March 2018

Policy Note

Eradicating child exploitation: Why a gender- and adolescent-specific lens is essential to accelerate progress

Overview

Ending child labour and modern slavery – including forced marriage – in line with the targets of Sustainable Development Goals 5 (Gender Equality), 8 (Decent Work) and 16 (Just and Inclusive Societies) requires a dual-pronged approach (see box below). It is critical to use a broad lens to identify and challenge child and adolescent exploitation in all its forms, while systematically disaggregating its underlying causes and effects by gender, age, disability and other indicators of social exclusion.[1]

The scale and scope of the challenge

- Despite progress, there are an estimated 152 million children – 88 million boys and 64 million girls – engaged in child labour on a daily basis. Of those, approximately half are in hazardous work, over two-thirds are in agriculture, and nearly all are in the Global South.[2]
- The risks that adolescents face are diverse and are shifting alongside global processes such as urbanisation and migration.

Gender plays a critical role in shaping risk, with boys more likely to be in paid labour and girls more likely to work without pay behind closed doors.

- Nearly 30% of trafficking victims,[3] and 25% of modern slavery victims,[4] are children under the age of 18. Adolescent girls are disproportionately represented in both, in large part because they are especially vulnerable to commercial sexual exploitation and forced marriage.[5]
- Of the children in forced marriage, 96% are girls and 44% were made to marry before the age of 15.[6]

1   ILO (2017b) Global estimates of modern slavery: forced labour and forced marriage. Geneva: International Labour Office and Walk Free Foundation
2   ILO (2017) Global estimates of child labour: results and trends, 2012–2016. Geneva: International Labour Organization
3   UNODC (Office on Drugs and Crime) (2016) Global report on trafficking in persons. Vienna: UN Office on Drugs and Crime
4   ILO (2017) Global estimates of modern slavery: forced labour and forced marriage. Geneva: International Labour Office and Walk Free Foundation
5   Ibid.
6   ILO (2017) Global estimates of modern slavery: forced labour and forced marriage. Geneva: International Labour Office and Walk Free Foundation

Key actions to accelerate progress

Renewed attention to the magnitude and breadth of adolescent exploitation, as part of the SDGs, is a necessary step towards eradicating it. As yet, however, there is still insufficient attention to the problem. By creating a broader lens, but failing to systematically disaggregate the underlying patterning and drivers of that exploitation, adolescents (and especially adolescent girls), who are already too often overlooked, risk being rendered even less visible in policy and programming. The devil, as they say, is in the details. We suggest that development actors invest in the construction of 'bifocals', which first let us zoom out, to understand the size and scope of the population of children facing exploitation, and then zoom in, to see the specific needs of different populations of children of different ages. This means delivering, at a minimum, on seven key priorities:

1. Address legal and policy gaps, and ensure appropriate budgeting to facilitate policy implementation, especially as they relate to the worst forms of child labour, trafficking, forced marriage, and modern slavery (as highlighted in SDGs 5,8, and 16).

2. Provide free, quality education through secondary school, ensuring that options for older adolescents are flexible enough to accommodate the reality that many of them have to work to support themselves. This should include evening classes as well as bridge programmes to help school dropouts return to formal education.

3. Engage with the private employers who will be increasingly important to ending child labour, given the social and economic transitions unfolding across the global South, including urbanisation and the unprecedented levels of people affected by humanitarian crises. It is vital to create skills-building and labour market opportunities in general, and in humanitarian contexts in particular, where limited access to employment opportunities has forced young people into highly exploitative work situations.

4. Strengthen age-, gender- and disability-responsive social protection programmes so that families have a safety net and can avoid resorting to negative coping strategies such as child labour, forced marriage or begging. Provisioning needs to go beyond design, be sufficiently resourced for effective implementation, and be well monitored.

5. Invest in programmes that provide tailored support to the most disadvantaged adolescents, such as those with disabilities, domestic workers, survivors of trafficking, and child-headed households. Interventions need to focus on reducing the exploitation that these adolescents face and, where they have suffered trauma, provide them with psychosocial services, including through investment in social workers and other support staff.

6. Work with parents and communities through outreach activities such as community conversations and media campaigns to tackle the underlying discriminatory social norms on age, gender, disability, caste, etc. that leave children vulnerable to the most egregious forms of exploitation, such as forced marriage, forced labour and trafficking. Interventions should also provide young people with mentors and social support to help them identify – and fulfil – their own aspirations.

7. Invest in robust data and evidence that will reveal more precisely the magnitude and patterning of child exploitation, as well as assess programme impacts. Evidence-informed programming can contribute to strengthening the effectiveness and efficiency of programming especially in the most resource-constrained contexts.

This information is based on a forthcoming report which will be published on gage.odi.org/