



# Just ACT

School Sisters of Notre Dame

Atlantic-Midwest Province

JPIC Office

September 2018

## Social Justice Resource

### *Child Labor, Illiteracy, and Poverty: A Tragic Cycle*

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#### EXPERIENCE

Alejandra, 12 years old, helps to support her parents and seven younger siblings by working fourteen hours every day collecting small mollusks in a mangrove swamp in El Salvador. She smokes cigars to repel the rampant mosquitos. "Alejandra ... has no time to go to school or play with other children. Anyway, she prefers not to play with other children because they say she smells bad and exclude her from their games."<sup>1</sup>

Evelyn Benèch of Haiti was 10 years old when she was trafficked into restavèk slavery. Her parents, too poor to sustain her, sent her to live with a family in Port-au-Prince. The family promised to foster Evelyn and provide her with an education and care, but, instead, abused her and forced her into domestic servitude.<sup>2</sup>

Dario, a 16-year-old in the U.S., recalls the grueling and physically debilitating experience of working on a tobacco farm in Kentucky: "You get tired. It takes the energy out of you. You get sick, but then you have to go right back to the tobacco the next day."<sup>3</sup> As his counterpart in Georgia, Elena (13), states, "I would barely eat anything because I wouldn't get hungry. ... Sometimes I felt like I needed to throw up. ... I felt like I was going to faint. I would stop and just hold myself up with the tobacco plant."<sup>4</sup>

Masuda, a 14-year-old Rohingya girl, describes the effect of being forced into sex work after the

disappearance of her family: "I used to play in the forest with my brother and sister. Now I don't remember how to play."<sup>5</sup>

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These heartbreaking stories are not unusual. Today, more than 150 million children – one in ten, globally – are performing child labor.<sup>6</sup> Worse still, of the 40 million people currently in slavery, one in four is a child.<sup>7</sup>

#### ANALYSIS

According to the International Labor Organization (ILO), "The term 'child labour' is often defined as work that deprives children of their childhood, their potential and their dignity, and that is harmful to physical and mental development."<sup>8</sup> This includes work that interferes in any way with their ability to acquire an education. The ILO further explains: "In its most extreme forms, child labour involves children being enslaved, separated from their families, exposed to serious hazards and illnesses and/or left to fend for

themselves on the streets of large cities – often at a very early age.”<sup>9</sup>

### ***The Pervasiveness of Child Labor***

Child labor can be found in the supply chains of many common brand names and products. Among the most offensive sectors are the agriculture, mining, technology, cocoa, and leather industries. Leather that ends up in the shoes and handbags of popular brands is often made in “hazardous, heavily polluting tanneries, with workers as young as 14.”<sup>10</sup> Cocoa used to make chocolate primarily comes from Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana, where nearly 2 million children work on cocoa farms – half of these children have been injured in work-related activities, according to research funded by the U.S. Department of Labor.<sup>11</sup> Approximately one million children work in mines, which requires them to work underground, in cramped spaces, carrying materials too heavy for them. It also exposes them to toxic chemicals and social dangers such as prevalent alcohol and drug abuse, and prostitution.<sup>12</sup> Paul, a 14-year-old orphan who began working in a mine at age 12, describes the experience: “I would spend 24 hours down in the tunnels. I arrived in the morning and would leave the following morning ... I had to relieve myself down in the tunnels ... My foster mother planned to send me to school, but my foster father was against it, he exploited me by making me work in the mine.”<sup>13</sup> In addition to well-known “conflict minerals” such as tin, gold, and tungsten, cobalt and mica are two minerals rapidly rising in popularity and often tainted by child labor. Cobalt is used for lithium-ion batteries – the kind in your cell phone, while mica adds the sparkle to products such as cosmetics and car paint.

Because child labor is a ubiquitous problem, many of the products we purchase have been tainted by it. Big corporations often maintain strict anti-child labor policies, but many of them are actually supplied with child-produced goods – they simply do not make the effort to trace their supply chain. As Mark Dummett, Business & Human Rights Researcher at Amnesty International, has said, “Without laws that require companies to check and publicly disclose information about where they

source minerals and their suppliers, companies can continue to benefit from human rights abuses. Governments must put an end to this lack of transparency, which allows companies to profit from misery.”<sup>14</sup>

Alliance 8.7, a United Nations initiative, reports that “since 2000, total child labour has been reduced by 38%, from 246 to 152 million. Hazardous child labour even has come down by 58%, from 171 to 73 million. Nevertheless, the new estimates also show that the pace of reduction has significantly slowed down since 2012, from 168 to 152 million in child labour, and from 85 to 73 million in hazardous child labour.”<sup>15</sup>



### ***Two Related Causes: Poverty and Illiteracy***

Beyond the loss of childhood, one of the most serious consequences of child labor is that children trapped in forced labor are inhibited from receiving an education – many cannot attend school at all, and the performance of the ones who can is impeded.<sup>16</sup> Child labor most often occurs in areas where “government services and welfare schemes have failed to reach the poor with training in new industries and schooling.”<sup>17</sup> In addition to being a human right,<sup>18</sup> education offers a pathway out of poverty, so it is imperative that children – especially those living in poverty – can participate in a quality education system.<sup>19</sup> Unfortunately, many families cannot afford to support themselves without the contribution of their children. The mother of one child-laborer, Sandeep (10), explains: “I know it’s dangerous but that’s the only work there is. ... I know

Sandeep doesn't want to do it but it is what it is. If he was able to go to school and learn and become something then that's good, but first we need to eat."<sup>20</sup> In order to reduce the perceived need for child labor, then, extreme poverty needs to be addressed. If parents who work could earn income sufficient to support their families, their children would be able to attend school, which would help to move the family as a whole out of poverty.

### ***School Sisters of Notre Dame/Beyond Borders – Commitment to Haiti as Model Solution***

In Haiti, for example, approximately 250,000 children are trafficked into domestic labor.<sup>21</sup> Many parents, living in abject poverty, make the heart-rending choice to send their children to live with wealthy families, hoping that the children will receive an education and experience stable living conditions. Sadly, this is often an ill-founded hope, and the children – known as “restavèks” – are forced into domestic servitude, where they are subjected to all kinds of abuse and denied necessities of child development, such as education, familial relationships, and playtime.<sup>22</sup>



The Atlantic-Midwest Province of the School Sisters of Notre Dame (AMSSND) collaborates with Beyond Borders to empower people – especially women and girls – with education and sustainable livelihoods, enabling families to remain together and live with dignity. The model they use is called the “Graduation Model,” which is “an asset-building approach” based on the work of Fonkoze, Haiti’s largest micro-finance lender, whose “implementation of the model with 150 women–

97% of whom graduated – resulted in a 50% drop in hunger among participants. The number who also reported that all or most of their children were regularly attending school increased too– from 27% to 70%.”<sup>23</sup> Beyond Borders’ Graduation Model consists of the following components: First, participants choose two income-generating assets, such as goats or mules; second, participants attend weekly meetings to receive training and support in using and developing their assets; third, participants are given a weekly cash subsidy to prevent the need to sell their assets; and fourth, participants are provided with access to free veterinary services and access to personal medical care, as well basic home repairs, the construction of latrines, and life-skills training.<sup>24</sup>

In addition, Beyond Borders, in partnership with AMSSND, provides water catchment systems to ensure access to clean drinking water and the ability to grow food, and assists communities in the development of communal and school gardens, which “provide food for daily meals and help students and parents learn how to improve their farming techniques to produce higher yields.”<sup>25</sup> Further, they help to develop the rural school systems. In their words,



[We] reach children who are the most vulnerable—children from the poorest families and children who have grown too old to start first grade. We provide training and materials to teachers to improve their performance and make schools more vibrant and liberating using non-violent, participatory teaching methods. ... We mobilize local people to hold the government accountable for using new funding for education in the most responsible and effective way possible. We are also working to provide more tools and educational methods that teachers can use to prepare their students to face Haiti’s

challenges outside the classroom and build a brighter future.<sup>26</sup>

These programs, which involve high levels of relational commitment and accompaniment with participants, address the financial and educational deficiencies that are often the impetus for child labor, and establish strong communal ties to support families in their efforts. By assisting families in developing sustainable livelihoods and providing access to quality education for those who are most vulnerable to trafficking, Beyond Borders, in partnership with AMSSND, provides an example of a practical and dignified approach to countering child labor and breaking the cycle of poverty and illiteracy that facilitates its use.

## REFLECTION

In the Gospels, the love Jesus has for children is apparent. We see Jesus ministering to children throughout his life – healing illnesses, casting out demons, and renewing life; and, of course, there is the well-known “blessing of the children,” when Jesus “became indignant” that his disciples would send children away from him, and then “embraced them and blessed them, placing his hands on them” (Mark 10). Jesus also repeatedly urges us to possess faith like a child.



As we follow Christ, then, we ought to become indignant about the exclusion of children from just and dignified opportunities, such as education, and our indignation ought to motivate us to embrace all children with love and to ensure that they have access to basic necessities – in other words, to give them a chance at new life. If Jesus regards the

innocence of childhood so highly as to recommend it as our approach to faith, we should ensure, too, that our children are able to experience this childhood innocence for themselves. This is the ideal of the Catholic faith, and the values conveyed here retain their moral worth, despite the failures of the Church to heed its own teaching. Grounded in Christ, the social teaching of the Church offers the means of flourishing and a moral standard for all activity.

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“Take care of [the children], take care of their hearts, their joys, their hopes. ... Playing with your children, ‘wasting time’ with your children, is also a way to transmit the faith. It is graciousness, the graciousness of God.”  
– Pope Francis

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We thus can affirm the words of Pope Francis, who exhorts us to “take care of [the children], take care of their hearts, their joys, their hopes. ... Playing with your children, ‘wasting time’ with your children, is also a way to transmit the faith. It is graciousness, the graciousness of God.”<sup>27</sup> Our hearts should break for those children who are denied this grace – through child labor or any other means, and we ought to do all we can to protect their innocence.

Our faith calls us to care for “the least of these” – and who can deny that children are among our most vulnerable? Sadly, though, we often neglect the dignity of children – perhaps we are unaware of the problems they face, or we feel too far removed from those problems to effect change. In the case of child labor, however, by making a bit of effort to become informed and to look into the supply chains of the products we buy, or simply by purchasing used or fair trade items, we can avoid unintentionally – but not inculpably – supporting companies that hold their prices down through the use of child labor. As Pope Francis explains, the culture today is one of individualism and relativism, and “many problems of society are connected with today’s self-centred culture of instant gratification.”<sup>28</sup> He writes:

The culture of relativism is the same disorder which drives one person to take advantage of another, to treat others as mere objects, imposing forced labour on them or enslaving them to pay their debts. The same kind of thinking leads to the sexual exploitation of children and abandonment of the elderly who no longer serve our interests. It is also the mindset of those who say: Let us allow the invisible forces of the market to regulate the economy, and consider their impact on society and nature as collateral damage. In the absence of objective truths or sound principles other than the satisfaction of our own desires and immediate needs, what limits can be placed on human trafficking, organized crime, the drug trade, commerce in blood diamonds and the fur of endangered species?<sup>29</sup>

To counter this culture of individualism, we not only must advocate for just political measures and business practices; we also must undergo and promote mental and spiritual conversion. As Saint Augustine maintains, ethical laws and codes of conduct might be necessary for stemming unjust practices, but teaching all human beings to embrace justice will be much more effective and lasting.<sup>30</sup>

Augustine also teaches that virtues such as justice “educate the human spirit and fit it for fellowship with God and for living in the everlasting city of heaven.”<sup>31</sup>

In addition to spiritual education, intellectual education is a necessary part of efforts to end child labor. Pope Francis, in his message to the participants in the International Forum on Modern Slavery, tells us that “the basic response lies in creating opportunities for integral human development, starting with a quality education: this is the key point, quality education from early childhood, to continue generating new opportunities for growth through employment.”<sup>32</sup>

Catholics recognize that all human beings are created in the image of God as intellectual beings. Our faith thus impels us to affirm education as a human right since it perfects a critical aspect of human dignity. If we are to end the scourge of child labor and enable children to flourish, then, education is critical. As the School Sisters of Notre Dame always have maintained, education is transformative: “Education means enabling persons to reach the fullness of their potential as individuals created in God’s image and assisting them to direct their gifts toward building the earth.”<sup>33</sup>

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“There can be no keener revelation of a society’s soul than the way in which it treats its children.”  
– Nelson Mandela

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## ACTION

Here are a few tips for helping to end child labor:<sup>34</sup>

1. **Educate yourself.**
  - a. Then share what you learn with friends, family, co-workers, and others, and work together to vote with your dollar and your ballot to address child labor practices.
  - b. *For more information:* [International Initiative to End Child Labor](#); [Child Labor and UNICEF in Action: Children at the Centre](#); [AMSSND - Justice and Peace Initiatives](#)
  - c. Watch the PBS documentary, [Trafficked in America](#)

2. **Share your time and money.**

Donate to reputable groups that are helping free children from exploitative labor and helping them get a good education. Volunteer your time when you can.

- a. The AMSSND/Beyond Borders Partnership is a good place to start – [donations to the Teacher Training Program and the Water Catchment System Program](#) are particularly helpful.

3. **Buy fair trade and sweatshop-free products whenever possible. Buy used when you can't.**

- a. Look for certified fair trade labels such as [Fair Trade USA](#), [Fairtrade America](#), and the [Goodweave label](#) to ensure that you're supporting positive practices that don't involve child labor.



- b. Use the [Food Empowerment Project's Chocolate List](#) to ensure that the chocolate you're purchasing wasn't made using child labor.

4. **Contact retail stores, manufacturers, and importers.**

Kindly ask them questions about the origins of their products. Let them know you want to buy products that don't involve child labor.

5. **Grow more of your own food.**

Buy from farmer's markets ([verify their labor practices](#) first), Community Supported Agriculture, and U-Pick farms.

6. **Invest ethically.**

If you're a shareholder, use your voice to ensure that your companies support humane, sustainable, just practices that don't include child labor.

7. **Contact government leaders.**

Currently Rep Carolyn Maloney (D NY) and Chris Smith (R NJ) have co-sponsored a bi-partisan bill to amend the Securities Exchange Act of 1934 in order to require certain companies to disclose information describing any measures the company has taken to identify and address conditions of forced labor, slavery, human trafficking, and the worst forms of child labor within the company's supply chains. Call their offices with this message: *"I believe that every child has the right to his or her childhood. The legislation you are sponsoring HR 3226, Business Supply Chain Transparency on Trafficking and Slavery Act, is critical to ending child labor and slave labor in the supply chain. I am urging you to reintroduce this bill to Congress as soon as possible."*

- a. Carolyn Maloney: **(202) 225-7944**
- b. Chris Smith: **(202) 225-3765**

8. **Pray for the children trapped in child labor.**

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<sup>1</sup> InFocus Programme on Promoting the Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work, "Child Labor Stories," International Labor Office, accessed August 29, 2018, [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\\_norm/---declaration/documents/publication/wcms\\_decl\\_fs\\_44\\_en.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_norm/---declaration/documents/publication/wcms_decl_fs_44_en.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Beyond Borders, "Ending Child Slavery," Beyond Borders, accessed August 29, 2018, <https://beyondborders.net/what-we-do/ending-child-slavery/>.

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- <sup>4</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>5</sup> BBC News, "The Rohingya children trafficked for sex," March 20, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-43469043>.
- <sup>6</sup> International Labour Organization, "40 million in modern slavery and 152 million in child labour around the world," September 19, 2017, [http://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS\\_574717/lang--en/index.htm](http://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_574717/lang--en/index.htm).
- <sup>7</sup> Alliance 8.7, "The Challenge," accessed August 29, 2018, <https://www.alliance87.org/about/the-challenge/>.
- <sup>8</sup> International Labour Organization, "What is child labour," accessed August 29, 2018, <http://www.ilo.org/ipecc/facts/lang--en/index.htm>.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>10</sup> Martha Mendoza and Julhas Alam, "Report examines grim Bangladesh leather trade, links to West," *AP News*, March 25, 2017, <https://www.apnews.com/57003bedd3ae4e3e9d1633cf50effc31/Report-examines-grim-Bangladesh-leather-trade,-links-to-West>.
- <sup>11</sup> United States Department of Labor, "Child Labor in the Production of Cocoa," accessed August 29, 2018, <https://www.dol.gov/ilab/issues/child-labor/cocoa/>.
- <sup>12</sup> International Labour Organization, "Mining and quarrying," accessed August 29, 2018, <https://www.ilo.org/ipecc/areas/Miningandquarrying/lang--en/index.htm>.
- <sup>13</sup> Amnesty International, "Exposed: Child labour behind smart phone and electric car batteries," last modified January 19, 2016, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2016/01/child-labour-behind-smart-phone-and-electric-car-batteries/>.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>15</sup> Alliance 8.7.
- <sup>16</sup> International Labour Organization, "Child labour and Education for All," accessed August 30, 2018, <http://www.ilo.org/ipecc/Action/Education/ChildlabourandEducationforAll/lang--en/index.htm>.
- <sup>17</sup> Nita Bhalla, Rita Chandran, and Anuradha Nagaraj, "Blood Mica: Deaths of child workers in India's mica 'ghost' mines covered up to keep industry alive," *Reuters*, August 2, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-india-mica-children/blood-mica-deaths-of-child-workers-in-indias-mica-ghost-mines-covered-up-to-keep-industry-alive-idUSKCN10D2NA>.
- <sup>18</sup> Cf. United Nations, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, <http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>.
- <sup>19</sup> United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, "Education for All Movement," accessed August 30, 2018, <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/education/themes/leading-the-international-agenda/education-for-all/>.
- <sup>20</sup> Bhalla, Chandran, and Nagaraj, "Blood Mica."
- <sup>21</sup> Beyond Borders, "Ending Child Slavery."
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>23</sup> Freda Catheus and Brian Stevens, "The Graduation Model: A 'Self-Help' Model Proven to Lift up the Poorest," Beyond Borders, accessed August 30, 2018, <https://beyondborders.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Graduation-Model-Story.pdf>.
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- <sup>25</sup> Beyond Borders, "Guaranteeing Universal Access to Quality Education," accessed August 29, 2018, <https://beyondborders.net/what-we-do/guaranteeing-universal-access-to-quality-education/>.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>27</sup> Diane Montagna, "Pope Francis to parents: Take care of your children's hearts," *Aleteia*, last modified March 28, 2017, <https://aleteia.org/2017/03/28/pope-francis-to-parents-take-care-of-your-childrens-hearts/>.
- <sup>28</sup> Francis, *Laudato Si'*, Encyclical letter on care for our common home, Vatican Web site, May 24, 2015, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papafrancesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papafrancesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html), 162.
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid., 123.
- <sup>30</sup> Augustine, *Ep.* 100.2, in *Augustine: Political Writings*, ed. E.M. Atkins and R.J. Dodaro (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid., *Ep.* 91.3.
- <sup>32</sup> Pope Francis, "Video Message of His Holiness Pope Francis to the Participants in the International Forum on Modern Slavery," (speech, May 2018), [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2018/documents/papa-francesco\\_20180507\\_videomessaggio-forum-schiavitu.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2018/documents/papa-francesco_20180507_videomessaggio-forum-schiavitu.html).
- <sup>33</sup> *You Are Sent*, Constitution of the School Sisters of Notre Dame, 22.
- <sup>34</sup> Adapted from Marsha Rakestraw, "10 Tips for Helping End Child Labor," Institute for Humane Education, accessed August 30, 2018, <https://humaneeducation.org/blog/2017/10-tips-for-helping-end-child-labor/>.