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Talk About It

What do you already know about the issue of child labour?

What Is Child Labour?

Magazine Article by Chivy Sok

About 246 million children between the ages of 5 and 17 are engaged in child labour, according to the International Labor Organization's (ILO) global estimate from the year 2000. An estimated 73 million of these children are below the age of 10.

What is meant by *child labour*? What kind of work constitutes child labour? And where are these child labourers found? How is child labour connected to us? These are very simple questions. The answers, unfortunately, are not so simple.

It has taken many years to come to some kind of agreement on the definition of child labour. While experts continue to disagree on some aspects of the definition, two international human rights conventions have helped to guide international efforts to eliminate child labour.

The first comes from the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. According to Article 32 of this convention, "**State Parties** recognize the right of the child 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."



If you have ever made a clay pot, you know it's messy work. You might do it for fun—this boy does it to survive.

Vocabulary

economic exploitation: being taken advantage of in the production, distribution, or transfer of wealth,

for example, being used as slave labour or forced to work in poor conditions

state parties: those countries that have formally approved and consented to a contract or agreement

A decade later, the ILO adopted a new convention that further defines the worst forms of child labour, the kind of work that is completely unacceptable and needs to be eliminated as soon as possible. The new ILO convention, commonly referred to as the Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, defines the worst forms this way:

1. 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 labour, including forced or compulsory recruitment of children for use in armed conflict
2. the use, **procuring**, or offering of a child for prostitution, for the production of pornography, or for pornographic performances
3. 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; and
4. 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. This last category is commonly referred to as *hazardous work*.

In 2000, the ILO conducted a study of the scope and magnitude of child labour. The Asia-Pacific region has the highest incidence of child labour. About 127.3 million working children between the ages of 5 and 14 are found in Asia, 73 million in sub-Saharan Africa, and 17.4 million in Latin America and the Caribbean. And about 5 million are found in developed countries and another 5 million in **transition economies**. This is only an estimate; it is nearly impossible to accurately measure the problem. But we know that this problem is widespread.

This 1998 Global March Against Child Labour was in Pakistan, where millions of children work to help their families survive.



Vocabulary

debt bondage: a form of labour, usually against one's will, to pay back something owed; often children are forced to work as slaves to pay off a family debt incurred generations previously

procuring: obtaining

serfdom: a form of slavery or forced labour in return for protection; a serf (a labourer) doesn't earn anything but the right to work the land and some of the food grown on the land

transition economies: countries in which the production, distribution, and transfer of wealth was controlled by the government, but now there is a free market and the prices of goods and services are determined by buyers and sellers

He's only 14, but he already looks like he's been labouring a long time. His work is crushing rocks to build a road, and he earns less than \$1 for a 12-hour workday.



Who picked the cotton that made your jeans? Children in Peru spend hours every day picking cotton, a backbreaking and thorny job.



Not only are children working rather than going to school, but it is not uncommon in Africa to find children doing dangerous work, such as welding.



When people hear the phrase *child labour*, they often think of problems in faraway places—problems in poor, developing countries. While it is true that the highest incidence of child labour takes place in these poor countries, North America also has this problem. In fact, North American history is filled with abusive forms of child labour, such as children working in mines, sawmills, and sweatshop factories. Today, some child labour continues to exist. We can still find children working on farms under some of the most hazardous conditions.

We are also connected to global child labour, directly and indirectly. About 70 percent of child labour takes place in agriculture. This includes the harvesting of bananas in Central America and cocoa beans for chocolate in West Africa and the picking of coffee beans and tea leaves in Latin America and Africa. Some of these agricultural products end up on our supermarket shelves. For better or for worse, we are connected to some of the most unacceptable forms of child labour.

Besides agriculture, what other forms of child labour exist? The list is long, and we can only cite a few categories to give an idea of the scope of the problem. Some children are

trafficked for forced labour or put into some of the most degrading kinds of work. Some are used to promote illicit activities such as the drug trade. Some children are kidnapped and forced to become child soldiers. Others are abducted to perform labour similar to slavery, such as becoming camel jockeys or working as servants in other people's homes. Other children, especially those orphaned by HIV/AIDS, are left to fend for themselves on the streets. These are the children who labour from dawn until dusk in dangerous conditions and live without knowing where their next meal will come from.

These 246 million children suffer from some of the cruellest human rights violations on a daily basis.

Chivy Sok is a human rights advocate.

Reflecting

Reading Like a Writer: What evidence did you find in this selection that the author carefully researched the topic?

Metacognition: How did making connections help you understand this article?

Critical Literacy: What did the author do to help you understand the reality of child labour?