Jennifer Hess

Professor Haq

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CHILD LABOR

Child labor is one of the most controversial topics because it effects adult employment, is an economic issue, and raises human rights concerns. Child labor is often viewed as a violation of children’s rights and an evil practice that deprives a child of education and play. (Abernethie 83). If we know that child labor is such a damaging issue to children why does the practice continue? In this research project I intend to demonstrate that defining child labor is complex and depending upon the context children working can either be beneficial to their growth and family well-being or it could be very detrimental to the child and the family.

What is Child Labor?

In many of the developing countries, childhood is experienced very differently from developed countries like America. Even in developed countries like the United States childhood is a stage of human development that has become a more recent phenomenon. Child labor has been part of American history According to Hugh D. Hindman, author of “Child Labor an American History” “child labor is viewed as an economically underdeveloped nation’s problem” but in reality in U.S. history child labor dates back to where many children were prone to follow their parents into the industrial employment. Child labor started in the industrial countries and brought about importance in national and family economic strategies. (Humphries, 175)

Child labor was an important part of industrialization, especially in the fields of mining and textiles in Western countries such as Britain, France, Belgium, and the United States. Child labor was deep-rooted in factories, mines, and agriculture which provided most jobs for children and adults. (Sjoberg 1997). Many of the miscellaneous manufacturing jobs for children was in areas such as; silk, brick, metal manufactures, footwear, and garments. Along with manufacturing children were employed to run errands, deliver messages to offices, and as monitors in schools. The most common source of child labor was in agriculture.. The jobs on the farms consisted of bird scarers, shepherds, and ploughboys (Humphries 2003b; Maynes 1995). Many farm families withdrew their children from school in order to use their labor in farm work. Even when legal prohibition was imposed on child labor the children’s contribution to farm work was ignored.(Coombs and Radburn 1995). For girls, domestic service was the main employment in many European countries in the 19th century (Coninck-Smith, Sandin, and Schrumpf 1997) Those who were drawn into the industrial employment the most were women and children, and the work was often the hardest. A child who was found working in a factory often worked between twelve to eighteen hours a day, six days a week. These factories were often dirty, clammy, and dark. Child labor was prevalent in coal fields too. (Hindman, 2002) These children who worked in the coal fields often became sick, and had no time to play and little time to rest. Technology often aided the employment of children in mines and mills. Some of the machinery was produced to be used by the child workers to help reduce labor costs (MaeLeod 1988) Steam power and machinery allowed women and children to take over work that had previously required the strength and skill of men (Nardinelli 1990). Children were often useful when it came to mines because of their size, they were able to drag the coal from the face to the surface (Humphries 1981)

Children were often preferred over adults for many reasons when it came to working in factories or mines. The children could be paid less than an adult and they were smaller in size so it was easier for the children to move into small spaces in factories. One of the most intriguing strikes that took place in American History was in 1902’s labor events. Throughout history the nickname “beaker boy” was often used. Beaker boy was a word that was used to describe those who endured some of the most grueling conditions among child workers anywhere. (Hindman, 2002) This nickname became a symbol that represented all that was wrong with child labor and was used throughout American history at this time. Child labor started during the second half of the twentieth century and into the twenty first. Many of the children worked as refugee agriculture workers and in the clothing industry. A lot of the children were employed directly or indirectly through mandated orders for companies in the United States or Western Europe

Child Labour in Cross-Cultural Perspective

To formulate a complete definition of child labor, it is necessary to define both ‘child’ and ‘labour.’ Childhood can be defined as a “transitory phase on the way to adulthood” (Bhukuth390). However, the conception of childhood varies among different countries and even within different social classes in the same country (Bhukuth 390). Different societies have established various cut-off points where childhood ends and adulthood begins. This includes a shift in responsibilities, a legal age of majority, or a rite of passage (Abernethie 86). It can be formulated based on a child’s maturity level and physical development (Abernethie 86).

The role of children changes over time as well. In eighteenth century America, the child was considered to be valuable because of his economic potential (Abernethie 88). This changed over time and by the 1930s compulsory education and laws banning child labor transformed the status of a child to an economically worthless being (Abernethie 88). Children were now seen as vulnerable dependents that need special protection (Abernethie 88). What accounts for this shift in the way childhood is perceived? Several factors explain this change in cultural attitude towards childhood. The role of women as mothers was emphasized; overestimated, new forms of work organization was implemented, and opponents of child labor grew more vocal, to name just a few of the factors (Abernethie 89).

How a Child is exploited?

Children are often exploited based off of many different factors. Many of these are full-time work at too early of an age, working too long, psychological strains, and dwell self-esteem. This is not only wrong, but it happens to violate the advocates of one’s owns human rights. One of the best examples that had helped emphasize children’s food, water, and shelter was the 5TH Assembly of the League of Nations. This document helped place emphasize and concern on what must be done for children.

Child Labor in the Developing World

The International Labor Organization uses terms of economic activity to define work (Bhukuth 385). The work must generate an income, even if the child remains unpaid, so child labor does not include domestic work for one’s own family (Bhukuth 386). However, this is debatable because children who perform household chores allow their parents to work, so in a sense, they contribute indirectly to their families’ income (Bhukuth 386). A common form of child labor is domestic work where an individual works in another person’s home watching children, running errands, and doing chores (Blagbrough 180). A child domestic worker often works for a relative, and this make the employment relationship blurry (Blagbrough 180). In her article ‘Child Labour in Contemporary Society; Why Do We Care?,’ author Abernethie equates labor with “physical work, with production, employment and toil, with work especially of a hard or tiring kind, with activity, and often implying such labor is carried out for some form of reward, return, or remuneration” (91). Examples of work include domestic chores, chores performed outside of the home (i.e. hunting, weeding, etc.), bonded labor, waged labor, and marginal economic activities (including inconsistent work such as sorting through garbage, theft, and prostitution) (Abernethie 92).

According to the International Programme on Elimination of Child labor along with Statistical Information and Monitoring Programme on Child Labor, found that 352 million children of the ages five to seventeen years of age were engaged in economic activities in the year 2002. ( Schmitz, Traver, et al ) One of the most interesting facts tied into child labor are that boys in an older age group are more likely to work than girls; although when girls work they tend to work longer hours than the boys. . Children employed in domestic work is often challenging because children are denied their basic right to an education. This is often found hard to distinguish in girls between paid and not paid for their work. (Arneson 5)Besides child labor being an issue of poverty and economic stability, socialization as well plays a role. Socialization plays a huge role because it raises the question of socialization through domestic chores within a family and socialization through work end. (Bhukuth 1)This creates a conflict within a child’s development, education, and formation. (Bhukuth 1) This is found to be detrimental to the child’s health and wellbeing.

There are many reasons as to why child labor is considered wrong and how developing countries play a major role in the use of child labor. There are many benefits to eliminating child labor But it is hard to prepare universal international standards for child labor because every society defines childhood differently (Bhukuth 392). The Convention on the Human Rights of Children is one of the most important documents identifying rights for children. These rights are broad and can be applied internationally. Article 32 stipulates that, ‘State parties recognize the right of the child to be protected from economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to be harmful to the child’s health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development. Article 28 describes the child’s right to an education which is considered to be necessary when eradicating child labor (Sanghera 217).

An alternative definition of labor is “any work that interferes with the child’s full physical development, the opportunities for a desired minimum of education, and leisure needs: (Bhukuth 387). This divides work into two categories: beneficial and harmful (Bhukuth 387). Work can be an enjoyable way of self-realization or it can be driven by profit and the employer’s needs (Abernethie 93). If a form of employment negatively affects a child’s education, health, or safety, it should be unacceptable (Abernethie 94). At what age is child employment deemed acceptable? The ILO set the minimum age to 15 years increased it to 18 years when the work is considered to be hazardous (Bhukuth 387). Some distinguish among work settings to determine what type of work is appropriate. “Unlike a factory, or a street, or a store, the home was sanctioned by reformers as a proper workplace… every child needs to be taught to work; but he needs to be taught not in the factory but in the home” (Abernethie 99). This turns on the idea that a child is more likely to be exploited doing waged labor which is controlled not by family members but by third .Ways that a child can be exploited through work include “starting work at too early an age; working too long; excessive physical activity; experiencing social and psychological strains; work and life on the streets; inadequate remuneration; too much responsibility too early; work that does not facilitate their psychological and social development; and work that inhibits their self-esteem” (Abernethie 100).

After World War II, the issue of children’s rights became a part of the international community’s consciousness and part of international community’s attempt to create minimum standards for universal human rights (Abernethie 109). As humans, children are granted every human right available to people, but because of their helpless status, they are entitled to additional rights (Abernethie 104). Human rights are not intended to advance pleasure or self-indulgence, rather they are things which are vital to human life and which protect the interests of the person). The weak needs protection of their rights because otherwise people that are in positions of power would dictate the social order and overwhelm the weak and disadvantaged (Abernethie 101). Children’s rights either convey nurturance upon them or provide avenues of self-determination (Abernethie 107). These two values, also known as the protectionist/liberationist dichotomy are at opposite ends of the spectrum and often clash (Abernethie 108).

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Although the international community has declared their support to protect the rights of children, there is a lack of substantive commitment (Sanghera 217). Better living conditions won’t be achieved unless economic, political, and social changes are made (Sanghera 217). Furthermore, some countries selectively use rights violations in order to advance their own cause (Sanghera 223). According to Sanghera, in an article titled ‘The Politics of Children’s Right and Child Labour in India,’ developed countries “create protectionist measures to block market access in industrialized countries from cheap exports from emerging economies” (223). This protects jobs in the North from competition from developing countries (Sanghera 223). Therefore, “the distinction between genuine concern for rights and the use of rights as a trade barrier” is blurred (223). Essentially, a nation’s advocacy of child labor bans might be motivated by self-interest rather than a child’s best interests (Sanghera 224).

Adding to the complexity of the debate is the question of whether child labor should be banned in the first place. There are several reasons why child labor is considered to be wrong. Advocates arguing for abolishing of child labor compare child domestic labor to a ‘contemporary form of slavery’ which encompasses the ‘status or condition of a person over whom any or all of the powers attaching to the right of ownership are exercised’ (Blagbrough 182). There are cases where children are given away or sold by their parents to other families (Blagbrough 182). In these cases, there is no effective way to keep track of what happens to the child and family ties are severed which results in complete dependence on the employer (Blagbrough 182). Here, child labor is equated with forced labor as the child is not consulted with, the interests of the employer overwhelm the interests of the child, and the employer can terminate employment at will but the child is not able to leave when he or she wants (Blagbrough 183). Human trafficking is often an element in child labor (Blagbrough 184). Mediators recruit children to work by lying about conditions and opportunities in order to exploit the child (Blagbrough 183). The potential for abuse is very broad.

Even more benign forms of work have the potential for abuse.

Children are not able to choose or protest against the terms of their employment which is determined by adults who have a position of power over the child (Abernethie 95). Exploitation is likely with employers preferring child workers over adult workers because they are more ‘submissive’ and ‘easier to control’ (Blagbrough 185). Children report verbal bullying and physical violence at the hands of their superiors. There is the potential for overwork and withholding food as punishment). In his article ‘Child Domestic Labour:A Modern Form of Salvery,’ author Jonathon Blagbrough notes, ‘in Haiti *restavek* (domestic worker) girls are sometimes called *la pou sa,* a Creole term meaning ‘there for that’ (186). Sexual abuse is prevalent because of the child’s vulnerability and isolation (Blagbrough 186).

As a live-in domestic worker, a child is on call at all times and his hours of work are variable (Bourdillon 3). Children might be discriminated against if they are of a different ethnic origin and lower status (Blagbrough 185). Child domestic workers have low self-esteem, and manifest psychological problems such as “bedwetting, insomnia, nightmares, frequent headaches, withdrawal, regressive behavior, premature aging, depression, and phobic reactions to their employers” (Bourdillon 3). Only one out of four street children in Accra and Bamako believe their life is better after they left home to seek employment (Boas and Hatley 16). Studies show that children do not identify employment as an important opportunity (Biggeri et al. 76). Rather, they value things like love and care, mental well-being, and social relations during their formative years (Biggeri et al. 76). This shows how difficult labor makes life for children.

People advocating for a ban on child labor argue that children should not be given such a high level of independence; rather, the child needs to be guided by responsible adults (Abernethie 90). A ban on child labor will cause more children to obtain an education and their welfare will improve (Soares 1048). The reduced labor supply would result in higher wages for adults (Soares 1056). There are many benefits to eliminating child labor. However, there is an alternate view where proponents argue that depending upon the situation child labor should continue.

Scholars supporting employment for minors note that child labor is the effect of problems within the economy and these deeper problems need to be addressed before banning child labor, or children will be worse off (Soares 1048). If child labor is banned in the organized sector, desperate children will turn to the unorganized sector to make money through jobs like prostitution (Chamarbagwala 255). In 2006, India banned the employment of children under the age of 14 as domestic workers (Bourdillon 1). This prompted a former child domestic worker to seek work performed at night while getting paid under the table (Bourdillon 1). Parents would also be greatly affected by a ban on child labor as they would need to decrease their consumption, find ways to make a higher income, and decrease their own leisure time (Soares 1049).

Children oftentimes willingly obtain employment. “In a Zimbabwe survey of 144 child domestic workers in eight centers, three-quarters said that the wished to find employment” (Bourdillon 6). Common causes for children leaving their homes to work are problems within their own family such as alcoholism, physical and sexual abuse, and poverty (Blagbrough 181).

Some children just like working and having an opportunity to support his or her family. When one child worker was asked about her current situation, she responded by describing her pride in her work and her ability to support her family (Bourdillon 6). She said that the work improved her self-esteem and enabled her to pursue an education (Bourdillon 6). Another plus side to finding work is the ability to move from a rural village to an urban center which has more opportunities and material resources (Bourdillon 6). The child becomes familiar with new place and could learn new languages and skills (Bourdillon 8). Aside from the immediate benefit of earning money, there are also other long-term benefits of work. A child could establish a good relationship with a wealthy family and this could result in later employment and a higher income or even an advantageous marriage (Bourdillon 7). Another good thing about child work is work can teach children essential skills and discipline (Abernethie 96). Furthermore, child labor might help many children obtain an education because they will have more resources to do so (Soares1050).

The reason why children become domestic workers can be attributed partly to poverty but also because society views the tradition as beneficial, especially for girls who will become wives and mothers someday (Blagbrough 180). In fact, domestic work is one of the few opportunities girls have in gender-restrictive societies (Blagbrough 181). Proponents champion domestic work saying that it is less arduous than other forms of employment, offers a protective environment for girls, gives children a chance of continuing their educations, and gives them a place in the family unit (Blagbrough 181). Not every child works in the home of a stranger. Rather, it is the custom in several countries to foster children with relatives and friends after a certain age (Bourdillon 8). This helps to maintain ties with extended family and uphold tradition (Bourdillon 8). For orphans, this is the closest thing to a family that they can hope to have, and it provides them with a way to survive (Bourdillon 8).

In an article entitled Does Child Labor Reduce Youth Crime?,” authors Horowitz and Trivitt point out that a child’s work environment could socialize him to adhere to the “rules, norms, and values” of the society in which he finds himself (560). For an example, in most types of employment, kids are exposed to a hierarchy with their boss at the top, followed by supervisors and employees (Horowitz and Trivitt 560). These differing positions are encountered in many, if not all work environments, and an employed child is able to learn and adjust to the dynamics of a chain of command. This could help the child to be more successful and to exhibit greater professionalism throughout his or her lifetime as opposed to a child that was never exposed to work.

Working children also learn that a job provides benefits, such as money, pride, a sense of accomplishment, the ability to be independent and support one’s family, etc. This could facilitate a child’s future productivity, as he or she has been exposed to the rewards work can bring and is therefore encouraged to always seek employment. In addition to learning about the structure of a work environment, children participating in the workforce are less likely to become involved in criminal activity (Horowitz and Trevitt 562). This is true even in times of unemployment (where children who have never worked before are more likely to commit crimes than children who are out of work but have worked in the past) (Horowitz and Trevitt 566). This shows that it is not just wages that keeps children from crime; it is the values learned at work that stick with them throughout their lives.

Horowitz and Trivitt admit, “In an ideal world early socialization would be conveyed predominately by family and school” (560). However, the authors go on to say that most families in developing countries are under extreme stress and might be involved in crime or violence or parents might work long hours every day (Horowitz and Trivitt 560). This means that it is not possible or even desirable for a family to effectively socialize a child to a culture’s values. What about schools? As will be discussed further, schools in poor areas often cannot effectively teach students basic literacy skills and, even if they could, grades would not have value in the area because of a lack of opportunities (Horowitz and Trivitt 560).

On the other hand, the socialization that results from a work situation might be undesirable. For live-in domestic workers, children see their richer peers go to school while they themselves work to support them (Bourdillon 5). This could make them feel inferior and believe that they have a lower position in life. Children might just be socialized to believe that exploitative and inequitable working relationships are normal (Abernethie 97). Gendered work activity could also perpetuate gender stereotypes with girls perfomring a certain kind of work like child rearing, while boys work in the fields (Abernethie 97). Girls are more likely to miss out on school and play because of their heavy domestic workload (Abernethie 98). Some argue that it would be more beneficial for a child to be socialized by his or her family or school (Abernethie 96).

To address the problem of child labor, several things can be done. It is not realistic to impose Western ideals of childhood on developing countries as this could lead to unenforceable and counterproductive policies (Abernethie 91). An outright ban on child labor would be devastating to very poor families who depend on their child’s income to survive. If a ban were implemented, alternatives would have to be created for children who desperately need a way to support themselves (Bourdillon 2).

Instead of outright banning child labor, policies can be implemented to reduce its prevalence and to improve the welfare of child workers (Soares 1063). Children need more support as employees than adults, and their special needs should be accommodated (Bourdillon 10). The focus could be placed on eliminating the worst forms of child labor. This includes slavery (“the sale and trafficking of children, debt bondage, and serfdom”), forced labor, prostitution, drug manufacturing and trafficking, and anything that harms the health, safety, and moral development of a child (Bhukuth 388). It is necessary to determine what type of employment socializes children in a beneficial way and at what age does work begin to benefit children (Horowitz and Trevitt 569). The benefits then need to be weighed against the costs in order to determine whether a type of employment can be helpful instead of harmful (Horowitz and Trevitt 569). Money could then be funneled into youth employment programs which could be a sign of good business for corporations employing youth (Horowitz and Trevitt 569). Formal contracts could be made mandatory so that a child’s hours of work are defined, as well as leave and other benefits (Bourdillon 10).

Other predictors of child labor are lower income, location (households in industrial areas are more likely to have working children), and having a female head a household as opposed to a male (Siddiqi 269). A long term solution would be to eradicate poverty by sustainable economic growth (Bhukuth 388). Of course, this is very difficult to do as poverty is a complex problem. Extra support for poor families and for families headed by a single mom could be implemented. These programs should be targeted in industrial areas where child labor is more prevalent. The incidence of child labor increases many times with the number of children in a family (Siddiqi 269). Population control programs such as educating people about family planning and providing birth control can offer a long term solution.

Some other ideas include restricting the time children spend working (Soares1048). This way, they will have more time to go to school and to play. In order to decrease opportunities for exploitation and abuse, it is essential to eliminate the isolation and discrimination child domestic workers face (Blagbrough 187). Children who live far away from home would benefit from regular visits by family members which inhibit bad treatment by employers (Bourdillon 9). This can be done by helping children maintain contact with their own familes and providing opportunities for socialization with other children their age (Blagbrough 187). Another idea is to give children a medium for them to express their views (Blagbrough 188). Entities can form local support groups for the children so they can fight collectively for their rights and offer each other mutual encouragement (Blagbrough 187).

A survey in Manila, Philippines identified the following solutions: “improved wages, protection from abusive employers, an education responsive to their situation, and respect for their work” (Bourdillon 7). However, studies show that when children have better job prospects with higher wages, they are less likely to attend school (Chamarbagwala 234). This is an example of how some policies could either help children in some ways, while harming them in others. A balance needs to be struck between improving work conditions and offering opportunities for education.

It has been demonstrated that developed and some developing countries have eradicated child labor by making education compulsory (Sanghera225). Governments should concentrate on illiteracy programs more than anything else as having a literate person in the family has a negative effect on child labour (Siddiqi 270). This has been a particular challenge in some places with a social hierarchy like India’s caste system (Sanghera 225). The elite avoid providing mass education to lower castes because this would empower them (Sanghera 225). Greater participation in education (especially for girls) could be attributed to economic growth, higher parental income, and education policy improvements (Chamarbagwala 240). Over time, improvements in cultural and social attitudes spark greater participation in education for girls (Chamarbagwala 240). Another way to help children attend school is to eliminate school fees so more children can participate in education (Boas and Hatley19).

On the other hand, although education is considered to be the salvation of children faced with exploitation, the reality is most schools in developing countries have a short supply of teacher, under-qualified educators, and inferior facilities (Chamarbagwala 233). In Africa, many children who completed school or who are going to school report that they cannot read (Boas and Hatley 15). Because of lack of opportunities to secure employment, getting a basic education in a developing country does not often result in economic benefits (Chamarbagwala 233). Even if opportunities exist, family connections and social status are more important in securing a high-skilled position (Chamarbagwala 233). Consequently, parents believe that children are better off learning skills at work while contributing to the family income (Chamarbagwala 233). If parents see that there are potential, viable economic benefits to attending school, they would be more willing to push their children to obtain an education (Chamarbagwala 234). As a caveat, families with virtually no resources to send their children to school are not affected by the likelihood of potential economic returns (Chamarbagwala 234). Studies shows that if you raise the economic benefits of education more children will be sent to school, but that would not be enough for the poorest families (Chamarbagwala 255).

Several non-profit organizations have been set up with unique missions applicable to child labour (Sanghera 220). ‘Butterflies’ established India’s first trade union for children who helps them lobby for their rights (Sanghera 220). This was controversial as some critics viewed this as legitimizing India’s child labor practices (Sanghera 220). Another organization, the ‘Rugmark Foundation,’ affixes labels on carpets to indicate that they were not made by children and are free to be exported (Sanghera 220). Non-profit organizations can create change in small, but effective ways.

It is unlikely that change would be achieved through a democratic process, because children do not vote and adults are likely to vote against a ban as child labor provides those benefits (Soares 1057). Legislation can set out minimum standards even though laws are hard to enforce in the privacy of people’s homes where many children work (Blagbrough 188). It is also a good idea to gain the support of the employer (Blagbrough 187). Awareness could be raised of “what is reasonable and unreasonable to demand of children” and societal disapproval could drive employers to conform (Bourdillon 14). Another reality is that children face abuse even in their own homes and schools (Bourdillon 9). It might be most beneficial to advocate for general respect for children, not just in the work place (Bourdillon 10).

In developing countries, childhood may be very different from what it is in Western countries like America. Because of poverty and a lack of educational opportunities, many children spend their days working. This can have many benefits for the child such as learning new skills, making money, supporting their families, and securing opportunities for their future. However, because of a child’s immaturity and vulnerability, he or she has the potential to face greater abuse and exploitation. In recent years, the international community has worked to identify and develop a child’s right to be free from exploitation through work. However, it is clear that an outright ban on child labor could be detrimental to poor children. Rather, popular consensus seems to advocate for improved working conditions for children and better educational opportunities. A lot of work remains in order to protect children from potential abuse because of their work, but the reality is this work is probably necessary for children in developing countries today.

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