

Child Labour in Latin America

By 6am in the market of San Pedro Sula, Honduras, horses are hauling carts loaded with pineapples, bananas and vegetables to the market stalls, sending up sweet smells of pineapple, coriander and rain (from last night's thunderstorm). As the traffic builds up, smog starts to clog the dawn sky. The first school uniforms appear. On the corner two small girls, aged perhaps five or six, are collating the newspaper supplements ready for sale. Everyone is chewing on mangoes. A group of teenage girls lounge around a table, each turning out tortillas from a huge ball of dough. Their bored, indolent faces contrast with the speed of their hands, mechanically but expertly slapping and patting the dough.

At 13, Marina is already part of Central America's tortilla production line. A diminutive, blonde girl with a prominent nose, she sports the ubiquitous market woman's apron, as she struggles back to her stall - a rickety table covered in blue plastic - with a large bucket of water. A charcoal brazier under a griddle stands ready for the tortillas. Marina's father comes past, face hidden under the obligatory straw cowboy hat, pushing hard on a handcart with wobbly wheels.

At 4 am I leave home with my dad. He's a porter in the market, so we come to work together - it's an hour's bus ride. I prepare the dough for the tortillas before the patrona arrives - she takes care of the selling. I finish around 10am, then I go home to eat. At 2pm, I change and go the Academy - I'm learning dress-making (I've finished primary school). Academy finishes at 4, then I go home and help mum with the housework.

I get about \$2.70 a day, and give about \$1.60 to my mum. I keep the rest for the Academy and all my materials. Some of the regulars buy me a drink or an avocado - today I even got sixty cents extra in tips.

My boss is a friend of my dad's. She asked me to come and wash her plates once, then she decided to give me work. Before then, I worked for another señora washing plates, but she bossed me about a lot, so I left after a month.

I like working. We were always bored at home. Here in the market I see lots of people, not just my mother and brothers. At home there was nothing much to eat - here I eat all the time!

Marina is typical of millions of child workers all over Latin America and the Caribbean. From as young as five or six, poor children start their working lives, either on the street or in the home. From then on, they must juggle the conflicting demands of school, work and home as best they can. Discussion of their work is complicated by the lack of reliable statistics. Much of the work performed by children, particularly domestic labor either in the home or as a maid, as well as much agricultural work on family farms, is invisible and fails to figure in surveys or statistics on child labor. Furthermore, neat definitions of what is and is not work are impossible when there is no clear dividing line between chores in the home, and work which contributes to family income, or releases older relatives to go out to work.

The almost complete lack of hard facts or credible research on crucial areas such as how many children work, what they do, whether numbers are rising or falling and the impact of child labor on the wider economy is one of the most striking features of the whole debate on child labor. UNICEF puts it down to a lack of interest from governments, problems of definition (eg when do household chores become work) and the illegal status of child labor in many countries, which drives it underground, making it much harder to gather reliable information.

Although they are undoubtedly underestimates, UN figures give a hint of the extent of child work, with one in five 10-14 year olds working in Brazil, Honduras and Haiti, and more than

one in ten in most Latin American and Caribbean countries. The International Labor Organisation (ILO) puts the figure for the total number of working children in Latin America and the Caribbean between 5 and 14 years old at 17.5 million. The proportions are many times higher among boys than girls, underlining the invisibility of much of girls' labor in the home.

Like Marina, the bulk of child workers operate in the urban informal sector, or in agriculture, especially on peasant farms. Although some children work growing crops such as sugar cane or coffee for export, worldwide only 5% of child workers are in the export sector – a point often forgotten in the public campaigns over child labor in the North America and Europe.

The informal sector is a catch-all category that includes all those working on their own account, rather than for a regular wage. In many Latin American and Caribbean countries more people work in the informal sector than in 'regular' jobs. Children are especially likely to be found there, since the informal sector needs no prior qualifications, start-up capital or papers. Furthermore, it functions largely outside government control, making any existing child labor laws irrelevant. The hours are flexible, and can be fitted around school or other commitments, and often it can take place under the supervision of a parent, relative or friend, which on Latin America's perilous streets is a reassurance to both family and child. As one Lima market woman explains, *'I don't want my daughter to go out to work. The temptation of the devil is on all sides. I prefer her to sell potatoes here, where I can keep an eye on her.'*

In recent years the informal sector has boomed, as government austerity programs have driven millions out of regular work. Nearly nine out of every ten of the new jobs created in the first five years of the 1990s were in the informal sector. In this brave new world of 'flexible working patterns' children make perfect employees - the cheapest to hire, the easiest to fire and the least likely to protest.

The informal sector's most visible child members are the street workers, but those most at risk are household workers - the invisible multitudes, mainly girls, shut away from scrutiny behind the front doors of Latin America's family homes. Many more millions of girls work in their own homes, caring for younger siblings, or maintaining the household so that their mothers can go out to work.

According to UNICEF, 'Child domestic workers are the world's most forgotten children... they may well be the most vulnerable and exploited of all, as well as the most difficult to protect'. Child domestics' isolation can be almost total; in Peru, one study showed that nearly a third *never* leave the premises. Invisible and unprotected, child household workers are vulnerable to physical and sexual abuse at the hands of their employers, and are often treated in a subhuman fashion. In Guatemala, one twelve-year-old indigenous girl faced a humiliating first night, *'the mistress called me. The food they gave me was a few beans with some very hard tortillas. There was a dog in the house, a pretty, white, fat dog. When I saw the maid bring out the dog's food - bits of meat, rice, things that the family ate - that hurt me very much. I was lower than the animals in the house.'*

The girl was Rigoberta Menchú, who later went on to win the Nobel Peace Prize for her work in promoting equal rights for Guatemala's impoverished Indian majority.

Besides the urban informal sector, many more children work in agriculture. In rural Colombia, one study claimed that over 50% of 12-17 year olds in rural areas work in some capacity, compared to less than 20% in urban areas. A survey of 1220 working children in a rural smallholder community near the Nicaraguan town of Esteli concluded:

'Work is a fundamental aspect of children's lives in Santa Rosa del Peñón. It is an important part of children's socialisation as members of their families and communities.' Girls largely stick to 'reproductive work' in the home, while boys were found to carry out roughly equal amounts of reproductive and productive work, the latter growing as they grew older. 'Few boys clean the house, cook or care for younger children. On the other hand, relatively few

girls are involved in farmwork, fetching firewood, or taking lunch to their fathers in the fields.' Girls on average worked longer hours.

Hours worked are just as varied as the kinds of job done. The survey in Nicaragua found that about half of children under ten worked 2 hours a day or less, but the working day increased rapidly with age. An analysis of Brazil's 1995 household survey found that, among the country's 4 million child workers, one in five under-10's worked 20 hours a week or more, as did half those in the 10-14 age bracket.

As to wages earned, Brazil's household survey suggested only 29% of working children receive any money at all, falling to only 7% in the under-10's – most work is done within the family, for no pay. Those older children who do earn money receive about half as much as adults with seven years of education.

Why do they work?

The reasons why children work are complex, combining both 'push factors' on the supply side, and pull factors on the demand end. Among push factors, according to the International Labor Organisation, 'Poverty emerges as the compelling reason why children work. Children commonly contribute around 20-25% of family income.' Moreover, their income keeps numerous families above the bread line. According to Unicef, 'A review of 9 Latin American countries has shown that without the income of working children aged 13-17, the incidence of poverty would rise by between 10-20%.'

Yet not all poor children work, nor are all working children poor, so clearly there are many other factors involved. One is unpredictability – it is not just poverty which makes poor families put their children to work, it is fear of unexpected falls in adult income – working children smooth out such troughs and spread risk. Studies show that children are more likely to drop out of school when family income varies sharply.

Another key influence driving children into work is the atrocious state of much of the region's school system. Faced with a dull, irrelevant curriculum, taught in unimaginative 'chalk and talk' formats to over-crowded classrooms, the education system suffers enormous drop-out and repetition rates. Four out of five Chilean teachers merely dictate classes to their students, who sit passively in rows, and both children and their parents often conclude that work offers better preparation for life than school. In Bolivia, only one girl in ten completes primary education, while only one in a hundred finishes secondary school.

Yet despite their unrewarding experiences in the classroom, many children still want to study, and an increasing number of them work to make this possible, either to pay their own share of the rising costs of putting a child through school, or to enable their younger siblings to have a better start in life. Child labor activists should note that this means work and education can have a mutually reinforcing aspect and that in such cases abolishing child labor can actually drive children out of school. According to one World Bank report, 'a study in Bolivia found that children who were not employed had the lowest educational achievement. Another study found that only 20% of children who dropped out engaged in paid employment.'

Other push factors include parents. Research shows that uneducated parents are far more likely to make their children go out to work, and even arrange it for them – in the Brazilian shoe industry, mothers are the main means through which children find work, half of them before their tenth birthday.

What the rest of the family is doing also helps determine whether and how hard a particular child works. Across Latin America, women are going out to work in increasing numbers, and this has led to eldest daughters being kept home from school to mind the house and look after younger siblings. Parents who do piece work are more likely to rely on 'help' from their children, although few families see this as real work, making it invisible in many surveys.

What about the demand side - why do adults employ children? ILO research suggests that the 'nimble fingers' argument that children are better able than adults to do some jobs is 'entirely fallacious'. Instead, the ILO concludes 'A major reason for hiring children seems to be non-economic – children are easier to manage because they are less aware of their rights, less troublesome, more compliant, more trustworthy and less likely to absent themselves from work.'

Children's low skill levels and rock-bottom wages make them ideal for the labor-intensive, low-tech worlds of the informal sector and shanty town – even the introduction of elementary technology such as wheelbarrows in Colombian brick quarries or electricity, gas and running water in the home makes many children's traditional jobs such as carrying bricks or collecting firewood redundant.

The impact of globalisation

The ILO's child labor program admits 'Specific evaluations of the precise impact of globalization on child labor have yet to be made', and the paucity of empirical research makes any discussion of the impact on child labor of Latin America's economic upheaval of the last 15 years somewhat tentative. However, most observers agree that the numbers of child workers are increasing.

A comparison of Brazil's household surveys in 1976 and 1995 showed a rise in urban male child workers from 10% to 15% of the age group, and urban females from 4% to 8%. Moreover, the proportion of working children in the cities not receiving a wage rose from 33% to 44%. All this during a time of rapid population growth, meaning far greater increases in the absolute numbers of working children.

At a regional level, even in the relative boom period of the early 1990s, UN figures show that child labor among adolescents (13-17) rose in five out of seven countries studied, and fell in only one. Latin America's much vaunted 'modernisation' appears to lead to more, not less, children in the workplace.

The reasons for the increase are not hard to find, especially in those countries which have undergone the worst rigours of 'structural adjustment' since the onset of the Latin American debt crisis of the 1980s. Structural adjustment ties into child labor in numerous ways.

Nicaragua is an extreme, but illustrative case. After the election of the anti-Sandinista candidate, Violeta Chamorro, to the presidency in 1990, the country was rewarded with a flood of US and other aid in astonishing quantities for a country of Nicaragua's size. Between 1990 and 1997, the government received nearly \$5 billion – well over \$1000 for every Nicaraguan man, woman and child. But it came with numerous strings attached. Within two months of the election, Nicaragua was obliged to sign the first of a series of agreements with the IMF, World Bank, InterAmerican Development Bank and USAID, under which the government has promised to implement painful economic reforms in exchange for aid. These powerful economic institutions have used Nicaragua's desperation to shepherd (some might say frog march) the country at high speed along the road to reform.

The main aims of the reforms were to end hyperinflation (running at 13,000 per cent in the year that Chamorro took office), and to shift Nicaragua from being a state-led economy, dominated by government-owned farms, state regulation and nationalised industries, towards a system where market forces decide the fate of the country.

In a series of 'stabilisation programs', the Chamorro government raised interest rates and cut spending to the bone, duly getting inflation down from 13,000 per cent to just 19 per cent in 1993. It privatised hundreds of state-owned companies, removed regulations on trade and banks and other financial institutions, and pushed up interest rates to 'squeeze inflation out of the system'.

Nation-wide, the combination of rocketing interest rates and lay-offs among thousands of state employees precipitated yet further economic collapse, despite the huge dollar inflows. Unemployment surged from 25 per cent in 1988 to 52 per cent in 1993. By 1994 three out of every four Nicaraguans were living below the poverty line. The state has ended all food subsidies and cut most school feeding programs, so children eat less - per capita consumption of the national staples of rice and beans fell by 15 per cent between 1990 and 1993. Many of Nicaragua's social improvements, which won admiration around the world in the 1980s, are being swiftly reversed and by 1998, Oxfam was reporting that health and education spending had been cut still further, and poverty was still rising.

The social impact of such measures is felt throughout the country, not least in the shanty town of Acagualinca, next to the main garbage dump of the capital, Managua. Here, most bread-winners have lost their jobs in recent years, driving entire families to swell the ranks of the rubbish-pickers, scavenging the dump for recyclable materials.

Recycling rubbish on the Managua dump is just one of many informal sector trades, most of them plagued by insecurity and pitiful wages, and home to the country's rising number of child workers. At one Managua cross-roads, thirty children weave between the cars begging or selling everything from chewing gum to superglue. Some of the children are so small that their larger brothers and sisters have to hoist them onto the car bonnets before they can run a dirty rag over the windscreens in exchange for a few coins or a curse.

Across the region, government after government has followed Nicaragua's example, abandoning decades of state-led development in favour of the 'iron fist' of the market. After decades of steady improvement, the numbers of Latin Americans living below the poverty line rose from 136 million in 1980 to 197 million in 1990. As recession gave way to growth in the 1990s, poverty continued to grow, albeit more slowly, reaching 209 million in 1994, or 39% of the population. Since poor families have more children than rich ones, the proportion of children living in poverty is even higher – in Mexico, Paraguay and Venezuela, half of all children inhabit the twilight zone below the poverty line.

Growing poverty and inequality, combined with the rising cost of schooling as governments cut back on education spending and introduce 'user fees' to parents have driven families to pull their children out of school and put them to work. The collapsing education system and the slump in the number of decent jobs offers few alternatives to hard-pressed parents. As an exhausted mother in a Chilean shanty town commented, *'why should kids read Neruda or go to the theatre if they're just going to end up picking oranges?'*

Other, more intangible facets of globalisation have also played a part. Nike-style consumer consciousness has penetrated down to the poorest barrios and favelas, influencing children's perceptions of their relative poverty. Increasingly, children make up their own minds to go out to work, and their aim is not mere survival, but the enticing prospect of acquiring fashion icons like trainers or brand-name clothes.

But there have been countervailing trends, making hard research into the changing face of child labor all the more essential. Urbanisation has continued apace, with some 75% of Latin Americans now living in cities, and this should have decreased the proportion of child workers, which is invariably higher in rural areas. Family size has fallen drastically in recent years - in the 1950s, the average Latin American woman had six children. Now that figure has almost halved - which should have reduced the pressure on older siblings to go out to work to help maintain their younger brothers and sisters. The spread of electrification and access to mains water should have eased the burden on children in the home.

Furthermore, while the quality of education has fallen, the quantity has increased. the region's governments have managed to expand education coverage faster than population growth. Their most spectacular achievements have been in primary school education, where they have managed to incorporate an extra two million children every year since 1950, even during the 'lost decade' of recession and spending cuts in the 1980s. Across the region,

about 94 per cent of 8-9 year olds now attend school, producing close to total coverage at that age range. More children now at least have the option of attending school.

The first half of the 1990s saw the downward trend in education spending reversed, but 1997 brought a sharp slowdown in growth, and the threat of a new, private sector-driven debt crisis spreading from Asia is placing such limited gains in peril.

The impact of child labor

For any child, going out to work brings both benefits and costs. Many working children do not feel coerced, but are proud of their contribution to the family income, while usually having plenty to say about how their lives as child workers could be improved. By working, children gain self esteem, skills and respect from their elders. On the other hand, working long hours can rob them of the chance of a decent education, since even if they manage to go to school, they are often too tired to concentrate in class. There are also more direct costs, in jobs where children run serious risks of damage to their health from poisonous chemicals, dust or workplace accidents, or simply by placing too much strain on growing bodies.

Adults concerned about the impact of children's work, however, often fail to weigh both the pros and cons of child labor, and rarely consult the children themselves. There is a growing international recognition, enshrined in the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, to which all Latin American governments have signed up, that children are not merely passive recipients of programs and policies, but individuals with rights, including the right to participate fully in the design of such policies. Nevertheless, their voices and views are largely absent from the debate on child labor.

The rare occasions when adult policy makers *do* talk to working children (rather than use them as window dressing for media stunts and conferences), are highly enlightening. When Paraguayan child workers were asked what they most liked about their lives, the most popular response was their jobs, well ahead of school, family and playing ball. A survey of 1500 Central American child workers showed that they felt they were discriminated against in the workplace simply for being children; street workers and maids feared violence; working conditions and long hours were criticised; and children also resented being deprived of their freedom and income (by having to give it to their parents, for example). But they definitely did *not* want to see their jobs made illegal. I found such views echoed in scores of interviews carried out for a recent book on child rights in the region. In Peru and Nicaragua, working children's organisations have gone further, campaigning for workers' rights to be extended to children, including the right to join a trade union.

The point about involving and consulting children is not just that it is right, but that it leads to better policies. Many politicians and other campaigners who are distant from the reality of children's lives take an unambiguous position that child labor is a moral evil that should be stamped out, but this can lead to counter-productive attempts to ban child labor through legislation, often making matters worse for the children involved.

The most notorious example of this is Bangladesh, where, following threats by the US Congress to pass legislation preventing the import of products from Bangladesh made by children under 14, garment factory owners sacked an estimated 50,000 children, mainly girls, who were forced to exchange their jobs in relatively clean, hygienic textile factories for lower-paid jobs breaking bricks or collecting garbage. Some turned to prostitution. A belated effort by the ILO and UNICEF to repair the damage provided school places for some 10,000 children, but the rest of the children could not be traced. On a recent visit to Bangladesh, I could find almost no trade unionist or NGO who supported the threatened boycott, and the suspicion was widespread that the action owed more to the desire to protect US jobs in the garment industry from foreign competition than to any genuine concern with children's lives.

This gulf between well-intentioned campaigners and many of the children they are trying to help springs partly from a Eurocentrism which sees it as 'abnormal' for children to work – the

phrase 'robbed of their childhood' invariably crops up. 'Normal' childhood is seen as a 'mythic walled garden' of play and study, free from the pain and responsibilities of adult life. Yet child work has always been the norm in most of the world, barring the last century of European history. Daniel Defoe believed that all children over the age of 4 or 5 could earn their own bread. These days, however, working children are seen as 'a schizophrenic barbarism: as children they are not real workers, and as workers they are not real children.'

Another source of opposition to child labor springs from its impact on the wider labor market. Trade unions fear that the lower wages paid to children exert a downward pressure on wages for adults, while child workers take jobs which could be performed by adults. This seems likely, but again, the debate is dogged by a lack of research - ILO researchers concede that there is little evidence either way on this issue, something quite astonishing given its centrality to the discussion.

Another broader issue is that in the words of the ILO, 'although poverty is a major cause of child labor, child labor is also a major cause of poverty.' By going to work, children tend to forego educational opportunities - they may go to school, but the strain of working prevents them learning. One UN study showed that Latin American boys who start work between the ages of 13 and 17 accumulate an educational backlog of more than two years compared to those who start work from 18 to 24, although the impact on girls is not so great. Two years less education translates into about twenty per cent less wages for the rest of their working lives - in the end, they lose six times more money than they gain by starting work early. At a national level, high drop-out rates leads to a less skilled workforce, damaging the economy's prospects of competing in an unforgiving global market. Short-term relief is bought only at the cost of future poverty.

Whatever the complexities of the issue, several million of the estimated 120 million working children around the world *are* working in subhuman conditions - sold as underage prostitutes or bonded laborers, chained to carpet looms in Asia, or ruining their lungs in the charcoal ovens of the Amazon - so what should be done about it?

The first step must be to involve the children themselves in designing policies. Anything else risks backfiring on the scale of Harkin Bill in Bangladesh.

Secondly, children's work should be treated not in isolation, but as part of a general effort to increase their opportunities and quality of life. One of the key aspects is improving the accessibility and quality of education, and making it more relevant to children's lives.

One World Bank study recommends, 'a gradual policy approach, whereby initially the combination of child labor and schooling is made more attractive, relative to only work.' This is preferable to 'a situation where legislation or other actions narrow parents' choices for their children to either schooling or working full time..... The objective is to design interventions that increase schooling attendance and make up for short-term financial losses to the family.' Interview after interview with working children backs these views up, showing that most want to study *and* work. What they want is to be enabled to combine them better.

In Brazil, the governor of the capital, Brasília, Cristóvam Buarque, has come up with a novel scheme to help working and poor children stay in school. Under the *bolsa-escola* scholarship program, poor families who keep all their children in school receive a minimum wage every month. The money is lost if any child misses more than two days in a month, except through illness. In 1996 the program was keeping 30,000 children in school at a cost of only 0.5 per cent of the total state budget, and the impact has been extraordinary. Repetition rates fell by ten per cent in the first year of the program, while absenteeism fell from 7 per cent to just 0.2 per cent. Brothers and sisters were even found to be policing their 'problem siblings', since all the children have to attend if the wage is to be earned. The scheme is now being introduced in other cities in Brazil.

Another option is providing workplace creches for working mothers, giving them an alternative to pulling their eldest daughter out of school to look after the younger children. At the very least the insidious rise in the cost of education to poor families must be reversed.

Meanwhile children should be banned from those jobs which *are* dangerous and exploitative, and cannot be improved by measures such as introducing decent health and safety standards. Elsewhere, the aim should be to provide better protection for working children. In the best cases, work, whether at home or for money, allows children to grow gradually from dependants into capable adults, renegotiating family relationships along the way as they learn to cook, keep house, care for children and earn money.

In the longer term, whether children work or not is likely to depend much more on the way that Third World economies develop than on debates over the merits of abolition. Lord Shaftesbury was able to abolish child labor in Britain largely because industry had advanced to a point where it needed qualified workers rather than malnourished child slaves. In the poor countries of the South, children will continue to go out to work as long as the causes of poverty have not been addressed and children's work remains the only way for their family to survive.

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