



A Holistic Approach Towards Ending Child Labour and Ensuring Education and Protection for Every Child- Past, Present and Future

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Abstract

Introduction: Child labour remains a pressing issue globally, with an estimated 160 million children engaged in work that deprives them of their childhood and development.

Case Description: De-fined as work that is hazardous, interferes with education, and harms physical and mental well-being, child labour affects children in various sectors, including agriculture, manufacturing, and domestic work.

Discussion and Evaluation: In India, the situation is critical, with millions of children involved in child labour, particularly in rural areas. The Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986, later amended in 2016, and the Right to Education (RTE) Act, aim to combat this issue through legal frameworks that prohibit child labour and ensure free and compulsory education. Despite these efforts, challenges remain, as poverty, lack of awareness, and socio-cultural factors continue to perpetuate child labour. International initiatives, such as the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 8.7, call for the elimination of the worst forms of child labour by 2025. In India, currently the Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan, aim to address child labour holistically by focusing on education and social empowerment along with legislations that prohibit child labour.

Conclusions: While progress has been made, a multi-dimensional approach involving legal measures, education, and community efforts is essential to fully eradicate child labour and safeguard children's rights. Strengthened collaboration among governments, organizations, and communities is crucial to ensuring every child's right to a childhood free from exploitation.

Keywords: Child Labour; Education; Child Rights; India; Legal Frameworks; SDGs; Poverty; Child Protection

Introduction

As per United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF), it has been estimated that nearly 1 in every 10 child is subjected to child labour across the globe, with approximately 160 million of them being subjected to child labour [1]. Child labour is commonly defined as work that deprives children of their childhood, potential, and dignity while harming their physical and mental development. It

includes work that is mentally, physically, socially, or morally hazardous and detrimental to their well-being, as well as work that interferes with their education by preventing school attendance, forcing them to drop out prematurely, or requiring them to balance schooling with excessively long and strenuous work hours. Whether a particular form of work qualifies as child labour depends on factors such as the child's age, the nature and duration of the work,

the conditions under which it is performed, and national regulations. Consequently, the definition and scope of child labour vary across countries [2].

According to the Child and Adolescent Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act (CLPR Act), 1986, as amended in 2016 ("CLPR Act"), a "Child" is defined as any individual below the age of 14. The Act strictly prohibits the employment of children in any form of work, including domestic labour, and any violation of this provision is considered a criminal offense [3].

Description

According to the 2001 Census, there were 1.26 crore working children in the 5-14 age group, out of a total child population of 25.2 crore in India. A survey conducted by the National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO) in 2004-05 estimated the number of working children at 90.75 lakh. By the time of the 2011 Census, the number of working children in the 5-14 age group had decreased to 43.53 lakh [4]. A report from Kailash Satyarthi Children's Foundation, after considering the rate of child labour population in the last four decades, says the total child labour population in the country will reach 81.2 lakh by 2021 and then decline to 74.3 lakh by 2025. Global estimates indicate that at the beginning of 2020, 160 million children—63 million girls and 97 million boys—were engaged in child labour worldwide, accounting for nearly one in ten children globally [5,6].

Discussion and Evaluation

Children have been found to be engaged in two broader work categories globally. The first is market-based work, which involves employment for wages in formal or informal sectors. The second includes work within the home, farm, or family enterprise, as well as the production of goods and services that are typically not exchanged for monetary compensation [7]. In India, child labourers are found across various sectors, including agriculture, industry, and services. They are commonly employed in brick kilns, carpet weaving, garment production, domestic work, food eateries, sugarcane farms, fisheries, and mining [6].

International efforts

Goal 8, target 8.7 of Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) states that to "Take immediate and effective measures to eradicate forced labour, end modern slavery and human trafficking, and secure the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labour, including recruitment and use of child soldiers, and by 2025 end child labour in all its forms" [9]. UNICEF's nine key asks for target 8.7 focus on a comprehensive, rights-based approach to eliminating child labour and the recruitment of children into armed conflict. They call for governments to enforce legal standards to reduce child exploitation, promote integrated efforts to tackle child labour, and engage with businesses to address these issues. Strengthening the social service workforce is crucial, as is ensuring children associated with armed groups are treated as survivors of child rights violations, not criminals. UNICEF advocates for eliminating child detention for those linked to armed conflict, prioritizing family reunification, and endorsing the Safe Schools Declaration to protect educational institutions from military use. Additionally, preventing violations against children affected by conflict, particularly recruitment and other grave abuses, is a key focus. These efforts, collectively, aim to safeguard children's rights and ensure their protection in vulnerable situations [1,9].

Initiatives

India took its first call in the grave issue way back in 1979, when the first committee by the name of Gurupadswamy Committee evaluated the issue of child labour and suggested measures to tackle it. The committee identified poverty as the root cause of child labour in India and suggested that legal course of action would not be the ideal method to put an end to child labour, but it would be poverty alienation could finally eliminate this menace from our society and it also identified this as a multifaceted challenge [10].

Following the recommendations of the Gurupadaswamy Committee, the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act was introduced in 1986 [4]. The Act prohibited the employment of children in specific hazardous occupations and processes, while regulating conditions in other types of work. The list of hazardous occupations and processes has been gradually expanded based on

the advice of the Child Labour Technical Advisory Committee, established under the Act. In 2016, the Act was amended through the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Amendment Act, which banned the employment of children under 14 years in all forms of work. The amendment also introduced provisions to prohibit the employment of adolescents (aged 14–18 years) in hazardous occupations and processes [3,11]. Prior to 2016, the Act did not say anything about engagement of children below 14 years of age in non-hazardous occupations, while on the other hand the Right to Education (RTE) Act made education free and compulsory for this very age group. Secondly, ratification of ILO Convention 182, which focuses on the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labour, should be pursued as a matter of urgency. This convention mandates that countries take immediate and effective measures to eliminate child labour in the most hazardous and exploitative forms, such as slavery, trafficking, forced labour, and illicit activities [12]. Lastly, ratification of ILO Convention 138 was needed, which establishes the minimum age for entry into employment at 15 years, is crucial for safeguarding children's rights and ensuring their protection from economic exploitation. This convention takes into account the diverse stages of socio-economic development of countries, allowing for flexibility in implementation while setting a universal standard for the minimum age for employment.

Currently India has launched Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) Scheme, which was subsumed by the National Child Labour Project (NCLP) Scheme of 1988. NCLP scheme was approved for implementation up to 31.03.2021 [14]. The government has proposed a holistic approach to school education, aiming to treat the entire spectrum from pre-nursery to Class 12 without segmentation. To achieve this, Samagra Shiksha—an all-encompassing programme for the school education sector, extending from pre-school to Class 12—has been developed. The broader goal of Samagra Shiksha is to improve school effectiveness by ensuring equal opportunities for schooling and promoting equitable learning outcomes across all levels of education. This integrated approach focuses on enhancing the quality of education and fostering inclusive development within the schooling system [15] and aligns with these Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, striving to provide quality education for all children, regardless of their background or socio-economic status.

Conclusions

In conclusion, while significant strides have been made in the global and national fight against child labour, the persistence of this issue underscores the urgent need for continued action. India's comprehensive approach, including the enforcement of laws such as the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, the Right to Education (RTE) Act, and its commitment to international conventions like ILO Conventions 138 and 182, highlights the nation's dedication to eradicating child labour and ensuring that every child has access to education and a bright future. However, these efforts require further strengthening and integration across all sectors—especially with initiatives like Samagra Shiksha, which seeks to provide holistic education. To truly safeguard the rights of children, a collaborative, multi-dimensional effort is essential, combining legal frameworks, education, and social empowerment to put an end to child labour in all its forms. It is only through such sustained and collective efforts that we can ensure a world where every child can grow, learn, and thrive free from exploitation.

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