

Poverty



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Arguments as to whether poverty is the cause of child labor or child labor causes poverty has been circulating all through out the globe in the past decades. Although child labor is prevalent in many countries, particularly affected with child labor are countries in the Third World or the so-called poorest sections in the globe. In the Philippines, child labor has been recognized as one of the most serious social problems as 12.8 percent of the total number of families had working children between the age of five to seventeen years old.

The Department of Labor and Employment has acknowledged that there are at least five million children working in commercial and industrial sectors of the Philippines. These figures correspond with the figures estimated by the ILO and UNICEF which is about 5 to 5.7 million working children. Incidents of child labor are reflections or indications of the critical level in the country that many of the Filipino children had to find work in 2001. Most of these children working are male ages 10 to 17 years old, unskilled and unpaid.

In the Philippines, a child is a person below the age of emancipation which is 18 years old. The term “child” acquired a new meaning with the re-enactment of Republic Act 7610 in 1992 or the Child Protection Law. This law has expanded its definition of children as “persons below eighteen (18) years of age or those over but are unable to fully take care of themselves or protect themselves from abuse, neglect, cruelty, exploitation or discrimination because of a physical or mental disability or condition. (IPEC Phils). Nonetheless, despite having an expanded definition of the term child, child labor on the other hand has been defined and interpreted in different ways. In a general sense, child labor may be defined as the involvement of

children in a variety of work situations whether regular or not in order to learn a livelihood for themselves and their families.

The ILO-IPEC defines child labour as " work situations where children are compelled to work on a regular basis to earn a living for themselves and their families, and as a result are disadvantaged educationally and socially; where children work in conditions that are exploitative and damaging to their health and to their physical and mental development; where children are separated from their families, often deprived of educational and training opportunities; where children are forced to lead prematurely adult lives. (IPEC Phils). Children in the Philippines have been found to work in various sectors of the Philippine industry.

The garment industry is a common site of children working or which uses child labor in order to manufacture products for the United States. Child labor is allegedly found in wood and rattan furniture making and in gold mining, but further research is required. In addition, there are reports of child labor in food processing (including sardine canning), fireworks/pyrotechnics, footwear, plastic bags, and so-called " muroami fishing", but there is little evidence that these items are exported to the United States with any regularity.

There are no statistics on the number of child workers in Filipino export industries. Moreover, child workers are also found in sectors of metal and mining industry, worked as domestic helpers, street vendors and even illegal trades such as prostitution and bonded labor where children are used as payment of debt, usually incurred by the parents. Children are forced in labor or work primarily because of poverty and dire economic conditions.

Most often, the children work in order to augment the family's income or to help their parents to satisfy their basic requirements such as food, clothing and education.

Usually, the parents of these children are unemployed, hence, in order to survive, children must work as well. It does not help that Filipino traditions dictate that the family must work as one solid unit wherein children help out their parents with chores even at a young age in order to compensate the child's economic burden to the family. Such is seen as "training" of the children for jobs in the future.

While poverty is the primary reason why children are forced to work, failure in education prevails as the second factor why the number of children engaged in labor has risen. Parents especially in rural areas would rather send their children to work instead of sending them to school because of there are no schools within a reasonable distance to the family abode or the wages that the child brings to the family would help the family greatly and the parents could not just afford sending the child to school.

Furthermore, the demand for child workers has continued to rise especially that employers know the advantages of employing children. Employment and hiring of children are considerably cheaper and they can be easily replaced at a fraction of adults' wages. The International Labor Organization has been the primary organization which works to address or solve this recurring social problem in the Philippines. It is a UN specialized agency which seeks to promote social justice and internationally recognized human and labor rights, create employment opportunities and improve working conditions around the world.

Among its principal means of action in addressing problems relating to labor include: supervision of international standards, provision of technical assistance, research and dissemination of information. The ILO has been particularly concerned with the rise of child labor in the Philippines because it has seen that the child labor has become a major economic and societal problem that requires a far more vigorous and active stance from the government.

Child labor, if left untreated and solved would result in dismal and catastrophic results for the country. Child labor not only jeopardizes the children's potential to become productive adults, it will ultimately undermine the country's economic and societal developments. Since poverty can be considered as the root cause of child labor and the ILO recognizes this fact, the organization has adopted a "two pronged approach" to the problem.

In 1994, as the Philippines participated in the International Labor Organization-International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labor together with representatives from various local NGOs and government agencies which formulated an agenda of action attacking child labor in the Philippines. The IPEC was responsible in giving the ILO new drive in its campaign against child labor. The programme operates in three continents and in more than 20 countries, including Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Pakistan, the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Thailand; preparatory activities are well under way in China and Mongolia.

By strengthening the capability of individual countries to deal with the problem, while promoting a worldwide movement to combat child labour, IPEC aims at the phased elimination of child labour. (IPEC Phils) The resulting

agenda which was adopted by the Philippines, set out priority target groups for action, among which are victims of trafficking and bonded labour, children in home-based industries, children in mining and quarrying, and children trapped in prostitution.

Priority areas of action for the IPEC programme were also identified as follows: direct action on protection, removal and rehabilitation of children from dangerous occupations; awareness-raising; legislation and law enforcement; and capability building. (IPEC Phils) However, despite the efforts of the ILO to enforce and eliminate child labor in the Philippines, the problem still continues to persist as this social problem is already rooted deep in the Philippine system and society.

As mentioned earlier, since poverty is underlying cause of child labor, there has to be frontal attack on the full-time work at the cost of education. Instead of focusing in stopping the participation of children in labor, the Philippine government and the ILO is seeking to eliminate the risks of children in work places. This approach adopted by the ILO will certainly accommodate the poverty factor that is present in the Philippines as well as maintaining the families' survival at the same time ensuring that children are nonetheless protected.

In order to do this, the ILO in cooperation with the Philippine government has to provide other measures that would not only support existing schemes such as social welfare services to need families and income generating livelihood projects in order to support the families' income. Moreover, preventive measures must also be adopted in order to address the problem of child labor in the Philippines. For example, activities that are aimed to

educate the general public, policy makers, families, employers and the children themselves about the hazards and evils of child labor must also be intensified.

The ILO must also lobby for more legislative action in the Philippine government so as to give way for the possibility of ratification of international conventions or the amendment of existing labor laws to make them conform to international standards. New child labor laws that are enforceable and realistic must also be considered as well in order for law enforcement agencies to implement and regulate them while the general public are also given correct interpretation of existing child labor laws.

Despite the efforts of organizations such as the ILO and strategies as well as laws are already in place, the problem of child labor will continue to be a pressing social problem in the Philippines. They still have a long way to go in order to save the children in bondage of child labor. Only through continued vigilance, promotion of the rights of child workers and knowledge of existing laws and legislations will help in the eradication of child labor in the Philippines.