

Children in El Salvador: Getting Exploited and Missing Opportunities

Yeomin Ryu

Abstract

This article researches past and current child labor exploitations in El Salvador that began to become endemic during El Salvador's civil war from 1979-1992. It looks into negative results caused by child labor. Child labor exploitation is an important issue not only because children get lower wages and work in poor conditions but also because this issue will cause the youth in El Salvador to miss their own opportunity to get educated and find a landmark of their life. Solving the child labor problem in El Salvador will play an important role in deciding not only children's future but also El Salvador's future.

I. Introduction

Since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, the importance of human rights has been reinforced in the world. Most countries ratified most of the human rights conventions, including the one on the Rights of the Child,¹ yet many children are continued to be exploited through child labor.

This article covers the history of child labor abuse in El Salvador and examines what kinds of negative results come from the child labor exploitation. As will be shown, the Salvadoran civil war, which was a conflict between the military-led government of El Salvador and the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN),² was the beginning of widespread and intense child labor exploitation in El Salvador. Until 1992, when the civil war ended, many children were abused by being forced to be child soldiers. After the end of the civil war, children in El Salvador continued to being exploited through child labor, especially in the sex industry, the sugar harvest industry, and in the informal sector where many children, especially girls, work as servants. As Human Rights Watch (2006, p. 5) pointed out:

Over 20,000 El Salvadoran girls and women between the ages of 14 and 19 were employed as domestic workers in sugar cane industry in 2004. Further, over 60 percent of domestic

¹ See <http://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>.

² The FMLN was a coalition of five left-wing guerrilla groups.

servant girls surveyed reported physical or sexual abuse or psychological mistreatment by their employers.

The two main negative results of child labor are (1) negative side effects on children's health and (2) the exclusion of children from getting a basic school education. Enforcing the fundamental right to be educated can be a solution to stop full-time child labor in El Salvador. This article provides first a brief review of the literature, followed by some empirical background on El Salvador. The subsequent discussion focuses first on where child labor exploitation has happened in El Salvador and examines then the two main negative results of child labor. The last section closes with some conclusions.

II. Literature Review

There is a lot of literature on child abuse cases in El Salvador, especially on the exploitation of children during El Salvador's civil war. The most relevant for our study is a June 2004 report by Human Rights Watch (2004a), entitled "Turning a Blind Eye: Hazardous Child Labor in El Salvador's Sugarcane Cultivation". This report documents the prevalence of child labor in the planting and cutting of sugarcane in El Salvador. Also, it shows us the hazardousness of working for sugarcane harvest field for young children. The following are some other influential publications.

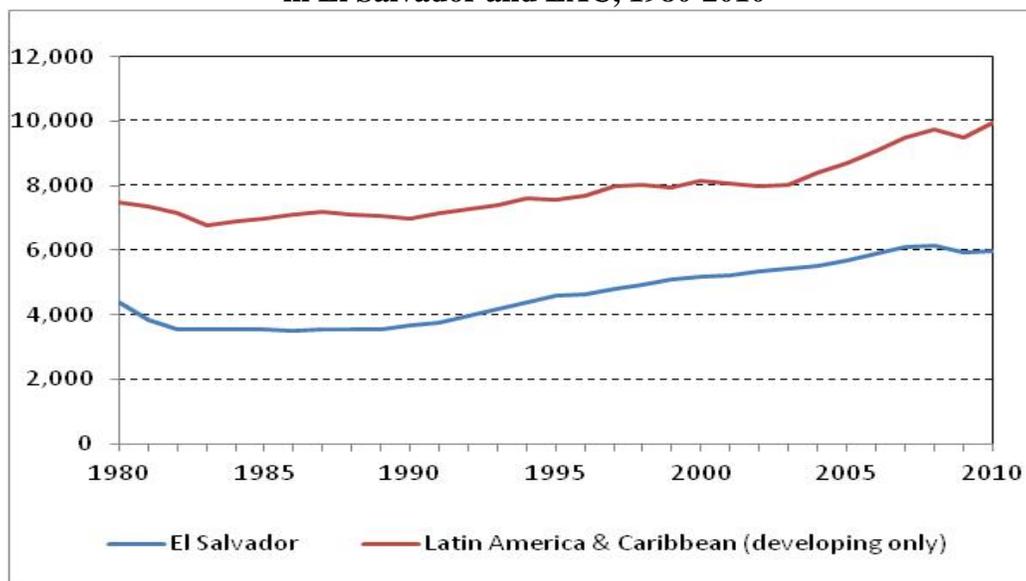
- Julia Dickson-Gomez (2002), who is a Professor at the Center for AIDS Intervention Research (CAIR) at the Medical College of Wisconsin, wrote an article entitled "Growing up in Guerrilla Camps: The Long-term Impact of Being a Child Soldier in El Salvador's Civil War" that focuses on how the experience of being abused as a child soldier in the battle field can affect children's entire life. She also shows how exploiting children as labor force prevents them from getting fundamental education and being mentally healthy.
- Dickson-Gomez, Bodnar, Aradenia, Rodriguez and Gaborit (2006) provide a qualitative analysis of childhood sexual abuse and HIV risk among crack-using commercial sex workers in El Salvador's capital San Salvador. The analysis is based on interviewing 40 female sex workers who were sexually abused while being a child. Dickson-Gomez et al. explain the relationship between childhood sexual abuse and later HIV risk.
- Schechter and Bochenek (2008) wrote an article on "Working to Eliminate Human Rights Abuses of Children: A Cross-National Comparative Study" that deals with three recent cases: one of which covers child labor on sugar plantations in El Salvador. In his book, he explains how the international law about child labor has been formed. Especially, while dealing with the case of El Salvador, he focuses on how child labor exploitation is done in El Salvador and difficulties of eliminating child labor in El Salvador because of multinational corporations by using an example of Coca-Cola.
- Finally, most recently, Jocelyn Courtney (2010) wrote an article published in the *Journal of Military History* on "The Civil War That Was Fought by Children: Understanding the Role of Child Combatants in El Salvador's Civil War, 1980-1992." This article generally explains how the civil war started in El Salvador and the reason of using children as soldiers. However, the most notable contents in this article are children soldiers' trauma after civil war and how employment and education problems arose after the end of the civil war.

III. Empirical Background

El Salvador is one of the smallest countries in Latin America and it has the 15th largest economy in Latin America. The population of El Salvador slightly surpassed 7 million in 2010. El Salvador's GDP heavily depends on the service sector, which counts for more than 60 percent, the industry sector counting for nearly 30 percent, and agriculture counting for 10 percent.³ It initiated industrialization with the establishment of the Central American Common Market (CACOM) in 1970.

The outbreak of civil war, which has lasted for 12 years, had a severe negative effect on El Salvador's economic development. As is shown in Figure 1, GDP per capita (in constant 2005 international \$) declined from US\$4,372 in 1980 to US\$3,854 in 1981, and continued to fall to US\$3,559 in 1982. It then remained at about that level for the remainder of the civil war. During the 1980s, El Salvador heavily relied on foreign assistance, mainly from the United States. After the end of the civil war, GDP per capita rose relatively sharply, partly due an increase in foreign investments and a surge in domestic consumption. However, economic growth stagnated in 2008 and decelerated in 2009 due to the global slowdown and due to El Salvador's dependence on exports to the United States and remittances from the United States. As Figure 1 shows, El Salvador continues to lack far behind the average developing country in terms of GDP per capita.

Figure 1: GDP per capita, PPP (constant 2005 international \$) in El Salvador and LAC, 1980-2010



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2012).

There also is a significant gap between the rich and the poor in El Salvador. According to the United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) World Factbook, El Salvador is the country with the 31st highest income inequality in the world.⁴ Though this implies that El Salvador has a highly

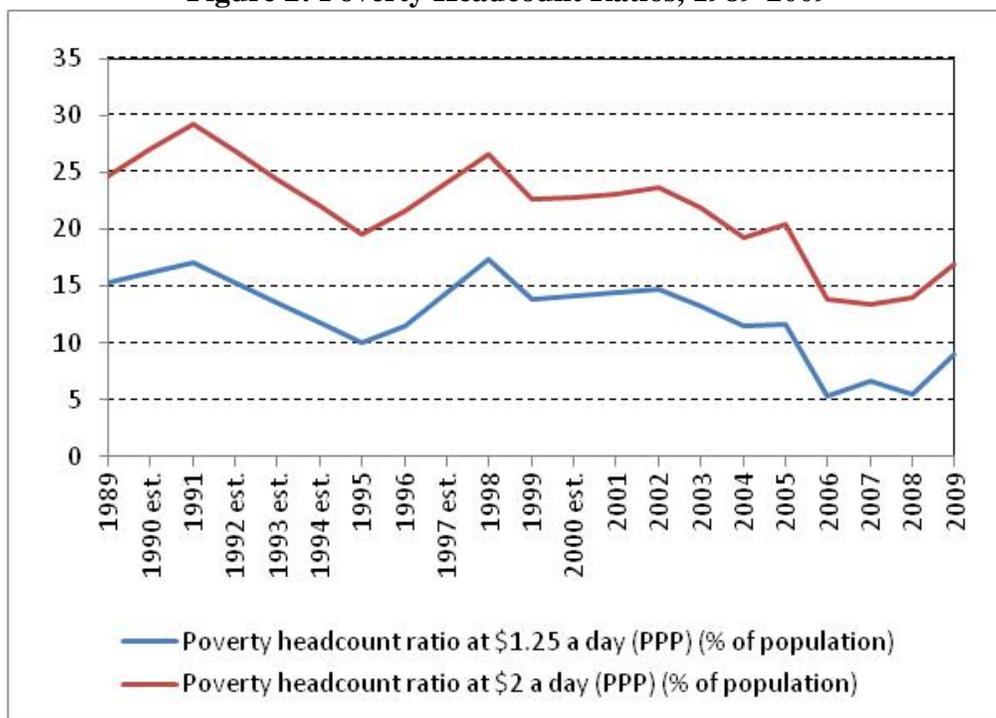
³ World Bank (2012).

⁴ See <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/rankorder/2172rank.html>.

unequal distribution of income, El Salvador is more equal than most other Latin American countries.⁵ Despite an average GDP per capita of about US\$4,000 (in constant 2005 international \$) in 2010, there are still many people in El Salvador living in poverty, despite the considerable progress made since the end of the civil war.

As Figure 2 shows, the poverty headcount ratio at \$1.25-a-day and \$2-a-day show overall the same trend. The ratios were increasing from 1989 (which is the first year for which such data exists) until 1991. They then declined until 1995, when they increased sharply until 1998. The poverty headcount ratio at \$1.25-a-day actually reached its highest level of 17.5 percent in 1998. The ratios then decreased sharply in 1999, after which they show some volatility within an overall downward trend, especially a very sharp reduction from 2005 to 2006, followed by some stagnation and increase due to the 2008 world financial crisis.

Figure 2: Poverty Headcount Ratios, 1989-2009



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2012).

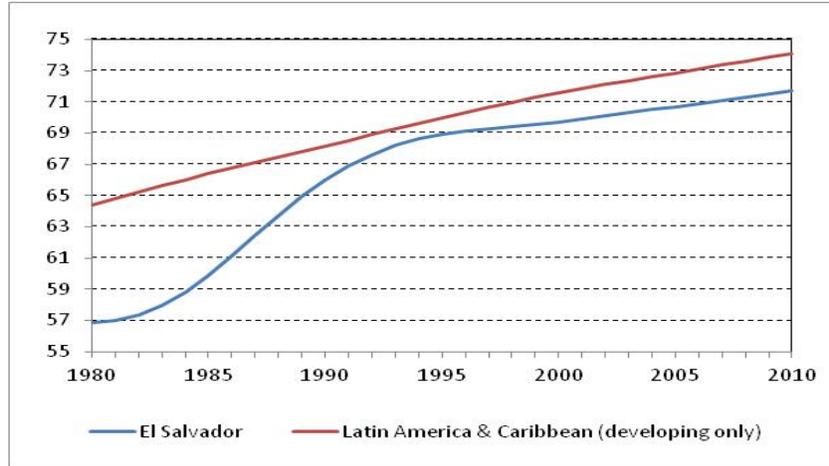
As shown in Figure 3, despite the civil war, life expectancy has steadily increased during the 1980s. This was mainly due to programs by the Ministry of Public Health and Social Services, which were recognized as national priorities, focusing on improvements of health services, control of malaria, improved sanitation and drinking water quality, and also increased child survival.

However, after decades of reducing the gap in life expectancy between El Salvador and the average developing country in LAC, Figure 3 also shows that the gap has once again started to become larger since 1994. In 1994, El Salvador's life expectancy was on average exactly 1.0 years below that of the average developing country in LAC. Since 1994, the gap has increased continuously

⁵ See <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/rankorder/2172rank.html>.

for every year, reaching 2.4 years in 2010. While the widening gap may appear relatively small, it is a potentially alarming development.

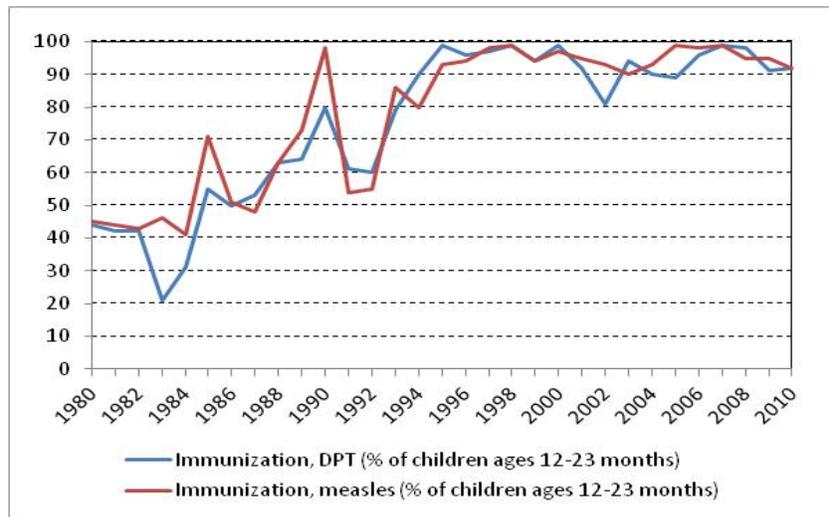
Figure 3: Life Expectancy at Birth (years), 1980-2010



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2012).

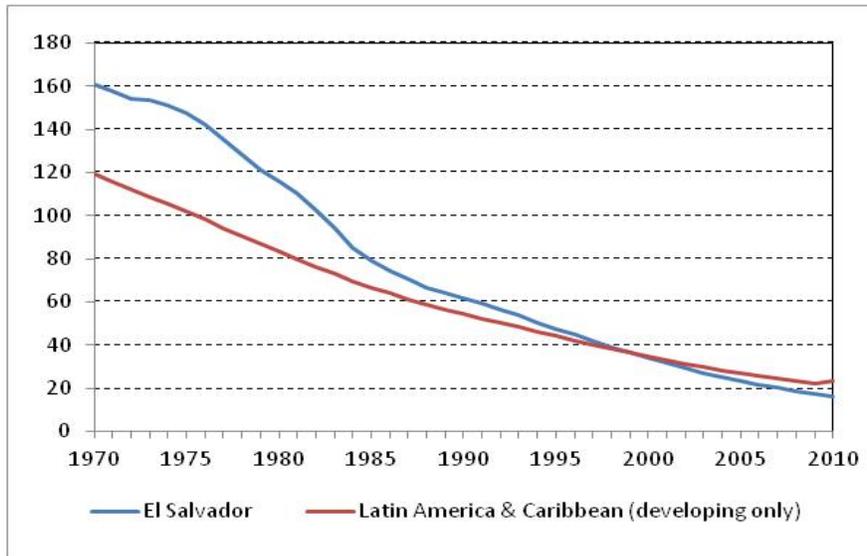
Figure 4 shows that El Salvador has made considerable progress with immunizations against measles and DPT (diphtheria, pertussis, and tetanus), and hence, El Salvador has now a lower under-5 child mortality rate than the average developing country in LAC, see Figure 5.

Figure 4: Immunization against DPT and Measles in El Salvador, 1980-2010



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2012).

Figure 5: Under-5 Child Mortality ((per 1,000 live births) in El Salvador and LAC



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2012).

IV. Discussion

IV.1. Main Areas of Child Labor Exploitation in El Salvador

El Salvador's civil war, which killed 75,000 people, persisted from 1979 to 1992. It got attention from the world not only because of its huge amount of harms but also because of its significant use of child soldiers in the civil war. The Salvadoran civil war is distinct for dependency on child soldiers. Over 80 percent of the government's troops and over 20 percent of the FMLN's were under eighteen years of age.⁶

Recruiting child soldiers tends to happen as a forced way through abduction (kidnapping of individuals), press ganging (larger group roundups), or quota recruitment (setting conscription quotas that had to be filled by a particular town or geographical area). The following two excerpts from Courtney Jocelyn (2010) show how the recruitment process is working.

In 1981, Carlos and his friend were walking on the street when a truck filled of soldiers came by and picked them up. His friend was released several days later because he was too small and wore glasses, but Carlos was forced to begin training with the Fuerzas Aérea (the air force). He was fourteen at the time. Looking back on his recruitment, Carlos recalled how he had never wanted to serve. "I did not share the ideology of the Air Force," he said. But if he had tried to escape, his family would have been killed.

Efrain Antonio Fuentes Mojica was abducted and forced to join the military just before his sixteenth birthday. Like Carlos, Efrain was afraid that if he did not go with the FAES, his family would be punished. He found out later that they were killed anyway.

⁶ Courtney (2010).

According to a study by the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare (2005), entitled *Entendiendo el Trabajo Infantil en El Salvador*, about 9 percent of Salvadoran children from the age of five to 17 were working in order to help support their families. That translates to more than 222,000 working children, of whom more than half were believed to be working in exploitive and dangerous conditions.

Today, the main field of abusing child labor force is the agricultural sector, especially in sugarcane farms. Schechter and Bochenek (2008) mention that child labor is rampant on El Salvador's sugarcane plantations. According to a news released by Human Rights Watch (June 10 2004)⁷, up to one-third of the workers on El Salvador's sugarcane plantations are children under the age of 18, many of whom began to work in the fields between the ages of eight and thirteen.

- The increased existence of multinational corporations in El Salvador with increased foreign investments is one of the main causes of instigating child labor abuse. Multinational corporations in El Salvador such as Coca-Cola and Starbucks ignored child labor abuse to maximize their benefits. For example, Coca-Cola indirectly supported the use of child labor force in sugarcane plantations. Jim Lobe (2004) documents that Coca-Cola buys the sugar milled from the cane from El Salvador's largest sugar mill, Central Izalco. Central Izalco purchases sugar cane from at least four plantations that use child labor in violation of the law.

Another main area of child labor is in the informal sector where many children, especially girls, work as servants helping with cleaning and cooking. Many times, these children are also physically mistreated and sexually abused. Various reports by Human Rights Watch have documented how children working as domestic help are abused in El Salvador.

- As stated in Human Rights Watch (2004b), children working as domestic help in El Salvador may work for up to sixteen hours each day, sometimes with only one or two days off each month. Human Rights Watch (2004b) also reports that over 60 percent of girls surveyed for a 2002 study by the International Labour Organization's International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC) reported physical or psychological mistreatment, including sexual harassment, from their employers. Although the IPEC study on domestic work concluded that its use outside the home was among the worst forms of child labor, the Salvadoran government has not identified domestic labor as one of the priority areas.
- Another report by Human Rights Watch (2006) reports that in El Salvador over 20,000 girls and women between the ages of fourteen and nineteen are domestic workers. The Human Rights Watch report also states that based on an ILO-IPEC study in El Salvador, 15.5 percent of girl domestic workers who had changed employers had left their previous employment because of sexual harassment or abuse, making such abuse the second leading cause for leaving a position. The lack of government oversight and the vulnerability of domestic workers combine to give employers carte blanche to abuse their domestic workers.

⁷ Human Rights Watch, *Child Labor on Sugar plantations* (2004)

IV.2. Health Problems among Working Children

Malnutrition and child labor are closely related to each other. Most of the children who are engaged in child labor are from poor families. Furthermore, the poor working condition for children is another reason for health problems of children.

In sugarcane plantations, children are required to use machetes and other dangerous knives to cut sugarcane, and work in the hot sun more than nine hours each day. Also, they cannot get medical treatment for being hurt while working. Anyway, the field with the most significant health problems in child labor is the commercial child sex industry. A significant number of children, especially girls, residing in San Salvador's metropolitan areas are exposed to the danger of sexual work and drugs. Dickson-Gomez et al. (2006) explained the endless vicious cycle in sex work, drugs, and the decline of health conditions.

Girls and women who had been sexually abused increased their crack use over time, and many reported turning to street-level sex work. They reported being forced to leave the brothels because their physical appearance deteriorated with continuing drug use or they were unable to afford to pay for a room because all their money was spent on drugs. Street-level sex work, in turn, increased women's sexual and physical victimization as well as their exposure to HIV/AIDS. El Salvador has the second largest number of people living with HIV/AIDS in Central America, behind Guatemala. As Table 1 shows, female sex workers, especially rooted from childhood sexual abuse, are the most-at-risk population, with an HIV prevalence of 5.7 percent.

Table 1: HIV and AIDS Estimates

HIV and AIDS Estimates	
Total Population*	6.1 million (mid-2010)
Estimated Population Living with HIV/AIDS**	35,000 [24,000–72,000] (2007)
Adult HIV Prevalence**	0.8%
HIV Prevalence in Most-at-Risk Populations***	Female Sex Workers: 5.7% (2009) MSM: 10.8% (2009)
Percentage of HIV-Infected People Receiving Antiretroviral Therapy****	51% (end 2007)

*U.S. Census Bureau **UNAIDS ***2009 Central American Sexual Behavior Surveillance and STI/HIV Prevalence Survey **** WHO/UNAIDS/UNICEF *Towards Universal Access*, 2008

Source: USAID/El Salvador, *HIV/AIDS Health Profile* (September 2010).

IV.3. Negative Effect of Child Labor: Lacking Education

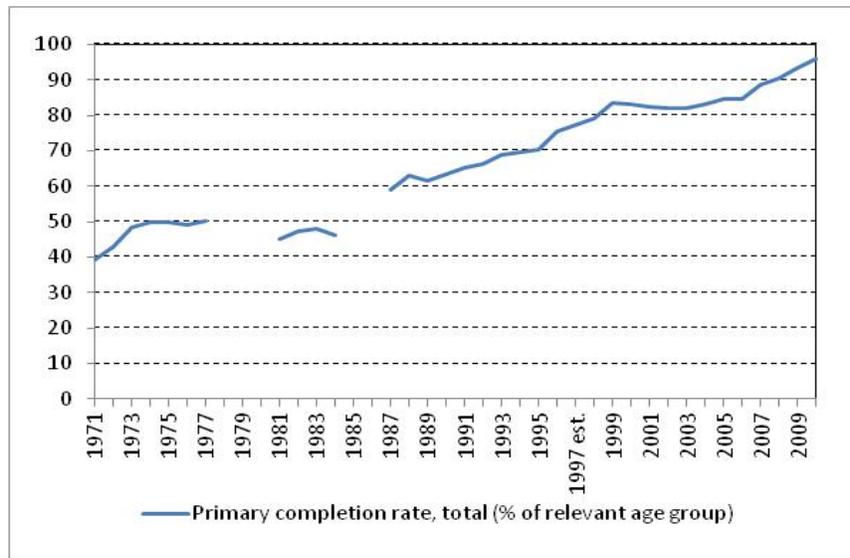
There are a lot of children in El Salvador who are excluded from getting generally considered basic services, such as getting an education, health care, and enough nutrition. The existence of excluded children in a society is strongly caused by the high income inequality among the rich and the poor. To explain, in order to support the family, it is common for children from poor families to dedicate themselves by being involved in workplaces, especially in sugarcane farms and coffee plantations.

It is easy to see that children who work do not have much of a chance to be fully educated. Indeed, as shown in a report by Human Rights Watch (2004a), children who work on sugarcane plantations often miss the first several weeks or months of school. For instance, a teacher in a rural community north of San Salvador estimated that about 20 percent of her class did not attend school during the harvest. Other children drop out of school altogether.

Another example of child labor abuse and missing of getting an education can be found from the case of child soldiers in the Salvadoran civil war. Child Soldiers International (2001) mentions that about 80 percent of the government troops were composed of children under 18 years of age. They were forced to be trained to learn fighting skills during the most developmental age and missed out on schooling. Without having proper education at an appropriate time, child soldiers have then trouble in adapting to the society even after demobilization. Furthermore, in 1999, “UNICEF reported that 61 percent of FMLN children were not integrated into the demobilization programme. Among those who did pass through this programme, only 5 percent completed the education programme.”⁸

Figure 6 shows the evolution of the percentage of children who complete primary education in El Salvador between 1980 and 2009 for all available years during this period. Despite some data gaps, it shows that the percentage of children completing primary education was lower during the first few years of the civil war then during the 1970s. Hence, it can be concluded that the early years of the civil war deterred children from completing primary education by exploiting children as child soldiers. It then started to accelerate more or less steadily since 1987, reaching 96 percent in 2010.

Figure 6: Primary Education Completion Rate (percent of relevant age group)

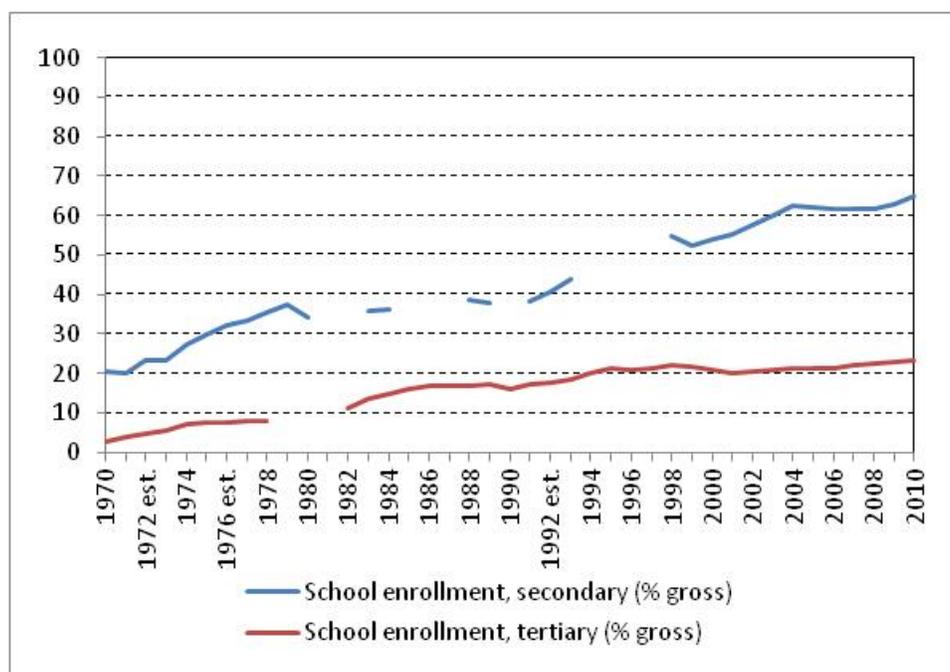


Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2012).

⁸ Statement of J. C. Legrand to the Latin American and Caribbean Conference on the Use of Children as Soldiers, Montevideo, Uruguay, 5-7/7/99; as reported in Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers (2001), p. 163.

Figure 7 shows El Salvador's school enrollment ratios for secondary and tertiary education. Considering the fact that the completion rate of primary education in 2010 was 96 percent, enrollments in secondary and tertiary remain extremely low. Obviously, the transition from primary to secondary depends on the financial situation of each family. Primary schools are usually provided for free by governments. Therefore, enrolling primary school costs less than that of secondary and tertiary, both, in terms of actual school fees as well as in terms of opportunity costs of lost income. Hence, enrollments in secondary and tertiary school can be a substantial financial burden for poor families and actually prevent their children from getting a secondary and tertiary education.

Figure 7: Secondary and Tertiary School Enrollment (gross, percent), 1970-2010



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2012).

The relatively low enrollment ratios for secondary and especially for tertiary schools explain why only 40.3 percent of the labor force have a secondary education and only 24.5 percent of the total labor force have a tertiary education.⁹ A well-educated labor force is becoming more and more critical for a country to succeed in the globalized world economy. Countries with low education levels will fall behind and to some degree, the low GDP growth rates of El Salvador compared to the average developing country in LAC, as is implicit in Figure 1, may already be an indication that El Salvador will fall behind if not taking the elimination of child labor and investments in education more seriously.

⁹ Based on World Bank (2012); this data applies for 1996, which is the only year for which such data is available for El Salvador.

V. Conclusion

Child labor abuse has been one of the most important social issues in El Salvador. The recruiting of child soldiers in the Salvadoran civil war was the most remarkable case of exploiting child labor in the world. However, abusing child labor has been endemic in the society in various fields such as agriculture and sex work. Although El Salvador could achieve economic development with the inflow of multinational corporations, it also led to recruiting children in coffee and sugarcane plantations.

Child labor is a multidimensional problem. Child labor comes with a variety of health problems but it also can deter the nation from growing in the longer-term because it prevents children from getting enough education. Eliminating child labor will be an important task for El Salvador as it will result in increased human resources who are highly educated and healthy. This would reinforce the national power. The El Salvadoran government will need to recognize the fact that it is important to make more educational opportunities by reinforcing legislative regulations on child labor exploitation and providing more public education.

References

- Child Soldiers International (2001). *Child Soldiers Global Report 2001 - El Salvador* (London, UK: Child Soldiers International); available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/498805fe4.html>.
- Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers (2001). *Global Report on Child Soldiers* (London, UK: Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, Text Version); available at: http://www.worldwideopen.org/uploads/resources/files/511/CNFL011_Global_Report_on_Child_Soldiers.pdf.
- Courtney, Jocelyn (2010). The Civil War that was Fought by Children: Understanding the Role of Child Combatants in El Salvador's Civil War, 1980-1992. *The Journal of Military History*, Vol. 74, No. 2 (April), pp. 523-556.
- Dickson-Gomez, Julia (2002). Growing up in Guerrilla Campus: The Long-Term Impact of Being a Child Soldier in El Salvador's Civil War. *Ethos*, Vol. 30, No.4 (December), pp. 327-356.
- Dickson-Gomez, Julia; Gloria Bodnar; Aradenia Gueverra; Karla Rodriguez; and Mauricio Gaborit (2006). Childhood Sexual Abuse and HIV Risk among Crack-Using Commercial Sex Workers in San Salvador, El Salvador: A Qualitative Analysis. *Medical Anthropology Quarterly (New Series)*, Vol. 20, No.4 (December), pp. 545-574.
- Human Rights Watch (2004a). *Turning a Blind Eye: Hazardous Child Labor in El Salvador's Sugarcane Cultivation* (New York, NY, United States: Human Rights Watch); available at: <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2004/elsalvador0604/index.htm>.
- Human Rights Watch (2004b). *No Rest: Abuse against Child Domestic Workers in El Salvador* (New York, NY, United States: Human Rights Watch, January 15); available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/402d1d754.html>.

- Human Rights Watch (2006). *Swept under the Rug: Abuse against Domestic Workers around the World* (New York, NY, United States: Human Rights Watch, July); available at: <http://hrw.org/reports/2006/wrd0706/wrd0706web.pdf>.
- Lobe, Jim (2004). Coke Benefiting from Child Labor in Sugar Cane Fields. Organic Consumers Association, website resource (originally published on June 10, 2004 by OneWorld.net); available at: <http://www.organicconsumers.org/corp/coke061304.cfm>.
- Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare (2005). Entendiendo el Trabajo Infantil en El Salvador, 2003-2005 (San Salvador, El Salvador: Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare, October).
- Schechter, Michael G. and Michael Bochenek (2008). Working to Eliminate Human Rights Abuse of Children: A Cross-National Comparative Study. *Human Rights Quarterly*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (August), pp. 579-606.
- United States Agency for International Development (USAID) (2010). *HIV/AIDS Health Profile El Salvador* (Washington, DC: USAID, September); available at: http://transition.usaid.gov/our_work/global_health/aids/Countries/lac/elsalvad_profile.pdf.
- World Bank (2012). *World Development Indicators / Global Development Finance database* (Washington, DC: The World Bank); as posted on the World Bank website: <http://data.worldbank.org/data-catalog/> (downloaded on May 16, 2012).