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CHILD LABOUR

GLOBAL ESTIMATES 2020, TRENDS AND THE ROAD FORWARD



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Executive summary



Child Labour: Global estimates 2020, trends and the road forward takes stock of where we stand in the global effort to end child labour. Published in the United Nations International Year for the Elimination of Child Labour by the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), co-custodians of target 8.7 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the report describes the scale and key characteristics of child labour today, and changes over time.

In line with child labour estimates produced by the ILO every four years since 2000, the 2020 calculations are based on the extrapolation of data from national household surveys. The new estimates use more than 100 household surveys covering two thirds of the world's population of children aged 5 to 17 years.

What the report tells us is alarming. **Global progress against child labour has stalled for the first time since we began producing global estimates two decades ago.** In addition, without urgent mitigation measures, the COVID-19 crisis is likely to push millions more children into child labour.

These results constitute an important reality check in meeting the international commitment to end child labour by 2025. If we do not muster the will and resources to act now on an unprecedented scale, the timeline for ending child labour will stretch many years into the future.

GLOBAL ESTIMATES AND TRENDS

Child labour remains a persistent problem in the world today. The latest global estimates indicate that 160 million children – 63 million girls and 97 million boys – were in child labour globally at the beginning of 2020, accounting for almost 1 in 10 of all children worldwide. Seventy-nine million children – nearly half of all those in child labour – were in hazardous work that directly endangers their health, safety and moral development.

Global progress against child labour has stagnated since 2016. The percentage of children in child labour remained unchanged over the four-year period while the absolute number of children in child labour increased by over 8 million. Similarly, the percentage of children in hazardous work was almost unchanged but rose in absolute terms by 6.5 million children.

The global picture masks continued progress against child labour in Asia and the Pacific, and Latin America and the Caribbean. In both regions, child labour trended downward over the last four years in percentage and absolute terms. **Similar progress in sub-Saharan Africa has proven elusive. This region has seen an increase in both the number and percentage of children in child labour since 2012.** There are now more children in child labour in sub-Saharan Africa than in the rest of the world combined. Global child labour goals will not be achieved without a breakthrough in this region.

Continued progress was registered over the last four years among children aged 12 to 14 and 15 to 17. Child labour in both age groups declined in percentage and absolute terms, continuing a consistent downward trend seen in previous estimates. Child labour rose among young children aged 5 to 11, however, after the 2016 global estimates signalled slowing progress for this age group. There were 16.8 million more children aged 5 to 11 in child labour in 2020 than in 2016.

The COVID-19 crisis threatens to further erode global progress against child labour unless urgent mitigation measures are taken. New analysis suggests a further 8.9 million children will be in child labour by the end of 2022 as a result of rising poverty driven by the pandemic.

Yet the predicted additional rise in child labour is by no means a foregone conclusion. The actual impact will depend on policy responses. Two additional scenarios demonstrate the huge influence of social protection coverage on child labour in the near term. Where social protection coverage is allowed to slip, a significant further increase in child labour

could occur by the end of 2022. A rise in social protection coverage, on the other hand, could more than offset the impact of COVID-19 on child labour, returning us to progress on the issue.

Other key results from the 2020 global estimates include:

- **Involvement in child labour is higher for boys than girls at all ages.** Among all boys, 11.2 per cent are in child labour compared to 7.8 per cent of all girls. In absolute numbers, boys in child labour outnumber girls by 34 million. When the definition of child labour expands to include household chores for 21 hours or more each week, the gender gap in prevalence among boys and girls aged 5 to 14 is reduced by almost half.
- **Child labour is much more common in rural areas.** There are 122.7 million rural children in child labour compared to 37.3 million urban children. The prevalence of child labour in rural areas (13.9 per cent) is close to three times higher than in urban areas (4.7 per cent).
- **Most child labour – for boys and girls alike – continues to occur in agriculture.** Seventy per cent of all children in child labour, 112 million children in total, are in agriculture. Many are younger children, underscoring agriculture as an entry point to child labour. Over three quarters of all children aged 5 to 11 in child labour work in agriculture.
- **The largest share of child labour takes place within families.** Seventy-two per cent of all child labour and 83 per cent of child labour among children aged 5 to 11 occurs within families, primarily on family farms or in family microenterprises. Family-based child labour is frequently hazardous despite common perceptions of the family as offering a safer work environment. More than one in four children aged 5 to 11 and nearly half of children aged 12 to 14 in family-based child labour are in work likely to harm their health, safety or morals.

- **Child labour is frequently associated with children being out of school.** A large share of younger children in child labour are excluded from school despite falling within the age range for compulsory education. More than a quarter of children aged 5 to 11 and over a third of children aged 12 to 14 who are in child labour are out of school. This severely constrains their prospects for decent work in youth and adulthood as well as their life potential overall. Many more children in child labour struggle to balance the demands of school and child labour at the same time, which compromises their education and their right to leisure.

THE ROAD FORWARD

The 2020 ILO-UNICEF global estimates indicate a critical juncture in the worldwide effort against child labour. Global progress has ground to a halt over the last four years after having already slowed considerably in the four years before that. The ongoing COVID-19 crisis threatens to further erode past gains. While there are nearly 86 million fewer children in child labour now than when we began measuring global levels in 2000, recent trends suggest we are falling far behind on the collective commitment to end child labour in all its forms by 2025. In this United Nations International Year for the Elimination of Child Labour, we must act with renewed urgency to put progress back on track.

Immediate steps are needed to avoid falling further behind during the ongoing COVID-19 crisis. The pandemic has clearly heightened the risk of child labour, above all through a sharp rise in poverty that may increase families' reliance on child labour, and through school closures that deny families the logical alternative to sending children to work. To reduce these risks, expanded income support measures for families in situations of vulnerability, through child benefits and other means, will be critical. So too will back-to-school campaigns and stepped-up remedial learning to get children

back in the classroom and help them make up for lost learning once there, when conditions permit.

During the acute and recovery phases of the crisis, it will be important not to lose sight of broader policy imperatives for ending child labour. These have long been clear:

- Extending social protection for children and their families to mitigate the poverty and economic uncertainty that underpin child labour.
- Ensuring free and good-quality schooling at least up to the minimum age for entering employment to provide a viable alternative to child labour and afford children a chance at a better future.
- Guaranteeing that every child's birth is registered so that children have a legal identity and can enjoy their rights from birth.
- Promoting decent work that delivers a fair income for young people (of legal working age) and adults, with a particular emphasis on workers in the informal economy, in order for families to escape poverty-driven child labour.
- Promoting adequate rural livelihoods and resilience, including through supporting economic diversification, investing in basic services infrastructure, extending social protection and devising agricultural extension policies for crop diversification. Family farms and enterprises that depend on the (mostly unpaid) labour of their children need greater support to improve their livelihoods and end that dependence.
- Ensuring that necessary laws and regulations are in place to protect children, backed by enforcement machinery and child protection systems, and the services required to apply them.
- Addressing gender norms and discrimination that increase child labour risks, particularly for girls, related to domestic work and unpaid household chores.

Special attention should address the heightened risk of child labour in growing crises, conflicts and disasters. Child labour concerns should factor in all phases of humanitarian action – from crisis preparedness and contingency plans to humanitarian responses to post-crisis reconstruction and recovery efforts.

Addressing child labour risks in domestic and global supply chains continues to be important. Especially relevant are the informal micro- and small enterprises operating at the lower tiers of supply chains, where child labour and other human rights risks are often most pronounced. Governments can lead through public procurement that discourages child labour risks in vendor supply chains.

The COVID-19 crisis has made actions across all these policy areas and contexts even more urgent at a time when governments are grappling with restricted fiscal space. Sound policy choices and resource allocation decisions will be critical. Strengthening the country-level evidence base on child labour can help to identify local priorities and guide policy and spending decisions. Social dialogue among governments, employers' organizations and workers' organizations is also key to developing appropriate and responsive policies for addressing child labour and related challenges, wherever they occur.

Governments will need to adopt creative resource mobilization strategies to expand their fiscal space. Given budget shortfalls generated by the pandemic, the international community will need to fill the financing gap. Many industrialized countries still fall short of long-standing commitments to official development assistance (ODA) and financing for sustainable development. This needs to change.

Debt relief should be extended and debt re-structured in already heavily indebted countries so that social spending is not crowded out by increasing debt service payments. We must avoid the mistakes of the past that saw urgently

needed credit flows made contingent on austerity measures that inflicted the most harm on children and families in greatest need.

The COVID-19 crisis has served as an important reminder of the need for international cooperation and partnership in overcoming global challenges. This is as true for ending child labour as for other critical development priorities in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Eliminating child labour is a task too big for any one party to solve alone. Countries must work together within the spirit of article 8 of the universally ratified ILO Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention (No. 182).

Alliance 8.7 plays an important role in facilitating cooperation on child labour among governmental and non-governmental actors. A global partnership launched in 2016, Alliance 8.7

groups governments, multilateral organizations, workers' organizations, employers' organizations, non-governmental organizations, academic institutions and think tanks to find ways of accelerating action on target 8.7. The alliance focuses on three strategies: conducting research and sharing knowledge, driving innovation, and increasing and leveraging resources.

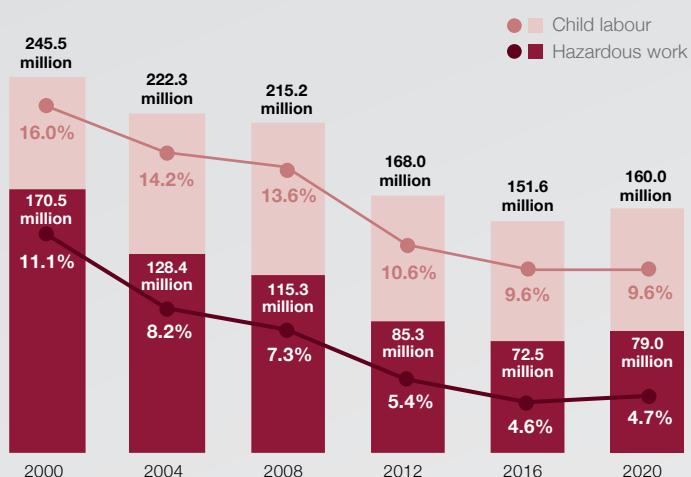
It is urgent to put action to end child labour back on track, in line with global commitments and goals. The evidence in this report outlines the risks and points to the solutions. While ambitious measures and investments are required, the COVID-19 pandemic has amply illustrated that these are possible when the well-being of humanity is at stake. We have made a promise to children to end child labour. There is no time to lose.

Child labour at a glance

Trends

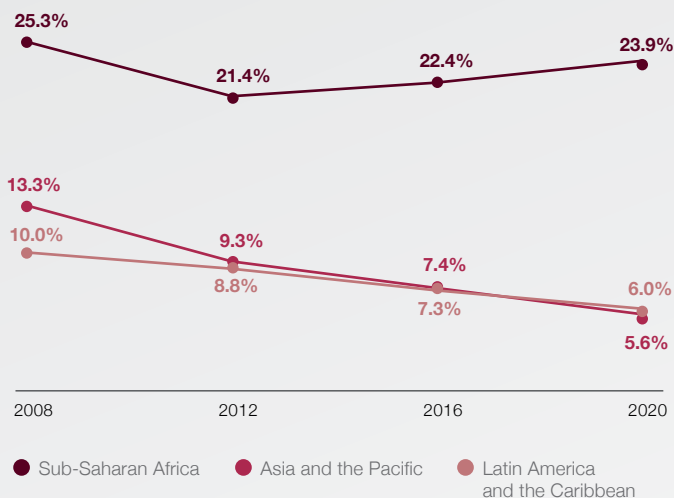
Global progress against child labour has stalled since 2016

Percentage and number of children aged 5 to 17 years in child labour and hazardous work



Asia and the Pacific and Latin America and the Caribbean have seen steady progress on child labour since 2008; similar progress has eluded sub-Saharan Africa

Percentage of children aged 5 to 17 years in child labour, by region

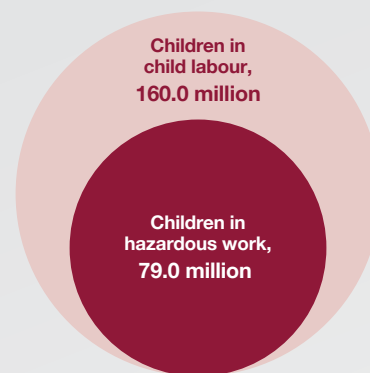


Notes: The figure shows regional groupings used for ILO reporting. Comparable historical data prior to 2016 were not available for other regions.

Current situation

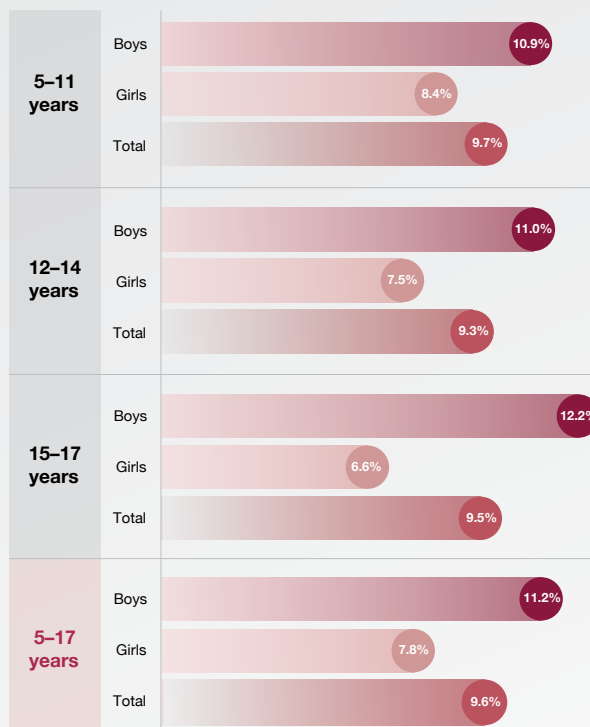
Worldwide, 160 million children are engaged in child labour; 79 million of them are performing hazardous work

Number of children aged 5 to 17 years in child labour and hazardous work



Child labour is more prevalent among boys than girls at every age

Percentage of children aged 5 to 17 years in child labour, by age and sex



We have made a promise to children to end child labour

Sub-Saharan Africa stands out as the region with the highest prevalence and largest number of children in child labour

Percentage and number of children aged 5 to 17 years in child labour, by region

Notes: The size of the bubbles is proportionate to the absolute number of children in child labour. The figure shows regional groupings used for SDG reporting. The region of Oceania is omitted because of low data coverage. For this reason, region-specific numbers do not add up to the global total.

Sub-Saharan Africa

23.9%
86.6 million

Central and Southern Asia

5.5%
26.3 million

Eastern and South-Eastern Asia

6.2%
24.3 million

Northern Africa and Western Asia

7.8%
10.1 million

Latin America and the Caribbean

6.0%
8.2 million

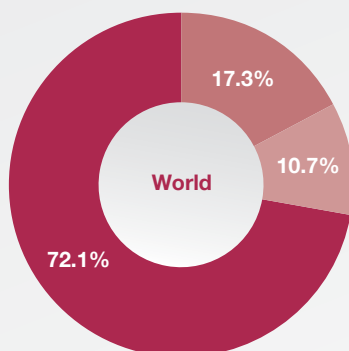
Europe and Northern America

2.3%
3.8 million

Most children in child labour work within their own family unit

Percentage distribution of children aged 5 to 17 years in child labour, by status at work

- Contributing family workers
- Employees
- Own-account workers

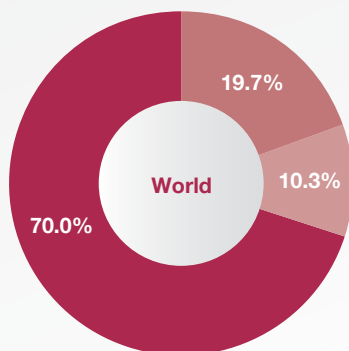


Note: Due to rounding, figures in percentages do not add up to 100 per cent.

The agricultural sector accounts for the largest share of child labour worldwide

Percentage distribution of children aged 5 to 17 years in child labour, by sector of economic activity

- Agriculture
- Services
- Industry



Impact of COVID-19

Without mitigation measures, the number of children in child labour could rise from 160 million in 2020 to 168.9 million by the end of 2022

Number of children aged 5 to 17 years in child labour, projected to the end of 2022

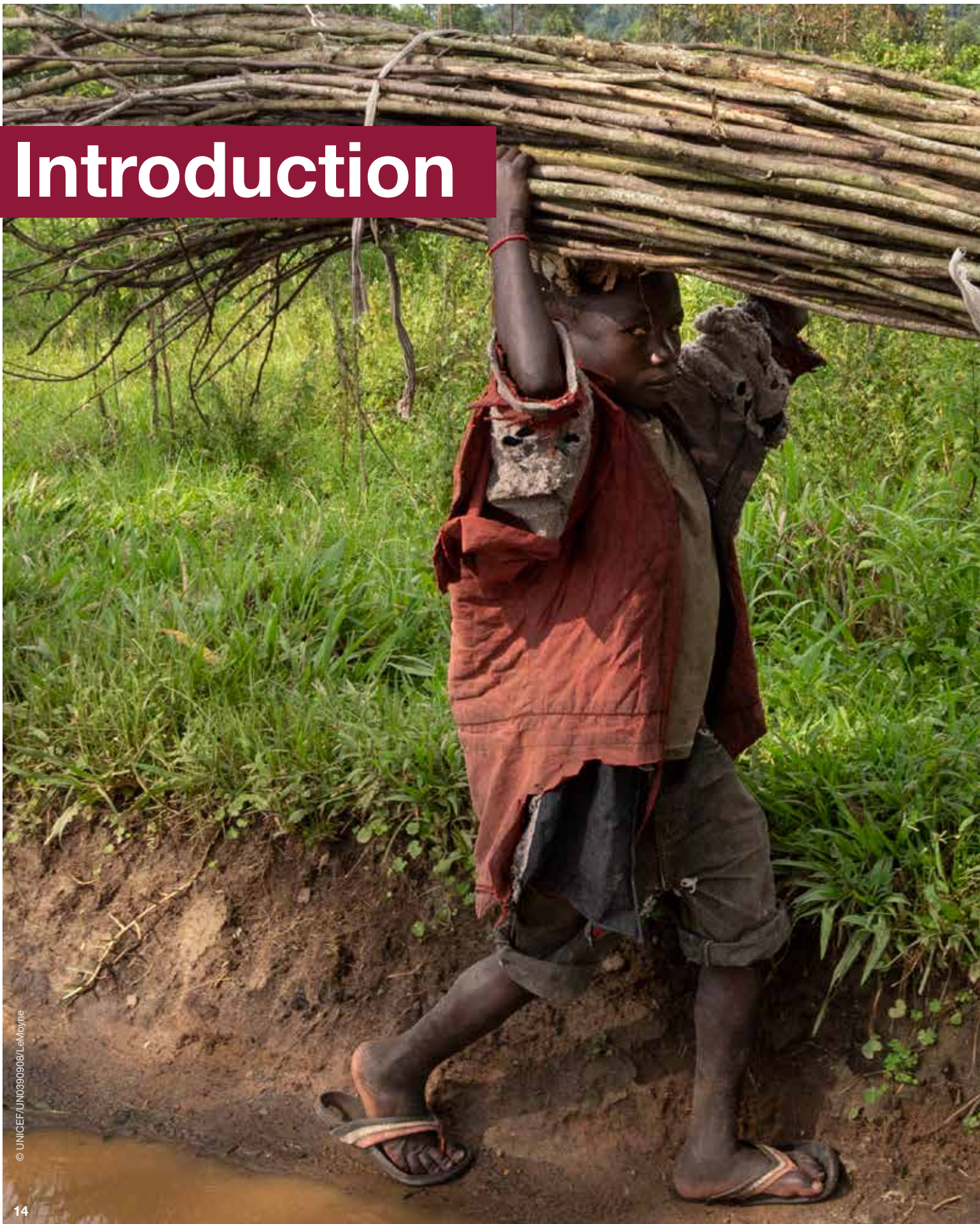


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There is no time to lose

Introduction





Every day, Archie wakes at 5 a.m., gets dressed, has breakfast and walks to work. There he squeezes himself into a narrow gap to dig blindly for gold in a deep underground pit, often underwater, breathing through a hose connected to a diesel-powered compressor. After 10 or 12 hours of labour, he returns home, has some dinner and goes to sleep. Archie is 11. Some of his young friends who work at the pit haul sacks of sand and gravel weighing more than they do, all day long.

Rafael, 12, sleeps in a shack in the woods. He does not have much to eat, mainly rice and black beans. He drinks from the water pit that he shares with the bulls on the farm where he has been working for five years, helping to pay off his father's debt.

Taisha, 16, cooks breakfast, cleans the house and cares for her grandmothers, which takes up most of her day. With her school closed during the COVID-19 pandemic, her chores have increased. She tries to watch educational programmes on television but does not have enough time to keep up. As the only member of her family ever to go to school, she gets very little support.

Around the world, 160 million children like Archie, Rafael and Taisha toil in child labour today. At an age when they should be nurtured and supported through education, adequate health and social protection, and enough play and leisure time, they have to work instead. The reasons vary: poverty, few options for education, little energy after work to study or no role models. The consequences, however, are sadly consistent. With tired bodies and weary minds, their chances to learn and thrive are diminished along with their prospects for a bright future.

This report presents numbers that tell the story of what children in child labour experience. It offers evidence crucial to making decisions to fulfil

obligations, both moral and legal, to end child labour. Issued during the United Nations International Year for the Elimination of Child Labour, the report takes stock of the global drive to end child labour and the impact of the COVID-19 crisis. What it reveals is alarming. Global progress against child labour has stalled for the first time since 2000. Further, without urgent mitigation measures, the current crisis will likely push millions more children into child labour.

These results are an important reality check in assessing prospects for ending child labour by 2025, in line with target 8.7 of the SDGs. If we do not muster the will and resources to act now on an unprecedented scale, the timeline for ending child labour will stretch many years into the future.

Jointly published for the first time by the ILO and UNICEF as co-custodians of target 8.7, the report details the scale and characteristics of child labour in the world today, and tracks its evolution over time. Like estimates produced every four years since 2000, the 2020 calculations are based on the extrapolation of data from national household surveys. The new estimates use data from more than 100 household surveys covering two thirds of the world's population of children aged 5 to 17.

The remainder of the report is structured as follows. The next section provides an overview of the 2020 global and regional estimates, and trends since 2000. The third section profiles child labour today, considering the age, sex and residence of children in child labour, the characteristics of the work they perform, and how child labour interferes with their education. The fourth section assesses the likely impact of the COVID-19 crisis on child labour through the end of 2022. The report concludes with a discussion of key policy priorities to return to a path of progress as we navigate the COVID-19 crisis and rebuild in its aftermath.

If we do not muster the will and resources to act now on an unprecedented scale, the timeline for ending child labour will stretch many years into the future.



CHILD LABOUR IN THE GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT AGENDA

SDG TARGET 8.7: Take immediate and effective measures to eradicate forced labour, end modern slavery and human trafficking and secure the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labour, including recruitment and use of child soldiers, and by 2025 end child labour in all its forms.

The international community has recognized the importance of ending child labour as part of achieving SDG 8 on decent work and economic growth. Under this goal, target 8.7 is to end child labour in all its forms by 2025. Ending child labour will also contribute to progress on many other SDGs, especially on education and health.





Statistical concepts and definitions

Three main international human and labour rights standards – the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the ILO Minimum Age for Admission to Employment Convention (No. 138) and the universally ratified ILO Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention (No. 182) – set legal boundaries for child labour and provide grounds for national and international actions to end it. In 2008, the 18th International Conference of Labour Statisticians approved a resolution on child labour statistics that translates these legal standards into statistical terms for measurement purposes.¹ The statistical concepts and definitions underpinning the 2020 estimates are consistent with this resolution.

Child labour comprises work that children are too young to perform and/or work that, by its nature or circumstances, is likely to harm children's health, safety or morals. In more technical terms, child labour encompasses work performed by children in any type of employment, with two important exceptions: permitted light work for children within the age range specified for light work; and work

that is not classified as among the worst forms of child labour, particularly as hazardous work, for children above the general minimum working age. A broader statistical definition includes hazardous unpaid household services, commonly referred to as hazardous household chores.

Employment encompasses any form of market production and certain types of non-market production (principally that of goods such as agricultural produce for own use). Employment includes work in both the formal and informal economy, inside and outside family settings, for pay or profit (cash or in-kind, part-time or full-time) and domestic work outside the child's own household for an employer (paid or unpaid).

The concept of **permitted light work** stems from article 7 of ILO Convention No. 138, which states that national laws or regulations may permit the employment or work of persons from 13 years of age (or 12 years in countries that have specified the general minimum working age as 14 years) in light work that is not likely to harm their health

or development. It should also not limit school attendance, participation in vocational orientation or training programmes, or the capacity to benefit from instruction. For statistical measurement, light work in this report includes employment and non-hazardous work for less than 14 hours a week performed by children aged 12 to 14.

The **worst forms of child labour** comprise categories set out in article 3 of ILO Convention No. 182. These entail all forms of slavery or practices similar to slavery, such as the sale and trafficking of children, debt bondage and serfdom, and forced or compulsory labour, including forced or compulsory recruitment of children for use in armed conflict; the use, procuring or offering of a child for prostitution, for the production of pornography or for pornographic performances; the use, procuring or offering of a child for illicit activities, in particular for the production and trafficking of drugs as defined in the relevant international treaties; and work that, by its nature or circumstances, is likely to harm the health, safety or morals of children.

Hazardous work refers to work that, by its nature or circumstances, is likely to harm children's health, safety or morals. When a country ratifies ILO Convention No. 138 and ILO Convention No. 182, they commit to determining their own hazardous work list. While the list is decided by individual countries after consultation with organizations of employers and workers, the ILO Worst Forms of Child Labour Recommendation, 1999 (No. 190), supplementing ILO Convention No. 182, urges consideration of work that exposes children to physical, emotional or sexual abuse; work underground, underwater, at dangerous heights or in confined spaces with dangerous machinery, equipment and tools, or that involves the manual handling or transport of heavy loads; work in an unhealthy environment that may, for example, expose children to hazardous substances, agents or processes or to temperatures, noise levels or

vibrations damaging to their health; and work under particularly difficult conditions, such as for long hours or during the night, or that does not allow returning home each day. For statistical measurement, in this report, hazardous work includes that in designated hazardous industries and/or hazardous occupations and/or that entails 43 hours or more per week.

Hazardous work by children is often treated as a proxy category for the worst forms of child labour for two reasons. First, reliable national data on the worst forms of child labour other than hazardous work, such as children in bonded and forced labour or in commercial sexual exploitation, are still difficult to find. Second, children in hazardous work account for the overwhelming majority of those in the worst forms of child labour.

Unpaid household services, or household chores, refer to services children provide without pay for their own households. These include caring for household members, cleaning and minor household repairs, cooking and serving meals, washing and ironing clothes and transporting or accompanying family members to and from work and school. In more technical terms, these tasks constitute a 'non-economic' form of production and are excluded from consideration in the United Nations System of National Accounts, the internationally agreed guidelines for measuring national economic activity.

Hazardous unpaid household services involve long hours, an unhealthy environment, unsafe equipment or heavy loads and/or dangerous locations. For statistical measurement, where household chores are included in the calculation of child labour in this report, hazardous household chores refer to those performed by children below the general minimum working age for 21 hours or more per week.² This broader definition is only used in discussing differences in child labour by sex.

Current levels and trends





GLOBAL AND REGIONAL OVERVIEW

Child labour remains unacceptably common in the world today. At the start of 2020, prior to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, 160 million children – 63 million girls and 97 million boys – were in child labour, or 1 in 10 children worldwide. Seventy-nine million children – nearly half of all those in child labour – were in hazardous work directly endangering their health, safety and moral development.

This global estimate masks large variations across regions. Child labour prevalence stands at 24 per cent in sub-Saharan Africa, three times that of Northern Africa and Western Asia, the region with the second highest prevalence. In absolute terms, the nearly 87 million children in child labour in sub-Saharan Africa are more than in the rest of the world combined.

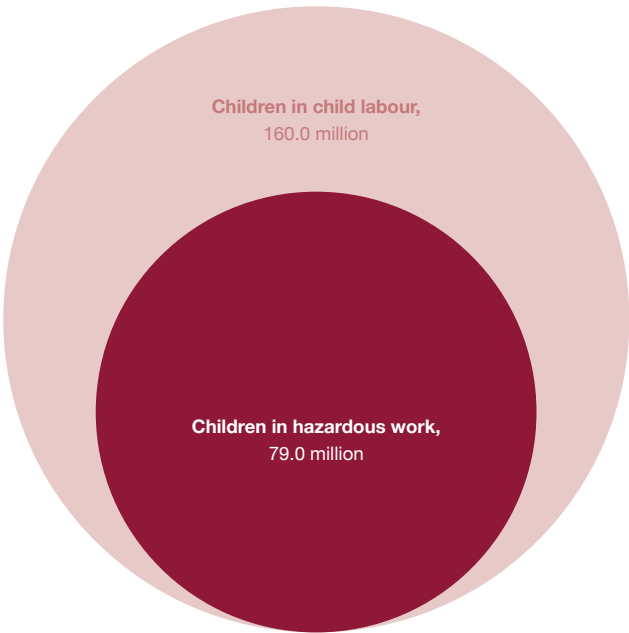
Recent history provides cause for concern. In the last four years, for the first time since 2000, the world did not make progress in reducing child labour. The absolute number of children in child labour increased by over 8 million to 160 million while the proportion of children in child labour remained unchanged. Children in hazardous work mirrored these patterns: The share remained almost unchanged but the number rose by 6.5 million to 79 million.

The pace of progress has varied dramatically across regions. The proportion and number of children in child labour have declined consistently since 2008³ in Asia and the Pacific and Latin America and the Caribbean. Similar progress has proved elusive in sub-Saharan Africa, where child labour has actually gone up since 2012, a trend especially pronounced over the last four years when the region accounted for much of the global increase.

At present, the world is not on track to eliminate child labour by 2025. In order to meet this target, global progress would need to be almost 18 times faster than the rate observed over the past two decades. According to pre-COVID-19 projections based on the pace of change from 2008 to 2016, close to 140 million children will be in child labour in 2025 without accelerated action. The COVID-19 crisis is making these scenarios even more worrisome, with many more children at risk of being pushed into child labour.

Worldwide, 160 million children are engaged in child labour; 79 million of them are performing hazardous work

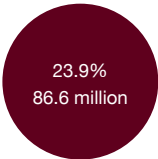
Fig 1. Number of children aged 5 to 17 years in child labour and hazardous work



Sub-Saharan Africa stands out as the region with the highest prevalence and largest number of children in child labour

Fig 2. Percentage and number of children aged 5 to 17 years in child labour, by region

Sub-Saharan Africa



Central and Southern Asia



5.5%
26.3 million

Eastern and South-Eastern Asia



6.2%
24.3 million

Northern Africa and Western Asia



7.8%
10.1 million

Latin America and the Caribbean



6.0%
8.2 million

Europe and Northern America

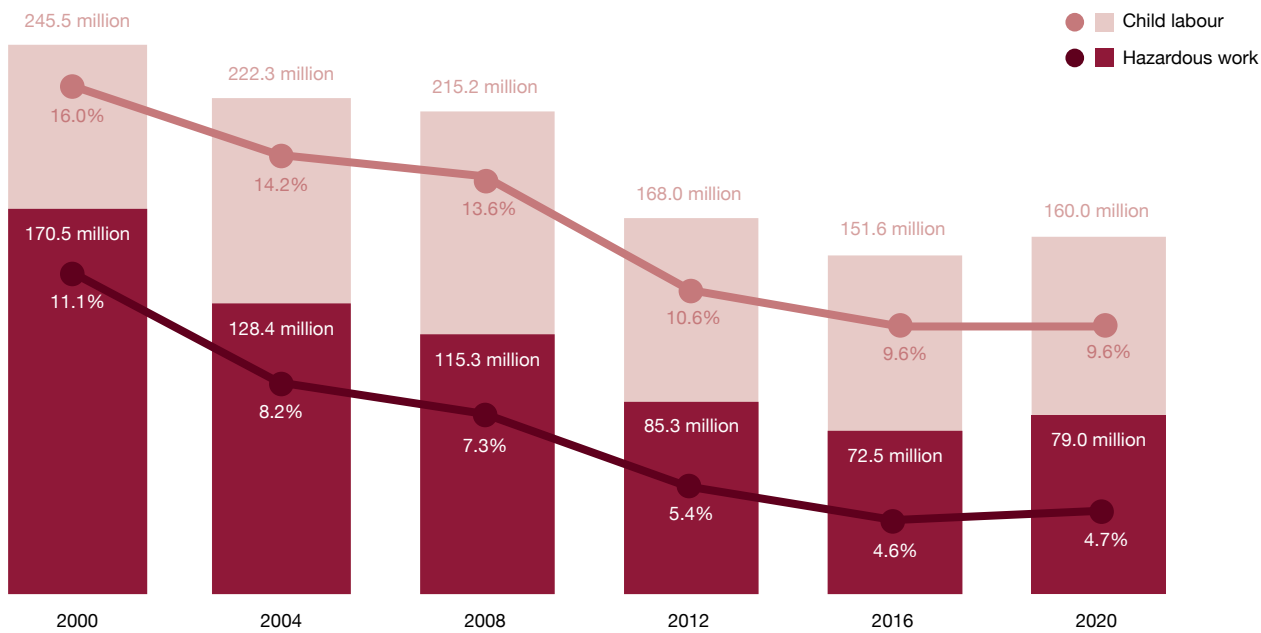


2.3%
3.8 million

Notes: The size of the bubbles is proportionate to the absolute number of children in child labour. The figure shows regional groupings used for SDG reporting. The region of Oceania is omitted because of low data coverage. For this reason, region-specific numbers do not add up to the global total.

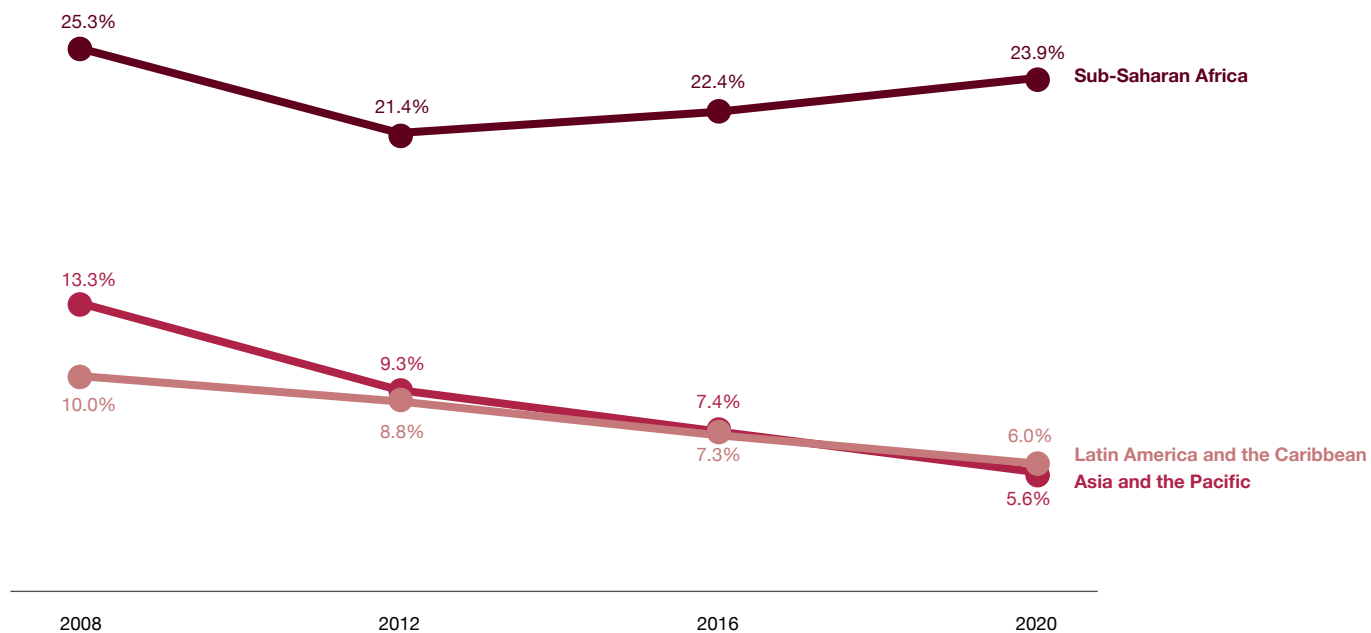
Global progress against child labour has stalled since 2016

Fig 3. Percentage and number of children aged 5 to 17 years in child labour and hazardous work



Asia and the Pacific and Latin America and the Caribbean have seen steady progress on child labour since 2008; similar progress has eluded sub-Saharan Africa

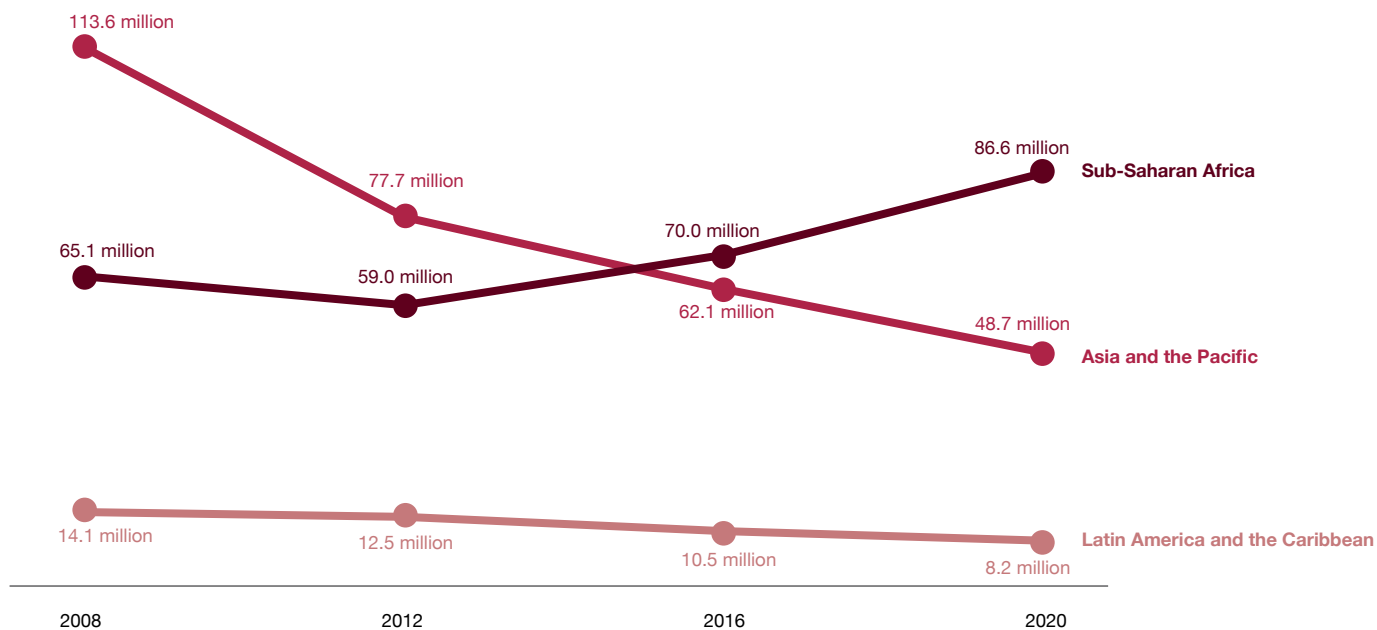
Fig 4. Percentage of children aged 5 to 17 years in child labour, by region



Notes: The figure shows regional groupings used for ILO reporting. Comparable historical data prior to 2016 were not available for other regions.

The number of children in child labour has increased in sub-Saharan Africa, while it has declined in other parts of the world

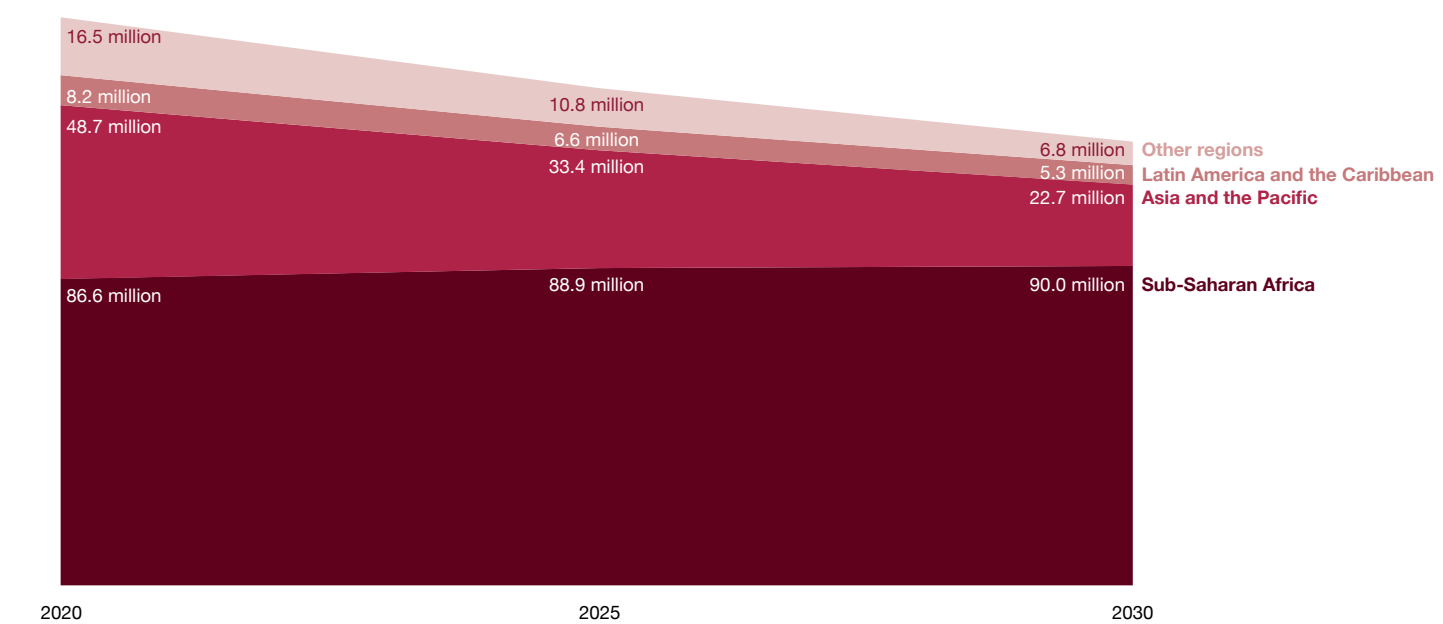
Fig 5. Number of children aged 5 to 17 years in child labour, by region



Notes: The figure shows regional groupings used for ILO reporting. Comparable historical data prior to 2016 were not available for other regions.

Without accelerated action, close to 140 million children will be in child labour in 2025 and 125 million in 2030

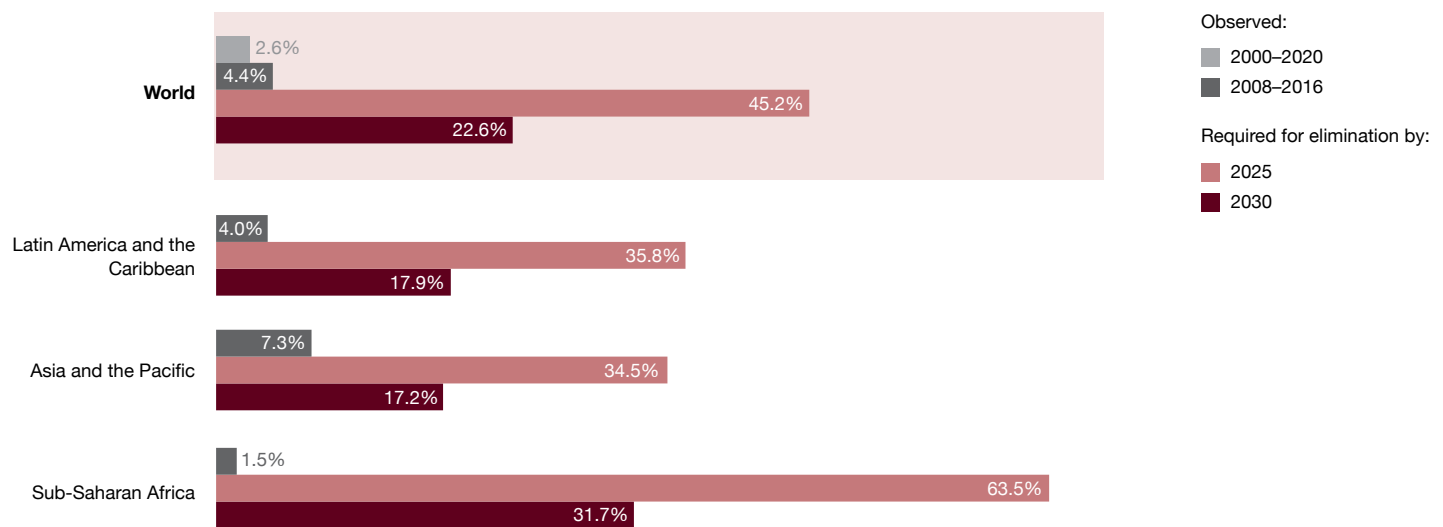
Fig 6. Projected number of children aged 5 to 17 years in child labour if progress from the 2008–2016 period continues



Notes: The projections build on trends in the percentage of children aged 5 to 17 years in child labour between 2008 and 2016, which is the period with the fastest reduction in child labour over the last two decades. They take into consideration demographic trends and show expected values if this progress were to continue. These estimates do not take into account the possible impact of COVID-19. The figure shows regional groupings used for ILO reporting. Required rates could not be calculated for other regions due to the lack of historical data.

Meeting the SDG target to eliminate child labour will require substantial acceleration

Fig 7. Average annual rate of reduction in the percentage of children aged 5 to 17 years in child labour, observed and required for elimination



Notes: The observed average annual rates of reduction quantify the rate of progress in the prevalence of child labour over each period. A higher rate indicates faster progress. Required rates are calculated to illustrate rates necessary to end child labour by 2025 and 2030. These estimates do not take into account the possible impact of COVID-19. This figure shows regional groupings used for ILO reporting. Required rates could not be calculated for other regions due to the lack of historical data.



Explaining regional trends

What drives progress in reducing child labour? Some insights come from looking at how regional child labour patterns correlate with broader demographic, economic and development trends.

Poverty reduction. Sub-Saharan Africa has succeeded in reducing poverty in recent years but levels remain high relative to other regions. More than 40 per cent of the population in sub-Saharan Africa still lives in extreme poverty.⁴ The region saw steady economic growth of over

2 per cent annually for all but one of the last five years, but given rapid population growth, the gross domestic product (GDP) per capita actually declined and continues to be low relative to other regions of the world.⁵ Rates of inequality remain at persistently high levels in many sub-Saharan African countries.⁶

Levels of informality. Regions making faster progress in reducing child labour have had greater success in reducing informal economic

activity although levels remain high. Many African countries are improving the conditions of informal workers⁷ but the region still lags behind in transitioning to formality. Eighty-six per cent of African jobs are in the informal economy, more than any other region.⁸ Some of the worst labour practices are clustered in the informal economy, which is mostly unregulated. Informality is associated with lower and less regular incomes, inadequate and unsafe working conditions, extreme job precarity and exclusion from social security schemes, among other factors. All of these can spur families to turn to child labour in the face of financial distress.

Social protection. Despite progress in extending social protection, coverage still falls short in all regions in terms of universality and the adequacy of benefits. A number of African countries have made notable efforts,⁹ with spending on social safety nets as a share of income equal to the world average.¹⁰ The region as a whole, however, still has much lower coverage than other regions. Only 17 per cent of the population in Africa is covered by at least one social protection benefit, compared to 66 per cent in the Americas, 43 per cent in Asia and the Pacific and 83 per cent in Europe and Central Asia.¹¹ Social protection in many cases determines whether or not families resort to child labour.

Education exclusion. There has been a significant net decline in children out of primary school in recent years in all regions. Yet the gap in education exclusion rates between sub-Saharan Africa and other regions remains large.¹² Although public spending on education in sub-Saharan Africa as a share of GDP has trended upwards in recent years, it remains well below the world average.¹³

Population growth. Population growth patterns influence child labour trends with stark differences

among regions. In Latin America and the Caribbean, a drop in the number of children in child labour by 6 million from 2008 to 2020 occurred as the population aged 5 to 17 fell by 4.8 million. Asia and the Pacific over the same period saw the number of children in child labour decline by 64.9 million as the population aged 5 to 17 increased by 12.8 million. In sub-Saharan Africa, by contrast, the child labour population grew by 21.5 million from 2008 to 2020, while the total population aged 5 to 17 rose by 104.8 million.¹⁴ Considering population growth casts child labour in sub-Saharan Africa in a very different light. The region has kept millions of children out of child labour over the last 12 years even if it has not managed to keep pace with population growth.

Other challenges. Multiple points of crisis contribute to high levels of child labour in sub-Saharan Africa. The region has the majority of fragile and conflict-affected countries; at least one quarter of all countries were fragile or in conflict in every year from 2015 to 2020.¹⁵ Further, the region is home to 39 per cent of the world's refugees, asylum seekers, returnees, stateless persons and internally displaced persons, a higher share than any other region.¹⁶ The Arab States region is also particularly affected by crises linked to conflict and state fragility.

The global HIV/AIDS pandemic also continues to exact a disproportionate toll on sub-Saharan Africa, which has the largest number of people living with HIV and accounts for 59 per cent of new infections.¹⁷ In addition, the region's limited resilience to climate change puts livelihoods at risk and undercuts prospects for moving out of poverty. Climate-related natural disasters, including floods and droughts that cause large-scale crop and livestock losses, occur with increasing regularity.



PROFILE OF CHILDREN IN CHILD LABOUR

Child labour across ages

The results of the global estimates make clear that child labour remains an important concern across the spectrum of children aged 5 to 17. Of the 160 million children in child labour, 89.3 million are young children aged 5 to 11, 35.6 million are children aged 12 to 14, and 35 million are children aged 15 to 17.

Child labour among children aged 12 to 14 and 15 to 17 continued to fall in both absolute and percentage terms over the last four years. By contrast, the 2016-2020 period saw a worrying rise in child labour among young children aged 5 to 11. In 2016, there were signs of slowing progress among young children. Today the trend line is moving in the wrong direction. The reason for backtracking is not clear and needs to be investigated as a priority.

Hazardous work accounted for about two fifths of the total number of additional children aged 5 to 11 in child labour during the four-year period. While children of all ages must be protected from hazardous work, its persistence and now growth among younger children is a particular concern.

Boys and girls in child labour

Involvement in child labour is more common for boys than girls at all ages. For children aged 5 to 17, child labour prevalence is nearly one third higher for

boys. The gender gap grows with age, and boys are roughly twice as likely as girls to be in child labour in the 15 to 17 age range.

Comparisons of child labour estimates for boys and girls must be accompanied by an important caveat. The definition of child labour upon which the estimates are based does not include involvement in household chores in children's own homes, an area of work for which girls shoulder a disproportionate burden of the responsibility in most societies.

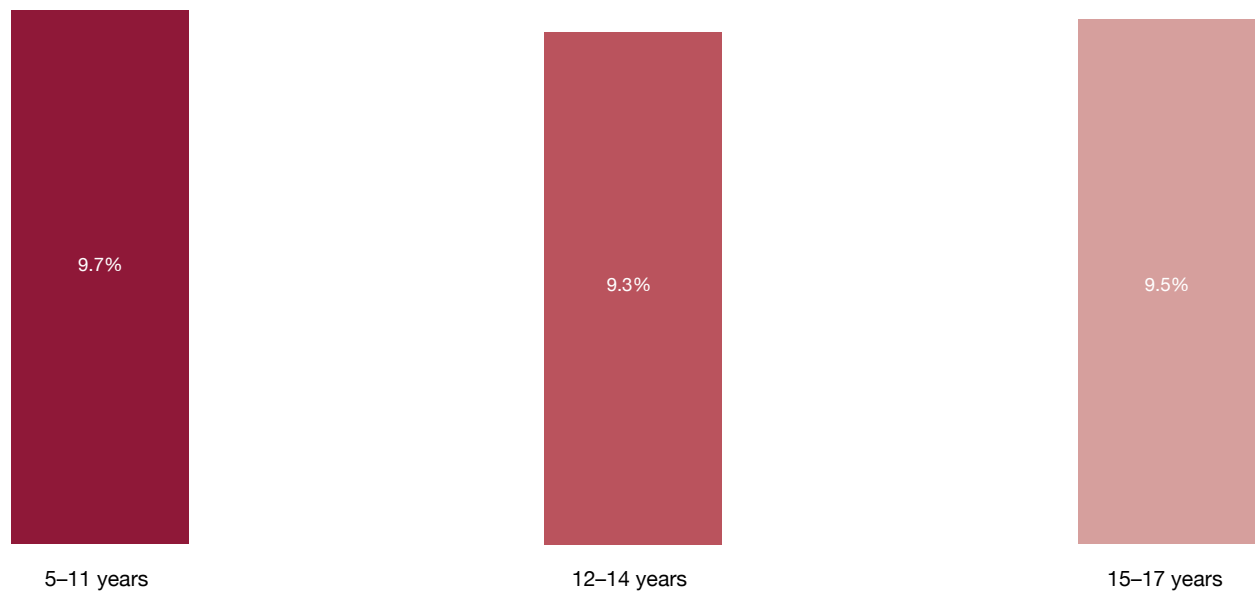
The 2020 global estimates look for the first time at how the inclusion of household chores affects overall child labour estimates as well as estimates of male child labour relative to female child labour. The results are noteworthy. When the definition of child labour is expanded to include involvement in household chores for 21 hours or more per week, child labour prevalence increases for both sexes, but the rise in female child labour is much larger. As a result, the gender gap in child labour prevalence is reduced by almost half, from 2.8 percentage points to 1.6 percentage points.

Child labour in rural and urban settings

Estimates of child labour by rural or urban residence, available for the first time in the 2020 global estimates, indicate that child labour is much more common in rural areas. The prevalence of child labour there is about three times higher than in urban areas. Child labour in rural economies primarily takes place in agriculture.

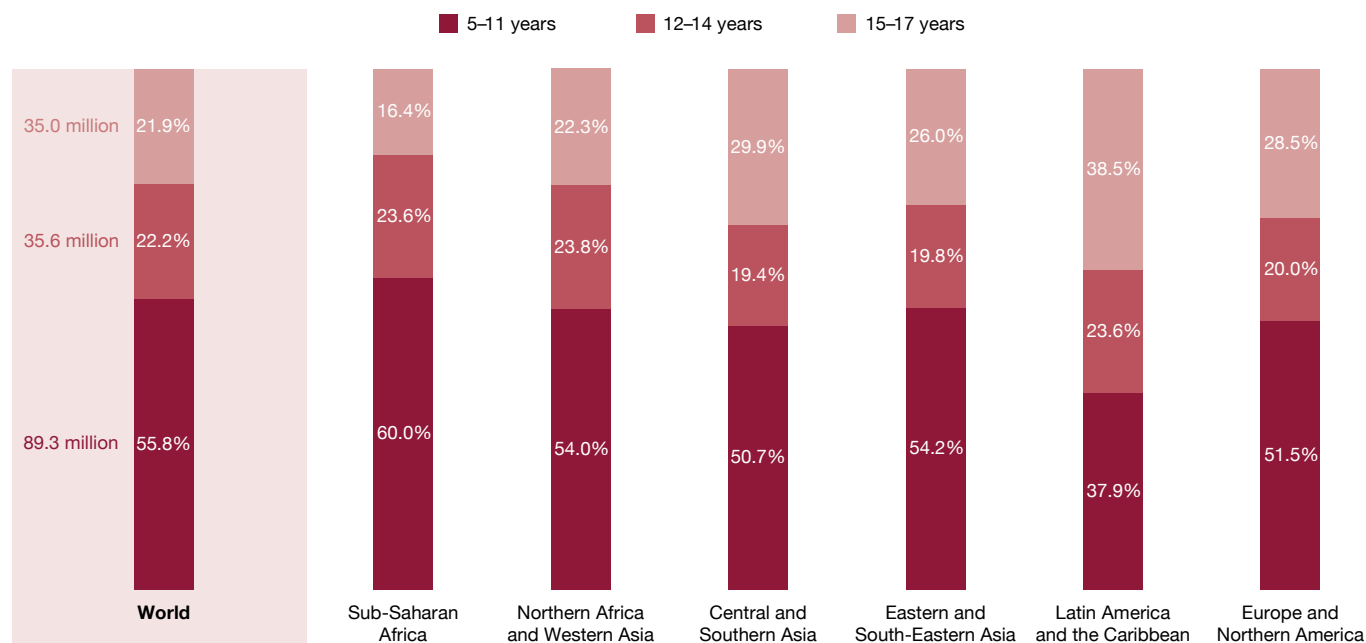
The proportion of children in child labour is similar across age groups

Fig 8. Percentage of children aged 5 to 17 years in child labour, by age



Sub-Saharan Africa has the highest share of young children in child labour, while Latin America and the Caribbean has the largest share of older children

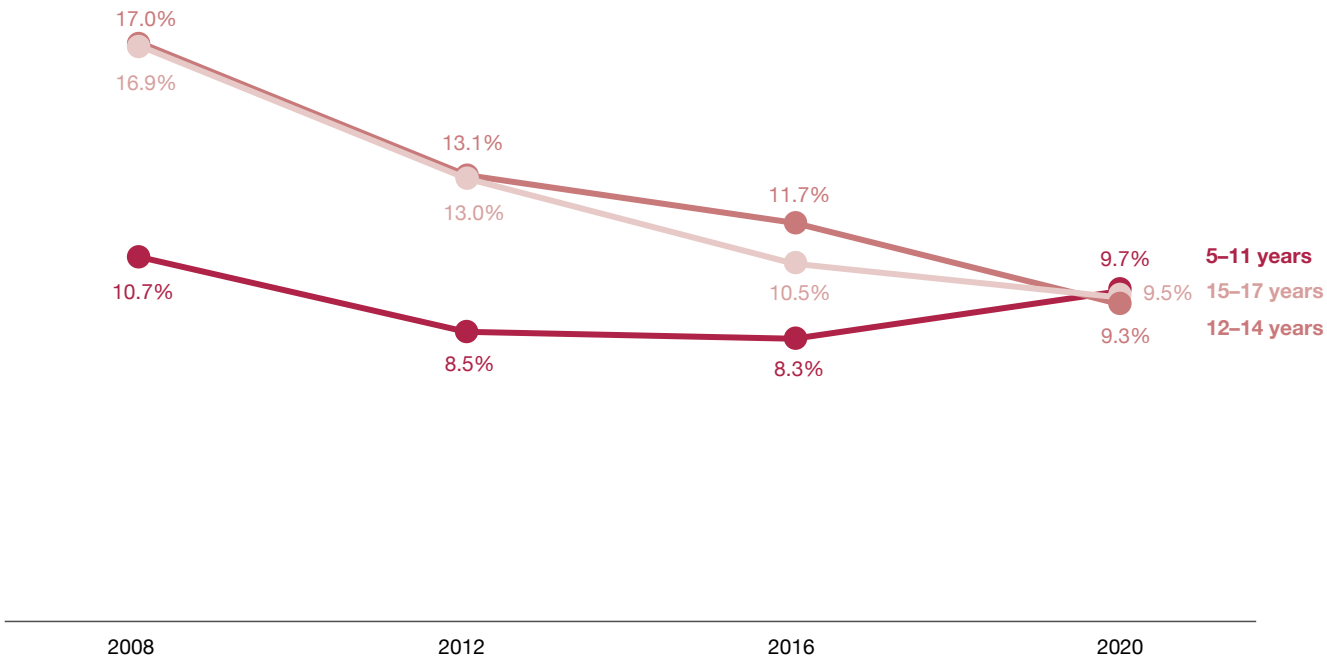
Fig 9. Percentage distribution of children aged 5 to 17 years in child labour, by age and region



Notes: Due to rounding, figures in percentages do not add up to 100 per cent and age-specific numbers do not add up to the global total. The figure shows regional groupings used for SDG reporting. The region of Oceania is omitted because of low data coverage. Caution is warranted when interpreting data for Europe and Northern America due to the small number of children in child labour.

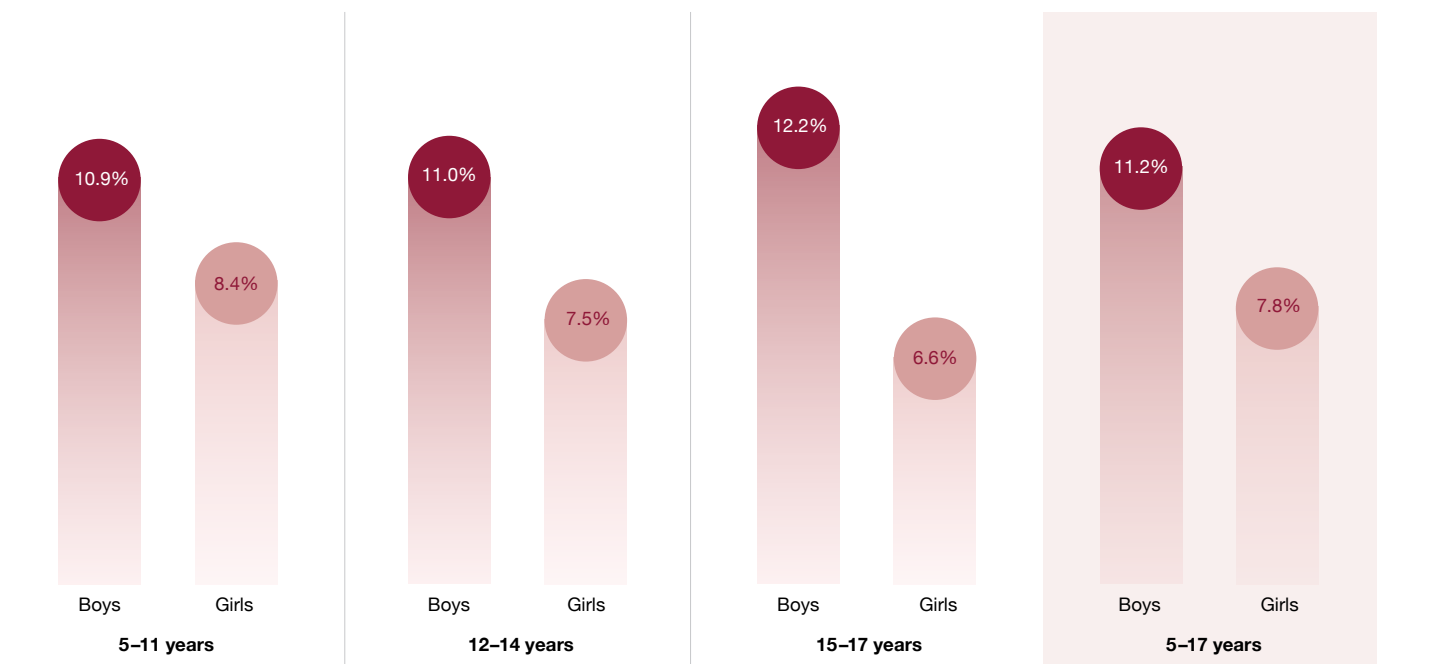
Since 2008, child labour has declined steadily among children aged 12 and older; the last four years saw a worrying increase among younger children

Fig 10. Percentage of children aged 5 to 17 years in child labour, by age



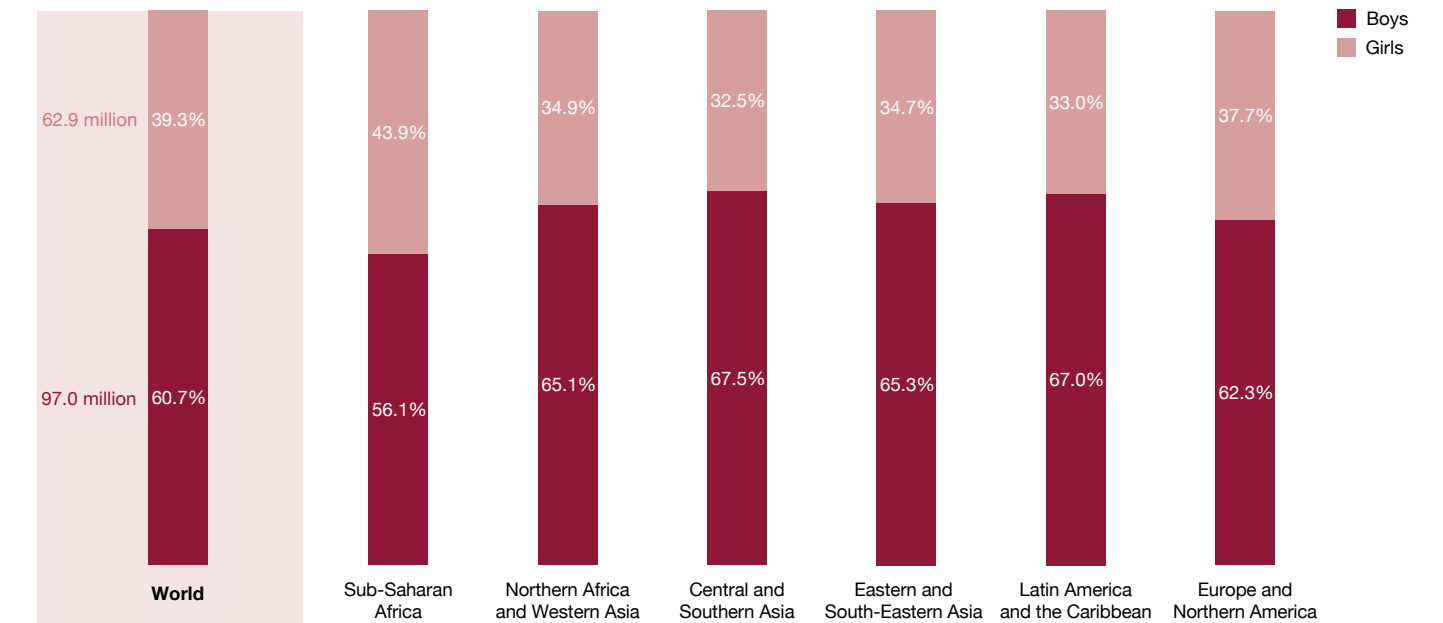
Child labour is more prevalent among boys than girls at every age

Fig 11. Percentage of children aged 5 to 17 years in child labour, by age and sex



Boys account for the largest share of children in child labour across all regions

Fig 12. Percentage distribution of children aged 5 to 17 in child labour, by sex and region

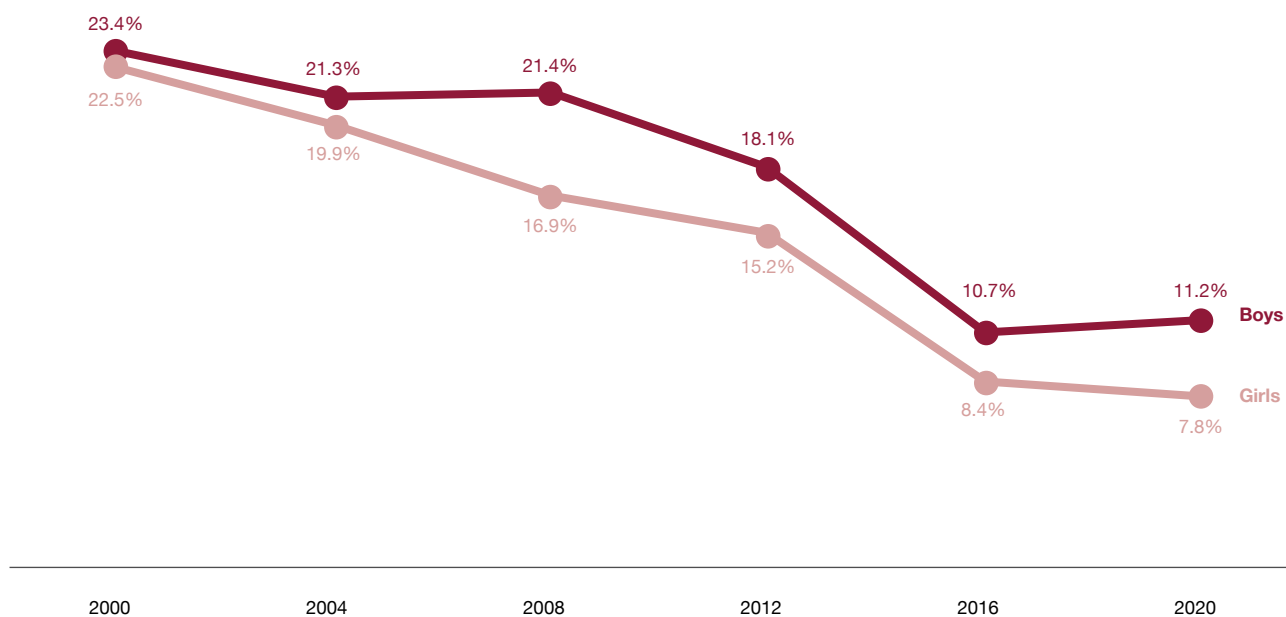


Notes: Due to rounding, sex-specific numbers do not add up to the global total. The figure shows regional groupings used for SDG reporting. The region of Oceania is omitted because of low data coverage. Caution is warranted when interpreting data for Europe and Northern America due to the small number of children in child labour.



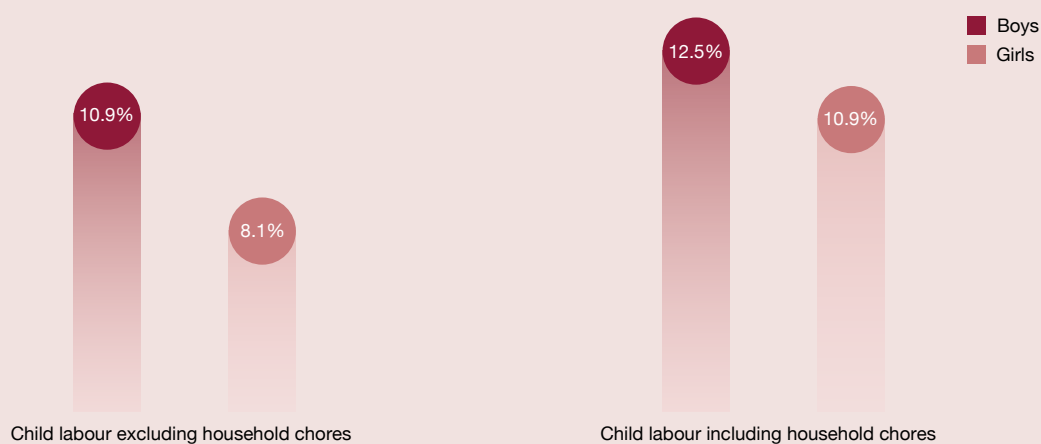
Child labour has declined faster among girls than boys

Fig 13. Percentage of boys and girls aged 5 to 17 years in child labour, by sex



When household chores are taken into account, the gender gap in child labour prevalence narrows

Fig 14. Percentage of children aged 5 to 14 years in child labour (including and excluding household chores performed for 21 hours or more per week), by sex

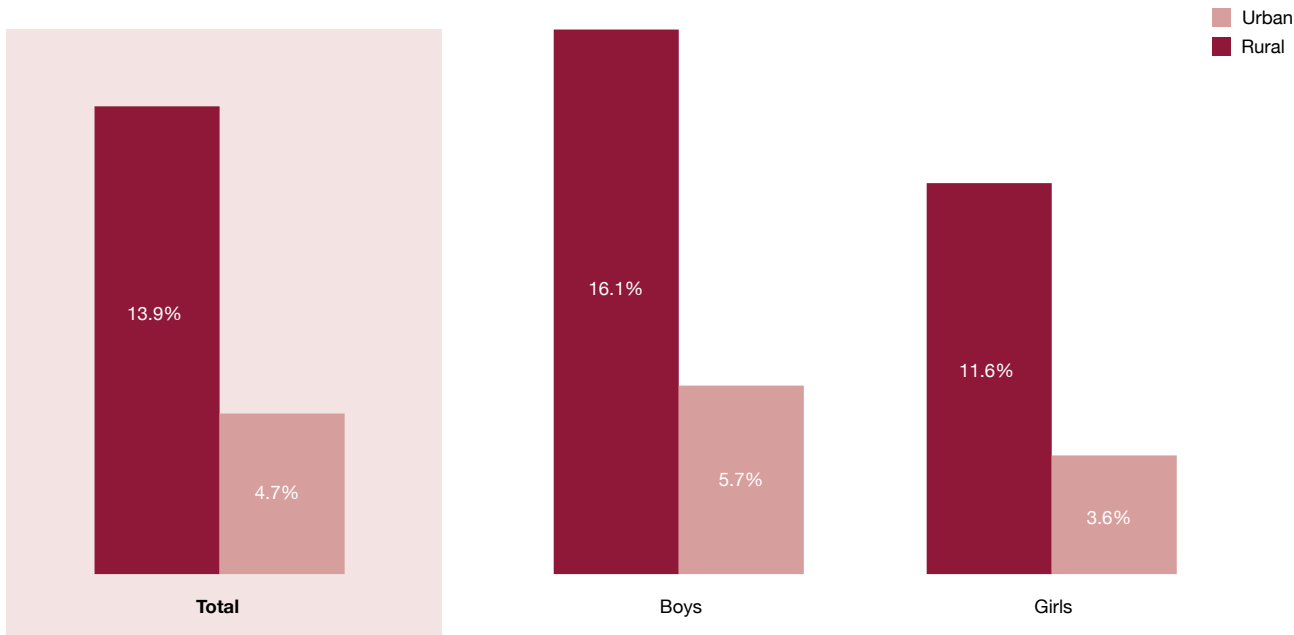


Notes: Household chores refer to services children provide without pay for their own households. These include caring for household members, cleaning and minor household repairs, cooking and serving meals, washing and ironing clothes, and transporting or accompanying family members to and from work and school. For statistical measurement, where household chores are included in the calculation of child labour, hazardous household chores refer to those performed by children below the general minimum working age for 21 hours or more per week.



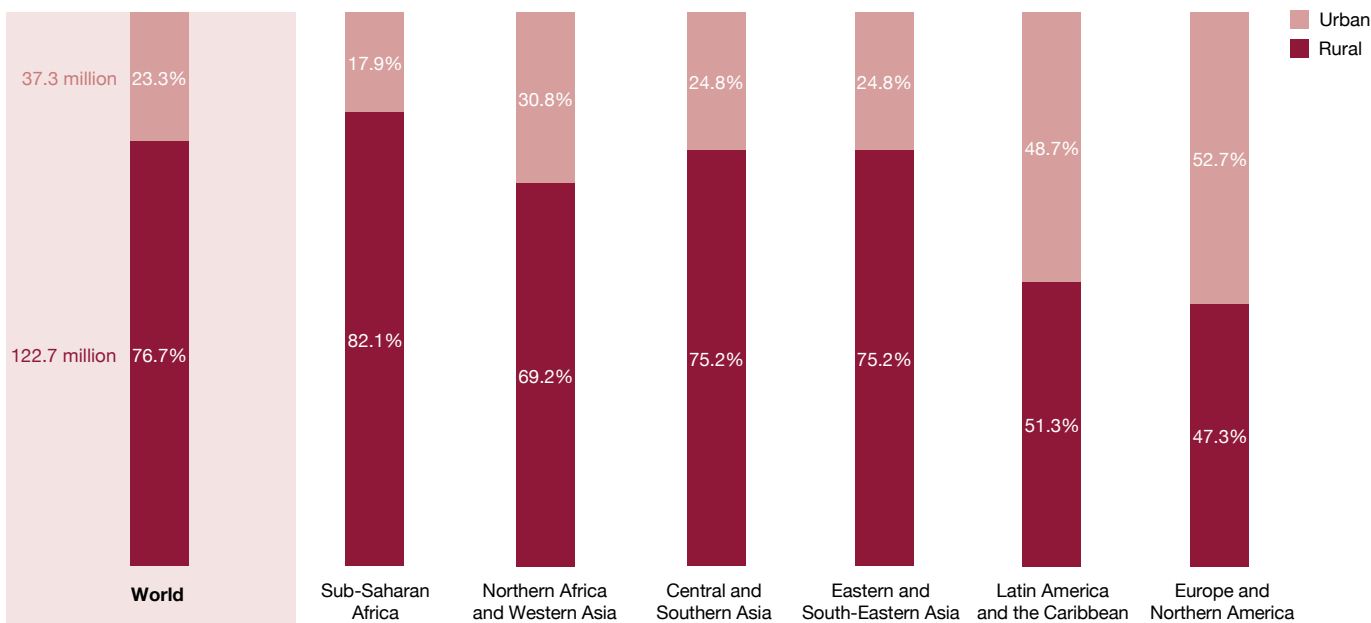
The prevalence of child labour in rural areas is close to three times higher than in urban areas

Fig 15. Percentage of children aged 5 to 17 years in child labour, by residence and sex



Child labour is more common in rural than in urban areas in almost all regions

Fig 16. Percentage distribution of children aged 5 to 17 years in child labour, by residence and region



Notes: The figure shows regional groupings used for SDG reporting. The region of Oceania is omitted because of low data coverage. Caution is warranted when interpreting data for Europe and Northern America due to the small number of children in child labour.



CHARACTERISTICS OF CHILD LABOUR

Most child labour – for boys and girls alike – occurs in agriculture. This is especially the case among younger children, for whom agriculture often serves as an entry point. Child labour takes place in family subsistence and smallholder farming, commercial plantations and other forms of commercial farming, agro-industrial complexes, capture fisheries, aquaculture, post-harvest fish processing and forestry.

Services and industry account for smaller but still substantial shares of children in child labour. In services, child labour includes domestic work and work in commerce, transport and motor vehicle repair. Child labour in industry comprises work in construction, mining and manufacturing. While agriculture has roughly equal shares of boys and girls in child labour, a greater degree of gender specialization occurs in services and industry. Girls in child labour are much more likely to be in services, including domestic work, and boys are more prone to be in industry.

The sectoral composition of child labour differs considerably across regions, although agriculture accounts for the largest share everywhere. In sub-Saharan Africa, agriculture plays the most important role, accounting for over four of every five children in child labour. Shares in services and industry are higher in other regions, but only two, Latin America and the Caribbean and Europe and Northern America, have combined shares of these two sectors exceeding that of agriculture. Not coincidentally, these two regions have the highest shares of children aged 15 to 17 in the overall child labour population.

Child labour is frequently hazardous wherever it takes place, with many variations. In family smallholder and commercial farming, common hazards include

exposure to inorganic fertilizers, pesticides and other dangerous agrochemicals; physically strenuous tasks such as carrying heavy loads; long periods of standing, stooping and bending, and repetitive and forceful movements in awkward body positions; exposure to extreme temperatures; use of dangerous cutting tools such as machetes and scythes; and use of and exposure to farm vehicles and heavy farm machinery.¹⁸ In capture fisheries, children can face prolonged periods at sea, away from their families, in situations of extreme vulnerability stemming from their isolation on the fishing vessel, the tasks they must perform, and the dangers of inclement weather and extreme temperatures, among others.¹⁹

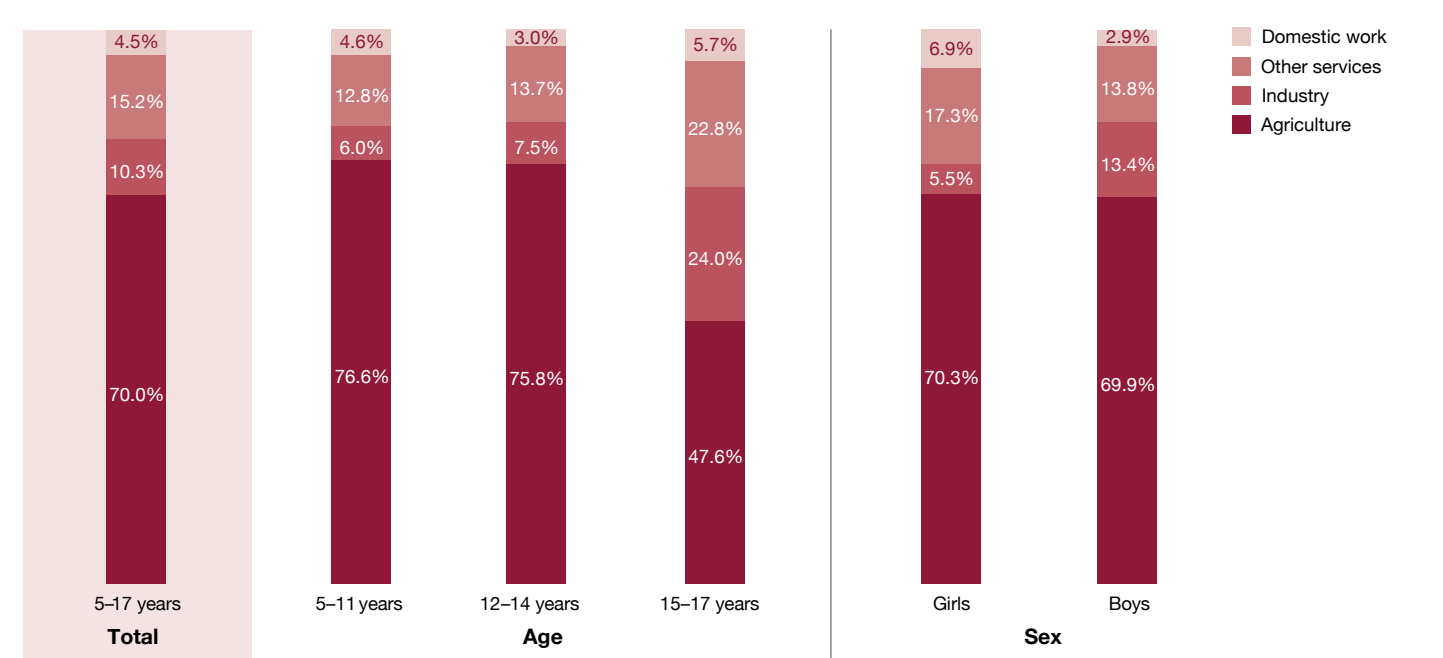
Artisanal and small-scale mining can force children to work in deep underground shafts, haul heavy loads of rock and use toxic chemicals to separate minerals or precious metals from ore.²⁰ The isolated nature of domestic work renders children particularly vulnerable to physical, verbal and sexual abuse. Street vending hazards can include night work, exposure to traffic and motor vehicle exhaust fumes and, in extreme cases, the risk of being drawn into illicit activities.

These are just a few examples of countless hazards that children in child labour may confront, all of which must be urgently addressed in line with the universally ratified ILO Convention No. 182.

The largest share of child labour takes place within the family, where hazardous work accounts for a substantial portion, counter to the common perception of the family as a safer working environment. In sub-Saharan Africa, 82 per cent of all child labour occurs within the family. The relative importance of family work has grown in the last four years, reflecting the growth in the shares of young children and African children in the overall child population. Both groups are especially likely to engage in family work.

The agricultural sector accounts for the largest share of child labour worldwide

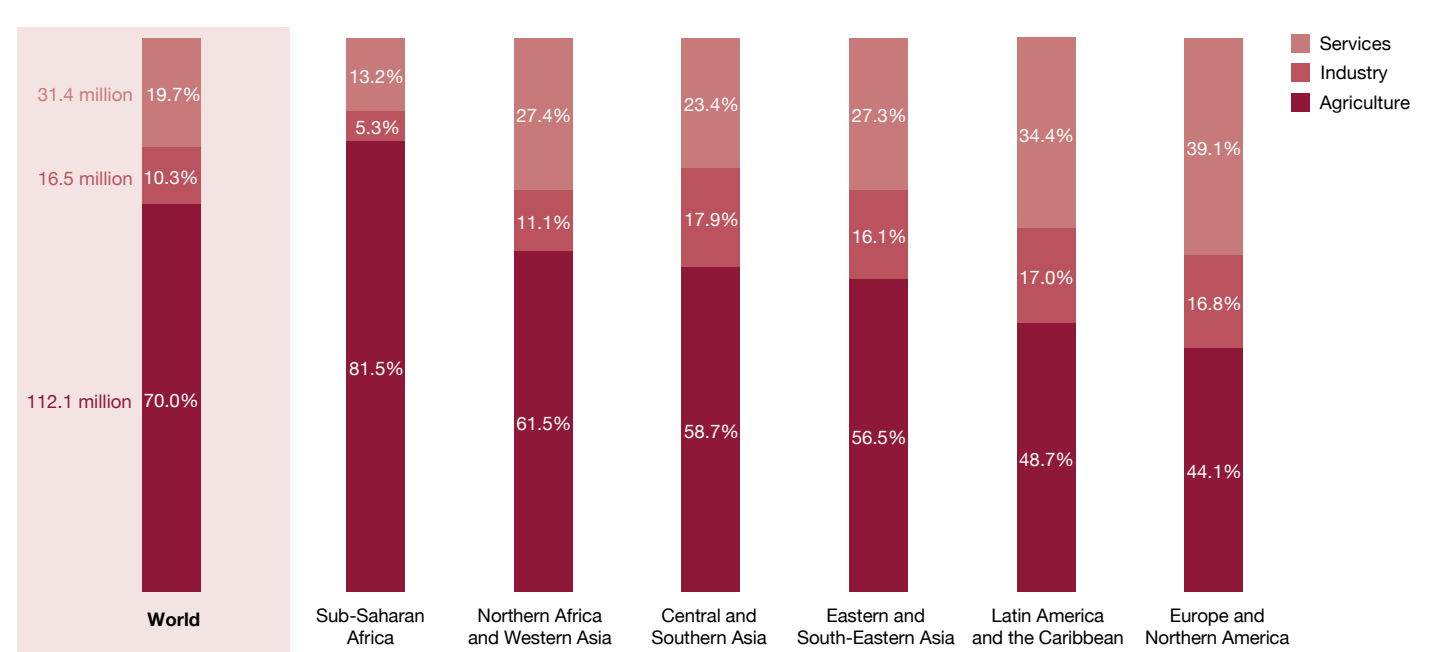
Fig 17. Percentage distribution of children aged 5 to 17 years in child labour, by sector of economic activity, age and sex



Note: Due to rounding, figures in percentages do not add up to 100 per cent.

The sectoral composition of child labour varies considerably across regions

Fig 18. Percentage distribution of children aged 5 to 17 years in child labour, by sector of economic activity and region



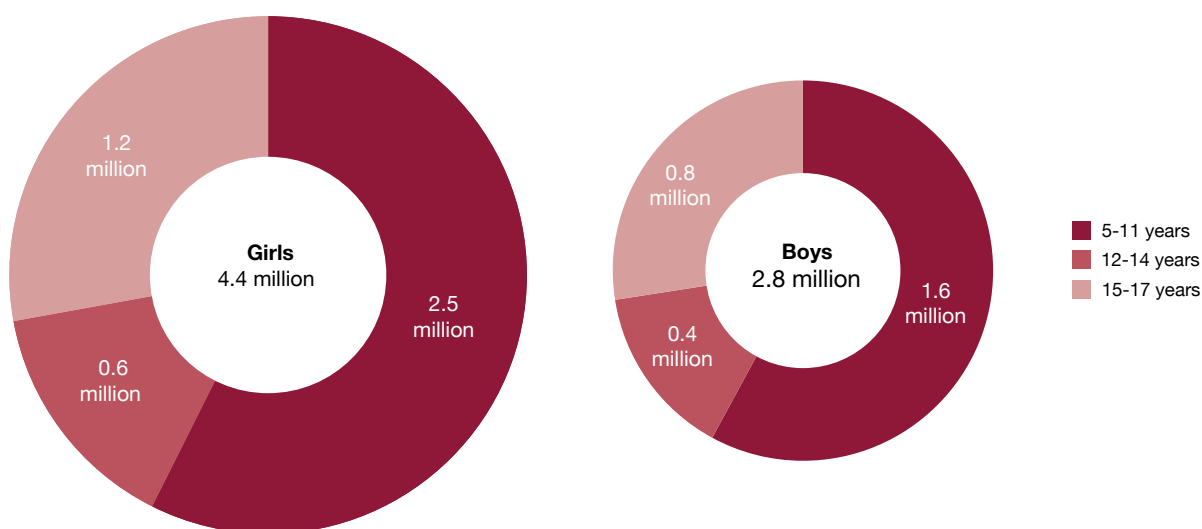
Notes: Due to rounding, figures in percentages do not add up to 100 per cent. The figure shows regional groupings used for SDG reporting. The region of Oceania is omitted because of low data coverage. Caution is warranted when interpreting data for Europe and Northern America due to the small number of children in child labour.





Worldwide, 7.1 million children are engaged in forms of domestic work that constitute child labour

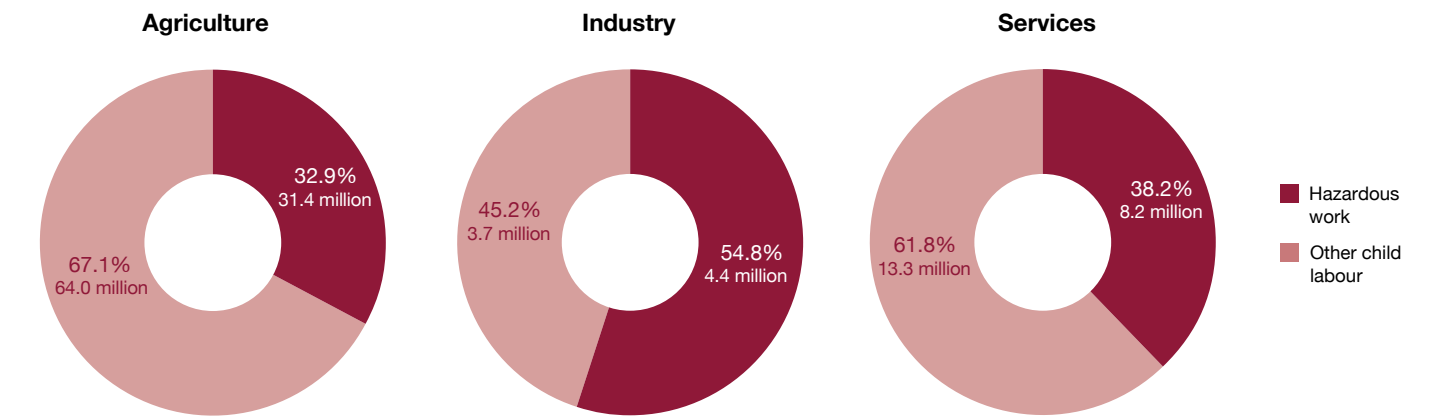
Fig 19. Number of children aged 5 to 17 years in child labour in domestic work, by age and sex



Note: Due to rounding, age-specific numbers for girls do not add up to the total.

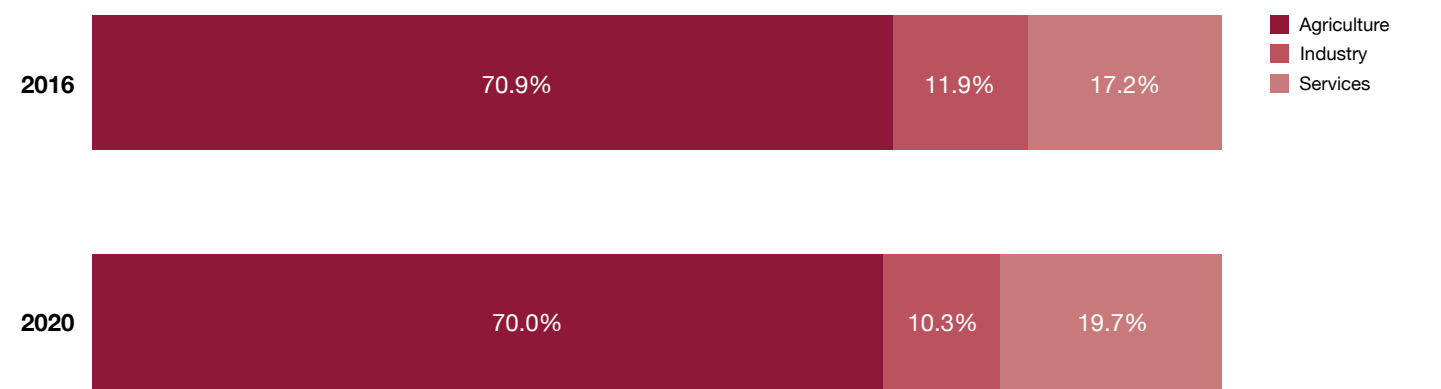
Hazardous work constitutes a sizeable share of child labour among children aged 5 to 14 across all three sectors

Fig 20. Number and percentage distribution of children aged 5 to 14 years in child labour, by hazardous work status and sector of economic activity



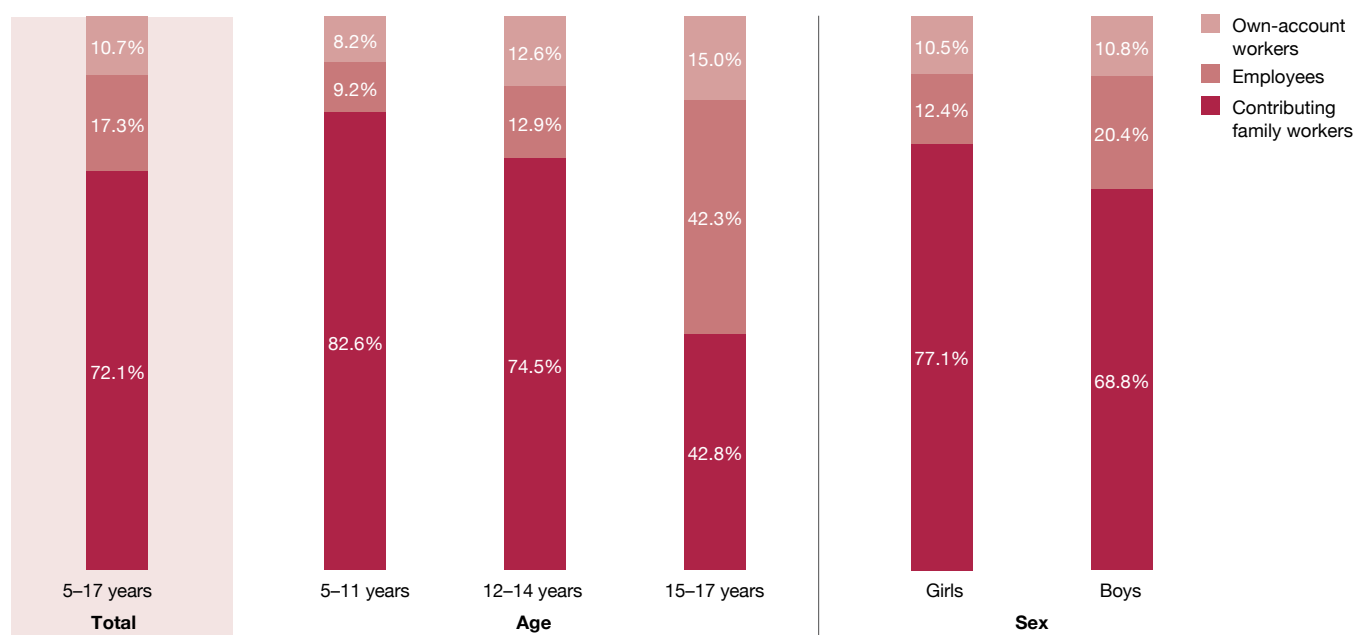
The sectoral composition of child labour changed only marginally between 2016 and 2020

Fig 21. Percentage distribution of children aged 5 to 17 years in child labour, by sector of economic activity



Most children in child labour work within their own family unit

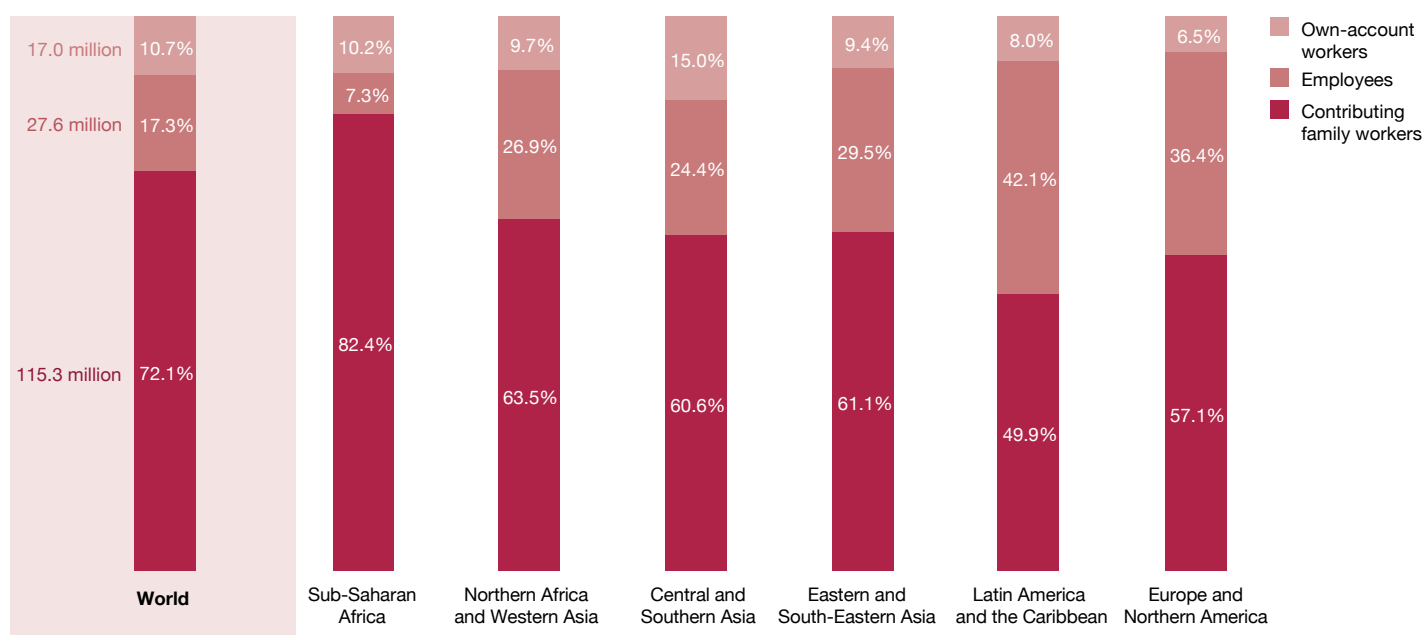
Fig 22. Percentage distribution of children aged 5 to 17 years in child labour, by status at work, age and sex



Note: Due to rounding, figures in percentages do not add up to 100 per cent.

Family work predominates across all regions

Fig 23. Percentage distribution of children aged 5 to 17 years in child labour, by status at work and region

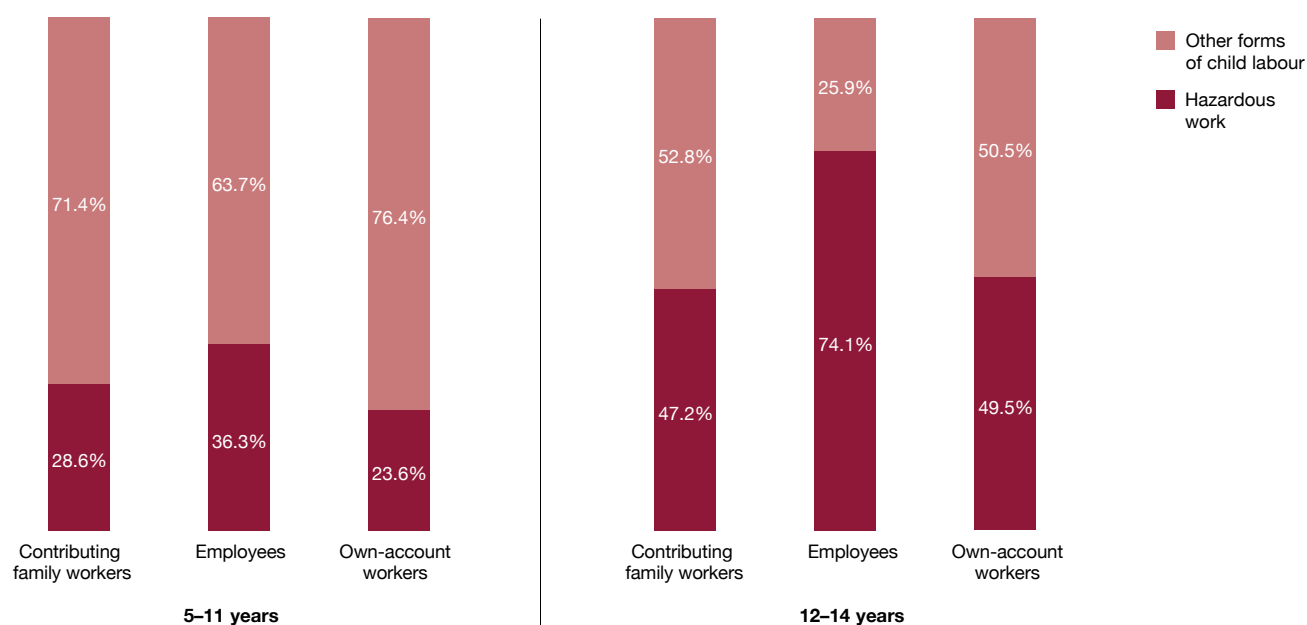


Notes: Due to rounding, figures in percentages do not add up to 100 per cent and numbers do not add up to the global total. The figure shows regional groupings used for SDG reporting. The region of Oceania is omitted because of low data coverage. Caution is warranted when interpreting data for Europe and Northern America due to the small number of children in child labour.



A significant share of child labour within the family is hazardous

Fig 24. Percentage distribution of children aged 5 to 14 years in hazardous work and other forms of child labour, by status at work and age



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