

*Full Length Research Paper*

# Gender, education and child labour: A sociological perspective

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**In all societies, boys and girls are assigned different societal roles and experience different perspectives of life as a result of their being male or female. Such differences have a gigantic impact on their lives. The importance of gender perspective is very important in understanding the convulsion of child labour. Gender, as opposed to sex, refers to the social differences and relations between boys and girls that are cultured and vary widely within and between cultures and change over time. While education in itself is clearly significant for the development of an individual and for the well being of the society, it may be less noticeable why education is important in the context of child labour. How are the two linked? Does child labour have an impact on children's school attendance? Can education play a role in combating child labour? If so, how can it be improved? These questions are dealt with in this paper.**

**Key words:** Gender, education, rights, exploitation, child, school, work, labour.

## INTRODUCTION

Modernity generates several pathologies of which child labour is one, which destroys children and childhood. The violence that is generated from this system perpetuates child labour. With the increasing process of industrialization, urbanization and continuous increase in population on one side, greater awareness about human development is on the other side, various social problems which have so far been abandoned or unattended, have come to assume significance. The problem of working children is one such problem. Though the magnitude of the problem has been escalating in that more and more children turn to be working children, the quantity of consideration the problem receives from government and various non-governmental agencies is not in rattle with its size, because, the tender aged boys and girls who are part of the problem are not in a position to present their case before the concerned authorities and by the time they become conscious and aware of their conditions, they do not remain children but pass into the role of adult workers. Thus, the traditional nature of the problem becomes a limiting factor for its solution.

## CONCEPTUALIZATION

The term "child labour" is denigration and is used in

sneering sense. This is because the type of work and the working conditions are such that they rebuff opportunities for physical, social and mental development of the children. So child labour can be defined in terms of age and the social situation in which it exists. Thus we see that the age criterion is common in both child labour and working child. The main difference is in the compulsion or lack of it. "A working child is one who falls within five to fourteen years age bracket and who is at the remunerative work-may be paid or unpaid and which is busy any hour of the day within and outside the family....."

Defining child labour is not as simple and straightforward as it may appear because it encompasses three difficult-to-define concepts "child", "work" and "labour". Childhood can be defined in terms of age. In some societies, age may not be a sufficient basis for defining "childhood". The accomplishment of certain social rites and traditional obligations may well be important requirements in defining "adult" and "child" status. In still others, the integration of children into socio-economic life may begin so early that it may be virtually impossible to identify clearly the different life phases. Besides, in the absence of an effective age record system, even applying an agreed legal definition becomes highly problematic. However, in the context of child labour, a working definition of a "child" may be a person below the general

limit of fifteen years or in special circumstances fourteen years, set by the Minimum Age Convention, 1973 (No.138).

According to ILO(1983), "child labour includes children prematurely leading adulteries, working long hours for low wages under conditions damaging to their health and to their physical and mental development, sometimes separated from their families, frequently deprived of meaningful education and training opportunities that would open for them a better future". According to Homer Folks, the chairman of the US National Child Labour Committee, the term 'child labour' is generally used to refer, "any work by children that interfere with their full physical and mental development, the opportunities for a desirable minimum of education and of their needed recreation".<sup>1</sup>

It is beyond the shade of doubt that politically, socially and economically child is the need of future. Child is not only the future of a nation and its aspirations but also, and mainly, its strength in reserve. The future of a nation is best insured if its children are healthy and active, educated and informed, disciplined and trained, as well as free from social prejudices and above all having a scientific outlook.

### Gender and child labour

For many years, policies, studies and programmes dealing with child labour have focused on boys, under the postulation that their needs and perspectives were identical to that of girls. As a result, girl child labourers were often made invisible whereas they represent a very large proportion of working children. It is only recently that working girls have received increased concentration largely due to the historic Convention on the Rights of the Child, the commitments adopted during the Fourth World Conference on Women (1995).<sup>2</sup>

The issue of gender is now universally regarded as a vital component in addressing child labour. Although they are exposed to many similar types of labour as boys, girls often endure additional hardships and are more susceptible to exploitation, sometimes as a result of their society's view of the role women and girls should play. The fact which is of particular concern is that a large proportion of the children are involved in some of the worst forms of child labour, namely commercial sexual exploitation.

For girls in particular, there are factors that create a conflict between child labour and education, and they are clearly reflected in the large gender gaps in schooling: sixty percent of the children around the world who do not go to school are girls.<sup>3</sup> Girls' education is threatened in

many countries by the frequent preference for educating sons, by early marriage, and by inheritance and social security laws that disadvantage women. Other factors that limit girls' educational opportunities range from the distance to schools, which place their security at risk, to the provision of relevant curricula sensitive to their needs and aspirations. In certain cultures, a girl's chances of going to school might depend on the availability of separate school facilities for girls (who cannot for cultural or religious reasons sit in the same schoolrooms with boys) or the presence of a female teacher. These and other problems often deprive millions of girls of an education.<sup>4</sup>

The value of girls' work and the high opportunity cost of foregoing it, poor opportunities for skilled employment after obtaining an education, and the prearranged role of girls who are expected anyway to have a life of domesticity and subservience are all baffling factors. Their education appears as a poor investment for many parents. Often, when faced with limited resources and many financial demands, parents prefer to invest in the education of their sons and not lose their daughters' critical contribution to the household economy.<sup>5</sup> There is a need of gender sensitive education. Child labour has an impact on different cultures and individuals in a variety of ways. Education concerning child labour should be both comprehensive and tailored to reach a variety of target audiences. Although gender perspectives continue to appear more frequently in analysis of child labour, there is still a lot of work to be done in grasping the role gender plays in determining the various forms and the extent of child labour.

There is no denying the fact that both girls and boys engage in the worst forms of child labour. However, it is important to realize that due to certain societal expectations, duties and responsibilities placed on girls, they are often more vulnerable to exploitation. Thus, the different expectations that society places on girls, as well as the differences in their situations and conditions must be taken into account before taking protective action. It is essential to understand the culture and environment in which child labour occurs in order to address all of the root causes of child labour, including gender bias. Surveys published by ILO reveal that the total number of working children increased noticeably, and working girls outnumbered working boys. From 1981 there is an increase in the work participation rate of girls and a decrease in the case of boys.<sup>6</sup> The problem of female child labour is a highly complex one. From birth to necropolis, female children toil hard both in and outside industries as a worker are on the increase. Patriarchal society has deeply internalized the idea of male supremacy and female dependency. Consciously or

<sup>1</sup> Mishra S.N. and Sweta Mishra, 2004, *Tiny Hands in Unorganized Sector*, New Delhi, Shipra Publications, pp.1-36.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/conference/>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> International Labour Office. 2004. *Child Labour: A Textbook for University Students*. Geneva: ILO. p. 153.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> World of Work. Dec. 1996. *Targeting the Intolerable*. Geneva: ILO. p. 7.

unconsciously, our society has been reinforcing the stereotypes of gender roles and expectations, with the result that girls find it almost impossible to break out of the mould that is cast for them by society. The female children are stained by neglects, discrimination, lack of opportunities and limited life options.<sup>7</sup> Gender discrimination often results in disparity in girls' enrolment, high dropout rate and their early involvement in economic activities. The female child helps the family to survive by spending her time and in this process she misses out education, good nutrition and future employment avenues that may be remunerative. Case studies about the children in employment reflect the pathetic plight of these children, particularly girls who suffer much more than boys.

The predominance of female labourers is reflected in the findings of various studies conducted in the garment industry in India, match, fireworks and beedi industries in Tamilnadu or in the bangle industry in Ferozabad. The findings showed that fifty to eighty percent of them lost their childhood, struggling between her work place and domestic chores at home. Female children are exploited unmercifully in many industries. Sometimes sexual abuse is also inflicted upon them. The crux of the problem of the female child is that she is caught in a situation, in which she cannot change, which is predetermined, pre-cast and pre-destined. Society has already defined her role, which is based on a male view. The societal preference for male children result in girls being valued less, fed less, educated less but worked harder and deprived of every opportunity to broaden their personal, social and intellectual horizons. In certain communities, the rules of permission and restriction on women and female children are much more stringent which allows for greater exploitation and discrimination.<sup>8</sup>

### Gender exploitation

In most of the developing countries even today, the female child has a lower status and enjoys fewer childhoods' rights, opportunities and benefits than the male child who has the first call on family and community resources with the female child instigating the process of inequality that the adult woman finds so difficult to overcome. Even where poverty is not an overriding factor in childhood development, gender inhibits equal opportunities for girls. Family preferences tend to favour boys over girls; family decisions in the distribution of food, labour, health care and access to schooling and other life changing opportunities usually benefit boys more than girls. A real gender differential in children is rooted in cultural perception. Available evidence indicates the pride

with which a newborn male child is welcomed and cynicism that greet the baby girl.<sup>9</sup>

Female children work in large numbers and for long hours in and outside the household, but their labour is unacknowledged or under-represented in formal labour statistics. Parental perception also contributes to the underrating of the labour of the female child. Such attitudes explain why boys are often given greater opportunities to learn economically valuable skills than girls. Gender disparity in education is influenced by the lack of educational facilities and cultural norms, which hold that girls are only 'born to marry' and therefore, addressing the needs of the female child could be the key to achieving a more equitable status and meaningful role for women in the long run.<sup>10</sup> Gender may influence child labour in ways similar to age. The returns to education may vary with gender. This seems likely to be especially important in third world where men and women participate in different economic activities. Likewise, the returns to activities other than age may also vary across cultures because of discrimination of the sex typing of tasks. Moreover age and gender may interact in important ways. First, girls develop earlier than boys so they may be capable of more sophisticated tasks at certain age. As puberty onsets, boys may develop comparative advantage in more physical activities. Second, the sex typing of tasks may be more important in the types of activities performed by older children. Hence gender difference in household or market work may manifest itself both in the types of activities performed at a given age, and these gender differences may vary with age. The research shows that the largest gender differences are in household production, and these gender differences are increasing in age.<sup>11</sup>

### Education and child labour

Over 70 million primary school aged children, and a much larger number of secondary school aged children, are not enrolled in school. Many more children are enrolled in school but do not attend regularly. Most of these children are among the world's child labourers.<sup>12</sup>

Widespread child labour is closely associated with poverty. The family may depend on the contribution a working child makes to the household income, and place more importance on that income than on education. A poor family may be unable to afford school fees, uniforms or other costs. Moreover, when a family has to make a choice between sending either a boy or girl to school, it is often the girl who loses out. A child who is in school full

<sup>7</sup> Anandarajakumar, P. 2004. Female Child Labour. APH Publishing Corporation: New Delhi. p. 57-58.

<sup>8</sup> Mohanti, Neeti. April 1997. Gender Perspective in Child Labour. Social Welfare: Vol. 44 (1). pp. 10-11.

<sup>9</sup> Anandarajakumar, P. 2004. Female Child Labour. APH Publishing Corporation: New Delhi. p. 61.

<sup>10</sup> UNICEF. 1990. Children and Development in the 1990's. New York: A UNICEF Source Book.

<sup>11</sup> Edmons, Eric V. 2003. Child Labour in South Asia. France: Directorate for Employment, Labour and Social Affairs. pp. 28-29.

<sup>12</sup> ILO. 2008. Quality Education is the Right Response to Child Labour. ILO.

time is more likely not to engage in child labour. Hence, expanding access to free and compulsory education is crucial to reducing child labour, as is the provision of quality education. Access to education is a necessary but not sufficient element as the challenge is to retain children in school. Only quality education can ensure that they stay in school. Quality means that teachers are recruited in adequate numbers to avoid high student teacher ratios in classrooms. Teachers and educators need to receive the training required to make them effective. Relevant curricula are also essential for an education of quality. Finally, no good education can be provided if classroom conditions are deplorable and students lack the necessary books, equipment and other educational materials. Children who receive an education of quality are more empowered to escape from poverty and, as adults, are more likely to send their children to school.<sup>13</sup>

### Child labour and school achievement

Attending school in the morning and studying at home in the afternoon requires time, and so does working. Depending on the circumstances, it is difficult for the child to find enough hours during the day to combine the two. A child's work can also compete with schooling in terms of money. While child labour is often a much needed contribution to the income of the family, education is so costly that the decision whether to send a child to school or to work is difficult for many poor parents.

Kanbargi and Kulkarni have examined the interrelation between child work, schooling and fertility in rural Karnataka. The study found a significant inverse relation between child labour and child schooling at the micro level. While the age of the child and the presence of younger siblings at home determined child labour, the age of the child and education of the father determined the schooling of children. However the study did not find any direct relationship between child labour and fertility; child labour significantly affects fertility through its negative effect on schooling. Since schooling had a negative effect on fertility, the overall effect of child labour on fertility was found to be positive. The analysis suggests that a reduction in the incidence of child labour and an increase in child schooling would lead to a decline in fertility.<sup>14</sup>

Myron Wiener and others hold the view that the universal extension of state-funded education in Europe, North America and Japan has been the most powerful instrument for the abolition of child labour. "No country has successfully ended child labour without first making education compulsory. As long as children need not

attend school, they will enter the labour force". Policy makers in most countries believe that mandatory education is a prerequisite for the eventual abolition of all forms of child labour.<sup>15</sup> Wiener also concludes in his book that child labour prevails due to illiteracy and refuted the popularly accepted explanations given by scholars on child labour, viz., low economic development of the nation, poverty, high birth rate and size of family.<sup>16</sup>

### Education and work

The expected returns to education (that is the benefits relative to the cost of education) are an important factor in the parents' considerations. However, the true benefits of schooling, such as increased future wages may often not be known to families, and even if they are, weighing up value against private costs is not an easy task. Even if parents are aware that the returns to education could be significant, the cost of schooling can be so high that the children are removed from school and pushed into works.<sup>17</sup> The benefits of going to school are mostly long-term, and will mainly affect the child, rather than the parent. On the other hand, the costs have to be born by the parents, and these costs are due in the short term. A comparative study of child labour and schooling in Africa found that one way to reduce child labour and increase incentives to keep the children in the educational system is to improve access to credit, which the family can pay back later.<sup>18</sup>

Education of good quality is a key element in the prevention of child labour. Children with no access to education have little alternative than to enter the labour market. Child labour is also one of the main obstacles to education for all, since children who are working full-time cannot go to school. The academic achievement of children who combine work and school often suffers, and there is a strong tendency for these children to drop out of school and enter into full-time employment.

When education is compulsory and attractive, it can help to reduce child labour. There is need to develop an integrated policy and programme of action to provide quality free and universal education that is relevant and accessible to children in poor families such as those to which the majority of child workers belong. Child labour concerns should be explicitly addressed and integrated into such a policy and programme of action; a holistic approach is necessary. Quality education should be

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. p.2.

<sup>14</sup> Kanbargi, Ramesh. 1991. *Child Labour in the India Subcontinent-Dimensions and Implications*. New Delhi: Sage Publications India Pvt. Ltd. p. 22.

<sup>15</sup> Myron Weiner. 1990. *The Child and the State in India: Child Labour and Education Policy in Comparative Perspective*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

<sup>16</sup> Agarwal, Babita. 2007. *Child Labour in India*. Jaipur India: ABD Publishers. p. 60.

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.savethechildren.org.uk>

<sup>18</sup> Martin, Gunther and Caglar. 2003. *Child Labour in Europe and Central Asia*. Preliminary results of polls sponsored by UNICEF, with the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, April 2001.

**Table 1.** Annual expenditure on basic education and other items.

S/ No.	The world's priorities (annual expenditure) (bn)	
1	Basic education	6
2	Ice Cream in Europe	11
3	Perfumes in Europe and USA	12
4	Pet foods in Europe and USA	17
5	Business entertainment in Japan	35
6	Cigarettes in Europe	50
7	Alcoholic drinks in Europe	105
8	Narcotic drugs in the world	400
9	Military spending in the world	780

Source: UNDP, Human development report 1998.

provided for children at least up to 15 years of age to stem the flow of children into the labour market and to provide working children and former working children with educational opportunities. A recent study estimates that worldwide, an additional US 16 billion dollar per year would be required to achieve universal primary education of decent quality by 2015 (Matz, 2003).<sup>19</sup>

Table 1 indicates that the world can surely afford to invest more money in the well-being of its children. However, while universal access to education is affordable in global terms, there are many countries, particularly in Africa, for which the costs of financing the types of education programmes are too high. These countries must rely on increased donor assistance from the developed countries to meet the present educational challenges.

NGOs can play an important role in this regard. No other suggestion is as important as the linking of education with the individual's life, need and ambitions so as to make him a powerful instrument of social, economic and cultural transformation, and to fulfill national objectives through him. This is possible only when education is linked with productivity. Simultaneously, it could develop truly indigenous life style that could go with modernization. Above all education could develop a sense of cooperation and could formulate a character through stress on social, moral and spiritual values.<sup>20</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The genuine rights of children are denied at different levels on account of their hectic and full time employment in different works due to multifarious reasons. Huge number of women and female children leading to 'feminization' of economic pursuit are busy with different sectors of the economy. Strengthening primary education, evol-

ing alternative production system, sensitization of workers on the matters of exploitation, unionization of adult workers, deconstruction of parental attitude towards educating female children through appropriate social education, vocationalization and technical education to child workers, etc. are the most important measures, which would lead to relief, rehabilitation, elimination and prevention of child labour in general and female child labour in particular.

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<sup>19</sup> International Programme for the Elimination of Child Labour. 2003. Combating Child Labour Through Education. Geneva: ILO.

<sup>20</sup> Agarwal, Babita. 2007. Child Labour in India. Jaipur India: ABD Publishers. p. 69.

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