

7

Addressing the Burgeoning Problems

Unattended Global Transformations and Their Unintended Consequences

The same demographic transformations that have brought work and family issues into the spotlight in North America and Europe are occurring globally. Throughout human history, both mothers and fathers, in addition to rearing children, have been engaged in productive activity. In recent history, what has markedly changed is not the fact that fathers and mothers work at multiple tasks but the location and nature of that work. The transformations that occurred in North America and Europe between the mid-1800s and the end of the 1900s, moving men's and women's work away from home and farm into a wage and salary labor force distant from childrearing, have occurred and are continuing to take place worldwide. The twin trends of urbanization and rising paid labor force participation occurring in most of the world's developing regions mean that fewer adults are near their children or other family members during the workday. Even in rural areas, the transformation of the agricultural economy is pulling the spheres of work and home apart and dramatically changing how children and other family members are cared for.

As a result of these demographic and labor force changes, hundreds of

millions of working families in low-income countries are now facing work-family challenges similar in nature to those faced by families in high-income countries, but with two important differences: They are doing so with caregiving burdens that are significantly higher and with far fewer resources. Age dependency ratios—the ratio of children and elderly to working-age adults—tend to be from 50 percent to 100 percent higher in the developing world than they are in industrialized countries.¹ In addition, illness rates for both common and serious diseases are higher in low-income countries, further adding to the caring responsibilities of working adults. At the same time, working adults in these nations have fewer resources to help them meet family needs. Not only are family incomes far lower, but governments in the developing world invest less in social services than do those in Europe and North America, not just in absolute dollars but also as a percentage of total public expenditures, in part due to debt burdens.²

On their own, the growth of cities and the movement of mothers and fathers from farms into factories and burgeoning service-sector jobs need not have led to two-year-olds being left home alone nor to seven-year-olds being pulled out of school to care for them. Demographic and labor force changes alone did not lead to children facing poorer health conditions, having less of a chance at an education, or families having little or no way to exit poverty. In fact, the success stories of countries that were able to respond to the changes in work and family life make mincemeat of these myths.

A great rift has occurred between the experience of families in countries that adapted to the demographic and labor force transformations and the experiences of men, women, and children in those countries that failed to adapt. Countries which lagged behind in ensuring decent working conditions for families might have been able to catch up had it not been for the corrosive effects of a tremendously costly version of “free” trade.

At the same time as these marked shifts were taking place for working families around the world, the number of large multinational corporations and their influence over the rules of trade and over limits on governments to ensure decent working conditions was increasing. Corporations had recognized that it was in their financial self-interest to be able to produce goods in any country without being bound by tariffs or labor rules. While there was no strong evidence that most individual workers, their families, or their communities would gain from companies being free to move jobs to the location with the least costs (where wages and benefits were lowest and safeguards for

workers were fewest), it was quite clear that influential corporations and their stockholders stood a great deal to gain economically. The era of so-called free trade was born, an era of global rules which protected the flow of wealth but offered no protections to the individuals who labor, their children, and their communities. Whatever legitimate questions existed at the outset, the consequences of the era of free trade have become increasingly clear.

There is now an unprecedented level of global competition for jobs—and global movement of jobs. First, the jobs began to leave high-income countries. The greatest job loss from the United States to other countries began with the manufacturing sector: The percentage of the U.S. workforce in this sector was cut in half between the mid-1970s and the early twenty-first century. However, the job loss is now widespread in the United States and includes jobs in the service sector, as well as low-skilled entry-level and high-skilled professional jobs. One estimate is that by 2015, 3.3 million American white-collar service sector jobs will have been lost overseas.³

A wide range of professional jobs is being lost by other high-income Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries as well.⁴ These jobs range from computer programmers to radiologists and pathologists.⁵ But jobs are not only being lost now from Europe, the United States, Canada, and similar economies, jobs are also being lost from middle-income countries. While Mexico at first benefited from the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in terms of job growth, many of those jobs have since gone to China and other nations with even lower wages and fewer job protections.⁶

If it were only about job loss, it could be readily argued that one nation's job loss is another's job gain. The problem is that the movement of jobs has spurred a downward spiral in working conditions. Employers have used the threat of relocating jobs to different countries as a basis for exacting lower wages and worse working conditions.⁷ Half of the employers in a series of union-organizing drives used threats of plant movement and plant closings to oppose unionization.⁸ This tactic results in worse job conditions and lower wages. In call centers in Great Britain, for example, the level of intensity of the work and productivity expectations have risen markedly. Flexibility and time off have declined substantially in order to compete with lower-wage countries. As globalization pressures have led service centers to require those working to reduce average call times to two minutes, an employee described not having time for lunch or going to the bathroom and feeling "out of con-

trol.”⁹ Facing far worse working conditions from the start, the factory workers we interviewed in Honduras were not losing their chance to eat or go to the bathroom, they were losing their chance to spend any time at home. One factory worker we interviewed, who worked seven days a week, fifteen-hour and longer shifts, explained that when she and her coworkers asked to have any days off, they were told that the factory would close and move to China.

Around the world, families are increasingly living on the edge. Employed adults face working conditions that make it increasingly difficult or impossible to care for themselves and their families’ health and well-being. Parents are being forced to make untenable choices between caring for their children adequately and earning the income they need for their families to survive and have a chance at thriving. This book has provided evidence that these experiences are devastatingly common, rather than remarkable for their rarity.

What are the costs to children and their families? There are many; a few will be highlighted here. Children are being left on their own, they are being left in the “care” of older children in the family, and in poor-quality care on a daily basis. The first situation leaves children to face potentially deadly, more-immediate consequences, and the latter two have long-term but equally devastating consequences—both for the care provider when that person is only a child and for the recipient.

Children on Their Own Too Young

As a result of the failure to adapt workplaces and societies adequately to the marked transitions, children in a wide range of countries are increasingly being left in dangerous conditions: left alone at too young an age, left unsupervised with young siblings, brought to unsafe work settings, and left without parental care when sick. No parents want to leave their preschool children home alone. Parents take that course of action only when they have no other choice. Some children are locked in one-room shacks or apartments for their own “safety”—or at least to lower their risk of injury compared to wandering outside alone—while others are brought to unsafe workplaces. Others are being left with very young brothers and sisters. It is euphemistic to say that these children are being “raised by” other children. It is equally misleading for anyone to say they are “in the care of their older sister” or, less commonly, “brother.” Seven-year-olds simply cannot raise three-year-olds on their own, nor can four-year-olds adequately care for two-year-old twins. These trends

are new and on the rise. While it has long been true that one could visit many parts of the world and see five-year-old children carrying swaddled infants on their backs, in the past, parents and extended-family members were nearby, working on a plot of land or cooking food at home. Now, this is far less commonly the case.

While the majority of families found some way to provide adult care for their children—even if it meant bringing their children to unsafe workplaces—a significant minority were forced to leave their children home alone or in the care of an unpaid child. Thirty-six percent of the families we interviewed had left a young child home alone. Thirty-nine percent had left a sick child home alone or had to send a child to school or day care sick, and 23 percent took children to work, often under unsafe conditions. Twenty-seven percent had left a child in the care of a paid or unpaid child.

It is not random which children suffer the devastating and sometimes deadly consequences of being left alone at very young ages. The thousands of families we have interviewed make several facts disturbingly clear about which children pay the highest price for the world's neglect of the enormous obstacles facing working families. The poorer a family is, the more likely the children are to be left alone or in the care of other children. When parents feel that they risk losing pay or a job which their family needs to stay out of poverty, they are more likely to have to leave a child home alone. When families are headed by a single parent, they are more likely to be poor and without social supports and more often are forced to leave their children to manage on their own. Finally, when families face additional risks and burdens—from health problems to wars to natural disasters—they are more likely to land in extreme poverty, and their children are more likely to be left facing these additional burdens alone.

In every country with limited access to formal childcare, children who are poor are more likely to be left home alone than children who are not poor. In Botswana, 56 percent of parents we interviewed who were living in poverty had been forced to leave their children home alone compared to 45 percent of parents who were not living in poverty. In Mexico, 40 percent of parents living in poverty had needed to leave their children home alone compared to 31 percent of parents not living in poverty. The gap was substantially narrowed where parents had the greatest access to formal childcare. The parallel numbers for Vietnamese parents leaving children home alone were 20 percent versus 19 percent.

When parents know that the price of caring for their children may be the loss of pay or a job which they cannot afford to forgo, they are often forced to leave a child home alone in grossly inadequate care. Sixty-one percent of parents who had lost a job or a promotion or who had difficulty retaining a job because of caring for a sick child ended up leaving their children home alone on their own or with another child. Sixty-six percent of parents who had experienced difficulties at work because of other caregiving responsibilities ended up having to leave a child home alone or with another child.

When parents had to care for family members' health problems—whether as a consequence of routine health needs, health problems linked to poverty, or those brought about by war or natural disasters—they were at greater risk of having to leave a child home alone. Parents of children five and under who had multiple caregiving responsibilities, such as those who had to care for a sick spouse or other sick family member, were twice as likely to leave children home alone as were parents caring for children only.

When parents have few social supports, because they are single with little extended family nearby, they either need to take leave from work to care for their children themselves or be able to rely on paid childcare providers. If they can do neither, they find themselves leaving their children without care. Nearly 78 percent of parents who were single with no other caregivers in the household had to leave children alone, compared to 30 percent of parents who had a spouse, partner, or other caregiver to help in the household.

Daily Erosion of Children's Health and Development

When young children are left home alone or in substandard care, the potential for tragedy is real. In half the families we interviewed in Botswana and Mexico and more than a third of the families we interviewed in Vietnam, children suffered accidents or emergencies while their parents were at work. In one family we interviewed, children had been trapped in a hovel that was burning down, while in another, a preschooler fell from an escarpment, resulting in a serious head injury. In still other families, young children had become victims of violence. But there is another, slower, but equally devastating type of tragedy that is transforming the lives of tens of millions of preschool children. Unable to find or afford decent care, needing to work and only finding jobs under the worst conditions, these parents are forced to leave their preschool children in care which jeopardizes their health and development as

well as their safety. The quality of the care they receive is so poor that with each day that passes their health and development slowly deteriorate, and their life chances decline further.

A substantial number of parents had to bring their children to work regularly. This included 28 percent of the poor, 26 percent of those with middle-school education or less, and 49 percent of parents working in the informal sector. There should be no romanticizing what it meant to these children's lives to be brought to work regularly. One need only remember the experiences that parents in the informal sector shared with us of having to cook with infants near flames, sell goods in crowded marketplaces on busy streets where children repeatedly witnessed accidental injuries and death, or having to tie their children up during the day to avoid injury. The lack of decent options of care for their children, amid a desperate need for an income to survive, is dangerously eroding the health, education, and development of children and the welfare of families.

In one-third of the families in Botswana, one-quarter of the families in Vietnam, and one-fifth of the families in Mexico, the conflict between parents' working conditions had additional negative impacts on children's health, such as when parents were unable to get children to well-child check-ups or were unable to stay with them when they were sick. The number of parents losing pay or job promotions or having difficulty keeping their jobs because of the need to care for sick children was large: 62 percent of parents faced these economic penalties in Vietnam, 48 percent in Mexico, and 28 percent in Botswana. Tragically, those who have the greatest need are affected most severely: 67 percent of parents with income under \$10 a day faced a choice of either losing pay because of their need to care for sick children or having to leave sick children home alone. Seventy-six percent of parents of children with chronic conditions had difficulty at work or had lost pay, jobs, or promotions because of caring for them. Globally, the lack of support for working families not only dramatically affects the world's children, but it also exacerbates gender and income inequalities. Forty-nine percent of women in our study had lost pay or job promotions or had difficulty retaining jobs because of the need to care for sick children compared to 28 percent of men.

Just as their health is affected, so too are the development and education of children affected by working and social conditions. We found that too often the gap in care available to infants and toddlers was met by parents—who had little other choice—pulling their young daughters out of school and

requiring them to provide care for their preschool siblings. When this occurred, the development and education of both the infants or toddlers and the school-age children were jeopardized. In families that had to leave children on their own, 49 percent had children who had experienced behavioral or developmental difficulties (double the figure of those who were able to send their children to formal childcare). Even when young school-age children got to attend school, the question of who would care for them during nonschool hours remained. The costs to young elementary-school children left alone were high; children's needs do not end when they turn five or start school. Even when they were able to find routine care for their children during the day, work conflicts affected the ability of the majority of parents to become involved in their children's education. Barriers to helping with homework, participating in school events, or other involvement in children's schooling because of work were reported by 51 percent of parents in Vietnam, 66 percent of parents in Mexico, and 82 percent of parents in Botswana. When parents had barriers to becoming involved in their children's education, their children were twice as likely to experience behavioral or academic difficulties in school. The most common reasons for work presenting barriers to parents helping with their children's education were extremely long work hours, lack of paid leave, and lack of any flexibility.

Do we ignore the price that children are paying, or do we do something about it? In the mid-nineteenth century, amid the waves of urbanization and industrialization that had hit Western Europe, Rudolph Virchow wrote in the weekly medical journal *Die Medizinische Reform*, "It is the curse of humanity that it learns to tolerate even the most horrible situations by habituation." The children we learned about in our interviews who had to leave school to care for younger siblings, whose parents' jobs prevented them from spending time together, and who became ill from preventable diseases because their parents were not able to take time off to get them vaccinated never habituated. Virchow's curse will come to pass only if all of us who have a chance to change the lives of children like these and those of more than 900 million other children fail to act.

If children continue to be left home alone at young ages or without adult care and support for their health and education, the lives of too many will continue to be either riddled with acute tragedies or reduced by chronic neglect. But our children do not need to be left in inadequate care. As a global community, we have a choice.