



Short Communication

Rethinking Childhood Protection in the Twenty-First Century

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Abstract

Globalization has reshaped economic opportunities and social conditions, but its effects on children remain uneven. This communication examines the relationship between economic globalization, poverty, and child labour, with particular attention to the difficulties faced by children in vulnerable households. It considers how economic pressures can increase families' dependence on children's earnings and, in turn, limit children's access to education, safety, and healthy development. The discussion also reviews the role of national and international legal measures in protecting children from exploitation and argues that legislation alone cannot address the economic conditions that sustain child labour. The Indian context is considered in relation to poverty, educational exclusion, and the legal regulation of child employment. The paper argues that effective protection of child rights requires measures that address household poverty, improve access to quality education, strengthen social protection, and provide safer livelihood opportunities for families. A balanced approach is therefore necessary to protect children's rights while addressing the economic hardships that contribute to their involvement in work.

Keywords: Economic Globalization; Child Rights; Child Labour; Poverty; Education; Social Protection; India; Child Protection.

Introduction

Globalization has changed the way economies, communities, and families are connected. The expansion of international trade, production networks, investment, and labour markets has created new economic opportunities, but the benefits have not been shared equally. In many low- and middle-income countries, families with limited and unstable incomes continue to face difficulties in meeting basic needs. When household resources are insufficient, children may become involved in paid or unpaid work to support their families. Child labour therefore cannot be viewed only as an individual or family decision; it is closely related to poverty, employment conditions, access to education, and wider economic inequalities [1].

Child labour remains an important concern for the

protection of children's rights. Work that interferes with schooling harms physical or mental development or exposes children to hazardous conditions can have consequences that extend well into adulthood [2]. Children who leave school early may have fewer opportunities to obtain stable employment later in life, which can contribute to the continuation of poverty across generations. The issue is particularly difficult in communities where parents have limited employment opportunities and where social protection systems do not adequately protect vulnerable households.

International efforts have established important principles for protecting children from exploitation. The Convention on the Rights of the Child recognizes children's rights to education, protection from economic exploitation, health,

development, and participation in matters affecting them. International labour standards have also sought to establish minimum ages for employment and to eliminate the worst forms of child labour [3]. These measures have strengthened the legal recognition of children's rights. However, the existence of laws does not necessarily remove the economic conditions that encourage families to depend on children's work. Weak enforcement, informal employment, poverty, and limited access to schooling can reduce the practical effect of legal protection.

The relationship between globalization and child labour is complex. International trade can generate employment and improve household incomes, which may reduce the need for children to work. At the same time, pressure to reduce production costs can encourage the use of inexpensive and vulnerable labour, particularly in informal sectors and poorly regulated supply chains. Children may consequently become part of economic activities that are difficult to monitor [4]. The impact of globalization therefore depends greatly on labour regulation, household income, social protection, education, and the ability of governments to enforce existing standards [5].

India provides an important context for examining these concerns. Although India has introduced laws and programmes aimed at restricting child labour and improving children's access to education, poverty and unequal access to resources continue to affect children in vulnerable communities. The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, the Child and Adolescent Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, and various social welfare programmes represent significant steps towards protecting children. Nevertheless, legal measures must be supported by effective implementation, household income security, accessible education, and opportunities for adults to obtain decent and stable employment.

The central concern is therefore not simply whether children should be permitted or prohibited from working. A lasting response requires attention to the circumstances that lead children into work in the first place. Policies aimed at eliminating child labour need to address household poverty, educational exclusion, informal employment, and inadequate social protection alongside legal enforcement. Protecting child rights requires an approach in which economic development and international trade are accompanied by safeguards that ensure children can study, remain safe, and develop without being forced into work because of economic hardship.

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Economic Globalization and Household Poverty

Economic globalization has expanded trade, investment, production, and employment across national borders. These changes can improve household incomes when new employment opportunities are stable and fairly paid. However, the benefits of economic growth are not distributed equally. Families working in informal or low-paid occupations may remain vulnerable to sudden changes in employment, food prices, and living costs. In such circumstances, children can become involved in household work or income-generating activities [5,6].

Poverty is one of the strongest factors associated with child labour. When parents cannot earn enough to meet essential household expenses, the income or assistance provided by children may become important for family survival. The decision to send a child to work is therefore often shaped by economic necessity rather than parental preference. Policies directed only at removing children from workplaces may have limited results if the financial difficulties of their families remain unresolved.

Globalization and the Expansion of Child Labour

The growth of international production networks has connected local producers with wider markets. Industries such as agriculture, textiles, mining, manufacturing, domestic work, and small-scale production may involve children, particularly where work takes place outside formal systems of inspection. Subcontracting and informal employment can make it difficult to identify the conditions under which goods are produced.

Global markets themselves do not automatically create child labour. In some circumstances, increased employment and higher household earnings can reduce children's participation in work. The outcome depends on wages, working conditions, labour protection, education, and the distribution of economic gains. Strong labour standards and responsible supply-chain practices are therefore important for ensuring that economic expansion does not occur at the expense of children's rights.

Child Labour and the Right to Education

Education is closely connected with the protection of child rights. Children who spend substantial amounts of time working may experience irregular attendance, poor academic performance, or complete withdrawal from

school. The problem becomes more serious when work is physically demanding or takes place during school hours.

The loss of education can affect a child's future employment prospects and earning capacity. This creates a cycle in which early entry into low-skilled work limits future opportunities and may contribute to continued household poverty. Improving access to affordable and good-quality education is therefore an essential part of reducing child labour. School attendance alone, however, is not sufficient; children also need safe learning environments, adequate teaching, and support when poverty creates barriers to regular attendance.

Child Rights and Legal Protection

International and national laws have established important safeguards against the economic exploitation of children. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child recognizes children's rights to protection, education, health, development, and freedom from economic exploitation. International labour standards have also addressed minimum employment ages and the elimination of hazardous forms of child labour [6].

A legal framework that prohibits or regulates the employment of children and adolescents and provides for compulsory education. These measures demonstrate recognition of children's rights within national policy. Nevertheless, legislation can be difficult to enforce when employment is informal, workplaces are dispersed, and families depend on irregular income. Effective implementation therefore requires cooperation among government agencies, schools, employers, communities, and social welfare institutions.

Challenges in the Context

The difficulty of addressing child labour in a large and socially diverse economy. Economic differences between households, unequal educational opportunities, informal employment, migration, and limited awareness of legal rights can increase children's vulnerability. Children from economically disadvantaged households may be particularly exposed to work in agriculture, small businesses, domestic activities, construction, and other informal occupations.

The challenge is not limited to removing children from employment. When a child's earnings contribute to household survival, immediate withdrawal from work without family support may place additional pressure on parents and children. Effective intervention therefore needs

to combine enforcement with measures such as income support, access to education, skill development for adults, and assistance for vulnerable families. Such measures can reduce the economic pressure that encourages child labour.

Globalization, Child Protection, and Social Responsibility

The protection of children cannot be placed entirely on governments. Businesses, international organizations, consumers, educational institutions, and local communities also have responsibilities. Companies involved in international production should examine labour practices throughout their supply chains rather than focusing only on directly employed workers. Transparent purchasing practices, workplace monitoring, and compliance with child protection standards can help reduce the risk of exploitation.

Social responsibility is particularly important where production depends on informal suppliers. If businesses demand very low prices or extremely short delivery periods, small producers may face pressure to reduce labour costs. Such pressures can contribute indirectly to exploitative employment practices. Responsible business practices should therefore consider both the rights of children and the economic conditions of workers and their families.

Towards a Rights-Based Response to Child Labour

A lasting reduction in child labour requires more than prohibition. Children need access to education, health services, protection, and a secure family environment, while parents need opportunities for decent and adequately paid employment. Social protection can play an important role by helping families manage periods of unemployment, illness, economic shocks, and other circumstances that may otherwise push children into work [6,7].

A rights-based response should therefore combine legal enforcement with poverty reduction, educational support, adult employment opportunities, and stronger protection for vulnerable households. International trade and economic growth can contribute positively to children's well-being when their benefits are accompanied by appropriate labour standards and social policies. The objective should be to create conditions in which families do not have to depend on children's labour for survival and in which every child has a genuine opportunity to learn, develop, and live in safety.

Conclusion

Globalization has created new economic opportunities, but its benefits have not reached all families equally. Poverty, insecure employment, limited access to education, and informal work continue to place many children at risk of entering the labour force. Child labour should therefore be understood in relation to the economic circumstances of families rather than as an isolated social problem. Laws that prohibit child labour are necessary, but legislation alone cannot remove the conditions that make children's work a source of household survival.

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