

3. Fear of Child Labour looms large among Children amid Pandemic

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After losing both their parents to COVID, Prashant* a 16 year old kid from West Singbhum, eldest among the five siblings, had joined the nearby brick kiln to earn a modest living to feed his younger brothers and sisters. (*name changed).

The second wave of COVID 19, that had lashed the country like Tsunami, has made children like Prashant, vulnerable, now more than ever. The children who are becoming orphans are left with need of care and protection. Now with more than 15 months of school closure, coupled with loss of livelihood of parents and children losing one or both the parents to the pandemic them further to the brink of various sorts of vulnerabilities ranging from getting engaged into labour force at this tender age or falling prey to traffickers and thereby joining as child labour.

With the on-set of second wave of COVID-19, that has hit our nation, it has been disheartening to read stories about children who have become orphans, losing one or both parents to the deadly Virus. A pandemic induced crisis requiring utmost attention of both public and the authorities has become essential, since many children have lost their parent or parents to the pandemic and are without care or protection. The pressure on children staying at home, especially girls, will be to contribute to household chores and sibling care. More and more girls will be pulled further away from education and into managing the household.

Children are forced to work because family incomes are not enough to survive on. With many people losing their jobs due to COVID-19, the financial crises being faced by families has increased manifold. These families will need extra pairs of hands to earn to provide two meals a day, leading to more children entering the economy or working on family-owned enterprises and farms.

Now more than ever the second wave has pointed out how orphaned children are at risk of becoming child labours with minimal or no support to at family level to feed them.

Save the Children, one of the leading child rights organisation, is deeply concerned about the growing number of children who have lost parents to COVID-19 in India. Desperate pleas to adopt orphaned children have been circulated on social media, leaving them vulnerable to trafficking and abuse.



These pleas indicate towards the painstaking realities of young children left to fend for their fate. In reality such orphaned children are more susceptible, now more than ever, to land in the traps of traffickers or criminals or joining labour force in absence of appropriate actions.

A Government of India survey (NSS Report No. 585, 2017-18, Statement 3.12, p.35) suggests that 95% of the children in the age group of 6-13 years are attending educational institutions (formal and informal) while the corresponding figures for those in the age group of 14-17 years is 79.6%. Hence, a large number of children in India remain vulnerable, facing physical and psychological risks to a healthy development.

The challenges are significant and manifold but it is not impossible to meet them if the right level of commitment among all the relevant stakeholders and the right mix of policy and programmatic interventions are present. It is through strategic partnerships and collaborations involving government, employers, trade unions, community-based organisations and child labour families that we could make a difference building back better and sooner.

The year 2021, is observed as the International Year for Elimination of Child labour. It's time to accelerate the pace of progress. It's time to inspire legislative and practical actions to eliminate child labour for good from the country. Although recent data shows quite a gloomy picture, with catalytic impact COVID-19 along with the pre-existing socio-economic situations, but it is time for action to achieve our commitments towards Sustainable Development Goals especially 8.7.

The Jharkhand Government have ramped up action to ensure protection to children who have lost their parents to COVID. The Government has already launched a helpline to response to the cause of such children and Child Welfare Committees (CWC) to respond to such cases with immediate effect to ensure safety and protection to these children in the coming days.

Initiatives like rural watchdog committees in the form of Village Level Child Protection Committee (VLCPC) need to be activated across the state. Similar committees at urban level too need to be formed to ensure protection to children from falling prey to traffickers. The state must re-instate the Jharkhand Commission for Protection of Child Rights (JSCPCR), which is remaining non-functional since 31st March 2019. Such constitutional bodies and community based structures need to be



activated in this hour of need to prevent further child trafficking from the state. A concentrated effort by both government of eth day and the civil society organisations is need of the hour to combat this social menace.