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Child Labour And the Reversal of the Trend

For the past one and half-year, we have been going through the news and debates flooded with distressing images of COVID-19 pandemic and its disastrous effects on the world economy. Millions of the workers lost their jobs or were forced to take pay cuts, economic activities slowed down due to restrictive prevention measures and migrant workers were forced to walk hundreds of kilometres back home. Fair amount of attention has been given towards adult migrant labourers but amidst these the issue of impact of pandemic on children remained invisible. Global child labour had been gradually declining in the past two decades, but the COVID pandemic threatend to reverse that trend. Recently the ILO has raised a wake up call and has organised a high level virtual event jointly with UNICEF on the occasion of World Day Against Child Labour during International Labour Conference. "We are [losing](#)¹ ground in the fight to end child labour and the last year has not made that fight any easier," UNICEF chief Henrietta Fore told reporters, stressing that "the Covid-19 crisis is making a bad situation even worse."

It is difficult to quantify the real data of children affected since pandemic erupted, but according to a new [report](#)² released by the International Labour Organisation(ILO) and UNICEF, the number of children in child labour has risen to 160 million worldwide with increase of 8.4 million children in the last four year. Millions are more at risk due to the impact of COVID-19. The report also says that if the latest projections of poverty increases due to the pandemic, another nine million children will be pushed into child labour by the end of 2022. "The new estimates are a wake-up call. We cannot stand by while a new generation of children is put at risk," said ILO Director-General Guy Ryder in a press release.

¹ [Child labour rises to 160 million – first increase in two decades \(unicef.org\)](#)

² [On World Day Against Child Labour, key points on the practice | World News - Hindustan Times](#)

The world day against child labour has been organised throughout the world with the [theme](#)³ "Act Now, End Child Labour" and on the occasion, many other politicians and celebrities like UN Secretary General, sand artist Sudarsan Pattnaik, Ayushmann Khurrana came with their statements to eradicate this social evil.

This pandemic affected most of those already in disadvantaged or vulnerable situations, such as children in child labour and victims of forced labour and human trafficking, particularly women and girls. These vulnerable groups are more affected by income shocks due to lack of access to social protection, including health insurance and unemployment benefits.

Most of the affected children are toiling in dangerous industries, like mining or with heavy machinery, and working more than 43 hours a week is likely to harm their health, safety or morals. Other key findings state that the agriculture sector accounts for 70% of children in child labour followed by 20% in services and remaining 10% in industry. Child labour compromises children's education and it restricts their rights by limiting their future opportunities leading to vicious inter-generational cycles of poverty and child labour. This issue takes childhood away from children, since most of these children work in difficult, often exploitative environments, their overall health and nutrition also suffers, leaving them vulnerable to various illnesses.

The first reason behind this reverse trend is that with many people losing their jobs, they needed extra pairs of hands to earn to provide two square meals a day for their family, leading more children to enter the world of work. Second, due to lockdown, reverse migration from urban centres caused shortage of laborers in industries and children are seen as a stop-gap measure to fill jobs left vacant by those migrant labourers who returned to their hometown and the burden has shifted to the poor households within urban areas. Third, the pressure on children staying at home, especially girls, puts them to do household chores. The closure of school led to a gradual detachment from education especially for children of disadvantaged class who can not access online education. This detachment from education is definitely going to increase the number of dropouts even if school reopens. Families whose earning members succumbed to COVID infection forced their children to enter the workforce. Vulnerable individuals and their families who have lost their jobs in the informal economy, in urgent need of funds for household survivals but with few savings and limited access to social

³ [World Day Against Child Labour 2021: Theme this year is 'Act Now, End Child Labour'-World News, Firstpost](#)

protection or other forms of government support, are likely to be at greater risk of falling prey to lenders providing credit on terms constituting debt bondage.

A group of 24 Non-governmental organisations conducted the survey among 818 children to study the impact of child labour following the COVID-19 pandemic and found that proportion of working children has increased from 28.2 percent to 79.6 percent due to pandemic and closure of schools. The survey found that children were working in bakery shops, book stalls, two wheeler service shops, newspaper distribution, ration shops, vegetable shops and as domestic helpers. Economic crisis at home pushed them to work and 18.6% of children face physical, mental and verbal abuse from their employers.

Now is the time to be proactive about making child labour a visible issue and initiate dialogues around it and start working towards them. A total of 591 children have already been rescued from forced work and bonded labour from different parts of India during lockdown by Bachpan Bachao Aandolan, a civil society group on children's rights founded by Nobel laureate Kailash Satyarthi who also called child labour "a [stain](#)⁴ on our dream of a thriving, mahaan Bharat", and emphasised how it must be eradicated from its roots. We have child labour prevention act but other non-profit organisations and communities need to work in line with government to identify those vulnerable children so that they can be rescued and rehabilitated.

Since taking office in 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government has introduced several measures aimed at eradicating child labor. The government launched an online portal (PENCIL) to register, rescue and rehabilitate child workers but the existence of PENCIL is not enough to end child labor in India as the number of complaints and FIRs against child labour remains very low as compared to actual number of cases so we need to become active and promote awareness at every level to ensure everyone knows about it.

In 2017, the government of India also ratified two ILO [conventions](#)⁵ concerning the elimination of child labour, the Minimum Age Convention, 1973 (No. 138) and the Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No. 182) that shows the commitment of the government to have child labour free society. Further, Vulnerable families should be covered under comprehensive social protection schemes to ensure a decent living. Labour laws must be strictly enforced and Child protection committees should work efficiently to identify those children and support their families through social protection schemes. The school authorities

⁴ [World Day Against Child Labour: Kailash Satyarthi Claims Child Labour is "Stain on the Dream of Mahaan Bharat" in NEWJ Exclusive – ThePrint](#)

⁵ https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_557295/lang--en/index.htm

must ensure that all students who were studying earlier are brought back to schools.

It's time to come forward and shift our commitments to action. The International Labour Organisation has declared 2021 as "The International Year for The Elimination of Child Labour" and with this step many celebrities, leaders and individuals should join this global movement. All small and big stakeholders can not only take action on the issue but also raise awareness. Children must be made aware of the support structures that exist for them so that they can use them. It is an economical as well as social issue so the society needs to be more responsible on this issue.

Our Publications:

- 1) Democracy, Capitalism, Labour Movement: In Quest of Decent Work:
<https://www.suruchiprakashan.com/democracy-capitalism-labour-movement>
 - 2) Decent Wage : It's not Just About Workers :
<https://www.suruchiprakashan.com/decent-wage>
 - 3) Industry 4.0 and the Future of Work(er) :
<https://www.suruchiprakashan.com/industry-4-0-and-the-future-of-work-er>
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