



CHILD LABOR IN THE MINING INDUSTRY

By Sister Joan Pikiell

Millions of children work to help their families in ways that are neither harmful nor exploitative. However, UNICEF estimates that around 150 million children aged 5-14 in developing countries, about 16% of all children in this age group, are involved in harmful child labor.

UNICEF classifies child laborers as those either too young to work or involved in hazardous activities that may compromise their physical, mental, social, or educational development.

The prevalence of child labor is highest in sub-Saharan Africa. In the least developed countries, around one in four children (ages 5 to 17) are engaged in labor that is considered detrimental to their health and development.

Children are used for coal mining, because their small stature makes them “perfect” for the small, narrow tunnels. These children also suffer from the risk of tunnels collapsing and poisoning from methane gas build-up.

Gems and precious metals are also mined using child labor. In Ghana’s gold mines, thousands of children risk brain damages from exposure to the mercury used the process. Spinal damage, respiratory disease, and injuries from mine collapse and sharp tools are also common consequences. Children are susceptible to these same dangers when mining for silver in Bolivia, sapphires in Madagascar, diamonds in Angola, or rubies in Tanzania, Kenya, or Vietnam.

Another industry that utilizes child labor is rock mining. In Sierra Leone, for example, children break granite rocks into gravel. The gravel is used in construction to make cement.

An industrious rock crusher can fill about 10 skillet sized pans per week at 30 U.S. cents per pan. Gravel mining is a hopeless existence with no prospects for improvement. It’s also dangerous as children often miss the rocks and hammer their toes or shins. Often gravel shards hit their eyes and cut their faces.

This summer, the world watched prayerfully for an international rescue team to come to the aid of 12 soccer players aged 11-16 stuck in a cave for 18 days. Imagine what could be accomplished if this type of international humanitarian effort went into addressing the needs of children stuck every day, for years on end, as child laborers in the mining industry.

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