

Child Labor: The Real Solution

by Sarah Rose Miller



What brand of clothing are you wearing right now? Where was your shirt made? Do you know what went into the making of your clothes? It could be the blood of a child, the sweat of a child, the tears of a child.

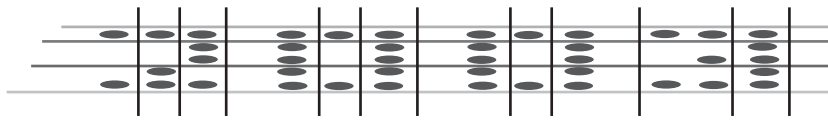
Now, as I read about child labor, I look down at the shirt I am wearing, a button-down blouse with leaf and flower designs weaving their way over the surface. I twist it around in an attempt to get a look at the tag, but the angle of vision is too awkward, and I have to take the shirt off before I can read the plain white print sewn into the tag: "100% Cotton Made in India."

As I slowly button the shirt back on, I think about what this means. India is a major home to child labor. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), an estimated 120 million children from the ages of five to fourteen work fulltime or more; of these, India is responsible for about 44 million. As likely as not, my shirt is the product of some unfortunate child forced by circumstances to work away his or her childhood in a sweatshop. My head or my heart—I can't tell which—gives a twinge to my conscience. However, I have a life to lead—I can't put it on hold while I go through my closet and throw out every item that reads "Made in India" or "Made in Honduras." For one thing, it is impossible to know for certain if an item was made by child labor; for another, what good would throwing it away do now? The child has already suffered from making it—it would do no good to refuse to wear it. How can I feel saddened and guilty every time I wear this shirt? On the other hand, how can I not?

Sweatshops aren't the only venue for child labor. According to Fran Röselaers, director of the International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labor (IPEC), a branch of the ILO, "Slavery, debt bondage, trafficking, sexual exploitation, the use of children in the drug trade and in armed conflict, as well as hazardous work are all defined as Worst Forms of Child Labour." Debt bondage, known also as bonded labor, is the most customary type of slavery found in the world today, most commonly imposed upon children because children are much easier to exploit than are adults. It is the most prevalent cause of child labor in India, where whole generations often become ensnared trying to repay a debt while the excessive interest rates (sometimes as high as 60 percent) keep increasing the amount owed. Sometimes, as with a young Indian girl whose story was presented on *60 Minutes II*, debt is incurred to save the life of the debtor. In the case of this girl, Shamshad, her family sold her labor for a \$25 loan in order to buy medicine to stop her seizures. As it usually takes years for a child to work off a \$25 debt, Shamshad kept her life but lost her liberty.

The most common type of debt bondage in India occurs from the home, usually in rolling bidis, a type of cigarette. The child usually has a daily quota to fulfill, and must turn the rolled bidis in to the employer at the end of each day. Other types of bonded labor occur inside factories. Clothing and other textiles, hand-knotted carpets, soccer balls, and bricks are just a few of the innumerable items fashioned behind factory walls under conditions of intense physical and mental stress.

Children may have other reasons for working in factories. One reason besides debt bondage is simple poverty; many poor families rely on their children to help provide for them. Mere lack of choice is another reason. Because India's public schools are in low repute, parents prefer that a child do something they consider useful.



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Employers prefer to use child labor mainly because it is cheap and easy to manage. On average, children are paid half the salary of adults, and they are much less troublesome. Employers also value the “nimble fingers” of children, believing that they can do fine work better and more efficiently than adults can. But the “nimble fingers” claim is just that—an empty claim; dexterity depends on the individual. On the other hand, the arguments that child labor is cheap and manageable have some validity—but other solutions can easily be found. If an employer had a crew composed half of children and half of adults, hiring only adults would seem cost prohibitive. If the increase in wages were extracted from the exporters, the decrease in profit would be so minimal as to be practically unnoticeable. The cost could also be charged to consumers, who would only have to pay about 2-5 percent more; few would be unwilling to do so. If all producers relied solely on adult labor, none would be at a comparative disadvantage. As to the notion of children being easier to control—is that really the basis upon which the issue of child labor should be decided? Emphatically not. The fact that children are more easily manipulated than adults should be a strike against child labor; manipulation of helpless children for self-gain is simply morally indefensible.

Yet child labor is by no means an easy question of right and wrong. For one thing, differences in culture must be examined. While modern western culture considers it cruel to put a young child to work, westerners have no qualms about forcing a child to sit behind a desk at school for seven hours a day, five days a week, from age five to eighteen. The point of this is education, to prepare children for the future by teaching the skills they will need. In cultures where job opportunities are less based on education (as in developing countries such as India), working in a factory is a way to learn a skill or trade. Who are we to say that our way is right and their way wrong? In a 1997 address to the International Conference on Child Labor in Oslo, Norway, Assefa Bequele propounded this unwarranted assumption that what is good for our culture is good for all cultures, stating, “We are all here for a common cause, and we dream the same dream, of a world where children are at school and not at work, doing homework and not building homes.” But we cannot make that decision for families in those countries where child labor is still rampant.

What we do have the right to judge, one country to another, one community to another, is whether child laborers are being treated fairly. In fact, the children’s working conditions are what should really be

scrutinized; anything else would be an imposition of western values on other cultures. Nor could we simply prohibit any child under the age of sixteen anywhere from being allowed to work. That would require the complete upheaval of social structures of cultures that have historically involved contributions of child workers. Fortunately, this isn’t the issue at hand. Equally fortunately, people of all cultures can agree that children—whether in school or on the job—deserve the best possible conditions and treatment.

Child labor is a complicated matter not only because it is a deeply ingrained tradition, but determining with certainty what exactly is happening where is difficult. When the U.S. Customs Service desires to investigate a company that exports products to the United States, it must obey the diplomatic protocol of warning the foreign government that it is launching an investigation. Yet that government can simply allow the Customs Service investigators into select factories that don’t employ child labor. Thus barring exhaustive searches which limited resources prohibit (and which would draw the resentment of the country being subjected to them), accurate and comprehensive conclusions are difficult to guarantee.

But enough has been discovered over the years to conclude that children are often placed in extremely hazardous areas such as mines and factories with exposure to toxic chemicals and poor ventilation systems. Children are often assigned positions operating heavy machinery designed for adults. Often they work twelve hour shifts or longer. All of this takes its toll on bodies not yet fully developed. Children who work under adverse conditions often end up stunted in growth, knock-kneed, deformed, or otherwise damaged for life. In girls, the pelvic area may not develop properly (forming a triangular shape, rather than the regular oval), which can lead to the eventual death of a baby the grown woman bears. Besides these long-term physical side effects, there are more immediate health concerns, such as on-site injuries (often with no option for medical attention) and physical and sexual abuse of children by the owner or adult in charge. The former can lead to hospitalization, debt, and more long years of work. The latter can cause deep emotional trauma and make it difficult for the child to emotionally connect with other people for years to come.

In 1999 the ILO adopted a new convention concerning child labor. Convention No. 182 necessitates an end to the “worst forms of child labour” in countries all over the world. Yet ILO officials say that this convention doesn’t replace No. 138, the minimum age convention adopted in 1973. Thus far, 132 nations out

of the 175 ILO member states have ratified Convention 182, and most of those that haven't plan to do so in the near future. Unfortunately, the ILO has little control over whether the factories in those nations that have ratified its conventions actually obey them.

The ILO has the right idea with Convention No. 182—the worst forms of child labor must be made an unreality. But the ILO is still aiming at the eventuality of having no child workers whatsoever. Priorities need to shift from the aim of eliminating child labor to the idea of imposing cruelty-free labor. Children should, in all fairness, be allowed the opportunity to work—many families need the money to simply stay alive. (In India, over a third of the people are unable to afford a proper diet.) And, after all, having children work is a very real part of numerous cultures, just as having a child schooled is a part of ours.

The way to bring about this change and to put an end to abuse, unfairness, and the extremely hazardous working conditions faced by children every day is through the consumer. The problem with Convention No. 182 is that it doesn't give individual factories or corporations an incentive to stop using and abusing children. The only thing that would give them that incentive would be a consumer movement. If consumers were to found a nonprofit organization to regulate child labor, companies would get the message that this movement had support. The organization could then start an independent agency to inspect fac-

tories and certify them as child-cruelty free. Companies that desired to sell their products under a child cruelty free label would give their business to those factories. They would pay a minimal membership fee for the independent agency to certify them and proclaim them a preferred company. This could add a very small percentage to the prices of their products, causing reservations. But increased sales to consumers eager to support decent conditions for children would more than offset such a minimal cost.

With a large consumer base buying only from companies certified to be child-cruelty free, this method will work. Surely there are enough people out there with a sense of humanity for this to be successful. The system would be similar to the organic movement—which has flourished. Consumers would pay a dollar or two more to wear a shirt they feel good about rather than being racked by guilt at the thought of what went into making it. It is a price that I would very willingly pay to ensure that children around the world no longer suffer the dangers and abuse which has so sadly become commonplace. It's such a small sacrifice to make to save the lives of so many. Wouldn't you gladly do the same?

Sarah Rose Miller of Bloomington, Minnesota, is seventeen years old. This essay placed first in the thirteen-to-seventeen-year-old age category of the 2003 Humanist Essay Contest for Young Women and Men of North America.

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