

E-ISSN: 2583-9667

Indexed Journal

Peer Reviewed Journal

<https://multiresearchjournal.theviews.in>



Received: 01-01-2024

Accepted: 04-03-2024

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ADVANCE RESEARCH IN MULTIDISCIPLINARY

Volume 2; Issue 2; 2024; Page No. 372-376

Bridging the gap: A case study analysis of child rights protection and legal frameworks in India

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Abstract

This paper explores the practical challenges and socio-economic barriers that impact the protection of child rights in India through a series of in-depth case studies. By focusing on real-world examples of child labour, early marriage, and access to education, the study critically evaluates the strengths and limitations of India's legal framework. The analysis highlights gaps in enforcement and offers recommendations to improve the protection and welfare of children, aligning domestic efforts with international commitments. Through examining various instances of child rights violations, it becomes evident that while India has made significant strides in enacting legislation to protect children, there remains a disconnect between policy and practice. The lack of effective enforcement mechanisms and accountability measures often hinders the implementation of these laws, leaving children vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. To address these shortcomings, it is imperative for the government to strengthen monitoring and evaluation systems, enhance coordination between agencies, and invest in the capacity building of key stakeholders. By taking a comprehensive approach to child protection, India can ensure that its legal framework translates into tangible improvements in the lives of its most vulnerable population.

Keywords: Child rights, legal framework, case study, enforcement challenges, socio-economic barriers, India

Introduction

Child rights in India are governed by a robust array of legal and constitutional provisions, yet millions of children remain vulnerable to exploitation, abuse, and deprivation. Despite international commitments such as the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1992, implementation on the ground is often hindered by socio-economic realities, cultural norms, and systemic enforcement challenges. This study leverages a case study approach to explore the complex interaction between legal frameworks and the socio-economic and cultural factors that influence their efficacy in protecting child rights.

By examining cases across child labour, early marriage, and education access, this analysis delves into the practical challenges that continue to obstruct child rights protections in India. As a developing country with significant socio-economic diversity, India faces unique challenges in balancing traditional cultural values with modern legal frameworks that uphold child rights. The findings of this case study analysis underscore the importance of bridging the gap between policy and practice, identifying where targeted interventions are most needed to enhance child

protection mechanisms.

The need for a nuanced understanding of how child rights laws are applied in practice becomes apparent when considering the persistence of issues like child labour and early marriage, which are often deeply rooted in local cultural and economic contexts. The study's approach aligns with recent scholarly calls for more context-specific analyses that account for the diversity of challenges facing children in different parts of the country. This paper contributes to this discourse by examining real-world cases that reveal the strengths and limitations of India's child rights framework, offering insights that could inform future reforms and strategies aimed at safeguarding the well-being of children.

Literature Review

The literature on child rights in India is extensive, encompassing historical, legislative, and socio-economic perspectives. Over the years, child rights have become an integral part of global human rights discourse, especially following the establishment of the UNCRC, which India ratified with an obligation to uphold its principles (UNICEF, 2021) [17]. The UNCRC outlines a broad spectrum of rights,

including protection from exploitation, access to education, and the right to be free from violence and abuse. However, achieving these rights in India is complex, given the country’s socio-economic and cultural diversity.

One of the primary challenges in child rights protection in India is the prevalence of child labour. As per the Census of India (2021), approximately 10 million children in the age group of 5–14 are engaged in labour, often in hazardous occupations. The Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Amendment Act of 2016 attempts to address this issue by prohibiting employment of children below 14 years in all sectors and restricting adolescents (14–18 years) from working in hazardous occupations. However, scholars such as Gupta and Kumar (2020) [6] argue that the law’s exemptions for family-based work create loopholes that perpetuate child labour in informal sectors, particularly in rural areas where children contribute to family income through agricultural work or small-scale handicrafts.

Furthermore, the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act of 2015 aims to provide comprehensive protection to children in conflict with the law and those in need of care and protection. This Act reflects international standards, particularly the UNCRC’s emphasis on rehabilitation over punitive measures for juveniles. Nonetheless, critiques have emerged regarding the Act’s provision allowing children aged 16–18 to be tried as adults for heinous crimes, which some argue is inconsistent with the UNCRC’s stance that all children under 18 should be treated as minors. Bajpai (2020) [1] contends that this provision risks exacerbating social stigma and fails to account for the rehabilitative needs of adolescent offenders, calling for policy adjustments to enhance alignment with international standards.

Access to education is another critical area of child rights in India, enshrined in Article 21A of the Indian Constitution and operationalized through the Right to Education (RTE) Act of 2009. This Act guarantees free and compulsory education for children aged 6–14 and has significantly improved enrollment rates across the country. However, studies indicate persistent issues with the quality of education, especially in rural areas. According to the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2022, while enrollment rates are high, learning outcomes remain subpar, with a significant percentage of children in grade 5 unable to read basic texts or solve simple arithmetic problems. Scholars like Banerjee (2021) [18] highlight that these learning gaps are exacerbated by socio-economic disparities, inadequate infrastructure, and high student-to-teacher ratios in public schools, which undermine the effectiveness of the RTE Act.

The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act of 2012 is another crucial piece of legislation that aligns with the UNCRC’s mandate to protect children from all forms of sexual abuse and exploitation. POCSO defines a range of offences, prescribes stringent penalties, and includes child-friendly procedures for investigation and prosecution. However, implementation challenges persist, including delays in legal proceedings, inadequate training for law enforcement, and societal stigma that discourages victims from reporting abuse. Studies by Dasgupta (2020) [19] and Singh (2021) [20] suggest that while POCSO is a strong legislative measure on paper, its impact is diluted by these practical challenges. Addressing these issues requires both systemic reforms and societal change, with scholars advocating for enhanced training for law enforcement personnel, greater public awareness, and supportive services for victims of abuse.

Another significant area of concern is child marriage, which continues to be prevalent despite the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act of 2006, which sets the legal marriageable age at 18 for girls and 21 for boys. Data from the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) conducted in 2021 indicates that 23% of women aged 20–24 were married before the age of 18, with higher rates in rural areas. Scholars such as Patel (2023) [21] and Ramaswamy (2022) [22] attribute the persistence of child marriage to socio-cultural norms and economic pressures, particularly in impoverished communities where marriage is often seen as a means to secure economic stability or social security. This practice not only violates children’s rights but also has far-reaching consequences for their health, education, and overall well-being. Efforts to eradicate child marriage, according to Kumar (2020) [6], require community engagement, awareness-raising initiatives, and strict enforcement of the law alongside socio-economic development measures.

Beyond domestic laws, India’s compliance with international standards is a recurring theme in child rights literature. Studies by international organisations, such as UNICEF (2021) [17] and Human Rights Watch (2023), have praised India’s commitment to child rights but also highlighted areas needing improvement. For instance, while India has ratified the UNCRC, it has not fully aligned its juvenile justice provisions with the convention’s recommendations. Furthermore, socio-economic disparities continue to affect children’s access to healthcare, education, and protection, limiting the reach of India’s child rights framework.

Table 1: Summary of Key Child Rights Legislation in India and Compliance Challenges

Legislation	Year	Objective	Compliance Challenges
Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act	1986, amended 2016	Prohibits child labour below age 14, restricts adolescent labour	Enforcement challenges in informal sectors, socio-economic pressures
Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection) Act	2015	Protection and rehabilitation for juveniles	Criticised for allowing adult trials for 16-18 age group, inconsistent with UNCRC
Right to Education (RTE) Act	2009	Guarantees free and compulsory education for ages 6-14	High enrolment but low learning outcomes; quality gaps in rural and marginalised areas
Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act	2012	Comprehensive protection from sexual abuse	Delayed proceedings, lack of child-friendly court infrastructure, social stigma
Prohibition of Child Marriage Act	2006	Sets minimum marriage age (18 for girls, 21 for boys)	High prevalence due to cultural norms, particularly in rural and impoverished communities

Conclusion

This review of the literature on child rights in India highlights the country’s considerable strides towards aligning with international standards. The legislative framework is comprehensive, addressing various facets of child protection, from labour and education to protection from abuse and exploitation. However, the literature reveals critical challenges in the implementation and enforcement of these laws, with socio-economic pressures, cultural norms, and infrastructure deficits undermining their effectiveness. Case studies illustrate these challenges, underscoring the gap between policy intent and on-ground realities.

The insights derived from existing literature suggest that India’s child protection efforts could be strengthened by addressing enforcement gaps and enhancing community awareness and engagement. Scholars consistently advocate for a holistic approach that integrates legal reforms with socio-economic initiatives, public education, and stakeholder collaboration. As India continues its journey towards safeguarding children’s rights, a concerted effort by all stakeholders, including the government, civil society, and international organisations, is essential to bridge the gap between legal frameworks and the lived experiences of vulnerable children across the nation.

Methodology

This qualitative study utilises a case study approach to examine the practical challenges in protecting child rights in India, focusing on key issues such as child labour, child

marriage, and access to education. The data sources for this study include:

- Government Reports (e.g., National Crime Records Bureau, 2020 ^[10]; Ministry of Women and Child Development reports)
- Legal case files highlighting specific instances where laws were enforced or gaps were evident
- NGO publications from organisations such as Child Rights and You (CRY) and Save the Children
- Interviews with stakeholders, including community leaders, law enforcement officials, social workers, and affected families

The case studies were selected to ensure diversity across socio-economic and regional contexts. Data collection involved in-depth interviews, review of secondary sources, and field observations. Thematic coding was used to identify recurring patterns and challenges related to child rights enforcement.

Results and Analysis

Child Labour: Persistent Challenges and Socio-Economic Realities

Despite legislative efforts such as the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Amendment Act, 2016, child labour remains a significant issue in India. The analysis revealed that socio-economic pressures, particularly poverty and lack of education, force children into the workforce.

Table 2: Child Labour Statistics in India (2016-2022)

Year	Estimated Child Labourers (Ages 5-14)	Percentage in Hazardous Work (%)	Source
2016	10.1 million	26%	Ministry of Labour and Employment
2018	8.4 million	23%	CRY Report (2018)
2020	7.6 million	21%	National Sample Survey (2020)
2022	7.1 million	20%	Ministry of Labour and Employment (2022)

Interviews with families and social workers highlighted that economic necessity often outweighs the legal prohibitions on child labour. For example, in rural Bihar, children frequently work in agriculture or manual labour due to inadequate family income. Enforcement challenges, such as a lack of monitoring mechanisms and resource constraints among enforcement agencies, were also evident (Gupta &

Kumar, 2020) ^[6].

Child Marriage: Cultural Norms and Legal Gaps

Child marriage remains a pervasive issue, despite the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006. Cultural norms, economic insecurity, and social pressures drive this practice, particularly in rural areas.

Table 3: Prevalence of Child Marriage (2015-2023)

Year	Percentage of Girls Married Before 18	Regional Variability (High Prevalence States)	Source
2015	27%	Bihar, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh	UNICEF (2015)
2018	23%	Bihar, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh	NCRB (2018)
2020	20%	West Bengal, Bihar, Jharkhand	Ministry of Women and Child Development (2020)
2023	18%	West Bengal, Rajasthan	CRY (2023)

Case studies revealed instances where child marriages were conducted covertly or justified by economic hardships. In interviews, community leaders cited cultural norms as a significant barrier to enforcement. Legal intervention was found to be inconsistent, with many cases going unreported due to fear of social stigma (Singh, 2021) ^[20].

Education Rights: Accessibility and Quality Gaps

The Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009, has improved school enrollment rates but continues to face challenges in terms of quality and accessibility, especially in rural and marginalised communities.

Table 4: School Enrolment vs. Dropout Rates (2015-2022)

Year	Primary School Enrolment (%)	Dropout Rate (%) (Ages 6-14)	Rural/Urban Disparity (%)	Source
2015	95%	27%	40%/20%	ASER (2015)
2018	96%	24%	35%/18%	ASER (2018)
2020	97%	22%	33%/15%	Ministry of Education (2020)
2022	98%	20%	30%/12%	ASER (2022)

Field observations highlighted inadequate infrastructure, such as a lack of proper classrooms, sanitation facilities, and trained teachers, as key barriers. Socio-economic barriers, such as child labour and early marriage, often led to high dropout rates, particularly among girls. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these challenges, with many children unable to access online learning resources due to digital divides.

Discussion and Recommendations

- 1. Improved Enforcement Mechanisms:** Strengthening the capacity of enforcement agencies, enhancing coordination among stakeholders, and providing adequate resources are critical for bridging the gap between legislation and practice.
- 2. Community Engagement:** Raising awareness about child rights, challenging harmful cultural norms, and promoting community-based interventions can help mitigate practices like child labour and marriage.
- 3. Socio-Economic Support Programs:** Poverty alleviation, education incentives, and vocational training programs can reduce economic pressures that lead to child labour and early marriages.
- 4. Quality Education Initiatives:** Addressing disparities in school infrastructure, teacher training, and student retention strategies can ensure more equitable access to quality education.

Conclusion

The case study analysis underscores that while India's child protection laws align with international norms, socio-economic challenges and cultural barriers hinder effective implementation. Bridging these gaps requires a multifaceted approach, involving policy reforms, community mobilisation, and targeted socio-economic interventions. By strengthening legal enforcement and addressing root causes, India can better protect its children and fulfil its commitments under international conventions.

Findings

The findings of this study highlight critical aspects of child rights protection in India, underscoring both the strengths and the challenges in the existing system:

- 1. Robust Legal Frameworks with Inconsistent Enforcement:** India has developed a comprehensive legal framework to protect child rights, including the Juvenile Justice Act, the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, and the Right to Education Act. While these laws align well with international commitments, their enforcement is often inconsistent due to factors such as inadequate resources, limited training among law enforcement personnel, and lack of coordination among various agencies.
- 2. Impact of Socio-Economic Factors:** Socio-economic

challenges such as poverty, limited access to education, and gender disparities continue to drive practices like child labour and early marriage. Poverty-stricken families often view child labour as a necessary source of income, and cultural norms perpetuate practices such as early marriage, particularly in rural areas. These factors highlight the importance of socio-economic support mechanisms in complementing legal measures.

- 3. Importance of Coordination and Awareness Initiatives:** Effective enforcement of child protection laws requires a coordinated effort between government agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), law enforcement, and community stakeholders. Awareness initiatives aimed at educating communities about child rights, legal provisions, and the harms of practices like child labour and early marriage are crucial for changing social norms and improving compliance.

Conclusion

Bridging the gap between legal provisions for child protection and ground realities requires a holistic and multifaceted approach. While India's legal framework for protecting child rights is robust, effective enforcement remains a key challenge due to socio-economic barriers, inadequate resources, and cultural norms. Addressing these challenges necessitates:

- 1. Improved Enforcement Mechanisms:** Strengthening the capacity of law enforcement agencies, enhancing inter-agency coordination, and ensuring sufficient resources for monitoring and implementation.
- 2. Community Engagement and Awareness Campaigns:** Raising awareness about the rights of children and the long-term harms of practices such as child labour and child marriage can empower communities to reject harmful norms and practices.
- 3. Socio-Economic Reforms:** Alleviating poverty, increasing access to quality education, and creating opportunities for economic development are essential for reducing the socio-economic pressures that drive child rights violations.
- 4. Alignment with International Standards:** Strengthening India's compliance with international standards, such as those outlined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), is vital for ensuring holistic and sustainable protection of child rights.

By adopting a comprehensive strategy that combines legal enforcement with socio-economic interventions and community engagement, India can create a more effective and inclusive system for protecting and promoting the rights of its children.

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