

SETARA-The Wellbeing and Vulnerability of Child Labor

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The Wellbeing and Vulnerability of Child Labor in Urban Slum Areas of Cirebon: a Study of Photovoice Narrative

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the welfare and vulnerability of child laborers in urban slums in Cirebon City, a topic that has often been overlooked in previous studies. Using a narrative photovoice approach, six participants aged 10–17 years were involved as the main subjects to document their life experiences through photographs. Key findings indicate that child laborers face various multidimensional vulnerabilities, including physical health, psychosocial, economic, and educational challenges, exacerbated by inadequate living conditions, hazardous work, and limited educational access. On the other hand, they also demonstrate significant resilience and survival strategies. Data analysis based on triangulation of narratives, visual materials, and in-depth interviews reveals the need for a comprehensive approach to addressing this issue, including improvements in social policy, community empowerment, and increased public awareness. This study contributes to a new understanding of the subjective experiences of child laborers and its relevance in developing evidence-based policies.

Keywords: Child Labor, Photovoice, Slum Areas, Vulnerability, Wellbeing.

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan mengeksplorasi kesejahteraan dan kerentanan pekerja anak di kawasan kumuh perkotaan Kota Cirebon, suatu topik yang seringkali kurang dieksplorasi dalam penelitian sebelumnya. Melalui pendekatan naratif photovoice dengan melibatkan enam partisipan berusia 10-17 tahun sebagai subjek utama untuk mendokumentasikan pengalaman hidup mereka menggunakan foto. Temuan utama menunjukkan bahwa pekerja anak menghadapi berbagai kerentanan multidimensi, termasuk kesehatan fisik, psikososial, ekonomi, dan pendidikan, yang diperburuk oleh kondisi tempat tinggal tidak layak, pekerjaan berisiko, dan akses pendidikan yang terbatas. Di sisi lain, mereka juga menunjukkan ketahanan dan strategi bertahan hidup yang signifikan. Analisis data berbasis triangulasi narasi, visual, dan wawancara mendalam mengungkapkan perlunya pendekatan komprehensif untuk mengatasi masalah ini, mencakup perbaikan kebijakan sosial, pemberdayaan komunitas, dan peningkatan kesadaran publik. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada pemahaman baru tentang pengalaman subjektif pekerja anak dan relevansinya dalam menyusun kebijakan berbasis bukti.

Kata Kunci: Kawasan Kumuh Cirebon, Kerentanan, Kesejahteraan, Pekerja Anak, Photovoice.

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Introduction

Child labor is a global phenomenon that occurs not only in developing countries but also in developed ones. The International Labor Organization (ILO) recorded 264 million children working in 2012. This number decreased to 218 million in 2016. The percentage of child labor varies across regions. Globally, African countries recorded the highest percentage of working children at 27.10%, while Arab countries reported the lowest percentage at 4.60%.

The Indonesian government is committed to addressing child labor by issuing various laws and regulations. The Indonesian government is committed to addressing child labor by issuing various laws and regulations. This commitment is reflected in the ratification of ILO Convention No. 138 concerning the Minimum Age for Employment through Law No. 20 of 1999, and the regulation on Child Labor under Law No. 1 of 2000 concerning the Ratification of ILO Convention No. 182. Additionally, Article 68 of Law No. 13 of 2003 concerning Manpower prohibits employers from hiring children. According to Endrawati (2011), these regulations align with efforts to protect children and their rights, as guaranteed in Law No. 39 of 1999 concerning Human Rights.

The increasing economic demands create a situation where children must work to help their parents support the family's economy. Due to their vulnerability, some child laborers even become the breadwinners of their households. In urban slums, child laborers face specific vulnerabilities caused by limited opportunities to optimize their skills and competencies due to economic constraints and difficulty accessing education. Urban child laborers often live in poverty and drop out of school, which adversely impacts their well-being.

Globally, it is estimated that no less than one billion people live in informal urban settlements known as slums (UN-Habitat, 2020). Informal or slum settlements are "gray spaces," as they are neither integrated into nor excluded from urban planning, economies, and governance. The informality of communities and activities in urban slums places them in a state of "permanent temporariness," meaning their existence is recognized but simultaneously marginalized (Yiftachel, 2009).

Efforts to organize urban slum areas are not without results. Both the central and local governments have undertaken various initiatives to manage these areas. In Cirebon City, the arrangement of slum settlements has been stipulated through Keputusan Walikota Nomor: 663/Kep.421-DPRKP/2021 tentang Penetapan Lokasi Perumahan Kumuh dan Permukiman Kumuh di Kota Cirebon (Mayor's Decree Number: 663/Kep.421-DPRKP/2021 concerning the Determination of the Location of Slum Housing and Slum

Settlements in the City of Cirebon). There are 11 slum settlement points in Cirebon City, most of which are located in coastal areas such as Cangkol, Samadikun, Kesenden, and Kesunenan (Cirebonpos, 2023).

The enactment of laws and their implementation are part of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations for 2030, which are committed to eradicating poverty (Goal 1) and reducing inequality and vulnerability (Goal 10) (United Nations, 2017). These goals cannot be achieved without collective efforts to improve the living standards of marginalized groups living and working in urban slum settlements.

As a collaborative effort involving various stakeholders, this study aims to recognize the rights of communities living in slum settlements and gather detailed information about specific vulnerabilities that can be used to develop evidence-based interventions (data and facts) to improve the health and well-being of these communities.

The specific experiences of child laborers remain insufficiently understood, limiting the opportunities to hold stakeholders accountable for their welfare (Lee et al., 2014). A holistic framing of well-being allows related stakeholders to depict interconnected material, social, and human dimensions, which can influence child laborers' experiences and perceptions of well-being and shape how they navigate the challenging environments in which they live.

This research is essential for understanding the well-being and vulnerabilities of child laborers in urban slum areas, such as in Cirebon City, as a fundamental step in formulating relevant, evidence-based policies. The unique challenges faced by child laborers in such environments warrant greater attention, particularly given their impact on children's basic rights, access to education, and opportunities for improving their quality of life. Previous studies have addressed various aspects of child labor, focusing on legal protections, health, and psychosocial well-being. For example, Djakaria (2017) examined the legal protections available to child laborers under Indonesian law, emphasizing the need for stronger frameworks to safeguard the safety and health of young workers. Similarly, Oktavianti and Nahdhah (2021) reviewed the legal protections for child laborers in Indonesia, focusing on enforcement mechanisms and the role of law in mitigating child labor. Feeny et al. (2021) explored the psychosocial well-being of child laborers in India, shedding light on the emotional and mental challenges faced by children in labor-intensive environments.

However, these studies typically focus on specific aspects of child labor, such as legal frameworks, health, or psychosocial factors, and often rely on either legal analysis or quantitative data that do not capture the lived experiences of the children themselves. The narrative study employing the Photovoice method in this research offers a unique opportunity for child

laborers to directly express their experiences, thus enriching the understanding of their well-being in a more holistic manner. While prior research has made significant contributions to understanding child labor from legal or health perspectives, few studies have utilized participatory methodologies that allow children to actively narrate their own stories, particularly in urban slum contexts where socio-economic conditions are often underexplored.

Moreover, most existing research has focused on rural or industrial settings, leaving a significant gap in studies that address the specific vulnerabilities of child laborers in urban slums. The use of Photovoice in this study enables the voices of children from these urban environments to be heard in a way that conventional research methods may overlook. This approach helps identify specific vulnerabilities shaped by factors such as environmental hazards, lack of access to services, and the complexities of urban poverty. Consequently, this study fills a crucial gap by focusing on child laborers in urban slum areas and utilizing participatory methods to explore their well-being and vulnerabilities in greater depth. The findings of this study are expected to make a meaningful contribution to advocacy and interventions aimed at enhancing the welfare of child laborers and supporting the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) targets, particularly in eradicating poverty and reducing social inequality in urban areas.

Literature Review

Child labor remains a deeply entrenched global issue, defined by the International Labour Organization (ILO) and UNICEF as work that deprives children of their rights, impairs their development, and hinders their access to education (ILO, 2021; UNICEF, 2021). While international frameworks—such as ILO Conventions No. 138 and No. 182—set normative standards regarding the minimum age for employment and the elimination of the worst forms of child labor, these definitions often require contextual adaptation to local socio-economic realities. In Indonesia, Law No. 13 of 2003 on Manpower provides a legal basis that prohibits the employment of children under 13 and restricts permissible work for those aged 13–15. However, the rise of informal and digital labor markets, especially in urban slum areas such as those in Cirebon, exposes children to new and less-regulated forms of labor exploitation. This underscores the necessity of a more dynamic and context-sensitive understanding of child labor.

Existing research has classified child labor based on age, type of work, and its impact on children's education and health (ILO, 2021), but many studies are still purely descriptive, failing to take into account the interaction between economic survival strategies and local family dynamics—especially

in urban slum environments. In Cirebon, for example, child labor is often not solely a matter of exploitation but also a mechanism of household resilience in the absence of sufficient public welfare systems (Nurwati, 2008). Families experiencing chronic poverty frequently depend on children's income as a coping mechanism, and children's motivations to work are influenced by a sense of duty and collective survival (Nurwati, 2008; Helmi, 2019). These realities reflect the intergenerational transmission of poverty, often entrenched in local social structures.

To understand the well-being of child laborers, this study adopts White's (2010) well-being framework, which offers a multidimensional and culturally responsive model. White identifies four key components: "doing well" (material well-being), "feeling good" (subjective satisfaction), "doing good" (moral action), and "feeling well" (holistic health). Central to this model is the well-being pyramid, consisting of three interconnected layers: the material dimension (income, consumption, and livelihoods), the relational dimension (social ties, identity, education, and security), and the subjective dimension (values, beliefs, and perceptions of happiness). Unlike linear economic models, White's framework recognizes that well-being is context-dependent, multidimensional, and often negotiated in resource-constrained environments, a premise that is particularly relevant for child laborers in the slums of Cirebon, where survival is often a higher priority than formal education.

However, while White's framework enables a nuanced exploration of children's lived realities, it has been critiqued for its limited attention to structural power imbalances that perpetuate vulnerability. This study addresses that gap by integrating Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979, 1986), which highlights the layered and systemic influences on child development, from immediate family contexts to broader policy environments. The application of this model allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how local, institutional, and societal forces converge to shape child labor experiences.

The vulnerability of child laborers must therefore be seen not only in terms of immediate risk but also as a systemic condition of powerlessness that restricts resilience and agency. Ward and Eyber (2009), as well as Nurhidayati and Fariz (2021), have identified psychosocial and economic vulnerability as key dimensions, which often intersect and reinforce each other. Other scholars (Van Breda, 2010; Makuyana et al., 2020; Chademana & Van Wyk, 2021) emphasize the importance of examining the micro (individual and household), meso (community), and macro (policy) levels when assessing vulnerability. These perspectives are particularly salient in the context of urban poverty in Cirebon, where children often face overlapping

vulnerabilities—ranging from economic exploitation and educational exclusion to psychological distress and social alienation (Suryadi, Fuad, & Badar, 2020).

Nonetheless, much of the existing literature still lacks attention to the voices and lived experiences of the children themselves. Most studies adopt top-down approaches, which risk oversimplifying the complex trade-offs faced by families who rely on child labor as a survival strategy. This study seeks to fill that gap by using the photovoice method to foreground the subjective perspectives of child laborers and how they themselves understand and navigate their vulnerabilities. As Helmi (2019) emphasizes in his case study of child construction workers in rural Cirebon, children's work experiences are shaped by both economic necessity and intricate social interactions

Method

This study focuses on the issue of child labor in the slum areas of Cirebon City. This research seeks to explore and reveal the lived experiences and challenges of children engaged in labor in slum environments. The issue of child labor is crucial to address due to its impact on the social, economic, and psychological development of children, a topic that is often underexplored in previous studies. Therefore, the aim of this research is to provide deeper insights into their realities and employ a participatory approach that enables the children to be active contributors to the research process. This method fosters a more comprehensive understanding of the participants' daily lives, especially as they face marginalization and life challenges (Wang & Burris, 1997; Fairey, 2018).

This study uses a qualitative approach with a photovoice methodology, which allows direct participation from child laborers as co-researchers. The photovoice method has been widely utilized in community-based participatory research to identify and reflect on community issues (Wang & Pies, 2004; Catalani & Minkler, 2010).

Participants

The research participants were children aged 10–17 years who have lived in slum areas for at least one year. This age range was selected because it encompasses children who are in a crucial developmental stage, balancing both educational aspirations and work obligations. Additionally, children in this age range are generally capable of reflecting on their experiences and articulating their feelings, making them ideal participants for this study on well-being and vulnerability.

While the selection of participants is based on age and residence in slum areas, future studies could benefit from clarifying why this specific age group is most relevant for understanding the socio-economic and

psychological effects of child labor, as these factors may vary at different developmental stages.

Data Collection and Procedures

The primary data for this study were collected through photos taken by the participants, in-depth interviews, and participatory observation. This combination of data sources allows for a rich, nuanced portrayal of their experiences and perceptions, which are often difficult to capture using traditional methods. Cameras or smartphones were provided to the participants to document their daily lives, with each stage of the data collection focusing on a different theme: In the first week, participants photographed their daily lives, capturing their routines and environments. The second week focused on themes of health and well-being. The third week was dedicated to documenting potential improvements to their living conditions.

In addition to the photos, in-depth interviews were conducted to explore the motivations behind the images and to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' experiences. These interviews allowed the researcher to discuss the themes in the photos, asking the children to explain what the images represented and how they related to their lives.

Ethical considerations were paramount throughout this research. The use of photos posed potential privacy concerns, especially given the vulnerable status of child laborers. Therefore, informed consent was obtained from both the participants and their guardians, ensuring that the children understood the nature of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and the use of their images. Privacy and confidentiality were maintained by anonymizing the photos and ensuring that they were only shared within the research team and with appropriate consent.

Data Analysis

The analysis of the photos and interviews was conducted using narrative analysis and triangulation to ensure data validity. Narrative analysis allows for an understanding of the stories behind the images and how the participants interpret their experiences. Each photo was analyzed to identify key themes related to the participants' marginalization and well-being. Triangulation was conducted by cross-referencing findings from different data sources—photos, interviews, and field notes—to ensure the reliability and validity of the conclusions drawn (Gale et al., 2013; Nowell et al., 2017).

During the analysis, coding was performed using a thematic approach, where patterns and relationships between experiences were identified. This approach allowed the research team to uncover recurring themes related to socio-economic factors and the challenges faced by child laborers. In addition to thematic coding, a discussion among the research team helped to refine the coding process and validate the findings.

To enhance the rigor of the triangulation process, regular feedback sessions with the participants were conducted, allowing them to reflect on the findings and provide additional insights into their experiences. These sessions also served as a form of validation, ensuring that the interpretations of the photos were in line with the participants' intended meanings.

Although the photovoice method offers valuable insights into the experiences of child laborers, there are inherent challenges. One limitation is the potential for bias in photo selection, as participants might choose images that are more meaningful to them or that align with their perceptions of the study's focus. Additionally, there are limitations to the ability of young children to fully capture the complexities of their lives through photography. Some children may struggle with technical aspects, while others may not be able to visually communicate the deeper emotional or social issues they face.

Result

The findings of this study reveal various dimensions of vulnerability experienced by children engaged in hazardous work. To facilitate a comprehensive understanding of their life experiences, the research results are presented based on key thematic categories. One of the main themes relates to the fragile living environment and environmental risks routinely faced by these children, as described below.

Living Conditions

The participants in this study were all born and raised in urban informal settlements, where poverty has been a constant reality since birth. Among the participants, three live with parents who are unable to provide adequate care due to illness or alcohol dependency, while two others have been abandoned by their parents entirely. These children reside in areas particularly susceptible to flooding and environmental hazards caused by improper management of household and factory waste. The unsafe conditions are further exacerbated by open drainage systems, which pose both health and safety risks to the residents.

In addition to the environmental challenges, the participants often experience hunger, reflecting the dire economic conditions they endure daily. These vulnerabilities highlight the compounded struggles faced by children growing up in such precarious circumstances. Table 1 summarizes key vulnerability factors, shedding light on the complex and interrelated hardships that define the lives of these child laborers.

Table 1. Vulnerability Factors of Child Laborers

Initials	Age	Gender	Vulnerability Factors
IP	16	Male	IP lives in a small house with his biological mother, father, two younger siblings, and five extended family members. After graduating from junior high school, IP did not continue his education because he chose to work at a chicken slaughterhouse. He has to work every day from 12 a.m. to morning. His father is a casual laborer and has a hobby of cockfighting. He once had an appendectomy and was previously exposed to drug addiction. His environment is vulnerable to drug circulation among young people. He is forced to work because of his family's economic condition. IP has become the breadwinner of the family, earning Rp. 55,000 a day, which he gives to his mother for household expenses and his younger siblings' school needs.
MI	14	Female	MI dropped out of school since the 4th grade of elementary school. He and his younger brother live with their grandmother (65 years old) who is often sick. MI's parents have divorced, and both have remarried. MI's father was a former casual worker in the market. MI was abandoned by his father when he was in the 3rd grade of elementary school, and since then, they rarely communicate, and he has never provided financial support since the divorce. Meanwhile, MI's mother, after remarrying, moved to Central Java with her new husband. She occasionally sends money but not regularly, and their communication is limited to phone calls. MI's income from collecting garbage ranges from Rp. 20,000 to Rp. 30,000 a day, which he gives to his grandmother for food, with the rest used for his younger brother's school needs, who is still in the 2nd grade of elementary school.
AM	16	Male	Initially, AM had a cheerful and happy personality. However, since his father passed away, AM's condition deteriorated, and he often isolates himself, becoming a quiet person who enjoys being alone. After his father's death, AM became the breadwinner of his family, earning money to support them, and he also had to take responsibility for his younger siblings who are still in school. Amid his life of bearing the family's burdens, he has to manage his time for school, work, studying the Qur'an, and other activities. AM continued his late father's activity of delivering spices to market vendors. The work he does before and after school earns him around Rp. 30,000 to Rp. 40,000 a day.
AR	13	Male	AR's daily life involves being a street musician at traffic lights. Both of AR's parents have divorced, and he now lives with his mother. AR became a street musician (a street child) due to economic hardship, which forced

Initials	Age	Gender	Vulnerability Factors
			him to drop out of school in the 3rd grade of elementary school. On the street, AR has friends who share the same fate. He performs alone or with his friends. He earns around Rp. 30,000 to Rp. 50,000 a day, most of which he gives to his mother for household expenses.
GA	14	Male	For three years, GA has been helping his father as a trash collector at the Kopiluhur landfill in Cirebon City. Due to this activity, GA did not continue his education and only completed elementary school. GA works every day from 7 a.m. to 4 p.m. His earnings are separate from his father's income. From the weight of the trash he collects and sells to the scrap dealers, he can earn between Rp. 150,000 and Rp. 200,000 per week. He does not enjoy this money alone; GA gives most of it for his family's food, while he takes only what he needs for himself.

Source. Data processing results

Child Labor Vulnerability

Child laborers in the slums of Cirebon City face significant physical and health vulnerabilities. They work in unsafe and unhygienic environments, with minimal equipment, such as flip-flops and used gloves. The risks they face are enormous, such as injuries from sharp objects or broken glass, exposure to hazardous medical waste, and threats from thugs or adult scavengers. One participant, MI, was seriously injured by broken glass while scavenging. Although he was injured, he could not rest for long because he feared losing the opportunity to earn money.

In addition, child laborers in Cirebon also experience long and irregular working hours. For example, participant IP works every day from 1 a.m. to 9 a.m. at a poultry slaughterhouse, while MI starts working at 4:30 a.m. searching for trash in narrow alleys. This condition is extremely draining, causing extraordinary physical fatigue and posing risks to their health. Although some have protection like trash pickers and boots, like GA who works at the Kopiluhur landfill, health risks remain, especially due to exposure to the strong smell of garbage.

Besides physical vulnerabilities, child laborers also face social and educational vulnerabilities. Four participants chose not to continue their education due to economic limitations and the time they had to spend working. MI expressed a longing for school but admitted that he could not continue his education because he couldn't afford it and did not have a primary school diploma. Similarly, IP was forced to stop school after junior high because he had to work to help his family's finances. They struggled to balance work and school and couldn't afford educational costs, which further worsened their social vulnerabilities.

Economic factors are the main driving force for child laborers to enter the workforce. IP explained that his family relied on his father's irregular income as a construction worker. The insufficient income for the family's needs forced IP to work to help meet daily expenses. MI also mentioned that he only earned 20-30 thousand per day, which he shared with his grandmother to buy food. With difficult economic conditions, these children are trapped in low-paying jobs, which further worsens their social and economic conditions.

Child laborers also experience psychological vulnerabilities, such as anxiety about the future and premature responsibility burdens. Some participants experience stress due to experiences of violence or exploitation, as well as insecurity due to the economic instability of their families. These psychological impacts can hinder their emotional development, reduce their self-confidence, and make it difficult for them to build healthy social relationships. Additionally, the difficulty in developing aspirations or dreams also becomes a significant challenge for them, as they face the harsh realities of life from an early age.

Child Labor Wellbeing

Child laborers in the slums of Cirebon City face significant challenges regarding their well-being, especially in material dimensions. They live in environments filled with trash, open waste, and poor sanitation, which affect their physical health as well as their mental well-being. This condition also impacts their subjective well-being, as they often feel isolated and stressed due to their uninhabitable surroundings. Such environments, with the pungent smell of garbage and clogged drainage systems, worsen their quality of life, both physically and emotionally.

Moreover, child laborers also experience limitations in relational dimensions, such as access to public goods and services. Many of them, especially street musicians and street children, find it difficult to access public facilities due to discriminatory treatment from society. This negative perception makes them feel ashamed or afraid to use facilities that should be available to the public. They also lack knowledge about their rights and how to access social assistance programs that could help them, thus hindering their efforts to improve their quality of life.

In the subjective dimension, some participants demonstrate mental resilience despite facing challenging situations. However, they also express sadness and a longing to return to a childhood filled with freedom. AM, for example, shares the dilemma he faces between continuing school or working to support his family. The great responsibility they bear, such as taking care of siblings or replacing the role of parents, burdens them emotionally, making them feel they have lost the time to play or socialize with their peers.

Feelings of loneliness and stress are also often experienced by child laborers, which are further exacerbated by a lack of social interaction. They feel isolated and compare themselves to friends who do not have to work hard to support their families. This worsens their perception of their well-being, with many of them feeling that their lives are dark and lonely. As AM expressed, they often feel trapped between the obligation to work and the need to experience happiness like other children.

Table 2. Dimensions of Child Labor Wellbeing

Dimension	Aspect	Findings
Material	Physical Environmental Conditions	Drainage systems full of trash and waste.
		Damaged open play facilities.
		Uninhabitable housing with poor sanitation.
Relational	Access to Public Goods	Limitations in accessing public facilities due to discrimination.
		Difficulty accessing social assistance and lack of knowledge about their rights.
	Social and Family Burdens	Responsibility to take care of siblings.
		Living with incapacitated adults.
Subjective	Feelings of Sadness, Loneliness, and Stress	Feeling isolated and anxious about comparing themselves with friends who don't have to work hard.
		Desire to return to a carefree childhood like their peers.
	Mental Resilience	Patient and accepting of their current condition.

Source. Data processing results

Child Labor Photographs

The participants presented photos they had taken themselves, which were then clarified to understand the meaning behind them. One participant, GA, captured an image of discarded food packaging from a fast-food restaurant. Based on interview results, the choice of this object reflects GA's perception of a "different world," a life he observes but finds difficult to access. The photo also illustrates GA's hope or dream of experiencing dining at such a restaurant.

Figure 1. Series of Photos Taken by Participants



Source. Field observation

Meanwhile, MI captured an image of his younger brother's school shoes, which carried a profound story of longing and hope. Through interviews, it was revealed that the photo reflects his personal experience of disrupted education and serves as a symbol of his dream for his brother to attain educational opportunities he himself could not access. His brother's school shoes symbolize MI's determination to secure a better future for his sibling, as shown by his sacrifices as a street child willing to perform as a busker to fund his brother's education. This choice of object unveils a strong emotional bond and a deep sense of responsibility, portraying the family dynamics where the eldest sibling often must "step aside" and strive for the future of their younger siblings.

In the photovoice activity, AM chose to photograph his late father's motorcycle, which he now uses to continue the family business by delivering cooking spices to the market. Through this photo, AM conveyed both a deep sense of loss and a strong determination to carry on his father's role. The motorcycle serves as a symbol of inheritance and continuity, reflecting AM's early maturity shaped by the demands of his circumstances. Additionally, the motorcycle holds emotional significance, connecting AM to cherished memories with his father and symbolizing the close emotional bond they shared.

IP also took a photo of a motorcycle, but with a different meaning. The motorcycle belongs to his aunt, and through interviews, it was revealed that this photo reflects IP's unfulfilled desire to own a vehicle of his own, as well as his hope for an improved quality of life. The photo serves as a symbolic reminder of the goals he aims to achieve, embodying IP's hard-working spirit and aspirations for a better future. On the other hand, the image highlights the contrast between the desire to own a motorcycle and the limitations of his income as a poultry slaughterhouse worker. The photo portrays the dilemma between meeting basic needs, such as food, and striving to acquire assets,

reflecting the heavy responsibilities of a teenager who must provide for his family.

AR chose to photograph a fellow street child sitting by the roadside, with the image reflecting himself. In the interview, AR explained that the photo represents a recognition of shared identity as street children and expresses a sense of solidarity. Through his photo, AR aims to highlight the importance of social connections amidst the harsh realities of street life, viewing friendship as a survival strategy that relies on the strength of social networks.

Discussion

This study employed the photovoice method to explore the well-being and vulnerability of child laborers in the slum areas of Cirebon, uncovering rich narratives that reflect complex intersections between material deprivation, emotional bonds, and social resilience. The findings align with and expand upon the theoretical frameworks introduced in the literature review, particularly White's (2010) well-being pyramid and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979, 1986), offering nuanced insights into the lived experiences of child laborers.

The photograph of discarded fast-food packaging taken by one participant illustrates the material dimension of well-being, as defined by White (2010) as "doing well." This image symbolizes not only economic disparity but also the child's awareness of social inequalities—where waste from affluent communities becomes a means of survival for marginalized children. The child's act of photographing this object reflects both their material hardship and their critical consciousness, resonating with the concept of economic vulnerability discussed by Chademana and Van Wyk (2021), and the systemic disparities highlighted in Bronfenbrenner's macrosystem layer.

The photograph of school shoes belonging to a younger sibling captures the relational and subjective dimensions of well-being. It represents the emotional commitment and protective role often assumed by older siblings in low-income families. This image encapsulates White's (2010) notion of "doing good" and "feeling well," illustrating the child's aspiration for educational mobility and a better future for their sibling, even at the cost of their own schooling. Such sacrifice is indicative of familial resilience (Van Breda, 2010) and reflects the interdependence between family dynamics and children's sense of purpose and identity.

The photographs of motorcycles—whether representing a deceased father's legacy or a relative's possession—offer further insight into the multidimensional nature of child well-being. These images highlight the importance of both tangible assets (material well-being) and symbolic inheritance (relational and subjective well-being). The act of assuming adult

responsibilities after the loss of a parent demonstrates early maturity and the reorganization of family roles, underscoring the child's ability to adapt to adverse conditions. This illustrates that child labor constitutes both a psychosocial and economic vulnerability (Ward & Eyber, 2009; Nurhidayati & Fariz, 2021), wherein children are confronted with interrelated challenges as they strive to uphold family cohesion.

The photo of a street child seated alone illustrates the significance of social ties and emotional solidarity among peers. Such imagery speaks to the relational dimension of well-being, demonstrating how friendships serve as coping mechanisms amidst the isolation and stigma of street life. The photo reveals how peer relationships contribute to emotional resilience, reinforcing the argument that child vulnerability cannot be fully understood without considering the social support systems children construct themselves (Collins et al., 2016).

Collectively, these narratives demonstrate that universal child protection policies—often designed without contextual sensitivity—may be ineffective or even counterproductive. As emphasized by ILO (2021) and UNICEF (2021), child labor in its most hazardous forms must be eradicated; however, this study supports critiques (Nurhidayati & Fariz, 2021) that point to the inadequacy of such frameworks in addressing the lived realities of economically vulnerable families. Blanket prohibitions on child labor may neglect the structural causes of child labor, including poverty, lack of access to education, and the absence of economic alternatives for families.

Therefore, this study advocates for a more holistic and integrated approach to policy design—one that incorporates White's (2010) multidimensional framework of well-being and Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective. At the micro level, this includes providing psychosocial support to child laborers to help mitigate the long-term psychological effects of trauma and stress. At the meso and macro levels, efforts should focus on community empowerment, economic strengthening of families, and the development of inclusive educational models that accommodate the realities of working children.

Importantly, the participatory nature of this study reveals that child laborers are not passive recipients of policy but active narrators of their own experiences. Their photographs are not merely representations of hardship; they are testimonies of agency, hope, and resilience. Thus, policy-making processes must include children's voices in planning, implementation, and evaluation, echoing a rights-based, participatory paradigm in child protection. This study affirms that behind every statistic on child labor lies a human story—one that demands a more compassionate, contextualized, and transformative policy response.

Conclusion

This study successfully portrays the well-being and vulnerability of child laborers in the urban slum areas of Cirebon City. These child laborers are trapped in complex living conditions, influenced by structural poverty, poor environments, and weak social protection systems. This forces them to work to help support their family's economy. The experience of working at an early age has significant psychological impacts, such as stress and trauma, and reduces their childhood. Additionally, unsafe working conditions, long working hours, and the risk of exploitation exacerbate their vulnerability to physical and mental health issues.

Social stigma and limited access to basic services further worsen the sense of isolation felt by child laborers, causing them to lose hope for a better future. The photovoice method used in this study provided an opportunity for the children to become the main storytellers, allowing them to share their stories and experiences. This method not only helped the children build solidarity but also created space for changes in more inclusive policies and social interventions that consider their needs and rights.

Based on the results of this study, several recommendations are provided for relevant stakeholders. First, the government needs to strengthen the social protection system for poor families, expand access to basic services, and build child-friendly infrastructure. Additionally, the capacity of social institutions and community-based social workers must be improved to address child labor issues. Second, civil society organizations need to strengthen advocacy for the rights of child laborers, develop community empowerment models, and increase children's involvement in decision-making processes. Third, future researchers are advised to develop an interdisciplinary conceptual framework and use participatory methods that actively involve children while adhering to ethical research practices. Overall, this study emphasizes the need for an integrated approach to addressing child labor, taking into account the socio-economic factors of the family and their impact on the children's well-being. Policies that involve multiple sectors and stakeholders are required to listen to and respect the voices of child laborers, while preventing further exploitation.

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Author Contribution Statement

This article was written by three authors: AH (Author 1) was responsible for designing the research topic and objectives, as well as writing the introduction and methodology sections, including the selection of data analysis techniques. ZM (Author 2) focused on data collection and statistical analysis, as well as writing the results and discussion sections that interpret the research findings. NI (Author 3) contributed to the literature review, suggested relevant theories, and assisted in writing the conclusion and editing the article to ensure completeness and alignment with academic standards. Each author contributed according to their specialization and expertise.

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