

Forum: United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund

Issue: Eradicating child labor through comprehensive legislative frameworks and international collaboration

Student Officer: Amber (Sum Yin) Lam

Position: Deputy President

Introduction

In the accelerating age of the 21st century, eradicating child labor has become a critical yet still widely ignored issue. From an appalling 245.5 million children suffering from child labor in 2000 to the current 160 million since the year 2020, child labor clearly has seen improvements over the past two decades. Yet, the recent globally wide-spread pandemic COVID-19 has been visibly stalling further progress towards the eradication of child labor, even predicted to have pushed millions more children into child labor. Up until 2024, agriculture is responsible for little less than three-quarters of all the child labor occurring worldwide, with the most child labor occurring around Sub-Saharan Africa and Central/Southern Asia, 86.6 million and 20.3 million respectively as of 2020. Still, child labor is not a recent occurrence. Since before the Industrial Revolution, child workers were based mostly in family factories and labored as minimum wage workers, and the amount of child laborers was culminated in the 18th century.



Figure: Children in Bangladesh in a highly child-labor prone environment, due to various economic reasons as well as climate change, which has caused destruction throughout Bangladesh.

Key Terminology

Child Labor

Referring to any work children that are not old enough to do have been doing, in a hazardous environment that could impact their health, safety, or any form of development. Some forms of child labor can resemble actions of slavery, like child sale or trafficking. Most common hazardous child labor environments include working in confined spaces or extreme heights or depths underground, with dangerous tools, equipment, substances, procedures, temperature or sound conditions.

Child Trafficking

Refers to children (under the age of 18) being “recruited, transported, transferred, harbored or received for the purpose of exploitation,” according to UNICEF USA. This includes any similar actions to selling, trade, or forced working of children under 18.

Forced Labor

Referring to any work under circumstances where the person working in question did not offer their voluntary help or was forced to work under a threat or a penalty. The lack of freedom to remove oneself from a job also amounts to forced labor. In the situation that the employer or provider gives false information or promises regarding the job, in which the worker would not have agreed to take under the true circumstances of the job.

Convention on the Rights of the Child

The Convention on the Rights of the Child was signed by Madeleine Albright, then the US Ambassador to the United Nations, on February 16, 1995. The General Assembly adopted the Convention on the 20th of November 1989, and it became effective on the 2nd of September 1990. The Convention is a series of articles defining the rights of children, consisting of 3 parts and 54 articles.

United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 8.7 (SDG 8.7)

The official quoted content of the UN SDG Target 8.7 is as follows: “Take immediate and effective measures to eradicate forced labor, end modern slavery and human trafficking and secure the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labor, including recruitment and use of child soldiers, and by 2025 end child labor in all its forms.”

Background

History

Child labor has a history almost as long as children themselves. The usage of children in workforces, as servants, has been in practice throughout history. However, child labor saw its ultimate peak during the Industrial Revolution in the United States. Due to extreme poverty and harsh work conditions, most of the children were unable to attend school or receive proper education, sending the economy into a seemingly hopeless vicious spiral. Children were forced to work in hazardous conditions with environments highly detrimental to their development, and treated harshly with the lack of any safety provisions. Especially in the 18th and 19th centuries with the rise of factory work, such factory owners strongly leaned towards hiring children – they were cheaper to pay than adults, and much more manageable. Just to receive a dollar, children labored up to 18 hours a day in dangerous environments. However, later in the mid-20th century, the American Congress added and amended child labor laws to mitigate more forms of child labor. Laws requiring certain years of education for underage students to hold job positions, and limiting the age and working hours of children in specific working environments to reduce child labor.

Child Labor in Different Countries/Regions and Statistics

As of 2020, Sub-Saharan Africa has seen the most child laborers at nearly 87 million, 23.9% out of global child labor. Devastatingly, the number of child laborers in Sub-Saharan Africa has only seen a steady increase since the 21.4% of the year 2012. Central and Southern Asia has ranks second, with 26.3 million children, 5.5% out of the global total. With the least child labor in 2020, Europe and Northern America saw 2.8 million child laborers, 2.3% out of the global total.

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Contrary to Sub-Saharan Africa, the percentage of child laborers in Asia and the Pacific as well as Latin America and the Caribbean has seen a slow decrease.

CHILD LABOUR AND HAZARDOUS WORK

		Children aged 5 to 17 years in child labour				Children aged 5 to 17 years in hazardous work			
		2016		2020		2016		2020	
		%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.
World total		9.6	151,600	9.6	160,000	4.6	72,500	4.7	79,000
Sex	Girls	8.4	64,100	7.8	62,900	3.6	27,800	3.6	28,800
	Boys	10.7	87,500	11.2	97,000	5.5	44,800	5.8	50,200
Age	5-11 years	8.3	72,600	9.7	89,300	2.2	19,000	2.8	25,900
	12-14 years	11.7	41,900	9.3	35,600	4.6	16,400	4.8	18,100
	15-17 years	10.5	37,100	9.5	35,000	10.5	37,100	9.5	35,000
ILO regions	Africa	19.6	72,100	21.6	92,200	8.6	31,500	9.7	41,400
	Sub-Saharan Africa	22.4	70,000	23.9	86,600	9.8	30,500	10.7	38,600
	Arab States	2.9	1,200	5.8	2,400	1.5	600	4.5	1,900
	Asia and the Pacific	7.4	62,100	5.6	48,700	3.4	28,500	2.6	22,200
	Americas	5.3	10,700	4.3	8,300	3.2	6,600	2.9	5,700
	Latin America and the Caribbean	7.3	10,500	6.0	8,200	4.4	6,300	4.0	5,500
	Europe and Central Asia	4.1	5,500	5.7	8,300	4.0	5,300	5.5	7,900
National income grouping	Low income	19.4	65,200	26.2	65,000	8.8	29,700	11.6	28,700
	Lower-middle income	8.5	58,200	9.0	69,700	4.9	33,500	4.3	33,600
	Upper-middle income	6.6	26,200	4.9	23,700	2.0	7,800	3.2	15,300
	High income	1.2	2,000	0.9	1,600	1.0	1,600	0.8	1,500

Notes: Numbers are expressed in thousands and have been rounded. Because of the rounding, disaggregated numbers do not always add up to total values.

Figure: ILO Executive Summary, Global Estimates 2020

Major Parties Involved

United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF)

The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund is a committee of the United Nations based on protecting the rights of children globally. UNICEF was founded from the UN General Assembly on December 11th, 1946 in hopes to better help families and children in countries heavily affected by World War 2. UNICEF is in more than 190 countries and territories to help disadvantaged children survive, and are the world's largest provider of vaccines. UNICEF has reached areas including health and nutrition, shelter, education and protection of children and adolescents. In 2023, UNICEF along with their partners helped over 210 million children with detection and treatment of child wasting, and in the same year provided millions of malaria vaccine doses to countries in Africa. Working with help from the International Labor Organization, UNICEF has collected various genres of information to strengthen child labor laws. UNICEF has also been continuously using collaboration and partnerships with

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governments to explicitly create non-hazardous, high-quality education systems in replacement of child labor in relevant countries around the world.

International Labor Organization (ILO)

The International Labor Organization (ILO) was founded in 1919 as part of the Treaty of Versailles, which ended World War 1. The ILO has been one of the United Nation's oldest specialized agencies and the United Nations Development Group, and remains one of the major contributor to laws of labor. Since its founding, the ILO's goal has been to set standards for labor internationally and sustainably eradicate labor issues globally. 187 member states are part of the ILO, 186 from the UN and the Cook Islands. The ILO has 189 separate conventions and treaties regarding different goals, including topics of the rights of children and child labor laws. All ILO conventions when coming effective are considered to be international labor standards, and its member nations are obligated to act on it.

National Child Labor Committee (NCLC)

The National Child Labor Committee was founded on April 25, 1904 with the mission to “[promote] the rights, awareness, dignity, wellbeing and education of children and youth as they relate to work and working,” according to the Library of Congress. Around the early 20th century, child labor was at a peak before calls for legislative action against such labor were made. Two organizations, the Consumers' Leagues and Working Women's Societies created the National Child Labor Committee. The NCLC started with the mission of ending child labor in sweatshops and establishing free education for children.

Timeline of Events

Date	Description/Note
1760-1840	The Industrial Revolution struck, causing child labor rates to dramatically escalate.

<p>1938</p>	<p>The working hours as well as types of jobs were put under tight restrictions for children under the age of 16 by The United States Fair Labor Standards Act. However, 15 countries around the world still have no minimum age for laboring.</p>	
<p>1973</p>	<p>The Minimum Age Convention required a minimum age to be set for labor as an act to minimize the amount of child labor. The age that the Convention set was 15; however, under strict working time circumstances the age of 14 years would be allowed.</p>	
<p>September 2, 1990</p>	<p>The General Assembly’s Convention on the Rights of the Child came effective.</p> <p><i>Link to the Convention</i></p> <p><<a 118="" 294="" 481="" 621"="" href="https://www.unicef.org/child-rights-convention/convention-text#:~:text=For%20the%20purposes%20of%20the,child%2C%20majority%20is%20attained%20earlier.></p> </td> </tr> <tr> <td data-bbox="> <p>1992</p> </p>	<p>The International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labor (IPEC) was founded by the International Labor Organization (ILO). IPEC is currently operating in 88 countries worldwide, and they have partnered with international and governmental agencies, Non-Profit Organizations (NGOs), universities, and children since their founding.</p>
<p>1999</p>	<p>The Worst Forms of Child Labor Convention was published to eradicate and prohibit forms of child labor that include slavery, trafficking, usage of children in armed conflicts, prostitution, pornography, drug trafficking, and other illegal works.</p> <p><i>Link to the Convention</i></p> <p><<a 118="" 294="" 816="" 866"="" href="https://normlex.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C182></p> </td> </tr> <tr> <td data-bbox="> <p>2016</p> </p>	<p>152 million children aged 5-17 were in child labor, with 73 million in hazardous work environments or jobs. Of the 152 million, 58% (88</p>

	million) were boys and 42% (64 million) were girls. Almost half (48%) were aged 5-11.
2019	The Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic struck globally, causing economies to fail drastically and family incomes to lower. This piqued the slowly declining use of child labor.
2021	The United Nations (UN) declared 2021 as the Year for the Elimination of Child Labor, and during the year the impact COVID-19 posed on child labor, as well as elevated progress towards Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) Target 8.7 would be made.
2025	The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 8.7, ending all forms of child labor, should be reached.

Previous Attempts/Solutions

The National Child Labor Committee (NCLC)

The NCLC was founded as an early attempt to mitigate child labor around the United States in 1904, preceded by a few organizations focused on adult labor. In the 20th century, the NCLC was one of the largest organizations seized on the matter of child labor. Since its founding over a century ago, the NCLC has successfully achieved a variety of their goals in eradicating child labor. The NCLC had developed a free compulsory education framework for all children in the early 20th century, which set federal child labor standards in the passage of the Fair Labor Standards Act. In 1912, the NCLC established the United States Children’s Bureau, investigating and collecting data on the children in America. However, most of the frameworks and legislations issued by the NCLC are not currently ongoing anymore.

<Resolution> adopted by the General Assembly on 19 December 2016

The Rights of the Child was a resolution based on reaffirming past contentions on children’s rights. It is consisted of four major parts, each focusing on different aspects of child labor and different solutions on child labor up to the year 2016.

International Labor Organization (ILO)'s past contentions

ILO's past contentions, especially the Worst Forms of Child Labor contention have explicitly caused countries to outlaw hazardous forms of child labor and remove the relationships of mine/factory working and the sex trade with children. The previously mentioned Rights of the Child resolution was also largely based on numerous conventions and laws regarding child labor throughout participating member nations. Some of the most recent ratifications, in June and August of 2024, were by Guatemala, Chile, Romania, and other member nations of the ILO.

Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 (FLSA)

In 1938, the United States constructed a series of labor laws, covering different areas such as fining and punishments, minimum wage, and employment. In 1938, the FLSA was signed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Specifically for child labor, there is a law regarding violation of child labor rules that could invoke a fining of up to USD\$10,000, and under certain circumstances allows imprisonment for a maximum of 6 months.

Potential Solutions

- Illegalizing specific products made from/produced using the assistance of child labor, cutting off imports or exports of such products. This could cut off the economic income of the child-laboring sites and lessen the usage of child labor.
- Providing free compulsory education not only for children under the age of 18 (in certain regions/countries) but also for the families of children in child-labor-prone areas by ILO, UN or other trusted partners. This can reduce the risk of families or schools unknowingly putting children under child labor.
- Creating donation systems in More Economically Developed Countries (MEDCs) as well as education systems to raise awareness in more developed communities where child labor is less common. This can provoke more action from the so-called "younger generation" to initiate funds and action towards the eradication of child labor. According to the ILO, economic deprivation is one of the leading causes of

child labor, which causes children to seek their own methods of attaining economic income in order to support their own survival.

- Constructing region/country specific penalization laws such as fining or imprisonment. While the United States have such laws combatting the disregard of its child labor laws, there are many less developed countries without penalties for child labor.

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Appendix

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2. https://normlex.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C182

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3. <https://socialwelfare.library.vcu.edu/programs/child-welfarechild-labor/national-child-labor-committee/>

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4. <https://normlex.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:11001:0::NO::>

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This website contains the member nations of ILO. On the left hand side of this website link you will find various other links regarding ILO's participation with child labor, including recent ratifications on child labor.