A 'Lens of Labor': Re-Conceptualizing Young People's Involvement in Organized Crime

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Abstract

Millions of the world's children engage in labor, often exploitative and essential to their survival. Child labor is closely related to crime; global discourse illustrates how young people are victims of forced and bonded labor and recent studies from the global South demonstrate how young people are hired as the 'illicit laborers' of organized crime groups. Despite this, there is a tendency to consider young people, not as laborers but as victims of trafficking or as offenders (often in relation to gangs). To address this lacuna, the article draws on data from 3 studies conducted in the global South to develop a conceptual framework suitable for understanding the intersection between labor and crime. The article develops a metaphorical 'labor lens', a lens which centers and prioritizes labor and instrumental drivers for crime, embedded within wider structures of illicit markets, established organized crime, state:crime collaboration and the need for children to work to survive. The article integrates economic drivers for involvement in organized crime with the moral economy, within the context of ecological frameworks of crime, embedded with wider issues of coloniality. In doing so, the article develops a new conceptual framework for considering young people's involvement in organized crime.

Introduction

Millions of the world's children engage in labor, often exploitative and essential to their survival (UNICEF 2021). Child labor is closely related to crime; global discourse illustrates how young people are victims of forced and bonded labor (ibid.) and recent studies from the global South demonstrate how young people are hired as the 'illicit laborers' of organized crime groups (Atkinson-Sheppard, 2019).

Despite this, criminological discourse largely considers young people who engage in organized crime not as laborers, but as victims or offenders (Fionda, 2005). To some extent, this dichotomy is reflected in the scholarship related to gangs, which often conceptualizes young people as perpetrators (Klein and Maxson, 2010; Van Gemert, 2005), and the scholarship related to trafficking, modern slavery and child soldiers which is more likely to focus on young people as victims (O'Connell Davidson, 2011). This extant landscape both

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expansive and important; however, labor—as a driving factor for young people's involvement in organized crime-remains marginalized in the discourse.

This article draws on data from 3 studies conducted in Bangladesh, China and Nepal which explored the landscape of gangs and organized crime and the specific involvement of vulnerable children in these criminal enterprises. The work began in Bangladesh (my doctorate study), and I then moved to China where I carried out a similar study (in alliance with Chinese academics). The last study, in Kathmandu, was developed using the same methodology as the studies in both Bangladesh and China, thus allowing comparisons between the research sites to occur.

Collectively, the case studies help to refine conceptualizations of gangs and the involvement of children in criminal entities; opening up discussions and critiques of normalized assertations largely derived from the global North. Analysis of the data and triangulation of the findings presented a clear and persistent theme: the need for young people to work to survive, some of whom do so within gangs and organized crime. The theme of labor—work that by its very definition is harmful to young people-illustrated a lacuna in criminological theory and empirical data, and an area of exploitation ostracized in extant criminological discourse.

To address this, throughout the article I ask you to don a metaphorical 'labor lens.' This lens centers and prioritizes labor and the need for young people to work, to earn an income and assist their survival on the streets, embedded within wider structures of illicit markets, established organized crime and state:crime collaboration. To develop this labor lens, I integrate economic drivers for involvement in organized crime with the moral economy, demonstrating how—as discussed in relation to cocaine distribution throughout the Americas, 'economies produce and are produced by social norms and expectations' (Arias and Grisaffi, 2021: 3). To further contextualize discussions, the article considers economic drivers, alongside the moral economy within the context of an ecological framework of crime, embedded with wider issues of coloniality. In doing so, the article develops a new conceptual framework for considering young people's involvement in gangs and organized crime.

Child Labor: Historical Perspectives

Historically, labor played an important component of juvenile delinquency. In nineteenth-century Britain and the USA, child labor was a prevalent phenomenon. Children worked in homes and factories, the textile industry, in agriculture, mines, docks and various other industries (Muncie, 2009). The terminology of 'factory children' was replaced by 'delinquent child' (Hendrick, 1997: 40–5). The visible presence of children living, working and begging on the streets, described as 'vagabonds', 'precocious traders' or 'daring thieves,' became a source of widespread social concern (Mayhew, 1861).

The streets of London in Victorian England were consumed with 'naked, filthy, roaming, lawless and deserted children' (Lord Ashley, cited by Magarey, 1978: 16). The relationship between youth delinquency, poverty, marginalization and the working classes permeated the 1800s leading to legislation related to youth crime and labor (Muncie, 2009). This is embedded within wider discussions of the development of the juvenile justice system, the 'child savers' of the nineteenth century (Platt, 1969) and struggles for civil rights and racial injustice, particularly in the USA (Ward, 2012). The 1819 and 1833 Factory Acts prohibited the employment of children under 9 in factories and mills and restricted the hours older children were able to work (ibid.). The Fair Labour Standards Act was enacted

in the USA in 1938 and banned the abuse and employment of children and young people. Paradoxically, as child labor diminished in the global North, colonialism and capitalism initiated new forms of labor in the global South:

> In precolonial India, children worked in the household economy, with the advent of capitalism, introduced by the colonial state, their work was drawn into the production of capital in the form of wage labor. In the late nineteenth century, when factories, mines and tea plantations in India began setting up factory schools to train working children to be more efficient workers, legislation was already underway in England to abolish child labor and enforce compulsory schooling for all children (Balagopalan, 2002: 28/29).

Children played a significant role in the labor force in colonial Zimbabwe, within the context of 'colonial and indigenous patriarchy and the economic needs of the time' but rarely reflected in historical commentary (Grier, 1994: 27). As the colonizers strove toward conquest, modernity and capitalism, new arenas for work including child labor emerged, initiating new forms of exploitation for some of the world's most vulnerable children (Balagopalan, 2002).

Criminology, Gangs and Organized Crime

Criminology advanced in the global North via a western centric lens, associated with the Enlightenment theorists including Bentham, Lombrosso and Durkheim. The notion of money as a driver for crime is discussed within various theories and empirical research (i.e., Rational Choice Theory, General Strain Theory, Marxist theories, etc.). The notion that these theories and the Enlightenment are associated with development is problematic and with specific reference to this article, the interplay between child labor and crime is surprisingly absent in this discourse.

In the 1920s, Thrasher and his Chicago School colleagues developed the social disorganization and subcultural theories of crime that underpin contemporary gang research. It is important to reflect on the applicability of these 'origin' theories when applied outside of context in which they were created. Thrasher (1927) considered gangs to be the products of industrialization, migration and urbanization. Thrasher's gangs were loosely organized, street-based groups, affiliated with certain neighborhoods and subcultural norms and values. In 1943, Whyte considered gangs in Boston as representative of 'the struggles of American ethnic and racial groups to gain or maintain a toehold in urban social systems' (Moore, 1998: 65).

In 1955, Cohen developed Merton's (1938) anomie theory arguing that gangs provide young people with an 'alternative culture.' Cloward and Ohlin (1960), influenced by both Cohen and Merton, suggested that gangs provide an 'illegitimate opportunity structure' where young people utilize these criminal groups to access resources, inclusion and mobility, unavailable to them via extant social structures. From the 1960/70s onward there was a move away from urban sociology (as seen in Thrasher's study) to 'a collective criminological effort to definition and response' (Fraser, 2017:10). Since the 1980s, the wider context of the US war on drugs and punitive trends toward incarceration situates gangs as a pertinent political issue (ibid.).

Today gang research is both expansive and complex. One perspective considers gangs as informal and disorganized (Decker et al. 1998); that expression rather than instrumental motivations affect individual and collective behaviors; and crime and violence are

considered the main activities of gangs (Decker and Van Winkle, 1996; Klein and Maxson, 2010). However, there has been a consistent effort from 'critical gang scholars' to consider gangs as multifaceted phenomena (Brotherton and Barrios, 2004), including 'humanizing' gangs and including gang members in ethnographic research (i.e., Moore 1991; Vigil, 2003). As Brotherton and Barrios (2004) demonstrate, gangs engage positively with communities, illustrating mechanisms for initiating social change, thus moving debate away from a focus on gangs and crime and into a more nuanced and complex arena (Brotherton, 2015).

Research also considers how gangs act as vigilante groups, interact with corrupt members of the state (Rodgers, 2021), or work amid (Atkinson-Sheppard, 2019; Raghavan, 2011) or progress into organized crime (Hagedorn, 2008) defined by Varese (2010: 4) as criminal groups that 'attempt to regulate and control the production and distribution of a given commodity or service unlawfully.' As Hagedorn (2008) argues, global North definitions of gangs are limited, often because they do not allow for an understanding of the fluidity of gangs and their ability to develop into more established organized crime groups. This raises questions about the distinction between gangs and organized crime (Burgos, 2021), echoed in Densley's (2012) work which considers the 'organization of gangs', Levitt and Venkatesh's (2000) research which illustrates how some gangs operate at the street-based operatives of organized crime groups and Dowdney's (2003) research which considers 'children in organized armed violence.' As Brotherton and Kontos (2022: 1) argue, 'as critical scholars of the gang phenomenon it is our obligation to make available to a broader academic public a range of alternative perspectives that do not fit into the positivistic, nomothetic, ahistorical and largely pathological frames characteristic of orthodox gang criminology.' "(There is a need for opening up discussions)," like the ones in this article, which broaden the landscape of gangs, and consider new areas for exploration, including labor.

The marginalization of labor in discussions of gangs relates to the prioritization of crime in mainstream theory and empirical data. This perspective is representative of the ways in which studies into gangs have been largely led and developed in the global North (Fraser, 2017).

Drawing a distinction between the global North and global South helps to disentangle the more complex issues within this article, of positionality, who has the power to generate, disseminate knowledge, theory and practice, and the overreliance on the production of knowledge from the 'metropole' (Carrington et al., 2016). The dominance of northern theory, policy and practice conceals the realities of crime and violence for most of the world's population (Connel, 2007), leading to 'cognitive injustice' (de Souza Santos, 2014) and failing to reflect on how the modern world and Western capitalist societies were created by conquest and colonization (Quijano, 2000; Mignolo, 1995; Maldonaro-Torres, 2007).

In the case of gangs, the focus on crime and instrumental drivers for violence leaves discussions of work or labor marginalized. Legislation enacted in relation to the abolishment of child labor led to a significant decline in child labor in developed countries; however, while various efforts have been enacted by states, development agencies and NGOs, over 160 million children remain engaged in child labor, most within the global South (UNICEF 2021).

This relates closely to modernity and conceptualizations of childhood. The notion of childhood as a social construction, questions related to a distinction between adulthood and childhood (Aries, 1962) and multiple 'types' of childhoods is well discussed within discourse related to children's rights (Balagopalan, 2002). However, Liebel (2020:1) explains how 'the dominant understanding of childhood in Europe is closely interwoven with the

process of colonization.' 'Western narratives of modernization' (Morrison, 2012: 3) symbolize a certain 'type' of child, associated with ideals of what a child *should* be and do and closely related to notions of innocence, education and play (ibid.). Nieuwenhuys (2013: 4) explains how 'the dominance of the North over the South is inextricably linked to Northern childhood(s) representations against which Southern childhood(s) are measured and found wanting…'. 'The hegemonic moral discourse on children idealizes the bourgeois separation of the child from labor' (Balagopalan, 2002; 19); children's involvement in illicit labor compounds issues further. Thus, it is imperative to understand childhood within the context of history, and colonialism (ibid.).

Child Labor: Contemporary Perspectives

UNICEF (2010:5) defines child labor as: 'Work that exceeds a minimum number of hours, depending on the age of the child and on the type of work. Such work is considered harmful to the child and should therefore be eliminated.' Some jobs are exploitative and to reflect this, The International Labour Organisation (ILO) and The Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention 1999 (No. 182) delineates exploitative child labor as:

1. All forms of slavery/sale or trafficking of children, debt bondage and serfdom, forced or compulsory labor including forced or compulsory recruitment for use in armed conflict.
2. The use, procuring or offering a child for prostitution.
3. The use, planning or offering of a child for illicit activities, in particular for the production and trafficking of drugs defined in the relevant international treaties.
4. Work, which by its nature or the circumstances in which it is carried out, is likely to harm the health, safety or morals of children (p1).

The ILO's (1999) definition of the Worst Forms of Child Labour is an important legislative framework for protecting young people embroiled in organized crime. This is one of three international conventions, including the ILO Convention No. 138 on Minimum Age for Admission to Employment (1973) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989 (UNCRC) which provide a global framework for addressing child labor, including its worst forms. However, focus on the worst forms of child labor tends to prioritize sex trafficking and slavery, leaving young people's involvement in gangs marginalized; it is rare for this policy to be considered in extant criminological research or theory (Atkinson-Sheppard, 2019).

Drivers for child labor are complex. However, dominant scholarship is often derived from an economic perspective and associates poverty with the need for children to work. Basu and Van's (1998) seminar work on subsistence poverty and child labor explains how parents will only send their children to work if the adult household income cannot sustain the family. This is closely related to the market wage—if wages are high, only adults will work, but if wages are low, child labor may become a family necessity.

The notion of the worst forms of child labor adds complexity. Some scholars argue that parents are unaware of the hazards of sending their children to work (Rodgers and Swinnerton, 2002), while others argue that parents and children exhibit agency over their decision making to engage in hazardous work—and made a decision for their children to work, based on the higher income potential involved in some of the worst forms of child labor (Rialp, 1993). Scholarship highlights the importance of reflecting on decision making and agency but considering this agency within the context of bounded and

restricted lives—young laborers engaged in hazardous work do so, in most instances, because of the demands and pressures of poverty (Naryan, 2000).

The tendency of existing discourse to frame explanations of child labor via a socio-economic lens leaves other perspectives marginalized (Hoque, 2021). The cultural and social acceptance of child labor—a 'social-cultural perspective'—that permeates societies in which child labor occurs remains marginalized (Delap, 2001). Despite this, Bourdillon (2006) and Nieuwenhuys (1994) highlight the importance of considering child labor within the context of the material and cultural conditions in which it occurs (affected by gender, age, siblings etc.); this includes social acceptance of child labor—which is often normalized practice for many families affected by poverty, embedded within wider understandings of childhood where work initiates children into adulthood and can and often does have a positive impact on their lives (Bourdillon 2006). In addition, street children are disproportionally likely to engage in child labor including the worst forms (Street Children Consortium, 2022); however, there remain lacunas in understanding related to what drives street children into work, and specifically for this article, what factors effect young people who work within organized crime.

Dominant discourse is polarized, considering young people who engage in organized crime as 'perpetrators' (usually gangs) or as 'victims', reflected in discourse related to trafficking, modern slavery and child soldiers. However, research into gangs often portrays a more nuanced picture. As Carter (2021: 32) suggests in his recent critique of Thrasher's research, gangs were, according to Thrasher 'an extension of playgroups formed by children escaping the claustrophobic material and cultural conditions of poor, immigrant communities' highlighting the wider social conditions which propel young people to join gangs. In addition, various scholars have moved understanding away from the dichotomous victim/offender 'lens' and into more expansive discussions of race, class, marginalization, gender and 'opportunities' offered by criminal groups (i.e., Cohen, 1955, Matza, 1964; Cloward and Ohlin, 1960). Moore (1991) and Vigil's (2003) work is well known for its 'humanism' and understanding, portraying the complex and nuanced realities of gang members' lives. Young's (2011) proposition of a 'criminological imagination' supports the notion of considering gangs amid the political, social and cultural context in which they occur. Brotherton's (2015) research develops a more critical analysis, moving away from the gang as a modern 'folk devil' and into a more expansive and nuanced understanding of gang formation, gangs as cultural institutions and community movements of cultural resistance. In many ways the discussions in this article support this 'position', considering how children associated with organized crime are more than just victims *or* offenders. The term gang member is an inadequate way to conceptualize young people who live on the streets, are acutely marginalized and work within crime groups as a mechanism to survive (ibid.). Alternatively, concern over trafficking has led to an international focus on this specific *type* of organized crime (O'Connell Davidson, 2011). Related issues of 'forced labor' often associated with slavery, trafficking and child soldiers are helpful in reflecting on coercion, control and children's agency (Beber and Blattman, 2013). However, the data considered in this paper points to the complexity and nuances of organized crime. Trafficking is an important contextual factor to these discussions but for the most part, the young people considered here were not victims of trafficking or slavery nor were they perpetrators. The notion of forced labor is also questioned in this context. It is importance to consider the nuances of labor, which, at times, is forced and where young people are coerced into engagement with organized crime groups, but which is also a mechanism for young people to exert

agency and earn an income. Thus, dominant discourse potentially obscures the nuances of organized crime and the variants of roles that children play in criminal enterprises.

Developing a Framework for Conceptualizing Labor

Extant discourse develops a widespread and pervasive picture of the relationship between economics, poverty and child labor. This article develops this further by reflecting on economic drivers of child labor alongside the moral economy. For the purpose of this article, the moral economy refers to 'the ways that economies produce and are produced by social norms and expectations' (Arias and Grisaffi, 2021: 4). The notion of a moral economy, first introduced by Thompson in the 1970s and developed by Scott (1977) illustrated the ways in which social norms and expectations interact with the production, distribution and consumption of goods (Fassin, 2020). In light of these discussions of illicit crime—and thus illicit labor, I focus on the 'norms of exchange' (Arias and Grisaffi, 2021: 4) that influence organized crime groups in Asia, including the ways in which these norms of exchange help to sustain illicit markets and affect the communities in which they operate. To consider the nuances of norms of exchange, the article situates these discussions within a framework of an ecological perspective of crime. One of the most influential ways of exploring the ecological perspective is via micro, mezzo and macro factors (Busch-Armendariz et al. 2017). The micro level focuses on the individual, their immediate relationships, families, etc. The mezzo level relates to communities, institutions, etc. The macro level considers wider social structures, government policies, the nature of states, etc. (ibid.). In doing so, the article expands on and develops a framework of labor suitable for explaining young people's involvement in gangs and organized crime.

Methodology

This paper draws on 3 case studies conducted in Bangladesh, China and Nepal. The first study considered street children's involvement in organized crime in Bangladesh and consisted of 3 years of participant observation of the criminal justice system, 80 interviews with criminal justice practitioners, NGO workers and community members and a year-long embedded case study with a group of 22 street children, and the organization that housed and supported them.

In China, I initiated a collaborative research team involving both British and Chinese researchers and together we conducted extensive observation of Chinese society, a media analysis and 99 qualitative interviews with criminal justice practitioners and community members from across China. The participants included one ex-gang member and young people with friends or associates in gangs, 12 of whom were incarcerated in a young offenders' institution in Shanghai, the majority for offences committed in groups. Research was conducted in Nepal and included 20 semi-structured interviews and a survey (40 respondents) with criminal justice practitioners, NGO workers and community members and which explored similar themes; namely the involvement of street children in gangs and organized crime.

Gaining access was challenging but supported by the facilitation of local 'gatekeepers' available to me via my work as a consultant for a criminal justice reform project in Bangladesh, via my collaborative research team in China and colleagues in Nepal. In all instances a 'snowballing approach' to interviewing occurred—as contacts developed so too

did our access to participants, and data. Interpreters were at different stages throughout the research projects. All research involving street children included an interpreter. As Temple (2002) argues, one of the most robust and reliable approaches is to utilize interpreters as 'part of the research process.' In all instances, interpreters were used to interpret and translate but also analyze and reflect on the data; helping me to understand the nuances of language, ideas and culturally specific concepts.

There were convergences in the process. Interview questions were consistent (although not exactly the same, to allow for country-specific relevance) and explored the context of gangs and organized crime, the nature of gangs and the involvement of vulnerable children in criminal groups. All participants received an information sheet and signed a consent form (including the children, for whom child-specific information sheets and consent forms were developed). Consent was also gained from the Director of the organization where the children lived, at the time, and due to the children living at the center and many being orphans, the Director was considered their guardian and responsible for housing, education and support. A specific child protection policy was developed, agreed upon with the NGOs and implemented in the research. Ethical approval was gained for each study.[1]

The analysis draws on a total sample set of 261 participants, across 3 countries and multiple research sites. Each data set was analyzed individually, and themes related to the context and nature of gangs and organized crime groups were explored. A triangulation of the data sets then occurred, this analysis process underpinned by a framework of convergences and divergences, i.e., what was similar among the data and what differed. The process and all 3 studies highlighted numerous methodological challenges and opportunities, many of which are outside of the boundaries of this article to consider (see Atkinson-Sheppard, 2021 for a more in-depth discussion). This process highlighted the theme of labor and its relevance across all data sets, enabling the proceeding conclusions to be drawn.

Discussion

This section introduces a conceptual framework which incorporates labor as a driving factor for young people's involvement in gangs and organized crime. As Arias and Grisaffi (2021: 3) argue, when discussing the cocaine trade, 'functioning of the illicit trade defies the logic of mainstream economic theory, which assumes that all action is self-interested, oriented toward maximizing perceived personal gain, rather the value chain produces and is, in part, produced by social expectations or moral economies.' The notion of moral economies is important in this context, the data from the 3 research sites illustrates the ways in which association with organized crime groups provides young people with ways to earn money but also demonstrates the specific and often nuanced benefits of illicit enterprises, embedded within wider social expectations, norms and expectations (illustrative of Cloward and Ohlin's, 1960) research discussed earlier). Thus, the labor lens has both economic components (monetary gain, employment opportunities) but also a 'moral economy' (Arias and Grisaffi, 2021). Young people's involvement in organized crime is set within wider social expectations and norms, including the need for young people to work and the widespread acceptance of child labor (often embedded within and associated

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[1] King's College London ethical committee, and the University of Westminster, British Psychological Society codes of ethical conduct.

with class-based distinctions and stigmatizing hierarchies), the existence, often based on acute poverty or marginalization, of large 'pools' of vulnerable young people and extensive organized crime that requires laborers to work at its lowest echelons. The norms and expectations that result from this demonstrate the ways in which involvement of children in crime groups is closely related to the context in which it occurs; the role of criminal groups is thus multifaceted, intertwined with economic drivers and 'structures of opportunity' (Cloward and Ohlin, 1960) yet economic factors alone are unlikely to explain gang affiliation (Levitt and Venkatesh, 2000). Instead, organized crime groups in the 3 research sites provide a level of social protection (i.e., Atkinson-Sheppard, 2017), inclusion and social mobility—meaning that for some, the gang provides a viable and accessible opportunity to earn money, gain respect and inclusion and navigate challenging social hierarchies.

To develop this framework further, I utilize the ecological perspective and categories: micro, mezzo and macro (Busch-Armendariz et al. 2017). It is important to clarify that labor—or the need/desire to work and earn money-is not the sole factor driving young people's involvement in organized crime, rather it is a compounding and imperative component within the wider moral economy of juvenile delinquency. Labor is not homogenous, it is context specific, nuanced and related to individual needs and the expression of a young person's agency. Contextually, labor is embedded within deregulated illicit markets, established organized crime groups, weak states, organized crime group:state collaboration and pervasive poverty.

Macro Level

'Macro' factors which influence a young person's involvement in organized crime relate to wider structural factors and social, political and historical contexts including coloniality (Maldonado-Torres, 2007). Coloniality or the Colonial Matrix of Power (CMP) (Mignolo, 1995) represents the *very nature* of Western civilization (Quijano, 2000). Quijano (2000) explains how with the emergence of the Americas, a new social order was formed, an order or CMP which prioritized global capitalism and utilized labor (and exploitation) to develop this economic agenda. CMP thus refers to an axis of exploitative global capitalism and racialized and gendered social hierarchies, constructing divisions between the conquerors and the conquered and initiating the global social structures evident today (Quijano 2000; Lugones, 2008).

Understanding the CMP is an imperative part of decolonizing disciplines, including criminology, and helps to 'shed light' on issues which have been silenced or marginalized. This supports wider efforts to tackle 'cognitive injustice' (de Souza Santos, 2014). The CMP prioritized profit over life, constructing a commodification of the 'conquered' (Quijano, 2000). The CMP is embedded within 'an epistemic hierarchy that privileges Western knowledge over non-Western knowledge and cosmologies and institutionalized in the global university system' (Grosfoguel, 2007: 33). The CMP is also deeply entwined with modernity; as Mignolo and Walsh (2018:17) argue, 'there is no modernity without coloniality.'

It is outside of the boundaries of this article to consider the specific ways in which the CMP has affected societies in Asia, an undoubtedly vast and complex issue. It is particularly challenging to consider the specific nuances in light of the 3 countries discussed here. Despite this, from a macro level it is important to develop a more expansive understanding of coloniality and its effects on labor and specifically child labor. The CMP developed economic systems based on a model of global capitalism; this model required and

commodified the colonized, including children. It led to the increased involvement of children within factories and the workplace and the widespread existence of child labor, specifically among the working classes and particularly in the global South (Balagopalan, 2002). The CMP also led—and leads to-'otherizing', based on the superiority of the conquerors over the conquered but also based on caste, class and the marginalization of certain populations in India and wider South Asia. As Brown (2016) explains, the introduction of the Criminal Tribes Policy led millions of Indian subjects to face surveillance, control, rules and punishments; in many instances these discussions of 'tribes', dacoits and 'thugs' in the 1700s (Dash, 2005) were some of the first discussions of gangs in India and illustrative of the relationship between the British colonizers and their control of India (Brown, 2016). The legacies of these policies affect the sub-continent today; those from certain castes (and classes) remain marginalized, stigmatized and more likely to face poverty, pushing many children into the workforce. The CMP also privileges children at school—and not those engaged in labor, associated with the previous discussions of the relationship between coloniality, modernity and conceptualizations of what children *should* or *should not* do (Liebel, 2020). This relates closely to the young people discussed in this study, those most marginalized, those facing caste and class-based stigmatization, occupying echelons of society that have roots in colonial histories, such as the dacoits in India and the wider subcontinent, which has relevance to Nepal, and Street children in Bangladesh and migrants in China, for whom notions of 'outsiders' plagues their existence, and accessibility to society.

Acknowledgements of the CMP help us to challenge Western domination in the development of issues pertinent to the global South, challenge 'cognitive injustice' (de Souza Santos, 2014) and disentangle issues of positionality discussed earlier and the lack of attention paid to labor as a driving factor in young people's involvement in organized crime. Issues of survival, acute poverty, widespread slum living, vast population sizes and endemic poverty are issues which encourage and facilitate child labor are over-represented in the global South but rarely feature in extant global North criminological theory and discourse.

At a state level, there were divergences between the research sites. The Bangladesh state is often described as 'weak' with violence underpinning political leadership (Moniruzzaman, 2009). Nepal experienced an armed conflict between 1996 and 2006 where parts of the country were controlled by a variety of non-governmental groups, including criminal gangs (Thapa, 2019). The authoritarian nature of the Chinese state provides a vastly different context to the establishment of organized crime (Wang, 2017), yet there are similarities between the ways in which macro factors affect child labor, and specifically labor within organized crime.

There are convergences regarding the presence of child labor and the existence of large pools of vulnerable young people, many of whom have to work to survive. In Nepal, political upheaval, access to resources and the breakdown of state governance during the decade-long armed conflict (Pradhan et al., 2015) contributed to large numbers of children who live on the streets. It is difficult to ascertain an exact number of street children; estimates vary between 5000 and approximately 1200–1500 street children in Kathmandu valley (Sharma, 2020). Children become 'street-involved' due to 'poverty, family conflicts, natural disasters, civil war and the pursuit of freedom' (Sharma, 2020: 129). To survive, children engage in a variety of labor including: 'rag picking, dishwashing, shoeshine boys, and newspaper sellers' (ibid.: 130). They face acute vulnerability and are at high risk of abuse and exposure to drugs, alcohol (ibid.) and the advances of organized crime groups (Pradhan et al., 2015).

In China, children's vulnerability is closely related to migration and the notion of the 'migrant class', illustrating the social marginalization faced by migrants today. The

Chinese National Bureau of Statistics (2017) estimates that in 2010, 245 million Chinese people had migrated between rural areas or from rural areas to cities to find work, including children. Furthermore, up to 61 million children are 'left-behind' in villages and cared for by extended family or left to fend for themselves (NWCCW, NBS, & UNICEF, 2014). Migrant children face a variety of social issues, including access to education, marginalization and repercussions from a lack of, or inadequate parental supervision (Chen et al., 2015). Many 'left-behind' children also become street children during their migration trajectory (Gao et al., 2018), demonstrating the important interplay between migration, vulnerability and the streets.

Official discourse estimated the number of street children as 150,000 (between 2007 and 2012) which then rose to 184,000 in 2013, and significantly decreased to approximately 50,000 in 2016 (Gao et al. 2018). However, scholars question the accuracy of official statistics in China (Xu, 2017) and media reports suggest the prevalence of street children likely to be much higher and closer to 1–1.5 million, although estimates do vary.

Hundreds of thousands (possibly millions) of children live on the streets and in slums in Bangladesh and many of these children need to work to survive (AUSAID, 2005). A Bangladesh government report estimated the number of 'street-involved' children to be around 500,000, 70% of whom live in Dhaka (ARISE, 2001). However, various factors (including a lack of birth records and inefficient ID systems) suggest that the number is likely to exceed this, with some estimates suggesting the number could surpass two million (AUSAID, 2005). Predictions by the Bangladesh Police Force (2008) suggest that the number of street children is likely to exceed 1.6 million by 2024.

Living on the streets makes children and adults particularly vulnerable to crime and violence and the World Bank (2007) argues that 'the sheer scale and diversity of crime and violence in the poor slums of Dhaka means that it has become 'routinized' or 'normalized' into the function and reality of everyday life and affects every aspect of daily life' (p1). This is situated within a wider context of acute marginalization, class and caste-based discrimination and a lack of access to resources, including sanitation, housing, education and employment (Rahman, 1985), circumstances in which gangs are likely to grow and thrive (Hagedorn, 2008).

The development of economic systems of global capitalism and the CMP led to racialized hierarchies, otherizing and the commodification of children. The impact of this are large 'pools' of vulnerable young people, many of whom who occupy the most marginalized caste and classes, and have to work to survive, demonstrating economic drivers of involvement in organized crime. However, the interplay with the moral economy is important here too. The data illustrates the widespread prevalence of child labor, embedded within the legacies of the CMP, outlining the macro factors which contribute to young people's involvement in organized crime.

Mezzo Level

In all research sites, pervasive and hierarchically structured organized crime groups require young people to act as the laborers of criminal enterprises. Deregulated criminal markets provide a context in which labor occurs. The data from all 3 studies illustrate how economic drivers for money, often to assist survival, and a moral economy combine; the norms and expectations related to organized crime groups illustrates state:crime collaboration and 'concurrent governance' (Sergi, 2015) where organized crime groups operate

alongside corrupt members of the state, facilitating and supporting the monopolization of organized crime.

In Dhaka, organized crime in Bangladesh operates via hierarchical structures. These structures, headed by 'mastaans', are organized criminal businesses. Mastaan groups are involved in extortion and the control and delivery of basic human services, particularly in slum areas. The data illustrated state:mastaan collaboration—highlighting the need to consider mastaans within the context of moral economies which relate to wider governance and social control. The relationship between mastaans and corrupt politicians is often reciprocal. Mastaans are ensured impunity if they share profits, particularly from extortion and provide 'political muscle', a phrase used by the participants to describe political intimidation, used to muster political support and votes. The influence of the mastaans is extensive. The data demonstrated widespread control of slum areas by mastaan groups and involvement in a wide array of criminal activity. According to the participants, mastaans engage in extortion, political violence, drug dealing and trafficking, 'land grabbing' and contract killings. The hierarchies of mastaan groups support these criminal activities. At a middle echelon mastaan groups rely on gangs to conduct criminality; street children are embroiled in the lowest echelon of these organized crime groups.

In China, scholars note the presence of gangs that existed in collusion with the state in Shanghai in the 1920s (Wang, 2017) and today research illustrates a plethora of organized crime groups operating within the country. The Triads, originally associated with Hong Kong, are now increasingly seen in south-east China, and further afield (Wing Lo, 2012). In Mainland China, Wang (2017) argues that some groups operate in alliance with corrupt politicians and the police and demonstrate 'mafia-like' characteristics. The data from the current study highlighted how in Shanghai, gang members are considered to be the street-based workers of organized crime groups. A participant explained further: 'It's like the Triads in Hong Kong, young people are naturally born into groups which exist in particular areas, these areas headed by a local Triad, following a big brother, the situation in Shanghai is approximate to that.'[2] A participant described the relationship among gang members, including a gang leader:

> It is natural for him to become the big brother and a bunch of little brothers to surround him. These little brothers frequently go to his office, have fun, drink wine, eat, sing. If there is some business to deal with, then they will go out. He does not give them salaries regularly; if they can steal oil, then they will steal oil. They then collect debt, or sometimes fight. *** gives them a reward. For example, if *** gets 20,000 yuan from collecting debt, he keeps 10,000 yuan, and the remaining 10,000 yuan will be distributed to his little brothers.[3]

Organized crime groups in Nepal engage in drug and human trafficking, terrorism, cybercrime and financial crime (Interpol, 2021). Nepal's geographical location facilitates transnational organized crime, including the smuggling of drugs, people and illicit merchandise (ibid.). Thapa (2019: 1) argues that organized crime groups are protection 'rackets' that operate in alliance with the state. This relates to the previous armed conflict of 1996–2006 when 'many parts of Nepal were controlled by irregular armed groups, political parties, local armed groups, and criminal gangs but less by the state government', illustrating

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[2] Semi-structured interview 24 (China).

[3] Semi-structured interview 32 (China).

weak governance and potential similarities with state-making discussed earlier in regard to Bangladesh.

An NGO worker described a state-organized crime collaboration:

The crimes committed by organized criminals are linked to the government and connected to politicians. Anything from drug smuggling to illegal smuggling of gold. We've seen cases of professional murders linked to politicians.. criminals are hired for various purposes, to gain revenge.[4]

A Deputy Superintendent of Police concurred: 'Political will is one of the fundamental elements which you need to reduce organized crime; gangsters are protected by political parties and their leaders who take a percentage of money from gangsters.[5] 'An academic explained how 'political parties act like gangs. There is a nexus between organized criminals and politicians. The heads of organized crime groups are often politicians and vice versa. Our Prime Minister is well known to harbor organized criminals. Organized crime groups often have party affiliation; some are MPs.'[6]

At a macro level, all research sites illustrate existing and pervasive organized crime groups who work in alliance with the state. Groups are hierarchically structured with clear leaders; gangs exist at a middle echelon and at the lowest echelon young people are hired as unskilled and semi-skilled laborers. This highlights the wider context of organized crime, often driven by economic factors but also associated with the moral economy and the norms and expectations which support and facilitate organized crime and the involvement of young people embroiled in the lowest echelon of these criminal enterprises.

Micro Level

Perceptions of labor formed an imperative theme of all studies. Both the adult and child participants explained how hiring children is common in Bangladesh, extending into the informal economy and organized crime and illustrating the importance of understanding economic drivers alongside the moral economy. The structure of mastaan groups helps to further reinforce this, as a participant explained, mastaan group members have 'roles and responsibilities that transfer all the way down to the streets and the children who live there',[7] profits and commission are disseminated, children are hired to engage in crime because as a young person described: 'they do it like a job, the boss orders them and they have to follow them. Just like a job.'[8]

According to participants, young people often have specific jobs, i.e., drug runner or weapon carrier. A young person (male, aged 15) explained further:

There is a boss, a group leader and there are jobs, like some people steal, others sell drugs or collects tolls [extortion]. The young people get money and then give it to their boss. The boss then gives them money for doing this. It's their job. If they clean

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[4] Semi-structured interview 3 (Nepal).
[5] Semi-structured interview 7 (Nepal).
[6] Unstructured interview 1.
[7] Semi-structured interview 18.
[8] Group interview 6 with the children (Bangladesh).

cars they don't earn as much money, by working for a mastaan group they can earn lots of money and quickly.[9]

The data demonstrated a clear process for driving profits or 'commission' as one female, aged 14 explained further:

They work together and when they get something or when they earn money, they give it to their boss and then their boss gives them some commission. And then they share it with their group. They attack people, they hijack people, they sell drugs, they fight, everything they do together as a group.[10]

Exploited child laborers earn up to 1000 taka per day (approximately £9) in gangs, far more than would be feasible in any other sector. The money acts as an economic incentive and helps to support an individual but also their family. In many instances, young people are 'the last economic resource of the household' (Salmon, 2005: 33). Migration is a compounding factor; many young people migrate from rural areas to Dhaka to find work. Crime groups offer money and protection, as the following quote from a young person explains:

They [young people] do it to sustain their lives, and their families' lives. This is a way to earn money, but they also do it for shelter [protection]. If they're from the village, they need to get a job in Dhaka for survival and that's why they work for mastaans, they have to survive here. The mastaan groups give them lots of work, bad work but a way to earn money and send money back to the village.[11]

In China, the data illustrate how (according to a social worker) 'most street children are migrant children. They run away from home due to parent's abuse and/or neglect.'[12] These children end up on the streets and experience acute vulnerability. This vulnerability leads some children into committing crime, often on behalf of adults or older criminals. Children work on behalf of adults to distribute leaflets, sell flowers, or beg on the streets.[13] Other children engage in theft or robbery, sometimes on their own, or in small groups or on the instruction of an older boss.[14]

There was a general consensus that children can be hired to conduct criminality: 'most street children are male and involved in petty crime, but which is organized, these kids are coerced, threaten into committing crime.'[15] Gangs also conduct direct recruitment of young people, from their villages or on the streets: 'In many instances gangs trawl through villages recruiting children into their groups, they're actively looking for them, they offer them money, food but they have to work for a living, on the streets, involved in criminality.'[16] This is embedded within wider vulnerabilities caused by children's left behind status: 'they're [children] sold by their families, this happens to lots of left-behind children, the extended family are left looking after the children, they have no way of earning enough money, so they sell the children to gangs/organized crime groups, sometimes these children

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[9] Group interview 1 with the children (Bangladesh).
[10] Group interview 4 with the children (Bangladesh).
[11] Group interview 5 (with the children) (Bangladesh).
[12] Semi-structured interview 11 (China).
[13] Semi-structured interview 12.
[14] Semi-structured interview 7.
[15] Semi-structured interview 17.
[16] Semi-structured interview 36.

escape these gangs and then they end up on the streets.[17] An NGO worker involved in supporting street children explained how a 'lens of labor' is pertinent in China:

> There is no-one to care for them, no-one to help so that's why they come to us.. a 11-year-old boy brought his friend into see us, the boy's arm was full of rancid burns, sores and cuts. We took him to the hospital, and they were able to save his arm. The boys explained that they had been sucked into gangs on the streets as a way to earn money, they were made to steal, pickpocket etc. Boys that don't fall into line get tied up, their arms tied to a chair and burnt with cigarettes, this happens until they conform and is a warning to other children in the group. If they run away, they do the same thing.'[18]

A social worker concurred:

> Street children survive on streets by stealing bicycles, food money etc., but some are controlled by gangs named after the leader's home town, like Sichuan gang (四川帮), Yunnan gang (云南帮). Gangs force children to join but they're also attractive for street children, because they help meet their basic needs and also protect them from exposing to more street risks. The big brother [older gang members] will train them how to steal, and assign tasks to them. The big brother sets the goal of how much money they need to steal each day, if they don't make this, they'll likely to be beated up.[19]

In Nepal, a Human Rights worker explained how 'anyone who wants cheap labor can hire them [street children].'[20] Another Human Rights worker explained further:

> Political parties hire street children, but they don't keep them for long; they use them and lose them. There are now less [political] strikes that there used to be, but children are hired to burn tires, and burn busses. The police don't arrest them. These children are employed, they are given petty money or given food for the day. Street children are used in other tasks, sexual activities, prostitution, drug dealing. They sniff drugs, so instead of wages they are given drugs. People ask, how do I benefit from these children?'.[21]

A lens of labor is pertinent in Nepal, 'money is the main driver street children; they get money from gangs; they need to earn money to survive.'[22]

The conceptualization of labor is important here; labor intertwined with survival, related to social inclusion and mobility, acquiring protection (including social protection) but a recognition that for the young people in this study, involvement in criminality is perceived as a form of labor, a viable and often profitable way to earn money, to assist their survival on the streets. At a micro level, economic factors and monetary gain combine with the moral economy to explain young people's involvement in gangs and organized crime.

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[17] Semi-structured interview 39.
[18] Semi-structured interview 34.
[19] Semi-structured interview 7.
[20] Semi-structured interview 1 (Nepal).
[21] Semi-structured interview 1 (Nepal).
[22] Semi-structured interview 3 (Nepal).

Discussion: A Labor Lens

The data discussed here, arising from 3 countries (with vast differences in terms of political context, historical contexts and social structures), illustrate the importance of labor as a driving factor in understanding young people's involvement in gangs and organized crime. At the start of the article, I asked you to don a metaphorical 'labor lens', a lens which prioritizes and centers labor as a driving force for young people's involvement in organized crime. To develop this labor lens, I integrated economic drivers of involvement in organized crime with the moral economy, in light of an ecological framework of crime, embedded within wider issues of coloniality.

The benefits of a labor lens are multifaceted. First, as the data have demonstrated, labor, and the need for children to work, is the predominant lens through which young people and the adults that surround them conceptualize children's engagement with gangs and organized crime. This was in contrast to the other standpoints that permeate discourse. Labeling the children as gang members is a poor reflection of their drivers of involvement in crime and is likely to stigmatize children engaged in a plight to ensure their own survival. Alternatively, the young people were not child soldiers nor were they victims or perpetrators of trafficking or slavery. A victim lens is also problematic in this context. The relationship between young people and organized crime is complex and multifaceted. Young people are victims of acute marginalization, poverty and violence but they do have some agency over their decision making. The data from all studies illustrated how gangs offer young people ways to earn an income but they also provide social mobility, 'social protection' (Atkinson-Sheppard, 2017) and 'street capital.' In some instances, criminal groups offer young people ways to earn 'quick and easy money.' Thus, the young people are not devoid of agency, but their decision making should be considered within the context of restricted and bounded lives.

If we assume a labor lens and the theoretical framework discussed here, we center work as a driving force for involvement in crime, moving the debate away from victim vs. offenders and into a new domain of child labor. There is the need for a better and more expansive recognition of labor in criminological theory; intersectional, and aligned with poverty, marginalization, coloniality, class, race and gender but at the forefront of understandings of children's involvement in crime—in the global South, and beyond. There should be more cohesion between criminological theory and international legislation, including the ILO definition of the Worst Forms of Child Labor and associated legislation.

One of the most significant limitations of this paper is the lack of space; the comparison between 3 different research projects risks missing detail, contextual nuances and in-depth understanding. It was outside of the boundaries of this paper to explore each study in any great depth; however, the purpose of the paper was to delineate a conceptual framework suitable for initiating debate about this issue, in the Global South and beyond.

Conclusion

Millions of the world's children engage in labor, often exploitative and essential to their survival. At the start of the article, I asked you to don a metaphorical 'labor lens', a lens which centers and prioritizes labor, highlighting the importance of considering economic drivers of organized crime alongside the moral economy, including reflecting on

the social norms and expectations which provide contextual explanations for this form of criminality, embedded within wider structures of illicit markets, established organized crime, state:crime collaboration and the need for children to work to survive. This labor lens has been used to center and prioritize labor; in doing so the article situated the marginalization of labor and the need for children to work within the wider context of coloniality and prominence of western centrism in the social sciences. The article considered the context of child labor in the global South and the benefits of a labor lens, particularly for young people who experience acute marginalization, poverty and the need to work to survive. The article reflected on the ways in which a labor lens helps to move away from the polarizing victim:offender dichotomy which both criminalizes vulnerable young people and denies their agency, paving the way to better understand—and respond to-the realities of vulnerable children's lives.

However, the caveat for this work, and comparative work like it, is that while generalizations—or similarities—are a significant part of understanding the nature of organized crime, acknowledging difference is what allows us to consider context, divergence between places, cities, countries and significant differences between the ways in which individuals, particularly children perceive and experience organized crime (Fraser and Hagedorn, 2018).

Labor is nuanced and subjective and thus is important to reflect on the wider realities of children's lives. In all research sites, the data hint at elements of pleasure—friendship, solidarity, dancing, drinking, drug taking, flirting and sexuality. Labor should thus be *integrated* into wider understandings of juvenile delinquency; it is this integration that will lead to a more expansive and reflective comprehension of young people's involvement in gangs and organized crime. The convergences between the studies of the notion of 'hiring' children to commit crime, the hierarchies of organized crime groups which mirror legitimate businesses, the roles and responsibilities attributed to workers, the hours young people work and the jobs that they do suggest that a lens of labor is a worthwhile and pertinent lens through which to consider children's involvement in organized crime.

The similarities discussed in this paper in regard to labor as a driving force for young people's involvement in organized crime demonstrate that wider—understandings of these issues should be sought. If children who engage in organized crime in China, Bangladesh and Nepal should be conceptualized as 'illicit child laborers', is the same not also true in other countries in Asia, and potentially wider afield? Debate such as this, arising from the global South, demonstrates new areas for consideration, ways to challenge 'cognitive injustice' (de Sousa Santos, 2014) and western centrism that permeates criminology (Carrington et al., 2016), opening up debate around additional spheres of child exploitation and abuse and experiences of gangs, all of which help to raise awareness of children's involvement in organized crime and develop our understanding of this complex, sensitive and significant issue.

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