
Child Labor and Health: Contributions to the Development of Knowledge: Visions and Paradigms

Trabajo Infantil y Salud: Aportes a la Construcción del Conocimiento: Visiones y Paradigmas
by Maria Alejandra Silva, Editorial Académica Española, 2011.

Reviewed by Graciela Biagini, PhD

The book deals with the complex issues of child labor and health. The interaction of these two problems creates negative synergies with long-term effects. Yet addressing them is difficult because they occur in contexts characterized by social exclusion, inequality, and structural vulnerability.

Recognizing that child labor is under-reported, the author uses a variety of analytic approaches to address this complexity.

First, she points to the differing conceptual approaches used to study to work, children, child labor, and health. In order to delimit the field of study and analysis, the author draws upon a variety of contemporary research, offering us a virtual “state of the art” literature review. Her analysis focuses on research into child labor and health that has been

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conducted in Brazil, Mexico, and Argentina. She looks at both the institutional setting and academic specialties of the authors, as well as the analytical categories and theoretical orientations used in the research. Although the specifics may vary, certain things are seen in all three countries. Child labor is an invisible problem and it is very difficult to study the impact of child labor on the growth and development of children living in conditions of poverty and exploitation. These conditions are seen as being “normal” in a context where the general realities of life and work are so harsh that it becomes impossible to tease out the specific impact of the child labor; children must develop survival strategies within homes that are struggling with the practical problems of subsistence. In Argentina at least, child labor is not typically a question of traditional or archaic modes of production. On the contrary, the problems of child laborers have been worsened by



the intensification of rural work on large high-production farms. Those workers employ toxic agrochemicals and pesticides (in the case of soybeans) that are applied using hand labor (ploughs). Children perform work that is physically demanding and occupy a very specific place within the larger world of a commodified division of labor. Citing her literature review, as well as her own first-hand re-

search in rural Argentina, Dr. Silva highlights that child labor cannot be studied in isolation. It has specific antecedents and consequences. Understanding this context is key to the development of social policy and has been a major focus of the author's work and concern.

Dr. Silva does not deny the harm caused by “child labor,” which, moreover, has been declared illegal throughout Latin America and whose elimination is essential to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG). However, she reviews the existing discourse on child labor with a critical eye. Economic, religious, philanthropic, and political approaches typically seek to blame and stigmatize. They are often quite moralistic, setting out what should and should not be done, while avoiding civic or political responsibility for the situation. Silva adopts a very different perspective, one based in sociological analysis and in the perspective of Latin American Social Medicine. She avoids both the “abolitionist” and “regulatory” approaches to child labor. Rather, she sees the right to health as a way of promoting the eventual eradication of child labor. She sees health as a social process determined by social structures that appear in the form of violence, subordination, abuse, prostitution, human trafficking, and involuntary adoption. These are all facets of an economic system that targets children for exploitation while denying their special status. Psychobiological

damage (i.e., both physical and mental) accumulates in the children due to long-term exposure to toxins, resultant neurological damage, developmental delay due to lack of schooling, emotional isolation, hypervigilance, etc. Finally, Dr. Silva’s analytical toolbox is further enriched by a discussion of “childhood” itself as a social and historical construct.

Despite limited information and invisibility of child labor, the book provides a thorough description of existing data, which is mainly derived from international organizations and national centers. This data is often based on surveys, which were designed for other populations – typically white, urban, and middle class. In my opinion, some of the indicators used in these studies are of questionable relevance for rural and illiterate populations. To her credit, Silva goes beyond this data by examining historical sources as well as pursuing independent research. One example is her use of key informants to expose the details of urban, rural, and slave child labor in Corrientes province. This research does not ignore the demographic, sanitary, and social/family conditions in the province. These are reflected in variations between districts in the levels of infant mortality, chronic malnutrition, school drop-outs, and educational attainment.

Dr. Silva also considers the current legal framework, existing regulations, and Argentina/s re-

sponsibility as a signatory of international agreements. Finally, levels of federal and provincial public spending are examined within the structure of fiscal federalism. These factors allow us to understand the limited impact of the Program to Reduce Child Labor, which was started in 2006 with a goal of eliminating child labor by 2015.

Dr. Silva – taking into account the complexity of the various issues – dissects regional policy towards children. Like other researchers, she is critical of how local governments manage their funds, particularly revenue-sharing monies from federal authorities. She describes how programs set up to eradicate child labor operate on a sporadic basis, without any monitoring or with no evaluation of their real impact. She signals how child labor is not currently part of the public agenda and calls for the involvement of multiple stakeholders in the fight against child labor. Clearly the State must participate, but social movements and organizations of various types should also be part of this effort. Following the recommendations of the ILO, Dr. Silva argues for a new approach to human capital development. Access to education must be prioritized and school-feeding programs must be strengthened in regions of high poverty, high rates of child labor, and high unemployment. Intersectorial initiatives are necessary and the concept of a “guaranteed minimal salary” (*ingreso ciudadano*) requires the coordination

of effective monetary transfer policies or indirect wealth transfers via tax policy. Specifically, she views favorably the adoption of the universal childhood benefit (*Asignación Universal por Hijo*) and believes that it will help reduce both poverty and extreme poverty.

In her conclusions – which are reflected in the book’s title – Dr. Silva examines the need for new approaches that take into consideration the socioeconomic and cultural processes that condition

child labor and its health impact. And she concludes this examination with an interesting reflection: “the methodology of adult ‘occupational health’ cannot address the health-disease process in the body of the child... Those who care for children, for bodies that are developing, lack the technical capacity to measure, weigh, and analyze the development of boys and girls who work as adults.” And she rightly recognizes that this is not merely a technical issue of weights and heights. It is a question of the

structural inequalities of Corrientes and Argentina’s Northeast. These inequalities not only block a more just distribution of social wealth, but they also block the very development of human potential.

This book is an important contribution to the study of child labor and health. But it also speaks to all those who are responsible for social policy and are thus responsible for improving the living conditions for the most vulnerable among us.

