

fact sheet

today's fight for tomorrow's freedom

Child labour

What is child labour?

Some types of work make useful, positive contributions to a child's development. Work can help children learn about responsibility and develop particular skills that will benefit them and the rest of society. Often, work is a vital source of income that helps to sustain children and their families.

However, across the world, millions of children do extremely hazardous work in harmful conditions, putting their health, education, personal and social development, and even their lives at risk.

These are some of the circumstances they face:

- **Full time work from five years of age;**
- **Dangerous workplaces;**
- **Excessive working hours;**
- **Verbal, physical and sexual abuse;**
- **Forced to work to work by circumstances or individuals;**
- **Limited or no pay;**
- **Work and life on the streets in harsh conditions;**
- **No access to education – inability to escape from the poverty cycle.**



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(left) child bonded labour, India

The large majority of working children are in agriculture – an estimated 70 per cent.

How big is the problem?

- The International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates there are 246 million working children aged between five and 17.
- 179 million are estimated to work in the worst forms of child labour – one in every eight of the world's five to 17 years olds.
- 111 million children under 15 are in hazardous work and should be "immediately withdrawn from this work".
- 8.4 million children are in slavery, trafficking, debt bondage and other forms of forced labour, recruitment for armed conflict, prostitution, pornography and other illicit activities.
- Child domestic work in the houses of others is thought to be the single largest employer of girls worldwide.

"Child labour has serious consequences that stay with the individual and with society for far longer than the years of childhood. Young workers not only face dangerous working conditions. They face long term physical, intellectual and emotional stress. They face an adulthood of unemployment and illiteracy."

Kofi Annan, United Nations Secretary-General

"We have no time for study and education, no time to play and rest, we are exposed to unsafe working conditions and we are not protected."

Children's Forum Against the Most Intolerable Forms of Child Labour, Bangkok

Why do children work?

Most children work because their families are poor and their labour is necessary for their survival. Discrimination including gender, race or religion also plays its part in why some children work.

Children are often employed because, compared to adults, they are more vulnerable, cheaper to hire and are unlikely to demand higher wages or better working conditions. Some employers falsely argue that children are particularly suited to certain types of work because of their small size and “nimble fingers”.

For many children, school is not an option. Education can be expensive and some parents feel that what their children will learn is irrelevant to the realities of their everyday lives and futures. Often, school is physically inaccessible, or lessons are not taught in the child's mother tongue, or both.

As well as being a result of poverty, child labour also perpetuates poverty. Many working children do not have the opportunity to go to school and often grow up to be unskilled adults trapped in poorly paid jobs. They in turn will look to their own children to supplement the family's income.



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Pelagy and Jocelyne

Eight-year-old Pelagy and six-year-old Jocelyne are sisters. Both worked as domestics for the same family in Libreville, Gabon, West Africa. While the children of the family went to school, the sisters laboured at home, washing, sewing, cooking, and cleaning. They were also forced to work outside the house to make money for their employer. Pelagy was beaten if she didn't sell her daily quota, and sometimes her employer tied her up. But when she saw her younger sister being tied up and beaten it was more than she could stand. They fled to the police and, at the time of this photograph, were waiting to return home.

What do children want?

Children have formed their own organisations and movements to force leaders to hear their concerns and take action to improve their situation. These include Niños y Adolescentes Trabajadores (NATS) in Latin America, the African Movement for Working Children and Youth in Africa and the National Movement for Working Children in India.

The African Movement wants the realisation of 12 rights, in particular:

- Right to vocational training
- Right to remain in our villages (not to have to go to the cities)
- Right to exercise our working activities in safety
- Right to light and limited work
- Right to rest during illness
- Right to be respected
- Right to be listened to
- Right to healthcare
- Right to learn to read and write
- Right to play and have free time
- Right to express and organise ourselves
- Right to equitable justice in case of problems

Where do children work?

- On the land
- In households – as domestic workers
- In factories – making products such as matches, fireworks and glassware
- On the street – as beggars
- Outdoor industry: brick kilns, mines, construction
- In bars, restaurants and tourist establishments
- In sexual exploitation
- As soldiers

There are about 300,000 child soldiers involved in over 30 areas of conflict worldwide, some even younger than 10.

Producing goods for export account for only an estimated five per cent of child labour.

illustration: Eric Jones



Action against child labour

International law:

International law forms the basis of Anti-Slavery International's work against the worst forms of child labour. The Conventions of the International Labour Organization, the 1926 and 1956 Slavery Conventions and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child are the major tools protecting children's rights.

Article 32 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989):

“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.”

Convention 182 of the International Labour Organization (1999):

The main aim of Convention 182 is to eliminate the worst forms of child labour. It stresses that immediate action is needed to tackle the worst exploitation of children, and that measures taken by the authorities should start as soon as the government is able following ratification. The main provisions of the convention are to clarify which situations should be classified as the worst forms of child labour, and to specify what governments must do to prohibit and eliminate them.