

The scientific knowledge on child labor in Latin America

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Child labor is a social and human tragedy. More than an inequity, it is a matter of injustice. Working during childhood deprives a vulnerable group, dependent on protection to survive, from fundamental human and social rights. The cruelty underlying child labor goes far beyond children's present. It affects their entire life course, compromises their own future and upcoming generations through a vicious persistent circle. Child labor also affects physical, psychological and social development, a result of limited access to school, family interactions, contact with other children, and even the right to be protected, to play, to dream and, above all, to be happy. Child labor is a symptom of much deeper underlying societal problems including poverty, marginalization, lack of decent employment opportunities for poor parents, and is often a consequence of family dysfunction, domestic violence and exposure to other forms of social violence. Impeded to be fully educated and facing long-lasting health problems ¹, working children will face difficulties during adolescence and adult life including greater likelihood of maladaptive coping strategies, increase in the burden of chronic disease, serious mental health and addiction challenges and even premature mortality ².

Globally, young people are three times more likely to be unemployed than adults ³. Youth who missed the opportunity of formal education and training because of child labor are at increased risk of unemployment, exploitation and marginalization. In addition, commonly, children's occupations are unsafe not only regarding work conditions. The unacceptable worst forms of child work, such as slavery or forced labor, sexual exploitation, drug trafficking and dealing, are all linked to illegal activities and often involve high levels of violence. Other hazardous occupations for children are agriculture, the logging industry, mining and construction, among others still prevailing in many countries for boys, while girls are frequently engaged in domestic work, as informal workers without protections, social support benefits, or career progression opportunities ⁴. The persistence of child labor in low- and middle-income countries regardless of times of prosperity or economic crisis ⁴ continue to intrigue researchers and public policy decision-makers, which emphasizes the need for more research and understanding of this complex social challenge.

While conditional cash transfer programs as an additional strategy to reduce child labor may create the appearance that child work rates are decreasing, alone, it often does little

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for the underlying root causes. Keeping children in substandard schools, distant from their homes, with curriculum contents alienated from their daily life, culture and often exposing children to violence is the reality in many settings where child labour is seen as the lesser of two evils. This structural problem within the larger context is an unfortunate reality in many parts of the world ⁵. Full-time schools ensuring good quality learning experiences and a safe environment could allure kids and satisfy poor parents' aspirations for the better future of their children. Indeed, there are no easy "silver bullets" for addressing child labor, and even anti-child labor policies can simply push the problem more to the margins, leading to more undocumented cases in unregulated areas of the informal workforce at greater risk to children. Indeed, adverse outcomes were detected in evaluations of microcredit, school participation and business training interventions, all of which increased children's participation in household income generation in specific contexts ^{6,7,8}.

A review of the literature, by Silva et al. ⁹, on child labor in Latin America, focusing on who does the research, what are the methods and topics considered, is a timely and relevant initiative, considering the current context of high unemployment, reduction of social protection coverage and increase of poverty, which is evident in many Latin American countries. In addition, the International Labor Organization (ILO) is celebrating 100 years this year, and its endeavor fighting against child labor needs to be remembered and recognized. In fact, The *Minimum Age Convention n. 5* issued in 1919 by the ILO has become one of the first landmarks on child labor. However, only in 1973 the *Convention n. 138* regulated the international standard on the onset of legal working age, adopted in many countries. As a result, child labor is declining in several regions and in Latin America as well, where there is an estimate of approximately 14 million of working children ⁴.

In this article, the proposal of mapping scientific literature on child labor in Latin America is welcomed. Interestingly, its purpose is less to identify and systematize research findings but rather produce evidences on who are the subjects behind knowledge production and identify the characteristics of scientific literature platforms of dissemination. In addition, the theoretical framework taken from Edgar Morin and his concept of legitimate knowledge is noticeable, which implies recognizing the role that politics and social actors play in the incorporation of research evidences on policies and programs.

The authors showed that the number of publications increased over the last decade, most of them rooted in Humanities or Health Sciences and Applied Social Sciences, the majority based on qualitative approaches. The strong presence of the field of Humanities is not a surprise, considering that the social determinants of child labor are widely recognized. However, interestingly, only a few Economy studies were found, although various studies target economic determinants and consequences of child labor under the World Bank research.

The knowledge gaps towards child labor noted by the authors are not exclusive to Latin America. For instance, there are voices claiming for evidences on the impact of interventions to prevent it, which can be scaled-up globally. However, the lack of evaluation studies grounded in robust theory and rigorous methods continue to be a strong barrier to get political support to prioritize policies and programs against child labor globally. A review of intervention studies revealed that they lack clarity in their definition of core concepts and outcomes ¹⁰, which is expected given that child labor is closely knitted to culture, social values and singularities of local labor structure and economic production. This diversity is an additional drawback for cross-national syntheses and comparisons. Unfortunately,

evaluative studies that could be useful to demonstrate how many children are no longer workers, especially in the worst forms of child labor, are still a priority and need to be targeted by special funding lines.

Similarly, the geographical distribution of research is also uneven across countries in the global scenario. It reflects not only the extension of research capabilities but also the local visibility of social problems, such as child labor, the implementation of specific public policies targeting the labor of minors, and availability of research funding. Based on the study findings, it is clear that information is urgently needed on how much the available scientific knowledge has been used to draw intervention strategies and their evaluation. Another aspect of importance to be evaluated is the number of citations, especially references in management documents such as protocols, manuals, policies and programs that could inform about the use of this knowledge and its potential power to become a true managerial research.

This article is an important step in describing and critically analyzing the contributions of the diverse Latin American body of theory and evidence on child labor. However, the power struggles noted by the authors within the academic field and political scene, or even among public policies decision-makers, are not exclusive and endogenous to this subject matter. Academic theories and definitions can also find resistance in broader political fields within and outside Latin America. For example, Maya Jariego ¹¹ describe in his study the organized resistance from a movement of working children who defend their rights to work against an intervention to prevent child labor in Peru. Future research can benefit from approaches that recognize the complexity of child labor and uses system approaches to integrate current knowledge and theory in the search of more acceptable, effective, feasible and sustainable responses to the problem.

Future studies on this topic will need to consider the abundant gray literature, commonly produced by activists, social movements and non-academic professionals, and to extend the scope to other languages such as French and English, the native language of a few Latin American countries. A driven force to reach higher standards of research quality are available opportunities for research training, access to collaborations, scientific partnerships and funding support, knowledge networks which can provide tools and technical assistance. To be successful, the fight against child labor requires the involvement of stakeholders and policymakers from several disciplines, fields of knowledge and institutions. Together, they are a major force in support to child labor research, including international organizations and their national agencies. Under the wave of far-right neoliberal governments in Latin America and in other regions, poverty is already increasing, along with unemployment and hunger, a context prone to raise child labor to levels already overcome. More research showing which works in real situations is much needed.

Contributors

V. S. Santana, L. Kiss and A. Andermann participated in the conception and writing of the article.

Additional informations

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