The Hidden History of Hershey

The sound of swinging machetes, swooshing through leaves and sometimes hitting something solid, rings through the forest. Holding these dangerous tools are children, some as young as 11. Throughout West Africa, children are employed on cocoa farms. Most of them are working illegally, under the promise of an education that goes unfulfilled. These young children swinging machetes are the beginning of a cycle of production that ends with a Hershey's Chocolate Bar in America. Thousands of kids pass out candy bars on Halloween, share chocolate as a dessert, and enjoy this delicacy without knowing its true story.

When I was 14 years old, I read an article in the Washington Post about slavery in the chocolate industry, and I was horrified. I immediately wondered what I could do. I remember walking into the kitchen and announcing to my parents that I no longer wanted to eat Hershey's Chocolate, or any of the other name brands. Instead, after a little research, I decided that I would eat Fair Trade chocolate. A few years later, I found the Food Empowerment Project. I decided that this would be my goal; to protest against this inequity and use my power as best I could to impact the system.

Most child labor in the cocoa industry happens in Ghana or the Ivory Coast, as well as Brazil and some other African countries. According to some sources, about 2.1 million children are engaged in child labor in these areas, although the number is likely higher. Traffickers abduct children from their homes, including Burkina Faso and other nearby countries, and bring them to these cocoa farms. Families often have no choice but to say goodbye to their children, as they are living in abject poverty and the traffickers promise education and money for the children. This

promise, of course, is broken. Human beings are turned into a commodity to appease America's appetite for consumer goods. And children are the victims of this commodification. Siaka was a young boy, 14 years old, who was from Mali. He was poor, and when a locateur offered him a job in Ivory Coast, he took it. He wore his best shirt because he thought he was going to have a "good time" in Ivory Coast. Little did he know, he was about to enter enslavement.

Children face brutal conditions, such as whipping, if they don't work fast enough. Many children use chainsaws or machetes in their work, which can cause serious injuries and violate UN laws on dangerous tools. Children working on cocoa farms are exposed to dangerous chemicals. One estimate states that 50% of children are exposed to such chemicals. Additionally, children eat the cheapest and lowest quality food, and often have no bathroom or clean water. Drissa, a worker, said "when people eat chocolate, they are eating my flesh."

The brutal conditions aren't just some words on paper - they are reality for boys like Siaka, who was beaten daily and promised money that he never got. By the time the new year rolled around, Siaka and his fellow workers had hardly been paid, were living in squalid conditions, missing their families…and Siaka's best shirt was in tatters.

There have been multiple attempts to address the child slavery and forced labor issue in the chocolate industry, for example, the Harkin Engel Protocol, which laid out a system of certification (which ultimately was not met). Additionally, there have been many reports and even court cases about this topic…however, what has been done has hardly scratched the surface of the problem. Meanwhile, chocolate companies continue to get away with horrific treatment of children without consequences. Many of them make commitments, but when it comes to walking the talk, there is a major lag.

We need to raise awareness around this crucial issue as best we can. Many people have told me that it doesn't matter that I'm not eating chocolate, because it doesn't make a substantial difference in the lives of enslaved children. However, I believe that change starts with one person. Maybe I will inspire someone else to do the similar thing, and we can band together and fight for policy change. Systemic change starts small, but in my opinion, the people we are fighting for are always worth the battle.

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