

Labour Ministry Tackles Child Labour

The Ministry of Labour and Social Security is moving to implement a national plan of action to address child labour in Jamaica.

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) estimates that 16,000 Jamaican children below the age of 18 are involved in child labour, with 7,000 said to be involved in the "worst forms of labour", which includes the sex trade and hazardous and illicit activities.

Director for the International Programme for the Elimination of Child Labour in the Ministry, Marva Ximinies, said that the plan will strengthen institutional capacity to combat child labour, increase knowledge base, raise public awareness and provide direct support and assistance to victims of child labour.

The plan will intensify initiatives already underway, including the 'Tackling child labour through education (TACKLE)' project, which was launched in February. The three-year project, which is being implemented by the ILO, through funding from the European Commission, aims to reduce poverty by providing access to basic education and skills training; and to strengthen the capacity of local authorities to implement and enforce measures to tackle child labour.

Miss Ximinies said that the Ministry is negotiating with Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) to provide support for the initiative.

"They (NGOs) will be required to collect data and also to provide direct assistance, which would include withdrawing and rehabilitating children that were involved or engaged in child labour. It would mean some form of remedial education along with other training for the persons, who are so engaged," Miss Ximinies explained.

She called on Jamaicans to report all cases of child labour. She noted that the Child Care and Protection Act mandates all citizens to report any incidence of child abuse and this includes child labour.

"Therefore, it is important that members of the public assist in providing us with the information that we can do the necessary follow up and provide the necessary social and economic support for our children, whether it is to re-attach them with their families or to provide them with the necessary support in terms of continuing their educational process," Miss Ximinies stated.

Minister of Labour and Social Security, Parnell Charles, speaking at the launch of ILO project in February, stated that the Government is resolute and committed to reducing child labour, and warned persons of the consequences of employing children.

"We, at the Ministry of Labour, are concerned about underage children, who are sent out by their parents to work fulltime. It must stop now," he stated, warning of sanctions for "parents and employers, who (exploit) our children by employing them and denying them the right to development in our educational institutions."

He noted that a number of programmes are in place to assist people in need, including PATH, while children can attend school tuition-free and receive a hot meal.

Children's Advocate, Mary Clarke, in the meantime, has informed that a number of children have confessed that they work or they are on the streets to subsidize the family's income.

"They are on the street when they should be in school and it compromises the safety of the child," Mrs. Clarke lamented. "This is denying the child to an education," she added.

The Children's Advocate is of the view that education would go a far way in reducing child labour in Jamaica.

"We have to look at how we get children out of child labour into education. We also need to look closely on how we can help parents to subsidize their income so they would not have to send their children out on the streets or, how we can help them to access cash transfer programmes like PATH and any other programme," she noted.

In 2000, the Government of Jamaica in collaboration with the International Labour Organisation (ILO)/International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC) implemented a country programme to progressively reduce and eliminate child labour in Jamaica.