



Child Labour and its Real Picture

KEYWORDS

Child labour-Little hands-Measures to Eradication

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ABSTRACT

The Prevalence of child labour is not a recent phenomenon. In the ancient times children were put to arduous labour in houses and in the fields. Performances of tasks like tending of cattle, collection of grass and fuel etc. by children relieve the adult members of the family for more productive work. There was no social labour against children working along with their parents. It was this factor of child labour which strongly established family and kinship ties in occupations. In the urban areas, because of their poverty many parents cannot make any investment in their children's development and are also reluctant to support them. They want their children to find work for themselves as early as possible. In developing countries, children have always been the responsibility of the primary institution of society, viz, family. The traditional care lavished on children, has suffered erosion because of new constraints and consequently abuse and exploitation of child has become common place. The plight of the child has been further aggravated by the endemic and entrenched poverty. In spite of the constitutional measures and number of welfare development schemes for them, a sizeable proportion of child population is still working as wage labourers/apprentu. paid/unpaid both in urban and rural areas in very deplorable and inhuman conditions.*

INTRODUCTION

The problematic aspect of child labour became more pronounced with the advent of industrial era. Being in the labour, such children are denied educational opportunities; their physical, mental and intellectual development is hampered. The working children generally remain unskilled, underpaid, under-privileged throughout life, their physical and social mobility get restricted and vicious and cumulative cycle of poverty, ill-health, under employment and unemployment also get strengthened,

Child labour problem with multidimensional implications is one among the many crucial problems faced by the developing nations. In the early phase of industrialization child labour suffered most brutal and unprecedented exploitation in the western world though its intensity has considerably been lessened in the advanced industrial nations now. Normatively child labour has serious consequences and implications for children, parents and families and as such it has been recognized as a social evil.

Concept of Child Labour

Defining child labour is not as simple and straightforward as it may appear because it encompasses three difficult-to-define concepts "child", "work", and "labour". Childhood can be defined in terms of age. In some societies, age may not be a sufficient basis for defining "childhood". The fulfilment of certain social rites and traditional obligations may well be important requirements in defining "adult" and "child" status. In still others, the integration of children into socio-economic life may begin so early that it may be virtually impossible to identify clearly the different life phases. Besides, in the absence of an effective age record system, even applying an agreed legal definition becomes highly problematic. However, in the context of child labour, a working definition of a "child" may be a person below the general limit of fifteen years or in special circumstances fourteen years, set by the Minimum Age Convention, T973 (No.138).³

The term child labour is often defined as work that deprives children of their childhood, their potential and their dignity, and that is harmful to physical and mental development. It refers to work that:

- Is mentally, physically, socially or morally dangerous and harmful to children: and
- Interferes with their schooling:

- by depriving them of the opportunity to attend school;
- by obliging them to leave school prematurely; or
- by requiring them to attempt to combine school attendance with excessively long and heavy work.

In its most extreme forms, child labour involves children being enslaved, separated from their families, exposed to serious hazards and illness and/or left to fend for themselves on the streets of large cities-often at a very early age. Whether or not particular forms of 'work' can be called 'child labour' depends on the child's age, the type and hours of work performed, the conditions under which it is performed and the objectives pursued by individual countries.

According to Francis Blanchard (former director of ILO) "Child Labour includes children prematurely leading adult lives, working long hours for low wages under conditions damaging to their health and to their physical and mental development, sometimes separated from their families, frequently deprived of education and training apprentices that could provide them a better future".⁵

According to Homer Folks, the chairman of the US National Child Labour Committee, the term 'child labour' is generally used to refer, "any work by children that interfere with their full physical and mental development, the opportunities for a desirable minimum of education and of their needed recreation".

UNICEF has given a comprehensive formulation in its attempt at defining child labour:

Starting full-time work at an early age,

- ❖ Working too long within or outside the family and unable to attend school,
- ❖ Work resulting in excessive physical, social and psychological strains upon the child as in the case of sexual exploitation and dangerous work as military service and mining,
- ❖ Work on the street is unhealthy and dangerous,
- ❖ Inadequate remuneration for working outside the family, as in the case of the child workers in carpet weaving.
- ❖ Too much responsibility at too early an age as in the domestic situation.
- ❖ Work does not facilitate the psychological and social development of the child Work that inhibits the child's self esteem.

The problem of child labour is not a concomitant feature of modern society only; in fact the problem has been there since the very dawn of human civilization, The reasons-responsible for this phenomenon are varied and have been changing as the years rolled on. Avenues of child labour over the years have broadened. As a matter of fact, the problem is vexed and widespread and is not a characteristic feature of any particular type of economy. It is prevalent even in highly advanced countries of the world, though in a disguised form,

A child is defined as an individual under the age of 18 years, based on the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the ILO Convention on the Worst Forms of Child Labour, 1999 (No. 182). Since it is commonly accepted that a child under 5 years of age is too young to be engaged in work (although there are cases of exploitation or abuse by adults) or to start schooling, we considered only the child population aged 5-17 years for the purpose of our estimates.

Not all work performed by children is equivalent to "child labour" needing abolition. Work in the sense of 'economic activity', is a statistical definition:

- Acceptable form of work by children (which may be regarded as positive), on the one hand, and child labour that needs to be eliminated, on the other,⁹ and between;
- Various forms of child labour and the WFCL, which require urgent action for elimination.

A Brief History of Child Labour

Although "child labour" as a social issue emerged as a consequence of the industrial revolution, children have always worked. They carried out tasks in the home, participated in agriculture, and learned crafts from an early age. This activity was taken for granted, and there were no debates over whether children should play a role in the economy.

All of this changed with the recruitment of children for industrial production beginning with Britain in the eighteenth century. The situation of children in British mines and textile mills was the target of several parliamentary investigations in the early nineteenth century, and the plight of youthful chimney sweeps. Young children who cleaned the inside of coal burning chimneys, in the process acquiring serious respiratory diseases, challenged the conscience of the country.

Over time, legislation was introduced which gradually outlawed many of these activities, beginning with the introduction of Half-Time Working in conjunction with the Factory Acts of 1833 and 1844. The purpose behind this system was to restructure child labour so that it no longer interfered with education (Hobbs and McKechnie, 1997). Beginning with the Education Act of 1918, regulation sought the removal of all younger children from the labour force; this approach was extended by the Young Person's Act 1933, which embodied the modern approach of age limits and hazardous orders.

Nevertheless, there has been a debate surrounding how consequential these legislative actions really were. On the one hand, many children continued to engage in economic activities prohibited under law, and inspectors either failed to recognise infractions or they turned a blind eye to them (Hobbs and McKechnie, 1997). On the other, while the prevalence of child labour in Britain certainly declined over the span of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, many scholars have tended to downplay the role played by legislation compared with other changes in society. Some, such as Fyfe, believe that the increasing availability of education and the greater importance attached to it by most British families, was the primary factor at work. In most cases, agitation and action by politicians, trade unionists and by entrepreneurs has led to legislative and concrete action to reduce the incidence of child labour during the closing decade of the 19th century and the early decades of the 20th century.¹¹ Others such as Nardinelli, hold that rising family income encouraged families to withhold their children's labour (Nardinelli, 1990). Unravelling these factors is difficult since they were contem-

poraneous and deeply interrelated. The British experience was echoed by other industrialized countries, although each has a distinctive history (Cunningham and Viazzo, 1996).

In Kautilya's Arthshastra, there is also a mention of employment of children in India in the form of slavery. During this period (3rd century B.C.) child slaves, who were less than eight years of age, were known to be working in many nobles' houses. During the medieval period there were certain crafts which totally depended on the employment of children. As such, children were normally placed as trainees under artisans and craftsmen. Even now this tradition continues especially in carpet, cotton and silk weaving industries. These industries employ a large number of children to perform various activities related to these industries.

The phenomenon of child labour was prevalent all over the world, in the pre-industrial revolution phase, though it had an altogether different nature and magnitude. During the post industrial revolution phase, child labour became a growing phenomenon upto the first half of this century in industrialized countries. In case of developing countries, it still continues to grow. With the economic recession, this problem was expected to become more acute. It has started making its appearance in industrialized countries. It is also witnessed in the third world, in general and in India in particular, as a result of persistent poverty and the population explosion.¹⁴

Rapid urbanization has made the problem of child labour more visible because of its association with work outside the family context and high rate of rural-urban migration of both the family and individual types. In case of a developing country, the children mainly work in small manufacturing units as cheap labour. We also find that due to technical innovations in the urban sector, children are often forced into street trades turning child labour into casual labour.

Child Labour at the Global Level

Child labour is a pervasive problem throughout the world. Industrialized economies especially of Europe, North America, and Australia etc. have by now reduced employment of children to a considerable extent; they are yet not fully out of the phenomenon of child labour. Some of them have some child labour originated from social problems, educational systems and poverty. But the problem of child labour as faced by developing economies today has indeed serious dimensions. Africa and Asia together account for over ninety percent of total child employment. Though there are more child workers in Asia than anywhere else, a higher percent of African children participate in the labour force. Child population working in the developing countries start work at a younger age, sometimes but not always within the family. The variety of jobs they do is greater than in the developed countries, and less recognised by the authorities. They enjoy fewer legal or other protections, if any, and no training to help them deal with the health and other hazards of their work, and they are often helpless to counter poor treatment and exploitation by their employers (or by their families). All in all, children in developing countries work much harder than those in industrialized countries, for less reward and most often foregoing the benefits of schooling. Some even have to create their own jobs, which they do by working on the streets or scavenging for garbage.

The young workers in the developed countries are in a better position. Perhaps their biggest advantage is that many of them manage to combine work with schooling, and one reason for this is the heavy emphasis on school attendance by the local authorities. Africa has the highest proportion in the world of working children (nearly one third), whilst Latin America, with its high levels of urbanization, has the largest population of "street children". And in many Asian countries children comprise over ten percent of the work force. Yet it is remarkably persistent and remains widespread in much of the developing world, including in the booming parts of the world economy. A 2003 survey by the International Labour Organization (ILO) suggested that there are 246 million child

labourers (aged 14 years or less) in the world and that as many as 180 million of them are engaged in hazardous activities that put them at direct physical risk.

CONCLUSION

India has the largest number of child labourers in the world. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) estimates that there are more than thirty five million such children, accounting for fourteen percent of the children in the five to fourteen years age group. Other unofficial estimates are much higher,

ranging between 60 and 125 million child labourers. Meanwhile, the census data for 2001 suggests a much lower incidence, with 12.5 million child labourers identified, which would be less than five percent of the relevant age group. This represents a declining incidence compared with the 1991 figure of 6.4 percent of the children between five and fourteen years. Out of the total population of child labourers in India, 46.26 percent are females whereas male child labourers made it 53.74 percent.

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