

An Empirical Analysis of the Child Labor in the Carpet Industry of Kashmir – Some Major Findings

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Abstract

In the present paper an attempt has been made to study various facts of child labor. Children have been defined here as those in the age group of 6-14 years, working in their family owned or non-family carpet weaving units. The major focus was (i) to find socio-educational life pattern of child labor, (ii) to locate factors compelling them to join labor force, (iii) to identify their socio-economic and family background, (iv) to delineate various positive and negative aspects of their working conditions, (v) to find the level of earnings of child and its impact on household income, (vi) to highlight the effects of abolition of child labor on the household, (vii) to identify the role of employers in eliminating child labor, and (viii) to know the opinion of parents and employers on child labor.

Multi-stage sampling was used to select child labors from 100 households engaged in carpet units of five village of Quimoh development block of Kulgam district, which was the universe of the present study. In its effort to collect more authentic data, the study has included parents (82) of the child workers and their employers (50) as well. The tools used for data collection were interview schedules besides observations, block development offices etc. The major findings and conclusions that emerge from the analysis and discussion are briefly summarized in the present paper. Apart from these, certain important recommendations are made to ameliorate the condition of child workers in contemporary society and also to prevent the entry of children in carpet weaving in future society.

Keywords: Child labor, employers, carpet weaving, poverty, education, health, illiteracy, sex

1. Introduction

The practice of child labor, with its numerous manifestations, is widely prevalent in different economic activities in all developing countries, and India is no exception. The industries most notorious for employing child labor include carpet weaving, fireworks and match manufacture, bidi-making, glass and bangle manufacture, construction work and rag-picking, not to mention child prostitution. The result is a childhood destroyed, a dismal future, a wounded psyche, and an imbalanced society and economy. The carpet industry of India – a serious contender with countries such as Iran, China, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Nepal in the markets of North America and Europe— has come increasingly under international pressure on the issue of child labor. This has given rise to many controversies and face-offs in the international trade arena.

2. Child labor in carpet weaving

Though a number of industrial units engage child workers, the carpet weaving, due its peculiar system of production employs lakhs of children in different parts of our country. An ILO study estimates that there could be 420,000 child laborers in India employed in carpet weaving industry. According to some NGO's the number of child laborers in carpet industry has increased from 100,000 in 1975 to 300,000 in 1990. A detailed sample survey of Indian Carpet Industry estimated child laborers to constitute 22 per cent of a work force of 6 lakh weavers amounting to about 1,30,000 children (Harvey & Reggin 1994) .

In the state of Jammu and Kashmir, Carpet weaving is one of the important occupations employing large number of children. A survey by Khatri, K. (1983) shows that about 80,000 to one lakh children between 6-14 years of age were engaged in carpet weaving industry of kashmir. Similarly another study by Sudesh Nangia (UNICEF 1988) shows that 25 per cent of the carpet weaving industry's workforce comprises of children below the age of fifteen and nearly a third of the total workforce comprises of children under 8 years of age.

There is an increasing awareness at present in the international media about child labor exploitation in South Asian carpet industry. This is partly due to 12 year old Iqbal Mosi, a bonded carpet weaver in Pakistan who was latter killed for his anti-child labor campaign. Thus their needs a special attention for the elimination of child labor.

Since employment of children in the carpet weaving industry have various far-reaching socio-economic consequences. It deprives them of the opportunities of education and recreation, stunts their physical growth and their development for adult responsibility. They suffer from various ailments directly attributable to their work. Various eye problems, joint and body aches, breathing problems, including various pulmonary ailments sap the child's élan vital. Added to this are problems of lack of exercise and of continuous sitting and stooping in a single posture resulting in loss of appetite and sluggishness of various parts of the body. The constant interplay of the fingers with thread results in scratches that not only look unsightly but are also painful.

In the rural areas children are also forced to work in the cold weather conditions in winter and heating arrangements are not provided to them. This is why children in winter season often claim about cough and cold and other related diseases. Further because of the poor ventilation system, they suffer from other communicable diseases.

Besides health, their education also suffers. As these remain illiterate and lack fundamental, general and professional knowledge which is required for normal mental and intellectual development and to prosper in social and occupational fields. Thus in the present study an attempt has been made to study various aspects of child labor in the carpet weaving industry of Kashmir. The major findings and conclusions that emerge from the analysis and discussion are briefly summarized in the present paper. Apart from these, certain important recommendations are made to ameliorate the condition of child workers in contemporary society and also to prevent the entry of children in carpet weaving in future society.

3. Major findings of the study

It is generally believed that child labor is male dominated but in the present study we found reverse is the case, as most (60%) of child labors are female. The societal preference for male children result in girls being valued less, fed less, educated less but worked harder and are more disciplined and deprived of every opportunity to broaden their personal, social and intellectual horizons. In most economically disadvantaged families, greater the poverty, the more aggravated is the situation of the female child. In certain families, the rules of permission and restriction on women and female children are much more stringent which allows for greater exploitation and discrimination. Higher proportion of female children in the sampled villages can be attributed to socio-economic factors as majority of the households put a ceiling into female children's aspirations. The notion of temporary membership in the parental home results in the perception of the female child as a burden to be passed on to another family where she remains an outsider, a household drudge, a reproductive machine and unpaid worker throughout in life. Further girl's economic participation goes unnoticed as they are employed in either family labor or domestic worker in unorganized sector like carpet units.

Majority of child labors were in the age group of 11-14 years and more than 3/4th were either illiterate or have not

completed even primary education. We found economic compulsion and educational backwardness were the two most important factors forcing children to leave the school at different points of time. Social and customary factors are other important factors especially for girls to withdraw from the studies. In other words, there is a close relationship between education of the child and the need for taking up the jobs for helping the families financially and keeping them alive. Unless these conditions are improved the problems of illiteracy and drop-out will persist and children will be forced to engage in some economic activities to help and supplement the income of their families.

Self employed children outnumber employed children and among them girls are mostly employed at their home as compared to boys. Nearly half of them spend their leisure time on domestic work, which is considered unhealthy for physical and mental growth and development of the child.

Majority of child labors belong to nuclear family and 60 percent have either eight or less members in family. This is in contrast to the common belief that joint and large families contribute more to the child labor population. The predominance of child labor in nuclear family shows that parent in the nuclear family have got greater influence to decide upon whether a child is to be educated or employed in contrast to the joint family system where old people have a considerable amount of influence in decision making.

Poverty and Low level of education among parents are breeding grounds for child labor system. There is positive correlation between poverty, illiteracy and child labor. It is quite evident from the analysis and review of various studies that where there is poverty and illiteracy child labor problem exists. Kerala were literacy is highest in the country, child labor problem is non-existent. In our study majority of parents were either illiterate or have not completed even primary education. Most of child labors were from BPL families as 3/4th household's monthly income was below Rs 3000. Nearly half of them were from laboring class followed by farming class. More than half of the households were having less than 2 Acres of land and 23 percent were landless. This reflects the fact that due to poverty along with illiteracy of parents children are deprived of the facilities which are essential for their proper growth and development and on the contrary they are put to work to supplement their family income.

Regarding child's contribution to family income, our study reveals that that there is a negative correlation between household's monthly income and child's contribution. In other words as family income increases the child's contribution towards family income decreases and vice versa.

We found that one-fourth of employers were preferring children in their looms because they are hard working and more than 1/5th prefer them because they are cheaper than adult workers. Twenty-two employers were employing children from lower communities and 14 percent from their own communities. The reasons for preferring workers from their own or socio-economically lower communities may be due to lack of social relationship between various communities in rural areas.

More than half (53%) child labors were found to be working from one month to two years and nearly 1/3rd were working in the looms from one month to one year. Nearly 3/4th were working between 6-8 hours a day. This means that majority of the children work for more than stipulated hours as laid down in various labor and industrial legislations which according to them should not be made to work for more than 5 hours a day. Thus child workers are highly exploited by employer by compelling them to work for longer hours in their looms.

So far, as the rest period of working is concerned, it was found in the survey that self employed children in their family units, in most of cases, had no scheduled periods for rest. These children were at liberty to attend their personal or family needs with due permission from their family members working on carpets. In the case of employed child workers their period of rest varied from season to season. During the summer season they were given rest for 2 hours (from 12-2 pm) while in rainy season as well as in the winter season, it was for one and a half hour as lunch break. All the looms remain off on Friday. Besides this children get religious holidays and sometimes due to shortage of raw material or during sickness they remain off from the work.

The monthly earnings of child labors were low. Half of them were earning between Rs 500 to Rs 700 and 18 percent below Rs 300. Therefore as mentioned earlier the parents are forced to send their children to this work because of many socio-economic problems and also in the hope that their children will earn more in the latter age

when they will become the master of their art.

It was found that half of the child labors had cordial relationship with their co-adult workers. Similarly half of them were having friendly relationship with their employers and 46 percent could not specify their relationship with employers. More than 1/3rd respondent's grievances were received by employers for payment of low wages and little more than 1/4th grievances were received for the refusal of advance money.

In our study 35 percent employers responded that children working in their looms are irregular, 1/3rd responded they quarrel with each other and 12 percent said that children are smoking during work. The punishment was given according to nature of mistake. Mostly employers were threatening the child workers and in some cases they give them physical punishments also.

More than half of the child labors were dissatisfied with the present job mostly because of low wages, temporary nature of job, unhealthy work environment, and rude behavior of employers and long hours of work. Nearly 1/4th of the parents responded that their children had developed smoking habits, 13 percent said that they did not obey them and 8 percent responded that they have joined the bad company. Regarding positive aspects, 17 percent of the parents responded that their children have become more responsive and 11 percent said that they have become hard working.

Most of the parents observed negative effects of carpet weaving on the health of child workers. The most common diseases were headache, vision problem, stomach and joint pain, finger pain and chest troubling. More than 1/4th of the child labors reported headache and a little less than 1/4th (21%) were having vision problems.

Majority of the parents (95 %) were considering education necessary for their children and about half of them suggested they should be educated up to 12th standard while 21 percent said up to college level. More than 3/4th (78 %) parents suggested evening classes should be held during leisure time and 17 percent wanted teaching for one hour during the period of work. Majority of the parents want the children to work in the age group of above 14 years yet most of them send their children to work below this age reflecting the fact that it is poverty, lack of income earning opportunities and other social conditions that force them to send their children to work.

More than half (58.54%) parents were in favor of abolition of child labor and 46 percent employers were also favoring the abolition of child labor. Those who were against argued that many poverty stricken families will fail to provide minimum living and social requirements if the child labor is abolished. They advocated that child labor should be abolished from hazardous areas and unhygienic environment.

Regarding the effects of abolition of child labor, about half of the parents responded it has negative effect on child and 64 percent responded it has negative effect on family. While 35 percent parents said it has positive effect on child and only 8 percent responded positive effect on family. Those who responded abolition of child labor has negative effect on child said that child will become vagabond, delinquent and pick up bad habits. On the other hand those who responded abolition of child labor has negative impact on family stated that economic support from child to family would not be available and hence will create many problems to them. Most of the employers (90%) were of the opinion that abolition of child labor will decrease family income and 93 percent said it would affect the physical and mental conditions of children. Further majority of the employers (95%) responded that abolition of child labor would decrease their production and as such their profit and income.

Last but not least our study reveals that 42 percent employers were in favor of implementation of legislative measures and 44 percent employers wanted that compulsory education should be provided to the children up to 14 years of age. Also all the sampled employers responded that NGO's should financially help the families of child labor.

4. Suggestions

On the basis of the study the following suggestions are placed for consideration by the Government, the economic planners and the administration:-

- The problem of child labor is directly connected with poverty and illiteracy of Indian masses. There should be every possible effort on the part of Government and NGO's.
- Poverty elimination programmes such as NREP, IRDP, DPAP, TRYSEM, JRY, etc. should be effectively worked out in rural areas. Self-employment scheme should be intensified. Beneficiaries of these programmes must be those poor families who are child laborer. There should be a close understanding among the economists and bureaucrats and political leaders. Such as wedding is not only inevitable but also realistic in the sense of improving the present state of affairs. There should be coordination not at the planning level but also up to evaluation stage.
- Government should implement such action plans in the areas where child labor concentration is much higher. These areas should get priority.
- Unemployment allowance, old age pension and red-card scheme for supplying the grains at half price among the poor all should be properly and fairly implemented. Benefit should reach genuine and needy people.
- Poverty alleviation programmes would be formulated and implemented in a decentralized manner with the participation of people at grass-root level through village Panchayats, panchayat samities, Zillah parishads, etc. Such an approach will contribute to the selection of projects suited to local conditions, and to integration of poverty alleviation programmes with area development.
- The economic conditions of the families from where the child laborers come into the work force should be improved.
- Wage earning schemes are like pain killers and give temporary relief. None of the programmes under the anti-poverty umbrella is executed in a way as may provide a lasting solution. Enough local initiative and discretion is needed to mould and share the programmes as per local needs.
- What the poor need is a stake in the land they till; fair wages for their work; education, training and up gradation of skills; credit and infrastructural support for self-employment in primarily, secondary and tertiary sectors. Above all, they need self-confidence and social recognition to come out of the poverty trap.
- The failure to improve the lot of poor and backward castes, so far, has been the result of complex interplay of economic and political forces and many maladies in the administrative machinery. It seems the failure has been partly due to wrong policies and partly due to inherent weakness in the political and economic institutions and administrative machinery in addition to the faulty planning. All need careful investigations and corrections to release the fruits of development in the real sense.
- Any legislation for totally prohibiting child labor amounts to hardships to the poor parents and their children unless they are rehabilitated or their families are provided alternative source of income.
- Child Labor should not be under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Labor. The rehabilitation programmes come under Education Department, Health Department, Rural Development Department, etc. Co-ordination with these departments is often a major hurdle. Therefore, child labor should be under the Ministry of Welfare because it would be better suited to deal with problem in its various dimensions.
- The state has to recognize the problem of the child labor with full responsibility and give the insurance of basic needs of life both to the parents and their children.
- Minimum Wages Act should be strictly followed and the act concerning it should be amended and reformulated to avoid loopholes in them.
- Schooling is the obvious and only best alternative to child labor along with several anti-poverty programme implementations as poverty coupled with mass illiteracy aggregates the situation. All the programmes for education meant for child labor should go side by side with nutrition health care, and social welfare as a package within ICDS.
- Laws on child labor and education should be consistent in purpose and implemented in a mutually supportive way.

- Voluntary efforts to undertake innovative experiments in early childhood education should be welcomed and supported.
- Top priority should be given to universalisation of elementary education for children between 6-14 years within a time frame not exceeding more than 5 years. The other important programme would be non-formal education to help children who are unable or unwilling to attend full time school. These facilities should be provided by NGO's. Education policy needs a constructive change. Primary education should be made compulsory and free for all children below the age of 15. Curriculum should be reformed to suit local environment, school timings, and local community resources. "Earn-while you-learn" programmes should be introduced and expanded according to local requirements. Thus education has become part of the problem but it must be reborn as a part of solution on the above guidelines.
- Adequate medical and recreational facilities should be provided to the deprived children for their emotional and psychological developments.
- The place of work should be provided with adequate infrastructure like safe drinking water, proper sanitation facilities etc.
- Educating the child is not enough without also educating the parents. Hence, there should be a greater emphasis on adult education which will teach about nutritional needs of the child and also make parents aware of the hazardous of sending their children to work. Educational programmes should not stop at free tuition fee, but should also exempt children from examination fee and provide them with free books, stationary, uniform and other requirements.
- Data on child labor are scarce. National and international systems must be put in place to gather and analyze globally comparable data on child labor, if the problem is to be addressed effectively. Special attention must be paid to the forgotten or invisible areas of child labor, such as within the home, on the family farm or in domestic service. Monitoring by communities themselves is important, and working children should actively participate in assessing their situations and in proposing ways to improve their conditions.
- The parameters of human development achievements in Kerala are at par with developed countries. Kerala Human Development is an outstanding testimony to the crucial role of female literacy in India; our state should also follow it.
- Employers should be convinced about the damage they cause by making children work and should be made to take oath that they would abstain from employing children. Fiscal and monetary incentives should be provided by the government to these factories in which there is a tradition of employing child workers. If they do not employ children, they may get tax rebate, soft loans, preference for raw material sanction, etc. Along with the practice of providing incentives there should be provision for disincentives also such as cancellation of licenses of those factories, which continue to employ children.
- In order to curb the exploitative practice of employers, the growth of trade union can certainly put a break to such employment practices. They should argue for substitution of piece-rate wages with time wage system. This would enhance the earning potential of adult workers which, in turn, will reduce the incidence of child labor. The major central trade unions should cut across all their political barriers in raising their voice against most deplorable practice of employing children in hazardous industries like glass industry, gem cutting, construction work, carpet weaving, etc.
- Voluntary organizations can also play a very important role in eliminating the practice of child labor. They should be primarily concerned with mobilizing public opinion and also conducting awareness campaign/camps for various social groups. Efforts should be made by the Government to identify those voluntary organizations which work in the society's interest and they should be suitably rewarded. Steps should also be initiated to integrate the efforts of different voluntary organizations.
- Information campaigns should be organized to make people aware to harmful effects of child labor and to explain to them the possible alternatives. In this context the government should launch publicity rallies, campaign using mass media poster, leaflets, etc.

- Strong political will is also very important to ensure implementation of all schemes and programmes and legislations related to children's welfare and their families.
- Last but not least the prevailing corruption in government machinery must be checked very effectively and properly otherwise our all efforts in the elimination of child labor will be like filling a vessel which has a hole in it.

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