

Child Labor

Exploitative child labor is any work done by children that is hazardous, prevents them from getting an education, or is harmful to their health or to their physical, mental, or social development.

We can fight child slavery together

According to International Labor Organization Convention 182, “the worst forms of child labor” include:

- All forms of slavery or practices similar to slavery, such as the sale and trafficking of children, debt bondage and serfdom, and forced or compulsory labor, including forced or compulsory recruitment of children for use in armed conflict;
- The use, procuring, or offering of a child for prostitution, for the production of pornography, or for pornographic performances;
- The use, procuring, or offering of a child for illicit activities, in particular for the production and trafficking of drugs as defined in the relevant international treaties;
- Work which, by its nature or the circumstances in which it is carried out, is likely to harm the health, safety, or morals of children.

Worldwide, there are an estimated 218 million child laborers, ages 5 to 17. Some 126 million of these children work in hazardous conditions (1) such as:

- Working in mines;
- Working with chemicals and pesticides in agriculture;
- Working with dangerous machinery. (2)

At least 2 million children are trafficked annually for child labor and sexual exploitation. (3)

Most child laborers are in the informal economic sector, where they are not protected by laws and regulations. Where does it occur?

Child labor can be found in almost every country. It is estimated that there are at least:

- 122.3 million child workers (ages 5 to 14) in the Asia Pacific region;
- 49.3 million child workers (ages 5 to 14) in sub-Saharan Africa;
- 5.7 million child workers (ages 5 to 14) in Latin America and the Caribbean. (3)

Who is most vulnerable?

The poorest children are extremely vulnerable. Children are less aware of their rights, and they accept repetitive and hazardous work willingly because they are more obedient and may not have other options.

Girls are also extremely vulnerable. In many cultures, girls are expected to provide financial support for their parents. Furthermore, parents are much more likely to educate boys than girls, leading to an increase in vulnerability.

What is the impact?

Child laborers face traumatic physical and mental abuse, dependence on drugs and other addictive substances, and a host of chronic diseases. Children engaged in the worst forms of child labor are also denied schooling, which could help them earn a fair wage and lead them to a better way of life.

What are the causes?

Child labor is a result of unjust systems and structures within a society. Some of the causes include:

- Poverty and gross inequality
- Unjust income distribution or land distribution
- Political instability
- Discrimination
- Migration
- Crime and failure to enforce the law
- Traditional cultural practices
- Employer's desire for cheap and flexible labor
- Gender inequity
- Adult unemployment
- Inadequate social protection
- Poor and inadequate education
- Desire for cheap consumer goods
- National disasters
- Economic recession
- HIV and AIDS
- Armed conflict

Poverty — both in the home and at a national level — is the major cause of child labor. The International Labor Organization points to a strong correlation between income levels and child labor across countries, with the poorest countries registering the highest rates of child labor.

However, this harmful practice is not only a consequence of poverty. It is also a cause. If children are prevented from going to school due to child labor, they will remain illiterate. This means that as adults they will not find well-paid jobs, and their own children may be forced to work. Child labor can also drive down the wages and working conditions of adult workers, making it more likely that children will need to work to supplement their family's income.

Access to education affects the incidence of child labor. In some areas, there is a shortage of adequate schools or teachers available to run classes, denying children an education and therefore encouraging them to seek work. Even where schooling is available, it may be costly.

How do consumers make a difference?

Often times (but not always) products are cheap because they are produced with low-cost labor. But some consumers are taking steps to create a fairer world. According to the Ethical Shopping Price Survey, 92 percent of consumers say they would pay a higher price for a product if it was marked with an “ethically certified” label. In response to this public sentiment, some companies offer products that are certified as “ethically responsible.” Currently, more than 15,000 products from 60 countries are labeled as “Fair Trade Certified.”

What is World Vision doing?

World Vision's experience working in countries around the world amongst marginalized people has revealed that children will continue to work unless there are sufficient economic alternatives for families.

We focus on eliminating the worst forms of child labor through a sustainable, comprehensive approach, which incorporates prevention, removal, and rehabilitation. Our programs strive to prevent the most extreme and dangerous forms of child labor and exploitation by:

- Working with parents to improve the family's income, so they don't have to send children out to work;
- Supporting the education system to keep children in school by providing school supplies, teacher training, and facility improvements;
- Providing scholarships for poorer children, enabling them to stay in school;
- Raising awareness in communities regarding the importance of education;

- Advocating for policies that strike at the causes of child labor.

Our programs strive to remove and rehabilitate children forced into child labor by:

- Persuading formal sector employers to improve conditions and shorten hours;
- Providing educational and skills-training opportunities;
- Coordinating with other agencies for family tracing and reunification.

In the United States, World Vision also advocates for public policies aimed at combating child labor. For instance:

- In partnership with other organizations, World Vision advocated for policies to end the trade of “conflict” or “blood” diamonds. The creation of the Kimberly Process ensures that diamonds sold in the United States do not come from conflict zones where diamond sales fund conflicts in which children are exploited.
- World Vision works with the U.S. Congress and the cocoa industry to ensure the continued implementation of the “Harkin-Engel Protocol” — the commitment by the global cocoa industry to combat the worst forms of child labor in the harvesting and processing of cocoa and ensure that children found working in cocoa plantations are given access to an education.
- World Vision works with the U.S. State Department to make sure that appropriate pressure is put on countries that do not make sustained efforts to eliminate the worst forms of child labor.

World Vision does not support punitive action, boycotts of products, or sanctions as consumer response to child labor. After almost 60 years of working with the most marginalized peoples, World Vision knows that such actions often end up hurting the most vulnerable. Rather, World Vision takes a multi-disciplinary approach.

Sources

1. Facts on Child Labour [PDF]. International Labour Organization. (2006).
2. State of the World's Children 2006 [PDF]. UNICEF. (2006).
3. End of Child Labor Within Reach [PDF]. International Labour Organization. (2006).