

## Chocolate: Fair Trade or Slave Trade?

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*The average Canadian eats roughly 6.7 kg of chocolate annually.*

Publicly acknowledged as a chocoholic, I reacted with shock and horror when a friend showed me a newspaper article on the connection between slavery and chocolate. I think he had expected my immediate response, but did not anticipate that I could change my chocoholic ways. He was both right and wrong. I switched to fair trade chocolate and cocoa products and continued to consume them with gusto...while learning more about the slavery connection.

The abuse of children and evidence of children being trafficked to work in cocoa plantations is being documented from several sources. The International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA), based in West Africa, reports that more than 284,000 children are working in hazardous conditions on cocoa farms. "We could identify some children who, we believe, had been traded in some way and did not have the freedom to leave the farms on which they were working" an IITA report says. The organization found that children harvest the cocoa beans from farms in the jungle using machetes. They spray crops with pesticides and insecticides, without masks, rubber boots, or proper equipment.

Save the Children Canada reports that 15,000 children between the ages of 9 and 12 have been sold into forced labour on cocoa farms on the Ivory Coast, West Africa, in the last few years. Most reports on the child labour practices on cocoa farms in West Africa indicate that children are often trafficked from Mali, Burkina Faso, Togo, and Benin, then brought into the Ivory Coast and other countries in West Africa.

I am often shocked by just how much of what we in the west consume is made under unjust and unfair working conditions, or as a result of devastating environmental practices. I am not a coffee drinker; yet I was aware that coffee growers are exploited for their products. But I was stunned to realize, with chocolate, that human lives are undervalued and violated just so a non-essential food can be picked and processed as cheaply as possible.

Save the Children's director for West Africa, Michel Larouche, works with children who have been lured into this work. "Child trafficking is a very well organized business. Middle-men independently approach boys working in local markets, promise them a salary, and lure them into the illegal trade." Larouche points out that, in some cases, "boys are kidnapped; just picked up and smuggled across the border to Ivory Coast by trafficking intermediaries. Such children are exposed to hazardous working conditions, confined in the workplace, and treated as 'slaves.'"

The Ivory Coast, in West Africa, accounts for 43 percent of the world's 6.6 billion-pound annual cocoa crop. In 1995, world cocoa prices dropped. To remain competitive and keep chocolate a cheap treat, the 3.6 million cocoa farmers on the Ivory Coast had to keep their bean prices low, and their labour costs even lower. It's now commonplace for families to use their children, and their relatives' children, as farm workers. Some plantation owners use children who are trafficked and do not pay them any wage.

In Canada, the chocolate industry contributes to the problem; last year nearly \$47 million worth of cocoa products came in to our country. Most of the big manufactures of chocolate purchase their cocoa on international exchanges, where cocoa from Ivory Coast is mixed with cocoa from other countries. This means that some of the chocolate consumed in Canada is produced by children who are trafficked and forced to work for 18-hour days, without adequate pay, housing, medical care, food, and schooling.

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In response to the growing call for action by Anti-Slavery International, Save the Children, and UNICEF, the international chocolate industry has responded. Members met with key non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in October of 2001 to formulate a protocol, and they agreed to a four-year plan to eliminate child slavery in cocoa production. The protocol calls for a voluntary public certification of cocoa by July of 2005, to assure consumers that the chocolates they buy are not produced from exploitative forms of child labour. Since certification of cocoa only commences in July, 2005, "Fair Trade Certified" labelled chocolates are currently the only ones that are independently certified to be free from exploited child labour.

"From our perspective, it's not enough," says Adrienne Clements, director of Save the Children, Canada, "and it's not soon enough... There are a lot of kids who are going to end up on these farms. Some of them may not survive; some of them may, but with trauma. It will affect them for the rest of their lives." For this reason, Save the Children Canada is encouraging the Canadian government to create a child trafficking bill, one that would make it illegal for crops to be imported into Canada from countries that support child trafficking. Save the Children Canada is also urging Canadian consumers to look for cocoa products that are free of child slave labour, and to buy chocolate with the "Fair Trade Certified" logo. Canadians can help make positive change in the lives of the children affected by forced child labour, Clements states, by being pro-active in the following ways:

- Request that the government of Canada implement the cocoa protocol
- Request that the government develop a national bill on child trafficking
- Request that chocolate manufacturers in Canada clearly ensure that children are not harmed during cocoa production and chocolate manufacturing
- Request that governments in recipient and supplier countries in West Africa step up their efforts to eliminate the exploitation of children
- Buy Fair Trade cocoa products

TransFair Canada is the country's only independent organization that certifies fair trade coffee, tea, cocoa and sugar. The Fair Trade Certified logo indicates that a product meets international fair trade standards... In particular, these standards ensure that cocoa comes from family farms organized into co-operatives, that the cocoa is purchased at a fair price, and that benefits from cocoa sales are shared equitably among cooperative members and finance social projects.

Chocolate can continue to be divine but let's enjoy it without exploiting and destroying the lives of others.

Source:

Pauline Mahoney, *Connections Magazine*, B.C., Winter 2002.

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