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*Counting invisible workers: Girls in domestic activities within their homes\**

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\* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations

## **Introduction**

The Convention on the Rights of the Child states that every child has “the right to be protected from economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child's education, or to be harmful to the child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development” (Article 32). Also, the International Labour Organization has defined child labour that is negative to the development of the child through Minimum Age Convention (No. 138) and through the Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention (No. 182).

Among the negative effects of child labour that stand out the most are the negative impacts on health, education and the general development of children. All these effects tend to perpetuate themselves from generation to generation reducing economic and social mobility. If children acquire fewer years of education and smaller labour market earnings in the future, being a child labourer might generate an intergenerational poverty trap since the possibility is high that their daughters and sons follow the same pattern.

When reviewing child labour literature it frequently stands out that the definition used to calculate child labour statistics does not consider domestic work within the household as child labour, regardless of the number of hours dedicated to it. Notwithstanding, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action states among its strategic actions that it is necessary to “ensure that strategies to eliminate child labour also address the excessive demands made on some girls for unpaid work in their household...” (Paragraph 180). It also states that is important to “Develop an international classification of activities for time-use statistics that is sensitive to the differences between women and men in remunerated and unremunerated work and collect data, disaggregated by sex...” (Paragraph 209).

Excessive demands on the time of children to work in economic and non economic activities conflict directly with their attendance at school, which is a children’s right recognized by the international community through the Millennium Declaration and the Millennium Development Goals. Therefore, it is essential to have statistics that reflect accurately the magnitude of domestic and market-oriented work that children undertake.

This document attempts to show that by not taking into account household tasks the participation of girls in child labour is underestimated. The lack of visibility of the intensity and hazardousness of this type of work keeps an important group of girls out of the scope of policies oriented towards reducing child labour.

### **1. Definitions**

Usually the definition of child labour only includes children who work in economic activities. These activities comprise all market production (paid work) and certain types of non-market production (unpaid work) including the production of goods for self-consumption. As a result, a child engaged in unpaid activities in a market-oriented establishment is considered as working, as well as children working as maids or domestic workers in someone else’s house. However, a child engaged in domestic chores within her own household is not considered as economically active; therefore she is not considered as working (ILO, 2002).

### a. **Child labour**

It is generally accepted that not all work should be considered as negative for children, since it may be a way for developing one's personality, maturity and skills. Therefore, the following standards have been established to define negative child labour:

- At least an hour of work if the child is younger than 12 years. Regular work (14-43 hours/week) performed by children under the minimum working age established by the International Labour Organization (ILO) Minimum Age Convention<sup>1</sup>. This Convention exempts children older than 12 years if they are engaged in "light work" (less than 14 hours/week).
- Harmful to a child's health and/or development.
- Prejudicial to school attendance or the capacity to benefit from the instruction received.

### b. **Worst forms of child labour**

The ILO Convention No. 182 defines the Worst Form of Child Labour for children younger than 18 years of age. Worst forms of child labour can be of the following forms: (i) Hazardous labour, which is "work that by its nature and circumstances in which it is carried on is likely to harm the health, safety or morals of children", (ii) Unconditional Worst Forms, which include "all forms of slavery...offering of a child for prostitution [or] pornography...offering of a child for illicit activities...[and] work which...is likely to harm the health, safety or morals of children".

## **2. How many working children are there?**

Global estimates of economically active children, child labourers and children working in hazardous occupations for the years 2000 and 2004 indicate that the number of economically active children has decreased from 351 to 317 million, the number of child labourers has diminished from 245 million to 218 million and the number of working children in hazardous occupations has been reduced from 170 million to 126 million. For the first time there is a dynamic picture of child labour and the numbers seem to be very encouraging (ILO, 2006).

The desegregation by sex of child labour indicators for the year 2004 shows that the percentage of girls among child labourers decreased with age, for instance among the children between 5 and 11 years of age 51% of them are girls, whereas in the 15-17 year group only 38% of them are girls. Almost the same statistics apply for children engaged in hazardous work (*ibid*).

### **Domestic work within the household, the invisible work**

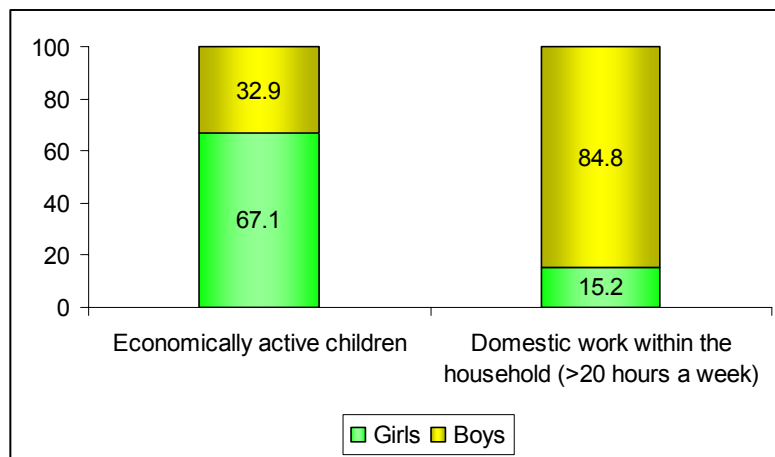
In order to have a better understanding of this phenomenon it is essential to have sex-disaggregated data. Notwithstanding, it is important to have additional indicators that can

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<sup>1</sup> The ILO Minimum Age Convention (No. 138) stated that the minimum working age fixed by ratifying Members States varies according to the level of development and according to the type of work. In general, this age is not less than 14 years of age for developing countries.

provide a clearer picture of the working conditions of the girl child and the real workload that boys and girls assume. The omission of household work from child labour statistics does not affect girls and boys equally, since usually girls undertake those activities. For instance in the case of Chile, Graphic 1 shows that 67% of economically active children are boys; however, if we analyze the percentage of children who spend more than 20 hours a week in domestic chores, we can see that 85% of them are girls.

**Graphic 1**  
**Sex composition of economically active children and child domestic workers within the household, Chile 2003**



Source: “Niñas, niños y adolescentes: Los riesgos de un trabajo invisible para el propio hogar”, María Jesús Silva, 2005.

Economically active children are the ones who work for at least an hour in economic activities. Children between 5 to 17 years old are included.

Furthermore, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) found that in 1997, between 15 and 25 percent of young urban women aged 15 to 19 years were exclusively dedicated to domestic work. In rural areas these percentages ranged from 25 to 50 percent of young women (ECLAC, 1999). Also, a study by the United States Department of Labour (2000) found that in Nepal and Turkey, if one ignores domestic work activities, boys are more likely to be working than girls; however, when domestic tasks are considered and included in the definition of work then the proportion of working girls is higher. In the case of Ghana Canagarajah and Coulombe (1997) find that by including domestic chores within the child labour definition the probability that girls between 7 to 14 years of age work is greater than the probability of boys.

### **What are we missing? An example**

Table 1 shows the percentage of boys and girls that are child labourers in Bolivia - according to different definitions of work. The first two columns show the percentage of boys and girls that are child labourers if we consider only the economic activities that they perform. The total percentage of child labourers among boys (24.1%) is higher than the percentage among girls (17.6%) and the difference seems to be higher as children get older, since when children are between 7 to 11 years of age 27.3% of boys and 20.4% of girls are child labourers, but among children that are between 15 to 17 years old 15.5% of boys and 8.2% of girls are labourers.

The fourth and fifth columns show the percentage of child labourers considering only domestic work within children's households; it can be seen that the pattern observed in columns (1) and (2) has reversed and the percentage of girls that are child labourers is always bigger than the percentage of boys, and that differences are higher even when children get older. In the 15-17 year group 11.2% of girls and 2.6% of boys will have to be regarded as child labourers - considering the time they dedicated to domestic work. It is important to remember that as children get older the definition of child labour requires a greater amount of work hours in order to label a child as a labourer. Therefore, another way of reading Table 1 is that among 15 to 17 year-old children 11.2% of the girls dedicate more than 43 hours a week to household chores, whereas almost 2.6% of the boys do so.

Finally, columns (7) and (8) show the percentage of boys and girls that are child labourers if both economic and domestic work is considered. It is worth nothing that in the 15-17 years of age group an important percentage of boys and girls are child labourers - 24.6% of boys and 28.6% of girls are child labourers reflecting the fact that many children perform a double "load" of work. This contrasts greatly with the percentage of labourers when only one of the definitions is taken in consideration.

**Table 1**  
**Percentage of boys and girls that are in child labour, Bolivia 2001**  
**(7 to 17 years of age)**

	...only economic activities			Child labour considering... ...only domestic work within their households			...economic activities + domestic work within their households		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
	% Girls			% Girls			% Girls		
	-			-			-		
	Boys	Girls	%Boys	Boys	Girls	% Boys	Boys	Girls	% Boys
7-11 years old	27.3	20.4	-6.8	71.0	79.2	8.2	78.4	82.7	4.2
12-14 years old	26.3	20.4	-5.9	26.2	50.1	24.0	48.7	63.3	14.7
15-17 years old	15.5	8.2	-7.2	2.6	11.2	8.7	24.6	28.6	4.0
Total	24.1	17.6	-6.4	41.4	55.3	13.9	56.7	64.8	8.1

Source: Author's own tabulations using Bolivia Household Survey, MECOVI 2001

A child labourer is any child that is less than 12 years old and works at least one hour, any child that is between 12 and 14 years old and works more than 14 hours a week. A child that is 15 years old or more (but younger than 18 years) and works more than 43 hours a week is also a child labourer, particularly if she works in a worst form of child labour.

Domestic work includes: taking care of children or elderly, carrying wood or water, cook or clean the house, buy groceries for the household, wash or iron clothes.

Table 2 shows the percentage of boys and girls that are child labourers in Argentina for the year 2004. Table 2 and Table 3 are not comparable with each other, because they use

different definitions of child labour; notwithstanding it is an additional example of how boys and girls use their time to perform different economic and non-economic activities. In this case a child labourer is any child between 5 and 17 years of age who works in a market-oriented activity or in an activity oriented to produce goods for self-consumption. Children who are between 5 and 13 years old and worked 10 hours or more in household chores and children between 14 and 17 years of age who worked 15 hours or more in domestic tasks are also considered child labourers. In this case, Columns (7) and (8) also represent the percentage of children who were not considered as working because they exclusively worked in household tasks - that is: the work of 4% of boys between 5 to 17 years, plus the work of 8.4% of girls between 5 and 13 years of age and 18.9% of girls between 14 and 17 years would not have been visible under the traditional definition of child labour.

**Table 2**  
**Percentage of working boys and girls, Argentina 2004**  
**(5 to 17 years of age)**

Child labour considering ....									
... only economic activities oriented to the market			...production for self-consumption				... only domestic work within their households		
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	
		% Girls			% Girls			% Girls	
		-			-			-	
	Boys	Girls	% Boys	Boys	Girls	% Boys	Boys	Girls	% Boys
5-13 years old	7.6	5.2	-2.4	4.8	3.3	-1.5	4.0	8.4	4.4
14-17 years old	23.8	16.3	-7.5	10.9	2.3	-8.6	4.0	18.9	14.9

Source: "Infancia Trabajo y otras actividades económicas", ILO, INDEC, Ministerio del Trabajo, 2006

A child labourer is any child between 5 and 17 years of age who works in a market oriented activity, in an activity oriented to produce goods for self-consumption. Those who are between 5 and 13 years old and worked 10 hours or more in household chores and children between 14 and 17 years of age who worked 15 hours or more in domestic tasks.

Domestic work includes: taking care of children or elderly, carrying wood or water, cook or clean the house, buy groceries for the household, wash or iron clothes.

### **Are these activities negative for the development of the girl child?**

Boys and girls who do not carry out domestic work within their household have similar average school enrollment rates in Bolivia (Table 3). Nevertheless, girls who are defined as child labourers according to the amount of the domestic work they perform have much lower enrollment rates. For example, the average enrollment rate for girls that are child labourers and are between 15 to 17 years old is 39%, whereas for non-child labour girls this rate is equal to 78.4%. Indeed, after searching for individual and household characteristics Zapata, Contreras and Kruger (2006) find in the case of Bolivia that girls are more likely to be working than boys if domestic tasks are included in the definition of work; furthermore there is a negative trade-off between working and schooling. Similarly, for the case of Mexico Levinson Moe and Knaul (2001) find that girls are less likely to commit exclusively to school if domestic work is considered.

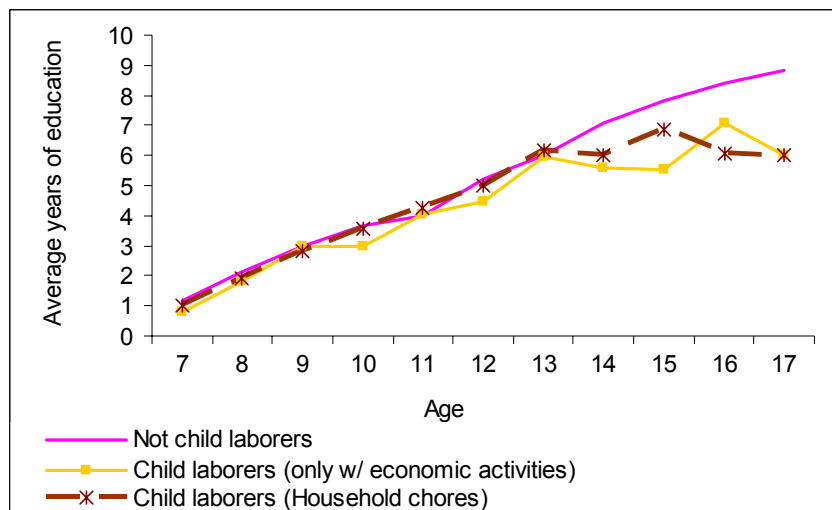
**Table 3**  
**School enrollment rates of children who perform domestic work within their households vs. children who do not perform these activities. Bolivia, 2001**

	Non-Child Labourers		Child Labourers	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
7-11 years old	96.3	97.0	96.2	97.0
12-14 years old	97.0	92.9	97.0	87.9
15-17 years old	82.0	78.4	55.2	39.0
Total	89.7	87.8	89.8	91.6

Source: Author's own tabulations using Bolivia Household Survey, MECOVI 2001

Education is an end in itself and an individual right that has a social and economic connotation - thus becoming one of the most important tools to achieve gender equality and increasing not only the present but also the future welfare of the girl child and their families. Graphic 2 shows the average years of education of girl child labourers compared to non-working girls. It can be seen that from age 12 onwards that the child labourers attain consistently less years of education than their non-working counterparts independently of the fact whether a girl is classified as a child labourer considering only economic activities or only domestic ones. By the time they are 17 the educational gap in years between labourers and non-labourers is of more than two years.

**Graphic 2**  
**Average years of education, Bolivia 2001**  
**Girls between 7 and 17 years old**



Source: Author's own tabulations using Bolivia Household Survey, MECOVI 2001

Even though there is no information on the negative effects that child labour has on the quality of education it is almost certain that it is also adversely affected. Table 5 displays the average hours that children have to dedicate to household tasks - among the more time consuming activities for girls being the carrying of wood or water (22 hours/week) and washing

clothes (22 hours/week). These activities should be considered as a worst form of child labour due to the hazardous activities they imply.

**Table 5**  
**Average hours a week that children use for domestic activities**

Domestic activity	Boys	Girls
Taking care of children or the elderly	13.9	15.7
Cook or clean the house	11.6	14.5
Buy groceries for the household	15.3	16.2
Wash or iron clothes.	14.9	22.0
Carrying wood or water	17.2	22.2

Source: Author's own tabulations using Bolivia Household Survey, MECOVI 2001

Table 6 shows the average years of education achieved for the girls in Brazil in the year 2001, using the same definition of child labour that was employed in respect of the Bolivia database. In this case, by the time girls are 17 years old those who are dedicated to domestic activities within their households have on average of one year less of education.

**Table 6**  
**Average years of education, Brazil 2001**  
**Girls between 10 and 17 years of age**

Age	Not child labourers	Child labourers (only w/ economic activities)	Child labourers (only household chores)
10	2.5	2.3	2.5
11	3.3	2.8	3.2
12	4.2	3.4	4.0
13	5.0	4.1	4.7
14	5.8	5.0	5.4
15	6.1	6.1	5.7
16	7.0	6.6	6.6
17	7.5	7.3	6.1

Source: Author's own tabulations using Pesquisa Nacional por Amostra de Domicilios, 2001

A child labourer is any child that is less than 12 years old and works at least one hour, any child that is between 12 and 14 years old and works more than 14 hours a week, any child that is 15 years old or more (but younger than 18 years) and works more than 43 hours a week is also a child labourer, particularly if she works in a worst form of child labour.

Therefore, if children dedicate their time to economic and non-economic activities beyond a certain hour threshold, these activities conflict with schooling and affect their future welfare. ECLAC (1996) found for Latin American countries, that more than 12 years of education are required in order to have more than 80% of probability to obtain an income above the poverty line. Thus, the right of the children to a childhood free of labour not only benefits them but is also important for the future development of the countries concerned.



## **Rethinking the definition of child labour**

Most of the negative effects of child labour also apply to child labourers in domestic activities within their households. Excessive hours of domestic work can be harmful to a child's health as shown by the extended hours they dedicate to carrying wood and water or to cooking for family members; it also adversely affects school attendance since there is a negative correlation between this type of work and school attendance; it most likely is also prejudicial to the girl's capacity to benefit from the instruction received at school because girl domestic workers have less years of education on average than their non-working counterparts.

If domestic work within the household is invisible, public policies will not be targeted to reduce it and girls who carry on in this job will continue to find themselves in a disadvantaged position. Furthermore, statistics on activities of girls and boys will help to better design public policies. For instance, examples of traditional policy recommendations to reduce child labour are income transfers and mandatory school attendance, whereas an understanding that there is a high incidence of child domestic work might highlight the need for policies focused on improving the provision of public services. This type of complementary policies might be a more effective way to reduce child labour.

Moreover, having statistics that show the type of work that children perform (economic vs. non-economic) will help understand at what age the sexual division of labour starts and how this, in the future, will affect the participation of women in economic and non-economic work.

It is very important that child labour surveys include questions about the participation and the number of hours that children dedicate to household domestic work. The Statistical Information and Monitoring Program on Child Labour (SIMPOC) that is part of ILO's International Program on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC) provides technical assistance to countries to generate data on child labour. Since 1998, SIMPOC has included in its mandate the need for accurate quantitative and qualitative data on child labour that is gender-sensitive. Currently collecting this type of data is an institutional norm for all SIMPOC-supported surveys. As a result the child labour surveys of Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua contain information both on the participation and the number of hours that children dedicate to domestic work within the household. In Panamá only information on the participation of children in these kinds of activities is available. Bolivia has information in respect of hours and participation based on its 2001 Household Survey. Many of these surveys do not collect information about the type of work that the child performs within the household, which is essential to build adequate child labour indicators, particularly to reflect the percentage of those who are engaged in activities dangerous to their health<sup>2</sup>; moreover the results of these surveys are not always comparable between countries because of differences in the number of questions asked, the age of respondents and the reference period. Nevertheless, they can very useful to undertake country case evaluations and general comparisons among countries.

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<sup>2</sup> Examples of activities dangerous for the health of the child are carrying water or wood for many hours every day.

## Policy recommendations

- Although it is essential to have sex-disaggregated information on child labour, it is fundamental to acknowledge that boys and girls do not carry out the same duties within and outside the household. Empirical evidence indicates that girls dedicate their time mainly to household work, while boys dedicate their's to market-oriented work. Therefore, it is important to conduct periodic child labour surveys that include domestic activities.
- The instruments used to collect the information (surveys) must place the same emphasis and care on collecting information about non-economic activities children perform as on collecting information about their economic-activities.
- After the data is collected, it is fundamental to use the generated data to built indicators that reflect the participation of boys and girls in economic and non-economic activities, as well as the total workload they have to endure. This information will help to write gender sensitive child labour reports. Specific examples of indicators that account for the intensity of domestic child labour within the household and of the total workload that children endure are:
  - (i) Percentage of child labourers, considering economic and non-economic activities, by sex.
  - (ii) Percentage of child labourers, considering only non-economic activities, by sex.

The first indicator will allow to truly asses the magnitude of the child labour problem among girls and boys, whereas the second indicator combined with the actual indicator on child labour (percentage of child labourers, considering only economic activities, by sex) will be useful to design public policies to address the problem.

- (iii) Number of hours dedicated to domestic work within the household.
- (iv) Number of hours dedicated to domestic work within the household, by type of activity.

These two indicators are essential to categorize domestic work into child labour or into worst forms of child labour, depending on the length of time dedicated to the work and on the type of activity that children perform.

- (v) Total numbers of hours dedicated to economic and non-economic activities.  
This indicator can show the real workload that girls and boys endure.

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