

CHILD LABOUR IN INDIA: A SOCIO-ECONOMIC CRISIS AND THE PATH TO REFORM

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ABSTRACT

"No child should be working when they should be learning, dreaming, and growing."

Child labour remains a frontline concern in India, as early entry into the labour market during the formative years deprives children of access to quality education, thus curbing their potential for a better future. Child labour is not merely a socio-economic issue—it is a violation of fundamental human rights, robbing children of their innocence, dreams, and dignity. This complex problem is deeply rooted in poverty, illiteracy, and systemic inequalities, and continues to affect millions of children across the country.

Children under the age of fourteen constitute 3.6% of the total labour force in India, with approximately 85% engaged in agricultural work, 9% in manufacturing, services, and repairs, and 0.8% in factories⁵⁷⁰. An emerging and alarming trend is the use of children as domestic workers in urban areas, where they face unregulated working conditions, minimal or no pay, and are exposed to physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. These environments often resemble modern forms of slavery, hidden behind the façade of care and employment.

Despite existing legislation and awareness initiatives, enforcement remains weak. However, various non-governmental organizations (NGOs), community-based groups, and international bodies have begun grassroots interventions focused on rescuing, rehabilitating, and educating affected children. This paper explores the key factors contributing to child labour, analyzes the consequences on children and society, and proposes practical, multi-faceted solutions. These include poverty alleviation, universal access to education, community empowerment, and stringent policy implementation. With collective action and sustained commitment, the vision of a child-labour-free India can become a reality.

KEYWORDS: Child Labour, India, Poverty, Education, Human Rights, Domestic Workers, Grassroots Interventions, Social Reform



⁵⁷⁰ <https://www.whatisindia.com/issues/childlab/index.html>

INTRODUCTION

It is crucial to differentiate between work that harms children and work that contributes to their growth. Not all activities children engage in should be classified as harmful child labour. When children or adolescents above the legal working age take part in tasks that do not pose a threat to their health, well-being, or education, it can be viewed as beneficial. For instance, helping in a family business, doing light tasks around the home, or earning small amounts of money outside school hours or during vacations, can offer valuable life lessons. These types of work allow children to develop important skills, learn responsibility, and contribute to their family's welfare, thus helping to prepare them for adult roles in society.

Whether or not a particular activity constitutes child labour depends on several factors, including the child's age, the nature and extent of the work, the environment in which it occurs, and the goals of individual nations. This means that definitions of child labour can vary significantly between countries and even across different sectors within the same country. Therefore, a clear understanding of what constitutes harmful labour is essential to ensure that children's work does not interfere with their development or future opportunities.

Child Labour: Meaning

The term "child labour" by the International Labour Organization 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/or interferes with their schooling by: depriving them of the opportunity to attend school; obliging them to leave school prematurely; or requiring them to attempt to

combine school attendance with excessively long and heavy work⁵⁷¹.

CAUSES OF CHILD LABOUR

Children's involvement in child labour is often rooted in societal, economic, and cultural factors, with many parents or guardians perceiving it as a 'normal' part of a child's life or a necessity for the family's survival. To effectively address child labour, it is essential to understand the issue from the perspectives of children, their families, and their communities. The following outlines key root causes that make children particularly vulnerable to exploitation in the workforce.

1. Poverty

Poverty remains the most significant driver of child labour. As noted by experts, "Poverty is certainly the greatest single force driving children into the workplace." When families are unable to meet basic needs—such as food, clean water, education, and healthcare—they often have no choice but to send their children to work in order to supplement household income. Poverty is deeply intertwined with other contributing factors, including low literacy and numeracy rates, the lack of decent employment opportunities, natural disasters, climate change, and social conflicts. The relationship between poverty and child labour creates a vicious cycle: unless one is addressed, the other cannot be eradicated.

2. Lack of Access to Quality Education

The availability and quality of education play a crucial role in combating child labour. "The availability and quality of schooling is among the most important factors," as children who are not in school are at a higher risk of entering the workforce prematurely. Schools must be welcoming environments with manageable class sizes, curricula that reflect the local context, and be affordable, particularly for rural families. It is not only essential to get children into school, but to ensure that education is of

⁵⁷¹ <https://www.ilo.org/international-programme-elimination-child-labour-ipecc/what-child-labour>

high quality and that children remain enrolled, free from the pressures of harmful work.

3. Poor Access to Decent Work Opportunities

Many children involved in labour lack the fundamental educational skills that would enable them to pursue safe, stable, and well-compensated work as adults. If young people cannot access decent employment—defined by safe working conditions, fair wages, social protection, and gender equality—they are often forced into hazardous work environments. Work that is unsafe or exploitative, particularly for those above the legal minimum working age, is also categorized as child labour. Thus, the absence of decent work opportunities for adults indirectly forces children into harmful labour practices.

4. Limited Understanding of Child Labour

In some families, there is a common belief that work contributes positively to a child's character development and skill-building. This view often stems from a lack of awareness about the dangers associated with child labour, which can adversely impact a child's health, safety, and future opportunities. Cultural norms and societal expectations can also perpetuate the practice, especially when the negative consequences are not fully understood by the community. Addressing these misconceptions through awareness and education is key to reducing the prevalence of child labour.

5. Natural Disasters and Climate Change

The impact of natural disasters and climate change is increasingly recognized as a driving force behind child labour, particularly in rural areas. "Farmers who see their crops destroyed due to climate changes have no other choice but to send their children out to work," as agricultural families often face crop failure or land degradation caused by extreme weather, altered rainfall patterns, or soil erosion. When livelihoods are threatened by environmental changes, families may be compelled to send their children to work in neighboring farms, thus exposing them to labour exploitation.

6. Conflicts and Mass Migration

Child labour is also closely correlated with conflict and displacement. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), children make up over half of the population displaced by war and conflict. These children are particularly vulnerable to exploitation, including child labour, due to the breakdown of social support systems, limited access to education, and disruption of child protection services. In conflict zones, the incidence of child labour is almost twice as high as the global average. Furthermore, children in conflict areas are at heightened risk of becoming involved in armed conflict, a form of child labour categorized as one of the Worst Forms of Child Labour.

FORMS OF CHILD LABOUR

1. Agricultural Labour

Children in India are often found working in agriculture, particularly in rural areas. They assist their families in various tasks like planting, weeding, harvesting, and carrying heavy loads. They are vulnerable to long working hours, exposure to pesticides, and physical strain.

Case Example: In rural areas of Punjab, children work in cotton fields. Many of them are exposed to harmful chemicals, pesticides, and long hours in the sun, which impacts their physical development and health. The children often work for minimal pay, contributing to the family income but at the cost of their own well-being⁵⁷².

2. Domestic Labour

In many urban households, particularly in middle and upper-class families, child domestic workers, mostly girls, are employed for various tasks like cleaning, cooking, and taking care of the elderly or younger children. These children are often subject to harsh working conditions and sometimes physical or emotional abuse.

⁵⁷² National Rural Support Programme - Child Labor in Cotton Seed Farming A Rapid Assessment in District Bahawalpur, Bahawalnagar, Rahim Yar Khan and Rajanpur. Retrieved from <https://nrsp.org.pk/publications/Baseline-Studies/Child-Labor-in-Cotton-Seed-Farming-Punjab.pdf>

Case Example: In Delhi, a 14-year-old girl named Kavita was rescued from a prominent family's home where she worked as a domestic help. She was forced to clean, cook, and care for children. She was physically abused for not completing tasks on time and was never allowed to attend school. This case highlighted how child domestic labour is common among wealthy families, despite legal protections⁵⁷³.

3. Manufacturing and Industries

The manufacturing and industrial sectors often exploit child labour. These children work in dangerous conditions, such as in brick kilns, glass factories, and garment factories. The hazards they face include exposure to toxic chemicals, long working hours, and physical injuries.

Case Example: In the infamous case of The Sari Weaving Industry in Tamil Nadu, children as young as 8 years old were found working in unregulated factories. These children were often forced to operate heavy machinery, leading to frequent accidents and injuries. They were not paid adequately and worked in unhealthy, unhygienic conditions. Efforts to curb such practices led to significant awareness campaigns and government action⁵⁷⁴.

4. Street and Service Sector

Street children are often coerced into begging, rag-picking, and vending. Additionally, they work in small businesses like food stalls, tea shops, and street vending. The children are usually vulnerable to abuse, exploitation, and violence while contributing to their family's livelihood.

Case Example: A well-documented case of street child labour comes from Mumbai, where several children were found working as rag-pickers, sorting through garbage to find valuable items for resale. Some children also worked in roadside food stalls, washing dishes or assisting in cooking, with no formal education

and exposure to health risks due to unsanitary conditions⁵⁷⁵.

IMPACT OF CHILD LABOUR

Societal Consequences:

1. Undermining Human Rights:

- Violation of Rights: Child labour is a direct violation of several human rights conventions, including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which advocates for the right to education, protection from exploitation, and the right to a safe environment. It perpetuates a cycle of vulnerability and injustice for children, especially in developing nations.

- Discrimination: Certain groups, including girls and marginalized communities, are disproportionately affected by child labour, leading to systemic social discrimination and inequality.

2. Poverty and Inequality:

- Perpetuating the Cycle of Poverty: Child labour traps families in poverty. While children may contribute to the family income, the earnings are often minimal, and the long-term economic stability of the family is compromised due to the lack of education and skills. In the long run, this keeps families in a vicious cycle of poverty.

- Inequality in Opportunities: Socio-economic disparities are deepened as children from impoverished backgrounds are forced into work instead of gaining an education, making it difficult for them to break out of the poverty cycle in the future.

3. Social Disintegration:

⁵⁷³ "Child Domestic Workers in India" (<https://ncpcr.gov.in>)

⁵⁷⁴ Source: International Labour Organization (ILO) - "Child Labour in the Garment Industry in India" (<https://www.ilo.org>)

⁵⁷⁵ Save the Children - "The Impact of Child Labour in Brick Kilns" (<https://www.savethechildren.in>)

- Family and Community Breakdown: Child labour affects family structures, as children are removed from their homes to work, often in hazardous and distant environments. This leads to the breakdown of family dynamics, emotional neglect, and a lack of healthy social interactions. The communities are also affected, as child labour reinforces poor living conditions and marginalization.
- Generational Poverty: As children grow up without education or the proper skills, they are more likely to pass on the same circumstances to their own children, perpetuating a cycle of poverty and exploitation across generations.

to access education or skill development. This results in a large number of young adults entering the workforce without the necessary skills to contribute meaningfully to the economy, stunting the country's development.

- Impaired Innovation: Without education and the ability to think critically, many children miss out on opportunities to engage in creative problem-solving or innovation. As a result, countries face limitations in technological advancements and intellectual growth.

3. Social Welfare Burden:

- Increased Healthcare Costs: Children involved in labour are often exposed to dangerous conditions that lead to long-term health issues. These issues result in increased healthcare spending by the government to treat children who suffer from malnutrition, physical injuries, or psychological problems caused by their work.
- Strain on Social Services: Governments face pressure to provide welfare support, rehabilitation, and reintegration services for children rescued from exploitative labour conditions. This diverts resources away from other critical sectors like education and infrastructure development.

National Consequences:

1. Economic Implications:

- Underdeveloped Workforce: The exploitation of child labour denies the nation an educated and skilled workforce. This impacts national productivity as children grow up without the necessary skills or formal education to contribute to sectors like technology, healthcare, or business. The economy suffers as a result of this lost human capital.
- Decreased Global Competitiveness: Countries with high rates of child labour face challenges in competing globally. The lack of an educated, skilled workforce makes it difficult for nations to advance economically and participate in high-value industries or research and development.

2. Human Capital Loss:

- Loss of Potential: Child labour leads to the loss of a generation's potential, as children are unable

LEGAL FRAMEWORK AND GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES

1. National Policy for Children (1974):

This pioneering policy laid the foundation for recognizing children as the nation's most valuable resource. It

aims to ensure the implementation of constitutional provisions and international declarations, such as the UN Declaration of the Rights of the Child. The policy provides a comprehensive framework for supporting the physical, mental, and social development of children from prenatal stages to adulthood. This document also stresses the importance of a coordinated approach between government and civil society to address children's needs.

2. National Policy on Education (1986):

The National Policy on Education (NPE) emphasizes addressing educational disparities, particularly for marginalized groups such as women, Scheduled Tribes (ST), and Scheduled Castes (SC). By fostering inclusive educational practices, the policy introduced programs like **Operation Blackboard** to improve primary education, enhanced teacher training, and developed specific incentives for disadvantaged families. Additionally, it promoted **adult education** to ensure broader access to learning opportunities for all members of society.

3. National Policy on Child Labour (1987):

This policy introduced a framework for tackling child labour through legislative action and integrated development programs. It prioritizes the abolition of child labour by providing alternative educational and welfare options for children working in hazardous environments. The policy advocates for special projects in regions with high concentrations of child labour, providing children with opportunities to receive education and healthcare.

4. National Nutrition Policy (1993):

Aimed at combating under-nutrition, the National Nutrition Policy focuses on a multi-faceted approach involving food

security, nutrition education, health care, and family welfare. The policy encourages the improvement of maternal and child nutrition and promotes the active participation of women in the nutritional development process. Programs under this policy also address food distribution systems to ensure that vulnerable populations, particularly children, receive adequate nourishment.

5. National Population Policy (2000):

This policy focuses on improving the status of children by addressing issues of education, healthcare, and survival. It mandates free and compulsory education for children up to the age of 14, universal immunization, and the registration of vital events. The policy also sets targets to reduce the infant mortality rate (IMR) and maternal mortality ratio (MMR), further supporting children's health and well-being.

6. National Health Policy (2002):

The primary objective of this policy is to improve public health infrastructure and promote equitable access to healthcare services across urban and rural areas. It emphasizes **preventive healthcare**, particularly for vulnerable children, and aims to enhance the overall quality of health services to better cater to the needs of children, pregnant women, and disadvantaged groups. The policy also stresses decentralization and strengthening primary healthcare services to ensure that no child is left behind.

7. National Charter for Children (2003):

The Charter outlines children's **inherent rights** to protection, education, health, and a safe environment. It highlights the government's role in safeguarding children's well-being, ensuring protection from abuse, neglect,

exploitation, and trafficking. The Charter specifically focuses on marginalized children, such as those living in poverty, children with disabilities, and those engaged in child labour or on the streets. It also stresses empowering children and adolescents through education and skills to become economically productive citizens.

8. National Plan of Action for Children (2005):

This action plan was developed to promote child welfare and is aligned with the broader goals of child protection, survival, and development. Key priorities include:

- Eradication of female foeticide, infanticide, and child marriage.
- Ensuring the survival, development, and protection of girl children.
- Addressing the rights of children in difficult circumstances and ensuring legal protection for all children, particularly those vulnerable to abuse and exploitation.
- The plan also calls for the reduction of malnutrition, immunization, and universal access to quality education.

Key Schemes and Programs for Child Welfare:

These programs are developed by both the central and state governments to complement the policies and ensure their effective implementation:

- **Integrated Child Development Service Scheme (ICDS):** Aimed at improving child nutrition, health, and education, particularly in rural and remote areas.
- **Integrated Child Protection Scheme (ICPS):** Focuses on providing shelter, care, and rehabilitation for vulnerable

children, especially those living in difficult circumstances.

- **National Awards for Child Welfare:** These awards recognize and honor exceptional individuals and organizations working towards the welfare of children.
- **National Child Awards for Exceptional Achievements:** These awards celebrate the achievements of children who have excelled in various fields despite difficult circumstances.
- **Rajiv Gandhi Manav Seva Awards for Service to Children:** Aimed at acknowledging individuals or institutions that have made significant contributions to the well-being and development of children.
- **Balika Samridhi Yojna:** A financial support scheme aimed at encouraging the education and health of the girl child.
- **Nutrition Program for Adolescent Girls:** Ensures better nutritional standards for adolescent girls to improve their health and well-being.
- **Child Line Services:** Provides emergency assistance to children in distress, including those suffering from abuse, exploitation, and neglect.
- **Rajiv Gandhi National Crèche Scheme for Working Mothers:** Provides crèche facilities for children of working mothers to ensure their early childhood care and development.
- **UJJAWALA Scheme:** Focused on the prevention of trafficking, rescue, rehabilitation, and reintegration of trafficked children.
- **Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan:** An ambitious program aimed at achieving universal elementary education for children aged 6 to 14 years.

- **National Rural Health Mission (NRHM):** Focuses on improving the health and nutritional status of children in rural areas, particularly in underdeveloped regions.
- **Rajiv Gandhi Scheme for Empowerment of Adolescent Girls (SABLA):** A scheme aimed at empowering adolescent girls through education, nutrition, and skill development.
- **Dhanalakshmi Scheme for Girl Children:** A conditional cash transfer program that encourages families to educate and ensure the welfare of their girl children.
- **National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR):** This body monitors and ensures the protection of children's rights across the country.

CHALLENGES IN ERADICATION

Eradicating child labor is a complex challenge that stems from a combination of economic, social, legal, and cultural factors. One of the primary drivers is poverty, as many families rely on the income generated by their children to survive, which perpetuates the cycle of poverty. Additionally, a lack of access to quality education in impoverished communities forces children into labor instead of school. Cultural and societal norms also play a role, as in some regions, child labor is normalized and even expected. Weak law enforcement, corruption, and inadequate resources further hinder efforts to enforce existing laws against child labor. Moreover, much of child labor occurs in informal and unregulated sectors, such as street vending and small-scale agriculture, which are outside the reach of government oversight. The global supply chain also contributes to the issue, with companies in developing countries subcontracting work to smaller suppliers who exploit child labor. Children in conflict zones or refugee situations are especially vulnerable to exploitation, as displacement and lack of resources expose them to trafficking and forced labor. The absence of social safety nets and

welfare programs forces families to send their children to work, and limited awareness and advocacy prevent broader societal understanding of the harmful effects of child labor. Employers who benefit from cheap child labor may resist efforts to eliminate it, while insufficient rehabilitation and reintegration programs for rescued children make it difficult for them to adapt to a normal childhood. Finally, political instability and economic crises often divert attention away from child labor issues, further complicating the efforts to address the problem. A comprehensive approach that includes stronger law enforcement, improved access to education, economic empowerment for families, and global cooperation is essential to combat child labor effectively and ensure that every child can grow up free from exploitation.

SUGGESTIONS

The eradication of child labor requires a multi-pronged approach, beginning with individual responsibility. People can play a key role by refraining from exploiting children, providing financial support to street children, and raising awareness in communities. Governments must enforce strict laws against child labor, ensure children's access to education, shelter, food, and all basic needs, and take steps to combat the root causes of child labor, such as poverty. Additionally, international organizations can contribute by raising awareness, pressuring governments to enforce laws, and supporting education programs. Strengthening access to quality education, implementing rehabilitation programs, and offering vocational skills can prevent children from entering labor markets. Monitoring and enforcing legislation against child labor is essential, with technology playing a key role in reporting and tracking violations. Support for vulnerable families, such as providing social safety nets, job opportunities, and direct financial assistance, can reduce the reliance on children's earnings. International cooperation, ethical corporate practices, and student advocacy can further support efforts. Governments and corporations must take

accountability for child labor-free supply chains and ensure the mental and physical well-being of children. By implementing comprehensive family policies, including promoting work-life balance and broader child welfare initiatives, we can create a society where children are protected from exploitation, ensuring they have the opportunity to grow and develop in a safe environment. Only through collective action from all sectors of society can we ensure a future where every child is free from labor and has access to the opportunities they deserve.

CONCLUSIONS

Child labour in India is a deeply entrenched issue that reflects the country's ongoing struggles with poverty, inequality, lack of education, and weak law enforcement. While multiple government policies and initiatives exist to protect children, the persistence of child labour reveals gaps in implementation and societal attitudes. Children continue to be exploited in agriculture, domestic work, manufacturing, and street sectors, often at the cost of their physical, emotional, and intellectual development.

The consequences of child labour extend beyond the individual—it undermines national development, weakens the economy, and perpetuates intergenerational poverty. However, hope lies in a multi-faceted and coordinated approach that combines legal enforcement, access to quality education, poverty alleviation, and active public participation.

To truly eliminate child labour, India must empower families economically, create child-centric social welfare systems, and transform cultural attitudes through awareness and community engagement. Only then can children be freed from the chains of exploitation and given the opportunity to learn, grow, and thrive in a society that respects their rights and potential.

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