Maltreatment of child labourers in Bangladesh: Prevalence and characteristics of perpetrators

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A B S T R A C T

Background: Child labourers are highly prone to maltreatment mostly perpetrated by members of their immediate family as well as employers and co-workers. This maltreatment is considered to be a serious public health issue. However, little is known about this form of violence.
Purpose: This study aimed to explore the views of key informants on the prevalence and attributes of perpetrators of the maltreatment of child labourers in Bangladesh.
Methods: The key experts were paediatricians, journalists, academics, and government bureaucrats such as policy makers and Non-Government Organisation employees working in the area of child abuse or labour relations. Interviews were purposefully conducted via TEAMS with 17 expert participants. A thematic analysis using NVivo was used to analyse the data.
Results: The key informants were of the opinion that the prevalence of the maltreatment of child labourers was unknown. However, they were of the view that physical maltreatment of child labourers occurred between 70% and 100% of the time, while emotional abuse and neglect was estimated to be 100% followed by 50% for financial exploitation. Child maltreatment is more likely to occur in informal workplace environments. Biological and foster parents were considered the primary perpetrators, while employers and adult co-workers were considered secondary perpetrators. Perpetrators of child labour maltreatment were often characterized as having a history of childhood maltreatment themselves, a lack of knowledge of social awareness and parenting, and suffer from economic difficulties.
Conclusion: The finding also calls into question the validity of key informant interviewing. Only the journalists, academics and medical experts had first-hand knowledge of the maltreatment of child labourers with experts in the NGO sector and government policy makers lacking detailed knowledge of the field.

1. Introduction

Globally, the maltreatment of child labourers is considered to be a serious public health and human rights concern, especially in

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low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), due to its detrimental effects on the physical and mental health of the child [1,2]. Despite the documented negative outcomes, the number of child labourers continues to grow exponentially, especially following the Covid-19 pandemic. A recent report by the International Labour Organization (ILO) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) noted that 160 million children work around the world, accounting for approximately one child in ten [3]. As a low developed country in South Asia, Bangladesh is not immune from this issue, as the country is estimated to have five million child labourers (aged 5–17 years) which is the second highest rate in the region [4]. Approximately 95% of Bangladesh's children work in the informal economy, particularly in crop production, drying and processing fish, and in domestic service for third parties irrespective of urban and rural precincts [5]. In the Asia Pacific region, the majority of children employed in rural areas are employed in informal sectors [6]. It has been demonstrated that these child labourers are not only at risk of occupational injuries but are also subjected to frequent intentional maltreatment both at home and at work [7–9]. It has been argued that among all groups of children, child labourers are at high risk of intentional maltreatment, which is mostly concealed [7]. The World Health Organisation (WHO) report on Violence and Health defined intentional violence against children (child maltreatment) as,

> *"the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against a child by an individual or group, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in actual or potential harm to the child's health, survival, dignity, or development"* [10].

Globally it is estimated that one out of two children are maltreated [11]. According to a recent systematic review, Asian children are the most vulnerable to child maltreatment (34%), followed by Northern America (30%), Africa (25%), Latin America (14%), Europe (7%), and Oceania (7%) [12]. This proportional distribution reflects the vulnerability to maltreatment of children in developing and least developed countries. Of note, there is a significant knowledge gap in this field, especially in low and middle income countries [2]. A recent meta-analysis found that globally 22.6% of children were abused physically, 36.3% emotionally, and 16.3–18.4% were neglected [13]. While global studies on the maltreatment of children, in general, are abundant [13,14], little is known about the intentional maltreatment of child labourers. To date, few studies have explored the violence towards child labourers particularly in developed countries. Das & Chen [7] have argued that the magnitude of child labour maltreatment is still underestimated.

Most contemporary studies focus on distinct forms of physical and psychological abuse of child labourers indicate that it is on the rise [2,15–17]. For example, it has been estimated that over 77% of Iranian child labourers have experienced maltreatment during their lifetimes. Child labourers in developing countries, such as Bangladesh, are also severely abused, as a recent study demonstrated that more than 67% of child domestic workers in Bangladesh have experienced at least one form of intentional maltreatment [18]. However, these studies are mostly limited to the victimization of child labourers at work. Generally, physical maltreatment in the workplace consists of hitting, beating, burning, or stabbing, while psychological abuse usually takes the form of bullying or scolding, and neglect includes the denial of rights at work [2,19–21]. However, in many studies, the extent of abuse of child labourers is underestimated [16,22]. A study conducted by Pandey and colleagues estimated that the highest proportion of child labourers (72.73%) are physically maltreated in India [15], and another study shows that more than 77% of working children in Iran are psychologically abused [23]. While in Nepal research has shown that 33% of child labourers are neglected both physically and emotionally [2].

Based on these studies, the prevalence of maltreatment of child labourers appears to be higher than the prevalence rate of maltreatment of children, in general [11,13]. As of yet, no rigorous study has been conducted to estimate the extent of these forms of maltreatment against children in Bangladesh. The study carried out by Hadi [16], however, revealed that a substantial number of child labourers in Bangladesh were physically and financially exploited. Financial exploitation is mentioned in many studies as a concern [16,22,24]. It is evident that child labourers receive very meagre wages and experience delays in payment [7,16], while parents confiscate the earnings of their children [24]. The abusive experiences of child labourers are associated with a variety of risk factors, ranging from the child's socio-economic status to the adverse characteristics of the perpetrators. In most studies, attention is placed on the personal characteristics of child [16,25,26], while the aetiological factors that drive the perpetrators to abuse them have been overlooked [27].

Less attention has been paid to perpetrators of maltreatment than to victims, resulting in a limited understanding of the diversity and trajectory of perpetrators of child abuse [28]. The same applies to child labour abusers. Despite of the severity of maltreatment of child labourers, there are few studies that specifically address the specific attributes of the perpetrators. A comprehensive understanding of the characteristics of perpetrators would assist in efforts to stop maltreatment at its source [27,28]. While it is assumed that victimized children are mostly maltreated by their immediate family members, where they spend most of their time [29], several studies have shown that employers and co-workers often also maltreat child workers [7,22]. Child labourers in the informal sectors in Bangladesh are also believed to be grossly maltreated by their employers [18].

Apart from the individual vulnerability and socio-economic limitations of the child, many studies argue that the maltreatment of child labourers is the result of cultural attributes that see these practices as common [30,31]. One of the core cultural influences is corporal punishment used by parents and others to regulate children's behaviour [30]. The existing research identifies the perpetrators' past history of abuse, psychological disorders, cognitive and behavioral problems, and alcohol and drug abuse characteristics as core contributing factors to explain why perpetrators abuse child labourers [7,32–34], although studies in the South Asian regions only highlight the limited economic resources and unemployment status of the caregivers as a factor [16,22].

It is evident that exposure to maltreatment causes adverse health outcomes for children involved in labour [2,15]. Consequently, it is of utmost importance to conduct rigorous research on this topic in order to inform policies. While developed countries have implemented a variety of programs and services to protect their most vulnerable children [28], many developing countries, such as Bangladesh, do not have access to these services. A thorough understanding of the prevalence of child labour maltreatment and the characteristics of the perpetrators would assist in devising strategies to protect them from abuse from perpetrators. Taking these

concerns into consideration, this study examined the following objectives.

- to understand the nature and extent of the maltreatment of child labourers in the context of Bangladesh, and
- to explore the characteristics of perpetrators of maltreatment of child labourers.

2. Materials and methods

This qualitative study drew on the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) checklist [35]. Seventeen key informants or experts were interviewed [36]. Key informant qualitative research draws on a purposeful sample of participants for their professional knowledge of the topic under investigation [37]. There is an assumption that the individual experts will have evidence-based knowledge of the topic, beyond the lived experience of ordinary people which is often the focus on qualitative studies [38]. The researcher identifies ideal individuals to interview given their expertise [39]. It is assumed that the right informants will provide the best understanding of the field. In many instances they can provide insight into the hidden and complex subjective information that would not be available otherwise. In order to plan effective interventions, information derived from them is essential [40].

2.1. Participants

This study employed a purposive sampling technique drawing on key expert methods. Seventeen key informants who had either research, clinical or administrative expertise in child protection and were familiar with the situation in Bangladesh were approached; this number was selected as it accords with recommendations from Morse who indicates that by 10–14 interviews saturation will be achieved [41]. Experts were recruited through a two-stage process. As part of the recruitment process, the websites of relevant organizations were read and their expertise in the area of child protection was assessed. In the second phase, experts were formally contacted through their respective line managers or, in the case of academics, directly. Following consent, the experts were contacted directly via email with a request for an interview and an explanation of the research and the purpose of the study. The key informants had professional backgrounds as academic researchers, paediatricians, journalists or were employees of Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) operating in the areas of child rights, or public servants within Government Ministries concerned with child protection. Table 1 presents the details of expert participants.

It is noteworthy that several national and international non-government organisations (NGOs) operate in Bangladesh with the purpose of promoting child protection, building advocacy capacity, conducting research, and reporting, implementing and evaluating various programs related to children's rights and contributing to policy frameworks [42]. In Bangladesh, university academics and researchers are considered to be the primary stakeholders in knowledge generation and transfer. The clinical outcomes of child maltreatment are also extensively studied by paediatricians [43]. Additionally, the Government of Bangladesh conducts investigations into child welfare, with programs directly led by ministry professionals. Child abuse portrayals in the media that are based on field observations and opinion-based features illustrate the vulnerability of disadvantaged children [44]. Children's maltreatment in Bangladesh is also frequently covered by the media [45]. These evidence-based knowledge sources led to the recruitment of expert participants.

2.2. Procedure

A semi-structured interview schedule was developed based on the research questions and validated following two pilot interviews. Notably, the interview questions for key informants were designed to fit each individual's area of expertise. This allowed us to identify gaps in the interview schedule, clarify interview questions, and add probing questions as necessary. Prior to finalizing the interview schedule, it was pilot tested with two interviewers. During pilot testing, gaps and flaws were identified, which were resolved. The interviews were conducted via the Internet platform, TEAMS in Bengali or English at a time convenient to the participants, given it was not possible for the lead researcher to travel to Bangladesh during the COVID-19 pandemic. All interviews were audio-taped and stored in a secure and password protected place in accordance with the National Health and Medical Research Committee guidelines [46].

Table 1
Study participants.

Sl. No.	Profession	Organizations	Number of participants
1	Academic & Researchers (Code A = academic or researcher 1)	Dhaka University (A1), Shahjalal University of Science & Technology (A2), Premier University (A3), North South University (A4), Khulna University (A5), and University of Northern Iowa (A6).	6
2	Government employees (G)	Ministry of Labor & Employment (G1), Ministry of Women & Children Affairs (G2), Ain O Salish Kendra (G3), Manuses Konno Foundation (G4)	4
3	NGO's employees (NGO)	Global Vision (NGO1), UNICEF (NGO2), ILO (NGO3)	3
4	Journalists (J)	The Daily Baler Khana (J1), The Daily Star (J2)	2
5	Paediatricians (P)	Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Medical University (P1) Osmania Medical College (P2)	2

The interviews conducted in Bengali were translated verbatim into English, and all interviews were uploaded to NVivo. All participants were given a pseudonym to protect confidentiality and anonymity. Interviewed were conducted between March to July 2021. The issue of saturation is addressed in the discussion section.

2.3. Analysis

Upon completion of each interview, the research team reviewed the text in order to resolve any discrepancies. The research team repeatedly checked the interview transcripts for consistency and accuracy. A thematic analysis (Fig. 1) following both inductive and interpretive approaches was used to analyse the data and to address the objectives of the study and was in accordance with Braun & Clarke [47]. The phases of analysis included reading the transcripts and re-reading them, followed by codifying the specific objective-based evidence, constructing preliminary themes based on the identified codes, reviewing and re-organizing the preliminary themes, defining, and naming these themes. Importantly, prior to undertaking thematic analysis, a coding framework was developed and adopted based on the literature review and interview schedule to support the analytical themes. Transcripts were imported into NVivo (12) and followed these steps to perform the analysis. In order to enhance the trustworthiness of the study, quotes obtained from experts were used to reflect their perspectives, and the revised themes were verified by the research team and through triangulation. Of note, the study utilized Street Bureaucrat Theory [48] and Knowledge Translational Theory [49] to provide an explanation of the views of key informants.

2.4. Ethical consideration

Key informants were provided with a copy of the introduction sheet of the study and the interview schedule to familiarize themselves with the project objective. We ensured that written consent was obtained from the key informants prior to conducting interviews. All data was confidential. During the interview session, key informants were also permitted to take a break or ask questions. Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Social and Behavioral Research Ethics Committee (HREC) (8639), Flinders University, South Australia in April 2020.

3. Results

Three major themes reflect the study questions; the nature of child maltreatment; the prevalence of maltreatment and the characteristics of perpetrators of child labour maltreatment. Knowledge of these issued varied depending on the key expert's direct involvement in the field. As will become clear, the findings suggest some difficulties with key expert interviewing as a method. This is addressed in the final discussion.

3.1. Nature of child labour maltreatment

Knowledge of child labour maltreatment varied between the key experts. Those directly involved in research, reporting or clinical work were able to respond to the questions with more confidence as they drew on their own lived experiences. Bureaucrats and policy makers tended to draw on second or third hand data and were less confident in providing an opinion responding that much of their knowledge came from the media or reports. They stated that child workers are victims of maltreatment, more so than children in general. However, the two academics, who had research experience drew on the items in the ICAST-CH questionnaire [50] and their own field work to provide categories of child labour maltreatment. The paediatrician also drew on the items from the Child Abuse Scale [51] and clinical observations. Several of the experts identified kicking, hitting, biting, burning, pushing, and stabbing as frequently recurring forms of physical maltreatment of child labourers. This is reflected in a quote by one Paediatrician, who also mentions sexual abuse which was not the focus of this study,

"… children in the workplace face physical maltreatment more than others [children] …, they are used to being victimize by biting, burning, stabbing, pushing …. kicking. I think the nature of sexual abuse also harms them physically, so that could fall under that [abuse and maltreatment] as well …" (P1).

In regard to emotional maltreatment, the underlined behaviour of the perpetrator/employer is described by the experts as bullying child labourers, in particular, frequent rebukes, scolding, or threats. An academic explained it as, "*They are rebuked more often …. As rebuking and scolding leaves no proof, they can easily hide it ….*" (A3).

The experts provided examples of several novel categories of neglect of child labourers such as deprivation of food, education, and primary health care. Also, they are often overworked and neglected when it comes to leave facilities. These child labourers do not have
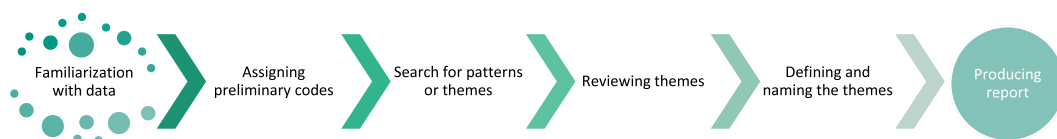

Fig. 1. Steps involved in the thematic analysis.

access to developmentally appropriate recreation facilities, or learning, and training opportunities. For instance, the participant from ILO stated that "*they are highly deprived of education, nutritious food, health advantages, recreation … …" (NGO3)*.

The experts outlined that the categories of financial exploitation are extensive. The observation is that child labourers are often deprived of their wages/salary or payment is delayed or may be provided with food and accommodation instead of wages. One journalist noted,

"They never receive actual or fixed-wage that they should get. I have seen in several workplaces; the employer serves meals as his/her wage" (J2).

Parents also often confiscated the money the child earns to cover household expenses leaving the child with nothing.

3.2. Prevalence of child labour maltreatment

The key expert participants engaged in policy work did not have a clear idea of the prevalence of maltreatment; however, they shared their views drawing on their knowledge of empirical studies on child abuse. Five themes were generated reflecting the prevalence of child labour maltreatment in different settings. These are; evidenced-based prevalence; home versus workplace prevalence; rural versus urban prevalence; exposure to maltreatment in informal settings, and the silencing of prevalence. Table 2 provides information of frequency of each sub-theme.

3.2.1. Evidence-based prevalence

Experts pointed to evidence of maltreatment of child labourers. Nearly all the participants supposed that the majority of child labourers are subjected to physical maltreatment. Most of the participants indicated from their knowledge and expertise in the area and evidence-oriented information that working children in Bangladesh are on average victimized at rates of between 70% and 100% in the workplace. One paediatrician stated that "*it would be almost 100%. [… …]. In our study, we have also estimated 100% in the domestic household as well …." (P1)*. In contrast, an academic argued that physical maltreatment had substantially decreased in recent times which he assumed to be below 30% (A3). Additionally, the experts asserted that threats and humiliation towards children who form the majority of unskilled labourers or apprentices in Bangladesh, was widespread. Experts noted that the degree of emotional maltreatment was around 90%–100%, much higher than other forms of maltreatment (*J2*). The majority of key informants, however, felt that neglect is almost universal among child labourers, in a similar fashion to psychological abuse. As per the opinions of all the interviewed participants, there is a likelihood that fifty percent to ninety percent of child labourers will suffer from neglect. Conversely, one administrator shared data from the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, "*I have wondered that the ratio of neglect is near half of emotional maltreatment. […. .]. It would be around 40 to 50%" (G2)*. Up to one-third to two-thirds of child labourers are financially exploited according to the participants. The extent of this form of maltreatment is reflected in a quote of an academic: "*Since there is no legal monitoring by government departments of informal workplaces, the rate of financial exploitation would go up to 50%" (G1)*. In addition, they supposed that these victimization rates among child labourers would have increased in recent times due to Covid-19 across the world.

3.2.2. Home vs workplace

Children are considered safe and protected in the home environment. However, the key experts were of the view that the prevalence of child labour maltreatment was the same in the child's home as in the workplace setting. One participant stated,

"It does not matter whether they are inside the home or studying at schools or even though they are working in a small industry or workplaces. I assume … they would be exploited in both areas equally" (G2).

3.2.3. Prevalence in rural and urban areas

Some participants stressed that the prevalence of maltreatment of child labourers in rural precincts was under-reported, while others estimated that the rate was the same in both rural and urban settings. Highlighting the research evidence, a paediatrician (P1) mentioned that "*with my findings, I can hypothesis that the rate of abuse in the urban and rural areas are the same"*.

Table 2
Prevalence-based reviewed themes.

Theme	Sub-theme	Frequency of codes
Evidence-based prevalence	Physical maltreatment	16
	Psychological maltreatment	13
	Neglect	15
	Financial exploitation	21
Home vs Workplace	–	6
Rural vs Urban layout	–	4
Exposure to maltreatment in informal sectors	–	8
Prevalence is silenced	Complexity in the conceptual understanding	5
	Lack of standard measurement tool	6
	Sample Size "Not to Be Trusted"	3

3.2.4. Exposure in informal sectors is higher

Child labourers employed in the informal sectors are at higher risk of maltreatment than children in formally regulated industries. Experts stated that children in occupations outside formal industrial regulation are financially exploited. Three participants noted that two-thirds of child labourers involved in the informal sector are subjected to abuse. One academic pointed out that,

> "The people who run this type of informal restaurants, stall or business. [….]. Young children are highly exploited in these informal sectors. I can assume that the rate would be two-third of total child employees" (A5).

3.2.5. Prevalence is not known

The most common theme developed from the views of expert participants was the poor coverage of prevalence of child labourer maltreatment. They stated that there are no systematic and methodical ways of determining the number of child labourers who are maltreated, and hence no reliable data or estimations of prevalence. The experts highlighted that the concept of intentional maltreatment by employers towards child labourers has not yet been adequately explored in the literature or research. Additionally, many parents/caregivers are not aware of appropriate approaches to disciplining children, so that they think physical or emotional abuse is acceptable. These gaps in the data and research hinder estimations of the true prevalence of maltreatment of child labourers. One expert academic noted,

> " …. besides, the classification and determinants of these abuses are somewhat problematic. The estimated data is not precise and does not reflect the actual situation" (G4).

The experts further raised questions regarding the validity and reliability of existing measurement tools. They stated that there were limitations in sample size of existing research and argued that the sample sizes were often very low and may not be representative of the population. These limitations evident in previous research were identified as problematic in estimating the true prevalence of child labour maltreatment.

3.3. Perpetrators of the child labour maltreatment

3.3.1. Who are perpetrators of child labour maltreatment

Expert professionals were aware of individual offenders of child labour maltreatment. However, they stressed that there are no methodical studies undertaken that addressed the characteristics of perpetrators/offenders of child maltreatment in the context of Bangladesh. For the most part their views were based on knowledge from the grey literature and media reports. Despite this they identified two categories of abusers: the immediate family members, relatives and neighbours, and intermediaries such as brokers and employers and workplace staff.

The key experts suggested that child labourers are more likely to be maltreated by those nearest to them. This is likely to be the child's biological or foster parents, and stencilings. The expert participant from the Law and Arbitration Centre postulated that,

> "We have seen a number of fathers abusing their daughters in their own homes. The mother is probably at work, then Dad exploits her … …Even though everyone knows about the exploitation, they ignore it and try to keep the issue secret" (G3).

Apart from adults in the immediate family, child labourers used to deal with other potential perpetrators of maltreatment. These middlemen, or third-party brokers, who are subcontracted to recruitment, hiring, and act as facilitators between child labourers and employers. These middle men often misrepresent the terms and conditions of the child's employment resulting in maltreatment of the child [52]. The brokers exploit child labourers financially, and physically. An administrator drawing on a report noted that,

> "Middlemen who work recruiting child labourers … …, usually have a hidden contract with the employers, whereby they receive partial benefit from the employer, and in many cases, they further demand a financial payment from the child labourer … …. as they helped them to get the job" (G1).

The most frequently identified individuals who maltreated child labourers were employers, supervisors, co-workers, and household members of employers and for domestic workers, those with whom they live. Experts assumed along with adult co-workers; the female head of the household maltreated child domestic workers the most. The scenario of domestic employers is reflected in a statement,

> "Working under female employers shows that they are usually picky and meticulous about the job … …., and senior co-workers, I assume and if child labourers don't work properly, they swear at the child, raising their hands to hit them" (A6).

3.3.2. Risk factors associated with perpetrators of child labour maltreatment

Expert participants stated that it is critical to identify the challenges associated with the maltreatment of child labourers to achieve effective measures to prevent it. One of the significant challenges is understating perpetrators' traits which are antecedents to maltreatment of child labourers. The key experts noted that risk factors for the child labour have been explored in many studies, but these studies tended to overlook the characteristics of perpetrators [53]. The thematic analysis of the experts' views resulted six themes reflecting the adverse characteristics of perpetrators (See Table 3).

Table 3 above outlines the characteristics of perpetrators that maybe a factor in their propensity to maltreat child labourers working for them. The themes are presented in detail below.

Theme-1. Adverse childhood experiences (ACE)

The key experts were of the view that perpetrators had themselves being victimized during their childhood, which results in an intergenerational transmission of child maltreatment. They believed that a number of perpetrators had grown up in environments where they were insecure and routinely beaten themselves, which predisposed them to in later life to maltreat children. This is reflected in the statement of an academic,

> "… … their employers have grown up since childhood in such environment that their learning was like that, they grew up being beaten often … …" (A2).

The perpetrators own past abusive experiences presumably created psychological difficulties, dysfunction, and possible juvenile delinquencies during their own childhood. These experiences were seen to impact on the perpetrators as adults and lead them to maltreat child labourers. An expert paediatrician stated that,

> "It (childhood abuse) disrupts the normal brain function and gradually heighten the stress related levels and cognitive impairment. It sometimes becomes a chronic issue. What I would like to say … …, yes …. they actually are psychologically dysfunctional which influences them to be a prospective perpetrator" (P2).

Theme-2. Illiteracy and perpetrators' attitude

Illiteracy was identified as one of the dominant risk factors of perpetrators. Experts argued that formal education is indispensable in shaping a person's attitude towards the maltreatment of child labourers. The experts attributed the substandard level of education of parents and employers of child labourers as a factor explaining their violence towards children.

> "Since they are not educated to a satisfactory level, their development and understanding is at a lower level in this way. This further leads them to be violent towards others … …...., particularly young children who are more vulnerable" (G1).

The participants stated that parental education informs them of the child's development needs and pattern of maintaining a stable and non-violent domestic environment. The absence of parental education can lead to the harsh treatment of children including domestic violence, and child maltreatment.

Theme-3. Limited knowledge and awareness

Apart from the formal education, caregivers' lack of social awareness was identified by the participants as a factor in child labour maltreatment. The key experts reported that caregivers/parents of child labourers usually failed to monitor or supervise their children even after sending them to work. Parents might consider maltreatment in the workplace as non-abusive and see it as positive for the child. Additionally, parents may believe that the children gain skills, education, and training through punishment while in employment. Contemplating the caregivers' role, an expert stated,

> "If you look at the family factors, you will see that many parents of our society do not know that when children are beaten, this is detrimental to them. Actually, they are not even cognizant about their children's development. I think … …. you know, many people do not know what type of behaviour towards children is ethically right and what is wrong" (G3).

Of note, impoverished parents often focus on the short-term financial benefits rather than long-term outcomes. In addition, expert participants emphasized the caregivers'/parents' knowledge of child rearing. They argue that parents may be unaware of the child's growth and development needs. With this view in mind, an academic noted:

> "As they have no knowledge about child education, psychology, nutrition, growth, they have only learnt from their life experience … …, and they think that this is the right way to treat children … …, which could be an explicit reason for the maltreatment of child labourers" (A2).

Table 3
Identified potential risk factors of perpetrators of child labour maltreatment.

Sl. No.	Theme	Sub-theme	Codes
1	Adverse childhood experiences	History of childhood maltreatment	4
		Complex childhood psycho-social development	5
2	Illiteracy and perpetrators' attitude	Education matters	10
3	Limited knowledge and awareness	Lack of familial and social awareness	16
		Employers' level of social awareness	3
		No knowledge of child health and development	2
		No formal parenting skill	4
		Not aware of laws	4
4	Emotional functioning and coping mechanism	Psycho-traumatic history	3
		Low stress coping capacity	2
		Parents' mental stress	3
5	Treated as "stigmatized group"	Weak moral guiding code	2
		Narcissism and lack of empathy	2
		Possessive style	3
6	Economic instability	Unemployed parents	11
		Low profit margin	5

Moreover, the experts asserted that parents and employers usually overlook the policies or legislations adopted for protecting children's rights. Employers often fail to comply with the government legislated regulations relating to minimum working hours, wage rates, and safety measures. Considering this situation, a participant noted that:

"(they are) ignorant of labour rules or regulation; it is a big issue here, I think … … that motivates employers to take the opportunity to financially exploit child workers" (G4).

The quotation above highlights the lack of employer and parent adherence to government policies and regulation regarding child labourers, and their working and living conditions.

Theme-4. Emotional functioning and coping mechanism of parents and employers

As previously noted, this research found an overarching pattern, highlighting perpetrators' emotional dysfunction. The participants asserted that social stressors impacted on perpetrators which may trigger past psycho-somatic events. This pre-disposed the perpetrators towards maltreating child workers. Highlighting a psychological disorder, one participant noted that,

"The people who have a particular psychological disorder, for instance …... in the case of the abusers of sexual cases, I mean who are Paedophile, maltreat children physically and psychologically as well. This trait of emotional abnormality makes them more violent towards children" (G4).

Expert participants also mentioned that past social stressors caused emotional difficulties for the parents and employers. The experts pinpointed that the emotions, such as anger or anxiety, depression, and medical conditions such as hypertension, or substance abuse, act as precursor of child maltreatment. One participant explained,

"They (parents/employers) are themselves not getting a salary as expected or they are facing adverse behaviour from their employer. As a consequence, they take their frustration and aggression out on other members of the family. They cannot control their anger and anxiety … …..., and therefore they become violent towards younger children in the family" (G1).

Theme-5.   Treated as "stigmatized group"

This theme reflects a loss of integrity, responsibility, and a form of moral failure by the perpetrators when dealing with working children. Participants suggested that many parents and employers internalize their children's status as inferior because of their stigmatized identity as labourer. They pointed to the absence of sympathy and affection towards young workers in the informal sectors, in particular. This scenario has been reflected in the statement of an expert professional.

"They are not capable of being loyal to individuals, or to having a social conscience. Losing the ethics, they become grossly self-centred, slanderous, and violent in nature towards inferior identity of an individual …... […. ..]. They could be more responsible towards children under them, but they regard the child workers as immoral as they are and treat the children accordingly … …..." (NGO3).

Theme-6.   Economic challenges

The experts agreed that adult unemployment in the household compelled the child labourers to seek work. Parental unemployment placed children in a precarious situation and increased their risk of being maltreated in the workplace. This is reflected in a description by a key expert participant,

"They [unemployed parents] need money as unemployment still exists, children have to stop their education, leave the family home and then engage in the labour. These types of children further experience violence in their home …" (G3).

Participants further attributed the employers' economic disadvantage as a major trait potentially increasing the maltreatment of the child by the perpetrator. They argued that small scale enterprises often encounter higher risks of unpredictability of profits, which can subject child labourers to exploitation. Based on an observation study, a journalist noted that,

"I asked some farmers about the payment issue of these young workers, and they shared with me that they recruit them for harvesting rice and other crops during the harvesting period. [… …], Yes, if we think production is good enough, then we pay adequately, otherwise, we do not pay them at all … …..". (J2).

4. Discussion

This research set out to gain insight into the nature and extent of the maltreatment of child labourers in the context of Bangladesh, and to understand of the characteristics of the perpetrators drawing on perspectives of seventeen key informants. The experts identified a range of physical, emotional, neglect, and financial forms of maltreatment, which were identical to those documented in the literature. It is evident that child labourers are exposed to a range of physical maltreatment such as slapping, beating, or pushing, along with emotional maltreatment such as humiliation, or intimidating behaviour. They are also neglected through failure to provided them with food, respite, protection from illness and safety within the workplace. These children are also subjected to financial exploitation, such as low wages, withholding wages, forced to work unpaid overtime or there are delays in payment, which have been observed in some previous studies as well [16,20,22,54].

Evidently, informal sector workers are highly susceptible to victimization and financial exploitation as the sector remain outside the legal and regulatory framework [26,55]. For example, the paediatrician assumed the rate of maltreatment against domestic

labourers was 100%, the Bangladesh Shinshu Adhikari Forum (BSAF) confirmed this estimation citing a rate of 95% [18]. This study indicates that child labourers are severely vulnerable to physical type of maltreatment. Parallel to the key informants' opinion, estimates from the research literature suggest physical maltreatment of child labourers ranges between 45% and 70% [2,15,26]. Moreover, the expert participants considered that child labour itself is a form of emotional abuse, therefore, they categorised it as a higher than other forms of maltreatment [56,57]. The expert participants have provided a range of emotional abuse between 90% and 100% for child labourers. However, data of many existing bodies of literature indicate that the rate of emotional abuse is lower than physical maltreatment irrespective of the whether the child is a labourer or not [13,15,58]. The key informants also identified rates of child neglect at around 90%, consistent with the related prior research findings [13,15,58]. It clearly indicates that child labourers are simultaneously subjected to both neglect and emotional abuse at higher rates than other forms of maltreatment. There is a consensus among experts that more than half of the victims have been financially exploited. However, prior studies reflect that accurate measures of financial exploitation are not known [16,22].

The key informants were not aware of studies that had been conducted in the informal sector, and believed it would be lower than in the formal sector given these industries would be governed by legislation; there is some evidence that children in the informal sectors frequently subject to financial exploitation [55]. Further to this they were unclear about the dangers of the workplace environment and home settings, viewing both as sites of maltreatment. Research shows that maltreatment is more extreme in the workplace environment than the home setting [7,16]. While three-quarter of child labourers work in rural areas [6], most of the participants assumed that they were maltreated equally in both rural and urban settings. Notably, previous studies have concentrated more on urban settings than rural areas. Despite this, several retrospective studies concur with the views of experts that children in both settings are similarly vulnerable to maltreatment [59–61].

The expert participants further emphasized that foster-parents, and stepbrothers, are common perpetrators, also found in many prior studies [27,28]. Apart from being abused by family members, it is also evident that living as well as working at the workplace increases the risk of maltreatment by employers, co-workers, and supervisors [22,54,62]. Similar viewpoints were shared by the key informants in this study. The research suggests that in case of domestic labourers, they are more likely to be attacked by family members of the employers as most of them live in the employers' houses [62,63], which is in contrast to the statements from experts in this study.

Currently, there are only a limited number of studies that have explored the factors that trigger perpetrators to abuse children [27, 28]. Most commonly, the mental state of individual during their childhood is often considered as a significant predictor of their interaction with others as an adult [64]. Consistent with many prior studies, participants in this study suggested that individuals with experiences of prolonged psychopathology, including stress, anxiety or depression thought to be associated with perpetrating children [27,65,66]. Belsey assume that individuals suffering from traumatic symptoms or growing up in an emotionally challenged family may encounter developmental difficulties [27,65]. This may result in them being disposed to maltreat children during their adulthood. Perpetrators of child maltreatment are more likely to have intergenerational childhood abusive experiences [28]. Similar to the prior studies, key informants in this study underlined that perpetrators of child abuse are likely to have experienced early childhood maltreatment [28,32,34]. Evidently, caregivers own experiences of childhood maltreatment may shape their attributes, which negatively impacts on their style of parenting and interaction with their children [67]. Subsequently, this results in an intergenerational pattern of reciprocal maltreatment practices. The key informants were of the view that low levels of education and literacy led to a lack of understanding of the impact of maltreatment on children's development. In turn, this negatively impacts the individual's behaviour towards others and exacerbates interpersonal conflict. Several preceding studies have suggested that parents and caregivers with low levels of education are more likely to act in a perpetrator's role than parents and caregivers with higher levels of education [65,68,69]. The experts indicated that parents and employers of the child labourers' lacked knowledge of the socialization process, child development and child health. This is also observed in many prior studies [70,71]. Researchers have observed that most of the caregivers of working children are not aware of their children's potential, but instead seek short-term benefits by sending their children to work [7,72]. The situation is compounded when abusers are unaware that maltreatment is a crime under the Children's Act and other laws related to child protection [28]. In addition, the study illustrates that children's participation in labour is associated with social stigma [73], which experts identify as "moral dirt". As per the experts, perpetrators often internalize the inferior status of child labourers, and in such cases, employers or co-workers are likely to abuse the children. Albeit not exhaustive, expert participants further speculated that this could happen because of a lack of empathy and self-control among perpetrators, which is evident in literature findings [65]. Furthermore, it has been argued that children are often mistreated by their household members due to their dependent nature or low level of earnings, which also exposes them to cruelty from others as they have already been humiliated because of their identities [74]. The economic circumstances of caregivers are a priori contributing factors, as they directly result in potential indicators of dysfunctional interactions within the family. Similarly, the experts in this study identified the economic vulnerability of individuals as a contributing factor to perpetrate children in labour [26,32,65].

4.1. Challenges to key informant methodological approaches

In the method section of this paper, we argued that key informant interview was an idea approach when researchers wished to gain evidence-based views on a particular topic. This is particularly for topics that have policy implications [37]. We outlined some of the attributes that should be studied before selecting key informants; their position and role in the organisation, and their experience in the topic under review [75]. We outlined how the key informants were selected, the agencies they worked with, and the fact that we had examined their home pages and profiles, and in some cases read their work to determine their expertise. However, as the results illustrate, the information provided by these experts differed significantly when asked questions on specific numbers, situations, and

examples of child labourer maltreatment. We would argue that there is a distinct split in the quality of the data from these key informants based on their lived experience of the topic. The journalists, academics and medical professionals all gave more precise and confident answers in interview, drawing on their own research, clinical observation, or investigations. The bureaucrats and policy personnel had limited direct knowledge of the field and admitted that many of their views came from reading reports or following stories in the media. These findings suggest that in determining who are key informants, questions about their lived experience of the topic, rather than their professional portfolio or job description should be examined. This is a disturbing finding given the seven respondents from NGOs and Government Departments are meant to translate research findings into health promoting policies. It is assumed that these experts draw on research conducted by academics to shape appropriate policy and legislation, and that in doing so, they are familiar with the facts and context of the problems. This study indicated that this was not the case. Those positioned to enact protective policies for children lacked knowledge of the types of maltreatment child labourers endured, the rate of abuse, and were unclear of who the perpetrators were, whether it occurred mainly in the home or workplace and what might be the explanatory factors. It is always assumed that those instigating policy and legislation must rely on secondary data, but it is assumed they are familiar with it.

Understanding why there is this discrepancy in the experts' views is possibly explained drawing on Lipsky's theories of street level bureaucrats [48] and the nebulous concept of knowledge translation [49,76]. It is now forty years since Lipsky published his seminal thesis on the gap between street level bureaucrats (state funded teachers, doctors, social workers, and police) and the public sector bureaucrats and policy makers in head office. Lipsky pointed to the gap in understanding between these two groups that made the work difficult for those on the ground. Our research points to the gap in knowledge between those in head office such as policy makers and legislators who in our study demonstrated limited knowledge of the situation and those researching the topic or dealing with injured child labourers. Research drawing on Lipsky's work has had extensive development over this period highlighted by the rise in new public management, the shift to outsourcing government work to NGOs and the general distrust in governments [48]. In short, it is well accepted that this gap exists between practitioners and policy makers. It is not simply that policy makers do not read the relevant research, they are also constrained by the political and economic realities and vested interests in the domain.

Despite a recognition of the political realities of the gap in knowledge between those on the ground and those able to action policy decisions, there is also a strong recognition of how long it takes research findings to eventuate in policy directives. There is now a growing body of work on knowledge translation that has argued that researchers themselves need to work with policy makers to translate the results of their work into to public policy [49]. The difficulty with this sphere of academic research is that it is driven by the evidence-based medicine movement where results are drawn from clinical double blinded trials to do with medical procedures, medications or treatments. Evidence of social issues from researchers, journalists or even medical practitioners on the ground is seen as more problematic, subject to bias, vested interests, and constructed. In effect it is not reliable evidence or at best, not generalisable [49] in a way that evidence-based medicine is. Hence it is not embraced, or as this study demonstrates, policy makers are not aware of it.

As a consequence of this gap the accounts of key informants working within government or NGOs corresponded with media reports. This is partly explained because there is a lack of data on the maltreatment of child labourers [77], but also because the translation of research and clinical findings does not connect with policy makers. While the media reports may result in public disquiet on the issue, concrete research is required to formulate effective policy and serious political work is needed to ensure it is legislated. This can be easily thwarted by social, cultural and economic vested interests. But we would suggest a first step is for research to make more effort in translating their research findings.

4.2. Strength and limitations of the study

This study is notable for providing detailed, qualitative information, while most of the other studies discussed only provided a quantitative perspective, disregarding the need for a more in-depth analysis. Unlike studies dealing with the violence of child labourers, which predominantly portray the perspective of children and family members, this study provided knowledge that was shared by professionals who drew on primary and secondary sources.

The study was conducted in 2021 in the early months of the Covid-19 pandemic making identification of key informants difficult to ensure. While we have outlined the approach, we took to recruiting the key informants, it was difficult to establish rapport over the Internet platforms of TEAMS, and at a time of crisis for many government agencies. While the number of 17 is adequate for reaching saturation, and this was achieved with a clear distinction obvious between the two groups of experts, it may be that a larger number might have shifted the emphasis. Of note, several perspectives were also overlooked by the expert participants, such as issues of gender, the possibility of abuses in different sectors, and human rights considerations. Clearly the next step is to survey or interview those who daily experience maltreatment, such as the child labourers themselves, their parents, and employers.

5. Conclusion

The study focussed on key informant's knowledge of the nature of maltreatment of child labourers and the characteristics of perpetrators. The participants were selected from academics researching in the area, medical specialists, journalists, and employees working in NGOs dealing with child labour. The findings are detailed illustrating consistencies with the research literature. A key observation of this study is that policy makers in government departments and NGOs have limited knowledge of child labour maltreatment despite their role is formulating policy and legislation. With the exception of the academics, journalists and paediatrician, most based their knowledge on media reports and their limited knowledge of the literature.

Awareness raising program about public policies regarding child protection and the health impact of child labour maltreatment should disseminated across the society. Children should be protected from working with uneducated and psychologically traumatized

employers or co-workers.

Authors' contribution

Md Abdul Ahad: Conceived and designed the experiments, performed the experiments, analyzed and interpreted the data, contributed reagents, materials, analysis tools or data and wrote the paper.

Yvonne Karen Parry: Conceived and designed the experiments, contributed reagents, materials, analysis tools or data and wrote the paper.

Eileen Willis: Conceived and designed the experiments, analyzed and interpreted the data, and contributed reagents, materials, analysis tools or data and wrote the paper.

Shahid Ullah: Conceived and designed the experiments, and wrote the paper.

Matthew Ankers: Performed the experiments, analyzed and interpreted the data, and wrote the paper.

Data availability statement

The data that has been used is confidential.

Consent for publication

Not applicable.

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Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2023.e19031.

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