

Child Labor: A Review

Paul A. Adekunle¹, Matthew N. O. Sadiku², Janet O. Sadiku³

¹International Institute of Professional Security, Lagos, Nigeria

²Roy G. Perry College of Engineering, Prairie View A&M University, Prairie View, TX, USA

³Juliana King University, Houston, TX, USA

ABSTRACT

Child labor is work that deprives children of their childhood, potential, and dignity, and is harmful to their physical and mental development. As at 2020, an estimated 160 million children – 1 in 10 globally – were in child labor, with 79 million engaged in hazardous work. Progress was stalled after 2016, due to COVID-19 pushing 9 million children into child labor by 2022. About 70% of child labor occurs in agriculture, followed by services 20% and industry 10%. The worst forms, defined by ILO Convention 182, include slavery, trafficking, commercial sexual exploitation, illicit activities, and hazardous work. The root causes are known to be primarily poverty, lack of quality education, economic shocks, and weak regulation. The consequences include injury, death, school dropout, and perpetuation of intergenerational poverty. ILO Conventions 138 and 182 provide the main international framework, setting minimum working ages and calling for immediate elimination of the worst forms. Proven interventions include cash transfers tied to school attendance, adult living wages, social protection, and labor law enforcement. While long-term trends show decline, current data indicate that the world is not on track to end child labor by 2025 under SDG Target 8.7. The paper looks at the causes, history, and challenges to child labor and helps to proffer solutions to curbing this domestic/local and international menace in order to promote children's right.

KEYWORDS: *Child, child labor, slavery, trafficking, commercial sexual exploitation, illicit activities, hazardous work, poverty, school dropout, injury, intergenerational poverty, SDG Target 8.7, social protection, labor law enforcement, gender inequality.*

INTRODUCTION

The International Labor Organization (ILO) defines child labor as work that deprives children of childhood, potential, and dignity, and is harmful to physical and mental development. This is work which:

1. Is mentally, physically, socially or morally dangerous to children
2. Interferes with schooling
3. Involves hazardous conditions or hours

However, it should be noted that not all work by children is child labor – such as light work, chores, or family business help after school is usually not classified as child labor, when it does not harm the child's health or schooling. In terms of global scale (2025 estimates) – about 160 million children are involved in child labor worldwide, with 1 in 10

children globally, as shown in Figure 1. 79 million of them work in hazardous conditions that directly endangers health, safety, or morals. The progress to control child labor was stalled as the number rose by 8.4 million from 2016-2020 after 20 years of decline, as COVID-19 reversed the gains. Regional breakdown shows that Africa has 72.1 million, highest prevalence, and while Asia Pacific has 62 million, but a lower percentage of children [1].

FORMS AND TYPES OF CHILD LABOR

The different types of child labor include [2]:

- Agricultural labor
- Domestic work
- Manufacturing and factory work
- Street vending
- Mining and quarrying

How to cite this paper: Paul A. Adekunle | Matthew N. O. Sadiku | Janet O. Sadiku "Child Labor: A Review" Published in International Journal of Trend in Scientific Research and Development (ijtsrd), ISSN: 2456-6470, Volume-10 | Issue-4, August 2026, pp.11-17, URL: www.ijtsrd.com/papers/ijtsrd140002.pdf



Copyright © 2026 by author (s) and International Journal of Trend in Scientific Research and Development Journal. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY 4.0) (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>)



- Commercial sexual exploitation
- Forced labor and trafficking

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Pre-industrial era

Child work existed in all agrarian societies. Children worked on family farms, in household production, or as apprentices from ages 7-12. This was considered normal socialization and economic necessity. It was rarely called “child labor” because the work was within families and tied to survival [3].

Industrial Revolution (1760s-1840s)

The scale and nature of child work changed drastically with factories and mines. Children were preferred labor because they were cheap, small enough to work in mines/machinery, and easier to control.

- Britain: By 1830s, children under 14 made up 20-25% of textile mill workers. Workdays were 12-16 hours, 6 days a week, as shown in Figure 2.
- Conditions: Mill children suffered deformities, lung disease, and high accident rates. In coal mines, “trappers” as young as 5 opened ventilation doors in darkness.
- Public response: Reports like the Sadler Committee Report, 1832 documented abuses and built pressure for reform [4].

Early regulation, 1800s

Britain led reform:

1. **Factory Act 1833:** Banned textile work under age 9, limited ages 9-13 to 9 hours/day, required 2 hours schooling, as shown in Figure 3.
2. **Mines Act 1842:** Banned all females and boys under 10 from underground work.
3. **Factory Act 1847:** 10-hour a day for ages 13-18.

United States: Industrialization came later. By 1870, 1 in 8 children worked. Textile mills in New England and mines in Pennsylvania relied heavily on child labor. Photographer Lewis Hine’s work for the National Child Labor Committee, 1908-1924, exposed conditions and shifted public opinion [5].

20th century Reforms

United States:

1. **1904:** National Child Labor Committee formed.
2. **1916:** Keating-Owen Act banned interstate commerce of goods made with child labor. Struck down by Supreme Court 1918.
3. **1938:** Fair Labor Standards Act set 14 as minimum age for most work, and 16 for hazardous work. This was finally held up in court.

International

- **1919:** ILO formed and adopted first conventions on minimum age.

- **Post-WWII:** Child labor declined sharply in industrialized nations due to compulsory education, higher wages, and stronger laws, as shown in Figures 4 and 5. This persisted in developing countries [6].

Late 20th century to present

1989: UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 32, recognized protection from economic exploitation.

1999: ILO Convention 182 on Worst Forms of Child Labor adopted and became fastest-ratified ILO convention.

2000-2016: Global child labor fell from 246 million to 152 million due to economic growth, education expansion, and international pressure.

2016-2020: Progress stalled. Numbers rose to 160 million. COVID-19, conflict, and economic shocks reversed gains [1].

WHERE CHILD LABOR OCCURS

Agriculture is known to account for 70% of all child labor, including farming, livestock, forestry, and fishing, this takes place mainly within family units. Services takes up 20%, and industry is 10%. The worst forms of child labor, as defined by ILO Convention No. 182, include slavery and trafficking, commercial sexual exploitation, use in illicit activities, and hazardous work.

Legal Framework

Two core international standards govern child labor which are:

1. **ILO Convention No. 138, 1873:** Sets the minimum age for work at 15 years, or 14 for developing countries. Light work is permitted at 13, or 12 in developing countries.
2. **ILO Convention 182, 1999:** It calls for immediate action to eliminate the worst forms of child labor. It has been ratified by 187 countries.
3. **UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 32:** Right to protection from economic exploitation.

US Law: Fair Labor Standards Act sets age 14 for most non-agricultural work, with hour limits. Agricultural work has exemptions.

Current Trends and Challenges

1. **COVID-19 impact:** 9 million additional children were pushed into child labor by the end of 2022 due to school closures and income loss.
2. **Supply chains:** Child labor are found in cobalt mining for batteries, cocoa, cotton, coffee, and electronics.

3. **U. S. increase:** Department of Labor found 5,792 minors employed illegally in FY2023, up 88% since 2019. Meatpacking, fast food, roofing [7].

What are the key drivers of child labor?

Poverty remains the primary key driver or cause of child labor. Children in families work to contribute to household income to meet basic needs. Some other factors are lack of access to quality education, economic shocks, conflict, and weak labor regulation, shocks due to COVID-19, climate disasters push families into poverty, cultural norms i. e. where “children should contribute” or gender roles, and the demand for cheap labor in the supply chains. Child labor is a human rights issue that is rooted in poverty and structural inequality, which therefore requires international standards for its elimination [1, 8, 9].

Consequences of child labor

For the children:

- **Health:** Can lead to injuries, chronic illness, malnutrition, exposure to chemicals. Reports have it that 22,000 children die in work-related accidents annually.
- **Education:** 1/3 of children in child labor are out of school entirely. Limits future earnings and keeps poverty cycle going.
- **Psychological:** It leads to abuse, isolation, loss of childhood, and higher rates of depression/anxiety as adults.

For economies: ILO has estimated that eliminating child labor would add \$4.6 trillion in benefits by 2030 through better health and education outcomes.

Challenges to eradicating child labor

Despite the global commitments under SDG Target 8.7 to end child labor by 2025, progress has stalled since 2016, due to the fact that this phenomenon is a symptom of poverty, weak institutions, and economic vulnerability, as shown in Figure 6. More so, as legal bans matter, but without income support, education access, and enforcement, families fall back on child work during crises. Multiple structural, economic, and enforcement barriers or challenges make eradication difficult, among which include [10, 11, 12-16]:

1. Persistent poverty remains the single strongest driver, as 659 million people still lived on less than \$2.15 a day in 2019. Economic shocks push families back into child labor even after exiting it.
2. Informal employment sectors: Laws do exist on paper but does not reach family farms, homes, or unregistered businesses. It is known that 80% of child labor occurs within the child’s own family unit.

3. **Corruption:** Corruption undermines laws, enforcement, and programs that are meant to end child labor. This is due to the fact that officials, employers, or inspectors can be bribed or influenced, leading to the collapse or failure of legal protections.

4. **Weak institutional capacity:** Many of the countries that have ratified ILO Conventions 138 and 182 lack the capacity to enforce them.

5. **Economic crises and conflicts:** COVID-19, conflict, and climate change disasters rapidly increase child labor. COVID-19 impact led to school closures and job losses with 9 million children forced into child labor by the end of 2022. Families sold their assets and removed children from school to work. The conflicts in Syria, Yemen, and DCR brought about the recruitment of child soldiers, while hazardous work rose as social protection collapsed.

6. **Lack of access to quality education:** Schooling competes with work. If schools are distant, costly, low quality, or unsafe, parents see less value in keeping children in class. 1 in 3 children in child labor are totally out of school. In sub-Saharan Africa, distance to secondary school and school fees remain as major barriers. Child labor limits education, thereby limiting future earnings, which perpetuates poverty.

7. **Demand in global supply chains:** Child labor persists in products with high global demand such as: cobalt used for batteries, cocoa, coffee, cotton, mica, and bricks. Global chains are complex and opaque.

8. **Social norms and cultural factors:** In this case, child work is normalized as training.

9. **Debt bondage and trafficking:** Worst forms of child labor most often involve coercion. Children are trafficked for commercial sexual exploitation, forced begging, or bonded labor to repay family debt.

Child Labor Reduction (Prevention/Solution)

Child labor is a complex social and economic problem driven by poverty, lack of access to education, weak law enforcement, cultural practices, and demand for cheap labor. The elimination of child labor requires coordinated efforts by governments, employers, communities, international organizations, and civil society.

Proven interventions (Solutions):

1. **Cash transfers + school access (Improve access to quality education):** Mexico’s Progresa/Oportunidades cut child labor by 17%.

Free and compulsory primary and secondary education will reduce the likelihood that children will enter the workforce prematurely. School feeding programs, scholarships, and educational materials can help keep children in school.

2. **Adult decent work:** When parents earn living wages, children work less. Policies that promote fair wages, workers' rights, and employment opportunities contribute significantly to child labor reduction.
3. **Social protection:** Health insurance, unemployment benefits reduce economic shocks.
4. **Strengthen and enforce child labor laws:** Labor inspections + penalties for employers.
5. **Strengthen corporate responsibility and Supply chain transparency/monitoring:** Corporate due diligence laws in EU, US [1, 10]. Businesses should monitor their supply chains to ensure that child labor is not used in production. Audits, certification programs, transparency measures, and ethical sourcing policies can help reduce demand for child labor.
6. **Reduce poverty and economic vulnerability:** Providing employment opportunities for adults will reduce the economic pressures that push children into labor.
7. **Raise public awareness:** Public education campaigns can change attitudes that tolerate child labor. Communities, religious leaders, schools, and media organizations can help educate parents and employers about the harms of child labor and the importance of education.
8. **Support community-based interventions:** Local communities can establish child protection committees, monitor at-risk children, and provide support services. Community participation helps identify and address child labor practices early.
9. **Address gender inequalities:** Girls are often involved in hidden forms of labor, including domestic work. Policies promoting gender equality, girls' education, and protection from exploitation are essential components of child labor elimination.
10. **International cooperation:** Governments, international organizations, NGOs, and businesses should collaborate to address child labor through funding, technical assistance, data collection, and policy coordination.
11. **Support rural development:** Many child laborers work in agriculture. Investments in rural infrastructure, agricultural productivity, and

access to markets can reduce the need for child labor [11-25].

From historical perspective, it is well known that child labor declines when:

- Adult wages rise enough such that families do not need child income
- Compulsory schooling is enforced
- Fertility rates drop, so that families have fewer children
- Economies shift from agriculture to industry/services with strict regulation.

It was for these reasons that child labor largely disappeared in wealthy countries by 1950s but persists till now in third world (or developing) countries where poverty and informal economies dominant [1, 4, 5].

ROLES OF INTERNATIONAL BODIES

International organizations play a crucial role in combating, preventing and eliminating child labor via policy development, advocacy, technical assistance, funding, monitoring, and international cooperation. International bodies can help to combat child labor by [1, 8, 9, 18, 32-41]:

1. **Establishing international standards:** International organizations/bodies develop conventions, treaties, and guidelines that define child labor and set minimum standards for child protection.
2. **Monitoring and reporting:** International organizations collect data, monitor trends, and publish reports on the prevalence and causes of child labor worldwide. These reports help governments and stakeholders develop evidence-based policies.
3. **Provision of technical assistance:** Organizations such as the ILO and UNICEF assist governments in designing and implementing laws, policies, and programmes aimed at eliminating child labor.
4. **Promoting access to education:** This is where international agencies support educational initiatives by funding schools, teacher training, schools feeding programmes, and educational materials, helping to keep children in school rather than at work.
5. **Supporting social protection programmes:** They advocate for and help finance social protection measures such as cash transfers, child grants, and healthcare services that reduce families' reliance on child labor.

- 6. Advocacy and awareness creation:** Global campaigns are carried out by international agencies to raise the awareness about the harmful effects of child labor and encouraging governments, employers, and communities to take action.
- 7. Facilitating international cooperation:** Child labor often involves cross-border issues such as trafficking and migration. International organizations coordinate efforts among countries to combat these challenges.
- 8. Funding child labor elimination programmes:** Organizations such as UNICEF, the ILO, the World Bank, other donor agencies provide financial support for projects that address poverty, education, and child protection.
- 9. Protecting children from exploitation and trafficking:** International agencies work to prevent child trafficking, forced labor, slavery, and other forms of exploitation through legal frameworks, rescue operations, and rehabilitation programmes.
- 10. Supporting research and knowledge sharing:** International bodies are to sponsor research, share best practices, and provide guidance on effective interventions to reduce child labor globally – worthy of note is that some groups may operate secretly (which are loosely described as “cabals”) but the terms such as *organized crime groups, trafficking networks, or exploitative labor intermediaries* used for them.

CONCLUSION

Child labor remains one of the most persistent social and economic challenges worldwide, depriving millions of children of their fundamental rights to education, health, protection, and healthy development. Many children continue to engage in hazardous and exploitative work due to poverty, lack of access to quality education, weak law enforcement, social inequality, and economic pressures on families, despite significant progress made via national legislation, international conventions, and advocacy efforts. However, the consequences of child labor extend beyond the individual child, affecting the communities and national development by perpetuating cycles of poverty, illiteracy, poor health, and social exclusion. There is therefore need for a comprehensive and wholistic approach to eliminating child labor to be combined with poverty reduction, universal access to education, stronger labor inspection systems, social protection programs, and collaboration among governments, employers, workers’ organizations, civil societies, and

international organizations. Child labor eradication is not only a moral and human rights imperative but as well as a prerequisite for sustainable development and social justice. Ensuring that every child has the opportunity to learn, grow, and reach their full potential is essential for building prosperous and equitable societies. More information on child labor can be obtained in books in [42-48] and the following related journals:

Journal of Economic Perspectives

Journal of Economic Surveys

Management and Labor Studies

The Annals of American Academy of Political and Social Science

Social Indicators Research

International Labour Review

International Social Work

International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health

BMC International Health and Human Rights

Review of Development Economics

REFERENCES

- [1] ILO and UNICEF, *Child labor: Global estimates 2020, trends and the road forward, 2021.*
- [2] United Nations (2015), *Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.* New York: United Nations.
- [3] H. Cunningham, *Children and Childhood in Western Society Since 1500-2005.*
- [4] J. Humphries, *Childhood and Child Labor in the British Industrial Revolution,* Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- [5] H. Hindman (2002), *Child Labor: An American History,* M. E. Sharpe.
- [6] ILO, *Marking progress against child labor, 2013.*
- [7] U.S. Department of Labor, “Child Labor” 2024; ILO-UNICEF joint brief 2023.
- [8] International Labour Organization (ILO) (1973), *Minimum Age Convention No. 138.* Geneva: ILO.
- [9] International Labour Organization (ILO) (1999), *Worst Forms of Child Labor Convention No. 182.* Geneva: ILO.
- [10] K. Beegle, R. Dehejia & R. Gatti (2009), “Why should we care about child labor?” *Journal of Human Resources,* vol. 44, no. 4, pp. 871-889.

- [11] International Labour Organization (2022), *Global Estimates of Modern Slavery*.
- [12] ILO, *Ending child labour by 2025: A review of policies and programmes, 2018*.
- [13] International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (2023), *ILO Programme Activities*.
- [14] E. Edmonds, *Child Labor*, Handbook of Development Economics, vol. 4, 2008; World Bank Poverty data, 2023.
- [15] U.S. Department of Labor, *List of Goods Produced by Child Labor or Forced Labor*, 2024.
- [16] M. Bourdillon et al., *Rights and wrongs of children's work*, 2010.
- [17] U.S. Department of Labor, Wage and Hour Division, *Child Labor statistics 2024*.
- [18] International Labor Organization (2022), *Global estimates of child labor: Results and trends, 2016-2020*. Geneva: ILO and UNICEF.
- [19] United Nations Children's Fund (2021), *Child labor and education*. New York: UNICEF.
- [20] World Bank (2023), *Ending child labor through social protection and economic inclusion*. Washington, DC: World Bank.
- [21] International Labor Organization (2021), *World employment and social outlook*.
- [22] International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labor (IPEC), *Various awareness and advocacy reports*.
- [23] Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2018), *Due diligence guidance for responsible business conduct*. Paris: OECD.
- [24] UNICEF (2021), *Child labor and community-based protection strategies*.
- [25] United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2022), *Global Education Monitoring Report*.
- [26] United Nations (2015), *Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Target 8.7*.
- [27] K. Basu & P. H. Van (1998), "The economics of child labor," *American Economic Review*, vol. 88, no. 3, pp. 412-427.
- [28] E. V. Edmonds & N. Pavcnik (2005), "Child labor in the global economy." *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, vol. 19, no. 1, pp. 199-220.
- [29] Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) & ILO (2013), *Guidance on addressing child labor in agriculture*. Rome: FAO.
- [30] International Labour Organization (ILO) (2021), *World Report on Child Labour: The Role of Social Protection in the Fight Against Child Labour*. Geneva: ILO.
- [31] World Bank (2021), *Human Capital Project Annual Report*. Washington, DC: World Bank.
- [32] UNICEF (2023), *Child protection strategy*. New York: UNICEF.
- [33] UNODC (2022), *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons*. Vienna: United Nations.
- [34] UNESCO (2022), *Global Education Monitoring Report*. Paris: UNESCO.
- [35] International Labour Organization (ILO) & UNICEF (2021), *Child labour: Global estimates 2020, trends and the road forward*. Geneva and New York.
- [36] United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2024), *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons*.
- [37] World Bank (2021), *Investing in Human Capital for Child Welfare and Development*.
- [38] World Day Against Child Labour, coordinated by the ILO since 2002.
- [39] ILO-UNICEF, *COVID-19 and child labor: A time of crisis, a time to act*, 2020; ILO-UNICEF joint update, 2023.
- [40] C. Marilyn, *A global view*, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000.
- [41] A. Cigno & F. C. Rosati (2005), *The Economics of Child Labour*, Oxford University Press.
- [42] G. K. Lieten and B. White (eds.) (2001), *Child labour: Policy options*, Aksant Academic Publishers, pp. 160-167.
- [43] G. K. Lieten (2009), *Child labour and the right to education in South Asia*, Sage Publications.
- [44] M. Bourdillon & G. Spittler (eds.) (2012), *Children's work and welfare in Africa*, African Studies Centre.
- [45] B. H. Weston (ed.) (2005), *Child labor and human rights: Making children matter*, Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- [46] P. L. Mehta & S. S. Jaswal (1996), *Child labour and the law: Myth and reality of welfare*

measures, New Delhi, India: Deep & Deep publications.

- [47] B. Wood (2020), *Upon the altar of work: Child labor and the rise of a new American sectionalism*, University of Illinois Press.
- [48] G. Nesi, L. Nogler and M. Pertile (eds.) (2008), *Child labour in a globalized world: A legal analysis of ILO action*, Ashgate Publishing Ltd., Aldershot, England; Burlington, Vermont, USA.



Figure 1. Child labour in Nigeria

Source:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Child_labour_in_Nigeria



Figure 2. Child labour in the British Industrial Revolution

Source:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Child_labour_in_the_British_Industrial_Revolution



Figure 3. Child labour (Average working hours of children, 2016)

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Child_labour



Figure 4. Child labour (Protecting children)

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Child_labour

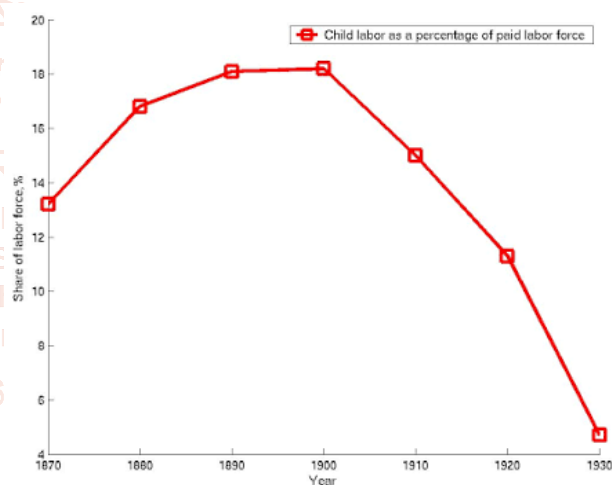


Figure 5. Child labour as a percentage of the paid labor force (distribution chart)

Source:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Child_labour_as_a_percentage_of_the_paid_labor_force.jpg

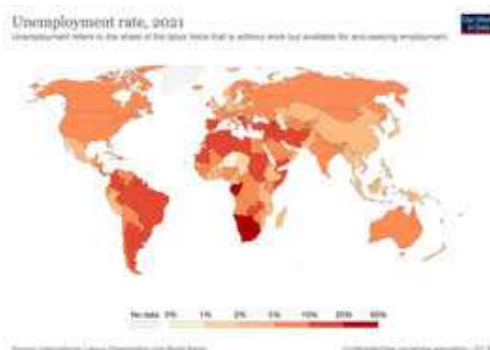


Figure 6. Sustainable Development Goal 8

Source:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sustainable_Development_Goal_8