



Organización
Internacional
del Trabajo

► Contributions to the debate on gender perspective in child labour

► Main results

- Child Labour (CL) can be conceived of as a reality that is historically, politically and culturally built, where gender relations occupy a key role. Gender permeates and cuts across all the analysed dimensions¹.
- The naturalization of CL is widespread. It is identified as the only alternative for families, or at least the most valid one, as a means to economically sustain households and as a factor of learning, discipline and preparation for adult life.
- The reproduction of stereotypes is firmly in place, associated with whether activities are considered to be work or not (above all reproductive work); with the positions of women and men in the sexual division of labour in the household; and with the tasks that young and adolescent girls currently perform, which are linked to caregiving tasks and to roles that are historically considered to be feminine (scarcely valued and barely remunerated).
- There are notable attempts to break these stereotypes by adolescent girls (in some cases, supported by their mothers), who are beginning to alter generic roles for the future. This alteration is taking place mainly in the decision to be included in the labour market in the future as a form of emancipation, and also in the decision to postpone motherhood in order to be able to study and work. The main driving forces behind this change are education and training, which are expanding their options for choosing and deciding on professional careers.

¹ The reflections included here are based mainly on the document prepared by Aspiazu, Eliana and Labrunee, María Eugenia, titled *“Gender perspective in child labour”*, ILO, 2021.

Gender permeates across all aspects, not only regarding the decisions by families to promote the early inclusion of Children and Adolescents (C&As) in the labour market but also in the tasks they carry out, the place where and the conditions under which they perform those tasks and the expectations linked to the education and the future professional careers and lives of C&As.

Through a critical analysis of CL, positioned from within the context and closely linked to the gender aspect, we can systematize a series of aspects that operate as possible conditioning factors. The particulars of the context are notable among these conditioning factors, specifically during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the poverty situation, the role of education, the current occupational status, the professional careers of the parents and cultural aspects.

Among the families in a socially vulnerable situation, with major economic difficulties and with the adults' employment being largely precarious, the incidence of the economic crisis and the restrictions derived from the pandemic (Preventive and Mandatory Social Isolation, “ASPO”) are clearly at the forefront: the majority of households experienced cuts to their income and had to rethink their family structures, focusing on survival. This often included CL as a strategy to increase income. The economic limitations and the care deficits from which these families are suffering, made more profound during the pandemic, on the one hand, translated into the insertion of Children and Adolescents into remunerated productive jobs so that they could contribute to the family economy; and on the other, it translated into more time engaged in non-remunerated domestic and care tasks at intensities that categorize them as CL, above all for young and adolescent girls, as a way to collaborate in the family dynamics.

In this context and according to the perceptions of the members of these households, CL comes up as the only and the most valid alternative for families. Contrary to what regulations maintain and the general consensus about the consequences of CL as well as about the violation of rights, upon investigating the family structures and the culture and conceptions that families have about education, work and the future,

the analysis becomes more complex, and the emerging connotation is not so negative.

Discursively, CL is mentioned by the actors themselves as a means of economic sustainability, but above all, as a learning factor, discipline, and preparation for adult life. However, in many cases contradictions emerge and these definitions contrast with the descriptions given by the Children and Adolescents themselves regarding the intensity of those jobs (long hours, physical exertion and responsibilities) and the activities they give up to work (play, friendships, study).

Regarding the educational dimension, various areas of interest can be identified. On one hand, in a context of non-presential education, the school's role is blurred and hindered by the limitations posed by virtuality and, in many cases, by a lack of connectivity. Regarding this point, the fewer hours engaged in school and the need for income to gain access to connectivity also operated as conditioning factors that drove adolescents to become engaged in labour activities. Yet, beyond that particular context and despite access difficulties, it is nonetheless notable how education continues to be the most relevant factor in the mind of these families as a means to accessing a life more full of rights and opportunities, with higher quality jobs. This perception is recurrent and allows us to see how, subjectively, education represents the possibility of upward mobility. Achieving this is almost exclusively associated with individual responsibility and with the effort of each person to get an education in order to get better jobs and achieve better living conditions, without questioning the role of the state or of companies in building rigidities in not only the labour market but also in gender segregation, both horizontal and vertical.

Significant gender differences between adults were observed within the educational dimension. Women value education more highly as a potential facilitator of quality employment and of greater economic autonomy with regards to their spouses. Many mothers mention their own educational deficits as a consequence of having dropped out of school to take on domestic and care responsibilities. To combat this, they suggest that their children need to have more

opportunities, especially based on education and on-the-job learning. For their adult daughters, the necessity to have career paths different from their own is more evident, paths more linked to studies and remunerated work, to independence and the possibility of choosing what to be and do.

The study also shows that the adults had working lives marked by situations of poverty and major limiting factors that also led them to join the labour market at an early age, to leave school and to take paths that have been marked by labour precariousness and instability. Profound gender differences are noted, sustained by a sexual division of traditional work in which the role of caregiver is given almost exclusively to women, the majority of whom experienced the formation of a family and maternity as a limiting factor of their educational and professional development.

Nevertheless, attempts to break this pattern continue to coexist with the daily reproduction of gender stereotypes. The view that domestic tasks (whether intensive or not) and CL are an educational tool continues to remain strong, especially for girls. In addition to giving them skills for organizing their own households as adults, it is seen as a way for them to join the labour market in domestic services as an alternative to difficulties related to obtaining more qualified jobs.

Finally, patterns related to the reproduction of stereotypes are observed. These stereotypes are associated with whether activities are considered to be work or not (especially reproductive work); with the positions of women and men in the sexual division of labour in the household; and with the tasks that young and adolescent girls currently perform, which are linked to caregiving tasks and to roles that are historically considered to be feminine (scarcely valued and barely remunerated). On the other hand, there are signs of some attempts by adolescent girls to break this pattern (with the support of their mothers), who are beginning to alter generic roles for the future. This alteration is taking place mainly in the decision to be included in the labour market in the future as a form of emancipation, and also in the decision to postpone motherhood in order to be able to study and work. The main driving forces behind this change are education and training, given that this could broaden their employment options.

► Algunas recomendaciones

1. It is important to strengthen the role of the school as a place for containment, for learning and for breaking stereotypes, therefore promoting teacher training (and consequent transmission to the entire educational community) on gender equality, on the definitions and regulations referring to CL and on recognizing the situations of Children and Adolescents and the impacts on their well-being. On the one hand, there is clear evidence of the need for more in-depth policies that are targeted at the cultural facet. Gender stereotypes related to the labour inclusion of men and women must be questioned, as well as the division of productive and reproductive tasks, and these aspects must be the focal points of in-depth study at schools through integral sex education (ESI). This will ensure that changes happen and that sensitivities are also instilled among males, who, given that they do not experience such inequalities personally, rarely recognize them or question them, thereby giving continuity to reproducing the sexualized meanings of activities.
2. The infrastructure also needs to be strengthened in order to ensure connectivity as a right, which is now clearly a basic right for Children and Adolescents to be able to have access to information and education in the online format. In Argentina, there are plans and programmes that seek to reduce the digital gap and guarantee equal access to telecommunication services, such as Resolution 3597/2016, which approved the Connectivity Programme, as well as Plan Conectar [Connect Plan], which is currently being implemented. It is essential that these programmes be implemented while giving priority to territories where C&As benefit directly.
3. It is also important to strengthen the development of neighbourhood spaces of containment, linked to sports and vocational training, which should operate using resources and staff professionals funded by the state, thereby offering new points of reference for Children and Adolescents about what to be and do. It's a priority to occupy the free time of C&As with activities that allow them to learn skills, healthy routines, sacrifice, and discipline through play, without involving responsibilities that exceed their age but which, at the right time, can be applied in their future professional work. These spaces must also generate instances of awareness-raising that modify the view of CL, consequently seeing how it is a violation of the rights of C&As and educating about its negative effects.
4. Said policies must be supplemented, on the one hand, by changes to public actions, therefore expanding those policies that had already begun to be designed and implemented and that promote not only defamiliarization and co-responsibility for care but also labour inspection at companies and social protection. In particular, the protection and standardization of domestic services must be strengthened because of its implications for the family life of female workers.
5. At the business level, awareness-raising instances must be created, which should contribute to eliminating the usual gender stereotypes among employers and should question socially legitimized business policies related to the use of female employment as a means of flexibility through outsourcing that allocates precarious, part-time jobs, with flexible schedules and for a limited time only, justified by the need to apply work-life balance. In this way, it is necessary to do away with the stereotype regarding the secondary role and complementarity of the female workforce in the home. Additionally, the idea that certain jobs are better suited to men and others for women must not be reproduced. Based on this prejudice, positions in certain fields in which the

participation of women is greater are more likely to be part-time and informal (lower wages and fewer possibilities of promotion).

6. The state can support the process by creating incentives or disincentives as requisites for receiving tax benefits or reductions, thereby promoting the necessary changes. It is highly important that the scope of these measures, which contribute to raising awareness about gender inequality, should also extend to offering decent and equal conditions to workers in reference to organizations of the popular economy, which have been booming and are widespread in recent years, above all during the pandemic.
7. Everything must take place comprehensively, within the framework of an economic process that creates quality jobs for adults, together with the development of an integrated care system that works jointly with the state, the private sector, the community and families. The ultimate purpose must be to foster better living conditions for Children and Adolescents within a context of equal rights and opportunities.