

CHILDREN AT WORK: THE LABOR SCENE THROUGH THE EYES OF FILIPINO CHILDREN

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This paper presents case studies of fifteen children, aged 9 to 14, who were working within Metropolitan Manila at the time of the study. Findings center on the family context of laboring children, their experiences with the school system, and their work situation.

The immediate impact of the crises in all spheres of Philippine society is magnified by focusing attention on the most vulnerable and powerless sector of a country: its children. Children are a mirror of the level of development of a country. Children are also a mirror of the crisis in a country. Although most societies consider their children to be the best investment opportunity for the future of a country, the Philippines reflects the neglect of children in the Third World. To qualify such a forceful accusation is to examine the social structures which obstruct a proper meeting of the needs of children.

In many Third World cities, working children are a familiar scene. In Metro Manila, for example, where 70 percent of the country's urban poor can be found, the public highways and street intersections are overrun with young vendors peddling everything from cigarettes to candies, from tabloids to feather dusters, from flowers to rags. The role of working children must be viewed within the broader context of underdevelopment in Third World nations which have been characterized by rapid urbanization and population growth. In many such countries, the levels of economic deprivation, unemployment and inequality have definitely not decreased, despite claims of seemingly sustained 'national development' efforts (often backed by high levels of foreign aid), reportedly high GNP, and supposedly respectable rates of economic growth.

Amidst the adverse economic conditions of the 1980's, there are many Filipinos whose only legacy to their children is the same poverty and deprivation bequeathed to them.

Structural obstacles to social and economic mobility force poverty-stricken families to cope by allocating the labor of children to whatever form of employment is available. The following is an exploratory paper which aims to present a qualitative description of working children in Metro Manila and to elaborate on socio-cultural aspects of child labor.¹ The paper will concentrate on the informal sector which is by far the largest category of child workers in the urban sector. The primary intention is to provide a basis for discussion of particular issues relating to working children, rather than a formal analysis of the phenomenon of child labor. Hopefully, the insights presented and the information gathered may be helpful for understanding the situation of working children and for furthering research on this important but little-studied topic.

Methodology

The data for this paper come largely from direct experience with low-income urban children for a period of two months. Given the nature of child labor in the informal sector, it was extremely difficult to follow strict sampling procedures. In-depth case studies of fifteen purposively selected children aged 9-14 were carried out in specific areas of Metro Manila. A three-part field study outline guided the data collection process towards three main areas: personal and household data, work information, and attitudes and beliefs.

Several methodological issues must be noted at this point. First, most of the studies in the past on child labor utilized the structured questionnaire and traditional survey approach.²

In the eighties, however, more people are realizing the need to study the more personal, human dimensions by going beyond the highly structured and Western-derived interview method. Thus, the qualitative aspects of child labor have been explored by utilizing the more participatory approaches, such as *pagtatanung-tanong*, *pakikisama*, *pakikiramdam*, and *pagmamasiid* (e.g. Pe-Pua 1982). Here the crucial principle which guides research is that the relationship between the child and the researcher determines the quality of information gathered. Children relate to you as people, not necessarily as researchers, because mutual respect cannot always be translated into words.

Secondly, the problem of children being less articulate than adults is a sensitive point. Words have to be very carefully chosen and questions appropriately phrased so as to be better grasped by the children. Children have a way of profoundly expressing a situation at hand. Children are most sensitive because they have not exactly developed the defenses and facades of adults.

It is also important to mention the special ethical considerations which come into play when children are interviewed. The presence of adults, especially parents of children, posed difficulties such as uneasiness on the part of children. It was noticed that the children were more open when adults were not around. All in all, in spite of the many problems encountered and the limitations at hand, the findings of the study are indicative of critical issues of child labor which need to be confronted.

Findings

Table 1 provides a summary profile of the 15 working children interviewed during the course of this study. As a first step towards analyzing the findings from these interviews, an extract from the first of these case studies (Rosalinda C.) may be presented:

By 7:00 a.m., Rosalinda, a fair-skinned, wide-eyed girl is standing, *bilao* (flat basket) strapped on her waist, along the narrow alley of the marketplace of Bayan, Marikina. Her

bilao is filled with neatly laid-out little packets of garlic which she sells for a peso a packet. Wedged between the little fingers of her left hand are neatly folded paper bills which she also uses when calling to a passerby to patronize her garlic. Her gross daily income varies from twenty to one hundred pesos per day. On the average, she spends 8 to 9 hours a day standing there along the alley, but on weekends when most people go to market, she stops selling as late as 7:00-8:00 in the evening. She turns over all her earnings to Ester, a distant relative of her mother. The mother of Ester is the one who provides the garlic which Rosalinda, as well as her cousins, sells. Rosalinda started 'helping' Ester in October 1984, a month after she turned 9 years old. Ester fetched Rosalinda from Dumaguete that October with the promise that she would send Rosalinda to school. "Kinuha ako tapos papaaralin daw ako dito. Eh hindi nakaano pano walang pera. Hindi ako naka-aral." (She offered to send me to school. But I couldn't because there was no money.) When asked what grade she reached in Dumaguete, Rosalinda replies, "Nag-aaral ako dati. Magiging grade three ako. Pano, walang pera. Sabi ng mama ko, magtatrabaho muna ako para makapag-aral. (Mama here refers to Ester) Kaya ako nagtinda, sabi ng mama ko kasi wala akong ginagawa." (I used to attend school. I would be grade three then. Because there was no money, Mama advised me to work in the meantime and sell so that we would have money, Anyway, she said it's better than being idle.) Aside from selling garlic, Rosalinda helps care for the younger children of Ester. "Nag-aalaga ako ng bata; nagtitinda ako araw-araw." (Everyday, I take care of the children and sell.) Asked what she does with the money, "Binibigay ko lahat sa mama Ester ko." (I give it all to mama Ester.) Asked if 'mama' Ester gives her little money, "Sasabihan ako, mukha akong pera." (She tells me 'I look like money' [literal translation of an idiomatic expression] if I ask for some) Asked what she wants to be when she grows up, she answers, "dancer."

Table 1: *Summary Profile of Case Studies*

<i>Name/Work</i>	<i>Age now/ age started working</i>	<i>How long have you worked?</i>	<i>No. of hours/day</i>	<i>Days/ week</i>	<i>Average gross weekly earnings</i>	<i>Proportion of earnings given to family</i>	<i>In school?</i>	<i>Who introduced you to work?</i>
Rosalinda, garlic vendor	9/9	3 mos.	8	7	₱175	give all	no	mother
Thelma, spice vendor	10/10	4 mos.	8	7	₱200	give all	no	parents
Josie, earrings vendor	12/11	1 year	8	7	₱140	give all	no	relative
Jaime, plastic scavenger	12/8	4 years	4	6	₱15	keep some	yes	friends
Rene, scavenger	14/9	5 years	5	7	₱38	keep some	yes	friends
Alan, helper	14/12	2 years	7	7	₱220	give all	no	father
Don-don, garbage picker	13/8	5 years	7	7	₱40	keep some	yes	friends
Tata, garbage picker	10/9	1 year	5	7	₱25	keep some	no	brother
Bong, vegetable vendor	11/9 ½	1 ½ yr	4	7	₱50	keep some	yes	friends
Susan, plastic hawker	9/9	7 mos.	4	7	₱30	give all	yes	mother
Sonia, bag hawker	10/9	9 mos.	4	7	₱30	give all	yes	parents
Cely, bag hawker	11/10	9 mos.	4	7	₱30	give all	yes	parents
Sammy, peanut vendor	12/9	3 years	4	7	₱15	keep all	yes	parents
Manuel, bottle cap cleaner	14/9	5 years	8	7	₱40	keep all	no	friends
Ariel, sweepstakes vendor	13/7	6 years	7	7	₱60	keep some	yes	mother

This profile is an ideological reflection of some of the principal aspects of child labor which shall be touched in the following discussion. These observations have theoretical implications which extend far beyond the limits of this single case study. If we extract the distinctive elements from the above profile, we will be able to look into the profile of these children in terms of (a) the family context (b) schooling and the working child and (c) children and their work.

The Family Context

The structures of families allow us to view the socio-cultural framework of child work. Any examination of structural economic phenomena of which child labor is an integral part must consider cultural factors related to the family. Such factors include attitude towards children, expectations of parents and children, and the roles of children.

At the onset, understanding children at work necessitates debunking Western notions and moralistic assumptions about childhood as a period of innocence and dependence. In underdeveloped countries like the Philippines, this ideal of childhood is definitely inconsistent with the objective conditions of poverty. A widely held belief in the Philippines is that the more children there are in the family, the more hands there are to help increase family income (e.g. Bulatao 1975). This is seen in the high degree of responsibility expected at an early age from the children of the urban poor. These responsibilities include a wide range of active roles.

Many of the roles expected of children are seen as a part of socialization. A sociological characteristic of child labor is the very difficult delineation between the economic and domestic roles of children. This merging of productive activities (unpaid or paid labor through income-generating activities) and reproductive activities (household chores and child-caring at home) is best illustrated where the nuclear family works as a production unit. Thus, kinship relations are embedded in the forms of control experienced by working children. One twelve-year old recounted his daily routine:

"Kalahating araw pagtinda ko. Sa hapon hindi ako pinalalabas. Ang libangan ko nag-iigib. Pagdating ko, nagsasaing ako. Ginagawa ko na lang, inuutusan. Pinabibili ako ng bilihan sa tindahan. Pag wala kaming tubig, nag-iigib ako, Pag may huhugasan, huhugasan ko." (I spend half a day selling. In the afternoon, I am not allowed to leave our house. Fetching water for domestic use is my hobby. I cook rice when I reach home. I also usually run errands. If we have no water, I fetch water. If there are dishes to wash, I wash dishes.)

A noticeable irony is that 'helping' in domestic chores without pay does not excite as much outrage compared to children working as scavengers in garbage dumps or those working for wages in the formal sector of the urban economy. This reflects an ingrained attitude that exploitative relations do not exist within the family.

Most of the case studies highlight specific aspects of the personal, paternalistic, pseudo-family guise in which working relations are cast. For example, children are used as a form of "currency" in transactions between elders. This was shown earlier in the case of Rosalinda. Parental rights over children are extended to a wide range of adults such as relatives, *ninongs* or *ninangs* (godparents), and friends. In urban market areas, there are many family-run activities like stalls and hawking in the informal sector. These enterprises are usually run by low-income families and are directed towards the needs of other poor urbanites. The survival of such enterprises depends on unpaid family members, mostly children, working from early morning till late at night. As this ten-year old illustrates:

"Araw-araw gumigising ako nang maaga, madilim pa (alas seis). Pinakagabi kong uwi ay 7:00; kung Sabado, o kaya Linggo, madalas alas ocho." (I wake up early every day. I'm awake by 6:00 in the morning while it's still dark. At the latest, I go home at seven o'clock in the evening. Usually, during weekends, I'm home by 8:00.)

The authority of adults over children identifies one source, not exactly a unique one, of subordination of children. Relations of kinship rest upon an interdependent reciprocity which implies that it is the duty of minors to submit to their elders, who are, in turn, obliged to care for their needs. Thus, working children usually turn over their cash earnings to their elders:

"Binibigay ko lahat. Hindi ako pinapahawak ng pera. Hindi ako binibigyan kahit kaunti." (I give it all. I am not allowed to hold the money. I am not given even little.)

"Binibigay ko sa tatay ko para mayroon kaming makain." (I give it all to my father so we have something to eat.)

Perhaps this is why the belief holds that children are socially dependent; that is, because they are by tradition lacking in the rights of adults and subject to adult authority. This authority of adults over children is one form of subordination of children but rather than posing it as an explanation for this phenomenon, the conditions which tend to reproduce it need to be understood. There are children within authoritarian family settings who would rather live independently and have control over the little that they make in their activities, than to help for long hours of work in a family.

School and the Working Child

The Philippine educational system has been characterized as being colonial, elitist and uncritical. The discrepancy between the needs of the urban poor and the unrealistic and unfulfilled expectations from education which are aroused by this system further magnify these qualities. Therefore, eighty per cent of the people in Metro Manila are educationally handicapped and doomed to remain on the lowest step of the socio-economic ladder (David n.d.).

For most parents, going to school is a step towards overcoming future economic hardships. For other parents, though, schooling is in itself perceived as an added burden to present economic hardships. Survival needs force children to postpone, or even to never exper-

ience, the luxury of schooling. They realize this reality early in life, and come to share the justifications given by their parents for their deprivation:

"Mabuti hindi ka nag-aaral para mabuhay tayo." (It's a good thing you are not in school so we can survive.)

The value of education is, for some children, a reason in itself to work:

"Sabi ng mama ko magtatrabaho muna ako para makapag-aral." (My mother told me to work now so that I can study.)

Schooling is seen as preparation for future work by some children, while others are also delighted by the excitement of learning new things at school.

"Sabi ng nanay ko mag-aaral ako para may matutunan ako. Maganda rin ho. Kasi may natututo ako. Kasi noong hindi ako nag-aaral, wala akong natututuhan, kahit plus man lang. Pero ngayon, meron." (My mother told me to study so I'd learn. I enjoy school because I learn. Before I didn't go to school and I didn't learn anything, not even the plus sign. Now, I learn.)

The harsh fact though, is that most lower-class children drop out of school before grade four (Ibon 1984).

"Nag-aaral ako dati, ngayon medyo tinatamad ako, nag-drop out na lang ako. Ako na lang, magtatrabaho." (I got lazy, so I dropped out of school to work.)

The public school, with its overcrowded classrooms; discouraged, underpaid teachers; and unstimulating environment reinforces negative attitudes of children toward education. At school, then, children learn little. Worse yet, they are not always able to participate in school because of frequent absences, tardiness, and other reasons. One child perceives an unusual schedule as ordinary:

"6:30 ang pasok ko sa eskuwela. Madalas alas siete ako nagigising, nahuhuli ako. 'Pag Miyerkules walang pasok. 'Pag Martes at Huwebes, buong araw kasi marami kaming

teacher. 'Pag Lunes at Biyernes, kalahating araw kasi malayo ang teacher namin — sa Makati nakatira.' (School starts at 6:30, but I'm usually late because I get to rise up as late as 7:00. On Wednesdays, we don't have class. Classes are for the whole day on Tuesdays and Thursdays. We have many teachers on Tuesdays and Thursdays. On Mondays and Fridays, half day. That's because our teacher lives far from our school.)

Needless to mention, the social class position of a child already affects his capacity to survive in school:

"Kasi pag wala akong pera, nagbabaon ako, eh. Nagpapamasahe ako. Meron akong piso araw-araw. Minsan hindi ako nakakabaon. Minsan hindi ako bumabaon ng pera, kanin ang binabaon ko. Kasi hindi ako nabubusog sa pera. Konti lang mabibili ko." (If I don't have money, I bring food. I commute. Daily, I have one peso. Sometimes I don't bring money, I pack rice. That's because I don't get satisfied with money, I can only buy so much.")

Children and Their Work

Children are invariably employed in the informal sector, that is in the unregistered sectors of the economy which do not observe legal requirements as regards taxes, social security, safety, etc. Here, there is no such thing as legislative regulations concerning wages, work conditions, or benefits.

Work time is irregular and intermittent. This flexibility in time allows most children to attend at least some school. Actually, parents do not even consider these jobs as employment or as work because hawking, selling or scavenging is just 'playing' in the open areas. Unlike their co-workers in the manufacturing and small-scale industries, children of the informal sector control their work time and enjoy some freedom of movement. But there are also risks. Children may be attracted to the excitement which street opportunities open to them and drift into delinquency.

Parents do not send their children out to work or to sell simply from a desire for extra income. Besides the possibility of extra cash earnings, there are also savings from not staying at home. If they are not attending school, there are reduced expenses for transportation, food, and other contributions expected by teachers. Being in the informal sector also allows flexibility with regard to the domestic tasks demanded of children. Sometimes, if necessary, the children must stay home to care for younger siblings while their parents go out to work.

Learning to "succeed" in the informal sector requires qualities of resourcefulness, alertness and independence. Thus, children learn the value of money. Several children summed up this value:

"Kung may pera kang sarili, puwede mong bilhin ang gusto mo." (You can buy what you want if you have your own money.)

"Nakita ko ang mga kaibigan ko tapos ang sabi 'Halika, magpulot tayo, magkakapera tayo.' Tapos nagkakapera kami ano, ang ginawa ko para magkakapera ako, sumama na ako sa kanila." (My friends told me 'Come, let's pick trash so that we'll earn money.' And we did get money. So I joined them so I would have money.)

"Apat na oras sa hapon, maghanap ng lata. Kinse sentimos isang kilo. 'Yung mga bote, depende sa hugis. Minsan marami ang tinatapon sa tambakan, malakas ang kita." (Four hours in the afternoon, looking for cans. Fifty centavos for every kilo. The price of the bottles depend on the shape. We earn much if they dump much garbage in the heap.)

One impression which may be gained from talking with these children is a noticeable "work ethic" which they typically hold. No matter the physical circumstances in which they work, even if this be a filthy dumpsite, they still show evidence of this value. Thus, they preferred to eke out a living rather than to resort to begging or stealing. In general, these children did not want to be unemployed or to

turn to unlawful activities. Many have been continuously coping by different types of casual labor, as well as by a sheer determination to survive.

Concluding Notes

Filipino children grow up to survive in the midst of poverty and lack of opportunities for their families. Parents send out their children not because they have a taste for it, preferring greater family income to healthy play and education for their children, but because these preferences are shaped by the wider economic and social dimensions. Any attempt to deal with the phenomenon of children at work must therefore take this context into account.

The acquisition of coping strategies by working in the informal sector is clearly an impor-

tant part of childhood and socialization. The slums, the streets, the garbage dumps: we must know the children at work, we must want to know and understand their way of life, their quest for survival, their search for a little dignity. If the children appear to doubt and withdraw, maybe it is because the harm in their faces reflects a minute portion of the damage felt within. If the children see us with distrust and disinterest, maybe we have never been interested in them or trusted them. If the children refuse to respect us and reject us, perhaps this is because they were rejected for too long and were denied too great a portion of their childhood. We must believe, not only in what they are, but more importantly, in what they can still become. We must first listen to their voices, if ever they are to give value to ours.

Notes

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¹The term child labor is used herein as a descriptive, rather than as an analytic, concept. There is no intention to enter into current debates on the use of this term.

²A paper by Tidalgo and Teodosio (1981) includes a useful literature review on child labor studies in the Philippines.

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