

Child Poverty and Child Labor in Cambodia and Uganda: Degree, Impact and Policies

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Abstract

This article examines the impact of child labor in Uganda and Cambodia, an everlasting issue perpetuated by the lack of governmental response and historical human rights violations. This article analyzes the history of child labor in these two countries, how the countries' governments have attempted to solve the issues, and why this issue persists. The article discusses how Uganda and Cambodia must find a new perspective and take a new initiative towards preventing child labor. It also examines how child sex work, which is one of the worst work children do in Cambodia and Uganda, is inconsistent with various approaches of ethical decision making.

I. Introduction

Child labor is an everlasting issue that has stained countries' workforces for centuries. Today, there are adequate avenues some governments have taken to eradicate child labor and trafficking. However, 86.6 million children in sub-Saharan Africa and 26.3 million children in Central and Southern Asia still employ children ages 7-14 years old today.¹ This article will examine the degree, impact and programs related to child labor in Cambodia and Uganda.

This article analyzes child labor in Cambodia and Uganda by reviewing birth registration, childhood employment, childhood employment industries, and the number of children out of school. Both countries have drafted and implemented responses to address child labor, which will be examined and compared to each other. Cambodia and Uganda have entirely different economic statuses and social environments, yet they still showcase how child labor is a multiple-faceted issue that requires an intersectional response and solution.

This article is structured into six sections, the first being the introduction, which is followed by a brief literature review (Section II) that summarizes four publications discussing child labor in Cambodia and Uganda. Section III reviews some socio-economic background of the two countries by illustrating the evolution of their GDP per capita, life expectancy, and literacy rates over time. Section IV examines specific struggles that impact child labor, which are discussed in three sub-sections. Section V serves as an ethical analysis of child labor, including reviewing what

¹ Reid (2022).

government programs have been implemented to prevent child labor and how especially child sex work is unethical. Finally, Section VI is the conclusion.

II. Brief Literature Review

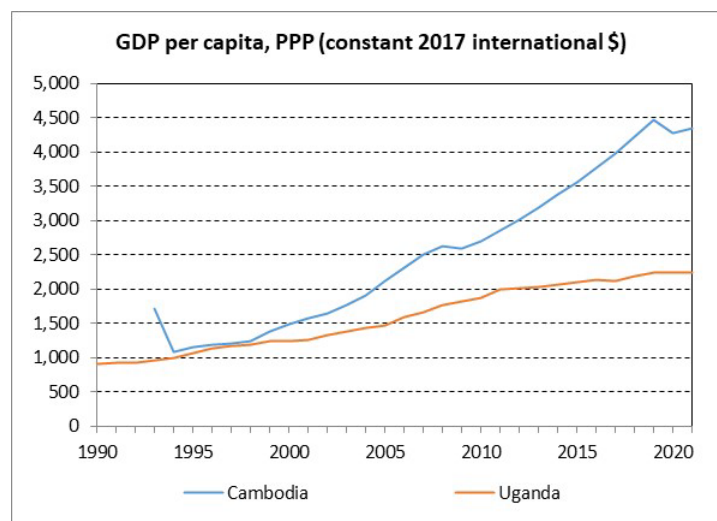
Given the large degree of children working in Cambodia and Uganda, there is a relatively large literature, including by academics, human rights activists, and government entities. This brief literature review focuses on four publications. First, an academic article by Kim (2009), which is based on her doctoral research of child labor in Cambodia at the University of Cambridge. Second, a Human Rights Watch report on child labor during COVID-19 by human rights activists Jo Becker and Lena Simet (2021). The third and fourth publications are Reports by the Bureau of International Labor Affairs of the United States (U.S.) Department of Labor (2021), respectively covering Cambodia and Uganda.

- Kim (2011) argues that the Cambodian education system is prolonging the child labor debate by not acknowledging the inherent issue that child labor prevents students from attending and finishing school. Kim describes that the education sector has a “passive approach” to child labor by assuming it is an economic issue, not an education issue. Policymakers and legislation are out of touch with Cambodian peoples’ realities, thus making any effort to solve child labor ineffective. The paper describes how governmental corruption and lack of motivation from citizens and politicians prevent an impactful educational policy that keeps children in school and out of the workforce.
- Becker with Simet (2021) report how COVID-19 has increased child labor in Ghana, Nepal, and Uganda. Food, economic resources, and governmental support were scarce for low-income families during the pandemic, thus forcing Ugandan children into the workforce due to the rising threat of starvation. Nationwide school closures permitted children to use the time they would’ve spent in school working. Children found themselves working within a myriad of working conditions and places.
- The U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of International Labor Affairs (2021a) reports on child labor and forced labor in Cambodia, arguing that Cambodia has had “Minimal Advancement - efforts made but continued practice that delayed advancement.” The bureau states that Cambodia has launched a five-year action plan to address online child sexual exploitation from 2021-2025. Nonetheless, the program has been ineffective in responding to child labor because the government refuses to hold public officials accountable for their involvement in child labor, especially sexual exploitation. They report that Cambodian judges are easily bribed to lessen or dismiss cases involved in these scandals. Overall, they establish that Cambodia is unequipped to respond to child labor until lawmakers and judges hold public figures accountable for their role in perpetuating sexual exploitation and labor.
- The U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of International Labor Affairs (2021b) asserts that Uganda has had “moderate advancement” since previous years and that the government has adopted new action plans to prevent child labor. The country has ratified essential international solutions for child labor, such as establishing a minimum working age, prohibiting forced labor, and outlawing child trafficking. However, the report demonstrates that Ugandan children can and are subjected to “worst forms of child labor,” such as sexual exploitation. Furthermore, they conclude that Ugandan law enforcement lacks the funding and resources to enforce child labor laws and inspections.

III. Socio-Economic Background

Figure 1 illustrates the evolution of purchasing power parity (PPP)-adjusted GDP per capita in constant international 2017 dollar from 1993 to 2001 for Cambodia and from 1990 to 2021 for Uganda. Analyzing these evolutions is essential when attempting to understand these countries' economies. There was a stark decrease in Cambodia's GDP per capita from \$1,717 in 1993 to \$1,078 in 1994, reflecting the country's political and economic instability until the mid-1990s. Following 1994, Cambodia's GDP per capita grew sharply and continuously, with two exceptions: a minor decrease from 2008 to 2009, and a more significant decrease from 2019 to 2020 due to COVID-19. Uganda's GDP per capita increased nearly continuously from 1990 to 2021, though Uganda's growth rates are far more moderate than Cambodia's. Excluding Cambodia's sharp decline from 1993 to 1994, Cambodia's GDP per capita increased more than four times from 1994 to 2021, while Uganda's GDP per capita increased far less than three times during the same period. In 2021, Cambodia's GDP per capita was \$4,355, while Uganda's was \$2,246, nearly half of Cambodia's, despite that the two countries' GDP per capita were nearly the same from 1994 to 1998.

Figure 1: PPP-adjusted GDP per capita (constant 2017 international \$)



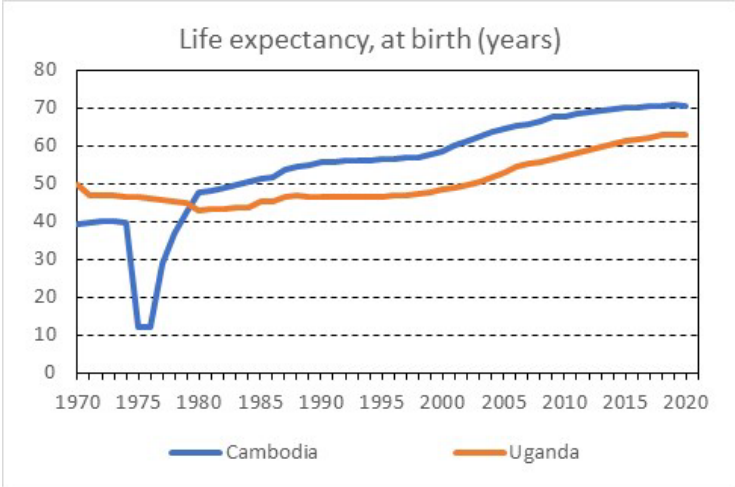
Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2023).

Figure 2 shows the life expectancy for Uganda and Cambodia, a statistical view that helps to understand how these two countries support citizens' health, education, jobs, and housing. From 1970 to 2002, Uganda's life expectancy has neither decreased nor increased dramatically. For ten years, from 1987 to 1997, Uganda's life expectancy was stagnant at around 46.5 years. Life expectancy has gradually increased by an annual average of about 0.75 years from 49.6 years in 2002 to 62.9 years in 2020. Cambodia's life expectancy has had some drastic changes: from 1974 to 1975, the average life expectancy rate dropped from 39.8 years to 12.0 years. This dramatic decrease demonstrates the severe damage of the Cambodian genocide, which occurred from 1975-1979.² For four years, approximately 2 million people were killed under the Khmer Rouge

² Holocaust Memorial Day Trust (2023).

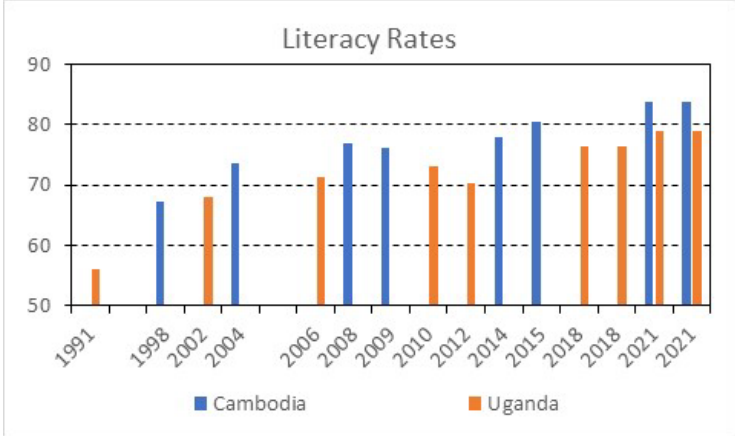
communist regime, thus directly influencing life expectancy in Cambodia. The regime’s fall in 1979 allowed life expectancy to rise and grow without significant complications. In fact, in 1980, Cambodia’s life expectancy increased to 47.6 years, nearly five years longer than Uganda’s standard at the time, 42.9 years. Since then, Cambodia’s life expectancy steadily increased. In 2020, Cambodia had a life expectancy of 70.4 years while Uganda had a life expectancy of 62.9 years, a difference of 7.5 years.

Figure 2: Life Expectancy at Birth (in years), 1970-2020



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2023).

Figure 3: Adult Literacy Rates in Uganda and Cambodia, all years available



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2023).

Cambodia has consistently higher literacy rates than Uganda for every year that data is available. From 1998 to 2021, which is the period such data is available for Cambodia, Cambodia’s literacy rate has increased by 23 percent, with only one marginal decrease from 2008 to 2009. In 2021, the literacy rate was 83.9 percent. Uganda has a lower literacy rate than Cambodia but has a higher

increase in relative terms. Uganda’s literacy rate increased by 41 percent from 1991 to 2021 with a marginal decrease from 2010 to 2012. In 2021, Uganda had a literacy rate of 79 percent.

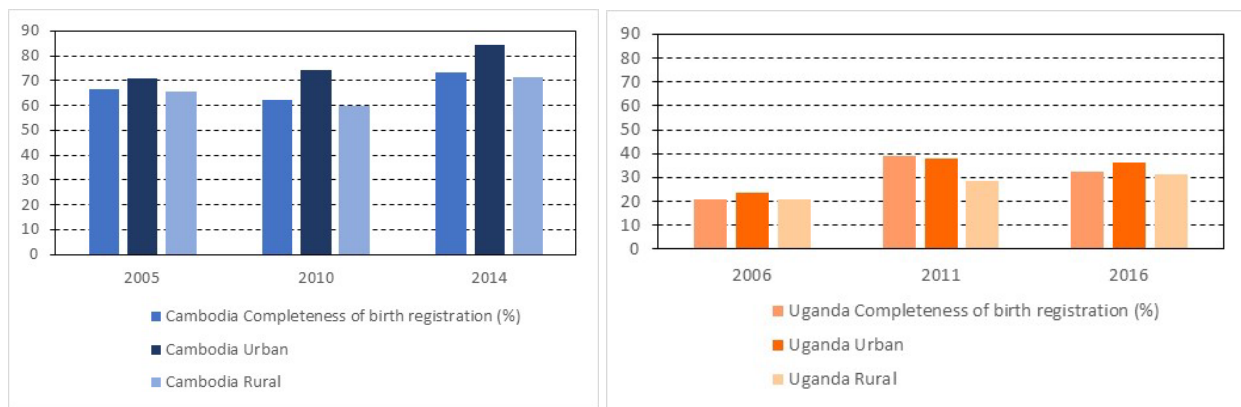
IV. Analysis of Facts

This section is divided into three sub-sections; the first will analyze how children are set up for failure by their inability to be registered under the state. The consequence of not being registered at birth sharply increases the risk of child labor, which is examined in the second sub-section. The third sub-section will review how many children are out of school in Cambodia and Uganda.

IV.1. Birth Registration

Figures 4 and 5 demonstrate the percentage of unregistered children at birth. Being an unregistered child in Cambodia and Uganda typically implies that the child becomes invisible. Invisible children are forced to live without government assistance or benefits in housing, education, health, etc. In addition, the lack of support and recognition perpetuates child labor and child sex trafficking. Unregistered children cannot marry or register their children in the future, thus continuing the cycle of poverty, child labor, and invisibility.³ This intersectional issue exposes governmental programs and the lack of accessibility. Despite the lack of substantial data, analyzing and recognizing the significance of birth registration in totality and urban and rural areas is essential.

Figures 4 and 5: Birth Registration in Cambodia and Uganda, all years available



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2023).

Cambodia’s overall birth registration grew from 66.4 percent (in 2005) to 73.3 percent (in 2014), an overall ten percent increase. Birth registration has improved every year, and that data is available in both urban and rural areas. As seen in Figures 4 and 5, there is a considerable and consistent gap between urban and rural areas in both countries. Urban areas’ registration rate increased from 71 percent (2005) to 84.4 percent (2014), an overall 19 percent improvement over nine years. Rural areas started at 65.7 percent (2005) and grew to 71.6 percent (2014), which is an only nine percent increase over nine years. Beyond the difference in levels, with Uganda having much lower birth registrations, Ugandan birth registrations have increased a lot from 2006 to 2011

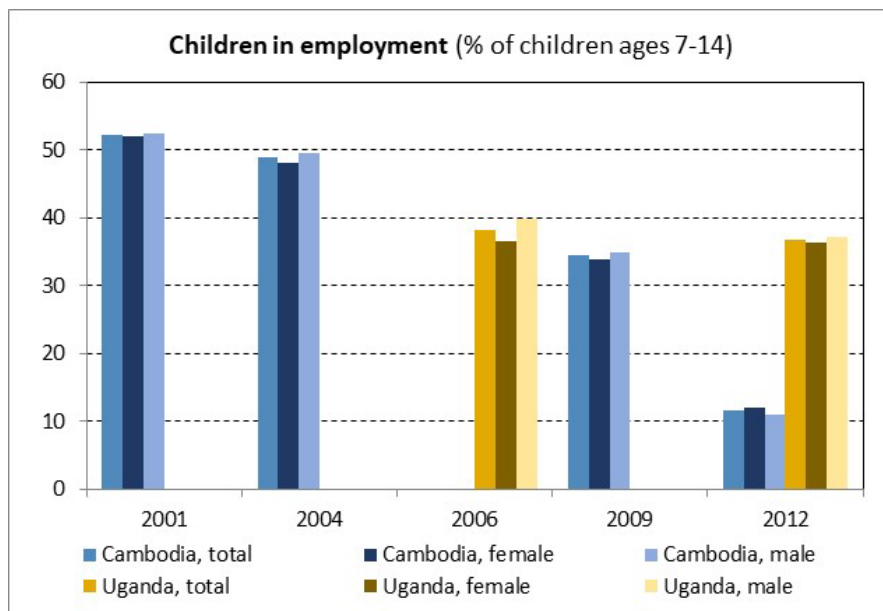
³ Kermeliotis (2009).

for rural and urban areas, however, they decreased in urban areas as well as overall from 2011 to 2016.

IV.2. Child Labor

There is limited data on how many children work in Uganda and Cambodia. Cambodia has with data for four years more substantial data than Uganda, which has data for only two years. Nonetheless, the limited data is still useful to examine the impact of child labor. As shown in Figure 6, Cambodia has significantly decreased the number of children working in the workforce. In 2001, 52.3 percent of children were employed, but in 2012 only 11.5 percent, a 78 percent decrease over 11 years. Uganda has also decreased the number of children working but not as notable. In 2006, 38.17 percent of children were working, which later lowered to 33.2 percent in 2012; this is a 13 percent decrease over six years. Cambodia and Uganda have similar differences between female and male children in the workforce, with the percentages of boys working being marginally higher than girls, though possibly more girls working in the informal sector not being reported.

Figure 6: Percentage of Children in Employment in Cambodia and Uganda, all years available

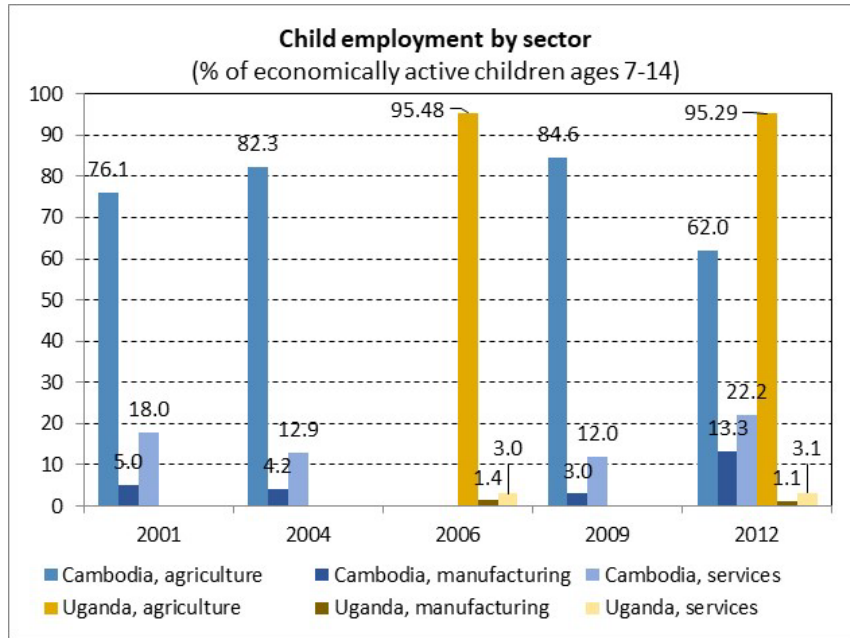


Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2023).

Figure 7 illustrates the nature of child labor in Cambodia and Uganda by showing all the available data for child employment by sector as percent of economically active children ages 7-14. Cambodia and Uganda have both expansive agricultural sectors, which is where most children work, though less so in Cambodia than in Uganda. Looking at 2012, which is the only year data is available for both countries, 62.0 percent of Cambodia's and 95.3 percent of Uganda's children were working in agriculture (among the economically active children). While there are very few percentages of children working in industry in Uganda (1.1 percent in 2012), 13.3 percent of Cambodia's economically active children worked in the industrial sector in 2012. While 22.2

percent of Cambodia’s economically active children worked in the service sector, there were only 3.1 percent of Uganda’s economically active children working in the service sector in the same year.

Figure 7: Child Employment by Sector (% of economically active children ages 7-14), all years available



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2023).

In Cambodia, wages for agricultural workers have increased by 206 percent from 2004 to 2012, demonstrating that it is the most financially prosperous job that many uneducated children can reasonably get.⁴ Furthermore, if a family owns a rice paddy farm, it is common for Cambodian children to work there, demonstrating the manipulating nature of work access and familial exploitation. In addition, access to other industries like manufacturing or service can be unattainable for children living in rural areas. All this also applies to Ugandan children, though at even higher degrees as Uganda is a far more agriculture-based country than Cambodia, with coffee, sugar, tea, cotton, and tobacco being the bedrock of Uganda’s economy.⁵

IV.3. Children Out of School

As noted in the literature review, Kim (2011) states that there is a crucial relationship between education and child labor. Kim claims that the lack of intersecting policy prevents the government from solving the issue of keeping children in the classroom and out of the workforce. Figure 8 demonstrates the percentage of children at primary-age-school being out of school. Though there are considerable data gaps, especially for Uganda, which has no data from 1997 to 2008 and then

⁴ World Bank (2015).

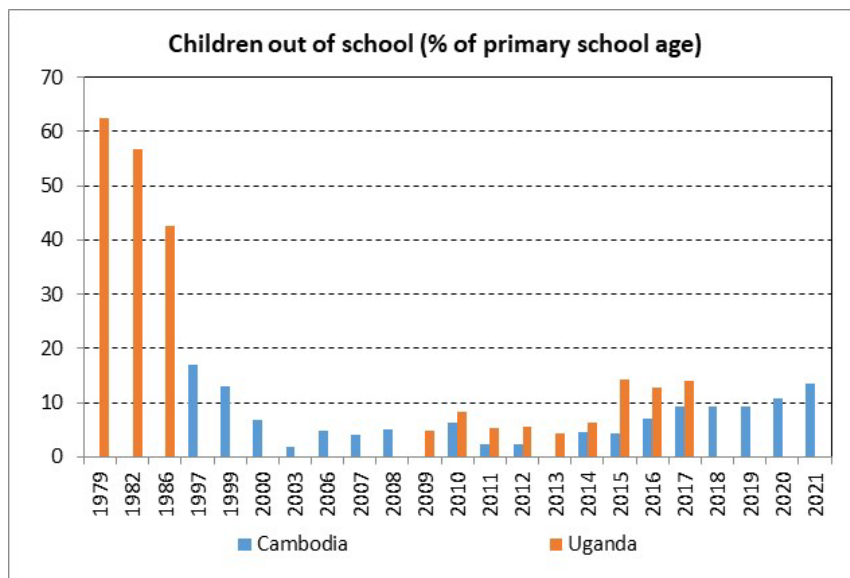
⁵ International Trade Administration (2022).

again, no data beyond 2017, it is clear that Uganda has overall made more progress with reducing the percentage of children out of school than Cambodia.

While Cambodia made very strong progress from 1997 to 2003, reducing the percentage of children out of school from 16.9 percent to 1.9 percent, the percentage increased to 4.8 percent in 2006, followed by a decade of relatively small ups and downs. However, the most recent trend for Cambodia shows a sharp increase from 4.4 percent in 2015 to 13.5 percent in 2021, which is about the same percentage of children out of school as there were in 1999.

Uganda reduced the percentage of children out of school very sharply from 62.4 percent in 1979, to 42.6 percent in 1986, and to only 4.8 percent in 2009. However, the percentage then nearly doubled to 8.4 percent in the subsequent year (2010), while decreasing again to 5.2 percent in 2011. It then remained around that level for the next few years, until it jumped up to 14.2 percent in 2015, which is about the same value for 2017, the last year such data is available for Uganda. The lack of overall decreasing trends in both countries showcases both countries' inability to address child labor and education on a sustained basis.

Figure 8: Percent of Children Out of School, Cambodia and Uganda, all years available



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2023).

V. Ethical Analysis

This sections first provides some historical background, then summarizes the main government programs to address child labor and child trafficking, and then addresses some ethical concerns related to child labor and child trafficking in Cambodia and Uganda.

V.1. Historical Background

The Cambodian genocide (1975-1979) destabilized and stunted the country's ability to grow and thrive for years. The Khmer Rouge (KR) regime destroyed the Cambodian socio-economic landscape, killing millions and forcing all citizens, regardless of age or health, to work in brutal agricultural fields. Unethical labor, lack of medicine, lack of education, and lack of food, were the

sole factors for many deaths during this time. The sheer number of fatalities and the destruction of the Cambodian governmental system resulted in complete restoration requiring resources they did not have.⁶ Reconstruction after KR was challenging in areas with higher concentrated KR control, preventing the growth of public service and governmental programs. Even years after the conflict, children's education and health continued to struggle, and they received minimal support from the Cambodian government. Children's inability to access education during the genocide and years after created a generational pattern of uneducated children not going to school and working primarily in paddy rice fields.⁷ It is essential to note the lasting effects of KR and how it has created an intergenerational cycle of poverty, fueled partly by extensive child labor.

In Uganda, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) led by Joseph Kony kidnapped 35,000 children between 1987 and 2006, forcing them to become soldiers and fight to overthrow the Ugandan government. The LRA also caused the displacement of 1.9 million people forcing the government to create resettlement camps.⁸ The conditions of these camps were disastrous, and many civilians did not have access to necessities such as safe water, sustainable food, and medicine. Many of the deaths at the time were not from combat but from diseases such as cholera.

Eventually, in 2006, the LRA was pushed out of Uganda and into South Sudan. However, the aftereffects of their occupation left many Ugandan lives in ruin, especially children. Victims of the LRA abductions are socially isolated and blamed by their community for their involvement in the movement.⁹ Survivors are also stunted emotionally, unable to process the trauma they experienced. Like Cambodia, this horrific phenomenon has created a cycle of generational trauma, preventing survivors' children from accessing quality education and housing. Thus, out of obligation and necessity, these families and children must conform to unethical labor.

V.2. Government Programs

Cambodia has government programs dedicated to addressing child labor and trafficking. In 2016, the government implemented the National Plans of Action on Combating the Worst Forms of Child Labor, which was dedicated to enhancing the monitoring of child labor and increasing law enforcement's prevention capabilities. The "worst forms of child labor" are in multiple sectors, such as agriculture, mining, service, and energy. This program also funds advocacy events and communication to help promote anti-child labor sentiment nationwide.

The plan is set to be reevaluated in 2025, where its effectiveness for eradicating child labor will be assessed. In addition to this program, the country has also established a Labor Code that prohibits anyone under the age of 15 from being able to work in the workforce. A further amendment to the Labor Code in 2021 allows inspectors of work sectors to arrest anyone suspected of labor wrongdoings, specifically child labor violations.¹⁰

In 2022, the United Nations praised Cambodia's child labor prevention efforts, claiming that its new policies, such as the National Plan of Action on Combating the Worst Forms of Child Labor, are celebratory and overall moving the country in the right direction. At the Committee on the Rights of Child, Cambodian representatives discussed creating a "national child rights information

⁶ Islam et al. (2017).

⁷ Islam et al. (2017).

⁸ Human Rights Watch (2012).

⁹ De Sam Lazaro and Hartman (2019).

¹⁰ This and the next paragraph are based on information provided in U.S. Department of Labor (2021a).

system” which would help illuminate child discrimination and educate children on their governmental freedom and rights. Furthermore, Cambodia has created a parenting curriculum to strengthen children’s online exposure, protecting them from harmful information and online labor exploitation.

Introduced in 2021, Uganda implemented a program called the National Action Plan for the Elimination of Child Labor. This effort works alongside the government’s National Development Plan, which aims to eliminate all forms of child labor by 2025. This program provides a legal framework to protect children from exploitative labor. One of the many objectives of the project is to increase access to education and social government protection, which will provide representation and service to children working in households and isolating rural communities. Moreover, the government is working to enhance advocacy efforts on child labor to help educate communities on the dangers of child labor and the other alternatives children and families have.¹¹

Launched in 2018 but put in place formally only in 2020, the Accelerating Action for the Elimination of Child Labor in Supply Chains worked to protect children susceptible to labor in the tea and coffee agriculture sectors. In 2021, the program will provide "vocational training" for children ages 14-17. The training works to "reintegrate" children into school after being forced to leave due to financial necessity. This intersectional program has built a support system for vulnerable children and families in rural low-income areas, thus decreasing child labor and increasing primary and secondary school attendance.

Law enforcement agencies have been proactive against child labor in Uganda as well. There has been an increase in arrests and convictions, especially for individuals involved in the worst forms of child labor, such as child trafficking, especially child sex trafficking. Furthermore, the government has also improved its effort to identify and protect children living and working on the streets. Previously, children were removed from the streets and placed in juvenile centers. Now, children are rounded up and put in government shelters with support from social workers dedicated to connecting them back to their families.

V.3. Ethical Concerns

It is clear that there is a legal framework to protect children from child labor, but equally important is the implementation of these laws. Although Uganda’s law enforcement has increased convictions, there have been many cases of government officials being involved in child labor networks. This blatant corruption disrupts progress and delegitimizes the government’s efforts to combat child labor. In addition, Uganda’s State House Anti-Corruption Unit has not publicly released its investigations’ results and effectiveness, thus furthering the lack of trust that advocates and citizens have in the government. The Uganda Police Force does have training that helps prevent trafficking. However, these programs are ineffective due to significant turnover and disregard for training information. Multiple reports of officers misclassifying cases and even encouraging child labor and sex trafficking victims to settle their cases via payments from their perpetrators.

Uganda does regulate the age at which children can enter the workforce, but some loopholes perpetuate child labor. Children aged 12 years or older can "apprenticeship" in industries that conduct dangerous and hazardous work. This loophole does not meet international standards for

¹¹ This and the next two paragraphs are based on information provided in U.S. Department of Labor (2021b).

labor laws and continues the cycle of industrial violence against children. Also, children are only required to go to school until age 13. This opens the door for children to enter the workforce illegally or be forced into domestic work at home that is often unpaid. The lack of centralized enforcement of labor laws and continued cracks in the system disrupt Uganda's fight against child labor.¹²

Similarly, Cambodia does not regulate work outside of formal employment relationships, meaning that work done domestically or under the table is not explicitly prohibited and does not have a minimum age requirement. For example, it is common for relatives to make children work domestically. These children are not represented or acknowledged as workers. By delegitimizing informal jobs, children are left vulnerable to families and community members that need domestic and local agricultural workers. Ultimately, this prevents children from being in school and receiving the necessary freedoms that children should be granted.¹³

Cambodia's judicial system does not criminalize using children for pornographic jobs and performances, further fueling the labor and sex trafficking industry. Child labor goes beyond working in agriculture, service, and manufacturing. It also involves unethical sexual practices. The Markkula Center (2021) has summarized six different sources (approaches) of ethical standards as they have been suggested by many philosophers/ethicists. The remaining paragraphs of this section examine how child sex work is unethical based on the six ethical approaches illustrated by the Markkula Center.

First, child sex work is a violation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which is a legally binding international agreement setting out the civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights of every child, regardless of their race, religion or abilities.¹⁴ Hence, child sex work is unethical under the right approach of ethical reasoning, which starts from the belief that humans have a dignity based on their human nature per se or on their ability to choose freely what they do with their lives.

Second, child sex work is also unethical under the utilitarian approach of ethics, which tries to increase the good and reduce the harm, selecting the action that produces the greatest balance (net benefit) of good over harm. While child sex work may benefit those buying it, the harm it causes to the child far exceeds the benefit.

Third, child sex work could be considered to be unethical under the fairness or justice approach as based on this approach, the ethical action treats all human beings equally, or if unequally, then fairly based on some standard that is defensible. Comparing child sex workers with other child workers or children that do not work, given the damaging implications of children being sex workers child sex work is not ethical under the fairness or justice approach.

Our fourth ethical approach is the common good approach, whereby the ethical action contributes to the community we are a part of. This approach suggests that the interlocking relationships of society are the basis of ethical reasoning. While child sex workers are part of society, child sex workers are not required for a functioning society. To the contrary, child sex trafficking has negative implications on the community and society overall. Hence, child sex work is also unethical under the common good approach.

¹² This paragraph is based on information provided in U.S. Department of Labor (2021b).

¹³ This and the next paragraph are based on information provided in U.S. Department of Labor (2021a).

¹⁴ See: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child>.

The care ethics lens is our fifth source or approach for ethical standards rooted in relationships and in the need to listen and respond to individuals in their specific circumstances, rather than merely following rules or calculating utility. Given that child sex work entirely ignores the needs of the vulnerable children, child sex work is directly contradicting the care ethics lens.

The final ethical approach to review is the so-called virtue approach. The ethical action under this approach ought to be consistent with certain ideal virtues that provide for the full development of our humanity. There is little doubt that child sex work is inconsistent with any common virtues. Hence, child sex work is unethical under any ethical approach or lens and should first of all be prohibited by domestic laws and then also adequately enforced.

VI. Conclusion

Even during the recent global COVID-19 pandemic, the economic landscape of Cambodia and Uganda has overall increased, demonstrating the resilience of their workforce. However, the looming threat and violence of child labor still permeates their industries, and without proper action, the intergenerational cycle of poverty, child labor, and under-education will continue. It is essential to recognize that Cambodia and Uganda had disastrous human rights violations that furthered families' and communities' reliance on child labor. However, these countries must move forward and adequately restructure their social and governmental response to labor.

As discussed in this article, to accurately protect children from work and trafficking, the implementation of anti-child labor initiatives needs further funding and care. Both countries need law enforcement that is financially supported and provides accurate and practical training that makes them advocates for children's rights. Transparent and public investigations on officials engaged in child labor are necessary because it restores citizens' trust in the government, especially when handling sensitive and complex cases like child sex and labor trafficking.

Although Cambodia's agricultural sector thrives, it relies too heavily on child laborers, especially in rural areas. This sector must have more thorough investigations and police regulations to ensure no child is working the fields. In addition, the lack of recognition of child domestic workers must be resolved and included in all policies fighting against child labor. All workforce sectors must receive high levels of care and scrutiny.

Addressing child labor means investing in education, food, and health in low-income rural areas. Breaking the cycle of child labor and poverty means providing universal access to school, food, and medicine – all of the things families need to thrive. Many children join the workforce to support their families because they do not have the necessary resources to live. To close this gap, both governments must rely on private and public funding to create sustainable and equitable lives for all people, not just children. Child labor is the consequence of governmental ignorance toward impoverished people.

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