

Child workers of the Americas.(Tough Times: Labor in the Americas)

by Duncan Green

Millions of children in Latin America and the Caribbean, as young as five years of age, are working either at home or on the street. The UN estimates that one in every 10 children are working in most Latin American and Caribbean countries while the International Labor Organization puts this figure at 17.5 million children between ages five and 14. The reasons for putting children to work include poverty, low-quality educational system and parents' lack of education.

© COPYRIGHT 1999 North American Congress on Latin America Inc. (NACLA)

The need for an extra family wage earner has driven millions of families to pull their children out of school and put them to work.

By 6:00 a.m. 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 mangos. 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 walks by, face hidden under the obligatory straw cowboy hat, pushing hard on a handcart with wobbly wheels.

"At 4:00 a.m. I leave home with my dad," says Marina. "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 10:00 a.m., then I go home to eat. At 2:00 p.m., I change and go to the Academy - I'm learning dress-making. Academy finishes at 4:00, then I go home and help my mother with the housework."

Marina works for a friend of her father. "She asked me to come and wash her plates once, then she decided to give me work," she explains. "Before then, I worked for another senora washing plates, but she bossed me around a lot, so I left after a month." Marina earns about \$2.70 a day. Of that sum, she says, she gives about \$1.60 to her mother, spending the rest on the costs of dress-making school.

"Some of the regulars buy me a drink or an avocado," she adds. "Today I even got sixty cents extra in tips."

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 at 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 shortage of hard facts and credible research on crucial topics 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. The UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) explains it as a lack of interest from governments, problems of definition - such as 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.(1)

Although they are undoubtedly underestimates, UN figures give a hint of the extent of child work, with one in five children between the ages of 10 and 14 working in Brazil, Honduras and Haiti, and more than one in ten in most Latin American and Caribbean countries. The International Labor Organization (ILO) puts the figure for the total number of working children in Latin America and the Caribbean between the ages of 5 and 14 at 17.5 million.(2) The proportions are many times higher among boys than girls, underlining the invisibility of much of girls' labor in the home.(3)

Like Marina, most child workers operate in the urban informal sector or in agriculture, especially on peasant farms. Although some children work in commercial agriculture in areas such as sugar cane or coffee picking, worldwide only about 5% of child workers are in the export

Child workers of the Americas.(Tough Times: Labor in the Americas)

sector.(4)

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, can be fit in 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 that she sells potatoes here, where I can keep an eye on her."(5)

In recent years the informal sector has boomed, as government austerity programs have driven millions out of regular work. 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."(6) Child domestics' isolation can be almost total; in Peru, a study showed that nearly a third never leave the premises.(7) 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 addition to the urban informal sector, many more children work in agriculture. In rural Colombia, over 50% of children between the ages of 12 and 17 work in some capacity, compared to less than 20% in urban areas.(8) A survey of 1,220 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 Penon. It is an important part of children's socialization as members of their families and communities." Girls are mostly involved in "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.(9)

Hours worked are just as varied as the kinds of job done. The survey in Nicaragua found that about half of children under nine worked two 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 four million child workers, one in five under the age of ten worked 20 hours a week or more, as did half those in the 10-14 age bracket.(10) 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.(11)

The reasons why children work are complex, combining both "push factors" on the supply side, and "pull factors" on the demand end. The most significant push factor is poverty. According to the ILO, when children work, they commonly contribute around 20 to 25% of family income.(12) Their income keeps numerous families above the poverty line. UNICEF notes that in a survey of nine Latin American countries, the incidence of poverty would be 10 to 20% higher if it were not for the income of working children between the ages of 13 and 17.(13)

Yet not all poor children work, nor are all working children poor, so clearly there are many other factors involved. One is unpredictability - for poor families, it is not just poverty which makes them send their children out to work, it is also 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.(14)

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 overcrowded classrooms, the education system suffers enormous drop-out and repetition rates. Yet despite their unrewarding experiences of 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 education, or to help their younger siblings to study.

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

Child workers of the Americas.(Tough Times: Labor in the Americas)

through which children find work, half of them before their tenth birthday.(15)

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. As a result, eldest daughters are forced to stay 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.(16)

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." "Children are easier to manage," says the ILO report, "because they are less aware of their rights, less troublesome, more compliant, more trustworthy and less likely to absent themselves from work."(17)

Despite the lack of specific research on the impact of globalization on child labor, 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%, and urban females from 4% to 8%. In addition, 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.(18) At a regional level, even in the relative boom period of the early 1990s, UN figures show that child labor among 13- to 17-year-old adolescents rose in five out of seven countries studied, and fell in only one.(19) Latin America's much-vaunted "modernization" appears to lead to more, not fewer, children in the workplace.

The reasons for the increase are not hard to find, especially in those countries which have undergone the worst rigors 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 aid from the United States and international financial institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB). But it came with numerous strings attached: the government had to agree to implement painful neoliberal economic reforms.(20)

In a series of stabilization programs, the Chamorro government raised interest rates and cut spending to the bone, duly reducing inflation from 13,000% in 1990 to just 19% in 1993. It privatized 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."(21)

But despite the huge dollar inflows, the combination of rocketing interest rates and layoffs of thousands of state employees precipitated further economic collapse. Unemployment surged from 25% in 1988 to 52% 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% between 1990 and 1993.(22) Many of Nicaragua's social improvements, which won admiration around the world in the 1980s, are being swiftly reversed.(23)

The social impact of such measures is felt throughout the country, not least in the shantytown 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 crossroads, 30 children weave between the cars begging or selling everything from chewing gum to super glue. Some of the children are so small that their larger brothers and sisters have to hoist them onto the car hoods before they can run a dirty rag over the windscreens in exchange for a few coins or a curse.

Neoliberal reforms across the region have pushed more Latin Americans into poverty. 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 region's population.(24) 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 live below the poverty line.(25)

Rising poverty and inequality, combined with the rising cost of schooling due to government cutbacks in education spending and new "user fees," have driven families to pull their children out of school and put them to work.(26) The collapsing education system and the slump in the number

Child workers of the Americas.(Tough Times: Labor in the Americas)

of decent jobs offers few alternatives to hard-pressed parents. As an exhausted mother in a Chilean shantytown commented, "why should kids read Neruda or go to the theater if they're just going to end up picking oranges?"(27)

Other, more intangible facets of globalization 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.(28)

But there have been countervailing trends, making hard research into the changing face of child labor all the more essential. Urbanization has continued apace, with some 70% of Latin Americans now living in cities.(29) 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, but 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.(30) The spread of electrification and access to potable water should have eased the burden on children in the home. And while the quality of education has fallen, the availability of schooling is now very broad. The region's governments have managed to expand education coverage faster than population growth, incorporating an additional two million children into primary-school education every year since 1950 - even during the "lost decade" of the 1980s. Across the region, about 94% of 8 and 9 year olds now attend school, producing close to total coverage at that age range.(31) More children now at least have the option of attending school.

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, which all Latin American governments have signed, that children are not 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 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 1,500 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 criticized; and children resented being deprived of their freedom and income (by having to give it to their parents, for example).(32) But they definitely did not want to see their jobs made illegal. In Peru and Nicaragua, working children's organizations have gone further, campaigning for workers' rights to be extended to children, including the right to join a trade union.

Involving and consulting children also 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 counterproductive attempts to ban child labor through legislation, often making matters worse for the children involved.

The most notorious example of this took place in Bangladesh, where, following threats by the U.S. Congress to pass legislation preventing the import of products from Bangladesh made by children under 14, garment factory owners fired 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.(33) 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 U.S. 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 from a

Child workers of the Americas.(Tough Times: Labor in the Americas)

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 been the norm in most of the world, barring the last century or so of European and North American history.

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.

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."⁽³⁴⁾ By going to work, children tend to forego educational opportunities - they may go to school, but the strain of working prevents them from 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 20% 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 lead to a less skilled workforce, damaging the economy's prospects of competing in an unforgiving global market.

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?⁽³⁵⁾

Interview after interview with working children shows that most want to study and work. What they need is better conditions in both. The first step must be to involve the children themselves in designing policies. Anything else risks backfiring on the scale of the debacle in Bangladesh.

Second, 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. Policies should also be adopted that increase school attendance and make up for short-term financial losses to the family.⁽³⁶⁾

In Brazil, the governor of the capital, Brasilia, Crist van Buarque, has come up with a novel scheme to help working and poor children stay in school in which 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 due to illness. In 1996 the program was keeping 30,000 children in school at a cost of only 0.5% of the total state budget, and the impact has been extraordinary. Repetition rates fell by 10% in the first year of the program, while absenteeism fell from 7% to just 0.2%. 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.⁽³⁷⁾ The scheme is now being introduced in other cities in Brazil.

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

Meanwhile children should be banned from those jobs which are inherently noxious or dangerous by 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 dependents 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. The British government - pushed by rising working-class militancy - abolished 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 families to survive.

NOTES

1. UNICEF, State of the World's Children 1997 (Oxford: Unicef, 1997), p. 26.
2. International Labor Organization, Child Labor: Targeting the intolerable (Geneva: ILO, 1996).
3. Comision Economica para America Latina y El Caribe, Anuario Estadistico de America Latina y el Caribe 1995 (Santiago: CEPAL, 1996) p. 34.
4. UNICEF, State of the World's Children 1997, p. 21.

Child workers of the Americas.(Tough Times: Labor in the Americas)

5. Giangi Schibotto and Alejandro Cussianovich, Working Children: Building an Identity (Lima: MANTHOC, 1990), p. 54.
6. UNICEF, State of the World's Children 1997, p. 32.
7. UNICEF, State of the World's Children 1997, p. 32.
8. Kimberley Cartwright, "Child Labor in Colombia," in Christiaan Grootaert and Harry Anthony Patrinos, eds., The Policy Analysis of Child Labor: A Comparative Study (Washington: World Bank, January 1998), p. 85.
9. Save the Children Fund UK, Children and Work in Rural Nicaragua, Learning From Experience: What Do We Know about Children and Work? (London: Save the Children Fund UK, September 1998).
10. Ana Lucia Kassouf, Child Labor in Brazil (London School of Economics, September 1998), p. 18, Mimeo.
11. Economic Commission on Latin America and the Caribbean, Social Panorama of Latin America 1995 (Santiago: ECLAC, 1996), pp. 54-55.
12. ILO website, "IPEC: Finding out about Child Labor: The Causes," September 1998, (www.ilo.org).
13. UNICEF, State of the World's Children 1997, p. 27.
14. Christiaan Grootaert and Harry Anthony Patrinos, eds., The Policy Analysis of Child Labor, p. 7.
15. Sergio Schneider, Fernando Cotanda and Marilis Lemos de Almeida, Diagnostico do Trabalho Infantil em Novo Hamburgo e Dois Irmaos, Porto Alegre (March 1997), p. 6, Mimeo.
16. Christiaan Grootaert and Harry Anthony Patrinos, eds., The Policy Analysis of Child Labor, p. 226.
17. ILO website, "IPEC: Finding out about Child Labor"
18. Ana Lucia Kassouf, Child Labor in Brazil, p. 8.
19. ECLAC, Social Panorama of Latin America 1995, p. 134.
20. Trevor Evans, Carlos Castro and Jennifer Jones, Structural Adjustment and the Public Sector in Central America and the Caribbean (Managua: CRIES, 1995), p. 179.
21. Karen Hansen-Kuhn, Structural Adjustment in Nicaragua, Sapping the Social Fabric (Washington: Development Gap, 1995).
22. Karen Hansen-Kuhn, Structural Adjustment in Nicaragua.
23. Oxfam International, Debt Relief for Nicaragua: Breaking out of the Poverty Trap (London: Oxfam International, October 1998), p. 14.
24. ECLAC, Social Panorama of Latin America 1995, p. 19.
25. ECLAC, Social Panorama of Latin America 1995, p. 115.
26. Duncan Green, Silent Revolution: The Rise of Market Economics in Latin America (London: Latin American Information Bureau, 1995), p. 155.
27. Duncan Green, Silent Revolution, p. 102.
28. Ben White, "Globalization and the Child Labor Problem," Journal of International Development, Vol. 8, No. 6 (1996).
29. UN Development Program, Human Development Report 1997 (New York: UNDP, 1998), p. 227.
30. ECLAC, Cambios en el Perfil de las Familias (Santiago: ECLAC, 1993), p. 35.
31. ECLAC, Education and Knowledge (Santiago: ECLAC, 1992), p. 37.
32. William E. Myers, Characteristics of Some Urban Working Children: A Comparison of Four Surveys from South America (Mimeo, 1990), p. 19.
33. Manfred Liebel, "What do Working Children Want?" Envio (Managua), February/March 1996, p. 36.
34. Author interviews with staff at Gonoshahajjo Sangstha, Bangladeshi NGO, Dhaka, July 1998.
35. Richard Anker and Helina Melkas, Economic Incentives for Children and Families to Eliminate or Reduce Child Labor (Geneva: ILO, 1996), p. 5.
36. Christiaan Grootaert and Harry Anthony Patrinos, eds., The Policy Analysis of Child Labor, p. 1.
37. Andrea Barros e Policarpo Jr., "Ajuda e ate carinho fora do horror," Veja (Sao Paulo), October 30, 1996, p. 54.

Duncan Green is a policy analyst at CAFOD, the Catholic

Child workers of the Americas.(Tough Times: Labor in the Americas)

Aid Agency for England and Wales. He is author of Hidden Lives: Voices of Children in Latin America and the Caribbean (Cassell, 1998), and a member of NACLA's editorial board.