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Impact of COVID-19 on child labour: A study in urban industrial centers of Guntur district

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Abstract

Children are like blooming flowers in the garden of society. They are so delicate that they have to be protected from the damaging effects of the society. Child labour is a social evil, which is harmful to the physical and mental development of the children. Due to various efforts child labour has decreased in this decade. But due to COVID-19 the situation has been changed. Children are the worst impacted in any sort of disaster. COVID-19 will be no different. The study focused on impact of COVID -19 on socio economic conditions and working status of child Labour in Guntur district of Andhra Pradesh. This study makes use of primary and secondary sources. The study found that COVID pandemic worsens the conditions of child labour.

Keywords: Child Labour, COVID-19, Informal sector, urban industrial centers, Guntur district

1. Introduction

Disasters like the COVID-19 pandemic have the potential to slowdown the economy which will push children into different sorts of work. Workers within the informal economy, who were performing on a daily-wage, casual laborers, unskilled workers, migrant workers, self-employed, out-sourcing workers and vendors, were the worst-affected to the lockdowns. Children are forced into the labour market as a cheap source in such a context. Studies within the past have found that one percentage increase in poverty results in a minimum of a 0.7 percent increase in child labour. Worldwide 218 million children between 5 and 17 years are employed. Among them, 152 million are victims of child labour. As per 2011 census India has 43,53,247 child labor and Andhra Pradesh has 1,51,437 child labor approximately. Due to the efforts of the Governments at various levels Child labour has declined by 94 million since 2000, but job losses and rising poverty and lockdowns is perhaps getting to force more children to exploitative and unsafe jobs as families use every available means to earn some money and survive. Hence, the study focused on the impact of COVID-19 on child labor in urban informal sector of Guntur district in Andhra Pradesh.

2. Definition of Child Labour

While define the term 'child labour', we have to consider two major indicators i.e exploitation and age. The UN Convention on the Child Rights (1989) and the ILO Convention 182 on Worst Forms of child labour have defined a child as a person who has not completed the age of 18. In the context of exploitation, UNICEF has given a comprehensive formulation at defining child labour. The explanation of the term 'child labour' is engagement of children in work for long hours, at low wages, in unhealthy and dangerous conditions thus depriving them of education and resulting in excessive physical, social and psychological strains. Government of Andhra Pradesh defines child labour as "Such work does not facilitate the psychological and social development of the child and on the whole, inhibits the child's self esteem. All Children out of school are Child Labour." According to this definition those children out of school is treated as child labour. This comprehensive explanation of the term 'child labour' by UNICEF and Government of Andhra Pradesh is considered for the purpose of this study.

3. COVID-19 and child labour

COVID-19 is that the communicable disease caused by the recently discovered corona virus.

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This new virus and disease were unknown before the outbreak began in Wuhan, China, in December 2019. The disease can spread from person to person through small droplets from the nose or mouth which are spread when an individual with COVID-19 coughs or exhales. The Corona virus disease (COVID-19) has impacted every segment of life like commercial establishment, education, economy, religion, transport, tourism, employment, entertainment, food security, sports, etc. The outbreak is a major destabilizing threat to the global economy. More children might be forced into exploitative and unsafe jobs. Those already working may do so for longer hours or under worsening conditions.

4. Objectives

In order to provide a definite direction to the study certain objectives are specifically highlighted as follows:

- to make an analytical survey on impact of COVID-19 on Child Labour in urban industrial centres of Guntur District ;
- to study and analyse the social, economic, political and ethical factors which compel the child labour to accept employment at an early age;
- to examine the possible remedial actions in tackling the problems of child labour

5. Hypotheses

1. The socio-economic conditions of child labour during the post COVID period are as miserable as their conditions of work and employment although there is a push and pull factor facilitating the employment of child labour
2. Poverty is the main reason for children taking up economic activity

6. The Area of The Study

Guntur district is located in Andhra Pradesh, India. The district is located along the east coast of the Bay of Bengal. Guntur is one of the important cities in India. National highway No-16 (Chennai-Kolkata) passes through the district. The total area of the district is 11,391 kilo meters (4,398 square miles). According to 2011 census the population of the district is 48, 87, 813. Guntur district is predominantly an agricultural district having few industrial pockets with an urban culture. Guntur district has four revenue divisions. One urban centre in each division has been selected for the study. The industrial centres selected for the study are Guntur, Tenali, Mangalagiri, Bapatla, Narasaraopet and Machala.

7. Research Methodology

The methods used for data collection in this study are Case study method, survey method; empirical research methods like participant observation are combined. The present study has been based on field as well as documentary sources. Field sources constituted child workers, their parents and employers. The published material available on the subject in the form of books, journals, reports, newspapers, etc., have been used as documentary source.

The study utilised mainly the primary data collected personally from 400 child labour and their families belonging to the urban, industrial centres of Guntur district. This sampled universe has been selected on random. These units include manufacturing units, construction works,

mining and quarrying, hotels and restaurants, bakeries and biscuit making units, rag picking, community, social and personal services including repair shops, super bazaars and jewelry shops.

8. Impact of Child Labour in Urban Informal Sector of Guntur District

Table 1: Age and Sex distribution of the working Children

Age	No of respondents		Total
	Boys	Girls	
Below 10 years	22(8.73%)	20(13.51%)	42 (10.5%)
10-14	103(40.87%)	61(41.22%)	164(41%)
15 - 17	127(50.4%)	67(45.27%)	194(48.5%)
Total	252(63%)	148(37%)	400(100%)

Source Compiled from the data collected

The socio-economic background of the respondents in the present study has revealed that out of the total sampled working children (400), 63 percent were boys (males) while 37 percent were girls (females).

Table 2: Distribution of the child labour in various fields

S. No	Feild	Boys	Girls	Total
1	Construcion	12 (4.76%)	10(6.76%)	22(5.5%)
2	Manufacturing	14(5.56%)	16(10.81%)	30 (7.5%)
3	Mining & Quaring	18(7.14%)	-	18(4.5%)
4	Repair shops	25(9.92%)	-	25(6.25%)
5	Hotels/Dabhas	32 (12.7%)	15(10.14%)	47(11.75%)
6	Bakery/Biscuit	46(18.26%)	46(31.08%)	92(23%)
7	Rag picking	21(8.33%)	11(7.43%)	32(8%)
8	Sellers/Vendors	65(25.79%)	30(20.27%)	95(23.75%)
9	Others	19(7.54%)	20(13.51%)	39(9.75%)
	Total	252 (63%)	148 (37%)	400 (100%)

Source Compiled from the data collected

As such, the survey revealed that Sellers and vendors occupied 23.75 percent. This is because of the COVID effect. During the period of lockdown vegetables, fruits and milk particularly in the streets was the only business available and most of the child labour moved to this side. Of the total sample 23 percent of the working children were engaged in the bakeries and biscuit making units. Hotels and restaurants were another important industrial category which employed around 12 percent of the total number of working children. 7.5 percent working in manufacturing field and 5.5 percent working in the construction field. Construction industry was badly affected due to COVID disaster. It is observed that in the outskirts of the towns more business was taken place and the child labour were also found.

Table 3: Community distribution of working children

S.No	Sex	OBC	SC	ST	OC	Total
1	Boys	87(61.7%)	64 (63.37%)	28(53.85)	72(67.92)	252(63%)
2	Girls	54 (38.3%)	37(36.63%)	24(46.15%)	34(32.08)	148(37%)
3	Total	141(35.25%)	101(25.25%)	52(13%)	106(26.5%)	400 (100%)

Source Compiled from the data collected

The scheduled caste, scheduled tribes and other backward castes combined to constitute 73.5 percent of the working children. SC, ST, BC and OC Children's constitute 25.25 percent, 13 percent, 35.25 percentage and 26.5 percent respectively to the total as shown in table 3. Religious classification has revealed that 83.25 percent of the

respondents in the study are Hindus. 8.75 percent belong to Muslims and 8 percent belongs to Christians

8.1 Occupation of the head of the house holds

The survey revealed that main occupations of the heads of household are daily labour/Kooly (33%), factory workers and other private employees (15%), Drivers (10.5%); Mechanics (7.5%) Agriculture labours (7.25%) Hawkers (4.5%) Vegetable venders (4.5%) while 3 percent are

remained as unemployed. Most of the heads of household are employed in occupations requiring little or no skill. Most of them work in unorganized sectors. There is also no security of employment or assurance of a stable income in these occupations. Due to lock downs in COVID period their economic condition became worse. Under such circumstances parents have little choice but to send their children to work.

Table 4: Child labour- Reasons for getting employment

Age group/ Reason	To supplement the family income	Living for the family	Forced by Parents	Closure of schools due to lock down	Other reasons	Total
Below 10 years	17	8	9	4	4	42 (10.5%)
10-14	88	31	20	18	7	164(41%)
15 - 17	98	61	24	6	5	194 (48.5%)
Total	203 (50.75%)	100 (25%)	53 (13.25%)	28 (7%)	16 (4%)	400 (100%)

Source: Compiled from the data collected

Child employment is a consequence of economic Compulsions confronted by poor families and the economic advantages the employer finds in hiring children. The data also reveals that the economic compulsion of the family is the major reason for child labour. The most common reason in case of 50.75 percent of the child labour is the need to supplement the family income or the need for an additional income; 25 percent of the Child workers had to seek employment to earn a livelihood for their families. Closure of schools due to lock down is the reason for 7 percent of the Child workers.

9. Reasons for Hiring More Child Workers during Post COVID

There is every reason to believe that post COVID-19 there is likely to be an increase in incidences of child labour across the country, particularly so in the poorer parts of the country. The reasons are manifold and there are both push and pull factors. The country has witnessed an exodus of migrant workers from cities and urban agglomerates during the period of lockdown. Economic activities have resumed to a particular extent. Local workers have a reservation wage and won't wish to figure below a particular wage level. Locally available children from the poorer sections of the workforce might be used to fill such shortages in the labour market.

The study also reveals the same. In construction field in Tenali town the wage for skilled labour is increased from Rs. 600/- to Rs 700/- during post COVID period. Children are available for less than 400/-per day at the same time. Employers are looking at the possibilities of having workers with low wages and they may employ children as they work for relatively less wages.

In urban service sector there is a perceivable lack of effective demand in the economy. Recession had occurred even before the pandemic struck, and the situation has only become worse. Employers across the board are desperately attempting to minimize costs. They would be tempted to employ child workers as the cost is almost half. In rural areas where migrant workers have since returned, there is a huge livelihood crisis. There aren't enough jobs to supply

gainful employment to job-seekers in rural areas where migrant workers returned in large numbers. Wages tend to fall below subsistence levels under such circumstances. This creates a very conducive atmosphere for engagement of child workers.

Schools are conducting online classes and youngsters in poorer sections of the society are not in a position to access online classes. Such children are confined reception during a social context where their families are finding it difficult to manage the bare necessities. Livelihood compulsions and availability of children at home and without school to attend is a recipe for a spike in incidences of child labour.

10. Govt. Of Andhra Pradesh Schemes

School dropout is one of the main causes for Child labour. The Government of Andhra Pradesh initiated several programmes like Ammavodi, Vidyadevena and Vasathi deevena for school children to continuing their education. "AMMA VODI" is a programme providing financial assistance to mother who is below poverty level regardless of caste, creed, religion and region to enable her to complete the education of her children from Class I to XII (Intermediate Education) in recognized Government, Private Aided and Unaided schools/ Jr. Colleges in the State from the Academic year 2019-2020.

In Vasathi Deevena Scheme, AP Government will give financial support to the students. In this scheme money shall be credited into the respective account of the mother of the eligible students for food and hostel expenses. Students will get rupees 10,000 for ITI course, Rs. 15,000 for Polytechnic and Rs. 20,000 for Degree Courses.

The State Government of AP is supplying nutritious diet for all the students studying in Government primary, upper primary, high schools, municipal, aided and zilla parishad schools in the State as part of Midday meal (Jagananna Gorumudda). Due to lockdown schools remain closed and 37 lakh students, studying in 45,723 government schools, got the dry ration during lockdown period under the mid-day meal scheme. Officials of the School Education Department delivered the dry ration to students at their homes. Dry ration consists of Rice, Eggs and Chikkies.

Table 5: Whether the children have known the Government programmes related to child labour

S. No	Response	Number of Respondents			Percentage
		Boys	Girls	Total	
1	yes	88 (34.92%)	60 (40.54%)	148	37%
2	No	146(57.94%)	78 (52.7%)	224	56%
3	No response	18(7.14%)	10 (6.76%)	28	7%
4	Total	252	148	400	100%

Source: Compiled from the data collected

During the survey the children were asked whether they know that the Government programmes related to child labor or not. Only 37 percent of them positively responded. That shows the responsibility of the Government to give more publicity for the programmes.

Table 6: Whether the children have got any benefits related to Child Labour programmes

S.No	Response	Number of Respondents			Percentage
		Boys	Girls	Total	
1	yes	52 (20.64%)	38 (25.68%)	90	22.5%
2	No	150(59.52%)	78 (52.7%)	228	57%
3	No response	50(19.84%)	32 (21.62%)	82	20.5%
4	Total	252	148	400	100%

Source: Compiled from the data collected

The data from the table 5 indicates that 37 percent of the children are known about the Government programmes related to Child labour and table 6 indicates that only 22.5 percent of the children are benefited with the Government programmes related to Child labour. This reveals that child labour and their families are not aware of the Governmental programmes related to child labour and the Government has to take necessary steps for conducting awareness programmes

10.1 Operation Muskaan

Operation Muskaan is a central Government initiative to rescue child labour. The Andhra Police launched the special drive to rescue children to make sure that they weren't exposed to corona virus during the pandemic. The Andhra Pradesh Police rescued 4,806 children as part of Operation Muskaan and Guntur urban police rescued 153 street children working in shops and factories in Guntur.

11. Major Findings of The Study

- One prevailing perception that will go against children's is that they are not being affected by Carona virus as compared to older people in the family. This will work as a push factor for youngsters to be sent them to work, whilst older people will remain at their houses with the fear of infection.
- From the study, it was revealed that child employment is a consequence of economic compulsions confronted by poor families and the economic advantages the employer finds in hiring children. Almost all sectors of the society badly affected due to lockdowns. Workers in the informal economy, who were working on a daily-wage, casual labourers, unskilled workers, migrant workers, self-employed, out-sourcing workers, street vendors were the worst-affected due to the lockdowns. Children are forced into the labour market as an inexpensive source in such a context.
- Viewing the disadvantaged position of the families of the child labour, the employers, on the other hand try to

extract the maximum work from the child labour for very low wages. The family pushes away the child and the informal sector pulls in the child.

- The incidence of child labour is higher among the lower castes. The lower castes in general are engaged in manual jobs which require no skill and Qualifications. They are backward both economically and socially which compel them to take up odd jobs for survival. Their poor economic status or conditions compel them to send their children to work rather than to schools, as they are unable to bear the expenses of schooling. During post COVID period poor become poorer and their conditions become worse and children were also need to work for getting daily needs of their families.
- Due to COVID almost all educational institutions conducting online classes but the poor and lower middle class people are not in a position to attend online classes lack of smart phone/laptop and internet connection.
- COVID pandemic worsen the conditions of lower middleclass people in particular. They are not in a position to pay school fees and provide laptop and internet connections and their children were out of school.
- The study reveals that the statutes are not being implemented to regulate the provisions meant for the child labour. In states like Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat which have announced relaxation of labour laws in the post-lockdown period. In general, enforcement of labour laws is lack in our country. Such relaxations will further undermine the implementation of labour laws. In such a context, as enforcement is far from strict. As a result, they are put to long hours of work and work almost equal to or more than the adults for very low wages under poor working conditions.
- When lockdown began to lift in June and factories reopened, work for adult daily-wage workers still proved hard to come by. Industry, keen to cover the three months of losses, trying to find the most cost effective labour possible. With impoverished families deep in debt, and their children not in school, many agreed to send their children to employment in factories, farms and restaurants. Once a child has started working and earned even a small amount of money they are unlikely to go to school, this follows a cycle of poverty, vulnerability and exploitation.

12. Suggestions

The International Labour Organization (ILO) has four policy pillars to respond to the COVID-19 crisis on the basis of international standards. First, stimulate the economy and employment. Second, support enterprises, jobs and incomes. Third, protect workers in the workplace. Fourth, rely on social dialogue for solutions. The ILO calls for governments, employers and workers' organizations to

effort together on effective policies to respond to all health, social and economic dimensions of the crisis.

- Abolition of child trafficking, elimination of poverty, free and compulsory education, strict implementation of labour laws and basic standards of living can reduce the problem to a great extent. Spreading literacy and education may be a potent weapon against the practice of child labour, because illiterate persons do not understand the implications of child labour.
- To stop child labour, we will have to first change our own thinking. We have to make sure that first of all, we do not keep any child on employment in our own home or office. We have to remember that we are not doing any favour to children of tender age by paying them money in exchange of their labour, but we are rather playing with their future.

13. Conclusion

The economy is gradually recovering from the pandemic disaster. The vaccine for COVID may reach to the people soon. On the other hand Child labour is a social evil and existing from times immemorial. Eradication of child labour is a gradual process. The immediate step that can be taken is empowerment. Social protection, easier access to credit, job creation, frequent labour inspections and tighter law enforcement, and measures to get children back into the school with free education can help mitigate the crises.

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