

CHILD LABOR IN WESTERN AFRICA

The International Labour Organization (ILO) defines child labor as work that "is mentally, physically, socially or morally dangerous and harmful to children; and interferes with their schooling by depriving them of the opportunity to attend school; by obliging them to leave school prematurely; or by requiring them to attempt to combine school attendance with excessively long and heavy work." Not all work that children do is child labor. Work done that is not detrimental to children's health, development or schooling is beneficial because it allows children to develop skills, gain experience and prepare them for future positions; these are not considered child labor.

The worst forms of child labor, related to cocoa production, are using children as slaves or in debt bondage, trafficking them, and forcing them to do hazardous work, which includes using dangerous machinery or tools, manually transporting heavy loads, working with hazardous agents or working long hours.

Chocolate is a product of the cacao bean, which grows primarily in the tropical climates of Western Africa, Asia, and Latin America. The cacao bean is more commonly referred to as cocoa, so that is the term that will be used throughout this article. Western African countries, mostly Ghana and the Ivory Coast, supply more than 70% of the world's cocoa. The cocoa they grow and harvest is sold to a majority of chocolate companies, including the largest in the world.

In recent years, a handful of organizations and journalists have exposed the widespread use of child labor, and in some cases slavery, on cocoa farms in Western Africa. Since then, the industry has become increasingly secretive, making it difficult for reporters to not only access farms where human rights violations still occur, but to then disseminate this information to the public. In 2004, the Ivorian First Lady's entourage allegedly kidnapped and killed a journalist reporting on government corruption in its profitable cocoa industry. In 2010, Ivorian government authorities detained three newspaper journalists after they published an article exposing government corruption in the cocoa sector. The farms of Western Africa supply cocoa to international giants such as Hershey's, Mars, and Nestlé—revealing the industry's direct connection to the worst forms of child labor, human trafficking, and slavery.

In Western Africa, cocoa is a commodity crop grown primarily for export; 60% of the Ivory Coast's export revenue comes from its cocoa. As the chocolate industry has grown over the years, so has the demand for cheap cocoa. On average, cocoa farmers earn less than \$2 per day, an income below the poverty line. As a result, they often resort to the use of child labor to keep their prices competitive.

The children of Western Africa are surrounded by intense poverty, and most begin working at a young age to help support their families. Some children end up on the cocoa farms because they need work and traffickers tell them that the job pays well. Other children are "sold" to traffickers or farm owners by their own relatives, who are unaware of the dangerous work environment and the lack of any provisions for an education. Often, traffickers abduct the young children from small villages in neighboring African countries, such as Burkina Faso and Mali, two of the poorest countries in the world. Once they have been taken to the cocoa farms, the children may not see their families for years, if ever.

Most of the children laboring on cocoa farms are between the ages of 12 and 16, but reporters have found children as young as 5. In addition, 40% of these children are girls, and some stay for a few months, while others end up working on the cocoa farms through adulthood.

Holding a single large pod in one hand, each child has to strike the pod with a machete and pry it open with the tip of the blade to expose the cocoa beans. Every strike of the machete has the potential to slice a child's flesh. The majority of children have scars on their hands, arms, legs or shoulders from the machetes.

In addition to the hazards of using machetes, children are also exposed to agricultural chemicals on cocoa farms in Western Africa. Tropical regions such as Ghana and the Ivory Coast consistently deal with prolific insect populations and choose to spray the pods with large amounts of industrial chemicals. In Ghana, children as young as 10 spray the pods with these toxins without wearing protective clothing. The farm owners using child labor usually provide the children with the cheapest food available, such as corn paste and bananas. In some cases, the children sleep on wooden planks in small windowless buildings with no access to clean water or sanitary bathrooms.

On cocoa farms, 10% of child laborers in Ghana and 40% in the Ivory Coast do not attend school, which violates the International Labour Organization's (ILO) Child Labour Standards. Depriving

these children of an education has many short-term and long-term effects. Without an education, the children of the cocoa farms have little hope of ever breaking the cycle of poverty.

To date, relatively little progress has been made to reduce or eliminate child labor and slavery in the cocoa industry of Western Africa. At the very least, the industry has agreed to work to eliminate what the ILO calls “the worst forms of child labor.” These are defined as practices “likely to harm the health, safety, or morals of children” and include the use of “hazardous tools” and any work that “interferes with schooling.” Approximately 1.8 million children in the Ivory Coast and Ghana may be exposed to the worst forms of child labor on cocoa farms.

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