

Issues and Challenges of Underage Workforce in an Indian Agriculture: A Policy Perspective

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Abstract

Engagement of underage workforce in an Indian Agriculture is a one of the most important issues. Despite different preventive measures made by union and state governments, the estimated figures of children who are working in agriculture sector as child labour are 40.34 million. In which 62 per cent are boys and 38 per cent are girls. In the progressive state like Maharashtra, percentage of working children in agriculture stands 60.67. It evidently shows gravity of this important issue in agriculture. This study discussed different causes which are responsible for this evil engagement. The primary data for this study is collected from 150 diverse agricultural households from western Vidarbha region of Maharashtra. This area is notoriously known for agrarian crisis. It also suggested some important solutions to address the issue of child labour in an Indian agriculture. The study emphasised urgent need for policy intervention with proper implementation.

Keywords: *Underage Workforce, Child Labour, Agricultural Policy, Policy Intervention*

Introduction

Children are bunch of possibilities. Policy makers have to provide enough attention to make them competent as per their aptitude and potential. It is undisputedly true that children are universally considered as most important asset for any nation[1]. Unfortunately, in agrarian countries like India, a majority of rural children are engaging in ruinous agricultural activities. It compiles them to compromise with their bright future. It has been found that out of all child labour force in the age group 5 – 17 years, nearly 98 million girls and boys are working in agricultural activities like farming, fishing, aquaculture, forestry, livestock etc[2]. In addition to that out of total child labourers working in agriculture 67.50 per cent of child labourers are not getting any kind of remuneration for their work. The 59 per cent children who are engaged in agriculture are doing hazardous work[3]. In so called developed country like United State of America, 33 children are seriously injured due to agriculture related incidents and in every three days, a child dies due to such kind of accidents [4]. An International reputed body like United Nations has also taken this issue seriously. The United Nation's Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) has shown their serious concern rising percentage of child labour in agriculture at global level in recent years. It also mentioned that it driven in part by an increase in conflicts and climate induced disaster. This reputed UN body related with agriculture mentioned 'child labour in agriculture' as a global issue[5]. The International Labour Organizations (ILO) provided data that the seven out of every ten working children are in agriculture[6]. It is also matter of serious concern that underage work force in agriculture is nearly 10 times that of children involved in factory work. At the same time, it is quite unfortunate that children working in agriculture have got very little attention as compare to child labour in manufacturing for

export or children involved in any other commercial activities[7]. Almost 60 per cent of girls and boys in hazardous work are found in agriculture[8].

The World Health Organization (WHO) is quite serious about the issue of child labour in agriculture. WHO provides focus on interconnection between Right to Life and Right to Health. According to it health is crucial component of right to life, where engagement of underage population in agriculture violates right to life of children. It is scientifically proven that agriculture is one of the most insalubrious work sectors at any stage which is dangerous for children because of their adverse mental and physical impact[9]. It also has been observed that agricultural child labour mainly found unpaid work on small holder farm families. This kind of issue is also found on commercial farms and plantation as well as through forced and trafficked child labour[10]. It is matter of serious concern in front of agricultural policy makers that this sector is emerging as one of the three most dangerous sectors in terms of work related fatalities, non fatal accidents and occupational diseases[11]. There is a need to understand this bitter truth that vast majority of child labour are not toiling in factories, sweatshops or working as domestic or street vendors in urban areas, they are working on farms and plantation. Though agriculture is an unavoidable activity, it cannot continue to be based on exploitation of children in child labour[12]. Especially in developing countries, the level of child labour that we observe in agricultural households has negative consequence on children's long-run development because this is an impetus for efforts aimed at reducing child labour[13]. Hence across regions and countries, agriculture is a main sector for children's economic activity[14]. Livestock animals, insects, machinery, structures, water bodies are included under agricultural environment. The children who live, play and work on farms are exposed to agricultural hazards which include biological, physical and chemical agents [15]. There is also a positive correlation among children's work in agriculture and debt bondage, where the poorest families have no land or too little to meet[16]. It also has been observed that there is more engagement of child labour in plantation of cash crops like sugarcane, cotton, tobacco and so on[17].

It is also essential to understand more about child labour in farming. Children are involved in different agricultural activities as a child labour. Similarly, child labour can be found in different sub sectors of agriculture like fishing, aquaculture, forestry, livestock etc. Some important activities are as follows: [18].

1. Preparation of land
2. Transport for agricultural activities
3. Planting of Seedlings
4. Weeding
5. Application of fertilizers and insecticides

Due to these and such kind of activities related with agriculture, children engaged in agriculture compel to do different kinds of hazardous tasks such as:[19].

1. Exposure to sharp tools
2. Accidents during handling of farm machinery and implements
3. Risk of snake bites
4. Injuries from other animals
5. Exposure to extreme environmental conditions
6. Exposure to agro chemicals and so on

In 2016 amendment has been done in 1986's law that prohibits child labour, Government of India amended a law that allow children below 14 to engage in 'home-based work' with their families, after school hours or help their families in fields forest. This act defined 'child labour' as work that is inappropriate for a child's age, affects children's education or is likely to harm the health, health or morals[20]. Despite these laws, rules and regulations, in India current trends indicate that more than 60 per cent of children in the country are part of the economy sustained by agriculture and related activities. The approximate numbers of children who are working in agriculture as child labour are 40.34 millions. In which 62 per cent are boys and 38 per cent are girls. In the progressive state like Maharashtra, percentage of working children in agriculture stands 60.67[21]. The Government of India established a

National Authority for the Elimination of Child Labour created machinery for co-ordination among nine major ministries of the federal government[22].

Policy Issues regarding with Children in Agriculture

Theme	Sub Theme	Code	Frequency	Percentage
Issues Related with Children in Agriculture	Policy Issues	Absence of Separate Policy for Children in Agriculture	136	90.66
		Poor Implementation of Swaminathan Commission	141	94
		Poor Farm Mechanization	123	82
	Economic Issues	Poverty	141	94
		Un-employment	148	98.66
		Deficit in Household Budget	139	92.66
	Social Reasons	Household Size	127	84.67
		Poor Educational Facilities	143	95.33
		Cultural and Family Traditions	134	89.33
		Historical Reasons	137	91.33

Source: Primary Data

To understand practical reasons behind the engagement of children in agriculture, a research survey is conducted at eastern Vidarbha region of Maharashtra. Three districts that are Amarawati, Buldhana, Yavatmal who are most affected due to agrarian crisis haven been chosen for this study. Ten villages from each district had been selected. Total 150 households had been selected (five from every selected village) for this study by using purposive sampling method of sample selection. To address this crucial issue in agriculture, it is essential to understand the actual reasons due to which such a huge under age population is engaging in hazardous works of agricultural sector. Some important influencing factors are as follows:[23].

- a. **Absence of Special Policy for Children in Agriculture:** The 90.66 per cent of respondents mentioned that there is a need of special policy provisions for children in agriculture as presently there is no any such a kind of provisions at policy level.
- b. **Poor Implementation of Swaminathan Commission Recommendations:** It has been observed that 90 per cent respondent households showed their serious concern about poor implementation of Swaminathan Commission recommendations which are regarding with children in agriculture.
- c. **Poverty:** It is one of the important reasons behind the issue of child labour in agriculture. Poverty gives birth to the different issues like social inequality, structural unemployment, and vulnerability of shocks. These issues create compulsion on parents of children to involve them as a child labour in agricultural activities.
- d. **Household Sizes:** Those families who have larger number of children are more likely to give their children to work in order to earn income for the family. Therefore, size of household is also deciding factor in engagement of child labour in agriculture.

- e. **Lack of Accessible, Affordable and Quality Education:** Poor accessibility and affordability of education in rural areas push children in labour activities in agriculture.
- f. **Cultural and Family Tradition:** In some areas agricultural labour activities become their part of culture where majority of children are engaging in agriculture.
- g. **Historical Reason:** Children belong to so called marginalized section of society is working as an agricultural child labour due to some historical reasons.
- h. **Illiterate Parents:** Those parents who are illiterate do not understand importance of education. Therefore, they provide force on children to engage in agricultural activities as a labour[24].
- i. **To Increase Family Income:** Children's wages are included with those of working parents. Therefore, parents want to engage their children in agricultural work as a child labour.
- j. **Poor Farm Mechanization:** This factor generates need of child labour in agriculture which is easily available with cheap labour cost[25].
- k. **Poor Access to Adult Labour:** It has been found that there is scarcity of adult labourers in agriculture due to different reasons. On other side child labour are easily available and affordable[26].
- l. **Family Migration:** The situation of children belongs to poor family becomes worst when family migrates. Due to such migration, there is a rise in drop-outs, child marriage and eventually children working as a daily wage labourer. In Maharashtra, many families migrate during Sugarcane harvesting seasons. Children also migrate with their families. Put to work at young age, there is a low possibility of children returning to school to continue their education[27].

This issue that is child labour in agriculture cannot be solved overnight. There is a serious need of policy level intervention and continuous efforts to address this crucial issue. This study wants to provide some important suggestions to solve the issue of child labour in agriculture.

1. **Policy Interventions:** There is a need to mainstream policies which are related with preventing and reducing agricultural child labour. At the same time it is essential to integrate child labour issue at the national and international levels with increasing emphasis on poverty alleviation and expanding and improving institutional mechanism for education.
2. **Goal Celerity:** It is essential to understand actual nature of the issue of child labour in agriculture sector. For that matter it is first necessary to determine what children should do? What not to do?
3. **Strict Implementation of Existing Laws:** There is a need to provide strength for implementation of children's rights and Children's participation in agricultural production.
4. **Competent Legal Framework:** The loopholes of existing laws and regulation should be fulfilled with competent legal framework by which their effective implementation becomes possible.
5. **Policy Advocacy:** The Civil Society members and other responsive members in the society should have to advocate for adequate legal and policy framework for the protection of children and strengthen their enforcement in the process of realizing children's rights.
6. **Poverty Elimination:** The special policy efforts are required to eliminate poverty from rural areas. Due to chronic poverty in rural India, parents compel their children to work as labour in agricultural activities.
7. **Food and Nutrition Security:** The food and nutrition security plays important role in avoidance of child labour activity.
8. **Income and Social Security:** Policy makers have to ensure income and social security of marginalized section of society through different schemes and programmes.
9. **Include Child Labour in Agricultural and Labour Census:** It is very important to include child labour issue in agricultural and labour census to provide a clear picture of the areas of greatest concentration and most hazardous child labour.
10. **Awareness Campaign:** It is essential to make child labour as a cross cutting issue through vast awareness campaign on child labour issue in agriculture at all level.

- 11. Need to Define Hazardous Labour in Agriculture:** There is an urgent need to define lists of hazardous labour in agriculture similar to International Child Labour Organization Child Labour Convention.

Conclusion

Historical, socio-political and especially economical reasons are responsible for engagement of underage population in Indian agriculture. No any country can sustainably develop itself by compromising its future force through the evil activity of child labour. Serious work has to be done for poverty eradication; employment generation, skill development, school education and so on. Temporary solutions cannot work to address this serious problem. There is an urgent need to provide enough efforts through policy level interventions by which we can check the burning issue of child labour in Indian agriculture. This study provided some important solutions like goal clarity, strict implementation of existing laws, competent legal framework, policy advocacy, policy intervention, food and nutrition security, income and social security, inclusion of child labour in agricultural labour census etc. The policy makers have to tackle this issue of child labour in agricultural sector with a holistic pragmatic approach.

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