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Child Workers as Active Agents:

Examining the Issue of Government Regulation in the Philippines

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Abstract

Despite national and international efforts to end child labor, children continue working throughout the world. On one hand, governments try to regulate children's work by limiting the types of work they can perform and directly stopping them from working. On the other hand, children need to work due to their economic situations, and they find meaning in their work. Although regulation is necessary to protect children from economic exploitations, it also separates childhood from working. Such a view of children also assumes them as passive objects of protection, rather than active agents of their own lives. Carrying this particular notion of childhood, government regulation may impose unintended, negative effects on children's work conditions. The purpose of this study is to understand why government regulations have been ineffective by examining the conflict between the interest of child workers and that of the government. It focuses the particular cases of child salvagers and street children in the Philippines. Through the examination of published materials, as well as the interviews with child workers and NGO staff, this study reveals that government regulation affects children negatively from children's viewpoints. It also discloses that children actively make decisions and adopt coping strategies to deal with their situations at work.

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There is no universal child. In some cultures, childhood is synonymous with protection, care, school, family, and play. In other cultures, children are expected to work and earn a living. It is estimated that worldwide 218 million children worked in the year 2004 (ILO, 2006). Despite international and national efforts to eradicate child labor, children continue to work. Human Rights Watch (2001) asserts in its World Report 2000 that “despite increased donor support, programs and legal commitments, abusive child labor remained a serious problem around the world.” Children work in different sectors of economy, sometimes visibly, sometimes invisibly. Central to this study is the question of why children work in spite of government regulations. If governments strive to end the issue of children’s work, why is the goal not achieved yet?

In accordance with the international norms developed by the United Nations and other organizations, national laws limit types of work children can perform under certain ages. However, such regulation itself does not necessarily determine whether or not their working conditions are safe. Furthermore, by limiting the types of work children can legally perform, such regulation may put them in more invisible, harmful work environments. In some cases, regulation also affects children working outside of legal frameworks by forcing them to leave their work. Although regulation is necessary to protect children from exploitative conditions and the worst forms of child labor, it seems to have unintended consequences, which affect children negatively. Regulation also reflects one segment of the contemporary Western notion of childhood, which claims that school and family are the only appropriate social realms for children.

Therefore, seen from the Western notion, children's economic activities are considered necessarily bad and have to be eliminated.

In contrast to this specific view on childhood, some critics are concerned with different patterns of childhood in non-Western cultures. They claim that mere prohibition of children's economic activities neglects cultural contexts in which their work actually makes sense. Further, they claim that imposing the Western view on childhood "not only [leads] to a neglect of children, because they [are] seen as not-yet-social beings, but [is] also inattentive to children's active social participation" (Prout, 2005, p. 1). According to their view, children are active agents rather than passive objects, and their voices thus need to be heard.

Given this background, it is necessary to re-examine the issue of children's work using the new notion of childhood. The goal of this study is to understand the cause of the conflict between the interest of the government and that of children. Focusing on the Republic of the Philippines as a case study, this study also aims to view the issue through children's eyes, thereby giving them a voice. Through the examination of published materials as well as interviews with child salvagers¹, ex-street children, and NGO staff, this study first explores how government regulation affects children's work in the Philippines. Namely, the focus is on how legislation limits types of work children can perform, what kind of harmful factors are experienced at their work, and how the government directly interferes with children's work. Furthermore, this paper examines children's responses to their environment, especially in the areas of children's reasons for working as well as their coping strategies against harmful factors at work and government regulations. With the examinations, this study argues that, from the child

¹ Salvagers, also known as scavengers, collect and sell recyclable wastes to earn a living.

workers' viewpoint, government regulation has unintended negative consequences on their working conditions. Furthermore, this study reveals that children actively make decisions and develop coping strategies to deal with their situations at work.

Children's Work and Government Regulations

International and Domestic Frameworks

Children's economic activities widely vary in terms of their conditions and forms. Thus, the international community has been faced with a challenge in defining what children's work means. Bearing in mind such differences in forms and conditions, states have adopted international norms and legal schemes to protect children from various forms of economic exploitation.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted in 1989, is one of the most fundamental agreements among the nations on the subject of children's rights. Proclaiming that children need special care and assistance to protect their own rights, the Convention refers to children's participation in economic activities. In particular, Article 32 of the Convention states:

States Parties recognize the right of the child to be protected from economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child's education, or to be harmful to the child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development.

Such principles of protection became more concrete through two international conventions created by the International Labour Organization (ILO). The ILO adopted "Convention No. 138: Minimum Age" and "Convention No. 182: Worst Forms of Child Labour" in 1973 and 1999 respectively. The Minimum Age Convention claims that the

international minimum age for employment should be 15 years old (or in developing countries it may be 14 years old). However, national regulation may permit children between 13 and 15 years old to engage in “light work” which does not harm their health, development, or educational attainment. Additionally, the provision of this Convention is not applicable to family or small scale holdings that do not regularly employ hired workers. On the other hand, the Worst Form Convention defines worst forms of child labor as: (1) slavery-like practices including child trafficking, debt bondage and the use of child soldiers; (2) the use of children in prostitution and pornography; (3) the use of children in illicit activities; and (4) other types of work that is likely to be harmful for children’s health, safety, or morals. Eradication of the worst forms of child labor is often recognized as the priority in the issue of children’s work.

The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) indicates a distinction between “child work” and “child labor.” According to its definition, child work consists of “[c]hildren’s or adolescents’ participation in work—economic activity—that does not negatively affect their health and development or interfere with their education” (UNICEF, 2006c). In contrast, “all children below 12 years of age working in any economic activities, those aged between 12 and 14 engaged in more than light work, and all children engaged in the worst forms of child labour” are considered as child laborers (UNICEF, 2006c).

Based on such international norms, states adopt their own national legislation regarding children’s work. Kolosov (2000) describe the responsibility of states to follow the international standard:

States have an obligation to ensure the implementation of this right [of children to be protected from economic exploitation] through the establishment of a minimum age for admission to employment, adoption of regulations regarding conditions of employment, and imposing sanctions to ensure effective enforcement of the [safe and healthy] conditions (p. 266).

National laws usually identify minimum age for employment, specific sectors in which children are not allowed to work, and regulation of the hours and working conditions of employment. In many countries, legislation considers children's participation in economic activities legal if they work in safe conditions only with their family members. National laws further permit special cases of children's work such as their participation in public entertainment.

Consequences of Legislation

Because government regulations limit the scope of children's economic activities in the formal sector, many children find places to work outside of the legal system, that is, in the informal sector. Although the definition of the informal sector may vary, the ILO (1993) in its resolution in the Fifteenth International Conference of Labour Statisticians defines the informal sector as follows:

The informal sector may be broadly characterised as consisting of units engaged in the production of goods or services with the primary objective of generating employment and incomes to the persons concerned. These units typically operate at a low level of organisation, with little or no division between labour and capital as factors of production and on a small scale. Labour relations—where they

exist—are based mostly on casual employment, kinship or personal and social relations rather than contractual arrangements with formal guarantees (p. 2).

The informal sector consists of various kinds of jobs, which are available for unskilled, uneducated, and inexperienced workers, including children. Some are self-employed workers, engaged in informal economic activities varying from “hawking, street vending, letter writing, knife sharpening, and junk collecting to selling fireworks, prostitution, drug peddling, and snake charming”; others form small-scale enterprises with few employees (Todaro & Smith, 2003, p. 325).

The ILO Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific (2000) further defines the characteristics of the informal sector as when “The employer-employee relationship is often unwritten and informal, with little or no appreciation of industrial relations and workers’ rights.” Without any contract, children in the informal sector are always at the risk of being jobless and having no or low income. Moreover, because no social security system is applicable, child workers in the informal sector are exposed to a wide range of harmful factors without protection. They usually suffer from long hours of work, exposure to physical, biological, and chemical hazards, lack of access to health and medical care, fights, involvement in illegal activities, and other harmful factors.

Murshed (2001) argues that “the enforcement of laws in many developing countries is grossly inadequate,” leaving invisible child workers—such as those in the informal sector—out of the public eye and not considering factors in the household that force children to work (p. 182). According to him, banning child labor may force children to work in unregulated conditions, where children can be exposed to harmful conditions that government inspectors cannot access (Murshed, 2001, p. 185). Murshed

introduces the example of the Bangladeshi garment sector. After the passing of the United States Child Labor Deterrence Act of 1992, which aimed at banning imports made by child laborers, 70,000 child workers were thrown out of the industry, and many of them entered the informal sectors with worse conditions than the garment factory. He claims that this is an example of “an assertion of human rights legislation resulting in an even greater violation of the rights of the children involved” (Murshed, 2001, p. 170). In this case, well-intentioned government regulation conflicted with child workers’ rights.

Government Regulations and the Western View on Childhood

After examining the effects of legislation on children’s work, one question arises: Why do states try to regulate children’s economic activities? The underlying reason for the legislation and government regulations is one segment of the contemporary Western notion of childhood. This concept views that work and childhood are mutually exclusive. According to the view, “proper” social realms for children are school and home, not work.

This contemporary Western view on childhood further formed a foundation for the concept of children’s rights, as expressed in the international legal schemes. The the Convention on the Rights of the Child reaffirms the principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), which proclaims that “childhood is entitled to special care and assistance.” Such international legal schemes claim that children, due to their physical and mental immaturity, should be provided with rights to be protected and cared for. They are also provided with special rights—such as rights to education and to play—that adults are not entitled to. In the scope of child protection, children’s economic activities are considered negative factors which violate their rights. Through such provisions, the international legal scheme promotes a particular pattern of childhood.

Although the view seems to be dominant given the fact that it is reflected in the international norms such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the concept of childhood is relatively new. French historian Philippe Ariès, in his famous book called *Centuries of Childhood*, claimed that the concept of childhood did not exist in the Medieval period in Europe. According to Ariès (2000), in the Middle Ages, children were mixed with adults at about the age of seven (p. 283). Thus, the distinction between adulthood and childhood was very vague. Furthermore, in the social context where family was the basic productive unit for survival, “Children resided on the periphery of family life and were subordinated to its collective interests” (Hutton, 2004, p. 93). Family loyalties and obligations, as well as adults’ interests, were considered more important than the personal advancement of children. The infant mortality rate was high, and no specific attention was given to children in the family.

The change started to occur in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries among the upper classes, and the modern European concept of childhood solidified in the eighteenth century or later. Family size became smaller, and parents took care of each child with much more affection and attention. With the notion that childhood was a preparatory stage for adulthood, parents began to demand a more organized, specialized education system which provides adequate curriculums for different age groups. The public education system expanded, and years of study became longer. In addition, there was a shift in the location of work during the Industrial Revolution. In the late eighteenth century, household industries developed significantly, increasing the economic importance of children in the household; however, after 1820, that type of industry declined and was replaced by manufacturing in urban factories (Mintz, 2004, p. 137).

This phenomenon contributed to the separation between home and the economic sphere. Thus, middle-class children were excluded from the world of work and work places became a sphere for adults.

As the notion of childhood developed, school and family became the appropriate social realms for children. On one hand, education enabled children to aspire to career goals and shape their own future. On the other hand, the household for them was “a ‘heaven in a hostile world,’ the place where they acquired the emotional resources to go out into the world at large” (Hutton, 2004, p. 95). Observing the historical development of the concept of childhood, Ariès (1962) concludes, “Family and school together removed the child from adult society” (p. 285).

The notion of childhood also contributed to the idea that children are the objects of adults’ protection. It views that that children are subject to special attention and treatment as they are not ready for adult life (Ariès, 1962). Kolosov (2000) claims:

Childhood is the most sensitive part of life of every human being. It is in this period of life that every individual is brought up, educated, and adjusted to realities of life.... They are in practice fully dependent on adults, can be easily manipulated and are particularly susceptible to all kinds of influence, both physical and mental (p. 260).

Such a vision of childhood, on one hand, imposes adults’ responsibility to protect and promote children’s rights. On the other hand, the view also denies children’s role as active agents by seeing them as fully dependent on adults’ protection.

Another View on Childhood: Children as Active Agents

Criticisms against the Western View

As mentioned earlier, according to the Western view of childhood, children are seen as objects of protection, who are not supposed to work. Thus, the elimination of children's work is believed to be a social progress. Children's work per se is considered a harmful factor for the development of children, as well as that of society as a whole.

Some contemporary authors criticize the Western view of childhood because it represents children as passive objects that need special protection. Liebel (2004) points out that in the Western perspective, "[I]t is left out of the account that working children are also subjects who cope with their own situation and develop their own ideas about their work and their lives" (p. 6). This counter view claims that the blanket prohibition of children's work implies the negation of children's active role in their environment.

In contrast to the Western view, different cultures have different understandings of childhood. In *The Cultural Nature of Human Development*, Rogoff (2003) writes that different cultures expect children to engage in different activities, which sometimes might appear surprising or even dangerous to other cultural communities. Rogoff (2003) emphasizes the importance of cultural context as follows:

Variations in expectations for children make sense once we take into account different circumstances and traditions. They make sense in the context of differences in what is involved in preparing "a meal" or "tending" a baby, what sources of support and danger are common, who else is nearby, what the roles of local adults are and how they live, what institutions people use to organize their lives, and what goals the community has for development to mature functioning in those institutions and cultural practices (p. 6).

In some cultures, especially in agricultural societies where family is the basic unit of production, children are naturally expected to engage in work. Parents in many cultures teach their infants how to use knives and other tools. In Zimbabwe, boys of the Tonga people, as young as 10 years old, own land and raise cattle (Hobbs et al, 1999, p. 52). In their cultural contexts, children are assigned tasks very different from those in the Western cultures. In addition, children have clear ideas of what they are doing, and they consider their work as part of their responsibilities in their families. In such cultural contexts, children's work per se is not considered inappropriate or harmful. Children's work is regarded as a form of education because it teaches children skills that they need.

Some children feel the need to work because of their families' economic situation. In those cases, it is argued that children's work leads to their confidence and higher self-esteem. Some children prefer working to begging because selling gives them the sense of self-worth and some skills (Liebel, 2004, p. 56). This shows that economic incentive is not the only reason for children's work. They make decisions in their difficult situations as active agents. Liebel (2004), introducing children's voices in which they express their sense of pride when working, claims, "Many work not only because there is no other solution for them or because they feel responsible for their families, but also because, by means of working, they can overcome their impotence and gain new confidence" (p. 2). Therefore, if performed under certain conditions, children's work can benefit not only their families but also their individual development.

What can cause problems is not children's work by itself, but the conditions in which children work. Even within the cultural groups that allow children to work, some working conditions can be relatively healthy and beneficial whereas some can be abusive

and harmful. As Liebel and others argue, in some cases children learn specific skills, earn a living, and gain self-esteem through work. Many child workers go to school before or after their work as well. On the other hand, there are factors that make their working environment harmful, such as long hours of work, physical hazards, and exposure to chemicals. Bequele and Myers (1995) state that work hazards often affect children more strongly than adults. They claim that children “are much more vulnerable to psychological and physical abuse than the adults, and they suffer more devastating psychological damage from living and working in an environment in which they are denigrated or oppressed” (p. 6). Thus, it is important to examine children’s economic activities case by case, rather than claiming that all types of work are undesirable.

Children’s Active Role in Their Work

Children in many cases take active roles to improve their work conditions and to cope with government regulations. Sometimes working children form groups to assist each other. For instance, shoeshine children in Paraguay allocate their work places and times among themselves, so that every child can attend school without worrying about finding a work site (Liebel, 2004, p. 222). Another case is a group of “fish pirates” in Chimbote, Peru. The group of children follows the trucks which carry fish from the harbor to factories and fills their bags with the fish to earn their living. Their group is well organized; children are allocated different tasks such as jumping on the trucks, waiting in order to receive bags, and drawing attention away from the action on the trucks (Liebel, 2004, p. 221–222).

Additionally, in some countries, working children’s organizations demand their rights and have political power. One of such movements is the African Movement of

Working Children and Youth (AMWCY). At its first meeting in 1994, the AMWCY claimed 12 basic rights of working children, including the right to be taught a trade, the right to limited and light work, the right to sick leave, and the right to self expression and to form organizations (Environnement et Développement du Tiers Monde, 2004). The movement's impact on children's work conditions include the cases of child domestic servants, whose employers agreed to shorten their work hours so that they can attend informal literacy classes in the evening, and negotiations with governments on children's access to medical care (Norgrove, 2004). Involvement in such movements enables children to voice their opinions directly and participate in the process of social changes.

Children's Work in the Philippines

Background

To examine children's active roles in their work and effects of government regulations on their working conditions, this study explores the case of the Philippines. The issue of children's work in the informal sector has been very visible in the country. The Smoky Mountain, a massive dumpsite located in the north of Manila, had been attracting the world's attention as one of the largest slums in Asia. The name originates in the spontaneous combustion caused by methane gas from the garbage. Home to thousands of the poor, the Smoky Mountain was the symbol of urban poverty in the Philippines. The dumpsite was officially closed by the government in the year 1995, and many salvagers moved to another dumpsite located in Payatas, Quezon City. In the year 2001, a landslide of garbage, caused by heavy rain, killed hundreds of people working in the dumpsite. However, the accurate number of death is said to be unknown because there is no official record of how many people lived and worked in the area. Many

children were also believed to be involved in the accident. The news was widely reported around the world and raised awareness within the international community (“Manila dump,” 2000; Pagano, 2000).

Children’s work is considered a serious issue in the country. UNICEF (2006a) reports that one of its priorities in the Philippines is to “[r]educ[e] the number of children who are sexually exploited, exposed to hazardous labour and substance abuse, or are in conflict with the law.” Thus, working children, especially those who are exposed to hazardous conditions, are the main focus of the organization. In addition to sexual work, different forms of work—such as domestic work, street vending, salvaging, and agricultural work—are also common and attract attentions of scholars and international organizations.

Furthermore, cultural values in the country emphasize children’s obligations to their families. Illo (2003) states, “Imbedded in the Filipino notion of childhood is work and responsibility” (p. 9). Shinomiya (1997), a movie director who produced two documentaries about child salvagers in the Philippines, reports that child workers go directly to their mothers after earning money from their work; mothers receive the money without saying “Thank you.” He describes that in the Philippines children are considered responsible for taking care of their parents, and the relationship continues throughout their lives (p. 23). Such family values provide a cultural context in which children’s work is accepted, or in some cases encouraged.

In addition, children’s work in the Philippines is strongly tied to the country’s economic condition. The United States Central Intelligence Agency (2006) estimates that 40% of the population in the Philippines was living under the poverty line in 2001.

Poverty increases the economic value of children's work in poor households, thereby contributing to children's decision to work. The ILO (2003) reports that the top two reasons for which children worked in the Philippines in 2001 were "to help in their own household enterprises" (39.7%) and "to supplement their family income" (29.8%) (p. 75).

Furthermore, although a larger portion of the poor population lives in rural areas, the issue of poverty leads to the aggrandizement of the urban informal sector. According to Garde (2006), urban poverty in the Philippines has increased over the past three years, in particular in Metro Manila; this phenomenon, together with the low economic growth in rural area leading to rural-urban migration, has resulted in some social problems, including "proliferation of slum settlements, pollution problems, unemployment, and deficient basic services." Due to the increased urban poverty and unemployment, many households find work in the marginal economy, in which workers, including children, are potentially exposed to unregulated, hazardous conditions.

Children's Work and Their Conditions in the Philippines

As a general overview of children's work in the Philippines, the ILO survey conducted in 2001 indicates that out of the 24.9 million children between 5 and 17 years old, four million (16.2%) were economically active at the time of the investigation (ILO, 2003, p. xviii). In terms of geographic distribution, the report states, "More than two-thirds (69.8%) of the working children were found in the rural areas" (ILO, 2003, p. 25). UNICEF (2006b) estimates that, between 1999 and 2004, 11% of children ages of 5 to 14 years old worked.

Regarding the conditions in which children work, the ILO survey indicates that 2.4 million, or 59.4%, of working children in the Philippines were exposed to hazardous

environments during the 12 months prior to the conduct of the research in 2001. There were three types of hazardous environments that the ILO categorized: chemical, physical, and biological hazards. Furthermore, among the 2.4 million children, many experienced multiple hazards:

About 1.0 million or 42.5 percent of the 2.4 million working children were exposed to more than one type of environmental hazards at work. Of this number, 16.0 percent (382 thousand) reported exposure to both chemical and physical hazards, 14.7 percent (352 thousand) to both physical and biological hazards, while 1.8 percent (43 thousand), to chemical and biological hazards (ILO, 2003, p. 56).

In addition, 20.6% of the working children stated that their work was risky or dangerous; the types of dangers experienced included contracting disease or getting sick, possibility of falling, physical mutilation, and vehicular accidents (ILO, 2003, p. 48).

Government Regulations in the Philippines

The Philippines has historically used various types of legal instruments to regulate children's economic activities. The Constitution of the Philippines recognizes the significance of protecting physical, moral, spiritual, intellectual and social well-being of children. Moreover, the Act No. 3071—An Act to Regulate the Employment of Women and Children in Shops, Factories, Industrial, Agricultural and Mercantile Establishments and Other Place of Labor in the Philippine Islands—was passed as early as March, 1923, during the U.S. occupation. The Act sets minimum ages of employment for different occupations. For instance, it prohibits children under the age of 16 to engage in economic activities such as operator of elevators, cleaning of machinery, and selling

medicines and drugs in a pharmacy or for any work that might affect the public health (ILO, 2003, p. 12). After the formation of the legal standard, the country has adopted a number of Republic Acts, Codes, and Presidential Decrees to describe specific cases in which children can work, to provide minimum ages for various types of work, and to regulate work conditions of children.

While the earlier legal instruments focused mainly on identifying specific kinds of jobs that are regulated, recent legislation has been stricter. As the level of trade and other economic exchanges increased, the Philippines needed to adjust its standard in accordance with that of the international norm. Furthermore, the country ratified the Minimum Age Convention and the Worst Form of Child Labour Convention in 1998 and 2000 respectively. With the ratification, the Philippines was obligated to further increase its level of regulation regarding children's work in the country.

In June, 1992, the government enacted the Republic Act 7610, which, according to the ILO (2003), "abruptly changed the entire Philippine policy of prohibiting child labor" (p. 13). Known as "the Child Protection Law," the Act presents provisions for protecting children in difficult circumstances, such as child abuse, prostitution, and trafficking. Article VIII of the Act is dedicated to working children. Its Section 12 states that children below the age of 15 may be employed when the employer secures "for the child a work permit from the Department of Labor and Employment" as well as "the protection, health, safety, and morals of the child."

The Republic Act 7610 has been amended by two other acts, the Republic Act 7658 (An Act Prohibiting the Employment of Children Below 15 Years of Age in Public and Private Undertakings) of 1993, and the Republic Act 9231 (An Act Providing for the

Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labor and Affording Stronger Protection for the Working Child) of 2003. The latter amendment allows only two cases in which children under the age of 15 may work: (1) When a child works directly under the sole responsibility of his/her parents or legal guardian and where only members of his/her family are employed; and (2) Where a child's employment or participation in public entertainment or information through cinema, theater, radio, television or other forms of media is essential. The Act further sets the standard for children's working hours, prohibits worst forms of child labor, and provides penal provisions for any violations of the Act.

Enforcement of Regulations and Challenges

Despite the national efforts to develop legislation prohibiting children's work, the Philippines faces difficulties in implementing the laws. For example, Abrera-Mangahas (2001) reports in the working paper on child labor in the Philippines, submitted to the Asian Regional Meeting on the Worst Forms of Child Labor in Phuket, Thailand, that labor inspection system in the Philippines is highly inadequate; according to her, at the time of report only 250 inspectors were responsible for monitoring 80,000 establishments (p. 134).

Sometimes intergovernmental organizations step into the issue of children's work in the Philippines. For example, the ILO implemented a child labor project between 1989 and 1992 with the cooperation of the governments of the Philippines and Netherlands, targeting 500 child salvagers and their families in the Smoky Mountain. The program supported the child workers through providing drop-in centers to take rests, educational programs, and other means of assistance. Gunn and Ostos (1992) state that the project

experienced several dilemmas, including the question of child protection as opposed to prohibition of child labor; some criticized the program, claiming that the provision of protective services condoned the existence of child labor (p. 643).

The criticism against the project reflects the idea that the goal of the government intervention should be to end children's work, not to provide them with safer work conditions. The idea, by enforcing the blanket prohibition of children's work, neglects the multiple views of childhood, through which their work is not necessarily seen as a negative phenomenon. The efforts to prohibit children's work further fail to recognize the active role that children play in their work environments.

Working in the Informal Sector: Child Salvagers and Street Children in the Philippines

To draw upon such points, this research examines the particular cases of working children in the informal sector in the Philippines, namely, child salvagers and street children. The two types of work are representatives of the informal economy, in which children are in most cases self-employed and exposed to dangers. The informal sector is where the interest of the state, which tries to regulate children's work through direct intervention, conflicts with that of child workers, who strive to earn a living to support themselves and their families.

Child Salvagers. Gunn and Ostos (1992) claims, "Child [salvagers] represent one aspect of a much larger phenomenon—the urban informal sector—a dynamic, unregulated, and expanding economy where children constitute a significant proportion of the world of workforce and where traditional approaches are often ineffective" (p. 629). Although in some cases child salvagers' earnings can be higher than that of adults working at local factories at minimum wage, the phenomenon also represents the cycle of

poverty, as many children at the Smoky Mountain are third-generation salvagers (Gunn & Ostos, 1992, p. 631).

Their work mainly includes collecting recyclable materials at dumps or on the street, and selling the materials to junkshops. At the dump, children are at the risk of inhaling smoke, getting wounded or burned, and falling. There are some dangerous materials at the dumps, such as hospital wastes, broken bottles, and, occasionally, corpses. To protect themselves from smoke, fire, and hazardous materials, child salvagers wear long-sleeved shirts, heavy socks, rubber boots, and T-shirts pulled over the head, and they use a bent wire tool called *kalahig* to pick items without touching them (Gunn & Ostos, 1992, p. 631).

Shinomiya (1995) reports cases of accidents caused by trucks carrying garbage and sicknesses at the dump. One of the child salvagers at the Smoky Mountain, Emon, lost his older brother because a truck ran over him. His younger sister passed away from measles. It was estimated that 300 children have died of preventable diseases such as asthma, pneumonia, dysentery, and cholera annually at the Smoky Mountain (Shinomiya, 1995). Forastieri (2002) reports that disorders found among child salvagers in the Philippines included high blood levels of lead and mercury, battering and gunshot wounds, tetanus, impaired lung function, ubiquitous presence of parasites, and skin disorders. In many cases, child salvagers and their families cannot afford to treat wounds and sickness, thereby causing the higher rate of child mortality.

Street Children. Street children compose another category of work in the informal sector. The loosely defined term, street children, is used to describe children who consider the street as their home or source of living. They are usually seen at the

major streets of urban areas, making the children's work in the sector very visible. The United States Department of State (2004) reports, "The Government estimated there were at least 22,000 street children nationwide, although some NGOs believed the number to be much higher." Silva (2002) estimates that around 30,000 street children live in and around Manila.

One study conducted in Baguio City in 1994 and 1995 indicates that occupations of street children included vending, cleaning and watching automobiles, prostitution, selling newspapers, domestic work, and carrying baggage (Bugtong, 1996). Another study conducted by Kuhutan (1991) reports that Muslim street children in the Islamic Center, Quiapo City, sold plastic bags because the location is close to the Quiapo Market, one of the biggest markets in Metro Manila. In both cases of the studies, street children experienced disease, malnutrition, competitive work, being ridiculed or robbed, being sideswiped or run over by vehicles, getting tired, and being apprehended by police (Bugtong, 1996; Kuhutan, 1991). Bugtong (1996) further points out the connection between street children and youth gangs, syndicated groups, and illicit activities such as trading in illegal narcotics. Some children steal from parked jeepneys (a type of public transportation) or from younger street children (Bahay at Yaman, 2004).

Purpose of the Case Study. This case study first explores how legislation affects children's work at the dumpsite and on the street. As mentioned earlier, laws against employing child workers makes it difficult for children to find jobs in the formal economy. Thus, they are more likely to be found in the informal sector, which are represented by salvaging and street work for the purpose of this paper. In such sectors, children are exposed to various kinds of harmful factors, due to the absence of work

environment control. In this case, lack of regulations on work conditions affects children. Government also affects child workers through direct intervention to prevent them from accessing to their work. Simultaneously, the study examines how children actively take their roles as agents, rather than being passively affected by such factors and regulations. Namely, the study examines children's reasons to work and their sense of responsibility as well as their coping strategies against harmful factors at work and government regulations.

The Case Study: Child Salvagers and Street Children in the Philippines

Interview Participants

As part of this study, interviews with child salvagers, ex-street children, and NGO staff were conducted between December 2005 and January 2006, in Quezon City, Metro Manila and Bustos City, Bulacan, in the Philippines. Participants were asked about what children do at work, their income, potential harms and benefits at work, schooling, and regulations. The questions were designed to explore children's work conditions, their reasons for working, regulations involved in their work, and how children see such regulations. Participants answered the questions orally.

Child salvagers were recruited at Payatas, Quezon City through a local NGO called I-CAN Foundation, Philippines. I-CAN Foundation operates in three communities in the Philippines. It is dedicated to improving living conditions of people through the provision of medical, health, educational, and livelihood programs. Ex-street children, on the other hand, were recruited at an NGO, Bahay at Yaman ni San Martin de Porres,² in Bustos City, Bulacan. This NGO provides rehabilitation, food, shelter, medication and educational support to street children to promote their independence. In total, seven child

² In the following sections, the NGO will be referred to as "San Martin de Porres."

salvagers and four ex-street children were interviewed. Furthermore, one staff member at I-CAN Foundation as well as three staff members at San Martin de Porres participated in the interviews.

Child Salvagers in Payatas, Quezon City

Participants of the interview in Payatas included seven child salvagers: Aileen (13 years old), Erwin (11 years old), Joel (11 years old), Grace (10 years old), Christine (nine years old), Marlon (seven years old), and Edwin (six years old).³ While the majority of them lived close to the dumpsite, two children came from another area and commuted to work there. Additionally, Madeth, a health worker at the I-CAN Foundation, was interviewed. Her main activities involved medical checkup at the Community Care Center in Payatas (twice a week), Feeding Program for malnourished children (twice a week), and Home-Visit Checkup (once a month). Spending most of her work time at the Community Care Center in Payatas, she was well-informed about children's work environment and their health-related issues.

Work Conditions. Child salvagers at Payatas collect recyclable materials, such as cups, cans, plastic and glass bottles, aluminum, bronze, and wire. After gathering the materials, children either sell them at the junkshop located near the dump, or bring them to their parents. All of the seven children stated that their family members, such as their parents or siblings, also worked at the dumpsite as salvagers or workers at junkshops. However, children in most cases worked by themselves or with their friends once they arrived to the dump. Regarding monitoring by their parents, only two child salvagers, Christine and Aileen, stated that their parents came regularly to check the children's work

³ The names of the child salvagers that participated in the interview are changed in order to protect their privacy.

performances and conditions. Other parents either just knew where their children were working or did not even monitor their work at all. Further, out of the seven children, six went to school, and they worked before or after their classes.

The participants were further asked what kind of dangers they experienced and what they were afraid of at work. According to the child workers, hazardous experiences at their work included falling, being caught in a landslide, being hit by trucks, physical injury, and group fights. Accidents—being hit by trucks, being involved in a landslide, and falling—were among the most common fears of child salvagers.

Among the seven children interviewed, six children reported that they had been injured at work. Three of them got injured because of broken or sharp materials at the dump. For instance, Edwin (six years old) recalled cutting himself from broken bottles, needles, and sharp metals. Another cause of injury at the dumpsite was fights among salvagers. Two child salvagers, Erwin (11 years old) and Joel (11 years old), stated that at the dump there are different groups of salvagers, and they claim their own territories. They get into fights when others pass by or start working near the territories. Both Erwin and Joel commuted from another area to work at Payatas, and they did not know other salvagers at the dump; for that reason, they had never been involved in the fights. Another child salvager, Christine (nine years old), stated that other child salvagers at the dump bullied her and once threw a stone at her; she showed a scar on her face, which was caused by the incident. Aileen (13 years old) and Marlon (seven years old) also informed that some salvagers threw tear gas in addition to stones.

Some children further reported health-related problems due to their work. Their health problems included fever, cough, feeling dizzy or nauseous, headache, and

stomachache. Marlon stated that he sometimes felt like vomiting when he was working. According to Madeth (health worker), the most frequently observed problem is acute respiratory diseases due to the smoke from the garbage. Many children also suffer from skin diseases because of chemicals from the garbage as well as diarrhea from eating something from the dump. Madeth said that these are the top-three health problems experienced by the child salvagers in Payatas.

To protect themselves from hazards at work, children in many cases worked with each other. Edwin, one of the child salvagers, reported that his parents did not monitor him when he was working; instead, his older friends took care of him. When they went home together after work, his friends would report to Edwin's parents what happened to him when he was working. Some children took breaks at home when it was too hot outside. Furthermore, Aileen mentioned that she used the Community Care Center run by the I-CAN Foundation when she needed medical assistance.

Reasons to Work and Sense of Responsibility. Among the seven child salvagers at Payatas, some stated that they actually liked working because they can earn income, buy things, and support their families. Aileen, for example, said that she wanted to assist her mother because she takes care of her children. Marlon thought that his work would help their parents pay bills. Edwin said that it was his own will to work because he wanted to support his family. He liked the work and thought that it was fun. On the contrary, two child salvagers, Grace (10 years old) and Christine, indicated that they did not like to work. However, they worked in order to eat and support their families. Christine gave her money to her mother, but sometimes she was allowed to keep part of the income.

When asked how she was planning to use her savings, she answered, “I will keep it so that I can give it to my mom when she has no money.”

Government Regulations. The most common fear that child salvagers mentioned regarding their work was the guards at the dump. The government tries to regulate work at the dump through direct interventions. According to Madeth, government regulations have become strict especially after the accident in 2001. Salvagers are required to have official IDs in order to enter the dump and work there; obviously, children under the age of 15 are not able to obtain the ID because they are under the minimum age. The guards are watching over the dump to regulate the work site. When the guards see child salvagers working, they shout at the children, grab them, and sometimes force them to go home. Aileen stated that if they catch any child working, the fine would be 250 pesos (about US \$5).⁴ According to Gonzales (2003), previously a salvager earned 200 pesos a day on average, while now he or she is lucky to earn 65 pesos because of the increased incentive and government regulation to promote recycling in recent years (p. 17). Given the situation, 250 pesos is a significant amount of money for the salvagers.

Many child salvagers said that they were afraid of the guards and tried to avoid them. Because they cannot enter through the main gate, children go through their own path, located on a different side. They would hide themselves, run, or take another way when the guards were around. Christine was the only child salvager who was not afraid of the guards at all. She indicated that she did not have to be afraid of them because her godfather was one of them. Grace on the other hand said that she was afraid of the guards but did not have any problem working in the dump. Her father was the leader of a salvagers group, and other adults in the group would let her work with them.

⁴ US \$1 is about 51 pesos.

Street Children in Bustos City, Bulacan

Four ex-street children participated in the interview in Bustos City: Jonathan (14 years old), Ronald (13 years old), Maricel (13 years old), and Janice (12 years old).⁵ They used to work on the street, but now they are protected by the NGO, Bahay at Yaman ni San Martin de Porres, and live with other ex-street children. Aside from the children, three staff members of the NGO were interviewed: Eunice (Administrative Officer and Treasurer), Myrna (Secretary and Rehabilitation & Development and Program Officer), and Danny (Program Officer). Unlike ex-street children, who only knew specific conditions in which they worked, staff members were able to provide broader views of street children and their work, as they have worked with more than 50 children in their center and others.

Work Conditions. Although the four children considered themselves ex-street children, the economic activities carried out by them varied widely. Jonathan (14 years old) and Ronald (13 years old) used to work as *kargador*—laborers carrying luggage at the markets—in Divisoria, Manila. They used to work in the same market, but they did not know each other until they came to live in Bustos City. They carried boxes and bags of products, such as fruits and vegetables. Both of them worked during the night—from 7 or 10 p.m. to 6 a.m.—and on average earned 50 to 100 pesos per day. Ronald sometimes took another job after working in the market; he went around the houses and collected garbage.

Negative factors at work, according to Jonathan and Ronald, included exhaustion, injury, unstable income, fights, and robbery. Both of them recalled their work as very

⁵ The names of the ex-street children that participated in the interview are changed in order to protect their privacy.

hard and tiring because they needed to carry heavy luggage for hours. Ronald said that he slipped on a plastic bag and sprained his ankle when he was working. He was also sometimes involved in fights among the boys working at the market. Jonathan said that he used to go to work even when he was sick and had a high fever. When asked about what they were afraid of when they were working, Ronald said that he was scared of being robbed. He recalled that when he was 10 or 11, someone stole his luggage. After that event, he was traumatized and was afraid of being robbed. In contrast, Jonathan stated that he was afraid of going to the market and not finding any job. He said that there was no guarantee to find work everyday at the market.

The third participant, Maricel (13 years old), started working when she was 11 years old. She used to live with her mother and grandmother, and other relatives also lived near by. Her uncle used to beat her, and that is why she left home and started living on her own. Joan met a lady who told her to work at her house for 20 pesos a day. The household also had a canteen, and Joan was assigned to wash dishes. She also performed other household chores. Joan said that she worked nine hours a day, without days off. Further, she never received the allowance as she was promised. Instead, she was fed everyday. In terms of harmful factors at work, she said that she was often scolded or verbally abused by the members of the employing household. Sometimes also she cut herself when she was using knives.

Another ex-street child, Janice (12 years old) started working as a street vender when she was 10. According to her, there is a dumpsite in Divisoria, where many vegetables are dumped regularly. She would pick up the ones that are still vendible and bring them to her stall. She worked everyday from 5 a.m. to 7 p.m. by her self and

earned 100 pesos; she said that her mother used to beat her if she did not bring home 100 pesos. Janice reported that she once got injured from a knife she was using to cut vegetables. She dropped it during her work, and a big scar still remains on her feet. Furthermore, regarding dangerous experiences at work, she stated that sometimes people attempted to steal her vegetables.

Among the four children, Janice was the only one whose parent came to monitor her work. Her mother came to see her everyday while she was working and checked if Janice had enough vegetables to sell. When she was running out of the vegetables, they would go back to the dump together to pick up more. They also had lunch together. Ronald and Jonathan recalled that their parents did not monitor their work. Ronald's father knew where he was and what kind of work he was engaged in as they worked in the same market. Jonathan, on the other hand, indicated that his parents' main concern was the money that he brought home. In Maricel's case, her parents had no means to communicate with her because she left her home and lived on her own.

According to the staff members of San Martin de Porres, the working conditions of street children involve high risks. Working on the street, they may get hit by cars. Danny (Program Officer) said that some street children hold onto moving jeepneys in order to change sites of their work. Eunice (Administrative Officer and Treasurer) stated that children working on the street suffer from various illnesses such as tuberculosis and respiratory diseases due to pollutants.

Danny mentioned that when a child faces problems or emergent situations, the problems themselves become reasons for being scolded by adults. For instance, when a child was hit by a car while vending something on the street, she was scolded and

shouted at by the driver, as opposed to being taken care of. Danny pointed out the situations in which children are blamed for the problems when they really are the victims.

Street children can be also involved in violence and illicit activities. Although their NGO has not worked with children involved in syndicated groups, the staff members said that it is very common. Street children, particularly boys, can be involved in fights as well. They are further exposed to various vices on the street. The most common is the use of “rugby” (glue sniffing). Some also smoke cigarettes. Others use illegal drugs like “shabu” (methamphetamine) and marijuana. Such illicit drugs are not sold openly on the street, but some children know where to get them through their gang networks.

According to Eunice, although most street children were first afraid of being on the street because of such harmful factors, they eventually learned how to cope with the fear because they need to survive. She stated:

They were weak, but when other bad guys hurt them, they learn to fight back after being defeated. They learn to run fast to escape the cops, the cars. They learn to snatch to have money to buy food. They learn to be fast and smart on the streets, because, that is the key to survival.

Eunice further indicated that street children try to “protect themselves from getting hurt emotionally by putting on a brave front, by distrusting people, by appearing bad.” She said that many of them, after their experience of living and working on the street, learn not to trust others. For that reason, it is hard for the staff of San Martin de Porres to reach out to the children and gain their trust.

Reasons to Work and Sense of Responsibility. Among the four ex-street children, Maricel and Janice stated that they did not like to work and did not find any benefits; they considered their work as only a means of survival. Maricel left her home and started working by herself due to her uncle's violence, while Janice worked because she was told to by her mother. On the other hand, Ronald and Jonathan said that they benefited from their work because they were at least able to eat and support their families. Ronald recalled that his income was used to supplement the food expense of his family. Usually, he would spend the money for his and his brothers' breakfast. Ronald further said that his father spent the money he earned for drinking, so Ronald had to support his family.

Government Regulations. Compared to the case of child salvagers, government interventions on street children's work are not as strict. In some cases, street children are rescued and assessed by social workers coordinated by the local governments. However, in many cases, children are released after a few weeks. Their lack of education prevents them from finding decent jobs. Not knowing other means to earn a living, many children, once released, go back to the street again. Thus, Myrna (Secretary and Program Officer) and Eunice saw programs by the government ineffective because they do not address fundamental solutions. They believed that the government has to understand the basic reason for children to go back to the street: they need to earn to live.

Staff members of San Martin de Porres also pointed out the unregulated conditions of street work leading to harms for children and lack of governmental supports. When street children get injured or sick at work, they may not be able to get treatments. Although government hospitals are available for them, some do not have enough knowledge or information. Thus, they just wait until they recover instead of going to

hospitals. Danny indicated that as children cannot rely on governmental bodies or even their parents in times of emergency, their only source of support is the local NGOs.

Discussion

The interviews with child workers and NGO staff reveal how legislation shapes the conditions in which children work. It first restricts types of work children can perform under certain ages. Moreover, the government directly intervenes with children's work in the informal sector, trying to remove them from the workplace. The government regulations completely conflict with the interests of child workers. In response to the regulations, children actively take initiatives to cope with their own environments. The regulation cannot stop them from working because they need to work and feel responsibility for their families.

Effects of Legislation and Regulations

Government regulations have two consequences, which are perceived as negative from the child workers' viewpoint. On one hand, legislation forces them to find work in the informal sector, where unregulated conditions of work affect children negatively. As Da Silva Telles and Abramo (as cited in Liebel, 2004) pointed out, working children undertake the position of "double illegality"; they are first seen as minors because of the age limit in the labor market, and further are pushed to work in the informal sector, where economic activities are not regulated by law. On the other hand, the government directly regulates children's work in the informal sector by removing them from the workplaces, using the guards and social workers.

The interview with the children disclosed that they work in the informal sector—in this case, at the dumpsite and on the street—because it was the only option for them.

Child salvagers, for instance, worked at the dumpsite because their parents and siblings also worked there. Street children, too, found their jobs through their families and friends; further, as the staff members of San Martin de Porres mentioned, many street children continue coming back to the street even after government's assessment because they do not know any other means of earning a living.

Working outside of the legal framework, children in the informal sector are exposed to highly harmful conditions. Moreover, because of their position of "double illegality," child workers in the informal sector are denied of benefits and protections that adult employees working in the formal sectors would enjoy. For instance, in both cases of child salvagers and street children, they worked with no supervision by adults. Child salvagers usually work alone or with other children, and they need to protect themselves. Street children, too, are often self-employed. For that reason, they are more likely to be involved in fights with other child workers. In some cases, adults also use exploitative means to compete against child workers. For example, at the dump, some salvagers including adults threw stones and tear gases at child salvagers. Maricel, who did dishes at a canteen, was not provided with the allowance he had been promised; there was no contract between her and the employer, leaving Maricel unpaid the whole time of her work. Further, when they get sick or injured, most children just took rests and waited until they felt better. There is no healthcare system from which they can benefit as workers. Finally, as Danny indicated, when street children are hit by cars, they are scolded and blamed for not paying attention, instead of being taken care of.

Given the highly hazardous conditions of the informal sector, the government attempts to directly regulate children's work in the segment by removing them from their

work places. At the dumpsite, the guards hired by the government check the IDs of workers and eject unlicensed workers, including children. On the street, social workers rescue street children and protect them in shelters temporarily. Such government intervention is considered to be one of the negative factors at their work from child workers' perspective. Namely, most child salvagers interviewed stated that they were afraid of guards in addition to other work hazards, such as landslides and accidents. Seen from child workers' viewpoint, the government regulation is a factor that prevents them from working and earning a means to survive.

Accordingly, the interviews with children and NGO workers indicate that the government regulations—intended to protect children from economic exploitations—in practice affect children negatively at two levels. By forcing children to work in the informal sector, where they are exposed to hazards without any protection system, legislation conflicts against children's interests in terms of their health and wellbeing. Moreover, through the direct intervention in the informal sector, government regulation again operates against children's economic interests.

Children's Active Roles: Decision Making and Coping Strategies

In contrast to the government's interests, children needed to secure their work in the informal sector. Many of the children interviewed stated that they worked in order to support their families. Some said that they decided to work because their parents asked to, while others voluntarily worked. Some did not like to work, yet they recognized that they needed to work for their families' survival. Thus, the benefits of the work recognized by the children were being able to earn income, to eat, and to assist their families.

Maricel was the only child worker who did not mention her family as a reason to work. In her case, she left her home when she was 11 because of her uncle's violence. She preferred living by herself and working to being beaten by her family member regularly. Through her decision to leave her family and support herself, Maricel reveals that children do decide for themselves to become independent rather than passively accepting their position in their families and being protected by adults.

The other 10 children interviewed stated that they worked for themselves and their family members. Janice said that she was forced by her mother to work, but she also recognized that her work probably was the only way for her and her mother to survive. Other children stated that they benefited from the work because they could support their families. Most child workers gave all or most of their income to their parents so that they could spend the money on basic necessities, such as food and water. Some children proudly reported that their earning supplemented their families' income. Ronald assumed a responsibility in his family through working two jobs. He bought food for himself and his little brothers using his earnings. He also felt a strong responsibility to support his family because his father spent money on drinking. Another child worker, Christine, was also very proud to earn 300 pesos per work day and support her family. She thought that her income was enough to supplement the needs of her family; she also saved part of her income in order to support her family in case of an emergency.

Some critics against children's work might say that those children were forced to work because of their economic situations. It is true to a certain extent, and some children would prefer going to school and not working. However, whether or not they liked to work, these child workers found meaning in their work. These children knew

that they had positions in their households. All members of the households shared responsibilities so that they could eat. In some cases, all family members worked; in other cases, some children stayed at home to take care of smaller siblings, while other children worked with the parents. The role of these children was to augment their families' incomes. They knew that without their help their families would not be able to survive. They wanted to help their families and actively took decisions to work in the informal sector.

Working in the informal economy, child workers interviewed for this study were exposed to harmful factors at work, including injury, sickness, and accidents because of the unregulated conditions of their work environments in the sector. Additionally, in the case of child salvagers, government intervention was one of the factors that children were afraid of. However, such negative effects of government regulation did not stop these children from working. Child workers not only were affected by the negative effects, but also tried to take actions in order to cope with them.

Child workers first adopted various strategies to cope with their hazardous conditions. The interviews with child salvagers revealed that children tried to make a safer work environment through working with other children. Some children dealt with the effects of harmful factors at work by taking rests when it was too hot or making use of a local NGO's medical assistance. Moreover, a child salvager was able to avoid other salvagers' attacks because of her position as a daughter of a group leader. Those strategies imply that children try to maximize their effectiveness and security at work through the available means.

On the other hand, the interviews with ex-street children found out that these children tried to adjust themselves to their environment. They acquired skills for fighting back against those who try to harm them on the street and learn how to run fast to avoid cars. They also developed an emotional protection mechanism by learning not to trust others or appearing to be strong. Through such adaptations, children actively found ways to protect themselves.

Children's active roles are also seen in their coping strategies against government interventions. Child salvagers in particular saw the government regulation at the dumpsite as one of the factors that they were afraid of. Children were afraid of the guards because they would be prevented from working and fined. Thus, the government regulation conflicted against the economic interests of children. To cope with the regulation, children entered the dumpsite through a hole located at the different side of the official entrance. Children also tried to escape the guards by running fast, hiding, and taking another way. Their responses in the interview revealed that children tried to cope with the guards through different strategies so that they could work at the dumpsite.

On the street, social workers tried to protect working children and to bring them to shelters. The major response of children to the regulation was to stay in the shelter for a certain time and come back to the street after being released. Their behavior reflects another aspect of the clash between government regulation and children's interests. Government intervention on the street is an impermanent solution, as the program does not educate children or provide alternatives so that they do not have to work on the street anymore. Hence, as Eunice and Myrna emphasized during the interview, it does not solve the underlying cause of children's work. Through temporarily protecting street

children and releasing them after a while, the intervention neglects the economic situations of street children, which drive their ongoing need to work.

The interviews with child salvagers, ex-street children, and NGO staff disclose that these children had different patterns of childhood from children in many developed countries. Their experiences are different, but it does not mean that these child workers are denied a childhood. Prout (2005) criticizes a study on Brazilian children, which claims that childhood is a privilege of wealthy children and non-existent for the poor. He states:

But to say that those poor children do not have a childhood is a highly normative statement. It is to naturalize the childhood of a rich as the only form that childhood can take. It turns it into a 'gold standard' against which all others are to be judged and (usually) found wanting (p. 13).

The interviews also challenge the idea that work impedes children's education. Among the seven child salvagers interviewed, six stated that they went to school. The result indicates that work and education are not necessarily exclusive from each other.

The interviews also reveal that government regulations are not effective because children find ways to avoid the guards or return to the streets. Furthermore, regulations are further perceived as a negative factor from the viewpoint of child workers. The conflict between regulations and child workers' interests occur because the regulations carry the particular segment of the contemporary Western notion of childhood. By separating children from work, the concept of childhood first neglects the economic situations of children. It also neglects the active roles that children play in their work, especially in decision making and coping strategies, as mentioned earlier. Without taking

into account the reality of children's work, government regulation may harm children, instead of protecting them.

Conclusion

The issue of children's work in the Philippines will not disappear, as long as the country's economic condition continues to suffer. The Philippines is considered one of the slowest-growing countries in the region in terms of economic development. The United States Central Intelligence Agency (2006) indicates that "it will take a higher, sustained growth path to make appreciable progress in the alleviation of poverty given the Philippines' high annual population growth rate and unequal distribution of income." Political instability has also contributed to the slow growth rate of the country's economy (Islam & Chowdhury, 1997). In the larger picture, children's work composes an important aspect of the deep-rooted problem of poverty.

Given the situation, the government of the Philippines has developed regulations to prevent and stop children from working. Based on the concept that childhood and work are mutually exclusive, such regulations were intended to protect children from economic exploitation, which would potentially harm them. Simultaneously, government regulations tend to perceive abolition of children's work itself as a goal. It is often forgotten that the abolition is a small piece of a larger picture, that is, to assure a better environment for children and their well-being through the course of their individual development. It is also left out of consideration that without children's economic contributions, their families are not capable of sustaining themselves. In their specific contexts, immediate abolition of children's work might not be practical, although the eradication can be a long-term goal for the country. Moreover, child workers' voices and

perspectives are not usually taken into account because they are treated as objects of adults' protection. In effect, they are capable of developing ideas about their lives, and they take initiatives to improve their situations. This study has revealed that from the child workers' perspective, government regulations negatively affected their work conditions. Furthermore, the children themselves developed coping strategies to deal with such negative consequences of legislation, rather than waiting for others to protect them.

One limitation of this study was that the small sample size of the interview participants. Furthermore, the participants do not represent all child workers in the Philippines. Experiences of child workers vary depending on the locations of their worksite, age, types of work, family backgrounds, and other factors. Even within the categories of child salvagers and street children, the experience of each child is very different from that of others. Therefore, the data presented in this study may not provide a general picture applicable for all cases of children's work.

Future studies on this topic may consider conducting interviews with a larger sample, including family members of the child workers. Such interviews would provide a clearer and more general picture of children's active role in their households, as well as the families' economic backgrounds that encourage children to work. Future studies could also better evaluate existing government regulations in terms of their effectiveness and influences on children's work conditions, by including voices of child workers regarding what they wish to see in their work environments. Such studies can provide recommendations for alternate government regulation, which would conflict less with children's interests.

When examining children's work, it is fundamental to view the issue from child workers' perspectives, because they themselves are active agents of their own lives. They have their own views and ideas that outsiders may not see. From their viewpoint, their well-being and work itself might not be mutually exclusive. In that aspect, local NGOs, including I-CAN Foundation and Bahay at Yaman ni San Martin de Porres, play a significant role through bridging the gap between the interests of child workers and those of the government. They also provide services and programs in accordance with the needs of children themselves. Recognition of the voices of child workers will break the notion that children are passive victims of economic exploitation. Without the new vision of children as active agents, government legislation to regulate children's work cannot be effectively enforced.

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