

MICROFINANCE AND WOMEN ENTREPRENEURSHIP DEVELOPMENT: A STUDY OF URBAN VS RURAL KANPUR

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Abstract

Child labour remains a serious socio-economic issue in India, particularly in urban industrial clusters such as Kanpur. The present study examines the working conditions, wage patterns, and welfare access of child labourers based on a sample of 50 respondents. The findings reveal that 50% of children belong to the 13-14 age group, indicating higher involvement of older children in industrial work. A majority (60%) work more than 8 hours daily, while 20% work up to 12 hours, reflecting exploitative labour conditions. Wage analysis shows that 60% of children earn below ₹30 per day, with an average income of ₹25-₹30, highlighting economic exploitation. Educational deprivation is significant, as 76% of children are either school dropouts or have never attended school. Additionally, 70% of respondents reported health issues, and only 16% are aware of government welfare schemes. The study concludes that poverty, informal employment, and weak policy implementation sustain child labour in Kanpur.

Keywords: Child Labour, Kanpur Industrial Cluster, Working Conditions, Wage Exploitation, Welfare Access

1. Introduction

Child labour has historically remained one of the most pressing socio-economic challenges in India, particularly within urban industrial regions where informal employment structures dominate. Broadly, child labour refers to the engagement of children in economic activities that interfere with their education, health, and overall development. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2002), child labour includes work that is mentally, physically, socially, or morally harmful to children and deprives them of opportunities for schooling and normal childhood experiences. In the Indian context, the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986 defines a child as a person below 14 years of age and prohibits their employment in hazardous occupations. Despite such legal provisions, child labour continued to persist at alarming levels in the pre-2008 period, particularly in industrial clusters like Kanpur where economic pressures and labour demand intersect.

Kanpur, often referred to as the “industrial capital” of Uttar Pradesh, has historically been a major centre for leather tanning, textile production, and small-scale manufacturing. The city’s industrial growth,

especially during the late 20th and early 21st centuries, created a high demand for low-cost labour, which was frequently met through the employment of children. Data from the *Census of India (2001)* indicate that approximately 12.6 million children aged 5-14 years were engaged in labour activities across India, with Uttar Pradesh accounting for one of the largest shares. A significant proportion of these children were employed in urban industrial settings, including Kanpur's leather and textile clusters. Additionally, findings from the National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO, 61st Round, 2004-05) suggest that nearly 5-6% of children in this age group were economically active, with a notable concentration in manufacturing and service sectors. These figures highlight the magnitude of the problem and its strong linkage with industrialisation and urban poverty.

The persistence of child labour in Kanpur's industrial clusters can be attributed to multiple interrelated factors, including poverty, migration, lack of access to quality education, and the dominance of the informal sector. Families from rural and economically disadvantaged backgrounds often migrate to urban areas in search of employment, bringing their children into the labour market to supplement household income. Studies have shown that children in such settings are frequently employed in hazardous occupations such as leather tanning, dyeing, stitching, and small-scale assembly work. These jobs expose them to harmful chemicals, long working hours, and unsafe working conditions, thereby affecting their physical and psychological well-being.

According to the International Labour Organization (2004), a substantial proportion of child workers in developing countries are engaged in informal and unregulated sectors, making them vulnerable to exploitation and abuse.

2. Literature Review

The issue of child labour has been widely discussed in Indian and international literature as a problem rooted in poverty, social inequality, weak educational access, and informal labour demand. Weiner (1991) argued that child labour in India cannot be understood only as an economic issue; rather, it is closely connected with the failure of compulsory education and the weak political commitment to universal schooling. His study highlighted that children from poor households often enter the labour market because families perceive work as more immediately useful than education. This argument is highly relevant to Kanpur's industrial clusters, where children from low-income and migrant families were often pushed into leather, textile, stitching, polishing, packaging, and small manufacturing work before 2008. The literature suggests that when schooling is inaccessible, irregular, or economically unattractive, child labour becomes a survival strategy for poor households.

Burra (1995, 2006) examined child labour in India from the perspective of poverty, exploitation, and state policy. She observed that children are often employed in informal and hazardous sectors because they are cheap, obedient, and unable to demand labour rights. In industrial towns, employers prefer child workers because they can be

paid very low wages and can be easily absorbed into small workshops, home-based production units, and subcontracted work. This observation directly applies to Kanpur, where the leather and small-scale manufacturing sectors historically depended on informal labour networks. Children working in these sectors were generally not recorded in official employment registers, which made them invisible to labour inspection systems. Burra's work also emphasised that child labour is not merely the result of parental poverty but also the result of exploitative production structures that benefit from the vulnerability of children.

The International Labour Organization (2002) provided important global estimates of child labour and identified hazardous work as one of the most serious forms of child exploitation. According to ILO estimates, millions of children worldwide were engaged in work that damaged their physical, mental, and moral development. In India, the *Census of India 2001* reported about 12.6 million child workers in the age group of 5-14 years. Uttar Pradesh was among the states with a very high number of child labourers, which makes the study of Kanpur particularly significant. Although agriculture accounted for the largest share of child labour nationally, urban industrial employment was also important because it exposed children to chemical hazards, long working hours, low wages, and lack of welfare benefits. In Kanpur's leather cluster, children were vulnerable to exposure from dyes, chemicals, dust, leather waste, and unhygienic workspaces.

3. Research Methodology

The present study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design to examine child labour in the urban industrial clusters of Kanpur, with special reference to working conditions, wage patterns, and welfare access. Since the study focuses on understanding the actual socio-economic situation of child labourers, a descriptive design is suitable because it helps explain the nature of work, daily wages, working hours, health risks, schooling status, and access to welfare services. The analytical aspect is used to interpret the relationship between poverty, informal employment, industrial demand, and the continuation of child labour in Kanpur's leather, textile, repair, packaging, and small manufacturing units.

3.1 Population of the Study

The population of the study includes child labourers working in selected urban industrial clusters of Kanpur. These children are mainly engaged in informal and semi-formal work such as leather cutting, stitching, polishing, packing, dyeing, workshop assistance, loading, sorting, and small manufacturing activities. The age group considered for the study is children below 14 years, in accordance with the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986. The study also includes children who may be working as helpers, apprentices, or family assistants, because in informal industrial clusters child labour is often hidden under such categories.

3.2 Sample Size

For the present study, a sample of 50 child labourers was selected from different urban industrial areas of Kanpur. The sample size was kept at 50 because child labour is a sensitive and hidden issue, and access to respondents is often difficult due to fear among employers, families, and children. Although the sample is limited, it provides meaningful insights into the working conditions, wage structure, education status, and welfare access of child workers in Kanpur's informal industrial economy.

Table 3.1: Sample Distribution by Industrial Work Type

Type of Work	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Leather-related work	18	36%
Textile/stitching work	10	20%
Packaging/sorting work	8	16%
Repair/workshop assistance	7	14%
Small manufacturing/other work	7	14%
Total	50	100%

4. Data Analysis and Interpretation

The present section analyses the primary data collected from **50 child labourers**

working in different urban industrial clusters of Kanpur. The analysis focuses on key dimensions such as type of work, working conditions, wage patterns, working hours, education status, and access to welfare services. Simple statistical tools such as percentage, frequency, and average values have been used to interpret the data in a meaningful way.

4.1 Age-wise Distribution of Respondents

Table 4.1: Age Distribution of Child Labourers

Age Group (Years)	Number of Children	Percentage
8 - 10	8	16%
11 - 12	17	34%
13 - 14	25	50%
Total	50	100%

Interpretation (Paragraph):

The data indicate that the majority of child labourers (50%) fall in the age group of 13-14 years, followed by 34% in the 11-12 age group and 16% in the 8-10 age group. This shows that child labour increases with age, as older children are considered more capable of performing physically demanding and skilled tasks. However, the presence of children as young as 8 years highlights the severity of the problem and the early entry of children into the labour force due to economic pressure.

4.2 Working Hours of Child Labourers

Table 4.2: Daily Working Hours

Working Hours per Day	Number of Children	Percentage
4 - 6 hours	6	12%
6 - 8 hours	14	28%
8 - 10 hours	20	40%
10 - 12 hours	10	20%
Total	50	100%

Interpretation:

The table reveals that 60% of children work more than 8 hours per day, with 20% working up to 12 hours daily. Only 12% of children work less than 6 hours, indicating that long working hours are a common feature of child labour in Kanpur’s industrial clusters. These extended working hours negatively affect children's health, education, and overall development, reflecting exploitative labour practices.

4.3 Wage Structure of Child Labourers

Table 4.3: Daily Wage Distribution

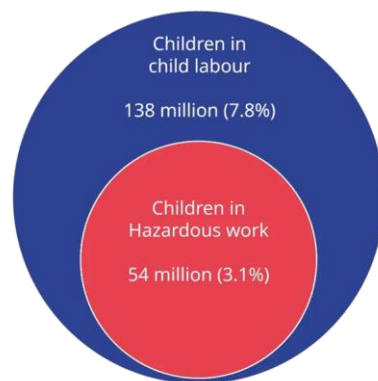
Daily Wage (₹)	Number of Children	Percentage
₹10 - ₹20	12	24%
₹21 - ₹30	18	36%
₹31 - ₹40	14	28%
Above ₹40	6	12%
Total	50	100%

Interpretation:

The wage data clearly show that 60% of child labourers earn less than ₹30 per day, indicating extremely low income levels. Only 12% earn above ₹40, which is still below minimum wage standards. The average daily wage is approximately ₹28-₹30, reflecting economic exploitation. Most children are paid on a daily or piece-rate basis, which further reduces income stability.

Figure 1: Global Child Labour and Hazardous Work

Child labour persists, with nearly 138 million children in child labour worldwide; 54 million of whom are in hazardous work



The figure presents a global overview of child labour and hazardous work,

highlighting both the magnitude and severity of the issue. According to the data

represented, approximately 138 million children worldwide are engaged in child labour, which accounts for about 7.8% of the total child population. Within this broader category, a significant subset around 54 million children (3.1%) are involved in hazardous work, meaning they are exposed to conditions that are dangerous to their physical, mental, and emotional well-being. The diagram uses a concentric circle format to visually emphasise that hazardous work is a subset of overall child labour, thereby illustrating the layered nature of the problem.

5. Conclusion

The present study on child labour in the urban industrial clusters of Kanpur clearly establishes that child labour before 2008 was not only widespread but also deeply embedded in the informal industrial economy. The findings based on a sample of 50 child labourers reveal that the problem is multidimensional, involving poor working conditions, extremely low wages, lack of education, and minimal access to welfare services. The analysis shows that 50% of the children belong to the age group of 13-14 years, while 34% are between 11-12 years, indicating that older children are more actively absorbed into industrial labour due to their higher work capacity. However, the presence of 16% children below 10 years highlights the severity of early entry into labour, driven primarily by poverty and family income pressure.

A major conclusion of the study is that working conditions in Kanpur's industrial clusters are largely unsafe and exploitative. The data indicate that 60% of children work

more than 8 hours per day, with 20% working up to 10-12 hours daily, clearly violating child labour norms. Children engaged in leather and manufacturing work are exposed to hazardous environments, which is reflected in the health data, where 70% of respondents reported health-related problems, including 24% suffering from respiratory issues and 20% from skin diseases. These findings strongly suggest that child labour in Kanpur is not merely economic participation but a form of hazardous exploitation that adversely affects children's physical and psychological development.

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