

Nanseul Shin
Professor Julia Keefer
Writing Workshop II
May 7, 2008

Child Labor in Africa

Living in a big city in the United States, child labor and Africa seemed irrelevant to me. It takes almost a day to get to an African country from America, even by plane. I have never been to any African countries even though I have dreamed of it. It is hard to imagine myself and Africa together. As an international studies major student, I got a chance to learn about Africa. When I changed my major to business, I found out that many business corporations are working in African countries, employing child workers. In my daily life, I can easily see tags on my clothes indicating that the clothes were made in an African country. As Deborah Barndt tracked back a tomato on a table to Mexico and figured out how a tomato could reach the table where we eat in the book *Tangled Routes*, I started thinking about how my clothes that I was wearing were manufactured and the conditions where they were made. It is always alarming that there is a whole different world beyond my own in which I have no idea what is going on there.

According to the International Labor Organization (ILO), there are 250 million child workers worldwide and most of them are working in developing countries, such as, Asia (61%), Africa (32%), Latin America and Caribbean (7%). Even though Africa has the second largest child workers, the percentage of child workers within a continent is the highest. ILO reported that 41 percent of all African children between the ages of 5 and 14 are involved in some form of economic activity, while 21 percent in Asian children and 17 percent in Latin American children are working. Half of those children work full time.

Those child workers are engaged in various industries. According to the ILO statistics, child workers are working in agriculture, fishing, forestry, and hunting (61 percent). The remainder is involved in manufacturing, retail and trade services, community and personal services (including sex industry), transport, storage, communication, construction and mining and quarrying. As shown, child workers work in almost every sector of our life.

There is no universal definition for child labor. ILO defines child labor as “any economic activity performed by a person under the age of 15.” On the basis of the ILO definition, child labor itself does not mean harmful or abusive labor. There are various types of child labor, including family-related chores or apprenticeship. However, the ILO reported that tens of millions of these children work under condition defined as “exploitative and harmful.” These are the worst forms of child labor¹ which are

¹ ILO Convention 182: Worst Forms of Child Labor

ILO Convention 182 was adopted in 1999 and has been ratified by 163 nations. It commits ratifying nations to take immediate action to secure the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labor. Under Article 3 of the convention, the worst forms of child labor comprise:

- (a) all forms of slavery or practices similar to slavery, such as the sale and trafficking of children, debt bondage and serfdom and forced or compulsory labor, including forced or compulsory recruitment of children for use in armed conflict;
- (b) the use, procuring or offering of a child for prostitution, for the production of pornography or for pornographic purposes;
- (c) the use, procuring or offering of a child for illicit activities, in particular for the production and trafficking of drugs as defined in the relevant international treaties;
- (d) work which, by its nature or the circumstances in which it is carried out, is likely to harm the health, safety or morals of children.

(See definitions of “Unconditional Worst Forms” and “Conditional Worst Forms” in this glossary for further information on the above categories.) Among other actions, ILO Convention 182 requires ratifying nations to: remove children from abusive child labor and provide them with rehabilitation, social reintegration, access to free basic education and vocational training; consult with employer and worker organizations to create appropriate mechanisms to monitor implementation of the Convention; take into account the special

dangerous and demeaning works that harm children's health, safety, morals, childhood and their future. (The Department of Labor. The Worst Forms of Child Labor. 2006)

Since child labor is highly tied with the poverty in Africa, it is impossible to eliminate the child labor. In 1999, the ILO conducted Child Labor Survey in Zimbabwe, and found out that 88 percent of children who were economically active, aged 5 to 17 came from households with incomes below US \$36 per month. As family incomes rose above US\$54, the rate of working children dropped to less than 1 percent. While conducting the survey, the ILO asked parents and guardians of working children, why they let their children work. Most of them responded that "to supplement household income" or "to help household in enterprise."

The deterioration of the school system also had an impact on the increased child labor in Tanzania, Africa. According to the ILO, as a result of economic decline, the school system has been weaker and the infrastructure has been poorer. The teacher moral has been lowered and the introduction of school fees under the country's structural adjustment program have resulted in the higher drop-out and truancy rates. Tanzania used to have high primary enrollment rate, but now it has been declined. In 1980, the primary enrollment rate was 90 percent but in 1996, it was 77.8 percent. Between the age of 10 and 14, 30 percent of them are not attending school. The school drop-out rate is 30 to 40 percent in villages where mines are around.

vulnerability of girls; and provide assistance and/or cooperate with efforts of other members to implement the Convention.

Source: ILO Convention No. 182, *Worst Forms of Child Labour* (1999); available from <http://www.ilo.org/ilolex/english/convdisp2.htm>. Ratifications are current as of May 2007.

Since child workers spend most of the day at work, they simply have no time to go to school. Also, the school system does not provide basic education² for them.

In 2006, the ILO reported in its Global Report on Child Labor that while the abusive and exploitive child labor has been decreased worldwide, there has been only a slight decline in African countries. Still, 74 million child workers aged 5 to 14 are engaged in hazardous work worldwide.

One industry that many children are engaged in working is the diamond industry. There are a few sectors in the diamond industry, which are mining, cutting and trading. Child labor is engaged in all those sectors and they are treated with little pay, they work long hours and there are many diseases caused by the poor working condition.

According to Universal Alliance of Diamond Workers (UADW), child labor in Indian diamond cutting industry is slightly over 3% of the total workforce, in number this means that there are 24,000 children who are working in diamond cutting industry. The problem is much more serious in Surat City, where 25% of diamond cutting workers are children. In average, it is estimated that child labor is prevailed between 10% and 20%, and the average age of those children is 12 years old.

In 1996, Indian Government surveyed 1,851 children working in the diamond industry and their families. According to the survey, an average of 40% of the children were workers in the surveyed families. Also, most of the families were below the poverty

² Basic education comprises both formal schooling (primary and sometimes lower secondary) as well as a wide variety of non-formal and informal public and private educational activities offered to meet the defined basic learning needs of groups of people of all ages.

line, which supports the idea that poverty is the main reason for child labor in the diamond industry.

According to a researcher from the UADW, who visited families in Surat City in June 1996, most families were dependant on their children's labor in diamond industry. Many of their parents said that they had little hope for their children's good education but they expect more of the diamond industry. Hence, the parents tended to send their children to work in the diamond industry rather than to schools. They believed that the diamond industry was the only hope that their children had to escape from the poverty, which, in fact caused the cycle of poverty. Since they could not get education, their jobs stayed what they had done and what they did. There were no financial progress or development.

Since diamond cutting is a highly skilled industry, most companies require job training and most of them let workers pay for the training. During the training session, workers get paid very little. Even after the training session, child workers are paid less than adult workers, even though they have the same quality of skills as the adult workers have.

According to trade unions and Non Government Organizations in Surat City, children in diamond industry are average 12 years old and they work 12 hours a day. They do not get employment card or pay slip, but they are paid on a piece rate basis, which is 60%-70% of what the adult workers.

Most diamond workplace condition is bad. They are congested, have very poor light and ventilation. Therefore, over half of the workers in this industry suffer from diseases caused by the workplace. They suffer from kidney dysfunction, tuberculosis,

lung disease, stomach problems, wheezing, pains in their joints and eyesores. These diseases are considered avoidable when the working conditions are better.

In 2003, BBC News reported that there were at least several thousands of children who were engaged in diamond mining in Sierra Leone, and the number kept increasing daily. For 10 years, Sierra Leone had been engaged in civil war, and the children had served as soldiers and now they worked in diamond mines. Most of the children were encouraged to work in diamond industry by their parents, or worked in diamond mines because they were the only worker in their families. Children were ages seven to sixteen and they worked at least 10 hours day.

One of the most serious problems discussed is that children workers are not provided education. According to BBC, even child workers said that they were not interested in studying at all and the number of students in the schools kept decreasing. Teachers tried to keep the students in the school, but they said that children were tempted to go back to mines even though there were no special incentives in mines. Since they kept going back to the mines, they were not educated which made them never step up to the next level, and the cycle of poverty remained perpetuated.

Even though there have been hundreds of millions children under 15 years old engaged in labor market, child labor was not widely recognized global concern until recently. In 1993, the United States Department of Labor began researching the issue. In the spring of 1998, over 1,400 non-governmental organizations (NGOs) expressed their concern over the exploited child workers by supporting the Global March Against Child Labor. Today, there are several NGOs working globally.

Selected Statistics and Indicators on Child Labor in Sierra Leone	
Percent of children 5-14 estimated as working	69.1%
Minimum age for admission to work	12
Age to which education is compulsory	12
Free public education	Yes
Gross primary enrollment rate in 2004	145%
Net primary enrollment rate	Unavailable
Percent of children 5-14 attending schools	42.7%
As of 2001, percent of primary school entrants likely to reach grade 5	Unavailable
Ratified ILO Convention 138	No
Ratified ILO Convention 182	No
ILO-IPEC participating country	No
*Must pay for school supplies and related items.	

U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of International Labor Affairs. 2006 Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor



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Photographed by International Labour Organization/ M. Crozet.

I interviewed Seunghyun Park, who visited Sierra Leone and Liberia for 30 days from December 14th, 2006 to January 12th, 2007. Since I have no direct experience in Africa, her voice was important to me. I wanted to hear from a person who visited there and saw what was happening right now in Africa. She visited Freetown in Sierra Leone and Monrovia, Greenville, Zwedru and Hapor in Liberia. During her stay, she mostly researched the education, economy, religion and life style of both countries. She is not a professional researcher or journalist but studies fashion business in New York City and has a passion for African countries, especially children in Africa. As a devoted Christian, she went there for missionary work. Since, she could find very little information on African countries, she visited the countries for gathering information for her further mission. Her stay in Sierra Leone and Liberia was focused on researching and understanding their overall life.

According to Park, 60% of children in Sierra Leone are not provided education. The reasons that these children cannot go to school vary but the two main reasons are 1) there is not enough school compared to the number of children and 2) children have no time to go to school because they have to go to work.

There is basically no educational support from government. Since both Sierra Leone and Liberia suffered from its long lasting civil war, the governments have lots of issues regarding reconstructing the countries. However the speed of reconstruction has stayed slow and education is outside the sectors that the governments are focused on.

Due to the war, more than half of their population have died and now it is reported that more than 50% of the total population are children under 14 years old. Since

children make up more than 50% of the total population, it is hard to have enough adult teachers. Most of the teachers working in the countries are high school graduates and their level of education is very low. The teachers barely read and write and did not achieve higher education. Therefore, the level of education has stayed low in these countries. Children cannot study because there are not enough textbooks to go around since most of them were burned during the civil war. There are approximately 10 schools in one town including elementary, junior and senior high schools. However this number is too small compared to the number of children. Therefore, the schools should divide children into morning and evening classes. Even children who go to school work after or before school hours.

Since there is no support from government, both countries need the support from NGOs. In Sierra Leone, there are a few NGOs, such as “World Child” and “Save the Children.” “World Child” mostly works for child soldiers who used to be involved in Sierra Leone Civil War. “Save the Children” works for children overall, and provides education for them. However, there are very few NGOs working in Liberia.

During the long lasting civil war in both countries, most NGOs and missionaries went back to their home countries and did not come back to Sierra Leone and Liberia yet. The number of NGOs is slowly increasing but still far under the enough number compared to the amount of work the countries need.

Most people in both countries are engaged in primary industry, such as fishing and agriculture. There are fewer children who are engaged in diamond mining than people generally think. According to Park, children are working at diamond mines in Kono, Sierra Leone and it is true that diamond mines prefer children. Generally more

than 90% of children are working in any kind of industry including agriculture, fishing, mining and sex industry.

Since the majority of the population are children in those African countries, it is inevitable that children are working rather than going to school. For those countries, children are the major labor source of their industry. The small number of schools and teachers is another reason that children cannot be provided education. People generally do not recognize the importance of education and focus more on working to survive.

Park said that people in Liberia want changes and development and are open for help from foreign countries, but the government strictly restricts foreigners and NGOs. Therefore, it is hard for NGOs and individuals to enter the countries. Park also experienced problems entering Liberia. She was not permitted to enter Guinea and was sent back to Morocco where she had to stay at the border for a few days.

Liberia and Sierra Leone have lots of resources such as gold, diamond, iron ore, rubber, cocoa, rice and so on. However, most employers are not their native citizens because foreign corporations have become their employers. Therefore, most of their natural resources are stolen and sold at unreasonably cheap prices to foreign countries. Most labor is from children in the countries and the cost of the labor is very cheap. Liberia has tried hard to reconstruct its economy and politics and open its problems to neighboring countries for their help. However, most countries have pretended helping them and took its natural resources.

Park concluded the interview saying that many citizens in Liberia and Sierra Leone are open to the help from foreign countries and want to see changes and development in these places. Therefore, it is crucial that NGOs should work in the

countries. They need to recognize the importance of education for further development. However, due to the lack of NGOs working in the countries, the level of education has stayed low for years.

Child labor has been portrayed in several literatures, especially in the nineteenth century in England. In the early nineteenth century, thousands of children in England were employed in textile factories, workshops and mines. They usually worked long hours for very low wages.

Michael Sadler, Parliamentary Committee, interviewed Elizabeth Bentley, who was a child worker in a mill in June 4th, 1832. The interview showed the bitterness and cruelty of the working condition in nineteenth century, England.

“I worked from five in the morning till nine at night. I lived two miles from the mill. We had no clock. If I had been too late at the mill, I would have been quartered. I mean that if I had been a quarter of an hour too late, a half an hour would have been taken off. I only got a penny an hour, and they would have taken a halfpenny.” (Bentley, 1832)

In 1833, there was the Factory Act which regulated the minimum age as 9 for children who were working in factories, but it was not enforced. Since most families were dependent on the wages of the children, they sent their children to work before the children met the minimum age. Before 1842, the minimum age of mine workers was not regulated and manufacturing industry was not regulated until the mid-nineteenth century.

Under these circumstances, where thousands of children were engaged in working, especially under poor working conditions, there have been several novels and poems inspired to reform child labor. Robert Southey, who visited textile factories in the early

nineteenth century; Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who published several pamphlets and letters on child labor and there were many other writers and artists who were inspired to create work after coming in contact with this situation. William Cobbett claimed that the prosperity of the British Economy was attributed to labor of children. The list of literature on child labor keeps going. Especially in the nineteenth century England, chimney-sweeping boys were the topic of a lot of literature. William Blake's *The Chimney Sweeper* was released in 1789. In 1822, Charles Lamb published an essay *The Praise of Chimney-Sweepers*.

One of the most famous writers who wrote about child labor is Charles Dickens. Based on his own experience as a child worker, he published the two well-known books, *Oliver Twist* (1838) and *David Copperfield* (1850). *David Copperfield* reflects Dickens's own experience working at Warren's Blacking Factory when he was twelve. The bitterness of working under the poor conditions for long hours in the period of his childhood has influenced his life and works. Dickens recalled that his experience working at his early age made him feel abandoned. His feeling and experience were well portrayed in *David Copperfield*, which is studied as Dickens' autobiography.

"I know enough of the world now to have lost the capacity of being much surprised by anything; but it is a matter of some surprise to me, even now, that I can have been so easily thrown away at such an age." (Dickens, 896)

While Charles Dickens portrayed child labor in one chapter, Frances Trollope wrote the whole book of child labor in *The Life and Adventures of Michael Armstrong*. In the book, Trollope portrayed employer, Sir. Dowling as an evil. In the era of its

publication, some criticized that the book showed too extreme scenes of British factories, and said that the book should be banned because the book made the factories shut down.

According to Frank Forrest's *Chapters in the Life of a Dundee Factory Boy* (1850), there were no regular working hours for child workers. There was no clock during the working hours. The clocks in the factories were often put forward in the morning and back at night.

Today, as children were employed for chimney sweeping because they were small enough to get into the chimney, many children in African countries are employed in mines because they are small. As portrayed in literature of the nineteenth century in England, child labor influenced children's lives. Dickens recalled his experiences as bitter and cruel, because child labor had no good influence on the childhood of children. Not only does child labor make children work under these poor conditions, they also lose their opportunity to get education.

In 2006, the movie *Blood Diamond* was released. Even though the movie mainly talks about "conflicts diamonds," it also shows how children were treated in Sierra Leone. The movie shows that children are not able to get enough education. In the first scene of the movie, an African boy Dia Vandy (played by Kagiso Kuypers) left to go to school from home which took him around an hour to walk there. This shows that there are not enough schools for children in Sierra Leone. And there is no school near the area of residence. After the war started, he could not get an education at all. While children were engaged in working and the war, there was absolutely no education provided for them. In the movie, Dia Vandy once had a dream to be a doctor, but had to give up his dream due to the war and the lack of education.

When my mother died I was very young,
And my father sold me while yet my tongue
Could scarcely cry 'weep! 'weep! 'weep! 'weep!
So your chimneys I sweep, and in soot I sleep.

There's little Tom Dacre, who cried when his head,
That curled like a lamb's back, was shaved: so I said,
"Hush, Tom! never mind it, for when your head's bare,
You know that the soot cannot spoil your white hair."

And so he was quiet; and that very night,
As Tom was a-sleeping, he had such a sight, -
That thousands of sweepers, Dick, Joe, Ned, and Jack,
Were all of them locked up in coffins of black.

And by came an angel who had a bright key,
And he opened the coffins and set them all free;
Then down a green plain leaping, laughing, they run,
And wash in a river, and shine in the sun.

Then naked and white, all their bags left behind,
They rise upon clouds and sport in the wind;
And the angel told Tom, if he'd be a good boy,
He'd have God for his father, and never want joy.

And so Tom awoke; and we rose in the dark,
And got with our bags and our brushes to work.
Though the morning was cold, Tom was happy and warm;
So if all do their duty they need not fear harm.

-Blake, William. The Chimney Sweeper.

William Blake depicted the life and death of young chimney sweepers through his poem *The Chimney Sweeper*. In 19th century England, chimney sweeping children were working in the congested chimneys where they suffered from several diseases that even threatened their lives. These days, children in Africa who are working in mines have to endure the same working conditions. As mentioned before, the children in mines easily get diseases including kidney dysfunction, tuberculosis, lung disease, stomach problems, wheezing, pains in their joints and eyesores. Also, these diseases would be avoidable if the conditions were better.

There are a few NGOs working in African countries, including All As One, Children of the Nations, Children’s Relief Trust and so on. Most African countries have experienced several wars for long years. Therefore, they have very weak infrastructure and the governments need to build them up. Since governments in Africa do not put much effort into children’s education because of their weak infrastructure, NGOs can be one of the main supports and solutions for the child issue and their education.

For example, “Children of the Nations” is one of the non-governmental organizations, working for African children. One of their programs is partnering with local schools and providing basic education for children in Sierra Leone. Below are their mission statement and current programs in Sierra Leone.

Mission Statement	To provide responsible care to orphaned and destitute children by the equipping of nationals, giving children
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	every possible advantage available to grow in a stable Christ-centered environment, empowering them to be the leaders of tomorrow.
Current Programs	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Children of the Nations is caring for orphan children, through a sponsorship programme providing them with a home, food, clothing, medical care, education and loving parents. 2. Partnering with local school to provide needy children with an education in literacy and primary and secondary subjects. 3. Partnering with other organizations like ADRA, Limbs of Hope, and JP Grant Center to provide needed resources for children in need. 4. Emergency relief - providing counseling and therapy training for children's social workers caring for children affected by war.

In African countries, children who work in factories or mines should have better working conditions. There should be certain regulations for working hours, working conditions and minimum wages. While most developed countries set the minimum age³

³ ILO Convention 138: Minimum Age for Admission to Employment

ILO Convention 138, adopted in 1973 and ratified by 148 nations, serves as the principal ILO standard on child labor. Under Article 2(3) of ILO Convention 138, Minimum Age for Admission to Employment, the minimum age of admission into employment or work in any occupation "shall not be less than the age of completion of compulsory schooling, and, in any case, shall not be less than fifteen." Countries whose economy and educational facilities are insufficiently developed may initially specify a minimum legal working age of 14 when ratifying the convention. Additionally, under article 7(1), "National laws or regulations may permit the employment or work of persons 13 to 15 years of age on light work which is - (a) not likely to be harmful to their health or development; and (b) not such as to prejudice their attendance at school, their participation in vocational orientation or training programmes approved by the competent authority or their capacity to benefit from the instruction received." Countries that

for working as 15, there is basically no enforced regulated minimum age in most African countries. Since most African people are dependent on income from their children, children tend to go out to work in their early years. In the nineteenth century England, they had the same problem. Most families were dependent on earnings from their children and the parents sent their children to work when they were younger than 15. Most parents prefer their children go to work as young as possible rather than going to schools.

However, in order to attract children to schools, there should be strong regulations. For example, until age 15, children should not be allowed to work full time but should have to stay in school for certain hours. It works the same for minimum wage, working hours and working conditions. Overall, the government should work for making laws and regulations for labor.

Most child labor problems need moral recognition and foreign support. In order to make better conditions for child workers, it needs a lot of time and money. In October 2007, the United States funded \$16 million to help to eliminate exploitive and abusive child labor. Democratic Republic of the Congo, Togo and Uganda were aided by the US for the projects to eliminate so-called “the worst forms of child labor.” The fund would be used to provide basic quality of education and vocational training for children in Africa and the research for the reliable data on the conditions of children in African countries.

specify a minimum legal working age of 14 may permit light work for persons 12 to 14 years.

Source: ILO Convention No. 138, *Minimum Age for Admission to Employment* (1973); available from <http://www.ilo.org/ilolex/english/convdisp2.htm>. Ratifications are current as of May 2007.

As I started this paper, Africa and child labor seemed irrelevant to us. For some people, child labor in Africa does not sound important or serious. However, the society we live in is highly dependent on the labor of African children. Clothes, shoes, even the soccer balls that children play with are manufactured in African countries by African child workers under the poor working conditions. It is our responsibility to know about where our products are coming from and how they were made as consumers. As the nineteenth century British literature made people recognize the situations that child workers were treated then led to reform the society, we, as consumers need to understand what is happening in the other side of world, yet we are dependent on.



Boys in Indonesia released from abusive working places, spend their time learning.

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