

CHILD LABOUR  
SOCIO ECONOMIC BACKGROUND

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Throughout human history most children would have worked from their young age when they were capable of some useful work. Even in their make-believe games they would have imitated the work of adults. It is only some decades ago that education was made available to all children of many of the countries of the world. Prior to that almost all children, except the privileged children of the affluent, would have had to work. If children do not have a more worthwhile thing to engage their time and attention, why should they not work? For in such a situation, work can be fulfilling for children also.

We are opposed to child labour because

1. the work is unsuitable for children; bad for their health.
2. the conditions of work are exploitative
3. they lose thereby an opportunity for a worthwhile education and are stunted in their development for life
4. and some others are more privileged to be able to advance in knowledge due to their opportunities for education

1. TRADITIONALLY

When universal education was not available, the opposition to child labour would have been due to the nature of the work and the conditions of work. In our traditional Sri

Lankan society when feudal relations prevailed, one's birth determined one's status in life and the work one could do. Opportunities for social mobility were limited. Then child labour was degrading for those who had to do work which was unfulfilling and was merely of service to others without adequate recompense or a sense of dignity of work. Feudal society was not based on the equality of persons, and in that sense it was unjust. But feudalism was built on the principle that the community had to care for all - while treating each one according to one's status in life. Traditional Sri Lankan society had a similar sense of concern for all in that manner.

Today, the relationships of traditional society persist in some of the relationships of employer and child worker as in domestic service. The argument in favour of children working with their parents in the fields also comes down from this historical reality.

## II. IN MODERN TIMES

Today we live in a society largely imbued with the democratic traditions of equality of persons in dignity and rights. Education according to one's talents is a right of every child. Employment, should be based on competence and merit and not due to mere privilege of birth, creed, race or political loyalty. In such a situation if a child is unable to have the education that is one's due owing to

poverty or discrimination, the child is forced to join the labour force. The child may not be able to study because -

- a) the parents need his or her work at home or in a field, or need the income of the child's work
- b) or the parents cannot afford to educate the child
- c) or there are no suitable schools or a place in the schools for the child. The general assumption is that all children are capable of giving themselves to full time studies in some type of school - academic or practical

In this case the social system is the cause of the children having to work at an early stage when they could and should be in the education stream. Then some children who are more privileged have the opportunity of education and the others have either to stay at home till they are adults or join the market for child labour. This perpetuates inequality. This is a first factor we have to look into concerning child labour - the nature of the educational system and the opportunities it provides for all children up to about 14 years.

In Sri Lanka about 15 - 25% of children never get to school, or do not go beyond the first grade. In most parts of the country, about 50% of them are out of school by Grade V. These would form the pool for the child labour. If therefore, child labour is to be stopped the educational facilities must be available to all and relevant to children's needs. Parents

should have the means to support children throughout their school going age and also meet the costs of their education. This means that the parents should have an employment and an income that is at least a family wage. Parents who can afford to send their children to school do not normally get them to work unless the schooling is considered not so meaningful, as by farmers or fisher folk.

A second factor concerning child labour is the unsuitable nature of the work and the exploitative conditions of the wage relations. Modern life takes children into factories that are unhealthy, unlike the field or the sea. The type of work in the work places can be injurious to health. The relations of the workplaces may be humiliating to children. The payment may be too low. These conditions are described in the country position papers. What is to be noted is that the conditions of work have become in some respects much more exploitative under our modern capitalistic society that is replacing traditional society. While many of the poorer children are pushed into the labour force, there is often no protection for them legally or socially.

In more recent times with the internationalization of society, the world economic system exploits the poor and the weak. While the affluent increase in their wealth and power, the system brings pressure on the poor in the poor countries. These have to compete to obtain the crumbs from the system offering their raw materials, products, labour and even women

at a cheap price. The pressure is to bring the cheapest and most docile groups of the population into the work force on the hardest conditions to maximize profits for capital. Hence the children's and the women's labour in the sweatshops of our civilization. The conditions which might have prevailed in "developed countries" prior to industrialization, colonization and their democratization are passed on, willy nilly, to the so-called "developing world".

If there is to be no cheap and exploitative child labour in the poor countries, the deeper causes of this phenomenon must be removed.

### III. NOT IN DEVELOPED CAPITALIST COUNTRIES

In the rich capitalist countries which have also gone through the democratic revolution as in Western Europe, there is no major problem of child labour because there is provision;

1. for universal diversified education;
2. for adequate family wages;
3. for unemployment relief on a very wide scale and social insurance is quite effective. The public conscience is alive and the countries have the means to provide all children with meaningful courses of education up to about 14 years of age. The market system has been moulded to serve this end.

#### IV. NOT IN SOCIALIST COUNTRIES

Child labour is not generally a problem in the countries which are organized on the socialist principles of communal sharing of property, work and the fruits of production. In these countries the priority of public policy is the satisfaction of the urgent needs of all before the provision of luxuries and privileges for a few. The common ownership of property reduces economic privileges and disparities. Children can go up the educational ladder if they have the competence and application for it. The wage system is such that along with the public school system, children can be in diverse educational courses till they are 14 or so. Unemployment too is not a serious issue in the planned economies.

Socialist countries, both rich and poor, have their own problems, such as those of political freedom and human rights in the political and civil order. But child labour is not a major issue in such societies whether they be poor or rich, "developed" or "undeveloped".

#### V. A PROBLEM IN POOR CAPITALIST COUNTRIES

Child labour and exploitation of child and other workers is an endemic feature of the poor "under-developed" or "developing" capitalist countries. It has been worsened by modernization and the break up of the mainly agricultural and rural way of life. As mentioned earlier in these countries:

1. inequalities abound in society and are growing
2. the educational system is inadequate in facilities, not sufficiently diversified and discriminative due to social inequalities
3. the poverty of the poor pushes them to child work
4. the lack of social consciousness and social organization prevents social justice in industrial relations
5. the world system makes these countries poorer relatively and sometimes in absolute terms
6. the local elite set up political and military dictatorships often backed by the 'developed' capitalist powers.

The process of underdevelopment continues with a draining of the wealth from the poor to the rich, the countryside to the cities, and from these poor countries to the rich capitalist countries, their multinational companies, banks and financial houses.

#### VI SOLUTION IN POOR CAPITALIST COUNTRIES

Therefore the solutions in these countries to the problem of child labour must have several strategies;

1. the consciousness raising in society on this issue and the organization and mobilization of the majority of the people to rectify this injustice
2. a family wage that enables parents to educate their children under a scheme of responsible parenthood and parenting



3. educational reforms - provision of more schools, more diversified and relevant education; subsidies for education
4. realization of full employment
5. social security such as unemployment relief
6. a reduction of social inequalities in incomes, wealth and opportunities for education and social mobility.

These cannot be realised within a capitalist society if it is so poor that it does not have the means to implement them, or so unjust that it lacks the political will for it. The situation is worsened -

- a) if the inequalities are growing, as in Sri Lanka during the past decade
- b) and if the poor countries are becoming poorer due to the unfavourable terms of trade, and their growing indebtedness
- c) if, within the poor countries, there are authoritarian regimes that support and depend on the unjust privileged elite.

#### VII NOT AN ISOLATED PROBLEM

There can be no meaningful and lasting solution to the problem of child labour in our poor Asian countries without a basic transformation of the social, economic and political relations in them. This in turn is linked to their liberation from being exploited by the rich of the rich countries.

Piecemeal activities such as educational reforms, legislative prohibitions of child labour, appointment of labour inspectors, creation of public opinion are necessary and useful. They can be ends in themselves and means to more fundamental changes at the macro level of society. Such changes cannot be effected without a large scale mobilization of people for social justice and freedom.

This seminar convoked by LAWASIA, must therefore give its attention both to the effort at piecemeal remedies to the evil of child labour and child exploitation, as well as to the larger issue of just and free social, economic and political systems in the poor Asian countries. This latter objective requires action at the Asian level too, for the enemies of freedom and justice are organised and collaborate at a global level to perpetuate their privileges.

We have, therefore, to think out our goals, priorities and strategies locally in each of our countries, and at the Asian level among us. If we carry out a programme in this direction we can make a valuable contribution to the children, women and all the people of Asia in the remaining 15 years of this century. I wish and pray that we be blessed with the wisdom and the courage to take some meaningful and determined steps in this direction.