



# The (LIMITED) case for boycott THREATS, BOYCOTTS, AND SELECTIVE PURCHASING

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## **INTRODUCTION**

International consumer boycotts will never end child labor. No crystal ball is needed to make that clear. A boycott by rich country consumers of all the products and services made or produced by children would only affect a tiny percentage of the total numbers of child laborers. Of the 246 million child laborers around the world<sup>1</sup>, only a small percent works in the export sector.<sup>2</sup> An even more comprehensive boycott, linked to child-helping plans, and carried out by consumers and employers in all countries, rich and poor, is simply impossible to imagine. Considering the likely unexpected consequences, such a broad-based boycott would be undesirable.

And yet, a credible argument exists for limited boycotts: A boycott against goods made by children, or services rendered by children, might support or strengthen other efforts to eliminate exploitative child labor.

Boycotts take negative or positive forms. Negative boycotts are instructions not to buy (e.g. not to buy a class of products, or specific products made by specific producers). Positive boycotts seek to persuade consumers to buy (e.g. class of products or specific products not made by children). The latter include “social labeling” campaigns, which exhort consumers to purchase products designated with a label indicating that they have not been made by laboring children.

Success for either kind of boycott should be measured in two ways. One is a change in a manufacturer’s or service provider’s behavior that benefits – or at least does not harm

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<sup>1</sup> “Facts on Child Labour,” ILO, Geneva, March 2003.

<sup>2</sup> The vast majority works in agriculture, and for the most part, not in export agriculture. “Facts on Child Labour in Agriculture,” Fact Sheet, International Labour Office, March 2003, downloaded October 20, 2003, from [www.ilo.org](http://www.ilo.org).

– child workers generally. The other measure of success should be the well-being of children who are working before the boycott is launched. A truly successful boycott would benefit – or at least not harm – those children.

## **1. THE THEORETICAL CASE**

Suppose that children are working at jobs that are harmful, hazardous or morally objectionable. Many efforts are underway to help the children by protecting them from immediate harm, and provide for their safety and welfare in the long-term. As part of those efforts, the children and people working with the children realize that some employers are refusing to release from employment the most harmed or at-risk children. Or, some employers are refusing to make the work or workplace safer than it is at present. To bring pressure on that employer, the children and their supporters call upon customers to stop purchasing products until the employer gives in to their demands.

In practice, child labor-related boycotts launched in the United States and Europe in the 1980s and 1990s produced results that are, by the measures of success spelled out above, mixed. Two boycott campaigns – against child-made soccer balls, and against the purchase of child-made carpets – will be considered.

A reasonable, although still conditional, case can be made for boycott threats that do not advance to the full boycott stage. Two boycott threats will be discussed.

## **2. FOUR BOYCOTTS AND BOYCOTT THREATS IN THE 1980'S AND 1990'S**

All of the cases considered have been extensively described elsewhere, and so only summaries are offered here.

Handmade Carpets: In the late 1980s, European non-governmental organizations launched a boycott of handmade, Oriental-style carpets from India.<sup>3</sup> The organizations called the boycott in response to reports that children making the carpets were being overworked, underfed, physically mistreated, and kept in conditions of bonded labor.

The boycott was eventually called off.<sup>4</sup> Reasons why included unintended consequences:

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<sup>3</sup> Much of the factual basis for this account has been derived from “By the Sweat and Toil of Children, Volume IV: Consumer Labels and Child Labor,” U.S. Department of Labor. Washington, DC, 1997, pp. 15-60.

<sup>4</sup> No firm dates are available at this writing for when the boycott was started or called off.

- Children making carpets in India had been fired, but given no other assistance to help them survive or contribute to their families' welfare. The boycott was making the lives of some child workers worse than when they had been working.
- The boycott had a great impact on one country (India) where carpets were being made by children but not in others (Pakistan, Nepal, Morocco) where children also were working.
- Boycotters could not differentiate between manufacturers who employed and exploited children and manufacturers who did not.
- The boycott tainted handmade rugs generally, although some countries (e.g. Iran) have virtually eliminated child labor.

Subsequently, at least four “social labeling” efforts were launched. Two involved putting labels on the backs of rugs purportedly not made by children, and two involved displaying labels at retail locations claimed to collect money from participating companies in the export-import chain and use the money to establish schools and health clinics for children in rug-making areas.<sup>5</sup>

The label schemes have gotten quite a bit of exposure in the news media, and that has helped spread word about the poor working conditions experienced by children working in India's carpet industry. A change in the way carpets are marketed in Europe has boosted prospects for the social labeling schemes. Small, family-run carpet stores have been losing sales to big, supermarket-style stores carrying lower prices (and often lower quality) carpets. These stores had centralized purchasing departments, and have demonstrated both a concern about child labor and an aversion to the stigma that a boycott could have put on their brand names. These large stores have begun to stock some carpets carrying the new social labels. Participation in “social labeling” by small retailers is spotty.

Soccer Balls: As early as 1995, human rights workers reported that Pakistani children were making soccer balls in the town of Sialkot, a medium-sized town where the vast majority of the world's tournament-quality soccer balls were being produced.<sup>6</sup> An international consumer boycott against child-made balls spread to the United States in 1996. The boycott sought to embarrass the companies that sponsored the World Cup soccer tournament. The companies, such as Adidas and Nike, had brand names whose value largely rests on consumer opinions. The boycotters hoped that the big companies would then pressure their suppliers – companies whose brand names are virtually unknown – to stop employing children. The campaign also called for the International Federation of Football Associations (FIFA) to require that producers making products carrying FIFA's stamp of approval agree not to employ child laborers. The campaign also sought to ensure that the “no child labor” labels be verifiable.

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<sup>5</sup> The first two are named Rugmark and Kaleen. The second two are Care & Fair and STEP. All are described in USDOL, 1997, and Janet Hilowitz, “Labelling child labour products: A preliminary study,” International Labour Office, Geneva, 1997.

<sup>6</sup> This is a capsule version of a longer story, which is well told in USDOL, 1997, pp. 95-126.

The boycott did not have any known effect in sales of brand-name soccer balls, but it did generate many stories in the news media. In 1997, the brand-name companies agreed with their Pakistani suppliers on a plan to take children out of the soccer ball industry, and improve local schools.<sup>7</sup> Many soccer balls now carry a no child labor label.

Child labor, however, has not disappeared from the soccer ball industry in Pakistan and India.<sup>8</sup> As recently as the 2002 World Cup tournaments, further efforts have been made to embarrass the brand-name companies into taking more action against child labor.<sup>9</sup>

Boycott Threat I: A Threatened National Boycott: Beginning in 1987, several versions of legislation were introduced into the U.S. Congress that proposed banning imports of goods made by children younger than age 15. In effect, the bill proposed a national boycott of child-made goods. The 1992 version of the bill<sup>10</sup> is commonly known as the Harkin bill.<sup>11</sup> Notably, the bill did not single out any one country's products.<sup>12</sup>

Manufacturers in one country, however, reacted strongly: Bangladeshi garment manufacturers, who had employed an estimated 100,000 children, protested that if the bill were to pass, they and their nation's economy would be ruined. At that time, Bangladesh was selling more than half its garment exports to the United States. In the spring of 1995, the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) announced that it would address the child labor issue by firing child workers.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The plan was supported by; the International Labor Organization; Save the Children; UNICEF; and the Sialkot, Pakistan Chamber of Commerce.

<sup>8</sup> David Rowan, "Child labour is used to make 'World Cup' balls," *The Times* (London), May 22, 2002.

<sup>9</sup> World Cup Campaign 2002,, <http://www.globalmarch.org/world-cup-campaign/press.php3>, accessed October 20, 2003.

<sup>10</sup> Beginning in 1987, early versions of the proposed national boycott against child-made imported goods did not gain as much public attention as did the 1993 Harkin bill. And so, to clear up confusions about timing, the following sequence is noted: Harkin introduced a version of the national boycott in August 1992. He reintroduced the bill in 1993. Harkin's office issued a new press release on March 18, 1993, which did not mention the 1992 version of the bill.

<sup>11</sup> To become U.S. law, legislation must be passed both houses of the U.S. Congress – the Senate, and the House of Representatives – and signed by the president. To be considered by either house of the U.S. Congress, Each piece of legislation must have sponsors in both the House and the Senate. Each bill has an official number and title, but they often – as in this case – acquire shorter nicknames. Tom Harkin was, and is, a Democrat from Iowa.

<sup>12</sup> A 1994 study of child-made products imported to the United States found that such products were being imported from at least 19 countries. See "By the Sweat and Toil of Children: The Use of Child Labor in American Imports," U.S. Dept. of Labor, July 15, 1994.

<sup>13</sup> Staff Correspondent, "BGMEA decides total elimination of child labour by Oct. 31," *The Daily Star*, May 18, 1995.

Some fired children found other work, in more miserable conditions than they had experienced in the garment factories.<sup>14</sup> The children's new plight caused a stir in Bangladesh, and a variety of accusations were floated against Harkin and the bill's supporters. Although the Harkin bill was not withdrawn, a series of events ensued that resulted in a 1995 memorandum of understanding (MOU) signed by the International Labor Organization (ILO), Unicef and the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA). The MOU established a set of programs removing the remaining children from the garment industry and placing them in schools.

Boycott Threat II: Negotiating Ploy: During the MOU negotiations, the Bangladeshi garment manufacturers refused to continue negotiating. A U.S. coalition of organizations opposed to child labor threatened to call for a consumer boycott of Bangladeshi garments. The coalition had not been part of the negotiations. But the coalition had been following negotiations closely, and threatened the boycott as a tactic to persuade garment manufacturers to return to the bargaining table. When the garment manufacturers did return, and when the MOU was signed, the coalition called off the boycott.<sup>15</sup>

### **3. ANALYSIS:**

Both full-fledged boycotts succeeded in some respects. Each boycott successfully mobilized attention by appealing to the morality and consciences of rich-country consumers. Both case aspersions on large companies that, by contrast, seemed unsympathetic. The two boycotts and the Harkin bill received wide press attention; the boycott threat during negotiations over the Harkin bill began getting press attention before the boycott threat was withdrawn.

During both boycotts, and the Harkin bill reaction in Bangladesh, manufacturers, distributors, marketers and others were forced to take notice of the child labor issue. Both boycotts also got wide attention in the public news media. This is in part because the boycotts offered a compelling contrast between the lives of consumers in the United States and Europe, and the lives of the child makers of carpets and soccer balls. Balls and carpets are associated with play, comfort even luxury. By contrast, the lives of children making these consumer products were notably lacking in play and comfort.

If nothing else, then, the boycotts helped raise awareness about child labor. At a time when many interventions against child labor were being devised at the international, national and local levels, the widespread media attention to the boycotts probably helped build public support in rich countries for their country's assistance to international anti-child labor work.

Three out of the four cases examined, however, had unanticipated and unwanted effects. In the carpet case, these effects led to the end of the negative boycott, and the beginning of

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<sup>14</sup> The exact number of children fired, and subsequently employed in other occupations, has never been determined. S.L. Bachman, "If we were fired from the factory, I could go to school, but then who would feed my mother and sister?" San Jose Mercury News, July 17, 1995.

<sup>15</sup> "MOU on child labour appreciated in U.S.," The New Nation, July 8, 1995.

social labeling campaigns. In the soccer ball case, despite the agreement among brand name companies and less well-known manufacturers to remove children from the industry, recent reports say that children continue to make soccer balls.

Only the strategic boycott threat made during MOU negotiations in Bangladesh had an effect that, in retrospect, still appears wholly beneficial: the garment industry's return to the bargaining table, and the conclusion of the MOU. And yet, the link between the boycott and the decision of garment manufacturers to negotiate the MOU has not been definitively proven. Definitive proof will not be available until someone from the Bangladesh garment industry says, in so many words, that the threatened boycott led the industry back to the bargaining table.

Outcomes from each of the boycotts varied in part because of each boycott's scope. Broad-based boycotts, in the garment and Harkin bill cases, generated complaints that manufacturers who were not employing children were being punished at the same time as manufacturers who were employing, and exploiting, children. The soccer ball boycott involved a smaller number of known brand-name companies, which could be embarrassed by revelations of the conditions in which their products were made. (The soccer ball marketers and manufacturers, in addition, had a case study to examine: how the bad publicity heaped on the Bangladesh garment industry when it initially fired children in response to the Harkin bill's boycott threat. That example suggested that firing children, and resisting some kinds of MOU-type agreement, would tarnish the upbeat image they had cultivated.)

#### **4. CONCLUSIONS & UNANSWERED QUESTIONS**

The limited case for boycotts rests on the hope that boycotts can mobilize attention among parties reluctant to take action to benefit children. In the very short term, a boycott threat may help galvanize action by a boycotted party. The second Bangladesh boycott threat suggests that this occurred in 1995, but does not prove it. Despite a great deal of disagreement about the Harkin bill's effects on Bangladesh's garment industry, over the eight years since the MOU went into effect, child labor has been minimized in Bangladesh's garment industry. Whether the children not directly benefited by the MOU benefited in the long run is not yet known.<sup>16</sup> Whether child labor has diminished in Bangladesh as a whole, or even among the families whose children had been working in the industry, it remains too early to say. Social marketing campaigns (positive boycotts) show some promise. But few comprehensive evaluations of their effects have been completed.<sup>17</sup>

Significant questions remain. They include: Is a boycott or the threat of a boycott worth initiating if, from the outset, it is known that the results will be mixed? What if it is possible

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<sup>16</sup> 16 Unicef and the International Labor Office are currently evaluating the MOU's effects on the approximately 100,000 children who had been working in the industry before 1995. At most, 8,000 children benefited from the MOU.

<sup>17</sup> 17 Hilowitz, 1997.

to know that more children will be harmed in the short term than helped, but long-term benefits might be great and widespread? Could any international consumer boycott help the vast majority of child laborers, who do not produce goods or services for the international consumer market? How can the resulting boycott avoid punishing employers or workplaces that do not exploit children at the same time that it punishes workplaces and employers that do? How long will the public have patience for any boycott? If working children, who are being harmed by their work, do not support a boycott, should the boycott be initiated anyway?

The case for boycotts and for boycott threats, then, remains tentative and conditional. This discussion has only dealt with four cases, and has only touched upon positive boycotts. Many more cases should be analyzed.

Knowing more about how to initiate a boycott without causing unintended harm would be useful as the attention of the U.S. government and international agencies shifts to different categories of child labor. Even though the vast majority of children does not work in export industries, children still can be found in appalling circumstances that lend themselves to the kind of attention-getting news media coverage that helped highlight children in carpet, garment, and soccer ball manufacturing. Recent reports about exploited, and often trafficked, children picking cocoa beans in West Africa led to calls from activist groups to boycott “slave chocolate.”<sup>18</sup> Many stories have described sex tours during which adults have sex with children.<sup>19</sup> Without such media attention, mobilizing public support for international efforts against child labor might be difficult. (Whether local activists will benefit from international attention will vary from case to case.)

It doesn't take a crystal ball to see that some export sectors are ripe for such attention. The international sex tourism industry is one. Nor does it take a crystal ball to see that boycotts, or threatened boycotts, are among the actions that anti-child labor groups might launch to protest egregious cases of child exploitation. What remains hazy is how boycotts or boycott threats might be used in a way that produces a net benefit for children, without causing the kinds of unintended harm caused by earlier boycotts launched in opposition to child labor.

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<sup>18</sup> For instance, “Initiative to Combat Child Slave Labor in Cocoa Fields Hailed,” Jim Lobe, *One World*, July 4, 2002, Global Exchange, [www.globalexchange.org/campaigns/fairtrade/cocoa/271.html](http://www.globalexchange.org/campaigns/fairtrade/cocoa/271.html) accessed /October 20, 2003.

<sup>19</sup> See, for instance, links on Andrew Vachss' *The Zero* site, [http://www.vachss.com/help\\_text/sex\\_tourism.html](http://www.vachss.com/help_text/sex_tourism.html).