

Child Labour and Educational Challenges in Developing Societies

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Abstract

Child labour continues to be a major social and economic issue in developing societies, affecting millions of children across the world. In many low-income and developing countries, children are compelled to engage in labour due to poverty, unemployment, family indebtedness, migration, and lack of social protection. These children often work in agriculture, domestic service, construction, factories, and informal sectors under unsafe and exploitative conditions. Such labour not only deprives children of their childhood and fundamental rights but also creates serious barriers to their educational development. Education plays a crucial role in social mobility and national progress; however, working children frequently face school absenteeism, low academic achievement, poor learning outcomes, and early school dropout. Inadequate educational infrastructure, shortage of trained teachers, gender inequality, and unequal access to digital resources further worsen the situation in developing societies. This paper examines the relationship between child labour and educational challenges by analysing the socio-economic factors responsible for child exploitation and educational deprivation. It also explores the psychological, physical, and social impact of child labour on children and society. The study highlights the role of governments, international organisations, and non-governmental agencies in reducing child labour through legal reforms, welfare schemes, and educational programmes. The paper argues that eliminating child labour and ensuring equal educational opportunities are essential for sustainable development, social justice, and human rights protection. Effective policy implementation, poverty reduction, and community participation are necessary to break the cycle of poverty and educational inequality in developing nations.

Keywords: Child Labour, Education, Developing Societies, Poverty, School Dropout, Child Rights, Social Inequality, Educational Challenges, Labour Exploitation, Sustainable Development

1. Introduction

Child labour is one of the most serious socio-economic and humanitarian issues affecting developing societies in the modern world. It refers to the employment of children in activities that deprive them of their childhood, education, health, and overall development. According to the International Labour Organization, child labour includes work that is mentally, physically, socially, or morally dangerous and harmful to children and interferes with their schooling. Although several international conventions and national laws prohibit child labour, millions of children continue to work in hazardous industries, agriculture, domestic service, mining, street vending, and other informal sectors, particularly in developing countries.

Education is universally recognised as a fundamental human right and an essential tool for social and economic development. However, in many developing societies, educational

opportunities remain unequal due to poverty, lack of infrastructure, social discrimination, gender inequality, and weak public institutions. Children engaged in labour are often unable to attend school regularly, complete their education, or access quality learning environments. As a result, child labour and educational deprivation are deeply interconnected issues that reinforce one another and contribute to the continuation of poverty and social inequality.

The problem of child labour has historical roots in colonial economies, industrialisation, and traditional forms of labour exploitation. In countries such as India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nigeria, and several Latin American nations, economic hardship and social inequality force families to depend on children's earnings for survival. Rural poverty, migration, unemployment, population pressure, and lack of awareness among parents further encourage the practice of child labour. In many cases, employers prefer child workers because they can be paid lower wages and are less likely to demand labour rights or protection.

The impact of child labour extends beyond the lives of individual children and affects society as a whole. Children working in hazardous conditions often suffer from malnutrition, physical injuries, emotional stress, and psychological trauma. Their limited access to education reduces literacy levels, weakens human capital formation, and slows national development. Educational exclusion also creates long-term social consequences such as unemployment, crime, inequality, and social marginalisation. Therefore, the issue of child labour is not only an economic concern but also a matter of social justice, child rights, and human dignity.

Governments and international organisations such as UNICEF, UNESCO, and the International Labour Organization have introduced various policies, legal frameworks, and welfare programmes to reduce child labour and improve educational access. In India, constitutional provisions, the Right to Education Act, Mid-Day Meal Scheme, and Child Labour Prohibition laws have been implemented to protect children and encourage school enrolment. Despite these efforts, enforcement challenges, corruption, social inequality, and economic instability continue to hinder progress.

2. Socio-Economic Causes of Child Labour

Child labour in developing societies is closely linked with socio-economic inequality, poverty, and lack of educational opportunities. Although laws and international conventions prohibit the exploitation of children, economic and social realities continue to force millions of children into labour. The causes of child labour are complex and interconnected, involving economic pressures, cultural attitudes, weak governance, and structural inequalities. Understanding these causes is essential for addressing the root of the problem and developing effective solutions.

Poverty is considered the primary cause of child labour in most developing countries. Families living below the poverty line often struggle to meet their basic needs such as food, shelter, healthcare, and clothing. In such circumstances, children are compelled to contribute to household income in order to support family survival. Parents with unstable employment or low wages frequently depend on the earnings of their children, especially in rural and informal economic sectors. In many cases, children work in agriculture, roadside shops, factories, domestic labour, and small-scale industries where wages are extremely low but still considered necessary for family sustenance.

Unemployment and underemployment among adults also contribute significantly to child labour. In developing societies, many parents lack secure employment opportunities due to limited industrial growth, low educational qualifications, and economic instability. Seasonal unemployment in rural areas often forces entire families, including children, to migrate in search of work. Migrant children are especially vulnerable because they frequently lose access to schooling and become engaged in informal labour markets. Employers often prefer child workers because they are cheaper, easier to control, and less likely to demand legal protection or fair wages.

Illiteracy and lack of educational awareness among parents further increase the incidence of child labour. Parents who have never received formal education may fail to recognise the long-term value of schooling and may consider work more beneficial than education. In some communities, traditional attitudes encourage children to learn family occupations at an early age instead of attending school. As a result, children become trapped in cycles of poverty and labour exploitation that continue across generations.

Social inequality based on caste, class, ethnicity, and gender is another major factor behind child labour. In many developing societies, children from marginalised communities experience discrimination and limited access to quality education and employment opportunities. Lower-caste families, tribal communities, minority groups, and economically weaker sections are more likely to send children to work due to social exclusion and economic deprivation. Girls are particularly vulnerable because they are often engaged in domestic labour, household responsibilities, and unpaid caregiving work that remains socially invisible and unrecognised.

Rapid population growth and large family size also contribute to child labour in developing countries. Families with many children may face financial difficulties in providing education, nutrition, and healthcare for all family members. Consequently, older children are often sent to work to support younger siblings and reduce the economic burden on parents. Lack of access to family planning services and poor healthcare infrastructure further intensify these challenges in low-income regions.

The failure of educational systems is another important cause of child labour. In many rural and underdeveloped areas, schools suffer from poor infrastructure, shortage of teachers, lack of sanitation facilities, overcrowded classrooms, and inadequate teaching quality. Children who experience poor educational environments often lose interest in schooling and become more likely to enter the workforce. Long distances between homes and schools, especially in remote villages, further discourage regular attendance. For many poor families, indirect educational expenses such as uniforms, books, transport, and examination fees become barriers to continuing education.

Globalisation and the expansion of informal economies have also increased demand for cheap labour in developing societies. Small industries, export-oriented production units, and unregulated sectors frequently employ children to reduce production costs and maximise profits. Child workers are commonly found in industries such as carpet weaving, garment manufacturing, fireworks, mining, agriculture, and domestic service. Weak enforcement of

labour laws and corruption allow employers to continue exploiting children despite legal restrictions.

3. Educational Challenges Faced by Working Children

Education is one of the most powerful instruments for social transformation, economic development, and individual empowerment. However, for millions of working children in developing societies, access to quality education remains limited and uncertain. Child labour and educational deprivation are closely interconnected because children engaged in labour often face serious barriers that prevent them from attending school regularly or completing their education. These educational challenges not only affect the personal growth of children but also hinder the overall development of society by weakening literacy, productivity, and human capital formation.

One of the most significant educational challenges faced by working children is lack of school access and regular attendance. Many children engaged in labour work for long hours in agriculture, domestic service, construction sites, factories, and informal sectors. Due to physical exhaustion and time constraints, they are unable to attend school consistently. In many cases, children either enrol late or discontinue education at an early stage. Irregular attendance reduces learning capacity and increases the likelihood of school dropout. As a result, working children often remain trapped in cycles of illiteracy and poverty.

School dropout is a major issue in developing societies where poverty forces families to prioritise immediate income over long-term educational benefits. Parents living in economically deprived conditions may consider education a financial burden rather than an investment in the future. Although primary education is officially free in many countries, indirect costs such as school uniforms, books, transport, examination fees, and private tuition create obstacles for poor families. Consequently, children are withdrawn from schools and pushed into labour markets to supplement household income.

Poor educational infrastructure further intensifies the challenges faced by working children. In many rural and underdeveloped regions, schools suffer from inadequate classrooms, lack of electricity, shortage of clean drinking water, poor sanitation facilities, and absence of libraries or laboratories. Overcrowded classrooms and insufficient teaching materials reduce the quality of learning. Girls are especially affected because the absence of separate sanitation facilities often discourages them from continuing education during adolescence. Such poor conditions weaken students' motivation and increase absenteeism and dropout rates.

The shortage of qualified teachers and ineffective teaching methods also contribute to educational inequality. Many government schools in developing societies face teacher shortages, irregular teacher attendance, and limited professional training. Teachers working in under-resourced schools may struggle to address the educational needs of working children who often require additional academic and emotional support. Rigid teaching methods and examination-oriented education systems further discourage children who are already burdened by labour responsibilities.

Working children also experience severe physical and psychological stress that negatively affects their learning ability. Long working hours, hazardous environments, malnutrition, and fatigue reduce concentration, memory, and classroom participation. Children engaged in labour frequently suffer from anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and emotional trauma due to exploitation and harsh working conditions. Such psychological pressures make it difficult for them to maintain academic performance or develop interest in education. Many children eventually lose confidence and discontinue schooling altogether.

Gender inequality remains another major educational challenge in developing societies. Girls are often expected to perform domestic labour, care for siblings, and assist with household responsibilities in addition to economic work. In many traditional communities, female education is considered less important than male education. Early marriage, social insecurity, and patriarchal attitudes further restrict girls' educational opportunities. As a result, girl child labourers experience double discrimination based on both gender and economic status.

Social discrimination based on caste, ethnicity, religion, language, and class also affects educational access for working children. Marginalised communities often face exclusion, prejudice, and unequal treatment within educational institutions. Children belonging to tribal groups, lower castes, migrant families, and minority communities may experience humiliation, neglect, and cultural barriers in schools. Such discrimination discourages regular participation and weakens educational outcomes.

The digital divide has emerged as a modern educational challenge, particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic. Online education became essential during school closures; however, many working children in developing societies lacked access to smartphones, computers, internet connectivity, and digital learning resources. Rural and economically weaker families were unable to support digital education, which widened existing educational inequalities. Children from poor households became more vulnerable to permanent school dropout and labour exploitation during this period.

4. Impact of Child Labour on Society and Child Development

Child labour has severe consequences not only for individual children but also for society, the economy, and national development. Children engaged in labour are deprived of their fundamental rights, educational opportunities, physical well-being, and emotional security. The effects of child labour are long-lasting and multidimensional, influencing children's physical growth, psychological development, social relationships, and future economic opportunities. In developing societies, the persistence of child labour weakens human capital formation and obstructs social progress and sustainable development.

One of the most harmful effects of child labour is its impact on the physical health of children. Many child labourers work in dangerous and unhealthy environments such as factories, mines, construction sites, agricultural fields, roadside workshops, and domestic service. These workplaces often expose children to hazardous chemicals, dust, smoke, heavy machinery, extreme temperatures, and unsafe tools. Long working hours and physically demanding labour can result in chronic fatigue, malnutrition, respiratory diseases, spinal injuries, vision problems,

and permanent disabilities. Since children's bodies are still developing, hazardous work environments can cause irreversible damage to their physical growth and overall health.

Child labour also has serious psychological and emotional consequences. Working children frequently experience stress, anxiety, fear, humiliation, and emotional exploitation. Many children are subjected to verbal abuse, physical violence, and harsh treatment by employers. In extreme cases, children become victims of trafficking, bonded labour, and sexual exploitation. Such experiences negatively affect their self-confidence, emotional stability, and mental health. Children deprived of affection, play, and education often suffer from feelings of isolation and hopelessness, which can continue into adulthood.

Another major consequence of child labour is educational deprivation. Working children are unable to attend school regularly or concentrate on studies due to physical exhaustion and economic pressures. Many children either drop out of school permanently or complete only basic education. As a result, they remain trapped in low-paying and unskilled employment throughout their lives. Lack of education reduces employment opportunities, limits social mobility, and perpetuates the cycle of poverty across generations. Thus, child labour directly weakens literacy rates and educational advancement in developing societies.

The continuation of child labour contributes to the cycle of poverty and inequality. Families living in poverty often send children to work to support household income; however, the absence of education prevents these children from securing stable and well-paying jobs in the future. Consequently, they remain economically vulnerable even in adulthood and may eventually depend on their own children's labour for survival. This intergenerational cycle of poverty and exploitation becomes difficult to break without proper educational and economic support systems.

Child labour also negatively affects social development and human capital formation. A country's progress depends largely on the education, health, and productivity of its population. When children are deprived of education and healthy development, societies lose potential skilled workers, professionals, innovators, and responsible citizens. Low literacy levels and lack of vocational skills reduce national productivity and slow economic growth. Developing societies with widespread child labour often struggle with unemployment, inequality, and weak social infrastructure.

The existence of child labour further increases social exclusion and marginalisation. Children belonging to poor families, lower castes, tribal communities, migrant groups, and minority populations are more likely to become child labourers. This creates unequal social structures where disadvantaged groups remain excluded from educational and economic opportunities. Social discrimination combined with labour exploitation deepens class divisions and weakens social justice within society.

Child labour also affects democratic development and human rights protection. Children deprived of education and awareness are less likely to participate actively in democratic processes or understand their legal rights and responsibilities. A society where children are denied dignity, safety, and education cannot achieve genuine equality and social justice.

Therefore, the persistence of child labour reflects broader failures in governance, law enforcement, and welfare systems.

From an economic perspective, child labour may appear to provide cheap labour for industries and poor households in the short term; however, its long-term consequences are harmful for national economies. Dependence on unskilled child labour discourages technological development, reduces labour productivity, and weakens the skilled workforce required for modern economic growth. Countries with high rates of child labour often face lower levels of human development and international criticism regarding labour rights violations.

5. Government Policies and International Efforts

The problem of child labour has received significant attention from governments, international organisations, and civil society groups across the world. Recognising that children are essential for the future development of society, several legal frameworks, welfare programmes, and international conventions have been introduced to protect children from exploitation and ensure their right to education. Despite considerable progress, the implementation of these measures remains uneven in many developing societies due to poverty, weak governance, corruption, and social inequality.

In India, constitutional provisions provide a strong legal foundation for the protection of children's rights. The Constitution of India prohibits the employment of children in hazardous occupations and guarantees the right to education and protection against exploitation. Article 21A recognises free and compulsory education for children between the ages of six and fourteen years, while Article 24 prohibits the employment of children below fourteen years in factories, mines, and hazardous occupations. Articles 39(e) and 39(f) of the Directive Principles of State Policy further emphasise the protection of children's health, strength, and dignity.

One of the most important legal measures introduced by the Indian government is the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009, commonly known as the Right to Education (RTE) Act. This legislation aims to ensure universal elementary education by providing free and compulsory schooling to children. The Act also focuses on improving educational infrastructure, teacher quality, and inclusive learning opportunities. Through this policy, the government seeks to reduce school dropout rates and prevent children from entering the labour force at an early age.

The Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act was enacted to prohibit the employment of children in hazardous occupations and regulate working conditions in certain sectors. Later amendments strengthened the law by banning employment of children below fourteen years in most occupations and introducing stricter punishment for violators. However, critics argue that enforcement remains weak due to corruption, lack of inspections, and the dominance of informal labour sectors where monitoring is difficult.

Government welfare programmes have also played an important role in promoting education and reducing child labour. The Mid-Day Meal Scheme, for example, was introduced to encourage school enrolment and improve nutritional standards among children. By providing free meals in schools, the programme helps reduce hunger and motivates economically weaker

families to send children to school rather than work. Similarly, scholarship schemes, free textbooks, uniforms, bicycles, and residential schools for disadvantaged groups aim to improve educational access for poor and marginalised children.

International organisations have made significant contributions towards eliminating child labour and promoting universal education. The International Labour Organization has been one of the leading global institutions working against child labour through conventions, research, and awareness campaigns. The ILO Convention No. 138 establishes the minimum age for employment, while Convention No. 182 calls for the elimination of the worst forms of child labour, including slavery, trafficking, bonded labour, and hazardous work. These conventions encourage member countries to strengthen labour laws and child protection systems.

Similarly, UNICEF works extensively to protect children's rights and improve educational opportunities worldwide. UNICEF supports programmes related to child welfare, nutrition, healthcare, education, and rehabilitation of child labourers. The organisation also collaborates with governments and non-governmental organisations to create awareness about child exploitation and educational inequality.

UNESCO has played a major role in promoting inclusive and quality education through global initiatives such as "Education for All" and Sustainable Development Goal 4, which aims to ensure equitable education for all children. UNESCO emphasises literacy, gender equality, digital learning, and educational accessibility as essential tools for social development and poverty reduction.

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civil society groups have also contributed significantly to combating child labour. Organisations such as Bachpan Bachao Andolan, Save the Children, and various local community groups work to rescue child labourers, provide rehabilitation, support education, and raise public awareness. Many NGOs establish bridge schools, vocational training centres, and counselling programmes to help working children reintegrate into formal education systems.

6. Measures for Reducing Child Labour and Improving Education

The elimination of child labour and the improvement of educational opportunities require comprehensive and long-term social, economic, and political efforts. Since child labour is deeply connected with poverty, unemployment, inequality, and weak educational systems, solutions must address these root causes rather than focusing only on legal prohibition. Governments, international organisations, educational institutions, communities, and families all have important roles in creating an environment where children can live safely, attend school, and achieve their full potential.

One of the most effective measures for reducing child labour is poverty alleviation and economic empowerment of families. Poor households often depend on children's earnings for survival; therefore, improving adult employment opportunities and increasing family income can significantly reduce the need for child labour. Governments should expand employment generation programmes, skill development schemes, minimum wage protections, and social security systems for economically vulnerable families. Financial support such as cash transfer

schemes, food subsidies, healthcare assistance, and pension programmes can help families meet their basic needs without relying on child labour.

Strengthening free and compulsory education is equally essential for preventing child labour. Governments must ensure that every child has access to quality education regardless of social class, gender, caste, ethnicity, or geographical location. Schools should be made affordable and accessible by providing free textbooks, uniforms, transportation facilities, scholarships, and digital learning resources. Educational institutions should also focus on child-friendly teaching methods that encourage creativity, participation, and inclusive learning rather than rote memorisation alone.

Improvement in educational infrastructure is necessary to increase school enrolment and retention. Many schools in developing societies suffer from overcrowded classrooms, inadequate sanitation facilities, poor electricity supply, and shortage of learning materials. Governments should invest in building safe and well-equipped schools, particularly in rural and underdeveloped regions. Separate sanitation facilities for girls, clean drinking water, libraries, laboratories, playgrounds, and digital classrooms can create a more supportive educational environment and reduce dropout rates.

Teacher training and educational quality enhancement are also important measures. Qualified and motivated teachers play a crucial role in supporting vulnerable children and improving learning outcomes. Teachers should receive regular professional training to address the educational and psychological needs of children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Flexible educational systems, including evening classes, bridge courses, open schooling, and vocational education programmes, should be introduced for working children and school dropouts to help them continue their education.

Special attention must be given to gender equality in education. Girls in developing societies often face discrimination, early marriage, domestic responsibilities, and social restrictions that prevent them from attending school regularly. Governments and communities should promote awareness regarding the importance of girls' education and ensure safe school environments. Scholarship programmes, residential schools, free sanitary facilities, and female teacher recruitment can encourage greater participation of girls in education and reduce gender-based educational inequality.

Strict implementation of child labour laws is another essential step. Governments must strengthen labour inspections, impose stronger penalties on employers violating child protection laws, and monitor industries where child labour is common. Informal sectors, domestic labour, agriculture, and small-scale industries should be brought under stricter legal regulation. Law enforcement agencies should work in coordination with child welfare committees, police departments, and labour departments to rescue and rehabilitate child labourers effectively.

Rehabilitation and counselling programmes are crucial for children rescued from labour exploitation. Many child labourers suffer from physical injuries, emotional trauma, and educational gaps that make reintegration into society difficult. Governments and non-governmental organisations should establish rehabilitation centres that provide healthcare,

psychological counselling, vocational training, and educational support. Bridge schools and transitional education programmes can help children gradually adapt to formal schooling systems.

Community participation and public awareness campaigns are equally important in combating child labour. In many societies, child labour is socially accepted due to traditional beliefs, poverty, or lack of awareness about children's rights. Awareness campaigns through schools, media, social organisations, and local leaders can help change public attitudes and encourage communities to prioritise education over child labour. Parents should be educated about the long-term benefits of schooling and the harmful consequences of child exploitation.

The role of technology and digital education has become increasingly important in modern educational systems. Governments should work towards reducing the digital divide by providing affordable internet access, digital devices, and online educational resources to economically weaker sections. Digital literacy programmes can help children access modern learning opportunities and improve educational inclusion in remote and rural areas.

International cooperation is also essential for addressing child labour at the global level. Developed and developing countries should collaborate through international organisations such as the International Labour Organization, UNICEF, and UNESCO to strengthen child protection policies and educational development programmes. Global efforts should focus on fair trade practices, ethical labour standards, and sustainable economic development to reduce the exploitation of children in international supply chains.

Conclusion

Child labour and educational inequality remain among the most serious challenges faced by developing societies in the contemporary world. Despite economic growth, technological advancement, and global awareness regarding children's rights, millions of children continue to work in hazardous and exploitative conditions while being deprived of proper education and healthy development. The persistence of child labour reflects deeper structural problems such as poverty, unemployment, social inequality, weak governance, and inadequate educational systems. These interconnected factors create a cycle in which disadvantaged children are forced into labour at an early age and remain trapped in poverty and social exclusion throughout their lives.

The study has shown that poverty is the primary driving force behind child labour, but other factors such as illiteracy, migration, caste and gender discrimination, population pressure, and lack of educational access also contribute significantly to the problem. Educational deprivation and child labour reinforce one another because children who work are often unable to attend school regularly, perform well academically, or complete their education. Poor educational infrastructure, shortage of trained teachers, inadequate learning resources, and the digital divide further worsen educational inequality in developing countries.

The impact of child labour extends beyond individual children and affects society as a whole. Working children frequently suffer from physical illness, psychological stress, emotional trauma, and social marginalisation. At the national level, child labour weakens literacy, human

capital formation, and economic productivity, thereby slowing social and economic development. A society that fails to protect its children cannot achieve genuine democracy, equality, or sustainable progress.

Governments, international organisations, and non-governmental agencies have introduced several laws, welfare schemes, and educational programmes to address child labour and improve children's rights. Initiatives undertaken by the International Labour Organization, UNICEF, and UNESCO have contributed significantly towards global awareness and policy development. In countries such as India, constitutional provisions, the Right to Education Act, Mid-Day Meal Scheme, and child protection laws have helped improve school enrolment and reduce labour exploitation to some extent. However, weak implementation, corruption, social acceptance of child labour, and economic instability continue to hinder effective progress.

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