

Meaning of Wellness: Case of Children of Illegal Coal Mine Workers

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Abstract

If every child has the right to be healthy and safe, then it implies that a concern for the wellness of children would include both physical and mental health. When children grow in an environment where they lack a sense of security and the necessary support system, it has a negative impact on their life. Considering the importance of family in providing a safe space along with positive experiences to a child, if parents themselves face extreme adversity, then it may prepare the ground for damaging the wellness of a child. If parents are forced to take up an occupation which brings with it a threat to life on an everyday basis, then the wellness of children cannot remain unaffected. Its negative impact becomes manifold when children are well-aware about the dangers involved with the occupation of parents. Their home environment affects not just their learning experience at home, but also in school. This paper explores the impact of adverse social and economic conditions on the children of illegal coal mine workers of Jharkhand and reflects on the meaning of wellness and the demands of social context in addressing various mental health issues.

Keywords: *Wellness, marginalisation, multiple childhoods, positive psychology*

Introduction: Understanding Wellness

Any discussion on the issues related to wellness in general, or among the children of illegal coal mine workers in particular, demands the understanding about the idea of wellness in some basic way.

Even though health and wellness are often used interchangeably, understanding these separately is also important. One must understand that,

“If your mind and body are free of disease, you are probably healthy. But remember that wellness is a balance that we must constantly strive to maintain. It is this delicate balancing act between the physical, emotional, occupational, spiritual, social, environmental, and intellectual aspects of our lives that dictates our wellness” (Skilled at life, n.d., Para. 13).

Though, one of the most widely accepted definitions of health is that of the World Health Organization (2018), which identifies health as “a state of complete physical, mental and social

well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (Para. 1), it probably tries to reduce the gap between the two, so that the right of being healthy can include more dimensions. The above mentioned dimensions of wellness should be seen interrelated as each dimension holds the potential to influence one or the other dimension. Through the above discussion, the most agreeable argument that comes up says that “health is a goal one can achieve, while wellness is a dynamic concept that continues for a lifetime.” Smith (2013, Para 1)

After arriving at an understanding of the concepts of health and wellness, we must move forward and identify the essentials to ensure wellness. The basic desired conditions for ensuring wellness for children of coal mine workers are not much different from that of any other child. The major difference that needs to be highlighted in the case of children of illegal coal mine workers is that among all the various dimensions of wellness, the occupational dimension focuses on the occupation of the parents and its impact on

their children. While considering the aspect of the occupation of parents, we also need to bring into the picture the socio-economic background of the family. Here, the extended idea of health propounded by World Health Organization (2018) needs to be mentioned which emphasizes on ensuring health in every sense. It mentions that, “the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health is one of the fundamental rights of every human being without distinction of race, religion, political belief, economic or social condition” (Para 2). This makes it clear that to secure wellness among children we need to consider all the aspects of their life which includes their family background and the current status of the parents.

Background: what it means to be children of illegal coal mine workers?

In order to understand the challenges faced by the children of mine workers, it is first important to understand the case of ‘illegal’ coal mine workers. As nationalisation of coal mines in 1971 made coal a national resource, any extraction of coal without having valid license was deemed illegal. However, there has been “illegal mining throughout the mineral-bearing tracts of the developing world” (Lahiri-Dutt, 2007, p. 58). Resources like coal are more likely to be mined because of two reasons: first, it is a resource that can be directly used after mining without much processing. Second, it can be supplied to the local market for domestic use or small and cottage industry.

Illegal coal mining has been acknowledged by various people and agencies, but when we talk about people involved in such work, it is surely not limited to the idea of legality only. One must understand what forces people to take up such an occupation. Lahiri-Dutt (2003) writes,

“Who are the illegal miners, scraping the living from the pits of peoples’ mines? Thousands of people are involved in this economy. Although newspapers refer to the role of coal ‘mafia’, those involved are actually mostly ordinary

villagers, mostly poor, struggling to eke out a livelihood at any cost” (p. 73).

As pointed above, the socio-economic background of these people needs to be considered. Being at the margins makes it extremely challenging for them to ensure the survival of their family. They are forced to take up an occupation that is considered illegal. Lack of opportunities forces them to look towards one of the resources available under the land. But does it actually serve the purpose of survival and working for the better future of the family? This question becomes far more important when we know about the work conditions of these coal mine workers, who extract coal through rat holes made in the coal mines without necessary safety equipment. It puts them under the threat of accidents and deterioration of health. Presenting the conditions in which the illegal coal mine workers of Jharkhand work, Akhtar (2017) writes “besides accidents, there are various occupational hazards. Coal mines emit methane. If there is no ventilation, it can displace oxygen and lead to loss of coordination, fatigue, breathing troubles, nausea and even death” (Para. 13). When the illegal coal mine workers enter the dark and underground coal mines without necessary safety equipment, they are likely to face such threats to their health and life. In case of any emergency it is unlikely that they will get the needed support or rescue. The situation can be worse for the children who accompany their parents in the mines for helping them in the work.

In case the mine collapses during work, not only does the extraction of dead body become difficult, but because of fear of the police, they either leave the body buried or ‘run away with the dead body to avoid investigation’ (Randolf, 2011). The families fear that investigation might lead to an action against them. Because of such circumstances “on many occasions, deaths in illegal mines go unreported” (Akhtar, 2017, Para. 7). The families of the mine workers are aware of such life threatening

situations. It is true that the risk of such accidents is there on a daily basis but the ordeal does not end here. They do the partial burning of extracted coal and load 250 to 300 hundred of kilograms of coal on their bicycles and push it to the market. This Journey may be sometimes more than 30 kilometers (Randolf 2011). Such hardships affect the whole family. Be it physically, emotionally, economically or socially, every individual of the family is affected. The worst effects are on children as the struggle of their parents deprives them of care, love, support and attentions that they need on day to day basis.

The research area and the processes involved

The reflections articulated in this paper are a part of a doctoral study for which the context is of the Ramgarh district of Jharkhand. In the exploratory study about the educational opportunities of the children of illegal coal mine workers, two government schools that have classes up to the elementary level were engaged with.

In the two selected schools, detailed discussions were organised with groups of children from class VII and class VIII. 20 children were interviewed on the basis of a semi-structured questionnaire. The medium of discussion was Hindi and Khortha (a language spoken by locals). These students also expressed their life-experiences in written form. Informal discussions with the teachers in these schools were also conducted.

The evidences of wellness being under threat

‘A child’s expression tells us a lot about his/her life’- this became clear to me when children from the said group started talking about their home environment and occupation of their parents. They explained how the struggle of their parents is affecting them on a daily basis. During my interactions with these children in selected schools, many instances came where the emotional turmoil of the children came to the fore. Almost all the children, when asked to share the details of their family, expressed a

dislike for their parents’ occupation. Most of them acknowledged the hardships of their parents’ occupation and some of the students went to the extent of linking it with the parents’ sense of responsibility to give them a good life. One of the girls explained the various emotional issues she was dealing with because of the occupation of her parents, and said that she feels troubled that her father has to go for mining coal. She understood that her father was providing them education with great difficulty so that they may have a good future. She also explained that whenever the mining work got stopped, it impacted the economic condition of the family, causing situations where the family had no money and they all were very stressed. She even wanted to drop out from the school to help her family, but fortunately her father managed to get money from some source or the other. Her father tells her often that he will educate her. He feels disappointed that he had no access to education and wants this to change for his children. Such expressions clearly highlight the pressure that the child goes through every day. Her circumstances are not giving her the space to feel good about herself and her home environment. Another student of class 7 explained how he has to miss school on the days that he goes with his parents for extracting coal. He shared his ordeal about the need to accompany father to the mining work. After working with his father in the dark and dangerous coal mines from 06:00 am to 10:00 am, he has to miss his school. He emphasized that he wants to study and become something in the future but has doubts about his dreams getting fulfilled as he is not able to go to his school regularly. This was not an isolated case where the interviewed child’s involvement in coal mining was articulated. The child being compelled to engage in the mining activity itself is a huge barrier in having a secure, healthy and happy life for the child. In such circumstances, wellness is bound be under threat.

Some observation in terms of wellness of the children

Some of the major observations that present a picture to us about the status of wellness among the children of illegal coal mine workers are as following:

1. They acknowledge the labour-intensive nature of the occupation of their parent/s.
2. The children are well aware of the threats involved with the occupation of their parent/s. They do not like the occupation of their parent/s and even call it *ganda kaam* or dirty job.
3. Children do not get adequate time to interact with their parents throughout the day because of the odd hours of work for illegal coal miners. Usually, they start their work post-midnight and return home after 10 o'clock, and by that time, the children have gone to their school.
4. Most parents are illiterate and are unable to enrich the learning experiences of their children by giving feedback or support on the tasks assigned by the school.
5. Both the schools have fewer teachers than required. To be precise, there are four teachers in each school while the number of classes in both the schools is 9. This, on one hand, results in extra work load on the teachers and also affects the quality of education, while on the other hand, it

deprives children the opportunity to interact with teachers and seek support.

Such outcomes highlight the status of emotional and mental health more than other aspects. This is a more serious concern as such issues are mostly ignored by the parents and teachers.

Conclusion

Wellness is not a tangible aspect of an individual's life, but it has the capability to affect it significantly. In the case of the children of illegal coal mine workers, who are living in a home environment that is making them extremely vulnerable in terms of their health and wellness, this paper attempts to articulate their challenges by explicating their lived reality. It was highlighted that the primary support system needed to ensure wellness of a child is that of her/his family and the school, however, in the case of children of illegal coal mine workers, both these institutions have limited contribution to children's wellness and are struggling to perform their duties towards children. After discussions of their lived reality, it was inferred that the health of the children of illegal coal mine workers is under serious threat. The evidences of the adverse effect may not be observed in terms of physical health but the emotional, intellectual, environmental, and social dimensions of their health are being affected on a daily basis due to the dangerous occupation that their parents are compelled to take up to ensure the survival of the family.

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