

World Day Against Child Labour

12 June 2007



Gender and child labour in agriculture

Whilst working girls and boys in agriculture face many common difficulties, the girl child bears a special burden. With little childcare and limited schooling opportunities, women often take their children with them to the fields. It is difficult to obtain accurate figures on the total number of children engaged in child labour in agriculture, let alone the gender breakdown between girls and boys. They may be perceived as assisting their families rather than labouring, and as such they are not counted in the total number of workers.

In small, family farm settings, it is not uncommon to see girls and boys working side by side their adult relatives. In larger farms and plantations, children may not be officially on the books as workers, but may be working to help fulfil the quotas of the adult relatives or are hired independently. They assist in planting, weeding, picking, carrying heavy loads and handling fertilizers and pesticides, often without proper protective equipment. Wages for women and for children are most often lower than men's, and in many cases children turn over their wages to adults.

Girls are a significant and often invisible part of the agricultural workforce. Girls are particularly disadvantaged as they often undertake household chores prior to going to work in the fields as well as upon returning from them. As domestic chores is often not viewed as work per se, the fact that girls engage in domestic chores such as fetching water over long distances, carrying firewood, cleaning, cooking and caring for younger children, on top of other child labour, needs to be factored in when considering their total workloads. Mothers are more likely to assign domestic chores to their daughters than sons because they perceive domestic chores as "feminine".

The long hours of work can lead to pure physical and mental exhaustion, clearly influencing the health and wellbeing of girl child labourers. An IPEC Rapid Assessment report on girls in child labour in agriculture in Ghana, for example, touches on this in terms of girls not having leisure time. The heavy workload also affects their chances of attending school or performing academically. This situation may be compounded with long, isolated hours in the field where girls may be subjected to violence and abuse.

Inequalities between men and women exacerbate the child labour problem. Strategies for addressing equality issues in child labour need to consider the ways in which male gender identities lead men to act in certain ways, affecting the role of women and hindering the achievement of development goals. One key aspect of women's empowerment is improving their access to land, which in many societies is solely or primarily in the hands of men. The girl child will often find herself working for a male relative her whole life, without ever gaining access to necessary decision-making as an adult woman. Access to credit, resources and training are also limited for many women. And while formal laws may provide for access, local customs and traditions (including those related to marriage, divorce and inheritance) may dictate otherwise. Informing girls and women of their rights and working towards removing the barriers to their access to land and resources are important measures to be taken in enhancing rural development.

There are cultural, social, psychological and even political problems that revolve around girl child labourers in agriculture. Many questions need to be answered from a legislative, cultural and economic point of view. These problems are

often exacerbated with the migration of men and boys to urban areas, many times leaving the women and girls behind to toil the land without the empowerment necessary to manage both the families and the farms. In Africa where HIV/AIDS is dramatically affecting demographics, women and girls often find themselves in untenable situations regarding both their health and their ability to run their lives. Education and a better understanding of the tangible benefits of gender equity need to be demonstrated in order to impact any positive and lasting change.

International Labour Organisation (ILO)

**International Programme on the Elimination of
Child Labour (IPEC)**

www.ilo.org/childlabour

