

Newsletter

Migration, Child Labour and COVID-19: Present Crisis, Future Catastrophe?

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Children's Day 2020- Unfolding Enthusiasm Amidst the Pandemic



Editor's Message

Friends

Year 2021 is going to be observed as the International Year for Elimination of Child Labour. Worldwide, several institutions and coalitions- the International Labour Organization (ILO), UNICEF and Alliance 8.7 to name a few - are joining hands to 'take action to fight child labour'. A website dedicated to this cause, www.endchildlabour2021.org, calls for action pledges through the "three stages of acting, inspiring and scaling up". It talks about the decrease in child labour by 38 percent in the last decade; however, the fact that globally there are still 152 million children in child labour with one out of 20 children in hazardous labour calls for multiple and concerted actions. While looking forward to the global launch event in January, we, the members of the WNCB alliance in India pledge our commitment to action for the elimination of child labour.

This issue focusses on migration and its impact on child labour. Pamela Philipose, in her essay, argues that "...the experience of migration, by its very nature, means that the dangers of child trafficking and child labour get greatly exacerbated precisely because migrants lack, not just familiar community networks, but access to secure shelter, healthcare, education, public rations, identity documents and employment. Just one adverse event can hold cascading consequences for them...(W)hat makes the situation in India particularly dire is that a robust legislative architecture to protect India's young from becoming part of the work force does not exist." In another essay, Neetu Sharma focusses on the impact on education and vulnerability of children due to pandemic induced migration, displacement and suspension of schools. "While one would like to believe that the crises will end with the virus, loss of educational opportunities and economic distress of the families will continue to loom over children's education and demand for labour especially in the informal sector will increase their vulnerabilities....(S)chool closures will create huge barriers for migrated children's return to school", she says.

Last month Sudharak Olwe, an accomplished photographer, travelled with his team and colleagues at WNCB to Bihar. In learning the art of photography from Sudharak, around 70 children, between 14 and 17 years, rediscovered themselves. Colleague, Garima, brings this journey of self-discovery by children in words for you. WNCB shall continue this art of story-telling with children using a plethora of mediums.

Happy reading.

Migration, Child Labour and COVID-19: Present Crisis, Future Catastrophe?

Pamela Philipose

Consider the following facts: 6 million schoolchildren in India are estimated to have lost their chances of schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Annual Status of Education Report reveals that the proportion of out-of-school children in the 6-10 age group has spiked from 1.8% (in 2018) to 5.3% (in 2020). Being out of school has left them vulnerable not just to hunger and malnutrition without access to institutionalised mid-day meals, it has left them in danger of early marriage and child trafficking. Access to healthcare was also severely affected by the general population and more specifically children during this period. According to Union Ministry of Health and Family Welfare data for April-June 2020, inpatient admissions registered a fall of 45.87 percent, and the full immunisation of children in the 9-11 month age group declined by 19.90%. Child psychologists also talk of a rise in the number of cases of physical and sexual abuse as homes became prison cells during the lockdown.

It is against this general backdrop of deprivation and despair that the many dimensions of the reverse migration crisis of last summer need to be viewed. A punishing lockdown announced by the Government of India with a four-hour notice led to a desperate scramble for at least 10 million people employed in towns and cities across the country. Left jobless, homeless, hungry and without public transportation, they scrambled to reach the distant places they called home, sometimes walking all the way under the summer sun. The differential impacts of the pandemic on various strata of the population immediately became manifest. Migrant workers were forced to bear a disproportionately larger burden and their children were made to pay the highest price.



The Indian media's coverage of the reverse migration story consistently under-reported the situation of children and yet it was the images of small, helpless bodies in transit that inevitably told the story: an exhausted child slumped over a suitcase being dragged down the highway; a toddler on a railway platform uncovering its dead mother who had succumbed to starvation, hypoglycemia and dehydration as she attempted to reach her Bihar village from her work site in Gujarat. Then there was Jyoti Kumari, 15, forced to ferry her ailing father on her cycle over 700 km. She luckily made it back and won universal acclaim, but Jamlo Makdam, 12, was not so fortunate. After having walked 150 km from the Telangana chilli farm where she worked, Makdam's underfed, dehydrated body collapsed before she could make it back to her village in Chhattisgarh.

The struggle to survive had led Jamlo to give up on schooling much earlier. What the pandemic did was to hasten the transition from the classroom to the workplace for hundreds of thousands of children in India who were once in school. This process of disempowerment came forcefully through in a recent public hearing of slum residents in India's capital city, conducted by the Delhi Rozi Roti Adhikar Abhiyan. Many of those who testified were migrants who, as one woman

was announced. With no ration card and no one willing to hire her, she was forced to let her 13-year-old grandson earn a few rupees plying a rickshaw. It is unlikely that the boy will ever return to school. More disturbing was the

let their 12-year-old daughter go with them.

A great deal of anecdotal evidence of children going missing during the pandemic surfaced in this period. In their paper, **"The COVID-19 Pandemic and Internal Labour Migration in India: A Crisis of Mobility"**, published in the Indian Journal of Labour Economics, S. Irudaya Rajan and his colleagues point to the numerous reports of women and children lacking safety and security in shelter homes, quarantine areas and COVID centres, with several cases of sexual assault and suicides emerging.

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dangers of child trafficking and child labour get greatly exacerbated precisely because migrants lack, not just familiar community networks, but access to secure shelter, healthcare, education, public rations, identity documents and employment. Just one adverse event can hold cascading consequences for them.

What makes the situation in India particularly dire is that a robust legislative architecture to protect India's young from becoming part of the workforce does not exist. This period of the pandemic saw the government hastily pass labour codes designed to extend the work day, liberalise hiring and firing practices, and undermine collective bargaining. This, taken together with a 2016 law that allows children over of 14 years of age to be put to work in **"non-hazardous"**, **"family"** enterprises has actually created an enabling environment for child labour considering that a regulatory regime is almost non-existent. Cheap juvenile labour comes as a bonus for industrial units looking to wipe out pandemic-inflicted losses.

For the children of the pandemic, the future looks bleak, with many of them destined to comprise a lost generation. Child labour has always been a part of the Indian reality and continues to be so, pandemic or no pandemic. The 2011 census put the figure of children between 5 and 17, classified as **"main workers"** (those having worked more than six months in a year), at 11.8 million, and the



put it, came to Delhi to feed themselves but were left **"drowning in debt after the lockdown."**

An alcoholic father, a mother whose employer fired her as a potential source of contagion, an ailing grandmother, a landlord threatening eviction, any of these circumstances - either singly or combined - strained the fraying safety net provided by these impoverished families for their youngest and most vulnerable members. It was only a matter of time before these under-aged bodies got pushed out of the home to earn a living. Take the story of 62-year-old grandmother, Rani, a domestic worker supporting her dead son's two children. She was fired soon after the lockdown

testimony of a tribal family, again migrants from the hinterland who supported themselves by fashioning idols of gods out of plaster-of-paris to sell to passing motorists on the highway. After the lockdown, their products no longer sold but motorists would occasionally stop by and offer money if they

present numbers would be significantly higher. However, what is striking about today's scenario is that it represents a disturbing reversal of the major gains achieved in the eradication of child labour through great effort and budgetary support made over a period of time.

The big question is whether the situation will revert back to normal - at least a pre-pandemic "normal" -- once this unprecedented health crisis ends. The evidence from countries around the world, including India, would indicate that such an outcome is unlikely, at least in the short term. The recent ILO-UNICEF report, 'COVID-19 and child labour - A time of crisis, a time to act' (June



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2020) notes that while the negative consequences of school disruption during the pandemic may be limited for those with means, poorer families may find it impossible to continue with their children's schooling because the income these young ones are now bringing in has become central to their survival.

Truly, as the COVID-19 pandemic played out in India, the bodies of children have emerged as a poignantly accurate measure of human precarity. If we allow this crisis to turn into a catastrophe by leaving it unaddressed, the future will judge us harshly.



Stability over Education-

The hard choice

Neetu Sharma

In a country already grappling with the prevalence of multifaceted and multisource violations of the rights of children, COVID-19 exposed an even larger number of children to abuse and exploitation of various forms. Economic shocks suffered by the poor in India have put children at a much higher degree of risk of being exploited. Most worrying is the fact that the impact of the pandemic is not only limited to the lockdown and immediate distress but will manifest in long term adverse effects on childhood in India.

An already grim state of affairs and lukewarm policy response

With about 152 million children worldwide working as labourers, India carried a significant portion of this burden (7.3%). A large number of children under 14 years are involved in hazardous work and have already lost the opportunity to be educated and find a decent life for themselves. The Child Labour (Regulation and Prohibition Act) 1986 and the National Policy on Child Labour 1987, the key legislative and policy responses at the national level have fallen short in preventing child labour and focussed, as the nomenclature suggests, on regulation and rehabilitation only. Only a negligible number of cases are booked under the law, with an even lower number of prosecution of the total number of child labourers. The percentage of the total number of victims rescued as per the National Crime Record Bureau (NCRB) data during 2016-18 to the total number of child labourers in the country lies at a meagre 0.02 percent. Further dilution of the law in 2016 through carving out a new category, 'adolescents' and allowing child work with family enterprises, had already increased the risk for children from economically weaker sections to drastically decreased list of hazardous industries

may allow the employers in industries like chemical mixing units, cotton farms, battery recycling units, and brick kilns (which are actually hazardous) to employ adolescent labour, now at even cheaper rates given the situation amidst the pandemic.

The COVID effect

Life came to a grinding halt with the outbreak of COVID-19 and ensuing lockdown in India. Development processes, economy, education and other associated processes - all took a hit and it may take us a long time to assess the impact of the pandemic on human development. However, some of the

immediate fallouts can already be seen, especially on the vulnerable groups. The immediate impact of the pandemic is seen on the internally migrated families, especially those engaged in the informal sector. Unfortunately, the impact is much more grim than originally estimated and highly complex.

An unscrupulous combination of loss of family's livelihood and suspension of formal education system manifested in several adverse experiences especially for poor children. Closure of early childhood care and development centres - *anganwadis* severely affected the provision of essential services such as food and nutrition, growth monitoring, immunisation and healthcare. It is of grave concern that even after 5-10 months of the first lockdown when most of the other services are getting back to normal, although, at the snail pace, schools and *anganwadi* centres continue to be dysfunctional. Worrisome is the fact that the ramifications are much beyond the loss of a year of childhood.

Reverse migrants did not come back to their safe haven; if that was the case, they wouldn't have migrated at the first place. They came back to the hardships, resourcelessness, a virtually non-existent social security system and even worse in some cases - regressive social norms, gender bias against young girls and women, social evils such as child marriages and discriminatory practices, especially based on class and caste. Exclusion of displaced and migrant communities from national economic and income safety nets

during COVID-19 lockdown periods have exposed children to high vulnerability, particularly for those not benefiting from formal assistance and those living off informal economies. The burden of financial distress on the families has pushed them to adopt several coping strategies and with schools being closed, children are getting consumed in petty labour. A large number of children in rural areas are getting subsumed into agricultural labour. Smaller towns have also found cheap labour with many children out there available to work. Cotton farms in Northern Karnataka, for instance, have absorbed a large number of children of reverse migrants.

Children studying in economy private schools could not afford to attend online classes. Many households did stretch themselves to keep up with the requirements of the internet-based classes but found themselves prioritising the male child over the female. The correlation between the pandemic, lack of schooling facilities and male preference, can easily be witnessed with the increased availability of young female agriculture labourers in rural areas.



While one would like to believe that the crises will end with the virus, loss of educational opportunities and economic distress of the families will continue to loom over children's education and demand for labour, especially in the informal sector will increase them to many vulnerabilities. Most of the displaced children do not have access to computers or an internet connection. Closure of schools will create huge barriers for migrated children's return to school. Re-joining education and completion of a secondary level will become even more challenging for children carrying the burden of household poverty.

Schools also function as the focal point for access to referral pathways for other critical, child-focused social services, such as child-friendly safe spaces, school meals and formal and informal support. As these activities are suspended, an increase in mental health problems, anxiety and tension can be expected in individual children, as well as families.

High time we act

There is no denying that the pandemic and the crises it generated are unprecedented. An immediate and well-coordinated response is all the more imperative. Global efforts to ensure continuum in education may give some directions. Better care network suggests measures such as planning for ensuring continuity of learning for migrant and displaced children,

including those in settlements, shelters or in hard to reach locations. Assigning reading or exercises for home study, dissemination of radio, podcasts or television broadcasts with learning, assigning teachers or volunteers to conduct remote daily or weekly follow up with students or their caregivers, ongoing review and re-adaptation of education strategies and methodologies, and establishing procedures to follow COVID protocols are few suggestions.

Too little too late

In India, we are yet to arrive at a coordinated strategy to address the situation. State governments are struggling to envision and rollout plans for continued education for migrant children. Attempts have been made by few state governments to bridge the gap in schooling through informal educational initiatives. One such initiative is the 'Vidyagama' or the continuous learning programme' of the state



government on Karnataka that has yielded some results with allowing children to come to public school campuses in smaller groups following all the COVID protocols. After being discontinued briefly, the programme was relaunched to extend it to private schools as well. However, with only a few children from select grades being able to attend schools, the future of a majority of children remains uncertain.

The pandemic has given us an opportunity to review and revisit the policy framework. The catastrophic impact does demand an immediate response; however, it also points towards the need to reflect on the systemic issues that ail the education system in India and its inability to cater to a majority of impoverished children. A sustainable approach that prioritised a robust, inclusive and equitable public education system would have helped in minimising the impact of the pandemic on marginalised children. It's time we start looking at innovative solutions based on the principles of inclusivity and access to quality



Dr Neetu Sharma heads the Centre for Child and the Law (CCL) at the National Law School of India University (NLSIU), Bangalore, where she has been working for more than 14 years. She has been engaged in socio-legal and policy research and teaching and training on child rights and right to food. She also leads the programme on Right to Food at the Centre.

education. Very recently the state government of Karnataka has accepted the proposal for establishing public schools in each Gram Panchayat and Ward based on the Kendriya Vidyalaya Model. The proposal is both pragmatic and effective and may usher in a new era in the public education system in the state. Similar progressive approaches seem Achilles heels to curb child labour with the recent changes in the central legislation but are not impossible to adopt. Draft child labour policy is a small step of the Karnataka State Government that, if implemented in its true spirit, may protect children from economic exploitation even in the post-pandemic era, and inspire other state governments to optimise the policy space in favour of children.

¹Operational Guidance Covid19 and Migration and Displacement
<https://rb.gy/maodhm>

²Karnataka govt revisits plan, KV-model schools likely in GPs, wards
<https://rb.gy/kjsv4z>

Children's Day 2020- Unfolding Enthusiasm Amidst the Pandemic



The year 2020 with the ongoing pandemic has managed to put a pause to the normal lives of people. While communities, globally, have managed to find a coping mechanism, committing to stability is still an active challenge. Inadequate health services, minimum financial support, and the closing of schools have been the contributing factors to draw the children back into the vicious circle of child labor and poverty. Comprehending the damage that has been inflicted on children and halted their development, has not been easy for the social sector either.

Yet, the WNCB India alliance, is striving to contribute to the best of their interest and to ensure a safe and healthy environment for them to flourish in. And so, reimagining a world of possibilities for our children and shaping a future full of infinite opportunities with its relentless interventions, WNCB alliance in India, observed the National Children's Day on November 14, 2020, with enthusiasm and hope.

Bringing together the innocent stars of the day, the Fakirana Sisters Society organised a painting competition where children poured their thoughts out with diverse colours, capturing the vibrant spirit of childhood. Whereas Manjari started *Anand Shala* in 3 locations to provide learning

opportunities to non-school-going children, school drop-outs and children who have never been to schools.

To honor the special day, candle marches/rallies were organised by the MV Foundation in the villages- demanding restoration of childhood by putting an end to child marriages and child labour.

The day turned out to be even more meaningful when WNCB India, in the spirit of marking #UNCRCWeek which culminates in the #UniversalChildrensDay on November 20th, announced the commemoration of Child Rights Week in India. By highlighting the right of every child that deserves a healthy childhood through the means of a tweetathon, WNCB India created a platform for an effective exchange of thoughts on a subject, visioning a world #ForChildrenByChildren.

On a similar note, MV Foundation also observed the week by directing its activities towards restoring childhood. Amongst various other activities organised, the power of questioning the harsh reality of child labor and marriage was faithfully practiced during specially curated meetings and discussions with participation from significant stakeholders. These meetings provoked immediate dialogue and change. Owing to the same, donations for books and stationery were made, a remedial centre for 35 children was inaugurated & many children were sent to the only place they belong- classrooms.





The Unceasing Efforts of WNCB

The consequences posed by the pandemic have widened the socio-economic gap between communities. The rate of increase in unemployment and the relief available have more than often mismatched. Providing support and sharing the hardships of the people, WNCB provided livelihood support in Sagauli and Jokihat of East Champaran and Araria districts in Bihar. 64 families were provided with tailoring and masonry kit to engage themselves in gainful employment and ensure education, safety and, security for their children.

To extend the relief to larger communities, WNCB performed a variety of services for the people of the Araria district of Bihar. To begin with, Service Providers Block and Panchayat level service providers were sensitized to the needs and concerns of the migrant families and their children. Their barriers in regard to having access to social protection schemes were brought in the limelight. To address the same issue, awareness camps were also organized to spread information on various employment and relief existing schemes. As a result, more than 80 families got job cards under MG-NREGS and engaged themselves in gainful employment.



Keeping children as the epicenter for development & progress, the program contributed significantly towards preserving their childhood and their future in Bihar.

Focused Group Discussions were organized with 4 Child Protection Committees to spread awareness on various health measures for COVID-19. Meetings were held with 7 School Management Committees focusing on enforcement of the Right to Education Act, enrolment of migrant and rescued children, identification of out-of-school children and launching campaigns involving community to mainstream (out of school) children. The School Management Committee members were oriented on developing school development plans with special emphasis on the enrolment of migrant children and providing them special training classes to bridge their learning deficit.



In view of many migrant families coming into villages, child protection committees were also oriented on keeping a close tab on the migrant families and children and prescribe health measures accordingly.

Establishing change at the ground level is one of the most challenging ways to do so yet most effective. Standing firm to this transformation, business owners came together with MV Foundation to announce the abolishment of child labourers in the market. In its ongoing robust initiatives to bridge the gap between education & childhood, WNCB India yet again managed to enroll children into schools with the help of its volunteers.



Through A Child's Lens

Garima Kaur



Children learning the basics of photography.

Despite the cold, the atmosphere is surcharged and electrifying as a crowd of stunned onlookers is about to witness an unusual sight in their neighborhood. In a makeshift newsroom created on the rooftop with a dining table and the chroma screen, Muskan and Shabreen, the news anchors are ready with their news bulletin as they face the camera.

"Silence!" shouts a 15-year-old Rehan, the director.

The backstage crew members Majid, Ujala, and Parveen perform their respective responsibilities as the director commands, "Roll Sound, Lights, Camera and...Action!"

"Namaste! I am Shabreen, bringing before you the latest news from Bettiah. The Railway Protection Force rescued two-child labourers at the Narkatiya Police Station and sent them to a children's home. Child labour is a criminal offense, education is their right..."

Reverberating applause echoes through the lanes of Narkatiya locality as children finish recording for Bettiah Live!

Intending to teach the art of storytelling through the medium of photography, the initiative of 'Capacity Building and Digital Inclusion' has led to children

rediscovering themselves as they weave together their world of thoughts and feelings.

WNCB India teamed up with Sudharak Olwe, a Padma Shree awardee and renowned photographer who, along with his team, took absorbing sessions with 50 children aged between 15-18 years, and mainstreamed with education and vocational training interventions.

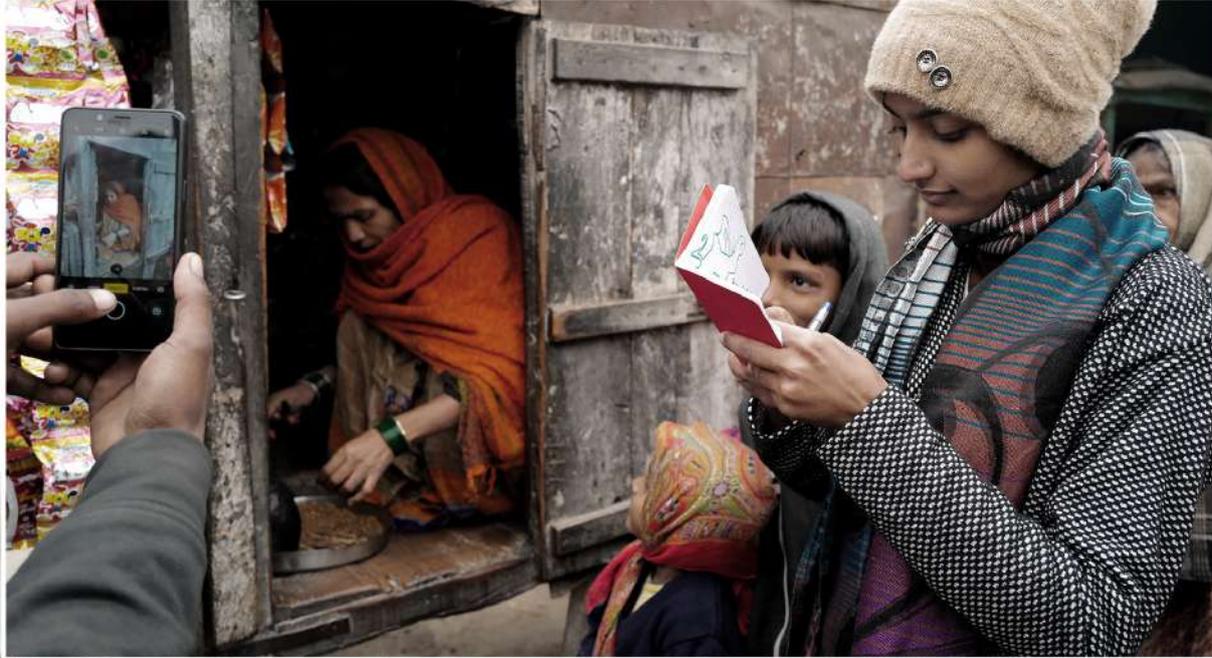
As children embarked on their journey to self-discovery, it all started with, "What do you see from your frame?" Various group exercises were conducted to stimulate the minds of children as they learned to decipher

the emotion behind a photograph. Delving deeper, Nirman Chowdhury taught them the science behind photography. Children were intrigued with the operational details of how a camera captures a photograph.

As children began to problematize the social issues of their concern, the interaction shaped their perspectives about their realities enabling them to understand how a camera could become a tool to foster social change. Rehan, though wanted to join the army when he grows up, expressed his keen interest to be a documentary photographer for Child-line-1098. Shabreen stated her unhappiness with the work of beedi making; posing as a health risk with too little gains, she was convinced to showcase the issue through the lens, which also employs children as child labourers.

Listening to the heartwarming story of Vicky Roy and his journey of working as a ragpicker to transforming his life with a camera, further instilled a sense of confidence among children.

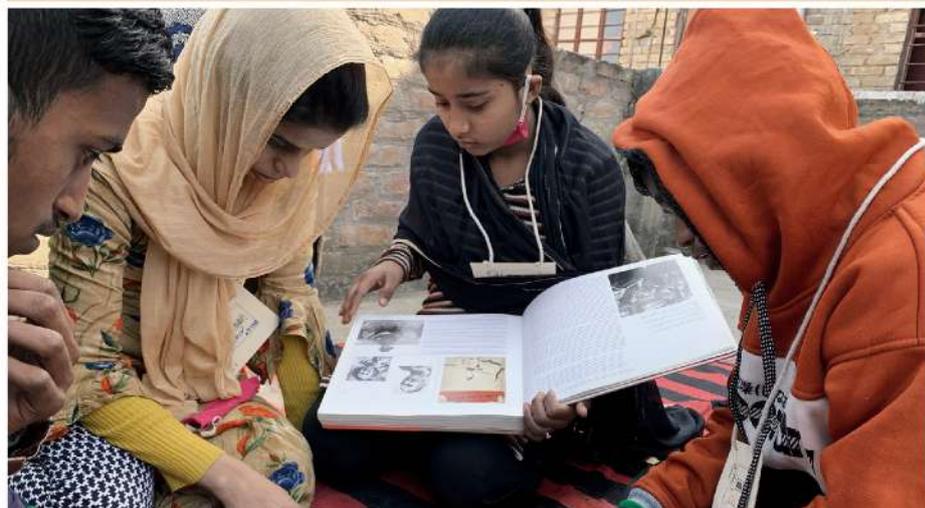
As tiny windows to the world, the workshop enabled children to reimagine a different world through their lens with a willingness to own a sense of self and dream bigger.



A team of children gets hands-on training while documenting the experiences of beedi woman worker through their pen and lens.



Children creating their own Newsroom and reporting from Bettiah Live!



Children learning the basics of photography.



A team of children during a practical training session.

Enabling children express their thoughts and emotions through group exercises.



About the Alliance:

Work: No Child's Business aims to contribute towards the concentrated global efforts in ending all forms of child labour by 2025. The WNCB alliance, envisions a world where children and youth are free from child labour and enjoy their rights to quality education and (future) decent work, thereby contributing to SDG 8.7 in six countries- Côte d'Ivoire, Jordan, Mali, Uganda, Viet Nam, and India.

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