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Child Labour and Disability: A Sector Review

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Introduction

Children with disabilities face enormous challenges, especially when they are born into a life of poverty. Imagine how their lives are impacted when they face an additional burden – a life of labour. The correlation between child labour and disabilities comes in three forms: children born with a disability who are pushed into labour, children who acquire a disability on the job and/or children who have a family member with a disability and engage in labour to support the family.

Child labour is often defined as "work that deprives children of their childhood, their potential and their dignity, and that is harmful to physical and mental development".¹ Children with disabilities are "those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others."²

Preventing child labour and fulfilling the rights of children with disabilities are important areas of work for UNICEF. In South Asia, UNICEF focuses on how these two issues are linked.

We know that children engaged in child labour are deprived of their childhood, potential and dignity. Their physical and mental development and health are affected, and they are deprived of their right to an education, exposed to violence and remain

Potential deprivations



trapped in the cycle of poverty. **But child labour is preventable if it is effectively addressed through social and child protection measures.**

Social attitudes and environmental barriers often prevent children with disabilities from participating in society fully and effectively on an equal basis. Children with disabilities face stigma and discrimination due to deep-seated negative perceptions. They may not enjoy the same rights and freedoms as other children.

Both children engaged in labour and children with disabilities face a multitude of risks. Many children acquire physical, cognitive and emotional disabilities due to child labour. Many children with disabilities

are often recruited into child labour. These human rights violations often involve the worst forms of child labour, such as hazardous work, bonded labour and child trafficking.

Children also engage in child labour because their caregivers or family members have a disability, and extra income is needed to support the family. These children may enter the workforce and/or perform substantial domestic tasks to support the family. This work can affect their health, education, and overall development. The bottom line remains that children engaged in labour are vulnerable. These vulnerabilities can be exacerbated if the child or a family member has a disability.

Key risks



Poverty

Most, if not all, children engaged in child labour, and a large proportion of children who live in poverty are likely to have limited access to educational opportunities and learning. When they reach adulthood, this means fewer job opportunities. Cognitive poverty is another burden to which children with intellectual, learning and sensory, and communication disabilities are particularly susceptible. This can lead to the inability to thrive if they go to school and poor decision making later in life.



Stigma and perceptions

Children with disabilities also face significant levels of social stigma. Social stigma covers the entire spectrum of disability and results from societal attitudes. In South Asia, many believe in *karma* and think disability results from a person's destiny or fate. Children with disabilities or family members who have a disability must contend with this extra layer of stigma when working. This makes these children even more vulnerable to being forced into hazardous work by traffickers.³



Institutionalisation

Children with disabilities are particularly at risk of being institutionalised due to social stigma, poverty or a lack of support by and for parents, caregivers and communities. Lack of early detection, health and inclusive education and community-based rehabilitation services at the local level are also factors.⁴ The risk of trafficking is often much higher for these children because they have been removed from their families and have limited capacity to assess risks and make decisions. This is especially true for children with intellectual disabilities.⁵

■ Child labour as a source of disability

There are multiple ways that child labour affects the health of children and causes disabilities. **Children can experience health hazards and acquire disabilities by working in specific sectors and jobs.** This includes being exposed to chemicals like mercury or chrome, working in dusty conditions or doing heavy work which affects them physically. Children can develop a disability over time or through an acute incident.⁶

Studies conducted in several South Asian countries show that child labour is associated with several adverse health outcomes, including poor growth, malnutrition, higher incidence of infectious diseases, behavioural and emotional disorders. This also includes disabilities that can result from an illness or injury.⁷

As expected, the younger the child, and the longer the working hours, the greater the probability of the child having an accident that could lead to long-term disability. The types of disabilities a child could acquire through work include hearing loss, loss of or damage to limbs, visual impairment, and facial injuries.

Several studies carried out in Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan highlight how child labour can lead to injury, illness and long-term disability regardless of the sector. For example, in Pakistan, research indicates children working in automobile workshops are exposed to polluted, hazardous environments and hard labour.⁸ They reported watery eyes, chronic cough, hearing loss, loss of a limb, fractures and permanent disability.⁹



Health impact



A study in India found that **children involved in informal recycling had a 2.5 times higher morbidity rate than the national average.**¹⁰ A secondary analysis of data from the Bangladesh Labour Force Survey (2013) revealed that 19% of children were engaged in hazardous work, 2% had experienced a significant injury, and 79% had been temporarily absent from work due to injury. The injury types reported include superficial injury 50%, fractures 5%, dislocation, sprain, strain,

amputation 33%, concussion, internal injury 3%, burns, scalding, frostbite 5%, infection 1%.

These and other **studies show that the incidence of injury is higher for children engaged in labour than for adults**, primarily because the machinery and tools used in most industries are made for adults. This results in children suffering from negative health and development outcomes, including fatigue, injury and musculoskeletal problems.¹¹

Disability and child labour: A snapshot

India



Child labour in the informal recycling sector

2.5X

higher morbidity than the national average

Bangladesh



Labour force survey

2%

injured

19%

hazardous work

79%

temporarily absent from work due to injury

■ Disability and child labour: Specific trades and sectors

In South Asia, the agricultural sector has the largest number of children engaged in labour – for example, in Southern Asia, 58% of children in child labour, aged between 5 and 17 years, work in agriculture.¹² Among children in employment, aged between 7 and 14 years, the proportion of children working in the agricultural sector ranges from 46% in Bangladesh to 94% in Nepal.¹³ Reports from the

ILO consistently show that children engaged in labour are more vulnerable to injury. Some areas of work, such as agriculture, industrial work, begging, are more dangerous for children than others and can potentially cause injury and result in disabilities. However, there is limited data on this topic, so it is difficult to assess the prevalence of disabilities across these sectors.

Agriculture



Research findings from Pakistan found that agriculture is the most dangerous occupation for children, causing high rates of injury because they work with knives, sharp tools and heavy equipment.¹⁴ According to a newspaper article mentioned in the study, **an estimated 100,000 children acquire agriculture-related injuries in Pakistan annually.**¹⁵ Likewise, an estimated 300,000 children working in the salt mines in India and the tobacco industry in Bangladesh are constantly exposed to hazardous working conditions and suffer long-term health complications.¹⁶

Begging



Disability is considered an advantage in begging since children with disabilities receive more sympathy and money. Studies from Bangladesh, India and Pakistan show how a child's disability is often exploited by their parents, families or begging gangs to create sympathy among the general public.¹⁷ **In some instances, children are trafficked and forcefully mutilated by criminal gangs.**¹⁸ The Bangladesh study on street children found that more than 50% of the children interviewed had a physical disability, while others had sensory disabilities.¹⁹

Domestic work



Despite some child labour regulations, many children are still working as domestic workers in South Asia. **Most work long hours, suffer physical abuse, and risk psycho-social harm.**²⁰ Anecdotal information and studies from South Asia show how child domestic workers are physically, mentally and sexually abused and suffer various injuries and illnesses.²¹ A recent high profile case where a teenage girl died due to severe burns brought to light the severe violations of child labour laws in the country.²²

Industrial work



In South Asia, industrial work encompasses a large variety of sub-sectors such as gem polishing, garments, carpet weaving, leather, shoemaking, construction work, automobile workshops, brickmaking and ship demolition. All these industries require repetitive, dangerous and heavy work. Industrial work can range from home-based workshops to construction sites, making it challenging to establish the exact cause of a disability. A study from the gem polishing industry in Jaipur, India, showed that 37.4% of children engaged in labour sustained injuries, mainly to their fingers and eyes. **Children most likely to sustain an injury were under 14, worked more than six hours a day, and were employed for less than two years in the industry.**²³

Weaving



Textile factories and weaving mills are common across South Asia. Many such industries hire children because of their 'nimble' fingers. **Child weavers report significantly more physical ailments than those from other industries.** A study from Pakistan found that most children knew carpet weaving is hazardous work, 78% of respondents faced physical injuries at work, and 80% reported backache because of long working hours or poor posture.²⁴

Armed conflict



In many South Asian countries, armed groups and militia continue to use children as soldiers, suicide bombers, sex slaves, cooks, spies, messengers and others. Many such children are as young as eight years old. The exact number of children involved in armed conflict remains unknown²⁵ but these children are exposed to acute levels of violence - as witnesses, direct victims and forced participants. Some children are injured and live with disabilities for the rest of their lives.²⁶



Recommendations

Generate evidence

The lack of reliable data on the interlinkages between child labour and disability and the magnitude of the problem poses a major challenge to plan and implement tangible actions to protect children. **Robust research which provides disaggregated data is vital.** Improving data collection on disability and child labour will strengthen monitoring mechanisms, including reports linked to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which promotes the human rights of all children with disabilities.

Advocate with relevant partners

Addressing the interlinkages between child labour and children with disabilities requires a concerted effort from a range of partners for both prevention and response. **It is vital to advocate with government, non-governmental organisations, private sector partners, and communities** to effectively address child labour, mainstream children with disabilities, or those affected by disability in the family. Advocacy efforts should also promote more effective and accessible child protection and social protection services for all, with a special focus on the most vulnerable.

Strengthen laws and policies

The lack of policies and strategies and the failure to implement existing ones is a primary reason why violations related to child labour and children with disabilities continues. It is vital to develop, monitor and strengthen the implementation of

new and existing legal and policy frameworks in health, education, justice and social welfare. Though national laws, legislation and policies often refer to the inclusion of children with disabilities, they lack access to mainstream development programmes and services. This needs to be addressed through effective policy implementation.

Allocate resources and take affirmative action

Governments should make adequate funding and human resources available to ensure children at risk of child labour and children with disabilities have equal access to social and protection services. Budget tracking should take place for funds earmarked for the inclusion of children with disabilities in public services such as health, education, vocational training, social development/welfare, sports and leisure. It is important to identify groups of children with specific disabilities who are particularly at risk of becoming engaged in child labour and provide adequate support to prevent this from happening.

Inclusion

Following the **'Nothing About Us Without Us'** principle, it is critical that development initiatives are implemented in collaboration with organisations working for children, Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) and, where possible, children with disabilities and children engaged in labour themselves. By engaging with children directly affected by child labour, we can gain their perspectives, understand the challenges they face and find solutions together – so that every child has a chance to fulfil their potential.

Endnotes

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