

PERSPECTIVE

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Drudges or Providers? Working Children in Myanmar

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Given that a fifth of children aged 10-17 in Myanmar work, it is worthwhile considering the types of work they are engaged in and the economic, political and household reasons for this.
- The incidence of Burmese children working has been shown to depend on household income, social class and structural factors. Parents', in particular father's, education level and skill level of employment have an impact on whether children work.
- Place of residence – urban/rural, middle class/working class areas, agricultural/industrial – plays a role in whether children work and the types of work they engage in. In general, more children in rural areas are engaged in work than those in urban areas. In addition, many of those living in rural working class areas are employed in the agricultural sector, like their parents. In contrast, those living in the industrial areas are likely to be engaged in factory work and are more likely to have been recruited by brokers or employers.
- More boys than girls are working and boys tend to begin at an earlier age than girls. However, girls who are working tend to have a double load of paid work and domestic work. The type of work they engage in is influenced by both gender and age.
- Families expect their children to work to contribute to the household and most children conform to these expectations. Families and employers perceive work as a way of building character and learning, instead of as a loss of childhood.
- The idea of children labouring in farms, factories and construction sites goes against conceptions of childhood and children in the international community. However, these need to be located in cultural and historical contexts, and contrasted with differing notions of childhood in Myanmar.

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DRUDGES OR PROVIDERS? WORKING CHILDREN IN MYANMAR

According to the census taken in 2014, 1.65 million children between the ages of 10 and 17 years old were engaged in employment in Myanmar.¹ This amounts to 20 per cent of the total number in that age group. Also, more than 210 000 children (2 per cent) in the same age group were actively looking for employment.

This article, relying on data from the 2014 census and two reports from the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the Woman and Child Rights Project in Mon State, examines children's reasons for working, the types of work they are engaged in and parental attitudes towards children and work. In doing so, it asks the question: are working children passive victims of adult circumstances or are they active agents in shaping their own economic life?

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONS OF CHILDHOOD AND CHILDREN

The UNICEF website, based on its own data, and data from the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the World Bank, estimates that 168 million children worldwide between the ages of five and 17 are engaged in employment.²

UNICEF's webpage on child labour states that:

Millions of children around the world are trapped in child labour, depriving them of their childhood, their health and education, and condemning them to a life of poverty and want. Of course, there is work that children do to help their families in ways that are neither harmful nor exploitative. But many children are stuck in unacceptable work for children – a serious violation of their rights.³

This statement reveals how UNICEF and the international community construct childhood, children and work. First, working children are “trapped”; they do not have a choice and are not able to change their circumstances. Second, they are being deprived of childhood, health and education. Third, child labour leads to penury. Fourth, many but not all are working in harmful or exploitative conditions. And fifth, UNICEF and the international community advocate a rights-based approach to protecting children.

¹ Department of Population. Ministry of Immigration and Population. Myanmar. March 2016. The 2014 Myanmar Population and Housing Census. *The Union Report: Occupation and Industry*. Census Report Volume 2-B, p. 13.

² UNICEF webpage “Child Labour” <http://www.unicef.org/protection/57929_child_labour.html> (accessed 1 April 2016).

³ Ibid.

The statistics on child labour in Myanmar and across the world are unsettling because they portray children in a way that goes against conventional notions of what a child and childhood are. Childhood is envisioned as a time of joy and pleasure, carefree days filled with play and school; children are artless cherubs, babes in the woods, little lambs whose innocence and vulnerability need to be protected.

This understanding of childhood is rooted in two discourses – the Romantic discourse and the discourse of *tabula rasa* (blank slate). The former, based on Jean-Jacques Rousseau's work in the eighteenth century, claims that children are innocent, pure and good and should be protected from the corrupting evils of the outside world. The other discourse draws from the philosophy of John Locke who believed that children enter the world as blank slates who could, with guidance and training, develop into rational human beings. Thus, children are a work-in-progress, with specific educational needs that adults should provide.

UNICEF's claim that working children miss out on childhood is based on these two discourses. This conception of childhood is a Eurocentric construction that emerged in sixteenth century Europe, reflecting the values and practices of a rising middle class.⁴

Historicizing and contextualizing accepted notions of childhood remind us that there are different ways of envisioning childhood. For example, the Neo-Confucian doctrine in fourteenth to nineteenth century Imperial China discouraged physical activity and outdoor play but promoted the formation of moral character and academic learning in the shaping of the ideal child.⁵ Undoubtedly, the various communities living in Myanmar have their own notions of what childhood and children are. In addition, the rapidly changing political and economic context that families and children are experiencing as a consequence of the transition to democracy and economic liberalization have a profound impact on young lives.⁶

Knowing how childhood is constructed in Myanmar is important but so is recognizing that children are not a homogenous group. Their experiences are shaped by social class, gender, ethnicity and other forms of social stratification. Moreover, they are positioned within micro (family) and macro (state) structures that configure and constrain their choices and opportunities. With this in mind, I turn to an examination of Myanmar's working children.

⁴ Diana Gittins. "The historical construction of childhood". In *An Introduction To Childhood Studies* edited by Mary Kehily. Berkshire, England: Oxford University Press, 2009, pp. 35-49.

⁵ Hsiung, Ping-chen. *A tender voyage: children and childhood in late imperial China*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005.

⁶ For a discussion on this with regards to early childhood education in Myanmar, see Ang, Lynn and Wong, Lily. "Conceptualising early childhood care and development in fragile states: Understanding children and childhood in Myanmar". *Global Studies of Childhood* 5 (2015): 367-380.

POVERTY AND STRUCTURAL FACTORS

A study conducted by the ILO in six regions⁷ in Myanmar reported that children work because of poverty. Unfortunately there is no definition of poverty in the report nor data on parental or household income to enable us to determine what this actually means. Although no direct relationship was established between parents' death and the incidence of children working, it was found that the percentage of working children who had a deceased parent was at least twice that of their non-working peers.⁸ In a country with low state support, families have to pool all their resources – including the labour of their children - to mitigate the adversity brought about by structural economic factors and unexpected setbacks.

The reasons for children working are complex. In a study of 45 children and 22 adults in Mon State done by The Woman and Child Rights Project, it was found that “poverty was not necessarily the sole cause of child labour, but rather the two [poverty and child labour] were jointly symptomatic of poor access to education and healthcare, landlessness, migration, and the effects of decades of armed conflict and human rights abuses”.⁹ A significant finding is that being a migrant is an important determining factor in child employment.¹⁰

Given the limited data, it appears that children work because of a variety of internal and external factors that affect the household economy. It is likely that the income from children's employment is an economic necessity for many families and serves also as a buffer against misfortune.

PARENTS' EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

There appears to be a strong correlation between parents' education level and employment, and children's participation in the workforce. The education level of the parents of the 152 working children surveyed by the ILO was much lower than that of the 162 non-working children interviewed. The mothers of working children had the lowest education among all parents, and constituted the group with the highest number with no formal education. The mothers of non-working children, on the other hand, were more likely to have high school and university education. The fathers of non-working children were reported as the ones having the highest education of all parents – on average, they were 15% more likely to have

⁷ The six locations are Sanchaung and Hlaing Thar Yar in Yangon Region, two wards in Patheingyi, Ayeyarwady Region, and Chaungzong and Mawlamyine townships in Mon State.

⁸ International Labour Office, International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC) / Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work Branch (FUNDAMENTALS). *Myanmar: Child labour knowledge, attitudes and practices (KAP) study in Yangon, Ayeyarwady Region and Mon State*. Geneva: International Labour Organization (ILO), 2015, p. 18.

⁹ The Woman and Child Rights Project. *Children for Hire*. November 2013, p. 9.

<<http://www.rehmonnya.org/reports/childrenforhire.pdf>> (accessed 25 April 2016).

¹⁰ ILO. *Myanmar: Child labour knowledge, attitudes and practices*, 2015, pp. 18-19.

high school and university education than the fathers of working children. In the study, all the fathers of non-working children had formal education.¹¹

Although the education levels of parents differed between the two groups, they had predominantly low-skilled jobs, such as construction, casual labour and trishaw driving. There was a slight difference in employment between the fathers of working and non-working children though. The former were employed in a wider variety of sectors such as street hawking, farming and fishing while the latter were mostly employed as shopkeepers and motorcycle taxi drivers. There is no explanation though for how this difference influenced children's participation in the workforce.

Significantly, the fathers of non-working children in Sanchaung township, a middle-class area in Yangon region, were more likely to have higher-skilled jobs than parents in the other research locations, such as medical doctor, party member, government informer, broker, logistics manager, web developer, although many were shopkeepers and drivers.

Given the lack of data, it is difficult to pinpoint why exactly parents' higher education levels correlate with children's engagement in work. However, it appears that the higher the level of parents' education and the higher skilled the employment of the father, the less likely that children will work.

PLACE OF RESIDENCE

Parents' education levels, employment and income coupled with place of residence have a huge influence on children's employment status. The census shows that three times more children in rural areas than in urban areas are engaged in work (see Table 2).

Table 1. Number and percentage of children working in Myanmar by place of residence¹²

	Employee (private organization)	Employer	Own account worker	Unpaid family worker	Total
Urban	260 279 (34.5%)	1533 (19.2%)	41 218 (14.6%)	35 701 (5.9%)	338 731 (20.5%)

¹¹ Ibid., p. 15.

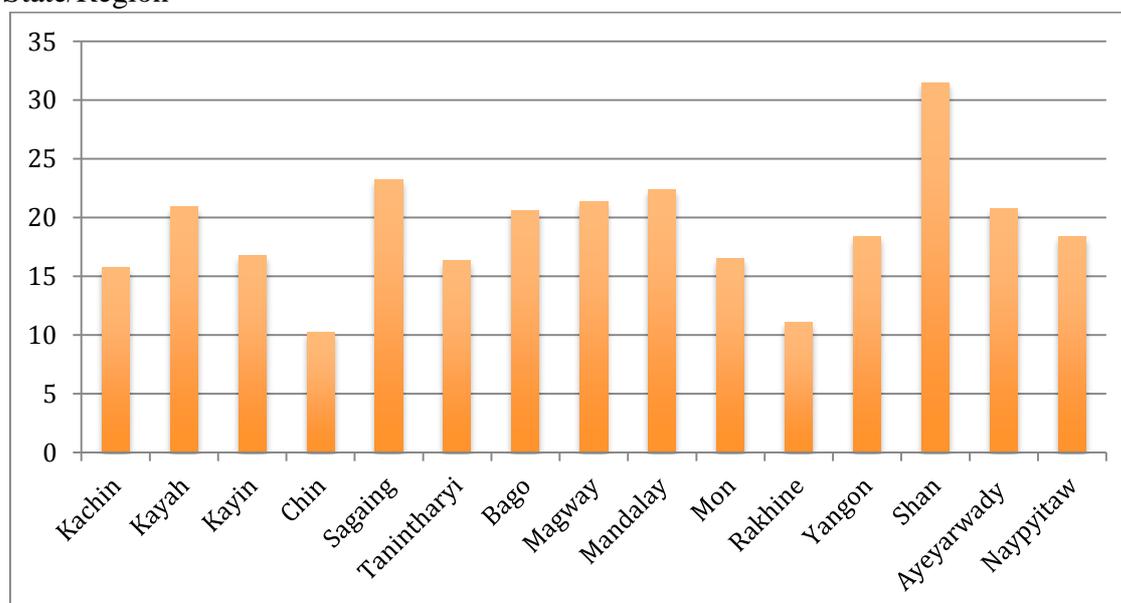
¹² Employee (Private organization): those employed and working for private employers or private organizations. All people in private companies, non-governmental organizations, international organizations, retail and wholesale enterprises fell under this category. Employer: persons who during the reference period worked in their own business, which also employed one or more other persons. Own account worker: self-employed persons who worked in their own business or worked in their own/family business for family gain and did not have any employees. Unpaid family worker: persons who worked in a business, farm, trade or professional enterprise operated by a member of the household/family and received no pay. Taken from Department of Population. *The Union Report*, 2016, p. 97.

Rural	494 025 (65.5%)	7987 (80.8%)	241 397 (85.4%)	572 274 (94.1%)	1 315 083 (79.5%)
Total	754 304	9520	282 615	607 975	1 653 814

Source: Department of Population. Ministry of Immigration and Population. Myanmar. March 2016. The 2014 Myanmar Population and Housing Census. *The Union Report: Occupation and Industry*. Census Report Volume 2-B, pp. 16-17.

Further, the census data show that children in certain States/Regions are more likely to be working. As Figure 1 shows, Shan State, at almost a third of all children, had the highest percentage of working children out of all the States/Regions. This figure was significantly higher than in all other States/Regions the majority of which were hovering around the 20 per cent mark. Chin and Rakhine States had the lowest at 10.2 per cent and 11.1 per cent respectively.

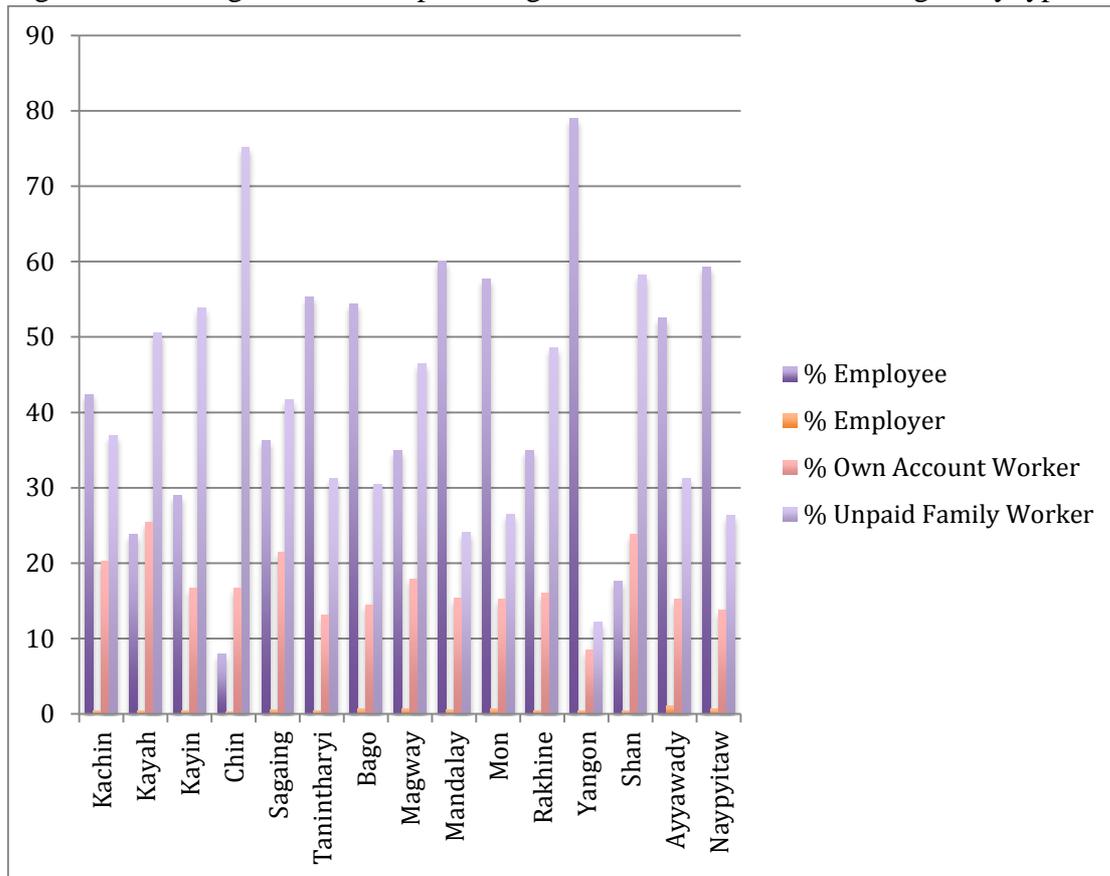
Figure 1. Percentage of children who are working out of total population of children in the State/Region



Source: Calculated from statistics in Department of Population. Ministry of Immigration and Population. Myanmar. March 2016. The 2014 Myanmar Population and Housing Census. *The Union Report: Occupation and Industry*. Census Report Volume 2-B, pp.12-89.

Figure 2 shows that the States/Regions with the highest percentage of children who were employees were in Yangon, Mandalay and Naypyitaw. In contrast, Chin State has the lowest percentage of working children who were employees and the highest percentage who were unpaid family workers, followed by Shan State.

Figure 2. Working children as a percentage of total children in State/Region by type of work



Source: Calculated from statistics in Department of Population. Ministry of Immigration and Population. Myanmar. March 2016. The 2014 Myanmar Population and Housing Census. *The Union Report: Occupation and Industry*. Census Report Volume 2-B, pp.12-89.

Unfortunately the census does not provide data that would explain these differences. Also, these data are not complete since a significant number of people in Rakhine State were excluded because they wanted to be identified as Rohingya. However, data from the ILO and the Woman and Child Rights Project in Mon State shed some light on the variation of children’s work in Yangon Region, Ayeyarwady Region and Mon State.

It appears that the type of work children are engaged in depends very much on the type of industry that predominates in their place of residence as well as their parents’ employment. In Mon State, almost half of the children interviewed were involved in agricultural activities in this state, reflecting the fact that over half the working population in Myanmar is employed in the agriculture sector.¹³

In Chaungzon township in Mon State, children worked in fisheries, thatching or farming followed by the construction sector. In Mawlamyine township in the same state, children

¹³ The Woman and Child Rights Project. *Children for Hire*, 2013, p. 24.

worked predominantly as waiters or in rubber tapping.¹⁴ It was found that children engaged in agriculture or other traditional means of employment (fishing, tending cattle) often followed their parents, siblings, or grandparents into these customary means of livelihood. This was not the case for working children in factories and restaurants who were typically recruited by brokers or employers.¹⁵

In Hlaing Thar Yar (the biggest industrial zone in Yangon) and Patheingyi (urban and semi-urban areas in Ayeyarwady Region), the largest proportion of working children were employed in factories, followed by the construction sector.¹⁶

Even though children tend to work in the industries that predominate in their area, they are also generally engaged in a wide range of other types of employment such as water delivery, rubbish collection, domestic service and serving tables, for example.

GENDER

The type of work and age at which children begin working were influenced also by gender. Table 2 shows that across all the categories of employment, more boys than girls are engaged in work. Interestingly though, boys were two times more likely than girls to be employers.

Table 2. Number and percentage of children working in Myanmar by gender

	Employee	Employer	Own account worker	Unpaid family worker	Total
Boys	430 016 (57%)	5783 (60.7%)	157 953 (55.9%)	320 305 (52.7%)	914 057 (55.3%)
Girls	324 288 (43%)	3737 (29.3%)	124 662 (44.1%)	287 170 (47.3%)	739 757 (44.7%)
Total	754 304	9520	282 615	607 975	1 653 814

Source: Department of Population. Ministry of Immigration and Population. Myanmar. March 2016. The 2014 Myanmar Population and Housing Census. *The Union Report: Occupation and Industry*. Census Report Volume 2-B, pp.14-15.

Except in the middle class township of Chaungzong, boys started working at an earlier age (on average below 13) than girls.¹⁷ However, girls are more likely to have a double load of work – outside employment as well as domestic work in the household.¹⁸

¹⁴ ILO. *Myanmar: Child labour knowledge, attitudes and practices*, 2015, p. 25.

¹⁵ The Woman and Child Rights Project. *Children for Hire*, 2013, p. 25.

¹⁶ ILO. *Myanmar: Child labour knowledge, attitudes and practices*, 2015, p. 25.

¹⁷ ILO. *Myanmar: Child labour knowledge, attitudes and practices*, 2015, p. 17.

¹⁸ The Woman and Child Rights Project. *Children for Hire*, 2013, p. 45.

The type of work boys and girls engaged in was determined by age and by gender. Boys under 13 years of age and between 13-15 years old were found to work predominantly as servers in teashops, while boys aged 16 and above worked mostly on construction sites where they carried rocks or built. Girls aged 13 to 15, and 16 and above, said they worked mostly in garment and food factories followed by restaurants. Nevertheless, these jobs, while common, do not represent the full range of employment undertaken by children: water delivery, rubbish collection, domestic service, farming, rubber tapping and fishing, for example.¹⁹

FAMILY EXPECTATIONS AND CHILD AGENCY

It appears that children are considered economic agents in the household economy – they are expected to help their families in the financial and domestic spheres. The majority of adults interviewed – including a significant portion of parents of non-working children – believed that where necessary, children should work for an income. Parents believed that children have obligations – school and work – towards their families. Parents and some employers also believed that working is good for children because they learn mathematics, become more confident and develop good character traits.²⁰

Overwhelmingly, working children agreed that they had a role to play in the household economy. In the ILO study, the majority (77 per cent) had themselves made the decision to work. Moreover, 80 per cent and 83 per cent of the boys and girls interviewed said they liked their jobs.²¹

These findings challenge prevalent Western notions of children and childhood, which confine children to certain spheres of activity and deny their agency. For the families interviewed, it would seem that work is not perceived as a loss of childhood but rather as one of the means of character-building and of fulfilling familial expectations.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper is not to promote child labour or to deny the various ways in which children may be exploited or harmed in the course of their employment. Instead, it seeks to consider children's work in relation to family economies, Burmese notions of childhood and wider structural factors that prevail.

I argue that in order to improve the lives of working children, we need to do two things. First, we need to understand how Myanmar society constructs childhood and children in

¹⁹ ILO. *Myanmar: Child labour knowledge, attitudes and practices*, 2015, pp. 28-29.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

relation to family expectations, competing national agendas, government policies, and rapidly changing political and socio-economic complexes.

Second, we need to understand what Myanmar children's working and other experiences are through their own eyes and their own words. Inherent in this assertion is the idea that there is a diversity of experiences across the population – there are different ways of being a child and different kinds of childhood even within the same country. In addition, children's desire to actively contribute to their families' welfare should not be seen as negative. Instead, the role of adults and organizations should be to help them work towards achieving this goal in a way that lauds children's agency while maximizing their welfare.

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