



## **Ethical Perspectives on Child Labor: Deontology vs. Utilitarianism**

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## **Introduction**

Throughout the last few centuries, child labor (CL) has been introduced into the industrializing world, where it's been looked at through various ethical perspectives, serving utmost importance in a cost-benefit analysis of CL in countries like Bangladesh. Amir Radfar, professor at the College of Health Studies of A.T. Still University, crucially finds that child labor affects more than 211 million children, with Asia having the highest rates of child employment. (Radfar et. al. 2018). Due to this finding, this report focuses on Bangladesh, as it's globally known for incidents of CL for multinational companies. Given CL's corporate benefits and its harmful physio-psychological effects on children, it's necessary to research an ethical perspective in order to evaluate an accurate cost-benefit analysis to combat increasing levels of CL in Bangladesh.

## **Ethical Perspectives**

Daniel Krummel and Patrick Siegfried, business management professors at the University of Manchester and University of Frankfurt respectively, view CL through two major standpoints: deontology and utilitarianism. Deontology "determines the moral and status of an action not by its consequences, [but] by justice, rights or fairness," while "utilitarianism takes the view that an action is ethically justifiable if the output is greater than the pain for all concerned" (Krummel & Siegfried 2021). These two standpoints create differing ideas for solutions regarding CL. Through comparative analysis, this report aims to establish corporate viewpoints on the issue and connect it to a viable solution regarding CL.

## The Deontological Perspective

A common perspective regarding CL is deontology: the idea that an action's morality is determined by the action alone, not by its benefits to others. In principle, CL is harmful due to its negative effects on the physio-psychological states of children, thus unethical. Zahangeer Bashir, a PhD of law at the Chonbuk National University, finds CL is deleterious to children due to lack of education, physiological harms, and high hours with baseline or no pay (Bashir 2015). Through her report, a deontological perspective is established as Bashir analyzes the negative implications of CL, and brings readers to understand that CL is full of harm.

However, a major focus of CL also comes from companies that employ children in countries where it's cheap, and it's critical to understand how these companies are able to do so and pass legal barriers. Ans Kolk and Rob Tulder, economics professors at the University of Amsterdam, explain that "of the codes that mention a minimum age to employment, only a small minority has universal applicability." Essentially, this allows companies in countries like the US to use underage workers in countries where laws are less strict, thus "country-specific" codes (Kolk & Tulder 2002) are null: laws in Bangladesh are not as strict as those in first world countries.

Consumers understand the harms of CL and attempt to boycott companies that condone CL. Yet, Kaushik Basu, chief economist of the World Bank from 2012 to 2016, and Homa Zarghamee, professor of economics at Columbia University, argue that consumer boycott may seem to force companies to cut ties with corporations that use CL in supply chains, but "paradoxically, the boycott of [CL]-tainted products can actually cause [CL] to increase" (Basu & Zarghamee 2005). This finding is crucial, as many may think simply boycotting is a solution to hinder the dependence of CL in Bangladesh, yet this finding highlights that boycotting is not a reliable solution in trying to alleviate the problem.

## The Utilitarian Perspective

A secondary ethical viewpoint is utilitarianism: the notion that an action's ethics are based on whether it creates the greatest good for the greatest number of people. Clark Kissiah, bachelor of philosophy, elucidates the benefits of CL through a utilitarian perspective, highlighting that "one of the best ways to fight global poverty is through the use of low wage labor. The best way to increase the welfare of the global impoverished is to allow sweatshops to operate freely within competitive markets" (Kissiah 2014). As children essentially make revenue for their families, Kissiah claims CL is necessary to not worsen the situation of many families. What makes this study notable is that rather than analyzing negative benefits of CL, this study uniquely highlights negative effects of the lack of CL, stating that alternatives are worse. Many sources that use a deontological perspective fail to mention why CL is such a lucrative area for big business: children are forced to work due to the financial situations of their family, who they are trying to support.

A majority of families that push their children into working early are forced to- otherwise they would be pushed into deeper poverty. Further, family size plays a considerable role in CL instances. Madiha Murshed, master of economics and international affairs, finds that "another issue that the family may consider in its calculus is the household's size and composition. More family members require a larger household income; but households may have big families so that children can be put to work and ensure the family's future in the face of uncertainty." (Murshed 2001). Many Bangladeshi households are large- as families consist of multiple generations and as many are poor, sharing one house allows for pooled finances, and forcing children to support these large households through labor is often encouraged by parents.

Much like societal views towards CL in developing countries, many in first world countries don't understand the reality of the harms that CL has on those involved. This is largely due to a geographical and cultural barrier, as Tara Stringer, doctor of integrated marketing communications from the Queensland University of Technology, discusses how consumers prefer the lowered prices of companies that use CL over ethical disadvantages of supporting companies who use this monetary supply chain mechanism. Many are faced with a cultural wall that shadows guilt from buying from these companies. Stringer finds that "there was an underlying social consensus that exploitative practices are an accepted part of the fast-fashion supply chain to ensure the continuation of low-cost clothing" (Stringer 2021). Through utilitarianism, CL is deemed as ethical, as it allows for the public to access clothing with lower pricing, which may help individuals who are financially struggling in first world countries. Many overpriced items cause financial burden to those in the working class, and especially during globally high inflationary rates, many seek cheap necessities, though perhaps produced through CL.

### **Ethical Values of Companies**

Although the public prefers deontology (as CL ultimately harms children), companies prefer utilitarianism for productivity and cost purposes. Hugh Hindman and Charles Smith, professor in management at Appalachian State University and professor in business at Niagara University respectively, find that heavily capitalist companies believe "tinkering with the free market is unwise," and "restrictions would increase employment costs, resulting in reduced employment and threatened competitiveness" (Hindman & Smith 1999). These concerns, plus corporate lack of knowledge of supply chain origins, have bolstered CL in Bangladesh. This

paper examines a corporate perspective that other sources overlook, significant when considering why companies maintain ties with corporations that facilitate CL, allowing for a switch in perspective from the individuals in Bangladesh facing the repercussions of corporate choices to the companies that host these choices in the first place.

Although illegal, companies find legal loopholes to continue CL for cheap employment and quick profit. Genevieve LeBaron, the vice-chancellors fellow in politics at the University of Sheffield, argues that companies are still able to take advantage of CL through subcontracting, a practice that is not halted by anti-slavery laws (LeBaron 2014). Through layers of corporate associations, subcontracting enforces CL, reinforcing utilitarianism. LeBaron explores reality, as although CL has laws that considerably minimize its usage, companies are still able to use loopholes to bolster CL.

## **Conclusion**

Reality is that companies prefer utilitarianism to increase profits and attract consumers. If companies considered a deontological perspective, a majority of CL would be extinguished. This could be implemented by companies administering deontological education programs to workers and allocating funding to investigate corporate supply chains.



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