

CONTROVERSY

Toys Made for Children, by Children

Tariq was 12 years old, stitching soccer balls for the equivalent of 60¢ apiece in Pakistan. It took him all day to make one ball, for an average of about 6¢ per hour. Featured in *Life* magazine in 1996, Tariq became the face of child labor in the developing world and sparked a major global civil society action to stop the commercial exploitation of children. Today, over 168 million children ages 5–17, about one in six worldwide, are still engaged in some form of child labor.^a Children work in a host of occupations, including rug weaving, the production of surgical instruments, mining and construction, and—like Tariq—the making of toys for other children.



Applying the Concepts

As TANs have directed attention to child labor, consumers in developed countries have acquired new **interests** in ethical consumption; more consumers are making informed purchases to reward improved working conditions and practices. These market

interactions, however, are more complex than they may seem. If the norm or **institution** prohibiting child labor takes hold, we must take into account the opportunities that poor workers, especially children, have in their societies.

Since Tariq appeared in *Life*, a norm against child labor has indeed emerged, at least in developed countries. Consumers in rich countries are increasingly avoiding goods that are known to be produced by child labor. For many people in developed countries, the concept of child labor is now abhorrent, nearly unthinkable, and assumed to be exploitative. Nonetheless, this principle has probably not yet hit the tipping point where enough individuals accept the principle that it acquires a broad moral status. Why?

The issue of child labor is more complicated than it first appears. Clearly, the economic exploitation of children is wrong. But the evil of child labor must be balanced against the alternatives to work for children in the poorest countries. These alternatives are often quite dismal. Most children and their families are not choosing between work and play or even education, but between work and starvation.

Although low, the wages earned by children are often essential to supplement the meager incomes of their parents. In families living on mere dollars a day, a child's earnings might be the difference between subsistence and starvation. In turn, for most villages where children work, schools are typically few and far away. Moreover, families dependent on child labor can rarely afford even the small fees required for schooling where it exists. In the end, banning child labor may only force child workers further into the informal economy—outside government oversight and regulation, where they are even more easily exploited—or into the sex trade.

Indeed, after the Child Labor Deterrence Act was introduced in the U.S. Senate in 1992, the mere threat of prohibitions on child-produced garments led business owners in Bangladesh to summarily dismiss many children from their jobs. According to a unique follow-up study that tracked those children, some were forced to take jobs “in more hazardous situations, in unsafe workshops where they were paid less, or in prostitution.”^b Thus, the core problem is the lack of other opportunities for child laborers.

A toy-making factory in Bangladesh.



a. International Labour Office, *Marking Progress against Child Labour: Global Estimates and Trends, 2000–2012* (Geneva, Switzerland: International Labour Office, 2013), 3–5. The number of child laborers is down from 246 million in 2000.

Under these circumstances, banning child workers can be seen as another form of Western cultural imperialism—a projection of values that are now dominant in the richest countries onto individuals and families struggling to sustain themselves in some of the world’s poorest areas. After all, minimum age requirements for employment in the United States were not enacted until 1938. In 1910, 2 million children were employed outside the agricultural sector in the United States—a number that would be much larger if we included farm labor.

Although the states had moved individually to regulate child labor, only during the Great Depression—when unemployment rates rose to extraordinary levels—could Progressives finally enact national minimum age standards for workers. This standard, combined with free primary schooling, led the proportion of children working to drop rapidly to less than 1 percent. Child labor was common in the now developed countries before they became rich. Why should consumers or voters in these countries now seek to deny employment to children in the poorest countries?

Clearly, it is not enough to simply ban child labor. Advocates must couple ending child labor with expanded educational opportunities and financial support for poor families to replace lost income. This task will be expensive, at least in the short term. The International Labour Organization demonstrates clearly that the long-term benefits of shifting children from work to education are enormous. More education not only frees children from labor but increases their earning capacity over the course of their lifetimes. But paying to educate cohorts of children, monitoring compliance with anti-child labor laws, and subsidizing families to replace the income lost incurs substantial net costs for approximately the first 20 years of any program.^c

Only after generations of children have completed their educations and entered the adult workforce do the economic gains begin to outweigh the costs. Politicians everywhere are notoriously shortsighted. To bear costs for 20 years before the gains arrive is a challenge, and one that even farsighted leaders may not easily manage.



To ask the poorest countries to incur such costs over two decades is, perhaps, to expect too much.

Though the norm against child labor that is taking hold in developed countries hardly seems objectionable, these consumers and politicians who advocate for this norm on moral grounds may not actually be helping children unless they also support expanded education and income transfers to those they leave with fewer—rather than more—opportunities in the world’s poorest countries.

Thinking Analytically

1. How does a growing interest in ethical consumption affect others, especially producers? Do the interests of consumers and producers always coincide?
2. Should rules and norms prevalent in rich countries be followed by poor countries? Should certain institutions be universal? If so, which ones and why?

b. UNICEF, *The State of the World's Children* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 23, www.unicef.org/sowc97/report.

c. International Labour Office, *Investing in Every Child: An Economic Study of the Costs and Benefits of Eliminating Child Labour* (Geneva, Switzerland: International Labour Office, 2003), 6.