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FROM CLASSROOM TO WORKSHOP : THE ALARMING RISE OF CHILD LABOUR

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the alarming resurgence of child labour across both developing and developed nations, focusing on the socio-economic causes, global data trends, and the effect of recent global crises, particularly the COVID-19 pandemic. As millions of children are pulled from classrooms and pushed into exploitative labor, the study evaluates global statistics, regional case studies, and the effectiveness of international and national policy interventions. The paper concludes with evidence-based recommendations to reduce child labour and restore educational access.

INTRODUCTION

Child labour is one of the most persistent and disturbing global human rights issues. Despite international laws and national policies targeting its eradication, the number of working children has increased in recent years. The International Labour Organization (ILO) defines child labour as work that deprives children of their childhood, potential, and dignity, and is harmful to their physical and mental development. Factors such as poverty, limited access to education, conflict, and health crises have exacerbated this problem, pushing millions of children from the classroom into the workforce.

According to the ILO and UNICEF (2021), approximately 160 million children are engaged in child labour worldwide. This marks an increase of 8.4 million over the past four years, reversing two decades of progress. Sub-Saharan Africa has the highest prevalence, followed by Asia and the Pacific. Nearly 70% of child labour occurs in agriculture, with the rest spread across services, industry, mining, and domestic work. The increase is particularly noticeable among children aged 5–11.

CHILD LABOUR

Any discussion of child labor must begin with a precise description of what the term means. The phrase "child labor" conjures images of children chained into factories, sold as slaves, or forced into prostitution. Fortunately, while many children work in the developing world, few experience such atrocities. The International Labor Organization (ILO) is the international body charged with country child labor, and it estimates that in 2004 there are 218 million child laborers in the world (ILO 2006). Most of these working children labeled "child laborers" are helping their family at home, on the family farm, or in the family business. Economics research on "child labor" tends to focus on these more commonplace activities, both because of their greater prevalence and the relative ease in collecting data on the typical types of activities children perform.

METHODOLOGY

This study relies exclusively on secondary data, drawing from national reports such as the Census of India, National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), Ministry of Labour and Employment documents, as well as publications from international organizations including the ILO and UNICEF. Academic journals, NGO reports, and credible news articles have also been referenced to provide a multidimensional view of the issue.

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FROM EDUCATION TO EXPLOITATION

Educational Disruptions

The COVID-19 pandemic caused widespread school closures, affecting over 1.6 billion learners globally. For many children, especially those from vulnerable communities, this interruption was permanent. With schools closed and income reduced, families turned to child labour as a coping mechanism. This shift not only disrupted education but also exposed children to long-term exploitation and limited their future economic opportunities.

Economic Pressures

Poverty remains the primary driver of child labour. When families are unable to meet basic needs, children are often sent to work in informal and hazardous sectors. These children are paid meager wages, face physical and emotional abuse, and are deprived of opportunities to escape the poverty cycle. The absence of comprehensive social protection programs contributes to this trend.

CHILD LABOUR IN INDIA IN INDIA : A STATISTICAL OVERVIEW

Data from the ILO (2021) estimates that globally, 160 million children are involved in child labour, with India contributing significantly. The 2011 Indian Census recorded 10.1 million child workers between ages 5 to 14. A large percentage—over 70%—are engaged in agriculture, followed by manufacturing, domestic service, and informal sector jobs. Urban child labour is often found in hospitality, roadside vending, and small-scale industries.

INDIA

In India, despite the existence of laws like the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, millions of children are employed in sectors like agriculture, textiles, construction, and fireworks. The pandemic significantly increased rural child labour, where enforcement of education policies is weak. Children, especially girls, often drop out of school to take on caregiving and income-generating responsibilities.

Tamil Nadu (Sivakasi)

Sivakasi, known for its fireworks industry, has been infamously associated with child labour. According to a Human Rights Watch report, children work in hazardous conditions handling chemicals and assembling explosives. Despite crackdowns, economic hardship compels families to send children to these factories. NGOs estimate that thousands of children, many under 10, are still involved. Health impacts include respiratory issues, burns, and long-term developmental disorders.

Uttar Pradesh (Firozabad)

Firozabad is known for its glass and bangle industries. Secondary data from Save the Children shows that children in these industries face exposure to toxic fumes, extreme heat, and sharp objects. Most of these children come from Dalit or Muslim communities with poor literacy rates. Despite awareness drives, many children remain outside the education net.

Impact of COVID-19 on Child Labour

School closures, income loss, and social service disruptions caused by the pandemic pushed thousands of children into labour. A study by CRY (2022) indicated that dropout rates rose sharply during and after the pandemic. Families prioritized survival over education, and enforcement agencies were diverted to health emergencies, allowing exploitative practices to flourish unnoticed.

POLICY AND LEGAL FRAMEWORK

Key laws include:

- The Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Amendment Act, 2016

- Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009

- National Policy on Child Labour

However, enforcement is often inconsistent. Secondary data from National Crime Records Bureau shows low conviction rates under these laws, indicating a gap between policy and practice

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Multiple international agreements target child labour, including ILO Convention No. 138 (Minimum Age) and No. 182 (Worst Forms of Child Labour), as well as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. While most countries have ratified these treaties, implementation remains a challenge. Successful national programs, such as Brazil's Bolsa Família and Vietnam's education subsidies, show that combining education, social protection, and enforcement can yield significant reductions in child labour.

THE LINK BETWEEN CHILD LABOUR AND LIVING STANDARD

The relationship between living standards and child labour Theoretically, child labour and family wages may be negatively correlated for a variety of reasons. First, when finances rise, the family may decide to have children work less since child labour may be undesirable in the eyes of the parents. Actually, Basu and Van (1998) proposed the "luxury axiom" in their groundbreaking research on child labour: When a family struggles to meet its basic needs, the idea known as the luxury axiom suggests that, beyond mere survival, families generally prefer not to involve their children in work. In the framework discussed in Section 1, this perspective views child labour as a negative factor, with families deriving satisfaction from their children's leisure time. The luxury axiom, then, reflects a specific set of preferences Moreover, because of diminishing marginal utility of income, the financial benefit of a child's earnings becomes less significant as the family's income rises.

It's important to note that a child's economic value might not only come from direct earnings but also from avoiding the costs associated with schooling—both direct (like tuition and materials) and indirect (such as time away from work). Nevertheless, working children can make meaningful financial contributions. For example, Psacharopoulos (1997) found that Bolivian children aged 13 earned about 13% of their household's total income. Similarly, Menon et al. (2005) estimated that in rural Nepal, children's farm labour accounted for around 11% of total agricultural output, equating to roughly 9% of the national GDP.Additionally, as family income increases, households may invest in tools or technology—like washboards or harvesters—that reduce the need for child labour at home.

This is reflected in the model as a decrease in household labour productivity, which would only reduce child work when there's no better alternative outside the home. With higher income, families might also improve their children's access to education by affording better nutrition, school supplies, or clothing. Economic conditions, market imperfections, and family-specific factors (such as how the future is valued) are also often linked to a household's financial situation and can influence child labour decisions. The key policy question is how strongly a family's income level determines whether their children work. If rising income naturally encourages families to prioritize education or leisure over child labour, then poverty alleviation alone might be sufficient to reduce child labour.

However, if child labour persists regardless of income and poses long-term harm to children's well-being, there is a stronger justification for targeted child labour policies. The influence of income on child labour is highly dependent on the specific social, economic, and geographic context, which explains the diverse results seen across studies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To combat the resurgence of child labour, governments and organizations must adopt a multifaceted approach:
1. Strengthen and fund free, quality education systems to make schooling accessible and attractive.
2. Expand social protection measures such as cash transfers and family subsidies.
3. Increase the capacity and accountability of labor inspection agencies.
4. Enforce corporate responsibility through

transparent supply chains and ethical sourcing. 5. Launch awareness campaigns to educate communities on the long-term harms of child labour.

CONCLUSION

The re-emergence of child labour is a global humanitarian crisis that threatens the rights and futures of millions of children. While the root causes are complex and interwoven with global socio-economic systems, progress is possible through sustained cooperation, political will, and investment in child welfare. Moving children from workshops back into classrooms must become a global priority. Child labour in India continues to be a deeply rooted socio-economic issue that transcends legal boundaries and policy measures.

Drawing from comprehensive secondary data—including national census reports, NGO findings, and publications from international agencies—this paper highlights how poverty, lack of education, regional disparities, and systemic neglect contribute to the persistence of child labour. Case studies from industrial hubs like Sivakasi and Firozabad reveal how entrenched economic structures and societal pressures push children into hazardous and exploitative forms of work, often at the cost of their health, development, and future opportunities.

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these conditions by increasing unemployment, reducing school attendance, and weakening social support systems. While India's legal framework provides a strong foundation against child labour, enforcement gaps, informal sector loopholes, and social indifference continue to undermine progress Ultimately, child labour is not just a consequence of poverty—it is also a result of failed systems. Eliminating it requires a holistic, multi-sectoral strategy. This includes strengthening education, providing economic incentives to poor families, enforcing child protection laws, and fostering partnerships between the government, civil society, and the private sector. Only through an integrated, data-driven, and empathetic approach can India fulfill its commitment to securing the rights and dignity of every child.

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