

A Critical Study on Child Labour in Keonjhar District of Odisha

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Abstract

Child labour is still a major issue in many parts of India, including Keonjhar district in Odisha. Even though there are laws like the Factories Act, 1948, and the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986, child labour continues to exist in great numbers. This study looks at why this problem is still going on, focusing on reasons like poverty, insufficient education facilities, and lack of support for families. The research incorporates both primary and secondary data to provide a better understanding of the issue. The research especially highlights child labour in hotels, farms, small shops, and even in households across the district. Using both interviews and government data, the study shows how children are being forced into work at a young age, skipping school and suffering from both physical and mental pressure. The paper points out that while some efforts have been made by the government and NGOs are not sufficient. It suggests stronger and better law enforcement, better schooling opportunities, more consciousness among people, and support for poor families to help stop this problem from growing. Solving this issue in Keonjhar is not just important for the children, but for a better future of the whole world.

Keywords: Family Support, Government Policies, Law Enforcement, Domestic Work, Mental and Physical Pressure, School Dropout, Social Awareness,

Introduction

Child labour is a growing issue worldwide, preventing millions of children of their right to education, health, and a happy childhood. In India, the problem is particularly severe in regions with high levels of poverty and socio-economic differences. Keonjhar, a mineral-rich district in Odisha, is a pitiful example where child labour thrives amidst an sufficient of natural wealth. Despite its rich reserves of minerals and vibrant tribal culture, Keonjhar's economic prosperity has not available to all its inhabitants, leaving vulnerable sections of society, particularly children, exposed to exploitation.

The prevalence of child labour in Keonjhar is interconnected to a combination of poverty, , cultural norms, illiteracy and socio-economic challenges. Many families in the district depend on existence livelihoods and are often forced to engage their children in dangerous and exploitative work to supplement their scanty incomes. This not only deprives these children of their right to education but also subjects them to physical and mental pressure, restricting them of opportunities for a better future.

This study aims to examine into the extent and types of child labour in Keonjhar, exploring its main causes

and evaluating its effect on the children and the community. It also seeks to identify gaps in existing interventions and propose actionable steps to address the issue effectively. Drawing on existing literature, it is evident that child labour in the district cannot be tackled without solving underlying forces such as poverty, gender disparities, lack of education and inadequate enforcement of legal frameworks.

Ultimately, the study shows the optimum need for a holistic and collaborative approach. By combining stricter law enforcement, economic empowerment, community involvement and improved educational opportunities, the aim is to create impactful solutions to eliminate child labour. Addressing this critical issue is not only essential for protecting children but also for building a healthier, friendly, more equitable, and prosperous society for future generations.

Understanding Child Labour

Child labour refers to the involvement of children in work that deprives them of their childhood, education, and opportunities for a better future. While not all work done by children is classified as child labour, tasks that are mentally, physically, or socially harmful fall under this category.

Keonjhar District: A Profile

Keonjhar is located in northern Odisha, with its economy heavily reliant on mining and agriculture. The district has a high tribal population, many of whom depend on subsistence farming and daily wage labour. Poverty, illiteracy, and lack of access to quality education are pervasive, making children particularly sensitive to exploitation.

The district's mining industry, which extracts valuable minerals like iron ore and manganese, is both a boon and a bane. While it contributes to economic development, it has also led to environmental degradation, displacement, and socio-economic inequalities—factors that fuel child labour.

An In-Depth Look at the Issue in Keonjhar District

Keonjhar, a district in the mineral-rich state of Odisha, India, is known for its abundant natural resources, spi tribal culture, and scenic beauty. Yet, hidden beneath its surface is a pressing issue—child labour. Despite numerous efforts to combat this social evil, child labour remains a significant concern in Keonjhar. This article examines the reasons behind child labour in the district, its consequences, and the steps being taken to eradicate it.

In Keonjhar, children are often found working in mines, fields, brick kilns, or even as domestic help in urban areas. Many of these children are as young as six or seven, forced to toil under harsh conditions for long hours.

Objectives of the study

To find out why child labour happens in Keonjhar district.

To understand how family income, traditions, and culture affect child labour.

To study how child labour affects children, their families, and the community.

To check how well government and NGO programs are working to reduce child labour.

To suggest practical and lasting ways to stop child labour in Keonjhar district.

To explore the common types and situations of child labour in the area.

To understand how child labour impacts children's health, education, and social life.

Literature Review

1.Global & National Frameworks

Comparative analysis shows divergent child labour regulations worldwide. Developed countries like the

U.S. impose strict restrictions, while nations such as Australia exhibit more sectoral leniency. Globally, approximately 217 million children are engaged in labour, especially in Asia. In India, the Child & Adolescent Labour Act (1986, amended 2016) prohibits employment of children below 14 and restricts adolescents from hazardous work, though enforcement remains problematic.

Minzen (2009) highlights the challenges in comparing child labour across developed nations due to varying regulations. Evidence of child labour exists in countries like the U.S., Australia, and Japan. While U.S. laws impose strict restrictions on child labour, other nations like Australia and New Zealand have not sufficient regulations.

Dorman (2001) observes that child labour varies by region but shows some common patterns. In North America, Australia, and Asia, child labour is prevalent in service sectors such as retail and catering, as well as in agriculture and trades. Children often compete with adults for jobs, especially outside family-run businesses.

Sharma (1982) found that children in Haryana entered the workforce due to family poverty, illness, or death of earning members, often coming from families with low incomes and large sizes.

Reddy (2012) pointed out that in Tirupati, the hotel industry's demand for cheap labour and inadequate enforcement of child protection laws perpetuate child labour. Studies consistently emphasize poverty as a primary driver of child labour in India.

Sinha (2000) adds that factors like gender inequality and cultural norms, particularly affecting girls, limit educational opportunities and push children into labour.

2.Odisha-Specific Trends

Between 2018 and 2022, Odisha registered only 6 cases under the Child Labour Act, despite rescuing 1,992 children via the National Child Labour Project (NCLP). A recent Odisha Plus report (2019–25) had 328 child rescues, though only 159 cases were legally prosecuted. Odisha is now involving self-help groups (SHGs) in detecting and reporting child labour at the village level.

3.Regional Research Insights

Western Odisha Migration Study (Nanda, 2020): Investigates migrant child labour in brick-kiln work due to poverty, illiteracy, large family sizes, and inadequate law enforcement.

Sambalpur District Survey (2021): Highlights the influence of parental substance addiction and peer pressure on child labour decisions.

Tribal Girls in Odisha (Das, 2021): Shows how seasonal migration disrupts education for tribal girls, increasing vulnerability to exploitation.

Statewide Analysis (Nanda, 2023): Notes improvements from remittances and government schemes but highlights persistent challenges in migrant labour and youth exploitation.

4.Role of NGOs & Civil Society

Organizations like Bachpan Bachao Andolan have rescued tens of thousands of children through community interventions and policy advocacy. In Keonjhar, Tulasi Munda—a Padma Shri awardee—began educating tribal children in the iron ore mining belt in the 1960s, illustrating the transformative power of grassroots activism.

5.Sectoral Insights:

Kumar (1992) highlights the prevalence of girl child labour in industries like beedi-making, where they work long hours in poor conditions. Social customs and economic hardships often lead children into exploitative work environments.

Dwivedi (1-999) reveals that poor-quality education, teacher disinterest, and inadequate school facilities

contribute to high dropout rates among child labourers, particularly girls. The lack of educational opportunities reinforces the cycle of child labour.

Meera and Neeta (1993) and Burra (1990) emphasize that traditional values, cultural norms, and family structures perpetuate child labour, especially among girls. Burra advocates for state-led efforts to address these systemic issues and ensure compulsory education.

The International Labour Organization (1996) estimates that 250 million children aged 5-14 are employed globally, with Asia accounting for the majority. In rural India, bonded labour practices continue, where parents are trapped in debts that force their children into work.

6. Gender Dimensions

Divya (1995) and Kumar (1992) explore the gendered nature of child labour. Divya highlights societal biases against girl children, while Kumar notes that girls often face worse working conditions and longer hours than boys.

Research Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach: Primary Data: Surveys and interviews conducted with families, local authorities, NGOs, and children engaged in labour. Observations in local markets, mines, and households. Secondary Data: Government reports, census data, and NGO publications. Academic journals and news articles related to child labour in Odisha.

Sampling Method A purposive sampling method was used, focusing on areas with high incidences of child labour such as mining zones, agricultural regions, and urban markets. Data Analysis Qualitative and quantitative data were analysed to identify patterns and correlations between socio-economic conditions and child labour prevalence.

Reasons Behind Child Labour in Keonjhar

Poverty

Poverty is the biggest reason why children in Keonjhar end up working instead of going to school. Many families struggle to earn enough for food, clothes, and basic needs. When parents cannot make enough money, they see their children as a way to earn extra income. Children are often sent to work to help the family survive, especially in cases where the family income depends on daily wages.

Lack of Education

Education in Keonjhar faces many challenges. Schools in some areas lack proper facilities, like classrooms and toilets. There are also not enough qualified teachers to provide good education. Additionally, in many tribal communities, people do not see the long-term value of education. Parents believe their children can help more by working now rather than going to school, which seems like a luxury when survival is at stake.

Mining Industry

Keonjhar is known for its mining activities, and this sector heavily influences the local economy. Many children work in mining because they are cheap and easy to exploit. Small-scale and illegal mining operations often employ children since they are less likely to demand fair wages or working conditions. These children often do dangerous tasks in unsafe conditions, putting their health and safety at risk.

Debt Bondage

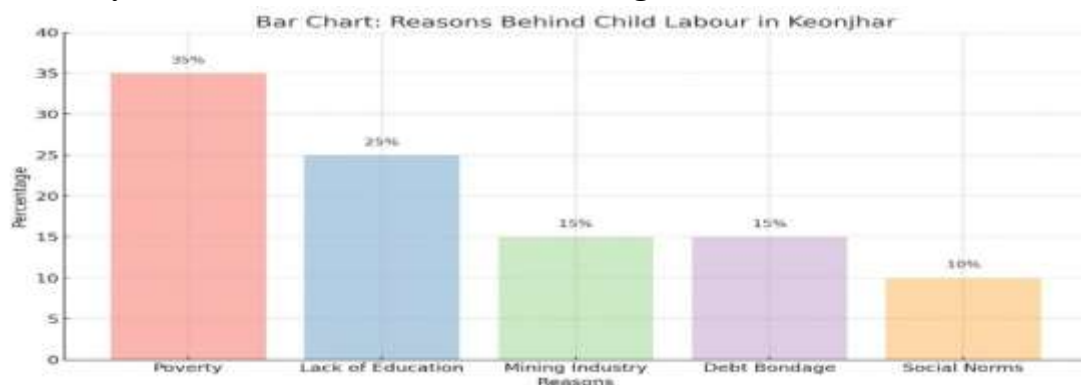
Many families in Keonjhar take loans with high-interest rates to meet their basic needs or emergencies. When they cannot repay the loans, they end up trapped in debt bondage. To clear these debts, children in

the family are forced to work, either in farms, factories, or other labour-intensive jobs.

Social Norms

In some tribal communities in Keonjhar, it is normal for children to start working at an early age. Traditional beliefs and practices encourage children to contribute to the household income instead of pursuing education. Parents often see this as part of their culture and do not realize the harm it causes to their children's future.

1.Bar Chart – Shows the percentage distribution of different reasons behind child labour in Keonjhar. Poverty and lack of education are the most significant contributors.



Poverty (35%) is the leading cause, forcing families to depend on children's income.

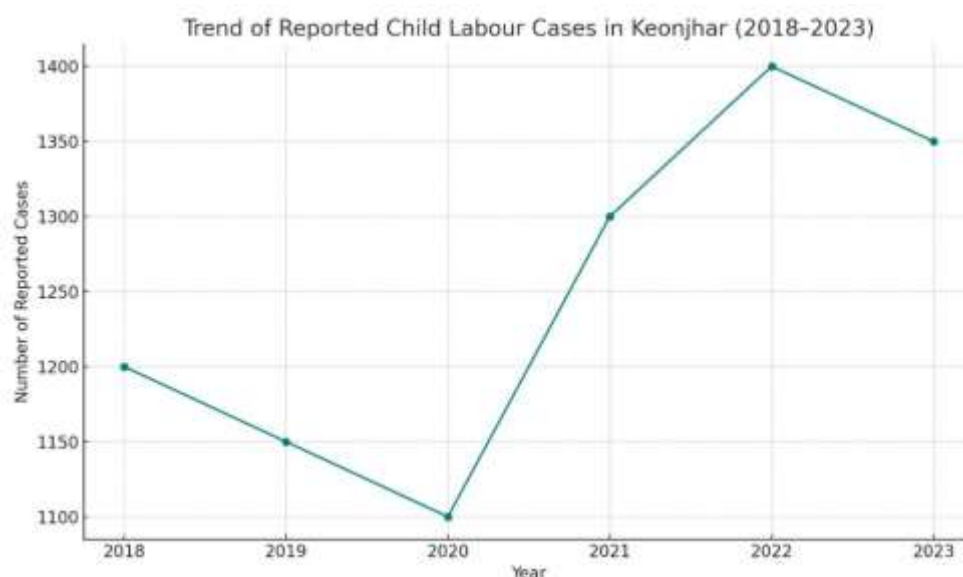
Lack of Education (25%) keeps children out of school and into work.

Mining Industry (15%) exploits cheap child labour, especially in unsafe and informal sectors.

Debt Bondage (15%) leads families to push children into work to repay loans.

Social Norms (10%) culturally normalize child labour in some tribal areas.

2. Trend Graph – Illustrates the yearly changes in reported child labour cases in Keonjhar from 2018 to 2023. While there was a slight decline initially, cases rose again post-2020, possibly due to the economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.



Forms of Child Labour in Keonjhar

Mining and Quarrying

Keonjhar is rich in minerals, and many children are involved in mining and quarrying activities. They are often tasked with heavy and dangerous work, like carrying large rocks, digging, or sorting minerals. These jobs expose children to harmful dust, toxic fumes, and physical injuries from accidents. Long hours of work in unsafe conditions can lead to long-term health problems like breathing difficulties, back pain, and even permanent disabilities.

Agricultural Work

In the rural areas of Keonjhar, many children work on farms. They help with tasks like planting seeds, harvesting crops, and watering fields. While this work may seem less harmful, it often involves the use of sharp tools or dangerous machinery, which can cause injuries. Additionally, children may be exposed to harmful pesticides and chemicals used in farming, which can affect their health over time. The long hours and physical strain also prevent them from attending school.

Domestic Help

Some children from Keonjhar are sent to towns and cities to work as domestic helpers in households. They clean, cook, and take care of household chores. These children are often treated poorly by their employers, facing neglect and sometimes physical or verbal abuse. They work long hours without proper meals, rest, or care. Being far from their families, they may feel isolated and lack the chance to study or play like other children.

Brick Kilns and Construction

In brick kilns and on construction sites, children perform hard, labour-intensive work. They mould bricks, carry heavy loads, and assist in construction activities. These environments expose them to extreme heat, dust, and unsafe conditions. The physical strain of these jobs can lead to injuries and exhaustion. Moreover, the long working hours leave no time for education, keeping them stuck in a cycle of hard labour and poverty.

Impact of Child Labour

1. Loss of Childhood

Child labour robs children of their childhood, which is meant to be a time for learning, playing, and growing in a safe environment. Instead of enjoying carefree days, these children face harsh realities, working long hours in difficult conditions. They miss out on playing with friends, exploring their talents, and building dreams for the future. This loss leaves a deep emotional impact, often making them grow up too quickly and robbing them of a happy and memorable childhood.

2. Health Risks

Working in unsafe environments exposes children to serious health issues. For instance:

In mining or construction, they may suffer from physical injuries like cuts, fractures, or back problems.

In farming, they are exposed to harmful chemicals and pesticides, which can cause respiratory and skin diseases.

Long working hours and heavy labor strain their growing bodies, leading to chronic pain and fatigue.

Psychological trauma, such as stress and anxiety, is common due to harsh treatment, isolation, or unsafe environments.

3. Educational Deprivation

Child labour often keeps children out of school because their families prioritize earning money over

education. Without education, these children cannot develop skills needed for better jobs in the future. This lack of schooling traps them in a cycle of poverty, as they can only do low-paying, manual work when they grow up. Moreover, missing education limits their ability to think critically, solve problems, and contribute meaningfully to society.

4. Economic Stagnation

When children are forced to work instead of learning, the community loses potential skilled workers and innovators. An uneducated population limits progress because they cannot access better-paying jobs or adapt to changes in technology. This keeps the region's economy stuck in a cycle of low productivity. Over time, the lack of education and skilled workers can slow down development and growth, not just for the families involved but for the entire society.

Efforts to Combat Child Labour in Keonjhar District

In Keonjhar, several initiatives are in place to fight child labour, involving the government, NGOs, community organizations, and businesses. Here's an explanation of these efforts in simple terms:

Government Interventions

The government has taken significant steps to stop child labour and provide alternatives for children and their families:

Legal Measures:

Laws like the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act ensure that children are not employed in dangerous or exploitative jobs. Officials conduct surprise inspections and rescue children from workplaces, while employers caught breaking these laws face penalties.

Education Initiatives:

Programs like Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan provide free education for children. In Keonjhar, schools are being improved with better buildings, qualified teachers, and free lunches (mid-day meals) to encourage children to attend school regularly.

Skill Development:

Older children who missed formal schooling are offered training in practical skills, such as tailoring, carpentry, or computer basics, to help them secure safer and more stable jobs as they grow older.

Role of NGOs

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have a big impact on reducing child labour:

Rescue Operations:

NGOs like Child Rights and You (CRY) and Aide et Action rescue children working in harmful conditions. They place these children in safe homes or schools.

Awareness Campaigns:

These organizations educate parents and communities about the harmful effects of child labour and the importance of education. They explain how sending children to school can lead to a better future for the entire family.

Support Services:

Rescued children receive education, health care, and sometimes even financial help for their families to ensure the children do not return to work.

Community Participation

Local communities play a key role in changing attitudes about child labour:

Grassroots Movements:

Village leaders and community groups hold meetings to spread awareness about why child labour is harmful. They encourage families to send children to school instead of work.

Parental Support:

Community efforts often include helping parents find alternative sources of income or connecting them with government schemes to reduce their dependency on their children's income.

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)

Mining companies operating in Keonjhar are increasingly contributing to child welfare:

Educational Programs:

Some companies build schools, fund scholarships, or provide free learning materials for children in mining-affected areas.

Skill Development:

As part of their CSR initiatives, companies often organize training programs for young people, preparing them for employment in safer industries.

Education and Counselling

Education and mental health support are essential for helping children transition out of labour:

Bridge Schools:

These special schools are set up to help children who missed years of schooling catch up with their peers. They provide an accelerated curriculum, making it easier for children to rejoin regular schools.

Counselling Services:

Many rescued children face emotional trauma from their work experiences. Trained counsellors help them heal, adjust to a new way of life, and feel confident about their future.

Poverty Alleviation Programs

Since poverty is one of the main causes of child labour, addressing financial struggles is critical:

Employment Schemes:

Programs like MGNREGA provide guaranteed jobs for adults in rural areas. These jobs ensure that parents earn enough to support their families without relying on their children to work.

Financial Assistance:

Families are given small loans or subsidies to start businesses like selling vegetables or tailoring. This helps them become financially stable and reduces the need for their children to work.

Challenges in Eradicating Child Labour in Keonjhar District

Although significant efforts are being made to eliminate child labour in Keonjhar, several obstacles make this issue difficult to resolve. Below is a detailed explanation of these challenges:

1. **Widespread Poverty: Economic Dependence:** Most families in Keonjhar face extreme financial difficulties. For them, survival often takes precedence over education, and they see their children's income as essential to meet basic needs like food, clothing, and shelter.

Cycle of Poverty: Poverty creates a vicious cycle. When children work instead of going to school, they miss the chance to get an education, which could help them secure better jobs in the future. This keeps families trapped in poverty for generations.

2. **Illegal Mining**

Unregulated Activities: Illegal and small-scale mining operations are common in Keonjhar. These operations are often hidden from authorities and do not follow labour laws, making it easy to employ children as cheap and easily exploitable labour.

Health and Safety Risks: Children working in these mines are exposed to hazardous conditions, such as dangerous machinery, toxic chemicals, and collapsing mine shafts. These activities are difficult to monitor due to the secretive nature of illegal mining.

3. Cultural Barriers

Traditional Practices: In some tribal and rural communities, it is considered normal for children to contribute to the family's income from an early age. This cultural belief makes it hard to convince parents to send their children to school instead of work.

Lack of Awareness: Many families do not fully understand the long-term benefits of education or the harm caused by child labour. Traditional thinking, combined with a lack of exposure to modern ideas, slows progress in changing attitudes.

4. Inadequate Resources: Limited Funding:

Both the government and NGOs often face financial constraints. Insufficient funding limits their ability to expand educational programs, provide vocational training, or support affected families.

Shortage of Staff: The scale of child labour in Keonjhar is vast, but there aren't enough trained workers, such as social workers, teachers, or inspectors, to tackle the issue effectively.

Weak Infrastructure: Many villages in Keonjhar lack basic facilities like schools, healthcare, or transportation, making it harder for children to access education or for authorities to reach remote areas.

The Way Forward: Eliminating Child Labour in Keonjhar

Addressing child labour in Keonjhar requires a comprehensive and coordinated approach that tackles the problem from multiple angles. Below is a detailed explanation of effective strategies:



1. Strengthening Education

Building More Schools: Many villages in Keonjhar lack schools, forcing children to travel long distances or drop out. Establishing more schools in remote areas ensures every child has access to education nearby.

Hiring Trained Teachers: Schools often face a shortage of qualified teachers. Employing and training more teachers can improve the quality of education and attract more students.

Providing Scholarships: Financial constraints prevent many children from attending school. Scholarships and free school supplies can help underprivileged families send their children to school instead of work.

Bridge Programs: For children who have missed years of schooling due to work, special “bridge” programs can help them catch up and rejoin the formal education system.

2. Economic Support for Families

Skill Training for Adults: Teaching parents practical skills, like tailoring, carpentry, or agriculture, can help them find better-paying jobs, reducing their reliance on their children's income.

Microfinance Schemes: Small loans at low interest rates can help families start businesses, such as setting up shops or farms, providing a sustainable source of income.

Job Creation Programs: Government schemes like MGNREGA, which guarantees rural employment, can ensure adults have consistent work opportunities, reducing the need for child labour.

3. Strict Enforcement of Laws

Cracking Down on Illegal Mining: Illegal mining operations are a major employer of child labour. Authorities need to regularly inspect mining sites, shut down unregulated operations, and impose strict penalties on violators.

Monitoring Industries: Industries like construction, brick kilns, and agriculture should also be closely monitored to ensure children are not being employed.

Rescue and Rehabilitation: When child labourers are rescued, they should be provided with education, counselling, and vocational training to help them rebuild their lives.

4. Awareness Campaigns

Community Education: Many families and communities are unaware of the long-term harm caused by child labour. Awareness campaigns can educate parents about the importance of education and the rights of children.

Involving Local Leaders: Influential community leaders, including tribal chiefs and religious figures, can play a key role in changing attitudes and encouraging families to prioritize education.

Using Media: Posters, radio programs, and social media can spread awareness about the benefits of education and the risks of child labour, reaching a broader audience.



4. Collaboration Between Stakeholders

Government and NGOs: The government and non-governmental organizations should work together to design and implement programs that address both the causes and consequences of child labour.



Private Sector Involvement: Companies operating in Keonjhar, particularly in the mining sector, can contribute through Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives, such as funding schools or vocational training programs.

Community Engagement: Local communities must be involved in decision-making and implementation processes. When families and community members are part of the solution, change is more likely to be sustainable.

Conclusion

Child labour in Keonjhar is a serious problem caused by poverty, lack of education, cultural practices, and weak enforcement of laws. It restricts children their right to a happy childhood, education, and dignity. While some progress has been made, many children in the region are still trapped in difficult and dangerous work environments. This issue not only harms the children but also keeps families and the community in poverty, limiting overall growth and progress.

To eliminate child labour, we must find its root causes. Improving schools and making education accessible and better for all children is key. Supporting families financially through poverty reduction programs can help to minimise their reliance on child labour. It is also important to address gender inequalities so that every child has the same opportunities.

Stronger and better enforcement of laws and community involvement are necessary. Awareness programmes and campaigns can change attitudes and reduce acceptance of child labour. By working together—government, NGOs, and the community—we can build a future where no child in Keonjhar has to work and every child can enjoy their childhood and dream of a better future.

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