



We, as working children's unions/organisations, demand that all Acts, Policies, Guidelines and Programmes meant to uphold the best interests of working children and adolescents should be empathetic and sensitive to our difficult and diverse realities. We must be heard and listened to in all matters affecting our lives. Like all children and adolescents, we too are citizens today.

Introduction:

We, working children and adolescents from 8 states of the country came together to discuss our rights, voice our demands and flag our aspirations at the national event to commemorate 30 years of UN Convention on the Rights of the Child on November 20, 2021.¹

The event, '**Children: Ambassadors of Change**' had representatives of unions and organisations of working children and adolescents from New Delhi, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Gujarat, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra and Karnataka. We spoke about our present situation, especially in the context of COVID – 19 and beyond. We were very emphatic that issues of working children and adolescents have never received the attention they urgently deserve. Making matters worse, COVID - 19 has further aggravated many of the long-standing systemic issues, gravely affecting us and our communities.

As representatives of our unions and child led organisations, we further discussed our issues in great detail during the past few months. Based on those, we have drawn up this petition in which we demand our rights and entitlements. We are sharing it, nationally, on the occasion of 'Child Labour Day, April 30, 2021², the day to uphold our rights. Our petition is addressed to the Government, as the primary duty bearer responsible for the realisation of our rights.

The Petition:

We, as working children's unions/organisations, demand that all Acts, Policies, Guidelines and Programmes meant to uphold the best interests of working children and adolescents be empathetic and sensitive to our difficult and diverse realities. We must be heard and listened to in all matters affecting our lives. Like all children and adolescents, we too are citizens today.

We demand that the Government takes note of our following recommendations and acts on them urgently and sincerely.

Surviving COVID - 19 crisis:

- We children are scared to go to hospitals. Our homes have many people and there is no way we can maintain safe distances within our home. We are also worried that if we go away into hospitals, who takes care of our homes? We urgently need support.

¹ This event was facilitated by the Concerned for Working Children, www.concerenedforworkingchildren.org

² April 30th, a day before May Day, was marked as Child Labour Day, for the very first time in 1990, by Bhima Sangha, the first ever working children's union of India.

- In one of our cities, we are already in the third week of lock down in this second wave. Neither parents nor children are earning. We must have free rations and food packets distributed. The amounts given during the last wave were highly insufficient – and very random. They must be given adequately and the grains given should be suitable to our region and food practices. These rations and medicines have to be home delivered as we cannot step out during this pandemic.
- All citizens should be given a free vaccine (both doses) as it is our right. Just as polio vaccines are given in every village, COVID - 19 vaccines should be given to every individual, free of cost – to protect our lives, lives of our family members and of our communities.
- All of us below 18 years should be given medical kits. They should contain fruits, vitamins, iron and such other supplements, Ayurvedic /natural medicines, guidelines for how to prevent COVID - 19 and COVID - 19 care.
- Instead of rough-handling children and youth for not wearing masks, police should have masks to give those who do not have it. Some of our friends did not have masks and they were taunted and humiliated, instead of being given masks.
- In one of our states, West Bengal, the election rallies had thousands of people coming together. Such public events should not be allowed to take place at all even in the future as under the present circumstances, they are very dangerous. If elections have to take place, they can use methods like voting using mobiles or the internet so that large gatherings of people are banned.
- Our education has become very badly affected. It is very hard to learn on zoom. We do not have access to smart-phones and even if we manage to arrange for one phone for many of us, we do not have internet facilities – for which we must have subsidy from the government. When we struggle and manage both phone and internet, even then, the way lessons are taught, it is impossible to learn or grasp them. We recommend educational kits made available for easy learning to all of us (Shaishav, Gujarat model), and to have community based small group teaching (Like Vidyagama, Karnataka State model) so we and all children are able to at least learn the basics required for next classes.
- All children have been ‘passed’ for two years in a row – without them having gained any knowledge or skills. This will make us unfit to further education or take job interviews. Instead the government should declare this period as a gap year and only use it to give us some skills and inputs to the extent possible. After this crisis passes, we should be allowed to repeat the same classes with actual teaching and learning.
- Due to the lockdown, we and our families are not able to go to work, so we do not have enough food to eat or money to pay house rent. As long as this problem persists, we should be exempt from rent. Only then will we be spared from the constant fear of the roofs above our heads being snatched away from us.

Protection for all children:

- Protection must be ensured for all of us, children and adolescents, so that we do not undergo any physical, mental or emotional violence or harassment.
- We, working children and adolescents are penalised and punished for our realities, our backgrounds and because we work. We work because we have to survive and we have to support our families. Laws that penalise us should not be implemented.
- Safety and protection of those of us to live and work on the streets must be ensured at all times as many of us experience different forms of abuse from many adults, including those who employ us.
- The government must identify people and agencies that sell children and subject us to all forms of exploitation – and not direct us to such institutions to ‘stay and be safe’,
- Government should take necessary steps to build awareness in the schools, in the community and in the larger society about children’s rights, its true meaning and how to respect children’s rights.

Safe occupations for adolescents:

- The law allows adolescents to work in safe jobs. This is very important for our survival and also for us to be able to support our own studies or our families. If we are compelled to or choose to work, our place of employment must be made safe - for boys, girls and children from other genders. In our work places, formal and others, we must be protected from all types of exploitation and abuse.
- The government should ensure safe employment to adolescents who have not received any schooling or formal education. There are a large number of us.
- Work done by adolescents should not hazardous – like preparation of fireworks, mining etc or work where we are exposed to intoxicants such as liquor and drugs. These are not acceptable to us.
- Even though adolescents are allowed to work only in safe occupations, because there is a scarcity of safe occupations, many of us are forced to take up hazardous work. Government should make sure we adolescents are employed in safe work. For that there is urgent need to create safe work opportunities for us.
- We are demanding for only safe work. This includes making some work which may now not be fully safe, but can be made safe, for example by modifying working conditions or providing safety. This however, does not apply to hazardous work.
- There have to be strict guidelines to ensure the safety and protection of adolescents who are now employed in work involving late night or early morning work.
- Employment opportunities that build our self-confidence and enable our growth should be provided to us. Work like sewing, electrical work, carpentry, vending, marketing, catering, hotel management, etc, in safe working areas and quarters and after good training would be very helpful.
- At present, many adolescents, especially girls work in places where we have little or no safety. If we are not working in a formal work place, it may be difficult to monitor our safety. In such situations, instead of removing us from there by force, agencies like ChildLine have to observe and inspect our place work to make sure we are safe. In case of any violations, authorities should be alerted and our safety at work places should be ensured. Protection and respect of girls in workplace is very important.
- Under Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), there should be safe employment opportunities for us, adolescents in the age group of 16-18. For example, we can grow vegetables and take part in farming and other activities that are suitable to our age and abilities. The MGNREGA programme takes place in the villages, with monitoring from the Panchayats and community members – so our safety can be ensured. This will help many of us who are now forced to stop going to school to be able to earn and also continue our schooling.
- In case of dire need, like we are facing due to COVID, there should be a system wherein we can borrow money from our employer and work in lieu of loan repayment. This is a requirement as we cannot get loans elsewhere. Or we should have options to receive loans at low interest rates.
- We should have facilities to take loans and monthly installments can be deducted from our salary. The government should provide us with facilities of EMI. That way we can manage our money efficiently. They should advise us about operating bank accounts and money management.
- The government should give low interest loans to those of us who wish to start our own business and also provide us guidance on how best to run the business.

- Work should be made available to us in accordance with our skills. For example, if we have learnt basic garage work it will be good for us to get more training in that work along with better opportunities to work. So that we can gain more skills and also earn good wages.
- There should be toilet facilities in our place of work. We cannot be threatened when we take toilet breaks. In villages, we will need community toilets.
- We should also be provided transportation when our work hours are long. For those of us who use public transport, we should get discounts on our tickets like students do.
- Our work should have scheduled timings. If we are made to work longer on some occasions, we should be given extra payment.
- We should be given good food in our place of work. Meals should be served on time.
- We need to be trained well for our jobs so that we work effectively.
- We should not be intimidated by our employers. If we commit any mistake, the employers should correct us and not yell at us or bully us. The government and organisations working with us should ensure that the employers abide by the rules and regulations set for safe work for adolescents.
- There should be no discrimination based on genders when wages are paid. Girls are getting lower salaries than boys. This should not happen. All adolescents should be paid the same wages. If we are working as much as any other adults, then we must have wage parity there too.

Professional Training and education

- Presently, professional training opportunities only involve skill training and labour-intensive training options and these do not substantially contribute to the formal economy. The scope of professional training options must be expanded.
- The government must provide professional training opportunities for young adolescents and youth in entrepreneurship, for instance in tailoring, beautician skills, manufacturing small products at home etc. We can then be self-employed, make a life for ourselves and support our families.
- The Government should build professional training centers where we can get training free of cost – especially for adolescents from communities facing severe difficulties. There are some such programmes like ‘Skill India’ but we are not able to access them. After 10th standard, or even earlier, like it is said in the New Education Policy (NEP) we should have opportunities to receive professional training but it needs to be effectively implemented. During the training period, it will be very useful to have stipend/scholarships/subsidy to cope with our survival needs.
- Our training opportunities must not be designed based on gender stereotypes. Instead, they must provide opportunities for adolescents of all genders to pursue professions based on their interest, aspirations and abilities.
- The National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) does have professional courses. However, its fee is too high for us to afford. It has to be reduced for those children and adolescents from BPL families. The Ministry of Social Welfare must provide those of us from the SC, ST and other backward communities with scholarships for professional education, as they do for academic education. We also need certification for the professional education we complete under NIOS. As of now we must pass a test for the certification, but this test can be taken only in English and Hindi, which excludes all those of us who do not know these two

languages. So NIOS should have text books in all regional languages and also have facilities for us to take the test in our own regional language.

- For some children, especially girls, professional education should be provided in the schools where it is easily accessible because for many of their families do not allow them to go to different cities for schooling or professional education.
- If any of us wish to take academic exams along with the professional education, we need support, remedial teaching and guidance.

Education:

- Among us are children and adolescents
 - who have never ever been to school;
 - who were in school until COVID occurred and now are not able to get back to school;
 - who combine work and education including those of us who work in order to support our own education;
 - who wish to take professional training;
 - who require safe work options and on the job education – to earn while we learn.
- The Government should have unique plans for each of our groups because our needs are different. Also there has to be a deep understanding of the difficult circumstances that each one of us are from, of our varied interests and our abilities. So, the solutions to the problems we face in education should be suitable to us. All of us, in addition to academic or professional education need information about our rights, our bodies, our livelihoods and about our lives.
- We recognise that good education may give us more opportunities to go ahead in life. At the same time, the government also needs to recognise that many of us have not found getting educated easy or useful. There are reasons for that and those reasons have to be addressed too.
- Many of us would like to 'learn and earn' so that while we survive, our chance to learn subjects, about rights, about work etc can continue. 'Earn and Learn' programmes along with evening high schools, distant learning schools, short term education courses and such other systems are very important for young people to learn and earn. This is the only way some of us can continue education.
- We are concerned that while the New Education Policy has many good suggestions, it may also direct poor children to professional education from young age where as rich children may pursue academic education. This is discriminatory. Access to professional training must not come in the way of choosing to pursue higher education – which some of us wish to do.
- Government should provide free education and remedial coaching for children from poor families, from single parent households, from distress migrant communities etc. Some of our members feel that all children should have free education as it is a fundamental right.
- Good quality of education must be provided in government schools. Teachers must be trained and oriented to do their work with sincerity. The student-teacher ratio of 30:1 must be ensured strictly.
- Government must design programmes to support us to continue our education, including providing hostel facilities for those of us from migrant communities, scholarships and fee waiver and support for all other school related costs.

- In the schools, no derogatory comments from the teachers about our communities should be permitted.
- We should not face any corporal punishment or abuses in schools. Attention should be given to how to help us learn best and how to make us understand what is being taught.
- Online teaching and teaching on mobiles are not working for us. If online education has to continue for some time, then it must be made easy to understand; and internet access, mobile phones and good network connectivity must be ensured. But this will not work in the long run. Schools should be made available in our own communities, like it was done by Government of Karnataka for some time under the 'Vidyagama' programme. If we do not get help to study, more of us will leave school completely and turn to work full time.
- The local government must ensure that all young people have the information about different opportunities available to us – for academic and also professional education – and help us to access the opportunities while providing the support we may need to do so.

Livelihood for our youth and our families:

- Job opportunities must be created for our adults in different sectors which are stable and provide with sufficient wages to meet at least all our basic needs - so that children in our families are not compelled to work in order to survive.
- Due to COVID, many of us lost jobs in the cities. We have now come back to the villages but without any jobs. Our families are in dire need of jobs.
- Our families produce many handicrafts and home-based products. The government must support their marketing and sales – this will help our families and our entire community.
- Poverty is the main cause for many of us taking up jobs. Therefore, the government should have many programmes to eliminate poverty so that those who wish to continue education can do so.
- In some families, both the children and parents are working, yet the income is not sufficient. The problem of unemployment and low wages must be dealt with immediately and consistently. Our adults should be provided good jobs and these jobs must generate a good income for the sustenance of the family.
- Counseling must be provided to parents to not force young people to turn to work, if they are able to continue to study or get professional education.

Demands specific for protection of children of De-Notified Tribal communities (DNT)³:

- Those of us who are from denotified tribes and those of us who live on the streets are extremely vulnerable to police harassment. Government should ensure that police personnel who extort money from us and who are violent to us are punished. All children who undergo such harassment should be given complete protection from police.

³ De notified tribes refer to the 150+ communities that had been categorised as criminal tribes by the British government through the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871. The Act assumed that criminality was hereditary, and many communities were brought into the fold of this Act with the British interests in monopolising their trades. The Act was repealed in 1952 but the branding and stigma persists.

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- Police Department should have a separate cell for our grievances. Police personnel should never be permitted to violate the provisions of JJ Act when they apprehend children suspected to be in conflict with law. They should be strictly prevented by discriminating us because of our DNT identity.
- Special training should be given in police stations in whose jurisdiction there are settlements of our Pardhis / Kanjars and other DNT groups.
- Positive messaging should be sent about DNTs in society so that our dignity is maintained. We do not want negative image that is presently in the media. Even if a couple of members of our community are apprehended, the papers refer to them as 'Kanjara gang' or 'Pardhi gang' implicating our entire community! This is blatant discrimination and slander.
- DNT communities that brew alcohol at homes should be given licenses and not harassed and exploited by the police because of this work.
- Our parents should be given work based on the skills they already have.
- Scrap-pickers within our community should not be seen with suspicion as they are now. They could be given jobs in the Municipal Corporation with skill upgradation if it is required
- DNT caste certificates should be provided to all children from DNT communities so that we can get the opportunities that are entitled to us.
- A decent amount should be given in scholarships to us to promote the value of education in our communities and prevent the heavy dependence on child labour.
- DNT Hostels run by DNT Department/Education Department should be regularly monitored to prevent abuse and discrimination that take place there now.
- Infrastructural facilities should be consciously planned for our settlements, as many of us do not have water facilities and land titles.

Health:

- Our communities lack good health care and facilities. The Government has to provide it for us.
- As a part of our Safe work environment we should have medical insurance and health check-ups on a regular basis. These have to be ensured by government.
- During COVID, good public sector healthcare and free of cost treatment must be provided to COVID – 19 infected people from our communities. Social distancing must be ensured during the COVID – 19 pandemic and facilities such as masks and sanitizers must be provided for all including young children
- There are no programmes for adolescent girls to get good nutrition, health support or counselling. They have to be available in all communities. Counseling and guidance must be provided to young adolescent girls who are undergoing puberty and experiencing physical and psychological impact of puberty. They must also get information about menstruation and importance of menstrual hygiene and guidance to manage emotional upheavals that comes along with puberty. Sanitary napkins must be made available to menstruating adolescent girls for free.
- Some of us also want support for de-addiction and detoxification, from tobacco and alcohol abuse. This is also needed for adults in our communities. In support of this, counseling and hospital services should be given free of cost.

Food security:

- School going children receive mid-day meals. If that cannot be given, they are provided with dry rations. We have access to neither meals nor rations. Working children and adolescents must also receive midday meals.
- The ration supplies given to our families are not at all adequate. The quantity of the supplies and the materials given both should be increased. Biometrics should not be insisted upon for giving us rations. Sometimes there is no match because of technical reasons and we are not being given the rations we urgently need.
- The installments due for housing should be waived because at present we are not even able to afford food.
- The Government must ensure supplementary nutrition and adequate medical support to adolescent girls who are suffering from malnutrition and anemia. The government should provide all adolescent girls with free rations.
- Government must ensure that the price of essential commodities comes down.
- For our senior citizens, single parents and widows, government should provide free rations, adequate pension, free along with health care.
- Many of us have come back to our villages after we lost jobs in the cities because of COVID. We need sponsorship and additional rations so that our extended families are not burdened by us.

Negative social practices:

- Government must stop illegal sale of alcohol in our communities. This leads to increased abuse of women and children, increased alcohol abuse in the community, a greater number of women and children beginning turning to alcohol abuse.
- Government should prevent drug addiction among working children, adolescents and children living and working on the streets. There are many young people who think of drugs as the way to overcome the problems faced. There is urgent need for help.
- Ideal Marriage Programme (Adarsha Vivaaha Programme⁴) which is a scheme to encourage and give incentives to young people getting married beyond the legal age of marriage should be implemented in all districts. This will provide the young couple with a cash award by the government and reduce the incidence of underage marriages. Awareness needs to be created by the local government in their respective panchayats/wards so that young people can benefit from it.

Governance:

- We, children and adolescents must be recognised as 'citizens today'.
- The government should not only focus on changing laws. Instead, it should focus on changing difficult realities faced by children.
- During elections, candidates give money and ask for votes. Public is not always aware whether or not the candidate is capable or responsible. Voter awareness about the credibility of the candidates, their abilities and duties should be given to all voters. This will help them to vote responsibly.

⁴ First implemented in India, facilitated by the Concerned for Working Children (www.concernedforworkingchildren.org)

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- Government should encourage young people like us to use multiple mediums like media, newspaper and other mediums to raise our issues.

Signatories:

Name of the working children's/ adolescent's union	Represented by	Facilitating organisation	Jurisdiction, State	Adult Facilitator + Contact Details
Women's Welfare Association	Arti Meghwal	Mahila Jan Adhikar Samithi (MJAS)	Ajmer, Rajasthan	Karuna Philip 8890870412
Tarun Sena	Asmita	Shaishav	Bhavnagar, Gujarat	Parul Sheth 9725030123
Bhima Sangha	Deepa, Fathimabi and Sudha	The Concerned for Working Children (CWC)	Bellary, Karnataka	Kavita Ratna 9448990480
Vidiyal Child Rights Movement	Rohit Sakthi	Sakthi – Vidiyal	Madurai, Tamil Nadu	Dr. Jim Jesudoss 9443335630
Azad Jugnu Club	Mahfouz along with Arin, Suman, Manjna, Shruti and Kuldeesh	Muskaan	Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh	Shivani 9425600382
Praajak's Youth Collective	Pritam Mondal	Praajak	Murshidabad, West Bengal	Bidisha Ray Chaudhry 9874337456
Balak Nama	Kishan	Childhood Enhancement Through Training and Action (CHETNA)	New Delhi	Iram Naz 9711670156
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