

Female Child Labourers in Zimbabwe: A Challenge to Achieving the Millennium Development Goals

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ABSTRACT Child labour negates the provisions of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). In Zimbabwe, many girl children are involved in child labour, subjected to inhuman treatment as some suffer physical abuse, economic exploitation and denial of opportunity to education. The thrust of this paper involves an investigation into female child labour as a hindrance to the achievement of the MDGs in Masvingo, Zimbabwe. The research utilised the qualitative methods and data was collected using observations and interviews. Scarcity of resources for schooling, broken families and poverty in households were noted to fuel the problem of child labour. The study established that the MDGs and child labour are inextricably linked causing a myriad of challenges to female child labourers in Masvingo. The female child labourers identified drug abuse, malnutrition and health related problems, dropping out of school and early marriages as the major factors that impede on the achievement of the MDGs. Subsequently, as a way forward, the researchers proposed that there is need for the government to harmonise the International Labour Organization (ILO) labour laws with child rights laws which make it an offence to engage children (0-18 years) in any form of labour.

INTRODUCTION

The problem of child labour is immense and has been growing in Zimbabwe and the world over, impeding the provisions of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Many unfortunate female children face a bleak future because of child labour. Child labour describes a situation where a young person who should be in school is engaged in income generating activities either for his/her parents, guardian, and employer or for his/her own sustenance (Hasnat 1995 as in Ahamed 2013). Chiketo (2012) also defined child labour as any type of economic task, paid, unpaid, or exploitative, engaged in by a child who is less than 18 years of age, which places the interests of the beneficiary well above those of the child and is detrimental to the physical, mental, social, educational and moral development of the child. Thus, child labour is a hindrance to the holistic development of children, thereby negating the achievement of the MDGs.

The MDGs, established in 2000 at the United Nations Millennium Summit and signed by 189 heads of state around the world, outline a list of eight overarching goals for developing countries to achieve by 2015, intended to improve living conditions and remedy key global imbalances by 2015. Goals one to three call for: fighting extreme poverty and hunger; achieving universal primary education; and promoting gender equality and women's empowerment by achieving gender parity in education. Goal 6 calls for the combating of HIV/AIDS. Poverty has often been considered the key reason for perpetuation of child labour (Chiketo 2012; Chinyoka and Naidu 2013). However, child labour is the primary result of poverty, as it pushes children into premature work thereby denying children the opportunity to acquire the education and skills they need to obtain decent work and income as adults (Rena 2009). The elimination of child labour is an essential prerequisite to eradication of extreme poverty and hunger (MDG 1).

Achieving universal primary education (MDG 2) is contingent on freedom from labour to allow female children to attend school and perform well. There is also a gender equality dimension (MDG 3) to child labour, in view of the discriminatory practices that disproportionately deprive many girls of appropriate education

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and add to their burdens through excessive household chores. The education of girls as future mothers play a crucial role in reducing child mortality (MDG 4) and improving maternal health (MDG 5), just as it does in favouring schooling of children over work in the next generation. Combating HIV/AIDS (MDG 6), too, bears on child labour since AIDS orphans are among children who are most at risk and since this disempowerment of women and girls increase the risk that they themselves may become infected (Mahlomaholo 2011).

Today, throughout the world, around 215 million children work, many full-time. They do not go to school and have little or no time to play. Many do not receive proper nutrition or care. They are denied the chance to be children. More than half of them are exposed to the worst forms of child labour such as work in hazardous environments, slavery, or other forms of forced labour, illicit activities including drug trafficking and prostitution, as well as involvement in armed conflict (Ahamed 2013). According to Anumaka (2013), an estimated 80 million child workers can be found across Africa. He further suggests that the number could rise to 100 million by 2015. That is the year in which the first and second provisions of the MDGs, “eradication of extreme poverty and hunger” and “achievement of universal primary education” are expected to be achieved. Unless poverty is reduced to enable parents to provide for their children, it will be almost impossible to eradicate child labour and, for as long as child labour persists, achieving universal primary education will remain a mirage (MDG Report 2013). Ahamed (2013) stresses the need to implement child protection measures to prevent the exploitation that often keeps children, especially girls away from school.

It must be noted that the status of the girl child constitutes an acid test of social development in the third world. Discrimination on the basis of sex is a structural feature of traditional cultures. The lower position of girls in such societies undervalues girl child labourers as compared to the male child labourers. Besides occupational hazards, girl children are vulnerable to sexual abuse both at the place of employment and at home when they are left to themselves (Iravani 2011).

Guided by the principles enshrined in the ILO’s Minimum Age Convention No. 138 and the Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention

No. 182, the ILO’s International Programme on Child Labour (IPEC) works to achieve the effective abolition of child labour (ILO 2010 cited in United Nations 2012). Also, the targets set by the MDGs have largely been missed on the African continent (UN 2012). The absence of an MDG addressing issues of child labour from the MDG framework is a regrettable omission that needs to be corrected with a sense of urgency for the intent to achieve the MDGs to be realised. There is an urgent need for strategies, policies and programs to be put in place to reduce the demand for and the supply of child labour.

Purpose of the Study

Given the afore-mentioned context, the study explored the impact of child labour in achieving the MDGs through examining the positive and negative effects of child labour on the development of girls. While child labour is a sensitive subject with both positive and negative connotations in Zimbabwe, people continue to practice it because of poverty. Most families in Masvingo cannot afford a basic meal and the cost of education for their children thus children are trapped in child labour to make ends meet. Households who cannot meet their basic needs may depend on the income of their children for survival. In many cases, these families are so poor that every member of their family needs to work. Despite the positive rationale of child labour given in this study, the evils of child labour are indisputable in Zimbabwe and the world over. Child labour is a hindrance to the holistic development of learners thus negating the implementation of MDGs in Zimbabwe.

Major Research Question

To what extent are the MDG goals hindered by the existence of female child labourers in Zimbabwe?

METHODOLOGY

The present study took the form of a descriptive survey that was conducted in three urban secondary schools in Masvingo district, Zimbabwe, in order to explore and present the impact of child labour on the provisions of the MDGs among Form Three learners in Zimbabwe. The main aim of this study was descriptive and

exploratory. Therefore, a qualitative research design was considered appropriate (Mitchell 2012). One of the advantages of the study was that it allowed the researchers to gain an understanding of social phenomena from the participants' perspectives, as seen within their natural settings (McMillan and Schumacher 2012).

The target population comprised students who were in Form Three at the three secondary schools concerned, as well as teachers who were teaching the pupils studying in nine different subjects. From a population of about 380, eighteen Form three learners and six teachers were purposively selected. The sample consisted of 18 female students, 6 from each school. To extend the findings, a double-pronged approach was used, made up of interviews and observations. The researchers interviewed eighteen female form three pupils face-to-face to obtain their views towards child labour. Six female learners per school were purposively selected. The assistance of 6 teachers (2 teachers per school) was secured by means of purposive selection. By making observations and taking copious notes during the audiotaped interviews, the researchers helped to ensure the accuracy and completeness of the data obtained, in accordance with Maxwell's methodology (2006), which holds that doing so contributes meaningfully to securing a valid description of what researchers see and hear.

In order to make sense of collected data, the researcher applied Tesch's open coding method of data analysis to identify themes and categories (Creswell 2008). It is a systemic process of examining, selecting, categorising, comparing, synthesising and interpreting data to address the initial propositions of the study (White 2002; Yin 2012; Leedy and Omrod 2013).

Ethical Consideration

Permission to conduct the study was secured from the Masvingo Provincial Education Office, Zimbabwe, as well as from the selected school headmasters/principals involved. Further permission was sought from the selected teachers as well as the parents/guardians of the selected learners. The participants were informed that their involvement in the study was voluntary, and that they were free to withdraw at any stage from an interview if they were not comfortable with participating. Prior to the commencement

of an interview, permission was obtained from the participant for it to be audio recorded. The participants were also assured of their anonymity in the research report.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Child Labour and Poverty

The participants revealed that poverty was the major factor fuelling child labour in Zimbabwean rural and urban areas. The respondents (learners and teachers) said that the female learners from poverty stricken households come to school with empty stomachs, paid their school fees late, do not have decent school attire and usually faint at school because of hunger. In view of the above, the majority of the female learners (16) interviewed supported child labour, with one learner saying that:

"Kana uchida kubhadhara mari yechikoro tanga washanda mari yako yechikoro kana kuti iye wakudziringira mari yechikoro ngaakubhadharare" (If you want to pay school fees on time there is need to look for employment first to get money so that you can pay in time)

The learners revealed that their parents could hardly get enough resources to use at school which includes stationery, uniforms and even school fees. Due to poverty children are forced to drop-out of school and look for employment for the survival of the family. Thus, child labour violates the provisions of MDGs 1 to 3 which call for fighting extreme poverty and hunger, achieving universal primary education and promoting gender equality and women's empowerment by 2015. While poverty was noted to exacerbate child labour, some teachers interviewed in this study echoed that schooling problems also contribute to child labour. Many times children seek employment simply because there is no access to schools (distance, no school at all). When these children leave school, they become potential workers and are denied an education.

Teacher one stated:

... in many instances I am aware of families where everyone in the family has to work and earn in order to make a minimum level of survival for the poor family. They have no choice. It is all about survival.

In line with the above argument, Iravani (2011) posited that poverty and unemployment

of adults are the main reasons for this problem of child labour. If all adult men and women had the opportunity to earn an acceptable income, no parent would want to send their children to any work, especially hazardous work. They would prefer to send them to school.

Child Labour and Schooling

Some teachers argued that since most parents were poor, learners came to school after doing hard work such as farming and all domestic chores. The study also established that families temporarily withdraw their girl children from school to work in the fields and sell goods like juice cards, fruits, vegetables, freezits, iced water and several other items of rather marginal significance so that they could increase their chances of earning income for the survival of the family. Female children were also observed to act as unpaid domestic servants in their own homes, taking care of the family's needs while both parents work. The words of one of the girl's interviewed below illustrate some of the challenges faced, and how these can affect participation at school:

As girls we are given so much work at home that we cannot do our reading. We are overworked, and being exploited, while the boys' just roam the streets, and sometimes do their schoolwork. We do all the household chores, like washing the clothes, cleaning the house, feeding the young ones, looking after sick relatives and parents, cooking for the entire family, and fetching firewood and water before we go to school.

The above challenges were also echoed by a female learner from one of the other schools. The literature confirms and illuminates these findings. A research study by Chung (2009:25) revealed that a woman who helps her family and her neighbours in the community is considered a role model and held in high regard. Notable however, is that children carry out different roles while helping, because of the gender stereotypes attached to roles which are labelled feminine and masculine. It should be noted that in Zimbabwe, and in Africa, culturally, the place of a woman is in the home, particularly in the kitchen, thus it is common knowledge in Zimbabwe that the women care for the family in every respect. They plan, prepare and cook meals, wash clothes, clean the home, and take care of the sick. The culture of Zimbabwe has a proverb which says

'*Musha mukadzi*'; the interpretation is that women are the nest-builders. In simple terms it says that the women own the home and they are in control, as they determine what everyone should eat. Thus, the girl children spend too much time on domestic chores, compromising their academic performance. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that gender, culture and poverty combine to produce highly significant educational disadvantages for girls in poor households. These findings are further supported by Rao (2004) and Iravani (2011) in studies conducted in India.

Given the above, achieving universal primary education (MDG 2) is contingent on freedom from labour to allow female children to attend school and perform well. There is also a gender equality dimension (MDG 3) to child labour, in view of the discriminatory practices that disproportionately deprive many girls of appropriate education and add to their burdens through excessive household chores. The education of girls as future mothers play a crucial role in reducing child mortality (MDG 4) and improving maternal health (MDG 5), just as it does in favouring schooling of children over work in the next generation.

Child Labour and Delinquent Behaviour

The researchers observed that child labour promotes truancy, absenteeism and poor academic performance. This was revealed during interviews with the teachers. It was also established in this study that girls were more likely to be employed in eating houses, night clubs and grocery stores where they are at high risk of sexual abuse and exploitation and of subsequently becoming HIV infected. Findings from the teacher interviews revealed that being away from parental protection puts girls in a much higher risk position of becoming exposed to sexual abuse and exploitation. Combating HIV/AIDS (MDG 6) therefore bears on child labour since AIDS orphans are among children most at risk and since this disempowerment of women and girls increases the risk that they themselves may become infected (Mahlomaholo 2011).

The study also established that the girls were perceived to be more trustworthy than boys; hence they were called upon, more often than boys, to contribute to the family income. Although there are laws that sometimes protect

children from child labour, these laws cannot be properly enforced. For many families, the money that female children bring home is what keeps the family going. Under these circumstances, society may accept abuse in the form of child labour as justifiable thus violating the provisions of MDGs 1 to 3 which call for fighting extreme poverty, achieving universal primary education; promote gender equality and women's empowerment by achieving gender parity in education.

Child Labour and Health Issues

During interviews, one of the teachers stated that due to their physical vulnerability as minors, working female children become exposed to a multiplicity of diseases that can result in death. Further, a child who begins work at a young age has more years to develop a disease than an adult with a similar exposure (Bourdillion 2011). The health condition of the female child labourers is also affected due to the exposure of children to chemicals which are mostly hazardous to their health. The time spent in working contributes also to the poor health of the children. Teachers interviewed highlighted that HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases were rife among the female child labourers. A study conducted by Fekaday et al. (2006) in Ethiopia to determine the impact of child labour on psychological and mental health of children showed that working children had more mood disorders, anxiety and stress than non-working children. Also the study found that psychological and behavioral problems are evident among working children compared to non-working children. This corroborates findings of this study as expressed by teachers as well as the learners which established that: prostitution; early marriages; drug addiction/abuse; sexual abuse; and various acts of delinquency and truancy were also common among female child labourers. Given the above, it should be noted from this study that child labour is a hindrance to the provisions of MDGS 4 to 8 which is about promoting health for all by 2015. There is therefore a need to reduce child mortality, improve maternal health, combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases, ensure environmental sustainability and develop a global partnership for development by 2015.

Employers capitalize on the docility of the female children recognising that these labourers cannot legally form unions to change their conditions. The greater incidence of health issues among female child labourers lead to increased school absences, tardiness rates, incidence of illness during class, and rates of undiagnosed and or untreated health problems or disabilities (Chiketo 2012).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the present study confirms the observations of the other studies that show that child labour is an impediment to the achievement and provisions of the MDGs. It reduces not only the individual's health and educational achievements, but also affects the quality of the health and education system. The presence of a large number of female child labourers is regarded as a serious issue in terms of economic welfare. Children who work fails to get the opportunity to develop physically, intellectually, emotionally and psychologically. In this light, the fight against child labour has gained international momentum during the last decade, and has become a major challenge for the MDGs in Zimbabwe and the world over. There is a need to identify the vulnerable children and point out the problems in relation to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), particularly poverty eradication, primary education for all, gender equality, combating HIV/AIDS and creation of a global partnership for development.

RECOMMENDATIONS

On the basis of the findings, a number of recommendations are made:

Collaboration must be enhanced between governmental and non-governmental institutions as well as strengthening strategic partnerships with other countries to provide better economic solutions for poverty which is the main reason for child labour. Since poverty is the root problem of child labour there is need for governments to device strategies to curb poverty.

There is also a need to increase awareness to the negative impacts of child labour among poorly educated parents and families in Zimbabwe. This will help them to value education of their children more than child labour. Compulsory free primary education needs to be addressed

by the Government. Further the use of vocational programs will assist in improving the skills of many children and also reduce the illiteracy of children in the country.

Child allowances or other assistance provide income for parents and caregivers. Benefits (cash/ food) conditioned on school enrolment create incentives for families to send children (especially girls) to school. The enforcement of labour market policies addressing child labour can increase school enrolment.

The Government needs to emphasise the child's physical, psychological, and social health care whether at school or at the work site through periodic health checkups and health care visits by the Department of Health. There is also a need for the government to harmonise the International Labour Organization (ILO) labour laws with child rights laws, making it an offence to engage children (0-18) in any form of labour.

Finally, the absence of child labour from the MDG framework is a regrettable omission that needs to be corrected with a sense of urgency if the intent to achieve the MDGs by 2015 will be realised. In view of this, the ninth Millennium Development Goal should be: End all forms of child labour.

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