

Analysis of the role of girls in child labor from a gender perspective

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— Abstract —

Child labor remains a persistent social problem that violates children's fundamental rights, with differentiated impacts according to gender. Despite regulatory advances and public policies aimed at its eradication, a significant proportion of children and adolescents continue to enter the workforce at an early age, negatively impacting their health, education, and overall development. In this context, female child labor has historically remained invisible, as it is primarily concentrated in paid and unpaid domestic and care work, which is usually carried out in the private sphere and escapes statistical and social recognition.

The objective of this article is to analyze the role of girls in child labor from a gender perspective, in order to highlight the specific forms of labor market integration, the structural and cultural factors that condition them, as well as the main consequences of this problem. The study employs a qualitative, reflective methodology based on the analysis of documentary information, official statistics, and institutional reports on child labor and gender.

The results of the analysis show that female child labor is characterized by its low visibility, the normalization of domestic and caregiving tasks, and greater exposure to precarious conditions. These dynamics generate educational disadvantages, limiting future opportunities and contributing to the intergenerational reproduction of gender inequalities. While the study is based on secondary sources, it offers a critical perspective that emphasizes the need to mainstream a gender perspective in the analysis and design of public policies aimed at eradicating child labor.

Keywords:

Child labor, gender, fundamental rights, inequality.

Child labor worldwide is conceived as a latent problem in society that continues to affect a large part of children and adolescents in different regions, according to global estimates by the International Labor Organization [ILO] and UNICEF:

Nearly 138 million children —59 million girls and 78 million boys— are in child labor, accounting for about 8 percent of all children globally. Among them, 54 million —that is, approximately 4 out of 10 children in child labor— are engaged in hazardous work that may harm their health, safety or morals (International Labor Organization & United Nations Children's Fund, 2025).

It is common to observe the participation of children and adolescents in productive activities, such as trade, construction, agriculture and even in activities that put their physical integrity at risk and threaten health. A visible example of this is minors working on the streets and at traffic lights, exposed to constant dangers, many perhaps being exploited and forced to work. The Encuesta Nacional de Trabajo Infantil [National Child Labor Survey] (ENTI) 2022 shows that:

Of the 28.4 million children between the ages of 5 and 17, 3.7 million engaged in child labor. This translates into 13.1 percent of the population aged 5 to 17. Child labor is divided into: 1.8 million (6.4 percent) children and adolescents only in non-permitted occupation; 318,000 who combined non-permitted occupation and household chores in unsuitable conditions (1.1 percent), and 1.6 million (5.6 percent) performed only household chores in unsuitable conditions.

By federal entity, the highest rates of child labor were in Guerrero with 24.5 percent, Chiapas with 20.8 percent and Nayarit with 19.1 percent (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía [National Institute of Statistics and Geography, INEGI] & ILO, 2024).

From these data we can recognize the magnitude of child labor, both globally and nationally, also emphasizing that Chiapas is placed in the second position of child occupation, which is an alert indicator that underlines the need to evaluate public policies in this area and strengthen them to reduce child labor.

Although statistics show a greater predisposition of boys to child labor, "of the 3.7 million people aged 5 to 17 who carried out child labor, 2.2 million were boys (60.2 percent) and 1.5 million girls (39.8 percent)" (INEGI & ILO, 2024). An analysis disaggregated by sex, *see Figure 1*, makes it possible to identify substantive differences in the forms that this phenomenon takes, since, while children are usually incorporated into productive activities in public and more visible spaces, girls are mostly concentrated in the category of household chores in unsuitable conditions, activities that tend to remain invisible, unpaid and socially devalued.

This situation highlights the persistence of deep-rooted stereotypes and gender roles that historically assign these tasks to women from an early age.

Forms of work	Absolute numbers in millions			Child labor participation rate and percentage distribution		
	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls
Population aged 5 to 17	28.4	14.5	13.9			
Child labor	3.7	2.2	1.5	13.1	15.5	10.7
Prohibited occupation exclusively	1.8	1.3	0.5	48.6	58.8	33.2
Household chores under inappropriate conditions exclusively	1.6	0.7	0.9	42.9	31.7	59.7
Prohibited occupation and household chores under inappropriate conditions	0.3	0.2	0.1	8.5	9.5	7.1

Note: National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI) & International Labor Organization (OIT). (2024). National Survey of Child Labor (ENTI) 2022. Results report. Mexico. Obtained from <https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/2025-01/Encuesta%20de%20trabajo%20infantil%20ENTI%20WEB%20%281%29.pdf>

Figure 1. Population aged 5 to 17 years old by form of work, by sex

Studies on child labor have often tended to generalize the experience of working children, without taking into account that the conditions and consequences of this phenomenon are not the same for girls and boys. This approach reduces the complexity of the problem by omitting the inequalities that influence the allocation of work activities from childhood onward. In particular, the absence of a gender perspective has contributed to the downplaying of domestic work, which is performed primarily by girls; despite being carried out under inadequate conditions, this work is often taken for granted as part of their traditional roles.

Against this backdrop, this paper is conceived as an academic reflection based on the analysis of secondary data, such as official statistics, institutional reports, and specialized literature. It is based on the assumption that child labor does not affect girls and boys equally, but is shaped by gender inequalities that determine both the ways in which children enter the workforce and the consequences of that entry. In this regard, the following questions arise: How does child labor in Mexico differ between girls and boys? How do gender stereotypes and roles influence the forms of child labor?

CONCEPTUALIZATION OF CHILD LABOR

Child labor is a persistent and complex social problem worldwide, as it involves the violation of the fundamental rights of children and adolescents. According to the International Labor Organization (2024), “the term child labor is generally defined

as any work that deprives children of their childhood, their potential, and their dignity, and that is harmful to their physical and psychological development”; for its part, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) states that:

Child labor refers to dangerous situations and conditions for which children are far too young, depriving them of their childhood and exposing them to extremely difficult conditions. Essentially, it involves children performing work under conditions inappropriate for their age, which harm their health, well-being, and safety, and which also prevent them from enjoying their right to education, play, and a healthy and dignified life (UNICEF, n.d.).

Both definitions agree that child labor involves performing dangerous or inappropriate tasks or work that hinders children’s healthy development; however, they also recognize that not every activity performed by children can be classified as child labor. In this regard, the ILO clarifies that the participation of adolescents above the legal minimum age in activities that do not interfere with their health and personal development or with their schooling is considered positive (International Labor Organization, 2024).

Beyond these institutional definitions, child labor must be analyzed as a structural social phenomenon closely linked to poverty, inequality, and the perpetuation of gender stereotypes. In this sense, it cannot be understood solely as a violation of the law, but rather as a social practice rooted in contexts of exclusion and precariousness. Various studies have pointed out that, in economies characterized by high levels of informality and job insecurity—as is the case in large parts of Mexico—families resort to involving children at an early age in productive activities and domestic work as a strategy to secure income and compensate for the lack of basic services. In this regard, William E. Myers argues that child labor cannot be explained solely by individual decisions, but rather by economic structures that normalize children’s participation in the workforce in contexts of poverty. Similarly, Manfred Liebel emphasizes that child labor is embedded in unequal social relations that limit the real options available to girls and boys, placing them at a disadvantage and subjecting them to rights violations. From this perspective, child labor is understood as the result of a web of social exclusions that pushes children—in ways that differ by gender—toward precarious and socially devalued work.

Child labor affects thousands of children and adolescents around the world, and Mexico is no exception. Despite efforts to combat child labor, the 2022 National Child Labor Survey (ENTI) reveals not only the scale of the phenomenon but also its distribution by gender. According to the findings, a significant proportion of children aged 5 to 17 are engaged in child labor, but with different patterns of involvement: while boys have higher rates of prohibited employment, girls are overrepresented in domestic chores performed under inadequate conditions. In particular, the ENTI shows that, among those who perform only inappropriate

household chores, girls account for 59.7% (0.9 million), compared to 31.7% of boys (0.7 million); and when combining prohibited employment with inappropriate household chores, the proportion of boys (9.5%; 0.2 million) exceeds that of girls (7.1%; 0.1 million) (INEGI & ILO, 2024). These data are relevant to the analysis, as they reveal distinct patterns of labor market entry beginning in childhood.

These patterns can be interpreted in the light of qualitative research documenting the invisibility of child domestic work and its link to structural inequalities. Within this context, research such as that of Miranda Juárez in Chiapas shows that domestic child labor is configured as “a social phenomenon inserted into complex logics that hierarchize subjects based on gender, ethnicity, migratory status and age” (Miranda, 2022). This evidence allows us to understand that the overrepresentation of girls in suitable domestic chores does not respond only to economic factors, but to the persistence of power relations and the sexual division of labor.

From gender perspective, child labor cannot be analyzed as a neutral phenomenon, since the experiences of girls and boys are crossed by historically constructed power relations. The gender perspective constitutes an epistemological approach that allows us to understand how the sex-gender system socially organizes the assignment of roles, responsibilities and opportunities, producing structural inequalities between women and men. As Joan Scott puts it, gender is a useful category of analysis to understand how such power relations are constituted and legitimized in specific social contexts.

In this framework, the sexual division of labor is central to explaining the differentiated insertion of girls and boys into child labor. According to the contributions of Silvia Federici, domestic and care work has historically been naturalized as a female responsibility, making its social and economic value invisible. This logic is reproduced from an early age, when girls are socialized to assume reproductive tasks within the home, which favors the feminization of child domestic work.

These dynamics are rooted in a patriarchal social organization that assigns the private and care-giving spheres to women, and the productive and public spheres to men, as Marcela Lagarde points out. Consequently, child labor carried out by girls tends to remain hidden and socially legitimated, while male child labor acquires greater visibility. From this perspective, female child labor not only responds to economic factors, but constitutes an early expression of gender inequalities that limit girls' access to education, leisure and the full exercise of their rights.

STRUCTURAL AND CULTURAL FACTORS DRIVING CHILD LABOR AMONG GIRLS

Child labor cannot be understood as an isolated decision made by families, but rather as the result of structural and cultural conditions that limit children's opportunities for well-being and development. Among the most determining factors are poverty, socioeconomic inequality, the inadequacy of public social

protection policies and the reproduction of gender stereotypes that assign girls a subordinate role in the home and in society. These conditions act together, generating contexts where child labor is perceived as an inevitable need and even as a natural responsibility of girls.

In the particular case of girls, structural factors are intertwined with cultural elements that reinforce their early incorporation into domestic and care work. While poverty and educational exclusion force many children to participate in work activities, it is social norms and the sexual division of labor that determine that it is girls who assume invisible tasks, such as cleaning, cooking, caring for younger siblings or paid domestic service. In this way, a cycle of inequality is reproduced that perpetuates both the feminization of child labor and the normalization of exploitation in the private sector.

The Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare (2014) points out that, according to UNICEF, school dropout is one of the most relevant factors that favor the incorporation of children and adolescents into child labor, since when they leave the educational system, they usually assume work or domestic responsibilities that replace the activities of their stage of development.

Although child labor is more common in lower-income households, poverty alone does not explain its persistence. The International Labor Organization notes that this phenomenon is driven by multiple structural factors, so while increasing family income is necessary, it is insufficient to eradicate it.

In the Mexican context, the factors that drive employment can be classified into two groups: those related to household income and those stemming from family solidarity. In the first case, girls and boys engage in activities to contribute financially; in the second, they participate in household chores to free up time for other adults to engage in paid work (Sandoval, 2007, as cited in Zepeda and Montes de Oca, n.d.). From a gender perspective, this “solidarity” is distributed unequally: it often falls on girls through caregiving, cleaning, and food preparation, without recognition or compensation.

International organizations such as the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) have also identified factors that increase the likelihood of child labor, such as poverty and vulnerability, a lack of decent employment for adults, food insecurity, human trafficking, and crises (health, climate, or violence) that exacerbate household fragility (UNICEF, n.d.). In Latin America and the Caribbean—particularly in Mexico—the rise in violence, forced displacement, and the presence of armed groups has increased the vulnerability of children and adolescents, making them more susceptible to various forms of child exploitation. These factors do not operate in isolation: they tend to accumulate and produce gender-differentiated impacts, especially when the work available to girls is concentrated in the private sphere and in caregiving activities.

Likewise, the ILO notes that social norms and attitudes influence who works and who attends school within the household, and that variables such as family

composition and birth order can affect these decisions (Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare, 2014). In societies where traditional norms persist, the expectation that girls “help” at home can become a daily obligation that, although perceived as natural, constitutes a form of child labor when performed under inappropriate conditions.

In short, while poverty is often a decisive trigger, it is not sufficient on its own to explain child labor among girls. The combination of economic precariousness and gender norms that assign caregiving to women contributes to normalizing girls’ participation in domestic work, rendering it invisible in statistics, and perpetuating inequalities in education, health, and opportunities throughout the life cycle.

WORK INTEGRATION FOR GIRLS: TYPES OF WORK

The involvement of girls in child labor takes specific forms that differ from those of boys, both in terms of the types of activities performed and the settings in which they take place. Generally speaking, while boys tend to engage in visible productive activities, girls more frequently participate in domestic and caregiving tasks and in low-paying or unpaid jobs, often under precarious conditions.

UNICEF mentions that “child labor and different forms of exploitation are all equally harmful and detrimental to the development and well-being of children”. Among the most common are:

- Domestic work. Many children are victims of human trafficking and are confined to private homes to perform domestic tasks. In countries such as Thailand, extreme cases of abuse and violence have been reported, particularly among girls employed as domestic workers (UNICEF, n.d.).
- Sexual exploitation. This form of child labor is particularly heartbreaking. The victims, mostly girls, are recruited by traffickers and forced into prostitution in clandestine brothels. The exploiters or traffickers, most of whom are known to the victims, use various strategies to deceive and subject children to exploitative situations (UNICEF, n.d.).

For its part, the International Labor Organization (2024) notes that “the worst forms of child labor involve enslaving children, separating them from their families, exposing them to serious dangers and diseases, and/or abandoning them to fend for themselves on the streets of large cities, often at a very young age.”

Article 3 of the International Labor Organization’s Convention on the Worst Forms of Child Labor (No. 182) provides that:

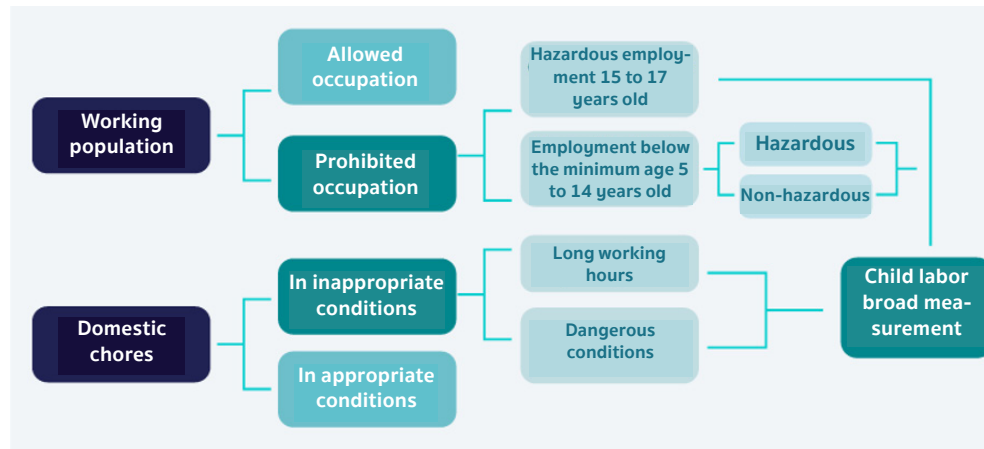
- For the purposes of this Convention, the term “the worst forms of child labor” includes:
- (a) All forms of slavery or practices similar to slavery, such as the sale and trafficking of children, debt bondage and serfdom and forced or compulsory labor, including forced or compulsory recruitment of children for use in armed conflict;

- (b) The use, recruitment, or offering of children for prostitution, the production of pornography, or pornographic performances;
- (c) the use, recruitment, or offering of children for the purpose of engaging in illicit activities, in particular the production and trafficking of narcotic drugs, as defined in the relevant international treaties, and
- (d) Work that, by its nature or the conditions under which it is carried out, is likely to harm the health, safety, or morals of children (1999).

In Mexico, the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI) and the International Labor Organization (ILO) distinguish that:

Child labor occurs in the production of goods and services for the market, which includes agricultural production for subsistence and the production of unpaid goods and services within households for their own consumption. When work is performed in prohibited and hazardous occupations and economic activities, or under conditions that are harmful to the physical and psychological development of the child, it is considered child labor. (2024).

It thus classifies child labor according to its form and components, as shown in Figure 2.



Note: Taken from National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI) & International Labor Organization (ILO). (2024). National Survey of Child Labor (ENTI) 2022. Results Report. Mexico. Obtained from <https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/2025-01/Encuesta%20de%20trabajo%20infantil%20ENTI%20WEB%20%281%29.pdf>

Figure 2. Form of work and components of child labor

Child labor consists primarily of prohibited work and domestic chores performed under unsuitable conditions that endanger the child's well-being. With regard to domestic chores performed under unsuitable conditions, girls account for 59.7%, a higher percentage than boys; see Figure 1.

According to ENTI 2022, the main dangerous characteristics in unsuitable household chores are: “heavy load, tiredness or exhaustion, back or muscle pain” (INEGI & ILO, 2024)

Gender gaps in child labor tend to decrease when domestic chores are incorporated into the measurement of the phenomenon. These activities include tasks carried out within and for the home itself – such as the care of sisters and brothers or of sick, elderly or disabled people – in addition to cleaning, food preparation, washing and ironing of clothes, company of family members. These activities are considered as child labor in cases where 21 hours or more per week are carried out among girls and boys aged 5 to 14 years; the global prevalence increases significantly, from 8% to 11%. Likewise, by including this type of work, the participation of girls is slightly higher than that of boys, which shows that they assume a disproportionate domestic burden (International Labor Organization and United Nations Children’s Fund, 2025).

Taken together, the different forms of labor insertion of girls show that female child labor is not defined solely by the activity carried out, but by the conditions, spaces and workload they assume from an early age. The high participation of girls in domestic chores in unsuitable conditions, as well as their presence in invisible or high-risk forms of work, reflects the persistence of the sexual division of labor and the social naturalization of care as a female responsibility. Analyzing these forms of work from a gender perspective helps us understand that girls’ work experiences are embedded in power relations that limit their access to education, rest, and opportunities for development, thereby contributing to the reproduction of structural inequalities.

THE IMPACT OF CHILD LABOR ON GIRLS' LIVES

Child labor among girls leads to a range of consequences that go beyond the immediate and create a situation of structural violation of their human rights. These repercussions are not only related to the loss of educational and developmental opportunities, but also deepen gender inequalities, thereby reinforcing the intergenerational cycle of poverty and social exclusion.

First, the educational consequences are particularly severe. The burden of household chores or participation in paid work forces many girls to interrupt their studies, attend school irregularly, or fall behind academically. This situation limits their access to higher levels of education and restricts their employment opportunities in adulthood, perpetuating their economic and social dependence on others.

Second, child labor among girls has consequences for their physical and emotional health. Long workdays, exposure to unhealthy environments, and a lack of adequate rest lead to physical exhaustion, malnutrition, muscle problems, and chronic fatigue. In addition, isolation and the pressure to take on adult responsibilities cause stress, anxiety, and low self-esteem, affecting the girls’ emotional well-being.

Another key aspect is the social and gender-related consequences. Assigning girls to caregiving and domestic work reinforces traditional roles that place them in a position of subordination to boys. This not only perpetuates gender stereotypes but also limits their participation in public, political, and community spaces, contributing to the exclusion of women in later stages of life.

In addition, it is important to highlight the long-term consequences, which include the intergenerational transmission of poverty and vulnerability to violence, exploitation, and trafficking. Many girls who begin working as child laborers continue to face precarious working conditions into adulthood, perpetuating patterns of inequality that are passed down from generation to generation.

The consequences of child labor for girls cannot be reduced solely to immediate economic or educational effects; rather, they must be understood as a comprehensive phenomenon that limits their present and decisively shapes their future. This situation highlights the urgency of designing public policies that include tailored preventive and protective measures, with a gender and human rights-based approach that ensures the full development of girls.

CONCLUSIONS

Analyzing child labor from a gender perspective allows us to recognize that girls' experiences in this context have specific characteristics that have long been overlooked. While poverty, social inequality, and a lack of employment in households are key factors driving children into the workforce, in the case of girls, these factors are intertwined with cultural norms and gender stereotypes that relegate them primarily to the domestic sphere. Thus, child labor among girls is driven not only by their families' economic needs but also by a social structure that normalizes the subordination of women from an early age.

In this regard, girls' entry into paid and unpaid domestic work, as well as their participation in agricultural activities and the informal sector, highlight the feminization of child labor and the persistence of structural gender inequalities.

Although there are statistics showing the involvement of girls in child labor, it is essential to incorporate a gender perspective across the board in the study, design, and implementation of public policies aimed at eradicating child labor. This involves recognizing the specific ways in which girls are involved; it is necessary to highlight the consequences they face and develop effective prevention strategies.

In conclusion, it is important to note that the eradication of child labor cannot be achieved without addressing the gender dimension that permeates it. Taking into account the circumstances of girls will not only allow for a better understanding of the complexity of this phenomenon, but will also help advance the creation of a more just society, where children can grow up free from child labor and exploitation.

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