

Child Labor and Associated Problems in a Rural Town in South West Ethiopia

Maruf Aberra¹, Kifle W/Michael², Indrias Lemma³

Abstract

Background: Child labor is the single most common form of child abuse and neglect in the world today. It includes both paid and unpaid work and activities that are mentally, physically, socially or morally dangerous and harmful to children. However, information on the magnitude of the problem is scarce.

Objective: To determine the magnitude of child labor and problems associated with it in Shebe rural town, South West Ethiopia.

Methods: A cross sectional study was conducted in January 2001 to assess problems associated with child labor. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire addressed to children between ages 5-14 years inclusive. Systematic sampling technique was used and a total of 289 children were interviewed. Data collected included the sociodemographic characteristics of parents and children, variables on economic activity, schooling, conditions of work, work related injuries as well as abuses and exploitation faced at work.

Result: Overall 78.9% of the children were working, either as paid workers (15.3%) or unpaid family workers (63.7%). The common sectors of work were domestic (56.4%) followed by agriculture (11.1%). More girls than boys are working. 31.2% of child workers spent on average more than 8 hours per day.

Abuses encountered at work were verbal/emotional (49.6%), physical (27.2%) and sexual (2.2%). Schoolwork had been widely practiced as the result of which 31.7% of the working children had encountered work related injuries, out of which 1.8% had disabilities.

Conclusion: The study revealed that child labor was widely practiced. It had affected the children's health and schooling. It had also predisposed them to exploitation and different forms of abuse. Based on these findings recommendations are made. [*Ethiop.J.health Dev.* 2003;17(1):45-52]

Introduction

It is generally agreed that child labor is the single most common form of child abuse and neglect in the world today. The International Labor Organization (ILO) estimates that around the world some 250 million children between the ages of 5 and 14 work for a living. Around 120 million work fulltime every day, all year round. About 70% work in dangerous environment (1).

Child labor includes both paid and unpaid work and activities that are mentally, physically, socially or morally dangerous and harmful to children. It deprives them the right to schooling, health care and leisure. It enslaves them and separates them from their family. It endangers the lives of children, interferes with the growth and development affecting their health and depriving them of education (1-3). The health consequences of child labor are as a result of long hours of work and insufficient rest, malnutrition, psychological stress from sexual abuse, confinement, fear of destitution and physical injury (4).

There are also several hazards related to child domestic work, including long hours of work,

¹Hiwot Fana Hospital, Harrar; ²Community Health Programme, Jimma University, P.O.Box 696, E-mail: bethy_kifle@yahoo.com, Fax:251-7-111450; ³Department of Pharmacology, Jimma University

lack of minimum facility to sleep or rest, abuse of health and moral, isolation from society, irregular meals, corporal punishment not to mention their vulnerability to sexual abuse (4,5).

Priority is being given to stop the worst forms of child labor. These include all forms of slavery, the use, procurement or offering of a child for prostitution, production of pornography or pornographic performances, involving children in the trafficking of drugs, involving children in armed conflict and any work by its nature or the circumstances, that is likely to harm the health, safety, or morals of children (6,7).

Child labor is most prevalent in developing countries. The global distribution showed 61% of child workers reside in Asia (excluding Japan), 32% in Africa, 7% in Latin America and the Caribbean. The high percentage of children in Asia is attributed to the large population density. Relatively speaking, Africa comes on top in economic activity participation rate of children, which is estimated to be 41% of the total children aged 5-14 years. In all regions economic participation rate of boys is greater than girls. However the number of working girls is said to be underestimated (3). It is a common understanding that child labor is a consequence of poverty. It also perpetuates poverty. A working child usually forgoes education and is up brought into an adult who will face unskilled poorly paid job (8).

However, the idea that child labor and poverty are inseparable should not be taken as an excuse for the prevailing problem. There are regions in poor countries where child labor is extensively practiced while in other equally poor regions it is not (1). Other reasons given for child labor apart from poverty are; short comings in the educational system, inadequate regulations to restrict child labor, ineffective enforcement and lack of public awareness (8).

Ethiopia has ratified only [No 138] of International Labor Organization (ILO) convention that states about minimum age for employment, some others are under review. In Ethiopia, the labor proclamation prohibits the employment of a child under 14 yrs of age [Art 82] (2). However in a country where large percentage of families are victimized by famine, disease, poverty, family displacement and social instability, some of the laws appear too good to be true. Thus many children earn their living under difficult circumstances in their fight to meet minimum basic needs for themselves and their families (2).

According to the estimate done by ILO in 1995, Ethiopia had on average 48.29% of children aged 10-14 years economically active. An ILO based study done in Addis Ababa in 1998 mentioned that prevalence of child abuse was 70% among child laborers but 25% among non-laborers. The types and frequency of abuse were physical (14.6%), emotional (37.9%), sexual (2.1%) which is five times more frequent than control groups and neglect (15.5%) which is eight times more frequent among the laborers (9).

A study done in the informal sector of three selected urban areas in Ethiopia showed that among the children included in the survey, 89% mentioned household poverty as a cause to their employment. Family separation or death of the parent was mentioned by 2% of the studied children but very few said that they got employed for skill development. Twelve percent of the children has no education at all and they work on average 8 hours/day, for self-employment. Fifty percent works during the weekends and on holidays (10). A study on 1500 rural Ethiopian households suggested that 92% of 4 - 15 year olds have at least one household work responsibility and close to half have two or more (11). Herding and fetching wood and water were reported to be the most common activities performed by children,

however older boys specialize in farm works whereas older girls specialize in domestic work. It should however be noted that the involvement of children in work activities that does not interfere with the child's education and development but could help children help their parents and acquire skill for future life is not considered as child labor (12). It is rather included under the responsibilities of a child in the xxxith article of African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the child. On the other hand, article xv of the same charter states that every child should be protected from all forms of economic exploitation or hazardous work that interferes with the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development (13).

Since studies done in Ethiopia on child labor are far from adequate, and almost all of them were conducted in the major urban settings of the country, the rural community where high prevalence of the problem is expected is not yet studied (14).

Therefore this particular study, with the objective of determining the magnitude of child labor and associated problems, will try to reflect the situation in rural communities.

Methods

A crosssectional study was conducted in Shebe rural town, Jimma Zone, Southwest Ethiopia to identify problems associated with working children in January 2001. Shebe is located 50 kms away from Jimma town and 385 kms from the capital, Addis Ababa.

The town has one Kebele and 1150 households. According to the Shebe Municipality office records of year 2000, the total population was 4940. The number of children between ages 5-14 years was 1165, with male to female ratio approximately 1:1. There is only one junior

secondary school. The town has one health center. The major economic activity of shebe is farming followed by small scale trading.

The study population constituted of children aged 5-14 years included residing in Shebe town during the study period. Using the prevalence of child labor 50% (as there was no previous household based study that had documented the estimate of the prevalence), with 95% confidence interval and margin of error of 5% the sample size was determined to be 289. Systematic sampling technique was employed to identify the study subjects. The first household was selected by lottery method. A child from every 4th house was interviewed. If the number of children was above one in a household, only one child was selected by lottery method. If no child was found in the selected household, the next household with a child was visited before going to the next fourth household. As the study was household based, homeless street children were not included in the study. Data on demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of the children, their schooling and economic activities, hours of work, earnings and the working conditions, different forms of abuse they ever faced at work place, work related injuries they ever faced while working and their perception about working in childhood and socioeconomic characteristics of their parents were collected using a pretested structured questionnaire that was locally developed by the investigators. Final year students of health category were recruited and trained for two days for data collection. Permission from the kebele officials was obtained prior to the initiation of the study. The purpose of the study was explained to the study subjects and their willingness to participate in the study asked before conducting interviews. Interviews were conducted during late afternoons and evenings as these were found to be optimal time to find children at home. Data collection was closely supervised by one of the principal investigators. Moreover, a sample of completed questionnaire was rechecked on daily basis for completeness and consistency. Incomplete and inconsistent questionnaires were given back to the

responsible data collectors for rectification. The data was cleaned, edited, compiled and analyzed using SPSS statistical software package. Major terms like child labor, economic activity, working children are defined as follows.

Child labor: economic exploitation and any other circumstance under which children perform paid or unpaid work that might be directly detrimental to their development, or that might prevent them from exercising their education, health and leisure (15).

Emotional/verbal child abuse: It refers to pattern of belittling, threatening, scaring, ridiculing or other non-physical forms of hostile or rejecting treatment (15).

Sexual abuse: involvement of a child in sexual activity that he or she does not fully comprehend, is unable to give informed consent to, or for which the child is not developmentally prepared or that violates the laws or social taboos of society (15).

Physical abuse: physical injury inflicted on a child by other than accidental means (16).

Economically active: children involved in work that involves production of goods and or services for sale or exchange and production of certain products for own consumption (17). **Working Children:** includes children involved in economic activity (above) and unpaid household chores such as preparing food, cleaning the house, taking care of children, or collecting firewood for own consumption (17).

Results

A total of 289 households were visited. The head of the household was the parent in 74.7% of cases, relative or guardian in 19.4% and employer in 5.2%. Majority, 57.6% of fathers were merchants or small-scale traders followed

by farmers. Most mothers, 59.1% were housewives followed by merchants and small-scale traders. 54.9% of mothers and 24.2% of fathers were illiterate while the rest can at least read and write or are from grades one and above.

Table 1: **Characteristics of children, and their parents Shebe town, Jan./2001**

| Characteristics of children | Number | % |
|-------------------------------|--------|-------|
| Age | | |
| 5 – 8 | 46 | 16.9 |
| 9 – 11 | 104 | 36.0 |
| 12 – 14 | 139 | 48.1 |
| Total | 289 | 100.0 |
| Sex | | |
| Male | 124 | 42.9 |
| Female | 165 | 57.1 |
| Total | 289 | 100.0 |
| Schooling | | |
| Currently attending | 218 | 75.4 |
| Never went to school | 40 | 13.8 |
| Dropout | 31 | 10.7 |
| Total | 289 | 100.0 |
| Paternal occupation | | |
| Merchant | 136 | 57.6 |
| Farmer | 39 | 16.5 |
| Gov't employee | 37 | 15.7 |
| Daily laborer | 11 | 4.7 |
| Others (driver, artisan, etc) | 13 | 5.5 |
| Total* | 236 | 100.0 |
| Maternal occupation | | |
| Housewife | 156 | 59.1 |
| Merchant | 69 | 26.1 |
| Farmer | 19 | 7.2 |
| Gov't employee | 14 | 5.3 |
| Daily laborer | 6 | 2.3 |
| Total* | 264 | 100.0 |
| Paternal education | | |
| Illiterate | 57 | 24.2 |
| Read and write | 51 | 21.7 |
| Grade 1-6 | 70 | 29.6 |
| 7-12 | 49 | 20.8 |
| 12+ | 9 | 3.8 |
| Total* | 236 | 100.0 |
| Maternal education | | |
| Illiterate | 145 | 54.9 |
| Read and write | 36 | 13.6 |
| Grade 1 – 6 | 46 | 17.4 |
| 7 – 12 | 33 | 12.5 |
| 12+ | 4 | 1.5 |
| Total* | 264 | 100.0 |

Among the 289 children interviewed, 42.9% were males and 57.1% were females. Most of the children, 48.1% were between the ages 12 and 14 years. Majority, 75.4% were attending school at the time of the study, 10.7% were dropouts, while 13.8% never went to school (Table 1). The two major reasons for not

attending school and for dropouts were the need to work and financial problem to cover school expenses.

Interviewed children were classified as working (paid-workers and unpaid family workers) and not working. Nearly 80% of the studied children were working, out of which, 44 (15.3%) were paid workers and 184 (63.7%) were unpaid family workers. The commonest working sectors identified in both groups were domestic work and agriculture (Table 2). Most

respondents, 67.7% started working below the age of seven and more girls than boys are working. Around 74% of the children reported that they started working in order to help their parents, 21% to help self and, 3% started working because their parents are not alive. However, 52.1% of paid workers earn an average daily income of below 3 Ethiopian birr. Around a third, 31.7% of the working children spent more than 8 hours at work per day. 29.8% were involved in night work, 73.4% worked on weekends and 33.5% work on public holidays (Table 3). Majority of the working children, 83.3% faced some form of abuse including verbal/emotional (49.6%), physical (31.6%) and sexual 5 (2.2%) (Table 4).

Table 2: **Distribution of work activities of children by sex, Shebe town, Jan. 2001.**

| Activities | Male | | Female | |
|------------------------|--------|------|--------|------|
| | Number | % | Number | % |
| Working | | | | |
| Paid worker | | | | |
| Own account worker | 9 | 3.1 | 1 | 0.3 |
| Domestic worker | 5 | 1.7 | 18 | 6.2 |
| Agriculture | 6 | 2.1 | 3 | 1.0 |
| Establishment | 2 | 0.7 | 0 | 0.0 |
| Unpaid family worker | | | | |
| Domestic worker | 45 | 15.6 | 108 | 37.4 |
| Agriculture | 20 | 6.9 | 3 | 1.0 |
| Parents' establishment | 2 | 0.7 | 4 | 1.4 |
| Others | 0 | 0.0 | 2 | 0.7 |
| Not working | 35 | 12.1 | 26 | 9.0 |
| Total | 124 | 42.9 | 165 | 57.1 |

Table 3: **Problems encountered by working children, Shebe town, Jan. 2001**

| Problem | Number | % |
|-----------------------------|--------|------|
| Not going to school | 40 | 18.3 |
| School dropout | 31 | 14.2 |
| Working more than 8 hrs/day | 69 | 31.7 |
| Night work | 65 | 29.8 |
| Working on weekends | 160 | 73.4 |
| Working on public holidays | 73 | 33.5 |
| Injury | 76 | 34.9 |
| Heavy physical load | 33 | 15.0 |
| Lack of rest or play time | 166 | 76.0 |

All sexual abuses were committed on girls who worked as paid domestic workers in the form of rape. Almost all interviewed children said that

they worked at school And some faced work related injuries. The types of work at school included cleaning the classrooms, toilets and school compound, work in the fields like in harvesting coffee, clearing bushes, fencing and digging. Sex distribution of injuries

Table 4: **Type of abuse faced by children, Shebe town, Jan. 2001.**

| Type of abuse | Male | | Female | |
|------------------|--------|------|--------|------|
| | Number | (%) | Number | (%) |
| Verbal/emotional | | | | |
| Yes | 44 | 19.3 | 69 | 30.3 |

| | | | | |
|----------|----|------|-----|------|
| No | 45 | 19.7 | 70 | 30.7 |
| Total | 89 | 39.0 | 139 | 61.0 |
| Physical | | | | |
| Yes | 34 | 14.9 | 38 | 16.7 |
| No | 55 | 24.1 | 101 | 44.3 |
| Total | 89 | 39.0 | 139 | 61.0 |
| Sexual | | | | |
| Yes | 0 | 0.0 | 5 | 2.2 |
| No | 89 | 39.0 | 134 | 58.8 |
| Total | 89 | 39.0 | 139 | 61.0 |

Total does not add up to 289 as the table shows abuses faced by working children (228)

encountered by children at work is shown on Table 5. Puncture and laceration were the frequent types of injuries at school while puncture and burn are frequent at domestic or other work sites. The frequency of puncture and burn at domestic work is more among female children than males.

Table 5: **Injuries encountered at work by children, Shebetwon, January 2001.**

| Injury | Male | | Female | |
|----------------------------|--------|-------|--------|-------|
| | Number | (%) | Number | (%) |
| As school work | | | | |
| Puncture | 28 | 53.8 | 24 | 46.2 |
| Laceration | 5 | 29.4 | 12 | 70.6 |
| Visual impairment | 1 | 25.0 | 3 | 75.0 |
| Skin ulcer | 0 | 0.0 | 2 | 100.0 |
| At domestic and other work | | | | |
| Puncture/cut | 19 | 43.2 | 25 | 56.8 |
| Burn | 6 | 26.1 | 17 | 73.9 |
| Fracture | 2 | 66.7 | 1 | 33.3 |
| Lost part of the body | 1 | 50.0 | 1 | 50.0 |
| Visual impairment | 2 | 100.0 | 0 | 0.0 |

Discussion

Despite several limitations like exclusion of homeless street children who are expected to encounter the worst forms of child labor, lack of uniformity in the definition of various forms of child labor and limited sample size, this study has tried to show the magnitude of child labor in a rural community setting.

The study showed that nearly 80% of the interviewed children were working. This is a higher figure when compared to the 1999

National Labor Force Survey of Ethiopia that showed 63.5% and 64.2% of rural children aged 5-14 years are working in the country and Oromia region respectively (17).

The findings that most children started working below the age of 7 and major sectors of work are domestic work and agriculture are consistent with other reports from rural communities (3, 11).

There is also wide practice of schoolwork because of which around one third of the children encountered some form of injury including severe forms that led to disability.

One of the problems encountered by working children was failure to attend school and school drop out. Other preliminary studies also suggested that child labor might be the major cause of extremely low school enrollment observed in rural Ethiopia (11, 18).

The study also showed that majority of the paid child workers earn very low payment [less than 3 birr (\$ 0.36) a day], many children are involved in night work, many work on holidays and weekends. These findings indicate exploitative forms of child labor and are all prohibited by the Labor proclamation (No 42/93) of Ethiopia (2,3). Similar findings were reported by a study that showed children work for more than 8 hours and earn 20-30 birr per week in most of the studied formal sector (2).

More than 80% of the working children faced some form of abuse including verbal (49.6%), physical (31.6%) and sexual (2.2%). These findings are higher than that reported in the 1998 ILO study in Addis-Ababa where 70% of the studied child laborers faced some form of abuse as compared to 25% who were non-laborers (9). This clearly shows that working children are more vulnerable and thus need special protection against all forms of abuse. All the five cases of sexual abuse identified in this study were in the form of rape on female

domestic child workers. It is very likely that the victims did not get medical or legal support for the trauma they faced.

In conclusion the study demonstrated that majority of the children aged 5-14 years are working. Many of the working children faced some form of abuse and several are subjected to exploitative working conditions. Although involvement of a child in work that is within his/her ability is not equivalent to child labor, and could be rather useful to acquire skill and assist families, the exploitative working conditions and abuses identified in this study should be prevented.

Therefore, increasing the public awareness on the existing labor laws, creating a means to protect working children from abuse and exploitation are recommended. The issue of child labor should be one of the priority Information, Education and Communication (IEC) activities on child health. Above all, as the issue of child labor is the least addressed, the least understood and least considered, conducting further studies is also strongly recommended.

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