Understanding Child Labor in the Philippines*

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The problem of child labor has been brought to the fore by recent accounts of child prostitution in our cities. Attempts to stem this unfortunate circumstance have ranged from suggestions to punish parents who allow their children to go into this heinous undertaking, to more forceful efforts to imprison the employers and customers of child prostitutes. Like children in agriculture, in sweat shops, or those vending on the streets, child prostitutes are workers. Why do they work? Are parents responsible for children going to work? The following analysis attempts to examine the phenomenon of children at work in the context of Philippine society, culture and history.

Defining the problem: What is child labor?

Child labor is the participation of children in a wide variety of work situations, on a more or less regular basis, to earn a livelihood for themselves or for others. Children's work may be paid or unpaid, and remuneration for their efforts may be made to adults rather than to themselves, or assessed in non-material ways (such as in terms of food, education, shelter or clothing). Very rarely are children able to determine the prices of their own labor.

To clarify the scope of the problem of child labor, its component terms have to be defined as well. Hence, it is asked: who are children and what is their labor?

Childhood and dependency: the Philippine context. The notion of childhood is not a unidimensional concept. Rather, it is a socio-historical construct which can be linked to the economic life of a culture or society. In general, however, childhood is taken to mean a period of dependency of younger members on the older members of a family or kin group.

Children define the family in Philippine society. As analyzed by Mendez and Jocano (1974), the term *mag-anak* is used only after children are born to a couple (*mag-asawa*). Children complete

the nuclear family, which is composed of parents and their offspring (Medina, 1991). All members of the family remain part of it, even when no longer living in the family abode or the household. The household may include only the nuclear family, or even other relatives across generations (an extended family).

Dependency relations are intense among family members within a household, regardless of age or seniority. Hence, all income earners are expected to contribute to the household coffers (Jocano, 1975). Vice-versa, all unemployed members can share in the bounty of the household, regardless of age, sex, or generational line.

Economic dependency, therefore, is not necessarily marked by age in Philippine society. Rather, it hinges on who can earn a living for the household. Children in low income families are also trained to earn a living at an early age and to "contribute to the family larder" (Jocano, 1975: 86). Training children to work happens in both urban and rural settings (Mendez & Jocano, 1974). It is considered an important aspect of childhood socialization. This has implications on the existence of child labor.

Children's work and child labor. Child labor does not refer to all types of children's work. Strictly speaking, it may refer only to those activities which are socially useful and remunerable, requiring manual and/or intellectual effort, which result in the production of goods or performance of services (Ballescas, 1987). It pertains particularly to efforts of children to earn a livelihood, on a more or less regular basis, for themselves, their families, or others who employ them.

- Child labor excludes household chores for one's own household or family.
- It excludes mendicancy because this is not a socially useful means of livelihood, and does not entail the production of goods or services.
- It includes work in family enterprises (in agriculture, services, or industry), debt peonage, employment and self-employment.
- It refers to the participation of children (below 15 years of age) in economically gainful activities, whether they are directly remunerated, or paid as part of the family unit.

Why is there child labor in the Philippines?

Several references on child labor point to poverty as its cause. However, to relate the phenomenon of children at work to their impoverished conditions fails to answer the "why" question.

Poverty is merely symptomatic of larger societal problems — an effect rather than a cause. Child labor may be indicative of poverty but is not merely a result of it.

Microscopic factors: Decision-factors in the household and community

Let us begin to understand children's labor from the point of view of the child, the household, and the community. In this analysis, we draw from empirical findings as well as historical and cultural records. The paradigm used by Torres (1991) to understand children's work in urban poor families is used as the basis for understanding microscopic events which predispose families to allow their children to work.

Perceived need for income. Recent studies indicate that children who go to work belong to households which *perceive a need to augment the present income resources* of the unit (Torres, 1991; Del Rosario, 1989; Boquiren, 1991). Such families are often nuclear, having six family members on the average but extending to as many as 20 members, predominantly young in composition, with parents in their late thirties.

Urban parents, if employed, are often engaged in low-paying, untenured occupations in the informal sector. Rural parents, likewise, may be unemployed or underemployed, working at seasonal jobs in agriculture supplemented at times by informal sector occupations. On the average, the incomes of these households fall below the national threshold for poverty.

When no other resource can be pawned, impoverished parents sell their children in exchange for goods and other material requirements for survival. At the very least, children are compelled to work to meet the family's survival needs.

Socialization into work. Work in agricultural Philippines is largely a nuclear family affair, with its members — both old and young, male or female — making up the work unit (Jocano, 1969). In traditional rice agriculture, labor is unpaid, and kinfolk who help in production earn from their labor by sharing in the harvest (Chi-Wen Cheng, 1974; Mangahas, et al., 1976; Barnett, 1975).

Presently, there are many types of work in agriculture and fisheries in which children participate with their families in paid labor from very early ages (from 3-4 years old). These include

1) gathering activities: shells; sea-sand for gravel; nipa; copra;
2) sorting activities: stones, shellfish (mussels), fish;
3) weaving;
4) sewing; and

5) sugarcane or rice production activities requiring seasonal hire (Veneracion, 1989; Boquiren, 1991; del Rosario, 1989; Orense, 1992; Sumagaysay, 1992; Gonzaga, 1991; Manaya, 1991).

In the urban centers, children also do work from their early years alongside siblings or parents. Often, such work are in scavenging or vending (Torres, 1991). In all cases, children state that they learn their tasks from parents or older siblings.

While both boys and girls are trained early to do a variety of paid activities with members of their household, work becomes more differentiated as they enter puberty. At this time, girls are expected to share more of the household chores with their mothers and other female relatives. Thus, in the areas of Bulacan and Rizal where embroidery, smocking and garments work have been home industries of women since the 1900s, it is not uncommon for young girls to perform peripheral tasks related to sewing from their early years (Del Rosario, 1990; Veneracion, 1990), graduating to full-fledged workers in their puberty. In Bicol, boys strip abaca, while the girls weave them into finished products (Orense, 1992). In Samar, young boys separate and bundle nipa leaves, while the girls make the nipa shingles for roofing (Sumagaysay, 1992).

Support for children's work in formal education. The school prepares children for work in the dominant occupations of the community. Excerpts from the Monroe Commission in 1925 on the American government's educational strategy for the country speaks for itself (from Camagay, 1988:91);

> "After studying the overall picture in the backward parts of the country, the Monroe Commission . . . concluded that the non-Christian provinces would need a system of education adapted to their special needs if they were to . . . prevent the loss of their ablest children. In future the aim would be to build upon and improve traditional activities (and) . . . the abandonment of. . . the emphasis . . . upon academic studies. The future stress would be upon agricultural training for the boys and domestic arts for the girls."
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> (Fry, "A History of the Mountain Province")

The Monroe Commission's recommendation paved the way for the establishment of agricultural as well as vocational schools. It also led to the inclusion of agricultural and domestic arts in the basic education curriculum. Its effect on children's work is illustrated by the following example. During the American period,

children in Morong province were taught needlework in school. Their finished products were then marketed by the General Sales Department and the Provincial Industrial Development Department of the province (Del Rosario, 1990).

The formal preparation of children for work continues up to modern times. For instance, Mendez and Jocano (1974) describe how the Work Education curriculum streams intermediate level pupils into either agriculture and industrial work education (for the boys), or into home economics education (for the girls).

In Bulacan, teachers even see to it that school children have only light assignments during periods of heavy demands for garments production (Veneracion, 1990). In other rural areas, teachers say that it is impossible to have classes during the harvest periods, since many of the children would be absent to help in the fields.

Family expectations from children. The decision to work is the child's own, according to their accounts. *Children may decide to work because of the internalized family expectation that everyone must pitch in to "fill the family larder."* Most of the time, a great percentage — if not all — of the child's income are remitted to parents or household heads.

In an urban poor community, Jocano (1975) describes how families prepare children for work activities from the age of 4 or 5 years. While the children may be scolded for skipping a class day, they are berated more if they fail to earn something for the family's basic needs in a day. In the Mountain province, historical accounts also show that, in the early part of this century, Igorot families preferred to have their children work rather than go to school (Camagay, 1988).

Learning the family's primary occupation is also part of the routine in rural communities. Parents pass on their skills in agriculture, traditional crafts and fishing to their children, conscious that the latter must eventually contribute to the family's upkeep.

Peer influence. In many cases, *children work with peers or siblings*, sometimes with parents and other relatives. Even street work begins as play between and among boys. When asked what they do on the streets, their reply is more likely to be "playing" rather than working (Torres, 1991). Play can begin as menial work with older boys, graduating to work when the children get paid for street jobs such as watching or washing cars (Jocano, 1975).

In Leyte, young children living in coastal villages go to the beaches with older siblings and other relatives to gather sand

and stones (Sumagaysay, 1992). They probably initially tag along because the older children are tasked to look after them. Thus, in the course of child-minding, the younger ones "learn the ropes", so to speak, from their siblings and playmates. Play and work tend to be interchangeable concepts in the worldview of these children.

Educational aspirations. Many of the Filipino working children are enrolled. Nevertheless, a number of them have dropped out from school for a year or two due to financial constraints. *Children then work to be able to finance their studies* in the succeeding year. For children who are enrolled, work enables them to buy needed school materials, and for transportation and meal expenses at school.

Though lowly-educated themselves, parents from poor households hold high educational aspirations for their children, with firm hopes that they will finish at least secondary education. The children themselves see education as a premium and consider it an ideal life condition if they can work to educate themselves. Thus, in the case of many Filipino working children, *work is perceived as a means to move up in the social ladder* because it can help educate them for future jobs.

Community opportunities for children's work. Studies show that children's work often occurs in areas near their places of residence, if not within the domicile itself. This is true in both urban and rural settings, be the work in sales, services, agriculture or small industries. Interviews support this conclusion, because parents state they prefer their children to work close to home.

Nonetheless, children's work fit into the labor market because there is always an apparent demand for the simple jobs they perform. In urban poor communities where there is no piped-in water supply, selling water is common work among children (Ballescas, 1987). In Lapu-Lapu City, children join their fathers to quarry sites near their residences to gather, sort and cut decorative stones sold to contractors (Remedios, 1991). In the fishing villages, children help in fish capture activities, fish processing and vending. In the streets of Metro Manila, the most common work of children is food vending. Needless to say, there is always a great demand for food anywhere in the country.

Apart from doing work to suit the local market, children also perform work for the export market. They are in subcontracting groups in their respective communities engaged in garments, embroidery, rattan furniture production, shellcraft, and other export-linked home industries. Some children are engaged in work

within fruit and palm-oil plantations, whose products are earmarked for the foreign market. Others are engaged in small-scale manufacture of woodcraft, metals and canned foods which may find their way in the export market.

Children are also in tourism, an industry avowedly dedicated to earn dollars for the country. They may work as waiters or waitresses in tourism-oriented establishments, or worse, as child entertainers and prostitutes (Cruz, 1987). In these cases, however, the children's communities' may already be by the streets themselves, or the entertainment salons within which they are confined to work (Porio, 1991).

Favorable outlook on working children. Children at work consider it a privilege to be able to help provide for the family's needs. They firmly believe that their families, neighbors, and the community at-large look favorably at their work status, especially since others of their age and position likewise engage in productive labor. Adult members of the household and communities affirm this opinion.

Nevertheless, parents are wont to say that, under ideal conditions, their children should only engage in household chores. If they do work, they wish that the children's jobs would be clean, safe and not laborious. Parents particularly state that girls should not work on the streets. However, their work as garments outworkers is fine, because it is executed in the households alongside their mothers and other women of the community. Boys, on the other hand, while perceived to be suited to work requiring a lot of physical effort, are considered less dependable workers than the girls.

Macroscopic factors: economy, policy, and culture

While microscopic factors help explain the household-level dynamics of child labor, the role of larger structural variables is also important to understand. The macroscopic context of child labor in the Philippines today can be traced to (1) *global conditions*, as well as to (2) *state policies*, (3) *national economic conditions*, and (4) *socio-cultural conditions* (Boquiren, 1994).

Let us now examine the particular contours of Philippine society which increase the probability of the emergence of child labor. These features constitute the societal context of child labor.

Social stratification and child labor

The historical record. If pre-Spanish history were to be reviewed, one may well find children at work even in those earlier times.

In all likelihood, the *aliping namamahay* of our pre-colonial barangays were children indentured to the upper classes by needy or indebted parents. Camagay (1988) states that pre-colonial slavery in the islands could result from various causes, such as wrongdoing or indebtedness. Parents who had borrowed rice or gold from more affluent members of the barangay often paid off their debts by making their children work for the creditor. This marked the beginning of child peonage.

During the Spanish colonial period, children worked on the farms with their tenant families. Often, earnings from agriculture failed to support the households, and there was little left over to pay the colonial taxes. To meet these needs, children were sent-off by their parents to become indentured servants of the landlords. Often, the children were never released from servitude, because the food and clothing provided them became additional obligations of the tenants to their landlords. It was not unusual either for parents to continue borrowing additional money from the *hacenderos* against their children's services (Camagay, 1988).

Even the *frailes* were guilty of employing young girls as workers (Camagay, 1988). Specifically, they were expected to thresh rice for the friars or to clean the church premises. The abuses heaped on the girls working for the friars forced Gov. Corcuera in 1642 to issue an edict reminding the priests that child labor in the Church was strictly prohibited by the Spanish empire.

Despite official sanctions against child labor, the sale of children continued up to the period of American colonization. Oftentimes, they were tribal children: Negritos, Igorotes, Ifugaos, Ilongots, Manobos, Mandayas, Moros or Tagbanuas. In the report of Dean Worcester entitled "Slavery and Peonage in the Philippine Islands" (1913, in Camagay, 1988:19), it was described that Negrito children were often purchased by lowland Christians from tribal "dealers", who raided their own tribes for children to be sold as slaves. In other cases, the Negritos were intoxicated then convinced to sell their children. In other instances, parents voluntarily sold their children to the Christian families.

To stop these practices, legislation had to be promulgated to make slave holding and slave hunting illegal activities with corresponding sanctions for willful violations (Camagay, 1988).

Just recently, magazine articles have exposed the continuation of debt peonage and the illegal sale of children in Mindanao as domestic helpers. One case was that of a woman sold from one household to another and made to work in ricefields (Sanz, *Sunday Inquirer Magazine*, Oct. 10, 1993). Meanwhile in Navotas and Cainta, child laborers in sardines factories were found to have been abducted from remote rural areas. They were made to sleep

in small, filthy cages and treated like prisoners by their employers (Coronel, 1993).

Present trends. In urban and rural communities today, the children we find at work in fields, factories and the streets do not belong to families with stable sources of livelihood. In one area, the children reported that the individual they work for is their family's landlord. To refuse to work, therefore, could mean eviction from their land and residence (Sumagaysay, 1992).

In more general terms, child workers are members of families working out survival wages among themselves, doing jobs at the lowest strata of the labor market (which sometimes defy acceptable classifications of work). They occupy small dwelling units of mixed material in rural and urban settings. In the cities, households of working children are in congested areas or slums of the inner cities.

Thus, while "teaching children the value of work" is an avowed family value, it often ends with doing house chores in the better-off households (Mendez, et al., 1984). In poorer households, however, to learn to work redounds to paid labor.

Throughout history, it has been the children of the lower classes who have been compelled to sell their labor to others. Social stratification, which means segmentation of society into class groups differentiated by the extent to which they own (or do not own) the means of production, is the principal culprit for child labor.

Uneven economic development. Economic development in this country has been marked by reversals, stagnation and slow growth during the past decade. While the Philippines led in Southeast Asia as an economic dragon in the early '70s significant gains made in the economy slowly decayed into a retrogressive situation in the early '80s. This period was marked by capital flight, shutdowns, lay-offs and displacement of workers, exodus of skilled human resources to foreign destinations, and a negative balance-of-payments profile.

Corruption in high places, militarization and internal insurgency aggravated the effects of global recession in the export-oriented Philippine economy. Among the global factors that wreaked havoc on the Philippine economy were (Herrin, 1987):

- increase in the price of oil,
- refusal of foreign creditors to extend more financial assistance to the corrupt Marcos government,
- protectionist policies in developed economies which were prejudicial to the export of traditional Philippine products, and
- competition from the other newly-industrializing countries of Asia.

In addition, while land reform was introduced to unleash the productive potentials of the rural economy, its slow implementation failed to develop a significant cash-based production system in agriculture. Plans for economic development failed to attract investments in underdeveloped areas outside large cities. Hence, urban areas tended to offer more employment and basic services to populations. As a result, massive out-migration of the labor force from rural to urban settings occurred.

Economic underdevelopment affected the whole nation, and became a motive force for child labor.

Conclusion

Child labor is a complex phenomenon, both in terms of its manifestations as well as in terms of understanding its bases. The minimization of children's participation in the labor force can only be accomplished by addressing the difficulties faced by impoverished families, both on the level of household processes as well as in terms of structural arrangements in Philippine society.

*The framework presented here is a condensed version of one developed for the International Labor Organization and the Department of Labor and Employment's *Comprehensive Report on Child Labor in the Philippines*, 1994.

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