupted school careers of ultra poor children typically end in early



dropout, and ultra poor girls still marry very young, these households appear to enjoy somewhat more room for manoeuvre with respect to school and marriage. This is in part because Government school stipends programmes have made this more financially feasible, and supported the general shift towards greater social acceptability of girls' education. As such, it is important to note that the way interests are perceived as with interests in the early marriage of daughters can and do shift. It may also be the case that the strength of demand for cheap labour, as provided by children, also plays a role in preventing progress on reducing harmful child labour. But this factor may be overstated as an obstacle to tackling the problem, particularly if concerns about the strength of demand actually become self-fulfilling by inhibiting efforts to tackle child labour.

A second factor is the existence of a reasonably robust sense of the public benefits involved in tackling school participation and early marriage. There has been public debate about the wider community and social benefits of mass education and of delaying marriage age, substantially driven by NGO and Government advocacy programmes and by the signals sent by service delivery programmes on these issues. This highlights that clear and direct messages on practices relating to some aspects of childhood poverty have been received and absorbed by the population. By contrast, child labour is seen as a private matter, the costs and benefits from which only affect the household concerned. There is little public discourse around the issue of how society is harmed by child labour, and only slightly more clarity about the ways in which children might be harmed by early entry into work. Notably, discussions for this study on children's 'harmful work' uncovered more concerns about the potential for children to engage in activities that harm society than about the harm effect that certain activities have on children.

A third factor is that when it comes to encouraging school participation and discouraging early marriage, communities have or believe they have, which may be as important the institutional capacity and mandates to act. These capacities involve the persuasion, material support or sanctions of School Management Committees, NGO groups, the informal operations of the informal community organisation or *samaj*, the official persuasive roles of teachers, the legal requirements of *kazis*, the blessings of community leaders, the actions of local government officials, or the messages preached by local religious leaders in the mosques. On both issues, local Government officials and community leaders feel they are clearly mandated by Central Government, which has pushed this agenda from the top through to the local level with support from the strong national network of NGOs. There are established modes and methods for intervening on early marriage and school. By contrast, there is more uncertainty about how responsibility is allocated locally to act on child labour, and about what such action might entail. There is also less conviction in the success of interventions taken to reduce children's participation in harmful forms of work than to promote school attendance or enrolment or to reduce early marriage prevalence. The absence of clear institutional responsibilities and mandates at the local level, the lack of clarity around who is responsible and for which actions, and the lack of faith in existing interventions on child labour contribute to the overall sense that this problem is more intractable than either school non-attendance or early marriage.

Implications of these findings for policy and practice include that

- a) **The transmission of extreme poverty is not determined solely by low income or material poverty.** Investments in children's futures are assigned lower value by ultra poor parents as the result of a complex of social and health conditions, compounded by severe income poverty. Many of these (for example, fertility, infant mortality, and immunization levels) show signs of improvement, and changes in social norms around children are creating new incentives and constraints with respect to household practices relating to their children. The overall direction of change with respect to investments in children is moderately positive, particularly for girls. But ultra poor households continue to rely on boys' labour from an early age. These practices are accepted by the wider community, which unlike with school attendance and early marriage creates no pressure on ultra poor households to invest in their children's futures.
- b) **Economic growth and development may be creating more incentives to deploy child labour.** The modest but steady pace of economic growth over the last decade, and the impact of livelihood diversification, with effects even in the rural and remote regions of the north, have increased the range of economic opportunities available. In the absence of social, legal or normative constraints on household practices relating to children, ultra poor households may be predisposed to take advantage of these new opportunities by sending their children to work. Analysis of the impact of economic growth and diversification on the extent and patterns of child labour, including of how the nature and degree of harmful work has changed, is urgently needed to inform the design of new services or advocacy programmes.
- c) **Interventions that succeed in reaching poor children may not reach the ultra poor.** Service delivery and advocacy programmes tend to be designed with the constraints and needs of the moderate poor in mind. As such, they frequently do not reach the ultra poor, or do not serve their needs adequately. Policy and interventions that reach the ultra poor need to be rethought to take into account their different social characteristics and multiple, interlocking constraints. Merely extending or expanding provision may not work. Services seem to be failing ultra poor boys most, virtually guaranteeing the transmission of extreme poverty into the next generation.
- d) **Advocacy works.** Government and NGOs have had successes in advocacy programmes: these clearly play an important role in influencing norms and practices relating to children. This seems to be particularly true of initiatives supported by central Government. But advocacy works most effectively to the extent that its messages are crafted in line with local realities. The analysis here indicates that advocacy interventions have to date been most effective when i) no important interests are perceived to be negatively affected a condition which is itself affected by the success of the advocacy intervention; ii) a case that resonates with local realities has been made for the wider public benefits of changes in private household practices; and iii) there is local institutional capacity to act, including a clear mandate and a direct policy push from central Government.

In practical terms there is scope for i) a firmer advocacy position against child labour, on grounds of equity or universal rights to education and protection; ii) highlighting the value of delaying children's, and particularly boys', involvement in work for longer-term gains; iii) focussing attention on the costs to society of harmful child labour; iv) advocacy messages to be designed taking into account local experiences and idioms.

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Part 1 Introduction

This report summarises research into the influence of community institutions on the inheritance of extreme poverty. It is based on the findings of original research in two poor communities in northern Bangladesh in 2004, of a BRAC 2002 survey of ultra poor households, and of a survey of community leaders and officials, also in northern Bangladesh in 2004.

The analysis presented here attempts to understand what makes childhoods among the ultra poor different from those in moderately poor households; it also explores the implications for policy and practice of that difference. The multiple nature and exceptional severity of the constraints on ultra poor households means that their poverty is qualitatively different, not merely by a matter of degree. The implications of this difference may be profound. The interventions and policies behind the impressive gains Bangladesh has made in human development reach the moderately poor, but are not necessarily designed to address the constraints of the ultra poor. Reaching ultra poor children needs not an extension of existing policy, but a substantial rethink.

Nor do ultra poor children inherit poverty simply because their initial conditions are worse. While it poses serious constraints, even extreme poverty does not wholly dictate behaviour. We know this because even in north-western Bangladesh, a region with few rivals globally for the severity of its poverty, there are destitute households strategising for and investing in their children's future. In the final analysis, it is not income that matters so much as how both economic and social factors including income are mediated in household strategies with respect to children and their decisions around protecting children from immediate and long term harm. Whether household strategies prioritise investments in children's futures over immediate returns to the household depends, in the final analysis, on the expectations and calculations of parents. The report draws on the idea of the 'quality-quantity transition' to analyse the context in which ultra poor households make decisions about their children. In general, it seems that ultra poor households are less far along this transition than other households, and are, as a result, predisposed towards attaining the most immediate stream of benefits from their children possible. Postponement in the interests of investments for the child's future is rarely (seen as) a viable option.

Community institutions and actors may materially influence the terms of the inter-generational contract through their impact on norms relating to children and childhood; because they wield informal social power at the community level and because they are frequently conduits or brokers for public policy and/or NGO programmes. Based on the initial round of research with ultra poor households and children, a survey was designed to assess the scope for exploiting this influence to intervene on extreme childhood poverty. The findings of the survey include that little progress has been made towards tackling the practice of and attitudes towards harmful child labour at the community level. While community actors and institutions are supportive of efforts to improve school participation among the poorest and to reduce the prevalence of early marriage, reflected in real progress on both these issues, child labour may in fact have increased. One cause appears to be that stronger interests are or are felt to be - at stake in the child labour case. These include the household interests in supplying child labour, as noted above, but also the strength of demand for cheap children's labour. A second is that while there is a reasonably robust



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sense of the public benefits involved in tackling school participation and early marriage, this is absent in the case of discussions of the benefits of tackling harmful children's work. Effective advocacy work by Government and NGOs on school and early marriage is less evident with respect to children's work, particularly in its more harmful dimensions. A third cause seems to be that while there are comparatively clear institutional responsibilities and local mandates, clarity around who is responsible and for which actions, and faith in existing interventions on school and early marriage, these are absent with respect to child labour. This contributes to the overall sense that this problem is more intractable than either school non-attendance or early marriage.

The findings of the research studies are presented in four parts. Part 1 introduces the background to the research. Part 2 outlines the methods used. Part 3 presents a situation analysis of extreme poverty in childhood, based on primary and secondary sources. Part 4 presents findings from the survey of community leaders and officials, while part 5 discusses the policy implications of these findings.

1.1 The focus on extreme poverty

The research reported here is part of a growing focus on extreme poverty in Bangladesh. It arises from the recognition that while progress has been made to reduce poverty, up to one-third of the population remains resiliently, severely poor. Bangladesh has made impressively rapid gains in human development, although absolute levels remain low. These gains mean that a ten-year old from an average poor family in 2005 is many more times likely to attend school, attain adequate levels of nutrition, and live a longer, healthier life than her equivalent in 1975 - or even in 1985. Depending on a number of factors - whether her parents choose to control their fertility and invest in their children's schooling - our ten-year old may even enjoy mobility out of the ranks of the poor (see Sen 2003).

Table 1.1 The ultra poor compared to the national rural average: selected indicators

Characteristic	BRAC-targeted ultra poor	National rural average
% of female-headed households	40	8
% of households not owning homestead land	54	6
% of households who cannot afford two meals a day	48	8
under-five mortality	14	11
EPI coverage (12-23 months)	68	70
% of 6-59 months children who are underweight	64	51
% of 12-59 months children who are wasted	14	12
total fertility rate per woman	5.45	3.54
gross enrolment ratio at primary	87	108
net enrolment ratio at primary	65	80
literacy rate (7+ population) (%)	9	33
adult literacy rate (15+ population) (%)	7	38
% of households with at least one literate person	20	58

Source: BRAC, 2004

While the overall direction of change is positive, a significant group at the bottom of the socio-economic pile remains unable to take advantage of the modest overall gains. Government and NGO policies which are adequately designed to tackle moderate forms of poverty may not be able to meet the different needs of the ultra poor, who tend to be excluded from what are otherwise 'pro-poor' services. To take one well-known example, micro-credit services reach 15 million mainly poor mainly rural women borrowers, but

do not generally benefit the poorest households (Amin *et al* 2003; Matin and Hulme 2003). BRAC's Challenging the Frontiers of Poverty Reduction/Targeting the Ultra poor (TUP) programme emerged out of such concerns.

The ultra poor are excluded from services that meet the needs of other poor groups partly because they have fewer assets and lower incomes - sufficient basis for exclusion or self-exclusion from micro-finance programmes, for example. But there are qualitative differences in their capacities and livelihood strategies that make the ultra poor different, and which may entail that policies and programmes need to be rethought. Table 1.1 shows key differences in the characteristics of ultra poor households (as targeted for BRAC's TUP programme) as compared to the national rural average. Other differences not shown include social exclusion engendered by ethnic minority status; gender and age hierarchies; and lower education levels. The ultra poor may be extremely risk-averse, yet vulnerable to crises as a matter of routine: the likelihood of marital disruption, illness, or death ensures shorter time horizons for planning and investment than enjoyed by the moderately poor.

1.2 The changing context of childhood in Bangladesh

The context is of vital interest here: Bangladesh has reached a particularly interesting historical moment with respect to childhood. From a context in which a only minority could access school two decades ago, there are now enough school places for every school-aged child in the country. There remain gaps in coverage, particularly among social and geographically marginal groups, and education provision is of poor quality. But the dramatic expansion in access and the closing of the gender gap represent remarkable achievements in this poor, rural, patriarchal society.

What drove this remarkable change in the context of childhood? Demand for education rose as changing economic conditions gave parents new reasons to invest in children's schooling; elite social attitudes and partisan political agendas contributed to the rising demand for mass education, and paved the way for large-scale public investments at primary level. NGOs and Government responded accordingly. Bangladesh's uniquely large and effective NGOs established a national network of non-formal schools targeted at poor girls. The state schooling system responded to this competitive threat with effective policies to draw poor children, including girls, into state primary schools (Hossain and Kabeer 2004).



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These policies include subsidies to selected students. The Food for Education (FFE) programme gave grain rations to disadvantaged rural primary school children, reaching two million by 1999. It was replaced in 2002 by a targeted, direct cash-subsidy programme, with over five million students a year expected to receive stipends. The Female Secondary Stipends (FSS) programme provides stipends and tuition waivers to girls in non-municipal areas attending lower secondary school, reaching close to four million girls a year. Regularity of attendance and exam performance are among the criteria for receiving these stipends. There is evidence that FFE improved the educational prospects of many girls and poor children in the 1990s (Ravallion and Wodon 1999; Ahmed and del Ninno 2002), and each additional year of the FSS is estimated to have increased female secondary enrolment by as much as 8 per cent. The FSS programme is also thought to have helped delay girls' marriage (Arends-Kuenning and Amin 2000).

More marked than its educational achievements is the cultural shift this development has engendered. School is now firmly part of the rural landscape. The delivery of school textbooks is an important winter season event, and only a generation ago, one would not have seen clusters of small girls clutching precious books en route to school. Universal attendance is a matter of rural civic pride, and it is a rare community leader who does not wish to boast that all the children in his village attend school. Of course, not all children attend school, and fewer do so regularly. But an important normative shift has been wrought: children are now expected to go to school, and their parents are expected to send them. In other contexts, the achievement of universal primary schooling has had a powerful impact on how children and childhood are perceived (Cunningham 1998). This change in the social landscape was the background to this study, as it prompted questions about its effects on perceptions of poor children. As it becomes the norm for children to attend school, it seems increasingly likely that the norm that children *should* attend school would also be established. Under such conditions, would there be pressures on poor parents to sacrifice current welfare in order to educate their children? Would the cultural pressure of this normative shift extend to community-level action?



Mahmud / map / SCUİK

Part 2 Research design

This present study is part of a programme of research started in June 2004 by BRAC/RED designed to explore the impact of informal community-level institutions on the livelihoods and prospects of the ultra poor. Equally, it contributes to the objective of a long term partnership between SC UK and BRAC/RED to build a national level understanding of the relationship between child work and poverty, leading to a situation in which communities and poor households are able to protect children from harmful work and other negative childhood practices.



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2.1 Questions and assumptions

The research was designed to explore ultra poor household practices, norms and beliefs relating to children, and the influence on these of community-level institutions and actors. The research design relied on two main assumptions. The first was that the inheritance of extreme poverty may be linked to the reliance of ultra poor households on child labour in its more harmful forms; early marriage; and lack of access to or poor attendance at school. These factors are assumed to contribute to the inter-generational transmission of poverty by causing physical and/or psychosocial damage to children; introducing them into characteristically unstable marital relationships; and preventing them from developing human capital which may enable them to improve their livelihoods prospects. There is little hard evidence that these factors contribute to the inheritance of extreme poverty in rural northwest Bangladesh, or indeed elsewhere (see Harper *et al* 2003). However, the life stories of the ultra poor people who took part in this study, in their own accounts, show how schooling, early marriage and childhood work have featured to bring them to present conditions. Second, all three factors have been the subject of Government and NGO interventions. Given that the ultimate goal of the research is to assess the scope for preventing the inheritance of extreme poverty, the research focused on targets that practitioners and policymakers had already identified as important and potentially actionable.

The second assumption was that community institutions and actors with local influence and power had the potential to deter these practices. The bases for this assumption include that:

Poverty does not directly compel households to engage in harmful practices with respect to children: whether children attend school, engage in harmful work or marry early are all mediated by cultural norms relating to childhood, gender and social status (see Delap 2001).

Wholesale changes in practices with respect to children's health, nutrition and schooling have been effected over the past two decades, sometimes in the face of hostility from parents, and often requiring rapid normative change (see for example Chowdhury and Cash 1996)

Local institutions have potential to deter harmful practices through customary influence over social norms and the exertion of authority, sanctions through informal legal arrangements, and official powers delegated by state structures (see Harper *et al* 2003 on the role of social norms in the transmission of poverty). In rural Bangladesh these institutions include formal organizations such as NGOs and schools as well as informal bodies such as *samaj* (the village institution customarily charged with dispute resolution and setting community norms).

2.2 Methods

The findings presented in this report are based primarily on field research with ultra poor households in two communities in the poor northwestern region. The discussion that follows of the 'ultra poor' is based on a definition of ultra or extreme poverty which, in line with contemporary thinking on poverty, combines the material dimensions of income poverty and asset vulnerability (in particular, landlessness) with other forms of ill being, such as social marginality, insecurity and exclusion, including from services. The process of targeting programme beneficiaries (for BRAC's CFPR/TUP programme in Rangpur and SC UK's programme through its partner organisation Solidarity in Kurigram) had drawn on local knowledge about poverty conditions to select the very poorest households and communities. Criteria used in targeting included income, asset, and social indicators (e.g. presence of able-bodied adult male), as well as information about access to services. The communities were a rural community in Rangpur district (Madhyapara in Shektari village, Porshuram Union) and an urban community (Shawdagarpara, in Kurigram Pourashava) in Kurigram district. While both communities are in the *shadar thana* (district headquarter), Shawdagarpara has considerably better communications, being located on the immediate outskirts of Kurigram town. Madhyapara is more rural, and it takes over an hour to reach Rangpur town in the dry season by cycle or cycle rickshaw. Both are areas with high poverty levels and both communities have a high proportion of households which on any number of conventional dimensions could be categorised as very poor. Levels of land ownership, including of homestead land, were low in both. BRAC has been implementing its TUP programme in Madhyapara Shektari and SCUK, through the Kurigram-based NGO Solidarity, has programmes in Shawdagarpara. These were selected because of the potential for the research to contribute to programme interventions and because the difficult task of assessing and selecting the ultra poor was already complete. Prior connections and relationships also meant the initial rapport-building and introductory phase necessary for qualitative research was already complete. This meant there was a helpful mutual familiarity between community members and the research team.

The initial familiarity with each community also enabled the research team to select communities with interesting differences between them. These included that:

The ultra poor in Madhyapara were income-poorer, but part of mainstream Bengali Muslim society. As members of the social group known as 'bedhe', by contrast, the Shawdagarpara community are more socially marginal. While this group is not exactly despised by mainstream Kurigram society, they are considered exotic because they are mainly involved in peddling or 'ferry' activities, are allegedly of Assamese origin, and are suspected of catching snakes for use in snake-charming. In a study of norms and social values around childhood, it was hoped that this difference would make it possible to isolate the impact of social marginality.

There are more and more attractive cash income-earning opportunities for parents, boys and girls in Shawdagarpara.

The quality of schools appeared to be better for the Madhyapara community, who were also in a position to receive the primary school stipend, which only applies to rural students.

Research activities in both communities included:

Interviews with key informants, including BRAC and Solidarity staff

Profile of children's activities in 30 BRAC TUP programme participant households (Madhyapara) and 57 children participants of Solidarity Poverty and Working Children Project (Kurigram)

Semi-structured interviews with ultra poor members of selected households

Participatory research and focus group discussions with working children, school-going children, working youths, adolescent girls, mothers, fathers, School Management Committee (SMC) members, community/*samaj* leaders

Semi-structured interviews with upazila education officials, teachers, SMC members, community/*samaj* leaders, Union Parishad members and chairmen.

Findings from the community-based research supported the design of the survey of community officials and leaders. A total of 200 teachers, School Management Committee members, *samaj* leaders, Union Parishad representatives and kazis (registrars of Muslim marriages) in Rangpur and Kurigram *shadar thanas*. The survey was designed to elicit knowledge and perceptions with respect to

constraints and livelihoods prospects of children from very poor households

wider consequences ('public bads') of extreme poverty in childhood

effectiveness of policies, programmes and interventions

roles and responsibilities of state, societal, household and other actors with respect to children.



Naomi Hossain

Part 3 Extreme poverty in childhood: a situation analysis

This section outlines key characteristics of ultra poverty as it affects children, drawing on secondary evidence to illustrate findings from the two community case studies. The emphasis is on uncovering features of extreme poverty which distinguish ultra poor children and experiences of childhood from the larger population.

3.1 Household characteristics

The first feature of the children of the ultra poor to strike the observer is their sheer numbers: these are households rich in small children. Of the ultra poor population targeted for BRAC's programme, 43 per cent of the population was below 15, compared to 39 per cent in the national average. Fertility rates are higher among ultra poor women, although contraceptive use rates are also above the national average, apparently a reflection of earlier marriage among ultra poor women (BRAC 2004). Mortality rates are also high, particularly among infants at around 14.5 per 1,000 compared to the national rural average of 11.3 (ibid: 56), and that many babies of the ultra poor do not survive infancy seemed to be taken as a matter of course (see Box 1).

Box 1. Why early marriage does no harm: a perspective from Rangpur

A group of BRAC TUP participants was discussing why Government law states women should be over 18 for marriage.

Beauty, the BRAC Community Health Worker, argued that mid-20s is the best time for marriage because it is better for the health of women and for the condition of the marriage. 'When girls get married young,' Beauty explained, 'then they have babies too quickly and their health suffers and then their husbands don't want them any more. And their mothers-in-law also abuse them for not being able to work and then their husbands leave them.'

The rest of the group was asked what they felt about the ideal age for marriage. One woman instantly called out '13, 14, 15', as if this was common sense. Romeza's daughter (a woman in her late twenties and herself the mother of two, one of whom, a daughter, is in class IX) argued that 'all this about the health of young brides' was rubbish: she had herself been married at 8 or 9 or 10 (her mother nodded her confirmation proudly) and told us to 'look at me, it had no bad impact on my health, I am strong and healthy.' Indeed she is a robust young woman.

Romeza's daughter then went on to talk about her five children. At this point we stopped her and said, 'but you just told us you have two children.' Yes, she explained, she has two living children, but three of three of her five had died in infancy. We asked 'wasn't your early marriage bad for your babies?' but she didn't respond. That she had lost three babies in infancy did not appear to affect the validity of her argument that early marriage had not been bad for her health.

Source: fieldwork notes, Rangpur, September 2004

Many more ultra poor households are headed by women (40 per cent) than in the national population (8 per cent). Of these, most are widowed, abandoned or divorced, although in some cases husbands have migrated for work or do not work, usually due to illness or disability. Of the ultra poor households in our two community case studies, 14 out of 30 in Madhyapara (46 per cent) and 11 out of 44 in Shawdagarpara (25 per cent) were headed by women. The illness and death of fathers feature prominently in the stories working children tell of why they work rather than attend school (see box 2). Marital disruption in the form of divorce, abandonment and multiple marriages by fathers is also considerably more common among the ultra poor, and an important condition underlying their greater vulnerability.

As others have shown, it is under conditions of household vulnerability (irregular income, acute occupational or physical insecurity) as much as poverty that children's economic contributions are most vital (see Delap 2001; Kabeer 2003). Ultra poor households in both our communities are vulnerable in terms of occupation, income and assets. Both groups were effectively landless, with few owning even homestead land. Commonly used indicators of household income-consumption levels suggest that the ultra poor within the Shawdagarpara community was considerably less cash-poor and enjoyed a better income flow than the Madhyapara community the result of dependence on trading and related business activities. But higher income for the Shawdagarpara community comes at the price of marginal although not entirely negative group identity, associated with dependence on business, as opposed to agriculture. One aspect of this social marginality was that it was acceptable, although not desirable, for married women who had already borne children to do 'ferry' (peddling ribbons, jewelry, cosmetics and so on).

Box 2. Triggers for entry into full-time work

Monwar Islam's father died and his *chacha* (paternal uncle) brought him into the business. Shaheen's father worked alone and he was the second oldest so he went to work. (His brother Mehdi says that Shaheen was naughty and didn't want to study, in any case. Shaheen gets angry and counters that he used to get beaten for not having books and pencils, that's why he was naughty).

Badiur Zaman gave up school when his mother died, when he was very young and in class III. He was the oldest boy. His father remarried and he studied a bit for one more year and then his new mother had a baby. There had been a small boy who used to take his father's lunch to him, but when the new baby came his father thought he could save a little and because Badiur was now big, he started to bring the food to the town instead, and no longer went to school.

Payel Uddin is from a very big family (four siblings in addition to himself) and his father said he should do something to help the family. Aminur Rahman is the oldest boy and he didn't have any pens or notebooks or a private tutor. His mother wanted him to study but he could see how tough it was for the family and his father couldn't afford the things he needed for school.

Anwar Hossain is also the biggest brother and his mother was sick with diabetes two years ago, so he went to work at that time. Milon Islam went to work when his father died. Jewel's family was in great difficulty from a long time ago. He tried doing 'ferry' work but he fell asleep at a fair and all his goods were stolen. Shazul Islam's father died and the family were very poor, and that's why he started work.

Source: focus group discussion with working youths, Shawdagarpara

The behaviour involved in 'ferry' makes it strikingly unusual for women outside the big cities in Bangladesh, who rarely travel alone if they can avoid doing so. Yet ferry work is common in our Shawdagarpara case: of our 44 households, adult women were reported to be in the ferry business in 19, compared to 17 reporting 'housewife' status. Of those involved in ferry, nine were widows, whereas all 17 'housewives' had husbands, suggesting that even here, it is desirable for adult women to remain at home as far as possible. The women were ambivalent about their capacity to earn. Although marriage patterns are reported to be the same as in the wider population (i.e. brides are brought in from other villages), there is some reluctance from other communities to marry in, possibly because of this unorthodoxy with respect to women's work.

One young married woman staunchly defended the importance of *maan-shomman* (respectability) over the need to work, arguing heatedly that 'it was better not to eat' than for women to do ferry or other kinds of work that involved leaving the house. She had relatively recently married into the community and was presumably defending the norms of her home village. Other women present were older and themselves 'ferry' workers; they remained silent and did not defend this practice.



The important point here is that in deference to the norms of wider society it is preferable that women withdraw from ferry work if and when alternatives emerge. These alternatives are likely to come in the form of young sons. One boy explained that society would describe the following as good behaviour by a child:

For example if I say, 'Ma, I have earned some money, you don't need to go to work today. Why don't you stay at home and eat and have your shower.' Then she is happy.

Similarly, other Shawdagarpara women felt that even under duress – such as there being no rice in the house – respectability was sufficiently strong motivation for sending boys to work rather than going themselves.

Where male household heads were present, they were predominantly in daily agricultural or wage labour and rickshaw-pulling in Madhyapara, and overwhelmingly in ferry or other forms of petty trading and small business in Shawdagarpara. Adult males in these ultra poor households were frequently too ill or incapacitated to work, with invariably negative consequences for children's schooling and work patterns. The BRAC survey confirms that ultra poor men lose a high proportion of working days to illness; BRAC programme staff in Rangpur suggested that some male ultra poor household heads were more inclined to visit tea stalls or to gamble than they were to work. (Such comments were heard less of the Shawdagarpara community, who had a local reputation for hard work.) However, laziness seems less convincing an explanation of this apparent reluctance to work than the debilitating and demoralizing nature of the occupations of ultra poor men (see Begum and Sen 2004 on rickshawpulling as an 'unsustainable livelihood'). That the BRAC survey documents higher mortality (crude death) rates among the ultra poor than in the rural national average and among ultra poor men compared to women points to the obvious conclusion: that the occupations of ultra poor men are, quite literally, life-threatening. And as fathers withdraw from physically debilitating occupations, sons are expected to take their places. This may entail the occasional absence from school; physical exertion that is damaging to growing bodies; or full and final entrance into low-skilled, low-paid, physically damaging occupations.

3.2 School

If there is a single, robust, national-level indicator of extreme childhood poverty in Bangladesh, it is likely to be primary school enrolment. A nationally-representative survey of children from the late 1990s found that one-fifth of all children had never enrolled, and that this group was drawn principally from the 'hard-core' poor (Mahmud and Sen, 1998, cited in Kabeer 2003). More recently, the BRAC survey found enrolment among the ultra poor lagged behind the national rural average (see table 3.1). In their analysis of the findings of the BRAC survey, Nath and Khan (2004) highlight distinctive features of the education of the ultra poor. One is that the gap between gross and net enrolment ratios is considerably lower among ultra poor groups than within the national average, and lowest among the poorest boys. This suggests that late enrolment is unlikely among the ultra poor: if they have not had the chance when they are very small, they are less likely than other children to go at all. The most likely explanation is that from an early age ultra poor children – ultra poor boys in particular – will be working under conditions which prevent their attendance at school. School is an indulgence only afforded the very young, whose labour is of little alternative value.

Table 2.1 School enrolment among the ultra poor compared to national averages

		Gross enrolment ratio			Net enrolment ratio			Never enrolled
		boys	Girls	all	boys	girls	all	children aged 6-10
primary	targeted ultra poor ¹	81	94	87	63	67	65	32
	national rural average ²	108	108	108	108	108	80	-
lower secondary (aged 11-15)	targeted ultra poor ¹				31	45	38	gender gap in enrolment children aged 11-15 15%
	national average ³	49	55	52	41	46	43	6%

¹BRAC 2004

²CAMPE 2002

³BANBEIS figures for 2001. BANBEIS does not collect statistics for primary.

Although the case study populations are too small for direct comparisons, overall patterns of enrolment and attainment in Madhyapara and Shawdagarpara appear broadly similar to the larger ultra poor population: dropout rates are high; average years spent in school low; and girls are more likely to attend than boys. Table 2.2 shows that just under one-third of children aged 6 to 10 in our community cases were not yet enrolled in school, which tallied with the 32 per cent 'never enrolled' in this group in the BRAC survey.

Box 3. Will you go back to school?

Mukti is the youngest of five sisters and the only one who ever attended school. At ten, she is in theory in class 1 at the local primary school in Shawdagarpara, but at the time we met her, she had not attended for about a month. Why had Mukti stopped going to school?

'Because it's not a good place to study. The teachers are not good. They make the children massage their legs, *paka chul tulte bole* (pull out their grey hairs). They mainly make the boys do it. But I had to do it once.'

Mukti's sister Munni and her mother Fatima support her decision not to attend. Fatima is a widow who does ferry work and struggles to support herself, the two younger unmarried daughters and the third daughter, Hanufa, who returned when her husband abandoned her, on earnings of about Tk 40-60 per day. (Tk 62 is equivalent to USD 1.) She said it was difficult in any case to get the money together to pay for exercise books, pens, good clothes, fees and so on. According to Munni, they might try to put her in the BRAC school next year when they have a new intake. On the next visit, however, Mukti is all dressed up and ready to go off with her mother to do 'ferry,' which is something she enjoys very much.

Survey-based statistics are less successful at conveying the nature of school careers for ultra poor children. More so than for other children, the ultra poor have a fragmented and episodic relationship with school, usually ending in early dropout. But irregular attendance and even long breaks do not necessarily entail that the children are not interested in school, or that they have no intention of returning if circumstances become more favourable (see box 3).

Table 2.2 Educational profile of ultra poor children in Madhyapara and Shawdagarpara

	Madhyapara	Shawdagarpara	Total
Total children aged 6-18	54	121	175
Total number of girls	23	62	85
Total number of boys	32	59	91
Children (6-18) in school	15	62	77
Children (6-18) not in school	24	54	78 (45% of total)
Boys (6-18) not in school	13	27	40 (44% of boys)
Girls (6-18) not in school	11	27	38 (45% of girls)
	<i>6 unmarried</i>	<i>17 unmarried</i>	<i>23 (27% of unmarried girls)</i>
Children aged 6-10	14	30	44
Children aged 6-10 not in school	6	7	13 (30% of children aged 6-10)
Boys aged 6-10 not in school	6	5	11
Girls aged 6-10 not in school	0	2	2
Children aged 11-17	23	80	103
Boys aged 11-17 not in school	8	20	28 (60% of boys 11-17)
Girls aged 11-17 not in school	9	20	29 (52% of girls 11-17)
	<i>6 unmarried</i>	<i>15 unmarried</i>	<i>21 unmarried (47% of unmarried girls 11-17)</i>
Never attended school	9	13	22 (13% of children aged 6-18)
Average years of schooling of those not currently in school	3.1	3.5	

From the perspectives of children, it seems that there are often temporary obstacles which they expect may be overcome and which will then permit them to attend more regularly. On two occasions, mothers in Madhyapara told us their sons had dropped out only for this to be contradicted by their sons. One intended to return when a leg injury healed; in the view of another boy, he was still in class III and intended to continue, although he had previously left another school which he did not like. (His mother complains she cannot discipline him and make him go to school or do anything else, for that matter.) During periods of non-attendance when children do not perceive themselves as having finally dropped out for good, parents may not share their children's optimism about their likelihood of returning. But then parents do not always take the determining role in these decisions. However, given the high dropout rate, the chances that children with irregular school careers will get very far are remote: the most likely outcome is that they stop attending and gradually stop expecting to, through a process of 'nondecision-making' about school (Kabeer 2003).

The availability of cash stipends for the 40 per cent poorest at rural primary schools and all girls at secondary level appears to be a positive inducement for the ultra poor population. However, neither stipend featured prominently in the calculations made by ultra poor households in favour of attending school, although their inadequacy was cited as a reason for having withdrawn. At secondary, the amounts were declared inadequate to cover the costs of fees, books, private tuition and clothing (see also Ahmed *et al* 2004). In Madhyapara, claimants explained that the rules regarding eligibility for the primary stipend were very strictly applied because of heavy demands from an overwhelmingly poor population. This meant that children who were caught cheating or who did not attend properly were excluded, even if they were poor.

This impressionistic finding could be taken as broadly supportive of arguments against stipends from within the NGO community. These arguments include that stipends create dependency on cash incentives for school attendance, when improving school quality is the preferred, more sustainable approach. On the other hand, it is arguable that larger amounts and more precise targeting could alleviate the extra constraints faced by ultra poor households. But under current eligibility criteria, the poor, rather than the ultra poor, are the main beneficiaries. Criteria for receiving the primary stipend include 85 per cent attendance and the achievement of at least 40 per cent in annual exams. Ultra poor children are considerably less likely than moderately poor children to achieve these because they are less likely to get help at home with their schoolwork, and because they are most likely to attend irregularly. Madhyapara children reported that 'sometimes parents say, 'don't go today, go and work in someone's house'', and that when parents fall sick or there is no food in the house, children work instead of going to school. It may be because the poorest face more obstacles in meeting stipend eligibility criteria that the primary stipend programme is only slightly progressive (Ahmed *et al* 2004).



Gono Unayan Kendra (GUK)

But the issue of school quality may also be significant for ultra poor children. The opportunity costs of attending school rather than working are likely to be higher than for other groups. Ultra poor children may also be more dependent on the quality of instruction they receive in the classroom than children who have the advantages of literate family members and private tuition. And by virtue of their poverty, ultra poor children have more discretion in whether or not to attend school: whereas better-off children are required by parental pressure and social norms to attend, ultra poor children's non-attendance is excused by their poverty. That they have more leeway to withdraw from school as it suits them means they may be more responsive to the humiliation of punishments and other forms of classroom discipline, or because they anticipate being told to leave because they lack appropriate clothing. Quality may matter more because the schooling decision is left more to the child who may be more sensitive to this than parents.

Nath and Khan in BRAC (2004) also highlight the strong pro-girl gender bias as a peculiarity of the ultra poor, a bias which rises from 5 per cent at primary to almost 15 at secondary, very likely as a result of the secondary school stipends for girls. Enrolments at secondary are generally lower than the national average (see table 3.1), and a smaller proportion of secondary school-aged girls from the ultra poor population is enrolled than either girls or boys from the general population. However, the substantially larger gender gap in enrolment among the ultra poor indicates that secondary school-going aged boys of this group are the most educationally disadvantaged. Note also that among the targeted ultra poor, 42 per cent of boys but only 30 per cent of girls in the 11-15 age group had never enrolled, suggesting that for almost half of boys in this age group, school was not even a consideration. The disproportionately high gender gap among the ultra poor is suggestive of the great power of the push into wage work for ultra poor boys of secondary school age, on the one hand, and of the high degree of responsiveness of ultra poor households to conditional cash transfer programmes (such as the female secondary stipends), on the other. That the BRAC survey finds the gender gap to be highest in regions with lower overall educational achievements further supports this view.

3.3 Early marriage

Although teenaged girls from targeted ultra poor households are more likely than the national rural average to be married, this difference is only marked in the 15 to 19 age group suggesting that early marriage practices are common among the wider population and not merely a characteristic of the poor. The ultra poor are different with respect to marital stability, however: already in the 15 to 19 age group, more than 8 per cent of ultra poor women are widowed, divorced or abandoned, as compared to 1 per cent of the national rural average, a proportion which doubles to 16 per cent for the 20 to 24 age group ultra poor (compared to a national average of 4 per cent). In our case study communities, 15 of the 39 girls reportedly aged between 12 and 18 inclusive were already married (see box 4). While strict comparisons of the actual prevalence of to early marriage among these ultra poor communities is not possible because of our small sample size and biased age-reporting, the marriage of very young daughters appeared to be a higher priority in Madhyapara than in Shawdagarpara.

One possibility is that the greater urgency with which the Madhyapara ultra poor households appeared to treat their daughters' marriages was linked to their higher proportion of women-headed households or more extreme income-poverty. Unlike in Madhyapara, all adolescent girls in Shawdagarpara earned small but steady incomes of their own, which they contribute to household expenses: one girl reported having contributed her savings to her sister's wedding costs. Shawdagarpara community leaders also complain that prejudices against people in business (like themselves) make it difficult for them get their daughters married off to farmers: dowries for daughters marrying outside the community could rise as high as Tk 100,000. Any delays in getting girls married off in Shawdagarpara may also, therefore, reflect the greater challenges of finding appropriate grooms or raising dowries.

Box 4. How Alifa's daughter was married at 14 (or thereabouts)

Alifa is the head of the ultra poor women's Village Organisation (the group through which credit and other inputs are provided by BRAC). Of Alifa's three children, the oldest is a girl of about 17 called Lipi Begum. About three and a half years ago, when she was about 14, Lipi was married to a cousin, her chacha-to-bhai (paternal uncle's son). Even though he was a close relative, a dowry of sorts was demanded, although not the usual big cash payment. Alifa said happily that they did not even have to give a 'biday dowry', not even the big feast that marks the sending-off occasions. Instead they only had to give the 'usual' things a cow, a ring and a cycle.

There was some resistance from the local kazi, who 'wouldn't hold the pen' to register the marriage, on the grounds that the girl was too young. Alifa explained that the standard fee of Tk 1001 was given to the kazi, but no bribe: how he eventually gave in was that Alifa was summoned to swear that the girl was over 18. With this assurance from her mother, the kazi finally agreed to register the marriage. Lipi was then able to study for another three years, getting up to class 10. She did not, however, pass her matriculation exam.

On another occasion Lipi was visiting and we got to meet her. She is small and sickly-looking, and looked at most around 14. But then she and her mother both appear to be stunted, and she may well be 17 or 18 by now. Alifa said that because Lipi had always been so sickly it was 'better to get her married off quickly'.

While early marriage is not exclusive to the ultra poor, they may face stronger pressures to marry daughters early, and it may strengthen mechanisms for the transmission of extreme poverty. One much-cited pressure on ultra poor parents to marry their daughters - and possibly sons - off early is dowry dynamics. The logic is that if dowries are lower for younger brides, the poorest are most likely to attempt to marry their daughters off earliest. There are a number of reasons to think that this is a simple explanation for a more complex reality: price negotiations tend to be based upon a number of variables (including looks and family background) making it unlikely that youth is the bride's sole marketable factor.

Delaying marriage may also be less acceptable according to the social norms governing the ultra poor. Their lower levels of education mean many display some residual ambivalence about the value of post-primary schooling for their daughters (who will in most cases end up married to men who did not complete primary; see Hossain and Kabeer (2004) and Mahmud (2003) on attitudes to girls' education). Adolescent girls who had dropped out of school appeared to be waiting for the right boy or the right dowry offer. In much the same way that it is preferable for boys who are not at school to go to work, girls who are not at school are married off at speed to avoid the possibility that they will get into 'trouble' or become 'spoilt'.



Naomi Hossain

Pressures on ultra poor girls to marry young emanate from fears that their reputations are particularly vulnerable. The ultra poor are less able to conform to dominant norms regarding women's behaviour, because they tend to be more mobile, to enjoy less male protection than other women, and because their families are less able to police their behaviour. There are suggestions from within the communities that 'love marriages' may be more common among the poor because they are less likely to require dowry. While sexual harassment en route to school is frequently invoked to explain dropout at secondary, there is also the fear that girls' mobility offers opportunities for clandestine contact. (In a notably 'modern' twist, one 15-year old bride in Shawdagarpara had conducted her secret affair with her now-husband through the medium of love letters.) Against such threats, stricter norms regarding early marriage may be one of few means available to the ultra poor of asserting superior morality against the (comparatively modern and lax) behaviour of wider society. Particularly strong pressures arise from the strength of norms about parental responsibilities to ensure their daughters are married at all: short life expectancy among ultra poor fathers in particular, creates irresistible pressures to marry daughters early.

Adolescent girls in both communities report that marriage discussions frequently break down over dowry issues, but that as soon as a suitable arrangement (groom and amount) is found, the wedding takes place. Dowry pressures mean the poorest can least afford to be selective about prospective grooms, paving the way for future marital instability. This was clear in the case of ultra poor programme member Mahmuda's daughter, who was married to a man older than her mother in the same month he married off his own daughter. No amount of probing could uncover that his qualifications as a 'good' husband rested on more than that Mahmuda's uncle knew him in Dhaka. By all accounts, the marriage had taken place suddenly, and there was little scope for investigating the groom. Pressures to arrange daughters' marriages may similarly result in marriages with very young, very old, poor or otherwise undesirable men, the reason being that these are cheaper dowry options.

Pressures to marry daughters off very young are to some extent counteracted by the growing acceptability of girls' schooling. Our small sample suggests that as long as girls remain unmarried they are more likely than boys to attend school; the BRAC survey also found the gender gap among the ultra poor to be 15 per cent in favour of girls at secondary, compared to around 6 per cent in the national average. The gender gap in ultra poor enrolment at secondary in rural areas is also likely to reflect the direct impact of the female secondary school stipend, to which ultra poor households may be particularly responsive and the pull of wage work for boys of this age group (from which girls are usually but not always excluded; see below). The stipend is generally credited with higher enrolments of girls at secondary but has had more impact on the schooling of the wealthy, who are more likely to continue in secondary (see Khandker *et al* 2003). But ultra poor households find the stipend does not meet the additional costs of

secondary schooling such as private tuition and books, and girls find they cannot maintain adequate standards of clothing and personal grooming. But to the extent that the secondary stipend enables ultra poor girls to stay in school, it can be credited with delaying their marriage to some degree (see Raynor and Chowdhury 2004 for a summary of the evidence). The stipend appears to help because a girl who is not at school is likely to be on the marriage market shortly (education provides a socially acceptable excuse for delaying marriage beyond puberty) and the stipend reduces the costs of keeping a daughter in the family home; very poor households are also specially welcoming of transfers in the form of regular cash injections.

3.4 Harmful work

Beyond infancy, most ultra poor children help their parents or contribute to the household. As is the case in other contexts, household membership involves participation in everyday household routines, and therefore, some amount of 'work'.

Older children spend longer on activities more readily identifiable as 'work'. Children's work tends to be highly gendered from the start, and very small children are early socialised into a strict sexual division of labour. By the time ultra poor boys are around ten, most make an important contribution to household income or expenditure-saving through work which is rewarded in cash or kind. In our communities, this is rarely remunerated through regular wages from an employer. What is noticeable about the ultra poor is the routine and universal expectation that boys will work from an age well before they can hope to substitute for adult labour; many may also be expected to attend school, but the household comes early to depend on them making a net contribution or reducing the burden they present to the household. The contributions of girls in our Madhyapara case tend to be less visible routine expenditure-saving activities (firewood or cow dung collection, for example) or cooking and cleaning to enable adult women to focus on income-generating or other activities.

A small number of girls from both communities work as domestic servants in local houses or for rich people elsewhere. Some girls from Shawdagarpara had moved to Dhaka for garments work, which has proved a reasonably attractive option. Girls in Shawdagarpara generally enjoy significantly greater income-earning opportunities than their counterparts in Madhyapara. In part, this seems to reflect the advantages of urban location: access and communications have dramatically increased with the new road and bridge, which have opened up the area to greater penetration by business and micro-finance institutions. There are some benefits derived from the business culture (ethos and reputation) of the community: their contracted-out piecework does not require Shawdagarpara girls to be mobile or publicly visible, but they do make direct contact with middlemen. They also display some aptitude for attracting and balancing a portfolio of income-generating opportunities.

Of course, not all the economic activities of children are harmful. Some kinds of work may be more likely to contribute to their escape from cycles of extreme poverty than to its repetition. It seems that the spread of children's occupations appears to be highly context-specific, and more closely related to ease of access than any other single factor: children work in harmful or poorly paid activities because they need to be earning. There are few cases featuring realistic choices between occupations. We look now at the extent to which children's work in these communities was harmful in terms of physical danger; long hours preventing school attendance; being demeaning or of low social status and low pay.

Physical harm

Participatory research indicates that physical risks are more prominent than other criteria in the assessments ultra poor children make of harm at work. Work undertaken by children in our communities that involved easily identifiable physical risks included carpentry, coolie work and agricultural labour in Madhyapara, and earth-cutting and rickshaw-pulling in Shawdagarpara. A number of these occupations have other advantages that counter the physical risks involved: for example, boys appear to enjoy the

freedom and high earning potential involved in coolie work. Earth-cutting is dangerous and difficult, but relatively well-paid. Carpentry offers the prospect of a skill. Agricultural labour and rickshaw-pulling have the advantage that they tend to be widely available and offer relatively good wages. Fear of physical harm influences how children evaluate and select their occupations. One boy in Madhyapara worked in the soap factory for a year before chest problems made him move into coolie work. None worked in *biri* factories, although in both Shawdagarpara and Madhyapara, factories were located close by. Some boys in Shawdagarpara had done earth-cutting work in the past, but this is mainly an activity of older boys, as is 'piling', a hazardous activity relating to construction in *chor* areas. Young boys use their knowledge of the physical risks involved to evaluate different occupations. In Shawdagarpara, working boys complained of the 'koshto' (difficulties) of ferry work, in their view, having to travel far by foot in the sun without scope for rest. On reflection, however:

ferry is better than earth-cutting, agricultural labour, biri factory work or pulling a rickshaw or a rickshaw van. Men who pull rickshaws/vans, they won't even take them in the hospital. They say, why should we treat you? You will just go and do more damage to yourself again soon.

Physical danger was not usually associated with work done by girls, although the physical insecurities involved in leaving home to work as domestics were highlighted by children in Shawdagarpara. The considerable risks involved in cooking over smoky and unstable fires are rarely acknowledged, nor is the potential for long-term damage to eyesight from *kantha shilai* (stitching embroidered quilts).

That the most physically dangerous work done by girl children is that which they do in marriage is usually overlooked. At the least, marriage entails sexual activities and child-bearing for which children are rarely physically or psychologically prepared. And the same domestic and sexual activities, when sold commercially, are considered to be harmful to children. While undertaking them within marriage is evidently different in respect of the contractual relationship within which the work is done, the tasks themselves do not differ in terms of their physical risks. That early marriage can be treated as a type of harmful work for girl children was highlighted for us by an incident in Madhyapara. The 15 year old daughter of one ultra poor programme member had been married off to the son of another. The motivation had apparently been that the groom's mother had 'nobody to help her with the housework'.

Long hours

Few occupations undertaken by the ultra poor children involve long hours as a result of compulsion by employers, mainly because few children are employees as such. It is more usual that low remuneration requires children to spend more time on tasks. Ferry is a case in point: many young boys start off doing ferry part-time in the afternoons, attempting to combine this activity with school. But as a low-return activity requiring considerable physical exertion and long hours if a reasonable return is to be achieved, the attempt to combine school and work quickly proves futile. Coolie work and working in shops (common activities for boys in both Madhyapara and Shawdagarpara) tend to involve long hours, travel to town, and in some cases sleeping in the shop itself. In these cases, attending school in the home village is not possible, and no alternative provision is made. Community leaders in the Shawdagarpara community repeatedly stressed the need for a night school to avert this form of harm from children's work. Among school going children, girls' household work tends to take far longer than the work done by boys, but as it usually fits in around schooling, tends to go unnoticed.



Shehzad Noorani / SCUK

Children who work as domestic servants or shop 'apprentices' tend to be in similar positions: they save their families the cost of their upkeep, but parents cannot transform this advantage into investments in their education. Arrangements that involve sending children to live with other people appear to involve considerable faith on the part of sending parents, and typically emerge among the conditions and pay-offs of a patronage relation. But where the relationship between patron and client is sufficiently strong for parents to feel confident about the terms of the 'contract', the arrangement seems comparatively attractive. This appears to be the case with Subira in Madhyapara, whose younger daughters have been domestic servants since their father died. Neither receives a salary or has attended school. The younger daughter, who works in the rich house next door and on whose land Subira is permitted to live, attends *madrassah* (*maktab* Arabic reading classes in the local mosque) some mornings. Subira expects that her daughters' wedding costs will be covered through this arrangement. The family next door feeds her younger daughter and gives her 'help' when needed, which she considers payment enough. Such an arrangement can be seen as investment in the child's future – a long-term and risky investment dependent upon the continuing goodwill of patrons, but an investment all the same. And investments of this type have potentially high payoffs in terms of dowry costs and future employment, as well as offering current support for parents.

Pressures and incentives to educate girls affect the likelihood of girls entering domestic service: in Madhyapara, at least, this practice was reported to be on the decline. It seems to be mainly because the social structure of both communities was comparatively flat that arrangements of this kind were rare. Married girls are frequently prevented from attending school on grounds that they are too busy with household work, so that early marriage fits a second characteristic of harmful work.

Demeaning or low status

Domestic service is usually cited as among the most demeaning forms of children's work, but as was noted above, this was uncommon in both cases. Cow-dung collection and *nadda* (dung-stick) preparation are other types of low status work of girls which were rare, but not absent. The most noticeable aspect of work in which status featured was with respect to ferry work. The association of the entire Shawdagarpara community with ferry assigns them a low status within wider society. The benefits of this marginality include that they monopolise what appears to be a relatively lucrative activity in which even women and small boys can work. The costs are that the economic motivations for withdrawing boys from school are strong, and the internal community pressures against doing so weak. It is worth noting that the practice of sending children to work instead of school is increasingly the preserve of the very poorest, and by association a low status practice in general. Certainly, ultra poor children feel that school attendance is closely associated with status.

Low pay

Low pay is a feature of most activities undertaken by ultra poor children. In many cases, parents are content for their children to be placed in activities from which they may invest in the necessary patronage connections and (less often) skills required to obtain employment or other benefits as adults. That parents perceive it as worthwhile to withdraw children from school in order to do no more than save the costs of their care highlights their extreme poverty. It also highlights the low value assigned to labour, particularly of poor women and children. In Shawdagarpara, for example, very poor girls and some small boys are involved in *bhumri* necklace production. Older, more skilled girls report making around Tk 5 per day for these necklaces, although a figure of Tk 2 per day is more typical. Calculations on the basis of per day or per hour earnings of this type are rarely made at all, however: a range of livelihood activities take place over the day, according to what is convenient and when. Low pay per individual worker is less of an issue in ultra poor households than is the total amount being brought in: as one woman explained when asked whether it was really worthwhile to keep her child off school to contribute Tk 2 worth of *bhumri*-production per day, 'if everyone helps, it adds up'.

3.5 Aspirations, norms and household strategies

Ultra poor children in our case study communities recognise they are disadvantaged compared to most, but in both cases, the communities from which they come are generally poor, and there are many within each who are readily identified as very poor. In both communities, the rich or *borolok* (big people) are few, and in any case, not very rich. As one girl in Shawdagarpara explained it, 'we have no rich people like you see in the TV, with cars, big houses. Our rich people are not like that'. Few boys in the Shawdagarpara community can expect to attend school beyond primary. Working boys estimated that there were only 30 to 40 boys aged 12-14 in their community whose families were well off (their fathers work in bazaar shops) for them to attend school instead of working. To the extent that they stand out from the moderately poor majority, the ultra poor children are those for whom a steady school career even through primary is an unlikely prospect. This difference between the poor and the ultra poor highlights the need to rethink the agenda on child poverty in Bangladesh.

All children aspire to education. The material pay-off in terms of job prospects does not seem to be the most important motivation, mainly because so few people ever gain access to the formal sector jobs for which schooling is supposed to equip them. Boys in Madhyapara explained that one needs at least a 'matric-pass' to get a *chakeri* (formal sector job): 'You need a certificate, without that, you don't get a job. Or if you do, you have to give a very big bribe, but with a certificate the bribe is less'. More commonly, children anticipate schooling will provide them with non-specifically 'better' prospects in the future: mention is made of the 'light' acquired through education or of how schooling is for a '*shundor jibon*' ('beautiful life'). An educated child is a valued member of society whereas nobody 'gives value' to a child who cannot read or write; they may even say bad things. An educated person is valued because he or she can read a letter for an illiterate person, because he or she knows things about how the world works. The clearest purpose of education is stated by children to be the learning of appropriate social behaviour and norms the acquisition of modern, polite manners. Children view the lack of education as a source of social exclusion, blocking their membership in general society. As school children in Madhyapara explained it, those who do not get educated cannot mix with the people of the *samaj*, don't know how to behave with people correctly or to speak properly. For some, education is a ticket to the rewards of social mobility, even if it cannot ensure the upward economic mobility ensured by a good job.

Some children recognise that parents make immense sacrifices in order to send their children to school, and that they do so with no hope of a return and only in order to give the child the best possible future. Others interpret their parents' motivations for educating them as focused on their future earning potential. This is particularly true of boys, as parents are understood to reap the benefits of their earnings. Children's aspirations with respect to education are closely tied up with their socialisation with respect to 'serving' their parents. Doing well at school may be part of that service in households in which schooling is treated as an investment. But ultra poor boys apparently recognise that service to parents starts while they are very young and involves relinquishing any claims on household resources, including for school attendance, in order for them to save on household expenditures or contribute to household income.

But while strong emphasis is laid on learning in order to earn and support parents, the social transformation implied by formal schooling can drive a wedge between parents and children. If schooling bestows membership in gentle society, it may do so by creating a gap between children and parents. While ultra poor children rarely attain such a high degree of education that it significantly affects their familial relations, stories circulate to illustrate the dangers of over-educating children, telling of (mainly) sons who have been educated out of their sphere and who refuse to work in the trade of their fathers, or at all. Parents may also fear that their children will be changed by the experience of school.

Children are sensitive to tensions over the distribution of scarce household resources, and their implications for investments in their schooling. Shawdagarpara children debated whether educated

children were in fact more supportive of their parents, or whether indeed education made you more likely to split from the extended family. One boy noted that while ideally, everyone wanted to live together, 'wives could sometimes be bad' and criticise their mothers-in-law in order to achieve separate households. In a telling depiction, girls enacted a scene of domestic conflict: a paternal grandmother complained bitterly that girls should not go to school, and that resources were being wasted on their education. The parents defended their decision, arguing that 'it is good for girls to learn, too'. Meanwhile the mother complained of having to give choice food portions to her lazy mother-in-law who made no contribution to the household.

Also in Shawdagarpara, boys told us that those who really want to educate their children will do so even if they are not rich and the sacrifice involves begging and working in other people's houses: 'but when the children get their education, go up to 8 or 9, then they don't want to know the parents, they won't bring them to live with them, they say you live like that, you are a beggar'. Others, we heard, simply leave after completing their education, never to return. From what children say, the preference for children's education is tempered by ambivalence about the returns parents can expect to reap from such investment.

Understandably, the aspirations of adolescent girls were centred less on supporting parents. This group is generally educated to a level above anyone else in their household. While it is generally accepted all will marry young, most before 16, other possibilities are also entertained. In Madhyapara, girls were ambivalent about delaying marriage into their twenties (as had some local professional women with whom they were acquainted), but welcomed the chance of respectable local employment – examples given were of BRAC pre-primary school teaching positions and managers of the local BRAC library and adolescent girls' group. In Shawdagarpara, girls seemed more enthusiastic about delaying marriage and again, women NGO workers were cited as examples of how this could be achieved respectably. There was also some discussion of local girls who had gone off to the garments factories in Dhaka under the protection of relatives. These girls were understood to earn well and to enjoy their lives in Dhaka. This was a realistic option for some of the Shawdagarpara girls, but some claimed they were better off staying at home as they could save more from their *bhumri* and bag-making activities than expensive Dhaka lifestyles would permit, even with a (far larger) garments factory salary. Girls' aspirations with respect to work and marriage appear to be subject to a number of other important outside influences: with their secondary school educations, many girls are able to borrow and read books and magazines which expose them to urban middle-class norms and those of West Bengal. It is a far larger world of ideas than that of their mothers.

While there are indications of education-induced social tensions between poor parents and their children, norms around childhood and children's behaviour remain shaped by the material needs of households and the related norms of family life. Parental, but particularly paternal, authority remains total. Children display little notion that their rights are abused when they are beaten or dominated. There are limits to the legitimate use of discipline, but these are generous: one boy thought that keeping a child tied up to beat him for three days was the limit, although he also suggested it was justifiable punishment in his case because he had caused permanent damage to the eye of a boy with whom he had been fighting. Children identify supporters and protectors almost exclusively amongst other family members, in particular paternal relatives and older siblings. While state institutions have gone some way towards penetrating households and family life, ultimate authority over children's behaviour remains with parents. Respected community leaders and other adults may chastise children for bad behaviour particularly for bad habits like truancy, smoking and gambling, and teachers discipline children in school, usually with parental – although not children's – approval. But children would not go to teachers with any problems they faced at home, because 'family matters should not be brought before teachers', as Shawdagarpara children explained; 'it is a matter of conscience, family honour and respect.'

The last decade has seen a cultural shift from a situation in which most people did not go to school, to one in which children who lack education are a deprived minority. Talking to parents about how their childhoods and life chances compare to those of their children, it is clear that this difference in opportunity has had an impact on parents' aspirations for their children. To date, however, the impact of the difference is likely to be more noticeable among the moderate poor rather than those whose poverty is of a more severe nature. That very poor parents invest in the schooling of their children at all is remarkable, given the constraints most face in maintaining the most basic of existences. There are households in which an almost irrationally strong emphasis is placed on education, including the education of daughters. Older siblings support their parents' decisions to keep younger children in school, when they themselves lacked such opportunities.

Yet in other households, we see boys of 10 and 11 being withdrawn from school, despite the presence of working, able-bodied males. In both communities, lip service was paid to the notion that school was the favoured option. Yet children – overwhelmingly boys – were routinely dispatched into full-time occupations that did not permit them to continue with their schooling. In most cases, the 'trigger' for such decisions was a major household crisis, usually involving the death or illness of the male household head. But reliance on boys' labour occurs even in the absence of such crises, and reflects a more routine expectation of household support from children's labour, and not necessarily as a last resort. A complicating factor is that it may well be their ability to rely on children's labour assets as measured in young male labour that pulls households out of extreme poverty. Gains in present income may be offset against the lost investment in the child's future prospects. Certainly, the routine reliance on boys' labour in the less income-poor Shawdagarpara community does not support the view that it is only at the extremes of poverty that children's labour will be drawn into service, at the expense of their education.

3.6 The economic context

The extent to which the wider economic context is implicated in the reproduction of extreme poverty was not an issue the present research was designed to address. But economic development clearly effects the context for ultra poverty, for example, in our case studies: children's livelihoods bring them into direct contact with global trade through the export of their *bhumri* necklaces and in how the 'garments' option features in the economic valuation of girls and women; new aspirations result from awareness of other lifestyles through the mass media; and local infrastructural development is rapidly opening up new micro-finance and commercial opportunities.

But we know little about the net effects of growth for ultra poor children, and these are unlikely to be obvious. This is mainly because the jury is out on whether harmful forms of child labour are declining. This is a significant gap for assessing the scope for preventing transmission of extreme poverty. If the present pattern of economic growth conceals growth in harmful work opportunities for children beneath the aggregate reduction of poverty, we have a problem. It seems most likely that the overall picture is mixed. The character and pace of economic growth has not yet resulted in the kind of employment opportunities that highlight to ultra poor parents the need for – at least – the primary education of their children. Moreover, rural economic diversification over the 1990s produced new economic opportunities for ultra poor parents, but also for their children. Some children will have been withdrawn from work and put into school, but – and this is the important policy point – in the absence of normative or practical constraints against child labour, others are likely to have entered new jobs or new forms of work. Indeed, the National Child Labour Survey suggests that a roughly 10 per cent decline in children's participation in agriculture has been matched by a corresponding 10 per cent rise in non-agricultural activity between the mid-1990s and 2003 (BBS 2003: 120-3). Sectoral shifts in the deployment of child labour need to be monitored, as the move towards non-agricultural activity is likely to have important implications for the scope and character of interventions to tackle harmful forms of child labour.

Part 4
The local politics of childhood poverty: community leaders and officials on school, early marriage and harmful child labour

Having seen how extreme poverty afflicts children, this section moves on to assess the scope for community-based action by assessing the construction of extreme poverty in childhood as a local political and/or policy problem. It addresses the following: are conditions of extreme poverty in childhood seen as problems requiring local action? And to what extent are such problems perceived to have feasible and appropriate solutions?

4.1 Awareness of childhood poverty and household practices

Local officials and community leaders seemed reasonably aware of many if not all the problems faced by the children of poor households in attending school, dropping out to work, entering harmful occupations, and marrying early. Awareness of high levels of irregular school attendance and dropout are matched by awareness of the prevalence of working children (table 4.1). Problems with school achievement are widely attributed to poverty, as table 4.2 shows. Poverty is understood to have a direct impact on school attendance because both the opportunity costs (children's work prevents them from attending regularly) and the direct costs of schooling are prohibitive. These same factors are cited as obstacles to school attendance by the ultra poor themselves.

Table 4.1 Educational attainment compared to the prevalence of working children (% of responses)

	What proportion of the children in your union		
	Attend school regularly?	Leave school before completing class V?	Work?
10% or less	0	12	4
11-24%	0	22	17
25-49%	1	42	40
50-59%	6	18	19
60-69%	14	4	9
70-79%	22	1	6
80-89%	40	0	3
90% and over	17	0	1
Total	100	100	100

Table 4.2 Why do some children not attend school regularly?

Responses	% of respondents (multiple responses allowed)
Children are sent to work because of poverty	91
Family can't afford costs of schooling because of poverty	85
Children or parents lack interest in education	72
Schools are of poor quality/ teachers don't teach properly	4
Others ⁸	

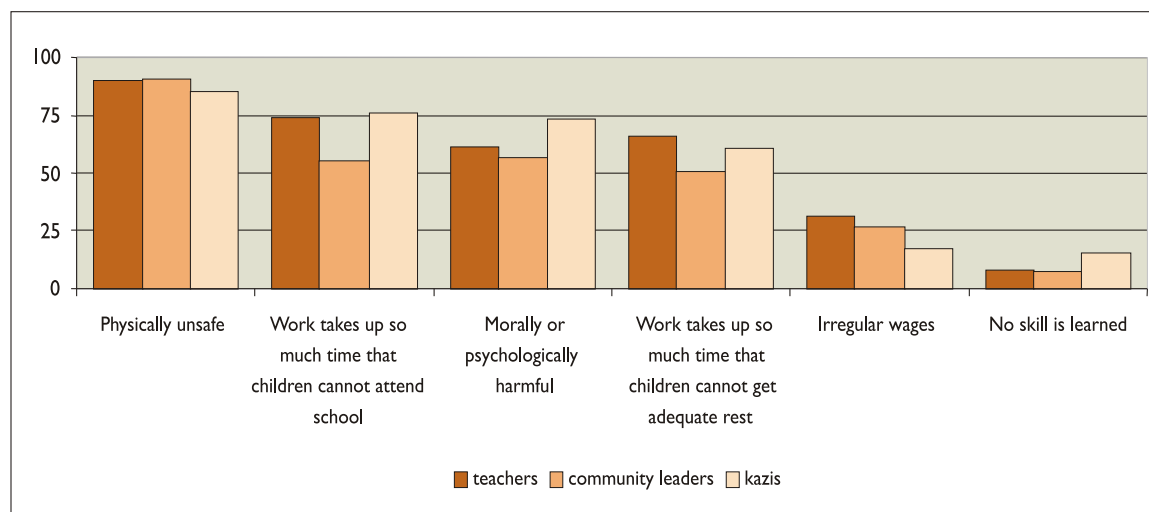
That poverty is widely seen as a constraint to regular attendance suggests that teachers, community leaders and kazis are generally sympathetic towards the struggles of poor parents to school their children. Nearly three-quarters of respondents felt the lack of interest by children or parents was an important factor behind irregular attendance, suggesting the perception that the problem was as much to do with the attitudes of the very poor, as with their poverty. Local officials and community leaders also associated low educational attainments with *extreme* forms of poverty. Asked which children never enrolled, most responded with variants on 'the very poorest'. Other responses alluded to characteristics common to the ultra poor: orphans, children of landless families, day labourers and the uneducated, and households with many children.



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As constructed locally, the problem of children's schooling is about households and families and not about education policies and provision. Few respondents thought school quality was the problem, and only 6 per cent felt local schools were of particularly low quality. But even if school quality was not widely felt to be low, around one-quarter of respondents detected room for improvement. And as we saw above, school quality is likely to prove a particularly major obstacle to the attendance of ultra poor children. However, the issue of quality has not become a local political issue in the way that bricks-and-mortar access issues are. In part this may be because it is mainly children who recognise that over-crowded classrooms and absent or unmotivated teachers represent a waste of their time. The low priority given to school quality issues suggests the need for these to be articulated as local political problems, as obstacles to the education of poor children.

Figure 4.1 The characteristics of children's harmful work



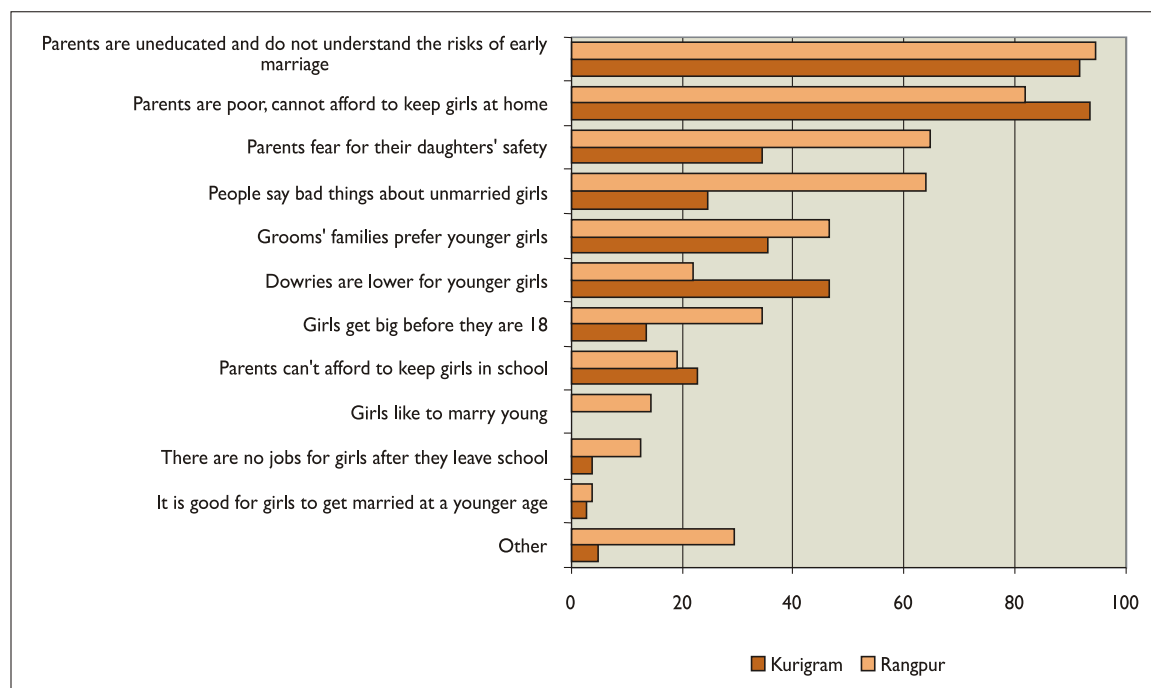
All respondents reported that children were working in their local area, and only 12 per cent reported no children were doing harmful work in their area. However, other findings with respect to the awareness of community leaders and officials about child labour are mixed. One-quarter of respondents viewed 'harmful work' (in this context discussed as *khotikor* or harmful as distinct from *jhukipurno* or hazardous) as including bad behaviour or, in the local term, 'antisocial' activity among children and youths (e.g. gambling, drug use, criminal activity). This meant that the focus was as much on the 'harm' done to the wider society as to the children themselves. It is for this reason that the column in Figure 4.1 suggesting

that 'moral and physical harm' is widely recognised as a characteristic of harmful child labour needs to be treated with caution. Note also that the comparatively low priority given to issues of skills and wages in the definition of harm in Figure 4.1 contrasts with the views of parents and children on the matter, as gathered through consultations by SCUK staff. These findings suggest the need to re-address debates about the nature of harm in children's work: there is evidently scope to raise awareness of local elites with respect to the potential for different kinds of harm from child labour.

The low proportion of female respondents in the sample (reflecting the poor representation of women among local officials and community leaders) may explain why poor girls merited less attention than boys. Occupations and types of work customarily performed by small girls were mentioned far less than the activities of small boys, reflecting the widely-held prejudice that work is not really 'work' by simple virtue of it being done by females. It is possible, too, that respondents gave low priority to the problems faced by poor girls because of the sense that progress has been made in improving girls' access to education and that the public policy emphasis inappropriately discriminates against poor boys.

Despite this hesitancy about the problems faced by poor girls, there was awareness of the prevalence of early marriage. Respondents almost universally attributed early marriage practices to the poor, although in practice, the non-poor also marry their daughters young. When asked why girls marry before 18, the mixture of responses highlights the complexity of the issue and the awareness of local elites of the pressures and constraints facing poor households (see figure 4.1). It seems that while the poor are most likely to marry their daughters off early in order to save costs, 'poverty' is not seen as the sole determinant of such behaviour: other factors include the preference for young brides and fears about girls' security or reputations, and there appear to be some regional variations driving the practice. Perhaps most telling, explanations of progress in raising marriage age do not focus exclusively on poverty (see Annex table A1). These attitudes suggest there is some scope for intervening on early marriage directly, rather than through the more difficult route of addressing the problem of poverty.

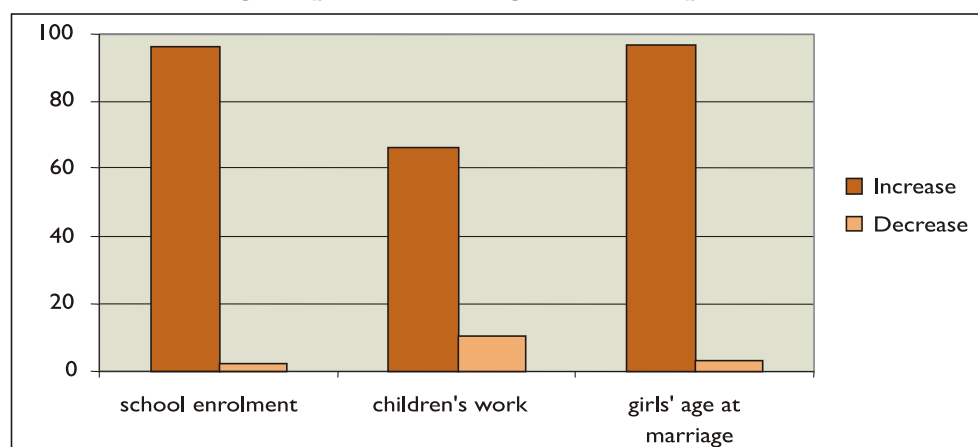
Figure 4.2 Local officials and community leaders on the reasons girls marry before 18



Household practices relating to children were perceived to have changed over time, but not all in positive directions (figure 4.3). Most respondents felt school enrolments and girls' average age at marriage had risen over the previous decade. By contrast, 66 per cent of respondents felt that child labour had become

more prevalent over the period, and more than half thought that children entered new occupations. These perceptions receive mixed support from national statistics, and suggest the need to look more closely at local data (see also Annex table A2). Nationally, the incidence of child labour is reported to have declined since the mid-1990s, from 88 to 59 per cent between 1995-6 and 2002-3 in the 10-14 age group. These changes have been accompanied by sectoral shifts (BBS 2003: 120-3). Our survey appears to be picking up recognition of these shifts.

Figure 4.3 Perceived changes in practices relating to childhood poverty



4.2 Action against childhood poverty as a public good

The BRAC research programme on village-level governance of which this study is part focuses on assessing the extent to which action against extreme poverty constitutes a public good. Is extreme poverty recognised to have negative consequences for the wider community? With respect to childhood poverty, the idea that there are those who gain from children's work is familiar. Here we look also at the extent to which low educational attainment, early marriage or harmful child labour are perceived to have wider negative effects. Is childhood poverty constructed as a local political problem? The expectation is that the greater the emphasis on the public 'bads' from a particular practice, the more likely it is that local norms and institutions will be arrayed to address the problem.

So what are perceived to be the costs and benefits to the community of extreme childhood poverty? Let us look first at education. We saw above that the ultra poor value education above all as a badge of membership of wider society, teaching children how to behave properly. One view occasionally expressed was that education had general advantages in the workplace; others felt that a basic minimum level of schooling being of value to girls in their roles as wives and mothers. Similar views about the benefits of educating the poor were found among community leaders and officials (see table 4.3). These views suggest that the local discourse about the problems associated with children not attending school is organised around the somewhat intangible rewards of mass education, for example, the benefits of having a better-educated society. It nevertheless directs attention to the fact that even if these are somewhat nebulous, there are some costs to wider society if children fail to attend school.

By contrast, the gains from schooling failures are cast as individual gains. Most respondents shared the commonly-held view that employers gain from



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children's non-attendance (see table 4.3). Like our respondents, many people believe there exists a constituency of opinion - 'vested interests' - in developing countries, that is staunchly opposed to the schooling of poor children. The thinking goes something like this: education of the poor is resisted by vested interests because poor children who attend school cannot also be available to provide cheap labour, and may grow up to be aware of their rights and the sources of their oppression. In one famous account of such thinking, Myron Weiner argued that middle class Indians think 'that the education of the poor would lead to increased unemployment and social and political disorder, that the children of the lower classes should learn to work with their hands rather than with their heads' (Weiner 1991: 5). Opposition to the education of the poor, in his account, was based in 'the Indian view of the social order': deeply-entrenched social hierarchies based on caste distinctions, requiring that the children of the poor should be available for, among other things, domestic labour in middle class homes.

It is undeniably true that the use of child labour is widespread in Bangladesh. This is generally taken to entail that employers of children have an interest in the availability of cheap labour at all costs, and a corresponding interest against the education of poor children because it may reduce their availability, docility or other qualities. Certainly, SCUK experiences in working with employers of children highlight the dependence of what are typically small-scale manufacturers and workshop owners on the availability of cheap labour; that currently involves employing children, but it is the cheapness rather than that they are children that appears to matter.

But does the existence of even widespread 'interests' of this sort mean that no progress can be made to reduce the prevalence of harmful child labour and increase the prevalence of education? It does not, for a number of reasons. First, because even widespread dependence on cheap labour does not necessarily translate into 'interests' in child labour in any meaningful sense that matters for programme or policy interventions. There may be people who would lose from an intervention designed to tackle child labour, but there is no indication that they are willing or able to organise to defend their right to continue to employ children. The important point may be that they do not have to organise: that there is an assumption that employers of child labour present an insurmountable obstacle makes a direct approach to child labour seem politically impractical. The more important consequence may thus be that its overstatement inhibits efforts to tackle the problem directly (see also Weiner 1991).

Second, things including interests - change. This is particularly true in Bangladesh, where economic and social transformation has proceeded apace over the last decade, at least. Those who have to date depended on or benefited from children's work may not always have to do so. At a time of steady economic growth, rapid livelihood diversification, and a virtual revolution in gender norms and practices, it is no stretch to assume that efforts to influence practices and norms relating to childhood should also stand a good chance.

A third reason not to expect that interests in the maintenance of child labour should prevent progress on the schooling of the poor and/or reduce the prevalence of harmful child labour is that ideas about children are changing in the wider society. As we saw above, an unusually high premium is attached to education across the different ranks of Bangladeshi society - a reflection of the greater potential for social mobility, the relative wealth of human compared to natural resources, and faith in education as a route out of poverty. All children are now expected to go to school, and if some children do not attend, it is only justified by virtue of the extreme poverty of their parents. These changes in the ideology of childhood in Bangladesh should challenge the moral tenor of arguments used by children's employers to justify their employment. Poverty currently justifies the employment of poor children or their schooling failures. But advocacy programmes that stress the universality of the rights of all children to attend school should be effective in this context, because a) the comparative weakness of social hierarchy (compared to India, in particular) is likely to make this a politically popular message; b) public awareness of Government programmes to extend access to the poor clearly signal that schooling is supposed to be

for all; and c) wider social discourse favours educating the poor, for reasons that include the social benefits of mass education (see Hossain and Kabeer 2004; Hossain 2005).

In practice, rising school enrolments may have reduced the pool of available child domestic and other child labour in Bangladesh. But it is not clear that this has been such a negative experience for the employing classes that they have either counted themselves the losers or attempted to resist the rise of mass education. Of course the change has been noticed. A boy in the Rangpur community case study said that *borolok* (big or rich people) had told him to 'stop showing off' by going to school and to 'come and work in my house instead'. But, he added, this kind of attitude was not common; indeed, other rich people in the village had chastised him for not attending school regularly. If anything, given the prevalence of child labour in rural Bangladesh, what is most remarkable is how little evidence of opposition to poor children's schooling can be found at the community level. A number of local-level factors may help account for this. First, it seems possible that the rich have adapted to the new situation. Second, while there may be those who perceive themselves as direct beneficiaries of children's poverty in this respect, such benefits are presented as the objectionable advantages gained by individuals at the expense of the poor, and not as in the wider public good. As such, their interests in the maintenance of extreme poverty are not of sufficient strength or unifying power to constitute a shared position against poor children's schooling. And a public position against the education of the poor is unacceptable in the current pro-education climate, as signaled by national and local government. Third, at least a minimum level of education for the poor is supported by officials and community leaders in Bangladesh: their experience is that the unschooled poor lack the 'awareness' necessary to enable successful implementation of official policy (see Hossain 2005). Fourth, a palpable degree of local civic pride is driving community efforts to promote education.

Table 4.3 The wider social impact of children not attending school

Response	% of respondents (multiple responses allowed)
The social costs of children's non-attendance at school	
Uneducated children become uneducated future citizens	79
Not attending school sets a bad example for other children	68
Uneducated people don't know how to behave well	61
Other people view the area as backward and uneducated	61
Uneducated children cannot get jobs and remain poor	44
Other	15
Who benefits if children do not attend school properly?	
Rich people, because they can easily get children's labour	91
Employers, because they can easily get children's labour	88
Parents, because children can do housework or earn	59
Poor children, because they can start a profession	15
Government officers, because they need not distribute stipends and books	2
Other	1

On early marriage, while the pressures on households to marry daughters off early are recognised, the impacts of early marriage are presented as negative for both the wider society and the households involved. Table 4.4 highlights the success of advocacy designed to educate the public on the health

disadvantages of early marriage – a message which has been absorbed by fully 99 per cent of our local officials and community leaders. It is also widely accepted by other community members, for whom it resonates with their actual experiences of early marriages and child birth. A particularly powerful local variant emphasises the damage caused to girls' looks by early and frequent childbearing. Unlike community leaders and officials, ultra poor women and adolescent girls did not appear to associate early marriage with divorce and marital instability. Note that table 4.4 suggests that even usually infallible arguments based on religious norms or the need to protect young girls provide weak support for the practice of early marriage.

Table 4.4 The wider social impact of early marriage

Response	% of respondents (multiple responses allowed)
Girls' health deteriorates and they need more medical care	99
Children of very young mothers tend to be less healthy	86
Early marriage increases population	86
Early marriage brings divorce and other social problems	76
Illiterate mothers cannot teach their children	5
Early marriage prevents social problem by protecting young girls	4
Early marriage is good because it fits with religious norms	2

Children's work is seen as having wider social costs mainly to the extent that it prevents their schooling, although it may also affect their health (table 4.5). The consequences of children's work are framed as limited to the household in question, and direct negative impacts on society are rarely perceived. As with early marriage, the benefits of the practice of sending children to work are seen as mainly households. Overall, it seems that children's work is seen as more of a private, household matter than school attendance or early marriage. This may relate to the absence of a public discourse about the wider negative social impacts of child labour.

Table 4.5 The wider social impact of children's work

Response	% of respondents (multiple responses allowed)
Social costs of children's work	
Children cannot attend school	97
Children can get sick	97
Children take work that could be done by adults	8
Other	8
Benefits from children's work	
Children earn money to help parents	97
Children don't hang around idly	47
Employers can get cheap or free labour	38
Children can learn an occupation or a profession	31
Other	1

4.3 Perspectives on interventions to tackle childhood poverty

How do local officials and community leaders perceive solutions to problems relating to school enrolment, harmful child labour and early marriage? We saw above that these problems are understood to be causally linked to the prevalence of poverty, although in each case, poverty is also understood to be mediated through attitudes and practices of poor parents. Preferred solutions to aspects of childhood poverty involve a mix of material support and pressure for normative/attitudinal change; they rely heavily on what has been seen to work in the past. Just over half of local officials and community leaders felt that Government policy focused sufficiently on the needs of children. While 70 per cent of respondents felt that girls were the main focus of Government policy with respect to children, only two-thirds approved of this. It was widely recognised that NGOs focused their efforts on poor children, particularly girls. 85 per cent of respondents claimed to approve of this focus.



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So who do local officials and community leaders hold responsible for taking action against childhood poverty? And what does this tell us about their views on the feasibility of such action? The importance of answering such questions is that the more feasible an intervention appears to be, the more likely it is to be supported. The overall picture that emerges is a preference for local level official action with community support, particularly from local elected and traditional leaders. The strong emphasis on community-based solutions is also highlighted by the allocation of responsibility to 'educated people' for action against childhood poverty: this (more affluent) group is included out of recognition of the role they play as employers of children in domestic and other work; it also suggests some faith in the efficacy of social pressure at the community level. National Government officials and NGO staff are accorded surprisingly little responsibility for action on these issues (see table 4.6).

Table 4.6 Responsibilities with respect to action on children

Whose responsibility is it to: (top five responses, by % of respondents)

i) Enable poor children to attend school?	%	ii) Prevent children engaging in harmful work?	%	iii) Prevent early marriage?	%
Teachers	6	Government officials*/samaj, religious and community leaders	5	Samaj, religious and community leaders	7
School Management Committee	4	Educated people	8	Kazis	2
Samaj, religious and community leaders	6	Parents of poor children	5	Union Parishad officials	6
Union Parishad officials	5	NGO staff	3	NGO staff	5
Educated people	8	Employers	4	Teachers	3
	4		2		2
	6		8		3

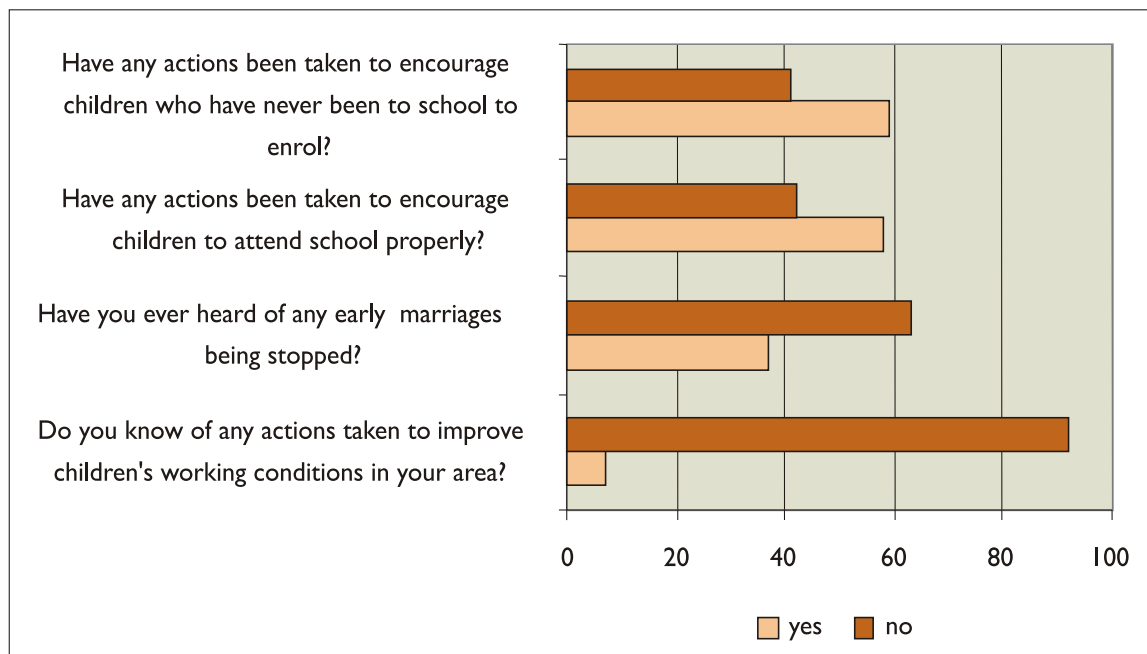
* including upazilas education officials (i) and police (iii)

Teachers and local community leaders clearly acknowledge their own responsibilities to tackle problems with school attendance, as mandated in national policy. By contrast, when it comes to acting on children's participation in harmful work, teachers and community leaders are less enthusiastic about putting themselves forward. This may relate to the absence of official policy mandates to take such action, but it

may also suggest they perceive this to be more challenging. There is more emphasis on the responsibility of Government officials and NGO staff - deflecting responsibility to more powerful but also more distant actors. The allocation of responsibility to educated people could also be deflection, as these are community members who cannot be held accountable for action against child poverty in any meaningful sense, but on whose goodwill any local-level change may be dependent. The allocation of responsibility to act to prevent early marriage places this problem somewhere in between school and harmful work, in terms of the mandate to act and the feasibility of action. There is a clear allocation of responsibility to actors mandated in public policy to act to prevent early marriage: kasis and government officials. Support is expected from religious and customary *samaj* leaders, suggesting a strong role for local actors. But Government officials and NGO staff also appear on the list, reflecting the fact that this issue has come to local political prominence through inclusion on national policy agendas, transmitted through district and sub-district initiatives and NGO programmes.

Figure 4.4 suggests an interesting unevenness in the awareness of local officials and community leaders of actions relating to childhood poverty. If these responses can be taken to gauge actual levels of activity on these issues, they indicate that at the local level most action is being taken to encourage school enrolment and attendance; that actions to stop early marriage also occur; and that actions to improve children's working conditions are most rare.

Figure 4.4 Knowledge of interventions on school attendance, early marriage and harmful child labour



Turning to views on the effectiveness of interventions to tackle these problems, we see that with respect to improving school attendance, local officials and community leaders approve of tried and tested interventions: awareness-raising activities and feeding and cash transfer programmes (see table 4.7). Local officials and community leaders see the expansion and extension of cash stipends as an important part of the solution to school attendance. Again, local actors and local institutions are emphasised: it is expected that stronger SMCs and teacher-guardian groups will play an important role through home visits and other forms of pressure and awareness-raising targeted at poor parents. Presumably the emphasis on local actors reflects the fact that the kind of moral compulsion and social pressure believed to be effective could only be exerted through community actors with shared norms and contexts.

The preferred interventions to prevent early marriage similarly alight on interventions that are part of ongoing efforts, again, implemented locally. We know, for example, that tackling early marriage is on the agenda of Union Parishads, which mandate imams to preach against the practice of early marriage in the mosque and during Friday prayers; (unofficially) make local Government resource distributions (e.g., VGD entitlements) conditional on not marrying daughters off below 18; and in rare cases exercise official legal sanctions against parents and kazis who break the law. Official sanctions may be rare, but are sufficiently prominent to ensure that



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kazis are reluctant to register the marriages of under-aged girls. *Samaj* leaders and other respected community actors may also be enjoined by Union Parishad actors to support the position against early marriage. This group plays an important role in sanctioning local marriages, including by contributing to the wedding costs of the poor - a common mode of charitable assistance. They wield considerable local power because they may refuse to attend a wedding of which they disapprove: for many village people, the approval of respected village elders is more important than legal registration.

Table 4.7 Preferred solutions to problems with children's school attendance, participation in harmful work, and early marriage

promote school attendance?	%	what actions can be taken to		prevent early marriage?	%
		reduce children's participation in harmful work?	%		
raise awareness among parents/guardians	59	provide safe/appropriate employment to children	53	stricter implementation/monitoring of regulations	61
provide clothes, books, tiffin	42	take action to promote their education or training	47	community leaders, family planning workers, imams should create awareness	51
tackle poverty/give economic assistance to poor families	29	tackle poverty	25	parents/guardians need to be made aware	25
stipends, education loans, FFE	27	regulate children's work/implement laws on children's work	19	improve opportunities for women's work, education	16
improve schools/ school environment/ teachers	23	increase parents' awareness	18	kazis need to be more aware	9
encourage parents to send children to school properly (through SMCs, parent-teacher associations, home visits)	22				

The preferred interventions to reduce children's participation in harmful work are of a very different type: these are dominated by proposals to provide of better and safer types of work for children. Actions to promote education and training come a close second, and almost one-fifth of respondents felt that tighter regulation or more effective implementation could work. Yet more than half of all respondents accepted the need for children's work and felt that the best means of tackling their participation in harmful work was to replace it with less harmful work. Parents' poverty and attitudes again appear as important factors influencing children's work. What we do not see among these proposed interventions is any evidence of faith in locally-based institutions or interventions to tackle these problems.

Part 5

Preventing the inheritance of extreme poverty:
conclusions and policy implications

5.1 Conclusions

Household strategies and investments

In all households, many factors go into determining investments in education or other decisions about children. Where the ultra poor differ is that they are less likely than the poor or other households to have entered what Kabeer calls the 'quantity-quality transition' (2001). Kabeer uses the term to refer to the impact of demographic transition (from high fertility and high mortality rates to low fertility and low mortality rates) on relationships between parents and children. She focuses on how the transition to lower mortality and fertility rates alters the 'inter-generational contract'; that is, how the expectation that more children will survive infancy affects how parents value their children, the investments they make in them, and what they expect in return. Under conditions of high mortality and high fertility, parents are less likely to rely on infants' survival and therefore to see the value in investing in their health, wellbeing and education: they may of necessity view their infants with detachment or even selectively aid their death.

The quantity-quality transition is taking place when parents increasingly value and feel able to take actions to ensure their infants' survival, and later, to invest in their health, nutrition and education. There are exceptions, and individual ultra poor households are at varying points on a notional continuum between valuing large numbers of children as opposed to investing in their 'quality'. However, the overall pattern suggests the ultra poor are less far along the transition than the non-poor or the moderately poor. The problem is not only a matter of objective, structural characteristics of extreme poverty, but also of how these are played out within the group's norms and aspirations with respect to children. The ultra poor frequently betray a faith in the value of raising many children over investing in their future. Ultra poor parents calculate it as worthwhile to withdraw children from school to place them in low-skilled occupations in which they receive low or no remuneration for their work, because doing so reduces their present burden. Habits of care associated with the transition, including basic practices to prevent routine infant accidents and illnesses, can be startlingly absent among the ultra poor, in part because of the weakness of any sense of agency to do with children. The absence of a sense of agency with respect to children was highlighted when ultra poor women in Madhyapara defended the practice of child marriage (box 1). Even after decades of ORT and immunization and health education, there is a sense that the death of infants is to some degree the result of fate, or other, similarly immovable forces.

But these are times of change in Bangladesh; even the ultra poor have been affected by the upsurge of demand for education and the growing array of efforts to supply it. While they may be structurally rooted in the kind of poverty that was pervasive in 1970s' Bangladesh, they are surrounded by new ideas that challenge the responses they would have made in that era. Even with few obvious prospects for good

formal sector jobs, schooling makes sense to the ultra poor: to keep up, as a matter of family pride, because, unlike official sanction and legal requirements, local social pressure is sufficiently strong that the unschooled face subtle but real ostracism.

Ultra poor children do less well on all schooling indicators, but most get at least a chance. Ultra poor girls do comparatively well, thanks to secondary school stipends and higher quality NGO schools tailored to their needs. This has



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meant that ultra poor households who are open to the prospect of delaying girls' marriage beyond puberty have an excuse for doing so. They are aware that earlier marriage is legally proscribed and may be subject to opposition from local community leaders and officials, and while it is difficult to measure such change, the direction of change in the discourse appears to be towards delaying marriage, if not as late as 18, at least to making it unacceptable to marry 12 or 13 year olds. The issue is complicated because early marriage is not exclusive to the ultra poor, but is shaped by gendered norms and the hard facts of the marriage market in wider society. It is not only the very poorest who fear their daughters' reputations will be damaged or that dowry costs will escalate, but the poorest feel these pressures most.



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In the changing environment, it seems that ultra poor boys have the strongest chances of inheriting extreme poverty. An earlier preference for investing in the schooling of boys over that of girls has been reversed, most observers believe as a result of the secondary school stipends. But the draw of paid work - predominantly available to boys aged 10 upwards - has also been strong. It is possible that economic growth and diversification may well have created the conditions for a rise in work opportunities for poor boys. And while ultra poor parents would prefer to send their boys to school, the option of sending them to work instead is routinely adopted. Because it cuts short schooling careers, this work is harmful to children and their development.

Unlike early marriage, the decision to send boys to work is not condemned by local society: poverty legitimates it. And yet it is not clear that poverty determines such behaviour, or that the ultra poor are forced to send their boys to work. It seems that some poorer households manage without their boys' labour if they are determined to invest in their human capital, while better-off households may depend on their boys' income from early on. An important factor appears to be the availability of reasonably lucrative work. Individual characteristics such as the commitment of the boy in question to getting an education may also matter. But boys are seen as unruly and difficult to discipline compared to girls, and more easily prone to bad influences and 'antisocial' behaviour. There is little in the way of normative pressure on poor households to retain poor boys in school, particularly above primary school-going age.

While we lack the analysis of household response to macroeconomic change that would enable firmer conclusions, it is clear that the social and demographic contexts, while subject to change, currently support the inheritance of extreme poverty. Decisions regarding investments in children remain the legitimate domain of households, and the influence of wider society or the state is limited to the influence of social norms and sanctions. Extreme poverty currently imposes too wide a range of constraints for ultra poor households to make rational decisions in favour of future-oriented investments in children's human capital. Under current conditions, decisions to put children in work or marriages that do them present and future harm are rational.

The impact of local institutions

Local institutions and elite actors appear to have some deterrent effect on the prevalence of ultra poor household practices that contribute to the inheritance of extreme poverty, in particular through the establishment of norms regarding children and childhood. But it is an uneven impact, more noticeable with respect to schooling and marriage than to children's work. Findings from the research on local officials and community leaders presented in Part 4 confirm the weakness of community-level normative pressure on poor households to invest in their boys' education. We find that local officials and community leaders are knowledgeable about the constraints faced by the poor, and in sympathy with

their explanations of ultra poor household strategies involving children. This is not surprising, given that these individuals are themselves community members, in many instances mandated to understand the constraints these households face. These key actors view poverty as the chief culprit for poor children's irregular attendance and early dropout from school, as well as their early involvement in work, participation in harmful work, and early marriage. There are other mediating factors parental attitudes, for example but poverty remains the chief diagnosis of problems relating to children.

Practices related to poverty in childhood predominantly affect the individual households concerned, but there are also believed to be some wider social impacts. Discourses about the wider social impacts of childhood poverty help to put on the local political and policy agenda what have long been in effect the private problems of the poor. This is most noticeable with respect to education and early marriage, and reveals the successful influence of Government and NGO advocacy efforts on these issues. This success appears to depend on the closeness of the fit between social messages and people's experiences relating to these matters. The strength of the interests supporting practices keeping children poor also appears to matter: the interests against children's schooling and in favour of early marriage are notably weaker than those supporting child labour practices. And to the extent that the prime beneficiaries of children's work remain their poor parents, local officials and community leaders may have less scope or authority to intervene.

Problems associated with children's work are focused more narrowly on poor households and children themselves, and are not seen to have as many negative consequences for the wider society; if anything, there is a cynical precision in the discourse about the wider benefits and beneficiaries of children's work which more than outweighs discussion of its negative social impacts. Advocacy relating to the idea of 'harmful' forms of child labour needs to be re-addressed in this north-western region: while there is some awareness that children are involved in physically hazardous types of work, that other kinds of harm might be present in children's work is less widely accepted. There is also a sense that children's 'harmful work' is likely to involve antisocial behaviour criminal activity, gambling and drugs, for example that is, cause harm to society as much as to the child. Again, attitudes towards ongoing local interventions and perceptions of the direction of change suggest that local officials and community leaders see harmful child labour as more intractable than the problems of early marriage and school attendance. The scope for local intervention on child labour is particularly unclear in comparison to how action on early marriage and school are seen.

The (gender) politics of child poverty

References to the potential for antisocial or criminal activity calls attention to other local governance concerns regarding the need for social control of young males. Local governance actors are particularly fearful of the presence of a group of partially-educated unemployed youths in their locality, whom they associate with criminal activity, substance-abuse and sexual harassment ('Eve-teasing', in the local term). Concerns about the criminality of un- or under-employed young men, particularly those with a little education but few job prospects, are usually focused on the sons of the middle classes or the rich. But those responsible for local governance are also clearly concerned about the potential for under-employed poor youths to involve themselves in harmful antisocial activities, concerns which may weigh in favour of keeping young boys in wholesome forms of work. This may help to explain why tackling child labour seems a lower priority on the local political agenda than issues relating to school and early marriage. Child labour is predominantly seen as a matter of boys' non-domestic paid work. The problem for local governance actors may be less to reduce the prevalence of such work - in any case a difficult and unpopular policy - than to provide more wholesome forms of work for young boys who might otherwise be tempted to go astray.

Such concerns may not make promoting public investment in poor boys' education highly attractive politically, unless such investment can be shown to strengthen social control of youths (for the political use of arguments of this type in a different context, see Alaimo 1995). By contrast, of course, political arguments in favour of girls' schooling have long been powerful, linked as they are to instrumentalist fertility control arguments, with strong support from more progressive perspectives. Progress towards changing attitudes about early marriage similarly relies on the strength of the political argument about the wider benefits of educating poor girls. Yet the strong emphasis on supporting girls' education is perceived as a problematic policy blind-spot with respect to the troublesome group of poor (working) boys: community officials and local leaders may not wish to free local youths from the constraints of hard work, but they recognise that this group is distinctly disadvantaged in terms of education policy.



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5.2 Policy implications

1. The transmission of extreme poverty involves a complex of factors not limited to low income

Policy directed at extreme poverty would benefit from recognizing that it is not only the economic conditions underlying ultra poverty that help ensure its transmission. The bad news is that the lower value assigned to investment in children results from an entire set of social and health conditions, compounded by the severity of their income poverty. The good news is that many social indicators that contribute to the priority of children's present over their future value appear to be moving in the right direction. Ultra poor women in their twenties are taking action to limit their fertility, and their children are close to the national average in immunization terms (BRAC 2004). The fruit of these and other changes include that many ultra poor parents aspire to educate their children, and their girls, at least, do not lag too far behind the rest of the population.

2. Interventions that succeed in reaching poor children may not reach the ultra poor

Interventions designed to reach the children of the moderate poor do with some laudable success. They may not, however, work so effectively for the children of the ultra poor. This is in large part because interventions are designed on the basis of characteristics and knowledge of the constraints that face the poor, rather than of the ultra poor. So, for example, interventions like stipends programmes may reduce the direct and opportunity costs of schooling for the poor. But they may have no impact on ultra poor boys, whose opportunity costs of schooling are comparatively higher, or for other ultra poor children, who are excluded by criteria for attendance and performance. (Urban children are also entirely excluded, of course). Ultra poor households are also constrained by a predisposition against viewing present investments in schooling as having any potential future pay-offs, and by shorter household planning horizons. Because the decision to attend school involves the consideration of more alternatives for the ultra poor, they may also be more sensitive to the issue of school quality than are the merely poor. These factors highlight the need to rethink, rather than simply extend, programmes for ultra poor children.

3. Informed programme decisions require analysis of the impact of economic opportunity on ultra poor children

The impact of economic growth may be negative or neutral for ultra poor children if rising economic opportunity translates into earlier employment for children rather than their enrollment into school. Aggregate involvement and sectoral shifts in children's occupations should be monitored to help assess whether present patterns of growth will pull ultra poor children out of poverty or ensure they remain under-skilled and employed in unsustainable livelihoods. At the same time, the impact of programmes designed to support ultra poor livelihoods on ultra poor children needs to be monitored over time, and efforts made to ensure that the changing structure of household opportunity does not draw more children into harmful work.

4. Interventions seem to be failing ultra poor boys most

The lower value assigned to investment in children's futures is particularly acute for ultra poor boys. While it is decreasingly acceptable for girls of 10 or 12 or even 14 to be married off as a strategy against extreme poverty, it remains acceptable for boys of those ages – or indeed, for girls, but with the caveat that acceptable work must be available – to be sent to work for similar reasons. The existence of stipends for secondary school girls has helped in this imbalance, as has the 'signal' from wider society that girls' schooling is important, including to their value in the marriage market. By contrast, there are at present no practical legal and few normative constraints against withdrawing boys from school to enter work, which is widely treated as legitimated by poverty. We found little evidence that the harm such practices may entail for the child's future were under discussion, suggesting there is considerable scope for interventions that stimulate local debate about the harmful nature of aspects of children's work.

5. Advocacy works

It is not only the objective conditions of ultra poverty that matter in the transmission of extreme poverty, but how norms and aspirations respond to the changing structure of opportunity. The value assigned to investments in children is not tightly conditioned by objective factors. Instead, it is influenced by changes in ideas, particularly, in Bangladesh, the establishment of the new norm of universal primary education that frames childhood. It should be clear that advocacy messages and signals sent by NGO and Government programmes relating to children have had a considerable impact on the value assigned to investing in children. The analysis above suggests that conditions under which advocacy interventions have to date been most effective include when i) no important interests are perceived to be negatively affected – a condition which is itself affected by the success of the advocacy intervention; ii) a case that resonates with local realities has been made for the wider public benefits of changes in private household practices; and iii) there is local institutional capacity to act, including a clear mandate and a direct policy push from central Government. But whereas attitudes towards children increasingly favour their attendance at school and frown upon very early marriage, children's work attracts little disapproval. Advocacy works to the extent that it is realistic, and takes account of people's experiences. This points to the need i) for a firmer overall position against child labour, perhaps on grounds of equity or the universal rights to education and protection; ii) to tailor advocacy messages more carefully to highlighting the value of delaying children's, and particularly boys', involvement in work for longer-term gains; and iii) to focus attention on the wider harm done to society by involving children prematurely in work; iv) to design advocacy messages taking into account local experiences and idioms.

Annex

Table A1 What has caused the rise in the age at which girls marry?

Response	% of respondents (multiple responses allowed)
Parents have become more aware of the risks of early marriage	84
More girls are going to school due to secondary school stipends	77
Higher dowries make it difficult to marry daughters	45
More work opportunities for girls	40
Grooms' families prefer educated girls	35
Parents have become richer	6
don't know	1
Others	14

Table A2 How has children's work changed over the last decade? (by district)

Perceived change	% of respondents (multiple responses allowed)	
	Kurigram	Rangpur
More prevalent	90	42
Less prevalent	4	16
Change in occupations	36	79
No change	6	17

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Notes

1. The concepts and the analytical framework used here are from Kabeer 2001.
2. Advocacy is used in this paper to mean both influencing public policy as well as public education or awareness raising.
3. The TUP programme was started in 2002 as an attempt to reach down to the very poorest. It emerged in part out of the recognition that microfinance was less suitable for the extreme poor than for the moderate poor. The programme comprises: a) careful targeting using a combination of methods, including community participation; b) transfer of income generating assets such as poultry, livestock; c) intensive training and enterprise support; d) support for and access to healthcare; d) social awareness training, mobilizing the village elites, and social communication. Independent reviews in 2003 and 2004 concluded the programme had shown good results, and the aim was that the programme would reach 70,000 ultra poor women in the poorest districts of the country by 2006.
4. Primary gross enrolment ratios, which measure the number of children enrolled in school as a proportion of the school-age population, reached over 100 since the end of the 1990s.
5. After discussion with Lamia Rashid and Emily Delap, 'harmful' was defined as work with at least one of the following characteristics: long hours that prevent regular school attendance; physical risk; demeaning or extremely low status; and low pay.
6. See Harper *et al* 2003 for an overview of debates about inter-generational poverty transmission; Kabeer 2003 for an application to Bangladesh.
7. A standard definition of extreme (or absolute) poverty used in official statistics in Bangladesh is that based on the lower of two poverty lines. The 'absolute', extreme or ultra poor are defined as those consuming fewer than 1805 KCal/person/day, as compared to the upper poverty line, which is at 2122 Kcal/person/day.
8. The community does not itself use the term 'bedhe', although its members are aware that they are perceived to be different from wider society. The term appears to denote some local variant of the social group formerly known in the West as 'gypsies'. It presumably refers to the fact that in their recent past they may have been itinerant boat-dwellers, snake-charmers peddlers of bangles, cosmetics and home-made medicinal products. It is not entirely clear whether the term is simply mis-applied to this group, or whether it is accurately applied but the group has become so well-integrated into Kurigram society that it no longer has much meaning. Some community members complained of social discrimination, but other Kurigram residents not of the community insisted that they were recognizably different, but not seen negatively. It is possible that as Bengali-speaking Muslims (they do not speak a dialect, although their speech features some linguistic quirks) with a reputation for religiosity they have successfully created for themselves an acceptable social identity as settlers (on Government land) within Kurigram. The essence of their difference is that they are not - and unusually, make no claims to being or having been - agriculturalists. In a country where the land, its ownership and its cultivation are such important symbols of cultural identity, identifying as a trader or peddler is an important mark of difference, and not a necessarily positive one.
9. The Total Fertility Rate for ultra poor women was 5.45 as compared to the rural national average of 3.54; General Fertility Rates were 17.3 per cent among the ultra poor as compared to the rural national average of 13.5 per cent (BRAC 2004).
10. Note that indicators of female household headship in Madhyapara and the prevalence of working children in both communities are likely to be high because these are criteria for targeting and inclusion in the BRAC (for Madhyapara) and the SCUK (for Shawdagarpara) programmes.
11. At the time of our last visit, the homes of the ultra poor in the Rangpur community were in some cases quite literally falling down after some reported conflict with landowners in which their houses were attacked to 'encourage' them to move on or to encourage BRAC to provide them with land (a version of events disputed by BRAC field staff). In any case, even before these events, the materials with which the Rangpur ultra poor build their houses were far inferior to the tin roofs and walls found among most of the Kurigram community. A second indicator of comparative affluence in Kurigram was clothing. In their clothes and general grooming the ultra poor women and children of Rangpur provide a stark contrast even to their own moderately poor neighbours, whereas members of the Kurigram community always looked considerably more prosperous, with most able to dress in new clothes for occasions involving leaving the village. A third indicator of comparative prosperity is that the majority of households in the Kurigram community had a BRAC or ASA credit programme member, which was not the case in Rangpur.
12. The survey was of two ultra poor populations, one which was finally selected for participation in the programme by BRAC and a group which while ranked as ultra poor by communities during participatory wealth ranking and related exercises, were not finally selected as among the poorest (BRAC 2004: 6).

13. The Kurigram community is under urban 'pourashava' government, and therefore ineligible for primary school stipends which only cover rural areas.
14. Ahmed *et al* 2004 report that out of sympathy and under duress from poor parents, teachers are frequently more lenient about the performance and attendance of poorer children (pp. 56-7). Note also that we encountered no allegations of misappropriation or corruption in the distribution of stipends.
15. 50 per cent of 15 to 19 year olds from targeted ultra poor households were married as compared to 37 per cent in the larger population. Interestingly, it is the (slightly less poor) non-selected ultra poor group which boasts the highest rates of marriage among 15 to 19 year olds, at 62 per cent (BRAC 2004).
16. To the best of our knowledge, five out of nine in Madhyapara and ten out of thirty in Shawdagarpara. Exposure to NGO training programmes has instilled wide awareness of 18 as the legal minimum age for girls' marriage, rendering any serious attempt to assess the actual situation more or less meaningless. However, information about local practices can be gleaned, particularly from adolescent girls.
17. This includes that there are lower limits to how young is acceptable, even among the ultra poor. Older, more educated brides are also more likely to marry educated men, for whom a higher dowry is required: thus pressure for earlier marriage may be to avoid a girl being educated out of her price-range.
18. Threats to the security of young girls seem to loom larger in parents' imaginations than the facts necessarily support. However, the general hysteria surrounding girls' security illustrates the continuing premium on female sexual purity, which may be seen as having been threatened by recent rapid social and economic change that has loosened control over other aspects of women's behaviour.
19. Shawdagarpara, for example, enjoys a local reputation for greater religiosity. It is possible that this is deliberate strategy to counteract negative perceptions of women's greater mobility in this community.
20. Huq and Chowdhury (2004) found the poorest were least likely to report marriage discussions were underway, suggesting that arrangements among the poor were likely to be conducted with haste, as soon as a feasible dowry amount was gathered.
21. See Karim *et al* (2004), on research conducted jointly with the SCUK Poverty and Working Children team. Karim *et al* found that excessively harmful occupations were those featuring i) the risk of death; ii) the risk of injury; iii) health-related discomfort or illness; iv) working through hunger, physical or mental abuse; v) excessively heavy loads; vi) excessively heavy physical exertion (e.g. rickshaw-pulling); vii) excessively long working times without opportunity for daily or seasonal rest; viii) risk of financial loss through accidents or mistakes; ix) low wages; x) 'obnoxious' activities such as cleaning latrines or working with tobacco; and xi) a long chain of activity (e.g. paddy processing).
22. Two types of seeds are strung into necklaces by children, the most expensive of which are sold for Tk 3 each. These have religious and medicinal uses and some are exported across the border to nearby India.
23. The National Child Labour Survey 2002-3 concludes that aggregate child labour is on the decline nationally, but this is subject to changes in the definitions used after the 1995-6 survey (BBS 2003).
24. Note that orphaned (*etim*) status in Bangladesh commonly refers to the absence of a father rather than of both parents, so that 'orphan' is another way of saying that the child's mother is a widow.
25. Even in Kurigram, where girls are in the unusual position of earning cash incomes early on, we encountered an extreme case of the attitude that by definition, whatever girls do cannot be termed work. A (female) School Management Committee member dismissed the full range of girls' economic activities as irrelevant, describing girls and women in her community as '*bekar*' (unemployed). Of the girls of her village she commented: 'What do they do? A bit of *bhumri*, cooking and household work'. Asked whether or not *bhumri* counted as work or business, she said, 'no, someone else brings the materials, they just string them together.'
26. However, see note 23 above.
27. During discussions of the impact of BRAC's TUP programme in another part of Rangpur district, it was pointed out to us that it is the workloads of non-poor women, not of men, that increase when domestic labour of ultra poor women and children is withdrawn. It may be that these women are simply expected to put up with the situation. Reasons to expect non-poor women would successfully adapt to the decline in the availability of poor domestic labour include that a) the pool of available adult labour remains large; and b) the non-poor frequently view their employment of the poor as an act of charity, more of a burden on their own households than a benefit (see Hossain and Matin, forthcoming).
28. Respondents were also asked whether they knew of any actions to reduce children's participation in harmful work, to which 89 per cent responded that they did, and only 8 per cent that they did not. However, this question was asked so as to suggest that respondents were being asked whether they had any suggestions for actions that would reduce children's participation in harmful work.
29. As in Scheper-Hughes' famous account of 'maternal detachment' in NE Brazil; see Kabeer 2001.
30. Hossain (2005) looks at this issue in some detail.