



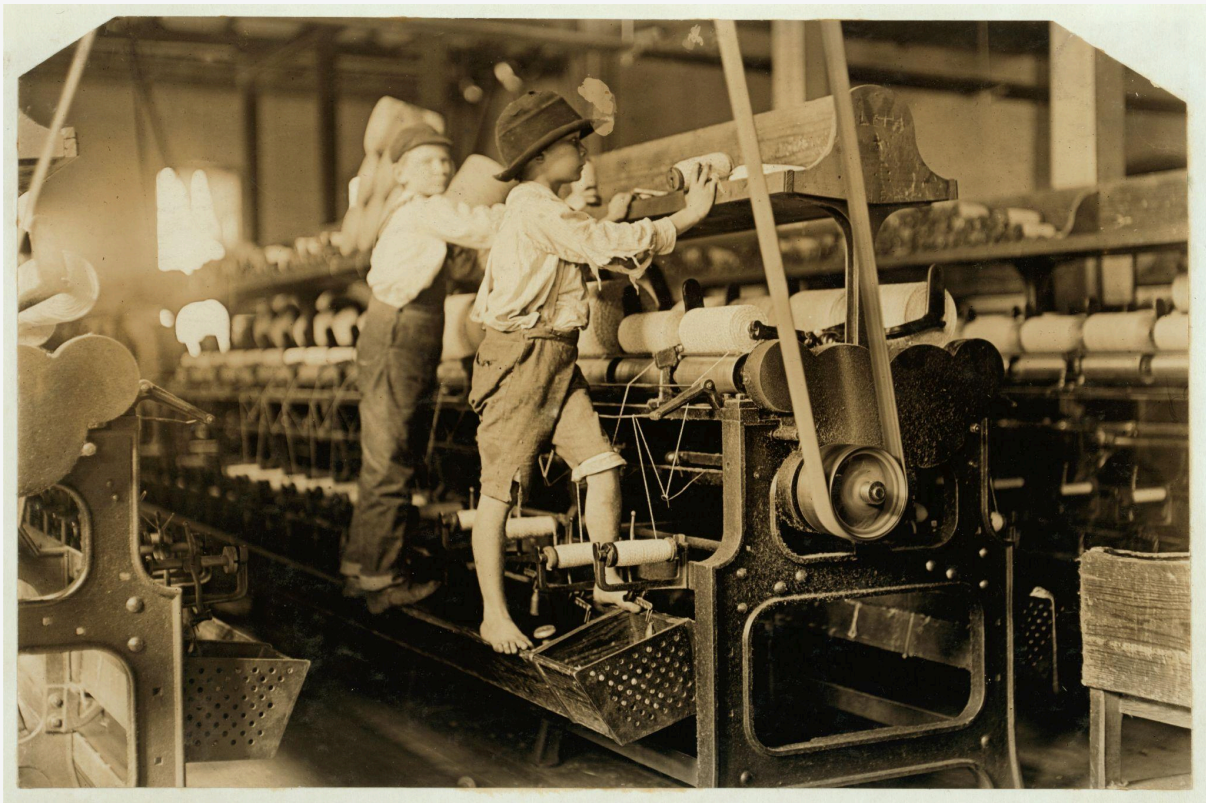
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# Combatting Child Labour in Production Chains of Multi-National Corporations

*Special Conference 2 (SPC2)*





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## Introduction

Child labor remains a pervasive and deeply troubling issue in the production chains of multinational corporations, reflecting systemic inequalities and exploitative practices embedded in the global economy. Across the globe, an estimated 160 million children are trapped in work; many in dangerous jobs that harm their bodies, crush their spirits, and deny them an education. These children work in industries integral to multinational supply chains, such as agriculture, mining, textiles, and manufacturing, where they face grueling hours, minimal pay, and unsafe conditions.

At the heart of this issue is poverty. Families in poor communities are often forced to rely on their children's labor just to survive. Meanwhile, weak laws and poor enforcement allow companies to look the other way as children are exploited in supply chains. This cycle of hardship doesn't just harm individual children. It keeps entire families and communities trapped in poverty, unable to build a better future.

Addressing this multifaceted problem requires a concerted effort from governments, corporations, international organizations, and civil society. By fostering greater transparency in production processes, supporting economic alternatives for vulnerable communities, and strengthening regulatory frameworks, the international community can take meaningful steps toward eradicating child labor. Through these measures, we can ensure that the rights and well-being of children are protected, paving the way for a more equitable and sustainable future.



## Definition of key terms

### *Bonded Labour*

A form of modern slavery where children are forced to work to repay family debts.

### *Child Labour*

The employment of children in an industry or business, especially when illegal or considered exploitative.

### *Economic Exploitation*

Unfair use of individuals, especially children, for financial gain, often involving low pay, poor conditions, or forced labor.

### *Minimum Age of Employment*

The legally set age below which employment of a child is prohibited.

### *Social Protection*

Systems and programs that provide financial support and services to reduce poverty and prevent families from relying on child labour.

### *Supply Chain Accountability*

Businesses' responsibility to ensure ethical practices by preventing child labour in all stages of production.

### *Supply Chain Transparency*

The practice of providing clear and verifiable information about the origins, working conditions, and sustainability of products.



## General Overview

### *Problems at the Workplace*

The involvement of children in labor is a distressing reality, particularly when it comes at the expense of their education and personal development. These workplaces are often fraught with safety hazards, excessive workloads, minimal pay, and superiors who impose unrealistic expectations.

An adequate workplace, a workplace that many are privileged to have, is not meant to interfere with personal life. According to health and occupational codes, an adequate workplace should provide welfare facilities, including enough toilets and washbasins, access to drinking water, and a suitable place to rest and eat meals. Additionally, it should also offer a healthy working environment with a clean workspace, comfortable temperature, good ventilation, proper lighting, sufficient space, and suitable seating.

### *~ Heavy Workload*

The international average of working hours in an OECD country in 2023 for an adult is 36 hours per week. In a book titled “Life and Death of the American Worker; the immigrants’ taking on America’s largest meat packing company”, victims of child labour of Tyson Foods – the largest meat packing company in the USA – revealed that they worked shifts exceeding 12 hours, 6 days a week. Some of these child victims being as young as 13, were working double the time an adult would in their country. The work was not only excessively long but also physically exhausting, involving repetitive operation of machinery, handling harmful chemicals, and processing meat.

Unfortunately, there are other similar case studies to this of the victims of Tyson Foods. Big companies exploit, manipulate and pressure children to perform demanding work with demanding hours. This constitutes a severe violation of human rights, as heavy workloads can have both immediate and long-term effects, particularly for children of such vulnerable ages.

### *~ Underpaid Labour*

Continuing with the same case study on the meat industry in the USA, victims also revealed they were severely underpaid, earning just \$2.25 for every thousand chickens processed. This wage is not hourly and falls well below the minimum wage in the USA. Many plants owned by multinational corporations exploit cheap labor, with some even resorting to forms of modern-day slavery to reduce costs.

In most cases, child laborers work to support their families. However, when they are underpaid, this goal becomes unattainable. Furthermore, the valuable hours spent working could instead be invested in education, which would ultimately provide greater long-term benefits for the children.



### *~ Safety Hazards*

Examples of child labor can be seen in many work settings, including agriculture, the mining industry, and the textile industry. This line of work often involves exposure to hazardous conditions such as harmful chemicals, heavy machinery, explosive means, and toxic metals. In the agricultural sector, children frequently handle pesticides without adequate protective gear, leading to: respiratory issues, skin disorders, and long-term health struggles. Similarly, children working in the mining industry are exposed to heavy metals like mercury and uranium, which can accumulate in the body over time, causing severe health problems such as kidney failure, neurological disorders, and chronic fatigue.

Safety hazards pose a significant risk to both the physical and mental well-being of children. Beyond the immediate dangers of injuries or toxic exposure, the psychological impact of enduring high-pressure work environments, often coupled with verbal abuse or exploitation, can result in anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Many children in such settings describe feelings of despair and emotional turmoil, stemming from the loss of a normal childhood and the constant demands placed upon them.

Furthermore, the lack of access to proper medical care worsens the long-term effects of their injuries or illnesses. The widespread neglect of safety measures, combined with the disregard for the welfare of these young workers, highlights how child labor constitutes a severe violation of fundamental human rights.

### *Transparency in Product Origins*

In today's globalised market, consumers are more conscious of the ethical, environmental, and quality aspects of the products they purchase, leading to a demand for clear information about a product's journey from raw materials to the final product. Ensuring transparency in a product's origins has therefore become a necessity. Consumers have the right to know what the products they consume come from.

To ensure product transparency, the producer must provide detailed information of each stage of the production process; sourcing, manufacturing and distribution. In most cases, child labour occurs in the sourcing stage of the production process. The issue is particularly acute in sectors such as agriculture and mining. In previous cases, companies have received backlash and possibly legal repercussions for not adhering the moral and legal code.

In December 2024, it was revealed that Nestlé—a Swiss multinational food and beverage conglomerate—sourced coffee beans from farms in Yunnan, China, that utilise child labor. Major corporations like Nestlé and Starbucks claim their roasted coffee beans come from certified farms, but this assertion is flawed. Due to a lack of contractual relations between coffee firms, certified estates and coffee farms, these companies have failed to meet their sustainability goals.





By presenting a false narrative – claiming that the coffee beans are being sourced ethically and legally – multinational corporations mislead consumers and profit from cheap child labor. When companies fail to be transparent, consumers unintentionally make choices that conflict with their personal ethics.

### *Impact on Children*

With labour comes hard work, time and effort. All of which are items that can be worn out over time. There is only so much time, especially during the youth. A traumatic childhood can ultimately negatively impact the course of one's life; in health, career paths and overall well-being. Therefore, it is important that these vulnerable yet precious years are preserved and shielded from distress and trauma.

### *~ Education*

Between the ages of 4 and 18, students typically complete their primary and secondary education, gaining knowledge that can shape their future careers; careers that often promise financial stability. Without these primary and secondary education, the future is filled with uncertainty.

“I have helped my father every day for about two years. I studied until sixth grade in school. I left school to help my father because he couldn't do the work anymore. He was sick... I regret leaving school. I would have liked to have gone to school to become smarter. I would like to become a teacher.” (Amnesty International Ireland, 2016).

The testimony above is from a 14-year-old who regrets leaving school, recognising how it derailed his dream of becoming a teacher. Although he understood the consequences of his decision, he felt he had no other choice. When individuals are forced into situations without alternatives, their decisions are not voluntary but compelled. In this case study, the world lost a potential teacher. Over time, such losses accumulate, profoundly affecting economic and social dynamics.

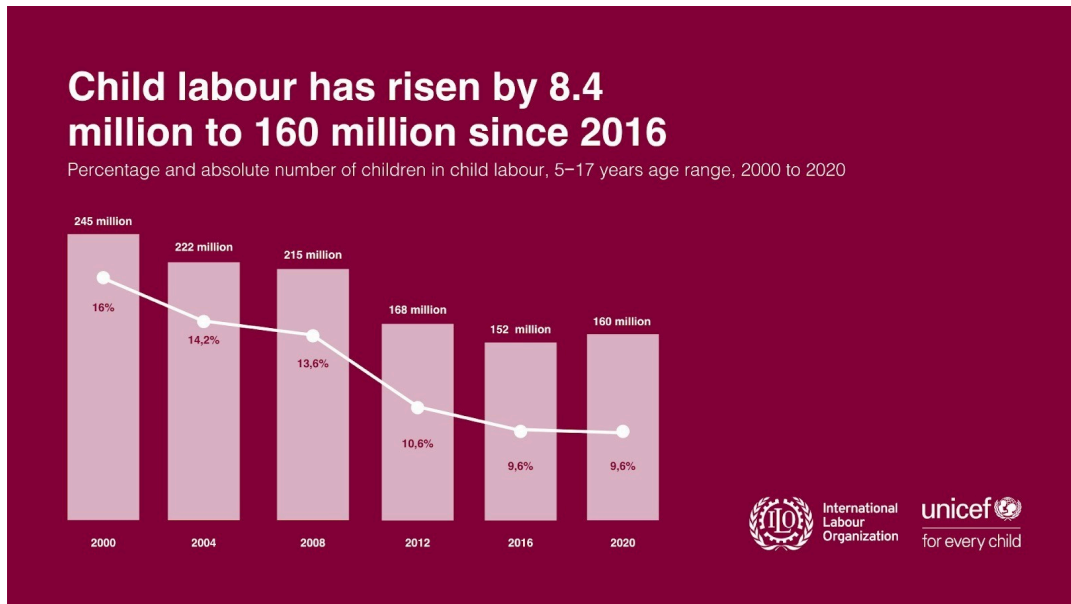
### *~ Upbringing*

Child labour disrupts the emotional and psychological development of children, robbing them of nurturing experiences like play, exploration, and social connections. Forced into adult responsibilities, they often face stress and exploitation, which can distort their sense of self-worth and hinder healthy emotional growth.

Without a supportive upbringing, these children may carry feelings of fear, resentment, or hopelessness into adulthood, affecting their ability to build relationships or trust. Protecting childhood is vital not just for the individual's well-being, but for creating a society where they can thrive and contribute meaningfully.

### Statistics on Child Labour

A total of *160 million children* (63 million girls and 97 million boys) are in child labour globally, accounting for almost *10% of all children worldwide*. Nearly half of all those in child labour, 79 million children in absolute terms; are in hazardous work that directly endangers their health, safety, and moral development.



The image above shows the statistics from the years 2000 to 2020. Though there has been an decline from 2000 to 2016, child labour increased by 8.4 million from 2016 to 2020. As of 2024, the global situation regarding child labor continues to be concerning. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO) and UNICEF, approximately 160 million children are involved in child labor worldwide.





## Major parties involved

### *International Labour Organization (ILO)*

The ILO has been a global leader in advocating for the elimination of child labour. Established in 1919, the ILO introduced Convention No. 138 on the Minimum Age for Employment and Convention No. 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour, both critical frameworks for global action. The organisation monitors and reports on child labour trends and works with governments, corporations, and civil society to implement targeted programs. It is committed to ensuring that multinational corporations adhere to international labour standards throughout their supply chains.

### *United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF)*

UNICEF focuses on children's rights and welfare, advocating for the removal of children from exploitative labour and providing educational opportunities to reduce economic dependence on child labour. The organisation collaborates with governments and corporations to create safer supply chains by identifying and addressing risks to children. Its programs include promoting corporate social responsibility and fostering community-based initiatives to empower families economically. UNICEF's historical role as an advocate for children positions it as a key actor in eliminating child labour in production chains.

### *Fairtrade International*

As an NGO and certification body, Fairtrade International aims to ensure ethical practices in global supply chains, including the elimination of child labour. It sets stringent standards for participating producers and traders, requiring regular audits to verify compliance. The Fairtrade system empowers small-scale farmers and workers by offering better wages and ensuring transparency, thus reducing the economic pressures that lead to child labour. Fairtrade has been a pioneer in raising consumer awareness about ethical sourcing.

### *India*

As a country, India is central to the fight against child labour in multinational supply chains due to its status as a major exporter of textiles, footwear, and agricultural goods. While the government has enacted laws like the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Amendment Act, enforcement remains inconsistent. India's economy, which heavily relies on informal labour, creates challenges in eradicating child labour entirely. Furthermore, India has partnered with organizations like the ILO and UNICEF to address these issues through initiatives like the National Child Labour Project.



## Timeline of events

**2000** International Labour Organization (ILO) launches the "International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour" (IPEC), focusing on raising awareness and eliminating child labour from global supply chains.

**2002 March 3rd** The ILO adopts Convention No. 182, urging countries to take immediate action to eliminate the worst forms of child labour, particularly in industries related to multinational production chains.

**2006 October 16th** The United Nations Global Compact releases a report urging multinational corporations to commit to human rights standards, including the prohibition of child labour in their supply chains.

**2010 June 11th** The UK Modern Slavery Act is introduced, which includes provisions for businesses to disclose their efforts in eradicating child labour from their supply chains.

**2013 May 22nd** The ILO releases a study highlighting the continuing prevalence of child labour in global supply chains, especially in sectors like agriculture, mining, and textiles.

**2016 February 10th** The European Union implements the "EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy," which includes guidelines for corporations to prevent child labour in their supply chains.

**2018 November 6th** The UN launches the "Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights," reinforcing the responsibility of businesses to respect human rights and eliminate child labour in production processes.

**2020 June 15th** Companies like Apple and Nestlé announce new commitments to traceability in their supply chains, using technology to track and eliminate child labour.

**2023 March 8th** The EU introduces new legislation requiring large companies to conduct due diligence in their supply chains to prevent child labour, marking a major step in holding multinational corporations accountable.



## Relevant UN treaties and events

### ***ILO Convention No. 138: Minimum Age Convention, 26 June 1973***

This convention established the minimum age for employment, setting a foundation for global efforts to combat child labour. It mandates that the minimum age should not be less than the age of completion of compulsory schooling and, in general, not less than 15 years. Exceptions are allowed for developing nations under specific circumstances.

### ***ILO Convention No. 182: Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 17 June 1999***

This pivotal convention targets the elimination of the worst forms of child labour, including slavery, trafficking, and hazardous work. It obligates ratifying nations to take immediate and effective measures to eradicate such practices, with particular focus on supply chains where exploitation is prevalent.

### ***United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs), 16 June 2011***

Adopted by the UN Human Rights Council, these principles outline corporate responsibility to respect human rights, including the prevention of child labour in global supply chains. They encourage due diligence processes and transparency in business practices to mitigate child labour risks.

### ***Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 8.7: UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, 25 September 2015***

This target commits countries to eradicate forced labour, end modern slavery and human trafficking, and secure the prohibition and elimination of child labour in all forms by 2025. Multinational corporations are key stakeholders in achieving these objectives through ethical sourcing and responsible business practices.

### ***A/RES/73/327: Resolution on Protecting the Rights of the Child, 12 July 2019***

This UN General Assembly resolution reaffirms global commitments to ending child labour in all its forms, emphasizing the importance of international cooperation and multi-stakeholder partnerships to address the root causes and enhance protections for children.



## Previous attempts to solve the issue

### *India's Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Amendment Act (2016)*

This amendment banned the employment of children below 14 years in all occupations except for family businesses and entertainment under certain conditions. It also prohibited adolescents (14-18 years) from working in hazardous industries. The act strengthened penalties for violations and expanded the scope of child labour regulations. However, loopholes allowing family-based work have drawn criticism for perpetuating hidden child labour.

### *The Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh (2013)*

While initially targeting safety issues following the Rana Plaza collapse, this legally binding agreement indirectly addressed child labour by requiring transparent and ethical practices in garment supply chains. It obligated multinational brands sourcing from Bangladesh to improve factory standards and worker rights, reducing exploitative conditions that foster child labour.

### *California Transparency in Supply Chains Act (2010)*

This law requires companies doing business in California with revenues exceeding \$100 million to disclose efforts to eradicate slavery and human trafficking, including child labour, from their supply chains. Although limited to one state, the act set a precedent for corporate transparency laws globally.

### *ILO-IPEC (International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour)*

The ILO-IPEC program was designed to support countries in developing national action plans to eliminate child labour, with a focus on the worst forms of exploitation. It has provided technical and financial assistance to over 90 countries. Projects included awareness campaigns, strengthening enforcement mechanisms, and building educational infrastructure to reduce dependency on child labour. Despite significant achievements, the program faced challenges in addressing informal sector employment where child labour is most prevalent.



## Possible solutions

At the core of this issue is the economic vulnerability of families in developing regions, compounded by weak enforcement of labor laws and a lack of corporate accountability. Companies often exploit gaps in supply chain oversight, sourcing raw materials or components from contractors who employ children under illegal or unethical circumstances.

### *Stricter Penalties*

Seeing as there is a pattern in the quantity of child labour in developing countries, it is safe to say that this is a place to start when combatting child labour internationally. Developing countries lack certain regulations and the resources to uphold such regulations. Corporations make use of these loopholes, however, it is possible to close them.

By implementing stricter guidelines, increasing oversight of the production process, and forming organisations dedicated to monitoring and supporting ethical labor practices, it is possible to create a significant shift in how child labor is addressed in developing countries.

### *Transparency and Ethical Certification*

A lack of transparency in supply chains makes it easier for child labor to go unnoticed, allowing unethical practices to continue. Many companies do not carefully monitor their suppliers, which creates opportunities for child labor to persist. However, this issue can be addressed by requiring companies to follow stricter transparency rules.

By making corporations publicly share detailed reports about their supply chains and undergo regular third-party inspections, it would become easier for governments, organisations, and consumers to hold them accountable. An international certification system could also be introduced to reward companies that follow ethical practices. These certifications would help consumers make better-informed choices and encourage companies to avoid using child labor.

### *Campaigning for Ethical Shopping*

Since consumer demand greatly influences how multinational corporations behave, refusing to buy products from companies that use child labor can be a powerful tool for change. When people stop supporting unethical brands, it puts financial pressure on those companies to improve their practices. But for these boycotts to work, they need to be combined with efforts to spread awareness.

Global campaigns can help educate consumers about which brands are connected to child labor and highlight ethical alternatives. Governments and NGOs could create public databases that rate companies based on their labor practices, making it easier for shoppers to make informed choices. At the same time, businesses that follow fair labor rules could receive tax benefits or marketing support as a reward, further encouraging ethical purchasing.



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