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# Let Children Be Children: Child Exploitation in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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At the age of seventeen, Min Min was promised a well paying job and a better life. He boarded a boat that was supposed to take him from Myanmar to Thailand, but did not realize until later that he had been tricked. He was sold to an Indonesian fishing boat, where he worked for three years. In addition to refusing to meet his basic needs, Min Min's owners made him work overnight and without any safety equipment. His slavers threatened him and told him that if he ever attempted escape, torture and an agonizing death would be awaiting him. Min Min was eventually able to escape and return home to his family, but many children in his situation are not so lucky.

The exploitation of children is a 21<sup>st</sup> century issue that needs to be resolved urgently. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) estimates that 1.2 million children around the world are currently being trafficked for economic and sexual exploitation. Children are being exploited in many different industries including agriculture, fishing, textiles, and prostitution. In many cases, child slavers deceive, kidnap, or buy children from their families. These children are exposed to dangerous conditions, violence, and abuse and are deprived of proper education and basic needs. The primary cause of child labor and exploitation is poverty. Out of desperation, struggling families turn to selling or sending their children to work. This practice over time becomes accepted and even normal in these impoverished areas. Mutually, business owners in developing countries may face economic troubles. These small businesses must compete on a global scale, against multinational corporations that use industrial machine power to manufacture goods. In an attempt to increase efficiency and reduce expenses, smaller businesses turn to employing children. Economic strain on both the family and the business' part can lead to a dependence on child labor.

There are many solutions that organizations and governments are trying that simply do not work. Most of these flaws lie in legislation. In many countries, children who have been forced to work are persecuted instead of given a chance to be a functioning member of society. Prostitution, in particular, is treated as a crime; children involved in prostitution are charged and punished for actions they were coerced into doing. As a result, children are deterred from escaping exploitative conditions. The actions that the child was forced to take later become the chains holding them down in bondage.

Additionally, laws against child exploitation are ineffective because of corruption in governments and law enforcement agencies. Many child slavers use money as a tool to avoid persecution. There are even incidents in which the police "save" children from their

employers, only to sell them back into bondage. Vannak Prum, a young Cambodian boy who was sold to a fishing boat, managed to escape from his dire conditions. When he reached a police station and asked for help, the police officers sold him to a palm oil plantation. We can only imagine the humiliation and loss of hope Prum felt when his escape failed. There are many loopholes around laws that ban child labor, and therefore further actions must be taken.

If laws are not effective in controlling and preventing child exploitation, then what can we do about the problem? When asking this question, we must first look at ourselves. It is easy to point the finger at the corrupt governments of developing countries, but are we, citizens and leaders living in developed countries, contributing to the problem? The answer is a definitive yes. An example is a corporation called the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The IMF and World Bank were set up by developed countries to aid developing countries in reducing debt and promote economic stability. During the international debt crisis of the 1980's, the IMF lent money to developing countries in desperate need. Although this act in itself was benevolent, the IMF is now acting as a loan shark; subsequently forcing countries to cut spending on health and education, destroy their own food industries, and devalue their own national currencies. Essentially, the IMF is pushing developing countries further and further down the slippery hole of modern colonization. In order to alleviate poverty and as a result, prevent child labor, the IMF must rethink its loan repayment plans and allow these developing countries to grow economically.

Another way we can prevent child exploitation is to stop supporting it. There are many ways we consciously and unconsciously benefit from child exploitation. First, many people from developed countries travel to poorer areas for child sex tourism. It was found that in Southeast Asia, a majority of the tourists that went to child brothels were from countries including Japan, America, and South Korea. Second, we buy most of our products from multinational corporations and consequently make it more difficult for smaller businesses to compete on a global level. Perhaps by supporting smaller businesses in developing areas, we can counteract the need for child labor.

The final solution is to bring awareness to modern child slavery. We must expose corruption in companies, governments, and law enforcement agencies. How can we hope to stop child labor if those that are supposed to enforce the law are breaking it? By bringing to light the problems in our society and government, we can help emancipate children from exploitation.

Clearly, child exploitation does not have a “quick and easy” fix. However, the children of today are responsible for the future of society. How can we hope to have a bright future if those who will build it are being exploited? Children should not be forced to harvest crops; they should be harvesting the fruits of knowledge. Children should not be forced to sell their bodies; they should be strengthening their minds. Children should not be fishermen; children should be children. Let us speak up and fight for those who do not have the voice to speak up for themselves.