Child Labor Essay, Research Paper

Child Labor

Until recently, child labor has not been recognized as an issue of important global concern. Developing countries continued, as they had for centuries, the accepted practice of using children as young as four and five to labor in conditions of bondage, serfdom, and slavery. International public attention regarding the plight of the young workers has grown steadily over the past few years, provoking world wide discussion of the problem and possible ethical solutions. The International Labor Organization estimates that at least 250 million children between the ages of five and fourteen are working in developing countries. The majority work under harmful and exploitative conditions. These children labor in a wide range of economic activities such as:

? agriculture

? animal husbandry

? commercial sex industries

? construction

? fishing

? garbage scavengers

? manufacturing

? mining

? quarrying

? tourism

Child labor is the single most important source of child exploitation and child abuse in the world today. Companies utilizing underdeveloped countries must be willing to accept the social responsibility that a further developed society expects. This includes meeting the legal, economic, ethical, and philanthropic elements of social responsibility.

The first element of social responsibility is the legal element. The legality and illegality of child labor varies from country to country. The Department of Labor and Bureau of International Labor Affairs defines child labor as any economic activity performed by a person under the age of 15. Not all work performed by children is detrimental or exploitative. Child labor does not usually refer to performing light chores around the house, or youths helping out in the family business. Rather, the child labor of concern is generally work that prevents effective school attendance or is performed under conditions hazardous to the physical and mental health of the child (Dept. of Labor 2). Although this minimum age requirements and guidelines apply to the 34 participating countries of the International Labor Organization, there are many other countries where there is no official age or defining line between when children become adults, and/or restrictions as to what type work should or should not be performed by children.

In 1998, the Department of Labor and Bureau of International Labor Affairs collected data from 16 countries where child labor had been identified as a major problem. It is estimated that just from these 16 participating countries, that a low figure of 250 million children, between the ages of five and fourteen were reported as working. One-half of these children are reported to work full-time. One-third of them working in extremely dangerous conditions and 90 million of them never attend school (Douglas and McIntyre 26). The Department of Labor and International Labor Affairs considers this figure to be low. In developing countries children helping out and child labor are synonymous with family survival and households may be reluctant to report when children are working. Also, each country chooses its own definition of what constitutes a child and what classifies as labor . Some countries do not count children working in either paid or unpaid work, while other countries count children as laborers only when the child is a full-time paid laborer. Additionally, certain countries do not classify students as child laborers no matter how many hours they work outside the home, while others count students working even one hour a week as employed . The International Labor Organization distinguishes three types of child labor. There are children who work with their families-on the farm, in the home or for a family business. Second, there are those who are paid to work in factories or who have been hired out or even sold by their families. Third, there are the street children (Dept. of Labor 4).

Children working at home or within a family-like arrangement are regarded as a socially acceptable practice in most countries. Additionally, this type work generally entails doing strenuous household work in exchange for little or no pay and/or room and board. Children who work as domestic servants, within their own home or for another family, often times suffer physical, mental, and sexual abuse. However, this type of child labor is hardest to detect and curtail since it does have a level of socially acceptable status. The same situation also applies to children who work on the family farm or for the family business. The fact that children are not paid makes the work seem insignificant, yet children working on the farm and family business greatly contributes to a family s survival.

The second type of classification of child labor that the International Labor Organization identifies are those children who are paid to work in factories or who have been sold by their families. In most developing countries there is no social welfare system set-up and the majority of the socioeconomic status of the people are poor. In these countries, you will find the worst and most exploitative types of child labor. Commonly refereed to as sweatshops, children are paid as little as legally possible. Furthermore, the child may have been sold to the business as an unpaid servant. The child receives no pay, is provided with little or no benefits, and generally works in unsafe and unhealthy working conditions. This type of exploitation is on the rise due to globalization and its effects on the poor. As long as industrialized countries continue to outsource and contract to developing countries, it will be hard to implement, mandate, and enforce strategies to eliminate illegal child labor.

The third type of child labor classification that the International Labor Organization identifies is that of the street children. Because of their family s impoverished condition, many of these children have been cast aside. Others, are runaways or have been separated from their families because of war. (Douglas and McIntyre 46). Whatever their situation, they battle to survive the odds. They do this by begging, stealing, and prostitution. Regarded as criminals, many people feel that the children deserve whatever happens to them. Most countries have enacted minimum wage age laws. However, as long as inadequate enforcement remains a problem, the exploitation of children will continue. Identifying the extent of child labor within a country is an essential step towards the development of effective strategies for eliminating and preventing the problem.

The second element of social responsibility is the economic element. In any debate over the ethical considerations of child labor, the economic element usually rises to the top. On one side of the debate is the fact that children should not have to suffer the atrocities that occur when forced into work at an early age. When the subject of child labor comes up in discussion, many people will immediately address the problem as it relates to foreign countries in the orient or South America. What many people do not realize is that child labor is a problem in our own country. Migrant farming, coal mining communities, and the garment industry are only of the few examples of fields that remain at the center of the child labor dispute. These children are forced to work from dawn until sunset, with little food and limited education. Most of these children are never outside of their own limited environment, so no one outside of their world realizes what is happening. When these children are denied a childhood along with an education, they will rarely escape the poverty into which they were born. The United States has severe restrictions on child labor, but in many industries these laws seem to be ignored (Evans 10). Also, the issue of child labor is serious on a global scale, particularly in third world countries where children are considered to be little more than cattle. Children are chained to looms to make rugs for hours on end, they are handling heavy machinery in garment sweatshops, and working long, impossible hours in fields and on farms. Pakistan, India, Brazil, and Laos seem to be the main areas of the world where little, if any, laws protect the safety and well being of these children (Hindman 28-30). Children in many foreign countries are actually sold into slavery to large companies. The life expectancy of children who live under these conditions is usually less than twenty years old (Hindman 29).

On the other side of the issue of economics and child labor is fact that many poverty stricken families have no choice but to allow their children to work. In our own county, children of migrant farmers often work in the fields alongside their parents. When questioned about the fact their children are working as hard as adults, a farmer was quoted by an anonymous author as saying that the children work so the family can eat ( Targeting ). When one looks at the choice of a child starving or having to work, the choice seems simple. Many parents would love for their children to go to school, and to live in a more stable environment, but even in our wealthy country, this is impossible for many. When a parent has little education, and has worked in a particular environment for their entire lives, the issue is not child abuse but habit.

The third element of social responsibility is the ethical element. Today, we in the United States look upon child labor in the most scrutinizing manner. Such abhorrence has not always been the case. Alexander Hamilton and the forerunners of the U.S. Chamber of commerce advocated the use of women and children to fuel the industrialization of the new nation (Hindman 28). As the U.S. converted from a rural agricultural society, to an urban industrial one, the ethical issues involving child labor remained non-existent. Our grandparents moved from the fields into the factory without comment or complaint.

The use of children to perform dangerous labor has only become an ethical issue within the United States during this century. In the early phases of the American industrial revolution, there were many reasons why child labor was considered appropriate. Poor parents needed the cash their children could provide and industries needed the cheap labor. Unlike the family atmosphere that prevailed on the farm, the industrial arena did not provide for the education and safety of children. Wealthy progressives initially raised ethical concerns in regards to child labor. Abolitionists argued that child labor meant the spread of illiteracy and ignorance, the lowering of the wage scale and hence the standard of living, the perpetuation of poverty, an increased in adult unemployment and crime, and the disintegration of the family (Hindman 28).

Pro-labor forces countered with several arguments of their own. Interference with the free market, and predictions of an economic downturn, were presented as reasons to continue child labor practices. The child labor ethics battle raged for several decades until Fair Labor Standards Act was upheld in 1941. Child labor in the U.S. moved from the realm of ethics to become the law of the land.

The same labor scenario that the U.S. faced in the 19th and 20th centuries is currently being played out in many developing countries. Parents and industry use the same reasons that the U.S. used to justify the use of child labor. These countries are terribly poor and the excuses are justified to some extent. The legal consequences of child labor in the U.S., and our abhorrence to the idea in general, blind most Americans to the real world realities that exist in many countries. Unfortunately, the choice many children and parents must face is to work or starve. America has reached the legal stage of social responsibility in regards to child labor while many countries are still in the economic stage. Their ethical battle is just beginning in much of the world.

Finally, the philanthropic element of social responsibility refers to a business contributions to society (Ferrell and Fraedrich 86). Is it presumptuous for us to declare that every aspect of child labor is negative? Should Americans, waving the emblem of abolishment, lead the way? When underdeveloped countries are forced out of using child labor, either by legislation or through consumer demand, what are some of the negative effects? Even some of the most well intentioned plans can fail. The Harkin Bill, introduced by the United States Congress in 1992, is a case in point. The Harkin Bill, had the noteworthy goal of prohibiting imports of products made by children under 15. Before the bill even made the statute books, the Bangladesh garment industry began dismissing child workers from its factories. At first glance, the bill seemed to be a success. However, the displaced girls turned to more hazardous jobs in unsafe workshops or to prostitution (Navin 51). The lessons learned from the Harkin Bill is that no single approach can effectively combat child labor. Displacing child labor without establishing educational facilities will only perpetuate the cycle. Furthermore, the Harkin example suggests that child labor opponents should conduct child-impact assessments before implementing any course of action. Thomas Donaldson, a Wharton professor and a member of The Conference Board’s Working Group On Global Business Ethics Principles, declares that the ethical dilemmas surrounding child labor and business can avoided by providing the answers to the following two questions:

(1) Is it possible to conduct business in the host country successfully without supporting the objectionable practice of employing children?

If the answer is “yes” then do something acceptable to both cultures. For example, hire only adults and provide some form of philanthropic support to the local host. This could be in the form of educational programs, environmental enhancements, or the construction of residences for the needy.

(2) Is the practice in clear violation of a fundamental international human right?

If so, avoid the practice (Hindman 51).

While this may sound like an oversimplification, it points the way towards an agreeable future that everyone can live with.

It is clear that developing countries leave little choice for their people. The four elements of social responsibility: legal, economic, ethical, and philanthropic must be examined as it applies to child labor. While big business continues to prosper, children continue to labor in occupations and industries that are dangerous and hazardous to their health and well being. The children suffer separation from their family, cumulative work hazards, stunted growth from working in cramped conditions. Some grow up with minds permanently scarred, distorted, and disabled. Many never grow up at all.

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