

Child labour

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Definition

- According to Child Labor (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986, a “child” is a person who has not completed 14 years of age. As per the 1983 report of the Director General of International Labor Organization (ILO), child labor includes children prematurely leading adult lives, working long hours for low wages, under conditions damaging to their health and to physical and mental development.
- The UNICEF has given a comprehensive formulation in its attempt to define child labor: (1) Starting full-time work at too early an age, (2) Working too long within or outside the family so that the children are unable to attend the school, (3) Work resulting in excessive physical, social and psychological strain upon the child, (4) Work and life on the street is dangerous and unhealthy, (5) Inadequate remuneration for working outside the family, (6) Too much responsibility at too early an age, (7) Work that does not facilitate the psychological and social developments and (8) Work that inhibits the child’s self-esteem as in bonded labor and prostitution.

Causes of Child Labor

- Absence of compulsory education at the primary level, parental ignorance regarding the ill effects of child labor, the ineffective implementation of child labor laws, nonavailability and non-accessibility of schools, boring and impractical school curriculum and cheap child labor are some other factors which encourage child labor. For the immature minds and bodies, it is difficult to understand the exploitation of child labor in the absence of adult guidance. The figure translates into 13.2% of all children between ages 10 years and 14 years being subjected to child labor.
- Of 12.6 million children in hazardous occupations, India has the highest number of laborers in the world less than 14 years of age. Although the Constitution of India guarantees free and compulsory education to children between the ages of 6 and 14 years and prohibits employment of children younger than 14 years in hazardous environments. Child labor is present in almost all sectors of the economy.

Major Forms of Child Labor and Determinants of its Pattern

- Two types of workers are classified, namely, main and marginal. Main workers are those who are engaged in a fulltime economic activity and marginal workers are those who are part-time workers.
- Many children work in their families as helpers in different household chores, caring for younger siblings. It has been observed that this sort of work discourages school attendance. Rural children are often involved in non-domestic work which is agricultural in nature and quite a good proportion of them are involved in work which is generally seasonal.
- In cities, on the other hand, children are found to work in market places and almost in every street corner. They are engaged in a variety of working situations such as vendors, waiters in restaurants, helpers in all kinds of shops, private houses, in industries such as carpet weaving, sari-embroidery, brassware, precious stone polishing, leather tannery, Bidi (handmade cigarettes) making, bangle manufacturing, glass industry, brick field, match and fire industries,

construction sites, garages, gas station, fishing, mines, handloom industries, lock industry and rag-picking.

- Girls at a fairly early age are recruited to the profession of prostitution. Children involved in gainful employment sometimes are bonded laborers in the backward areas of some developing countries. Progenies of single parent households are more likely to join the labor force at an early age.
- Another factor is the birth order of child, the first child having the highest probability of being gainfully employed. Moreover, during the last few decades, in developing societies, the mortality rates have declined markedly, which has resulted in the survival of a larger number of children. The proportion of children under 14 years of age as compared to 15–19 years of age-groups is higher among the poor. Thus, poor families are left with only young children as potential workers. To summarize, children are engaged in various activities such as visible, invisible, formal, informal, paid or unpaid. Boys are usually engaged in relatively larger number of occupations than girls.

Types of work for urban children are classified below:

1. Within the family

- Domestic house tasks: Cooking, child care, fetching water, cleaning utensils, washing clothes, etc.
- Handicrafts and cottage industries, weaving, leather work, wood work, etc.
- Within the family but outside home: Domestic service, construction work, mining, i.e. quarry mines; informal economy, i.e. laundry, recycling rubbish

2. Outside the family

- Bonded labor
- Apprentices
- Skilled traders: Carpets, embroidery, brassware works, gem polishing, etc.
- Industries/unskilled occupations, mines, etc.
- Commercial: Shops, restaurants and hotels
- Begging.

Health Hazards for Working Children

- Chronic starvation and unhealthy environment does contribute to ill health in all children, whether working or otherwise. Also many children start working at a very early age and do hazardous work for 12–15 hours a day without any holiday. Several occupations may not be hazardous by themselves but the environment makes them such. These environmental factors include ventilation, dust, gases, fumes, odors, lighting, noise, humidity, crowding, vibrations and ionizing radiations.
- All the children are in the process of growing and attaining their full physical stature and therefore, their growth is likely to be affected, resulting in stunting. This has been proved in several studies.
- Children who started working early in life suffered from deterioration in their nutritional status but such impact was not seen for those children who started work after the age of 11 years. Health effects of labor on children also vary according to the type of work situation.
- Children who are engaged in their own household jobs or family-based industries may have no direct adverse health effects.
- On the other hand, bonded and wage child workers may have greater effects on health because of the exploitative and unregulated nature of work, in which children are more exposed to health hazards, heavier workload and physical and mental abuse. Most of the poor child workers go to work without adequate food, clothing and proper shelter. They ultimately

become victims of a wide range of diseases like diarrhea, general weakness and various viral and bacterial infections.

- Other potential common psychological problems include habit disorders; personality disorders like timidity, irritability, sensitiveness, temper tantrums, obstinacy, daydreaming, negativeness, fear, jealousy, inferiority complex; psychoneurotic disorders such as nervousness, tremors, headache, pain, hyperventilation syndrome, masturbation, etc.; antisocial behavior like stealing, sexual offences, premarital sex; depressive psychosis and anxiety neurosis; drug abuse, and psychosexual problems.

Occupational Health Hazards

- Any occupation which allows the working children to come in contact with harmful substances like chemicals, as in the balloon and lock industry or fire in glass industry, match and fireworks, or cotton puff and dust as in power loom industry is termed intrinsically hazardous, which may have an adverse effect on physical and psychological development of children.
- **Exploitation of Child Labor**
- Child labor is economically unsound, psychologically disastrous, physically as well as morally harmful and precludes the full unfoldment of a child's potentialities. It also deprives them of education, training and skills which are essential *pre-requisites* of earning power and economic development. Sexual abuse is a common problem faced by girl children who work as a contract labor. The working girls in sleazy "B" and "C" grade hotels, lodging house, restaurants and also in domestic houses are exposed to physical assaults and sexual abuses by their employers and customers.

Initiative Against Child Labor

- Abolition of child labor is not possible from developing countries in the near future. However, the improvement in condition of work and work environment should be seriously considered. Child Labor (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986 was enacted to replace the Employment of Children Act, 1938. This Act is the culmination of the process of consideration that the Government has been giving to this pervasive problem figuring in the economic and social landscape in the country. This law is aimed to identify processes and industries which are hazardous, with a view to ban child labor in these sectors and to regulate the condition of work in non-hazardous industries. The implementation of this Act depends largely on labor inspectors. However, it has been found that there are not enough inspectors and most are easily threatened and bribed. Thus, in this view, the future action program is set out under the following three heads: (1) The legislative action plan, (2) Focusing of general development program for benefiting child labor, wherever possible and (3) Project based plan of action in areas of high concentration of child labor engaged in wage/ quasi wage employment.

National Child Labor Policy

- The National Child Labor Policy (NCLP) was formulated in 1987 and ten industries were selected for remedial action. The NCLP aims to revitalize and coordinate employment generating the asset-building anti-poverty programs in the designated areas, to strengthen the labor law enforcement machinery and to provide the children with better facilities for education, nutrition and health. However, the NCLP can only cover, at best, 30,000 children, a minute fraction of the total 44 million working children in India.

KAILASH SATYARTHI – who runs an NGO, has freed 80,000 children from child labour