

**Little Hands at Work: A Study of Child Workers during Covid-19**

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## ABSTRACT

The present study, which is a result of a student-faculty initiative, was conducted to understand the lives of child workers and the challenges faced by them, especially in the covid-19 situation. It also focused on the challenges faced by children trying to balance work and school activities.

A sample of 123 children in the age range of 6 to 16 years was selected using purposive sampling technique from Delhi NCR. Semi-structured interviews and intensive case studies of 36 child workers out of 123 were conducted. The data collected for the study was analysed qualitatively.

The findings revealed that financial difficulties were being experienced by almost all the children who were working outside home. Other challenges included shortage of food, the risk of getting infected, loss of study hours, mental stress, having no shelter. and moving to other places during the pandemic. More than 90 percent of the children were aware of the existing pandemic and were taking precautions for the same. Assistance from the government proved to be a great help for more than half of the respondents. Some also reported receiving help from community members and their employers.

**Keyword:** *child workers, Covid 19, challenges, education, difficult circumstances*

## **Introduction**

Childhood is a significant period in an individual's life. In every society, childhood as a stage is considered important as it marks the foundation of an individual's personality, and in turn the future of the society. For a better future of any society, it is important for the whole society to emphasise the availability of resources being provided to the young generation of the country. Nutritious diet, good quality education and a safe and nurturing environment continue to be responsible for an individual to become a productive member of the society (Ahuja and Kalpana B. 2020). The children who are deprived of basic needs come under the category known as children in especially difficult circumstances and this is a world-wide issue. In India the problem is relatively high due to the large child population, poverty, unemployment, illiteracy and so on. These reasons many times lead to child employment and unsafe child labour.

Child labour is a bitter reality that exists globally. There is no single definition of child labour. Each organisation has tried to define it with reference to the nature of work and the age of the child. Children under the age of 14 who work in jobs that are not suitable for their abilities as a child, may experience adverse effects on their health, education and moral development. According to International Labour Organisation and United Nations Children's Fund (2020), child labour refers to work that children are too young to do and/or employment that is likely to affect children's health, safety, or morality due to its nature or conditions.

### **Causes of Child Labour**

Child labour is one of the most serious issues in the world, particularly in underdeveloped or developing countries. Children are forced into child labour for a variety of reasons. Poverty is one of the leading causes of child labour. A majority of the children work because their families

are unable to provide basic necessities. Poverty and child labour are inextricably linked. For financial reasons, parents are sometimes forced to send their children to work as the employers prefer to give children work since it is the cheapest type of labour. Overpopulation is another reason for child labour. When a family has many members but little financial resources, the only choice is for each person to work, and feed and support the other members of the family. Unemployment or partial employment of adult members of the family also leads children to work. Other causes of child labour may include migration to the cities, debts, illness, accident, or death of the adult members of the family and so on. (Chopra, 2015)

### **Consequences of Child Labour**

Child labour can inflict serious physical and mental harm. At work, children are exposed to several types of injuries (burns, cuts, fractures, exhaustion, joint pains and so on), sexual abuse, Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs), physical abuse, emotional maltreatment (blames, rejections, labelling and so on), physical and emotional neglect, lack of education which leads to lack of educational qualifications, thus, continuing their poverty (Lal 2019, 2199 - 2206). Child labour also deprives children of the opportunity to enjoy their childhood and places a burden on them, which hinders their overall development.

### **Covid and its Impact on Child Labour**

The full lockdown declared by the Indian government in March 2020 had a significant impact across the country. Following the announcement of the nationwide lockdown, a vast number of workers found themselves unexpectedly jobless.

Child labour is a global issue. During the past two decades, child labour has been consistently reducing worldwide, but with Covid - 19, there are chances of a reverse trend. In a

recent report by the International Labour Office and the United Nations Children's Fund (2021), it was noticed that the number of children engaged in child labour has increased to 160 million, an increase of 8.4 million children in the previous four years. At the start of 2020, 63 million girls and 97 million boys were working throughout the world, accounting for nearly one out of every ten children (8).

It was further noted that during the last two waves of Covid-19 in India, millions of people lost their jobs; many of them who had unstable jobs and relied on daily income, lost work causing a negative effect on children. The households where children were trapped due to the nationwide lockdown were usually gloomy places, with inadequate food and in some cases, violence and abuse was directed towards children (Khaitan, 2021).

#### Education

Schools were also shut throughout the world due to Covid limitations, along with the restrictions on other facilities. In this epidemic, it was discovered that over 1.5 billion students from all over the world were deprived of basic education. Changes in the daily routine, such as lack of outside activities, a disrupted sleep pattern, and social distancing, have all had influence on the children's overall development. Students in rural areas were the majority of those who were unable to utilise remote learning facilities, regardless of the country's economic development level (United Nations Children's Fund 2020).

Although some children may be unaffected by school interruptions, this may not be the case for those who live in low-income households or in locations where Covid-19 has had the greatest impact. Some parents may not be able to afford education for their children once the classes resume and schools open, which may further lead to an increase in the drop-out rate and

child labour. On the one hand, children of legal working age may drop out of school and enter the workforce. On the other hand, children under the age of legal majority may seek work in informal and home settings, where they are exposed to hazardous and exploitative conditions, including the worst types of child labour (International Labour Organization and United Nations Children's Fund 2020).

#### Health

Many employees, particularly those working in the unorganised sector, had almost no choice but to keep working, increasing their chances of being ill. In a report by International Labour Organization and United Nations Children's Fund (2020) it was revealed that households may experience catastrophic health expenditures, which might be aggravated by the loss of earning members. Children, therefore, become means of survival in such cases. Girls, in particular, may have a larger role in caring for sick family members. Due to the sheer economic downturn and confinement, children may have fewer opportunities to participate in income-generating activities. However, some children will be forced to do other things to earn money.

#### Financial Problems

As the labour market becomes more constrained for parents, their children may be forced into dangerous and exploitative jobs. The Covid-19 situation has resulted in a historic drop in economic activity and working hours. Lower earnings and fewer job options might push individuals into informal or harmful work, further suppressing wages and contributing to child labour. When legal and informal credit sources are scarce, households may resort to desperate measures such as bonded labour to get credit. This has been a prevalent technique in history, and

the Covid-19 situation may aggravate it leading to debts and further increasing poverty (International Labour Organization and United Nations Children's Fund 2020).

### Child Rights

In a report released by International Labour Organization and United Nations Children's Fund (2020) it was revealed that child labour is most common in the unorganised sector, where minors may readily work as unskilled workers. As a result, the threats to children's rights posed by working in the informal sector may increase. Many youngsters may be pulled out of the schools and pushed into the workforce because of increased informal employment and financial distress.

This student faculty research project was created with an aim of engaging undergraduate students in research work. It is important to provide the students some field work experience, engagement with community and sensitising them towards the need and challenges of community members. Research at the undergraduate level can give students an opportunity to discover their interests.

The following were the objectives of this student faculty research project:

- To develop an understanding about the situation of child workers
- To identify the challenges and issues faced by child workers
- To study the impact of Covid on the lives of child workers
- To examine the challenges faced by school going child workers
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### **METHODOLOGY**



## **Participants**

The data was collected from primary sources. The sample for this study consisted of 123 children in the age range of 6 to 16 years who were working outside home to earn money. The sample was selected from Delhi NCR.

## **Sampling**

The residential areas of Delhi were identified by purposeful sampling. Child workers were identified as participants using the voluntary response technique and the snowball method. All individuals gave their permission, and their participation was entirely voluntary.

## **Procedure of Data Collection**

The purpose of the study was explained to all the participants and permission was taken from them. The initiation of data collection was in August 2020. It took three to four initial visits to obtain permission from the participants, explain the purpose of the study and form a rapport with them. The total sample consisted of 123 child workers in the age range of 6 to 16 years. The data was gathered using semi-structured interviews and a detailed case study of 36 out of 123 child workers. The data was collected as per the convenience of the participants.

## **Pilot Study**

A pilot study was carried out to validate and test the effectiveness of the tools in generating information for the study. The pilot study was carried out with 14 child workers from the residential areas of Delhi. Some changes were made to accommodate a large range of responses in the existing interview guide.

## **Ethical Considerations**

The present study was conducted in a well-informed environment with the informed consent from the participants. All the participants were informed about the objectives of the study, and their participation was completely voluntary. All through the study, participants' privacy and the amount of information they wanted to share was respected.

### **Data Analysis**

Since the study is qualitative in nature, the data gathered was subjected to a qualitative analysis. Common themes were created by identifying and compiling similar response patterns. Some linkages between different data sets were also identified to prepare the findings of the study.

## **Results And Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to understand the lives of child workers with a special focus on the pandemic situation. The participants' responses were grouped under various categories in order to highlight the impact of Covid on the lives of child workers.

### **Profile of Child Workers and the Context**

The sample comprised 123 children ranging from 6 to 16 years who worked outside the house to earn money in Delhi NCR. More than 90 percent of the children reported that they resided with their families, while 8.7 percent reported living alone.

When asked about their education, 35.8 percent of the total participants reported that they were going to school, others reported they dropped out (30.9 percent), never went to school (32.5 percent), and very few (0.8 percent) revealed dropping out of school during Covid.

With reference to migration, more than 60 percent of the participants reported migrating for work from other states (such as Uttar Pradesh 26.8 percent, Bihar 23.6 percent, Haryana 3.3 percent, Manipur 3.3 percent, Rajasthan 0.8 percent, West Bengal 0.8 percent, Nepal 0.8 percent, and Jharkhand 0.8 percent).

The children were involved in diverse occupations like, working in shops, dhabas, or tea stalls (27.6 percent), as domestic workers (20.3 percent), as vendors (20.3 percent), labours (6.5 percent), rag pickers (4.9 percent), dhobis (4.1 percent), factory workers (4.8 percent), car cleaners (3.3 percent) and others (8.1 percent) reported distributing newspapers, shepherd packaging, and working as delivery persons, sweepers and so on.

### **Impact of Covid on the Lives of Child Workers**

Every individual had to deal with a variety of obstacles during the lockdown. Many people, particularly those working in the informal sector, had almost no option but to keep working as the only way for them to survive was to work.

#### **Awareness about Covid-19**

Except for a few participants (4.9 percent), everyone else was aware of the Corona virus. During Covid, more than 90 percent of the participants reported wearing a mask as a precaution. Additional precautions taken by the children included the use of hand sanitizers (39.8 percent) and washing hands to maintain hygiene and reducing the chance to get infected (63.5 percent). Physical distancing was mentioned by more than 70 percent of the total participants to avoid the risk of Corona Virus.

## Financial Problems

The International Labour Organization and the United Nations Children's Fund (2020) estimated that the drop in economic activity and working hours in the pandemic resulted in reduced incomes and fewer job options, and hence, people may be pushed into informal sector or/and hazardous work, lowering salaries and which may further lead to child labour, the cheapest and preferred labour.

In the present study, more than 95 percent of the children reported facing financial problems, which led to additional issues such as lack of food, which was reported by 50 percent of the participants. Other issues raised by child workers were lack of shelter (1.6 percent), mental stress (1.6 percent), the risk of being infected (15.3 percent), the loss of education (5.7 percent), and the need to relocate (0.8 percent).

## Education

Many nations were forced to declare total shutdown due to the rapid emergence and continued spread of the Corona virus. It included travel restrictions as well as the closure of stores, factories, and educational institutions.

The closure of educational institutions across the country had a significant influence on the educational, social, and mental health development of students (Odriozola-González et al., 2020). Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were more negatively affected by it (Aucejo et al., 2020).

Governments all across the world rushed to establish remote learning solutions that could reach over a billion students to battle significant educational challenges caused by school closures due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Three out of every four children in the world who were unable to

access remote learning options came from rural regions and/or from low-income families, according to the study done by the United Nations Children's Fund (2020). The study also reported a negative impact on the academic lives of students due to a drop in family income, limited access to digital tools, and high rates of internet services.

In the present study, it was found that only 36.6 percent children were going to school before lockdown. During Covid, 0.8 percent of this group dropped out. Only 22.8 percent of the total participants had access to a smartphone, and only 6.5 percent of those who did were able to attend classes. Some of the children (5.7 percent) who had access to a smartphone also shared it with their siblings, which led to missing a few classes. Even if some children were unable to attend online sessions, they (11.4 percent) were receiving school assignments via WhatsApp or any other source. Since some students did not have any access to online classes, they (20 percent) reported practising self-study.

#### Assistance Received during Covid-19

School meals were no longer provided to children due to Covid-19 limits and poor families were unable to fulfil basic needs of children due to income losses. Many countries reacted to these issues by implementing social and income-protection programmes that allow families to buy food.

In the present study, more than 60 percent children reported receiving assistance from the government. Community members (2.4 percent) and employers (1.6 percent) were also mentioned as sources of assistance by the participants.

All of the participants who received government assistance reported that they were given rations. Other items received from the government were masks (12.2 percent), financial assistance (6.5 percent), gas cylinders (6.5 percent), and sanitizers (4.9 percent).

## CONCLUSION

Child labour is one of the most serious matters impacting the world at large, particularly in underdeveloped, and developing countries like India. Due to financial constraints, many children leave their houses and enter the workforce. Other causes for children to work include adult family members' unemployment, a large number of members in the family, illness or death of the earning member, to name a few. Global progress toward reducing child labour has slowed in recent years, and the Covid-19 outbreak has exacerbated the crisis. The sudden announcement of a total shutdown due to an upsurge in Covid cases had a global impact, especially on individuals who rely on daily wages to meet their necessities.

The purpose of this research was to depict the lives of children who worked outside their households during the pandemic. According to the findings of this study, Covid has had a significant influence on the lives of child labourers, both directly and indirectly. The most significant barrier encountered by the children and their families was found to be financial difficulties, which led to additional challenges such as shortage of food. An important finding was that more than 90 percent of the participants were aware of the corona virus and were taking some precautions to avoid it. The pandemic had a significant impact on the education sector, with children reporting difficulty accessing digital education, leading to dropout and child labour. Assistance from the government was relief for some children.

It is important to recognise that the pandemic that has resulted in numerous complications. But it cannot be an excuse for not protecting children from dangerous and exploitative work. Instead, we should use this as a chance to discuss all possibilities for recovery and constructive change. Capacity building of young minds requires a well-rounded strategy and effective

techniques, which will drive employability, productivity, health, and well-being in the decades ahead, ensuring the nation's favourable overall progress.

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