

# "Red Card to Child Labour:

## Fair Play for Children, Decent Work for Adults"

On 12 June, the world comes together to observe **World Day Against Child Labour** and renew its commitment to ensuring that every child enjoys the right to learn, play, grow, and thrive in a safe environment. But the data shows we are falling critically short of that commitment.



# The global picture

**138M** children in child labour globally (2024)

**54 million** are in hazardous mining, construction, chemical exposure, and heavy machinery

The majority are out of school

Africa and the Asia-Pacific together account for 9 out of every 10 child labourers in the world

2025 global elimination target, missed



*These numbers translate into lived realities that are hard to look away from. **What does hazardous child labour actually look like?** It's children hauling ore in underground mine shafts. It's kids on farms exposed to toxic pesticides and heavy machinery. It's the long overnight shifts instead of classrooms. *And it runs through the very supply chains that power our global economy:**

# 61%

of child labour occurs in **agriculture**, a sector central to global food and commodity supply chains.

# 13%

is in **industry** construction, mining, and manufacturing. In Central and Southern Asia, this figure is double the global average.

- More than half of all child labour happens in middle-income countries.
- Progress has stalled in Sub-Saharan Africa. Despite falling prevalence, the absolute number of children in labour remains unchanged due to population growth.

This is a global crisis, but for those of us in India, it is also a domestic one, and our Constitution has long anticipated it. **India's legal architecture against hazardous child labour is robust on paper:**

- **Article 24-** Prohibits employment of children below 14 in factories, mines, or any hazardous work.
- **Articles 39(e) & (f)-**Direct principles mandating the State to ensure children are not forced by economic necessity into work unsuited to their age.
- **Article 21-**Interpreted broadly by courts to include the right to life with dignity, encompassing education and protection from exploitation.
- *These constitutional provisions are reinforced by statute.* The **Child and Adolescent Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986** (amended 2016) prohibits the employment of children in all occupations and adolescents (14-18 years) in hazardous work.
- **The Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015,** extends protection further, defining any child found working in contravention of labour laws as a "child in need of care and protection."
- **The Right to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009,** mandates schooling up to age 14, making education the legal alternative to labour.

Courts have consistently interpreted these provisions to impose a positive obligation on the State to eradicate child labour and ensure children's welfare. **In M.C. Mehta vs State of Tamil Nadu and Ors. (MANU/SC/0169/1997)**, the Supreme Court recognized child labour as a national problem driven by poverty and lack of education, mandating compensation for child labourers and the creation of a rehabilitation fund. **The Delhi High Court in Court on its Own Motion and Ors. vs Govt. of NCT of Delhi and Ors. (MANU/DE/1025/2009)** clarified that the Juvenile Justice Act applies broadly to all children under 18, irrespective of whether their employment is hazardous, ensuring a wider net of protection.

## What needs to happen now?

- File **PILs** highlight specific instances of child labour linked to economic hardship and educational deprivation.
- Advocate for **stricter enforcement** of the Child and Adolescent Labour Act, 1986, and the Juvenile Justice Act, 2015.
- Demand **comprehensive rehabilitation programmes** like education, vocational training, and financial support for families so that rescued children are not pushed back into the workforce out of economic necessity, as directed in the *M.C. Mehta case*.
- Invest in **social protection systems**- universal child benefits, safety nets, and adult employment programmes so that no family is forced to choose between survival and a child's education.



**Let's pledge to give every child a childhood, not a livelihood.** Every child belongs in a classroom, on a playground, and in a safe environment not in factories, fields, mines, or workplaces. On this World Day Against Child Labour, let us commit to building a future where every child is free to learn, grow, and thrive with dignity.

*Reference:*

<https://www.unicef.org/stories/child-labour>

<https://www.ilo.org/topics-and-sectors/child-labour/world-day-against-child-labour>