

# Child labour and emotional disorders in an urban district, Ethiopia: A rapid assessment on community perception of child labour

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## Abstract

**Background:** According to the ILO statistics, millions of children in the world work in hazardous and intolerable occupations. Many of these children are exposed to sexual, emotional and physical abuses and thereby become vulnerable to various childhood emotional and behavioural disorders. **Objective:** To assess community awareness about child labour, its perceived causes, associated problems and means of tackling both.

**Methods:** One hundred and fifty eight individuals selected by convenience sampling method from different sectors of Addis Ketema District in Addis Ababa gave information about child labour through a self-administered questionnaire. The study took place from September to November 1997.

**Results:** Eighty two per cent of the respondents perceived child labour as a social problem. Vending in the street, domestic work (working as housemaid) and work in low scale private enterprises were perceived as major areas of child labour. Eighty percent reported that child abuse is common among child labourers. Beating, neglect and emotional abuse were perceived as the most frequently occurring types of child abuse in child labour. Poverty alleviation in the families, provision of free education to children, raising awareness in the society, family planning, legislation and law enforcement were the major perceived areas of intervention to minimize child labour and associated problems.

**Conclusion:** This study showed that the community has fairly good level of awareness about the existence of child labour, associated problems and its possible solutions. [*Ethiop. J. Health Dev.* 2001;15(3):197-202]

## Introduction

Some people find it difficult to make a distinction between child Labour and child work. Few consider child labour only when there is employer and employee relationship, although others argue that it can exist irrespective of this (1). These different views about child Labour greatly influence the statistics and the society's understanding of the problem.

Child labour is an exploitative condition

involving working children below 15 years of age (2). Child labourers work long hours for low wages under conditions damaging to their health; sometimes separated from their families, frequently deprived of educational and training opportunities that could open up a better future for them. It is one of the most important sources of child abuse. Child labour is ubiquitous and not necessarily a developing nation issue (3). Child Labour has become a global agenda in recent years. The International Program for the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC), a branch of the ILO has been taking the lead in organizing the global campaign towards the progressive elimination of child Labour through technical and material assistance. Its priority target groups are children in hazardous working conditions and

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occupations, bonded child Labourers, very young working children and working girls (4).

It has been very difficult to obtain exact statistical figure regarding child Labour in many countries around the world (5, 6). According to the best ILO estimate, there are about 250 million child Labourers worldwide, over 90 per cent of them are found in Africa and Asia (7).

Data about child labour in Ethiopia are very scanty. However, nationwide child labour census has been completed just recently (personal communication). In early 1990s, a survey in Addis Ababa on the formal sector of child Labour among 63 children in 15 establishments showed that 86% of them were engaged in full-time work; all earning less than a quarter of an adult worker earns. The regular working hour was longer and they were forced to work on weekends and holidays in poor ergonomic conditions. Among the study subjects 60% were not currently attending school and 75% of them were away from their parents for 2-4 years. Except for 10% of the study subjects who quit schooling due to low interest in education, the rest were forced to do so because of economic reasons (1).

At about the same time, another survey that looked at 60 child labourers in an informal sector in Addis Ababa showed that the average age of child labourers in this sector was 13.5 years. Over 80% of these working children were 5th graders and 17% had never gone to school. Among those who had attended school, 31% of them were regular students while 27% were dropouts. The sampling frame of that study covered 10 different child labour activities namely: taxi & shoe shine boys, street & tea room workers, tailors, carpenters and garage apprentices, shop keepers, maid-servants (child domestic labourers), and porters. The taxi boys, maidservants, street workers and porters worked for 12-13 hours daily. A more recent study in Addis Ababa, DireDawa and Nazareth in 404 child Labourers showed that 80% were in a state of

bondage and 74% worked in poor ergonomic conditions (8). This study also found that significant number of those children had low self-esteem, problems in schooling, and resentment over their work.

Ethiopia has ratified the UN Convention that guarantees rights of children (9). It has also adopted various relevant National Policies and clearly ascertains the right of children in its Constitution(10). The old Penal and Civil Codes ensure protection of the child. The country has not signed any of the ILO Conventions on minimum age although it is one of the oldest members of the ILO. However, there is an article in the Labour Law of the country that prohibits employment of a child below 14 years of age(11).

Recently, the Ethiopian government has been showing remarkable interest in the global endeavor against Child Labour. The workshops being held from time to time and a draft legislation, which is under discussion regarding the rights of a child, are major steps foreword to improving the situation (1,12). However, we feel that there is a need for a lot of research on child labour in Ethiopia to strengthen and consolidate the positive effort towards the development of a policy to protect the rights of a child in the country. To this effect, evaluation of the community's view has tremendous contribution in guiding intervention planning.

The objective of this study was to assess how far the community in the study area was aware about the nature of child labour and its extent. The second aim was to learn what respondents thought were the major types of child labour and the driving elements behind. Finally, the study tried to identify perceived problems associated with child labour, different types of child abuse and prevention methods. The study was conducted between September and mid November 1997.

### **Method**

This study took place in Addis Ketema District

of Addis Ababa City. The district is situated at the center of the capital and includes the famous open market of Africa, *Maṛkato*. This area is economically dynamic and is inhabited by all shades of national folks. The new district administration is divided into four sub-districts (*woredas*) and further into 51 Urban Dwellers Associations (*kebeles*), basic unit of administration. The population of the district is estimated at 314,565. Children of 5-15 years old accounted for 23.7 per cent. The literacy rate is 79.67% (13). At the time of the study there were 29 elementary and junior secondary schools with a student population of 63,135 where 52.6% were females and only 30% of the schools were government schools (personal communication). There were 4 Police stations and eight NGOs in the district.

Respondents (Key informants) were selected from three sub-district offices, five schools, six urban dwellers' association offices, one police station, and two NGO offices located in the district. They were teachers, public service providers and government officers, self-employed, NGO workers, students, housewives and mixture of others. The criteria for selecting most of these respondents were based on the following assumptions: their wide exposure to children in all circumstances, the position they held in the community, their proximity to appreciate the problems of child labour and assumed capability to suggest preventive mechanisms.

Respondents were selected by convenience selection method, which is one of the selection methods used in Rapid Assessment Procedure. This technique enables to crudely estimate general opinions and perception of a population regarding the subject in question (14). It uses both qualitative and quantitative data and mainly helps to evaluate the nature, magnitude and patterns of a problem. The procedure mainly helps to get some insight into the perceived nature, magnitude and seriousness of a problem. It also helps to learn public opinion about the preventive methods. Investigators thought this method was appropriate

for the purpose of this study.

Investigators prepared a one-page open-ended questionnaire in a local language, Amharic, to collect information from the respondents. The content of this questionnaire includes respondent's socio demographic information, knowledge about child labourers whose age is below 15 years, common types of work these children engage with and compelling reasons for this. The questionnaire also contains about possibilities of abuse in these children and types of abuse. It finally asks the respondents about their perception regarding the subject in question and possible solutions. The questionnaire was distributed to potential respondents for self-administration.

The study had Ethical clearance from Amanuel Hospital and the National Ethical Clearance Committee.

Data entry and analysis was done using computer software, Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 7.5.1 (15).

### Results

Out of 170 identified potential respondents 158 people responded to the questions while 22 persons refused to participate in the study. The mean age of the respondents was 32 years. Eighty seven per cent were between 18-47 years of age and 8.3% were above 48 years. About 32% of our participants were occupationally affiliated to schools. Of these, most were teachers in the primary or junior secondary level and eight per-cent were school principals. Service providers were respondents whose activities included trade, *kebele* work, police and administration. In this group, 25% was community representatives, i.e., *kebele* chairmen or administrators (Table 1).

All except eight per cent of the respondents stated that Child Labour exists and is a major social problem. Major types of child labour identified were domestic labour, working in the street and private enterprises. The main perceived reasons for becoming child labourer

were economic problems, family issues like divorce, substance use in parents, lack of education and instability, in the families (Table 2).

Table 1: **Socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents, Addis Ababa, 2001**

Characteristics	Number	Per-cent
<b>Sex</b>		
Male	95	60.1
Female	63	39.9
<b>Age</b>		
< 18	7	4.5
18-27	60	38.7
28-37	40	25.8
41-47	35	22.6
48+	13	8.3
<b>Level of Education*</b>		
College	75	48.1
Secondary	63	40.4
Junior secondary	7	4.5
Primary	11	7.0
<b>Occupation*</b>		
Teacher	40	26.0
Public servant	32	20.8
NGO worker	25	16.2
Government office worker	21	13.6
House wife	18	11.7
Self employed	7	4.5
Student	7	4.5
Others	4	2.6

\* Sum of values does not correspond to the total population because of missing values.

Table 2: **Respondents' perceived reasons for becoming child labourer, Addis Ababa, 2001.**

Reasons	Number	Per-cent
Economic problem	113	77.9
Family matters	10	6.9
Lack of education	5	3.4
Others	17	11.7
Missing	13	—
<b>Total</b>	<b>158</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Eighty per cent of the respondents stated that various forms of physical and emotional abuses are very common among child labourers (Table 3).

Perceived high-risk occupations for child abuse were street labour, domestic labour and work in private enterprise, in that order.

Table 3: **type of child abuse in child labour identified by respondents, Addis Ababa, 2001**

Type of abuse	Number	Per-cent
Beating	29	24.6
Neglect	31	22.5
Accident prone	13	21.0
Sexual abuse	9	12.3
Emotional	34	9.4
Poor nutrition	1	6.5
Undue workload	17	2.2
Mixed type	3	0.7
Don't know	1	0.7
Missing	20	
<b>Total</b>	<b>1158</b>	<b>100.0</b>

More than 80% of the respondents were aware of the existence of internationally accepted basic child rights. Intervention areas stressed by the study population included family support to alleviate poverty, providing free education to children, raising awareness of the community, family planning, legislation and law enforcement on child labour (Table 4).

Table 4: Respondents' perceived measures to prevent child labour, Addis Ababa, 2001

Intervention	Number	Per-cent
Poverty alleviation of parents	66	6.5
Access to education for children	36	23.2
Duties of government & NGO	28	42.6
Parents responsibility	15	18.1
Others	10	9.7
Missing	3	—
Total	158	100.00

## Discussion

To the knowledge of the authors, no similar study was conducted in Ethiopia and a lot of effort put to searching literature from elsewhere did not avail any. Thus, it was not possible to compare the findings of this study with others'

The result of this study gives a clue that there is some knowledge and perception of child labour as a social problem. Domestic labour, working in the street and private enterprises were identified as major types of child labour. Although their existence in the country is evident (8) the respondents did not spell out bonded labour and child prostitution, which are regarded as more hazardous than others to child labourers.

Although most assumed that poverty is the compelling force to child labour, it was not perceived as the sole cause for the problem. Among other causes, low education level on the part of the parents was perceived as a

cause for child labour. This was clearly shown to be the case on subsequent studies by the authors of this paper where low education level of parents was significantly associated with child labour.

The respondents perceived that street labour exposes children to child abuse more often than other types of child labour. Probably this is because it is easier to take notice of this group being abused as (Physical abuse) and insulting (emotional abuse) that are among the most frequent types of abuse identified by the respondents can often take place in the streets. On the other hand, child abuse that takes place among those working indoor would not be visible to outsiders and this may have lead the respondents to the perception that domestic labour carries less risk than street labour.

The possible intervention areas, such as raising community awareness, provision of free education to children and poverty alleviation proposed by the respondents are fully in agreement with the idea of social scientists working in this field.

Although it seems that there is a need for further increase in the awareness of the community on this issue this study indicates that there is some form of readiness in the public regarding intervention to minimize intolerable forms of child labour. The results of this study were assumed to serve as a good parameter in the major planned activities to be carried out in the upcoming phases of the project and in the evaluation of future interventions. Thus, starting a further study to look into the nature and the magnitude of the problem in the district appeared to be justified. We recommend well-designed and larger studies of similar nature in the future, as it is difficult to make strong conjecture from this study alone.

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