



CHILD LABOR: ISSUES, CAUSES AND INTERVENTIONS*

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by

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Abstract

Child labor is a pervasive problem throughout the world, especially in developing countries. Africa and Asia together account for over 90 percent of total child employment. Child labor is especially prevalent in rural areas where the capacity to enforce minimum age requirements for schooling and work is lacking. Children work for

a variety of reasons, the most important being poverty and the induced pressure upon them to escape from this plight. Though children are not well paid, they still serve as major contributors to family income in developing countries. Schooling problems also contribute to child labor, whether it be the inaccessibility of schools or the lack of quality education which spurs parents to enter their children in more profitable pursuits. Traditional factors such as rigid cultural and social roles in certain countries further limit educational attainment and increase child labor.

Working children are the objects of extreme exploitation in terms of toiling for long hours for minimal pay. Their work conditions are especially severe, often not providing the stimulation for proper physical and mental development. Many of these children endure lives of pure deprivation. However, there are problems with the intuitive solution of immediately abolishing child labor to prevent such abuse. First, there is no international agreement defining child labor, making it hard to isolate cases of abuse, let alone abolish them. Second, many children may have to work in order to attend school so abolishing child labor may only hinder their education. Any plan of abolishment depends on schooling. The state could help by making it worthwhile for a child to attend school, whether it be by providing students with nutritional supplements or increasing the quality and usefulness of obtaining an education. There must be an economic change in the condition of a struggling family to free a child from the responsibility of working. Family subsidies can help provide this support.

This analysis leads to certain implications for the international community. Further investigation into this subject is required before calls are made for banning child labor across the board. By establishing partnerships with humanitarian organizations, the international community can focus on immediately solving the remediable problems of working children.

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INTRODUCTION

Though restrictions on child labor exist in most nations, many children do work. This vulnerable state leaves them prone to exploitation. The International Labour Office reports that children work the longest hours and are the worst paid of all laborers (Bequele and Boyden 1988). They endure work conditions which include health hazards and potential abuse. Employers capitalize on the docility of the children recognizing that these laborers cannot legally form unions to change their conditions. Such manipulation stifles the development of youths. Their working conditions do not provide the stimulation for proper physical and mental development. Finally, these children are deprived of the simple joys of childhood, relegated instead to a life of drudgery. However, there are problems with the obvious solution of abolishing child labor. First, there is no international agreement defining child labor. Countries not only have different minimum age work restrictions, but also have varying regulations based on the type of labor. This makes the limits of child labor very ambiguous. Most would agree that a six year old is too young to work, but whether the same can be said about a twelve year old is debatable. Until there is global agreement which can isolate cases of child labor, it will be very hard to abolish. There is also the view that work can help a child in terms of socialization, in building self-esteem and for training (Collins 1983). The problem is, then, not child labor itself, but the conditions under which it operates (Boyden 1991).

ATTRIBUTES OF CHILD LABOR

Child labor is most concentrated in Asia and Africa, which together account for more than 90 percent of total child employment (see Table 1). Though there are more child workers in Asia than anywhere else, a higher percentage of African children participate in the labor force (see Table 2). Asia is led by India which has 44 million child laborers, giving it the largest child workforce in the world. In Pakistan, 10 percent of all workers are between the ages of 10 and 14 years (Weiner 1991). Nigeria has 12 million child workers. Child labor is also common in South America. For example, there are 7 million children working in Brazil (ILO 1992).

Table 1:

Distribution of Economically Active Children under 15 Years of Age

(percent of total world child labor)

Region	1980	1985	1990
Africa	17.0	18.0	21.3
Americas	4.7	5.6	na

Asia	77.8	75.9	72.3
Europe	0.3	0.2	0.1
Oceania	0.2	0.2	0.2
Source: ILO 1993.			
Note: na...not available			

Table 2:

Comparison of Labor Force Participation Rates of Children and Adults by Region (percent)

Region	15 years and over	10-14 years
Africa	65.2	22.0
Americas	61.8	7.9
Asia	68.1	15.3
Europe	54.5	0.3
Oceania	62.7	6.9
Source: ILO 1993.		

Legislation has been able to control child labor in the formal sector to some degree. As a result, child labor is most prevalent in the highly unmonitored, informal and rural sectors. For example, 66 percent of officially employed children aged 6 to 14 years in Peru work in the countryside (Boyden 1991). Because much of child labor is either in the informal sector or illegal, there is a lack of accurate data on this subject. Further quantification is necessary in order to learn more about this problem.

The lack of enforcement of labor restrictions perpetuates child labor. This is manifested in different ways. The number of enforcement officials is very low, especially in developing countries where the immediate priority of subsistence takes precedence over anything else. There are also inconsistencies in legislation, which may pose problems. For example, a difference may exist between the minimum ages required to work and drop out of school (see Table 3). In many countries (Costa Rica, Thailand, Sri Lanka), the minimum working age is lower than the required age of compulsory education, giving children access to employment before they have even completed the minimum amount of

schooling. When impoverished children are allowed to work legally, they will often abandon school to better their family's condition. In the reverse situation, if the minimum age requirement for work is greater than the compulsory schooling age, children who have completed the required schooling must stay inactive for a period of time before they can legally work. For example, when a poor child from Bangladesh finishes the required schooling at 10 years of age, that child is not supposed to work until the age of 14. Such an expectation seems unreasonable.

CORRELATES OF WORKING CHILDREN

Children work for a variety of reasons. The most important is poverty. Children work to ensure the survival of their family and themselves. Though children are not well paid, they still serve as major contributors to family income in developing countries. For example, minors in Paraguay contribute almost a quarter of the total family income (see Table 4).

Children are often prompted to work by their parents. According to one study, parents represent 62 percent of the source of induction into employment. Children make their own decisions to work only 8 percent of the time (Syed et al. 1991). In fact, a possible reason parents in developing countries have children is because they can be profitable. Children seem to be much less of an economic burden in developing versus developed countries. Children in developing countries also contribute more time to a household than they deplete as compared to their counterparts in developed countries (Lindert 1976). Therefore, parents in developing countries make use of children's ability to work.

Table 3:

Compulsory Education and Minimum Age Work Regulations in Selected Countries

		Minimum Age for Work		
Country	Compulsory Education Required Age	Basic Minimum Work Age	Light Work	Dangerous Work
Bangladesh	10	14	12	16-18
Bolivia	13	14	-	18

Chile	13	15	14	18-21
China	16	16	-	18
Costa Rica	15	12-15	12	18
Cote D'Ivoire	13	14	12	16-18
Djibouti	15	14	-	16
Ecuador	14	12-15	-	18
Egypt	14	12	-	-
France	16	16	12-14	16-18
India	14	14	none	18
Iran	10	15	-	18
Iraq	12	15	-	18
Italy	13	15	14	15-18
Nepal	11	14	-	18
Nigeria	12	12	<12 with approval	18
Paraguay	13	15	12	18
Peru	12	14-16	-	18
Spain	15	16	-	18
Sri Lanka	15	14	-	16-18
Switzerland	15	15	13	16-18
Thailand	15	12	10-12	15-18
Turkey	14	15	13	18
Zaire	12	14	-	16-18
Source: Sinclair and Trah 1991; UNESCO 1993.				
Note: - Age is the same as Basic Minimum Work Age				

Schooling problems also contribute to child labor. Many times children seek employment simply because there is no access to schools (distance, no school at all). When there is access, the low quality of the education often makes attendance a waste of time for the students. Schools in many developing areas suffer from problems such as overcrowding, inadequate sanitation and apathetic teachers. As a result, parents may find no use in

sending their children to school when they could be home learning a skill (for example, agriculture) and supplementing the family income. Because parents have so much control over their children, their perception of the value of school is a main determinant of child attendance. Parents who are educated understand the importance of schooling from personal experience. As a result, parental education plays a large role in determining child schooling and employment (Tienda 1979). School attendance by a child is also highly correlated with family income (Ilon and Moock 1991). Therefore, when children drop out of school, it is not necessarily because of irresponsible parenting; it may be due to the family's financial situation. When these children leave school, they become potential workers. A major reason India has the largest juvenile workforce is because 82 million children are not in school (Weiner 1991). The result is that only a minority get a quality education. For example, only 41 percent of Indians over the age of 15 are literate. This decreases to 33 percent in Bangladesh and 26 percent in Pakistan (Weiner 1991). Poor families, however, are able to recognize good quality schooling and are frequently prepared to sacrifice child labor in order to invest in a good education for their children (see Box 1).

Box 1: Recognizing Human Capital

The importance of human capital was recently rediscovered by the indigenous people of Guatemala. During the 1970s, anthropologists surveyed indigenous people in the communities in which the government was planning to locate its bilingual primary schools. Most parents did not believe that their children should remain in school longer than three or four years if they were boys, less so if they were girls. Many concluded at the time that indigenous people did not know the value of schooling and that they were discriminating against girls.

In the 1990s, these same communities were interviewed again by anthropologists. The parents now believe that their children should stay in school longer, and they no longer differentiate between boys and girls. Why the change? The anthropologists claim that the quality of schooling has increased, thus the returns to schooling have also increased, and the parents know this. The parents are responding to the positive changes that have taken place.

Recent evaluations of the bilingual school system confirm this. Repetition and dropout rates have decreased and the rates of promotion have increased. Girls have shown significant performance improvements over time. Academic achievement has increased, and in some cases students in bilingual schools out-perform students in monolingual Spanish schools. And very importantly, proficiency in Spanish is often better in the bilingual schools. Parents' attitudes toward bilingual schooling are very favorable, but positively related to their children's performance in Spanish.

Sources: Richards 1988; USAID Evaluations; communication with anthropologists.

Traditional factors are also important. The established female role in certain countries dictates that women will not fit into traditional roles if they become educated (Bequele and Boyden 1988). There is a pervasive notion in some nations that educated females will not get married nor have children. Therefore, many families raise daughters solely to take over the household duties in order to release the mother for paid labor. Such cultural practices restrict the education of females and promote child employment. The acceptance of social class separation perpetuates child labor as well (Weiner 1991). For example, people of India's lower castes are expected to perform manual labor and therefore are more apt not to attend school.

Often parents in developing countries assign different roles to their children. This has been called child specialization, and may increase the number of working children (Chernichovsky 1985). This phenomenon involves certain siblings going to school while others work. Many times this depends on the birth order where the oldest is the one who attends school. Patrinos and Psacharopoulos (1993) find that the number of siblings does not have much of an effect on school enrollment, although it does have a significant effect on child labor. This exclusive effect is not inconsistent with the idea of specialization.

Rapid rural-to-urban migration is the cause for the increasing rate of child labor in urban areas of developing countries. Families leave the severity of agricultural working conditions for cities in order to search for economic opportunities that often do not exist. In the last 40 years, this movement has been drastic. In 1950, 17 percent of the population of the developing world lived in urban areas. This increased to 32 percent in 1988. By the year 2000 it is estimated that this proportion will increase to 40 percent, and to 57 percent by the year 2025 (United Nations 1989). Such increases, coupled with worsening economic trends, force children and their families into urban poverty; children are soon required to work (Barker and Knaul 1991).

DEVELOPING A STRATEGY

School represents the most important means of drawing children away from the labor market. Studies have correlated low enrollment with increased rates of child employment (ILO 1992). School provides children with guidance and the opportunity to understand their role in society. Therefore, many insist on immediately abolishing child labor in developing countries and requiring children to go to school. Yet this approach is unfeasible for a number of reasons. First, children will not attend these schools without an economic change in their condition. Schools must make it worthwhile for children to attend in order to make up for lost earnings. One necessary provision is that these schools be free. Another possibility is that these schools serve food supplements. Parents might view this nutrition as valuable and therefore keep their children in school. The quality of education can also be improved so that schooling is considered an important factor in the future success of a child. Only after the introduction of such substitutes will school attendance increase.

Another problem with complete abolition of child labor is that education and employment for children are not mutually exclusive. As mentioned previously, many children work and go to school. In fact, many children have to work to go to school; otherwise, they could not afford the tuition and other fees associated with attendance. This underscores the fact that child labor and education may work together in many cases. As mentioned above, specialization allows some children to acquire an education through support of their working siblings. The result of abolishing child labor would then be a reduction in the educational attainment of a population. A study in Bolivia found that children who were not employed actually had the lowest educational achievement (UNICEF 1992). Another study found that only 20 percent of children who dropped out engaged in paid employment (Seetharamu and Devi 1985). Therefore, immediate abolition is not necessarily the answer. The relationship between labor and education is more complicated than expected.

Table 4: Contributions of Children to Family Income (percent)

		Contribution by Age (years)		
Country	Overall Child Contribution	10-12	13-15	16-18
England, rural (1787-1796)	13.0	9.0	17.4	22.8
Peru (1991)	14.0	7.5	11.7	16.5
Paraguay (1990)	23.7	19.5	22.3	25.8
Source: Patrinos and				

Psacharopoulos 1993, 1995;
Lindert 1976.

Note: For Paraguay, ages by
category are: 12-14, 15-16,
and 17-19.

The use of child labor may actually be a fundamental evolutionary stage in the development of a country. Evidence suggests that parents have children based on a cost-benefit perspective (Singh and Schuh 1986). As documented above, children in developing countries tend to be of economic value and, as a result, become a desirable asset for struggling parents. Children can significantly contribute to family income. Therefore, child labor is an intrinsic component of survival in a developing country. After a certain level of development is reached, children are more of an economic burden and take on less fiscal importance as contributors. This process is illustrated in Table 4. During England's "developing stage", children's contributions to family income paralleled those of present day Peru and Paraguay. But as a country develops, children start to consume more than they produce. After World War II, the United States experienced pronounced development. An upward drift of adult skills and wartime demands for female labor pulled a large number of mothers from home (Lindert 1976). The result was, for the first time in the US an extra child consistently exhausted more household earnings than s/he supplied. Therefore, the role of children differs in developed and developing countries. At certain levels of poverty in developing countries, child labor may play an instrumental role in economic survival which augments national economic development.

DISCUSSION

The analysis above leads to certain implications for the international community:

- Collect/study child labor data and devise interventions that allow for the possibility of children being in school and working;
- Improve the quality of schooling by investing in education so as to increase its value to children and parents;

- Provide subsidies to poor families prone to having working children so they can afford their children's schooling (income subsidies, nutritional supplements); and
- Establish partnerships of international organizations dedicated to improving children's lives.

Some recent efforts to protect jobs in developed countries are misguided. Competition from developing countries is probably not the cause of unemployment in developed countries. Under the guise of protecting workers' rights, some developed countries propose that minimum global labor standards be adopted by the GATT successor, the World Trade Organization. Among the issues proposed is the prohibition of child labor.

Developing countries argue that such measures would rob them of their comparative advantage: lower labor costs. Many see the issue as just that: rich nations attempting to wipe away developing countries' comparative advantage by arguing for human rights. Genuine human rights concerns are important, but protectionism is not the answer. High levels of unemployment have many causes other than trade, so labor standards in one country may not affect levels of employment in another.

Threatening trade restrictions based on labor standards is not justified. The problem with such a stance is that (i) not all forms of child labor are exploitive or cruel; (ii) the age deemed "child" labor is not clear; (iii) poor countries cannot necessarily afford such measures; (iv) levels poverty would increase; and (v) school attendance would decline. Furthermore, free trade is probably part of the solution to eradicating child labor. This is because a free trade regime promotes development worldwide. And as countries develop, the incidence of child labor decreases substantially.

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