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Child Labour and Poverty

Prepared by Herbert Jauch for The Villager newspaper

Since independence, the Namibian constitution and laws such as the Labour Act are protecting basic workers rights, including protection against child labour. The Labour Act says that nobody may employ a child under the age of 14 while children who are 14-15 years old must be protected from work that is harmful to their health or development or undermines their schooling. At international level, Convention 189 of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) as well as Recommendation 201 call for the protection of the rights of all domestic workers, particularly those below the age of 18. However, many people still do not understand what child labour is and how it affects children. Namibia's trade unions therefore decided to participate in the international day against child labour on 12 June in domestic work to give this issue some prominence and to point out why it must be eliminated.

What is child labour in domestic work?

It is important to understand the difference between child labour and other types of work by children that are usually considered to be acceptable. Most Namibian children do some kind of work in the family home or on their farms. This is especially the case in rural areas. Not all of this work is harmful to the child, for example helping to clean the house or washing the dishes. Child labour refers to exploitative, dangerous work which undermines the child's schooling and his/her social, physical, mental, spiritual or moral development. Child labour is harmful and must be abolished to guarantee all our children a decent childhood.

Why is child labour so widespread in domestic work?

Children are often paid even lower wages than adults and are therefore at great risk of being exploited. Poverty is the biggest contributor to child labour as it forces children to work just to survive. Some of them lost their parents while in other cases parents are too sick or too poor to support their children. Therefore, fighting poverty and ensuring that all Namibians can meet their basic needs is crucial in the struggle against child labour.

The work that most Namibian children do is mostly done in the home. In rural households, children (especially girls) collect water and firewood. Other common tasks carried out by children include looking after animals and cooking. This can take several hours and may affect school attendance and performance negatively. As a result, such children have no time to play, have no time to do homework and are often tired when they go to school.

How does child labour affect children?

Available information indicates that in Namibia, almost 40% of all children between the ages of 6 and 17 are affected by child labour. Most of them are girls and children in

rural areas. Over 80 000 Namibian children work long hours in the household and 160 000 children suffer at school due to the work they have to do. This undermines their chances for a better future.

Although most child labour takes place in private households, there are also other forms of child labour in Namibia. Some children are living with their families on farms and are involved in charcoal production. This undermines their education and is hazardous to their health. Some children are used by adults to commit crimes such as housebreaking, theft and even rape and murder. In addition, there is even some child trafficking in Namibia when children are brought in for domestic work, mining and commercial livestock work, charcoal production, road construction, vending and commercial sex work.

The most common causes for child labour in Namibia are poverty and an unstable home environment. Child labour in domestic work is widespread and presents a major problem not only in Namibia but in other countries as well. The ILO estimates that over 15 million children are engaged in paid or unpaid domestic work world-wide. They are vulnerable to exploitation and their work is often hidden from the public eye. The affected children (most of them girls) miss out on schooling which undermines their chances for a better future. The ILO therefore calls for the effective abolition of child labour and for the protection against all forms of abuse, harassment or violence. Also, children's rights to education and further training must be safeguarded.

Trade unions who want to play a meaningful role in the fight against child labour will have to raise awareness about the dangers of child labour amongst their members and their communities. They will also have to support international efforts like the new standards to promote decent work for domestic workers and initiatives to protect children. Critically, unions also need to discuss more direct and effective ways to fight poverty which is the underlying factor in most child labour cases. Therefore, redistributive measures that favour the poor such as a Basic Income Grant (BIG) and effective social protection measures have to be campaigned for and implemented as instruments to fight poverty and child labour. Unions should play a central role in this regard.

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