



Review

Are Working Children in Developing Countries Hidden Victims of Pandemics?

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Abstract: The consequences of the recent pandemic have been disproportionately disruptive to several social groups, including children. As developing economies have been firefighting the recent pandemic, the welfare of minors could be affected and children's economic exploitation and abuse could increase. Therefore, the present research aims to shed light on and to investigate the association between child labour in developing countries and pandemics, including the coronavirus, through conducting a systematic literature review on previous empirical studies. The present research concludes that previous studies on non-COVID-19 pandemics have mainly focused on the African economies, while studies on the recent pandemic have focused on Asian countries. In addition, differences were observed in relation to the methodological approaches and the characteristics of minor employees and the protection services in certain countries have proven to be insufficient. Suggestions for future research and policy implications are presented.

Keywords: child labour; developing countries; pandemics; epidemics; COVID-19



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1. Introduction

Pandemics and health crises in developing countries have been the subject of several empirical and theoretical studies due to their socio-economic impact on household income and well-being (Asfaw and von Braun 2004; Wagstaff 2007; Gustafsson-Wright et al. 2011; Islam and Maitra 2012). Health crises also reverse socioeconomic development and affect the family system, mainly the well-being of young people (Taraphdar et al. 2011). It has been observed that they increase unemployment, influence family members' responsibilities and have a negative impact on school attendance rates and the quality of education (Duryea et al. 2007; Fong and Iarocci 2020; Goulas and Megalokonomou 2020; Gupta and Jawanda 2020).

Previous studies have focused on the impact of pandemics and health crises on the welfare of children. Lockdowns during pandemics increase the reported cases of child abuse and neglect and the loss of parental support worldwide (Douglas et al. 2009; Jentsch and Schnock 2020; Rodriguez et al. 2021). Nevertheless, during pandemics, the social protection of children has been judged as inadequate, as in the case of the H1N1 flu (Douglas et al. 2009; Murray 2010). In general, pandemics create conditions under which the maltreatment, abuse and neglect of children are enabled (Rodriguez et al. 2021).

Similarly, the surge of the recent pandemic SARS-COV-2 (hereinafter COVID-19) threatened the health and well-being of several social groups worldwide, including children. COVID-19 is expected to have macroeconomic consequences, including higher poverty (e.g., Pak et al. 2020; Brum and De Rosa 2021; Gutiérrez-Romero and Ahamed 2021), higher unemployment rates in both developed and developing countries (e.g., Achdut and Refaeli 2020; Couch et al. 2020; Workie et al. 2020) and reduced household income (Ali et al. 2020; Kansime et al. 2021). Consequently, it is likely that children's welfare and human rights will be affected, as has been observed in previous health and social crises and in pandemics (Holmberg 2017; Shelley-Egan and Dratwa 2019; Rafferty 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic has attracted research interest over the past few months that has mostly focused on its socio-economic consequences worldwide (Aneja and Ahuja 2020; Ali et al. 2020; Nicola et al. 2020). It has been estimated that COVID-19 will mainly affect the well-being of vulnerable groups, including children (Armitage and Nellums 2020). The UN Committee of the Rights of the Child highlighted the importance of investigating the impact of the recent pandemic on children's human rights, including health issues, their well-being and development, as well as the problem of child labour (Campbell et al. 2021; Lee 2021). Therefore, the estimated effects of COVID-19 on child labour merit attention and this should be a top research priority considering the vulnerability of minors to child labour. In particular, according to Zahed et al. (2020) the case of children when investigating the consequences of COVID-19 is often neglected, even though they are a vulnerable social group. Apart from the psychological and physical consequences of COVID-19, the researchers concluded that working children are more susceptible to the infection and that the pandemic has increased poverty, which is a contributing factor to child labour.

The recent pandemic is expected to increase the risks for vulnerable social groups including children and it could lead to higher rates of child labour, exploitation, forced labour and slavery (Ahad et al. 2020; Rafferty 2020; Raman et al. 2020). These findings are in line with Gupta and Jawanda (2020), who argued that the pandemic will increase economic insecurity and child exploitation, including child labour, mainly in poor regions. Similarly, the pandemic is expected to lead to an economic crisis and to increase child poverty, which is a determinant of child labour (Goldman et al. 2020; Van Lancker and Parolin 2020). Ghosh et al. (2020a) also argued that the recent pandemic has had a significant psychological impact on children. According to the researchers, COVID-19 is expected to increase child abuse and domestic violence, as well as child labour and exploitation.

Over the past decades, several international organizations (e.g., the International Labour Organization (ILO)'s International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour, the UNICEF Office of Research-Innocenti, the ILO's Asia Regional Child Labour Programme) and non-governmental organizations (e.g., Save the Children, Love 146, the HAQ Centre for Child Rights, the International Initiative to End Child Labor, Plan International, World Vision etc.) have made significant efforts towards the reduction in child labour rates in developing countries. It has been argued that over the past decades the rates of child labour were controlled due to several economic policies that set commitments for poverty eradication, educational opportunities and the elimination of child labour, according to the first Millennium Development Goal (MDGs) (Leinberger-Jabari et al. 2005; Haines et al. 2007; Rena 2009). Nevertheless, it has been predicted that the pandemic and the health measures will lead to an economic recession, limited demand for consumer goods, higher unemployment, reduced household income and cross-border remittances (Ahad et al. 2020; Nicola et al. 2020).

The impact of previous pandemics (e.g., Ebola, SARS, HIV/AIDS, H1N1, Influenza) on the well-being of minors has been the subject of previous studies (Holmberg 2017; Shelley-Egan and Dratwa 2019). Nevertheless, the economic exploitation of children during health crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic, remains under investigated. Therefore, the present paper represents the first effort to conduct an extended literature review on empirical papers that have studied the association between pandemics and child labour in developing countries, including the COVID-19 pandemic.

The paper is structured as follows: In Section 2 the issue of child labour is briefly defined and the principal reasons for this phenomenon are mentioned. The following sections present the findings of previous studies. In particular, in Section 3 the findings of the literature review on child labour and pandemics are presented and discussed, focusing on developing countries, while Section 3 is limited to the association between COVID-19 and working children. The paper concludes with suggestions and policy implications. The limitations of the present study are also presented in Section 6.

2. Rationale and Contribution of the Study

This research focused on low- and middle- income economies (for brevity developing countries) and argues that they are characterised by overpopulation and inadequate health systems which renders these economies more vulnerable to economic and social shocks, such as the recent health crisis (Bong et al. 2020). In particular, less developed countries have insufficient health care services, including limited health personnel and protection equipment (Bong et al. 2020; Sharfuddin 2020), high poverty rates and limited public expenditure on health and access to social amenities (Ataguba and Ataguba 2020). Moreover, population density in developing countries rendered social distancing impossible during the COVID-19 pandemic (Bong et al. 2020; Bortz et al. 2020), while several developing economies have a large labour force, including minor employees (Sharfuddin 2020).

Furthermore, the case of children, not to mention working ones, was chosen and it is argued that they are vulnerable social groups. Sserwanja et al. (2021) observed that limited attention has been paid to children's health during the COVID-19 pandemic, mainly in developing economies. Therefore, the welfare of children during the recent pandemic should be a subject of research interest, as COVID-19 could lead to an increase in the abuse, exploitation and maltreatment of children and violent incidents (Kechagia and Metaxas 2018; Brown et al. 2020; Fong and Iarocci 2020; Raman et al. 2020; Wu and Xu 2020; Sserwanja et al. 2021). Compared to other employed groups, working children are at an increased risk of several infectious diseases, including HIV/AIDS and various types of hepatitis (Roggero et al. 2007; Naemabadi et al. 2019) and to respiratory mobilities (Tiwary et al. 2009; Awan et al. 2010; Romero et al. 2010; Shendell et al. 2016) due to a lack of training.

According to Daly et al. (2020) there has been minimal research on child labour and COVID-19 that has focused on the case of migrant employees. It is noted that Gupta and Jawanda (2020) studied the potential consequences of the pandemic on children's well-being and everyday life, while Zahed et al. (2020) investigated the association between COVID-19 and child labour in general; on the contrary, the present research focuses on developing economies. Similarly, Robertson et al. (2020) investigated the indirect effects of the pandemic on children in developing countries but focused solely on the mortality rates. Therefore, previous studies have focused on the other ways in which COVID-19 affected children (e.g., mortality rates, everyday life etc.). On the contrary, the present research is the first systematic review to investigate the impact of previous pandemics and COVID-19 on child labour.

3. Definition of Child Labour

The past decades have witnessed various efforts by international and local organizations in the fight against the phenomenon of child labour. The present research focuses on minor employees in developing countries and argues that they have higher rates of child labour (Scanlon et al. 2002), including contributing family workers (Diallo et al. 2013). Child labour includes the violation of the human rights of minors and it is associated with various harmful activities (Edmonds and Pavcnik 2005). Several definitions of child labour have been presented to date, ranging from wage work for minors (Psacharopoulos 1997) and various forms of market work (Ray and Lancaster 2005) to domestic activities (Basu et al. 2010; Assaad et al. 2010). These findings are in line with Levison and Moe (1998) and Webbink et al. (2012), who also defined domestic activities as a "hidden" form of child labour. According to Basu (1999), child labour could be either paid or not paid and it is associated with domestic activities.

Similarly, according to the ILO/IPEC (2021), child labour should not be confused with child work. In particular, child labour includes activities that deprive minors of their childhood, potential and dignity and could negatively affect their mental and physical development; it is therefore harmful to minors. Based on the ILO Minimum Age Convention (ILO 1973, No. 138), minors should be older than 15 to legally participate in the labour force (ILO 1973). UNICEF has further extended the above presented definitions and

focuses on the importance of both domestic and economic work. In particular, child labour refers to minors aged 5–11 engaged in any economic activity or at least 28 h of domestic activities, minors aged 12–14 engaged in any economic activity, excluding light work for no more than 14 h weekly and minors aged 15–16 engaged in any hazardous work (UNICEF 2007). Therefore, it is concluded that there is no single universally accepted definition of the phenomenon. Finally, the ILO/IPEC (2021) observed that in order to define “work” as child labour several factors should be considered, including the age, the hours and the type of work, the working conditions and the objectives.

Several international organizations provide country-level data on child labour, including the ILO, the World Bank, the United Nations and UNICEF, as well as child labour indicators (e.g., ILO’s indicator on the Proportion and Number of Children aged 5–17 years engaged in Child Labour, UNICEF’s indicator on the Percentage of Children aged 5–17 years engaged in Child Labour etc.), while certain previous studies have used the secondary school non-enrollment rates as a proxy for child labour (Kucera 2002; Busse and Braun 2004; Braun 2006; Beegle et al. 2009), although several minor employees go to school and it is argued that school enrolment and child labour are not incompatible activities; therefore, combining child labour and school enrolment is feasible but difficult (Ravallion and Wodon 2000; Attanasio et al. 2010; Edmonds and Shrestha 2014).

Poverty has been proven to be the main cause of child labour (Admassie 2002; Basu 2002; Jafarey and Lahiri 2002; Kim 2009; Rena 2009) and poor children are often forced to stop school and start working (Admassie 2002; Shafiq 2007; Sasmal and Guillen 2015; Rena 2009). It has been suggested that even in the case that schools re-open after the lockdown, several parents would probably be incapable of paying for schooling, mainly in rural areas (Kluttz 2015). In developing countries, poor children are rarely paid for their work, while others are engaged in rural activities by their parents to contribute to the family income (Fetuga et al. 2005; Chaudhuri 2011).

As a consequence, minors are at higher risk of sexual exploitation, trafficking and victimization (Scanlon et al. 2002; Edmonds and Pavcnik 2005; Chaudhuri and Dwibedi 2016; Greenbaum and Bodrick 2017; Ahad et al. 2021), increased rates of mortality and occupational injuries (Roggero et al. 2007; Schlick et al. 2014; Shendell et al. 2016). In several developing countries working children drop out of school (Shafiq 2007; Huisman and Smits 2015) or show poor academic performance (Psacharopoulos 1997; Holgado et al. 2014; Putnick and Bornstein 2015; Kumar and Saqib 2017).

Finally, as for the regional distribution of child labour, according to the United Nations, rates are higher in the Sub-Saharan economies (Figure 1). The problem has been mainly attributed to high poverty rates in the region (Canagarajah and Nielsen 2001; Admassie 2002; Chukwudeh and Oduaran 2021), poor school quality (Ray 2002; Rena 2009) and social conditions in post-war African countries (Hilson 2010; Maconachie and Hilson 2016). Similarly, for the period 2010–2018, the Sub-Saharan African countries had the highest percentage of children aged 5–17 engaged in child labour, estimated at 29% (UNICEF 2019a).

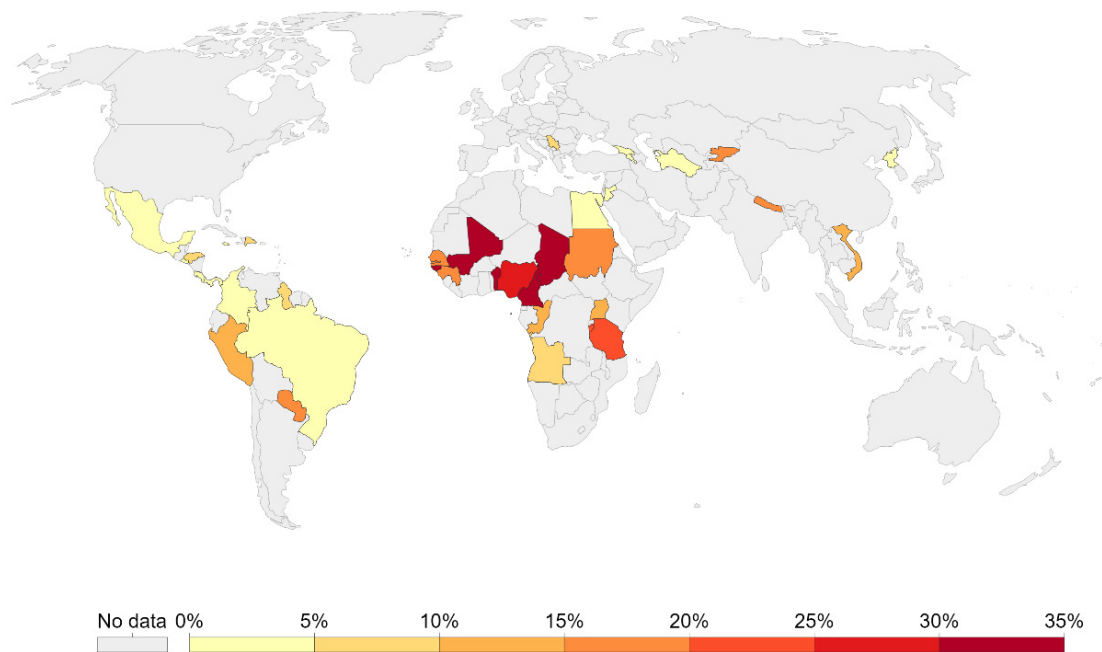


Figure 1. Share of children aged 5–17 years engaged in labour (2017). Source: [United Nations Statistics Division \(2021\)](#).

The Latin American and the Caribbean countries rank second among the regions with higher child labour rates, which has also been attributed mostly to poverty ([Sedlacek et al. 2009](#); [Lieten 2011](#)). Consequently, despite the regional prevalence of the phenomenon in Sub-Saharan Africa, there are economically active children in other geographic regions as well. Thus, the problem mostly affects the developing countries; however, it is not a matter of national or regional concern but a subject of international dialogue, most of all during global crises such as pandemics, which are investigated in the following section.

4. Studies on Child Labour and Previous Non-COVID-19 Pandemics in Developing Countries

Child labour is considered a visible and the most common form of child abuse and neglect in developing countries ([Caesar-Leo 1999](#); [Maruf et al. 2003](#); [Mahmod et al. 2016](#)) and based on the above, the present research focuses on the association between child labour and the pandemics in the developing countries, including the COVID-19 pandemic. In several developing countries, pandemics push minors into the labour markets ([Grier 2004](#); [Deb 2005](#)). Therefore, an in-depth systematic literature review was conducted using reliable databases, (e.g., Sciencedirect, Scopus, Google Scholar, NCBI etc.). The key terms used during the research were “child labor”, “child labour”, “epidemic”, “pandemic”, as presented in Table 1. It is noted that scientific peer-journal articles were included that were published in English and that focused on developing countries, as well as reports from international organizations, such as the UNICEF, the ILO etc. Thus, books and conference proceedings were excluded.

Table 1. Terms and variations of the database research.

| Keyword(s) | Synonym or Variations |
|----------------------|--|
| Child labour | Child labor, minor employees, working children, child labor force, child labourer, child laborer, employment of children, labour of children |
| Pandemic | Epidemic, contagious diseases, Ebola, SARS, HIV / AIDS |
| Developing countries | Developing economies, low-and-middle income countries, emerging economies, emerging countries, developing nations, Third World |

The literature review revealed that there has been limited contemporary academic research on child labour and pandemics over the past decades, as presented in Table 2. For each study, the case study of the developing country and the pandemic is presented, as well as the methodological approach applied. Moreover, the main conclusions of the previous related studies are included in the following table.

Table 2. Studies on child labour and previous non-COVID 19 pandemics (developing countries).

| Author(s) | Case | Country/Countries | Methodology | Findings |
|---|---------------------------|-----------------------------|--|--|
| Nyambedha et al. (2003) | HIV/AIDS | Kenya | A combination of qualitative and quantitative research, cross-sectional research, semi-structured interviews, questionnaire, in-depth interviews. | The HIV/AIDS epidemic in Kenya affected the care of orphans since the majority of orphans worked as servants. In addition, the pandemic led to demographic changes and affected food security in the country. |
| Roggero et al. (2007) | HIV/AIDS, malaria | 83 developing countries | Multiple regression between child labour and health indicators. | There is a positive association between child labour and the presence of infectious diseases, such as malaria and HIV/AIDS. |
| Lugalla and Sigalla (2010) | HIV/AIDS | United Republic of Tanzania | Ethnographic qualitative research, including in depth-interviews, observation etc. | Minors were forced into the labour force due to increased poverty rates and reduced household income. Poverty and HIV/AIDS were correlated, mainly for orphans. |
| Evans (2012) | HIV/AIDS | Tanzania and Uganda | Qualitative survey, semi-structured interviews, focus groups. | In both countries youths were pressured to work in order to sustain their family. The pandemic also affected the physical health and well-being of caregivers. |
| Gicharu et al. (2015) | HIV/AIDS | Kenya | Qualitative and quantitative research, interviews, questionnaire, observation. | The pandemic affected children's lives and increased absenteeism from school, dropout rates and child labour. |
| Save the Children/UNICEF/World Vision/Plan International (2015) | Ebola virus disease (EVD) | Sierra Leone | Thematic content analysis. | The Ebola pandemic increased child labour and maltreatment, mainly due to school closures and reduced household income. |
| Ly et al. (2016) | EVD | Liberia | Cluster sampling during March–April 2015 in 941 households. | The pandemic led to higher poverty and child labour rates, leading to psychosocial problems and higher social vulnerability. |
| Ngegba and Mansaray (2016) | EVD | Sierra Leone | Questionnaires, interviews, observation and focus group discussion for the period September–November 2015. | The pandemic affected mainly the well-being of girls; most of them dropped out of school in order to engage in economic activity. |
| Sorsa and Abera (2016) | Malaria | Ethiopia | A combination of qualitative and quantitative research, including in depth interviews, focus groups discussions, observations and cross-sectional surveys. | The researchers studied child employment in three major Ethiopian towns and concluded that minor employees had a negative attitude towards education. Among them, the malaria epidemic was reported as the main health problem. The pandemic threatened their development and the family unit. |
| Abimanyi-Ochom et al. (2017) | HIV/AIDS | Uganda | Cross-sectional study carried out from October 2010 to January 2011 using questionnaires. | The pandemic increased the need for child labourers in households with a person living with the disease. The impact was greater for boys. |
| Mora-Garcia (2018) | Malaria | Costa Rica | Quantitative research, difference-in-difference method. | Malaria eradication programs increased schooling and reduced child labour. |
| Yoder-van den Brink (2019) | EVD | Sierra Leone | Dissemination and implementation research. | The Ebola pandemic affected everyday lives and well-being in the country. Child labour increased due to the school closures. |
| Smith (2020) | EVD | Sierra Leone and Guinea | Multiple survey (Demographic Health Surveys, Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys), pre and post period 2013–2016. | Dropout rates in the post-Ebola period increased and students were forced to work in order to face the economic crisis and to support their families. |

It could be argued that previous pandemics in developing economies exacerbated the existing issues of child exploitation and labour, while gendered responsibilities were observed. Moreover, previous studies focused on paid child labour and it is argued that non-paid work could be characterised as invisible and difficult to estimate. Among the above presented studies, [Sorsa and Abera \(2016\)](#) were the first to study child labour and malaria as a type of pandemic. However, their study did not focus exclusively on the association between the two variables, but mainly on children that worked in regions in which malaria was endemic. [Lugalla and Sigalla \(2010\)](#) argued that in Tanzania there was little awareness of working children, mainly in rural areas. They suggested that the government and international organizations should cooperate to reduce rural poverty and therefore eliminate child labour.

Furthermore, among the included studies, it was observed that the African economies, in which child labour rates are high, have attracted increased research interest ([Canagajah and Nielsen 2001](#); [Maconachie and Hilson 2016](#)). According to the literature review findings, certain studies and reports (e.g., [Save the Children/UNICEF/World Vision/Plan International 2015](#); [Ngegba and Mansaray 2016](#); [Yoder-van den Brink 2019](#); [Smith 2020](#)) studied the impact of pandemics on child labour in post-war countries, as in the case of Sierra Leone. It was concluded that pandemics could deter the so-called *crisis of youth* in Sierra Leone and it was argued that several minors end up in informal or unskilled labour ([Peters 2011](#); [Maconachie and Hilson 2016](#)).

On the contrary, the Latin American and the Caribbean countries have attracted limited research interest, although they have insufficient social protections and high poverty rates, which result in increased child labour incidents ([Sedlacek et al. 2009](#); [Lieten 2011](#)). Several previous studies have focused on child labour in the Latin American and the Caribbean economies as a whole ([Sedlacek et al. 2009](#); [Lieten 2011](#); [Silva et al. 2019](#)) and in specific cases of countries ([Psacharopoulos 1997](#); [Kea 2007](#); [Zapata et al. 2011](#)), while [Mora-Garcia \(2018\)](#) focused on Costa Rica and concluded that child labour in the agricultural sector displaced schooling.

To summarise, there is evidence to support the claim that there is an important research gap on child labour in Latin America during pandemics, which should be confronted since minor employees remain a major social issue in the region. It is interesting that several Latin American countries were affected by pandemics over the past decades, including the outbreak of cholera in the '90s ([Kumate et al. 1998](#); [Poirier et al. 2012](#)), which affected other countries with high rates of child labour, such as Brazil, Bolivia and Venezuela ([Psacharopoulos 1997](#); [Silva et al. 2019](#); [Costa et al. 2020](#)). Therefore, the present study concludes that there is a research gap regarding child labour and pandemics in the region.

5. Studies on COVID-19 and Child Labour in Developing Countries

Based on the above presented procedure, the additional terms "COVID-19" and "SARS-COV-2" were included as keywords. Therefore, the keywords used in this analysis were: "child labor", "child labour", "epidemic", "pandemic", "COVID-19" and "SARS-COV-2". The results of the final search are presented in Table 3. It is noted that the included papers were based on secondary data and literature reviews.

The studies lead to the common argument that the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to lead to an employment crisis in developing countries, which will lead to higher percentages of child labour. As for the methodological approach, it was observed that all of the included papers were based on a literature review and on secondary data. Except for the study of [Greenbaum et al. \(2020\)](#), the researchers focused on the cases of specific countries rather than on a group of countries. The case of India was dominant and it has been studied by four researchers to date, who were motivated by the increased demand for cheap labour force in the country and high poverty rates in the country ([Kaur and Byard 2021](#)). On the contrary, [Sserwanja et al. \(2021\)](#) focused on the case of Uganda, which was motivated by the increase in children abuse incidents in the county during the pandemic.

Table 3. Studies on child labour and COVID-19 (developing countries).

| Author(s) | Case | Sample | Methodology | Results and Suggestions |
|---------------------------------|----------|-------------|-------------------|--|
| Chopra (2020) | COVID-19 | India | Literature review | Child protection services in the country are not fully functional. Children in the country, mainly street and abandoned children, receive limited support, which increases the risks of child abuse and labour. |
| Greenbaum et al. (2020) | COVID-19 | Not defined | Literature review | The recent pandemic could increase human trafficking and labour exploitation. Minors are more likely to engage in hazardous or illegal activities and work in unhealthy working conditions. |
| Larmar et al. (2020) | COVID-19 | Nepal | Literature review | Recovery programs should be applied in the country in order to build capacity and strengthen cooperation among social workers, non-governmental organizations, health professionals and community-based organizations. |
| Owusu and Frimpong-Manso (2020) | COVID-19 | Ghana | Literature review | The COVID-19 pandemic is expected to have severe socioeconomic consequences, mainly for poor families. As a result, poor children are more likely to be left homeless and be forced to work. |
| Progga et al. (2020) | COVID-19 | Bangladesh | Literature review | Child labour should be effectively detected and prevented. A dataset on child labour would be an effective solution in Bangladesh and in other countries of the region, including India, Nepal and Pakistan. |
| Nguyen et al. (2020) | COVID-19 | Vietnam | Literature review | It is estimated that the pandemic could lead to severe socioeconomic problems, including increased exploitation and child labour, higher dropout rates and malnutrition. |
| Ramaswamy and Seshadri (2020) | COVID-19 | India | Literature review | Lockdown during the recent pandemic and the arising economic issues are expected to increase child abuse, trafficking and maltreatment, including child labour. The study concluded that attention should be paid to the likely psychosocial and mental health issues for children as a result of the pandemic. |
| ILO/UNICEF (2020) | COVID-19 | Not defined | Literature review | The research concluded that the recent pandemic could affect child labour through reducing employment opportunities, living standards, remittances and migration and international aid flows. Additional channels that could influence child labour were increased informal child labour, reduced Foreign Direct Investment and school closures. |
| The World Bank Group (2020) | COVID-19 | Not defined | Literature review | The COVID-19 pandemic will lead to a shock to education, resulting in higher dropout rates, which are linked to higher rates of child labour. |
| United Nations/DESA (2020) | COVID-19 | Not defined | Literature review | School closures as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic are associated with higher child labour rates and maltreatment. |
| Kaur and Byard (2021) | COVID-19 | India | Literature review | The potential consequences of COVID-19 include an economic crisis, which would mainly affect children. India has severe gaps in the protection services and therefore minors are more vulnerable to child labour and exploitation. |
| Sserwanja et al. (2021) | COVID-19 | Uganda | Literature review | The pandemic had a significant negative impact on the children's health status and food care. The country has insufficient social support systems which rendered children even more vulnerable to child abuse, including child labour and limited financial support. |

Table 3. Cont.

| Author(s) | Case | Sample | Methodology | Results and Suggestions |
|--------------------|----------|--------|-------------------|---|
| Daly et al. (2021) | COVID-19 | Nepal | Literature review | Nepalese children are more vulnerable to poverty, poor health, including COVID-19 contamination and educational exclusion. |
| Pattanaik (2021) | COVID-19 | India | Literature review | The study concludes that the COVID-19 pandemic is expected to have a significant negative impact on the country's economy and on the labour market imperfections, leading to higher child labour rates. |

In particular, the majority of the above presented studies turned their orientation towards child labour and COVID-19 in the Asian developing countries. Therefore, it is observed that to date there is no published research regarding the case of the Latin American and the Caribbean countries, while there is decreasing research interest in the African developing countries compared to previous pandemics and health crises. This could be attributed to the characteristics of several Asian countries that render children more vulnerable to the disease, including population density, poor health systems and insufficient testing, which led to research interest in COVID-19 and its consequences to the region (Sarkar et al. 2020; Stone 2020; Alam 2021).

On the contrary, even though Africa has similar characteristics to Asia, it has not been studied so far given that the onset of the COVID-19 was later and mortality and fatality rates were lower compared to other regions (Bamgboye et al. 2020; Makoni 2020). Thus, according to Ghosh et al. (2020b) there is an African paradox. Additionally, it is concluded that the Latin American countries, which are listed among the highly affected countries (Rivarola Puntigliano 2020), have not been the subject of recent research.

Another developing issue refers to the gender of the minor employees during the COVID-19 pandemic. The present study concludes that the role of child labourers during the recent pandemic has not been the subject of research so far. Nevertheless, gender is listed among the determinants of child labour (Edmonds and Pavcnik 2005; Alam et al. 2015; Bérenger and Verdier-Chouchane 2016). Additionally, in developing economies, including the Asian countries presented above, gender inequality remains a pervasive problem (Stone 2020) and it could be exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Pinchoff et al. 2021).

Finally, the reports of international organizations on child labour and COVID-19 (e.g., ILO/UNICEF 2020; United Nations/DESA 2020; The World Bank Group 2020) reached the common conclusion that the current pandemic could reverse the positive trends and increase child labour worldwide. This rise is attributed to the disruption in supply chains and to higher commodity prices. School closures, dropout rates, limited employment opportunities, failing living standards and trading activity in the post-COVID-19 period are listed among the channels of child labour during the pandemic. It is noted that Ghosh et al. (2020a) also concluded that COVID-19 is expected to increase child labour; nevertheless, their research did not focus on developing countries and thus the study was excluded from the above presented table.

6. Discussion and Suggestions

The present research focused on the consequences of pandemics, including COVID-19, on child labour in developing countries. Developing countries were the subject of the research since they have several structural and social inequities. The pandemic is expected to have socio-economic and employment consequences that will greatly affect individuals' well-being and lives, including minor employees. This research represents the first attempt to conduct a literature review on the association between pandemics and child labour in developing countries.

The findings of the literature review on pandemics highlighted their impact on child labour rates, among other increasing socio-economic issues. It is concluded that pandemics

are associated with an increased demand for child labour, along with absenteeism and higher dropout rates (Gicharu et al. 2015; Ngegba and Mansaray 2016; The World Bank Group 2020). Similarly, it is anticipated that the COVID-19 pandemic could lead to human rights abuses, mainly in developing countries, as well as to social inequalities. The recent pandemic could lead to a sudden rise in the child labour rates in developing countries, wiping out previous efforts to combat the problem and to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals on forced labour, trafficking and child labour (Goal 8.7.).

The research on child labour and pandemics is ongoing and therefore there were limited studies related to the subject. Further research should be conducted and primary data should be collected. Additionally, the social consequences of the recent pandemic on minor employees and their caregivers could be compared to previous pandemics. However, the association between child labour and pandemics has been selected due to its importance. The study concludes that as for the relation between previous pandemics and child labour, it was observed that there was increased interest in the African countries (e.g., Nyambedha et al. 2003; Lugalla and Sigalla 2010; Evans 2012; Sorsa and Abera 2016), including the post-war economies (e.g., Save the Children/UNICEF/World Vision/Plan International 2015; Ngegba and Mansaray 2016; Yoder-van den Brink 2019; Smith 2020). On the contrary, the researchers who investigated the impact of COVID-19 on child labour mostly focused on the case of the Asian economies (e.g., Chopra 2020; Larmar et al. 2020; Ramaswamy and Seshadri 2020; Kaur and Byard 2021; Daly et al. 2021).

In addition, certain studies predicted psychosocial and mental health problems and concluded that pandemics affect children's wellbeing (e.g., Ngegba and Mansaray 2016; Yoder-van den Brink 2019; Ramaswamy and Seshadri 2020), while others observed that pandemics could reduce school attendance and increase dropout rates (e.g., Gicharu et al. 2015; Smith 2020) and Yoder-van den Brink (2019) argued that school closures could increase child labour, focusing on Sierra Leone. Finally, insufficient protection services were observed in several developing countries and this was related to child labour (e.g., Chopra 2020; Kaur and Byard 2021). Finally, certain researchers have predicted that the recent pandemic could lead to children's exploitation (e.g., Greenbaum et al. 2020; Nguyen et al. 2020) and increases in child labour due to high poverty rates (ILO/UNICEF 2020; Lugalla and Sigalla 2010; Ramaswamy and Seshadri 2020).

The included studies and reports were based on different methodological approaches, considering that the research on the recent pandemic is ongoing and that currently there is no published study that includes primary data. Studies on previous pandemics were based on both primary and secondary data, using a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches. Among them, certain studies (e.g., Sorsa and Abera 2016; Evans 2012; Ngegba and Mansaray 2016) collected primary data from focus groups, which could lead to inaccurate or biased results. It is noted that only the report presented by the Save the Children/UNICEF/World Vision/Plan International (2015) included a thematic content analysis, which was based on the capture of certain words and phrases; nevertheless, the phrases might not have captured the exact meaning of the answers. Questionnaires were used by certain researchers (Nyambedha et al. 2003; Gicharu et al. 2015) which provided wide coverage, compared to other research tools (e.g., observations, interviews etc.) and ensured greater validity and anonymity. As for the studies on the COVID-19 pandemic, as mentioned above, they were based on a literature review given that the investigation into the association between COVID-19 and child labour is ongoing and it is difficult to collect, elaborate and publish primary data on the subject at present.

6.1. Limitations

The study is subjected to certain limitations, which are mostly related to the issues that arise when investigating child labour. Firstly, one limitation refers to the number of the published papers on child labour and COVID-19, let alone in developing countries. Nevertheless, the paper focused on the specific issue motivated by the literature gap and

the importance of child labour as a social phenomenon and COVID-19 as a global health crisis.

Secondly, it is difficult to estimate the hidden or non-paid work by minor employees, such as domestic activities, which are defined as a form of child labour (Levison and Moe 1998; Basu et al. 2010; Assaad et al. 2010; Webbink et al. 2012). Thirdly, only published scientific papers from different databases and reports from international organizations were selected and included. Therefore, dissertations and book chapters were excluded, as well as papers not published in English. Finally, another limitation of the research refers to the ethical dilemmas arising when investigating child labour. According to Daly et al. (2020) it is difficult to communicate with the families of minor employees; however, their study focused solely on minor employees in Nepal. On the contrary, Dammert and Galdo (2013) conducted large-scale research and observed that the survey design influences child labour statistics, which is in line with the findings of Dillon et al. (2012).

6.2. Suggestions for Future Research

Empirical and theoretical research on child labour should be a top priority among researchers of different fields. A literature gap was observed for the case of child labour in the Latin American and the Caribbean countries considering that the impact of health crises, including previous pandemics and COVID-19, has not been adequately studied. Therefore, it is concluded that the countries of the region should also be investigated to cover all geographic regions.

The literature review concluded that only the study of Abimanyi-Ochom et al. (2017) considered the impact of a pandemic on child work by gender using primary data and questionnaires. Therefore, gender could also be the subject of future studies, given that it is an important factor of child labour (Edmonds and Pavcnik 2005; Kea 2007; Bonke 2010; Putnick and Bornstein 2016). As for the recent pandemic, there are vague findings on the impact of COVID-19 on the everyday life of boys and girls. Certain studies concluded that COVID-19 was disproportionately affecting the quality of life and health status of adolescent girls (Pinchoff et al. 2020; Tamarit et al. 2020; Ravens-Sieberer et al. 2021), while other researchers did not observe significant differences between genders (De Matos et al. 2020; Wunsch et al. 2021). It is observed that these studies (e.g., Pinchoff et al. 2020; De Matos et al. 2020; Wunsch et al. 2021) focused on the impact of COVID-19 on quality of life of boys and girls, including mental health issues, social isolation etc.; therefore, the relationship between the recent pandemic and child labour in relation to gender remains a subject of future research.

In addition, future studies should also be oriented towards the investigation of children in the street during the pandemics, considering that the related literature remains relatively silent. Children in the street are vulnerable to exploitation and violence (Caesar-Leo 1999) and it would be interesting to investigate the impact of health crises in this specific sub-group. Similarly, the case of migrant children in developing countries is of increasing interest, as suggested by Daly et al. (2021).

Finally, the study focused on the impact of large health shocks on child labour arguing that they influence, among others, household income, insecurity, demand for a cheap labour force, migration and remittances, etc. Nevertheless, other large shocks could increase child labour. It is observed that armed conflicts and wars increase child labour (ILO 2010, 2011; Haer 2019; Naufal et al. 2019), as well as economic shocks (Beegle et al. 2003, 2006; Duryea et al. 2007; Dumas 2020), earthquakes and other natural disasters (Santos 2010; Vásquez and Bohara 2010) etc. Therefore, future studies could conduct a systematic review on the relationship between child labour and other forms of shocks (e.g., economic, social etc.).

6.3. Policy Implications

The study concluded that emergency actions should be taken in order to prevent child exploitation and to ensure that previous gains will not be lost. It is crucial to tackle child labour and to proceed to combined actions to protect children at risk of exploitation. The

study highlights the importance of preventing child labour as a side effect of the pandemic and argues that it undermines the development of children and society.

Furthermore, the existing legal framework on child labour should be enforced and implemented worldwide. Policymakers should focus on the effectiveness of child protection services and on their role in preventing the exploitation and abuse of children. Among the studied economies, it is observed that India has inadequate protection services (Chopra 2020; Kaur and Byard 2021), while the social support in Uganda is insufficient, according to the findings of Sserwanja et al. (2021). Therefore, protection services should be improved through improving the recruitment and retention of employees, promoting cooperation among services and improving supervision (UNICEF 2019b).

Local authorities should cooperate with childcare institutions and international organizations to report violence against children and facilitate communication among children, police/non-government organizations and lawyers. According to the findings of Larmar et al. (2020) the cooperation between the involved parts could be strengthened via recovery programs based on the capacity development approach, as in the case of Nepal.

Finally, public awareness on child abuse and exploitation, mainly amidst social crises, should be raised. Attention should also be paid to poor households and cash transfer programs for them could be developed. Poor working children contribute to the family income to cope with poverty; therefore, banning child labour could negatively affect household income. Smith (2020) proposed that poor households should receive financial support so that children are not forced into labour. Therefore, to help children in developing economies during pandemics local authorities and governments must provide child-friendly environments and free education.

Regardless of the geographic region and the countries' level of development, actions should be coordinated to prevent a potential reversal of the achieved goals regarding child labour. It should be kept in mind that child labour should be eradicated in order to develop a just and free society. In conclusion, as suggested by the UNICEF, it is *a time of crisis, a time to act*.

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