

Child labor social problem

[Science](#), [Social Science](#)



Child Labor

Perhaps the most vulnerable socio-demographic groups in any society of the world comprise children, senior citizens, the physically and mentally disabled, refugees of war and civil strife among others. Among these many groups the vulnerability of children gets compounded owing to their cognitive inability to understand their own victimization and insufficient safeguards to prevent the violation of child rights. Child labor is one of the chief social problems that our society faces in contemporary times. The question at the heart of this issue is an ethical one, however it has several complex facets, a discussion of which is instrumental to any critical probing of the issue.

It is relevant here to allude to Barbara McKinnon's seminal work *Ethics: Theory and Contemporary Issues* wherein the author studies contemporary moral debates in conjunction with dominant ethical theories. One can apply the theories of both Intrinsic Good and Instrumental Good in a debate arguing against child labor. While the former argues that child labor is ethically incorrect since it leads to the exploitation of an arguably defenseless section of the society, the latter states that the burdening children with work inappropriate for their physical and psychological development shall also stunt the growth of the individual child and thus of the nation (McKinnon, 2010).

Modern ethics can be broadly divided into two approaches- the consequentialist and the deontological. While the consequentialist approach may be defined as one “ which holds that the evaluation of outcomes or

states of affairs is more fundamental than the evaluation of actions”, the deontological theory opposes the claims of consequentialism and posits that “ the notions of rightness and wrongness” are as fundamental to individual and collective decision making processes as the larger repercussions of actions (Utilitarianism, 2012). Interestingly, both these seemingly oppositional theories can be employed for a critique of child labor. While as per the notions of consequentialism, child labor may be said to crush the future human resources of the economy, the ethical underpinnings of child labor and its role in causing great and irrevocable harm to its victims as well as the social fabric of a nation may be viewed vis-à-vis the deontological approach.

It is crucial to bear in mind that not all instances of child employment can be characterized as child labor. The most common cause of child labor is poverty and economic deprivation. It is thus necessary to cognizance of the factors which contribute to the employment of underage children before one dismisses the phenomenon as simply morally incorrect based on naïve didacticism. It is important for the state to provide socio-economic amelioration to underprivileged families to ensure that their children are not forced to work in their formative years. Additionally the state should provide measures such as free and fair education, minimum wage employment and safe housing schemes to check the growth of child labor. Very often it becomes necessary for children from underprivileged socio-economic backgrounds to take up jobs which help supplement their family’s income to a certain extent. Similarly, children who show promise in sports or the performing arts may be encouraged to participate in the relevant spheres

from very early ages. However, any work which causes physical or mental agony to children or is obtained by coercive means and hinders their overall development amounts to child labor. In most democratic nations of the world such forms of employment are deemed both legally and morally unfitting. Child labor makes poverty a vicious cycle within families and communities. It can be well said that it is both a source and a result of practices of socio-economic discrimination. Studies show that children from historically underprivileged groups are more likely not to complete their formal education for the sake of employment. The steps for eradicating child labor can broadly be said to be two-fold, the first being to tackle the root of the problem, that is to view it as a human rights issue and thus establish clear legal provisions for preventing and penalizing it and the second one being to spread awareness regarding the pitfalls of child labor in order to change the widespread social complacency regarding it. For instance, UNICEF, which is the single largest organization upholding the cause of children's rights, employs a number of methods such as assisting " communities in changing their cultural acceptance of child labor, while supporting strategies and programming to provide alternative income to families, access to nurseries, quality education and protective services." (Child protection from violence, exploitation and abuse, 2011)

Yet another dimension of the issue can be analyzed from the perspective of the justice approach. The justice theory of ethics " uses universal principles such as reciprocity and equality of human rights and respect for the dignity of all human beings as individual persons" (White & Taft, 2004). Thus in the social framework that this theory puts forth, all individuals have moral

sovereignty within the bounds of certain broad rules, regulations and obligations. Perhaps it is child labor being perceived as a norm that is necessary to eliminate from societies across the world. It is crucial to bear in mind that while parents are the custodians of children till they come of age, the state must also expressly provide for the rights of children as equal citizens of the country in such a way that no individual, including their parents or legal guardians, can jeopardize their right to life and liberty. Thus one may conclude by observing that child labor is a grave malaise of contemporary societies. While various legal and sociological measures may be employed to understand and tackle it, the heart of the issue is essentially ethical.