



Family Digest 41

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Child Labour

“States Parties recognize the right of the child to be protected from economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child's education, or to be harmful to the child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development.”

Article 32, UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

Saturday, 12th June was World Child Labour Day. In 2019 the year 2021 was adopted as the *International Year for the Elimination of Child Labour* by the United Nations. However, the UN announced recently that child labour has risen for the first time in 20 years, with one in ten children in work worldwide and millions more at risk due to COVID-19.¹ In times of disaster and social upheaval such as COVID-19, there tends to be an increase in child labour. Furthermore, UN agencies warn that “additional economic shocks and school closures caused by the COVID-19 crisis mean that children already in child labour may be working longer hours and under worsening conditions.”²

Research indicates that, of those children found to be working, almost 60 percent did so in order to help their parents financially. Other reasons why children engage in child labour include poverty, parental absence, and poor enforcement of educational and child labour laws. The underlying cause of child labour is rural and urban poverty.

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) found that the number of child labourers has increased to 160 million from 152 million in 2016, with the greatest rise in Africa, due to population growth, humanitarian crises, climatic disasters and enduring poverty.

According to the South Africa's *Basic Conditions of Employment Act 17 of 1997*, it is a criminal offence to employ a child younger than 15, except in the performing arts with a permit from the Department of Labour. Furthermore, section 28 of the Constitution specifically protects children from exploitative labour practices, from work that is inappropriate for a child's age, and work that is hazardous or puts the child's educational, physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development at risk.

It is important to distinguish between child labour and legitimate child work. Child work refers to work that helps the child's socialisation, maturation, and educational, cultural and skill development. It is recognized that children do have responsibilities and that performing normal duties is part of a healthy socialization process. Child work includes a child performing menial tasks such as sweeping the floor, washing dishes and generally helping in the home.

However, child labour is synonymous with child exploitation, and leads to the impairment of the child's physical, emotional, educational, moral and cultural development. It is also largely hidden. Children may be employed on farms, in factories and as domestic workers. Child labourers are typically overworked and underpaid and without any health and employment protections. There is also a significant relationship between worst forms of child labour and human trafficking. Children may be sold into child prostitution or economic bondage and used in the production of pornography. Worldwide, around 73 million children are affected by the worst kinds of child labour.³

The words of the Network Against Child Labour are as appropriate now as they were 30 years ago: "While it seems unlikely that we will be able to eliminate child labour in the foreseeable future we need to be developing strategies to monitor its incidence, to identify its nature, and to be devising ways in which we can more effectively protect the health and welfare of children; educational and child labour laws would do much mitigate this menace. The rightful tasks of children are to '*learn and play*'.⁴"

The links below provide additional information on this much neglected subject.

<https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/06/1093682>

<https://www.sabcnews.com/sabcnews/child-labour-rises-globally-for-the-first-time-in-decades/>

<http://www.statssa.gov.za/?p=9661>

<https://www.ilo.org/ipecc/Regionsandcountries/Africa/lang--en/index.htm>

<https://www.restlessstories.com/poverties/child-labour-in-south-africa>

<https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/5bd05af12.pdf>

https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_766351/lang--en/index.htm<https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210610-child-labour-swells-for-first-time-in-two-decades-un>

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¹ <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210610-child-labour-swells-for-first-time-in-two-decades-un>

² <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210610-child-labour-swells-for-first-time-in-two-decades-un>

³ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/06/1093682>

⁴ Network Against Child Labour, 1991

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