

Child Labor Between Hope and Reality: A Psycho-Sociological Study

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Abstract---The present study aims to uncover the underlying causes of the phenomenon of child labor from a psychosociological perspective, as it has emerged as a threat to both society and the individual. The child represents the cornerstone of any society and embodies its future; however, this future requires security and protection—conditions that are incompatible with the world of labor. Every child has the right to live in dignity, and it is the responsibility of the society in which he or she lives to guarantee that right. Since the family constitutes the primary nucleus of society and serves as the institution most responsible for ensuring the child's safety and emotional stability, it becomes imperative for researchers and specialists to explore the factors that compel children to work, whether within or beyond the family environment. Numerous studies and research works, both Arab and international, and across various scientific disciplines, have examined this issue. Despite its social sensitivity, the alarming growth of child labor calls for comprehensive academic attention. Statistical reports have indicated a significant increase in child labor rates, a development that threatens to shape a future society marked by psychological, physical, and economic impairment.

Keywords---Child, Labor, Child Labor.

Introduction

The child is a fragile element within society. Although he represents the man of the future and the woman of the future—in fact, the very essence of the future—he lacks many elements of strength during the early stages of life, particularly in childhood. This period constitutes a stage of formation and growth, during which the child remains in critical need of others.

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A child requires material security—food, clothing, and shelter—to live with dignity, alongside emotional needs such as self-esteem and self-worth. These needs are cultivated by the family and the community through praise, encouragement, and rewards for good deeds, moral conduct, and academic effort. Such reinforcement enables the child to discover and nurture talents that may eventually lead to the emergence of future scientists, doctors, engineers, and responsible citizens.

However, the reality observed today reveals children burdened with responsibilities that even some adults struggle to endure, such as earning a living for themselves or, at times, supporting their entire families. This situation confines them within a continuous struggle for survival, depriving them of dreams and aspirations for a promising future. Consequently, they begin to perceive life through a dark and hopeless lens—resulting in disheartened youth, troubled men, conflicted fathers, and ultimately, a society afflicted by imbalance and despair.

As the saying goes, “When the cause is known, the wonder ceases.” In seeking to contribute to addressing this distressing phenomenon, it becomes essential first to examine its root causes from both psychological and sociological perspectives. These two dimensions offer direct and indirect insight into this multifaceted problem, which cannot be effectively addressed without the concerted efforts of researchers from various scientific domains—psychological, social, economic, legal, and others.

First: The General Framework of the Study

1. Theoretical Background of the Study:

Scientific research constitutes an interconnected sequence in which no link can be detached from another; the findings of one study often serve as the foundation for subsequent research, whether theoretical or empirical. Therefore, it is essential to review previous studies and scholarly works that have examined aspects related to the topic of the present study. Among the most significant works relevant to this research are the following:

Sami Abdel-Qawi and Mona Abu Teira (1999), in their study *“Child Labor: A Psychological and Social Study,”* found that the most influential factors contributing to child labor are economic conditions and the educational level of parents.

Another study by Adel Azar and Nahed Ramzy (2001), titled *“Towards an Integrated Strategy to Address the Problem of Child Labor within the Framework of the Convention on the Rights of the Child,”* revealed that one of the main causes of child labor is early academic failure and families’ lack of concern to address this failure, which stems from their low educational attainment and limited perception of the value of education.

Additionally, a study by Nahed Ramzy and Adel Azar (1991), titled *“The Psychological and Health Dimensions of the Phenomenon of Child Labor in Egypt,”* demonstrated that working children experience poor psychological, social, and general adjustment.

2. The Problem Statement:

Child labor is a negative social phenomenon that has existed since the dawn of humanity. Throughout history, societies have witnessed its spread in varying degrees and diverse forms.

Its severity differs from one society to another, depending on the level of development, awareness, and prevailing culture, as well as the structure of social classes and lifestyles. This variability has led to viewing child labor as a social disorder rather than merely a criminal act. Combating it requires collective cooperation and concerted efforts to contain this phenomenon, whose expansion threatens to destroy the social fabric and undermine the foundations of a healthy social structure. It serves as an alarm bell—a warning that society must heed carefully and respond to swiftly, at the very least by implementing preventive measures against potential dangers, while simultaneously addressing the current manifestations of the issue.

- A child is a human being far more vulnerable than an adult, which makes him dependent on others to gain strength in facing life's challenges, resolving problems, and building a sound personality that leads to maturity and self-reliance.
- One of the most crucial supports a child relies upon in confronting the various daily challenges he encounters is the availability of material resources and a stable family life. The family serves as his safe haven and warm shelter, from which he derives affection, compassion, and emotional nourishment essential for his psychological and social development. However, it is evident that in some societies in general, and within certain families in particular, the child receives the opposite of what he needs—being required to earn money and work instead of being provided with care and protection.
- The family is, therefore, a vital institution in an individual's life, given its role in fulfilling basic human needs and ensuring proper socialization that enables positive integration into the wider community. In this regard, both Mohamed Owaidah (1996) and Abdel Rahman Bukhari (1997) affirm that during the early years of life, the child is more closely attached to his family environment than to any other. Within the family, he acquires essential experiences that contribute to his physical, psychological, emotional, cognitive, and social development. If the family environment provides suitable conditions that meet the child's needs for social harmony, successful adaptation to the social environment becomes attainable. However, if that environment is characterized by deprivation, frustration, conflict, and disintegration, the effects on the child's personality are profoundly negative (Arbadi, 2004, p.17).
- Consequently, sending a child to work constitutes one of the most severe and dangerous forms of deprivation. This reality has prompted an investigation into the causes of child labor from psychological and social perspectives, through the following central question: **What are the causes of child labor from a psychosocial perspective?**

Second: Literature Review

1. Study Terminology:

Child:

According to the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* issued by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), Article 1 defines a child as:

"Every human being below the age of eighteen years unless, under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier."

This means that a child is an individual who still requires care and guardianship and is not yet capable of bearing civil and social responsibilities independently (Ben Halilem, 2014, p.25).

Concept of Work:

The concept of work has evolved in the modern era to encompass broader meanings related to life, existence, self-realization, and social status. Adam Smith viewed labor as the foundation of all wealth, prosperity, and progress.

Regarding child labor, children often begin working at a very young age—sometimes as early as four or five years old in certain regions. Despite their tender age, they perform tasks identical to those assigned to adults. Employers frequently prefer hiring children because they accept lower wages, are more compliant, and less likely to voice complaints. These very characteristics have long contributed to the widespread exploitation of children. Therefore, defining child labor necessitates determining the age at which a child's participation in work becomes unacceptable and legally prohibited (Ben Aissa, 2016, p.177).

Discussing the concept of child labor first requires identifying who qualifies as a child. According to Article 1 of the *International Convention on the Rights of the Child*, a child is defined as any human being below the age of eighteen, unless majority is attained earlier in accordance with applicable law.

This definition recognizes that the concept of childhood varies from one country to another and from one society to another. In many societies, childhood does not necessarily end at a specific age, as the

transition to maturity and adulthood may occur earlier or later than eighteen. This implies that there are other determinants of childhood beyond chronological age (Mahmoud, 2002, p.11).

2. Parental Responsibility Toward Children:

The relationship between parents and children is a natural one rooted in obedience to God. It encompasses mutual rights and duties between both parties: parents bear the responsibility of ensuring the proper upbringing, education, and moral guidance of their children, while children are obliged to respect, obey, and support their parents, particularly in old age.

God Almighty has repeatedly commanded kindness toward parents in the Qur'an, often linking it directly with His worship. He said:

"And your Lord has decreed that you worship none but Him, and that you be kind to parents. If one of them or both attain old age with you, say not to them 'uff' (a word of irritation), nor repel them, but speak to them a noble word." (Surat Al-Isra, 17:23)

The wisdom behind God's repeated commands for children to honor their parents—and not vice versa, except in rare instances—lies in the fact that parental love is an instinctive drive. It naturally compels parents to care for and protect their children without the need for divine injunctions. This parental responsibility, as established in Islamic teachings, begins not after the child's birth but even before marriage—through the choice of a righteous spouse—and continues throughout life. It is expressed in fulfilling the rights of children, which, when properly upheld within a Muslim family, serve as one of the most effective safeguards against intellectual and moral deviation (Al-Bakmi, 2010, p.17).

All of this highlights how difficult it is for a family to push its child into labor, which deepens the concern surrounding the issue and necessitates further investigation into the underlying causes of child labor.

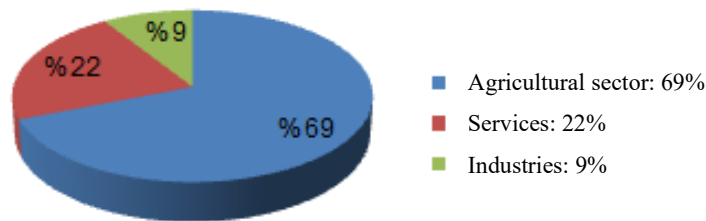
3. Fields of Child Labor:

Working children are engaged in a wide range of trades and occupations across several sectors, including industry, agriculture, fishing, and services, among others. Global estimates indicate that the overwhelming majority of child labor is concentrated in agriculture (69%), followed by services (22%), and then industry (9%). Within these sectors, children perform the same tasks as adults, and in some cases, adults even refuse certain types of work that are instead assigned to children—particularly hazardous or physically demanding tasks.

Children are frequently employed in the informal sector, which typically seeks to evade legal oversight by concealing the actual number of workers and their working conditions to avoid taxes and social security obligations. This sector often relies on child labor because it is inexpensive and highly compliant (Ben Aissa, 2016, pp.186–187).

The fields of child labor can be illustrated in the following figure:

Figure (1): Fields of Child Labor



4. Manifestations of Child Labor in Algeria:

The manifestations of child labor in Algeria have varied according to the social and historical conditions of each period in which this phenomenon has emerged. During the colonial era, it was closely linked to the general circumstances of colonial oppression. Urban child labor reflected the distinctive features of city life, as children in urban areas engaged in various activities such as selling newspapers, cleaning car windows, polishing shoes, or carrying settlers' market purchases to their homes. These activities characterized child labor during that period, which was deeply intertwined with the colonial context in Algeria.

Following national independence, significant changes occurred in the conditions surrounding children. The introduction of free education, as part of a broader planned economic policy, enabled large numbers of children to attend school. However, in more recent times, child labor has spread widely across Algerian cities, particularly in major urban centers where industrialization has been concentrated. This development has been accompanied by the unregulated migration of vast numbers of rural families to cities. Consequently, child labor during this period became closely linked to the difficult living conditions of these migrant families, who settled on the outskirts of urban areas in slums and makeshift housing.

One of the consequences of such migration was the unemployment of fathers, which drove children from these displaced families to engage in informal economic activities in city streets and alleys—such as selling consumer goods, tobacco, or sweets on sidewalks and near bus stations. These small-scale trades generated modest income that helped their families meet their daily needs.

It is worth noting that the economic crisis experienced by Algeria, whose early signs appeared in the mid-1980s, further intensified this phenomenon. Child labor re-emerged in a new and more pervasive

form, as the economic downturn severely affected the living standards of many families during that period (Jghdali, 2008, pp.90–91).

5. The Magnitude of Child Labor Worldwide:

Concerning the scope and global spread of this phenomenon, statistics issued by the International Labour Organization (ILO) indicate that there are approximately 250 million economically active children worldwide between the ages of 5 and 14. The vast majority of them live in developing countries, among whom about 120 million children work on a regular basis and are, therefore, not enrolled in school. The proportion of working children aged between 10 and 15 years represents about 20% of the total number of child laborers. Most of these children work under conditions that are incompatible with human dignity and constitute a flagrant violation of human rights in general, and of children's rights in particular.

The distribution of working children varies across continents. Asia ranks first in the prevalence of this phenomenon, with an estimated 150 million working children, representing about 61% of all working children worldwide. The participation rate of children in the labor force on this continent is approximately 21% of the global child labor force.

This high rate is largely attributed to the significant concentration of the problem in India, which possesses the largest child labor force in the world. However, there is a clear discrepancy among different estimates concerning the extent of the phenomenon in India. While official government statistics report 17.4 million working children, many non-governmental and independent organizations contend that the actual number is considerably higher.

According to UNICEF data, the number of working children in India under the age of 14 ranges between 75 and 90 million, whereas other unofficial sources estimate that there are over 100 million working children, including those employed in the informal sector and within family-based work environments (Mahmoud, 2002, pp.19–20).

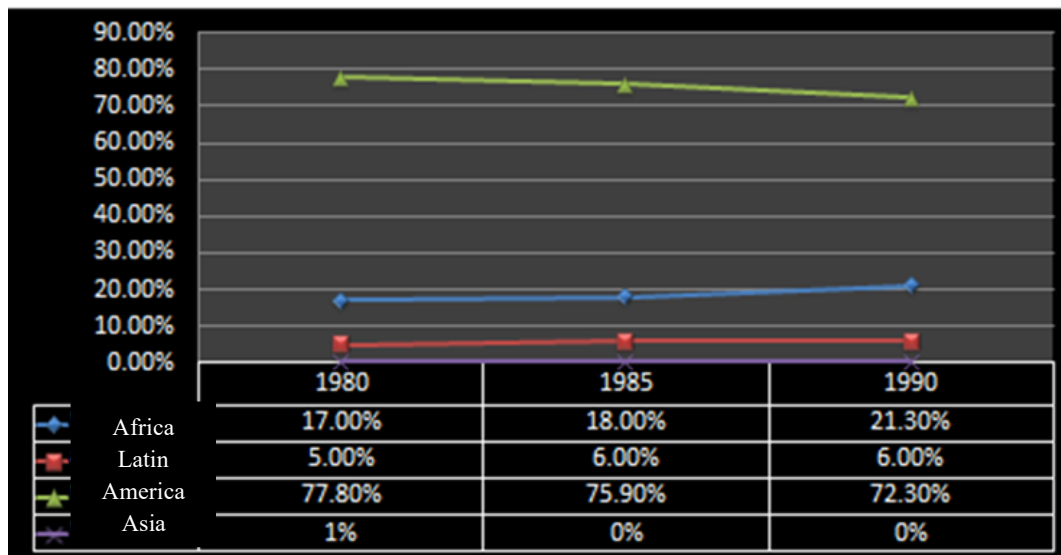
- The final UNICEF report for the year 1995 confirmed that there were no fewer than 200 million children under the age of 15 engaged in various fields of work. This figure is only approximate, as reports received from many countries on this issue are often inaccurate due to attempts by these states to conceal the true extent of the phenomenon, given that it reflects the economic and social conditions of a nation. Developing countries are the most affected by the problem of child labor. For instance, India, being the second most populous country after China, is among the nations where this phenomenon is most widespread. UNICEF statistics revealed that out of 175 million children enrolled in schools, nearly a quarter of them (45 million) are engaged in work, while among the remaining 130 million children, between 50 and 60 million are found in workplaces instead of schools. The majority of these working children in India belong to the poorest social classes or tribal minorities and work under extremely harsh conditions, ranging from 12 to 16 hours a day, for very low wages (Jghdali, 2008, p.76).
- The African continent has the highest rate of children participating in the labor force, reaching 41%. Studies predict a further increase in the volume of child labor in many African countries over the next ten to fifteen years if current trends continue. Observers estimate that the number of working children may reach around 100 million by the year 2015 as a result of the rapid population growth witnessed in many African countries, combined with the ongoing deterioration of living standards and the limited absorptive capacity of educational systems in these regions.

The phenomenon of child labor also extends across several European nations. In Southern Europe, a significant number of children engage in paid work, particularly in seasonal activities. Many work as street vendors, laborers in small workshops, or domestic servants. In Central and Eastern Europe, there has been a marked increase in child labor due to the economic difficulties faced by large segments of the population during the transition from centralized economies to free-market systems. Similarly, in

the United States of America, the rapid expansion of the service sector, coupled with a sharp rise in part-time employment and an increased demand for a flexible workforce, has contributed to a noticeable growth of this phenomenon.

- Numerous transformations have occurred over time in the global scope of child labor. While the phenomenon has declined in certain countries and regions, it has simultaneously intensified in others (Mahmoud, 2002, p. 21).
- Figure (2) illustrates these shifts in the rates of working children under the age of fifteen during the decade spanning 1980–1990.

Distribution of Working Children in the World Under the Age of 15 During the Period (1980–1990)



A detailed analysis of these statistics, which reflect both the rise and decline of child labor worldwide, reveals significant regional disparities. In Africa, for example, the phenomenon has not diminished; rather, it has grown considerably—from 17% in 1980 to over 21% a decade later. Conversely, in Latin America, the rate of child labor increased only marginally, from 5% in 1980 to approximately 6% in 1990. These figures underscore the uneven patterns of change across regions. In some parts of the world, the prevalence of child labor has even decreased. For instance, in Asia—despite its initially high rate of 77.80% in 1980—the phenomenon witnessed a notable reduction, falling to 72.80% after ten years. This decline can be attributed to increasing awareness and concerted efforts by relevant authorities to mitigate, and ideally eradicate, the widespread occurrence of child labor.

Meanwhile, Europe experienced a pronounced decline in child labor rates, estimated at 6% in 1980. By the end of the decade, the phenomenon had nearly disappeared altogether. This reduction reflects the continent's robust economic conditions, high levels of social and cultural awareness, and the presence of effective regulatory and educational systems that collectively curbed the persistence of child labor.

6. The Consequences of Child Labor:

Child labor generates numerous consequences that affect children's health, psychological well-being, and social development. Among the most prominent outcomes are exposure to various forms of abuse and the emergence of deviant behavioral tendencies.

• Health Effects:

The health-related consequences are among the most visible and severe outcomes of child labor, stemming from the excessive exploitation of children's physical capacities. These effects are multifaceted and encompass physical harm, sexual abuse, and various forms of neglect—physical, psychological, and educational. Moreover, the psychological repercussions often include feelings of isolation, rejection, and deceit, which can have lasting impacts on a child's overall well-being.

• Social Effects:

Child labor also generates a range of adverse social consequences, contributing to broader societal problems. One of the most concerning outcomes is the development of deviant behaviors and the exacerbation of adult unemployment, both of which undermine social stability and cohesion (Ben Aissa, 2016, p. 207).

• Psychological Effects:

Children who enter the labor market prematurely are deprived of the joys and experiences that define childhood, which deeply affects their psychological state. Such children often suffer from emotional deprivation, numbness, and feelings of inferiority that stem from an internalized sense of inadequacy—particularly when comparing themselves to peers who continue their education. This emotional deficit also fosters mistrust toward others, as the limited communication with family members and peers deprives them of healthy social interaction. Spending the majority of their time among adults, they lose opportunities for age-appropriate relationships, leading to the distortion of social development and the formation of deep psychological fissures that embed themselves in the subconscious.

In the absence of healthy channels through which they can express their accumulated feelings of frustration, powerlessness, and injustice, these children often resort to maladaptive coping strategies and harmful behaviors as outlets for their suppressed emotional distress.

• Cognitive Effects:

Among the adverse consequences resulting from child labor is the deterioration of children's cognitive and academic performance. The working conditions these children endure often compel them to neglect their studies and fail to meet the demands of their education. This, in turn, impairs their ability to read, write, and comprehend effectively. Such circumstances severely limit their intellectual development and diminish their chances of achieving future academic success, thereby increasing the likelihood of school dropout.

This relationship explains the strong correlation observed in many developing countries between child labor and school attrition, where children are deprived of their right to education at an early age. Consequently, this not only hinders their intellectual growth but also negatively impacts their overall life trajectory.

Child labor thus deprives children of one of their most fundamental rights—education—and exposes them prematurely to the harsh realities of life. The situation becomes even more concerning given that such work is often performed outside legal frameworks and without oversight from the governmental bodies responsible for enforcing labor laws and protecting children's welfare. (Hadj Saoudi, 2016, pp. 78–79)

Conclusion

What deeply troubles individuals in low-income societies is the persistent struggle to secure a livelihood by any available means—even when it comes at the expense of their children's childhood. Historically, many physicians, scholars, and professionals experienced difficult upbringings in which they balanced work with study, driven by a belief that education represented the pathway to a brighter and more dignified future worth every sacrifice.

Regrettably, this spirit of perseverance and purposeful motivation appears to have waned in contemporary society, particularly in light of rising unemployment rates among university graduates. The situation has grown even more distressing as field observations and interviews with the families of working children reveal that, in some cases, older siblings finance their education through the earnings of their younger brothers or sisters.

Such a reality calls for profound reflection and a serious reassessment of societal values and priorities. It underscores the urgent need to confront the moral, social, and economic conditions that allow the exploitation of children to persist—conditions that not only deprive them of their rights but also undermine the very foundations of human development and social justice.

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