

Impact on Child Labour: Issues and Challenges

Dr.A.Vennila., Mr. Dinesh S.

B.Com(CA), M.B.A.,M.Phil.,Ph.D.CMS Institute of Management Studies, Coimbatore. M.B.A, PGDCA, UGC-CCE, (M.Phil),

Rathinam Institute of Management, Rathinam College Arts and Science, (Affiliated to Bharathiar University) Pollachi road,Coimbatore.

Corresponding Author: Dr.A.Vennila

ABSTRACT: The relationships between child labour and health are complex. They can be direct and indirect, static and dynamic, positive and negative, causal and spurious. There is epidemiological evidence of greater impact of some occupational exposures on child health as compared to adults. Adverse environmental health conditions affect children more as these have negative effects not only on health but also on the development. Children are more prone to and more at risk than adults because of rapid skeletal growth, organ and tissues development, greater risk of hearing loss, greater need for food and rest, higher chemical absorption rates, smaller size and lower heat tolerance due to their physiological and immunological countenance; some additional factors also contribute to this. Documented reports show the impact on health viz. poverty related (e.g. Malnutrition, fatigue, anemia etc), psychological effects and distress of child labour, occupational cancers, neurotoxicity, injuries, exposures to adverse physical factors, skin ailments etc. A multi-disciplinary approach involving specialists from medical, toxicological, environmental, psychological and socio-anthropological fields shall produce integral information and, approach on various aspects of child development to prepare a better policy for child labour. India has the highest number of child workers, but unfortunately, there is hardly any research done or policies framed for their occupational safety and health. Hence there is an urgent need for intensive focus and research along with political and practical decisions to improve the conditions of working children for the betterment of their health and development.

KEYWORDS: Child Labor. Environmental and Occupational Health. Developing Countries

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I. Introduction:

Early childhood is the period from prenatal development to eight years of age. It is a crucial phase of growth and development because experiences during early childhood can influence outcomes across the entire course of an individual's life. For all children, early childhood provides an important window of opportunity to prepare the foundation for life-long learning and participation, while preventing potential delays in development and disabilities. Despite being more vulnerable to developmental risks, young children with disabilities are often overlooked in mainstream programmes and services designed to ensure child development. They also do not receive the specific supports required to meet their rights and needs. Children with disabilities and their families are confronted by barriers including inadequate legislation and policies, negative attitudes, inadequate services, and lack of accessible environments. If children with developmental delays or disabilities and their families are not provided with timely and appropriate early intervention, support and protection, their difficulties can become more severe—often leading to lifetime consequences, increased poverty and profound exclusion. Working children are from different age, race, income or health status groups. Some of the important aspects viz. short and long term effects of physical, mental and chemical work exposures and conditions on the health and development of child, the nature of work and its hazards and possible health effects, the situation in which children work etc. must be analyzed well. Anatomical, physiological and mental aspects in different socio-economic conditions are health components, which require urgent attention, particularly concerning growth and development, orthopaedic and musculo-skeletal disorders, poisoning, intoxication and premature deaths. Child labour Laws were implemented in US during American industrial era by the intervention of social workers like Samuel Gompers (labour leader), Sinclair Lewis (writer) and Lewis Hine (photographer) after decades of struggle. It is difficult to find good data about the impact of child labor on health to assess and evaluate its harmful aspects especially so in S.E. Asian countries. Some environmental epidemiologic studies and research on young workers suggest that children could have higher health risks than adults when exposed to some hazards. Moreover, several theoretical concerns about the impact of occupational exposures on child health still need to be studied.

Brain research has shown that the “prime time” for emotional and social development in children is birth to 12 years of age. Differing aspects of emotional and social development, which incorporate higher capacities, such as awareness of others, empathy and trust, are important at different times. Emotional intelligence is critical to life success. The part of the brain that regulates emotion, the amygdala, is shaped early on by experience and forms the brain’s emotional wiring. Early nurturing is important to learning empathy, happiness, hopefulness and resiliency. Social development, which involves both self-awareness and a child’s ability to interact with others, also occurs in stages. For example, sharing toys is something that a 2-year-old’s brain is not fully developed to do well, so this social ability is more common and positive with toddlers who are 3 or older. The caregiver’s efforts to nurture and guide a child will assist in laying healthy foundations for social and emotional development.

II. Factors Affecting Child Development:

Children’s development is influenced by a wide range of biological and environmental factors, some of which protect and enhance their development while others compromise their developmental outcomes. Children who experience disability early in life can be disproportionately exposed to risk factors such as poverty; stigma and discrimination; poor caregiver interaction; institutionalization; violence, abuse and neglect; and limited access to programmes and services, all of which can have a significant effect on their survival and development

III. Poverty

Although disability can occur in any family, poverty and disability are strongly interlinked: poverty may increase the likelihood of disability and may also be a consequence of disability. Pregnant women living in poverty may experience poor health, restricted diet, and exposure to toxins and environmental pollutants, all of which can have a direct effect on fetal development. Children living in poverty are more likely to experience developmental delays than children from higher socio-economic backgrounds because they are disproportionately exposed to a wide range of risks . These include: inadequate nutrition; poor sanitation and hygiene; exposure to infection and illness; lack of access to health care; inadequate housing or homelessness; inadequate child care; exposure to violence, neglect and abuse; increased maternal stress and depression.

IV. Stigma And Discrimination

Children with disabilities are among the world’s most stigmatized and excluded children . Limited knowledge about disability and related negative attitudes can result in the marginalization of children with disabilities within their families, schools and communities . In cultures where guilt, shame and fear are associated with the birth of a child with a disability they are frequently hidden from view, ill-treated and excluded from activities that are crucial for their development. As a result of discrimination, children with disabilities may have poor health and education outcomes; they may have low self-esteem and limited interaction with others; and they may be at higher risk for violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation.

V. Child-Parent/Caregiver Interaction

Stimulating home environments and relationships are vital for nurturing the growth, learning and development of children . The quality of child-caregiver interaction may be compromised when a child has a disability. Several studies have shown that there are differences in parent-child interaction when a child is disabled—mothers or caregivers of children with disabilities usually dominate interactions more than mothers or caregivers of children without disabilities . Some children with disabilities have high support needs as a result of disabling health conditions and impairments and this dependency, in addition to other social and economic barriers, can place considerable stress on caregivers.

Violence, Abuse, Exploitation And Neglect

The first year of life is a particularly vulnerable period for children—they are not only at risk of infectious diseases and other health conditions, but also at risk of violence, abuse, exploitation and neglect. The United Nations Study on Violence Against Children highlights that in some OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries, infants under one year of age are at around three times the risk of homicide than children aged one to four, and at twice the risk of those aged five to 14 . However, the true extent of violence during the early childhood period is unknown given that it mainly occurs in private settings such as homes and institutional environments, and that social and cultural norms may influence the hiding and / or condoning of certain violent behaviours.

VI. Conclusion

Poverty is one of the important factors for this problem. Hence, enforcement alone cannot help solve it. The Government has been laying a lot of emphasis on the rehabilitation of these children and on improving the economic conditions of their families.

Many NGOs like CARE India, Child Rights and You, Global March Against Child Labor, etc., have been working to eradicate child labor in India. The child labor can be stopped when knowledge is translated into legislation and action, moving good intention and ideas into protecting the health of the children. The endurance of young children is higher and they cannot protest against discrimination. Focusing on grassroots strategies to mobilize communities against child labor and reintegration of child workers into their homes and schools has proven crucial to breaking the cycle of child labor. A multidisciplinary approach involving specialists with medical, psychological and socio-anthropological level is needed to curb this evil. It is in this context that we have to take a relook at the landmark passing of the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act 2009, which marks a historic moment for the children of India. For the first time in India's history, children will be guaranteed their right to quality elementary education by the state with the help of families and communities. The world cannot reach its goal to have every child complete primary school by 2015 without India. Although there have been significant improvements in the proportion of children from socially disadvantaged groups in school, gaps still remain. Girls are still less likely to enroll in school than boys; in 2005, for upper primary school (Grades 6–8) girls' enrollment was still 8.8 points lower than boys, for Scheduled Tribes (ST) the gender gap was 12.6 points and it was 16 points for Scheduled Castes (SC). RTE provides a ripe platform to reach the unreached, with specific provisions for disadvantaged groups such as child laborers, migrant children, children with special needs, or those who have a "disadvantage owing to social, cultural, economical, geographical, linguistic, gender or such other factors." Bringing 8 million out-of-school children into classes at the age-appropriate level with the support to stay in school and succeed poses a major challenge. Substantial efforts are essential to eliminate disparities and ensure quality with equity. Successful implementation of the Act would certainly go a long way in eradicating child labor in India.

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