

# Children and Work Research Series: Session 4

## Children as Affective Laborers

*Dr. Leigh Campoamor*

The concepts of affective, emotional and caring labor have opened up crucial discussions about un- and undervalued work performed by women under patriarchal capitalism. However, children are generally absent from such discussions, figuring only as objects of women's labor; this contributes to their invisibilization as actors who produce different forms of value. I suggest that approaching children as affective laborers can enrich discussions about gendered labor under patriarchal capitalism and offer a productive way out of stale models for addressing the fraught topic of child labor. My approach highlights how children and mothers constitute intergenerational laboring units and helps move us beyond the socialization/exploitation dichotomy with regard to children's work.

My research draws primarily on my ethnographic fieldwork in Lima, Peru with children who work as candy vendors, jugglers, and musicians on busy streets and public buses, as well as my twenty-year relationship with Peru's Movement of Working Children. The children in my research produced value in many ways, including through home-based activities, everyday exchanges with adult strangers in public space, and participation in political debates. Approaching children as affective laborers enables me to highlight the fluidity between the home and the street as sites of work, challenging the binary between private and public spheres foundational to patriarchal capitalist understandings of production and modern conceptions of childhood. In situating children's work within the multilayered and multigenerational relationships of care, I challenge the narratives of blame that target poor and racialized parents of working children. Specifically, I reveal how, in the context of informal work and anti-child labor discourse, the concept of exploitation has paradoxically become a gendered concept, deployed by state agencies, NGOs, and members of the global public to discipline family units in the name of child protection. By contextualizing children's lives in the context of patriarchal capitalism, I demonstrate how universal norms regarding childhood presuppose conditions that are systematically denied to these families, revealing the limitations of the rights framework as a way of addressing structural inequalities.

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## **Bio**

Leigh Campoamor is a scholar, activist, and precarious worker who holds a Ph.D. in Cultural Anthropology from Duke University in the United States. In the last several years, she has taught in various small liberal arts colleges in the United States and was a Visiting Scholar at NYU-Gallatin's Urban Democracy Lab. She is currently an Instructor of International Comparative Studies at Duke University. Dr. Campoamor has published articles in *American Anthropologist*, the *Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology*, and *NACLA: Report on the Americas*. She is completing a book entitled *Public Childhoods: Growing Up Working in Peru's Informal Economy*, a historically-grounded ethnography that elucidates the tensions between institutional efforts to produce and manage children as disciplined bearers of an imagined future (or carefree non-adults) and working children's attempts to survive, make their lives meaningful, and imagine individual and collective futures as they are interpellated into these moralizing discourses. The book includes a longitudinal component that returns to the now-adult children at the center of her research ten years later, as they navigate young adulthood. Dr. Campoamor has been collaborating with Peru's Movement of Working Children for twenty years, and credits the movement with sparking her interest in the topic of children's work and her process of unlearning adult-centrism. She has also researched corporate involvement in child labor eradication through a case study of a Telefonica, a transnational telecom giant that sought to introduce digital technologies as a tool of children's rights activism in Colombia, Peru and beyond. In addition to her ongoing commitment supporting working children's activism in Peru, she is involved in racial and economic justice activism in her adopted hometown of Durham, North Carolina.