THE MARGIN OF THE MARGINS: THE GIRL-AND BOY-CHILD WORKERS IN THE FISHERIES OF SAN MIGUEL BAY, PROVINCE OF CAMARINES NORTE, PHILIPPINES

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ABSTRACT

In the Philippines as elsewhere in Asia, working children in the fisheries sector is pervasive yet tends to be invisible. Their exclusion in the fisheries development equation is perpetuated by public ignorance and apathy. Aimed at increasing public awareness and understanding of this phenomenon, this study on the girl- and boy-child workers in 25 coastal villages in the Province of Camarines Norte was conducted. Using systematic random sampling design, a 58% incidence of child workers was reported. On average, there were 1.80 working children per household in the area. They were found mostly in capture fishing, housekeeping, fish processing, seaweed farming, and vending activities. Gender division of labor was apparent in the high concentration of boy-child workers in capture fishing, and of girls in food and fish peddling and household chores. Their earnings accounted for 11% of the household income. Among others, poverty triggered their decision to jeopardize or even forfeit their education by engaging in productive works. Undaunted by the risks, hazards and hard labor, they continued to choose to work to help the family. Still, despite the economic benefits of work, they expressed a desire to pursue their studies. The paper claimed that for fisheries development initiatives to have significant impacts, it must listen to the voice of the child workers.

Keywords: Working children, poverty, gender division of labor

INTRODUCTION

In the Philippines as elsewhere in Asia, poverty is a rural phenomenon found mostly in agriculture. Of the poverty groups in the agriculture sector, the fishermen are among the poorest of the poor. In 1997, it was reported that poverty among municipal fishermen in the seven bays of Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao ranged from 80% to 95%, the highest in the country (Asian Development Bank 1997). And within this marginalized group are working children (or child workers) whose situation is aggravated by the deprivation of education, nutrition, and health care which in many ways further restrict their growth and development. Perpetuated by public ignorance and apathy, fisheries development equations appear to have a blind spot on the pervasiveness of working children as it tends to give more focus on resource conservation and rehabilitation, and upliftment of socio-economic conditions of populace.

Working children is pervasive yet tends to be invisible. Results of the 2001 Philippine survey on children showed that total number of working children 5-17 years old was recorded at 24.8 M representing 16.2% of total number of children 5-17 years old (NSO 2002). This figure was 2.5 M or 11% higher than what was registered during the period July 1, 1994 to June 30, 1995. Among the 16 regions with high percentages of economically active children, Region 5 (Bicol), the location of the areas for this study, ranked fourth. The result also revealed that seven out of ten working children resided in

rural areas. About 11.3% of them worked as farmer, forestry worker and fishermen. Working children in urban areas are found in farming, trading, personal services and manufacturing jobs. Exposed to long hours of work and under extremely hot or cold temperature and to other hazardous conditions, many of these working children complained of cuts, wounds, punctures, bruises, hematoma, amputation or loss of body parts, fractures, sprains, abrasions, contusions, burns, eye strain or eye sight impairment, hearing impairment, and others. This scenario suggests that children, as wealth of nations, are being squandered and exploited as mere commodities and cheap labor, unmindful of the fact that such practice is a denial of human rights and entails an immeasurable long term cost not only to the working children but also to society.

To heighten awareness, provide understanding on the complexity of the pervasiveness of working children in the fisheries sector and craft a more responsive and responsible fisheries development programs, a study on the situation of the working children was conducted in 2001. The highlights of the results are presented in this paper.

OBJECTIVES

Generally, this paper intends to provide pertinent information towards understanding of girl- and boy-child workers situation in the fisheries of San Miguel Bay. Specifically, it aims to:

1. Describe the characteristic of child workers' households;
2. Describe the incidence and characteristics of child workers in the area;
3. Describe economic activities, work hours and working condition;
4. Determine their earnings and expenditure;
5. Identify reasons for working and aspirations in life; and
6. Identify actions towards promoting children's interests in fisheries development

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted descriptive research design. With sampling survey as its primary data gathering technique, a sample size of 370 household respondents with sampling error of 5.6% was drawn. And, employing a probable selection key, the child worker respondent within the household was selected and a 50-50 distribution of respondents by sex was arrived at.

To substantiate the findings in the survey, key informant interviews with village captains and officials, teachers and youth aging 18 years and above, and focus group discussions (FGDs) with child workers, parents, health workers and public officials in the villages of Banucboc, Mangcawayan, Barangay 3, Barangay 4, and Manguisoc were conducted. The aim was to gather information on the community's perception on working children's situation and health hazards, their struggles and aspirations in life.

THE STUDY AREAS

Municipality of Vinzons. Vinzons has a total land area of 9,060 square kilometers spread among its 19 villages, 8 of which are located along the coastline while the others are along rivers and/or further

inland. Vinzons lies at the eastern flank of Camarines Norte bordering the Pacific Ocean. It is 255 kilometers south of Manila and is accessible by land.

In 2000, the municipality of Vinzons had an estimated population of 37,975 of which 51% were male and 49% were female. It comprised 7,426 households with 80.5% residing in rural areas. Vinzons' economy is dependent on its agriculture and fishing industry. Fifty-six percent (56%) of its total land area are devoted to agriculture, and planted mostly to coconut and paddy rice, particularly in the lowland areas where irrigation is present. Fishing is predominant in coastal village in the eastern side of town that borders the Pacific Ocean and in the Calaguas Islands in the north. Fishponds carved out of marshes and swamps are likewise prevalent in the area. Small-scale industries like the making of *nipa* shingles, *nipa* wine, *bagoong*, and various local delicacies are also thriving.

Municipality of Mercedes. Known as the fishbowl of the Bicol Region, Mercedes lies in the eastern section of the province of Camarines Norte. The northern part of the town faces the Pacific Ocean while its eastern flank borders San Miguel Bay. At the eastern coast of the municipality is San Miguel Bay where its coral reefs and mangroves serve as feeding and nesting ground for various fish species. The northern side of the town that faces the Pacific Ocean provides safe haven for fishing vessels in the region.

Mercedes has a total land area of 15,510 hectares distributed among 26 villages most of which are situated along the coast of San Miguel Bay. In 1995, Mercedes had an estimated population of 38,641 comprising 6,195 households. Average population growth was 2.3%. Mercedes is agriculture-based economy. It is a producer of fish. Production is mainly from commercial, aquaculture and municipal sources. It consists of *dilis*, blue crab, *galunggong*, squid, *tanguigue*, *lapu-lapu*, shrimp and tuna. Other marine species caught in the area are sea cucumber, sea urchins, shellfish, lobster, octopus and others. The coastal area of the municipality is also suitable for oyster and/or mussel culture and seaweed production.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Characteristics of Child Workers' Households

Sample households' level of education was relatively low. About 69% completed elementary schooling, 26% high school, and 4.6% had some college schooling. Average household size was 6.4, significantly larger than the region's average of 5.3 (NSO 2002). Using the overall appearance and housing materials of the dwelling place as indicators of socio-economic classification of households, 60.3% belonged to class E, the extremely lower class, 38.1% to class D, the lower middle class, and only 1.6% to class C, the middle class. By the same measure, no household in the sample could be classified as upper class (A or B).

Majority (78%) were engaged in fishing activities such as fish capture, seaweed farming, fish processing, and fish peddling. The rest, 22%, were involved in a wide range of productive activities such as services (laundry, housekeeping, ice-making), non-farm agriculture (livestock raising), lower skilled (carpentry, cook), lower professional (teacher, artist), transport, unskilled non-farm, upper skilled (*hilot*,

technician, welder) and others (Table 1). Average monthly income was US$109.55 placing the poverty incidence at 62%, higher than the region's 57.3% (NSCB 2003)

Table 1. Distribution of households by occupation, Mercedes and Vinzons, Philippines, 2001

Types of Occupation	Frequency	Percentage
Fish capture	207	55.9
Seaweed farming	34	9.2
Processing	23	6.2
Fish peddling	24	6.5
Service	27	7.3
Lower skilled	11	3.8
Non-farm agriculture	2	.5
Lower professional	3	.8
Transport	9	2.4
Unskilled non-farm	14	3.8
Upper skilled	8	2.2
Others	3	0.8
NA	3	0.8
TOTAL	370	100.0

Incidence and Characteristics of Child Workers

Survey of 370 randomly selected households revealed a total of 1,147 children aged 5-17 years. Of this population, 668 (58.23%) were economically active, indicating an average of 1.80 working child in each household. Of the total 668 child worker respondents, 32.04% have stopped schooling while 65.87% were still attending school at the same time working. By gender, there were more boys who have stopped schooling relative to girls.

Child workers' age averaged 12.46 years and ranged from 4 to 17 years. While 2.4% of the child workers got involved in fisheries productive activities earlier than age 5, majority (48.60%) started at the age of 9-12 years (Figure 1). The prevalence of boys engaging in productive works earlier than 5 years, however, was higher than among girls.

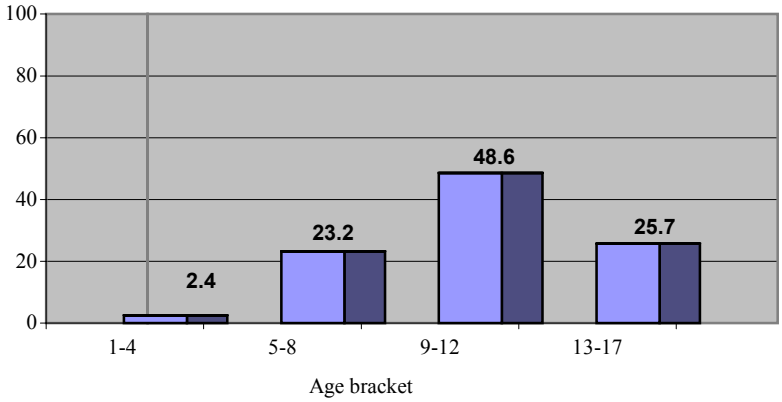

Figure 1. Child workers' initiation into work by age bracket, Mercedes and Vinzons, Philippines, 2001.

Child Workers' Economic Activities and Gender Division of Labor

Learning the ropes of work through observations, and trainings by their parents, peers, neighbors, siblings, employers and relatives, child workers got involved in multiple economic activities namely, fish capture, fish drying, seaweed farming, fish peddling, food peddling, boat guarding and cleaning, ice-making, farming, construction, and service-related activities. The large percentage, however, were found in capture fishing (26.22%) and fish processing (24.05%) (Table 2). Some were engaged in boat guarding and cleaning (19.73%), seaweed farming (9.46%), service crew (6.22%) and various other works related either to fishing and farming.

Table 2. Distribution by types of work of child laborers, Mercedes and Vinzons, 2000.

Types of Work	Frequency	Percentage
Capture fishing	97	26.22
Fish processing	89	24.05
Seaweed farming	35	9.46
Fish peddling	17	4.59
Food peddling	5	1.35
Boat guarding and cleaning	73	19.73
Ice-making	3	0.80
Service crew	23	6.22
Marketing	8	2.16
Artist	4	1.08
Farm caretaker	6	1.62
Construction worker	4	1.08
Others	6	1.62
TOTAL	370	100.00

Children's work activities tended to echo the gender division of work among adults. Girls took over household chores (42.16%), and food and fish peddling (each with 32.4%), enabling their mothers to engage in other activities (Figure 2). Girls also got themselves involved in fish processing (20.54%), seaweed farming (10.27%) and fish capture (3.78%) indicating that fishing is not solely a man's world. In areas where fish processing is a vital economic activity, girls were found actively involved in various stages of fish processing: fetching of sea water for salting of fish, pooling of fish/squid in one area, gathering of sawdust fuel to smoke the fish, laying out of dried fish/squid on a wooden sheet, drying them under the sun, and helping out in the packing of the dried products. In seaweed farming, many were engaged in cutting and tying the seaweed seedlings with plastic twine or straw around the nylon line prior to planting, and drying of newly harvested seaweeds. Girls' activities in fish capture were mainly shell digging, cucumber picking and capture of fingerlings by the seashore. Some (13.51%) were sent to work as helpers in eatery, merchandising store and others exchanging their unpaid housekeeping role in the home place for paid work. Quite a few, 2.16%, were into repacking of junk foods.

On the other hand, boys were drawn mainly in fish capture (51.35%), fish processing (29.73%), and seaweed farming (8.65%) suggesting that they begun their working life as their fathers' helpers. Involvement in activities such as fish vending, cleaning of boats, loading and unloading of fish and household chores was minimal.

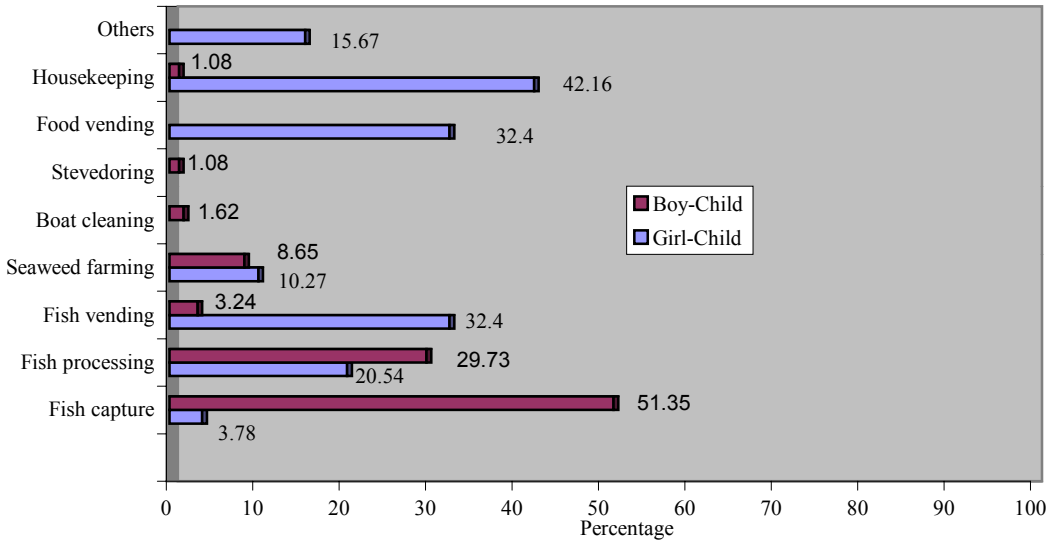

Figure 2. Child workers' division of labor, Mercedes and Vinzons、Philippines, 2001.

Unlike the boys, girls took on a host of other activities such as cleaning the house, washing dishes, fetching water either from a nearby or far-away well or public pump, cooking, washing clothes, tending of younger brothers/sisters, gathering of sawdust, running an errand, watering the plants, livestock raising, disposal of garbage, mending of clothes and watching the store.

Child Workers' Work, Work Hours and Working Conditions

In fish capture, where workers were mostly boys, work hours ranged from 1 to 17 hours, averaging some 7 hours at sea in narrow *bancas* (canoe) (see Figure 3). Work normally started early in the morning and ended between noontime to early afternoon.

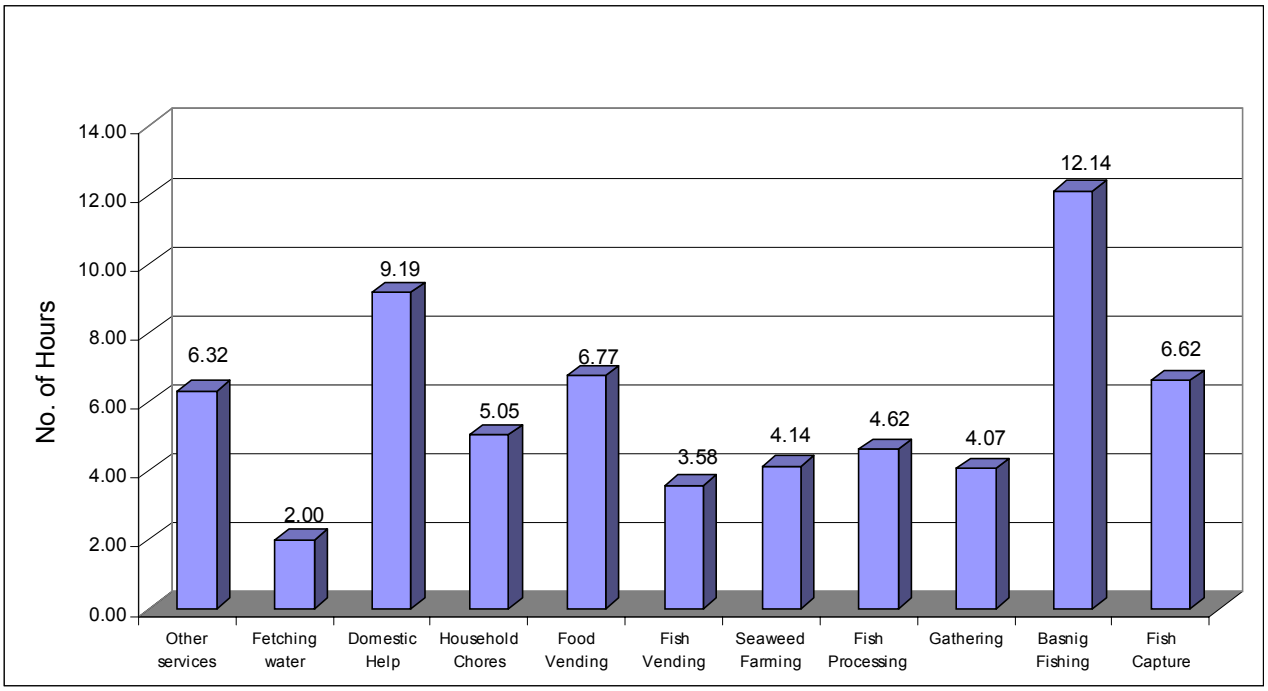

Figure 3. Average work hours per type of work, Mercedes and Vinzons, Philippines, 2001.

Those involved in *basnig* (bagnet) fishing, in particular, were at sea for an average of 12.14 hours. They could be exposed to the assaulting small of fish and crude oil for as long as 22 hours, starting from as early as 10 in the morning till as late as 8 in the morning the following day. During long trips, they did not get to sleep for about 4 to 6 hours each on the way to and back from the fishing grounds. However, they had to sleep inside of or covered with plastic sheets to protect themselves from getting wet from the splash of the waves against the boat.

In gathering of fingerlings, shells, and others along the shore, children stayed under the scorching heat from 1 to 7 hours, averaging some 4 hours a day. As visibility is vital, gathering was done during the day - the same time as school hours.

Fish processing was primarily either drying or smoking. In drying, work for children aged 15-17 years, started early morning, normally at 6 or 7. Only they were allowed to clean and slice the fish or squid, the latter task requiring precision and delicate handling of both the squid/fish and the razor-sharp

knife. In the meantime, male child workers fetched pail after pail of water from the public pump or, more often, from the sea for use in the cleaning.

The younger ones joined as soon as there were already a good number of squid or fish ready for drying, normally after just 30 minutes. They spread and laid out the fish/squid on mats made of thin bamboo slats. They placed these bamboo mats, about 3 by 4 feet in dimension, on top of parallel bamboo railings elevated 3 feet from the ground. In the course of drying, child workers turned the squid/fish over manually and one by one every 2 to 3 hours, depending on the sun's heat, to prevent the fish/squid from sticking into the bamboo mats to dry both sides evenly. This intense tasks would continue till noontime and occasional on 2-3 hour intervals in the afternoon under the sun's heat and amid the assailing smell of drying fish/squid. From mid to late afternoon, intense work resumed as fish/squid were gathered when they dried. Child workers also had to watch over the fish/squid throughout the day to keep animals, dogs, cats mainly, away or to stay ready to hastily gather the squid/fish in case it rains. Cumulatively, work in drying lasted about 5 hours on the average, and ranged from 30 minutes to 10 hours a day.

In smoking, a predominantly male activity, work hours could run up to 10 hours or more, many times overnight, depending on the amount of fish. Smaller boys worked mainly in pre-cooking the fish – they placed the fish in a *tiklis*, a cylindrical bamboo baskets about one and half feet in diameter and a little more than a half foot in depth, which were immersed in boiling vats for some 15 minutes. Bigger boys tended to the smoking itself as it involved hauling the fish into the furnaces in big rounded bamboo trays, about 3 feet in diameter and 4 inches in depth. However, since the different stages in smoking fish were done inside one place, everyone else was involved in smoking fish, including the boys in pre-cooking, breathed the thick smoke from the burning *kusot*, wood shavings. The workplaces, commonly shacks with open sides or slats of wood for walls, were not enclosed, but were nonetheless continuously clouded in smoke as processing proceeds. During the long hours of tending to the boiling vats and the smoking furnaces, in their exhaustion, took naps right inside the shacks. On the average, smoking was done about three times a week among the small-scale fish processors, and almost everyday among the larger ones.

After the fish have cooled, women, including teen-age girls, would pack the fish in deep cylindrical baskets, about two feet in diameter at the mouth and three feet in depth, outside the smoking shacks.

In seaweed farming, work commenced at early morning and lasted throughout the day. Child workers worked, on the average, some 4 hours, and could last from 1 to 10 hours a day. While tying the seedlings could be done in the shade, planting, general maintenance and care, and harvesting were always under the sun or the rain.

Fish vending had an average of 3.58 work hours, ranging from 1 to 9 hours a day. Children peddled the catch or share of their fathers from *basnig* fishing or helped peddle the fish their parents purchased from *basnig* around town. This activity would start from early morning, when the boats arrive, till mid noontime, but could extend up to the afternoon. Some would stopped in midday and resumed later after a new batch of catch arrives late in the afternoon. In the case of processed fish, girls, primarily, peddled *tinapa* (smoked fish), *badi* or *tuyo* (dried fish), and dried squid in the early morning and in the late afternoon.

Food vending, on the other hand, had longer work hours, averaging almost 7 hours, and ranging from 1 to 12 hours a day. Food was peddled around the town or in strategic spots in busy streets or the marketplace. Many, mostly girls, engaged in food vending, and worked from 9 to 12 hours a day.

Household chores were done mostly between 7:00 in the morning to 12:00 noon. But work would start as early as 5 am. On the average, children were engaged in house cleaning, dish and clothes washing, fetching water, and attending to younger siblings for 5 hours. Work ranged from 1 to 16 hours a day. Paid domestic work lasted from 4 to 17 hours. On the average, domestic help took up some 9 hours a day.

Fetching water, as a separate task, took about 2 hours. Though as seemingly harmless and simple task, the means and distance in fetching water aggravated the gravity of the work. Fetching water required pumping or drawing water from an open well or spring. In many cases, water was carried on these 20-gallon containers hanging from the ends of wooden or bamboo pole and slung on the child's shoulders.

Other services (boat cleaning and guarding, stevedoring, construction labor, etc) took an average of 6.32 hours per day, and would last from 1 to 12 hours a day. Most of these tasks involved guarding and cleaning boats docked at port. Children in these tasks were similarly exposed to the foul smell of fish and crude oil in the boat.

Child workers experienced great bodily discomfort from work such as body pain mainly from fetching and hauling of nets, exhaustion from prolonged standing, and exposure to heat, and head ache from exposure to intense heat and work pressure. Some felt nauseated from long walks and assaulting odor of the dried fish/squid, while others complained of hunger pangs, drowsiness, difficulty in breathing, itchiness and ear pain from diving. Some got cuts/wounds from cleaning and slicing the fish, punctures from glass splinters, barnacles, fishing hooks, chest pains from diving, and burns from engine contacts.

Child Workers' Earnings and Expenditure

Child workers earned an average monthly income of US$13.68, representing 11% of the total household monthly income. Expectedly, boy-child workers earned almost three times higher than the girl-child workers'. While the boy-child workers average monthly earnings was US$19.18, the girl's earning was just US$7.61. This is not surprising as girls were mostly engaged in home-based works which were either very cheap or unpaid.

In general, parents benefited most from the children's earnings, receiving 60% of the total income of the children. A larger chunk (34%) was kept for themselves while 6% was shared to their siblings. Figure shows that the money these children kept for themselves were spent on food, (60%), clothing (10%), leisure (10%) and personal care such as shampoo, soap, powder and perfume (5%). About 6% were spent on schooling needs such as transportation allowance, slippers, school supplies and required school contributions. Some used the money to buy their younger siblings some food, materials necessary for fishing or other household necessities. Indeed, the shares of their wages to the family clearly reflects the reality of boys and girls as important part of family support system.

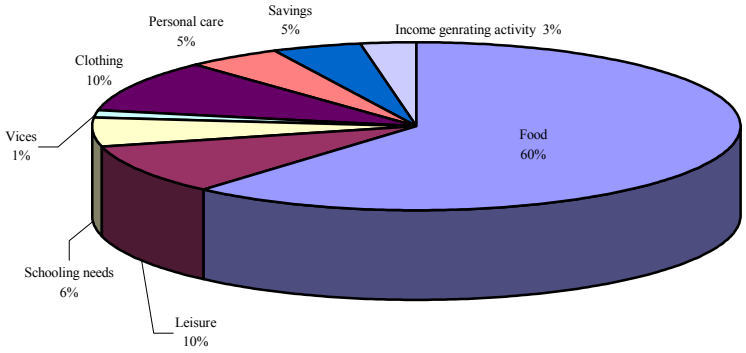

Figure 4. Expenditure pattern of child workers, Mercedes and Vinzons, Philippines, 2001.

Child Workers' Reasons for Working

Feeling responsible for the survival of their families, majority (57.57%) worked to support their parents/grandmother (Table 3). Some worked to have some cash on hand (30.81%), support studies (4.86%), follow mother's will (2.16%), and prepare themselves for future work (1.62%). Others worked simply to have money for their siblings and to while the time. This indicate a poignant finding that children will endure the most dangerous and health threatening jobs to help their families survive and that children do not work against their will.

Table 3. Percent distribution of reasons for working, Mercedes and Vinzons, Philippines, 2001.

Reasons For working	Frequency	Percentage
Have money	114	30.81
Help the parents/lola	213	57.57
Support studies	18	4.86
Follow mother's will	8	2.16
Save for siblings	3	0.82
Prepare for future work	6	1.62
Others	8	2.16
TOTAL	370	100.00

Parents participants of the FGDs confirmed that they had to send their children to work to bring in cash income. They argued that while public elementary and high school education offer free tuition, associated expenses can be burdensome – books, school materials, uniform and transportation. Some allowed their children to work simply to have money to buy clothes for themselves, or to gain experience for future employment, or to while the time. Others claimed that children themselves insisted on working having lost their interest in studying. A few, however, believed that children had to work to help support the family. On the other hand, some child workers admitted becoming lazy, preferring work

to study, while others felt trapped in a situation where they had to work either upon the behest of their parents or as compelled by the poverty situation.

Child Workers' Aspirations in Life

Despite the economic benefits they derived from work, 95.1% expressed interest to pursue their studies simply to help the family, escape poverty, fulfill one's dream to be a doctor, a teacher, a nurse, engineer, finish computer studies, land a good job, build house, help siblings, learn how to read and write, gain more knowledge, and have better quality of life. Others wanted to continue their studies to do the biddings of their mothers, to have something to impart to their children, know the extent of their capability, and have more money. These same aspirations were echoed by the parents.

Many of those who did not aspire to pursue their studies believed that completing school remains an elusive goal having no sufficient money to finance their studies. Others exhibited less confidence being slow learners, or being too old for their grade level. Some showed contentment in having their present job and helping out their parents.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The situation of child workers demonstrates how poverty has created stress structure affecting the family's ability to perform its functions of caring and nurturing of children. The lack of entitlement to income, education, nutrition and other services has compelled the children to enter the works of adults even at an early age. Majority worked for family more than it was to meet their own needs – indicating the paramount importance they give to family's welfare. This sense of duty seemed to weigh heavily on the shoulders of the working children who tend to carry greater workload and thus, tend to quit school in order to work.

While boys and girls took on a mix of activities, girls were more inured into both housekeeping and economic roles suggesting the multiple roles that females even at early age play. Despite this multiple tasks and longer hours worked, girls' received lesser pay than boys. Both girls' and boys' economic contribution to the family have proven that they are important resources for family's survival, preventing them, however, from enjoying their rights to uninterrupted education, and health care.

While fisheries related programs have been initiated to address fishery problems including poverty, they seemed to have failed to address equally important basic needs of the community and to consider the child workers as one of the stakeholders who needed to be heard. Effecting a responsive and responsible fisheries programs necessitates the promotion of working children's interest in the fisheries. This entails recognizing their contribution to the family and to the community at large, dealing with their common concerns together, and remaining sensitive and responsive to their needs. Interaction with working children must be founded on the principle of partnership encouraging them to take an active role in planning and decision-making process and to be active recipients of the resources and opportunities being offered to them.

To realize this, it is important that the following be observed: conduct of widespread awareness campaign on the Rights of children; conduct of an awareness of and sensitivity towards gender issue to fully understand the circumstances of their daily life and their working conditions; examination of cultural

influences that dictate the gender roles and the expectations for working children; provision of forum with children to express their views on the issue of working children and identify some solutions; provision of appropriate education for concerned children as a solution to the low educational levels in the communities; provision of micro-enterprise development to parents and job placement services to fight local unemployment. Unless working children form part of the development equations, responsible fisheries development programs will not be realized.

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