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Child Labor

READ TO DISCOVER:

1. Why is child labor so dangerous to children?
2. What larger issues have to be dealt with in order to end child labor?
3. Why is it so difficult to end child labor?

DESCRIPTION OF THE COMMITTEE

The International Labor Organization (ILO) is a specialized agency of the United Nations concerned with human rights in the workplace. It became the very first UN specialized agency in 1946, but was actually created even before the UN was founded as part of the Treaty of Versailles.

The ILO works to improve protection of worker's human rights and set minimum standards for labor rights around the world. These minimum standards include the right of collective bargaining, freedom from discrimination in the workplace, and a reasonably safe and secure working environment.

The Governing Body passes conventions and recommendations on labor rights and controls the work of the agency. It meets three times per year in Geneva, Switzerland.





INTRODUCTION

Child Labor is work performed by a child that is harmful to the health and wellbeing of the child. Work may be harmful if children are doing dangerous tasks or if they work too many hours. For example, some children involved in child labor are forced to work in crowded, cramped places for up to 18 hours a day. Some of the most common jobs that child laborers hold are on farms, in mines and in factories.

The issue of child labor is a very complicated one that stems from a number of larger problems. Three of the obvious issues that are closely tied to child labor are **poverty**, lack of **education**, and abuse of **human rights**.

Child labor is an issue that affects about 215 million children in the world.¹ Although it occurs all around the world, child labor is most common in Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. In fact, UNICEF estimates that one out of every four children in Sub-Saharan Africa is engaged in child labor.² With so many children involved, it is no surprise that international organizations are worried about the effect on the world's youth.

BACKGROUND

When **industrialization** began in Europe in the late 18th century, factories began popping up in cities. As the factories were built, owners recognized that they would need lots of people to work in their factories if they were going to succeed. These factory owners wanted to make as much money as possible so they offered the lowest possible wages to their laborers.

DID YOU KNOW...

The Fair Labor Standards Act was passed by the United States Congress in 1938. It set a minimum age of employment and limited the number of hours children were allowed to work, making child labor in America illegal.

Another way for factory owners to make more money was to hire children. Children were willing to work for even lower wages than adults and could perform the same types of low-skilled jobs as adults. Another reason that children were appealing to factory owners was that they were considered more manageable and unlikely to protest working conditions.

When industrialization was happening in Europe and North America, public education did not exist. Children would only go to school if their parents could afford to pay for it. Education was considered a luxury. Rather than paying for their children to go to school, many parents thought that their children should be working to earn money.

Terms & Concepts

Child Labor: the employment of children at regular and sustained labor

Poverty: deprivation of common necessities that determine the quality of life (food, shelter, clothing, and safe drinking water)

Human rights: rights to which all human beings are entitled from birth

Industrialization: a process through which society changes from being based on agriculture (farming) to being based on industry (factories and businesses)



It was not until the 1870s that the United States started offering free education to children and it was even later in England and other European countries. New laws were passed in many European countries and in the United States that required all children to go to school until a certain age. With free schools and laws forcing children to attend them, families had no choice but to send their children to school instead of to work.

Making education free and **compulsory** is a huge step towards ending child labor. Unfortunately, many countries around the world cannot afford to offer public education, so there are millions of children around the world who still do not go to school. Many of these children go to work instead and are part of child labor today.



A girl carries a tile on her head while working on reconstruction efforts in Honduras.

Source: © UNICEF/ HQ98-0464/ Balaguer

It is important to remember that industrialization has not happened at the same time or in the same way around the world. Many Asian, Latin American, and African countries are still in the process of developing and industrializing. They have their own timelines of industrialization and cannot necessarily be expected to follow the same course as Western Europe and the United States. Today's modern technology allows developing countries to industrialize differently and sometimes more quickly than has ever been possible before. It may take some time for rapidly developing countries to meet the labor standards already accepted in the developed world.

Terms & Concepts

CURRENT SITUATION

Compulsory: required.

Agriculture: activities related to farming.

Domestic labor: domestic tasks are those that take place within the home such as cooking and cleaning.

Child labor takes many different forms and occurs in many different industries around the world. While the publicized image of child labor tends to be of poor children working all day in dirty factories, most child laborers work in places other than factories. In fact, about 60% of child laborers work in **agriculture**.³ Other common areas of work for child laborers are mining and **domestic labor**.

Regardless of the form it takes, child labor can be very harmful to a child. When a child is involved in child labor, he or she can suffer physically, mentally, and emotionally. Having a full time job at a young age has a huge impact on a child's mind and body. Some children are forced to do work that is too difficult or too demanding for their age and size, leaving them at risk of being hurt or disabled. Working so many hours also makes it difficult or impossible for the child to go to school. Without education, children are left without the knowledge and skills needed to get higher paying jobs as adults.



Ages and Hours of Work

The UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) defines child labor as work that exceeds a minimum number of hours, depending on the age of the a child and the type of work.⁴ For Children ages 5 to 11, this is one just one hour of economic work or 28 hours of domestic work in a week. For 12 to 14-year-olds, it is defined as at least 14 hours of economic work or 28 hours of domestic work per week, and for children 15 to 17 years old more than 43 hours of work per week is considered harmful child labor.

Children often begin work at very early ages, especially in the agricultural and domestic sectors. In some agricultural industries like the banana sector in Ecuador, children start as early as eight. In the United States, some children start working in the fields when they are only 12 years old. In Egypt, the children working in the cotton fields are usually between seven and twelve.⁵



A young girl in Mexico picking cotton illegally.

Source: www.refugeechild.net/?cat=10

These young workers work very long days. In India, bonded child laborers often work sixteen or seventeen hour days, starting at 5 or 6 in the morning and going until 9 or 10 at night.⁶ Many work seven days a week for weeks at a time, and some are expected to work 365 days a year. This is a major barrier for children because they are unable to participate in other activities such as attending school or playing with their friends.

Terms & Concepts

Maim: to wound or injure so that part of the body is permanently damaged.

Disabled: not fully functional, impaired.

Pesticides: a substance aimed to keep bugs and other pests away from agricultural crops.

Injuries, Disabilities, and Ill-treatment

Children who work suffer high rates of injury. They can be cut by sharp knives and tools, fall from ladders, hurt their backs carrying heavy loads, and be crushed or **maimed** by heavy equipment. These sorts of injuries can leave children **disabled** for the rest of their lives, or even kill them. In the United States, child farm workers make up only 8% of children who work in the United States, yet account for 40% of work-related fatalities among minors.⁷

Child laborers are also exposed to many harmful chemicals and other substances. Children in mines breathe in dust and unclean air that can lead to breathing problems and lung disease. Many agricultural workers are exposed to **pesticides** without being told about their dangers or how to protect themselves. Many suffer from headaches, fever, dizziness, nausea, rashes and diarrhea. In severe cases, pesticide exposure can lead to convulsions, coma and death. Long term effects also include cancer, brain damage, and birth defects.⁸



Many child workers also do not have clean water for drinking and keeping themselves clean. Without enough to drink, children suffer from **dehydration** and may pass out after hours of work. They are unable to wash their hands, and spread harmful chemicals and germs to others and through their bodies. Lack of toilet facilities contributes to the spread of parasitic infection among workers. This is particularly dangerous and humiliating for girls.

"I took care of two children... I cleaned all parts of the house, washed the floor, washed clothes, ironed, cleaned the walls, and washed the car. I cleaned two houses, because I also cleaned the grandmother's house. I worked from 4 a.m. to 7 p.m. I had no rest during the day. I worked everyday and was not allowed to go out, not even to walk on the street. The lady employer yelled at me everyday. She slapped me one or two times a week. My employer kept my passport. I was scared to run away without my passport. I wanted to run away, but I was afraid the Malaysian government and security would catch me."

-Srihati H., 17 years old, former Indonesian migrant domestic worker in Malaysia

Source: http://www.hrw.org/legacy/english/docs/2007/02/20/global15343_txt.htm

Often times, children are subject to physical, mental, or emotional **abuse**. Physical abuse against child workers ranges from slapping to severe beatings, knocking heads against walls, and burning skin with irons, among other forms of violence. Employers often use physical violence when children make mistakes or disobey. Verbal abuse, such as insults or threats, often goes along with physical abuse and is added on top of excessive workloads, sleep deprivation, lack of or low quality food, and poor living conditions.⁹ Sometimes children are also subject to forced labor, where they are locked up or denied their wages for long periods of time so that they are not able to return home.

Impact on Education

Sometimes children take part in work during the summer or other vacation months when they are not in school. In other cases, child labor can have a serious negative effect on a child's education. Long hours of work mean children miss classes and are usually too tired to study. Eventually they fall behind and often drop out of school completely. Some children who suffer the worst conditions have never been to school at all.

Terms & Concepts

Dehydration: when your body does not have as much water and fluids as it should.

Abuse: when a person mistreats or misuses other people.



Terms & Concepts

Bonded child labor: a system of child labor in which parents receive a loan from someone and, in return, their child has to work for that person until the loan is paid back.

Wages

Child laborers work for very low wages, and are often paid less than adults for the same work. In many cases they are paid far below the legal minimum wage of the country for their work. Only one in five working children is paid, the majority are unpaid family workers.¹⁰ There are also some places where children can be sold by their parents to employers in return for money. This system, which essentially turns the child into a slave, is known as **bonded child labor**. In many cases they are working to pay off a debt, and do not receive anything for their time. Parents or other relatives promise the labor of the child to an employer in exchange for money, and the child must then work long hours over many years to pay off these debts. This is most common in Asia, especially in India.

Why do children work?

It may be hard to understand why children work, but there are many possible explanations. Some parents force their children to go to work because the family simply needs to earn more money. Other children volunteer to work because they feel a responsibility to help out. For these families, child labor is a solution to poverty rather than a problem. In order for child labor to come to an end, the families of child laborers need to be offered another way to support themselves.

Many people value the fact that children can play a role in making money for a family. These people do not believe that there is anything wrong with allowing children to work. There are even those that believe that if children want to work, it is wrong to stop them from doing so. Most everyone can agree that some sorts of limits to protect children would be helpful, but not everyone agrees with what those limits should be. Conflicts in opinion make it very difficult to tackle the issue of child labor.

Laws and Enforcement

In some countries, laws are in place that set limits on the hours children can work and the ages they can work at. In other countries, these laws do not do enough to protect children. The biggest problem, however, is that countries do not do enough to enforce these laws. Even though many people agree that child labor is a problem, many countries' governments turn a blind eye to the situation. Their countries rely on child labor too

ORPHANS AND CHILD LABOR

In many underdeveloped parts of the world, poverty and disease leave thousands of children without parents. In Africa, the AIDS epidemic has left millions of children orphaned and often there is no one to care for them. Sometimes, orphans must work to be able to provide for themselves. Because there is no one to stand up for these children and make sure they are treated fairly, they are often subject to the worst working conditions.



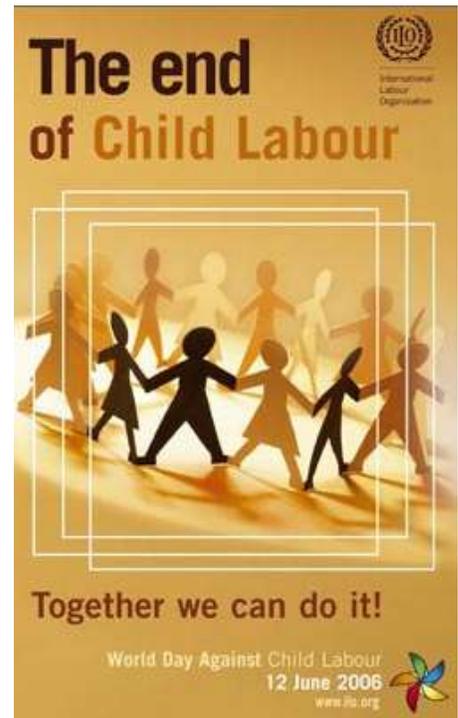
much to outlaw it. Governments want to protect their children but they also want to protect their countries' businesses. Using child labor can help the economies of impoverished countries grow. Until governments start stepping in and forcing employers to change their business practices, child labor will continue to be a problem.

INTERNATIONAL ACTION

Because of the work of the international community over the last decade, child labor is on the decline. However, the improvements being made are starting to slow down. There was a 3% decline in the period from 2004 – 2008, but this is a marked drop from the 10% decline in the 2000 – 2004 period.¹¹ Further, while the number of children subject to the worst forms of child labor is falling, the overall rate has slowed.

The United Nations General Assembly has passed two resolutions that outline the human rights specifically guaranteed to children. These two resolutions are known as the *Declaration of the Rights of the Child* (1959) and the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989). The Declaration gives children special rights including free and public education, healthcare, protection from neglect and cruelty, time to play, and minimum age of employment.¹² The Convention states that children have the right to “Be protected from economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child’s education, or to be harmful to the child’s health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development.”¹³ These two documents are symbolically important but have not had a huge impact on child labor. The resolutions are not laws but rather represent the United Nations’ opinion about the rights of children. Individual governments have to pass their own child labor laws for anything to change.

The ILO, especially, works hard to combat child labor. The 1973 adoption of the *Minimum Age Convention (138)* required countries to set a minimum age of at least 14 for child workers. In 1998, the ILO adopted the *Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work*, which covers the effective abolition of child labor.¹⁴ This was followed in 1999 by the *Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention (182)*, which focused world attention on the need for immediate action against forms of child labor that are damaging to the physical, mental, or moral well-being of children. Over the last decade, there has been considerable progress in the ratification of ILO standards of child labor. In 2006, the ILO set the goal of ending the worst forms of child labor by 2016. However, now at the halfway mark in this program, it looks like the world will fall short of meeting



World Day Against Child Labor helps educate people about the problem of child labor.

Source: <http://sonrisa.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2006/08/poster.jpg>



these aims. The 2010 Hague Global Conference on Child Labor aimed at strengthening progress towards the 2016 goals and pushed the ratification of Conventions 138 and 182. One third of children live in countries that still have not ratified these conventions.¹⁵

On a smaller scale, many individual governments have passed laws that protect children from child labor. These laws often forbid children from working until they reach a certain age. Others limit the type of work children can do or how long they are allowed to work. Finally, some countries have laws that make going to school free and compulsory for all children.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CREATING A RESOLUTION

Terms & Concepts

When drafting resolutions, delegates should focus on addressing the challenges in child labor, while providing guidelines and suggestions for implementation. One of the biggest obstacles to ending child labor is the United Nations' respect for each country's **national sovereignty**. The UN cannot step in and interfere with how a government is running a country unless it is clear that the government is neglecting or harming the people. This makes ending child labor very complicated.

National sovereignty: the right of a country to decide what happens within its own borders.

A resolution should address the following issues:

- Assessing and evaluating existing standards and norms,
- Ways to address the abuses of child laborers and to offer them protection without fear of repercussion for taking part in work,
- Encouraging countries to adopt standards and enforce laws to help combat child labor,
- Education as a tool for combating child labor, and
- Long term strategies to help with the underlying reasons children work in the first place, such as poverty, gender values and disease.

Child labor is connected to many other issues such as abuse of human rights, poverty, and lack of education. It would be very hard to solve all of these problems at the same time. Instead of looking for one comprehensive solution, the UN is looking for progress. Making things a little bit better now will bring the world another step closer to ending the problem.



Questions to Consider:

When researching your country's policy, keep the following questions in mind to better understand your country's position and possible solutions on the topic:

1. Why does child labor exist in certain parts of world more than others? How much of an issue is child labor in your country?
2. Are there certain jobs that kids should not be able to have? Are there any compromises or alternatives?
3. What kinds of incentives can we find to get children into school? What is a good balance between school and work?
4. How can families support themselves without their children's wages? How can we replace the salary that a family loses when the children stop working to go to school?
5. Has your country found any ways to limit child labor? How?
6. Who can be helpful in creating solutions to this problem? Would working with governments, NGOs, or other organizations be most helpful?

RESEARCH AID

The ILO website provides a number of useful links about its work on child labor, including reports and case studies. It is also the main source of information about the ILO itself.

- o **ILO Child Labor:** http://www.ilo.org/global/Themes/Child_Labour/lang-en/index.htm

The UN Children's Fund also offers information on the work of UN agencies in combating child labor.

- o **UNICEF Child Labor:** http://www.unicef.org/protection/index_childlabour.html

Human Rights Watch is one of many NGOs that works to raise awareness about and fight child labor. Their site provides many useful news reports on the topic.

- o **Human Rights Watch:** <http://www.hrw.org/en/category/topic/children%E2%80%99s-rights/labor>

The World Factbook by the United States Central Intelligence Agency will provide you will basic information about your country and hundreds of other countries around the world.

- o **CIA World Factbook:** <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/>



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<http://www.ilo.org/declaration/lang--en/index.htm>.

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