



COVID-19 & CHILD LABOUR

How the COVID-19 crisis is affecting child labour in India and recommendations for government action

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The UN's children agency UNICEF recently warned the world that the COVID-19 pandemic is becoming a child rights crisis. India has the largest child population in the world with 472 million children, many of whom are going through the pandemic without roofs over their heads. Even for those living in houses, most Indian houses (69 per cent) have only one or two-rooms according to Census data.

Moreover, houses are not necessarily the safest spaces for all household members, especially for children living in abusive households. Also, there may not be enough space for individuals to practice social distancing within their homes. Lastly, children have little to no privacy and have to share their spaces with other family members.

The children worst affected by the COVID-19 crisis are those of daily wage earners and casual workers who now have no work, livelihood and earnings. Their families are vulnerable, having no food reserves. Children are going hungry and have barely one meal a day. In India, with almost 90 per cent of people working in the informal economy, about 40 million workers in the informal economy are at the risk of falling deeper into poverty during the crisis.

We are hearing heartwrenching stories of migrant workers who, with infants and young children, were left without any option but to walk hundreds of kilometres to return to their home village. A recent estimate by India's Labour and Employment Ministry, referring to migration between states in the country, pegs the size of the migrant workforce in 2016 at over 100 million, of which roughly 20 to 25 per cent are children.

We have seen how employers of children and the middlemen abandoned children in work places and left them to their fate without food, shelter or any form of protection. According to the National Crime Record Bureau's (NCRB) India report for 2016, everyday 150 children go missing in India. They are either kidnapped or abducted. Unofficial and unreported cases could be in millions per year. The number could now be much higher as a result of the COVID-19 crisis.

Since the beginning of lock-down the press has repeatedly reported cases of boys and girls being forced to join the workforce, mainly in agriculture on cotton, chilli, paddy, vegetable and other farms. Regretfully unscrupulous middlemen are more than willing to exploit the vulnerabilities of poor families and start child trafficking operations.

The following data present a harrowing picture.

- In 2011 there were 33 million working children between the ages of five and 18 (census 2011). Of these 62 per cent were employed in agriculture. The current crisis is driving up these numbers as demonstrated by data from Childline India. According to Harleen Walia, its Deputy Director, the number of calls to the helpline since the lockdown has increased by 50 per cent. Around 8 per cent of other calls out of a total of 300,000 calls received were about child labour.
- There is growing evidence that girls are at a greater risk and are being subjected to more violence, physical abuse, sexual harassment, the burden of household work and child marriages/early marriages. The National Family Health Survey (NFHS) states that the prevalence of child marriages was 21% in 2015-16 (NFHS-4). This figure is likely to increase by huge numbers as families struggle to find ways to feed their children.
- The risk of school drop out has significantly increased. Even children who are attending low cost private schools may drop out. Girls face an even greater risk of dropping out of school. There were 99 million children in total who dropped out of school in 2011 (Census data). Because of the COVID-19 crisis around 320 million children are staying at home due to school closures. Students from classes nine to 12 have been most severely impacted by this lockdown. More than 130 million children fall in this bracket. Not all are expected to return to schools when they reopen.
- The digital divide has widened dramatically due to school closures. With the introduction of online classes by both government and private schools, there is a danger of widening disparities in the education sector, especially where access to internet and online services is nonexistent or at the most minimal.

Recommendations

On the whole the lockdown imposed to prevent the spread of COVID-19 has reinforced inequities in society as well as the education system. Unless urgent measures are taken to protect children from hunger, labour exploitation, violence, abuse and child marriage, the number of victims is likely to increase beyond anyone's imagination.

The MV Foundation urges the Central and the State governments to protect children's right to education, prevent them from joining labour force and prevent child abuse in all its forms. We recommend that:

1. The government provides adequate meals, including lunch, during lock-down to prevent starvation and child labour.
2. Each and every administration unit maintains a data base of children aged below 18 years in their constituency and reviews their status once a fortnight.
3. Every administration unit maintains a database of children who have returned home from their work place and those who have migrated out.

4. Every effort is made to bring all school-going children back to school once schools reopen. Self-help groups, women collectives, youth clubs and community leaders are to be involved in this task.
5. All school dropouts and out-of-school children should be identified and re-enrolled into schools once they reopen. Special training should be arranged through accelerated learning methodologies to enable them join age appropriate classes.
6. A full-time social volunteer must be placed by the concerned governments exclusively to attend to the needs of children. Such volunteers should work in coordination with several departments with the sole aim of facilitating access to all the entitlements of children.
7. The Child Labour Act and Child Protection Laws must be fully and effectively implemented as a matter of urgency. The number of inspections should be increased. If the existing machinery is not sufficient, the superior officer at the lowest administration unit (Gram Panchayat/Municipal Ward) must be given the powers of the Inspecting Authority to implement these Acts.
8. Market players should develop self-regulatory mechanisms to ensure that no child labour is used in the production process or in their supply chains. They should enter into agreements with the suppliers that include clauses against the use of child labour in the production of raw materials to the finished product.
9. Governments must seek the support of NGOs as equal partners in their endeavor to abolish child labour and getting every child into school. The initiatives of NGOs working for the creation of Child Labour Free Zones must be replicated and taken to scale across the country.

The world has seen epidemics, disasters and calamities. But these were limited to a world region or a handful of countries. Countries which were unaffected were able to support the countries that were. But COVID-19 is different. It is now present in virtually every country on earth. Millions of children will suffer if we do not take action. To avoid lasting damage to their future, we must act now. We must scale up support for children whose families' income is insecure and provide the social protection they so urgently need.

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