

The Role of the Informal Economy in Child Labour in Rural India

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Abstract

This research paper delves into the heartbreaking reality of child labour within India's informal economy, where millions of children are forced to abandon their childhoods for work. Despite laws designed to protect their rights, countless young lives are caught in a web of exploitation driven by poverty and a lack of opportunity. This study reveals the complex factors that lead children into labour—such as economic hardship, inadequate access to education, and societal norms that often overlook their suffering.

By gathering stories and statistics from various sectors, including agriculture, domestic work, and small factories, this paper illustrates the urgent need for change. It highlights not only the risks these children face but also the resilience they show in the face of adversity. The research calls for a collaborative effort from governments, non-profits, and local communities to develop effective solutions prioritising education and social welfare. Ultimately, this paper aims to shed light on a critical issue that affects the future of countless children in India and to inspire actions that can help restore their right to a safe and joyful childhood.

Keywords: Informal Economy, Child Labour, COVID-19, Rural India, Human Rights, Economic Development, Labour Policies, Rural Employment.

1. Introduction

In India, the issue of child labour is not just a statistic; it's a daily reality for millions of children who find themselves trapped in a cycle of work instead of play. While laws exist to protect their rights, the stark truth is that many children are forced into labour, often in dangerous conditions, sacrificing their education and dreams. This paper aims to shine a light on these vulnerable young lives, revealing the reasons behind child labour and its far-reaching consequences.

Imagine a child who should be in school, laughing with friends, and dreaming of the future. Instead, they work long hours in fields, homes, or factories, contributing to their family's meagre income. Factors such as deep-rooted poverty, limited educational opportunities, and cultural expectations often push families into this heartbreaking situation, where children's rights are overlooked in the struggle for survival.

The informal economy plays a significant role in perpetuating child labour. Without regulatory oversight, industries like agriculture and domestic work can easily exploit children, subjecting them to physical and emotional dangers that hinder their growth and well-being.

To combat this urgent issue, it is crucial to explore compassionate and effective policies that focus on empowering families and providing access to education. This paper advocates for a holistic approach that brings together government, non-profit organisations, and communities to create lasting solutions. By prioritising the rights and dreams of children, we can work towards a future where every child can thrive

in a safe and nurturing environment.

Key Research Questions:

- How does the informal economy contribute to child labour in rural India?
- What are the main factors driving child labour in informal sectors?
- How effective have government interventions addressed child labour in these sectors?

2. Literature Review

The literature on child labour in rural India and the informal economy provides a comprehensive background on the complex relationship between poverty, informal work, and child labour.

2.1 Child Labour in Rural India

Rural India is a hotspot for child labour due to economic hardships, especially in sectors like agriculture and textiles. According to ILO (2020), many child labourers are involved in family-owned businesses and agricultural activities, which are part of the informal economy.

2.2 The Informal Economy in India

The informal economy accounts for a significant portion of India's workforce. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2019), approximately 81% of India's workforce is employed in informal sectors. Government reports like those from the Ministry of Labour and Employment (2022) highlight that these sectors are largely unregulated, leading to exploitative conditions, including the involvement of children.

2.3 Link Between Informal Economy and Child Labour

Several studies, such as those by Bhat and Kumar (2018), show that families involved in the informal economy are likelier to engage their children in labour due to unstable incomes, lack of social protection, and the need to meet daily subsistence. This often leads to a cycle of poverty that perpetuates child labour across generations.

In a study specific to rural India, **Sen and Das (2008)** highlight the critical role of **poverty, education, and gender disparities** in driving children into work in the informal economy. Their research underlines how children from vulnerable households are forced into labour as a means of survival, especially in rural areas where formal employment opportunities are scarce. **Sen and Das** emphasise the need for **policies that promote decent work opportunities** within the informal sector and provide **social protection** for children, suggesting that without such measures, rural child labour will continue to thrive.

Similarly, **Tendulkar and Rao (2010)** argue that **poverty** remains the primary driver of child labour in India, exacerbated by **inequality** and **regional disparities**. They emphasise that child labour is a consequence of economic survival in impoverished households, and its prevalence is often more acute in rural regions with underdeveloped infrastructure and fewer opportunities. The study points out that child labour reinforces the **cycle of poverty**, as children who work instead of receiving education have fewer chances to escape poverty in adulthood.

2.4 Prevalence of Child Labour in the Informal Economy in India

Child labour in India is intricately linked to the pervasive informal economy, as highlighted by Harris Zargar in his article "Child Labour in India: The Missing Data & The Informal Economy", published in

Global South Development Magazine on November 1, 2016. Poverty compels many children to seek employment in undisclosed sectors, often leading to dire situations, including human trafficking and exploitation.

In India, a significant portion of the workforce is employed in the informal economy, which comprises over half to two-thirds of all non-agricultural jobs, according to the International Labour Organization (ILO). This sector is marked by a lack of social protection, low wages, and hazardous working conditions. As Zargar notes, the informal economy is critical in providing economic opportunities for women, with female workers accounting for about 70% of non-agricultural employment as of 2013. However, this creates a concerning intersection where children also become part of this labour force, often facing similar vulnerabilities.

Many children are part of the home-based or casual workforce, with reports indicating that an estimated 20% of carpets manufactured in India involve child labour, according to a 2014 Harvard University report. Disturbingly, children as young as five are reported to work up to 12 hours a day, particularly in hazardous industries such as silk production. This exploitation is exacerbated by family dynamics, where children's time and mobility are controlled by adults, making them vulnerable to forced labour in hazardous conditions.

Zargar emphasises that while government statistics suggest a decrease in child labour—from 21.55 million in 2004-2005 to 4.94 million in 2009-2010—these figures do not account for children engaged in the unorganised sector, where much of child labour occurs. Organisations estimate the number of child labourers to be around 20 million, in stark contrast to official figures that claim only 2.5 million.

Kailash Satyarthi, a Nobel Peace Prize laureate, has consistently highlighted the persistence of child labour within India's informal sector. The reality is grim, with about 17.8 million children currently out of school, many of whom end up working in the informal economy. The unregulated nature of this sector complicates efforts to accurately track the number of children involved in labour, further obscuring the problem.

The existing empirical data often fails to capture the social and cultural dynamics contributing to child labour, leaving a significant gap in understanding the issue. Without accurate data, it becomes challenging to uphold laws designed to protect children's rights.

To combat the prevalence of child labour, Zargar suggests implementing several measures, including stricter enforcement of child labour laws, raising awareness in communities, and ensuring the right to education until a specific age. Improving data collection on child labour in the informal economy is essential to address this pervasive issue effectively.

3. Methodology

This research uses secondary data from reputable sources, including government databases, international organisations, and scholarly articles. The data provide insights into the role of the informal economy in child labour trends in rural India.

3.1 Data Sources

Government Reports: Data from the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), Census of India, and Ministry of Labour and Employment.

International Organizations: Reports from the International Labour Organization (ILO) and UNICEF provide global and national child labour data.

Peer-Reviewed Journals: Academic studies on child labour and the informal economy, sourced from databases such as JSTOR and Google Scholar.

3.2 Data Analysis

A thematic analysis approach examined the connection between the informal economy and child labour. Key themes such as poverty, informal employment, and lack of education were identified from secondary data sources to understand their relationship with child labour in rural areas.

3.3 Policy Context and Its Impact on Child Labour in Rural India

The influence of **Tendulkar and Rao's findings** on India's socio-economic policies has been profound, particularly in shaping the government's approach to **poverty alleviation** and **child labour**. Their work on the **relationship between poverty, inequality, and child labour** has informed policies aimed at improving social justice and protecting children from exploitation in the informal economy.

Both committees emphasised the **high prevalence of child labour in rural areas**, identifying it as a consequence of **poverty and inequality**. These findings have directly influenced the **Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act** and initiatives like the **National Child Labour Project**, which aim to eliminate child labour and rehabilitate children through education and skill-building programs.

The **Tendulkar Committee's poverty estimates**, which were lower than others, sparked a debate on the effectiveness of poverty reduction strategies in India. These estimates were instrumental in designing **targeted poverty alleviation programs**, such as **MGNREGA** (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act), which aims to provide rural households with **employment opportunities** to reduce their reliance on child labour for additional income.

Moreover, **Tendulkar and Rao's findings on inequality** highlighted disparities between rural and urban regions. This has influenced policies like the **National Food Security Act** and **affirmative action programs** for marginalised communities, which address the **socio-economic factors** driving children into labour, particularly in rural informal sectors.

3.4 Economic Factors Contributing to Child Labour: Insights from the HCES 2022-23

One of the significant contributors to child labour in rural India is the **economic pressure** faced by households. The **Household Consumption Expenditure Survey (HCES) 2022-23**, conducted by the **National Sample Survey Office (NSSO)** under the **Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI)**, provides crucial insights into the consumption patterns and living standards of rural households. According to the survey, the **Monthly Per Capita Consumption Expenditure (MPCE)** for rural households increased by **40.42%**, from ₹2,008 in 2011-12 to ₹2,817 in 2022-23, while for urban households, it rose by **33.5%**, from ₹3,510 to ₹4,686.

Despite these increases in MPCE, a significant portion of rural household expenditure (**46%**) continues to be allocated to food, reflecting the ongoing **prioritisation of basic survival needs** over education or investments in child development. This economic burden creates conditions where families may feel compelled to rely on child labour to supplement household income, particularly in the informal economy where labour regulations are weak or absent.

The **poverty estimates** derived from the HCES further provide a critical context for analysing child labour. Regions with higher poverty levels are more likely to exhibit greater child labour prevalence as families face limited access to education and decent work opportunities. Moreover, the **regional variations** in

consumption and living standards identified in the survey suggest that child labour is more prevalent in economically disadvantaged regions. This trend aligns with existing research, indicating that children in rural areas are more vulnerable to being drawn into labour due to the **economic vulnerability** of their families.

In addition, the HCES data emphasises the need for targeted policy interventions to address the underlying **economic drivers** of child labour. Given the persistent prioritisation of essential needs, there is a clear necessity for **social protection measures** that can alleviate economic pressure on households and reduce reliance on child labour. By improving access to education and strengthening support systems for vulnerable families, such interventions could help mitigate the cycle of poverty that perpetuates child labour in rural areas.

3.5 Hunger and Child Labour: Insights from the Global Hunger Index

The **Global Hunger Index (GHI) 2023** provides critical insights into the relationship between hunger and child labour in India. With a GHI score of **28.7**, categorised as serious, India has made progress since its score of **29.2** in 2015, but challenges remain. The country ranks **111th out of 125** nations in the 2023 report, highlighting the persistent food insecurity affecting many households.

Key indicators from the GHI report are particularly alarming. India has the **highest child wasting rate** at **18.7%**, alongside a **child stunting rate** of **35.5%** and a **prevalence of undernourishment** at **16.6%**. These statistics are indicative of the severe malnutrition affecting children, which can severely hinder their physical and cognitive development.

Malnutrition and economic pressure often intersect, compelling families to prioritise immediate survival needs over education. When children suffer from malnutrition, their ability to learn diminishes, increasing the likelihood that they will enter the workforce at a young age to contribute to family income. This cycle perpetuates child labour, as economic hardship leads families to rely on the income generated by their children, often at the cost of their education and well-being.

Addressing hunger and improving nutritional outcomes is crucial for reducing child labour in India. Comprehensive interventions that focus on enhancing food security and promoting access to education can help break this cycle, enabling children to pursue their educational goals rather than entering the workforce prematurely.

3.6 Impact of COVID-19 on Child Labour in India

The **International Labour Organization (ILO) report "Child Labour and the COVID-19 Pandemic: Evidence from India" (2021)** highlights the significant exacerbation of child labour due to the pandemic. The report outlines key findings that are crucial for understanding the contemporary landscape of child labour in India:

- **Exacerbation of Child Labour:** The pandemic intensified the existing problem of child Labour, particularly in rural areas where economic hardships were most severe.
- **Economic Disruption:** Lockdowns forced many children into the workforce as families struggled to make ends meet. The need for additional income prompted parents to send their children to work, further entrenching them in child Labour.
- **Marginalized Communities:** Children from marginalized communities—especially Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and low-income households—faced disproportionately high

rates of child Labour. This highlights the intersectionality of poverty and social inequality in exacerbating child Labour.

- **Agricultural Sector:** The agriculture sector became a significant source of child Labour during the pandemic, as families relied on their children's Labour to maintain their livelihoods amidst economic uncertainty.
- **Closure of Schools:** The widespread closure of educational institutions deprived children of their primary protection against child labour. Without access to education, many children were left vulnerable to exploitation and labour demands.

This comprehensive analysis underscores the urgent need for targeted interventions to address the impact of the pandemic on child labour. It highlights the necessity of re-establishing educational opportunities and implementing social protection measures to support vulnerable families and reduce child labour rates moving forward.

3.7 Economic Factors and the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic

The **Economic Survey of India (2020-21)**, published by the Government of India, provides critical insights into the economic challenges faced by families during the pandemic and their subsequent impact on child labour:

- **Pandemic-Induced Economic Distress:** The survey highlights that the economic fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic significantly increased the number of children entering the workforce. Families faced financial hardships, leading to the need for additional income sources, often at the expense of children's education and well-being.
- **School Closures:** The prolonged closure of schools during the pandemic further exacerbated the child labour issue. With children out of school, many were left without supervision and support, making them more susceptible to entering the labour market.

These findings illustrate the interconnectedness of economic distress and child labour, emphasising the need for comprehensive policy interventions that address economic recovery and child protection to mitigate the adverse effects of future crises.

4. Results

The analysis of secondary data reveals the following findings:

4.1 High Prevalence of Child Labour in Informal Sectors

Data from the NSSO (2021) show that the majority of child labourers in rural India are involved in informal work, particularly in agriculture, small-scale manufacturing, and domestic work. The unregulated nature of these sectors makes enforcement of child labour laws challenging.

Despite efforts to universalise education and reduce child labour, **Child Labour and Schooling in India: A 2024 Reappraisal** by UNICEF highlights that child labour remains prevalent in specific sectors and regions, particularly in **rural areas**. This persistence is often due to the economic reliance on informal work, where children are seen as contributors to household income. The report shows that while India has made progress in expanding access to primary education, the **school-to-work transition** is still a significant challenge, particularly for children in secondary education who are at higher risk of dropping out and entering the informal workforce.

4.2 Socio-Economic Drivers of Child Labour

Poverty and lack of access to education are significant factors driving child labour in rural India. The absence of formal employment opportunities often forces families to engage their children in informal work. According to ILO (2020), children in rural households are often seen as contributors to family income, which leads to a high dropout rate from schools.

Tendulkar and Rao (2010) further support this argument by emphasising that **inequality** and **regional disparities** contribute to the persistent problem of child labour. Their research shows how poorer regions with higher inequality rates often have more significant numbers of child labourers, especially in rural areas where education access is limited and economic opportunities for adults are scarce. This connection between economic disparity and child labour highlights the structural challenges in addressing the issue.

The **UNICEF report (2024)** further elaborates on the **gender disparities** in child labour and schooling. It notes that **girls** are at a higher risk of being engaged in child labour, and they experience **lower school attendance rates** compared to boys. This gender imbalance is particularly evident in rural areas where cultural norms and economic pressures make it more difficult for girls to continue their education, leading to higher instances of their involvement in informal work.

Additionally, the **COVID-19 pandemic** is noted as a factor that worsened the situation for vulnerable children in rural areas. The disruption in education due to the pandemic led many children to leave school and engage in child labour to support their families, reversing some of the gains made in reducing child labour over the past decade.

4.3 Impact of Government Policies

The government has launched several initiatives to combat child labour, such as the National Child Labour Project (NCLP). However, reports from the Ministry of Labour (2022) indicate that these policies have had limited success in rural areas, where enforcement is weak and informal sectors dominate the economy.

4.4 Government Initiatives Addressing Rural Child Labour

The policies shaped by the findings of **Tendulkar and Rao** have contributed to India's ongoing battle against **child labour**, particularly in rural areas. The **Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act**, supported by the **National Child Labour Project**, draws directly from the concerns raised by these committees about the exploitation of children in various informal sectors.

MGNREGA, for instance, addresses one of the root causes of child labour: poverty. Offering guaranteed employment to adults in rural households reduces the financial pressures that often force families to send their children to work instead of school. Similarly, **Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana** promotes **financial inclusion** by giving marginalised families access to banking and credit facilities, empowering them to secure resources without relying on child labour.

Furthermore, the committees' emphasis on addressing **inequality** between rural and urban areas has resulted in policies to improve living conditions for rural populations. For instance, **Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana** offers affordable housing, and the **Skill India Mission** provides vocational training for youth, increasing their employability and breaking the cycle of poverty that sustains child labour.

5. Discussion

The findings highlight the intricate relationship between the informal economy and child labour in rural India.

5.1 Challenges of Regulating the Informal Economy

The informal economy's vast scale and unregulated nature pose significant challenges to addressing child labour. Even though laws like the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act exist, their implementation is complex in sectors where children are considered an integral part of the workforce (ILO, 2020).

5.2 Role of Poverty and Social Norms

The secondary data underscore that poverty is the primary driver of child labour in rural India. Informal jobs provide low and unstable incomes, making it necessary for children to contribute to household earnings. **Sen and Das (2008)** argue that poverty, compounded by **limited access to education** and **gender inequalities**, creates conditions where children, especially girls, are disproportionately pushed into labour. Furthermore, social norms in rural communities often condone child labour, particularly in family businesses or agriculture (Bhat & Kumar, 2018). **Sen and Das** also highlight that **boys and girls experience child labour differently**, with girls often burdened with domestic work in addition to informal employment.

Tendulkar and Rao (2010) also illustrate how **poverty perpetuates the cycle of child labour**. They argue that children who are forced into labour are more likely to remain trapped in poverty as adults due to the lack of education and skill development. This cycle of poverty is worsened by **inequality** and limited opportunities for upward mobility in rural regions.

5.3 Policy Implications

For government interventions to be effective, policies must target not only child labour directly but also the underlying socio-economic conditions of rural households. Expanding social protection schemes, improving access to education, and creating formal employment opportunities for adults could reduce the need for child labour in informal sectors. **Sen and Das (2008)** suggest that promoting **decent work opportunities in the informal economy** could help address the issue at its root. They advocate for policy frameworks that provide **social security** and **education incentives** for vulnerable children, ensuring that economic hardship does not force families to resort to child labour.

Tendulkar and Rao (2010) recommend **comprehensive policy interventions** that address **poverty** and **inequality** as root causes of child labour. They advocate for policies that promote **economic development** in impoverished regions, improve access to **quality education**, and reduce the economic pressures that drive families to rely on their children's labour. By addressing these underlying issues, the government can create a sustainable impact on reducing child labour in rural areas.

The **UNICEF report (2024)** emphasises the need for **strengthening education systems** to reduce child labour. It recommends investments in **quality education** and **early childhood education** to prevent children from dropping out and being pushed into labour. This is particularly important for rural regions where informal economies dominate, and educational infrastructure is often lacking.

The report also stresses the importance of **effective child labour policies**, including enforcing existing laws and implementing **social protection measures** for vulnerable families. This aligns with the argument that tackling child labour in rural India requires not only economic and social interventions but also a more substantial commitment to enforcing **child labour laws**, particularly in sectors prone to informal employment.

6. Conclusion

The informal economy in rural India continues to play a significant role in perpetuating child labour, largely due to its unregulated nature and the economic challenges faced by rural families. Despite government interventions aimed at combating child labour, the scale of the informal sector and persistent socio-economic disparities hinder progress. This paper highlights the crucial link between child labour and the informal economy, where many children find themselves in hazardous working conditions, often in sectors that lack oversight and regulation.

Recent insights, including UNICEF's 2024 reappraisal, emphasise the importance of targeted interventions in education, stricter enforcement of child labour laws, and tailored programs for marginalised communities. Furthermore, as highlighted by Harris Zargar in “Child Labour in India: The Missing Data & The Informal Economy,” published in *Global South Development Magazine* (2016), the prevalence of child labour in the informal economy reflects a pressing need for comprehensive strategies that address both the vulnerabilities of children and the socio-economic conditions that compel them into labour. While strides have been made, significant challenges remain in eradicating child labour, particularly in rural and informal sectors.

Informed by the foundational work of Tendulkar and Rao, socio-economic policies such as MGNREGA, financial inclusion initiatives, and specific child labour reduction programs have sought to alleviate poverty and inequality, which are key drivers of child labour. However, the gap in accurate data collection and understanding of social and cultural dynamics necessitates ongoing research and policy innovation. The success of these interventions underscores the importance of continued poverty alleviation efforts, expanding access to education, and providing alternative livelihood options for families. As India advances its commitment to eliminating child labour, these strategies remain vital in safeguarding vulnerable children and ensuring their access to a better future.

7. Future Research Directions

While this research highlights key issues surrounding child Labour in rural India, several areas require further exploration to deepen understanding and inform more effective interventions. Future research could focus on:

- **Evaluating the impact of specific government programs:** A more detailed analysis of how initiatives like MGNREGA or financial inclusion schemes directly impact child Labour rates in rural regions would provide clearer insights into their effectiveness.
- **Exploring gender-specific challenges in child Labour:** Investigating how gender disparities influence child Labour practices, particularly in rural settings, can help tailor interventions more effectively for boys and girls.
- **Assessing the role of technology in eradicating child Labour:** Understanding how digital platforms and innovations can help monitor and reduce child Labour, particularly in remote areas, remains an unexplored frontier.
- **Longitudinal studies on socio-economic mobility:** Tracking families over time to assess whether current interventions are breaking the cycle of poverty and reducing reliance on child Labour in the long term could offer valuable policy guidance.

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