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Research report

Forum: The United Nations Childrens Fund

Issue: “Preventing the exploitation of child labor in
global supply chains to uphold children’s rights”

Student Officer: Arjun Srivastava

Position: Deputy Chair of UNICEF



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Model United Nations
Arnhem

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Introduction

In a world that countries rely heavily on other countries, global supply chains have become the stem for modern-day economics and commerce. Ranging from everything to electronics, to clothing to pharmaceuticals, these networks span across several countries, continents and go through immeasurable amounts of very different people. While globalization has no doubt brought about economic growth and innovations in commerce sectors, there is also another side to the story: the persistent use exploitation and use of child labour.

Accross every corner of the world there is evidence of products of child labour and use of child labour. According to a recent UNICEF report in 2024 “an estimated 137.7 million children were victims of child labour and 54 million of those were in a condition that the International Labour Organization (ILO) finds hazardous. Children as young as 4 years old are being forced into working in plantations, mines, factories, workshops and other unsafe and exploitative areas.. Like any other major world issue the root of child exploitation is very complex but often are: lack of quality education or education at all, weak legal systems, poverty and greed fueled by the pursuit of cheap labour by multinational corporations. In most cases child exploitation is not by choice but out of necessity or out of fear that there will not be enough support for families.

The biggest challenge to this issue is poverty. According to the World Bank an estimated 333 million children live in poverty, when times are tough for individuals they are forced into doing things they do not like and are potentially dangerous. Corporations also hide child labour in their supply chains under subcontracting, illegal employment, and cross border production leading to corporations to claim their ignorance and local governments not having the resources to do anything, have political will or corruption.

The exploitation of children is not only economic, legal or a social issue it is a human rights violation. It violated the Convention of the Rights of the Child, it undermines basic development goals and perpetuates the cycles of poverty, instability and poverty. UNICEF is the main UN body that is responsible to protect children's rights and wellbeing. UNICEF plays a significant role in addressing this crisis through diplomacy, advocacy and direct intervention. UNICEF works not just on preventing child exploitation but also ensuring that children have access to education, protection and a good future.

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Definitions of key terms

Child Labour

The act of employing labour from minors, exploiting them through any form of work that will deny them of their development and harm their physical, mental and social wellbeing

Supply Chain

The flow of goods and services that include all of the processes in between raw materials to the final destination.

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)

A model that keeps corporations that keeps them socially responsible and operate to help the world rather than degrade it.

Poverty Cycle

In economics, a cycle of poverty, poverty trap or generational poverty is when poverty seems to be inherited, preventing subsequent generations from escaping it.

Human Rights

Human rights are universally recognized moral principles or norms that establish standards of human behavior and are often protected by both national and international laws.

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General overview

Exploitation of children in supply chains is a very deep rooted issue, rooted in weak governmental systems, inequality particularly with race and gender, and economic desperation. This is all the consequence of a global economic system that can and does prioritize money and efficiency rather than human rights and dignity.

By 2021, International Labour Organization (ILO) and UNICEF estimated that around 160 million children worldwide are participating in child labour. Almost half of them are undertaking hazardous work, which is by either physically dangerous, psychologically damaging, or morally inappropriate work. A notable portion of this work is found in the supply chains that contribute to the world economy. Particularly in the:

- Agriculture: Cocoa, coffee, tea, cotton, palm oil
- Mining: Gold, cobalt, mica
- Textiles & Fashion: Garment factories in South and Southeast Asia
- Electronics: Cobalt mining in the DRC for lithium-ion batteries
- Construction & Brick Kilns in South Asia and the Middle East

From UNICEF and the International Labour Organization's Child Employment in 2021 estimate report, around 137.7 million of children were in full time with child work in physically and mentally damaging jobs. The sectors that employ mass child labour are:

- Agriculture: Cacao, Coffee, Tea, Cotton Palm Oil, Sugar
- Mining: Gold, Mica, Cobalt
- Textiles and Fashion: Clothing and Fashion factories in east and southeast asia
- Electronics: Cobalt mines in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Manufacturing in China
- Construction: In Africa, the Middle East, and Asia

More often than not children in these environments are exposed to near deadly conditions such as harmful chemicals, extreme climate, heavy labour and constant threats. Children are denied any sort of proper education, basic health services and many children live in a state of servitude. In almost all cases their work is unregistered, making it incredibly difficult to detect and stop violators.

Child exploitation in supply chains is not caused just by one problem but rather a highly intricate interconnected web of issues such as:

- Poverty and the Poverty cycle: Families in less fortunate nations often need rely on children's income just to survive

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- Lack of Education: Regions with underdeveloped education systems lead to people have to work manual labour contributing to the poverty cycle.
- Weak Legal Systems: Child labour is illegal in most nations but even in countries where child labour is illegal there may be weak legal systems due to lack of funds, and corruption
- Culture: In some East Asian and West African cultures children are encouraged to work and contribute to the family.
- Displacement: During times of conflict children can be displaced leading them to have to work just to survive or even in a lot of situation being captured and being forced to work as slaves
- Corporate Greed: The biggest incentives for employing minor is their cost, children are much cheaper labour than adults and will lead to greater margins for the company.

Supply chains by design are vast, decentralized chains that connect raw materials, processing, manufacturing, packaging and distribution. Companies outsource labour and manufacturing to several other nations at a much lower cost than their own home countries. Leading to contractors to employ illegal, informal and underage workers in little to no supervision.

A major clothing brand may buy their cotton from china, employ workers from bangladesh to manufacture, process, and package the product for the product to be sold in a department store in the Netherlands all of the processes prior to distribution can and does involve child labour.

Due to the immense complexity of these chains it leads to lots of gray space and companies claim ignorance. Even after audits and inspections the sheer complexity and greed for profit make the inspections useless leading to nothing.

While these children work away they are being deprived of a childhood and a healthy upbringing.

- Healthcare: Due to the poverty and the lack of pay children and their families get they cannot afford basic healthcare and due to the dangerous conditions children work in they often get injured.
- Education: Since the children are working a full time job they do not have time to obtain a formal education and break the poverty cycle.
- Protection from Harm: The conditions in which children work leaving more than 20,000 children to die and leaving hundreds of thousands of children to be severely injured. More than 54 million children are exposed to what the ILO deems to be dangerous working conditions.

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Major parties involved

United Nations Children's Fund

UNICEF is the main UN body to work on the rights of child. UNICEF protects childrens rights by actively promoting education, supporting families in need and being the biggest advocate against child labour. They work with governments and corporations to work against child labour by offering incentives and penalties. They work on funding education, schools and other socials services other than labour.

International Labour Organization

The ILO creates the international standard for labour regulations and helps lead efforts to stop child exploitation. They conduct inspections, create legal frameworks and partners with corporations to promote ethical global supply chains.

United Nations Development Programme

The UNDP is the main UN body tasked with combatting poverty, achieving sustainable economic growth and human development.

Timeline of Key Events

1992 the ILO creates the International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC) to fight against child labour through social and legal reforms

1989 The Conventions on the Rights of a Child is adopted

1999 the ILO establishes Convention 182, to eliminate the worst kinds of child labour and hazardous work conditions in supply chains

2014 The ILO and UNICEF release toolkits thay guide businesses to be more child friendly

2021 UN declares 2021 as the elimination year for child labour to reach their goal of ending it by 2025

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Previous attempts to solve the issue

Possibly the first global effort to eliminate child labour came from the ILO which created conventions like ILO convention No. 138 on the minimum age (1973) and Convention No. 182 on the worst forms of child labour (1999). These were legally binding through international law to set age limits and stop corporations from allowing children to work in hazardous conditions creating a strong base for laws later down the line.

During the early 2000's several campaigns were released for corporate responsibility, leading to IGO's to create initiatives like the UN's Global Compact and the OECD's Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises. Corporations started to audit supply chains, certifications (the most notable being Fairtrade) and tightening rules to ensure they did not use child labour.

Organizations like UNICEF, Save the Children, World Bank, and the ILO have launched programmes to address the root causes of child labour (eg. lack of education, poverty and economic vulnerability). UNICEF's Child Labour Platform and the ILO's International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour have attempted to combat these issues through monetary assistance, aiding education access and raising awareness to reduce the need for child labour.

Possible solutions

UNICEF often aids corporations to get out of using child labour but not as much as they can. UNICEF can encourage multinational corporations to sign pledges to make sure that the roles in their supply chains are ethical, child free and transparent by providing guidelines, conducting audits and positive consequences when they comply.

UNICEF can launch more campaigns on national and international levels in high risk areas to raise more awareness on child labour and its harm to society. This could involve school programmes, education through various media platforms and collaborations with figures to end child labour.

UNICEF could develop frameworks to report on corporations to share their supply chain details and audit corporations in exchange for positive compensation.

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