

Protecting Childhood from Economic Exploitation: A Sociological Reading

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Abstract

This article sheds light on the economic exploitation of children from a sociological perspective. It highlights the gap between international and national legal texts intended to protect children, and the reality of everyday practices in developing countries. The article analyzes the overlapping factors responsible for this gap. These include socio-economic conditions, cultural factors, weak monitoring mechanisms, and the absence of genuine political will.

The article also identifies the sociological characteristics of children who are most vulnerable to exploitation. These include children from poor and marginalized families, children who are not enrolled in school, children from broken families, children with disabilities, and girls engaged in hidden domestic work. The article concludes by proposing a number of mechanisms and measures that may contribute to the effective implementation of child protection procedures against economic exploitation.

Keywords: child labor; economic exploitation; child protection; sociology of childhood.

Introduction

The difficult economic conditions experienced by some countries in different parts of the world push families living under poverty and marginalization to send their children into the labor market at an early age. This exposes them to all forms of exploitation, especially economic exploitation.

This issue has drawn the attention of international organizations affiliated with the United Nations and its various agencies. These include bodies concerned with human rights, children's rights, and the International Labour Organization. Such institutions have developed a set of laws, conventions, and recommendations aimed at protecting children from the economic exploitation they may face in workplaces.

Despite the wide-ranging efforts made to eradicate this problem, the economic exploitation of children remains one of the major challenges facing the international community. This is due to the difficulty of putting these laws and conventions into practice for many reasons, especially in poor countries. It is also difficult to prove acts of exploitation, since they often occur in informal sectors that remain outside state supervision.

1. The Concept of the Child

Psychologists and sociologists define the child as “the young person from birth until social and psychological maturity is achieved, and until the elements of personality and selfhood are

completed through reaching adulthood, without relying on a minimum or maximum age limit for childhood” (Hamouda, 2007, p. 24).

It is clear that, according to this view, the definition of the child is not determined by a fixed or pre-established chronological age. Rather, it is related to the extent to which the child’s personality has developed and to the level of social maturity attained. This remains a relative matter. It differs from one individual to another and cannot be determined with precision. In some cases, it may require subjecting the person concerned to certain tests or assessments.

By contrast, the concept of the child in many legal texts adopted by international organizations is linked to a specific chronological age. This appears, for example, in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted under the title Children First in 1990. Article 1 of the Convention states: “A child means every human being below the age of eighteen years unless, under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier” (UNICEF, 1990, p. 65).

The same chronological age, namely eighteen years, was adopted by the International Labour Conference in Convention No. 182. Article 2 states: “The term child shall apply to all persons under the age of eighteen” (International Labour Conference, 1999, p. 2). This age was also adopted by many regional bodies, including the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child. Article 2 of the Charter defines a child as “every human being below the age of 18 years” (African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, 1990, Article 2).

2. The Concept of Child Labor

Child labor is defined as any productive activity performed by children, whether on a permanent or temporary basis. Children may work as wage earners, in which case they differ from adults mainly in terms of wages, since they usually receive less than adult workers. They may also work as apprentices for employers in return for symbolic compensation. Some may work in homes as domestic servants. Others may work for the benefit of their families without receiving any specific wage (Bouhadjar, 2015/2016, p. 82).

Another definition classifies the work performed by children as child labor when it has negative effects on the child’s life. This refers to work with the following characteristics:

- Work that places heavy burdens on the child and threatens the child’s safety, health, and well-being.
- Work that takes advantage of the child’s vulnerability and inability to defend his or her rights.
- Work that exploits children as cheap labor in place of adult labor.
- Work that uses the presence of children without contributing to their development.
- Work that hinders the child’s education and training and changes the course of his or her life and future (HRDO Center, 2015, p. 19).

According to this definition, any work that deprives children of their childhood, limits their physical and mental development, violates their dignity, or affects their education can be classified as child labor.

In this context, one of the objectives of the International Labour Organization is “to prevent the employment of children and to establish a system for the employment of young persons of both sexes in a manner that does not hinder their physical growth and does not prevent them from completing their education” (Hassan, 1971, p. 26).

In the same vein, a guidance note issued by the World Bank for borrowers stresses the need to respect children's rights and to avoid exposing them to risks at work. It states that children below the minimum working age may not be employed. In some developing countries, the minimum age for work is set at fourteen. Children under the age of eighteen may not be employed in connection with a project in a manner that is likely to be hazardous, to interfere with their education, or to be harmful to their health or to their physical, mental, spiritual, moral, or social development.

The guidance note further states that work considered hazardous for children includes any work whose nature, or the conditions under which it is carried out, is likely to endanger children's health, safety, or morals. Examples of hazardous and prohibited work for children include:

- a. Exposure to physical, psychological, or sexual abuse.
- b. Work underground, underwater, at heights, or in confined spaces.
- c. The use of dangerous machinery, equipment, or tools, or work involving the handling or transportation of heavy loads.
- d. Work under difficult conditions, such as long working hours, night work, or confinement within the employer's workplace (World Bank, 2018, p. 9).

3. Forms of Child Labor Prohibited by International Law

Conventions No. 138, concerning the minimum age for admission to employment, and No. 182, concerning the prohibition and immediate action for the elimination of the worst forms of child labor, jointly define the different types of work that are unacceptable under international standards.

For the international community, the term "child labor" does not include all work performed by children under the age of eighteen. There is general agreement that work carried out within legal frameworks, and which does not harm the child's health or development or prevent school attendance, may be a positive experience for children (International Labour Organization, 2006, p. 23).

At the same time, there is agreement on prohibiting forms of work that harm the child's best interests and dignity. These are the types of work classified by the International Labour Organization as prohibited for children.

Child labor prohibited under international law falls into three categories:

- The unconditional worst forms of child labor, internationally defined as slavery, trafficking, debt bondage, all forms of forced labor, the forced recruitment of children for use in armed conflict, prostitution, pornography, and illicit activities.
- Work performed by a child below the minimum age allowed for that particular type of work, as determined by national legislation and in accordance with recognized international standards. This also includes work that may hinder the child's education and full development.
- Work that threatens the child's physical, intellectual, or moral health, whether because of its nature or because of the conditions in which it is performed. This is known as "hazardous work" (International Labour Organization, 2006, p. 23).

The Save the Children publication provides examples of hazardous forms of child labor, including:

- Domestic service.

- Military service.
- Deep-sea fishing.
- Work in textile factories.
- Cotton harvesting.
- Stone quarrying.
- Construction work.
- Carpet weaving.
- Mining.
- Scavenging in waste sites.
- Brick-making (Save the Children Federation, 2017, p. 11).

4. General Trends in Child Labor

Child labor trends at the international level in general, and in the Arab region in particular, are marked by the following features:

- The rate of child labor increases with age. Higher rates are recorded among children aged 15 to 17, compared with children aged 5 to 14.
- Hazardous work is more common among adolescents aged 15 to 17. This age group therefore requires special attention.
- The rate of children engaged in work is higher among boys than among girls.

It should be noted that most statistical surveys conducted by international and regional organizations remain, to some extent, unable to reveal certain hidden forms of work performed by girls. These include domestic work and unpaid household services. Such forms require further study and verification (League of Arab States, 2019, p. 14).

Children working in domestic service are exposed to various forms of harm. These include physical and sexual abuse, long working hours, isolation, limited access to education, and sometimes total deprivation of education. The University of Nairobi reports that “children working in domestic service suffer from psychological problems far more than other children, whether working or non-working. Frequent headaches, nutritional problems, nightmares, exhaustion, and misery were commonly observed among child domestic workers” (United Nations, 2013, p. 6).

In general, child labor rates are higher in rural areas than in urban areas (League of Arab States, 2019, p. 14).

Quantitative evidence collected by bodies concerned with child labor also shows that the phenomenon reaches its highest levels in poor countries. A World Bank review states that where poverty and inequality prevail in a society, children are more likely to enter the labor market. They are also more likely to face exploitation. The small contribution made by a working child’s income to a poor family may be decisive. The same applies when a child helps with household tasks, allowing parents to work. In such cases, the child’s work may represent the thin line between hunger and subsistence. Successive surveys have confirmed this fact. A high proportion of working children hand over their entire wages to their families (Boulifa, n.d., p. 4).

There is therefore a strong relationship between poverty and child labor rates. In this regard, reports by international organizations concerned with child labor indicate that the highest national rates of child labor are found in Sub-Saharan African countries. The national rate of

working children is estimated at 47% in Cameroon and 49% in Somalia. In Guinea-Bissau and Benin, the rates reach 51% and 53% respectively. In Mali, the rate reaches 56%. It is therefore unsurprising that these countries record some of the lowest scores on the End of Childhood Index (Save the Children Federation, 2017, p. 11).

Reports by the International Labour Organization confirm that child labor perpetuates poverty across generations. It keeps the children of poor families out of school and limits their chances of social mobility. This waste of human capital has been linked to slow economic growth and weak social development. ILO studies have shown that eliminating child labor in developing and transition economies can generate economic benefits far greater than the costs involved. Most of these costs are related to investment in better school and social services (International Labour Organization, 2019, p. 42).

5. Factors Weakening the Effectiveness of Child Protection Mechanisms against Economic Exploitation in Developing Countries

Poor and developing countries often possess a broad body of laws and regulations aimed at protecting children from economic exploitation. Most of these are derived from international charters and conventions, especially the Convention on the Rights of the Child of 1989. These countries have also made efforts to protect children from all forms of exploitation.

Yet everyday practices in these countries reveal a wide gap between legal texts designed to protect children and a social reality that sharply contradicts them. This situation requires an examination of the factors that prevent these texts from being implemented in practice. These factors may be summarized as follows:

5.1. The Socio-Economic Factor

This factor is reflected in the inability of heads of households, especially large families, to secure a minimum level of subsistence. This is due to the absence or weakness of social and health protection, the spread of permanent or temporary unemployment, and low wages that fail to meet basic family needs. The situation becomes even worse when one of the parents falls ill.

Under the pressure of need and poverty, families may be forced to send their children into the labor market. This occurs mainly in sectors that do not require training or special skills, such as agriculture, herding, construction, and domestic work for girls. More generally, children are pushed into informal activities that are difficult for government authorities to reach. They work to obtain food and to contribute to the support of the family.

In such cases, parents shift from being natural and essential partners in protecting the child to becoming contributors to the child's exploitation. This is driven by the logic of survival. Monitoring then becomes ineffective, since parents themselves tend to conceal the practice.

5.2. The Cultural Factor

Some local communities are shaped by social customs and traditions that place family responsibilities on children. This is especially true of the eldest child, whether male or female. These practices are often justified as a way of teaching the child responsibility, self-reliance, family solidarity, and a trade.

Such a culture does not view these practices as exploitation or as a violation of children's rights. On the contrary, the working child may be presented as a model to be praised. These practices are seen as part of family socialization. As a result, they are transmitted from one generation

to another. Over time, they become deeply rooted cultural patterns that are difficult to abandon or change.

5.3. Weak Monitoring Mechanisms

Authorities in poor countries often find it difficult to monitor violations related to the economic exploitation of children. This is because such exploitation usually takes place in random and undeclared workplaces. These workplaces belong to informal activities that remain beyond the reach of state supervision.

Monitoring is also weakened by the shortage of resources. There is often a severe lack of inspectors in monitoring services, especially labor inspectors. Their capacities are also limited. This prevents them from detecting violations of the legislation in force.

In addition, administrative and financial corruption is widespread in these countries. Violations may be ignored in exchange for bribes. This is linked, in part, to the low wages of labor inspectors and police officers.

5.4. The Political Factor

Another factor is the absence of genuine political will to combat the economic exploitation of children. This may be due to the involvement of some political officials in such practices. It may also result from shared interests between officials and influential actors who practice this form of exploitation.

Such actors often have the ability to avoid prosecution and punishment. This is due to forms of administrative corruption, such as favoritism, clientelism, and patronage. At times, this corruption is justified under the pretext of preserving the political and social stability of the country.

In addition to the above, it is important to stress that certain objective conditions also contribute to the spread of child economic exploitation. These include insecurity caused by political coups, civil wars, sectarian conflicts, and ethnic conflicts in some developing countries. Such conditions lead to the displacement of families and to forced migration. They also expose the children of displaced and refugee families to exploitation, especially when these families find themselves without shelter.

Child exploitation also increases when state authority is absent or weakened. This often occurs during severe economic and financial crises. In such circumstances, the state becomes unable to provide families with the minimum conditions for a decent life. It may also be unable to provide institutions responsible for child welfare, such as free education. Child protection then becomes a secondary issue.

To summarize the points discussed above, developing countries may possess a legal arsenal derived from international instruments, such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child of 1989. However, everyday practice reveals a wide gap between legal texts and social reality. This gap is caused by several overlapping factors.

The first is socio-economic. It is represented by family poverty, weak social protection, and unemployment. These conditions force parents to send their children into the informal labor market, including agriculture, construction, and domestic work. Parents thus become partners in exploitation rather than protectors.

The second factor is cultural. Certain social norms reinforce the child's responsibility toward the family and consider work to be part of the child's upbringing. This turns such practices into inherited patterns that are difficult to change.

The third factor is the weakness of monitoring mechanisms. Authorities struggle to reach random and unlicensed workplaces. There is also a shortage of inspectors and a lack of resources. Administrative corruption and bribery further worsen the situation.

Finally, there is the political factor. This is reflected in the absence of genuine political will, either because some officials are involved or because influential actors are protected. Sometimes this is justified in the name of maintaining stability.

Objective conditions also aggravate the phenomenon. These include insecurity, civil wars, forced displacement, and severe economic crises. In such contexts, child protection becomes a secondary priority, as the state is unable to secure the minimum requirements of a decent life.

6. Sociological Characteristics of Children Most Vulnerable to Economic Exploitation

A review of sociological literature and reports issued by international organizations on the economic exploitation of children shows, from the outset, that children's vulnerability to economic exploitation is not randomly distributed. Rather, it is closely linked to social, economic, and political structures that reproduce vulnerability within society.

Certain categories of children are therefore more exposed to economic exploitation than others. The most prominent of these categories are the following:

6.1. Children from Families Living in Extreme Poverty and Marginalization

Poor and marginalized families often push their children into work in order to secure survival. In such cases, children become a source of income and an economic resource for the family.

6.2. Children Who Are Not Enrolled in School or Who Have Dropped Out

This is a vulnerable category that lacks protection. These children are easily exploited in informal labor market activities and in undeclared work.

6.3. Children from Disintegrated Families

This category includes orphans, homeless children, refugees, and irregular migrants. In addition to poverty and urgent need for work, these children suffer from legal vulnerability. This is often due to the irregular status of their residence in the host country and the absence of identity documents. As a result, they are excluded from the formal labor market and do not benefit from social care or protection.

Children living in disintegrated family situations, such as orphans and street children, are also exposed to exploitation because of the absence of supervision and social protection. They are often unable to access the basic services required for a decent life.

6.4. Children with Disabilities

Children with disabilities may be exploited in marginal work or in illegal activities, such as begging and drug trafficking.

6.5. Girls in Hidden Domestic Work

Girls engaged in hidden domestic work are exposed to concealed forms of exploitation. They often work for long hours and live in complete isolation from their families and friends. This may lead to physical and psychological illness as a result of constant tension and psychological pressure.

A report issued by the World Health Organization in 1987 stated that psychological stress, premature aging, depression, and low self-esteem are common symptoms among young domestic servants (De Ferranti, 1997, p. 11).

What is striking about the economic exploitation of children is that it is not limited to poor countries. It also exists in very wealthy countries. Amartya Sen drew attention to this point in his book *Development as Freedom*. He noted that richer countries often include large numbers of people deprived of basic needs and basic opportunities. These include access to health care, functional education, paid employment, and economic and social security. He further observed that, even in very wealthy countries, the average life expectancy of some groups of citizens may not exceed that found in much poorer economies, commonly referred to as Third World economies (Sen, 2024, p. 35).

7. Mechanisms for Overcoming the Non-Implementation of Protection Laws

7.1. Cultural Awareness and Changing Social Norms

Some social norms that encourage the economic exploitation of children should be reassessed. Work should be done to change them through long-term interventions. This is especially important in protracted crises or during transitional phases from humanitarian conditions to development settings (Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, 2019, p. 103).

A culture of reporting should also be promoted among citizens. This should include reporting all cases of exploitation and abuse affecting both boys and girls. Reporting may also be made mandatory. Concealment and failure to report may be treated as punishable offenses (Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, 2019, p. 109).

Families should also be guided and made aware of the negative consequences of sending their children into work at an early age.

7.2. Institutional and Technical Innovation

Digital applications should be developed to facilitate the reporting of cases of child economic exploitation. These applications should guarantee confidentiality and protection for those who report.

Specialized human resources should also be trained in the field of child protection from economic exploitation.

A child protection agency should be established and granted legal personality. Its general role should be to coordinate, monitor, encourage, and supervise the activities of child protection committees and all child protection service providers.

The state must provide sufficient funds to establish and operate this agency. The child protection agency should be responsible for monitoring the implementation of the law and the general situation of child protection in the country. It should also submit periodic reports on all its activities to the competent authorities.

These reports should address cases in which children are exposed to the risk of neglect, harm, abuse, or exploitation. They should also examine the root causes of such cases and the response required under the law and public child protection policies. These reports should be made available to the general public (International Centre for Missing and Exploited Children, 2013, p. 13).

Government centers should also be created to receive children who are most vulnerable to economic exploitation. These children should remain in such centers until they reach adulthood. They should also benefit from vocational training that enables them to practice a profession in the future.

7.3. Education and Training

Scientific conferences and study days should be organized under the supervision of reputable academic bodies. These events should aim to draw the attention of government officials to the seriousness of the economic exploitation of children in dangerous and degrading work.

Greater attention should be given to education, especially basic education. It should be made free of charge. Schools should also be made more accessible to local populations, especially in rural areas and popular urban neighborhoods.

Educational programs should receive greater care. They should be adapted to labor market needs in a way that increases future employment opportunities. This would make schooling more attractive. It would also make parents more willing to educate their children, since education would be seen as a path to social mobility and a way out of poverty.

Financial assistance should be provided to poor families so that they can care for their children and ensure their rights to education and health. This means expanding social protection, especially for vulnerable groups in society.

The competent authorities should also work seriously to address all problems that lead to school dropout. This is particularly important in the later stages of education. Dropout children should be reintegrated so that they do not become vulnerable to exploitation.

7.4. Economic and Social Policies

Poverty and marginalization should be combated by increasing family income. Poverty is a main cause of the economic exploitation of children.

Decent work for adults should also be provided and strengthened. Decent work gives workers important benefits, such as continuity of employment, which enhances job security. It also provides fair wages that ensure a decent life for workers and their families. In addition, it gives workers and their families access to social insurance and social protection.

When adults have decent work, children can live in dignity. They are not forced to enter the world of work at an early age. This reduces their exposure to economic exploitation.

7.5. Research and Data

A unified and comprehensive database, or information bank, on child labor should be established. This would allow the competent authorities and researchers to understand the phenomenon accurately. It would also help them monitor it and follow its development.

Such a database should include the scale of the phenomenon, such as the number of children who are victims of exploitation. It should also include the qualitative characteristics of these children, such as age and gender. It should provide information on their social characteristics, including the nature of the families to which they belong.

It should also include the geographical and regional distribution of victims, whether in cities or rural areas. In addition, it should record the economic levels of the families from which exploited children come. After analysis, these data could help propose solutions to reduce or limit the spread of the phenomenon.

7.6. Coordination and Partnership

Employers, labor organizations, and civil society organizations should be involved in the prevention of child labor and in the response to it. They should also participate in the economic empowerment of children who have reached the legal working age (Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, 2019, p. 126).

Efforts should be coordinated among all actors working in the field of childhood at the national level. These include ministries, public bodies, associations, and other institutions. This

coordination is necessary to contain and control the phenomenon. Experiences should also be exchanged between countries in order to benefit from successful practices in child protection.

Conclusion

At the end of this sociological reading of the economic exploitation of children, it can be said that the seriousness of this phenomenon lies not only in the deep effects it leaves on the lives of millions of children around the world. It also lies in the sharp contradiction between the global consensus on child protection, as expressed in international conventions and charters, and the inability of developing countries in particular to translate this consensus into lived reality.

The analysis has shown that the phenomenon is not merely a legal violation that can be addressed by adding more legislative texts. It is a complex problem in which fragile economic structures intersect with entrenched cultural systems and unstable political and security contexts. These economic structures include poverty, unemployment, and the absence of social protection. The cultural systems include norms that glorify the child's early "responsibility." This means that any effective strategy to combat the economic exploitation of children cannot be limited to awareness campaigns or to increasing the number of labor inspectors. It must adopt a comprehensive and integrated approach.

Such an approach should combine the improvement of living conditions for poor families, the transformation of cultural perceptions through education and community dialogue, the development of innovative and independent monitoring mechanisms, and the establishment of genuine political will. This political will must not tolerate corruption. It must also refuse to justify exploitation in the name of stability.

Protecting childhood today is not a moral luxury. It is an investment in the human capital of the future. It is also a real test of the extent to which societies are committed to justice and human dignity.

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