

Comment

No child's play

Fishing is considered one of the most dangerous occupations in the world. The employment of children below 18 years of age in hazardous fishing, therefore, is a matter of concern. Unfortunately, it is practised in several parts of the developing world, both in marine and inland fisheries.

Children help prepare the craft for a fishing trip; bail out water; help haul in the nets and clear them of fish; dive into the water to guide the fish into encircling seines; disentangle fishing nets from tree trunks in deep reservoirs; bait hooks, fish with handlines, and haul in longlines; help prepare meals for the crew of the vessels, and arrange the fish in the ice-boxes; and anchor and un-moor fishing vessels. They also guard the catch, equipment and crew belongings.

Bailing out fishing vessels can be a backbreaking job, especially on board a leaky pirogue. Diving deep down to drive fish into an encircling gear in a coral reef can damage eardrums. Baiting hooks or removing fish from hooks can injure hands or fingers. Guiding the fish into encircling gear can sometimes cause drowning; so too, removing fishing gear entangled on tree trunks. To our knowledge, no country maintains statistics on child mortality in fishing. There are only unconfirmed reports of such incidents.

Many fishing communities believe that children who master a profession early on, find work easily. However, there are many children who, due to socioeconomic and overfishing reasons, end up as workers in fishing. Many children in Senegalese fisheries, for example, are orphans, or their parents are so poor that they have to take up fishing to earn a livelihood. In Ghana, overfishing of coastal waters is said to be a main reason for children, especially girls, to be sold under bondage by their impoverished fisher parents to boatowners in the hinterland of Volta Lake, to undertake dangerous diving at night for fish.

Often, the work is carried out in abusive conditions. The children sometimes work up to 10 hours in one shift. They are beaten, physically abused or harassed. They are not given rest periods of sufficient frequency and duration for the safe and healthy performance of their work (see *Growing pains*, pg 8).

It should be ensured that children below 18 years of age, especially girls, are not employed in night fishing or in fishing operations that involve diving or swimming or work that involves manual handling and transport of heavy loads, and work for excessive periods of time. We consider all these as hazardous forms of fishing. In the case of non-hazardous fishing operations, the minimum age should be 15 years and the working hours of fishers above this age should not exceed eight hours per day and 40 hours per week, and they should not work overtime, except where unavoidable for safety reasons. While sufficient time should be allowed for all meals, fishers under the age of 18 should be assured of a break of at least one hour for the main meal of the day. These measures are proposed in the International Labour Organization (ILO) Work in Fishing Convention that will come up for adoption at the 96th Session of the International Labour Conference in June 2007. Urgent attention is needed to halt the exploitation of children in fishing, particularly where the work is hazardous, exhausting, and of long duration.