

Opinion: With millions unprotected, action is needed to end child slavery

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Azir Mulla, 14, sews inside a tailor's shop in Gauhati, India, Wednesday, Dec. 10, 2014. Photo: AP/Anupam Nath

NEW DELHI, India – It is a blot on the face of humanity that we have not yet wiped out child slavery. Not only does child slavery persist, but the number of child slaves, 5.5 million, has remained constant in the last two decades. Children are bought and sold like animals, sometimes for less than a pack of cigarettes. In addition, there are 68 million child laborers, 59 million children who do not go to school and 15 million girls younger than 15 who are forced to marry every year. The situation is completely unacceptable.

Eighteen years ago, the Global March Against Child Labour led a worldwide movement to bring child labor and child slavery to the attention of world leaders. The campaign was a complete success. It led to the adoption of the International Labour Organization's Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention. Countries that signed it promised to stop children from working in especially dangerous jobs.

Clearly, however, there is much work left to do. The organization has collected 550,000 signatures on a petition to push the United Nations to include strong language against child slavery in its Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). Among its goals, the SDG seeks to end forced labor, slavery and human trafficking, and to stop the worst forms of child labor.

Groups, Individuals Must Pressure Leaders

But now it is time to back that promise with action. After all, if child labor, slavery, human trafficking and violence against children continue, the SDG would have failed. And the responsibility does not lie only with governments. Businesses, organizations and individual citizens must all contribute, not least by pressuring their leaders to make a change.

Consider the situation in India. The country is considering making changes to two major policies, the National Education Policy and the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act. On the one hand, a new education policy would put limits on child labor, because many child workers do not go to school. It also aims to improve the life of millions of poor and powerless children. On the other hand, the proposed amendments to the Child Labour Act would have the opposite effect.

Specifically, the changes to the Child Labour Act would allow children younger than age 14 to help their families in “non-hazardous” family businesses or the entertainment industry. This may sound innocent, but it fails to acknowledge reality. Family businesses can be as brutal as any other kind of jobs, and the list of “hazardous” occupations is far from complete.

Children Can Suffer In Family Business

Before being rescued by my organization, Bachpan Bachao Andolan, 8-year-old Arpita was forced to work 16- to 18-hour days in the home of her uncle as a servant. When we rescued her, we had to break down the door. It was the dead of winter, and she was barely clothed and badly fed, covered in wounds and cowering under a rag on her uncle’s balcony.

Likewise, when we rescued 10-year-old Mohsin and 8-year-old Aslam in 2007, they were starving. The two children worked for their uncle making children’s clothing for one of the world’s largest garment retailers under terrible conditions. The jobs performed by Arpita, Mohsin and Aslam would not be considered “hazardous” under the amendments to the Child Labour Act.

In a recent analysis, we found that one-fifth of the children younger than age 14 rescued by Bachpan Bachao Andolan were working for family businesses. More than 40 percent of the rescued children were performing hazardous jobs that would be allowed under the proposed changes. For example, the children worked in roadside restaurants or manufactured garments, leather goods, cosmetics or electronics.

Changes In India's Law Opposed

There are millions of enslaved children like Arpita, Mohsin and Aslam. But if the proposed amendments are adopted, we will not be able to rescue a single child under 14 years of age who works for his or her “family.” It does not matter how terrible their work conditions

are. The impact – not just on individual children, but also on the future of the society – would be devastating. On behalf of India's children, we call upon our Parliament to do the right thing and reject the proposed amendments to the Child Labour Act.

Beyond India, the imperative to protect children is just as strong. If we are to realize the future promised in the SDGs, surely we must do everything in our power to protect the fundamental human rights of every person, especially the most vulnerable. Governments worldwide must deepen their commitment to child-friendly policies and protecting and educating of their young people.

My colleagues and I have humbly done our part over the years, rescuing more than 84,000 children from dreadful conditions. To those children and their families, it has meant everything.

Still, far too many children remain enslaved. They are missing out not just on their childhood, but also on the chance for a happy, healthy and prosperous future. It is time for the world to stand up and lend its voice to those whose cannot speak for themselves. We must demand that our leaders fulfill their promise of ensuring that every child's life is free from exploitation, enriched by education and full of promise. Our generation can and should be the one that ends child slavery forever.

Quiz

- 1 Which of these sentences from the article would be MOST important to include in a summary of the article?
- (A) Eighteen years ago, the Global March Against Child Labour led a worldwide movement to bring child labor and child slavery to the attention of world leaders.
 - (B) It was the dead of winter, and she was barely clothed and badly fed, covered in wounds and cowering under a rag on her uncle's balcony.
 - (C) The jobs performed by Arpita, Mohsin and Aslam would not be considered "hazardous" under the amendments to the Child Labour Act.
 - (D) My colleagues and I have humbly done our part over the years, rescuing more than 84,000 children from dreadful conditions.
- 2 The central idea that working in family businesses can be harmful for children is BEST supported by:
- (A) description and anecdotes
 - (B) statistics and analysis
 - (C) analysis and anecdotes
 - (D) description and statistics
- 3 Which selection from the article is an example of an emotional appeal?
- (A) Eighteen years ago, the Global March Against Child Labour led a worldwide movement to bring child labor and child slavery to the attention of world leaders. The campaign was a complete success.
 - (B) And the responsibility does not lie only with governments. Businesses, organizations and individual citizens must all contribute, not least by pressuring their leaders to make a change.
 - (C) Likewise, when we rescued 10-year-old Mohsin and 8-year-old Aslam in 2007, they were starving. The two children worked for their uncle making children's clothing for one of the world's largest garment retailers under terrible conditions.
 - (D) We must demand that our leaders fulfill their promise of ensuring that every child's life is free from exploitation, enriched by education and full of promise. Our generation can and should be the one that ends child slavery forever.

4 Which sentence from the article BEST represents the author's point of view on the enslavement of children?

- (A) There are millions of enslaved children like Arpita, Mohsin and Aslam.
- (B) It is a blot on the face of humanity that we have not yet wiped out child slavery.
- (C) Children are bought and sold like animals, sometimes for less than a pack of cigarettes.
- (D) The impact – not just on individual children, but also on the future of the society – would be devastating.