

"Child Labor and Slavery in the Chocolate Industry," 2017

Child Labor and Slavery in the Chocolate Industry

Chocolate is a product of the cacao bean, which grows primarily in the tropical climates of Western Africa, Asia, and Latin America. The cacao bean is more commonly referred to as cocoa, so that is the term that will be used throughout this article. Western African countries, mostly Ghana and the Ivory Coast, supply more than 70% of the world's cocoa. The cocoa they grow and harvest is sold to a majority of chocolate companies, including the largest in the world. In recent years, a handful of organizations and journalists have exposed the widespread use of child labor, and in some cases slavery, on cocoa farms in Western Africa. Since then, the industry has become increasingly secretive, making it difficult for reporters to not only access farms where human rights violations still occur, but to then disseminate this information to the public. In 2004, the Ivorian First Lady's entourage allegedly kidnapped and killed a journalist reporting on government corruption in its profitable cocoa industry. In 2010, Ivorian government authorities detained three newspaper journalists after they published an article exposing government corruption in the cocoa sector. The farms of Western Africa supply cocoa to international giants such as Hershey's, Mars, and Nestlé—revealing the industry's direct connection to the worst forms of child labor, human trafficking, and slavery.

The Worst Forms of Child Labor

In Western Africa, cocoa is a commodity crop grown primarily for export; 60% of the Ivory Coast's export revenue comes from its cocoa. As the chocolate industry has grown over the years, so has the demand for cheap cocoa. On average, cocoa farmers earn less than \$2 per day, an income below the poverty line. As a result, they often resort to the use of child labor to keep their prices competitive.

The children of Western Africa are surrounded by intense poverty, and most begin working at a young age to help support their families. Some children end up on the cocoa farms because they need work and traffickers tell them that the job pays well. Other children are "sold" to traffickers or farm owners by their own relatives, who are unaware of the dangerous work environment and the lack of any provisions for an education. Often, traffickers abduct the young children from small villages in neighboring African countries, such as Burkina Faso and Mali, two of the poorest countries in the world. Once they have been taken to the cocoa farms, the children may not see their families for years, if ever.

Most of the children laboring on cocoa farms are between the ages of 12 and 16, but reporters have found children as young as 5. In addition, 40% of these children are girls, and some stay for a few months, while others end up working on the cocoa farms through adulthood.

A child's workday typically begins at six in the morning and ends in the evening. Some of the children use chainsaws to clear the forests. Other children climb the cocoa trees to cut bean pods using a machete. These large, heavy, dangerous knives are the standard tools for children on the cocoa farms, which violates international labor laws and a UN convention on eliminating the worst forms of child labor. Once they cut the bean pods from the trees, the children pack the pods into sacks that weigh more than 100 pounds when full and drag them through the forest. Aly Diabate, a former cocoa slave, said, "Some of the bags were taller than me. It took two people to put the bag on my head. And when you didn't hurry, you were beaten."

Holding a single large pod in one hand, each child has to strike the pod with a machete and pry it open with the tip of the blade to expose the cocoa beans. Every strike of the machete has the potential to slice a child's flesh. The majority of children have scars on their hands, arms, legs or shoulders from the machetes.

In addition to the hazards of using machetes, children are also exposed to agricultural chemicals on cocoa farms in Western Africa. Tropical regions such as Ghana and the Ivory Coast consistently deal with prolific insect populations and choose to spray the pods with large amounts of industrial chemicals. In Ghana, children as young as 10 spray the pods with these toxins without wearing protective clothing.

The farm owners using child labor usually provide the children with the cheapest food available, such as corn paste and bananas. In some cases, the children sleep on wooden planks in small windowless buildings with no access to clean water or sanitary bathrooms.

On cocoa farms, 10% of child laborers in Ghana and 40% in the Ivory Coast do not attend school, which violates the International Labour Organization's (ILO) Child Labour Standards. Depriving these children of an education has many short-term and long-term effects. Without an education, the children of the cocoa farms have little hope of ever breaking the cycle of poverty. To date, relatively little progress has been made to reduce or eliminate child labor and slavery in the cocoa industry of Western Africa. At the very least, the industry has agreed to work to eliminate what the ILO calls "the worst forms of child labor." These are defined as practices "likely to harm the health, safety, or morals of children" and include the use of "hazardous tools" and any work that "interferes with schooling." Approximately 1.8 million children in the Ivory Coast and Ghana may be exposed to the worst forms of child labor on cocoa farms.

Slavery

Recently, investigators have discovered children trafficked into Western African cocoa farms and coerced to work without pay. Abby Mills, campaigns director of the International Labor Rights Forum, adds, "Every research study ever conducted in [Western Africa] shows that there is human trafficking going on, particularly in the Ivory Coast." While the term "slavery" has a variety

of historical contexts, slavery in the cocoa industry involves the same core human rights violations as other forms of slavery throughout the world.

Cases often involve acts of physical violence, such as being whipped for working slowly or trying to escape. Reporters have also documented cases where children and adults were locked in at night to prevent them from escaping. Former cocoa slave Aly Diabate told reporters, “The beatings were a part of my life. I had seen others who tried to escape. When they tried, they were severely beaten.” Drissa, a recently freed slave who had never even tasted chocolate, experienced similar circumstances. When asked what he would tell people who eat chocolate made from slave labor, he replied that they enjoyed something that he suffered to make, adding, “When people eat chocolate, they are eating my flesh.”

Is Slave-free Chocolate Possible?

Despite their role in contributing to child labor, slavery, and human trafficking, the chocolate industry has not taken significant steps to remedy the problem. Within their \$60-billion industry, chocolate companies have the power to end the use of child labor and slave labor by paying cocoa farmers a living wage for their product.

The chocolate industry is also being called upon to develop and financially support programs to rescue and rehabilitate children who have been sold to cocoa farms. To date, the industry has done little to remove child labor, let alone aid survivors of child labor. Hershey’s, the largest chocolate manufacturer in North America, has not thoroughly addressed accusations of child labor in its supply chain and refuses to release any information about where it sources its cocoa. This lack of transparency is characteristic of the chocolate industry, which has the resources to address and eliminate child labor but consistently fails to take action.

Are the Labels on Chocolate Meaningful?

Aside from large-scale production in Western Africa, a significant amount of cocoa is also grown in Latin America. This is where the majority of organic cocoa originates. At this time, neither slavery nor child labor have been documented on these cocoa farms. While it remains possible that some Latin American farms may employ these practices, it is not widely documented as it is in Western Africa.

The truth is that consumers today have no sure way of knowing if the chocolate they are buying involved the use of slavery or child labor. There are many different labels on chocolate bars today, such as various fair trade certifications and the Rainforest Alliance Certification; however, no single label can guarantee that the chocolate was made without the use of exploitive labor. In 2009, the founders of the fair trade certification process had to suspend several of their Western African suppliers due to evidence that they were using child labor. Chocolate companies, however, continue to certify their products to tell consumers that they source their cocoa ethically. But in 2011, a Danish journalist investigated farms in Western Africa where major chocolate companies buy cocoa. He filmed illegal child labor on these farms, including those certified by UTZ and Rainforest Alliance. Despite the industry’s claims, child labor still plagues cocoa farms in Western Africa.

Multiple government and NGO programs have been developed, attempting to address the root causes of “the worst forms of child labor” and slavery in West Africa. However, the success of these efforts will depend greatly on the genuine support or lack thereof from the chocolate industry over the coming years.

Recommendations

Consumers play an essential role in diminishing the food industry’s injustices. Child slavery on cocoa farms is a difficult issue to fully address because the most serious abuses take place across the world; however, that does not mean our responsibility is reduced, since chocolate is a luxury and not a necessity like fruits and vegetables.

Taking all of this into consideration and looking at the research that is available at this time, F.E.P. has created a list with vegan chocolates that we do and do not recommend based on the sourcing of the cocoa. Other than a few exceptions (which are explained), we encourage people not to purchase chocolate that is sourced from Western Africa. The list is available on our website along with free downloadable apps for the iPhone and Android.