



A boy sells eggs on the streets of Bangui, Central African Republic, in April 2021.  
(CNS/Reuters/Ines Kpakole)



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In his first general audience of the year, Pope Francis called on the global community to eradicate child labor, urging that we "cannot remain indifferent, cannot accept that little sisters and brothers, rather than being loved and protected, may have their childhood taken from them, their dreams."

While almost every country in the world has committed to preventing child labor, it persists through deeply entrenched systemic drivers: namely, the demand for cheap, fast production and the impunity of corporations that profit from vulnerable communities. At least 160 million children worldwide are exploited through [child labor](#), a crisis that continues to affect the most vulnerable people. The pope's call for global action is an urgent call to service — one that asks us to uphold justice and dignity for every child.

Child labor doesn't exist through isolated cases — it happens through massive, organized global systems. Corporate giants rely on labor abuses across supply chains and manufacturing. Rapid [algorithm-driven trends](#) incentivize fast fashion giants like [Shein](#) and [Temu](#) to cut corners and pursue faster production models.

Beyond fashion, businesses like HelloFresh — the largest meal kit company in the U.S. — promise convenience while [allegedly relying](#) on labor from migrant children. The true cost of cheap, easy purchasing comes in the suffering of millions, including child laborers, across every step of production in industries that affect our daily lives.





Filipino youths are pictured in a file photo as they carry placards during the celebration of the Global March Against Child Labor in Manila. (OSV News/Reuters/Romeo Ranoco)

According to the [International Labour Organization](#), a majority of child labor exists in agriculture, including [harvesting for garment production](#), [forestry](#), [livestock and fishing](#). Children are often targeted since they are less likely to resist exploitation. For families struggling to survive hunger and poverty, children are [expected to work](#) to contribute to the household income.

We cannot remove ourselves from this equation either. When we consume almost anything — from the clothes we wear to the food we eat — we take part in a fractured economy reliant on human suffering. Overconsumption has created a society where wealth outweighs human dignity. Our response must be the converse. We have a collective responsibility to change it.

But right now, corporations enjoy a great deal of impunity. Even when laws exist to regulate labor practices, [gaps in enforcement and monitoring](#) make it difficult to hold offenders accountable. As communities, we must demand more from our governments to strengthen existing policy and implement real action to enforce children's rights. As consumers, we must recognize the power in our choices. We can de-influence ourselves from a culture of overconsumption and commit to purchasing more consciously and more ethically. We do not have to be perfect, but our choices can send a message: The life of a child is more important than satisfying our material needs at the lowest cost.

However, withdrawing support from exploitative companies must not be where our actions end. We must address child labor at every phase by confronting its root causes and providing support for victims. Pope Francis asks us to serve children who are "victims of exploitation and marginalization." Children are [forced into the margins](#) by poverty, conflict, social exclusion, environmental crises and gender-based injustice. They are deprived of a chance to go to school and enjoy a safe, healthy childhood.

Likewise, survivors of labor exploitation, if left without the necessary care to heal and grow, may continue to be targeted by traffickers and abusers. Children, especially, need comprehensive, survivor-informed care to address the trauma they have experienced. They must have the chance to pursue education and grow, to feel the love of a family and a community that can keep them safe from further harm.

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Addressing the vulnerabilities that put children at risk is within our control. We cannot be satisfied with a world where corporations and powerful individuals hoard obscene amounts of wealth as marginalized communities are forced into desperation and suffering. We have the power to alleviate poverty. We have the power to secure care for victims of global crises. And we can all push for a world free from injustice and abuse.

The millions of people affected by exploitation need action from the billions of people who have the capacity to help. The church's social teaching emphasizes our role in upholding the sacredness of life and the dignity of work. Concrete action can begin small: Use your voice and your networks to bring awareness to the issue of

child labor. Use platforms like [Good on You](#) to help make ethical purchases. Contact your lawmakers to demand accountability and urgent action against exploitative businesses. Every step moves us closer to the church's vision of a just society where all can flourish in dignity.

The pope's call to eradicate child labor comes at a critical time for defending human rights. Our world exists in a state of crises and instability, where war, climate change and displacement threaten many. We can feel helpless against the tide of injustice and cruelty. But we must recognize what hangs in the balance.

Pope Francis condemned the economy of child labor as one that "consumes our greatest store of hope and love." This is what's at stake. This is why we are called to serve. And why we must act now, in any and every way we can.