

# Pebbles in the shoe: a profile of child workers in the footwear industry

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*"Let us do what we can now, eliminate child labor, ... so that children today and in the future, can start to take back their childhood ."* (Del Rosario and Bonga, 2000)

## Introduction

Children should have entitlements to rights and privileges similar to those of adults. Their years spent as children are crucial years to their development towards adulthood. Unfortunately, children exposed to intensive labor early in life have been forced to be adults prematurely thus, depriving them from enjoying their childhood. Moreover, they have less chances of growing up to be healthy and trained adults because many drop out of school and are exposed to hazardous situations/conditions at work, among others.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 20 November 1989 specifically outlines how children should be treated. Many UN member states, including the Philippines, have ratified this Convention. Article 32 of the said Convention explicitly states the "right of the child to be protected from economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to interfere with the child's education, or to be hazardous or harmful to the child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development." Moreover, the Convention also asks for the States Parties to:

- a) "provide for a minimum age or minimum ages for admission to employment;
- b) provide for appropriate regulation of the hours and conditions of employment;
- c) provide for appropriate penalties or other sanctions to ensure the effective enforcement of the present article." (Convention on the Rights of the Child, reprinted by UNICEF Manila October 1990)



Earlier, the International Labour Organisation Convention 138, also referred to as the Minimum Age Convention, was adopted by its member countries in 1973. It states that “the minimum age... shall not be less than the age of completion of compulsory schooling and in any case, shall not be less than 15 years.” ([http://www.die.gov.tr/CIN/ILO\\_convention\\_138.htm](http://www.die.gov.tr/CIN/ILO_convention_138.htm).) Recently, they also adopted ILO Convention 182 in 1999 on the immediate prohibition and abolition of the worst forms of child labour. More specifically, the Convention issued the following commitments:

- ☞ Governments must act immediately to eliminate the worst forms of child labour.
- ☞ All children aged below 18 years must be protected against the worst form of child labour.
- ☞ To eliminate the worst forms of child labour means the elimination of:
  - slavery and forced labour
  - participation of children in armed conflicts, prostitution and sexual exploitation
  - the use of children in drug trafficking
  - all dangerous work likely to endanger the safety and moral and physical health of children
- ☞ Governments must define national activity programmes after consultations with trade union and employers’ organizations as well as other relevant groups such as children who have been victims of the worst form of labour and their family
- ☞ Governments must do all it can to enforce the Convention and failing to do so will mean sanctions will be imposed
- ☞ Governments must save children from the worst forms of child labour, help them and ensure their social integration when they decide to leave their job. (<http://www.wctcsme.org>)

## The ILO-IPEC in the Footwear Industry

Subscribing to the idea that *All working children are basically at risk and the ultimate objective of society should therefore be the elimination of child labor* (ILO 1994 as cited in del Rosario and Boñga 2000), the International Labor Organization established the International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (ILO-IPEC). The programme “aims to work towards the progressive elimination of child labour by strengthening national capacities to address child labour problems, and by creating a worldwide movement to combat it.” (<http://www.ilo.org/public/english/standard/ipec/about/factsheet/facts19.htm>) In the Philippines, a Sub-



Regional Program to Combat Child Labor in the Footwear Sector in Southeast Asia, also covering Indonesia and Thailand is being implemented. It seeks to prevent and systematically remove children from work as well as provide appropriate alternatives such as community education, family-based interventions and access to viable income augmentation activities. (Culanag 2000)

Barangay dela Paz in Biñan, Laguna was selected as a pilot site of the programme. The community was chosen based on previous studies that have reported the extensive use of child labour in footwear manufacturing and trade activities in the area. The major implementers of the program formed a Programme Advisory Committee composed of major local government and non-government partners and programme stakeholders which met regularly to plan as well as undertake their respective activities to help the child workers and manufacturers in the community, e.g., identifying and recommending safe and healthy workplace, provision of credit/savings facility to footwear manufacturers, formation of homeworkers' organizations, among others. But before laying the groundwork for these individual programs there was the need to establish information on those to be directly affected – the working children, their families as well as their employers. Hence, the research conducted by the Research and Extension for Development Office of the University of the Philippines College of Social Work and Community Development.

## The Research

The research conducted during the early part of 2001 aimed to identify, locate and establish baseline information on the working children and footwear workshops/enterprises in Barangay dela Paz and nearby Barangay Malaban, also a footwear manufacturing community. The data gathered formed a database of those involved in the footwear industry — the working children, their families as well as their employers. This was intended to provide baseline information to other partner agencies in determining appropriate intervention strategies to prevent, withdraw and rehabilitate working children in the community. In addition, the study also came up with a profile of the working children in the footwear industry.

## Research Methodology

The study did a rapid appraisal of all the households in four (4) of the six (6) *puroks* of Barangay dela Paz. Additional households in Barangay Malaban were included bringing the total respondents to 2,244. A one-page interview was conducted among the household heads and/or their spouses focusing on the basic information about the family such as family composition, educational attainment, occupation, income and additional data about children 5-17 years of age. From the result of the rapid appraisal, working children were selected to participate in guided interviews and in-depth discussions conducted by the research team. Five discussion groups were formed

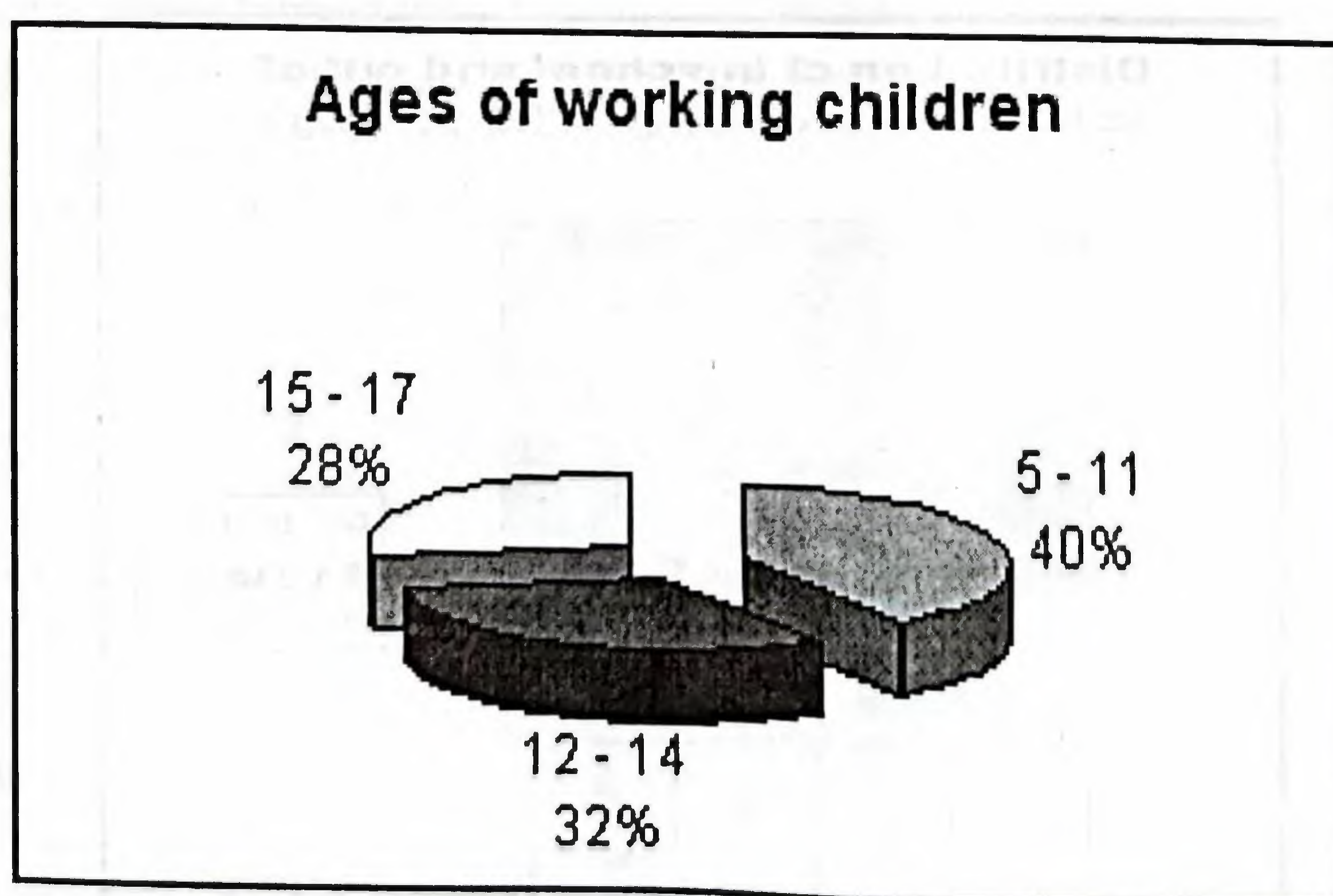


composed of three (3) groups of working children who were presently attending school and two (2) groups of working children who have stopped schooling. Since education is a vital need in a child's development, schooling and non-schooling children were chosen to note the effect of working on the education of the children. The discussions focused mainly on their involvement in footwear-making including hazards met, their attitude towards working, as well as their dreams and aspirations.

## Survey Results

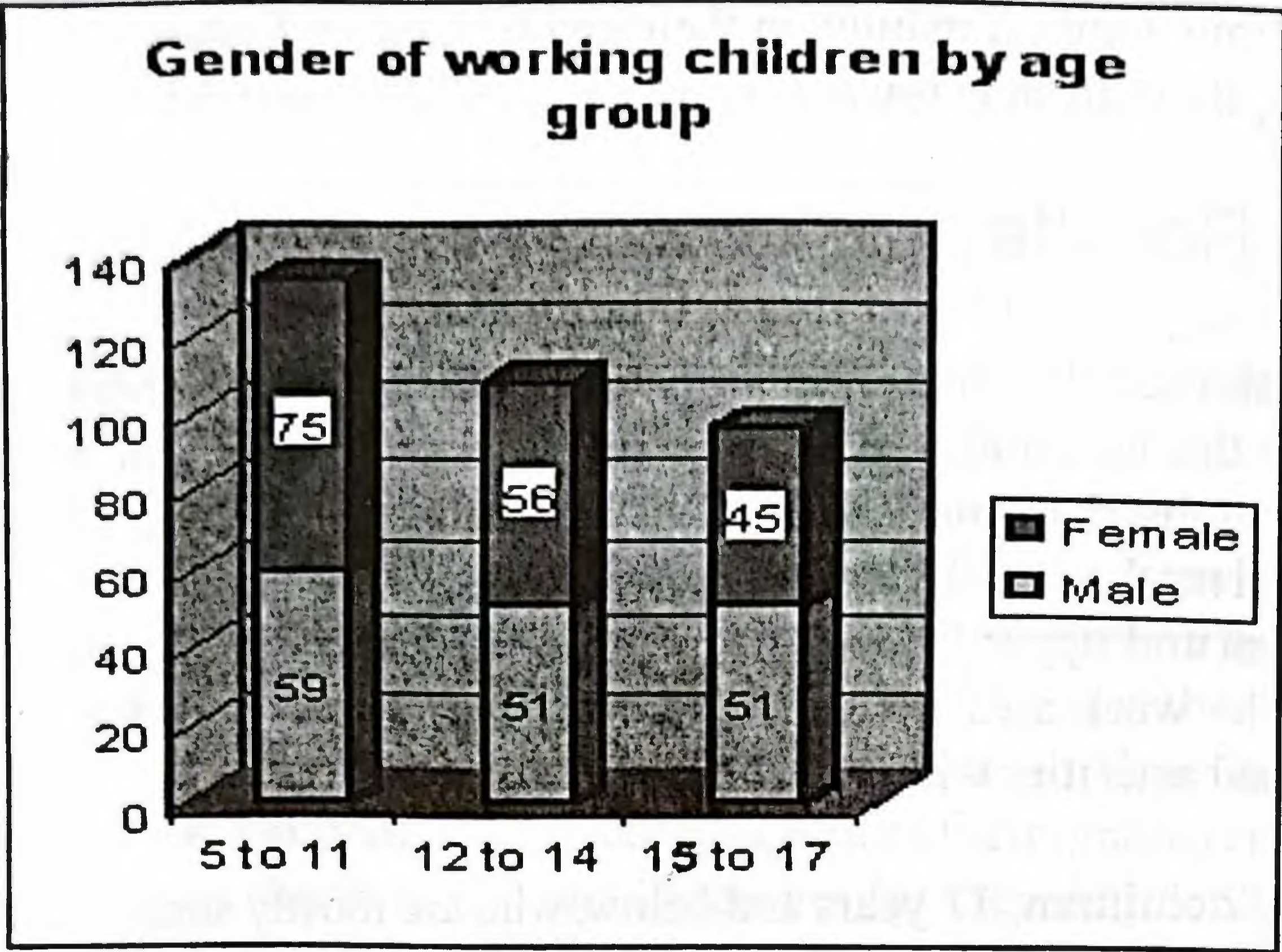
The survey showed that the majority (1396 or 62%) of the households have members, particularly the husband and/or the wife, who are engaged in footwear making undertaking jobs that combine management, supervision and training, footwear assembly and marketing. In most of the households, the men mostly do the process of *lapat* (bottom and upper lasting) while the women take charge of the *rebete* (upper making). The work area is typically located in the individual family's households mixing normal activities with footwear making.

A total of 337 children, 17 years and below, who are mostly sons or daughters of the respondents, were recorded to be working in the footwear industry. The youngest were two (2) 5-year old children engaged in attaching ribbons or buckles and placing finished products in boxes. It is interesting to note that most (40%) of the working children belonged to the youngest age bracket (5–11 years old) while the fewest number belonged to the oldest age group (15–17 years old). The following graph illustrates the age distribution of the working children.

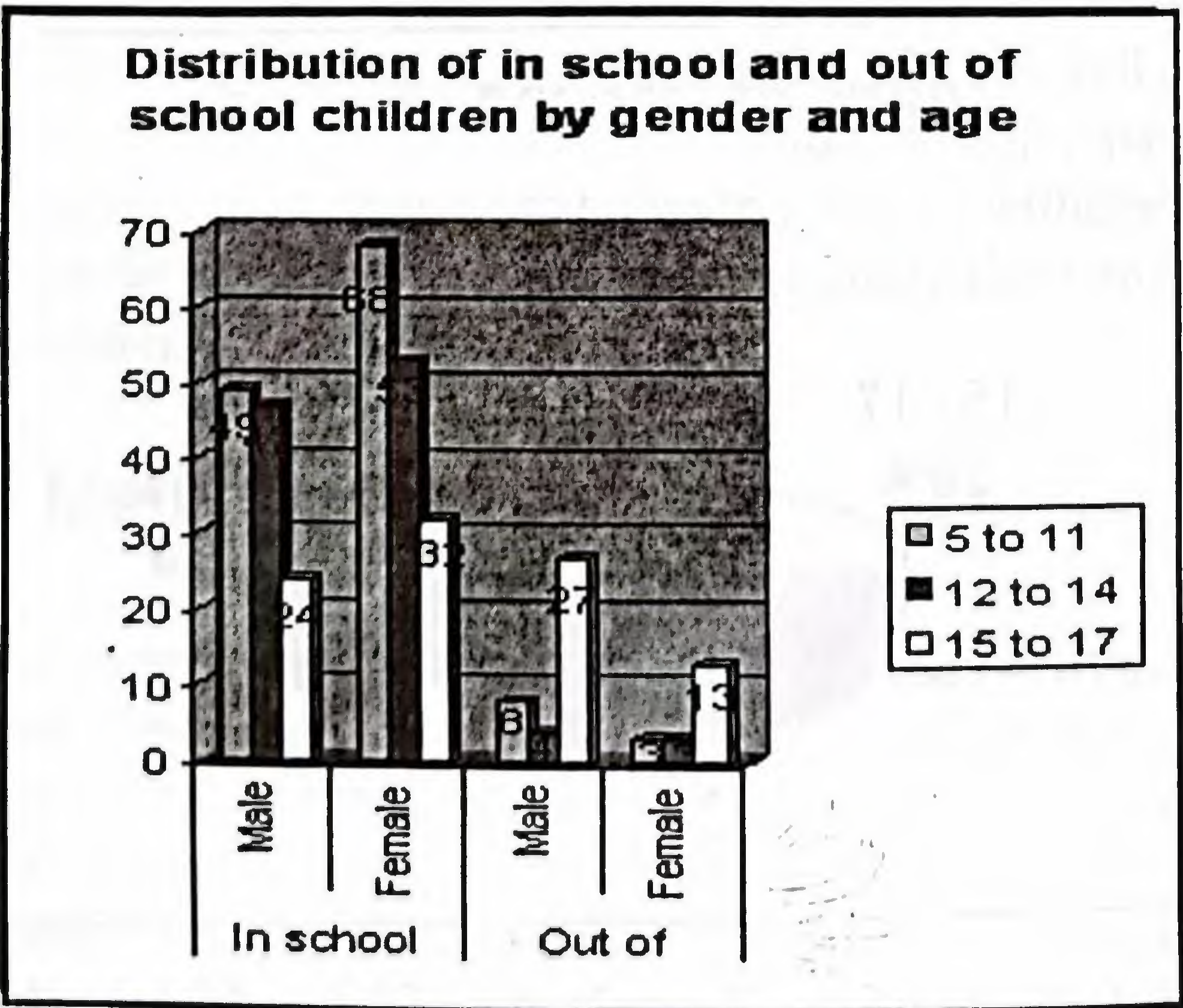




A slightly higher number of female child workers (52%) was noted. The gender distribution by age group revealed that the younger age groups were mostly girls while the older groups included more boys. The picture below shows this finding



While majority (81%) were in school, more male children were reported to be presently out-of school and belonged to the 15-17 age group. The comparison of schooling and non schooling working children is shown in the graph below.





# Guided Interviews and In-depth Discussions

## In- school Working Children

The working children who are in school were composed of three (3) age groups: 5-11 (16 participants), 12-14 (20 participants), and 15 – 17 (9 participants).

All the working children in school were living with their parents, in families of 3 – 11 members. The 5-11 year-olds were in Grades 2 – 6 while the 12-14 year-olds were in the primary level and second year high school. The 15-17 year olds were in Grade 6 or the first three years of high school. It was disclosed that four (4) of the 5-11 year old participants might have to stop schooling in the academic year 2001-2002 due to lack of funds and poor health.

### *Length of time as a child worker in the footwear industry*

The duration of their involvement in the footwear industry ranged from at least a week to 9 years with some already working since they were 4 years old. Majority were involved in the footwear business since they were 8 years old.

### *Reasons for working*

The most frequent reason given for working was to help the family. Others said they were motivated to work to support their schooling, to help to hasten the work without having to hire other people and to learn new skills. While majority worked voluntarily, there were some who claimed they were forced by their parents to work for the following reasons: to have their own income, to earn for the family in exchange for their educational expenses, to learn about life and to be able to help the family. Footwear making was the most practical work for them because their parents were in the same line of work, and hence they were most familiar with the business.

### *Specific kind of work*

In majority of the footwear shops these children worked in the manufacture of leather or synthetic sandals, leather shoes or “step-ins.” They were generally involved in cutting patterns, attaching buckles (*hibilya*), making boxes, applying glue, polishing or cleaning and placing finished products in boxes. A few others were doing *rebete* or *lapat*. Three (3) 15-17 year old children were engaged in selling. Tools and materials commonly used were scissors, stapler, mallet, grinding machine, bonding chemicals or solvents, textile, thread, polishing and cleaning agents.



### *Volume of production*

Depending on the stage of work involved, the working children could finish from one to ten dozen pairs in a week. The youngest batch (5-11 year olds) claimed to finish at least a dozen while the older groups could produce three to 10 dozen pairs. For the 12 – 14 year old children, cutting of design patterns usually took the longest hence, only three dozens could be finished in a week, whereas the application of bonding chemicals seemed to be the easiest as they could dispose of 10 dozen pairs weekly. Outputs of the 15-17 year old children per week reached 2-10 dozens at each stage of work. For example, those doing *rebete* could finish 2-8 dozens and those pasting brand names could finish 1-5 dozens per week. Some of the children admitted that they could not meet their quotas at times due to lack of time, too high a quota, fatigue due to overwork (doing job at the footwear workshop and household chores at the same time), and bodily aches as a result of work.

### *Seasonality of work*

The holiday months from September to December brought in the most work for the working children. Consequently, they also earned more during these peak months, for example, about P 150.00 per dozen footwear or P700 each month or P 50 for every pair sold. On the other hand, during the summer months, very few orders came so they earned only about P 10.00 per week from footwear assembly, or P 10.00 – 20.00 for every piece sold, or on the average, about P 300.00 per month. Sales were also high on Sundays but low on Fridays or Wednesdays.

### *Accidents and hazards at work*

These children admitted to having met minor accidents in the workplace or having suffered from the effects of long term exposure to pollutants and chemicals although they considered these as acceptable risks which were simply remedied by first aid. Among the common complaints of the 5-11 year old working children were colds, headaches and backaches. One girl suffered burns in her hands. Others said they got dizzy or had headaches due to toxic fumes. They also suffered from persistent coughs, sore eyes and fever. Among the 15-17 year old child workers, maladies associated with their work included fatigue due to overwork at home and in the workshop; backache due to the cramped work spaces and headache due to exposure to bonding chemicals and solvents. Long working hours also diminished their time for rest or sleep. Those in footwear selling were affected by weather problems.

Moreover, these children revealed that when they committed errors, their parents either scolded or pinched them. Others were spanked in the butt or slapped in the arm or were hit with a broom. One girl disclosed that her hair was pulled and her head was hit against the wall by her parents. Such abuses however were isolated cases committed when the



children forgot to mind a younger sibling although the abuses were sometimes committed even for mistakes made in footwear making. While they did not react to these acts of violence, the children indicated having very bad feelings which persisted even after some time.

### *Attitude to work*

Notwithstanding the above grievances, these children accepted their having to work at a young age. They believed it was alright for them to work because it provided them with the means to study, enabled them to earn additional income for the family, taught them skills they could use when they grow up and gave them the opportunity to help speed up their parents' work. They also said that working made them more responsible and self-sufficient and prevented them from associating with bad company.

### *Aspirations*

On the other hand, all the children expressed their desire to go into different ventures in the future. As such, they said they would like to finish their schooling and to become professionals. They believed there are better opportunities if they were educated and could better fulfill their dreams of a good life. Through education they believed their parents would be proud of them and happy. They aspired to become doctors, engineers, teachers, law enforcers, veterinarian, nurse, dentist, pediatrician, scientist, criminologist, computer programmer, judge or pilot. Those who wanted to pursue a vocational course dreamt of becoming a secretary, automotive mechanic or electrician. Another wanted to be a soldier. Some mentioned other places of work such as working in Manila or Japan. One simply wanted to be a housewife.

The 12-14 year old children specifically wanted to get out of the footwear business when they would grow up as they felt there was no stability in it since there were no orders sometimes and therefore, no income. The 15-17 year old child workers who planned to remain in the footwear business aspired to become managers or proprietors.

## **Out- of- School Working Children**

The out-of school child workers who participated in the discussion were composed of nine (9) 8-14 and eleven (11) 15-17 year old children.

These children came from families of 4-11 members. All of them were living with their families. Before quitting school, they had reached either the primary or the secondary level with two of them having finished only grade 1. Although more than half of them claimed to be honor students, they had to stop studying due to the following reasons: lack of resources, too many siblings, and for some, lack of interest in studying.



### *Length of time as a child worker in the footwear industry*

These out-of-school working children had been working from two months or less to about four (4) years. Some of them had began working when they were eight (8) years old.

### *Reason for working*

For all of them, working was a voluntary decision on their part. They felt they had to work in order to earn a living to enable them to help their parents/family, go back to school and to be able to buy their necessities. They said that they had also found fulfillment in their work and that the footwear business was something they had come to like. Before joining the footwear work force, some of them had already been working as trash collectors, doormat cutters, delivery boys, vendors, factory workers, household helpers or waitresses. Their shifting to the footwear industry had been a result of the factory closing, their decision to come back and help the family, peer pressure or dismissal from previous work.

### *Specific kind of work*

Majority of the children had been involved in footwear production rather than in selling. Some worked in their households for their parents while others worked for relatives in separate footwear workshops. The most common assembled footwear were synthetic shoes and sandals, slippers and “step-ins.” Most of them did pattern cutting, out-sole and in-sole assembly, bonding, and packaging and made boxes. Materials commonly used by children in performing their job consisted of bonding chemicals, scissors, polishing chemicals, mallet, sewing machines and grinding machines.

### *Volume of production*

The children could finish an average of 3-4 dozen pairs a week at various stages of work. Some had quotas such as 10 dozen pieces in two weeks. Peak season is during the opening of the school year and the holiday months of June to December yearly while the summer months were the lean months which brought in few orders. During the peak season, the 8-14 year old participants said they earned as much as P200.00 per week while the 15-17 year old workers said they received as much as P300.00-500.00 per week. During the low season they earned only P 100.00 per week. One of the child workers claimed that she did not receive any payment since she was just helping her parents.

### *Accidents and hazards at work*

The most common accident met by the 8-14 year old working children was having their



fingers hammered. Usually Mondays were bad days for most, as they suffered from stomach ailments, although no explanation was given for this. The 15-17 year-old children, on the other hand, complained of sensitivity to the bonding and cleaning materials used in footwear assembly. Hence, respiratory diseases were common. They got dizzy and were easily fatigued due to the ingestion of fumes and dust in an enclosed area. The work area was in bad shape. It occupied a small space and experienced frequent brownouts. Occasionally, the children were hurt by the tools used or were burned by the chemicals. Sometimes when they had to meet the demands and deadlines set by the manager, they had to extend work beyond normal hours resulting in lack of sleep, fatigue and a predisposition to sickness. For some who marketed their products as individual hawkers, they said they experienced harassment by the police who were out to confiscate their products unless they bribed them with money. To cope with the bad cops, they said they just ran away from them and looked for a new place where they could sell their products. To regain their strength, these children suggested getting enough sleep, putting on protective masks, more ventilation in the work area and having a larger work space.

The children also said that when they committed errors, they were told either to repeat the process; were sent home; were asked to stop working; or were cursed or scolded by the parents or employers. In cases of verbal abuse, some of the children either cried or reasoned out while others became confused or disoriented. Some children who were told to stop working searched for other places of work.

### *Attitude to work*

Despite the abovementioned complaints, the children had no negative thoughts about working. To them, working made their parents happy and provided them with ready cash for their personal needs and some household expenses. Their expected wages also became a sort of collateral for them when they asked for cash advance from their parents.

Children therefore agreed that it was absolutely alright for children to work, as their incomes enabled them to help their parents particularly during difficult situations, and made them less dependent on their parents. They said they also learned skills that they might need later in life.

### *Aspirations*

On the other hand, all of them expressed a desire to move on to other types of work in the future such as becoming a teacher, having their own footwear business or working in other factories. In case they found themselves in the same line of work in the future, they said they wanted to engage in other part time jobs or sidelines such as tricycle driving to supplement their income. They voiced out the importance of finishing their studies to have more opportunities for better jobs. All of them, except for



two, expressed the desire to go back to school and to finish their studies, be it through a vocational course or a college degree. They wished to pursue their studies because they wanted to learn in order to have better opportunities in the future. They believed that they would encounter more difficulties without education.

## Interpretation of Data

The experiences shared by the child workers of the footwear industry in Biñan, Laguna are not different from those related by child workers in other sectors. The long working hours, unjust compensation, and exposure to hazards, among others, are the common predicaments verbalized by these children thus supporting the ILO belief that *“all working children are basically at risk.”*

In-school and out of school children related similar work experiences. These children identified economic problem as a major push for them to enter into child labor. There were no marked differences in their responses. For the out of school children, although working was not explicitly pointed to as the reason for dropping out of school, economic difficulty such as lack of resources still pervades as the main reason for quitting school.

In view of the agreements adopted in ILO Convention 182, the information and experiences shared by the working children are clear indications of violations of the agreements in the said convention. First and foremost, these children belong to the age group, i.e., below 18 “who must be protected against the worst form of child labor.” Secondly, the footwear manufacturing activities these children are exposed to are considered “dangerous work which endanger their safety and physical health.” The data showed that the exposure to toxic fumes and chemicals led to persistent cough, colds, headaches, dizziness and burps. Quite a significant number suffered from accidents such as having their fingers hammered or cut by sharp tools. The cramped and enclosed work spaces caused these children to suffer from backaches. Working also diminished their time for rest and sleep especially when they had to work for long hours to meet the demands and deadlines set which resulted to fatigue and made them susceptible to illness. Those who peddle their products were more exposed to accidents in the street in addition to the harassment they get from bad cops who want to get a share of their earnings.

While we view all these as a clear violations of their rights as children, it is more frustrating to note that the footwear child workers or even their parents do not realize this. Instead, these children considered working as an opportunity and/or a responsibility to help earn for their families. These were the reasons given by their parents when these children were asked to assist in this productive endeavor. As a result, they were amenable to working to enable them to finance their educational needs, develop them towards being more responsible and self sufficient, learn new



skills as well as to keep away from bad company and vices. It is in this light that their parents inculcated in them the value of work, responsibility and solidarity by working together as a family. Such values have instilled in them the acceptance of work as a natural part of their growing years.

However, the data also showed that some of these children were involved in the industry primarily to earn. As some of them have quotas to meet, their involvement in footwear making could be considered to be that of a normal worker who were paid according to their output. Moreover, it was recorded that some of these children have already been working even before they joined the footwear manufacturing business which showed that their main preoccupation was to work and to earn.

The parents, on the other hand, due to economic difficulty considered it reasonable to allow their children to work in order to earn for their personal needs, particularly for their schooling.

Although the children have rationalized their early involvement in productive endeavors, they also have a feeling that they do not enjoy fully the rights they are entitled to. They expressed that they felt deprived of their rights to education, sufficient food, recreation, decent shelter and health care, and yet, none of them mentioned that working was a violation of their rights. They blamed the lack of resources, the unavailability of government services and the empty promises of politicians and government officials as the reasons why they did not enjoy these rights.

## A Call to Action

Supporting the belief that every child is entitled to a normal development, the call for the elimination of child labor should be advocated. The vital and initial step is consciousness raising among the persons directly concerned. Foremost are the children and their parents/family. It is imperative that the children are made aware of their rights and the parents/family of their responsibilities. They should also know the implications of working on the development of the child, e.g., effect on their health, education, among others. Likewise, the community should also be conscious of the plight of the child workers. It is only when the persons concerned are made aware of the issue can the other services be implemented and appreciated.

Programs and services to promote the welfare of children particularly regarding health, safety and education should be encouraged from both government and non-government agencies. Additional legislations which will serve the interest of child workers should be passed and existing ones be strictly implemented. It is also important that basic social services be prioritized and genuine poverty alleviation measures be undertaken by the government as its main social responsibility. It would be ideal if government, non-government institutions, the family and the community will work together to give the children the rights and benefits they are entitled to.



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