

Children and Work Research Series: Session 12

Sport and Child Labour

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Abstract

The Centre for Sport and Human Rights organized a project on Sport and Child Labour with the aim to produce a white paper on this topic as a contribution to the 5th Global Conference on Child Labour held in Durban in May 2022. The [white paper](#) was the result of an extensive literature review and a series of consultations with different groups of stakeholders e.g. athlete unions, international sports organizations, child rights and child labour experts, athletes and parents.

Across the globe adults who were child athletes have begun to raise their voices, recalling situations and conditions they encountered as young persons in sport that disturbingly have some of the characteristics of child labour. Results of this project will be briefly presented and recommendations will be discussed.

Breakout Room Reports

Break-out Room 1

The group was reluctant to see a major role for the ILO however there are concerns that children can be harmed and / or exploited through sport and that structures / systems to protect children do need to be created. Once appropriate structures / systems exist then children themselves (through their own agency) would be able to act in their own interest. There will still be challenges for children as the fear of not being able to continue in the sport or advance to the next level of training

The emphasis in developing protective systems for children in sport would not aim to remove children from sport as there are many positive aspects of sport that can contribute to children's development. The aim instead would be to remove the harmful and exploitative aspects of sport.

It is unlikely that age-based standards would be effective as different types of sports can affect children's development at different ages so there will not be a "one size fits all" for protective systems across all sports.

Societal pressures for high performance athletes to be continually establishing new records need to change as these levels of performance may arise through forms of intensive training beginning at a young age that may be harmful for the children involved. Hi performance athletes sometimes become “role models” for children and this can create unrealistic and unhealthy expectations on the part of some children who may try to emulate these athletes but eventually be unsuccessful.

The entertainment industry has developed some protective systems for child-performers, and it could be useful to look at how this was done, the effectiveness of the systems in protecting child performers and whether there are lessons that could be applied to sport ... perhaps a future research project. Sporting bodies could be tasked to develop similar / analogous systems that could vary across different types of sports but would be effective in protecting child athletes as various levels of involvement and performance. A potential role for the ILO could be ensuring that sporting bodies have developed these types of systems and in sharing positive examples and experiences.

Sports training can interfere with children’s education so protective systems will need to ensure that children can successfully combine their interest in sports with their education. Scheduling sports training around school holidays could be one way of reducing potential conflicts.

Adults who were exploited as child athletes are beginning to speak out about the type of experiences they endured (see example from Brazil below) and these testimonies will help to force sports bodies to make changes.

The link to the white paper (see below) was also shared during the group discussion.

Example from Brazil

1. Joanna Maranhão: ‘Brazilian Sports Needs Cultural Shift To Tackle Athlete Abuse’ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/samindrakunti/2022/08/29/joanna-maranho-brazilian-sports-needs-cultural-shift-to-tackle-athlete-abuse/?sh=4eb6f8822356>

White Paper

2. Centre for Sport and Human Rights – Child labour in Sport: Protecting the Rights of Child Athletes. <https://www.sporhumanrights.org/library/child-labour-in-sport-protecting-the-rights-of-child-athletes/>

Break-out Room 2

The discussion focussed largely on the comparison between demands on children in high-profile sports and the abuse and exploitation of children in child labour, particularly as condemned in the ILO conventions 138 and 183. This comparison led to discussion of the roles the ILO might play in reviewing the performance of governments and sporting bodies in controlling how children are treated in sporting contexts. It was suggested that the ILO could also use its experiences with child labour to help in producing and supporting guidelines on hours spent in training in relation to the different activities and the ages of the children.

On the one hand, the positive role of sport in child development is widely acknowledged, particularly in the motivation to work hard in order to excel. For many children, participation in sport is a matter of pleasure and entertainment. So how do we determine when work at one's sport becomes unacceptable labour?

While some in the group spoke in favour of extending the concept of child labour to sporting activities, others were cautious about making too much of this comparison. It was pointed out that the ILO is a labour organisation, with a focus on paid employment. It had difficulty in trying to bring unpaid domestic work into discussions of child labour, a difficulty that has not been entirely resolved. The ILO has little expertise in education or child development. Its attempts to delineate harmful work have not been without controversy. So using the child labour label in the context of sporting activities needs to be treated with caution.

Moreover, the stressful demands made on children in competitive sport, the fostering of unrealistic ambitions, and the humiliation of failure can be problematic in a variety of children's activities, including sometimes schooling. In all such cases the contexts and competencies of the children concerned, as well as their ability to exercise choice, are relevant to the effects of their activities on their present and future lives. Labour-like guidelines, such as on hours of work and intensity of training for different ages and safety precautions against various types of risk, could help in certain contexts; but these need to be applied with sensitivity to individual, local and regional contexts. Indeed, apart from considering particular activities like high-profile sport, we might also consider the responsibility of a culture that offers very high rewards for competitive success in many spheres, a consideration that would be lost under the label of child labour.

The label of child labour could usefully draw attention to problems in the ways children are treated in high-profile sports, particularly important in the light of a reluctance by sporting bodies to consider critically their current practices. On the other hand, such a label rigidly applied might lead to a narrowing of vision. Even if the ILO does become involved in monitoring how children are treated in high performance sporting activities, the Organisation needs to work in conjunction with expertise in other areas, including child care and protection, child development, education, and physical and mental health. All these areas need to come together to ensure the best interests of children, and in all areas, the guidance of science is needed.

The group were appreciative of the need to raise this issue, and of the fact that the consultation process obtained testimony from adults who had experienced a childhood in which high-performance sport played a dominant role.

Speaker Bio

Jaap E. Doek is Professor Emeritus Family- and Children's/Youth Law at the VU University Amsterdam, Extraordinary Professor children's rights at the Anton de Kom University in Paramaribo Suriname and guest lecturer children's rights at the Leiden University.

He is the chairperson of the Supervisory Board of Child Helpline International (CHI), a member of the International Board of Trustees of the African Child Policy Forum (ACPF), a member of the Advisory Committee of Defence for Children International (DCI). He was a member (1999-2007) and the Chairperson (2001-2007) of the UN CRC Committee.

He is senior legal advisor of ECPAT international (Bangkok). In that capacity he was involved in the drafting of the Terminology Guidelines for the protection of children from sexual exploitation and abuse (ECPAT 2017) and in the drafting of the Guidelines for the Implementation of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography (approved by the CRC Committee in May 2019) and the Explanatory Report to these Guidelines.