

Child Exploitation : Meaning, Causes and Consequences

Dr .Mekhaneg Abdallah *

Faculty of Law and Political Sciences
Legal System Laboratory for Contracts and Transactions in Private Law
University of Djilali Bouanama Khemis Miliana – Algeria
a.mekhaneg@univ-dbkkm.dz

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Abstract:

This paper deals with child exploitation. Worldwide, millions of children are robbed of their childhood because they are forced into work that jeopardizes their health and education. Child labor encompasses all activities that deprive children of their childhood, their potential, and their dignity, and that harm their schooling, health, and physical and mental development. These working children are everywhere, yet invisible: domestic servants in homes, behind the walls of workshops, hidden in plantations.

While the vast majority of children work in the agricultural sector, the worst forms of child labor include the use of children as slaves, prostitution, drug trafficking, crime, or recruitment as soldiers in conflict situations or for other dangerous work. Child labor is primarily driven by poverty in families and communities, but it is also the product of other factors: social norms that tolerate it, the lack of decent jobs, migration, and emergency situations¹.

It is also a consequence of social inequalities exacerbated by discrimination. Children from indigenous and lower caste communities are at greater risk of dropping out of school and being forced into child labor. Migrant children are also highly vulnerable to clandestine and illegal work. Progress toward eliminating child labor is therefore closely linked to reducing these vulnerabilities, mitigating economic shocks, and ensuring access to social services.

Keys words: child exploitation, vulnerable, dangerous work, inequalities, poverty.

* Corresponding author

¹ Unger, J.A. & De Luca, R.V. (2014). The relationship between childhood physical abuse and adult attachment styles. *Journal of Family Violence*, 29, 223-234.

Introduction:

Child exploitation is a worrying and growing phenomenon worldwide. Child labor in developing countries is a complex situation, varying depending on whether it occurs in rural areas, within families or communities, or in megacities. It is unevenly distributed across social classes, often with marked ethnic or racial characteristics. In these countries, it represents a significant social and economic reality. A blanket ban, without discrimination, could penalize the poorest and ultimately harm children. Given the extreme diversity of situations, half of the children affected live in lower- and upper-middle-income countries. The problem is more prevalent in countries experiencing conflict and disaster.

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.

When the ILO was created in 1919, the problem of child labor was already mentioned in its Constitution but was considered from the technical perspective of setting a minimum age for admission to employment. It is only recently that the issue of children has been recognized as a matter of human rights at work.

The research question is: how is child exploitation defined, and what are its forms and harmful effects?

1. Definition and forms of child exploitation

Art 32, para 1 of the International Convention on the Rights of the Child states that The 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 development¹.

1.1. Definition of child exploitation

It should be noted that today the informal sector (particularly domestic work and sales) employs a large number of children, especially girls, who work at the risk of their health and their lives.

1.1.1. General definition:

Child labor refers to any activity that deprives children of their childhood, education and dignity, but is also harmful to their physical and psychological health and prevents them from developing properly.

Child labor is defined as any form of economic activity carried out by children that deprives them of their dignity and impairs their normal physical and psychological development. This

¹ Art 32, para 1 of the International Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989.

economic activity includes, among other things, undeclared work, unpaid work, and work in the informal sector.

It is therefore important to distinguish between suitable occupations—such as helping with household chores after school or participating in light family farming—and those that are physically or morally dangerous. The latter, which compromise children's well-being, such as work in mines, sexual exploitation, trafficking, or the use of dangerous tools, clearly constitute child labor and must be combated.

1.1.2. Definition of the International Labor Organization

The (ILO) defines child labor, or infant labor, as all activities carried out by children for economic or social purposes which deprive them of their childhood, impair their potential and dignity, and harm their physical and mental health¹.

This type of work is dangerous for children's development and compromises their education. It deprives children of their childhood, their potential, and their dignity, and harms their physical and mental development. Child labor refers to economic or domestic activities performed by minors below the legal minimum age set by each state².

According to the definition of the International Labor Organization (ILO), the forms of work that can be classified as "child labor" depend on several criteria: the age of the child, the number of hours worked the conditions under which the work is carried out, as well as its nature.

In relative terms, sub-Saharan Africa is in the most alarming situation, with one in four children working, compared to nearly one in eight in the Asia-Pacific region and one in ten in the Latin America and Caribbean region.

2. Forms of child exploitation

Child labor can take many forms: work in dangerous industries, domestic work, street work, agricultural work, or informal work.

Generally, child trafficking does not result in one, but several forms of exploitation.

The following list includes the most frequently encountered forms¹:

1.2.1. Sexual exploitation

Whether it takes place in the physical or digital realm, the sexual exploitation of children is always real and has devastating consequences. Sexual acts or the provision of sexual services to third parties for payment are the most common form of sexual exploitation. It is presumed that sexual exploitation primarily occurs in private and hidden locations. The internet plays a

¹ Definition of the International Labor Organization.

² Morton, T.D. (2012). Rethinking Neglect Intervention. Policy and Practice, Vol. 70(6), 24-26.

significant role in sexual exploitation. Social media and online platforms offer new opportunities for brokering sexual services and renting locations¹.

Online sexual exploitation is also an aspect of child trafficking and is steadily increasing. It encompasses any depiction of a child in an explicit sexual act, real or simulated, or any depiction of a child's sexual organs for primarily sexual purposes. Victims of sexualized violence in the digital space often suffer a double harm: first when they experience the abuse, and then when the images².

1.2.2. Exploitation of the workforce

For example in agriculture, catering, construction, in private homes, in the socio-medical sector, in hairdressing or beauty salons, in the context of an au pair job or an internship: social isolation and the lack of separation between the place of residence and the place of work reinforce dependence and vulnerability, as well as the risk of suffering several forms of exploitation.

1.2.3. Crimes

Like theft, burglary, drug trafficking, etc., criminals use children and young people to further their own ends because they are more easily manipulated and more vulnerable, dependent on adults, and face lighter sentences. Younger children are often used to transport drugs. Most of the time, no link is made between the crimes committed and child trafficking. However, identifying child trafficking would be particularly important in these cases, as victims of human/child trafficking should not be held accountable for their actions³.

1.2.4. Organized Begging

Organized begging involves targeting children and young people and systematically forcing them to beg. The money they collect is immediately taken. Very often, they are socially isolated and threatened. When children are apprehended by the authorities, their situation of exploitation is often underestimated. In such cases, there is also a high risk of facing multiple forms of exploitation⁴.

¹ Bender, H. L., Allen, J. P., McElhaney, K. B., Antonishak, J., Moore, K., Kelly, H.O., & Davis, S. M. (2007). Use of harsh physical discipline and developmental outcomes in adolescence. *Development and Psychopathology*, 19, 227-242,

² Bender, H. L., Allen, J. P., McElhaney, K. B., Antonishak, J., Moore, K., Kelly, H.O., & Davis, S. M. (2007). Use of harsh physical discipline and developmental outcomes in adolescence. *Development and Psychopathology*, 19, 227-242,

³ Covington, S. (2007). The relational theory of women's psychological development: implications for the criminal justice system. In Ruth Zaplin (Ed) *Female offenders: Critical perspectives and effective interventions*, 2nd ed. P. 1-25.

⁴ Fiorillo, D., Papa, A., & Follette, V. (2013). The relationship between child physical abuse and victimization in dating relationships: the role of experiential avoidance. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice and Policy*, Vol 5(6), p. 562-569

1.2.5. Illegal Adoption

In the context of international adoption, the offense of child trafficking is committed when parents are persuaded by promises of ill-gotten gains to entrust their child to someone for adoption. The exploitation of the child is not a component of the offense. Therefore, a different definition of child trafficking applies in the context of adoption.

1.2.6. The use of violence

Radicalization is a process by which a child is led to adopt increasingly extreme political, social, or religious views. To achieve their goals, extremist groups sometimes use children to perpetrate extreme violence and recruit new members. Online, young people are increasingly exposed to digital forms of violence, as well as radical content and rhetoric. They can thus become victims of propaganda. Because national security is at stake in these cases, these situations are rarely identified as child trafficking¹.

The main types of child labor are:

Child labor refers to work that is dangerous to the health and physical, social and psychological development of children.

The worst forms of child labor are completely banned. These include all kinds of slavery or similar practices. Illegal activities such as prostitution, child pornography, military recruitment, and drug trafficking are also addressed.

-Child labor can therefore take several forms:

-Dangerous work

-Economic exploitation

-Modern slavery

-Commercial sexual exploitation

2. The causes and consequences of child exploitation

The factors contributing to child labor are numerous: Parental poverty forces children to work to support the entire family. The lack of birth certificates prevents children from proving their identity and age in the face of illegal exploitation. Difficult access to education and a failing education system—school fees, violence at school or on the way to school, geographical isolation are all obstacles to education and exacerbate child labor².

¹ Joseph, M.A., O'Connor, T.G., Briskman, J.A., Maughan, B., & Scott, S. (2014). The formation of secure new attachments by children who were maltreated: An observational study of adolescents in foster care.

² Manion, K. (2011). Focusing on the child: Redressing neglect in child protection. *Social Work Now*, 25-32.

2.1. The causes of child exploitation

Child labor can be caused by various factors, with poverty remaining the primary one. Families in need may encourage or force their children to work. Limited access to education and a lack of regulation are also contributing factors. The absence or lack of laws against child labor facilitates its perpetuation.

Child exploitation is any situation that harms children physically, mentally, sexually, or morally, including the worst forms of labor (slavery, mining, prostitution, child soldiers, drugs) and trafficking, caused primarily by poverty, lack of education, conflict, and weak social norms, forcing vulnerable families to seek help by sacrificing their children's well-being for a meager living¹.

The causes of exploited children lie in complex realities and often at the crossroads of problems: poverty and debt, wars and natural disasters, the frantic search for maximum profit and cheap labor, inadequate educational systems.

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2.1.1. Economic factors

Poverty is the primary factor explaining child exploitation. Participation in family labor (domestic work and fieldwork) is often a matter of survival for families. Poverty is not decreasing; in fact, it is increasing in some countries.

According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 165 million people fell into poverty between 2020 and 2023.

In a context of economic crisis, unemployment and political or climatic upheavals, all the factors are in place for millions of people to be unable to find stable employment, to resort to the informal sector and to put their children to work to provide a necessary supplementary income for the household.

Miller, J.B. & Richards, A. (1987). Retrieved from *A Pedagogy for Liberation Dialogues on Transforming Education*. Empowerment as a social act. p. 108-

¹ Cashmore, J. (2011). The link between child maltreatment and adolescent offending: Systems neglect of adolescents. *Family Matters*, 89, 31-41.

² McLeod, G.F.H., Fergusson, D.M., & Harwood, L.J. (2014). Childhood physical punishment or maltreatment and partnership outcomes at age 30. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 84(3), 307-315.

Despite official legislation prohibiting child labor, states themselves sometimes accommodate this economic reality, which is often difficult to control, because the work is carried out within the family or in the informal sector.

Specific attractions of child labor in a globalized economy

Why employ a child rather than an adult? Most employers have no shortage of arguments to justify this preference.

In reality, the motivations are of a different nature. With few exceptions, most of the work done by children could be given to adults, but what motivates the employer is the docility and low cost of this labor. To be competitive and gain market share, many companies have chosen to reduce their costs by relocating their production to countries where labor is very cheap and labor regulations are less restrictive. In concrete terms, this relocation has resulted in a proliferation of subcontractors in the manufacturing process (workshops, small factories, home-based workers, etc.). In these numerous production chains, it is particularly easy to conceal the employment of children and to disregard existing laws¹.

The issue of child labor must therefore be addressed within the framework of a globalized economy, where children have become key links in the production chain, considered an essential asset of the global economic system. Only the implementation of global economic rules based on respect for fundamental rights can put an end to this situation of "child labor."

contrary to the dignity and rights of children.

2.1.2. Insufficient schooling

Child labor is closely linked to children's ability to attend school. Indeed, if a family is too poor to pay for schoolbooks and school meals, and its basic needs are not met, it will have no choice but to send its children to work. However, a child who works full-time cannot afford to study.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) estimates that 250 million children worldwide are not in school.

Overall, the rate of out-of-school children had decreased considerably over the past few decades, but averages mask significant disparities between regions, with an increase in sub-Saharan Africa. Furthermore, the exclusion of girls from education has increased the proportion of out-of-school girls².

¹ Miller, J.B. (2008). Connections, disconnections and violations. *Feminism & Psychology*, 18, 368.

Miller, J.B. & Richards, A. (1987). Retrieved from *A Pedagogy for Liberation Dialogues on Transforming Education*. Empowerment as a social act. p. 108

² Toth, S.L., Gravener-Davis, J.A., Guild, D.J., & Cicchetti, D. (2013). Relational interventions for child maltreatment: Past, present, and future perspectives. *Development and Psychopathology*, 25, 1601-1617.

For all these children deprived of schooling, the right to education seems very abstract. Having to bring home a wage to feed their families, it is impossible for them to attend school. The ILO's priority is therefore to ensure decent work for adults, so that children are no longer forced to work for their families' survival and can attend school.

Other shortcomings, at a more political level, prevent all children from attending school, particularly in developing countries, which struggle to allocate sufficient budgets to the education and health sectors. The debt they incurred with developed countries after decolonization quadrupled between 1980 and 2000. In some countries, this debt is even greater than their gross national product¹.

Development aid from Northern countries, which has been constantly reduced in recent years, is not very effective in improving the situation.

2.1.3. The issue of gender

The experience of work or access to education can differ greatly depending on a child's gender: when parents are forced to choose which of their children will attend school, the choice more readily falls on the boy. There are several reasons why he is more readily chosen. Firstly, because the traditional division of roles within the family dictates that girls assume a greater share of household chores: in many countries, parents rely on daughters to care for siblings, clean, and cook.

Secondly, because girls' education is not considered a profitable investment since they marry young and leave the family home quite quickly. Boys, on the other hand, are seen as the custodians of the family inheritance (their father's profession, property, land, etc.); this is why the provision of essential goods such as health, food, and education is reserved primarily for them.

Thus, domestic work is the main economic activity for girls, and domestic worker positions are held almost exclusively by them. Since most domestic activities take place in the private sphere, the young girls who participate are all the more exposed to all kinds of violence and exploitation, far from prying eyes.

¹ Larsen, C.D., Sandberg, J.G., Harper, J.M., & Bean, R. (2011). The effects of childhood abuse on relationship quality: Gender differences and clinical implications. *Family Relations*, 60, 435-445.

2.2. Consequences of child exploitation

There are many consequences of child exploitation such as:

2.2.1. Limited access to education

Without accessible, free, quality and safe schooling, the alternative quickly becomes work. Many children leave school very early, or never attend, because their parents cannot afford to buy supplies or pay additional fees¹.

In some countries, schools are too far away, poorly equipped, or teachers are under-trained. These are all obstacles that encourage early childhood education.

A decline or loss of education means children have less chance of breaking the cycle of poverty, which is one of the causes of child labor.

2.2.2 Sociocultural norms

In some parts of the world, making one's child work is culturally accepted, even valued. It can be seen as a rite of passage, or a natural contribution to the family's survival.

These deeply held beliefs make the fight against child labor even more difficult. It is therefore necessary to engage in respectful dialogue, while reiterating the fundamental rights enshrined in the International Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Promoting these changes means concretely defending children's rights in every society.

2.2.3. Impact on health and development

Children who start working too early or in arduous jobs often suffer injuries, chronic illnesses, or stunted growth. They are exposed to bullying, malnutrition, exhaustion, and sometimes even outright child abuse. Their mental well-being is also affected by stress, fear, and isolation. These consequences can last a lifetime.

2.2.4. Cycle of poverty

Deprived of education, children grow up to be adults without qualifications. Their prospects are limited. This exposes them to precarious employment and even continued exploitation. Thus, child labor fuels a vicious cycle of generational poverty. Breaking this cycle by strengthening child protection is essential for the human and economic development of all the countries concerned.

¹ Bundy-Fazioli, K. & Delong Hamilton, T.A. (2013). A qualitative study exploring mothers' perceptions of child neglect. *Child & Youth Services*, 34, 250-266.

By strengthening family autonomy and supporting local economic activities, this project addresses several key drivers of rural development. By securing parents' livelihoods, it also helps create a more favorable environment for children's education, thereby reducing the risk of early labor¹.

Furthermore, the State must take appropriate social policy measures to prevent child exploitation and guarantee effective remedies against it. The protection of children against exploitation must not be limited.

The prohibition of child labor for children under 15 is a value upheld by the Council of Europe and cannot be called into question. However, in the interest of effectiveness, States are committed here to prioritizing the fight against the most intolerable forms of child labor and to adopting the proposed measures.

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Conclusion

The issue of child labor is one that mobilizes the international community and, although progress has been made in recent years, it remains insufficient.

Of course, it is desirable that children not work before the end of their schooling. But, unfortunately, this is difficult to implement due to the poverty and precariousness in which so many families live: not to mention single-parent families, families where the child is the sole provider, or when children live with a grandparent who can no longer work.

It is essential that states implement action plans to ensure these children can attend school and are no longer forced to work. However, in the meantime, it is important that states, supported by civil society and NGOs, provide access to education for all children—even if it is evening or informal schooling—and that they protect and defend children against all forms of labor exploitation. Respect for the dignity and rights of the child must be a priority, but the socio-economic context must also be taken into account.

The main objective is to enforce the law. Most conventions are ratified by a majority of states, and it is essential that these states adapt their own legislation to comply with international law. Implementation depends in particular on information and training. For example, BICE develops training programs for magistrates, lawyers, judges, police officers, and teachers. It also conducts awareness campaigns in local communities to ensure that the legislation is widely known and works to establish training modules in schools and universities.

¹ Joseph, M.A., O'Connor, T.G., Briskman, J.A., Maughan, B., & Scott, S. (2014). The formation of secure new attachments by children who were maltreated: An observational study of adolescents in foster care. *Development and Psychopathology*, 26, 67-80.

Furthermore, child labor organizations exist in Africa and Asia, modeled on those that developed in Latin America a little over thirty years ago. These organizations bring together children for whom work is vital to provide for their families and often to pay for their education.

These organizations do not defend child labor, as they take a critical approach to it, but rather advocate for children's rights as workers. For those, for example, who live on the streets, these organizations provide spaces of solidarity where they receive training on their rights. These child labor organizations must be supported by training their leaders. In Côte d'Ivoire, BICE encouraged the creation of one such organization, assists it in its operations, and has provided it with premises.

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Taking action to protect children. School is the best protection against child labor. In the areas where we work, we take concrete steps to ensure that every child can attend school from a very young age and remain there. This involves essential actions designed to remove barriers to education and create a safe and motivating environment for children:

Therefore, to combat child exploitation, we recommend the following suggestions:

- Numerous awareness campaigns are being implemented to change perceptions surrounding child labor.
- International conventions, such as the ILO (International Labour Organization), establish standards to protect children, like Convention 138 on minimum age or Convention 182 on the worst forms of child labor.
- At the same time, there is a global desire to promote universal, free and quality education, in order to offer children an alternative to child labor.
- Advance the legal commitment to end child labor
- Promote decent work for adults and young people of legal working age
- Establish and expand social protection systems, including floorboards, to help poor families
- Expanding access to free, quality public education as a logical alternative to child labour
- Addressing child labor in supply chains
- Protecting children in vulnerable and crisis situations

-Finding solutions for humanitarian crises linked to climate change or conflict, which exacerbate the vulnerability of children and the transgression of existing laws.

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