

CHILD LABOUR

"...to enable families living in poverty to survive, a quarter of a billion children aged 14 and under, both in and out of school, now work, often in hazardous or unhealthy conditions. ...Having approved the International Labour Organisation convention on the worst forms of child labour, Member States must now implement it fully."

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Vital statistics

- Some 250 million children between the ages of 5 and 14 work either full time or part time.
- Almost half, some 120 million, work full-time, every day, all year round.
- Some 61 per cent of them live in Asia, 32 per cent in Africa and 7 per cent in Latin America.
- 70 per cent of them work in agriculture.
- 70 per cent work in a dangerous environment.
- Of the 250 million children concerned, some 50 million to 60 million are between five and 11 years and work, by definition, in hazardous circumstances, considering their age and vulnerability.
- Child labour is also common in developed countries. For example, in the United States, more than 230,000 children work in agriculture and 13,000 in sweatshops.

The story of Iqbal Masih

Iqbal was only four when he was sold into slavery. He was a child of bondage, sold by his family to pay for a debt. Though very small and very weak, he was forced to work at a carpet factory for 12 hours a day. He was constantly beaten, verbally abused and chained to his loom for six years. Severe malnutrition and years of cramped immobility in front of a loom stunted his growth.

All this changed in 1992, when Iqbal and some of his friends from the carpet factory stole away to attend a freedom day celebration organized by a group working to help end bonded labour. With their help, Iqbal, too, became free and soon became a well-known critic of child labour. His campaign scared many, especially those who used children as bonded labour. In December 1994, Iqbal visited the United States to receive a human rights award. Soon after his return, Iqbal was killed by a gunman hired by factory owners.

Iqbal was just one of over 250 million child labourers worldwide, but his story has inspired many to act for change.

What is child labour?

Among adults the term “child labour” conjures up a particular image: children chained to looms in dark mills and sweatshops, as if in a long nightmarish line running from Lancashire in the 1830s right through to the South Asia of today.

In reality, children do a variety of work in widely divergent conditions. This work takes place along a continuum, from work that is beneficial, promoting or enhancing a child’s development without interfering with schooling, recreation and rest to work that is simply destructive or exploitative. There are vast areas of activity between these two poles.

It is at the most destructive end, where children are used as prostitutes or virtual slaves to repay debts incurred by their parents or grandparents or as workers in particularly hazardous conditions, that efforts are focused to stop such abuse.

Who is a child labourer?

The term “child labour” generally refers to any economic activity performed by a person under the age of 15, defined by the International Labour Organization (ILO) of the United Nations. On the beneficial side of the continuum, there is “light work” after school or legitimate apprenticeship opportunities, such as helping out in the family business or on the family farm. At the destructive end is employment that is

- Preventing effective school attendance;
- Hazardous to the physical and mental health of the child.

Are age limits for work the same in all countries?

Almost everywhere, age limits formally regulate children’s activities — when they can leave school, marry, vote, be treated as adults by the criminal-justice system, and join the armed forces — and when they can work.

But age limits differ from activity to activity and from country to country. The legal minimum age for all work in Egypt, for example, is 12; in the Philippines, 14, in Hong Kong, 15. Peru adopts a variety of

standards: the minimum age is 14 in agriculture; 15 in industry; 16 in deep-sea fishing; and 18 for work in ports and seafaring.

Many countries make a distinction between light and hazardous work, with the minimum age for the former generally being 12, for the latter usually varying between 16 and 18. ILO conventions adopt this approach, allowing light work at age 12 or 13, but hazardous work not before 18. The ILO establishes a general minimum age of 15 years, provided 15 is not less than the age of completion of compulsory schooling. This is the most widely used yardstick when establishing how many children are currently working around the world.

Box: Marie

Marie is a seven-year-old from Haiti. She is a *restavek* — Creole for *rester avec* — the local term for a type of child domestic found all over the world, one who has been handed over by a poor rural family to live with and provide domestic “help” for a usually urban, wealthier family.

She gets up at five in the morning and begins her day by fetching water from a nearby well, balancing the heavy jug on her head as she returns. She prepares breakfast and serves it to the members of the household.

Then she walks the family’s five-year-old son to school; later, at noon, she brings him home and helps him change clothes.

Next, she helps prepare and serve the family’s lunch before returning the boy to school.

In between meal times she must buy food in the market and run errands, tend the charcoal fire, sweep the yard, wash clothes and dishes, clean the kitchen and -- at least once a day -- wash her female boss's feet. She is given leftovers or cornmeal to eat, has ragged clothes and no shoes and sleeps outdoors or on the floor.

She is not allowed to bathe in the water she brings to the household. She is regularly beaten with a leather strap if she is slow to respond to a request or is considered disrespectful. Needless to say, she is not allowed to attend school.

Source: UNICEF.

What is hazardous work?

Most child labour, 71 per cent, is found in agriculture and fishing. The main tasks in agriculture include working with machinery and agrochemicals, and picking and loading crops. Hazards may include unsafe machinery, hazardous substances (insecticides, herbicides), heavy lifting and extreme temperatures. In deep-sea fishing, children might be diving to depths of up to 60 metres to attach nets to coral reefs, risking exposure to high atmospheric pressure and attacks by carnivorous and poisonous fish.

In manufacturing, where 8.3 per cent of child labour is found, items such as glass bangles, matches, fireworks or bricks might be made. Hazards occur in the form of noxious fumes and radiant heat from the molten glass; stepping on or handling hot broken glass; exposure to hazardous chemical mixtures; stuffing cracker powder into fireworks, risking fire and explosion; exposure to silicate, lead and carbon monoxide; carrying excessive weights; and burns from ovens through the processing of clay in the making of bricks.

A legal framework against child labour

Two UN agencies have directed their attention to the prevention of child labour worldwide: the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the International Labour Organization (ILO). They have helped

define the problems and develop international legal frameworks to correct them. As a result of their work, we now have several international treaties (or conventions), banning child labour and identifying concrete measures for Governments to take. Once a country ratifies a convention, UN bodies monitor compliance and hold countries accountable for violations.

1919: The first ILO child labour convention, the Minimum Age (Industry) Convention (No. 5), adopted within months of the creation of the International Labour Organization, prohibited the work of children under the age of 14 in industrial establishments.

1930: The ILO Forced Labour Convention (No. 29) protected children from forced or compulsory labour, such as victims of trafficking, children in bondage, like Iqbal, and those exploited by prostitution and pornography.

1966: The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, re-emphasizing issues of slavery and forced or compulsory labour, was adopted by the General Assembly, along with the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights calling for the protection of young people from economic exploitation and work hazardous to their development.

1973: The key instrument of the ILO was adopted: Convention No. 138 on the minimum age for admission to employment (15 or the age reached on completion of compulsory schooling).

1989: The UN adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child, specifying the right of the child to be protected from economic exploitation and hazardous work, and the refraining of States from recruiting any person under 15 into the armed forces.

1999: ILO unanimously adopted the Convention concerning the Prohibition and Immediate Action for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention (No. 182). It called for States to prevent the most damaging child exploitation practices or the worst forms that currently exist (*see box*).

Are making laws enough to prevent child labour?

Obviously not. Though the United Nations has already created a large number of international conventions, setting legal standards to prohibit the exploitation of child labour, the problem remains widespread. After all, laws mean very little if they are not enforced. Besides, specific measures attacking child labour must be taken at the national level.

According to the ILO, national strategies to address child labour issues should, at minimum, encompass the following five elements:

1. **National plan of action:** Single action or isolated measures against child labour will not have a lasting impact. Actions must be part of an overall national plan.
2. **Research:** To develop effective national (and international) policies and programmes, extensive research must be undertaken to determine the state of child labour.
3. **Awareness:** Child labour is often viewed as an unavoidable consequence of poverty. Without greater awareness about the extent and exploitative nature of child labour, the conditions for change will not occur.
4. **Broad social alliance:** Government action against child labour often ends with making laws. Initiatives against child labour traditionally come from non-governmental organizations that have limited resources. Both need to work together. Other segments of civil society — the media, educators, artists and parliamentarians — should also be enlisted in the fight.
5. **Institutional capacity:** To formulate and execute a national policy, an institutional mechanism (such as a ministry or a department) within the Government must be created *to monitor enforcement*.

Signs of progress

- **Legal framework:** With over 20 international treaties against child labour in place, the world now has a legal framework. What is needed is its implementation at the national level.
- **International action:** ILO created the International Programme for the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC) in 1992. It works towards eliminating child labour by helping developing countries strengthen their capacity to deal with the problem and create their own national action plans. So far it has helped implement more than 1,100 programmes in some 20 countries
- **Joining hands:** The United Nations wants to bring Governments, factory owners and international donors together to work against child labour. Such initiatives as one between ILO, UNICEF and the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association were undertaken to remove under age workers from 2,000 garment factories, place them in school and provide family income supplements. UNICEF also pioneered a policy of not buying any products made by child labour in their operations. Some Governments have followed this example.
- **International solidarity:** Children, youth, concerned citizens and government leaders in Asia, Africa, Europe, and North and South America in 1998 took part in a march against child labour. The march travelled through 56 countries, gathered supporters and raised greater awareness, putting new pressure on Governments to ratify conventions on child rights. (See <http://www.globalmarch.org>)
- **Student advocacy:** More and more students are getting involved, raising funds to build schools and treatment centers for child workers. For example, Free the Children, a Canadian-based student organization advocating the elimination of child labour, formed by then-13-year-old activist, Craig Kielberger, has raised funds to build schools in South Asia (<http://www.freethechildren.org>). The Kids Campaign to Build a School for Iqbal, a Massachusetts-based grass-roots student campaign initiated by a school in the United States, has drawn worldwide support to build a school for Pakistani children of bonded labour in honour of Iqbal Masih (www.digitalrag.com/iqbal/index.html).
- **Corporate responsibility:** Growing concern has been shown by corporations to address this issue and develop corporate codes of conduct to reduce their numbers of under-age employees and/or provide work to other members of the family or schooling to supplement work. For example, all major soccer ball manufacturers have developed a voluntary programme to eliminate use of children under 14 in factories in Sialkot, Pakistan, where 75 per cent of the world's hand-stitched soccer balls are produced. Supported by ILO, UNICEF and Pakistani manufacturers, a programme was launched to provide schooling for these child workers and instead give their jobs to other family members. In addition, many clothing manufacturers now hire outside companies to inspect working conditions in their factories. While some companies fund their investigators directly, others have agreed to independent monitors from human rights offices not employed by the corporations.
- **Advocacy by trade unions:** In Brazil, trade unions in cooperation with IPEC have managed to secure child labour clauses in contracts with employers in over 88 municipalities in over eight federal states. In addition, employers have signed pledges to eliminate child labour from production chains of the charcoal, citrus and footwear sectors. Trade unions help by monitoring working conditions, denouncing abuses and reaching large numbers of adult members through education programmes, collective bargaining and campaigning for policy change at all levels.
- **Anti-sweatshop movement:** Campaign by labour rights groups has helped improve working

conditions in sweat shops. In several instances, multinational companies now put pressure on their contractors to ban or reduce child labour.

Box

Ratify ILO Convention No. 182 now!

ILO Convention No. 182 is considered by many as perhaps the most significant legal instrument to tackle child labour. It defines the worst forms of child labour and asks all Governments to ban them. These are:

- All forms of slavery;
- Child prostitution;
- The use of children for illicit activities, especially drug trafficking;
- Work exposing children to grave health and safety hazards.

Ratification of the Convention should be the first and immediate task for all Governments. It will mean acceptance of the Convention by national parliaments. Secretary-General Kofi Annan, in his Millennium Report has urged all Member States to ratify and implement the Convention without delay.

Once Governments have ratified the Convention, they must apply it in law and in practice. Among other things, Governments should:

1. Introduce action programmes to remove and prevent the worst forms of child labour;
2. Provide direct assistance for the rehabilitation of children and their social integration;
3. Ensure access to free education;
4. Identify children at special risk;
5. Take account of girls and their special situation.

Governments must also report regularly to the ILO regarding the application of the Convention and be accountable for all allegations of violations.

As of August 2000, 30 countries have ratified the Convention.

Box: Bina Akhtar's dream

Bina Akhtar was only 10 years old when she began working at a garment factory in Dhaka, Bangladesh's capital. She earned about \$14 a month clipping loose threads from shirts and pants bound for stores in the United States. Five years later, Bina was no longer working in the factory. Instead, she was going to school, studying mathematics, English and history.

This was possible because of a programme put in place by the United Nations. ILO and UNICEF, working closely with the Government of Bangladesh, persuaded factory owners to ban children younger than 14 from their shops. They also consented to surprise inspections. Since 1994, ILO monitors managed to move an estimated 50,000 children from the garment factories, all of them under the legal work age of 14.

According to ILO's Rijk van Haalem, who helped design the Bangladesh programme, when inspections began in 1996, children were found in 33 per cent of all factories searched. By the end of 1999, that figure had fallen to under 10 per cent.

Bina was one of those rescued by UN inspectors. She was immediately enrolled in a school. Until then, she had never set foot inside a classroom.

“Education is not a burden to me,” says Bina. She now dreams of becoming a nurse. .

Adapted from the Asian Wall Street Journal (21 March 2000)

What are the areas needing attention?

UNICEF recommends the following:

- Immediately end hazardous and exploitative child labour — including bonded labour, commercial sexual exploitation and work that hampers the child's development.
- Provide free and compulsory education, ensuring that children attend primary education full time until completion.
- Expand legal protection, ensure consistency and implementation in mutually supportive ways.
- Register all children at birth, in order to protect the child's right to have evidence of the child's age.
- Extend data collection and monitoring — gather and analyse globally comparable child labour data.
- Develop codes of conduct and procurement policies — Corporations should adopt codes of conduct guaranteeing that neither they nor their subcontractors will employ children in conditions that violate their rights and then abide by those codes.

Suggested activities for students

- Are there local or national examples that you can identify? Find out what others are doing. (Check Internet sources if those are available to you.) Of the UNICEF recommendations, which do you feel would be priority areas for your country? Make posters. Tell others what you learn.
- Find out if your Government has ratified the conventions concerning child labour (A status of countries and their actions concerning Convention No. 182 is available at <http://www.globalmarch.org/convention-campaign/index.html>). Write your Government leaders. Urge them to ratify child labour Convention No. 182 -- if they have not already done so. Letters can do a lot.
- If your Government has ratified the Convention, write and ask what is being done to implement it. Has your country developed a plan of action? If so, what does it say? What is being done to address local or national issues? Who is helping? How can they use support? Organize a forum to learn more about the issues in your school and invite those who are working on the issues to speak and make recommendations for actions you can take.
- Support federal legislation that improves the conditions of child labourers in your country.
- Find out what others are doing, for example, the Free the Children campaign in Canada or the School for Iqbal campaign in the United States. Support these efforts or start your own.
- Shop smart. As a consumer ask where and how items you are purchasing were made. Use your purchases to help improve conditions for children, not aid in their exploitation.
- Start a letter-writing campaign in your school or gather signatures on a petition to send to local or national authorities to let them know of your interest and concern.

Selected resources:

On the World Wide Web:

- www.unicef.org (United Nations Children's Fund)
- www.un.org/Cyberschoolbus (United Nations)
- www.savethechildren.org

- www.unhchr.ch (Committee on the Rights of the Child)
- www.ilo.org (International Labour Organization)
- www.humanrightswatch.org
- www.undp.org (United Nations Development Programme)

Publications:

A new tool to combat the worst forms of child labour, ILO, 1999

The state of the world's children 1997, UNICEF, 1997

Stand Up for Your Rights: A book about human rights written, illustrated and edited by young people of the world, Peace Child International, 1998

Human Development Report 2000, UNDP, 2000

Graphs/Charts

The working child: 1 out of every 4 in the developing world

(from UNICEF's the State of the world's children, 1997, page 25)

Long days, long weeks

(UNICEF 1997, page 25)