

Child Labour among School-going Children During COVID19 Pandemic: Need for Social Work Intervention

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Abstract

COVID19 pandemic exposed the severe socio-economic inequities in the Indian society. The most vulnerable of these were the children. The current study is an attempt to understand the implications of the pandemic on child labor and its consequences on the living conditions of the children. The study was undertaken in Kalyan-Dombivali, a twin city close to Mumbai, in the state of Maharashtra, India. The study reveals that the pandemic forced even the school-going children to engage in labour work. One of the main reasons for increased child labour was the economic distress among the families of these children caused by the lockdowns imposed during the pandemic. But the most striking finding of the study is a new form of inequity in form of 'digital divide' that forced the students out of the education system and pushed them to child labour. The study highlights the conditions faced by these children and provides a strong justification for recognizing their labour as child labour that needs to be prevented by undertaking appropriate social work interventions so that these children can return back to the school.

Keywords: Childlabour, child education, social work, pandemic, COVID19

Introduction

Disasters such as the COVID19 poses threat to life and livelihoods of all the citizens of the world. But the socio-economic inequity in the society aggravates the problems and puts the poor and other disadvantaged sections of the society in more hardships than the other sections of the society. The most vulnerable among these are the children from these disadvantaged communities. Hence, it is important to understand the impact of COVID19 on these children. The most prominent of these impacts could be on child labour. This prompted the authors to undertake a study to understand the implication of COVID19 on child labour. The paper presents the results of the survey undertaken in the city of Kalyan-Dombivali. The paper begins with conceptual discussion on child labour followed by description of the research methodology. The results of the survey are presented in the final section of the paper.

Concept and the Problem of Child Labour

Participation of a child, below 14 years of age, in any economically productive activity, with or without payment, is defined as child labour. Child labour has been banned in India as per the Child Labour (Prohibition & Regulation) Amendment Act, 2016. The act also prohibits employment of adolescents in the age group of 14 to 18 in hazardous occupations. There are two types of child

labourers, viz., main workers and marginal workers. Main workers are those who work for a period of 6 or more months per year. While marginal workers are those who work for less than 6 months.

Child labour is one of the biggest social problems in developing countries like India. Due to child labour, children are devoid of their childhood. They have to work for prolonged hours in very bad conditions. Child labour affects the physical, mental and emotional health of children. These children do not have basic rights, like right to play, right to education and right to entertainment. Child labour is found in urban and also rural parts of India.

Based on the International Labor Organization, in 2020 an estimated 152 million children are involved in child labor, 72 million works in hazardous environments, and almost 62 million live in Asia. A great number of these children are the only earning members of their families. In India there are 10.13 million child labourers in the age group of 5-14 years (Census, 2011). In Maharashtra there are 4,96,916 child labourers (Census, 2011). As per the report of the Action Aid, 1 in every 11 children in India has to undertake labour work to make a living.

Poverty is seen as one of the major determinants of child labour. Child labour is a complex phenomenon involving decision of the child, their families and employers. It also includes the extent of acceptance or opposition to child labour in the surrounding community. It takes many forms depending of the economic activity in the locality, age and skills of children, and nature of poverty. It is geographically dispersed and not necessarily concentrated in particular work sites. It is not always visible and the impacts of child labour are also not easily understood. These makes prevention of child labour a major challenge

Research Methodology

The study was undertaken to gain insights on the experiences of children engaged in child labour. The objective of the research was to understand the phenomenon of child labour in the context of the COVID19 pandemic. Following were the main research questions of the study:

1. What are the conditions of the children engaged in labour due to pandemic?
2. What are the reasons and implications of child labour in the pandemic period on the development of children?

The site selected for the study was Kalyan-Dombivali Municipal Corporation (KDMC). This is one of the largest cities in the Thane District and the extended regions of Mumbai called the Mumbai Metropolitan Region. In this way, it is representative of the urban centers in India. The study followed survey methodology. A sample size of 60 children, below age of 14, engaged in labour work were selected for survey. This was a purposive sampling of children who were school-going in pre-pandemic period but engaged in child labour post pandemic. Survey questionnaire was developed and administered through interview method.

Findings of the Study

The profile of the children surveyed shows that 80% of them attended government schools prior to pandemic and rest attended private schools. Almost half of the children belonged to migrant families (43%), while others were permanent residents of Kalyan-Dombivali. On an average the families had four members in their house. The migrant families were from States of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar,

Jharkhand and Gujarat. One of the reasons for high number of non-migrants engaged in child labour is that the migrant families returned back to their villages. This reverse migration created shortages in child labour. This demand was catered by the non-migrant children whose families were facing economic distress due to lockdown.

Reasons behind Child Labour in Pandemic

An important aspect of the survey was to understand the context and reasons behind child labour during pandemic. Questions were asked on whether the children engaged in child labour because of the family distress or other reasons. Other reasons included whether they were forced by somebody else or for educational purpose or they voluntarily engaged in child labour. Table 1 summarizes the results of the same. It was found that around half of the children (48%) were pushed into child labour due to the economic distress in their families due to pandemic. Others did not feel this pressure and voluntarily decided to engaged in labour work. This is an important finding suggesting that half of children engaged in children only because they were out of the school. The importance of continued education is seen here.

All these children were attended school prior to the pandemic. But in the pandemic period they were pushed into the child labour. Most of the children (80%) were from government schools which were not able to cope with the lockdown as compared to the private schools. Even if the schools started online education, these children would not be able to attend due to the lack of access to information and communication technology (ICT). Among the children almost 73% were not able to join the online school. All these children reported that they were not able to attend the online school due to non-availability of smart phone required to connect to online school sessions. This is representative of the digital divide where these children lacked access to modern ICT for attending online schools.

Table 1. Reasons for Engaging in Child Labour (n=60)

Sr. No.	Reasons	Number of Children	Percentage of Children
1	Extreme poverty	05	08 %
2	Temporary family distress	24	40 %
3	Voluntarily for extra income	16	27 %
4	Availability of free time	15	25 %
5	Overcome educational expenses	0	0
6	Forced by others	0	0

Type of Labour Work

One of the concerns of child labour is whether they are engaged in highly laborious or hazardous work. This was captured in form of the type of work the children were engaged during pandemic. Table 2 summarizes the results. Work on brick kiln is the most hazardous and laborious work among the different type of work that children were engaged. A smaller, but still a substantial 18% of children were engaged in brick kiln. Work in restaurants is another type of work where the working hours are long and involved late night work. This involved washing and cleaning work in restaurants. There were 15% children engaged in this work. Majority of the children (65%) were engaged in retails shops and street vending. This is less laborious but may involve work during school or teaching hours.

Table 2. Type of Work/Labour Work by Children (n=60)

Sr. No.	Type of Labour Work	Number of Children	Percentage of Children
1	Brick kiln	11	18 %
2	Restaurants	09	15 %
3	Retail shops and street vending	39	65 %
4	Others	01	02 %

Working Conditions of Child Labourers

The study shows that about half of the children were engaged in labour work for almost eight hours. This is like a full-day employment. The rest were employed on an average for four hours. The working conditions were such that half of the children faced some form of humiliation, either in form of direct abuse or due to excessive questioning by the employers. Very few children (9%) received charity from the employers in form of offering of food and clothing. About 40% of the children felt that the employers were helpful. Overall, the study shows that the working hours and conditions of about 50% of the children were not very congenial and children faced some of the other form of age-related bias and abuse.

The surveyed asked questions related to specific problems or hardships faced by the children with respect to the working conditions. Table 3 summarizes the same. This shows the severity of the hardships that children experienced in the working conditions. A total of 32% of the children faced physical hardships with regards to hunger and toilet.

Table 3. Hardships faced by Child Labourers about Working Conditions

Sr. No.	Hardships about Working Conditions	Number of Children	Percentage of Children
1	Unhygienic and unclean working environment	26	43 %
2	Excessive working hours	12	20 %
3	Hungry for continued hours	09	15 %
4	Not allowed to go to toilet	10	17 %
5	None	03	05 %

An important aspect of the working conditions is the remuneration for the labour work. Table 4 summarizes the daily wages earned by the child labourer. The study shows that the wages earned are very lower. Almost 75% of the children reported wages lower than 200 Rupees per day. This is less than the minimum wage rate in agriculture and EGS in the State of Maharashtra. This clearly shows the extent of exploitation of children as cheap labourers during the pandemic period.

Table 4. Daily Wages Earned by Child Labourers

Sr. No.	Wages (Rupees per day)	Number of Children	Percentage of Children
1	100-200	45	75 %
2	201-300	11	18 %
3	301-400	03	5 %
4	401-500	01	2 %

Conclusion

The COVID19 pandemic has pushed school-going children into child labour. The survey of such children in a representative urban center, namely Kalyan-Dombivali city, clearly show the economic hardships due to which the children were pushed into child labour. Socio-economic disparity and digital divide contributed in denying continued education for these children. Considering these severe impacts, the study highlights the need to provide equitable access to information and communication technology (ICT) to avoid child labour among school-going children in the situation of pandemic. Children were engaged in highly laborious work in places like brick kiln and restaurants. They faced unhealthy conditions with sever hunger and inability to access toilet facilities. Children are exploited for cheap labour.

Overall, the study highlights the need to consider the impact on children caused by child labour in the assessment of impacts of COVID19 pandemic. There is a tendency to not recognized the labour work as child labour considering that it is temporary and sometimes involves work within family business. One of the key concepts in understanding child labour is to examine if the children can continue experiencing childhood. International Labour Organization (ILO) defines child labour as “work that deprives children from their childhood, their potential and their dignity, and that is harmful to physical and mental development”. One of the criteria is whether the labour interferes with their schooling. The study clearly shows the close relationship between child labour and inability to attend online school. The working conditions were also harmful to their development as a child. Hence, the study strongly recommends to recognize the labour work by children during pandemic as child labour. This will help in undertaking social work interventions for quick restoration of the situation so that these children can return back to school. Once the problem is recognized the social workers should undertake comprehensive survey in all cities for enumeration of such child labour among school-going children during the pandemic and also expose their working conditions. This should help to plan various social work interventions for facilitating the return of these children back to the school. In absence of such social work intervention it is most likely that these children will get assimilated in the labour market without any option of returning back to education.

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