

*Sanja STANIĆ\****EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY – SOCIALLY NEGLECTED CHILDHOODS**

**Abstract.** *Childhood is socially constructed, depending on social, economic and cultural circumstances. Poverty, social differences, conflicts, and social injustice have a negative impact on children's lives. The aim of the article is to present childhoods under conditions of exploitation. Despite general progress, and the emancipation of children's rights, data confirm an increase in the number of children who are engaged in war conflicts, perform difficult and inappropriate work, or in slavery. In conclusion, the exploitation of children is considered in the context of social conditions and processes, neoliberal capitalism, globalisation, and documents that guarantee children's rights.*

**Keywords:** *childhood, exploitation, children's rights, social inequalities, globalisation*

**514****Introduction**

The idea of childhood has changed throughout history. Considering childhood in Western European countries, the French historian P. Aries concluded that the “idea of childhood” did not exist in medieval society and the concept of childhood had been created by modern society (Tomanović, 2004; Corsaro, 2005; Brockliss, 2016). Since the Enlightenment, the perception of childhood has changed. Gradually, childhood is becoming the focus of the family and society. The world of children was separated from the world of adults, children were given their own space, they did not mix with adults, playing the same games and using the same vocabulary. The West's child-centred concept of childhood, which began to dominate thinking around the world during the second half of the nineteenth century, was itself continually being developed, refined and contested (Brockliss, 2016: 3–5).

Contemporary social changes, primarily in family structure, culture and other social institutions, have strongly impacted the concept of childhood. Authors agree that the emergence of the modern idea of childhood is a product of modernity and bourgeois ethos. As Jenks states, “children have

\* *Sanja Stanić, PhD, Professor, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Split, Croatia.*  
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become our main preoccupation, we have become their protectors and nurturers, and they have become the main object of our love, our human capital, and our future” (2004: 97). Placing the child in the centre and attributing great importance to childhood, the modern era sees the child as an investment in the future, an object of love and human capital (Tomanović, 2004: 10–11). Zelizer follows this transformation through the change in the social value of the child. The economically useful child of the 19th century was replaced by the economically useless yet emotionally priceless child of the 20th century. The sentimentalisation of childhood extended to all social classes. The meaning of a child in the 20th century is almost sacral, as it “inhabits a special world governed by feelings, not work and profit” (2004: 77–78).

Today, the Western concept and idea of childhood has become almost global. As the great European powers, and to a lesser extent the USA, became globally commercially and militarily dominant after the 1850s, the rest of the world began to look at Western culture as an ideal to be imitated and absorbed. This was also true for the concept of childhood and raising children (Brockliss, 2016:1).<sup>1</sup> However, despite the globalisation of the Western concept of childhood and emancipation of the emotional meaning of the child, it cannot be said that childhood is universalised. Parallel to the childhoods that take place with safety and well-being, many children are not encompassed by social changes and processes that improve their position and ensure well-being. Besides progress as a dimension of the 21st century, we are witness to armed and civil war conflicts, social injustice, the deepening of social differences, and the growing gap between rich and poor, representing the context within which childhoods can be found that are quite different from those in West.

The main aim of the article is to present childhoods that take place in extremely negative social, political, economic and security conditions, childhoods that are mostly socially neglected. The focus is on describing, understanding and explaining the problem of children exploitation. The research questions are descriptive and normative (Dillon according to Alvesson and Sandberg, 2013) with the aim of addressing the continuity and causes of child exploitation along with what is to be done to mitigate the problem. To this end, relevant academic literature outlining the problem in both the past and today was reviewed. The selection was made using the Google Scholar database. To identify recent trends, secondary data were used.

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<sup>1</sup> *Childhood has not been defined and experienced in all societies and times in the same ways. The Western concept of childhood could be understood as a historical and ideal type, existing more as a theoretical concept than the overall accepted practice. As Brockliss states: “The West’s child-centered concept of childhood which began to command the world’s attention in the course of the second half of the nineteenth century was itself continually being developed, refined and contested” (2016: 2).*

## Children in armed conflicts

War is a serious conflict that includes material destruction, human casualties, and various forms of violence, some of which are especially harmful for children. In wars, children can be passive victims or actively participate in armed conflicts. Moreover, children are often recruited for the purpose of being active participants in armed or war conflicts (Haer, 2019). In addition, they can be used as spies, scouts, messengers, home servants, or sex slaves. In any case, they are exposed to extreme exploitation and abuse (International Committee of the Red Cross, 2012: 2). Although child soldiers are most often considered to be boys, estimates show that as many as 40% of child soldiers are girls (Conradi, 2013: 1212).

According to a UNICEF (2022) report, between 2005 and 2020 over 93,000 children took part in war conflicts. Since 2005, more than 266,000 cases of serious violence against children have been recorded in armed conflicts in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America, while in excess of 104,000 children have been killed or injured in armed conflicts worldwide. There has been a strong annual increase in the number of children killed in wars since 2013. The report warns that the actual numbers are significantly higher than the official statistics.

Children become members of armed groups in different ways. They can be kidnapped or recruited into the army by force. They may join the army because of poverty or family debt. Joining armed groups can help them feel safe, ensure their survival, or improve their social status. It is not uncommon for them to join armed groups because they want to be with their peers.

In 2021, armed conflicts escalated. The most affected children were in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia, Yemen, Israel, the occupied Palestinian territory, Afghanistan and Syria. Exposed to severe forms of violence were 23,982 children, of whom 19,165 had been recruited, kidnapped or exposed to sexual violence, whereas 1,600 were victims of multiple forms of violence (UN General Assembly, 2022: 2).<sup>2</sup>

Due to the war in Ukraine, which began in 2022, the number of children engaged in armed conflicts is set to dramatically increase. This war confirms the severity of childhood in wartime. The consequences are already known by displaced, wounded or dead children. As the war is still ongoing, the data are changing. In August 2022, UNICEF reported that by that time close to 1,000 children had been wounded or killed during the war, while

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<sup>2</sup> *The biographical book A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier (2007) by Ishmael Beah, a boy who experienced the horrors of being recruited during the civil war in Sierra Leone, is an illustrative example. During the civil war in this country, from 1991 to 2002, children under the age of 18 made up 40%–50% of the rebel forces and about 20% of the government military forces. In total, it is estimated that 10,000 children were exploited for war purposes and forced to be soldiers (The Borgen Project).*

an average of five children had been killed every day (UN Report of the Secretary-General, 2022).

The media reports stories of children in the conflict in Ukraine. Some of them have been forced to participate in the armed conflict to protect and defend their families and communities.<sup>3</sup> However, it should not be ignored that two sides are involved in this war, which means one may expect that children are also involved in the actions of the Russian army.<sup>4</sup>

Growing up surrounded by war, violence, sexual abuse, and the risk of being recruited can have a harmful effect on children. Ethnic or political tensions, repression or terrorism also affect children. Many children live in countries where ethnic conflicts or political violence are ongoing. This reality has become their way of life. Growing up in conditions of chaos and deprivation can endanger the psychosocial development of children (Ajduković, 1995), cause mental disorders, behavioural and sleep disorders, somatic problems, and endanger cognitive functions and moral reasoning (Ladd and Cairns, 1996). Despite many studies about children in war conflicts, we still do not have a comprehensive picture of the impact of war on children across time and space (Bahgat et al., 2018).

Throughout history, children have been exploited as soldiers or exposed in other ways to the horrors of war. Yet, the difference is that in the 20th century children acquired rights that guaranteed their lives and growing up with safety and protection. Despite legal protection and global efforts to ensure that children grow up in safety, the number of children in war zones is rising. In that way, their childhood is severely disrupted, as a period of life that should prepare them for healthy adulthood.

## Working children

In history as well as today, children help with house chores, such as cleaning their rooms, looking after younger siblings, helping in the kitchen, or gardening. Children's activities, responsibilities, and easier household chores have positive effects on their development. They grow with self-esteem, prosocial and cooperative behaviour, they socialise into family roles, obligations and responsibilities (Goodnow, 1988; Klein et al., 2009).

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<sup>3</sup> *An 11-year-old boy voluntarily joined the Ukrainian army. He participated in combat and was hospitalised after being wounded. His commander was aware of the boy's age (Shevchenko, 2014). Groups of boys 'armed' with toy weapons protected their destroyed village after it had been liberated by Ukrainian forces. They control positions or checkpoints (Ramsay, 2022).*

<sup>4</sup> *According to Garener (2022), Russia is indoctrinating youth by shutting down social networks and exposing them to propaganda influences through video games or by popular influencers. According to Boffey (2022), Ukraine accused Russia of using children's bodies as 'human shields' on tanks while they regroup their forces.*

There is a difference between child work and child labour. Easier tasks performed by children, well-structured and distributed, that do not limit activities, such as play and learning, are not child labour. On the other hand, child labour is work that harms their physical and mental health and limits their development (Fyfe according to James, Jenks and Prout, 2010: 108).

According to the International Labour Organization (2023), child labour deprives young individuals of their childhood, potential and dignity. It refers to work that is mentally, physically, socially or morally dangerous and harmful to children and/or interferes with their schooling by stripping them of the opportunity to attend school, obliging them to leave school prematurely, or requiring them to attempt to combine school attendance with excessively long and heavy work. Although exploitative child labour also exists in developed countries, it is most often associated with poor and developing countries, where children are forced to work to add to their family's income.

There is a particular burden on girls who bear the 'triple burden' of school, housework, and work outside the home, which increases the risk of them falling behind and becoming more vulnerable to poverty and exclusion (UNICEF, 2021). A child's age and the type of work they perform are considered important determinants. Work that is usually done by adults, in which children are exploited working in agriculture or industry, has attracted criticism (Momen, 2020: 7).

A useful division of child work is provided by Putnick and Bornstein (2016), dividing it into three categories: children's work in the household, for example, cleaning, cooking, babysitting, doing laundry, shopping etc., as a hidden and unpaid form of child labour. The second category is children's work in the family, namely, any type of work related to the activity or business the family is engaged in. The third one, child work outside the home, which can be paid or unpaid, is most common in agriculture, industry, and services.

It is difficult to obtain precise data on child labour. The reason is the sensitivity of the problem, closed families, or poor availability. Still, there is no doubt that, for the first time in the last 20 years, child labour has increased. UNICEF estimates that globally at the start of 2020 child labour had risen to 160 million children, or 63 million working girls and 97 million working boys in the world. That is an increase of 8.4 million child workers in the last 4 years.

The number of children working in hazardous jobs has grown by 6.5 million since 2016. According to a UNICEF/ILO report (2021), the economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic are expected to further worsen the child labour situation. Due to the pandemic, an additional 9 million children have been at risk of being forced to work. These children will have to put in longer working hours, in more difficult working conditions, and

many will be drawn into child labour because of family reasons like job loss, parents' unemployment, or other family vulnerabilities.

Throughout history, children have regularly participated in family chores and worked outside the home. However, there was a strong rise in child labour at the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th centuries in both traditional activities and newly opened factories and workshops. During the industrial revolution, child labour became more 'visible' because children began to work in large numbers in the industrial sector, often in the textile industry and coal mines. Working full time, and even longer than that, the children contributed their earnings to the family's income. It is estimated that at the start of the 19th century over 50% of children under the age of 14 were working in British factories (Tuttle, 2001), while in 1870, more than 750,000 children under the age of 15 were working in the USA (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017). They started working at a younger age because, in the early phases of industrialisation, there were many employment opportunities for children (Humphries, 2013). The employment of children at an ever-younger age is also caused by changes in the family structure. While older children became independent earlier and left their parents' home, younger children took over their role in contributing to the household budget (Horrell and Humphries, 1995).

Corsaro describes child work in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in the USA. Working children contributed to their families and economy as well (2005: 74-81). Their work was appropriate to their gender and age. Through their work, children gained a sense of autonomy and were proud to help their families, while having fun at the same time. At that time of strong changes in America, through work children played an active role in their own socialisation, developed their potential, and prepared themselves to enter the world of adults (Corsaro, 2005: 79).<sup>5</sup>

Working children are described in Croatian literature too. Research has confirmed that through the 20th century the economic usefulness of the child was significant. Between the two world wars, in rural areas the family was the basic production unit. From the age of 14 to 16, children performed all kinds of work on family farms. Jobs were assigned by gender. Children were taught by their mother or father (Leček, 1997). In coastal towns, due to poverty, alongside their work in family businesses, children aged from 7 to 17 years were forced to work additional jobs. While boys were more useful in their own houses, girls earned an income by serving in households (Vene, 2008).

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<sup>5</sup> Corsaro mentions the example of *Newsies*, boys who in the early 20th century contributed to household budgets by selling newspapers on the streets of American cities. They founded their union to prevent an increase in newspaper prices (2005: 78-80).

Changes in child labour occurred in the early 19th century. One of the earliest restrictions was the Factory Act passed in 1833 by the British Parliament to improve the conditions for children working in factories. Children were forbidden to work before the age of 13 and could not work more than 9 hours per day (Beck, 2021). In addition to legal restrictions, a significant change in child labour was the introduction of compulsory education. Zelizer considers that to these changes led to children becoming “a luxury for the poor, and a pleasure for the wealthy” (2004: 77).

Although limited by legislation and reduced by cultural and social changes, child labour remains a phenomenon in the 21st century. In less developed countries, parents are forced to send their children to work as an outcome of poverty or family debt. Employers often promise them a good job, accommodation, regular food, and an education for their children, yet research shows that the actual conditions are quite different, close to slavery as the worst form of child labour (Theuws and Overeem, 2014). Children often work in the textile industry and mining, mostly doing simple tasks that do not require knowledge and skills. Their work, especially in the fast fashion industry, enables affordable clothing and footwear. This explains why “a blind eye is turned” to children’s work. Children are engaged in hazardous jobs, exposed to dangerous devices or substances. In most countries, there are no control or prevention mechanisms.<sup>6</sup> Among underdeveloped countries, child labour is often associated with trafficking, forced labour, and slavery.

### Commercial sexual exploitation of children

Sexual exploitation of children is one of the worst forms of child labour. The Declaration and Agenda for Action (1996) defines it as

*a fundamental violation of children’s rights. It comprises sexual abuse by the adult and remuneration in cash or kind to the child or a third person or persons. The child is treated as a sexual object and as a commercial object. The commercial sexual exploitation of children constitutes a form of coercion and violence against children, amounts to forced labor, and is a contemporary form of slavery.*

Children’s sexual exploitation includes prostitution, pornography, trafficking for sexual services, online sexual exploitation, for the purposes of

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<sup>6</sup> For example, child labour in cobalt mines in the Congo. According to UN estimates, in the province of Katanga more than 40,000 children work in hazardous conditions in cobalt mines, without safety equipment, for a few dollars a day (European Parliament).

travel and tourism, as well as some forms of early and forced marriage. The International Labour Organization assesses that the sexual exploitation of children and minors is economic exploitation similar to slavery or forced labour. The destructive effects of sexual exploiting children are considered a serious violation of the integrity, dignity and fundamental rights of girls and boys as human beings (Riggio and Hecht, 2016).

Child prostitution is on the rise in less developed countries in Asia, Latin America, and Africa.<sup>7</sup> Social turbulence such as armed conflicts, poverty and insecurity, running away or being thrown out of the home are also situations when children are forced to provide sexual services in exchange for food, money or protection. Children can be sold or bought for forced marriage or prostitution in underdeveloped as well as developed countries. They can be kidnapped and sold across borders to be used in prostitution in other countries. Due to the sensitivity of the problem and limited research, exact data are not available, although it was estimated that at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century there were 1.8 million child sex workers (Bardin, 2005: 266).

Child sex tourism has become a growing business in recent decades. Tourist destinations are chosen based on the offer of adult and child sexual services. The global social stratification gap has particularly contributed to the rise of the child sex tourism industry (UN News, 2019). In some countries, this form of tourism has reached alarming proportions, requiring urgent government intervention.<sup>8</sup>

It is commonly understood that children may be pushed into the sex industry because of poverty or a hard life. However, they are not the only reasons that children lead to actively engage in their own exploitation. There is a trend that children who are not facing financial difficulties enter sexual relations with adults in positions of power or authority exchanging sex for concession, gifts, or expensive items. At the same time, such activities of children are not perceived as prostitution (ECPAT, 2020: 3). In highly consumerist societies, prostitution 'for pocket money' can also be motivated by peer pressure, building identity and status through the possession of expensive things that their parents cannot afford.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> *In India, children make up more than 40% of sex workers. They offer sexual services in brothels, massage salons, tourist tours or streets. Many of them forced into sex work come from poor families in rural areas with the promise of employment (Srivastava, 2019).*

<sup>8</sup> *Thailand has history of child prostitution (Lau, 2008). It is estimated that in 2009 there were 30,000 to 40,000 under-age children in prostitution (Milde, 2013). Children perceive the providing of sexual services as a desirable 'job' since the earnings from prostitution are significantly higher than with other jobs (Sachs, 1994).*

<sup>9</sup> *In Japan, a society that has rapidly transformed from a traditional to a consumer society, this phenomenon is known as Enjo Kosai (McLellan, 2013). In 1996, the Japanese police stated that there was an epidemic of prostitution among schoolgirls (Reitman, 1996). This type of prostitution of minors for expensive gifts or pocket money is evident in other countries, including Croatia (Index.hr).*



## Children in slavery

Slavery is an extreme form of inequality in which individuals own another person as property. The slave owner disposes of the slave's life and can exploit, sell or deprive them of their life without sanctions (Giddens, 2007: 270). According to the UN document International Day for the Abolition of Slavery, modern slavery is used as an 'umbrella' term to cover forced labour, debt slavery, forced marriage, and human trafficking. It refers to situations of exploitation that a person cannot refuse because they are exposed to threats, violence, deception, or the abuse of power.

In 2021, there were 49.6 million people in slavery, of whom 27.6 million were in forced labour and 22 million in forced marriage. The sale of women and children for the purpose of prostitution is the largest slave trade in history and a rapidly growing criminal industry (Panko and Babu, 2012: 68). It is estimated that there are about 10 million children in modern slavery today.

The most common forms of slavery refer to the exploitation of children through hard and unpaid work in agriculture, factories, construction and mines. It also includes child prostitution, pornography and other forms of sexual exploitation, as well as forced marriage. Child slaves work 7 days a week, including holidays, and are not paid for their work (The World Counts, 2023).<sup>10</sup> The reasons for the rise of modern slavery are the over-exploitation of the natural resources of underdeveloped countries, global migration trends, the growth of information and communication technologies, low transport costs, low risk, the low price of modern slaves, and the fact that it is an extremely profitable business (Pupovac and Lovrić, 2020: 67).

Although children were slaves in history as well, the social circumstances determined how they were valued and the attitude to child slavery. There is accordingly a difference between the contemporary understanding of child slavery and that in times gone past. For example, in ancient Rome there was no difference between children in the family and slave children because both performed hard work. The idea of working children was not a moral problem for the Romans. Since work was integrated into a familiar environment, there was no drastic transition from a "carefree childhood" to work for slaves as well as for free children. Certainly, childhood was not valued like it is today and there is an obvious difference between the Roman approach and ours (Laes, 2008: 273–274).

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<sup>10</sup> For example, using boys as riders in camel races in the United Arab Emirates. At least 30 boys a month are kidnapped from their families to become camel riders, or the families themselves rent or sell them to pay their debts (Beaumont, 2001).

Childhood in slavery in the southern states of the USA is described in American literature. The life of children in slavery is reconstructed based on historical data. Although it was not easy for any slave child, there were easier and harder jobs. For example, it was easier to work as a servant in the house than on a cotton plantation (Corsaro, 2005: 70–74). Despite the frequent belief that child slaves were being excessively exploited, they started working in the fields at the age of 13. The reason is more economic and less humane in nature because if children worked hard they could not be expected to grow up to be productive adult slaves. Slave children had freedom of movement in the environment and could play with white children. Nevertheless, the differences were manifested in the play given that white children regularly held the main roles (Alston according to Corsaro, 2005: 72).

One form of modern-day child slavery is Restavek.<sup>11</sup> It persists in Haiti and affects 1 in 15 children. Extremely poor families, usually in rural areas, sell their children to wealthier families in the hope that they will receive an education in exchange for doing unskilled chores. Girls represent 60% of Restavek children. In their new families they perform chores and are not paid (Rezolucija Europskog parlamenta, 2018).

## Conclusion

523

This article set out to present childhoods dominated by exploitation. As shown, children have been exposed to exploitation in the past through until today. Notwithstanding human life and society in the 20<sup>th</sup> century having seen advances in various aspects, which improved the conditions of children's life and ensured a safer childhood, some forms of violent exploitation of children are still on the increase. Children in any kind of exploitation have lost their childhoods.

The introduction of compulsory education reduced child labour, compulsory health care ensured their health and life, while increased material standards improved their well-being and quality of life. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, children obtained rights for the first time. The last century has been marked by the strengthened role of the state in providing support to parents for raising their children (Lansdown, 2004: 185). Noting the high level of care shown in child protection and the efforts to establish a safer and better childhood, the 20<sup>th</sup> century is often called the century of the child. However, a large number of children remain outside general development and the reach of measures that have been introduced on the national or international levels. Recent data even indicate that child labour and other forms of child exploitation are worsening. It is obvious that there is a gap

<sup>11</sup> The term comes from the French language *rester avec*, "to stay with".

between the efforts of the social actors and institutions and the different reality of many childhoods.

An explanation may be found in the notion of the social construction of childhood, which implies that childhood is a part of the social structure such as social class, family, or age groups. Therefore, children live their lives in the childhood determined by the dimensions of a given society (Corsaro, 2005). Positive or negative political, economic and cultural trends affect children's social environment, experiences and lives. This makes it appropriate to talk not about one shared childhood, but about many childhoods, the differences between cultures and within them, their class, ethnic, gender and other determinations (Jenks, 1996: 29–31). As Jenks states, there are no identical groups, communities, societies or social circumstances, and also no universal childhood. On the contrary, there is a plurality of childhoods, which can be constructed in different and changing ways. Childhoods should therefore be understood contextually. Childhood does not exist in a definitive and recognisable form but can be constructed in different and changing ways (Jenks, 2009: 93–98).

This article presented different types of child exploitation. As shown, children are exploited as participants in armed conflicts, as working children and slaves. Different forms of child exploitation were revealed as a historical phenomenon, a permanent problem that persists over time. In general, it can be said that what mainly links the various forms of child exploitation are strong social disturbances; more precisely, social inequalities, poverty, and social and political conflicts.

The childhoods described in this article should be perceived in the social and economic context of the modern world. Neoliberal capitalism, which has become an almost worldwide system, has intensified social inequalities and poverty on all levels. The chief characteristic of this model of capitalism is the maximisation of profit, while social goals and politics are neglected. Profit as the supreme value is penetrating the non-economic sphere, moving into areas like education, health, culture, sports and other social and public activities (Mesarić, 2006: 612). Capitalism, whose strength rests on the realisation of interests and production concentrated in countries with cheap labour and is based on the unconditional consumption of resources and goods, ignores human values and human needs, even the most vulnerable ones. Further, the exploitation of children is spread by globalisation processes that have expanded inequality as a serious problem facing world society (Giddens, 2000: 6). The impacts of globalisation, which were supposed to make life more certain and predictable, often brought the opposite effect (Giddens, 2005: 17) and contributed to a worsening of the economic divisions within and between nations, the rise of fundamentalism, and nationalist and ethnic tensions (Thompson, 2012).

In this article, the exploitation of children is generally described as a phenomenon existing in developing or countries experiencing turbulent social or political periods. At the same time, we are aware that socially neglected childhoods exist in developed countries, including those with an established democratic culture. Social inequalities have been increasing in recent decades causing a social gap and the related impoverishment of the population, which has a strong impact on children and their lives.<sup>12</sup> Children who live in poverty are exposed to deprivation and various risks, including the possibility of abuse in general. It is also worth mentioning that ever since the European migrant crisis of 2015 we have witnessed the inhumane treatment of migrant children. This topic acts as strong motivation for further research.

Modern child exploitation should be perceived in the context of legal protection, respectively, documents that should guarantee a safe childhood and quality of life. The first Geneva Declaration on the Rights of the Child was accepted in 1924 as a fundamental document, then The Declaration on the Rights of the Child in 1959. Thirty years later, the 1989 expressed the ideals and goals of the world community in relation to individual children's rights (Hrvatska enciklopedija, 2021). The Convention established universal standards that should be guaranteed to every child. It was important in the international movement for children's rights because, along with the rights of care and safety, it introduced the rights of participation, and became obligatory for the countries that had ratified it. The right to monitor countries which had ratified it was implied (Lansdown, 2004). The Convention was signed by 196 countries and became the fastest and most widely accepted agreement in the field of human rights in history. Among international documents, the World Declaration on the Survival, Protection and Development of Children from 1990 defined challenges, opportunities, obligations, tasks and future steps, and is a supporting and transitional means for fulfilling the obligations imposed by the Convention (Čubelić, 1994).

Despite almost universal ratification of the Convention together with other efforts of national or international agencies, awareness campaigns and the work of NGOs, too many children are involved in different kinds of exploitation. There is a gap between legal acts aimed to improve the position and well-being of children and the reality of many childhoods in the

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<sup>12</sup> For example, the poverty risk rate in the Republic of Croatia in 2022 was 18%, while among children aged 0 to 17 it was 16%. The influencing variable is not only social, but also spatial differences; the risk of poverty among children in Pannonian Croatia was 25.9%, while for the City of Zagreb it was 9.5% (Croatian Bureau of Statistics, 2023). The consequence of poverty is the child work that exists in Croatia. Due to poverty, children work as beggars. They are aged between 7 and 13 years old. For this 'job', a physical handicap is desirable. They can spend HRK 20 of the money they earn, while the rest is to pay off their parents' debt (Globus, 2014).

21<sup>st</sup> century. The data presented in this article confirm that many children are still outside the reach of acts that should guarantee their safety and protection, whether they are participating in war events, live in poverty, or are in forced labour. It seems that international documents are still programmatic, tasks and visions that need to be worked on. Nevertheless, their value is significant because were signed on the level of the world community and are binding on a moral and cultural level. However, their realisation takes place with different intensities in certain parts of the world (Čubelić, 1994: 457).

To the children who experience any form of exploitation, all four groups of the Convention's rights are denied. In the first place, survival rights like the right to life, an adequate standard of living, nutrition, suitable accommodation, and healthcare. Such children are also deprived of their rights to development such as education, the right to play, free time, cultural activities, information and expression. The children involved do not gain protective rights against abuse, neglect, exploitation, the prohibition of child labour, and the protection of refugee children or in armed conflicts. Finally, children are deprived of the right to participate in their environment, which is a group of rights that prepares a child to become an active, adult citizen.

The severity of the problems that exploited children face is depressing. The illegality and sensitivity of the phenomenon mean that precise numbers of child exploitation are not available; still the growing trend is evident. In spite of positive legal acts protecting children and ensuring them rights to live free from exploitation and abuse, as stated earlier, a large number of children globally experience some form of exploitation every year. This leaves space for action aimed at reducing social inequalities and ensuring all kinds of children's safety in an unstable world. To all who are children's advocates, regardless of whether they are individuals, organisations or state institutions, future efforts should be aimed at reducing child poverty, promoting peace, and monitoring the realisation of children's rights.

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