Child Labor Essay, Research Paper

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Child Labour In the past few years, a great deal of attention has been drawn to the global problem of child labour. Virtually everyone is guilty of participating in this abusive practice through the purchase of goods made in across the globe, usually in poor, developing nations. This issue has been around for a great length of time but has come to the forefront recently because of reports that link well known American companies like Wal-Mart and Nike to the exploitation of children. Prior to this media attention, many Americans and other people in developed nation were blind to the reality of the oppressive conditions that are reality to many.

Child Labour has been in existence in different forms from the beginning of time but it wasn t until the Industrial Revolution that it became the problem it is today. With the arrival of the factory system in the 18th century, Children as young as 5 were being used as workers in England. During this period, a law called the English Poor Act gave the government the responsibility to care for children that had no parents or whose parents were too poor to care for them. Under this law, the government would take these pauper children and place them in jobs where they could become apprentices and learn a trade. The law was not usually affective because when the children were handed over to the factory owners, they usually became slaves. Other children were sold by their parents as indentured servants. Children were used to tend to machines in factories and many worked in the dark, damp coalmines, carrying coal on their backs up ladders. Many children would work 10 to 15 hour days with a small break for lunch. On top of this, the children were paid a starvation wages.

The problem spread to other industrialized countries including the United States. Massachusetts passed a law in 1836 that required working children to receive some amount of schooling. Connecticut followed in 1842 with a law that created a maximum amount of hours children could work a day in a textile factory. It wasn t until the Fair Labour Standards Act of 1938 that real progress was made in child labour in the United States. One example of these terrible abuses is the story of Iqbal Masih, a Pakistani child who was forced into labour as a carpet weaver. At the age of four, the boy was sold as an indentured servant to a factory owner for the equivalent of $16 dollars. Iqbal s parents were forced to sell him in order to feed and clothe the rest of their family, a situation that is extremely common in the poor villages of India like Iqbal s. At the factory, Iqbal would begin work around 6 a.m., working 14-hour days with one 30-minute break for lunch. The conditions in the factory were very poor with very little lighting and no fresh air. The children that worked there were not allowed to speak and were often beaten if the broke the rules or made mistakes. When Iqbal was 10 years old, he was severely beaten by the factory owner, a man named Arshbad, and decided to escape and report it to the police. When the police looked the other way, Iqbal was forced to return to the factory and was chained to his loom. Some time later, Iqbal escaped and went to a meeting of the Bonded Labour Liberation Front, an organization whose goal was to free Pakistan s bonded workers. Here Iqbal listened to a man named Kahn talk and spoke to him afterward. With Kahn s help, Iqbal was free and started to attend a school operated by the BLLF. Iqbal became a crusader for the rights of children, addressing crowds across India and Pakistan. His work had a large impact, reducing the export demand once people in developed nations heard of the conditions in the factories. Iqbal was awarded the Reebok Human Rights award in 1994 and continued to study hard at school with dreams of becoming a lawyer and fighting for children s rights. Because his work had resulted in the loss of income to many factory workers due to a decrease in the export market, Iqbal was not popular with some Pakistani.

This was apparent when he was gunned down while riding his bicycle to his uncle s house on Easter Sunday of 1995 at the age of twelve. Although Iqbal s story is a tragic one, it is not uncommon. The International Labour Organization or ILO, which is in charge of the monitoring of worker s rights by the United Nations, estimates that at least 250 million children under the age of 15 hold jobs which undermine their education and threaten their health. Of this figure, 153 million are said to work in Asia, 80 million in Africa, and 17.5 million in Latin America. On average In developing countries, more than 18 percent of the children between the ages of 10 and 14 work. In the current expanding global economy, multinational corporations take advantage of child labour to keep their prices down. A 1996 ILO study concluded that another reason for the high amount of children workers is because children are less aware of their rights, less troublesome and more willing to take orders without complaining.

Situations like Iqbal s are also extremely common with children being sold into slavery because of the extreme poverty that exists in developing nations. It is estimated that in these developing countries, 30 percent of the population does not have enough food to sustain the minimal standards of nourishment. Children are also used in certain industries, like the carpet making industry, because their size and small hands are more suited to tie the millions of small knots that go into each rug. The town of Sialkot, Pakistan, is the site of some of the worse child labour practices in the world. In Sialkot, 7,500 children under the age of 14 make surgical instruments like scalpels and forceps out of metal. Comprising 15 percent of the total workforce, the children produce roughly 20 percent of the world s supply of these surgical instruments. They are exposed to harmful metal vapour and extreme heat that could instantly burn them critically without any safety precautions. Sailkot is also home to one of the largest soccer ball industries in the world with 80 percent of 36m balls that are sold worldwide annually being produced in this town. One in five of the 30,000 stitchers in the town of 300,000 inhabitants are children paid an average of 75 cents per day. We have laws (prohibiting child labour), but the government has found it s not always possible to enforce them in a country as large as India, stated India s Finance Minister. With the growing publicity that this subject has been getting internationally in recent years, some steps are being taken to help end this practice.

In 1996 FIFA, the world governing body for the sport of soccer, discovered that soccer balls branded with the FIFA approval stamp and being used in championship games were being partially made with the aide of child labour, they decided to take action. Children as young as nine were making these balls in Sialkot, India, making 75 cents to stitch balls that retailed for $75 dollars. FIFA, with the help of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions drafted an agreement that all producers of officially licensed FIFA soccer balls must follow to maintain their FIFA licensed status. Under this agreement, workers must be provided with fair wages and working conditions with workers under the age of 15 forbidden. Under pressure from the West, the Indian government has developed a new plan that s goal is to free 2 million children from work by the year 2000. Under this new plan pays parents a monthly allowance of food and currency if they send their children to school instead of work.

The Rug mark program in India and Nepal is also an example of an effective plan to help notify consumers of the labour practices that go into the products they buy. This program provides a label that assures no child labour went in to the creation of the rug and is paid for by a small export tax on the carpet. In 1999, the United States was instrumental in the passing of a treaty at the International Labour Organizations convention in Geneva that sought to bring a worldwide end to this problem. The treaty was then sent to Congress where it was passed and then signed by the president. Although some of these plans might be affective, it must be made certain that they are not counter-productive. An article in the London Observer reported that in a response to American pressures, thousands of children in Bangladesh were let go and left to the streets. The West, particularly the Americans, are overzealous. In trying to protect the children from hardship, they are making them undergo even worse hardship, Bangladesh s Finance Minister Saifur Rahman stated. Although there have been major strides of progress in the area of child labour in the last decade, the problem is far from solved. An effort must be made to inform consumers and regulate companies so that a finger can be pointed at those companies who continue to take advantage of the children in these developing nations.

Another type of child labour is the family unit. This is where the whole family works in order to provide food and shelter. This is the common type in Egypt. In most cases the family cannot afford to pay for the child s education so instead of playing football all day, he goes to work. When they work they aren t abused or maltreated, they are well treated and well paid. This does not harm anyone and brings extra income into the family. In a country with 51% literacy, the uneducated children are should be expected to work. We do not have any sweat shops or big factory operations in Egypt unlike Bangladesh or Pakistan. So you cannot classify Egypt and Bangladesh in the same category when it comes to child labour. Family working units are a good thing will continue to exist. But these family working units aren t suitable to modern products. They are suitable for traditional products such as carpets and garments.

The ILO cannot put an end to all the child labour. They don t have any legal power. They employers sure won t since they don t want to increase costs. Some morally conscious employers will but the majority won t. Then there is the government of the country where the multinational comes from (99.9% of the time American) which can force inspections and could take action against the company. The trade unions are weak and don t have the funds to do the job. This is also the third world where bribes are an everyday thing.

In conclusion I stand against the kind of child labour such as in Bangladesh which. Selling of kids to Big factories is immoral. On the other hand I do support the example set in Egypt and the family work units. They do more good than bad to the economy and save the government a lot of welfare money.

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