

The social and occupational health problems of child labour: A challenge the world is facing

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Abstract

Eliminating child labour is one of the biggest challenges that the world is facing. Child labour not only causes damage to a child's physical and mental health but also keeps him deprived of his basic rights to education, development, and freedom. Children of lower socio-economic class are known to be inducted as child labour. The main causes of child labour include poverty, unemployment, excess population and urbanization. The construction sector is one of the most hazardous working environments especially for children. Children are exposed to dangerous machinery causing fatal and non-fatal injuries, while operating or working near them. Children are exposed to strenuous labour, which can affect the musculo-skeletal development of the children. In industries, child workers are exposed to various physical, mental, social occupational hazards resulting in lower growth and poor health status. Working long hours, child labourers are often denied a basic school education, normal social interaction, personal development and emotional support from their family. The Child Labour Act was implemented in India in 1986 that outlaws child labour in certain areas and sets the minimum age of employment at fourteen. Eradicating poverty is only the first step on the road for eliminating child labour. 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. Proper education of the children and banning child labor will help in boosting the success of the country.

Key-words: Child labour, social and occupational health, poverty.

Introduction

Childhood is that phase of life where a child is free from all the tensions, fun-loving, play and learns new things, and is sweetheart of all the family members. The other side of the story is that the child has tensions and burdens. Here, the innocent child is not the sweetheart of the family members, instead he/she is an earning machine working the entire day in order to satisfy the needs and wants of his/her family. This is what is called '*Child Labour*'. The term Child Labour is used for employment of children below a certain age, which is considered illegal by law and custom. The stipulated age varies from country to country and government to government. Child labour is a world phenomenon which is considered exploitative and inhuman by many international organizations.

According to statistics provided by UNICEF, there were an estimated 158 million children aged 5 to 14 years in child labour worldwide in the year 2006, and this figure is continuously increasing. Child labour in Asia accounts for the

highest percentage of child labour (61%) followed by Africa (32%).

India is the largest example of a nation plagued by the problem of child labour. Estimates cite figures between 60 and 115 million working children in India - the highest number in the world¹. About 22000 working children die due to occupational hazards every year, as per ILO estimates.

UNICEF (1997) considered a child as exploited if he/she is put to work². The declaration of the rights of child, Indian Constitution has laid down that child hood should be protected against exploitation.

As per provisions in the Constitution of India, "the State shall direct its policy towards protection of childhood and youth against exploitation and they shall not be employed to work in any factory or mine or engaged in any hazardous employment"; but unfortunately India has the largest number of urban and rural child workers in the world³.

The Child labour (Prohibition and Regulation Act 1986) Act No. 61, that the Act prohibits employment of Children

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low the age of 14 years. This Act defines in Section 2 that child who has not completed his/her 14 years of age has been restricted from employment in any factory and declares persons between 15 years and 18 years of age will be eligible to the work⁴.

According to the estimates, there are more than 250 million working children between the ages of 5 and 14 years in developing countries, and the majority of the child workers live in the developing countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America; but there are also pockets of child labour in many industrialized countries^{5,6}. Work, environmental and occupational conditions have a negative impact on health and development of the children⁷.

Social problems of child labour:

Child labour is an evil practice; children of lower socio-economic class are known to be inducted as child labour. The main causes of child labour include poverty, unemployment, excess population and urbanization. Among these, poverty is the primary cause of child labour.

Poverty is undoubtedly a dominant factor in the use of child labour; families on or below the poverty line force their children into work to supplement their household's meagre income. Poor families have more number of children, so it becomes very difficult for them to survive on the income of only one family member which is also quite less. Poor families have more number of children, so it becomes very difficult for them to survive on the income of only one family member which is also quite less. So they make their small children their source of income. Some other common causes of child labour are parental illiteracy, social apathy, ignorance, lack of education and exposure, exploitation of cheap and unorganized labour.

Adults often find it difficult to find jobs because factory owners find it more beneficial to employ children at cheaper rates. Adult exploitation of children is also seen in many places. Elders relax at home and live on the labour of poor helpless children. The industrial revolution has also had a negative effect by giving rise to circumstances which encourage child labour. This is so because they can be recruited for less pay, more work can be extracted from them and there is no union problem with them.

There are many cases of child labour where a child has to work against the repayment of a loan which was taken by his father who was unable to pay it off. This is called as

'bonded child labour'. Such children work like slaves in order to pay the loan taken.

Parents are forced to send little children into hazardous jobs for reasons of survival, even when they know it is wrong. Monetary constraints and the need for food, shelter and clothing drive their children in the trap of premature labour. Over population in some regions creates paucity of resources.

The construction sector is one of the most hazardous working environments with regard to the risk of accidents, especially for children. Parents make their children work in factories, shops, even selling items on streets. Some parents even carry infants on the streets to earn money from begging.

The service sector includes domestic services, child prostitution/commercial sex workers, street workers, work for family etc. The informal and hidden nature of the domestic work makes it difficult to estimate the number of domestic workers around the world, but it is one of the most common forms of urban child labour in developing countries and employs mainly girls.

Many small girls are even made to indulge in prostitution. Some percentage of child labour also comes from harassment by parents, step-parents or relatives. Illiterate and ignorant parents do not understand the need for wholesome proper physical, cognitive and emotional development of their child. They are themselves uneducated and unexposed, so they don't realize the importance of education for their children.

Urbanization is a basic factor behind street workers. Many of them are not street children in the strict sense since the majority of these street workers return home each night and provide critical financial support for their families². These children polish shoes, wash and guard cars, carry luggage, sell goods at the traffic light intersections and scavenge and pick up rags. Street workers are mainly exposed to street violence.

There are many other social factors that conspire to drive children into employment, none of which is unique to any one country or any one family's circumstances. Child labour may not even be recognized when children work as part of the family unit. This is particularly common in agriculture, where an entire family may have to work to meet a particular quota or target and cannot afford to employ outside help.

Children may also be expected to act as unpaid domestic servants in their own home, taking care of the family's needs while both parents work.

Occupational health problems of child labour:

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.

The children generally start to work at a very young age and usually work for long hours for little or no payment. They are exposed to dangerous farm machinery causing fatal and non-fatal injuries, while operating or working near them. Children are also exposed to strenuous labour, like carrying heavy loads and working in uncomfortable postures such as stooping in the same position or bending very frequently, which could affect the musculo-skeletal development of the children. Other hazards present in the fields are pesticides and the weather, especially the heat, which can be particularly dangerous for children. Poor field sanitation contributes by facilitating the transmission of communicable diseases, which is worsened by the pesticides and the heat. Migrant workers are particularly at risk since their housing conditions are frequently inappropriate⁸.

Children are more vulnerable and susceptible than adults biologically due to many reasons. The brain of the child is not fully developed. The full number of neurons is reached at around two years of age and myelination of the brain is not completed until adolescence; exposure to certain toxins present in the workplace can hinder the process of maturation. The gastro-intestinal, endocrine and reproductive systems and renal function are immature at birth and mature during childhood and adolescence. Exposure to certain toxins present in the workplace can hinder the process of maturation, and the elimination of hazardous agents is less efficient. Most of the cells of the organs and tissues in children are smaller than in adults, therefore they have a larger sur-

face area; absorption of toxin through the skin is higher than in adults⁹.

Children have greater energy consumption. Sweat glands are not fully developed, and the thermo-regulatory system is not fully developed during childhood leading to increased sensitivity to heat and cold. Children have greater energy and fluid requirements per unit body weight than adults. The reason is that they lose more water per kilogram body weight through the lungs, due to the greater passage of air through them, through the skin and through the kidneys. They are more likely to dehydrate. Children have thinner skin, again leading to an increased absorption through the skin⁹.

Additionally, children are psychologically immature, they have risk-taking behaviour, they are not experienced at work, nor are they trained on hazards or on safety; often there is inadequate supervision. Children learn poor health and safety behaviour from adults, and in terms of organization and rights, they are virtually powerless. Children have a higher risk of injuries than adults. Heavy loads are more dangerous for children than adults. In a study by Parker et al⁵, back injuries were more common in smaller workers than in adult workers.

The inappropriate structure of work schedules (long hours, early/late hours with frequent changes) and the lack of supervision increase the risk of work-related injuries and illnesses. Childhood and adolescence are periods of rapid growth in a young person's life; and thus, they could be at particularly high risk of injuring ligaments and damaging bone-growth plates.

Machines, tools, work furniture and personal protective equipment are not designed for children. Children using machines, tools and work furniture (seats, workbenches, etc.) designed for adults may develop musculoskeletal disorders such as chronic repetitive-strain injuries, repetitive-motion trauma, back problems, tenosynovitis, vibration-induced disorders and white-finger syndrome. Children often have to work without personal protective devices or use alternative devices that do not provide real protection^{10, 11, 12, 13}. Since children respond differently than adults to physical and chemical exposures^{14, 15}, the permissible exposure limits (PEL) established for adults might not be sufficiently protective for children.

Specific hazards vary according to the industry type. Thus, child workers will be exposed to high temperatures, high

risk of accidents caused by cuts and burns at the brassware and glass-bangle industry, to silica dust at the earthenware and porcelain factories, and to chemical hazards and risk of fire and explosion at matches and firework workshops²⁻¹⁰.

The psychosocial hazards arise from the child worker's failure to adapt to an alien psychosocial environment. Carelessness, inattentiveness, over-confidence, ignorance, inexperience, lack of job satisfaction, insecurity of job, stress due to salary problem, personal grievances, poor human relationships, poor service condition, wrong system of payment and degree of responsibility are some of the psychosocial factors which may under mine mental health of the workers¹⁶.

Child labour always have lower growth and poor health status as compared to their non-working children where child labour is absent. Child workers may start adopting the habits which are usually associated with adults like Gutkha chewing, bidi smoking, use of alcohol and drugs, gambling and involvement in sexual offences etc¹⁷. Absenteeism is a main factor due to the illness.

Depressing and monotonous working conditions undermine their mental and psychological growth. They fail to experiment with fantasy and imagination and miss the opportunities of fun frolic, play and recreation; deprived of love, security, nutrition, education care and attention. Immature and inexperienced child labourers may be completely unaware of the short and long term risks involved in their work. Working for long hours, child labourers are often denied a basic school education, normal social interaction, personal development and emotional support from their family. Beside these problems, children face many physical dangers and death from forced labour. Long-term health problems, such as respiratory disease, asbestosis and a variety of cancers, are common in countries where children are forced to work with dangerous chemicals. HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases are rife among the one million children forced into prostitution every year; pregnancy, drug addiction and mental illness are also common among child prostitutes. Exhaustion and malnutrition are a result of underdeveloped children performing heavy manual labour, working for long hours in unbearable conditions and not earning enough to feed themselves adequately.

Recommendations:

Everyone should take some steps in the direction to stop child labour so that we can bring smiles to many faces and make this world a beautiful place for a child to live in. There are various organizations which are fighting against child labour by helping children and imparting education among that part of society from where majority of the child labour comes. Poor families should be given knowledge about family planning/control so that they are not burdened by children. It would be advisable not to keep small children at home for taking domestic help in daily household chores.

The future of a community is in the well being of its children. So it becomes imperative for the health of a nation to protect its children from premature labour which is hazardous to their mental, physical, educational and spiritual developmental needs. It is urgently required to save children from the murderous clutches of social injustice and educational deprivation, and ensure that they are given opportunities for healthy, normal and happy growth.

Conclusion:

Child labour is not only affecting under-developed and developing countries, but developed countries are also facing this though the rate is comparatively very less. The main causes of child labour include poverty, unemployment, excess population & urbanization. Child labour not only causes damage to a child's physical and mental health but also keeps him/her deprived of his/her basic rights to education, development, and freedom.

Children are more prone to and are at more 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.

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.

There is urgent need of intensive focus and research along with political and practical decisions to improve the conditions of working children. Government, workers, employers and the community must share the responsibility for controlling the special psychological risk factors that child faces. Considering the present situation, there is urgent need of social, political and technological intervention, good quality research, proper legislation and law, a comprehensive

sive policy, which can be implemented, for better planning and management of child labour issues to improve the condition of working children.

The Government of India has implemented the Child Labour Act in 1986 that outlaws child labour in certain areas and sets the minimum age of employment at fourteen. This Act falls short of making all child labour illegal, and fails to meet the ILO guideline concerning the minimum age of employment set at fifteen years of age. Though policies are in place that could potentially reduce the incidence of child labour, enforcement is a problem. If child labour is to be eradicated in India, the government and those responsible for enforcement need to start doing their jobs. Policies can and will be developed concerning child labour, but without enforcement they are all useless. Eradicating poverty, however, is only the first step on the road to eliminate child labour.

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