

HAZARDOUS AND HARMFUL CHILD LABOR

Around the world, 246 million young people—one in every six children aged five to seventeen—are engaged part-time and full-time in work that falls under international definitions of child labor. More than half the total—an estimated 179 million children or one in every eight children aged five to seventeen—work in the hazardous and harmful jobs classified as the worst forms of child labor.¹ Asia is home to nearly two-thirds of all working children, and South Asia has the largest number. Almost one quarter of the world's child laborers live in Africa, and 8 percent live in Latin America and the Caribbean. About 1 percent live in the United States, Europe, and other developed nations, and 1 percent live in the transition economies of the former Soviet Union and East Bloc.²

The Global Fund for Children (GFC) is one of the few organizations that provide funding to innovative grassroots organizations that reach out and target individual children in the villages and neighborhoods where they live and work. Statistics about the size of the child labor problem are staggering, and their sheer size often overshadows the humanity of individuals in need. GFC helps children to address the problems that lead them into inappropriate work and to gain the skills to build productive lives. In order not to lose sight of the individuals that lie behind the statistics, GFC maintains that help is best delivered one child at a time.

An Overview of the Problem: Hazardous and Harmful Work

Children work in a wide array of jobs. They work as maids, miners, waitresses, goatherds, shoemakers, fishermen, prostitutes, drug runners, soldiers, carpenters, garage mechanics, street vendors, and more. They work in small factories and at home making glass bangles, fireworks, leather, textiles, and hand-rolled cigarettes. They till fields, harvest crops, and plough the ground again for planting anew. They work for their families, for other employers, or for themselves.

Controversy swirls around the best way to define the child labor problem. Not all work is considered harmful, as most people and laws recognize. Laws in most countries—from the United States to India to Mexico—define child labor by the age of the working child. Most industrialized countries define child labor as jobs performed by children younger than twelve to fifteen years old. As common as these legal standards are, however, they are not universally accepted.³ Other international standards and classifications that have won wide acceptance define the problem using categories of work. UNICEF counts seven main types of child labor: domestic service, forced and bonded labor, commercial sexual exploitation, industrial or plantation labor, street work, work for the family, and girls' work.⁴ In 1999, the International Labor Organization (ILO) adopted a new standard, Convention 182, which defines and calls for immediate action against the “worst” forms of child labor: “slavery, debt bondage, prostitution, pornography, forced recruitment of children for use in armed conflict, use of children in drug trafficking and other illicit activities, and all other work harmful or hazardous to the health, safety or morals of girls and boys under 18 years of age.”⁵ This new standard was so popular that

¹ International Labor Office, *A Future without Child Labor* (Geneva: ILO, 2002), p. 18.

² International Labor Office, p. 19.

³ William E. Myers, “The Right Rights? Child Labor in a Globalizing World,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 575 (May, 2001): pp. 38-55.

⁴ Carol Bellamy, ed., *State of the World's Children, 1997*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 24.

⁵ ILO Washington Office, “Child Labor Convention Becomes International Law,” December 13, 2000, <<http://us.ilo.org/news/focus/0012/FOCUS-5.html>> (May 17, 2002).

ILO delegates adopted it unanimously, the first ILO standard to win unanimous approval since the organization was founded in 1919. On the human rights front, treaties, especially the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), give children the right not to be exploited at work. The CRC has been ratified by 191 countries, but not by Somalia or the United States.⁶

Laws and standards, while necessary, are increasingly recognized as only one part of the answer to the complex problems that lead children into harmful, hazardous, exploitative, and inappropriate work. The roots of child labor lie in poverty, discrimination, traditional expectations, and lack of other opportunities.⁷ Two-thirds of child laborers counted by the International Labor Organization live in rural areas, and the vast majority of them work in agriculture and related occupations.⁸ Although stories in the news media often showcase children making goods for export, only a small minority of child laborers—less than 5 percent—make export products. Most child laborers make products and perform services for the domestic markets in the countries where they live.⁹

Approximately 70 percent of working children toil in the production of basic commodities and services in rural areas. They work in agriculture, fishing, hunting, and forestry.¹⁰ This work can be harmful in its own right, for instance by exposing children to pesticides, or can harm a child's prospects by keeping him or her out of school.

Exploitation and extreme working conditions occur both outside and inside the home. Less extreme working conditions, even if a child is working to help his or her family, also can slow a child's growth and learning. Long hours of work in factories, at home, on the streets, or in agricultural fields keep millions of children out of school and leave those who do attend school too exhausted to study. One-fifth of children perform risky and harmful jobs in the commercial sector: 8 percent work in manufacturing, restaurants and hotels, or wholesale and retail trade; 4 percent work in transport, storage, and communication; and 3 percent in construction, mining, and quarrying. This sector also includes the millions of girls who make up the 7 percent of child laborers working in domestic work and services.¹¹

Schools are part of the problem in many countries. Budget cutbacks have slashed money for teachers, classrooms, and supplies. Children must travel long distances, pay more than they can afford, and then endure instruction by inadequately trained teachers who are captive to dull curriculums that train children poorly for the job market or for further study. Often, work seems more rewarding, with faster and more obvious rewards.¹²

While some work physically harms children or causes disease, problems in the home can in turn cause children to work. Injuries and diseases related to early and inappropriate jobs include mild skin injuries, diarrhea, lung diseases such as tuberculosis and silicosis, permanent bone injuries,

⁶ For the full text of the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child: <<http://www.unicef.org/crc/crc.htm>>.

⁷ Bellamy, pp. 27-32.

⁸ Iftikhar Ahmed, "Getting Rid of Child Labor," ILO/IPEC working paper, April 15, 2002, International Labor Office, <<http://www.ilo.org/public/english/standards/ipec/publ/policy/index.htm>> (May 17, 2002).

⁹ International Labor Office, p. 28.

¹⁰ International Labor Office, pp. 10, 22-23.

¹¹ International Labor Office, pp. 29-30.

¹² Bellamy, p. 48-58.

and, in the worst cases, death.¹³ For instance, children who scavenge for garbage and work in dumps face a high risk of tetanus, as well as other diseases and injuries.¹⁴ Meanwhile, parents who are illiterate or ill face greater obstacles to keeping their children healthy and in school. While educated and literate mothers tend to have healthier children, the opposite is also true. Uneducated parents raise unhealthy and uneducated children, leading to a pattern of illiteracy, illness, and more harmful work.¹⁵ In Cambodia's Stung Meanchey dump, for instance, three children and a cousin in the Phou family pick through a mountain-high pile of garbage to pay for their school expenses at the local half-day government school. Their father's illness keeps him home, which caused him to lose his job manning a garbage truck. The mother, who works in their home, struggles to support her family by raising ducks. The boys often are hungry and eat food they scavenge from the dump. When one of the boys falls ill with a stomach ailment, the first remedy his mother turns to is a folk remedy she can afford: She simply rubs a silver coin on the skin of her son's back.¹⁶

Girl domestic servants are at risk for physical and sexual abuse. Even if they are not abused, most are isolated from family and friends and unable to attend school.¹⁷ In Haiti, as many as one out of ten children work as domestic servants. Child servants are known as *restavecks*, for the French words meaning "to stay" (*rester*) and "with" (*avec*). That reflects the usual pattern: Poor parents send their children to urban families to stay, to be fed, and to be cared for.¹⁸ Domestic labor is only one type of work found in the unregulated, informal economic sector. Child labor in the informal sector—outside of official, regulated workplaces, in homes and streets and fields—is growing, according to recent studies.¹⁹

Estimates of the numbers of children performing illegal and coerced work, such as prostitution and child soldiering, are unreliable. An estimated ten million children work in the sex industry. At least one million children, the vast majority of them girls, become prostitutes every year.²⁰ Sex workers are at risk for contracting HIV/AIDS, and other sexually transmitted diseases.²¹ Estimates for the number of child soldiers range as high as 300,000.²²

The Global Fund for Children's Response to the Problem: Funding Effective Grassroots Organizations

The Global Fund for Children (GFC) is one of the few organizations that make targeted investments in grassroots organizations working to eliminate hazardous and harmful work for

¹³ Valentina Forastieri, *Children at Work: Health and Safety Risk*, (Geneva: International Labor Office, 1997), pp. 8-30.

¹⁴ S. Gunn and O. Zenaida, "Dilemmas in Tackling Child Labor: The Case of Scavenger Children in the Philippines," *International Labor Review*, 131/6 (1992), pp. 629-646.

¹⁵ David L. Parker and Sarah Bachman, "Economic Exploitation and the Health of Children: Towards a Rights-Oriented Public Health Approach," *Health and Human Rights*, 5/2 (2002), pp. 2-29.

¹⁶ S. L. Bachman, "A Stitch in Time?" *Los Angeles Times Magazine*, Sept. 16, 2001.

¹⁷ Bellamy, p. 32, ff.

¹⁸ National Coalition for Haitian Rights, "Restavec No More: Eliminating Child Slavery in Haiti," April 18, 2002. <http://www.nchr.org/hrp/restavek/report_es.htm> (May 17, 2002).

¹⁹ Santosh Mehrotra, Senior Economic Adviser, Innocenti Research Center, UNICEF, interview by Sarah Bachman, May 2002.

²⁰ Australian Human Rights & Equal Opportunity Commission, "Information for Students: Children and Sexual Exploitation," no date listed, <<http://www.hreoc.gov.au>> (May 17, 2002).

²¹ Bellamy, pp. 32-35.

²² BBC News, "Child soldiers banned by U.N. law," February 11, 2002, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/world/newsid_1815000/1815223.stm> (May 17, 2002).

children around the world. Founded in 1994, the Global Fund for Children identifies and invests in innovative community-based educational programs for poor children around the world. We have come to recognize that some of the most creative projects in the world operate on a small scale, exist in marginal locations, and have few contacts in philanthropic networks. Through our intermediary grant-making program, we support nonformal educational programs that integrate basic education with awareness building and training in reproductive health, hygiene, vocational skills, environmental issues, microenterprise development, human rights issues, conflict resolution, computer skills, and artistic expression. GFC is particularly sensitive to the distinct needs of girls and boys, AIDS orphans, street children, child laborers, and other vulnerable groups of children and youth.

Improving education—starting simply by providing a teacher and a place to study or a piece of chalk and a board on which to write—is widely considered one of the most effective ways of helping child laborers. When children are in school, they are usually not performing harmful or potentially harmful work. They also learn key skills, from “the three Rs” to how to stay healthy in a world full of disease.

*Rural Institute for Development Education
Kanchipuram, India*

Some projects draw direct ties between types of work and the education or other solutions they offer children. The Rural Institute for Development Education (RIDE) has been a leading advocate for the eradication of child labor in the silk looms of Kanchipuram and other cities in the state of Tamil Nadu, India. RIDE has helped more than nine hundred children escape from bonded labor. Under the bonded labor system, parents pledge their children’s labor to repay loans advanced by employers. Children who have been working often need to catch up academically before they can reenter regular school at an appropriate grade level. RIDE operates “bridge” schools to help working children make the transition.

*Jeeva Jyothi (Ever Living Light)
Chennai, India*

In Tamil Nadu, hundreds of children work with their families in the two hundred rice mills in north Chennai (Madras). The rice is boiled and soaked and then must be spread on concrete floors for drying. Workers walk through the spread-out rice, using their feet to aerate the damp rice so that it will dry without spoiling. Temperatures can reach well above one hundred degrees Fahrenheit. Workers, many of them bonded laborers, may walk twenty to thirty kilometers in a fourteen- to eighteen-hour day. The Global Fund for Children supports Jeeva Jyothi, a program that works to convince families to try to break the cycle of poverty by sending their children to school. Jeeva Jyothi, was started by Susai Raj. Raj was twelve years old when he was forced to leave school and begin working to help his family survive. In 2001, Jeeva Jyothi counseled 300 families working in the rice mills and succeeded in enrolling one hundred children in “bridge” schools.

*Ruchika Social Service Organisation
Bhubaneswar, India*

Since 1998, GFC has supported Ruchika Social Service Organisation in the northeastern Indian state of Orissa, which operates transition schools for street children. Ruchika first reaches street children by bringing education to where many live and work: the railway stations, where children sell bottles of water, shine shoes, and carry luggage, and then curl up to sleep on any flat

surface they can find. Ruchika founder Inderjit Khurana believes that if children have run away from regular public school, school should find the children and adapt to them.

*Asociacion de Defensa de la Vida (Association for the Defense of Life)
Huachipa, Peru*

In many poor countries, buildings and roadbeds are made of handmade or hand-crushed bricks. Brick making involves shaping wet clay into brick molds, laying out the molded bricks in the sun, and turning the bricks over repeatedly until they dry. Some families work in brickyards, while others rely on middlemen to ferry the raw bricks they make to kilns for firing. The dust breathed in by child brick makers, as with child miners and potters, puts them at high risk for lung diseases such as silicosis and tuberculosis.²³ In the village of Huachipa, eighteen kilometers south of Lima, Peru, the Asociacion de Defensa de la Vida (ADEVI) is working to convince parents to keep their children in school instead of taking them out to make more bricks. ADEVI has been so successful that more children want to go to school than there are seats in the classroom, and so children can only attend a half day of lessons.

*Friends for Street Children
Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam*

Similarly, Friends for Street Children in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, helps more than 120 children and their families with classes in mathematics, Vietnamese, natural sciences, personal hygiene, finances, and job readiness. As unsuccessful state farms in Le Minh Xuan Commune have left many people unemployed, children are often forced to drop out of school to help support their families. The programs and training offered by Friends for Street Children give these children an opportunity either to take classes that fit their own schedules or to attend regular schooling.

*Association des Femmes Educatrices du Mali (Association of Female Educators of Mali)
Bamako, Mali*

Child maids, as mentioned above, are among the most isolated child workers, and their isolation inside private homes puts them at high risk for physical abuse, including rape. Many employers are reluctant to let their child maids attend school. The Global Fund for Children supports Association des Femmes Educatrices du Mali (AFEM) in Bamako, Mali. AFEM provides some three hundred female domestics aged twelve to twenty-four with a seven-month course in reading, writing, arithmetic, health awareness, and human rights education, followed by a four-month course in income-generating projects. Because many of the participants must work during the day, all classes are taught at night.

²³ Parker and Bachman, p. 2-29.

Conclusion

Helping child laborers around the world is a huge and complex job. Progress can be made if effective programs receive the support and recognition they deserve and if their voices are included among those working to improve the life chances of exploited children. The Global Fund for Children has played a critical role in finding and supporting these organizations and believes that with ongoing resources and redoubled commitment, concerned global citizens can provide affected children with renewed hopes and enhanced life opportunities.