

***HAVE WE ASKED THE CHILDREN?
Different Approaches to the Question of
Child Work***

Nandana Reddy

The Concerned for Working Children

&

Chairperson

The International Working Group on Child Labour (IWGCL)

Presented at

THE URBAN CHILDHOOD CONFERENCE

TRONDHEIM

June 9 - 12, 1997

I thank the organisers of this conference for giving me the opportunity to speak at this very important and historic occasion. This is the biggest event of this decade focusing on a subject that very little attention has been paid to - the nature of Urban Childhood. This is probably the first serious attempt of this scale to examine the phenomenon of urbanisation and the effects of this on our children. As we enter the twenty first century this issue is going to develop into a problem of critical proportions in both the countries of the North and the South. The city of Trondheim must be congratulated for choosing to celebrate 1000 years of their existence by deliberating on this issue. Children on the streets of New York and Brazil, child domestics in Africa and Asia, children used for prostitution in Thailand and India. For the next three days we are going to be exploring and delving deeper into the lives, experiences, problems, causes, dreams and aspirations of these children.

It is fitting that this conference is taking place in Norway, a country in the forefront of children's rights and I am very happy to be back here and to be able to speak of and for working children. I came here first in 1988 and fell in love with your country. It seemed so primeval, so untouched by man. I was moved by your tolerance, humility and honesty. Your respect for nature and love for children. Your willingness to strive for things that seemed impossible in the world of today, where the selfish pursuit of profit and consumerism are the corner stones of success. You have pride in your history and culture and have managed to retain the child in you through your rich traditions of myths and folklore.

I have another connection with Norway. My mother an actress played the part of Aase in Henrik Ibsen's Peer Gynt. I was twelve years old and I was carried away with the poetry and beauty of the metaphors. I watched the death scene with tears while I was transported by the magic of the world of Soria Moria.

But the world we have built for our children is far from the Soria Moria of Peer Gynt's imagination. We have reached a stage where our children are forced to work not just for survival, but also because they find it is the only way they can escape or better the situations they are in - whether that is caused by poverty in the third world or consumerism in the first.

We can no longer shy away from this reality or fool ourselves that those beautiful images we have of our children playing, laughing and going off to school are the reality. The majority of our children do not experience that in today's world.

For the next few minutes I would like to take you on a journey into the world of working children and share with you some experiences of the International Working Group on Child Labour (IWGCL) and the Concerned for Working Children (CWC) over the past years. I would like to discuss some critical issues regarding strategy and as you are a very specialised and enlightened audience and time is limited I will be brief.

For us, adults, this interaction with working children has not been easy. We have had to abandon our frameworks and face the reality of the world we have created for our children. We have had to take responsibility for the mistakes we have made and admit that the image of reality that we wish to cling to is not the real world that working children experience. They have forced us to

change our paradigm. They have taught us to dream and to hope and to believe in the possibility of change. They have made us ashamed of the state of the world and embarrassed us with their perception of what is possible and what needs to be done.

I have known Lakshmi, a very intelligent and caring child since she was eight. As soon as she was old enough she started rolling beedies (Indian cigarettes), as her mother a single parent could not find work that would support her family. Later Lakshmi was sent to work as a domestic in a small town. There she suffered all manner of physical and other abuse. She returned to the village traumatised by the experience and with no option except to roll cigarettes. It was then that Lakshmi joined Bhima Sangha, a union for working children in Karnataka, a state in South India. She enrolled for CWC's professional training programme and is now, ten years later, a leader of Bhima Sangha and on her way to becoming a children's rights lawyer.

But children like Lakshmi who are part of the hidden forms of child work such as domestic work, the informal sector and agriculture, have been left out of policy and programming so far. No formal strategies have been designed for the millions of children like Lakshmi and if we pursue this trend, they will be left to fend for themselves, to sink or swim in the murky depths of their situations.

Papu, a street child from New Delhi and a member of Bal Mazdoor Sangh, a union of street children says: "We are treated as the Nations filth. They ask us `why do you have to run away to this city? Don't you know that this is the capital?' When there is a VIP visiting they round us up from the station platforms and the footpaths and lock us up. By doing that they feel they have cleared away some of the cities garbage."

They are many children like Lakshmi and Papu who have become unsuspecting victims of a system that has failed to provide adequate infrastructure for children and this is the first and foremost violation of children's rights and one of the major causes for child labour. Poverty, the unequal distribution of wealth and an exploitative socio-economic system only aggravates and perpetuates the situation.

Derlis, a working child representing the Movement of Working Children from Paraguay has an impeccable logic. He says that all rights for children, including those in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) remain dead words on bits of paper. This he says is the reason children are forced to work. But the right to work is not considered a right. He says, "We want to be acknowledged as workers like any other worker. We want all the rights as workers. Obtaining this recognition should be our starting point, and this implies many things".

Working children feel that if they are recognised as workers and given the rights as workers, then we the adults, would begin to fulfill at least some of the articles in the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

However, the question for us adults is if we accept Derlis' stand, are we legitimising child labour or do we see the fulfillment of children's rights as workers as a step toward the total realisation of

the Convention on the Rights of the Child and thereby the creation of a situation where children will not have to work.

Our attempts to address this problem date back nearly one hundred years. We have spent all of this century in search of answers to the problem of child labour in the third world, and all we have to show for ourselves are a string of failures.

As we approach the close of the twentieth century we still find ourselves far from any real, viable or sustainable solution to this very vast and complex problem. Our strategies are still of the disaster management mode. Our focus is on a small number of occupations and processes from which we attempt to `remove' children only to find that they reappear in others.

Our approach has been a top down one dominated by the experience of the countries of the North and influenced by the models of development they have adopted. The frameworks used to perceive the issue of child labour were largely the application of adult definitions originated in the West that were reflected in legislative and policy approaches.

Child labour was the priority for the ILO when it was formed in 1918, and as the only successful examples of addressing the issue at that time was that of Britain and Europe, these standards were thrust on all countries of the world without a real understanding of the social, cultural, political and economic fabric of the South and thereby the reasons that force children to work in countries of the Third World, that still account for the majority of working children on this planet.

SUMMARY

With the backdrop of the formulation of yet another ILO convention on child labour, the need for strategies that really work and are good for children has become critical.

We have been working within a paradigm handed down to us from the North. Strategies based on this model; no matter how good intentioned they are, have failed and in many cases harmed the children they were meant to help. A closer look at the reality of the South, specially the reality of working children themselves has forced us to revise this paradigm. The need of the next century are blue prints of solutions that are developed based on this amended view to ensure that they work and more centrally benefit the working children they address.

In developing these alternatives the participation of working children themselves is crucial. To ensure this it is necessary to strengthen working children's protagonism globally and to open international political space to their organised representation.

Adults have an important role in advancing the protagonism of children as they are in political, economic and social control of society. For adults to accept the children's agenda implies acknowledging that working children are protagonists of their own lives, legitimate actors

actively participating in society. This view directly challenges the prevalent patriarchal image of children as "projects" to be acted upon.

This paper will explore these different approaches based on the work and experience of the IWGCL and will attempt to propose the direction we should be taking to address the child work issue.

The model of development grafted on third world countries has proved inappropriate and harmful not just to the majority of our people but to the rich natural resources, culture and traditions of these regions and our children as always are the most severely affected. This is where the real problem of child labour begins.

The basic causes of child work have not been successfully tackled by any global or national intervention so far and we are even now advocating simplistic, single dimensional solutions such as compulsory education and consumer boycotts to a multi dimensional problem that is deeply imbedded in national structures and strongly influenced by global pressures and trends. So far we have failed to have any widespread or lasting impact on working children anywhere in the world and our interventions have in many cases harmed the children we have set out to help.

With the alarming increase of child labour in the Third World and the re emergence of child labour in the West, it is clear that the cause is the collapse of social nets and the increased incidence of unequal and exploitative socio-economic and political systems.

I would like to examine the reasons why strategies aimed to solve the problem of child labour in the Third World have failed.

These interventions were aimed at the 'removal', 'suppression' or the 'cleaning out of sectors' of the children that worked there, rather than attacking the causes or reasons that forced children into the work force. These interventions sought to put children into schools - if need be by force - without so much as recognising 'formal education' as a part of the problem of child labour and asking ourselves why children have rejected this system.

We did not realise that removing children from a situation of work did not mean that the deprivation the child experienced was in any way solved. A child prevented from working did not automatically get all it needed for normal growth and development. We were slow to recognise that the deprivation these children faced was actually the reason they worked in the first place and that it was imperative that these factors were compensated.

Once this was done education in its broadest sense could be offered as an alternative to work, provided it was redesigned to give these children the chance of competing on equal terms with privileged children.

The problem with strategies so far, is that they have focused all resources and attention on the symptom - that is the children at work - rather than on the cause or the reasons why children work and have never offered viable alternatives to the children, their families and communities.

They have also never been seen as steps towards or as elements of an appropriate development model for Third World countries.

We have been under the delusion that all child work is intolerable. It is true that we have intolerable forms of child work that are so damaging to children that they can never be made acceptable.

However, the majority of children work in situations, which though exploitative, have the potential to provide these children with something positive as well. Children working in these situations feel that the exploitation should be addressed while protecting the beneficial elements. For, for them the choice is not between work and no work - but between working in harmful or less harmful situations.

One of the benefits these children say they get from working is a means to enter the formal sector of employment through the back door, which would otherwise be closed to them as a result of their having been 'pushed out' of an inaccessible and irrelevant education system.

This is a group of children that we tend to ignore and if we do so we would have, as Peer Gynt says, locked the gate of Paradise and taken away the key for a very large number of our children.

We have been treating working children as guinea pigs and have experimented with their lives. Manju, a tribal boy and a working child representing Bhima Sangha, a working children's movement in South India, equates our attempts with the arranged marriage system. He says: "The boy and girl are not consulted, if it works, fine - if not the couple has to bear the consequences". He says we treat strategies like lottery tickets. "Adults take their chances and the children pay the price".

One of the main reasons for the failure of strategies and interventions designed to address the problems faced by children who work is that the group closest to the problem and who possess the deepest knowledge of the situation, that is the children themselves, have not been the ones setting the global child labour agenda. NGOs, another group who have been the most concerned with the issue and have been trying to address the needs of working children for decades have been excluded from the process of strategy and policy development.

Romain, a very poised representative of working children from West Africa said: "For many years people have struggled to redress our situation, to find a solution for the problems of working children. But no one has succeeded so far. Why? Because they took decisions about us without consulting the children".

Last December 29 working children representing their movements from three continents of the world, Africa, Asia and Latin America arrived in the small village of Kanyana, Kundapur on the West Coast of South India for this first International Meeting of Working Children.

Working Children's Movements with a long history of struggle in the defence of their rights and for recognition of political and social protagonism participated in this consultation. This was the result of a series of meetings at regional, national and local levels that spanned two years.

Their journey there was not an easy one. Overcoming stiff resistance from the Indian establishment and barriers of language and culture, children spent two weeks together sharing experiences of work, organisation and political actions. They presented unified positions on the need to organise politically, to represent themselves and on the right to be consulted by planners at local, national and international levels. These children gave us a few lessons in how to live in harmony. Their handling of differences, their conflict resolution skills and their demonstration of love and affection were amazing. Their ability to have fun, to be mischievous - to be just children even while they were debating with great depth on issues of immense importance was a revelation to many of us.

However, for adults to accept the children's agenda implies acknowledging that working children are protagonists of their own lives, legitimate actors actively participating in society. This view directly challenges the prevalent paternalistic image of children as "projects" to be acted upon.

The right of children to organise and participate in decisions regarding themselves does not mean that they have all the answers, nor does it mean that we, as adults, are absolved of our responsibilities towards our children. It is only giving them the first step towards being able to defend themselves and reshape their future.

We must also be prepared for the fact that children will say things we do not necessarily agree with, they will ask embarrassing questions for which we do not have ready answers and they will disagree on the stands they take based on the differing realities they face. But we must be willing to accept this. The concerns of working children need to be put on the agenda and discussed. Their questions must be answered and only if we accept this challenge will we be any closer to finding solutions that work.

These children must be given the right to intervene in their environment and change elements that do not uphold their rights as children. It is our right to control and advocate on behalf of children that also gives us the possibility to abuse them. Children should have the right and the ability to resist this.

The ILO is in the process of drafting yet another convention on child labour. The framing of this new convention has reopened the debate and this is a good time to redefine the issue and attempt to state a viable, sustainable, and child friendly alternative agenda.

However, we must also recognise that this is the most public and clear acknowledgement to date of the total failure of strategies to combat this problem in the Third World. The new convention is to focus on the elimination of the most intolerable forms of child labour, further narrowing the field of intervention to concentrate all efforts on the thin layer of working children exposed to the most extreme forms of exploitation.

The focus of the new convention could be the most limiting so far. It could leave out more working children from programming and policy than ever before and set the trend of international funding and intervention for the next decade at least.

This could make it extremely difficult to address the needs of all those children all over the world who do not fall into this category. As I mentioned earlier, the majority of children who work, find themselves in the gray area between the intolerable and the beneficial forms of work. Many of these children also work in conditions of exploitation; their very basic rights to education, health care, nutrition and other services are violated. They have concerns and needs that must be addressed.

A failure to do so would only result in these numbers growing and many of them crossing the fine line into sectors or processes that are intolerable. Manju compares this to scooping the scum off the top of a boiling pot without doing anything about the fire underneath.

The tacit implication of this new approach is that the majority of children will continue to work and that we are not only willing to accept this, but also willing to ignore their need for protection, services and dignity. This focus on the most intolerable forms of child labour alone, and in the absence of a comprehensive strategy that goes beyond the child to address basic causes, could render even those that are targeted more exploited and push them into conditions that are far worse than now.

This new instrument could be either doomed to failure like all the others no matter how widely it is ratified or turn itself into a powerful tool to help working children. The crux of the problem is not the focus, but the strategy for the alternate paradigm.

If this proposed Convention is to succeed, we have to ensure that its success is not measured only in terms of the removal of children from these forms of work, but that their situation is improved. For this we need to have a monitoring mechanism, to monitor the impact on each and every 'targeted' child in place before the implementation of any strategy. This should be mandatory for any child labour intervention. This must be insisted upon as a basic minimum.

If this Convention is implemented without these safe guards for children, it can do one of two things. Increase the number of children in the sectors of work between the intolerable and beneficial, or push children into more hidden and perhaps more exploitative forms of child work.

Even if the new Convention succeeds in all aspects we will only have taken the first important step. We also have to be concerned about the fate of the millions of working children not covered by this proposed convention.

What about their rights, their needs, their concerns and the reasons why they work, which are similar to those that cause children to work in intolerable situations?

We also have to remember that the success of a Convention is not based on the extent of ratification by member states. Even if it is widely ratified - it may not be implemented. We therefore need a political commitment from Governments of both the North and the South.

I sincerely hope that the ILO and the members of its tripartite, who are sincere in their commitment to solve the problems that working children face, will consult the representatives of working children world wide and together with them formulate a strategy that will really serve as a powerful instrument to address this issue and ensure that monitoring mechanisms are in place to measure the impact on children.

We must also not forget that there are no simple or uniform solutions to this problem - no magic blueprint for success. We will have to develop these for each local specific situation. The level of intervention from local to global will have to be tailor made, but mesh together and strengthen each other. This diversity will be the strength of any action plan.

I would like to make a special and humble appeal to the Trade Union Movement, to please see these young workers for what they are - small citizens fighting for the right to change the structures and forces that oppress them.

These are young persons who see the strength of collective bargaining as a means to improve their situation.

They are fighting the same battle you fought for the working class of the world many years ago, when the white flag of peace was dipped in the blood of struggle and turned red.

These children are not asking for this right just for themselves, working children, but for all children so that they may ensure their protection against all forms of exploitation.

We have done very little for working children and know with certainty that we cannot do away with the causes that make children work or give them back their childhood overnight.

So grant them this - the right to intervene themselves and remember they will be the working classes of tomorrow. Unite with them and fight their battle with them.

A significant aspect of this conference and one that makes it distinctly different is that its participants are made up of persons who are closest to the problem. It is providing a forum for social activists and social scientists and the most important actors, namely the children themselves, to write an alternative agenda and influence global strategy.

We are privileged to have with us four young resource persons Rosemary, Nagaraj, Umey and Dibou, representatives of movements of working children from three regions of the world.

I therefore sincerely hope that we will use this space to do precisely this - write THE AGENDA for children the way they would like to see it.

To do this we will have to build a partnership with them - listen to them - learn from them - and together strive for a better quality of childhood - a better world.

We should be able to honestly say that Nagaraj and his friends consider us their collaborators, their colleagues. We have to forge a partnership in the truest sense of the word. Their dreams should be our challenges and we together should develop a common agenda and strategy. After twenty years of working in this field I can tell you this is possible, we have done it and this is the only way.

Seven years ago I had a dream that working children would stand here instead of me and tell us what they want. Today in Trondheim this dream has become a reality. We will be listening to Nagaraj, Rosemary, Dibou and Umey during the next few days.

Now I have a dream that the Trade Union Movement will forge an alliance with working children's movements and the NGO sector and that this will be the most powerful movement against the economic exploitation of children world wide.

I have a dream that the Government of Norway will do at Oslo in October what the Netherlands has done and what Sweden is planning to do - make this country a haven for working children to participate in a meaningful way in setting their own agenda, despite the resistance to this from certain quarters.

I have a dream that all strategies for working children will ensure that the quality of life of children, their families and communities will be dramatically improved and that these interventions will empower the peoples of the Third World to develop models of development that are suited to their countries and sustainable globally.

I dream that countries like India will be given the space to find their own solutions to this problem.

And I must warn you that my dreams have a habit of coming true.

For this we will need to set all our old biases aside and see the problem from the perspective of the children themselves. We have to turn our differences into strength. Our conflicting opinions can be a step forward towards solutions truly beneficial to children.

Adebora, a working child representing Movimento in Brazil sums this up beautifully. She says; "Everybody should defend their ideas, everybody should be equal and have the same rights. We all want to change our lives, myself, everybody here, we all want to fight, even those who could not come, the children who stayed back home. We are all fighting for a better country, for a better world - for a life. We are fighting to be citizens like anyone else. No more differences."

Remembering the wisdom of Adebora, here in the land of the midnight sun with so much light to guide us, who knows - our impossible dreams may just come true. We might just find the Soria Moria for our children in our lifetime