



CHILD LABOUR TRAJECTORIES OF GIRLS AND ADOLESCENTS IN THE CROSS-BORDER REGION OF POSADAS (ARGENTINA) - ENCARNACIÓN (PARAGUAY)¹

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Abstract

The main objective of this article is to analyze the relationship between gender and child labor trajectories, considering as a case study the situation of working girls and adolescents in the cross-border region connecting the cities of Posadas (Argentina) and Encarnación (Paraguay). To achieve this, the characterization outlines the activities carried out by women, emphasizing the significance of gender in the construction of social inequalities from childhood. Regarding its methodology, the study incorporates primary sources, including interviews with women and municipal and provincial administration officials with political responsibility on the subject; field observations and localized surveys; and structured information from open-access government statistics and articles from scientific repositories. In conclusion, it is suggested that girls and adolescents predominantly undertake household tasks. Furthermore, despite girls and adolescents also engaging in work outside the home – in businesses with family members or in street food vending – it is often boys of the same age who are tasked with solitary jobs that require strength, physical dexterity, and handling of monetary transactions.

Keywords: Gender, Child Labour, Inequalities, Borders

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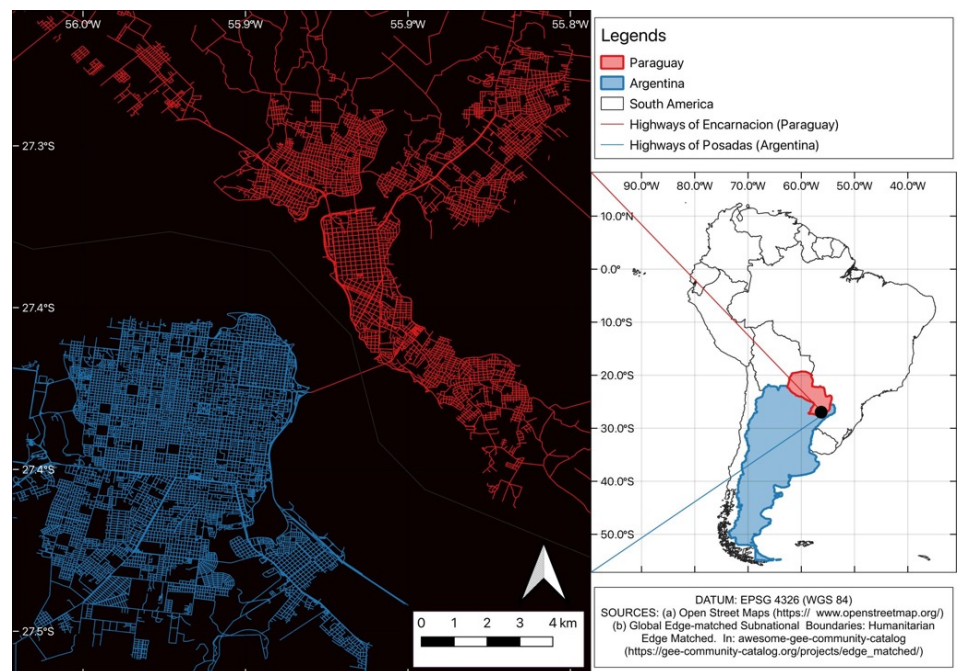
TRAJETÓRIAS DE TRABALHO INFANTIL DE MENINAS E ADOLESCENTES NA REGIÃO TRANSFRONTEIRIÇA DE POSADAS (ARGENTINA) - ENCARNACIÓN (PARAGUAI)

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Resumo

O principal objetivo do artigo é analisar a relação entre gênero e trajetórias laborais infantis, considerando como caso de estudo a situação das meninas e adolescentes trabalhadoras na região transfronteiriça que une as cidades de Posadas (Argentina) e Encarnación (Paraguai). Para isso, a caracterização destaca as atividades desenvolvidas pelas mulheres, ressaltando a importância do gênero na construção de desigualdades sociais desde a infância. Em relação à metodologia, o trabalho incorpora fontes primárias, incluindo entrevistas com mulheres e funcionárias municipais e provinciais com responsabilidade política sobre o tema; observações e notas de trabalho de campo; informações estruturadas de estatísticas governamentais de acesso aberto e artigos de repositórios científicos. Como conclusão, sugere-se que são as meninas e adolescentes que predominantemente realizam as tarefas domésticas. Além disso, apesar de também desempenharem atividades laborais fora de casa – em estabelecimentos comerciais com familiares ou na venda ambulante de alimentos –, são os meninos da mesma idade que executam trabalhos solitários que exigem habilidades de força, destreza física e transações monetárias.

Palavras-chave: Gênero, Trabalho Infantil, Desigualdades, Fronteiras.



Introduction

Child labour is defined as the utilization by an adult (over 18 years old) of children and adolescents in activities, both within and outside the home, with repercussions on their present well-being and life trajectories (ONU, CEPAL, and OIT, 2018). It is a multidimensional problem, conditioned by social, economic, cultural, and symbolic factors (Miño, Cossi, and Gómez, 2023), which constructs inequalities in trajectories in terms of positions, capitals, and strategies of social mobility, promoting, in turn, a differentiation between different types of households and their related childhoods (Bourdieu, 2007; 2011).

Among the boys and girls engaged in labour activities, there are differences regarding the type of work – street vending, household chores, caregiving for dependent individuals, or continuity in family businesses and commerce – and differences regarding the situational context in which the activity is framed (Padawer, 2018; Labrunée, 2024). In this sense, the commodification of childhood trajectories aligns with socialization processes that favor greater autonomy for the trajectories of boys and adolescent males in activities that require negotiation and calculation skills, entering the labour market even earlier than girls (Crovetto et al., 2018).

Following this argument, the main objective of this article is to summarize a characterization of the gender constraints in child labour (Martínez, Del Carpio Ovando, and López Mateo, 2023), focusing on the situation of working girls and adolescents (under 14 years old) in the cross-border region connecting the cities of Posadas (Argentina) and Encarnación (Paraguay). Thus, the initial research questions suggested are: Does gender

Illustration 1: Map of the cross-border region connecting the cities of Posadas (Argentina) and Encarnación (Paraguay).

serve as a critical factor in the trajectories of working girls? Are case studies approached from a gender perspective necessary as a critical contribution to statistical data on working childhoods in the region? Are there differentiations in time use according to gender, starting from childhood? Based on these research questions, we will synthesize the methodology used for the study.

Methodology

This research is framed within a qualitative case study conducted during the years 2020–2023. This study includes interviews with women and administration officials with political responsibility on the subject (N = 20) and fieldwork observations in the cities of Posadas (Argentina) and Encarnación (Paraguay). As secondary sources, official documents, open-access statistics, and research background from scientific repositories were considered.

In terms of the study location, the choice to focus on two cities in the region is due to the need to analyse the research problem, taking into account the particularities that unprotected child and adolescent labour acquires in urban environments. In this sense, we note that there are currently few studies on the issue in the region, and proposed interventions to prevent child labour situations are mainly developed in rural settings (Miño, 2023). Below is an indicative map of the cross-border region where the research was conducted (illustration 1).

Gender Constraints in the Labour Trajectories of the Studied Region

According to the data from the latest Time Use Survey in Argentina and Paraguay, there is differentiation based on gender both in the type of work and the number of hours dedicated to various activities. In Paraguay, women over 14 years old dedicate an average of 28.7 weekly hours to unpaid work, such as household chores, work for other households and the community, caregiving, and activities for self-consumption (INE, 2017). Thus, women spend approximately 4 hours a day on unpaid tasks, which is twice the time men dedicate to the same type of activities. Among unpaid domestic tasks, activities such as laundry, dishwashing, and household cleaning represent the highest hourly burden for women in Paraguay, with food preparation and cooking being the most time-consuming (INE, 2017).

In Argentina, there is also a clear gender differentiation in time use for various activities. Women over 14 years old spend more time than men on unpaid work, with a greater daily dedication to domestic work (INDEC, 2022). The activities with the highest time commitment for women in Argentina are household care tasks, where there is a difference compared to men of double the daily hours dedicated—6:07 hours for women compared to 3:30 hours for men (INDEC, 2022).

Therefore, it is feasible to assert that this representation illustrates a deeply rooted model of work division in the region, one that originates and perpetuates culturally from childhood (Oviedo and Cossi, 2019). In this model, women generally take on all domestic tasks with a very uneven contribution from men without receiving any compensation. In contrast, men grow up and socialize, assuming, as a given fact, all domestic work. Under this dynamic, girls are raised in an environment where they learn and emulate this way of managing and resolving daily tasks and reproductive work, considering in most cases that it is their duty, and therefore, they do it without questioning too much about it. Even discursively, there is often reference to the satisfaction that domestic and caregiving tasks bring as sufficient

compensation (Batthyány, Karina; Genta, Natalia; and Scavino, Sol, 2017).

“I am a mother, homemaker, and wife, and I am very proud of my role; I have never felt exploited. It all depends on the upbringing you had and the one you, along with your husband or not, give to your children.” (Norma, 62 years old, homemaker).

“Before, it was called a division of tasks; the man worked outside and the woman at home. Now, if both work and the woman does everything at home, it doesn’t work anymore.” (Adriana, 34 years old, is a Commerce employee).

As seen through these fieldwork quotes, being a cultural pattern in the studied region, women often do not perceive themselves as exploited under such dynamics, something that is slowly changing thanks to the struggles, achievements, and awareness activities that feminist groups have historically promoted.

“How disappointing and incredible that even today, many people still cannot see how this model that leaves women enslaved is perpetuated, and although it may sound strong, it is because it is a task without any remuneration, therefore, without financial freedom, so much that those concepts are in fashion.” (Natalia, 36 years old, teacher).

From this perspective, the differentiation in time use – referenced in the presented data from both countries – is not constructed in adulthood but is a situation reflected in structural processes established in childhood. Thus, we consider that the sexual division of labour arises from an early dichotomization observed in working childhoods, both in domestic tasks and other activities (Del Río and Cumsille, 2008; Leyra Fatou, 2012). In this sense, the positions occupied by women from childhood configure a role linked to lower-paying activities compared to the male gender, with low social hierarchization and, in the long term, a higher degree of economic dependence (Nemcovsky, 2013). Next, we will refer to the situation of working girls and adolescents in the Posadas-Encarnación region.

The situation of girls and adolescent workers in the Posadas-Encarnación region

The data from the latest Survey of Activities for Children and Adolescents in Paraguay (OIT and DGEEC, 2013) indicates that girls represent a higher percentage in the performance of domestic tasks compared to boys. The average weekly hours dedicated to domestic tasks by girls and adolescents—between 5 and 17 years old—in relation to the time spent by boys remains consistent in both rural and urban areas, increasing with age. Thus, the inequality gap in time uses between girls and boys in Paraguay reveals a differentiation of 20 percentage points, with girls dedicating more time to house cleaning, laundry, and food preparation. This difference increases by 30 percentage points in the older age group, from 14 to 17 years old. In general terms, in Paraguay, girls tend to spend double the weekly hours than boys on all types of domestic activities – around 11.6 hours for girls and adolescent females compared to approximately 6.2 hours for boys and adolescent males-. Within domestic tasks, boys show a greater dedication to activities such as carrying water, firewood, and doing household shopping, tasks that require physical strength or take place outside the home (OIT and DGEEC, 2013).

In Argentina, data from the latest state records on child labour also indicate a greater dedication of girls and adolescent females to domestic tasks within the private home. According to data from the Survey of Activities for Children and Adolescents in Argentina (INDEC, 2018), in the north-east region, girls and adolescents between 5 and 15 years old dedicate more time than boys of the same age to intensive domestic work. This type of activity, specified in terms of intensity based on the number of hours performed, includes cleaning, cooking, caring for siblings, or caring for another person living in the home (INDEC, 2018). It is noteworthy that, in Argentina, according to official statistical data, remunerated activities outside the home, such as caring for the elderly, sick, or children, house and business cleaning, laundry and ironing, kitchen tasks, and crafts, are also mainly carried out by girls and adolescent females. In

contrast, activities such as mowing the lawn, tree pruning, construction-related tasks, food delivery, and merchandise transportation are mostly performed by boys (INDEC, 2018).

In general terms, it is asserted that both in childhood and adulthood, the care of individuals such as small children or dependent older adults is predominantly carried out by women. This type of work, which takes place in the privacy of homes, due to its nature, maintains a hidden character and is a social issue that has been poorly studied and measured for a long time (Figari, 2001; OIT, 2004). However, according to referenced data from fieldwork conducted within the framework of this research, in the cross-border region of Posadas-Encarnación, girls were also observed working in secondary production activities such as commerce in local establishments with family members, in food stalls at fairs, or in street vending of fruits, baked goods, or handicrafts. In this regard, girls, evidently under the age of 12, were observed in Posadas selling bags of lemons. These situations align with references to child labour made by interviewed public administration official, who stated that “the boys and girls who sell in the downtown area of Posadas are usually between 7 and 12 years old and belong to the fourth generation of families dedicated to street vending” (public administration official, year 2022). The interviewed professionals suggested that there might be a differentiated use of children in this type of street vending because “families send children at these ages because they recognize, as a sales strategy, that people tend to buy more from a child than from an adult” (public administration official, year 2022).

Street vending by girls and adolescents has been observed in Posadas for over 10 years. In this regard, public administration official working in a childhood protection institution pointed that “the boys and girls who sell on the street can generate a considerable amount of money and usually spend it on products unrelated to the daily consumption of their origin families” (provincial public administration official, year 2021). The interviewees emphasized that when they started city patrols more than 10 years ago, it was difficult to convince girls and boys to attend a programme

or pursue a different path since the money they earned allowed them to stay in the city streets with greater autonomy, consuming products that they did not have access to through their families. In addition, regarding the sale of bags of lemons, those involved in the issue of politics of prevention of child labour hypothesized that “there are adults who distribute the lemons for sale and then take part of the profits” (provincial public administration official, 2021). Thus, it is noted that the street vending of lemons would be managed by a third party, unrelated to the selling families, and therefore, it would constitute an informal business involving child labour.

On the other hand, in the fieldwork, it has been observed boys washing cars outside restaurants, supermarkets, or in the central areas of both cities, and taking care of cars in the long lines formed at the Paraguayan head of the San Roque Gonzales de Santa Cruz International Bridge. All of them usually offer payment for these informal services through bank transfers, indicating how child labour becomes naturalized within the urban settings of the region under study.

Conclusions

Currently, both in Argentina and Paraguay, there is a clear gender delineation as a determining factor – from childhood with continuity into adult life – in relation to the type of work and the number of hours dedicated. According to the gathered data, women, from childhood onward, dedicate a greater number of working hours than men to domestic activities involving care, both inside and outside the home, with little or no remuneration. In Argentina and Paraguay, girls and adolescent females dedicate up to twice the time that boys and adolescent males do, primarily to caring for others – children or dependent individuals, inside or outside the home – and to food preparation and cooking.

The gap in the differentiation of the type of activity based on gender tends to widen as the age of the child or adolescent increases. Additionally, it was observed in the studied region that girls also engage in other secondary activities,

such as commercial employee, accompanied by a family member. This delineation could be seen as an investment by the household linked to future expectations and the preparation of the child for the local job market through informal skill-building. Furthermore, it was observed boys and adolescents of the same age engage in activities outside home, exposed to potential social conflict, performing tasks such as car care or involvement in illegal activities on the International Bridge “San Roque González de Santa Cruz” independently. These observations lead us to emphasize the importance of integrating a gender perspective into studies on socialization processes and, specifically, child labour in often-hidden activities that impact the work and social trajectories of children and adolescents. Furthermore, considering the unique aspects of the social participation space studied, future research could beneficially examine the role of tourism as a potential risk factor for labour exploitation of girls and adolescents in the region.

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