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Child Tea Sellers at Vehicle Station: A Study of Kathmandu

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Abstract

Child labour is a serious issue all over the world worth investigating that disrupts children's overall development. Children are a vital part of society and deserve every basic human right fundamental to their growth. However, many children worldwide are denied these essential rights, with Nepal being a notable example. Socio-economic conditions and limited access to affordable loans for a better future push struggling parents to involve their children in different types of work. One of the forms of visible child labour that exists in Kathmandu city is children working as tea sellers at vehicle stations (CTSVS). Better road connectivity has increased such forms of child labour, especially in small vehicle stations around Kathmandu city, to move passengers across Nepal. This study only covers two major vehicle stations in Kathmandu that were purposively selected for the study. Hence, this paper tries to assess the welfare and conditions of the Child Tea Seller at the Vehicle station.

Keywords: Children, Childhood, Child Labour, Child Tea Sellers, Vehicle Station

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Introduction

Child labour poses a complex developmental issue that requires careful examination. Many people are troubled by the exploitation of children, who are often forced into work and denied the education essential for their personal and future development. Children are an integral part of society and deserve to have their basic childhood rights, which are their fundamental human rights. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child ensures that every child around the globe has the right to survive, develop, receive protection, and take part in societal activities (International Labour Organization, 2015). However, many children worldwide are denied these rights with Nepal being a notable example facing challenges with child labour. Significant factors contributing to child labour in Nepal are rigid socio-cultural traditions, lack of education, economic difficulties, a biased caste system, and insufficient awareness of fundamental human rights. Children are vital parts of society and deserve to have their basic rights respected, which are their fundamental human rights. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child ensures that every child around the globe has the right to survive, develop, receive protection, and participate in societal activities (International Labour Organization, 2015). However, many children worldwide

are denied these essential rights, with Nepal being a notable example of a nation facing challenges with child labour. Significant factors contributing to child labour in Nepal involve strict socio-cultural traditions, lack of education, economic difficulties, a biased caste system, and insufficient awareness of fundamental human rights (Government of Nepal, 2018a). Nepal has a small land mass of 147,181 sq. km with an estimated population of 29,694,614. The intensity of poverty, illiteracy, malnutrition, and other forms of deprivation have hindered the pace of overall development of the country and Nepal still remains a developing nation with a per capita income of US\$ 1,489. In Nepal, nearly 15% of children aged 5 to 17, or around 1.1 million, were engaged in child labour, which shows a decreasing trend from 2.6 million in 1998 and 1.6 million in 2008. Similarly, about 200,000 children (3.2%) are involved in hazardous work, a significant reduction from 620,000 in 2008. Boys are more likely than girls to be involved in such dangerous work, with 3.7% of boys compared to 2.6% of girls (ILO, 2021). According to Bausch (2017), in developed countries, a high standard of living and strong economic conditions reduce the need for children to work to support their families. In contrast, in less developed nations, children often need to work long hours to help their families. Additionally, poverty and a lack of affordable credit options force



struggling parents to engage their children in more hazardous forms of child labour (Shrestha, 2001).

Despite a downward trend in child labour in Nepal, due to poor economic family background, many children are forced to participate in both overt and covert labour markets. The type of work these children are involved in is troubling. In Nepal, the agricultural sector employs most of these children, who usually engage in activities such as herding livestock, planting and harvesting crops, ploughing fields, gathering firewood, mowing grass, and milking cows and buffaloes (ILO, 2021). Besides agriculture, it is becoming increasingly common for children to find employment in transportation, communication, domestic services, and trade and commerce. However, due to the strict enforcement of the government's child labour laws, many individuals have resorted to falsifying or exaggerating their ages to continue working (Neupane, 2023).

Child labour is often viewed as a vital source of income for impoverished families, as it helps sustain the household's economic status. This can involve children working for wages or assisting in ways that allow adult family members to engage in other economic activities. One of the prevailing forms of visible child labour nowadays seen in Kathmandu, a capital city of Nepal, is 'Child Tea Seller at the Vehicle Station', hereafter referred to as 'CTSVS'. In Nepal, improved road connectivity across the country has led to an increase in various forms of transportation, particularly small vehicles, that are increasingly used to transport passengers to their destinations. These transportation services are available at various locations in Kathmandu from early morning until late evening. In this context, children are taking up tea-selling jobs for passengers. They mostly carry tea in thermoses and serve it along with other essential food items to the passengers in vehicles. It is believed that children selling tea and snacks make more money than adults by gaining the sympathy of passengers. It is often seen that CTSVS sells tea in the mornings rather than during the day or in the evening.

Multiple surveys indicate that working children in various sectors suffer from different diseases and health issues due to insufficient parental love and care, lack of recreational time, and limited access to basic education. These factors contribute to long-term physiological and psychological harm (Desai and Singh, 2016; Guglielmo, 2023). The Government of Nepal has taken different initiatives to combat the child labour problem in Nepal by signing different agreements and packs. For example, Nepal ratified the UN Convention on the right of Children in 1990, the Constitution of Nepal establishes the rights of children and makes provision for freedom from exploitation, adopted the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act (CLPRA) in 2000, Act of Relating to Children 2018 (ARC), the labour Act, 2017, etc. The ARC, 2018 includes provisions aimed at safeguarding children from exploitation and prohibits child labour for those under the age of 14. The Ministry of Women, Children, and Senior Citizens is tasked with enforcing this act. Nevertheless, the expansion of road connectivity and enhanced access to transportation has contributed to a rise in this form of child labour within the country. Consequently, this paper

seeks to investigate the conditions associated with CTSVS. According to the Children Act, a child is defined as any individual under 18 years. This paper focuses on CTSVS participants who are under 18 years of age.

Methodology

Kathmandu is the country's largest city and has the best modern facilities, attracting many children and adults from all over the country. For this reason, it was chosen as the study area. Two major vehicle stations in Kathmandu were purposively selected for the study. They are Balkhu Sumo Station and Kalanki Micro Station. Many passengers who prefer a shorter travel time to reach Hetauda and Birgunj via Kulekhani, Makwanpur, choose Balkhu Sumo Station, where over 30 Sumo companies operate. Similarly, Kalanki Micro Station is even more popular for passengers seeking quick travel to various destinations, with more than 50 companies providing services. These vehicles primarily use the Prithvi Highway along with other routes as needed. In total, 20 CTSVS (10 from each station) were selected randomly for interviews.

Children, Childhood and Child Labour

In *Centuries Childhood of Childhood*, Aries (1962) claimed that childhood, as we see it today, is a recent idea. In medieval times, children were considered young adults with similar roles, behaviours, and clothing as grown-ups. Despite various critiques from scholars, he initiated an important discussion among historians, sociologists, and social scientists, presenting a new perspective on childhood that is crucial for developing modern programs and policies aimed at children. Eventually, society began to see childhood as a separate stage of life, influenced by new family dynamics, education systems, and attitudes toward children. Child labour remains a widespread issue globally. For many children, work is a source of suffering and exploitation, representing a serious violation of human rights. It often leads to educational disadvantages, social inequities, and health problems (Guglielmo, 2023). However, for some families, having children work is necessary for their survival. Children are the most vulnerable members of any community and require the most support because they can be easily taken advantage of by harmful individuals. During their formative years, children can be easily shaped in terms of their behaviour. This is a crucial time to offer them proper care, love, and affection, which will support their physical, mental, and social development (Nakarmi, 2024).

Defining child labour is more complicated than it seems because it involves three challenging ideas: 'child,' 'work,' and 'labour.' According to the International Labour Organization (2015), child labour differs from work that doesn't harm a child's health or education. If a child engages in work that is dangerous to their well-being or threatens their future physically, mentally, or morally, it is considered child labour. Children working at a young age lose their childhood and come across obstacles in their overall development process. In Nepal, the Children Act of 2018 defines children as anyone under 18 and focuses on protecting their rights and welfare (Government of Nepal, 2018b). Similarly, the Labour Act of 2017 strictly prohibits children under 14 from working as



labourers. For those aged 14 to 18, it limits the kinds of work they can do, making sure it doesn't harm their health, education, or overall growth (Government of Nepal, 2017). These laws focus on protecting children's rights, ensuring they have access to education, health care, and protection from exploitation. It asserts that children deserve a safe and nurturing environment and prohibits hazardous child labour. The Acts also highlight the responsibility of parents and guardians to ensure care and support for children's growth.

Background of CTSVS

Nepali Society is composed of diverse caste and ethnic groups with distinct cultural traditions. The so-called elite groups, the Brahmin and Chhetris (Aryans), hold the most influential position in

politics, the national economy, and land ownership in Nepal. Of the total, CTSVS interviewed, 50 % were Tamang, followed by Brahmin and Chhetris (25%), Madhesi castes, including Shah, Das, Yadav, and Mandal, made up 20% CTSVS interviewed while Gurung constituted 10 %. The Newar, Majhi, and Tharu comprised 5% of those selected CTSVS. Most noteworthy of the study was that no Dalits were noted as CTSVS in the study areas. Among the CTSVS, there are 55 % Hindus and 45 % Buddhists, similarly, 90 % of them are males and only 10% are females. The majority of them, i.e. 95% are above 16 years old, and only 1 (5%) CTSVS is 15 years old. All of them are migrants and migrated with their parents from nearby districts such as Makwanpur, Nuwakot, Dolakha, Sindhupalchok, and Chitwan. No one is noted from the Capital City i.e. Kathmandu, Lalitpur, and Bhaktapur Districts.

Caste/Ethnic Group	CTSVS	Age		Religion	Male	Female	%	
Brahmin/Chhetris	5	16+		Hindu	5	-	25	
Tamang	6	16+		Buddhist	5	1	30	
Madhesi	4	3	16+	Hindu	4	-	20	
		1	15					
Gurung	2	16+		Buddhist	2	-	10	
Newar	1	16+		Buddhist	1	-	5	
Tharu	1	16+		Hindu	1	-	5	
Majhi	1	16+		Hindu	1	-	5	
Total	20	CTSVS						100

The role of parents has a tremendous influence on the process of socialization. Raising and teaching young children how to behave is a regular part of family life. Parents pass on cultural values, rules, and behaviours to children as they grow and spend time with family (Nakarmi, 2024). The study shows that 60% of CTSVS currently live with both their father and mother, 20% live without their father, 15% live without their mother, and 5% live with a step-parent. Due to limited land and exposure to natural disasters, agriculture productivity is very low. Hence, the majority of the families of the CTSVS are involved in multiple occupations rather than agriculture. Agriculture as a single occupation does not adequately sustain them throughout the year. However, agriculture is the main occupation of all the parents of CTSVS which includes subsistence farming, with crops such as rice, maize, wheat, millet, etc. When agriculture is unable to sustain their families and there is only a limited employment alternative in their areas, the majority of them are migrated with their parents and relatives (Gautam, 2008). No children involved as CTSVS found run away from villages without giving any information to their family members. Children who migrate with relatives have obtained parental consent prior to their migration. They all migrated to Kathmandu due to insufficient economic conditions at home with aspirations for a better life and attraction to an urban lifestyle.

Assessing the Welfare and Conditions of CTSVS

Education plays a key role in the overall personality development of any person. It is important to be liberated from all sorts of exploitation and oppression. It is important to note that all the CTSVS are enrolled in school and attending classes. One CTSVS recently passed the SEE and plans to continue his education by joining Plus Two. The others also wish to continue their studies. One of them is Sanu Shrestha (a fictitious name) is from the Makwanpur district. He lives with his younger brother. He is currently attending 10th grade at a nearby government school. He came to Kathmandu with a relative, with his parent's permission, and began selling tea at the Balkhu Sumo Station with his relative's help. He has been working at the same station for two years. He sells tea and snacks from 6 am to 9 am, then goes to school. After school, he sells tea and snacks for another hour. His brother studying in grade 8th in the same school also often assists him in selling tea and snacks. He earns over 12,000 rupees every month. He says that this job is the only reason they can afford his and his brother's school education, as well as the rent for their house. He also saves money and supports his family occasionally. All the CTSVS earn between 10,000 and 18,000 rupees per month from selling tea. According to them, they have full control over their income, yet some prefer to let their parents or relatives keep

their earnings. This is often because they lack a bank account and they do not feel safer to keep the money themselves. They worked normally for 4 to 6 hours a day. According to Nepal's Child Labor (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1999, children aged 14-16 can work in non-hazardous conditions for a maximum of 6 hours a day and should not exceed 36 hours per week (Government of Nepal, 1999). When they are asked about the condition all of them say they are comfortable in this job and able to continue their education due to this occupation. Except for two respondents, the others help support their families by sending money occasionally. Two children, who don't want to send money to their parents, believe that their parents are used to drinking alcohol and worry that the money they send will be spent on alcohol.

Food is a basic need of all the human beings. Good nutrition is important for children since it helps them grow physically, develop their cognitive skills, and strengthen their immune systems. Eating healthy food builds a strong foundation for a healthy life. The study reveals that all CTSVS take food three times a day and at least once a week they eat eggs and meat. And, occasionally they prefer to eat seasonal fruits as available in the market. CTSVS are also found with adequate and western clothing and watching movies is an important part of recreation for them. They often watch at least one movie a month. Most of them prefer newly released Nepali movies. They often go with their friends to watch movies. It gives children a fun way to relax and take a break and inspires their imagination and creativity. Movies can show them new ideas, cultures, and ways of thinking, helping them learn important lessons and build empathy. Seasonal illnesses are commonly reported by all CTSVS, with the most frequent being colds and fevers. However, they also mentioned that they visit the doctor if their condition does not improve within a week. If someone faces trouble, other CTSVS are there to help, whether it's financially or in other ways. However, they do experience conflicts and competition when selling tea. These issues often happen when one person takes over another's selling area or clients. However, there has been no evidence of any serious conflict between CTSVS so far. The main problem of CTSVS is unstable income. They often can not earn, especially when there are vehicle strikes or other disruptions preventing vehicles from operating the service. In addition to this, the risk of accidents while crossing roads is seen as another serious issue for CTSVS.

Conclusion

CTSVS is a form of child labour in Nepal, particularly evident with the enhanced road connectivity and transportation across the country. Most of the CTSVS are working as an integral part of the family, supporting the family economically. CTSVS results from large-scale rural-to-urban migration, especially from families with poor financial conditions. However, it is not always true that migrant children come from broken families, as most CTSVS come from households where both parents live together in a harmonious environment.

Poor economic conditions, limited land, and low agricultural productivity are the primary reasons for children's migration from

rural areas to cities, where they enter the labour market to support themselves and their families. Despite being employed, all children in the study areas are enrolled in school and have migrated with parental consent. Most of the children working as CTSVS work 3 to 5 hours per day and earn over 12,000 per month, indicating that they make a sufficient income. The children working as tea sellers expressed satisfaction with their work and having a supportive environment and fair earnings, with no records of mistreatment or abuse reported in the study areas. Therefore, regarding the prevailing assumptions about the risks of child labour, it is not always necessary to adopt a uniform view. The findings suggest that child labour is not necessarily harmful if they are not in the early stage and allows sufficient time for education and working conditions do not adversely affect the child's health and personal development. The findings indicate that child labour may not be inherently harmful, provided that it does not occur during the early developmental stages, allows adequate time for education, and the working conditions do not adversely affect the child's health or personal development.

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