



ERADICATING CHILD LABOR IN INDIA: PROPOSALS FOR TRANSFORMATIVE POLICY REVISIONS

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In this article, author Anjali Nambiar discusses the need for swift and comprehensive interventions to protect the rights and future opportunities of child laborers in India—the country that accounts for the highest number of child laborers globally. She discusses the root causes of the ongoing prevalence of child labor and identifies the limitations of current policy in the face of economic drivers. She recommends policy solutions that include funding education, strengthening enforcement, and fostering a culture of compliance and accountability.

BACKGROUND

India harbors a disturbingly high proportion, exceeding ten percent, of the world's total child laborers, part of a deeply concerning global challenge. The Campaign Against Child Labor and UNICEF estimate that more than ten million children in India are exposed to child labor, engaging in activities that are outlined by IPEC to pose mental, physical, social, or moral risks and detrimentally affect their education.¹ Various industries in India, particularly in the

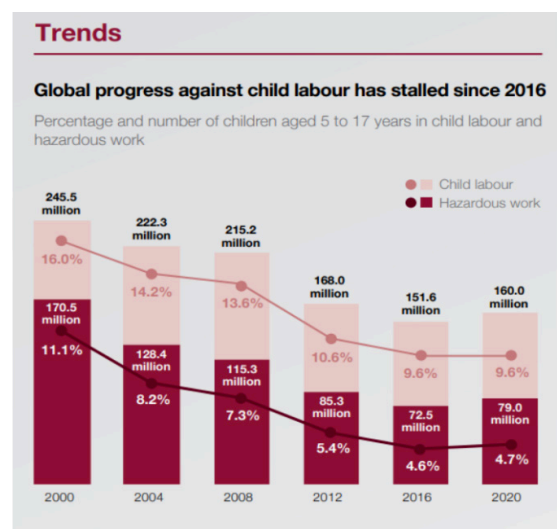
garment, construction, agriculture and fireworks industries, employ child labor.² Renowned organizations such as Kellogg's, Unilever and Nestlé have been implicated in child labor practices through the palm oil supplying company Wilmar.³

The Indian government has implemented various measures to address child labor. At the policy level the government formed its inaugural committee to investigate child labor concerns in 1979. Subsequently, in 1986, the government enacted the Child Labor Prohibition & Regulation Act, which was further amended in 2016. This legislation prohibits the employment of children younger than fourteen in all forms of work and includes provisions prohibiting adolescents (aged fourteen to eighteen) from engaging in hazardous occupations and processes. Additionally, numerous non-governmental organizations (NGOs), such as Amnesty International and Save the Children, are actively involved in combating child labor in India.

These measures have resulted in a reduction of approximately

2.6 million child laborers between 2001 and 2011, representing a 16 percent decrease.⁴ Despite the progress, change has been gradual, emphasizing the urgent need for a unified and targeted effort to eradicate child labor, bolstered by substantial government and NGO support.

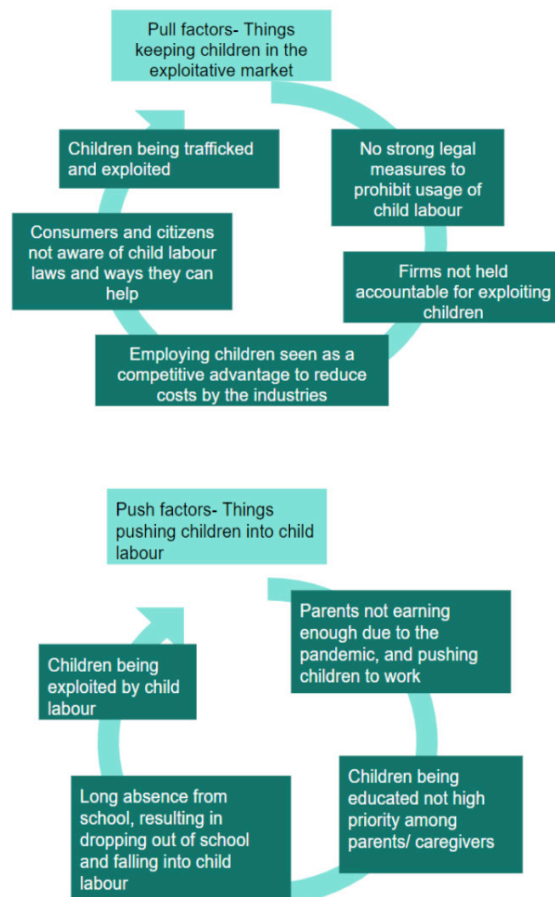
More concerning, the COVID-19 pandemic could result in the reversal of these efforts if swift action is not taken. Through the lockdown in India, numerous vulnerable families suffered from the adverse effects of school closures and economic hardships, leading to widespread internal migration and an increased reliance on child labor for income.⁵



Source: Child Labour and Global Estimates 2020-ILO

ROOT CAUSES OF CHILD LABOR

Child labor is perpetuated by both demand side and supply side reasons. There is a supply side push of children into the labor market due to poverty. There is also demand from the industries to pull them into the labor market and keep them exploited for reasons such as ease of employment and low wages.⁶ To effectively design policies to reduce child labor, understanding these factors is imperative. These are elaborated in the diagram below.



The social, economic, and political dynamics contributing to the persistence of child labor in India are multifaceted. Several factors have been identified, including poverty, social norms, lack of access to education, and weak enforcement of child labor laws.

Poverty is a significant factor influencing the prevalence of child labor.⁷ Children from impoverished families often work to contribute to their family’s income, perpetuating a cycle of poverty and lack of education. A study in one of the southern cities of India to measure the risk factors leading to child labor found that they included debt, having a disabled family member, large family sizes, and maternal education.⁸ For instance, the children of mothers who had no formal school education had 1.73 times the risk of being sent to work compared to those of mothers

who had formal school education.

Social norms also play a role, as certain traditional attitudes and practices may condone child labor, particularly in rural areas. Additionally, the lack of access to quality education limits opportunities for children, making them more vulnerable to exploitation in the labor market.⁹

From a political perspective, weak enforcement of child labor laws and inadequate social protection measures contribute to the persistence of child labor in India. Despite the existence of legislation, enforcement remains a challenge, allowing for the continued exploitation of children in various industries.¹⁰

Policy interventions need to consider these factors to ensure that the policy is eliminating the root cause of child labor. A comprehensive policy should be able to pull children out of this market, keep them from reentering the market in the future and also prevent them from being subject to child labor at all.

POLICY GOALS

To effectively combat child labor in India, the following goals should guide the policy interventions:

- 1. Efficacy:** Over the past ten years, India has managed to mainstream 10 percent of children who were exploited. The suggested policy should aim to reduce the number of children employed by 40 percent within the next ten years, which is the approximate global average reduction over the past decade.¹¹ This reduction will serve as a clear indicator of the policy’s success in curbing child labor.
- 2. Political Feasibility:** The policy should be able to withstand changes in government. To ensure sustained progress, it is crucial that

the policy maintains support across political parties and remains immune to potential disruptions caused by transitions in government.

3. Citizen buy-in: It is crucial for the policy’s success, emphasizing active involvement and participation of Indian citizens. By engaging citizens in both policy formulation and implementation, we can foster long-term sustainability and elevate it as a significant agenda that political parties cannot overlook.

4. Administrative burden: The ideal policy recommendation should be able to reduce administrative burden on the implementing body, removing barriers to accessing public services and rights and ensuring marginalized groups are not disproportionately affected.

POLICY OPTIONS AND EVALUATION

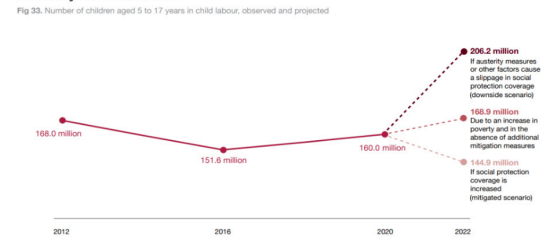
To address the issue of child labor in India, this article analyzes the following policy options.

Letting present trends continue: Continuing with the existing laws and policies without additional intervention will inevitably result in a further increase in the number of children subjected to labor. One report even finds that the current ban is only increasing the number of children subject to child labor.¹² Over the past decade, the number of children being moved out of child labor has been abysmally low—around ten percent, which is a quarter of the global rate of reduction. There has also been a gradual reduction in the budgetary allocation to the rescue efforts.¹³

In order to accelerate the progress towards the elimination of this social problem in the wake of the turbulent socioeconomic conditions, there needs to be concerted mitigation

measures to create and implement additional policies to bolster the efforts.

Without mitigation measures, 8.9 million more children will likely be engaged in child labour by the end of 2022



Source: Child Labour: Global Estimates 2020, Trends and the Road Forward

1. Conditional cash transfers to schools:

One policy solution is cash transfers to families, conditional on school attendance and regular health checkups for nutrition levels. This can incentivize parents to keep their children in schools reducing the likelihood of child labor due to household vulnerability. Similar programs have been implemented in Columbia.¹⁴

Cash transfers conditional on sending the students to school instead of employing the students have demonstrated effectiveness in reducing child labor. For example, a study in Costa Rica¹⁵ showed a reduction of up to four hours of child labor per child per week through this approach. These programs have also proven to be cost-effective and efficient. The conditionality can help ensure the money is not spent on other household assets leading to increased child employment, such as buying sewing machines to then exploit children to work on those machines.

Cash transfer initiatives, such as Direct Beneficiary Transfers and COVID-19 relief funds, have garnered support across political parties in India. Implementing cash transfers to schools to combat child labor and increase

education access is likely to enjoy bipartisan acceptance and gain popular support.

Cash transfers also have the advantage of actively involving Indian citizens, directly benefiting families in need and promoting the value of education. By engaging citizens and highlighting the importance of keeping children in school, the policy can generate widespread support and become a prominent agenda in political discourse. That said, there is a possibility that some sections of the population would be unhappy with the use of taxpayers money as cash transfers and may oppose this policy.

One downside of conditional cash transfers is that they introduce certain administrative burdens on the state, including financial resources for sustaining the program, data requirements for targeting the beneficiaries, increased burden on poor households to satisfy these conditions and other operational issues. But these costs can be reduced by simplifying and streamlining the eligibility criteria¹⁶ and leveraging technology and digital platforms for application, monitoring, and payment processes and integration with existing cash transfer programs.

2. Public information campaigns:

A targeted awareness campaign, similar to the ones intended to cause behavioral change in issues like smoking or drinking while driving, could be an effective way to nudge behavior change towards sending the children to school, instead of pushing them into early employment.¹⁷

Information campaigns, such as those promoting early childhood education, have proven to be effective in bringing about behavioral change in social issues such as suicide prevention.¹⁸ Targeting guardians of affected children to ensure they see the value of additional years of schooling could make a difference in multiple ways. Research has shown that increasing educational attainment

is associated with rising life expectancy, lower mortality, higher earnings, reduced disparities in health, and improved cognitive abilities. In low-income countries, an extra year of education is projected to increase a person's future income by ten percent.¹⁹

By emphasizing the long-term benefits of education, including higher earnings and improved health, such campaigns can appeal to a wide range of political perspectives, from social welfare to economic growth. Furthermore, public information campaigns are a non-coercive policy tool that is often perceived as less intrusive than regulatory measures, making them more politically viable and less likely to face opposition. Moreover, the use of modern communication channels, including social media, allows political actors to reach and engage with diverse constituencies more effectively. This aligns with the contemporary trend of leveraging digital platforms for political communication and engagement.

Implementing a public information campaign as a policy to promote education and discourage child labor can be considered a strategy with a low administrative burden. Such campaigns typically rely on mass media and communication channels to disseminate information, which can be more efficient and less resource-intensive than direct interventions requiring extensive bureaucratic processes. Public information campaigns have the potential to deliver messages at a low cost per head, making them a cost-effective policy instrument. While there are risks and costs associated with any policy, the use of mass media campaigns to change health behavior has shown that with adequate planning and execution, these campaigns can be successful in achieving their objectives with relatively low administrative demands.²⁰

3. Increasing penalties on organizations employing children

The current policy to curb child employment features very low fines and few convictions of individuals found to be guilty of this crime, especially at the central government level.²¹ The government could strengthen audit processes and penalize organizations that are found to employ child labor an amount equivalent to a significant share of their profits.

The United States implemented a child labor tax to reduce child labor in the year 1916. Though it was reversed, it does hold promise as a tool to reduce child labor if employed as a penalty mechanism by the government. That said, this policy alternative may not garner enough support from all the political parties as there may be certain pressure groups that may want this to be reversed. In addition, citizens may not be involved in this policy as much, but they will be able to exert pressure on the government to penalize the firms and ensure rights of the children are not curtailed.

Imposing higher penalties on organizations that employ child labor can introduce administrative burdens such as the need for regular inspections, strengthened audit processes, and the enforcement of penalties.²² However, these measures can also increase government revenue through the collection of fines from non-compliant organizations. The revenue generated from these fines could potentially be reinvested into programs aimed at eliminating child labor, such as education and social welfare initiatives, thereby contributing to the long-term economic and social development of the country.²³

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

To effectively combat child labor and enhance the welfare of children in India, we advocate for the implementation of a multifaceted approach that integrates targeted public information campaigns and conditional cash transfer programs. Public information campaigns have proven to be influential in altering societal behaviors, as demonstrated by successful initiatives addressing issues such as smoking, drunk driving, HIV transmission, and child marriage. By leveraging similar strategies, we can instigate a cultural shift towards prioritizing education over child labor. These campaigns should disseminate information on the importance of education, the dangers of child labor, and the long-term benefits of investing in children's futures.

Conditional cash transfer programs have been effective in incentivizing desirable behaviors, particularly in low-income communities. By providing financial assistance to families contingent upon their children's school attendance, we create a direct economic incentive for education while mitigating the financial pressures that often drive children into the labor force prematurely. This approach addresses the root causes of child labor by addressing the underlying socio-economic challenges faced by vulnerable households.

While legal interventions such as child labor bans are essential tools in combating exploitation, they are not always sufficient in ensuring child welfare.²⁴ Imperfect enforcement and the marginalization of vulnerable households necessitate complementary strategies that address the systemic barriers perpetuating child labor. By integrating conditional cash transfers with public information campaigns, we adopt a comprehensive approach that acknowledges the limitations of bans alone and addresses the nuanced

realities of child labor in India.

In conclusion, a comprehensive policy framework that combines public information campaigns with conditional cash transfers offers a pragmatic and compassionate solution to the pervasive issue of child labor in India. By addressing the multifaceted drivers of exploitation and fostering a supportive environment for education, we uphold the rights and dignity of every child while nurturing a brighter future for generations to come.

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