



Gender issues in child labor

Developing effective policies against child labor requires attention to gender differences among working children. This note reviews the available evidence.

Worldwide, an estimated 352 million children age 5–17 are engaged in economic activities (paid and unpaid market production; ILO 2002). This figure would undoubtedly be higher if it was possible to estimate children’s involvement in household chores.

Working long hours in economic activities or household chores can adversely affect children’s health and education (ILO 2004). Developing effective policies to combat child labor requires understanding gender differences among working children, because:

- Standard definitions of child labor tend to underestimate girls’ work.
- Economic activities of boys and girls differ by country and industry.
- Determinants of child labor may differ by gender.
- Consequences of child labor may differ by gender.

Standard definitions of child labor tend to underestimate girls’ work

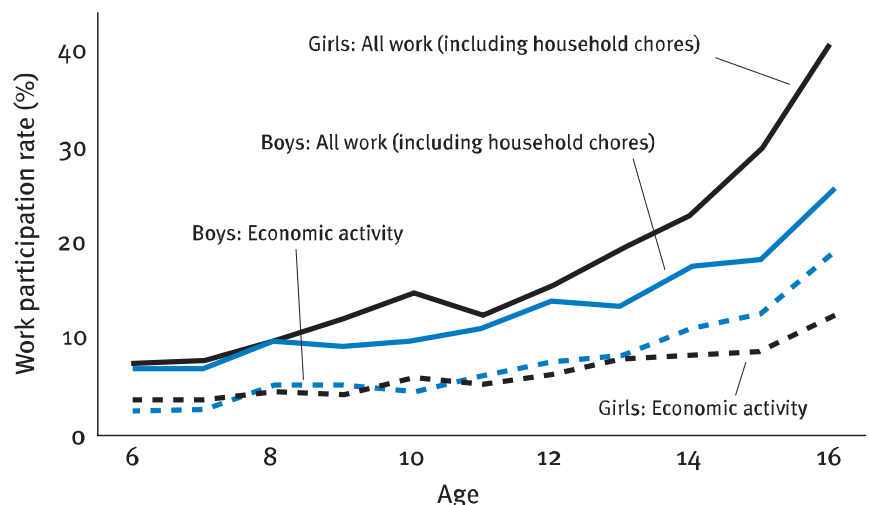
Standard definitions of child labor focus on economic activities and on the “worst” forms of child labor (defined by the International Labour Organization as children’s involvement in hazardous work, armed conflict, pornography, and the like). These definitions typically exclude household chores, and so underestimate children’s work. This is particularly an issue for girls in developing countries, as they tend to perform more household chores than do boys.

In rural India, for example, boys usually have higher participation rates in economic activities than do girls (figure 1). However, when household chores are included, girls have

higher total work participation rates at all ages. Because household chores account for a growing share of girls’ work as they age, the underestimation of their total work resulting from the exclusion of those chores rises accordingly.

Work performed by girls may also be underestimated because more girls than boys are reported as being “idle” in household surveys—indicating that they are not in school and are not working. In rural Morocco in 1998, for example, 38 percent of girls and 19 percent of boys were reportedly idle. “Idle” children might really be doing nothing, but it is also possible that parents do not consider the tasks their children undertake to be “real” work (Cigno, Rosati, and Tzannatos 2002). Domestic chores, in particular, may be ignored, thus explaining why more girls than boys are reported to be idle.

FIGURE 1 WORK PARTICIPATION RATES FOR BOYS AND GIRLS IN RURAL INDIA, 1994



Source: Author estimates based on data from Cigno, Rosati, and Tzannatos 2002.

Including time use modules in household surveys provides information on the household chores performed by children and can help avoid underestimation of the total work they perform. But most household surveys do not include such modules.

Economic activities of boys and girls differ by country and industry

Global estimates of children's involvement in economic activities hide substantial national differences. Boys are more likely than girls to be economically active in Latin American countries such as Bolivia and Colombia, while girls are more likely to be economically active in African countries such as Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana (Grootaert and Patrinos 1999; Blunch and Verner 2000).

Girls and boys also tend to be concentrated in different types of economic activity. In an international overview, Ashagrie (1998) finds that boys are more concentrated in manufacturing, trade, restaurants, hotels, and transport, while girls are more concentrated in agriculture and personal services. The variation in girls' and boys' economic activity by country and industry points to the need for data collection and analysis at the national and local levels. It also highlights the importance of identifying the needs of both boys and girls when designing child labor prevention policies.

Determinants of child labor may differ by gender

The differences in the amount of household chores and economic activities performed by boys and girls suggest that the determinants of child labor may also differ by gender. We examine the differential impact on boys and girls of *household welfare* (as measured, for example, by household spending per adult equivalent), *water infrastructure*, *illness in the household*, and *adult employment*. The evidence suggests that increases in household welfare may not be sufficient to reduce the total work burden of children, and indicates that investments in water infrastructure, health, and child care may help reduce the

time that children—especially girls—spend on household chores.

Household welfare

Much empirical evidence shows that children's economic activity decreases as household welfare increases (Dar and others 2002). However, a more nuanced story is emerging from recent research. Using land size as an indicator of household welfare for rural families, Bhalotra and Heady (2003) find that girls' farm labor actually increases with household welfare in Pakistan and Ghana. A similar effect is not found for boys. Ray (2000) shows that while changes in household welfare influence the composition of girls' work (economic activities relative to household chores), it has no effect on the total hours they work.

Water infrastructure

In many countries, collecting water is largely the responsibility of women and girls. Thus improvements in water infrastructure can play a crucial role in reducing children's, especially girls', work hours and increasing their school attendance. A connection to a public water network is expected to affect parents' decisions about their children's time allocations in two ways. First, it reduces the cost of purchasing water through private schemes, freeing up household income for school fees. Second, it reduces the time required to collect water, reducing the opportunity cost of children's time.

In urban Yemen, connection to a public water network reduced the likelihood that girls were reported to be idle by 13 percentage points, reduced the likelihood that they were engaged in economic activity by 2 percentage points, and increased the likelihood of school attendance by 16 percentage points. The effects on boys were much smaller. These results suggest that the largest portion of the increase in attendance comes from reportedly idle girls—indicating that many of these girls had an important role in water collection (Guarcello and Lyon 2003).

Illness in the household

Idiosyncratic shocks to the household may affect the time allocations of household mem-

bers differently. The limited research on this topic suggests that the time allocations of girls may be particularly sensitive to illness in the household. Peruvian data shows that illness among young children increases household work for girls but not for boys (Ilahi 2001). Using Indonesian data, Pitt and Rosenzweig (1990) find that a 29 percent rise in the incidence of child illness decreases an older sister's likelihood of labor force participation by 25 percent, decreases her likelihood of going to school by 15 percent, and increases the likelihood of her participation in home care by 53 percent.

Adult employment

When both parents are engaged in economic activity, children, particularly girls, often substitute for mothers in performing unpaid household work. Ilahi (2001) finds that in urban Peru, both girls and boys spend more time on household work when adult female employment rises, but the effect is larger for girls. Research on the effect of changes in the cost of child care on girls' school enrollment offers further evidence, albeit indirect, of this type of substitution. Glinskaya, Garcia, and Lokshin (2000) find that in Kenya, a 10 percent increase in child care costs reduces older girls' school enrollment rate by 3 percent, while there is no significant effect for boys. This evidence suggests that access to low-cost child care could reduce girls' household chores and have positive schooling effects.

Consequences of child labor may differ by gender

Because males and females engage in different types of work, both early and later in life, the impact of child labor on future labor market outcomes may also differ. Research on Mexico and Brazil finds that the future earnings penalties for engaging in early economic activity (with or without concurrent schooling) are more severe for girls than boys (Knaul 2001; Gustafsson-Wright and Pyne 2002). In Mexico, the returns to early work experience can compensate males for the associated earnings penalties, but this is not the case for females.

These results may reflect boys' ability to gain marketable work experience that they can use in their later careers, while girls mostly gain experience as domestic workers that is not transferable to other occupations. Where early economic activity is unavoidable, girls would benefit from gaining more transferable work experience while staying in school.

Policy implications

A number of policy implications follow from the evidence presented above. First, including time use modules in household surveys would capture unpaid household chores performed by children, thereby providing more accurate estimates of total work time. Cross-checking answers with several household members (including children) further increases the accuracy of such data and can reduce the prevalence of apparent idleness. The diversity of child labor practices across countries and industries further necessitates research and data collection at local levels, and highlights the importance of considering the needs of both girls and boys when formulating policy.

Second, interventions aimed at reducing child labor should address its specific causes, and should recognize that these causes may differ by gender. The determinants of child labor should be examined by running separate regressions for boys and girls, or by interacting the gender dummy with the main explanatory variables. Doing so would improve understanding of the nature and size of differential effects, and enhance the targeting and effectiveness of policy interventions.

Third, investing in water infrastructure, providing low-cost child care, and increasing access to health care facilities can significantly reduce the time that girls spend on household chores, thereby increasing their school attendance. Improving opportunities for income generation by fathers and mothers can reduce the need for economic activity by children, but care should be taken to prevent an increased burden of unpaid household work for older girls when their mothers go to work.

Finally, interventions aimed directly at increasing children's schooling—such as providing subsidies for school fees, reducing dis-

Policies for reducing child labor must recognize that its causes may differ by gender

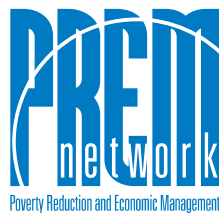
tance to schools, and improving school quality—are also likely to reduce the prevalence of child labor. As with policies aimed at reducing child labor directly, these interventions may have gender-differentiated effects.

Further reading

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Prepared for World Bank staff