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Beyond Economic Exploitation: Addressing the Psychological Well-Being of Child Laborers in Low- and Middle-Income Countries

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Abstract. The global framework for child protection has long centred on safeguarding children's material security, their right to education and their physical safety. While considerable progress has been made in regulating various forms of harmful child labor, these tangible protective outcomes do not necessarily imply a corresponding improvement in the psychosocial well-being of affected children. This article focuses on exploitative and hazardous child labor in low- and middle-income countries and draws on recent empirical research and child rights standards to explore how psychological well-being can be incorporated into public policy evaluation. Existing studies have found associations between child labor experiences and psychosocial difficulties, which may also occur alongside experiences of abuse, poor caregiving, and unfavorable educational environments. In contrast, there is still limited evidence on children's psychological recovery after leaving child labor and on the effectiveness of related interventions. Therefore, while education and labor protection measures should continue to be promoted, psychological well-being should gradually be incorporated into policy goals, monitoring systems, and follow-up support.

Keywords: Child labor, psychological well-being, child protection, policy evaluation, social equity, low- and middle-income countries

1. Introduction

According to the latest joint estimates by the ILO and UNICEF, approximately 138 million children worldwide were engaged in child labor in 2024, including about 54 million in hazardous work that could harm their health, safety, or moral development [1]. Child labor has long been discussed in relation to socioeconomic factors such as poverty, limited educational opportunities, and labor market structures. Current child protection strategies mainly focus on reducing children's participation in labor and ending hazardous work, while also expanding educational opportunities and improving family economic conditions to reduce the likelihood that children enter harmful work [1]. These measures are well grounded in practice.

This article focuses on exploitative and hazardous child labor and does not treat all work performed by children as harmful. Not all work performed by children constitutes child labor. Whether work should be considered harmful depends on the child's age, the type and hours of work,

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working conditions, and whether the work affects the child's health, development, or education [1]. Age-appropriate, non-hazardous activities within the household that do not interfere with schooling or rest should not be conflated with excessive working hours or hazardous work. Article 32 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child requires children to be protected from economic exploitation and from work that may harm their health or development. Article 39 further requires measures to promote the physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration of children who have experienced exploitation, abuse, or other forms of harm [2]. Therefore, the protection emphasized by the Convention includes not only ending hazardous work but also supporting children's recovery afterward.

Current child labor protection efforts have established approaches in poverty reduction, education, and labor inspection. However, withdrawal from child labor alone does not establish whether children have achieved psychological recovery and social reintegration, which Article 39 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child requires States Parties to promote [2]. Drawing on recent research, this article discusses the relationship between child labor and psychosocial difficulties, the gap between existing research and policy evaluation, and possible policy adjustments. This article highlights an outcome that is often overlooked in policy evaluation: children's psychological recovery after leaving work. Considering psychosocial well-being alongside withdrawal from labor and school participation may provide a more comprehensive understanding of whether child protection policies support children's longer-term recovery and development.

2. Literature review

2.1 What current protection systems measure

The ILO and UNICEF's global report documents child labor and hazardous work and examines children's school participation [1]. The intervention meta-analysis by Alves et al. assesses effects on children's participation in work and working hours [3]. These indicators provide information about children's labor and educational circumstances, but they do not directly measure psychological recovery after withdrawal from child labor. Labor participation, hazardous work, and school enrollment are relatively easy to define and measure, but these indicators also have clear limitations. They can show that a child's external circumstances have changed, such as leaving work or returning to school, but they cannot capture the child's psychosocial state, including emotional well-being or a sense of safety in daily life.

2.2 From labor status to psychosocial outcomes

Several studies using Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) record child labor and psychosocial difficulties in the same household datasets, and their findings are consistent. In Bangladesh, hazardous child labor among children aged 5-14 was associated with psychosocial functioning difficulties (adjusted odds ratio 1.41, 95% CI 1.16-1.72) and with school dropout [4]. In Laos, child labor participation was associated with five of the ten psychosocial difficulties examined [5]. In a pooled sample of low- and middle-income countries, child labor and poorer caregiving practices were associated with greater socioemotional difficulties, anxiety, and depressive symptoms [6]. These studies are mainly based on cross-sectional data, so causal relationships cannot be established from these findings alone. In addition, poverty, educational disruption, family environment, and abuse may influence children's psychological well-being. Therefore, existing

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evidence is better interpreted as showing that child labor is one factor associated with psychosocial difficulties rather than the sole cause of psychological problems.

2.3 Family environment, longer-term effects, and recovery needs

Children's psychological well-being may be shaped not only by their labor experiences, but also by family and caregiving environments, longer-term effects of child labor, and the support available after they leave work. Ahad et al. surveyed parents of working children in rural Bangladesh and found that physical and psychological abuse were associated with children's internalizing problems and attention difficulties [7]. The study used snowball sampling, which limits its representativeness, and relied on parent reports, which may introduce reporting bias. Its findings suggest that family violence and caregiving should be considered together with labor. Pellenq, Gunn, and Limacompared 915 children working in brick kilns with 638 children not engaged in that work across Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Pakistan [8]. Children in brick-kiln work reported higher stress, a lower sense of safety, greater perceived abuse, and poorer emotional well-being. Jayawardana, Baryshnikova, and Cheng used the Indonesia Family Life Survey data and statutory minimum wages as an instrumental variable [9]. They found larger estimated effects of childhood labor on later adolescent depressive symptoms above the median of the symptom distribution. The result depends on the instrumental-variable assumptions and suggests possible longer-term effects of childhood labor. However, the study does not directly assess psychological recovery after withdrawal from child labor.

Evidence on recovery after children leave labor remains limited. Kaur et al. noted that evaluations of interventions for rescued child laborers are scarce and that some frontline workers lack training to identify emotional difficulties [10]. Chatterjee et al. described a trauma-informed consultation model in India that combined support for children, caregiver training, and ongoing case discussions. Psychological support after children leave work is receiving growing attention, but its effectiveness remains unclear [11].

3. From research evidence to policy gaps

The studies reviewed above show that child labor is associated not only with labor and educational outcomes but also with children's psychosocial difficulties. However, changes in children's labor participation and school enrollment do not directly show whether their psychosocial well-being has improved. This creates a gap in policy evaluation: if evaluation stops at withdrawal from labor and return to school, policies may fail to identify children who have stopped working and returned to school but still experience psychosocial difficulties. This gap does not exist simply because psychosocial outcomes cannot be measured. The International Labour Organization has proposed indicators for assessing the psychosocial hazards and impacts of child labor and noted that these indicators can be incorporated into existing monitoring and research tools [12]. However, Kaur et al. found that the identification of psychological needs among rescued child laborers and the evaluation of relevant interventions remain limited [10]. A more practical question, therefore, is not whether all children withdrawn from child labor should receive psychological treatment, but whether existing protection systems can identify those who continue to need support. From a social equity perspective, children's experiences and needs after leaving child labor differ. Providing the same withdrawal and return-to-school support may therefore fail to address the continuing psychological and social needs of some children. The next section proposes feasible policy adjustments based on existing international practice.

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4. Policy recommendations

4.1 Expand protection goals and monitoring

Child labor protection can be expanded to give greater attention to children's psychological well-being after withdrawal from labor. In addition to monitoring whether children have left hazardous work and returned to school, programs could also monitor their emotional well-being, daily functioning, and sense of safety. These measures are not intended to imply that all children require psychological treatment but to help identify those who may still need additional support after leaving child labor. This broader attention to children's psychosocial well-being is consistent with UNICEF's approach to mental health and psychosocial support [13]. Such monitoring does not necessarily require a completely independent system. Studies using MICS data from Bangladesh, Laos, and multiple low- and middle-income countries demonstrate that information on child labor and psychosocial conditions can be collected within the same surveys [4-6]. Existing programs could therefore consider adding a small number of psychosocial indicators to identify children who may need further support rather than using these measures for clinical diagnosis.

4.2 Connect monitoring to actual support

If programs begin to monitor children's psychological well-being, they also need to consider what support is available when problems are identified. The World Health Organization reports that many low- and middle-income countries continue to face limited investment in mental health services and shortages of trained professionals [14]. Rather than creating a completely separate system, a more realistic approach may therefore be to add basic staff training, psychosocial support, and referral mechanisms to existing child protection services. Chatterjee et al. provide one example through a consultation model that combines support for children, caregiver training, and case discussions [11]. Although this type of model requires further evaluation, it shows how psychological support can be integrated into existing child protection services. At the same time, psychological support should not replace family economic support, educational opportunities, or labor protection, which remain important components of efforts to reduce child labor [3].

4.3 Include follow-up after withdrawal from child labor

Child labor protection should not end immediately after a child leaves work or returns to school. The International Labour Organization's child labor monitoring guidelines include follow-up after withdrawal as part of the monitoring process [15]. Rather than prescribing a single standardized follow-up period, the guidelines emphasize continued monitoring to verify that children remain in school or another appropriate arrangement and that their situation improves over time.

Programs could use follow-up contacts to determine whether children remain in school, whether they return to labor, and whether previously identified psychosocial difficulties have improved. The frequency and duration of follow-up may need to be adapted to local program contexts, as the ILO guidelines do not prescribe a single standardized follow-up period. Policy adjustments could therefore incorporate attention to psychosocial well-being into existing follow-up mechanisms rather than creating a separate tracking system.

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4.4 Strengthen cross-sector cooperation

Recovery after withdrawal from child labor may involve labor protection, schools, health services, and social services. Child labor programs can help identify children's initial needs, schools can monitor their adjustment after returning to education, and health and social services can provide additional support when needed. Clear referral pathways and coordination across these sectors can help ensure that psychosocial monitoring leads to actual support rather than ending with data collection. UNICEF identifies health, education, social welfare, and child protection as sectors involved in providing mental health and psychosocial support for children and emphasizes the importance of connecting referrals with actual services [13]. Pellenq et al. also found that school attendance was associated with several positive psychological indicators. This suggests that schools are not only an endpoint in enrollment statistics but may also provide an important setting for observing how children adjust after returning to education [8].

Implementation of these recommendations may be constrained by limited mental health funding and shortages of trained professionals in many low- and middle-income countries [14]. Implementation will also depend on local administrative conditions, so the recommendations will need to be adapted to different country contexts rather than applied as a single model. The implementation of these adjustments should also be reviewed over time to assess whether they are working as intended.

5. Conclusion

Recent research shows meaningful associations between child labor experiences and psychosocial difficulties, while leaving child labor and returning to school do not fully capture children's subsequent recovery. Integrating psychological well-being into child labor protection does not mean weakening poverty reduction, education, or labor protection, nor does it mean that every child requires psychological treatment. Rather, it would help existing systems identify children who continue to need support after leaving child labor. From a social equity perspective, children experience different working conditions, forms of abuse, and family environments, and their recovery needs may therefore differ. Even when children have the same opportunities to leave labor and return to school, some may still require additional psychological and social support. The recommendations in this article reflect these differences in children's support needs. Child labor programs could add a few psychosocial questions to routine monitoring and continue follow-up after children leave work. Follow-up should assess whether children remain in school, return to child labor, or continue to experience psychological difficulties. Children who need further support could be referred to appropriate education, health, or child protection services. These measures should build on existing services, be adapted to local budgets and staffing, and be evaluated after implementation. This article uses a selective narrative review and does not systematically assess child labor programs and policies across low- and middle-income countries. Future research could follow children after they leave child labor to examine changes in their psychological well-being and support needs. Studies could also compare programs that include psychosocial assessment and follow-up support with those providing usual services. These studies could assess whether the additional services improve children's well-being, whether children receive the support they need, and how much staff time and funding are required.

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