

06.21



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June 2021

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Childline, a national helpline for children in distress, received 1,92,000 distress calls between March and August 2020 with most of them reporting cases of child labour.

At least 1.01 crore child labourers in India, aged between 5 and 14, are engaged in agriculture, hazardous industries, service establishments, and domestic work (UNICEF n.d.).

The agriculture sector is the biggest employer of children who are involved in dangerous farming activities such as handling pesticides and fertilisers, carrying heavy loads, and operating unguarded machines in commodities ranging from sugarcane, rice, tea, or spice plantations.

However, addressing child labour in the agricultural sector is hindered by factors such as caste-based poverty, lack of learning opportunities, migration, homelessness, unemployed parents, and lack of regulation enforcement. Further, multi-dimensional poverty amongst farm workers and small farmers plays a key role in not just generational child labour but also child marriage and gender based violence against women and children. This also suggests that the issue of child labour in agriculture is not an isolated one.

COVID-19 pandemic has only worsened this problem. Childline, a national helpline for children in distress, received 1,92,000 distress calls between March and August 2020 with most of them reporting cases of child labour. Compared to 2019, where the helpline handled 170,000 calls (Associated Press 2020), 2020 saw a significant uptick in calls. The upward trend has only continued in 2021 with Childline noting a 50% increase from regular call volumes compared to 2020. Within a short span of 21 days, 20 March to 10 April 2021, the helpline received 4,60,000 calls pleading for the protection of children (Chawla and Singh 2021).

The pandemic has also increased the risk of distressed children being trafficked. By December 2020, Bachpan Bachao Andolan, an India-based movement campaigning for children's rights, facilitated the rescue of over 2,000 children and the arrest of over 132 traffickers and employers. Even during the lockdown, many were intercepted while being trafficked (Ghosh 2020).

The first wave of the pandemic was devastating for the most impoverished children, that is children of daily wage earners, migrant workers, and casual workers who have been struggling for sustainable livelihoods. Children from these households comprise a large portion of child labourers, especially in agriculture, where they are constantly undertaking migration. While most families rely on seasonal harvesting for work and migrate depending on where they get employment, seasonal employment only lasts for a few months and is not enough to make ends meet. As a result, children migrate along with their families, working for one agricultural supply chain or another, losing out on any semblance of a formal education.

Addressing the vulnerabilities of child labourers in agriculture, and in the context of migratory flow in rural and semi-urban areas, must be an issue of utmost importance amidst the pandemic. COVID-19 is steadily ravaging rural India causing an unending crisis where children are unable to access basic necessities such as healthcare and education. Due to an unprecedented lockdown and loss of livelihood for millions of vulnerable families, basic survival and protection from COVID-19 have become outstanding concerns. Limited resources of the government and civil society are being targeted towards providing food, shelter, and medical assistance to vulnerable households.

Scenarios such as these require strong government and civil society interventions to prevent more children from becoming victims of child labour. Moreover, children already employed in the agricultural sector need to be traced and rehabilitated to avoid a complete loss of education and childhood. The existing policies have failed to reach the child labourers and other children at risk in due time. For instance, the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory

Education Act (2009), that mandates the local authorities to ensure admission of children from migrant families, has not had a noticeable impact on the lives of the most vulnerable children, including child labourers.

With these pre-existing conditions hindering working children's access to education, the enforcement of ICT-centric education (Information and Communication Technology) in lieu of school closures is exacerbating the existing digital divide. Large parts of rural India are not covered with broadband networks and even fewer rural households have access to the internet. According to Sudevan (2020), the key Indicators in the Household Social Consumption on Education in India report, fewer than 15% of rural Indian households have internet access as opposed to 42% urban Indian households. Additionally, there are gendered differences within the digital divide. According to the same report, only 8.5% of women are able to use the internet.

It is also crucial to mention that even if the challenges of technology availability and network connectivity are overcome, the social and pedagogical requirements of rural education also need equal attention. They must adapt to the needs and contexts of children who have historically been disadvantaged when it comes to quality of educational and learning opportunities.

The need of the hour is to immediately address these gaps to prevent any further increase in the number of child labourers and out-of-school children. First step towards this would be strategising efforts towards creating opportunities for decent and sustainable work for youth and adults is equally important to maintain household incomes and prevent children from entering the workforce. Secondly, debt bondage forces the entire family, including children, to work in hazardous conditions for longer hours. Even still, daily wage workers and smallholder producers in agriculture are some of the most vulnerable groups, lacking guaranteed minimum wages, freedom of association, and fair prices for their crops and labour hours. This needs to be strictly abolished by the government and monitored by the private sector.

Most likely, the pandemic will only make the situation worse for millions of children, along with their families, who are facing a range of human rights violations working in agriculture supply chains. Transnational as well as local agro goods companies that claim to be committed in addressing child labour are actually perpetuating the problem by not taking immediate and effective measures to mitigate these practices.

Additionally, closing policy gaps are a big step towards alleviating child labour in the agricultural sector. For instance, the controversial Child Labour and Adolescent (Prohibition and Regulation) Act (2016) in India legalises child labour in "family or family enterprises". The term "family and family enterprises" is defined ambiguously. If applied to the agricultural sector, the issue is only exacerbated (Global March 2020). Moreover, nearly 70% of child labour is classified under unpaid family labour (Food and Agricultural Organisation of the United Nations 2018), creating a problematic grey area within the act that doesn't criminalise agricultural child labour.

Addressing the issue of agricultural child labour during the pandemic will require a commitment from all relevant stakeholders in mitigating the ecosystem and pushing children's away from work, especially in hazardous areas. A commendable example of stakeholder engagement is that of Bal Mitra Gram. Area-based approaches such as child-friendly villages, or Bal Mitra Gram, have a robust child labour monitoring system led by community participation. Such spaces address child labour in a sustainable manner. These interventions have already made over 540 villages in India 'child-friendly', reaching more than 72,000 children in the country (Satyarthi n.d.). In these areas, increased trust and collaboration between multiple stakeholders works effectively to address child labour and ensure education.

Good practices such as these also consider the need for addressing gender-based inequalities by including women as key stakeholders in emphasising the different needs of girls and boys with respect to accessing education and holistic development.

This year's World Against Child Labour Day focuses on actions taken for the 2021 International Year for the Elimination of Child Labour with the motto to "Act Now" (International Labour Organisation 2019). Stakeholders concerned about child labour have already lost valuable time discussing potential solutions instead of implementing them. The United Nations declared 2021 an International Year (Ibid), presenting a crucial opportunity for the private sector to commit to the cause. The private sector, government, and civil society at large need to realise that there is no single silver bullet to end child labour. A solution can only come from constantly initiating new interventions while scaling up existing efforts.

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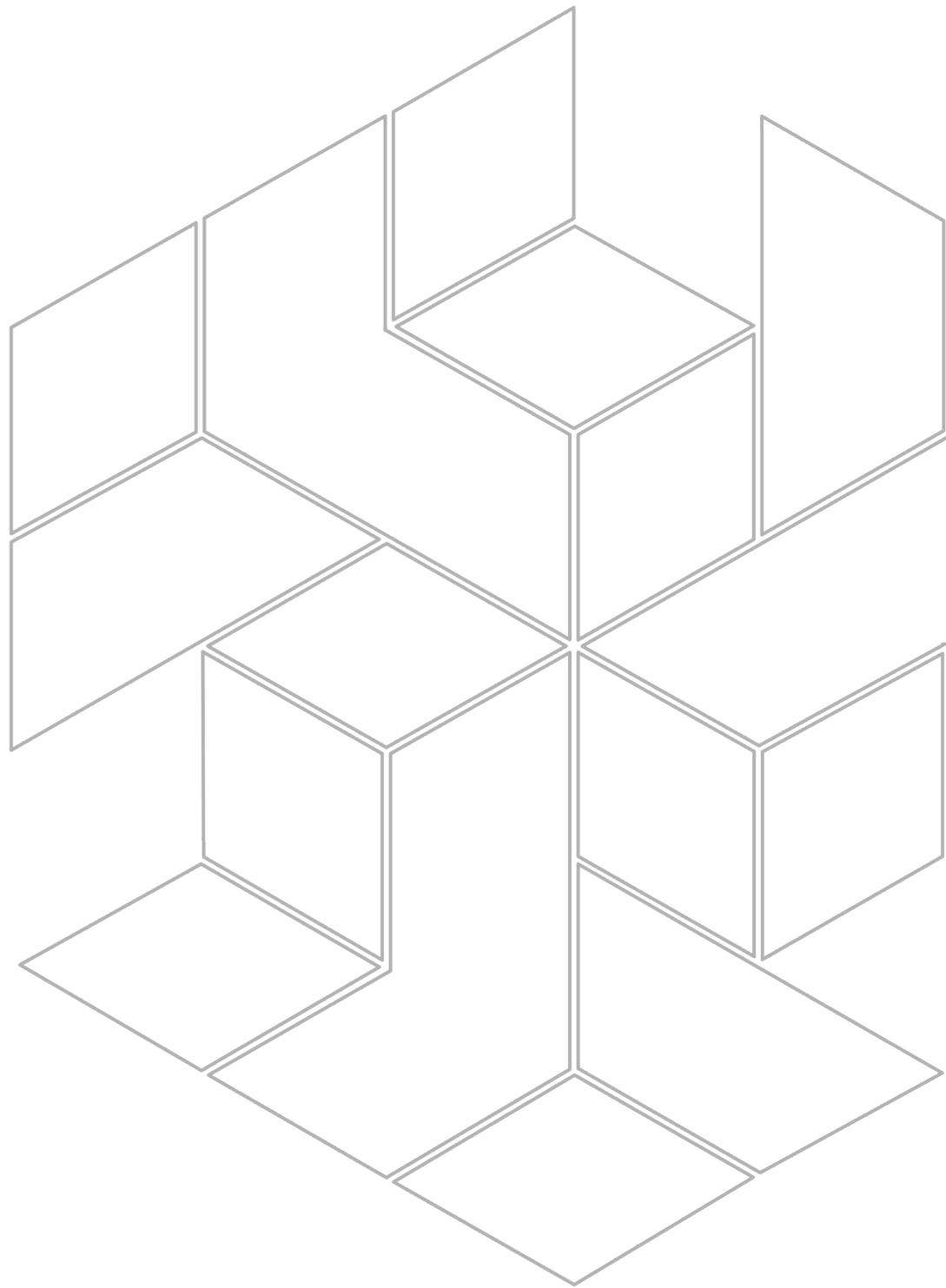
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