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Child labour: A barrier to India's sustainable development goals

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Abstract

One of the most pervasive societal evils is child labour. Among South Asian nations, India accounts for a disproportionately high percentage of child labour worldwide. The ILO report "Child Labour in South Asia" claims that India has 5.8 million children aged 5 to 17 working, followed by Bangladesh (5 million), Pakistan (3.4 million), and Nepal (2 million).

The present situation of child labour in India is distressing. Even though there was a decline in the number of working children to 3.9% in 2011 from 5% in 2001, the decline rate is grossly insufficient to meet Target 8.7 of the United Nations (UNs) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which is to end child labour in all forms by 2030. The COVID-19 pandemic has compounded the existing situation of child labour and made it difficult to achieve the global goal of ending child labour. Child labour impedes children from gaining skills and education, further perpetuating household poverty across generations and slowing down economic growth and sustainable development. To reach SDG Target 8.7, eradicating child labour will require a globally integrated approach, coordinated actions, effective policy-making and efficient use of resources, etc.

Objectives and methodology: This study is based on a sample of two hundred child labourers randomly taken from the Dimapur city. The primary data is collected through a survey method using semi-structured questionnaires. The main objectives of this study are to closely assess the socio-economic parameters, including place of origin, caste and religion, and parental occupation, as well as the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on children engaging in child labour. Thus, by using both the qualitative and quantitative approach, this study investigates the magnitude of child labour and its impact on the global sustainable development goals with reference to the Dimapur district in Nagaland.

Keywords: Child labour, sustainable development goals, covid-19, integrated approach

Introduction

If a child is working, the country is ignorant. How a country handles its youngest citizens and their potential is a true indicator of its growth and enlightenment. One deeply ingrained social problem is child labour. In our society, it is repulsive to use children as labourers. It is abhorrent, unreasonable, inhumane, and immoral ^[1]. Child labour puts children's potential in danger by depriving them of their future opportunities, health, and education. Underdeveloped and developing countries are places where child labour is both very widespread and common. In India, the problem of child labour has become very common.

India accounts for a disproportionately large portion of child labour worldwide, particularly in South Asia. An ILO report titled "Child Labour in South Asia" states that the country with the highest rate of child labour between the ages of 5 and 17 is India (5.8 million), followed by Bangladesh (5 million), Pakistan (3.4 million), and Nepal (2 million) ^[2]. The Census of 2011 revealed that there were 259.6 million children in India between the ages of 5 and 14. Of these, 10.1 million (3.9% of the total child population) are employed, either as "main workers" or as "marginal workers." Furthermore, over 42.7 million children in India do not attend school ^[3].

The current state of child labour in India is alarming. Even though the number of working children fell from 5% in 2001 to 3.9% in 2011, the rate of decline is far too slow to reach UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 8.7, which calls for the abolition of all kinds of child labour by 2030 ^[4]. However, this drop was more noticeable in rural areas, whereas the number of child workers climbed in urban areas, indicating an increasing demand for child labour in low-wage jobs ^[5].

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The efforts to abolish child labour have stagnated globally for the first time in 20 years, which startled us recently. We must acknowledge that child labour is increasing for the first time in 20 years. There are 160 million kids working as minors. Eighty million of them work in the worst and most dangerous jobs. Some are enslaved, separated from their families, exposed to dangerous conditions, sexually exploited, or left on the streets of big cities by themselves often at a very young age. These jobs pose a serious risk to their physical and mental well-being.

These statistics indicate that, despite global development, one in ten children are victims of child labour, and the number is rising at the moment. The ILO urges the global community to strengthen the battle against child labour and promote more social fairness. To create an atmosphere where children are shielded from this reality, social protection is essential, and the European Union (EU) is still collaborating with its international partners in this regard. Thus, the European Commission and the High Representative emphasised on the 2023 World Day against Child Labour that until children worldwide are not exploited, have their rights violated, and are prevented from attaining their full potential, no sustainable and equitable future can be achieved^[6].

In any civilisation, child labour stems from poverty. To achieve sustainable development, poverty in all of its manifestations must be eradicated. Promoting sustainable, inclusive, and equitable economic growth is necessary to do this. Some ways to do this include expanding opportunities for all, lowering inequality, raising the minimum standard of living, encouraging equitable social development, etc. All of these interrelated components are essential to people's health as well as the health of societies^[7].

The SDGs call on all countries, rich, poor, and middle-income, to promote prosperity while conserving the earth. They also emphasise that eradicating poverty must be combined with initiatives that promote economic growth and address a wide variety of social needs, such as education, health, social protection, and job opportunities, as well as addressing climate change and environmental protection^[8].

According to the report of the 2023 Global Hunger Index (GHI), India ranked 111th out of 125 countries in the GHI, 2023. In contrast, in October 2014, India ranked 55th out of 120 countries. This indicates that, despite years of progress up until 2015, the global fight against hunger remains largely at a standstill^[9].

The COVID-19 epidemic has exacerbated the current state of child labour, making it more challenging to accomplish the international goal of putting a stop to child labour. The pandemic issue, according to the International Labour Organisation (ILO), poses a threat to undo the gains made in the fight against child labour around the world. For the first time in the past 20 years, there will be an increase in child labour as a result of the epidemic forcing millions of kids

into the workforce^[10].

The frequency of child labour is influenced by a number of interrelated factors, including poverty, unemployment, underemployment, illiteracy, etc. While many others are in it for survival, household poverty pushes children into the labour market to earn money to supplement family income. Child labour prevents children from learning and developing their abilities, which prolongs household poverty across generations and slows down social or sustainable development as well as economic growth^[11].

Working with children is an awful activity. A child is not equipped to work like an adult, so this evil practice should be banned, and the government should see that no child is deprived of education just because of poverty. Though there are laws banning child labour, they are blatantly ignored even by educated and well-informed people. There needs to be gigantic efforts made by the Government as well as the country's people to stop this practice. Children are the future of the nation. Hence, if their youth is ruined, the nation's progress comes to a halt. In order to reach SDG Target 8.7, eradicating child labour will require a globally integrated approach, coordinated actions, effective policy-making and efficient use of resources. Thus, this paper investigates the magnitude of child labour and its impact on the global sustainable development goals with reference to the Dimapur district in Nagaland.

Objectives

1. To examine the socio-demographic background of the child labourers.
2. To understand how child labour hinders the progress of SDGs.

Methodology

The study was conducted over a span of 8 months between the months of July 2020 to February 2021 in the Dimapur district of Nagaland to determine the situation of the child labourers and the factors that lead or push them in such a heinous work and is based on fieldwork. The purposive random sampling method was used for this study, and the sample size was 200, with children aged 5 to 17 years of age who have been working as child labourers for their survival. Both quantitative and qualitative methods were applied in the study. A semi-structured, open-ended questionnaire was used to collect quantitative data from the study participants after obtaining assent from the study subjects. Qualitative data was collected by using an interview schedule and carrying out short-term participant observations.

Results and Discussion

The socio-demographic condition of the child labourers was examined based on the primary data that was collected from the study participation. There is no official statistical data available on the child labourers in Dimapur. This study also examined the reasons for engaging in this type of work.

Table 1: Socio-demographic information of the child labourers

SI No	Socio-demographic information of the child labourers		
1	Gender	Frequency	Percent
	Male	128	64%
	Female	72	36%
2	Age group (N=200)		
	7-10 year	68	34%
	11-14 year	102	51%

	15-17 year	30	15%
3	Native place (N=200)		
	Assam	115	55
	Manipur	7	3.5
	Nagaland	78	41.5
4	Religion of the Respondents (N=200)		
	Muslim	110	55
	Hindu	17	8.5
	Christian	73	36.5
5	No. of family members		
	2- 4 members (small)	19	9.5
	5 - 7 members (medium)	68	34
	8 - 10 members (large)	102	51
	11 and above members (very large)	11	5.5
6	Ownership of the house where the family lives		
	Rental	128	64
	Owned	18	9
	Provided by Employer	54	27
7	Living Status of Parents		
	Father (alive)	156	78%
	Mother (alive)	162	81%
8	Living Status of Parents (Abandoned family)		
	Father abandoned the family	21	10.5%
	Mother abandoned the family	13	6.5%

The above table shows that out of the 200 child labourers from Dimapur district who participated in the study, more than half, i.e., 128 (64%) were males and 72 (36%) were females. Most of the respondents 102 (51%) were between 11-14 years old; 68 (34%) were from 7-10 years old and between 15-18 years age group were 15% i.e., 30 respondents. The study found that the majority of the respondents were from Assam, i.e., 110 (55%); the second-highest numbers were from Nagaland, i.e., 83 (41.5%) respondents; 7 respondents were from Manipur. The major religion in the study population was Islam, which comprised 110 (55%), 73 (36.5%) respondents from the

Christian religion and a small minority, i.e., 17 (8.5%) respondents from the Hindu religion. Out of the 200 respondents, most of the respondents, i.e., 102 (51%), belong to a large family, while a small minority of 11 (5.5%) belong to a very large family. Out of which 128 (64%) respondent's families live in a rental house. However, regarding the living status of parents in terms of their being alive or dead, it is found that the majority of the respondents' parents were alive, i.e., father 156 (78%) and mother 162 (81%). And 21 (10.5%) and 13 (6.5%) respondents had been abandoned by their fathers and mothers.

Table 2: Distribution of child labourers based on types, work experience, hours of work and mode of employment

Sl No.	Distribution of Child Labourers Based on Types, Work Experience, Hours of Work and Mode of Employment:		
1	Types of Work		
	Domestic	32	16
	Service sectors (hotels, garages, restaurants, workshops)	83	41.5
	Rag picking	58	29
	Others (shops, vendors, brick factories, construction works, etc.)	27	13.5
2	When did you start working?		
	Before Covid-19 pandemic	139	69.5
	After Covid-19 pandemic	61	30.5
3	No. of hours of work/day		
	5-7 hours	46	23
	8-10 hours	108	54
	More than 11 hours	36	18
4	Monthly Income of the Respondent		
	₹1000-₹3000	122	61
	₹3001-₹5000	71	35.5
	₹5001 & above	7	3.5
5	Work experience in years		
	≤1 year	64	32
	1 -3 years	105	52.5
	>4 years	31	15.5
6	Mode of Employment		
	Through own effort	54	27
	Through parents	98	49
	Through relatives	48	24

The above table 2 shows that among the 200 respondents, the majority i.e., 83 (41.5%) respondents mentioned that they were working in the service sectors such as in restaurants, hotels, garages, workshops, etc., while 58 (29%) were rag pickers, 32 (16%) respondents were working in the homes of individuals as domestic labourers, and the least, 27 (13.5%) were working in various other sectors as street vendors, construction workers, factory workers, etc. The pandemic has also triggered a massive increase in child labour as households use every available means to survive because COVID-19 has caused a rise in poverty. As the pandemic wreaks havoc on family incomes, 61 (30.5%) children have started working since the COVID-19 pandemic. The majority of the respondents, i.e., 108 (54%) were working for 8-10 hours daily, whereas, 36 (18%) respondents were working more than 11 hours a day, and 46 (23%) respondents were working the least number of hours,

which is between 5-7 hours in a day. However, the primary data depicts that the monthly income of the respondents ranged from Rs. 1000 to more than Rs. 5000 for a few. More than half of the respondents i.e., 122 (61%) were earning less than Rs. 3000, another 71 (35.5%) respondents were earning monthly wage of Rs. 3001 to Rs. 5000. A few, i.e., 7 (3.5%) respondents were earning more than Rs. 5000 per month. The study found that the majority of the respondents, 105 (52.5%), had a work experience of 1-3 years, while 64 (32%) respondents had less than one year of work experience, and 31 (15.5%) respondents had more than four years of experience. It is quite surprising that almost half of the respondents, 98 (49%), were introduced into the occupation by their own parents, followed by 54 (27%) respondents through their own efforts, and 48 (24%) through their relatives.

Table 3: Determinants of child labour in dimapur

Sl No.	Determinants of Child Labour in Dimapur		
1	Literacy Level of the Respondents (N=200)		
	Illiterate	54	27
	1 st - 5 th standard	111	55.5
	6 - 8 th standard	35	17.5
2	Parent's occupation		
	Labourer/daily wagger/construction worker	147	73.5
	Rag picker	22	11
	Farming	9	4.5
	Unemployed	10	5
	Own business	12	6
3	Reasons for parents' migration		
	Poverty	94	47
	Parents' migration	36	18
	Better life	70	35
4	Reasons for working		
	Family cannot afford schooling/tuition fees	103	51.5
	To save family from starvation	42	21
	Nobody (adult) to feed family	36	18
	Because of poor or below average performance at school	19	9.5

The above table 3 reveals that out of 200 child labourers who were interviewed, 54 (27%) respondents had not even enrolled in primary education at all. More than half of the children, i.e., 111 (55.5%) had only completed 1st to 5th Grade education and discontinued their studies, while a few respondents, i.e., 35 (17.5%) completed between 6th to 8th standard education and discontinued due to various family and personal reasons. The majority of the respondents' fathers, 147 (73.5%), were daily wage earners. A few fathers were rag pickers 22 or 11%), 9 (4.5%) were farmers, 10 (5%) of the respondents' fathers were unemployed, and 12 (6%) had their own businesses. However, the majority of the respondents, i.e., 94 (47%) migrated because of poverty, 70 (35%) due to their parent's migration, and 36 (18%) in

search of a better life. The reasons cited by the majority of respondents for choosing to work at such young ages was driven by their basic needs 103, 51.5%). Followed by the need to save family members from starvation 42 (21%). Another important reason cited by 36 (18%) of the children working in order to support their family because there is no adult in their families for earning. Finally, it was found that there were reasons other than poverty that made children engage in various work; i.e., 19 (9.5%) children joined child labour because they were not good in their studies. Thus, it is noteworthy to acknowledge the huge contribution of a family's condition in determining a child's engagement in child labour.

Table 4: What Children said about joining the child labour?

Sl. No	What did the children say about joining the child labour?	No. of respondents(N=200)			
		Yes	%	No	%
1	Did your parents seek your opinion before putting you to work?	83	41.5%	117	58.5%
2	Do you like the work you are doing?	48	24%	152	76%
3	Did you ever complain to your parents about the work you were doing?	133	66.5%	67	33.5%
4	Do you want to continue this work?	78	39%	122	61%
5	If you get financial support, will you rejoin school?	102	51%	98	49%

Table no. 4 shows that children are not satisfied with their present work for various reasons. The most important or common reason, as per the majority's i.e., 117 (64%) study participants' opinion, was that "their parents did not seek their opinion to put them to work." It was also disturbing to note that the majority of the child labourers, i.e., 152 (76%) are not happy with their work. For instance, when the researcher enquired about who had introduced them to the work they were doing, many said it was their parents. In this regard, there was a unanimous response: "I wanted to do more study but my father asked me to work and earn money..." This sentiment was shared by many of the child labourers. Thus, parental pressure and influence seemed to have played a significant role in the children's engaging in work at younger ages.

Another issue of concern was that 133 (66.5%) respondents regularly complain to their parents regarding the difficulties they are facing in the work areas, but unfortunately, their complaints seem to be falling on deaf ears.

VI: Major findings

1. The majority of the participants were boys, i.e., 128 (64%), whereas 72 (36%) were female participants.
2. Large family size (102, or 51%), girls made up 72 (36%) of the study participants, and they were mostly engaged in domestic work, handcrafting, and agriculture work.
3. Older children between 11 and 14 years (102, 51%) were more engaged in child labour as compared to the younger children (7-10 years), who consisted of 34%.
4. The predominant religion in the study population was Muslim (110, or 55%) and Christian (73, or 36.5%), while there were fewer participants from the Hindu religions 17 (8.5%) in this study.
5. The largest portion, 115 (55%) of respondents, were from the native states of Assam, 7 followed by 78 (41.5%) from Nagaland and 7 (3.5%) from Manipur states had migrated with their parents mainly due to poverty and low income in their native places.
6. A large number of respondents (i.e., 98, or 49.5%) reported that their parents introduced them to work and sought their assistance, which they could not decline.
7. 61 (30.5%) children started working after the COVID-19 pandemic.
8. The majority of the participants, 122 (61%), earn less than ₹3000 per month.
9. More than one-fourth of the total respondents (i.e., 54, or 27%) had not even enrolled in school at all. More than half of the children, i.e., 115 (55.5%), could not complete Class I to V standards, and only 35 (17.5%) child labourers could complete the Class VI to VIII standard of free and compulsory education.
10. The majority of the study participants (103%) attributed their large family size and tremendous economic burden as the reason for their engagement in labour.
11. More than half of the participants, i.e., 122 (61%) would want to discontinue the work they are doing, and 102 (51%) also showed their willingness to rejoin studies if they got financial support for their families.
12. More than half of the participants, i.e., 117 (58.5%), opined that their parents did not seek their opinion to put them to work.

Recommendations

It is not surprising that there is no one simple policy measure to eradicate child labour. Its persistence through two centuries is testimony that there is no easy solution. However, the Government of India has already framed so many laws for the protection of children that no other new law is required. However, stricter enforcement of existing laws for the benefit of poor children is required.

However, Edmonds and Pavnick in 2019 reveals that to achieve sustainable development goals inclusive efforts is required such as community involvement and social organizations, institutions, youth organizations, churches, etc. should join hands with the government departments, and an attempt should be made to make the benefits of social schemes launched by the central and state governments reach the families below the poverty line and those who are forcing their children to work^[12].

The researcher believes that the inclusive efforts from both the government and the people are required to achieve the SDGs and to uplift these children's conditions and protect them from exploitation by taking such measures as:

1. National, state, and local governmental agencies to ensure strict implementation of laws to enforce the minimum age for children's entry into economic activities and ensure that no child below 14 years of age is employed.
2. Provision of ration cards or Below Poverty Line (BPL) cards and housing facilities so that impoverished and migrated families that can meet their basic needs for food and shelter, allowing the children to be freed from the responsibility of contributing economically to the family and instead, get access to at least the basic education up to age 14.
3. To achieve the SDGs Target on the eradication of child labour, there is an urgent need for state policies targeted at deterring (discouraging) parents/guardians from putting their children into child labour.
4. Child rights agencies should increase public awareness programs to areas where street hawking and other forms of child labour are rampant.
5. Since findings revealed how childrens' education is affected, invariably executing generational poverty, the education of every child should be seriously secured.
6. The government should ensure adequate provision of good employment opportunities to boost parents' income. This will help reduce poverty and, hence, put child labour at its minimal level.
7. Listen to and accept children's voices and their perspectives and opinions about their workplace in a respectful and democratic manner.
8. Carry out public education campaigns about the rights of children and child workers.
9. Public education initiatives on family planning methods to reduce family sizes and the number of children who are malnourished, underprivileged, and impoverished are necessary since growing populations are also one of the main causes of poverty, which perpetuates child labour.
10. Ensure that parents are informed of workplace safety and legislation on work pertaining to their children's ages. In an era of social media, it would be wise for the government to appeal through social media and marketing campaigns to educate parents on children's working rights, the law, and appropriate work conditions.

Conclusion

Based on the findings, the study posits that child labour remains a significant barrier to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. It is an important global issue that is associated with poverty, poor educational opportunity, the need for survival and violence, which drive impoverished households to choose any means available to earn and feed their families. In such a context, efforts to ensure the rights of the child become secondary for the family, whose sole purpose is survival. This problem is further compounded by illiteracy, a lack of other job skills, large family size, family disintegration, a lack of public awareness, and a general apathy towards education. Despite the reason why children work, child labour is an anomaly which should be eliminated if children are to be groomed socially, physically, morally, and intellectually. To achieve the SDGs by 2030, it is crucial for governments, organisations, and communities to invest in education, enforce labour laws, and address the root causes of child labour. Only by protecting and empowering children can we truly ensure a sustainable future for all.

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