

## When Empowerment Leads to Impoverishment: A Case of Sanimart Project in Bhola District, Bangladesh

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### Abstract

*This study was conducted in Bhola district of Barisal Division in Bangladesh. The purpose of the study was to conduct a careful analysis of the plights of working adolescents who are also attending schools, to find out whether UNICEF project being implemented by COAST Trust is actually leading to the intended objective of adolescent empowerment. I organized focus group discussions reaching a total of 60 adolescents. Educational pass records of a total of 120 students were reviewed and compared to ascertain whether the work of the children has potential correlations with their pass grades.*

*I conclude that the empowerment project has instead caused disempowerment of the adolescent girls because of a number of reasons; long working hours are so detrimental for the girls given that the girls have to attend school and after schools proceed to work for additional 4 hours, and perhaps perform other domestic works in their households, the remuneration of girls is very low but being so helpless, they cannot complain about the unfair wages for which they work daily, the speak up culture which is so much required in empowerment situation is not available in the work places of the girls, the girls leave their work places at night which could expose them to other sexual harassment scenarios in a very conservative environment, the working environment could endanger the health of the young girls since they are dealing with cotton materials which may lead to respiratory related diseases, and finally, the extra work time has to a larger extent led to the low pass grades of the girls in schools.*

*Certain measures could be taken to avert or reduce the impact of working adolescents such as: girls who are below the minimum required age for work can appoint their parents or representatives to work on their behalf while close scrutiny is maintained to ensure the girls benefit from the proceeds of their work. The entrepreneurs can be compelled by Ministry of Women and Children Affairs (MOWCA) to ensure they pay necessary minimum wage that is commensurate with the work of the adolescent girls. Finally, the employers must be compelled to reduce the number of working hours to ensure the girls can reach their houses before dark as well as by allowing them a day off in a week.*

**Keywords:** Empowerment, impoverishment, agent, empoweree, disempowerment, child labor, Power differentials, economic influence.

### Introduction

Empowerment has taken different connotations, has widely been used and misused. For the purpose of this research, empowerment is the expansion of assets and capabilities of women to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control, and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives. On the other hand, impoverishment means disempowerment which is the contrast of empowerment. Campaigns aiming at promoting empowerment in social contexts usually focus on the redistribution of power, empowerment as “a quantifiable increase in the amount of power possessed by an individual or a group” (Weidenstedt, 2016). Such “power” can be gained by an increase of, for instance, rights, knowledge, money, or goods. As much as many programs have been implemented in developing Countries with many of them making great breakthroughs, it has never been thought of that other underlying consequences could make the objectives of empowerment go wrong. No much researches have investigated this area and thus my interest on carrying out this investigation to bring to light instances where development programs could unintentionally cause



more harm than the intended benefits. I used data from a project implemented by COAST Trust in Bhola district to articulate this fact.

United Nations Children’s Fund, Barisal Field Office implemented sanitation marketing project in the Island District of Bhola. The district was targeted because of its worse indicators pertaining to conservatism against women. Sanitation marketing activities included one of the components where entrepreneurs were involved in the production of hygiene kits which they locally produced. The entrepreneurs employed young girls with ages ranging between 5-17 years. Their main tasks were to assort cotton, sewing, and many other tasks related to the making of hygiene kits. Each of the girls had at least a task to perform in the local manufacturing process.

On 2<sup>nd</sup> October 2018, I visited the project site along with other UNICEF staffs to review the progress of the project. The overall objective of the project was to empower the young adolescent girls through provision of employment which helps them to get little income they could use to pay for their school fees and other personal necessities. My interaction with the young girls depicted issues which could drastically impede the achievement of the intended goals. One of the key issues is the working conditions; the girls would go to the work place after leaving school and would work until 7pm every day, leaving little time for their studies as well as other household chores. Particles from cotton could result in adverse health concern as they may breathe-in the particles. Finally, the organizational policy of UNICEF and other legal frameworks which have been ratified by the Government of Bangladesh are against the utilization of children (child labor).

This article therefore reviews the working conditions of young adolescents engaged in sanitation marketing project as a mechanism to bolster the empowerment of these girls. This topic is carefully chosen because the intended objectives of the project may result into adverse consequences of the project on the beneficiaries, more so, working conditions for the children is another important concern and falls within the purview of effective management.

In this article, the methodology used was focus group discussion with 60 adolescents working under COAST Trust sanitation marketing project supported by UNICEF in Bhola district. Project documents, examination records of 120 students, and other reports were also reviewed to corroborate the findings of my interactions with the adolescents.

### Study questions

The questions to be answered by this article are:

1. To what extent can the working conditions of adolescent girls impede their efforts in school?
2. Is the remuneration level commensurate with the time the girls spend at work?
3. Can the intended objective of empowerment result into impoverishment because of the poor working conditions and remuneration policy of the entrepreneurs?
4. What could have been the best approach to the sanitation marketing project, specifically the production sanitary pads?

### Literature review

The aim of empowerment is to improve peoples’ life through power transfer resources, this transfer of power resources may be through education, health services or housing but may also be through the sense of social-psychological changes in terms of identity and support; inspiring work environments, or recognition of identities, character traits, performances, and achievements. Generally, transferring power resources will provide the receiver with more agential options, leading to a greater sense of control and self-efficacy (Weidenstedt, 2016; Hamed, 2010; Marcus and Page 2016; Ukil, 2016; Ke and Zhang, 2010). However, the concept of emancipation stretches into development aid fields, health care, nursing, mentoring, employees’ performance and management. Weidenstedt (2016), sees empowerment taking on two dimensions; empowerment as a life/performance enhancement often found in work places where one party attempts to empower someone else, and contrary to this is empowerment as a grassroots/social movement often done through self-empowerment which takes the bottom-up approach. The empowerment

methodology aimed by COAST Trust's project is the top-down design where the agency attempted to empower the adolescent girls by collaborating with grassroots entrepreneurs.

According to Weidenstedt (2016), Power differentials between the empowerees and the agency is visible as empowerees have nothing and the agent who wants to empower has some resources. This power differentials can affect the very essence of empowerment program because empowerees may not be able to say their views. More so, the resources transfer to the empowerees being limited furthers the divide which is perceived as inferiority by the empowerees. Additionally, it should be noted that there is some sort of reciprocity expectations from the agent whether explicit or implicit, since the empowerees has nothing to reciprocate, the only way to pay back is by being grateful even though they do not like the services provided to them by the agent; and most often the agent claims to know what is needed for the empowerees and not allowing them to decide what is best for them causing paternalistic sentiment which obviously results in disempowering. Weidenstedt maintained that the expressed objective of empowerment could go wrong if it is approached as simple structural matter rather than looking at it from the communicative point of view.

Many other researchers echo similar sentiment on the negativity of empowerment on the basis of how agencies approach the concept. For instance, Riger (1993) asserts that empowerment could result into individualism and competition within the groups being empowered. This element of control leads to disempowering among the empowerees. On the other hand, there is danger as empowerment can be substituted as a goal when what people need is actually good jobs and more incomes. Marcus and Page (2016), Ross et al (2015) discuss the significance of secondary education on women empowerment, coming with a number constructive points such as; women who have attained secondary education would have some right to decide on the number of children they wish to have, they would also participate in major family decision involving substantial purchases of equipment, they would also have right to decide on issues pertaining to their health, and also right to resent early marriage. In the same way secondary education attendance empowers female counterparts, so does it for their fellow male who stands up against any abuse of women's rights. So long as I agree with this assertion, there are potential dangers whereby the notion of empowerment could go wrong especially when it brings on board children to work under ruthless entrepreneurs whose objectives are to ripe profit irrespective of the conditions of the helpless adolescents.

Eerdewijk et al, 2017 observe disempowerment and gender inequality manifest themselves in unequal distribution of resources and women and girls' lack of control over their bodies and low self-esteem, combined with biased laws and policies and discriminatory gender norms and practices. They went on to make a model where empowerment is contingent on the interaction between three elements; agency, institutional structures, and resources. According to them agency is the purposive capacity to take action and ability to pursue goals, specific expressions of agency are decision making, leadership and collective action. Much as their analysis of the roles of agency are literally correct, a lot of complexities arise in implementation of empowerment programs and particularly when the agency role is taken over by a business entity with an expressed objective of making profit. This, as also noted by Weidenstedt (2016), results into power differential and lack of an avenue for the empoweree to make their voices heard on matters critical to them. On the other hand, institutional structures are the social arrangements of formal and informal rules and practices. They shape and influence the expressions of agency as well as women and girls' control over resources. Institutional structures can be found in the arenas of the family, community, market and state. However, there are certain times when the institutional structures fail to strictly regulate the activities of entrepreneurs as their bad deeds are blared by the notion of empowerment. The third concept is about resources which encompass tangible and intangible capital and sources of power that women and girls have, own or use individually or collectively in the exercise of agency (Eerdewijk et al, 2017; Vildö, 2017). Resources differential also has dangers of creation of inferiority among the beneficiaries of empowerment as well as making the empowerees grateful for whatever assistance they receive even though it was not their choice.

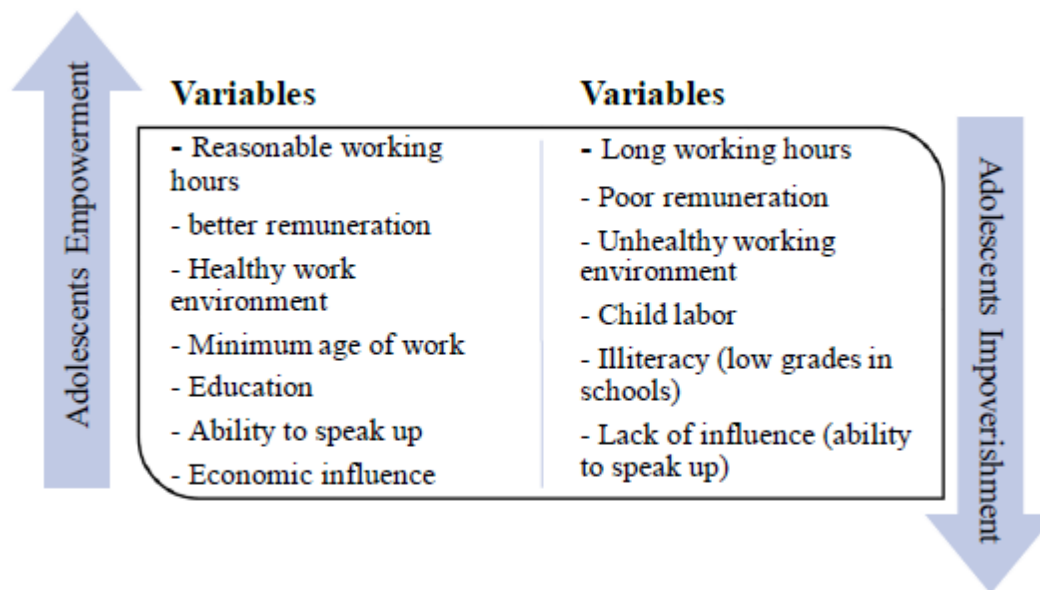
Murari (2013) in a study of barriers of abusive leadership on employees' empowerment in Bangalore, India depicts that arrogance and interpersonal insensitivity have a negative role in employees'

empowerment resulting in poor work culture satisfaction, low commitment and less job involvement of the employee in an organization. However, perfectionism variable of abusive leadership has a low but positive effect on employee empowerment. Organizational cynicism can result in a decrease in positive attitudes and behaviors such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and organizational citizenship behavior. It can also result in an increase of negative tendencies such as intentions to quit the job, and other counterproductive behaviors. Therefore, organizational cynicism can create an obstacle for employee empowerment (Yıldırım and Yıldırım, 2016). These observations are in contrast with Harriger, Lutes, and Ricci (2001) who in their study of effects of empowering students to do their homework at their will, showed that students who were in the category of empowerment failed to comply with the requirement of writing their homework as they treated it as a none priority to them leading to low pass results. This is another typical scenario where empowerment can adversely lead to negative consequences.

Children in Bangladesh are engaged in the worst forms of child labor, including in the production of bricks and forced child labor in the production of dried fish. The Government published its 2013 National Child Labor Survey which shows that 1,698,894 children ages 5 to 17 are engaged in legally prohibited child labor, while 1,751,475 children are engaged in permitted forms of work (Bureau of International Labor Affairs, 2015). Bangladesh has ratified ILO C. 138, Minimum Age, ILO C. 182, Worst Forms of Child Labor, UN CRC Optional Protocol on Armed Conflict, and UN CRC Optional Protocol on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography which prohibit child labor and other forms of abuse to children. Section 33 of the Child Care and Protection Act, 2013 clearly states that, no person shall employ a child under the age of thirteen in the performance of any work. Despite these prohibitions, children continue to work under conditions which may be hazardous to them.

### Theoretical framework

The article project follows the below theoretical framework.



**Figure 1.** Conceptual framework

In the above model, variables like reasonable number of hours worked daily, healthy working environment, access to quality education, ability to speak up, economic influence, and adherence to minimum age of work would arguably results into the intended empowerment of the adolescent girls. On the other hand, long working hours, low wage rates, unhealthy working environment, illiteracy/low grades

in schools, lack of influence or lack of speak up culture in work places, and child labor would result into impoverishment of the adolescent girls. Using the first variables as bench marks, this study will ascertain whether the adolescents' empowerment program has achieved the intended purpose.

## Methodology

This project adopted focus group discussions with 60 adolescent girls working under sanitation marketing project implemented by COAST Trust in Bhola district of Barisal Division, Bangladesh. Questions were posed to the adolescents in a session lasting for 30 minutes each. Examination results of the 60 girls were reviewed in comparison with the results of other 60 students who were not working during the period between 2017 and 2018. Direct observation of their working conditions and environment was also made at their manufacturing area. Interview with the entrepreneur who employed them was also carried out.

The responses from the girls and various personal documents relating to their schools were strictly kept confidential and will never be revealed in this article in order to avoid potential risk of retribution by their employers. The consent of the empowerees were sought and the purpose of the FGD elaborately made to them before they could participate in the discussions.

## Results

### Impacts of poor working conditions on school performance of the adolescent girls

A review of the 2017 and 2018 examination pass rates of the girls working under the adolescent empowerment program was done, additionally, a comparative review of the pass rates of students who are not on any empowerment project involving extra hours of work was also carried out taking similar samples for 2017 and 2018. The results of both analyses are tabulated in the tables hereunder.

**Table 1a.** Showing performances of adolescent girls

<b>Year of Examination</b>	<b>Average Pass for 2017 (%)</b>	<b>Average Pass for 2018 (%)</b>
Class 9	50.4	49.2
Class 10	48.9	49.7
Class 11	56.0	51
Class 12	57	52
<b>Total Average Pass</b>	<b>53.075</b>	<b>50.475</b>

Source: Primary Data

**Table 1b:** Showing performance of students who are not working

<b>Year of Examination</b>	<b>Average Pass for 2017 (%)</b>	<b>Average Pass for 2018 (%)</b>
Class 9	80	82.4
Class 10	84	79.3
Class 11	78.5	80.5
Class 12	67.1	78
<b>Total Average Pass</b>	<b>77.4</b>	<b>80.05</b>

Source: Primary Data

### Wage rates and potential impacts

On discussions with the entrepreneur who has employed the adolescent girls and with the girls themselves. A very minimal wage was paid to the girls depending on the number of hours worked after school on daily basis. These wages are not commensurate with the time the girls spend working at the

manufacturing facilities. The results of the cumulative monthly wage on the basis of cumulative hours worked are presented in the following table.

**Table 2.** Showing monthly cumulative wage per hours worked

<b>Hours Worked</b>	<b>Hourly Rate (BDT)</b>	<b>Total Monthly Income (BDT)</b>
80	4.17	333.6
90	4.17	373.3
100	4.17	417
110	4.17	458.7
120	4.17	500.4

Source: Primary data

### **Best alternatives for the adolescent girls**

Possibility of removing the bottlenecks which adversely affect the achievement of the intended objective of the project can be attained by application of certain measures. For instance, girls who are below the minimum required age for work can appoint their parents or representatives to work on their behalf while close scrutiny is maintained to ensure the girls benefit from the proceeds of their work. The entrepreneurs can be compelled by Ministry of Women and Children Affairs (MOWCA) to ensure they pay necessary minimum wage that is commensurate with the work of the adolescent girls. Finally, the employers must be compelled to reduce the number of working hours to ensure the girls can reach their houses before dark as well as by allowing them a day off in a week.

### **Child labor**

Some young girls started working in the production of sanitary pads facility from the age of 5 years and have since been working until their 17<sup>th</sup> birthdays. Most of them revealed that their families are weak financially to support payment of their basic necessities. Because of the subservient nature of the young children, they are easily utilized by the rogue employers, poorly treated but would continue to work for very little remuneration as the work they do is the only source of income for themselves and their families. This situation continues to unfold on the children despite the Government of Bangladesh's ratification of various treaties and international norms which protect children from child labor and other worst forms of abuse. Child Care and Protection Act was also enacted in 2013 with provisions in section 33 and 34 and subsequent subsections. Strictest application of these laws and treaties is required in order to avert or reduce the circumstances of working domestic children and those receiving wages.

### **Unhealthy working environment**

The environment in which the young girls were working as observed was not so good given that they were handling cotton materials which may adversely cause respiratory tract infections in the medium to longer term. Long working hours considering the time spent at school and also at work is detrimental to the healthy wellbeing of the adolescent girls. Corroboration of other studies reveals that unhealthy conditions correlate with the level of performance of individuals, for instance, Ross et al (2015) argue that women with body mass index (BMI) values in the underweight category face a serious problem in developing countries, given their role in the economic wellbeing and health of their families and women whose daily economic activities involve agricultural and other physically-demanding work, being underweight impedes their ability to perform their activities efficiently.

### **Long working hours after school**

Discussions with the girls revealed that they work approximately 4 hours daily after school from 4pm to 7pm and thereafter disperse to their homes when it is already dark. This is a potential threat for the girls especially in a conservative environment where females are cruelly treated. Potentially the girls could be



exposed to further harm like sexual harassment when leaving work at late hours. Furthermore, the entrepreneurs revealed that they work throughout the days of the week and leaving no any single day for their rest and other household shores. When any of the girls fell sick, she is allowed a day off without pay.



**Figure 2.** Working Adolescent girls/Emmanuel Mabor

### **Lack of influence**

The adolescent girls do not have any influence in matters pertaining to the work, for instance, their work hours are set by the employers, no any avenue for the negotiation of how much they should be paid, and they had no idea of how much the sanitary pad which they produce is sold. During our focus group discussions, they were not comfortable discussing when the employers were available, an indication that potential issues exist between the employers and them as workers. These reaffirm various studies which uncovered the power differentials emanating from the power differences between the empowerees and the agencies (Weidenstedt, 2016; Eerdewijk et al, 2017; Riger, 1993), this even got worst because the agents are business entities who are working to earn profits.

### **Discussions**

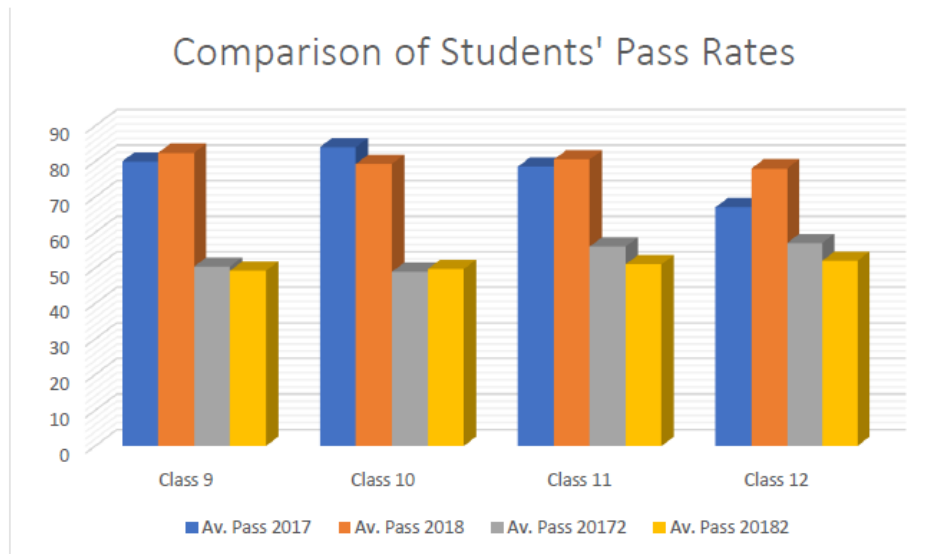
#### **Adverse consequences of the adolescent empowerment project on the girls**

The immediate impact of the adolescent empowerment project is that it breaches national and international norms pertaining to child labor. Girls between the ages of 5-17 are working under different entrepreneurs to manufacture local sanitary pads. They cited inability to bear educational and other personal expenses as the main reason for venturing to work, because there are many indirect costs such as transport and uniforms levied by schools. This confirms other studies on the situation of working children done in Bangladesh. For instance, UNICEF observes that social norms and economic realities mean that child labor is widely accepted and very common in Bangladesh. Many families rely on the income generated by their children for survival, so child labor is often highly valued. Additionally, employers often prefer to employ children because they are cheaper and considered to be more compliant and obedient than adults. This resonates with my findings during the interactions with the adolescents as they felt uncomfortable to speak about their working conditions in the presence of their employer until I had to organize a different meeting with them. This situation of working children continues unabated despite the sanctions in sections 33, 34 subsection 3a and 3b of the Child Care and Protection Act, 2013.

Using variables (reasonable number of hours worked daily, healthy working environment, access to quality education, ability to speak up, economic influence, and adherence to minimum age of work) as bench marks for achieving empowerment under the context within which the children were working, I have

proven beyond reasonable doubt that the indicators from my focus group discussions with the young girls, the entrepreneurs, and review of educational records that the project has never achieved its purpose but created a subservient situation for the adolescent girls which is akin to disempowerment or at worst impoverishment.

In comparative review of the pass rates of the working girls vis-à-vis that of fellow students who are not working extra hours after school, the data revealed the pass rates of working children to be lower than that of fellow students who are not working. There could be other contributors for the difference in their results but importantly the lack of time for the working girls to revise their notes, do homework and other academic related work is a main factor leading to the low performance in schools. This is obviously an adverse consequence of the empowerment project on the education of the adolescents, therefore the work of the children affects their performance in schools to a larger extent as seen from the data review of their pass grades.



**Figure 3:** Bar chart showing comparative analysis of pass rates in examination in 2017 and 2018

The rate of passing of the working adolescent girls is significantly lower than those of other students who are not employed.

Reference to the Child Care and Protection Act, 2013 which prohibits engagement of children in hazardous work at section 3a and b which states

*No person shall employ a child – in performance of any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child's education or to be harmful to the child's health or physical, mental, spiritual or social development; or in night work or an industrial undertaking (Child Care and Protection Act, 2013).*

The engagement of the girls is therefore in contravention of the Child Care and Protection Act 2013. Careful review to ascertain if the conditions of work fall under the purview of the minimum permissible threshold of the law also revealed that the conditions supersedes the bare minimums. On average, the children work 4 hours daily after school and by the end of the month, their total hours of work will be 120 hours and hourly pay rate of BDT 4.17 which comes to a maximum earning of BDT 500.4. whereas the price of each sanitary pad sells at BDT 30, this implies that the rate at which the girls are paid is far below their level of effort and the profit which the entrepreneurs enjoy.



## Conclusion

In a nutshell, development project which seeks to empower young people must carefully evaluate the conditions of work to ensure that the intended benefits for the empowerees are actually achieved, especially when profit making entities are involved in the process of empowerment. Empowerment projects should encompass within their design the aspect of influence, the ability by the young people or other disadvantaged people whom the project intend to empower to communicate freely on matters affecting them at work. Project designs should be in conformity with international norms as well as the national laws of the context in which the projects are to be implemented so that at the end there is no breach of the laws.

I conclude that the empowerment project has instead caused disempowerment of the adolescent girls because of a number of reasons; long working hours are so detrimental for the girls given that the girls have to attend school and after schools proceed to work for additional 4 hours, and perhaps perform other domestic works in their households, the remuneration of girls is very low but being so helpless, they cannot complain about the unfair wages for which they work daily, the speak up culture which is so much required in empowerment situation is not available in the work places of the girls, the girls leave their work places at night which could expose them to other sexual harassment scenarios in a very conservative environment, the working environment could endanger the health of the young girls since they are dealing with cotton materials which may lead to respiratory related diseases, and finally, the extra work time has to a larger extent led to the low pass grades of the girls in schools.

## Recommendations

To resolve the problems of these working children, I propose the following steps:

1. Parents or appointed representatives of the girls below the minimum permissible age for work should be the ones working, strict supervision by Department of Social Affairs should be done to ensure that the proceed from the work benefits the children.
2. Intervention by the Department of Social Affairs is needed to renegotiate the working hours for the children to make sure that the children do not work until night fall since that can expose them to other dangers while walking to their houses after work.
3. Finally, minimum wage scale should be negotiated with the employers to ensure that the amount of work done is commensurate with the wages.

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