

UNDERAGE LABOR, HUMAN ASSET ORCHESTRATION AND ECONOMIC PROGRESS THEORY AND POLICY

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- **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this paper is to pull together the emerging theoretical and empirical literature on the economics of child labour, and to draw out the underlying commonalities between various contributions in this field. In doing so, we also identify various policy options and their relative merits.

1. Introduction

Child labour is an emotive subject, the discussion of which is often charged with passion. People sometimes think about it with their hearts rather than with their heads. What is a child labourer? Following the lead given by the International Labour Organisation (ILO), a person of age less than 15 years is taken to be a “child”. A child is a “labourer” if he or she is “economically active” regardless of his/her occupational status (wage-earners, own account workers, unpaid family workers, etc). Household work performed in parental homes is not counted as child labour. Even with this definition, it is quite difficult to estimate the extent of child labour.¹ There are now, however, fairly reliable estimates, and according to recent studies by the ILO (ILO (1996), Ashagrie (1993)), there are about 120 million children in the world who work full-time and the number goes up to 250 million if one also counts part-time workers.

About three quarters of the world's child labourers live in Asia and about one-fifth in Africa. The high figure for Asia reflects its very high share in the world's population. The picture is different in terms of participation rates: in Asia, about 10 percent of children in the 10-14 age-group are economically active, while the corresponding figure for Africa is about 25 percent. The problem is thus more severe in Africa than in Asia. On the positive side, these figures have been falling over the last fifty years. In 1950, the corresponding figures were 36 percent for Asia and 38.5 percent for Africa. Again, the decline has been slower in Africa than in Asia.

existent in the United Kingdom these days, it has not been so long since children worked in large numbers and for long hours. In 1861, when the per-capita income of the UK (in 1979 prices) was US\$695, about 30 percent of British children in the 10-14 age group worked. In comparison, in 1979, when the per-capita income was merely US\$200 (in 1979 prices), about 21 percent of the Indian children in the 10-14 age group worked. In this sense one may say that the incidence of child labour was a lot more objectionable in the United Kingdom in 1861 than it is in the developing countries today.

In view of these facts, one may be puzzled by the trend in the concern for child labour: while the incidence of child labour is falling, the concern for it is rising! The globalisation of the world economy could have something to do with this. Because of globalisation, information on child labour across the globe is now readily available to academics and activists. More importantly, goods produced by children in less developed countries are now easily available to consumers in the developed world.

This has, as Basu (1999) notes, "Brought two different kinds of people on the same platform --- individuals who are genuinely concerned about the plight of children in poor countries and those who comprise forces of protectionism in the developed countries." This was evident on the streets of Seattle and Prague where very diverse groups protested against "globalisation". One can possibly go a step further and say that protectionist forces are in fact hijacking the genuine concerns of altruistic individuals. Some people view this sudden increase in concern for child labour in the developed world as a reaction to the recently concluded Uruguay Round of the GATT (see, for example, Bhagwati (1995), Fields (1994), Maskus and Holman (1996), Rodrik (1996), Srinivasan (1996) and Basu (1999)). It was agreed in the Uruguay Round that existing protection against imports of agricultural goods and textiles into the developed world would be removed. Against this background, it is worth noting that the groups that are preparing league tables of stores and supermarkets involved in "unethical trade" (i.e., importing goods from the less developed countries produced by children) are targeting, wittingly or unwittingly, precisely the products on which protections are to be removed. Also, after intense lobbying from protectionist forces, the US administration is reportedly pushing for the inclusion of "international labour standards" and a "social clause" in the World Trade Organisation charter.

It is to be noted that, according to UNICEF, only 5 percent of child labourers are employed in the tradeable sector. Therefore, trade sanctions against products produced by child labour are unlikely to have a significant effect on the incidence of

child labour. There is some evidence to suggest that such measures could even be counter productive. For example, in 1993 under threat of trade sanctions from the US Congress, employers in the garment industry of Bangladesh sacked about 50,000 child labourers -- 75 percent of the total then employed -- from the garment industry.

Researchers subsequently found that very few of the dismissed children had entered education; most had taken up even more hazardous jobs in leatherwork, brick-making etc., with some of the children even having entered prostitution (see UNICEF (1997)). As a result of such findings, many international institutions are now either focusing on the “worst forms” child labour,² or are trying alternative instruments to reduce the incidence of child labour.³

Although one needs to be cognizant of the motives behind “concerns” for child labour, the fact that large numbers of children work instead of going to school in developing countries is without any doubt very unfortunate. Everything should be done to rectify this as quickly as is possible.⁴ The crucial question, however, is what sort of action should be taken to eliminate, or at least reduce the incidence of, child labour. In order to arrive at the right policy prescriptions, it is vitally important that we understand why children work.

In recent years, there has been a growing effort by economists to study the causes and possible cures for child labour. This is in great part out of concern that, in the absence of proper research and analysis, pressure groups in developed countries might force through policy measures which end up worsening the situation facing children and their families in the developing world. As a result, many studies have come to the fore recently, of which many are theoretical and even more are based on micro-econometric research.⁵ The latter has been facilitated by the availability of a large number of data sets from several developing countries.⁶

In this article, we shall review the emerging literature and highlight the policy

The ILO, for example, has recently come up with a new Convention on the worst forms of child labour such as bonded child labour, child soldiers, child prostitutes, child labour in hazardous work as in glass factories etc.

For example, the World Bank has been trying pilot projects in which poor Why do Children Work? Theory and Evidence:

Economic theories of child labour have, with few exceptions, been based on some shared premises. First, that child labour is socially undesirable and its reduction a

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worthy goal. Second, that there are other, more desirable, activities in which a child can engage, namely school attendance and leisure. Third, that the child labour decision is the prerogative not of the child but of a parent. However, the parent is motivated not by narrow self-interest but by a benevolent and rational outlook which takes into account the welfare of the whole household, including that of the child. In this context, the parent shares in the undesirable consequences of child labour, through the introduction of a psychological cost of children working upon the parent.

If parents dislike child labour, then the decision to impose it upon their children must be based on the economic conditions facing the household. It is fair to say that a single factor has been emphasised in all economic explanations of child labour: abject poverty.⁷ But in precisely what fashion does poverty influence child labour? This is where differences arise.

1.1. Child labour and adult labour:

One strand of the literature has focused on the interactions between the adult and child labour markets. In a seminal paper, Basu and Van (1998) show that the link between child labour and parental poverty can be mutually reinforcing. They construct a model

It should however be pointed out that poverty is not the only factor. As pointed out in UNICEF in which children can either work or enjoy leisure. Parents value the latter and not the former. However, child leisure is a “luxury” in that only sufficiently rich households can afford to “buy” it. Also, child workers can substitute for adult workers in the labour market, even though each child may be only fractionally as productive as an adult. This substitutability implies that entry into the workforce by children leads to a fall in wages for adults. These assumptions lead to the possibility of dual labour market outcomes. One outcome is a “good” one in which children do not work. This allows adult wages to be high enough to rationalise each household's purchase of child leisure. The other outcome is a “bad” one in which all households send children to work. Under competition from child workers, adult wages remain low. This reinforces the absence of child leisure.

These possibilities bear several interesting implications. First, individual households have no control over which outcome occurs. Even if individual parents were to withdraw their own children from work, this would raise market wages only slightly;

A second implication is that child labour is not uniquely tied to an economy's level of development. If we imagine that as an economy grows, so does the overall level of wages, then it is possible that in a sufficiently advanced economy wages are so high that, even under potential competition from children, adults would earn enough to afford not having children work. In this case, a bad outcome cannot arise. At the other extreme, in an extremely poor economy, adult wages would be low even without competition from children; hence, a good equilibrium could not be sustained. In between these two extremes, there may be economies that, for a given level of development, are capable of producing either outcome. This implies that economic growth may by itself not eliminate child labour in the short to medium run, at least not in a predictable fashion.

1.2. Child labour and credit markets:

A second strand of research has studied the tradeoff between labour and schooling. This overlaps with a large and influential body of research, known as "endogenous growth theory". This theory maintains that long-run, sustainable growth is made possible by continuous increases in an economy's stock of knowledge. Education plays an integral part in this process by disseminating knowledge across the population. There are also spillover effects: in an economy where a large proportion of workers is educated, even the uneducated ones are more productive and receive high wages. A high incidence of child labour obviously interferes with these mechanisms of economic prosperity and growth.

Credit markets can affect the tradeoff between child labour and schooling. It is widely believed that by acquiring at least primary education, children are able to enhance their wage-earning potential later in life. Whether this is true or not is open to question, one that we shall discuss later on. In any case, any increase in wages accrues only after the schooling process is over, which could take five years at the minimum. During this period, the household forgoes the income the child could have earned by working instead.¹⁰ If households could borrow at reasonable terms against the child's higher future earnings, sending children to work might be unnecessary. In the absence of credit, however, the lost income from the child's formative years could very well

Journal of Systems Engineering and Electronics (ISSN NO: 1671-1793) Volume 33 ISSUE 7 2023 tilt the balance against schooling. Cain (1977) found that whereas children from landless families worked only after the age of twelve, when they became employable as wage labourers, those from small land-owning subsistence farming families worked on family plots from a much earlier age.

1.3. Education Quality and Child Labour:

As mentioned in the preceding subsection, credit markets can affect the tradeoff between child labour and schooling. The extent of this tradeoff depends, *inter alia*, upon the returns to education, which in turn depend upon the quality of schools. Most economists assume that the returns to education are high enough so that in the presence of a perfectly functioning credit market, child labour would not exist. This is partly under the influence of the empirical literature on endogenous growth theory, which has found that higher schooling levels in developing countries can have growth-enhancing effects on their economies. However, even if the overall impact of schooling is positive, this does not mean that all schools in a country impart an education of sufficient quality to benefit its recipients.¹³

There is now a large empirical literature on the returns to schooling in developing countries. The exact findings of this literature are mixed, varying from country to country and study to study. For example, Psacharopoulos (1994) reports discounted The data were obtained from the Village Level Studies survey, conducted by the International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT) and reported in Walker and Ryan (1990).

¹³ Even if the returns to education are not as high as assumed in some studies, this does not devalue them. Such assumptions allow these studies to focus on other issues, such as inadequacies of the credit market, which constitute separate causes of child labour. Rates of return on the order of 20-40 percent for primary schooling in Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. Such rates of return imply that borrowing for children's education would be profitable even at interest rates of 20 percent per annum or higher.¹⁴ Psacharopoulos's findings are based on a compilation of results from many studies, chosen more for the quality of their analysis than the comparability of their data. So the reported estimates should be treated as representative of country- and region-wide averages.

Studies which have more specifically focused on the education provided to rural areas

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and to the poor who live in urban areas often present a very different picture. A recent study of India by the PROBE team (1999) was not very optimistic. The team carried out a detailed study on the nature of education in five states in northern India. It found that the state of basic education was appalling and even though parents valued education on its own right, they believed that their children were unlikely to benefit from education in its current state. Drèze and Gandhi-Kingdon (2000) also found that in India the quality of education to a great extent affects the decision on participation in education.¹⁵ UNICEF (1997) cited low quality of schooling as a reason for high drop out rates among primary school students in developing countries: an average of 30 percent, rising in some countries to 60 percent.

In Jafarey and Lahiri (2000, 2000a), child labour can co-exist with child schooling even though credit markets are perfect. This is possible for two reasons: low returns from basic education and the existence of a direct disutility that parents receive if their children work (i.e. if they do not attend school). A low rate of return to basic education makes the discounted value of returns from education negative. This negative pecuniary return, could rule out schooling altogether. But, because of the non-pecuniary benefits the parents receive from seeing their children educated, they do choose a certain amount of schooling as well. On balance, parents choose positive

Note, however, that the absence of organized credit markets means that even 20 percent interest on borrowing remains outside the reach of most poor people. In many countries, the only source of finance is in the hands of landowners or professional moneylenders, who can charge interest rates of over 100 percent a year.

See also Cohen and House (1994) and Saha and Sarkar (1999) for micro-evidence on the low returns to schooling in developing countries.

A survey of child workers from working-class backgrounds in Karachi found that, of those who had ever enrolled in school, 95 percent had dropped out without completing the primary stage (PILER (1998). levels of both schooling and labour.

Note that in rural areas of many developing countries, there are few opportunities for well-off households to provide better quality schooling to their children than that available to poor households. If the rural rich had access to schooling which significantly enhanced their children's future earnings, they might be willing to forsake the contribution made by their children by working on family farms. Hence,

1.4. Child Labour and Poverty Traps:

While all economic studies touch upon poverty as a causal factor in child labour, one branch of the literature emphasises the reverse, i.e. child labour as a cause of poverty. This literature studies child labour decisions for successive generations of the same family. In any generation, children who work do not go to school and do not acquire the skills needed to earn decent wages as adults.¹⁷ Upon becoming parents themselves, they send their own children to work. Yet another generation misses out on an education and, in its own turn, sends its own children to work. This vicious circle is known as a “poverty trap”.

Basu (1999) outlines a rudimentary model of a poverty trap. The main idea is that schooling cannot be undertaken piecemeal. A child either enrolls full-time or not at all. Thus, sending a child to school implies sacrificing a “lump” of income that the child could have earned by working all those hours.¹⁸ Only parents with a minimum skill level of their own earn enough to be able to forsake this lump of income. Such parents bequeath a legacy of education and affluence to their coming generations. Parents who are unskilled themselves do not send their children to school. This sets off a legacy of child labour, lack of schooling and poverty down through the

¹⁷ It is possible that child workers gain work experience which also enhances their skills in later life. This literature does not rule that possibility out; however, it assumes that education leads to a greater increase in a child's future skills than work experience. Generations. Note that credit markets are absent in this analysis; hence, forsaking the low wages of a child worker in exchange for the high wages the child would receive as an educated adult entails a “sacrifice”.

Ranjan (1999a) links poverty traps to the distribution of income. Consider two societies which have the same level of aggregate income. One society starts off with its income equally distributed, the other with a distribution that is greatly skewed in favour of the rich. It is possible that in the first society, every parent has the minimum level of income needed to afford needed to put children through school, while in the second society, only a few households will be able to afford the sacrifice of their children's wages. The first society will evolve through time equitably and with universal education for its children, while the second society will polarise into a

Dessy (2000) extends the analysis of poverty trap mechanisms to encompass fertility choices. Instead of lumpiness in schooling time, Dessy emphasises the time needed for child care: for each child, a certain portion of the parent's time has to be devoted to child care, i.e. taken out of income-earning activity. The greater the number of children, the less income is earned by the parent and the more the incentive to rely on child labour rather than send children to school. As in the earlier papers, a vicious circle is possible. Parents with low skills (and low wages) have, on the one hand, less to lose by not working and taking care of children instead and, on the other, more to gain by having each child work. Hence, a poverty trap develops with low parental skills, high fertility and child labour reinforcing each other through the generations.¹⁹

In one empirical test of this branch of the literature, Ranjan (1999b) used cross-country data from a variety of sources and found that the level of income inequality in each country, as measured by what is known as the Gini coefficient, did have note that schooling also involves costs such as tuition fees, books, and transportation. These contribute to the "lumpiness" of the income sacrifice needed for children to attend school. Hence, the assumption that schooling cannot be taken piecemeal is not crucial.

¹⁹ Of course, at the other end, there is a virtuous circle of high parental skill, low fertility and child schooling. Note that parents are completely altruistic in both types of outcomes. Children, in themselves, are a source of satisfaction. For those caught in a poverty trap, large families compensate (only partly) for the poverty that each generation finds itself in. Those who escape this trap, on the other hand, derive most of their pleasure from high levels of consumption per family member.

Significant and positive effect on the incidence of child labour in that country.²⁰ This was not a direct test of a poverty trap. At the very least, such a test requires testing for the possibility that a parent's lack of education can in itself be a factor behind a child not attending school.

Emerson and de Souza (2000) have explicitly tested for such evidence using survey data from Brazil.²¹ They found strong evidence of intergenerational persistence in child labour: if the parents had joined the workforce at an early age, this increased the likelihood of the child joining at an early age. Higher parental educational attainment lowers the probability of child labour. Grandparents' education also lowers the

Evidence that lack of parental education contributes to child labour is also provided by Ray (1999) for India and Grootaert (1998) for the Ivory Coast. Certain aspects of each of these papers are worthy of separate mention. Ray, for example, also finds that households with a large number of siblings are more likely to send children to work than to school. This is consistent with one of the predictions of Dessy's (2000) model.

Grootaert (1998) finds one circumstance in which parental education can *encourage* child labour, i.e. he finds that an increase in a mother's education can positively affect the labour supply of daughters. This result may be explained by appeal to another of his findings, namely the existence of a bias against female education. Girls who do not engage in paid work are not sent to school in the first place; they are obliged to help their mother do housework. As a mother's labour market prospects improve with

The Gini coefficient is one measure of income inequality in an economy. It varies between a hypothetical value of 0, which reflects the case when all households have the same income, and that of unity, which reflects the case where the richest household (or collection of households) monopolise all the income and no one else has any.

²¹ The data were from *Pesquisa Nacional por Amostragem a Domicilio* (PNAD) survey of 1996, covering approximately 85,000 households and providing economic characteristics for two generations within each family, as well as information on the educational attainment of grandparents.

²² The empirical papers discussed here have explicitly connected schooling decisions to child labour. In addition, there is a very large literature which has focused purely on the determinants of school enrollment in developing countries. This literature is too large to be cited here, but is in general agreement with the findings of the papers discussed above.

her own education, she does less housework and releases the girls into paid labour. As in Ilahi (1999), it appears that gender bias is an important part of the child labour story.

Apart from studying how parental education affects child labour, Emerson and de

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Souza (2000) also studied whether child labour in turn perpetuates poverty. They divided the effect of child labour on lifetime wages into two components: a direct one, which (essentially) gives the change in lifetime wages due to having worked instead of having played, and an indirect one, which gives the change in lifetime wages due to having worked instead of having gone to school. They found both effects to be negative. These findings are closely paralleled by Ilahi and Sedlacek (2000) who, using the same survey as Emerson and de Souza, report that the indirect effect on future wages of missing out on education is at least three times larger than the direct effect from early entry into the workforce. The latter effect, however, remains negative as in Emerson and de Souza. These studies together point to a very disturbing conclusion: children who work will earn less as adults than children who just stayed home and played -- the benefits of gaining work experience are outweighed by the losses to physical and emotional well being for child workers.

2. Policy Options:

Having discussed various reasons for the existence of child labour, we now turn to their policy implications for reducing or eliminating it.

In the context of their dual-outcome framework, Basu and Van (1998) suggest that a ban on child labour can, by coordinating the removal of children across the economy, rule out the bad outcome. Indeed, by leading to a high-wage outcome in which parents are quite happy not to send children to work, such a ban can be self-implementing.

Dessy (2000) advocates a similar policy with a slightly different twist: instead of a ban on children working, he suggests that making education compulsory can prevent an economy from settling into a poverty trap with a high fertility rates and high incidence of child labour. Unlike Basu and Van's framework, however, Dessy's argument does not depend on the possibility of multiple outcomes for households of a given income class. Forcing poor households to send their children to school is not going to imminently produce a "good" outcome in which they are content with that choice. While a good outcome will be reached by later generations, the immediate impact of compulsory education would make existing generations of a poor dynasty

There are also practical differences between a ban on child labour and a policy of compulsory education. Assuming they are both perfectly effective, a ban on child labour cannot guarantee that children will enrol in schools, while compelling children to attend schools will not ensure that children will not work. This is because in practice labour and schooling are not the only activities open to children; there is some slack in their time, taken up by leisure and household chores. Ravallion and Wodon (2000), for example, have found that policies that have increased school enrollment in Bangladesh have not had much impact on reducing the incidence of child labour.

Should compulsive measures be used in practice? In the case of a ban on children working, one problem would be the time lag between children stopping to work and an increase in adult wages to the required level. In the intervening time, there could be a significant loss of income for those affected, implying that temporary safeguards for poor families might be in order here as well. Further, while the logic of dual labour market outcomes supports the use of a ban, if child labour exists not because of a dual outcome, but simply because the economy is poor, a ban will not raise parents' wages by enough to reconcile them to its absence.²³ In this case, and assuming that a ban cannot be enforced outside sectors of the economy which fall within the government's purview in the first place, parents might move their children into informal sector jobs where working conditions might, if anything, be worse. While adult wages would rise following the withdrawal of children from work, this would have to be balanced against the income loss due to children stopping work. In a poor economy, even if overall household income rose on balance, the rise would not be sufficient to make parents happy with not sending children to work. Of course, there is the possibility that, on balance, overall household income falls. This would simply add to the burden of poverty.

²⁴ Recall the case of the garment industry in Bangladesh, where employers initiated a voluntary ban on child labour (UNICEF (1997)).

3. Conclusion:

During the last decade, the issue of child labour taken centre stage in policy debates on development. It has been a thorny issue for many international institutions such as the World Bank, ILO, UNICEF, UNESCO, UNCHR, WTO, etc. Many national

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development institutions, such as the DFID in the United Kingdom, have also been taking this issue very seriously. Furthermore, there are numerous non-governmental Jafarey and Lahiri (2000b) establish this implication formally. Consider a hypothetical social planner who has been endowed with a fixed quantity of resources to allocate between the two policy instruments. The planner decides the allocation in order to minimise the incidence of child labour in the economy. Jafarey and Lahiri (2000b) show that while both policies should be funded, the better the credit market conditions facing poor households in the economy, the greater should be the share of funds devoted to improving school quality. Organisations (NGOs) which deal exclusively with the problem of child labour. The globalisation in the world economy has also been leading to demands for the globalisation of accountability, especially of those who employ child labour.

The recent academic literature on child labour started to surface about three or four years ago. However, this literature has already grown very rapidly on both theoretical and empirical fronts. The main question that it has addressed is: why do children work? Many arguments have been put forward and many empirical studies have tried to test the resulting hypotheses. Empirical studies have also uncovered aspects of the problem which have as yet not received attention in the theoretical literature: the gender dimension of child labour being one.

In this article, we have attempted to discuss the growing literature in an integrated fashion. As should be clear from the discussion, child labour is a complex issue and it has no simple solution. Among the factors that have been identified as prime causes are poverty, poor quality of education, lack of credit opportunities, high inequality of income, high degree of uncertainty facing the poor, and inequality between the sexes. As for policy options, it is now becoming clear that what is needed a combination of policy measures that attack the causes outline above. Among these are: better credit opportunities, investments in education quality, empowerment of the poor with basic economic, social and cultural rights, and some degree of legal measures such as compulsory schooling and banning of child labour, particularly of the worst kind. What is more or less universally believed is that trade sanctions and unilateral consumer boycotts are likely to make things worse.

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