

Children Mining for Gold in Burkina Faso

By Marc Sollinger



Every day a small child named Theophile descends into a cramped mine. He spends up to fourteen hours there, tossing shards of ore into a bucket 150 feet below the ground. Theophile is mining for gold in the small African nation of Burkina Faso, one of the poorest countries in the world. With the rising price of gold, gold mining has become a booming industry there, and between 30 and 50% of the workers on small-scale mines are children like Theophile. Many of those children receive only room and board, and they suffer from severe illnesses due to their work.

Children in Burkina Faso don't just work in mines, they pick cotton, herd goats, and sometimes are forced to beg. 37% of kids there are engaged in child labor instead of going to school. But child labor isn't just a problem in the Colorado-sized country of Burkina Faso, 215 million children around the world work full-time.

The United Nations defines child labor as “work that deprives children of their childhood, their potential and their dignity, and that is harmful to physical and mental development.” That means work that prevents children from going to school or is dangerous to children. There's a difference between this work, and helping out around the home, assisting in your parent's farm, or earning extra money outside school hours.

Up until the Great Depression, child labor was the norm in the United States. During the Industrial Revolution, at least 1.75 million children were working in factories and mills, and in 1900, about one in five workers was under 16. This was due to the explosion in American manufacturing and the need for small and agile laborers. Many social reformers tried to end child labor, but although use of child labor declined in the early 20th Century, it wasn't until

1938 that employing children under sixteen became illegal.



(http://www2.maxwell.syr.edu/plegal/uticatah/mazloomwq2_files/image012.jpg)

The 215 million children that perform child labor do many different things. They work in mines, in fields, and in factories. 115 million of these children work in the worst forms of child labor, which the United Nations defines as: “slavery, trafficking, debt bondage and other forms of forced labor, forced recruitment of children for use in armed conflict, prostitution and pornography, and illicit activities.” Due to the global economy, many large corporations benefit from child labor, even if they don’t engage in it themselves. In fact, a lot of products that Americans use in their day-to-day lives might be produced by child labor. These include: candy bars, coffee, smartphones, even underwear.

Although nearly every country has signed the UN Declaration on the Rights of the Child, which forbids the worst forms of child labor, child labor is still a huge issue, related to poverty, globalization, and the demand for cheap products and labor. There are however, agencies and groups working to help stop it. They do this by working with corporations to ensure that companies don’t buy products from factories and farms that use child labor, inspecting workplaces to check if any children are employed there, and by trying to educate people about the realities of child labor. Perhaps the most visible project is the UN’s “Red Card to Stop Child Labor” which encourages young people to write postcards to governments and companies urging them to stop child labor practices.

Images from www.cia.gov and <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/multimedia/burkina072013/4.html>