

Child Labor in the Philippines:
A Review of Selected Studies and Policy Papers*

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A. Synthesis and Conclusions

On the whole, the decade brought forth a rich and comprehensive body of literature on child labor. These studies cover Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao; the three major industry sectors of agriculture, manufacturing and service, and a whole array of subtypes of work in the formal and informal sector. They give us a more or less in-depth picture of child workers' personal characteristics, the kind of households they belong to, the kind of work they are involved in and in what manner, the profile of some of their employers, and the sort of communities they live and work in. One study recounts the historical experience of child labor in the Philippines and shows that children's labor had been utilized and exploited in the Philippines since Spanish colonization. Some of the case write ups of child workers enable us to feel, in more intimate terms, the disadvantaged situation of individual children who work.

1. Definitions

In terms of approach, some of the studies energetically discussed the definition of child, work and child labor, but came to no definitive conclusion.

Most agreed that a child is one in a dependent position vis a vis adults, and is vulnerable. *What is work?* Some said it is any form of compensated activity, while others specified that compensation could be in cash or kind. There was an issue as to whether unpaid child work was child labor. In general, many agreed that child work is remunerated work (in cash or kind), done by children 15 years old and younger, while child labor implied work characterized as detrimental to the child. What characterized work detrimental to the child and whether employment of children in the home was child labor, remained issues. One clear indication was that the Philippine government had as yet not signed ILO Convention No. 138 on the minimum employable age.

It appeared that in the cultural context of the Philippines, where it was common to see children involved in adult work in practically all industry sectors, including in unpaid family labor, domestic work and homework, several opinions varied regarding child

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labor. Some opined that not all child work was child labor (or that not all child labor was hazardous). Others felt that child labor by definition was exploitative and detrimental to the child worker. Still others believed that even if child labor was exploitative and detrimental to the child per se, action programs should, nevertheless, prioritize helping the child in the more hazardous circumstances.

2. Framework and Approach

Most studies except for Camagay's historical research, which used archival scrutiny, required being present in the field. Both survey and case methods were commonly used. To a lesser extent, participatory and action-oriented research and process documentation were practiced. Analysis of surveys, case studies, drawings, songs, drama, and all sort of documentation was resorted to. In other words, both qualitative and quantitative ways of data gathering were utilized.

Research experiences in the field, however, were plagued with the problem of the invisibility of child labor. Some studies pointed out that child labor indeed, tended to be hidden, seasonal, multiple, changing, and migratory. Some took issue that survey approaches based on preconceived generalized notions of the nature of child labor were proven inadequate given the actual situation of child workers in specific contexts.

Thus, the incidence of child labor (a common interest and a main concern of surveys) remained elusive. Even the 1995 national NSO survey which showed that there were more male workers than females was challenged. It was possible that girls (many of who worked in homework, side by side with their female kin at home) had remained invisible, and that it could have been a reason why boys, who were most likely to work out in the open (in agriculture), were more visible, and were, therefore, reported.

Many studies did not articulate a theoretical and conceptual framework, making assessment of their approaches and analyses inadequate. Gender, age, work sector, and cultural analyses of data were hardly considered in the frameworks covered, with the exception of a few. The latter stressed that child labor should be understood economically, politically, culturally and ideologically, within the context of the global and local economy, and as a manifestation of gender socialization and value systems. Some studies pointed out the macro role of capitalism, and neocolonialism in causing the poverty from which child labor emerged, and stressed that the economic system and government policies and laws (e.g. export orientation) were important conditions in determining the incidence and prevalence of child labor. Thus, some underscored the need for having a framework of and more sensitivity to gender and age seasonality, locality, environment, and specific culture in research and action.

Most authors nevertheless, agreed that:

- (i) Poverty due to unemployment and underemployment had been the most major push factor in the occurrence of child labor. It was important to keep the macro perspective in view and to have a structural approach

in tackling child labor;

(ii) But that micro factors were crucial in the conceptualization and implementation of more feasible and relevant programs for child workers. Micro factors should include the child's personal and work profile; his/her household's profile; the employer's profile; the community situation; migration; age, gender, culture, values, and aspirations, etc.

3. Findings

The outcome of all the studies put together brought to the fore much information on the specific contexts of child labor. The studies gave us clear ideas on the background of child labor and on its supply and demand. They made us more familiar with the communities, families, households, friends, workmates and employers of child workers. Specifically, they provided us with insights on:

- (i) The role of socialization in creating child labor;
- (ii) The impact of the global economy on the communities of child workers;
- (iii) The prevalence of subcontracting;
- (iv) The role of cultural attitudes in sustaining child labor;
- (v) The role of poverty as a push factor to child labor;
- (vi) The importance of gender and age analysis;
- (vii) The importance of having an integrated analysis of data, and
- (viii) The effects of faulty government policies and programs on the present and future of child workers.

In general, the studies were aware that, given the complex nature of child labor and the limited database and logistics available to them, they could not really conclusively generalize according to their findings. However, many insights and commonalities were gained, and these have contributed greatly to the database which later studies were able to rely on for their guidelines. There is no doubt that these case studies contributed enormously to the *piecing together* of the complex picture of Philippine child labor in the decade, and to the increase in the advocacy for action on child labor.

The following rich information was harvested:

a) Characteristics of Child Workers

- **Age, Gender, Work**

Most of the child workers studies were between the ages of 10-14 years, which age range the ILO said 1 out of every 9 is a child worker (ILO 1994). More male than female workers came to be included in the studies. However, data on the age and gender was difficult to compare, because of the variability of different age sets used as basis.

It was evident that the work sectors children were involved in were age-and sex-specific. From the limited samples included in the studies, it seemed that no child below 12 was

found working in prostitution. Unfortunately, the materials in this review did not include children in pedophilia, many whom (as projected in media) were younger than 12 years old. Both male and female children were found in prostitution, with males entering the trade at an older age than girls.

Female children were more associated than their male counterparts with work their mothers were already doing, such as home-related work, while older boys tended to follow their father's work.

The national survey of children 5-17 years old conducted by the NSO (1995) showed that there were more male than female child workers, especially among the older ones where boys doubled the number of girls. Male child workers also outnumbered female counterparts in the work sector of farming and fishing. Similarly other studies observed more boys than girls in stone quarrying, vegetable growing, and poultry farm work.

On the other hand, the NSO found more girls than boys in wholesale/retail trade; non-food manufacturing industries; and personal services. Other studies also showed that females were in overwhelming numbers vis a vis their male counterparts in the manufacturing of garments.

A more or less equal number of males and females were observed working in glove and abaca/shell craft manufacturing, as well as in sardines canning.

In the informal sector, girls were found to be more numerous than boys in sales, vending, prostitution and domestic service, while boys dominated in transportation and street-oriented service, as well as in newspaper selling. Younger scavengers could be males or females, but as they grew older, girl scavengers began to dominate in number.

While age and gender were shown to be related to specific types of work in communities, *on the whole, younger age and femaleness was characteristic of work that was more home-bound/home-based and with less remuneration.*

- **Health Status**

Most of the child workers studied were from poor families and communities, and this was reflected in their overall community health norm. Nevertheless, no significant differences in height and weight were obvious between working and non-working children from the same communities.

Certain work situations were shown to affect the child workers' health in specific ways. The hazards the children were exposed to were found to be place-, work-, and gender related.

The NSO survey showed that about 30, 000 children had reported having suffered from work-related injuries/illnesses. Majority of these lived in the rural areas, especially in Region VII, ARMM, and Region X. Their most common injuries reported were

cuts/wounds/punctures. Some illnesses/injuries reported were such that 3 in every 100 had to stop working and 50% had to temporarily stop working.

Schistosomiasis, fatigue, backache, wounds, and over-exposure to the sun were related to agricultural work. Sleeplessness was reported in night fishing and garments manufacturing. Typhoid, gastro-enteritis, beriberi, respiratory ailments (TB, bronchitis and pneumonia), headaches, fever, coughs, dysentery, ruptured eardrums, and damaged auditory nerves were reported in deep sea diving. Fatal accidents such as drowning were reported in sea-related work.

In manufacturing, skin and respiratory illnesses; impairment of the nervous system due to chemicals; headaches; backaches; leg cramps; allergies; and eyestrain were reported. Sun over-exposure was reported in stonework. Accidents in manufacturing were due to cuts, punctures, and bone mashing.

In services, exposure to environmental hazards and road accidents in street trades, colds, cough, STDs for prostituted children, harassment and threats to the body and life were reported.

The NSO reported that while boys suffered more from the effects of hazardous work, illnesses such as body aches/pains were more common among females, and more females also contracted skin rashes/diseases. Other studies showed that since there were more girls found in prostitution, they were also more prone to STDs.

- **Educational Status**

The studies showed that majority of the working children were in school. The NSO said that 69.8% of the working children surveyed were studying. However, the studies also showed that the degree of being out-of-school was associated with the nature of work. A high degree of out-of-school child workers was found in prostitution and street vending, fishing and drying; and planting and harvesting of sugar cane.

Furthermore, some localities had a higher percentage of out-of-school working children than others, like Ormoc. This was related to the high unemployment rate of parents in the municipality.

A higher degree of being out-of-school was also related to:

- (i) Unaffordable secondary education;
- (ii) Inaccessible intermediate and secondary schools;
- (iii) Incomplete schools at all levels;
- (iv) Cultural attitudes;
- (v) Gender stereotyping/ discrimination;
- (vi) A more regular supply of employment; and
- (vii) A higher degree of urbanization (the NSO showed that there were fewer child workers in school the urban than rural areas)

It is to be observed that specific situations of child workers at the community level cannot be projected to, say, the municipal or regional level, and vice-versa. Child labor has been shown to vary across work, age, gender, and place over different periods of time.

b) Household Characteristics

Most studies showed that altogether, the child workers' households had a range of from 2 to 23 members (with the more numerous in extended types of households). The majority of households, however, were usually nuclear, young and poor. The child workers' parents were either unemployed/underemployed or seasonally employed, with incomes below the poverty line.

Majority of the child workers in the studies lived in with their parents, but there were exceptions. In Rizal, majority of the child workers came from migrant families. In some localities and work sectors (e.g. garments production) child workers lived near or at work and were separated from their parents.

Apart from the family economic status of being poor, the profile of family labor was shown to be a big factor in the child's decision/socialization to work. Some studies showed that family and household members of child workers were engaged in a mix of livelihood activities, which kept the family alive. Child workers were shown to have shifting and occasional/irregular/seasonal work just as other members of the family/household.

It was not uncommon to find from 2-4 child workers in one child worker' family where more household members were engaged in working, indicating that modeling was a factor in motivating the practice of child labor. In general, the parents' occupation influenced the child worker's decision to work as well as what sector they would work in. Children's involvement in work was also gender-specific, in that boys tended to follow their fathers' work, and girls their mothers'.

c) Community Characteristics

The communities of child workers were characterized by available employment in the informal sector, that was seasonal, occasional, low- paying, and requiring simple skills. Economic opportunities were diverse and varied in quantity and type according to locality. The communities could therefore be described as poor, depressed, in the fringes, inhabited by landless residents, and in some cases, by migrants.

d) Child labor Incidence

The following factors have been shown to play a role in encouraging the supply of child labor:

- family and community poverty due to unemployment/underemployment and low paying jobs;
- the tradition/modeling of child labor in the family and community;
- early socialization toward working; parental and peer influence;
- inaccessibility of schooling and being out-of-school;
- age and gender factors (gender tracking and age expectations regarding children's activities); and
- inadequate awareness of opportunities and rights.

In terms of demand, the following factors have been shown to play a role in encouraging child labor:

- the macro economic situation and government's cheap labor policies;
- locality;
- availability of jobs in the community and information on job availability (some findings indicated that, where there were more available jobs, there was a greater likelihood and incidence of child labor);
- types of jobs suited to seasonal/irregular, low paying employment;
- the economic situation (for example, crises); and
- laws and policies on child labor

The latest NSO statistics on working children in 1995, found 3,669,903 working children in the Philippines. This was a far cry from BWYW estimates in 1985 of 5 to 7 million, and UNICEF estimates in 1987 of 5 million. Did the number of child workers actually decrease, or should we look for explanations in the framework and approach that researchers and institutions used to estimate their figures? Factors like a change in economic situation, as well as the research approach may have been responsible for these differences. These issues were not resolved even with the first national survey for 1995 by the NSO, as questions were raised vis a vis its results.

On the whole, the most studied work sectors of child workers were garments, vegetable growing, and sales. The NSO reported that majority of child workers were engaged in agriculture, followed by services then by manufacturing. Other studies showed that there were more child workers in services, while the trend was consistent throughout the studies with regard to manufacturing.

In summary, establishing incidence was not only a matter of counting, for many other qualitative factors were at play in determining the complex phenomenon of child labor.

e) Policies, Legislation, Action Programs:

As of 1995, the Philippines had not yet ratified ILO Convention No. 138, which was the most comprehensive International Convention on child labor. This convention no longer exempted family enterprises from the prohibition of hiring children, and since R.A. No. 7610/7658 still conditionally allowed the employment of children 15 years old and below under specific circumstances of parental/guardian supervision, the Philippine government had felt reluctant to sign it.

The studies showed that there had been no lack of GO, NGO and PO efforts and structures to tackle the child labor problem in the Philippines. Nevertheless, the assessments of action programs had surfaced many issues of approach, perspective, coordination and resources which were important in guiding the conceptualization, planning, implementation, monitoring and continuation of action programs.

There was no doubt that research had been proven essential in the formulation of legislation, policy and advocacy for child workers, and that, this had to be viewed in the light of interacting qualitative as well as quantitative factors at the micro, meso and macro levels. However, there were choices to be made depending upon points of views. One major issue had been which type of child labor to prioritize in advocacy actions. The exploitation and abuse of child workers in terms of work sector was evident in the studies, however, there were degrees of 'hazardousness'. Deep sea diving was shown to be very hazardous, and in effect, "muro-ami" fishing got to be banned during the decade. Nevertheless, would not the regular and systematic utilization of child labor in the factory and home in export-oriented garment industry also be as intensely exploitative of more children in the total account? Furthermore, could prostitution not be considered just as even more extensively detrimental to the child worker?

Indeed, the studies had made one thing clear: since child labor was such a "hidden" phenomenon, any effective advocacy action on child labor would require a multi-level, structural perspective that was participatory, action-oriented, detailed, comprehensive, community-based and sensitive to gender, age, social organization, culture, locality, work sector, historical and seasonal considerations.

B. Recommendations

The studies have been groundbreaking. The focus on child labor has been established. However, there remain there remain issues and research gaps. Lessons continue to be learned from the experiences of the researchers and advocates in the decade. The review would like to suggest the following:

1. That child labor continue to be monitored more closely, regularly and institutionally by GOs, LGUs, NGOs, POs, and the academe;
2. That the NSO continue its regular survey of working children, while further refining its perspective, approach and practice toward more

gender-, age -, work sector-, and culture-sensitivity in consultation with involved sectors;

3. That all those engaged in the study and advocacy of child labor come together to seriously deliberate on the issues of child labor in view of integrating and disseminating data, improving research, and formulating more relevant, realistic and lasting action programs at the community level nationwide;
4. That research on child labor should proceed with action programs in mind, in view of :

a) Conducting more gender-/age-/locality/culture/history-sensitive researches, on

- The girl child
- The effects of globalization on the communities of child workers
- Children in subcontracting not only in the garments industry
- Children in domestic service
- Children in different areas of agriculture
- Longitudinal perspectives of child workers and their communities
- Vertical perspectives of children in trafficking and prostitution

b) Disseminating and publishing the findings on child labor toward enhancing advocacy and awareness at all levels of society, the nation and the world.

Media still has to substantially discuss the social implications of child labor. Creating greater public awareness concerning the issues of child labor is still a task to be taken seriously. Some have suggested that all agencies of government should be mobilized to address the phenomenon of child labor, since child labor is not just an employment problem.

c) Clarifying perspectives on child labor toward a more lasting and workable approach to its elimination.

It is obvious that to eliminate child labor, it is necessary to follow the law. However, the laws against child labor have been in existence, yet child labor continues to persist, increase, and adjust with socio-economic and political shifts. There is still a lack of a clear direction and framework for program interventions. Only few employers in the formal labor sector believe that child labor is a significant labor problem. The school, child workers and their families themselves are likely to consider child labor as acceptable and inevitable.

Several decade studies have insisted, and rightly so, that advocacy to eliminate child labor is not just the simple reduction of child labor in the work place. The elimination of child labor must pay close attention to the conditions that have created the poverty which

has spawned child labor. The link between the forces that have created poverty and the factors leading to child labor go beyond community and national boundaries, and must be understood, articulated and engaged. Approaches cannot merely be punitive of the very countries, societies, and families that are, to begin with, poor and against the wall. The advocacy for children to be spared the exploitation and abuse inherent in child labor should be comprehensive, toward the creation of programs that can effect a more lasting positive change in society and the world.

Let us all do what we can *now*, to eliminate child labor by advocating and ensuring that communities will survive better, so that children today and in the future, can start to ***take back their childhood.***