A close-up portrait of a young boy with dark hair, looking slightly to the right. He is wearing a dark blue school sweater with white stripes on the collar and a red lanyard around his neck. The background is blurred.

Work as a factor in the construction of a life
plan for working children and adolescents.
As examined by a gender-based approach

Executive summary



Save the Children

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Introduction

Participation of working children has been historical and increasing in Latin America. There are several reasons for this, from traditional and cultural forms—where children get involved in collective, family tasks as part of their upbringing, socialising, and affection—to reasons seeking economic income—through self-employment or serving third parties—as a survival strategy. In this process, the characteristics of the work performed by working children and adolescents are of vital importance, for they may have positive or negative consequences for their lives, as long as they comply (or not) with decent conditions for their development.

In this very dynamic, it is crucial to consider the different dimensions in the life of children—gender, age, territoriality, and ethnicity—which are factors of greater discrimination and oppression for certain groups of working children and adolescents, and which are decisive in the options for access to and control over their work, as well as in the impacts the job will have on their lives and on the exercise of their rights. In particular, on gender equality terms—a requirement for a complete fulfillment of children’s rights—the workplace is one of the settings for greater violations, especially for girls and women.

The gender division of work is created with the social constructs of gender—assigned according to the gender of the newborns—and it organises the social system in the productive aspect—linked to men and a salary and social value—and in the reproductive aspect—linked to women and with no social or economic value. The immediate consequence of this process is the working overload for women, which limits their access to other developmental spaces, such as education, paid work, political participation, among others.

The aforementioned blossoms and grows within a patriarchal society, which legitimises the assignment of discriminatory roles for women and men, and which reinforces the recurrence of attitudes and behaviours that do not recognise equally the value of men and women in the different spaces of socializing, generating a variety of impacts in the lives of working children and adolescents. Thus, Save the Children International and Save the Children Canada, within the project “Children Leading the Way”, conducted a qualitative research: *Work as a factor for the construction of a life project for working children and adolescents. As examined by a gender-based approach.*

This study seeks to explore and examine, from the viewpoint of working children and adolescents, the actual or non-existent contribution of work to achieve the desired life plan, considering the different features of life that have an impact in the rearing of children. The study was focused on six communities in Bolivia and Nicaragua—both urban and rural—and involved, other than working children and adolescents, the experiences of the families, organisations, authorities, and employers—all of them key actors for their training and socialising, and also enablers for the future of working children and adolescents.

The document has two central chapters: the Bolivia chapter and the Nicaragua chapter. Both include the development of complementary theoretical frameworks, the description and analysis of the results based on two different types of qualitative methodologies, as well as conclusions. The study ends with a section of recommendations to work with.

We hope this research becomes a substantial contribution for an understanding of the living conditions of working children, and their implications in the exercise of equal rights in order to identify and implement improved strategies and policies which respond appropriately to the different interests and demands of working children and adolescents.

Goals and methodology

The general goal of the study is to find out if work facilitates or hinders a desired life plan for working children and adolescents, considering the different dimensions of life and the conditions affecting them. The study uses primarily the rights-based and gender equality approaches within the framework of intersectionality—the diversity of characteristics in life faced by children and adolescents, and which can shape situations of multiple oppression—, as perspectives for the interpretation and analysis of the experiences expressed by the working children and adolescents who took part of this research.

The thematic considerations—addressed in the study—are: the socializing spaces by gender in order to achieve a life plan, the types of established relationships in their spaces, the power relations in their socializing spaces, the sociocultural systems that have an influence in those constructs—patriarchal, adult-focused, colonial, ethnic—, the achievement expectations, as well as the perceived satisfaction factor of children and adolescents regarding what work brings them, distinguishing between their effects and implications in women and men.

The study was carried out in three municipalities in Bolivia—El Alto, Cochabamba and Camiri—, and 29 women and 29 men took part in it, most of them belonging to child and adolescent labourers' organisations. They were between 9 a 17 years-old, attending school from 4th to 12th grade. Other adults in the families and key actors of the organisations working with children and adolescents were also interviewed.

In Nicaragua, the research was conducted in three municipalities: La Dalia, Rancho Grande and El Cuá. A total of 23 women and 23 men ages 12 to 22 participated in the research. Adults also collaborated—members of the families of working children and adolescents, community authorities, and coffee plantation employers—where some of working children and adolescents participating in the study work.

Regarding the qualitative methodology developed, each consulting team had the independence to use different tools to gather information. In Bolivia, information was gathered from primary and secondary sources. The primary information came from: i) participatory workshops with groups of working children and adolescents in each of the cities, where observations, perceptions, and life plans of the children and adolescents were collected, and ii) interview with key informants, former departmental



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and local authorities, and an expert with field work in projects addressing working children and adolescents. The secondary information came from reference books on the issue and a theoretical approach.

In Nicaragua, the methodological process was reflective: the voices and experience of children and adolescents were at the heart of the analysis and of the very concepts of work and life plans for working children and adolescents. Regarding the methods, a combination of the following was used simultaneously: i) individual semi-structured interviews, collective interviews/workshops, individual and family life stories, and observations in the selected municipalities, and ii) interviews with Save the Children's partner organisations. The recording of the life stories was carried out in a colloquial manner (Speedy, 2008)¹.

Comparative results

Broadly speaking, working children and adolescents participating in the study perceive work as a facilitating space for relations and actions that inform their life plan. For them, work is a space of emotional connection, a material support, a condition to study and complement their family life. These are all facilitating aspects for achieving their life plan.

(1) Speedy, Jean. 2008. «Constructing stories in narrative interviews». In *Narrative inquiry and psychotherapy* (59-85). Hound Mills: Palgrave Macmillan.

For the working children and adolescents from Bolivia and Nicaragua, *work is part of the learning process of a trade or occupation, and a way to be “responsible” and “workers”*, which have to do not only with the dynamics of family everyday life and economic survival, but also with their future. Working “for themselves” or for the family and with the family seems to be the necessary conditions for a job to be regarded as positive, not only when it is fieldwork but also the one that makes money.

It is worth mentioning that there are working children and adolescents who also express satisfaction for the job done when the conditions are not the best ones —such as work in farms, under conditions of exploitation—, because of the money they make and because they have the company of their parents/caregivers, with whom they share strong emotional ties. In Bolivia, working children and adolescents interviewed said the fact that they make money has several connotations for achieving their life plans, and it is also linked to the possibility of studying, wishes of inclusion through access and consumption of technology—cellphones and the Internet—, purchasing clothes and others. The differences between girls and boys have not been significant so far.

In Nicaragua, *self-employment* was mentioned frequently. Working in their own parcels of land or owning a ranch is for many an outstanding purpose. For the adult men and women of the families we interviewed this is quite clear, and it is also seen as a family resource. Among working children and adolescents it is present especially in the narratives of men, but it was also present in women’s accounts,

although this is less common and less decisive for their life plans. It is less frequent among working girls of Dalia and Rancho Grande and in children working in the coffee plantations.

In both countries —where children start working at a very early age—, *the field work performed by working children and adolescents* has, in general, a positive connotation for those interviewed. The starting age goes anywhere from 7 to 13 years of age. Beyond the economic motivation, working is a matter of collaboration, emotion, reciprocity and willingness in the relationships with parents, caregivers, their community, and working spaces. These aspects have a positive value, higher than other conditions that may occur in their work—working hours, kind of work, fare wages, and pursuing their studies.

However, the discourse of what work means for them depends of the different experiences they have had surrounding work, whether positive or negative. An important, influential element in this meaning is the attitude of loyalty towards their parents, which leads them to dignify work even before a permanent institutional discourse of eradication of child labour, especially in Nicaragua. This includes safeguarding the work they perform, and their parents and caregivers.

This strategy is used in a context of extreme need and inequality, where the work performed by working children and adolescents —and which their families require them to perform—has been identified —regardless of the work they do in their plots of land with paid work—as something negative and harmful at discourse level. Besides from this loyalty—which is common in working children and



María Esther Pozo - Focus group in Bolivia

adolescents towards their families—they work and build among their families.

The *domestic work* in both countries is carried out mainly by girls, adolescents and women. Although this job does not necessarily have a negative connotation, and is defined in terms of collaborative value, it does not have the positive connotation that work in the field or self-employment have, as they facilitate a life plan. This type of work —domestic work— is regarded as “support”, not as a vital issue for the subsistence of the families.

This depreciation —which is not exclusive of rural areas— leads many working children and adolescents to not see themselves as workers, although they perform domestic chores. For some of them their future aspirations may be more connected to their ideas of productive work in the field; for others, in pursuing a career to become professionals, and in some others a very clear possibility to escape the type of life they have. Also, subordination lies at the heart of what girls and adolescents workers may experience within the patriarchal system and in the face of the depreciation of rural work and small-scale trade in the predominant capitalist economic system.

Also in Nicaragua, paid agricultural work is identified as a practical strategy to solve temporary income problems in the families. The historical social inequities in the country —particularly, poverty and land dispossession— makes this work a frequent alternative for rural families. However, this is very convincing when it is also connected with another key socializing element: studies, specifically formative activities where they take part with the organisations and are not necessarily related to trainings in the public education system, which is considered deficient.

In both countries, *education is valued as a high priority*, and is perceived as a fundamental step in order to achieve a desired life plan. In the case of Nicaragua, the formative processes with the organisations have a higher priority than those of school. The main factor is “to learn by doing”, which is more coherent with the vocational practices developed in their environments—such as agricultural or agroecological technical education. Even when in both countries working children and adolescents access the public education system, it has many obstacles for achieving a desired life plan.

This is due to the difficulties for physical access—the distance to schools, especially for secondary schools—, the lack of transportation in the communities, the quality and appropriateness of the education provided, as well as the violence experienced by the teachers. In the specific case of



girls and female adolescents, walking long distances makes them more vulnerable to assaults and sexual harassment, robbery and intimidation. This is why in certain cases they relatives prefer to look after their safety and not letting them go to school.

In the narratives of the Nicaraguan group, an issue emerged significantly—in terms of socializing space—, and it was the *environment*. Its preservation and good management is part of a vital strategic relationship between working children and adolescents, their current job and their life plans. Their discourse has clearly assumed the care of natural resources and the need to avoid polluting them with chemicals. This aspect has been incorporated into the formative processes with the organisations. In many cases, they seem to be associated with a vision of complementarity between different activities/jobs, options to generate more income, and dreams of becoming professionals. In others, there is also a combination with a vision where the earth is their main resource and the longing to remain in their communities and close to their families.

Both in Bolivia and in Nicaragua, *the main settings for working children and adolescents to socialise are the family, the workplace, the organisations, and in some cases the church* (different denominations). In Nicaragua —specifically in La Dalia—, sports and games are important socialising settings. These places are not definitely separated, but rather connected depending on the activities they are performing. In Bolivia, play and leisure are still identified as children’s spaces, and not women’s for whom housework and care chores are still perceived as an obligation. This leads to having a greater concentration of women in cleaning, cooking, and other types of domestic tasks. In spite of this, there are less differences in

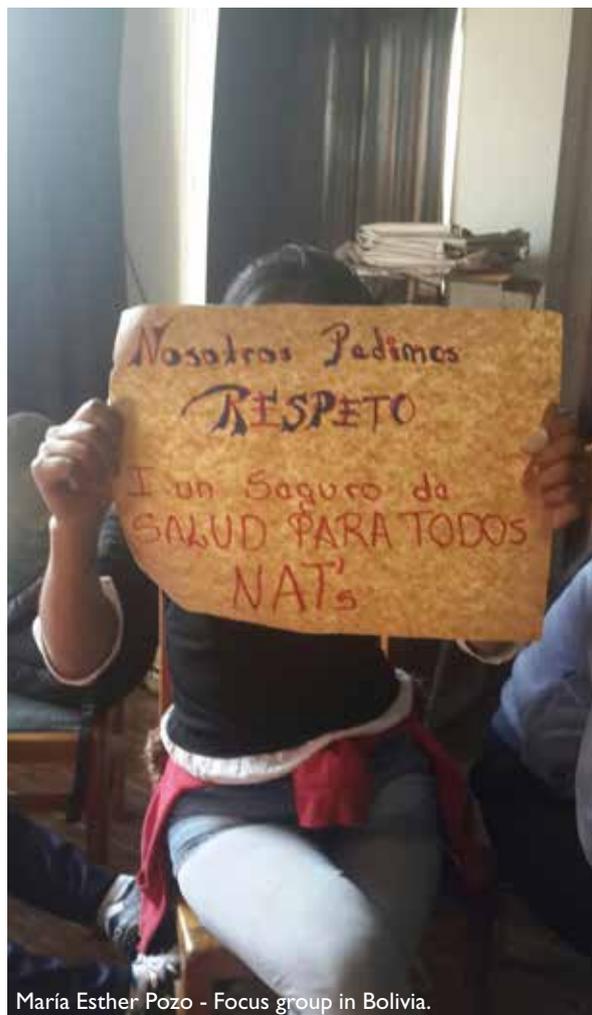
the traditional gender roles as reported by children than among adults; that is, their spaces and type of work are being shared more. Children say they do housework, such as doing the laundry and tidying up their bedroom in most cases.

In Bolivia, we found that the *social territorial management* that children and adolescents have is distinguished by gender: for girls is more diverse and complex than for boys, that is to say, the living space identified by them is social-territorial, dynamic, and interactive with nature, social organisations, schools, recreational spaces, health centers, factories, companies, plazas and marketplaces. Here the girls identify places of uncertainty and risk in their environment. Whilst for boys, the path and social-territorial management are linear, without the complexity described by girls.

On the other hand, some working children and adolescents are aware that *they experience violent situations in the different socializing spaces*. The women identified violence with more clarity and intensity in the different settings of their lives, although both—boys and girls—define the family setting as the most violent, followed by the workplace and the school. In Bolivia, working children and adolescents strongly recognise the spaces of violence when they refer to themselves in the third person and in a collective manner; whereas in the first person this violence turns invisible, probably due to how natural the family violence is, and the little capacity to recognise a situation of vulnerability.

For women, the main concern and cause of sorrow occurs within the family: risks of disease and absence, and death of their grandparents or mother. Another aspect that saddens them is violence among parents or towards women; for example, they say that being hit or yelled at makes them sad. Plus, they refer to gossip and bad-mouth as permanent threats and sources of fear where these occur. The disgrace towards women is a mechanism of control over the female body which is often reproduced in the Bolivian society.

Likewise, in the narratives of family life of adult persons in the families of *working children and adolescents* in Nicaragua, difficult and unwanted experiences were revealed from a very early age, which were associated to the workplace and are explained by migrations—as survival strategies—and early pregnancy. In the case of migrations, it has an impact on situations like loss of friends or distance of family members, giving up their belongings, and change of environment. Regarding early pregnancy, it is regarded as an unwanted event and the interviewed mothers hope it does not happen again with their daughters.



María Esther Pozo - Focus group in Bolivia.

The stories about unwanted pregnancies —when speaking of daughters— also highlight the high occurrence in the communities where participants of the study came from. Nicaragua is the country with the highest rate of teenage mothers in the region . It also indicates that the perception of this risk is clear among the parents of the girls and female adolescents, and even of boys and male adolescents. In Bolivia, although it does not arise fluently and solidly in the dialog with working children and adolescents, issues of human trafficking are reported repeatedly as part of their everyday life, because they are familiar with real situations and are aware of its dangers.

Both working children and adolescents from Bolivia and Nicaragua admit—in their accounts—*having rights and being subjects of rights*, especially the right to life, to work, and to education. The latter two—work and education—strongly define their sense of belonging among working children and adolescents. And being part of the community, they have a certain degree of awareness regarding their opportunities to a decent development. This can be related to their participation experience along child-led organisations and NGOs, which promote training processes with them.

In particular, in Bolivia, the *organisation and participation experiences of working children and adolescents* in organised groups are received differently by women and men. Empowerment and socializing for women and men is produced in the same aspects of their personal and organizational life; the difference is that the level of empowerment requires greater efforts for women. In Bolivia, in the municipality of Cochabamba, a successful case is being reported, where women have been holding the chair of the organization for five years. This has not happened in the other organisations of working children and adolescents, located in other municipalities considered in the study. In general, working children and adolescents who belong to child-led groups or organisations have a positive concept of themselves, and they see themselves as people with abilities, opportunities to have a say and be active, as well as establishing solidarity relationships with their peers.

Citizen participation and political action of working children and adolescents is linked to their membership in an organisation that gathers working children and adolescents. It is an opportunity for the exercise of their rights and public action, and at the same time it provides them with the opportunity of interacting with the State and civil society organisations, as well as with their peers. Nevertheless, both girls and boys express situations of traditional subordination, where authority is performed by their parents; although they recognise the organisation of working children and adolescents is a source of guidance in their lives, in terms of possibilities for knowledge and social change. In that regard, the identified gender differences are that girls recognise a greater subordination and authority in more settings, and that the sense of obedience is more distinct in girls than in boys.

General recommendations of the study

The fulfilment of the human rights of children and adolescents involves the complete eradication of inequalities and gender discrimination. The results and conclusions of the study show that working children persistently face a series of obstacles for their development due to gender issues. This places them in specific situations of vulnerability, in social, cultural, political and economic systems which neglect their conditions as subjects of rights by reinforcing this dynamics of oppression. This last aspect is directly related to their possibilities to wish for and build the life plan they yearn for.

The following recommendations are framed in order to answer one of the questions with greater interest in this study, How to enable the realisation of life plans sought by working children and adolescents within their spaces and dimensions of life, and as subjects of rights?

1. We should begin by viewing work as an opportunity space for training, socializing, citizenship, and the construction of a desired life plan, as long as it meets decent conditions which leave out exploitation, discrimination, and inequality. In this sense, the acknowledgement and appreciation of working children is essential in the different fields and geographical spaces where they develop—urban and rural, domestic and non-domestic, paid and unpaid— in order to build their developing capacities and also for an effective implementation of protection measures and to guarantee the fulfillment of their rights.

It is necessary to encourage a clear, strong and positive discourse on work and on the acknowledgement of working children and adolescents as workers in the communities where they carry out their activities. The negative aspect of working children and adolescents' work —due to the predominant institutional discourses— entails not only practical consequences when demanding rights, but also fractures in their daily lives—with different nuances depending on the type of work we refer to.

(2) According to official data, the pregnancy rate among adolescents in the country is 92 per thousand women, it is the highest in the region of Latin America and the Caribbean. Likewise, the average teenage birth rate is 85 per thousand women (UNFPA, 2013), and 25% of all pregnancies nationwide are adolescent. The teenage maternal mortality rate reaches 22% of all maternal deaths in the country, and violence is one of the causes of death during teenage pregnancy. Adolescent fertility in rural areas surpasses that of urban areas by 75%.

Domestic work, especially carried out by working children and adolescents, should be particularly enhanced, and not disassociated from the domestic work carried out by adult women. If nothing is done regarding the stigmatization of multiple systems using women, adolescents and girls as “housemaids” —especially those of working class and rural areas—, to deconstruct this type of negative labour by using different paradigms—such as good living or the economy of rupture and the sustainability of life—any gender discourse will only generate more contradictions for the life experiences of working children and adolescents, which tend to be more family-centered and collective. In this same line, it is important to see—to a greater extent—the increasing contribution to the domestic work of working children in their homes, which is a significant progress in terms of gender equality.

Regarding the two cases—particularly for the girls—it is necessary to continue working with the families and other actors from transformative gender approaches that seek changes in the regulations and of patriarchal and sexist practices, and which seek to reduce the work hours in domestic work for girls, redistributing them among the boys and the men in the family. This will have significant impacts in the use of girls’ and women’s time in other activities —study, recreation or paid work outside the home—, and will involve boys and men in a greater degree performing house work and practices of paternity and positive masculinity.

2. The life plans of working children and adolescents need greater attention and advocacy, because it is thought that at this stage of life they are “subordinate” or “incapable” to decide and project their lives. Acknowledging their leading role, autonomy and empowerment should advocate for actions promoting the generation of opportunities for training, technical and humanistic education, according to their needs and their own projects. And in this framework, to facilitate Access to this training on equal terms for men and women.

Likewise, it is important to consider the spaces for socializing and relationships, which are part of working children and adolescents’ everyday life and which define their spaces for entertainment, work, study, and reproduction. Transforming these into safe circuits for their development and performance will be a key step because it will guarantee real opportunities for them to construct their desired life plans and, at the same time, will generate the conditions for their engagement in decent work. It is essential to guarantee that working children and adolescents be acknowledged as subjects of rights with options and resources, and with the ability of achieving their life plans, and not merely focusing on whether their plans and wishes are realistic in their environments.

3. Education was targeted as one of the core aspects to achieve a life plan. This way, generating and strengthening the resources that allow them to access and benefit from a quality public and alternative, appropriate education—which considers the different needs of children—will contribute, as a result, to the achievement of their aspirations.
4. Violence against children and gender-based violence are issues that should be incorporated in the analysis of working children, as seen by an approach that makes them visible as products of vertical relations of power within patriarchal and adult-centered systems—which place children in the lower status of society. Several of working children and adolescents coexist in social-territorial spaces where they are permanently exposed to situations of violence: this is one of the hardest obstacles for the construction of individual abilities of the emotional, cognitive, and relational types, which allow them to encourage actions for a desired life plan, be protected from harm and abuse, as well as gaining access to decent and productive working conditions.

In this context, it is necessary to make visible the “new kinds of violence” and the “new forms of perpetrating violence”, including the risks of misusing technology for abuse, harassment and exploitation. Therefore, the treatment of violence should be faced from various perspectives: building capacities of self-defence, generating information, promoting a culture of peace, and advocating for policies against violence perpetrated against these persons: sexual violence, and trafficking in children.

5. The presence of teenage pregnancy among working children and adolescents comes as a core issue in the elaboration of the research—also the high rate of adolescent pregnancy in Latin America: second after Africa—. It is one of the most serious violations of rights, for it is the main obstacle for education, overcoming poverty, autonomy to develop a safe, healthy and pleasant sexuality, as well as to decide on the options for life.

We require actions that allow us to eliminate the family and community load and control over the bodies of working children and adolescents, and to socially distribute their care with, for instance, community security measures. This in turn, will allow visibility and will strengthen their resilience in situations that lead them to—and frequently force to—pregnancy.

6. Addressing the needs and demands of working children and adolescents of groups living in a greater social exclusion and discrimination —indigenous, rural, girls and adolescents with lower levels of education, and living in extreme poverty conditions— is a key component of our work, which requires strategies and policies that adopt equity and special protection steps.

This study and others developed on the issue of children and labour have reported that—in most Latin American countries— these groups are exposed to greater threats of being exploited in their workplaces, recruited by human trafficking for sexual and labour exploitation, and involved in activities considered as the worst forms of labour—mining, sugar harvest, among others.

This situation reinforces the multiple discrimination by which girls and adolescent women are the main victims of crimes associated with human trafficking, gender-based violence, crime, drug addition, among others. This way, assuming an intersectional approach in the design and implementing policies for this group is crucial to understand the different impacts they suffer due to features such as sex, ethnic background, age, social class, location, etc.

In order to examine these aspects with working children and adolescents from rural areas, we need to develop a comprehensive approach which includes gender and sexuality aspects closely linked to the social relationships within the family—between generations, of affection, among others—, activities in the community, and activities related to the sustainability of life—including in turn, the environment.

7. The participation of working children and adolescents in spaces of political and community organisation, and linked to non-governmental organisations, is a highlighted aspect of their personal and collective strength. These places are not only for training, but also for integration into a collective of peers with the same experiences, and enabling spaces for the adoption of leading roles that will generate changes in their lives.

In other words, these places should be regarded as an opportunity as long as we can try to work transformations in them regarding the power relations, as well as processes of empowerment in the private and public spheres —family, school, workplace, community and organisation, power, decision-making, and resource access and control.

Finally, we must initiate a plural and broad debate where children and adolescents take part, as well as the institutions working with working children and adolescents, considering their autonomy, empowerment, and claim agenda.

8. The design, implementation and monitoring of the public policies and State and private programmes should include the adoption and follow-up of steps to guarantee gender equality, which should be consistent with commitments assumed by the States in the framework of international treaties related to the defence of children's and adolescents' rights and gender equality: the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention on the elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979), the Declaration of Vienna and Programme of Action, the Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing (1995), the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, the Inter-American Convention to Prevent, Sanction, and Eradicate Violence against Women (OAS, Belem do Pará, Brazil, 1994), among others.



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