Socio-Cultural Discourses of Children Engaged in Child Labor in India: A Macro-Ethnographic Study

Pareek Bharat, Nidhi Dhimaan, Sudha A. Raddi¹, Lekha Bist², Kamaljit Kaur, Jyoti Tiwari³, Daljit Kaur

Psychiatric Nursing, SPHE College of Nursing, Gharuan, Mohali, Punjab, India, ¹College of Applied Health Sciences, Department of Nursing, University of Bisha, Saudi Arabia, ²Department of Nursing, Galgotias University, Noida, Uttar Pradesh, ³Department of Nursing, University Institute of Nursing, Chandigarh University, Mohali, Punjab, India

Abstract

Background: Child labor is considered one of the main social problems that affect the community and has a physical and psychosocial impact on a child's health, growth, and development. The study aimed to describe the sociocultural discourses of children involved in child labor. A macroethnographic approach was used to collect the data from the selected community areas of Punjab, India. **Materials and Methods:** A community-based qualitative study using purposive sampling was carried out among children engaged in child labor ($n = 8$). The data were gathered through in-depth or semi-structured interviews and non-participant observation under four phases: community context assessment, egocentric network analysis, validation, and dissemination of study findings. The guide for consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative research (COREQ) was followed. Ongoing analysis was conducted using Spradley's analysis approach to identify the themes. **Results:** Thematic analysis resulted in the emergence of various themes related to child labor, namely, adaptability, money-centric attitude, sense of being underserved, social deprivation, work burden, reduced emotional expression, workaholism, abuse, family shoulder, family cohesion, and sense of industry. Apart from that, inhuman living and working conditions, as well as school deprivation among study subjects, were observed. Poverty emerged as the single most compelling factor for child labor in India. **Conclusion:** The study concluded that child labor had a negative impact on children's overall development. An effective intervention to stop child labor is if vulnerable children are identified through primary healthcare, and a relationship of trust is built that allows for the provision of health care, education, support, and referral to additional services outside the health sector.

Keywords: Child labor, ethnography, India, psychosocial problems, working children

INTRODUCTION

Children are the wealth of the future. Child labor is defined as any work that deprives children of their childhood, restricts their capability to attend regular school, and is mentally, physically, socially, and morally dangerous and harmful.[1] Child labor is a global concern linked to insufficient educational opportunities, poverty, and gender inequality.[2]

The International Labour Organization (ILO) and UNICEF reports describe that the number of children engaged in child labor has increased to 160 million all around the world, an increase of 8.4 million children in the last 4 years. As a result of the pandemic, 9 million children are at risk of being forced into child labor by the end of 2022.[3]

At the start of 2020, 1 in every 10 children aged 5 years and above was engaging in child labor around the world, or 63 million females and 97 million boys. Over the last two decades, substantial progress has been made in eliminating child labor around the world. Between 2000 and 2020, the number of children engaged in child labor fell by 85.5 million, from 16% to 9.6%.[4]

In all, 7% of all children are engaged in child labor in the Asia and Pacific region. Without corrective initiatives, it is anticipated that the number of children engaged in child labor

Address for correspondence: Dr. Pareek Bharat,
Professor and Principal, SPHE College of Nursing, Gharuan - 140 413,
Mohali, Punjab, India.
E-mail: Pareekbharat10@gmail.com

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will increase by 8.9 million by the end of 2022 due to growing poverty and vulnerability.[4] In India, 1 out of every 10 workers is a youngster. One out of every eight youngsters aged 5 to 14 works for their own family or someone else.[5]

India is the nation with the largest population of child laborers. Among South Asian countries, India has the highest rate of child labor among those aged 5 to 17 years (5.8 million), followed by Bangladesh (5 million), Pakistan (3.4 million), and Nepal (2 million).[6] Indian states Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Bihar, and Madhya Pradesh report nearly 55% of all working children in the country.[7] Around 4,867 child laborers were rescued and rehabilitated in the state of Punjab in 2021–2022.[8]

Children who engage in child labor run the risk of experiencing both physical and mental harm.[3] Due to inequality and a lack of educational opportunities, child labor is still prevalent in India.[9] Working children are increasingly engaging in a variety of unhealthy activities. As a result, a subculture emerges that is diametrically opposed to society's dominant culture.[10] Child labor poses numerous physical risks to children's health, but the most devastating effect is psychological.[11]

The majority of child laborers start working at a young age, are underweight, work long hours in dangerous jobs, and do not go to school. They are either underpaid or unpaid, and frequently.[12] Child labor is a significant social problem that has negative effects on economic growth in developing nations.[13]

According to a 2021 National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) report, there were 149,404 crimes against children.[14] The majority of children who work as laborers have many physical and psychosocial problems in their lives, which increase the risk of mental illness and antisocial behavior.[11] The need for this study is to identify the problems of child labor and its impact on the child's health and well-being.

Materials and Methods

Study design and setting
A macroethnographic research design was used. The study was conducted in the environments of the key informants (subjects) from the chosen community in Punjab, India (their homes and workplaces) (setting: natural).

Study participants and sampling
Children who, whether male or female, are employed in any kind of work and are under the age of 14 years and willing to participate in the study were selected using the purposive sampling technique.[15]

Instruments and data collection
Following the selection of the key informants ($n = 8$), they were followed at various points in time in various settings, such as at home, during play, and at work. Extensive fieldwork was conducted to learn about their culture, and the investigator spent a significant amount of time over a period of 3 months with key informants. Data were collected with the help of various study tools in four phases.

- **Phase 1:** With the help of community context assessment through performative and non-participant observation, the community context was studied to describe the key informant's context.
- **Phase 2:** An egocentric network analysis was performed, focusing on each key informant's relationship within the group and with all other people.
- **Phase 3:** Findings were validated with the help of investigators triangulation of the informant's verbatim and key observations.
- **Phase 4:** Dissemination of study findings to the informant and others.

Data analysis
Ongoing analysis was performed. Spradley's analysis was used where thematic analysis was carried out.[16] A brief transcript of each key informant's information was prepared and observed for relevant categories and codes.

Ethical consideration
The study was approved by the Institutional Ethics Committee (SNI/05/20 April, 2018). Informed consent was obtained from each participant's parents or guardian, and data confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed. The proposed research was explained in a very simple manner, in a language that ensures that the child understands the request to participate in the research. Verbal or written assent, as approved by the ethics committee, was obtained from the subjects as per the ICMR 2017 guidelines.[16] The five subjects were between the ages of 10 and 12 years; hence, verbal assent was obtained in the presence of the parents or guardian. Three subjects were above 12 years of age; hence, written informed consent was obtained. To protect the participants' anonymity, fictitious names were used instead of their real names.

Methodological rigor
The methodological rigor of the study was determined based on the criteria described by Lincoln and Guba for qualitative research, which are as follows.[17]

Credibility: Well-planned research designs ensured a thorough and reliable representation of key informants' experiences and context. Audio recordings of participant verbatims made it simple to confirm emerging themes. The approach of consensus was used.

Dependability: Data triangulation was used to collect data. The investigator could indeed assess the extent to which saturation has been achieved through ongoing analysis.

Confirmability: The investigator's triangulation confirmed the validity of the emerging categories and themes. A consensus approach was used to integrate the categories and themes that emerged from the data.

Transferability: Multiple data collection methods were used in various settings (home, workplace, etc.). All cultural aspects of the study subject were adequately covered.

RESULTS

Sample characteristics

A total of eight subjects, including males (n = 5) and females (n = 3), were selected. No one refused to participate. The mean and SD of the key informants' age were 11.87 and 1.72, they began working at a young age ($\bar{x}$ and SD, 9 ± 2.07), most subjects dropped out of school (n = 5), and migrants from other states (n = 6). The characteristics of the participants are shown in Table 1.

They lived in slums and lacked basic amenities such as a proper drinking water supply, sanitation facilities, sewers, and street lights. Overall, the living conditions of all informants were deplorable and inappropriate. The majority of the subjects found themselves wearing untidy clothes that they did not change every day, and personal hygiene was generally neglected. Due to financial constraints, all key informants (except Pooja) dropped out of school. They are all working to support their families financially, and they are working with parental support. Subjects held low-wage positions as waiters, housekeepers, and unskilled laborers. Their working conditions are frequently noted to be subpar and crowded, with a lengthy and packed schedule, no safety precautions, long working hours, and being highly susceptible to physical dangers and substance abuse.

Thematic analysis

A thematic analysis was carried out to uncover the cultural themes of working children. All themes were abstracted and described verbatim with the help of key informants. The participant's verbatim was translated from Hindi to English by the researcher with the help of a language expert. Conceptual equivalence was ensured by retranslating verbatim from English to Hindi. Important emergent theses are as follows:

Adaptability

They were found to be adaptable to their working and social environments. Adaptability to the work environment, work attitude, coping, and education are some of the dimensions of this theme that have emerged.

Key informant's verbatim

"There is no harm in working here," and I am not under any work stress." "This work is like a gym for me." "It is a good place to earn money." "I go to work happily." I felt great. When my mother needed me at the store, I used to take a leave."

Moneycentric attitude

Working at a young age has been shown to develop a money-centric attitude among children engaged in child labor.

Key informant's verbatim

"Work, money, and school are all important aspects of my life. I'd like to do something for my parents." "I get money if I work; I don't need to ask my mother for money." "Only the person who works can eat, whereas I can do any work for money." "Money is everything." I'm going to work for myself to make some money." "I want to make a lot of money."

Sense of being underserved

Key informants expressed feelings of being underserved. This theme's dimensions include home/work conditions, work attitude, and life aspirations.

Key informant's verbatim

"At this age, all I want to do is go to school, not work in Mandi. "Who will be content with this type of work?" "No one should work like me; instead, they should study." "I wish I had a big doll to play with at home." People who see me say, "Look how these small children are working."

Social deprivation

They were far removed from their usual social circles. It was found that they were preocc upied with a demanding workload and a lengthy work schedule and even lost interest in activities

Table 1: Characteristics of key informants

Fictitious names	Age in years	Gender	Education	Native place	Schooling	Age at starting work	Workplace	Working hours	Income	Work profile
Pooja	10	Female	3rd	Punjab	Continued	7	Grain market	4	1500/-	Helper
Harish	13	Male	5th	Uttarakhand	Discontinued	8	Chicken shop	12	6000/-	Waiter
Alam	14	Male	5th	Bihar	Discontinued	11	Sweets shop	12	5000/-	Helper
Ajay	14	Male	7th	Utter Pradesh	Discontinued	12	Motor garage	13	6000/-	Helper
Gauri	10	Female	3rd	Punjab	Discontinued	6	Roadside small shop	12	1500/-	Sales girl
Anurag Kumar	12	Male	8th	Utter Pradesh	Discontinued	8	Grocery shop	14	8000/-	Sales boy
Ritesh Kumar	10	Male	7th	Utter Pradesh	Evening classes (2 hours)	10	Grocery shop	12	3000/-	Sales boy
Poonam	12	Female	10th	Utter Pradesh	Discontinued	10	Local residential colony	10	10000/-	Domestic help to nearly 10 houses daily
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that children their age would find enjoyable, such as playing or making new friends.

Key informant's verbatim

"I work 7 days a week with no days off." I used to sit in my spare time to relax." "I don't have time to entertain myself." I have no friends here. "When I see children walking with their parents, I wish I could go out with my parents as well." "I don't like to go anywhere." I used to work on Sundays as well. "I know a lot of people here, but I don't talk much." "I don't miss my home at all." "I dislike playing. I just watch TV and wander around the station, not having time to play."

Work burden

Any young child who works will undoubtedly experience stress and burden due to the workload. Their social life and education seem to be suffering as a result of this burden**.**

Key informant's verbatim

"There is a lot of work to be done. I put in 13 hours per day." "While working, all I can think about is finishing my work and getting home as soon as possible. At home, I feel at ease. Leaving for work at 8 a.m. and returning home at 9 p.m. I used to work 7 days a week." "I don't sleep during the day."

Reduced emotional expression

They have low emotional reactivity towards others and a high tolerance for being scolded or abused by others.

Key informant's verbatim

"I never get angry at others." They scold and talk dirty to me if I take leave and return the next day. I just keep quiet and carry on with my work." "I don't confront anyone when I'm angry. In my head, I yell at people to get rid of my rage." "I just keep my anger to myself and do not vent it on others."

Workaholism

Most key informants were highly motivated to work. "My work is my friend." It was nominated for its work zeal.

Key informant's verbatim

"Work and earning money are important aspects of my life." "Work earns respect." "I enjoy working because I am compensated for it." "We also do extra work that they did not assign to us; we never refuse work. I enjoy it." "I enjoy doing every task here." "I came here to work because I wanted to."

Vulnerable to abuse

Child labor can result in serious physical and psychological harm. It has the potential to lead to slavery, sexual, or economic exploitation, or both.[18]

Key informant's verbatim

"I was once the target of physical abuse. I resist doing that. I smacked him when he tried to touch me. I punched him." "Clients, co-workers, and even my employer are using abusive language with me."

Family shoulder

With a sense of being the family's shoulder, a strong desire to support the family emerges.

Key informant's verbatim

"My priorities are my grandparents, parents, work, and studies. I want to build a toilet and a bathroom in my home." "I work to bring my brother and sister new clothes." My family is extremely poor, so I am forced to work." "I'm responsible for taking care of my siblings at home. Concerning my siblings and parents, "My father is ill; he quit his job." I'm concerned about my sisters because I need money to pay for their weddings." "I only work for my family."

Family cohesion

Study participants had strong emotional ties to and attachments to their families.

Key informant's verbatim

"My father would not have had to perform the labor if I had money." I wish we had a home of our own." "I make money while reducing family tension." "I just want to make sure my parents are safe and well." "I want to raise my parents' name in society." "I don't want my mother to be in the store with me." "I'm concerned about my father."

Sense of Industry (means of self-actualization)

According to Erik Erikson's theory of emotional development,[19] a sense of industry is an important emotional development factor in children. The majority of key informants have a clear vision of their future and want to be successful**.**

Key informant's verbatim

"I want to do work of my own choosing without being pressured by anyone." I hope to advance in my career and learn about various types of work. I simply want to be the master of my trade." "I will open my own motor garage, eventually becoming the owner of the garage." "I keep thinking that I will work and become wealthy in the future." "I want to open a large wholesale store, similar to a ration store." "In the future, I hope to achieve something."

Discussion

Poverty has emerged as the most powerful motivator for child labor. The families of study subjects were in financial difficulty. Many studies and reports are in support of this, where it was reported that child labor is the most common when families face financial difficulties or uncertainty, whether due to poverty, sudden illness of a carer, or job loss of a primary wage earner.[18] The root cause of child labor is extreme poverty, which forces parents to employ their children[20] and is the main factor pushing young people into the workforce.[21]

One of the adverse outcomes of child labor is school dropouts, as they cannot continue schooling due to long working hours, work burdens, losing interest, etc., Sufficient evidence is available in the scientific literature where child labor is found to

be the reason for school dropouts.[22] They enrolled themselves as students but did not attend classes at school.[23] Illness, child labor (employment), financial difficulties, and family issues are among the most prevalent reasons for school dropout.[24]

Children are working under inhuman conditions. The present study revealed many work-related problems such as high work burdens, long working hours, physical abuse, injuries, low wages, unskilled work, and exploitation. Similar problems were reported by many researchers. When children enter wage-paid employment, they are subjected to a variety of risks, including physical torture, abusive language, long working hours for inadequate pay, and so on. They have no job security because they are almost always employed in the unorganized sector.[25] Young children are more tolerant and unable to object to discrimination.[26] Child laborers may experience numerous issues, such as mistreatment by both employers and customers.[27] They have the risk of experiencing physical, mental, and sexual abuse, put in long hours, and usually live away from their families and friends.[28] Another study revealed that low wages, long working hours, working on school days, and an unsafe work environment are major issues in child labor.[29]

Physical and emotional abuse are the most frequently reported experiences of children who work as child laborers (46.6–72.7%) and 40.8–47.7%, respectively. These experiences were linked to poor mental health, especially symptoms of affective disorder symptoms[30]

The subjects of the present study were found to be losing age-related interests such as playing, having friends, or affiliating with other children. Working has a significant negative impact on a child's social development if they spend most of their time working rather than playing with their peers and learning how to interact with them appropriately.[28] Child labor interferes with children's normal development, including their physical, intellectual, and emotional psychosocial development.[31]

The present study revealed that most study subjects wanted to work willingly and loved their jobs. They consider work a means of self-actualization. Theoretically, some children would still like to engage in productive activities even if poverty was not a factor.[32]

Parents of most study subjects were illiterate, daily wage workers, and poor, which triggered children to work and support their families. Literature also suggests that low educational status, an unskilled or partially skilled occupation, and large family size are parental factors associated with child labor practice.[29]

The study's participants were observed to be socially isolated, neglected, and losing age-appropriate interests such as playing, making friends, or joining in with other kids. Due to the long hours that children are required to work, familial bonds are not formed, and the children do not establish social support systems within the family context.[33]

It has great potential to be an effective intervention to stop child labor if vulnerable children are identified through primary health care. Building a relationship of trust with the parents and children engaged in child labor opens the door to providing healthcare, education, support, and referrals to additional services. Beyond health, PHC has tremendous potential as an effective intervention to tackle child labor. Home visiting can be an effective tool to prevent child maltreatment by educating parents regarding work-related harm, monitoring occupational hazards and diseases, and conducting mental health assessments. Providing healthcare services such as child counseling, universal child care, and vocational training for parents with the help of non-government organizations (NGOs) or other agencies can be an effective strategy that can be implemented through the primary healthcare system.[34]

Limitations

First, a macro-ethnographic approach was used, with the study focusing on broadly defined cultures; as a result, it is possible that smaller units or cultures were not thoroughly and finely studied. However, participant observation was used, which is more thorough and illuminating. Second, because the study had a small number of participants, the generalizability of the findings may be compromised despite the fact that the data saturation principle was strictly followed and that qualitative studies typically deal with small samples.[15] Third, actual verbatim transcriptions of interviews in English may cause semantic and conceptual equality issues; however, constant validation of emerging themes was performed using a consensus approach. Finally, because the key informant's data were gathered during the daytime, any cultural practices or artifacts other than this time period of data collection were not noted.

Conclusion

Due to a variety of socioeconomic factors, a large number of children in India are employed as child laborers. The main causes of child labor are poverty, destitution, illiteracy, and familial obligations. Because of child labor, many children have lost their childhood and opportunities for education. Young children are made to work in inhumane conditions. The study strongly recommends an effective intervention to stop child labor if vulnerable children are identified through primary healthcare and a relationship of trust is built that allows for the provision of healthcare, education, support, and referral to additional services outside the health sector.

Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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