

THE CHALLENGE OF CHANGE: GLOBALIZATION, CHILD LABOR, AND CHILDREN'S RIGHTS¹

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Children are on the front line in the world's conflicts, environmental hot spots, and places where multinational corporations are operating as part of the international process of globalization. All too frequently, children are abused and victimized by many people, including their own parents, non-kin, governments, multinationals, and even non-government organizations. A large proportion of the world's refugees are children. Children are involved heavily in some of the world's worst civil wars, as can be seen, for example, in Sierra Leone and Liberia. In the 16-year long civil war in Mozambique, at least 10,000 children served as soldiers, and 200,000 children were orphaned or abandoned by adults. Nearly half a million died from war-related causes.

One can see the ravages of child exploitation in the case of child labor in industries in south and southeast Asia, perhaps the best example of which is the carpet industry. It is enlightening to read the book Free the Children by Craig Kielburger, a Canadian youngster who championed the cause of Iqbal Masih, a freed Pakistani child laborer and human rights activist who received the Reebok Youth in Action Award. Iqbal was a victim of debt bondage, which was the result of loans taken out by his family. Like many other children, he had to work to pay off the loans to his family. On Easter Sunday, April 16, 1995, Iqbal was struck down by an assassin's shotgun blast. He did not die in vain: as one journalist put it, a thousand Iqbals were born. Iqbal Masih and Craig Kielburger and other child activists have done a great deal to bring attention to the issues of extreme child labor and trafficking in children for various purposes, including sexual slavery.

Children are exposed to structural violence. Poverty, hunger, and exploitation are part of the structure of the world's socioeconomic system today. Poverty is the biggest killer of children. According to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and Bread for the World's Institute on Hunger and Development, 40,000 per children per day are dying as a result of poverty, malnutrition, and disease. One quarter of the world's people live in absolute poverty; they struggle to survive on less than a dollar a day. Seventy percent of the people in the world who are absolutely poor are women and children.

In the United States, the fastest growing group of homeless people consists of women and their children. In Latin America, Asia, and Africa, child-headed households -- CHHs -- some the result of the scourge of HIV/AIDS, are living on the streets and attempting to make a living in any way that they can. The trash dumps of Africa, the Middle East, Latin America, and Asia,

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and, in some cases, the United States, have children who go through the garbage in the hopes of finding items that they can eat or sell to raise income.

The world's first human rights movement, the anti-slavery movement, also included an anti-child labor movement. This movement, fueled in part by reports in the media and the writings of such individuals as Charles Dickens and Mark Twain, led to efforts to bring about a reduction in child labor. In spite of the gains in the 19th and early 20th century, in the latter part of the 20th century and into the 21st century, the percentage of children engaged in extreme labor and the trafficking of children against their will has increased. Much of child labor is in the developing world (the South), but industrialized countries (the North) also benefits from the labor of children, some of which is part-time. In some industries in the United States, such as agriculture, child labor is an important -- and poorly regulated -- part of the American economy.

Children, because of the lack of a support system and extreme poverty, sometimes have to go onto the streets. Street children, such as those in Brazil, are exposed to serious risks, including sexual and labor exploitation. In 1992, when the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) ("the Earth Summit") was to be held in Rio de Janeiro, the police and city workers kidnapped children off the streets and moved them out of the city; there were reportedly killings of street children in Rio de Janeiro and elsewhere. In some cases, the police officers that were involved in such cases were not prosecuted, meaning that they acted against children with impunity.

Children have finally been covered by a human rights convention, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990). It should be pointed out that only two countries have failed to ratify this convention: the United States and Somalia. While it is a forward-looking and comprehensive piece of international legislation, the problem is that the CRC lacks a means of enforcement. It requires governments to take a panel of experts' recommendations seriously. Its success, therefore, depends on diplomacy and not legal action. Fortunately, legal precedents have been set with cases in Europe, the United States, and elsewhere that lay the foundations for enhanced children's rights.

The United States Department of State estimates that every year 700,000 children are trafficked -- moved from one place to another across international borders -- in order to utilize their services. At least 50,000 children are trafficked into the United States annually. There have been cases recently in which young girls (and sometimes boys) have been smuggled into the United States and used as prostitutes. Such a case, for example, occurred in northern San Diego County in California in the past year.

Child slavery and trafficking is at least a 7 billion dollar a year industry. In some instances, it is tied closely to the drug trade. All too often, young people are lured to other places with the promises of jobs, places to stay, and high wages, only to find themselves living in terrible conditions, with little or no control over their own lives. Child prostitution, as George Kent notes, is an extreme form of sexual abuse of children and an especially intensive form of exploitative child labor. The numbers of underage prostitutes -- the targets of European, Asian, and American "sex tourists" -- in Thailand are in the tens of thousands. The expansion of the tourism industry and the greater availability of information on sex tourism opportunities through

the worldwide web have made child prostitution a lucrative business for countries, companies, and individuals. In some cases, girls are drawn into the sex trade through the promise of “mail order” marriages. Sex trafficking follows trade patterns and reflects the disparities in incomes between poorer and richer countries. Girls from central Asia, eastern Europe, and Russia who go to the United States after being promised job opportunities have sometimes ended up in brothels in various parts of the country. There is relatively little case law relating to child prostitution, but there is new legislation being drawn up and implemented at the state and federal levels in the United States.

A major problem in the world today is children in armed conflicts. The roles of children in war and conflict make the issue of protecting children a matter of necessity. Unfortunately, the Convention on the Rights of the Child is weak on the issue of child soldiers. The Convention sets the recruitment age as low as 16, thus legitimizing the use of child soldiers. Children are forcibly recruited into militaries through kidnapping or conscription at gunpoint, as has occurred in Asia and Africa. In some cases, child soldiers are provided with drugs that are sold by multinational pharmaceutical firms, which have yet to be prosecuted for their actions. It is only when guerilla groups, traffickers, and multinational corporations are investigated and prosecuted for their actions that these kinds of problems will be resolved

The numbers of children at risk are on the rise in many areas where the effects of globalization can be seen. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the World Food Program (WFP) have pointed out that hunger is a major problem in Africa, including in those countries where Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) have been carried out, such as Ghana. The impacts of structural adjustment -- in which the International Monetary Fund imposes conditions on countries such as raising food prices, reducing the size of the civil service, and cutting back on spending for health, education, and welfare -- on children and women are especially severe. In Africa in 2001, one person in three was chronically undernourished. Some of the people who are facing privation were internally displaced persons -- IDPs, some of whom have had to leave their homes because of development projects such as dams and roads, which are part of the efforts to expand the infrastructure of the continent.

In the United States, globalization of trade in agricultural products has seen an expansion in the use of child labor. Agricultural work is by far the most grueling and dangerous employment area in which children are involved regularly in the United States. About one half to two thirds of all children engaged in seasonal agricultural labor are paid less than minimum wage. Children are exposed to hazardous levels of toxins from pesticides and fertilizers used in the fields, and they have lower access than adults to medical assistance. Under the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA), children as young as 12 can work in the agricultural industry. Human Rights Watch, in a recent report² says that the Fair Labor Standard Act's bias against farm worker children amounts to *de facto* race-based discrimination, given the fact that an estimated 85 percent of migrant and seasonal farm workers in the U.S. are ethnic minorities. The children of farm workers often have lower access to educational and training opportunities than other children in the country.

² Human Rights Watch (2000) Fingers to the Bone: United States Failure to Protect Child Farm Workers. New York and Washington, D.C.: Human Rights Watch. P. 3.

Of the world's largest business interests, 51 are multinational corporations and 49 are nation-states. The World Trade Organization, a primary mechanism of economic globalization, has resisted the imposition of labor laws and environmental protection. The Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI), a set of trade rules that was negotiated in secret at meetings of the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development in Europe (OECD), forbids the use of investment criteria that includes consideration of the environmental, human rights, or labor records of nations or companies. The WTO, the OECD, and the European Union (EU) have attempted to get around the efforts of anti-globalization groups who have sought to have fair child and adult labor standards, environmental regulations, and occupational health and safety rules implemented.

Efforts are being made by a variety of organizations, some of them children's support groups such as the Children's Defense Fund, Save the Children Federation (SCF), the Children's Foundation, and the United Nations Children's Fund, and others broadly focused human rights groups such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, to promote the rights and well-being of children. In doing so, some of them stress what we might refer to as the three P's:

Provision,

Protection, and Participation. The Convention on the Rights of the Child and other international human rights conventions maintain that individuals have the rights to have their basic needs met -- the rights to security, shelter, food, clean water, education, health care, and recreation.

Children have the right to protection -- to be protected from harmful acts, including abuse, neglect, and exploitation. Finally, in terms of participation, children should have the right to be represented, to have their voices heard, and to have governments and organizations working with children are accountable for meeting the challenges facing children in today's society.

Young people today can make a difference. They can take part in organizations that work with children. They can volunteer to work with groups that focus attention on children, the homeless, immigrants, refugees, and people facing physical and mental challenges. They can learn about the issues facing children, and they can tell others about what they have learned. Young people can build careers around children's issues, study human rights in colleges and universities, and work with government and non-government organizations that work with and on behalf of children. By focusing on issues that affect children and other people, the youth of today will be able to have a lasting impact on society and make the world a better place in which to live.