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**Protection of Rights of Young & Adolescent Girl Children Working in Coir Sector**

**Background:** The recent economic development trend has created a variation in the society where many people are struggling to mainstream them in the process. The adverse impact of rapid growth of consumerism has created a compulsion to earn more for the poorest of the poor for their survival. In these circumstances, people with less economic assets are bound to search for employment opportunities in unorganized sectors, as a result scope is created for harassment and deprivation with payment of fewer wages in compared to labour investments. Further, the exploitation has reached to the most delicate section of the community, i.e., women and children. Children are either available or being posed under compulsion to work in any circumstance to supplement their family income. In many instances this has become the major source of their family for their sustenance. On the other hand, due to traditional belief and cultural factors, in many families boys are given utmost priority in nutrition, health and education. As a result, many girls at tender age are bound to work in spite of their interest in education. Though there are acts for protection of child rights and promotion of a child friendly environment and ensure education for all children up to a certain age and level of education, but due to economic deprivation and compulsion of earning, many children are employed under harsh and hazardous conditions. Also, the free & compulsory education act provides scope for education for all up to elementary level, which ultimately resulted in deprivation of children between 14-18 years. Working children are the object of extreme exploitation in terms of toiling for long hours for minimal pay. Their work conditions are especially severe, often not providing the stimulation for proper physical and mental development. Many of these children endure lives of pure deprivation.



*Young Girl Children operating automatic coir yarn producing machine*

There are hundreds of adolescent girls, especially from the Schedule Caste and Dalit community from Satyabadi, Pipili, Brahmagiri, Puri Sadar, Nimapara and Gop Blocks of Puri District of Odisha are engaged in coir sector, either as regular wage earners or as part time wage earners to earn and supplement to their family income. It is found that there are around 140 (SSI, Cooperatives, NGOs, etc.) coir units and more than 200 Self Help groups engaged in coir activities where more than 3000 workers, both skilled and non-skilled workers are engaged. Out of which 25% are adolescent girls between the age group of 14-18 years.

**Situation:** “Coir” is considered as the poor man’s industry in India. Across the coast line and coastal Districts of Odisha coir is found (processed from the coconut husk) and thousands of poor families are depending up on coir sector for earning their livelihoods. Alone in the peripheries of Satyabadi (Sakhigopal) Block in Puri district of Odisha, there are 12 Defibering units, 114 spinning and mat & matting units and more than 200 SHGs engaged in producing coir handicrafts, yarn and mat. There are more than 3000 workers engaged in coir sector, out of which maximum are women and adolescent girls (Young Girl Children). There are more than 500 such children below the age group of 18 years, working either as part time or as full time workers across Satyabadi, Pipili, Brahmagiri, Puri Sadar, Nimapara and Gop Blocks of Puri District in different coir units and as members in different Women Self Help Groups. It is very difficult to earn INR 50 per day after working for more that 8-10 hours based on the current wage system of coir sector in the locality. The young girl children between 14-18 years of age, after dropout from the schools due to extreme poverty, are working in hazardous conditions. Another factor attached to this is maximum (around 70%) of them belong to *Dalit* (Schedule Caste Community). Thousands of workforce is engaged (mostly women and girl children) in the sector without considering women and child rights, insurance coverage, provident fund coverage and without any medical attention for their occupational health. In this context, thousands of women and girl children are deprived of their rights and leading precarious life, creating a challenging condition for equitable development across gender, caste and class.



*Young Girl Children at worksite*

In this context, it is highly essential to put a sustainable effort for protection of rights of these young & adolescent girl children and provision for maximizing scope for education of the poor Schedule Caste children (in specific to girl children) with sustainable livelihood to their families. Also, the children working in coir units are not aware about their rights, constitutional provisions, scope and opportunities for them to maintain and lead a free and healthy life without any discrimination. There is a need to take up sincere effort for protection of rights of these adolescent girl children. There is need of educating the owners (employer) of these coir units and the parents of those girl children on their rights, duties and role and responsibilities in protection of rights of these children.

**Works undertaken by SKF:** Protection of rights does not mean to fight against the authority or duty bearers. Rather, it should create opportunity to negotiate with the duty bearers and the authority and also prepare the right holders for such negotiations to bridge the gap and ensure establishment of rights. We believe in a principle of placement of demands and appropriate negotiations for protecting the rights of the underprivileged and deprived sections. We have our limitations for which our initiative is also limited to a certain geographic and thematic issues not in a widespread manner but we are trying to create an example with promoting conducive environment where the workers, the employers, authority & duty bearers and the civil society have equal space to exhibit themselves for establishment of rights and equal opportunity for each and every human being associate to the trend, business and industry (coir) associated with the daily livelihoods and food security of thousands of poor families.

Looking in to the condition of the poorest of the poor engaged in coir sector for earning their livelihood, Samaj Kalyan Foundation (SKF) is working in these Blocks of Puri district and providing skill development training to the people engaged in coir sector. In specific, we are in the process of capacity building and skill development of adolescent girls working in coir sector either in producing two ply coir yarn or coir mat or coir handicrafts and home/office/hotel/corporate decorative items. This initiative is taken up in respect of protection of adolescent girl's rights and access to better economic benefit by enhancement of their skill and capacity, ultimately creating a special place of these children in their respective families. It is observed that the income status of these girls is improved from INR 40-50 to INR 100 per day.

We are in a process of organizing these poor girls in to groups and sensitizing them on their rights and also organizing regular camps to educate them on adolescent health including personal hygiene & sanitation, reproductive rights, etc.

We are in a process of negotiating with the employers and duty bearers to recognize these groups (after attaining the age of 18 years) as skilled workers and ensure the norms of daily wage.

Schematic linkage is also in process due to which many of them are accessing benefits from Coir Board (Govt. of India) and finance from banks to become entrepreneurs. Market linkage of their products has created opportunity for self help groups to access good rice which ultimately resulted in increasing the daily income status of these workers.

These initiatives have worked as entry point in the sector to understand the vulnerability of these children in respect with child rights and adolescent rights. Initially we have faced difficulties due to the pressure from employers and now we are active in the field after many hardships and long negotiations with them. More so, we have initiated a process and there are many aspects to cover to achieve the goal of equal opportunity and equal life for all and we need hands of cooperation from all the stakeholders to achieve our mission.



*Our instructor providing onsite skill development training*

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