

# Study the Socio-economic Status and Causes of Child Labor in Dublar Char Sutki Palli at Bagerhat District, Bangladesh

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## ABSTRACT

The study was conducted to assess the socio-economic status of child laborers in the dried fish village (sutki palli) of Dublar Char, an island located in the Sharonkhola range of the eastern Sundarbans the largest mangrove forest in the world under Bagerhat district, Bangladesh. The study took place from November 2023 to March 2024. During the dry season, Dublar Char's dried fish village was bustling with fish processing activities, where large numbers of fishermen were drying marine fish. The study focused on understanding the socio-economic conditions and causes of child labour in this area, surveying 100 child laborers aged 10 to 15 years. Of these, 47 % were 15 years old, and 12 % were 10 years old. The children came from two family types: 57 % from nuclear families and 43 % from joint families. Regarding marital status, 87% were unmarried, and 13 % were married. Housing conditions were poor, with 97 % living in makeshift huts, and 3 % were homeless. Family incomes ranged from Tk. 5,000 to Tk. 10,000 per month, with Tk. 5,000 being the lowest. Access to basic amenities was limited: 47 % had satisfactory drinking water and sanitation, while 53 % lacked adequate facilities. Additionally, there were no educational institutions available for working children on Dublar Char.

**Key words:** Child labor, dried fish, socio-economic status, Dublar Char.

## INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh is a developing country characterized by widespread poverty and a predominantly rural, agriculture-based economy (Rahman, 2017). It is a riverine country, endowed with abundant resources in agriculture, aquaculture, silviculture, mariculture, and a large human population (Hossain, 2014). Bangladesh covers a total area of 147,570 square kilometers and has a population of approximately 170 million, according to BBS (2022). Administratively, the country is divided into 8 divisions, 64 districts, 492 upazilas (sub-districts), and 4,552 unions (Bangladesh National Portal, 2023). There are 30 agro-ecological zones (AEZ) in the country, encompassing diverse landscapes such as the Sundarbans-the world's largest mangrove forest-wetlands, the barind Tract and the hill tracts (Sun et al., 2022). The economy of Bangladesh depends on agricultural activity in the field of crop, livestock, fisheries, aquaculture, silviculture which provides employment to more than 70 percent of the total labor force including the child labor (Alam et al., 2009). Children are the future pillars and wealth of a nation, as their innocence, creativity, and potential to contribute through a healthy and vibrant generation shape a nation's prospects (Utamirohmasari, 2024). Research shows that a child's brain develops until the age of ten, lungs until fourteen, and muscles until seventeen, with childhood typically spanning from birth to puberty, between ages 1 and 15 (Di Cicco et al., 2021). According to the convention of ILO-1973 (No.138), a child is a person below the age limit of 15 years or in special cases 14 years (Heesterman, 2004). According to article-4 of the children act-2023 of Bangladesh classifies anyone up to the age of 18 as child (Law

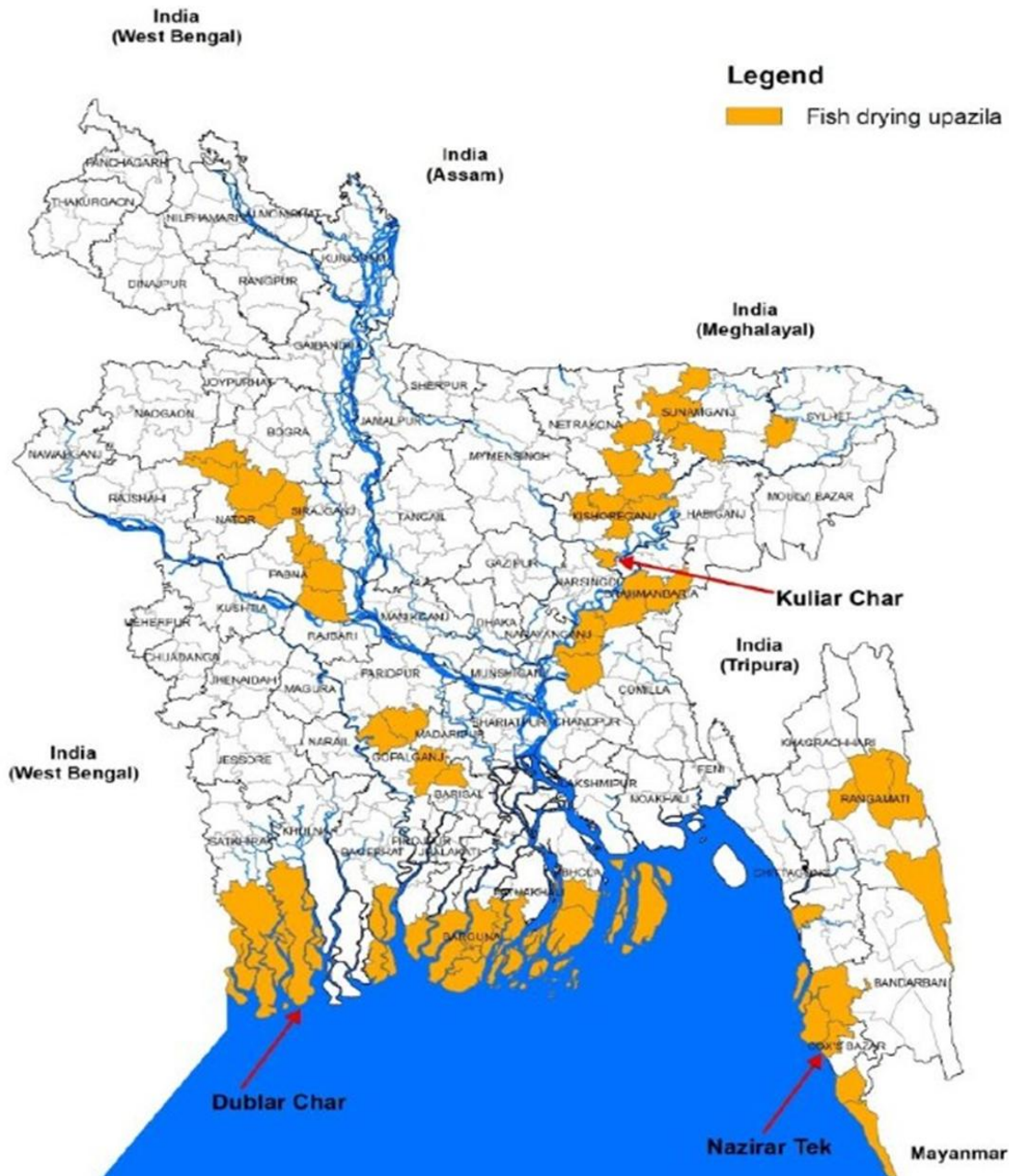
of Bangladesh, 2016). Under Bangladesh's national Muslim law, a child is considered an adult upon reaching adolescence, typically defined as 12 years for girls and 15 or 16 years for boys (Siddiqui 2001). Child labor is widely recognized as a violation of children's rights, obstructing their emotional, physical, and psychological development, and preventing the full realization of their creative and productive potential (Okala, 2019). Despite its devastating consequences and existing legal prohibitions, the incidence of child labor continues to rise at an alarming rate worldwide, particularly in poorer and developing nations (Arat, 2002). Child labor remains one of the most persistent socio-economic challenges in developing countries, where poverty, social vulnerability, and lack of education perpetuate cycles of exploitation (Sohel et al., 2024). Bangladesh, a densely populated developing country with a population of about 170 million, has nearly half its population under the age of 18, with 73% of children living in rural areas and 13% engaged in child labor (White, 2002). This widespread child labor is driven by factors such as poverty, unemployment among adults, large low-income families, lack of education, social prejudices, and parental ignorance about the value of education and the harmful effects of labor on children's health (Mohapatra and Dash, 2011). In Bangladesh, child labor is engaged in the following 8 major sectors like domestic work, garment/industry/ factories, hotel/restaurant, vehicle/automobile workshop/garage, shop and bakery, construction firm, ship breaking and agriculture (Ahad et al., 2021). Child labor is prevalent in Bangladesh, particularly in rural areas where most people rely on subsistence farming, and children are traditionally involved in crop cultivation, livestock rearing, and fisheries-sectors like aquaculture, mariculture, fish harvesting, processing, preservation, and marketing offer promising employment opportunities and demand a large labor force (Salmon, 2005).

In Bangladesh, coastal communities such as Dublar Char in the Bagerhat District, known for their seasonal fish-drying settlements (Sutki Palli), exhibit alarming rates of child labor (Rahman et al., 2024). Dublar Char, situated along the shores of the Sundarbans in Bangladesh, has long been a center for dry fish processing (locally known as 'sutki'), where children often brought from areas like Bagerhat, Pirojpur, Khulna, and Satkhira were employed under harsh conditions for six-month periods, earning only Taka 10,000 to 12,000 for the entire duration (Alam and Pakira, 2023). Children in these areas are routinely engaged in hazardous work under harsh conditions, often driven by acute economic necessity and the limited availability of alternative livelihoods (Woodhead, 2004). Despite national and international commitments to eliminate child labor, the practice continues to thrive in marginalized coastal zones, exacerbated by weak law enforcement, cultural acceptance, and systemic poverty (Weston, 2005).

The primary objective of this study is to understand the socio-economic status of child laborers working in the Dublar Char Sutki Palli. Specifically, the study aims to identify the key problems faced by child laborers in Dublar Char, shedding light on the challenges that affect their daily lives and well-being. Additionally, the research seeks to assess the overall socio-economic conditions of these children, including aspects such as their family backgrounds, living standards, income levels, and access to basic services. Another important focus of the study is to examine the current working conditions experienced by the child laborers and to evaluate the extent of their exploitation within the dry fish (sutki) industry. Through this comprehensive approach, the study intends to provide insights that can inform strategies for improving the lives of these vulnerable children.

## Study Area profile

Dublar char in the Sundarbans, a mangrove, is known as 'sutki palli' as every year, fishermen and people related to dried fish business through in the area for catching fish and processing. Dublar char is an island in Bangladesh with an area of 66.5 km<sup>2</sup>. Dublar char is located on the coast of Bay of Bengal about 70 nautical miles (130 km) from the localities of Mongla and Sharonkhola Upazila of Bagerhat District of Khulna Division. Dublar char is the largest dry fish processing site in the Sundarban region. Fish drying activities are carried out in Alorkol, magherkella, Narkel Baria, Shelarchar and Meherli areas. The village of dry fish (sutki pally) in Dublar char in the Sandarban is found bustling with activities in the dry season. The island host raas mela (fair) every year. It is a pilgrimage for Hindu religion. Fishing and fish drying last only 6 months i.e., October to March every year. Over 10,000 fishermen are reached at Dublar char every year for fish harvesting and drying. For many fishermen families in Dublar char, dried fish is one of the main sources of their livelihood. Among the fisherman of Dublar char many children labor is engaged in dry fish processing. For this reason, the mentioned site has been selected as study area.



**Figure: 1 Pictorial view of fish dry upazilla in Bangladesh**

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The present study was conducted focusing on the socio-economic status and causes of child labor of “Dublar Char Sutki Palli” at Bagerhat District during November 2023 to March 2024. Initially, primary information was gathered from the District Fisheries Officer (DFO) of Bagerhat, and the Additional Deputy Commissioner (ADC-Revenue) concerning the socio-economic status and causes of child labor of these communities. Based on this initial data, a preliminary survey was carried out in the targeted area, leading to the decision to undertake a detailed study of the “Dublar Char Sutki Palli”. The survey was conducted using a structured questionnaire and covered various socio-economic indicators including community age, family size and marital status, housing patterns, safe drinking water and sanitization, educational facilities, monthly family income and Salient causes of child labor.

Primary data were collected from 100 child laborer were interviewed personally, supplemented by Participatory Research Approach (PRA) tools such as Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and Crosscheck Interviews (CIs) with key informants at locations near the “Dublar Char Sutki Palli”. A semi-structured interview schedule was



designed and employed to collect data on the livelihood and socio-economic variables of child laborers. Secondary data were sourced from existing literature, relevant publications, and quarterly and annual reports available from the Upazila Fisheries Office. Data from various sources were collected, coded, and entered into a database using Microsoft Excel and SPSS software. To ensure accuracy, data sheets from each stage of the survey were cross-checked against the original records.



**Figure: 2 Pictorial view of data collection**

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Dublar Char is an island located south of the Sundarbans in the Bangladesh territory, positioned southwest of Cuttack and southeast of Hiron Point. It is a remote island pasture situated between the Kunga and Marapashur rivers. The total area of the pasture spans 81 square miles. During the dry season, over 10,000 fishermen—including child laborers from various coastal regions converge on Dublar Char. From there, they venture into the deep sea aboard approximately 2,000 trawlers to catch fish. Afterward, the catch is dried to produce sutki (dried fish). On average, between 5,000 to 10,000 tons of dried fish are produced annually. According to the Department of Fisheries (DoF) of Bangladesh, Dublar Char alone contributes over 10% of the country's total dried fish production (DoF, 2020). The dry fish industry in Bangladesh not only makes a significant contribution to the national GDP but also accounts for 1.39% of the country's total export earnings (DoF, 2020). The segment discusses the necessary issues of socio-economic characteristics and status on child labor in the study area such as age structure, family type and marital status, housing condition, safe drinking water and sanitation, educational facilities, and annual family income etc.

### Age structure

As a descriptive study, it was essential to gather demographic information about the respondents, who were aged between 10 and 15 years. To analyze the age structure, respondents were grouped into four categories: lower age (6-10), lower-middle age (10-12), middle age (12-14), and upper age (14-15). The findings revealed that the majority of respondents (47 %) fell into the upper age group, followed by 30 % in the middle age group, 11 % in the lower-middle age group, and 12 % in the lower age group. The most significant finding of this study is that the upper age group (14-15) represents the highest proportion of child laborers at 47%, while the lower-middle age group (10-12) accounts for the lowest at just 11%.

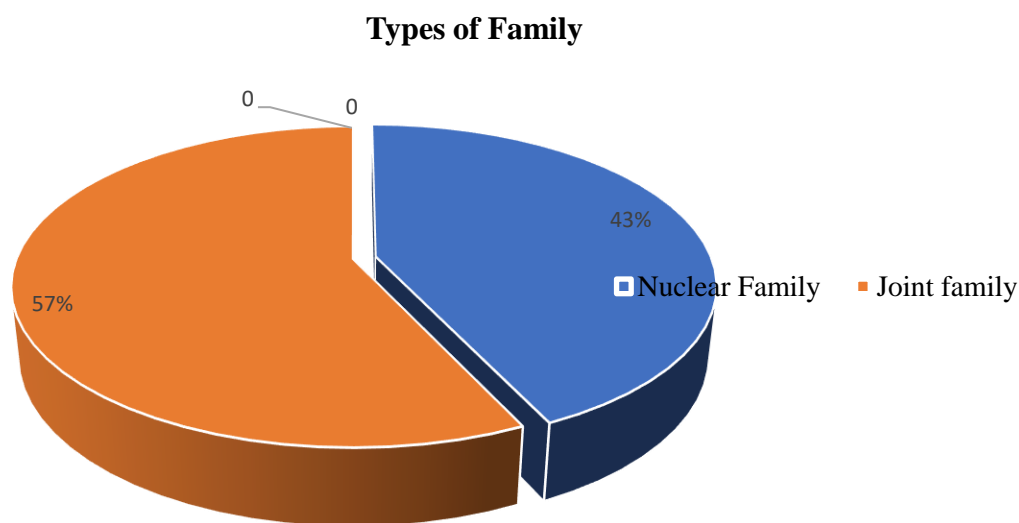
**Table 1: Distribution of child laborers in dublar char by age**

Age	Frequency(N)	Percentage (%)	Cumulative Percentage
10	12	12	12.0
12	11	11	23.0

14	30	30	53.0
15	47	47	100.0
Total	100	100	

### Family type and marital status

In this study, the families of child laborers were classified into two categories: nuclear and joint families. A significant majority (57 %) of child laborers in Dublar Char Shutki Palli belonged to joint families, while 43 % came from nuclear families. Family size emerged as an important socio-economic indicator, influencing household income, food consumption, and overall well-being.



**Figure. 3 Types of Family**

In this study, the marital status of child laborers was categorized as either married or unmarried. The vast majority (87%) were unmarried, while 13% were married. Married child laborers often bear the burden of supporting their families and typically live in extremely vulnerable conditions. According to the Child Act, child marriage is strictly prohibited in Bangladesh and is considered a punishable offense.

**Table 2: Distribution of child laborers in Dublar char by Marital status**

Marital status	Frequency(N)	Percentage (%)	Cumulative Percentage
Unmarried	87	87.0	87.0
Married	13	13.0	100.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100.0</b>	

### Housing Condition

Housing is a key indicator of living standards, as it fulfills basic human needs-providing shelter from the elements, a sense of security, privacy, and personal space. Adequate housing is also vital for health and plays a significant role in childhood development. The type and condition of a dwelling often reflect an individual's social status. This study examined the housing conditions of child laborers engaged in the shutki palli at Dublar Char, categorizing their living arrangements into three types: homeless, *kacha* houses (makeshift huts), and *pucca* houses (permanent structures).

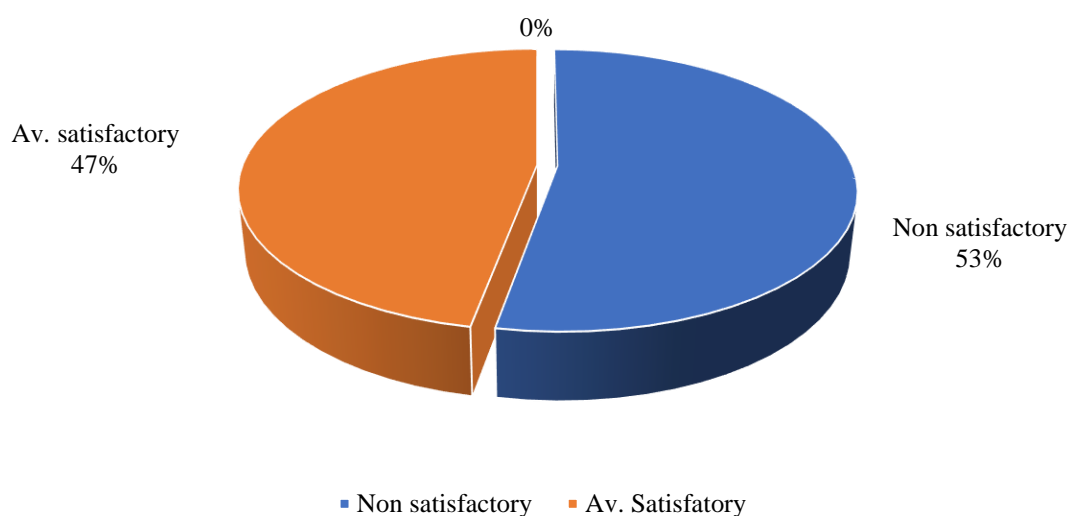
**Table 3: Distribution of Child Laborers in Dublar char by their Housing Condition.**

Living condition	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)	Cumulative Percentage
Homeless	2	2.0	2.0
Katcha house	97	97.0	99.0
Paka house	1	1.0	100.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	

The study revealed that 2% of child laborers are homeless, lacking any form of shelter, while a vast majority 97% live in *kacha* houses (makeshift huts), indicating extremely poor living conditions. Only 1% of child laborers were found to reside in *pucca* (permanent) houses, highlighting the severe housing insecurity faced by these children.

### Safe drinking water and sanitization

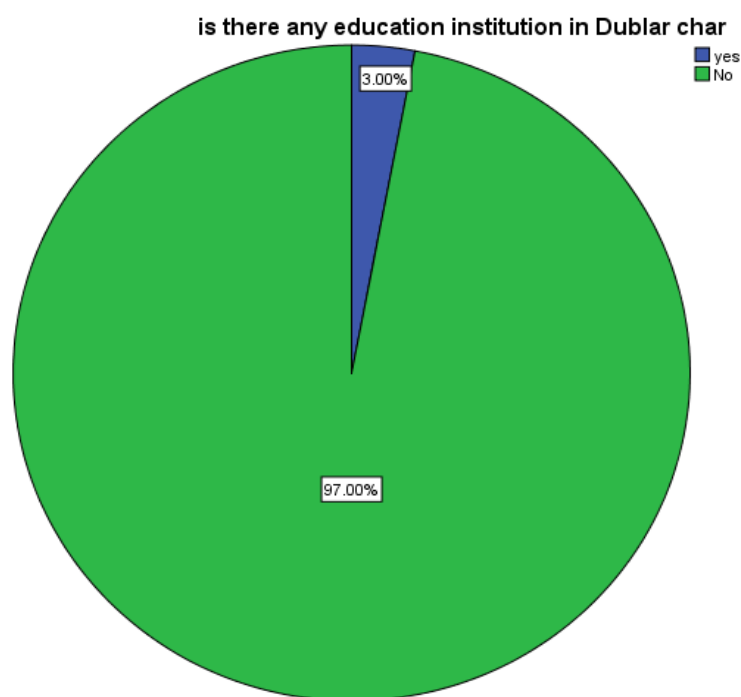
Access to clean and safe drinking water is one of the most valued elements in any community. It is essential for maintaining good health and hydration, but only when it is free from contamination. Safe and easily accessible water is crucial for health, whether it is consumed, used in food production, or enjoyed recreationally (WHO, 2023). Sanitation, on the other hand, promotes hygiene by preventing human contact with harmful waste, particularly feces, through the proper treatment and disposal of waste, often integrated with wastewater management.

**Provision of drinking water and sanitization**

**Figure. 4 Provision of safe drinking water and sanitation**

The study found that 53% of child laborers reported unsatisfactory drinking water and sanitation facilities, while 47% considered the drinking water and sanitation conditions to be average or moderately satisfactory at Dublar Char.

### Educational Facilities

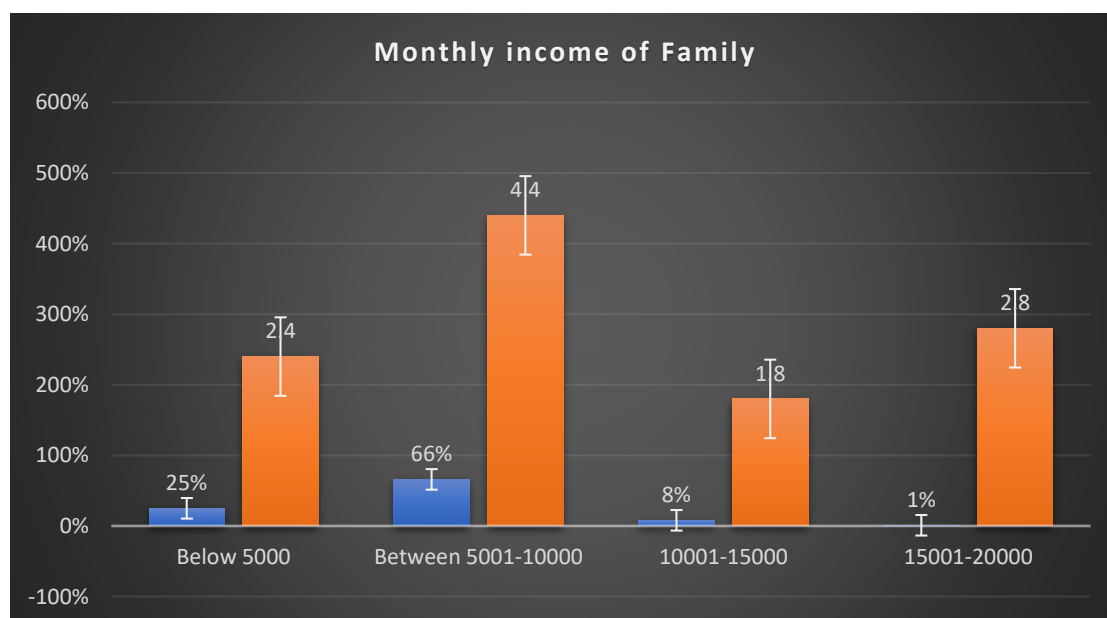
Education is a cornerstone of socio-economic development and serves as the backbone of a nation. Its impact on the community is profound, as it shapes the future. Children are the pillars of tomorrow, and these pillars are strengthened through access to quality education. Ensuring quality educational institutions is essential for providing children with the education they deserve. In this study, 97% of respondents in Dublar Char reported that there are no educational institutions in the area.



**Figure. 5 Status of educational institution in Dublar Char**

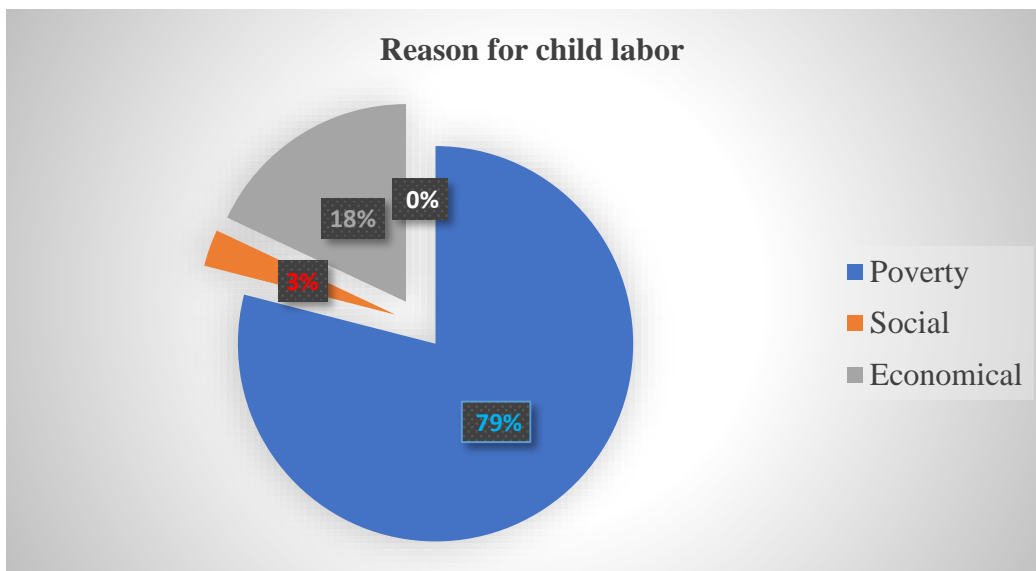
### Monthly Family Income and salient cause of child labor

An individual's family income is a key determinant of socio-economic status within a society, influencing access to basic needs such as food, shelter, clothing, healthcare, and education. A laborer's income level depends on the type of work and their capabilities, with total income derived from both primary and secondary occupations. In Dublar Char, child laborers were categorized into three groups based on their monthly income.



**Figure. 6 Monthly income of family**

The present study found that the majority of child laborers earn between Taka 5,001 and 10,000 monthly (66%), followed by 25% earning below Taka 5,000. The third largest group earns between Taka 10,000 and 15,000 (8%), with a small minority earning between Taka 15,000 and 20,000 (1%). Child labor arises from various factors, often involving the exploitation of children, depriving them of their childhood, regular schooling, opportunities, and proper mental and physical development. The causes of child labor are multifaceted.



**Figure. 7 Salient causes of child labor**

The present study revealed that the primary cause of child labor is poverty, accounting for 79% of cases, followed by economic factors at 18%, and social factors contributing to the remaining 3%. Similarly, a study by [Nacem et al. \(2011\)](#) also identified poverty as the root and most significant cause of child labor.

## RECOMMENDATIONS:

Based on the findings, several policy recommendations are proposed to mitigate child labor in Dublar Char. First, there is a critical need to enhance livelihood diversification programs for families, particularly through off-season employment opportunities and small enterprise development. Second, access to flexible, community-based education models should be expanded, accompanied by incentive schemes such as stipends and school meal programs to retain children in school. Third, the enforcement of existing child labor laws must be strengthened through improved monitoring, community policing initiatives, and awareness-raising campaigns aimed at both employers and parents. Furthermore, integrated health and social protection services should be introduced to support the physical and psychological well-being of vulnerable children. Finally, forging partnerships with non-governmental organizations and private sector stakeholders can create market-driven incentives, such as child-labor-free certification for fishery products, promoting ethical labor practices in the coastal economy. These combined measures can contribute to breaking the cycle of poverty and child labor, ensuring a more just and sustainable future for children in Dublar Char.

## CONCLUSION:

Today's children are the future citizens who will lead the nation. If they are not given the opportunity to prepare as responsible citizens, national development will be hindered. This study strongly discourages the practice of child labor at 'Dublar Char Shutki Palli'. Poverty and child labor are often passed down from one generation to the next. The study revealed that fishers and their offspring, involved in child labor, lack access to many essential amenities, including education, proper health care, hygiene, sanitation, awareness of early marriage, dowries, housing, and savings. If child laborers in Dublar Char are provided with proper education and adequate training, they will gain an understanding of the harms of child labor and become aware of the opportunities for a better future. The study identifies poverty, economic factors, and social conditions as the predominant causes of child labor. Therefore, it is crucial for the government and relevant organizations to take initiatives that promote a brighter future for these children.

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