



FULL STORY

## Child labour rising in T&T

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Children are being turned into prostitutes and in one case a girl as young as eight, in Central Trinidad, was discovered selling her body to customers for as little as \$5.

They are hustling sales on street corners and in the market place, taking up whatever jobs are offered to them and they are being exploited.

These are some of the findings of a national inter ministerial committee established for the Prevention and Elimination of Child Labour. It is made up of representatives from the ministries of Labour, Community Development, Culture and Gender Affairs and the International Labour Organisation, (ILO).

It has pointed its finger at poverty underlining the fate of young children and describes child labour as a hidden industry and a breeding ground for criminals.

Shanmattie Singh, who heads the 15-member committee said that any type of work that is damaging to the mental, physical and emotional development of the child is considered to be child labour. She said that for the first time it has been placed on the policy agenda and the challenge faced by the committee was in gathering information. She said that researchers had to enter every industry to find the children and it was a tedious job.

The committee which was set up in August 2004 meets once a month. The report is in its final stages of completion, she said adding that the more the committee looked at child labour, the more complex it became.

It is against the law for children to be working before the age of 16 .

She said that there was need for a system to collect information on the nation's children. Records will enable those in authority to identify and prevent child labour wherever it existed, it is felt..

Leslie Bowrin, a member of the committee, said that child labour had increased in recent years in rural as well as urban areas.

He explained that any type of work that kept children out of school was a form of violence.

"More children are in the workplace today because of a number of social problems including broken families, large households with small incomes, domestic violence, HIV/AIDS deaths and migration," Bowrin said.

He said that very often women lived on their own as single parents with their children. Some of them migrate to the US and other countries for better job opportunities leaving the children with relatives. A lack of care results in children seeking to support themselves. They are taken advantage of when they take up jobs-usually menial work.

"The streets are no place for innocent children", he said.

The International Labour Organisation Sub-regional office for the Caribbean has commissioned a review of the Child Labour Laws in Trinidad and Tobago. It noted that although there were sound national policies in areas of education, protection, welfare, social security, labour administration and other social development there was no

coherent policy on child labour.

The review has called for Government to upgrade the compulsory age for the completion of schooling from 12 years. It recommends the age be raised to 16, and a minimum age for admission to the workplace at 16..

The ILO report stated that a major concern was the fact that economic growth was not leading to lower poverty rates. A 2003 report noted that by the end of Form Two in secondary schools, 28.2 per cent of children from lower-income homes had dropped out. At primary level 16 per cent of children left school.

Vexed with government's approach to child labour, Rev Cyril Paul, president of the Inter-Religious Organisation, said that Government has a way of going into denial until they cannot deny any more.

"Government must set up the machinery to address the problem," he said.

He pointed to groups of children at traffic lights and at shopping centres and malls hustling money from passersby.

"Some of these children have told me that they would be beaten if they did not return home with some money," he said adding that there was mischief in these children and they could be lying.

"But the situation with the nation's children is bad. We need to do something to save the children from ruining their futures," he said.

He pointed to the fact that children were kept home from school to look after their siblings while single parents go out to work.

"It is an economic need," he said.

Satnarayan Maharaj, secretary general of the Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha said that there was a need to differentiate between children helping their parents and working. He said that parents took their children to work with them to keep them in a safe environment under their watchful eyes and it was healthy for the children as well.

He said that the Maha Sabha stood ready to support any move to curb child labour but he was not aware that in Trinidad it existed as it did in other developing countries. He acknowledged the problem of children going astray as a result of broken homes saying that within Hindu communities counselling was offered and the extended family came to the rescue of the children.

The ILO report noted that there was no legal requirement for the monitoring of child labour. It said that a child 14 years of age could do "light work" with parental consent but that it must not prejudice the child's attendance at school. The hours of work must not exceed 48 hours a week and not between the hours of 10 p.m. and 7 a.m.

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