



*Adult and child workers in the N.V. Pulp-, Jam- and Conserve Factory Princenhage (ca. 1913)  
(Aspecten van het Sociale leven in Breda na 1850)*

## **Childhood, Work and Education, 1900-2000: The Netherlands and Netherlands Indies/Indonesia Compared**

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*This paper compares child employment and attitudes towards it in the Netherlands and the Netherlands Indies/Indonesia, from the late 19th century to the present.*

*In the Netherlands, by the first years of the 20th century a whole apparatus was in place to keep children (up to age 12) in school and out of certain kinds of full-time work.*

*This contrasted starkly with the situation in its greatest colony the Netherlands Indies, where the colonial government made no attempt to introduce primary education until 1907, and the issue of child labour was not formally raised – reluctantly, and in response to international initiatives – until the 1920s. Implementing the ILO's 1919 child labour convention in the Indies, the government maintained this double standard by re-defining both 'child', 'workplace' and even 'night-time', mainly to suit the convenience of the European plantation companies. By the end of the 20th century the Netherlands would appear to have effectively eliminated child labour, while it remains a serious problem in Indonesia. The situation is actually rather less clear-cut, since nowadays more Dutch than Indonesian children are likely to be involved in labour markets. These comparisons are not meant to belittle the extent of the problem in Indonesia, or to exaggerate it in the Netherlands, but to help us better understand the real nature of the 'child labour' problem, which is not a problem of 'work' as such or even of earning money, but of the abuse of children in certain forms and conditions of work.*

### **Child work and school in the Netherlands around 1900**

In the Netherlands, both the restriction of child labour and the expansion of access to primary education had been subjects of lively debate, campaigning and political mobilisation since the mid-19th century. Legislation limiting the employment of children

had been introduced in 1874 and again in 1889. These laws in themselves had little effect, but the number of children attending school rose steadily in the late 19th century: when the first compulsory education law was introduced in 1900, already about nine in ten boys and girls aged 6-12 were attending school. The impact of the 'leerplichtwet' was therefore quite modest: in the four years after passage of the law, school attendance among children aged 6-12 rose only about three or four percent, from 92 to 95 percent (boys) and from 90 to 94 percent (girls).

In both child labour and education, legislation followed rather than stimulated social trends towards universal primary education and a reduction in the full-time employment of children. By 1900 a whole apparatus was at work to place and keep children in school, and a much more modest inspectorate to keep them out of certain kinds of full-time work.

The 'child labour' problem in the Netherlands in the early twentieth century was of two main kinds. First, many children went to work full-time as soon as they had completed the required seven years of compulsory education, often before their twelfth birthday, in occupations subject to no restrictions on work conditions or working hours; and second, school-going children aged 12 and below were involved on a large scale in part-time and seasonal work, in both urban and rural regions. Both these problems are well documented in various enquiries conducted by government agencies, professional associations or political parties.

In 1907 the 'Socialdemocratische Arbeiderspartij' (SDAP) and the 'Nederlandsch Verbond van Vakverenigingen' (NVV) undertook a large-scale enquiry on working hours and conditions in relation to their campaign for introduction of the 10-hour working day and restrictions on night-work and child employment. This covered 23 separate branches of factory and workshop industry, as well as several non-industrial sectors including construction, transport, shop and office work. Full-time employment of children aged 12-13 was found on a large scale; daily working hours for both girls and boys were the same as for adults, most commonly around 11 hours. Another enquiry by the SDAP focused on working hours and conditions of agricultural workers, and concluded: "*Child labour is at least as common as women's labour. Children do roughly the same work as women and work for as long or even longer, of course for still lower wages*". Children aged 12-13 were not covered in the minimum-age laws until 1919.

For those children aged 12 and under (and since 1900 subject to compulsory education law) school attendance did not mean freedom from employment, as documented in the enquiries already mentioned as well as reports focusing specifically on the 'part-time child labour' problem by the Netherlands Teachers' Union and the Joint Commission on Educational Matters. A teacher in a rural school reported: "*Except for the children of wealthy people, all children of nine years and above are exploited*". In most cases, children worked both before and after school and it was pointed out that legal work (such as agricultural work) could have just as negative consequences as work in factories and

workshops. In Amsterdam, many boys and girls in the 'first and second class schools' (those where parents were unable to pay the full fees), besides spending 26-30 hours per week in school, worked for an additional 30 hours and in some cases even more than 50 hours. Some of the most common urban jobs for both boys and girls were the delivery of messages, bread, milk, newspapers and laundry, as well as helping in shops.

When some three thousand teachers in Amsterdam were asked if they observed a negative impact of part-time employment on the children's education, they were quite divided on the issue: besides the 851 who gave no answer or a "don't know", 1184 answered "no" and 968 "yes". This only confirms the rather obvious reality (ignored by some child labour campaigners even today) that not all forms of work are harmful to children or to their education; it is not work itself, but certain harmful forms and conditions of work, that harm children. The frequently-mentioned harmful consequences included lateness and absence; tiredness in school, backwardness and various kinds of misbehaviour (fighting, stealing, lying etc.). As the Joint Commission's report asked rhetorically: "*The 'leerplichtwet' demands that the child goes to school; but what is the use of going to school if the school bench is the place where the child comes to get some rest after having done some exhausting work?*" The same report also commented: "*On the whole the consequences of child exploitation are more moral than intellectual... Children who work get the feeling of being grown up and of having had enough of learning and teachers. They begin to feel like workers; they are no longer children*".

The compulsory education law actually allowed children six weeks' 'verlof' (leave) per year, which could be extended to 8-10 weeks by adding two weeks' vacation and even a couple more weeks after the first warning before the parents became subject to a fine. In rural areas at harvest time, it was impossible to keep children in school, as reported from Emmen: "*In the summer of 1905, for more than two months I had no more than 25-30 of my 56 pupils. The rest just don't come to school, although they had only six weeks' leave... mainly at the time of the potato harvest*". Especially after the summer, full-time work alongside adults gave the children attitudes and self-assurance which were not welcomed in school: "*After the summer leave the boys come back crude and churlish ['ruw en lomp']: fighting, cursing, smoking pipes*". In the town of Breda, work in home-based industries was common also for school-age children; schools reported large-scale absenteeism in the months of June, July and September (besides the official summer holidays in August), mainly for work in fruit and vegetable bottling. Some children missed 40 to 130 days of school. "*And when they did attend, they fell asleep in class, falling behind and having to stay in the same class next year ... moreover it corrupted their characters, as they had to avail themselves of all kinds of lies and evasions to excuse their absence*", as the head of one girls' school observed.

The new 'Arbeidswet' of 1919 prohibited entry into factories and workplaces for children under 14 years. Nevertheless, children of 12 and 13 frequently entered full-time employment in other sectors. Girls often began work as full-time housemaids even

# Arbeiders, gaat voor je kinderen staan!

DE WIJZIGINGEN IN DE ARBEIDSWET  
OVER KINDERARBEID.



— UITGAVE VAN DE COMMUNITISCHE JEUGD —  
CENTRAAL-BUREAU LAAGTE KADUJK 2 AMSTERDAM.

*"Workers stand up for your children". A pamphlet (1924) of the Central Bureau of Communist Youth (Amsterdam) protesting against the government's decision to postpone to 1930 the introduction of a seventh year of compulsory education (International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam)*

before their twelfth birthday, as soon as they had completed the seven compulsory school years. Domestic service was by far the biggest source of employment for women, employing 44 percent of the female workforce in 1898; this declined by 1930 to 31 percent but was still the largest single employer of women, being overtaken by other sectors only after the second world war. Domestic servants were excluded from the general (1919) restriction of working hours to 8 hours per day and 45 hours per week, and their work-day often exceeded 14 hours.

**"Is there enough work for children?": colonial attitudes  
to child work in Indonesia, around 1900**

While basic education and child labour were subjects of intensive state intervention, social concern and political mobilisation in the Netherlands, Dutch attitudes in the Netherlands' largest colony the Netherlands East Indies were quite different. Around 1900 there are no indications that the authorities thought that the lack of education among the children of her majesty's colonial subjects, or their widespread, full-time involvement in work, constituted an important social problem. While (as we have seen above) only about five percent of Dutch children were not in school by 1900, at the same time only about one in two hundred Indonesian children (the children of local chiefs and officials) attended school of any kind. If there were no schools for them to go to, one could hardly express serious concern that children were working. In fact, in the Indies as in the Netherlands and many other countries at the time, the greatest social concern was expressed not about children at work, but those 'idle' children who were neither at work nor in school. An earlier experiment with village schools in Central Java had been cynically reviewed by the Director of Education: "*The intention was certainly a good one, namely to keep the young boys busy... the schools were indeed of some use; the boys were kept out of mischief, such as setting things on fire (they had caused some serious fires in the past)*".

In the massive *Inquiry into the Declining Welfare of the Native Population of Java and Madura* undertaken in 1905, only one question was asked about child employment: "*Is there generally sufficient opportunity for wage-employment among men, women and children?*" The inquiry's findings indicate that not only native employers but also the colonial government itself and European plantation corporations employed children on a large scale. Children's working-day was the same as that of adults (usually between 8-10 hours) and children's wages were generally about half those of adult men, and 65-75 percent those of adult women; in terms of both working hours and their relative wages, Javaneese children actually seem to have been better off than their counterparts in the industries, workshops, farms and other trades in the Netherlands.

It was not until the so-called 'ethical policy' and the decision to introduce village schools from 1907 onwards (for which villagers themselves had to pay most of the costs) that villagers in most regions had any prospect of access to education for their children. The new policy however (which would require establishment of about 10,000 village schools, one for every three of Java's 30,000 villages) was implemented slowly. A few voices called for efforts to speed up the process, among them F. Fokkens, former Resident of the island of Madura, who published a series of articles on the topic: *"If the new policy is everywhere desired - and it is, because in all regions there is a pressing need for the little man to receive education - then it should also be implemented simultaneously everywhere... The whole affair is very cheap for the government... then at least we shall not have to reproach ourselves so much with the thought of how much the native population have done for us Netherlanders, and how little this has been recognised by us"*. Despite such arguments, and despite the fact that villagers bore the costs of constructing the schools and the teachers' salaries without complaint, by the 1930s only about one-third of native children were attending primary school (for two and a half hours each day and remaining for only three years, thus leaving at age 9 or 10).

### **Regulating and re-defining 'Child Labour' in the 1920s**

When child labour legislation finally came to the Netherlands Indies in the 1920s it was - in contrast to the domestic regulations in Holland - neither stimulated by social concern for child welfare, nor linked to education policy. As members of the League of Nations and the new International Labour Office established at the Treaty of Versailles the Netherlands, like other colonial powers, were obliged to apply all conventions which they ratified to their colonial possessions. The colonial government were thus faced with the obligation to implement the ILO's 1919 convention on Minimal Age for Admission to Employment (ratified by The Netherlands in 1922), which stipulated that: *"Children under the age of fourteen years shall not be employed for work in any public or private industrial undertaking, or any branch thereof, other than an undertaking in which only members of the same family are employed"*, and also that children should not be employed at night-time.

In 1924 the government prepared to draft a new ordinance to regulate the employment of children. The newly-established Labour Office circulated an inquiry to various departmental heads, regional and district authorities and to the major employers' associations, asking *"Whether enterprises can be identified which would be rendered unviable or seriously inconvenienced by a prohibition on child labour"*. The ordinance eventually proposed to the Volksraad (the colony's fledgling Popular Council in Batavia) was a much weakened version of the ILO Convention, with a number of changes - mainly in response to the concerns of employers' associations - including argued re-definitions of both 'child', 'labour' and 'workplace' and even of 'night-time'. 'Child' was re-defined by dropping the minimum age from 14 to 12 years (although in the Netherlands itself the minimum

age had just been raised from 12 to 14 in the new 1919 Labour Law): the official reason given to the Council was simply the (alleged) "*earlier maturity of eastern peoples*". 'Night-time' was also redefined from the Convention's "*rest-period of 11 consecutive hours which includes the hours between 10 pm and 5 am*" to a period of only seven hours between 10 pm and 5 am (in defiance of the realities of this tropical region where night-time last from roughly 6 pm to 6 am, constantly throughout the year); and finally, mainly in response to pressure from the tobacco industry where many thousands of children below 12 years worked in the enormous drying- and packing-sheds, 'workplace' was re-defined in such a way that "*the mainly open drying-sheds were not included, and only work in the closed fermenting-sheds would be covered*".

Debating the proposal in Council some members expressed disappointment that the issue of child labour had been raised only from considerations of "*international propriety*", and also that European and native employees' associations had not been included in the inquiry. Some objected that the limitation of child labour made no sense if it was not linked to compulsory education, as it had been in the Netherlands and other Western countries. Others asked why the government proposed to concede far more exceptions in the Indies than in the Netherlands; why was no consideration given to limiting children's working-hours, for example to 8 hours per day, and why were no regulations proposed to protect young workers 13-14 years of age? Others suggested that all workplaces, including those with less than ten workers, should be included, excepting only 'pure' household enterprises where only members of the same household were at work; many native and Chinese enterprises, it was argued, would fall outside the ordinance while it was precisely in these enterprises that prohibition was most needed, for example in the batik workshops where it was known that serious abuses were common. The government gave rather feeble responses to these and other objections, but the ordinance was approved by the Council without changes and came into force in 1926.

In this way, while formally fulfilling its obligations to the universalising spirit of the ILO Convention, the government maintained a double standard in formalising the supposed needs and rights of Dutch and native children, as far as both employment and education were concerned.

Although the new ordinance was not well-adapted to the realities of a mainly agrarian economy, the inspectors were quite active in investigating and prosecuting violations, as can be seen from the Annual Reports of the Labour Office. In the years 1933-1938 no less than 444 cases were brought to court, with fines being imposed in most cases on the (mainly Chinese, Indian or Arab) employers. The most commonly prosecuted cases involved batik workshops, tobacco sorting and processing, kapok processing, textile weaving, rice or maize milling, ground-nut sorting, tapioca making and coffee processing. At least in some corners of the Labour Office, officials pointed to the need





*Estimating the ages of children on a tobacco plantation in Klaten (Central Java), 1928. The children are divided into three categories: A. "Children" (12 years and below who were not permitted to work in enclosed workplaces), B. "half-grown" (13-16 years, who were the subject of a voluntary agreement with employers to limit work-hours to 8 hours per day), C. "adults" (17 years and above) (Vorstenlandse Tabaks-enquête, 1929)*

to extend the regulations to enterprises with less than ten workers. In 1930-31, de Kat Angelino's report on the batik industry noted that most batik workshops where child workers were found were not covered by the 1925 regulations; but they were: *"Very unhealthy places, where the labour of children under 12 years can no longer be permitted ... given the very unhealthy conditions in this industry, it seems desirable to prohibit the employment of children in even the smallest batik enterprises"*. The Labour Office were also active in monitoring the conditions of work of 'young persons', although these were not covered by any regulations. For example, in the tobacco-drying sheds of East Java, voluntary agreements were negotiated with employers to limit the work-hours of "half-adults" (*"halfwassenen"*) of 12-16 years to eight hours per day during harvest and seven hours at other times; persons of this age were found *"in almost all kinds of enterprise, both inside and outside factories and workshops"*.

In the absence of any civil registration system for the recording of births, the administrators often reported problems in establishing the age of their young workers. In the tobacco region of Klaten (Central Java) Raden Iskandar (a native official of the Labour Office) brought together a collection of male and female children and young persons, with an adult man and women for comparison, and invited a committee of five persons to estimate their ages (the local village head, schoolteacher, policeman, a foreman of the tobacco company, and himself). The objects of the experiment were lined up in various combinations, with their (assumed) ages pinned on a card on their shirts and photographed beside a 1.60 metre measuring rod, with a common broom made of the stems of coconut leaves ('sapu lidi') laid on the ground in front of them for additional comparison. In this way a rough instrument for child 'ageing' was provided for the administrators.

It is important to note that the purpose of all these efforts was not to stop children from working, nor to send them to school (as we have seen, schools were still not yet available in most villages), but simply to exclude them from certain kinds of work. It was reported that some children came home in tears when turned away from the tobacco sheds. Some villagers jokingly remarked that they were only crying at the loss of their *"snoepcenten"* (literally: pennies for candy) and maybe also because they were not yet seen as grown-up. Children's interest in earning money as well as their sense of 'worker consciousness' were also manifested in other, not so childish ways. On one occasion a tobacco nursery foreman sent for some children to pick caterpillars by hand off the young tobacco leaves. After the children re-appeared with handfuls of infested leaves for payment, he tore them out of the children's hands and stamped on them, refusing to pay: the disappointed children then set fire to a drying-shed in protest.

As for the possible dangers of condemning children to idleness, Raden Iskandar commented (in de Kat Angelino's report) that children barred from work in the packing-

sheds would not be hanging around idle, and open to the “demoralising influences of the village”: “There is always something to do in and around the village that brings in cash or saves on expenses... The young child can look after little brothers and sisters, whose working mother might otherwise have to hire help for this; the girls can cook rice and vegetables, clean the house and yard, bring meals to the parents [in the fields], gather firewood that otherwise would have to be bought, look for wild greens in the fields; the boys can graze the animals or ducks, cut fodder, help their fathers in all stages of rice and tobacco cultivation; many children earn money selling snacks, serving in foodstalls, or running errands for neighbours”. Besides offering a fine stereotype of gender divisions of labour, Iskandar’s comments underline the point that the child labour regulations and their enforcement apparatus were not intended to keep children away from the world of work, from agricultural production (including commercial export crops) or even from earning money, and certainly not to push them into school - which, interestingly, is hardly mentioned in the entire report - but simply to exclude them from the world of ‘industry’ and large-scale, formal sector agro-processing in enclosed buildings.

### **‘Kinderarbeid’ and ‘bijbaantjes van scholieren’: myths and realities of child employment in Indonesia and the Netherlands in the late 20th century**

Space limitations force us now to leap over about half a century to consider the state of the ‘child labour problem’ in the Netherlands and its former colony Indonesia at the close of the 20th century.

In the Netherlands, child labour regulation since 1919 followed a typical ‘European’ evolution, in three ways: gradual extension of the definition of ‘child’ for employment purposes by raising the minimum age for (full-time) employment, in tandem with compulsory education, to 16 years; extension of an additional category of ‘young persons’ subject to special protective regulation from 16 to 18 years; extension of the prohibited categories of ‘employment’ to include non-industrial sectors such as retail trade, office work, hotels and restaurants, bakeries, and agriculture. These regulations, together with the fact that school enrollment up to age 16 is now virtually complete, provide a basis for the view that ‘child labour has been eliminated’ in the Netherlands and similar countries.

In Indonesia on the other hand, although a new labour law was enacted in 1951, its child labour clause was never implemented, and during the first half-century of Indonesian independence - in contrast to what we have seen for the late colonial period - not a single employer was prosecuted for employment of under-age children. This does not seem to have changed much since enactment in 1997 of another new labour law which states bluntly: “The employment of children by any employer is prohibited”, allowing exceptions for “children who for certain reasons are compelled to work” and who should not work for more

than four hours per day or at night-time. Indonesia then, in the eyes of countries like the Netherlands and international organisations like the ILO, is seen as having a serious child labour problem (like many other Asian, African and Latin American countries) and as being unable or unwilling to implement its own child labour laws or international child labour conventions.

On closer examination however the contrast is not quite so simple. In Indonesia, when compulsory education (to age 12) was introduced in 1984, already 90 percent of boys and girls aged 7-12 and about 70 percent of those aged 13-15 were attending school; by the end of the 20th century - even in the period following Indonesia's spectacular financial and political crisis of 1997-8 - primary school enrollment had risen to 96 percent, and junior secondary enrollment to 79 percent. The number of children under 15 who are employed and not attending school is therefore relatively small: according to most estimates about one in ten of children in the 10-14 age group. School attendance, as we have seen earlier in the case of the Netherlands, does not eliminate child employment but reduces it to a part-time activity and thus is a powerful tool in addressing the child labour problem.

A good example of this is given by Tjandraningsih and Anarita's recent study of East Java's tobacco industry. Older informants (those who were of primary school age in the early decades of Indonesian independence, to about the mid-1970s) recall conditions similar to those which we have already described in the late colonial period: not going to school at all, working full-time in the drying-sheds helping their mothers from the age of 5-6 years until they got married (for girls, sometimes as early as 12 years) and started to work on their own account. While today's tobacco companies, both state-owned and private, still make widespread use of child labour it is now on a rather different basis. All the children attend school for at least some years; many begin working in the drying or sorting sheds before they are 12 years old (particularly girls) but the great majority combine this with school, working four hours or less on school days, and only about one in ten have not completed primary school.

Meanwhile, (harmful) 'child labour' may have disappeared in the Netherlands, but children's participation in labour markets has not, and in fact may even be increasing. In the mid-1980s a careful study by Neve and Renooy found that three-quarters of all children aged 13-17 were regularly employed in the commercial sector (that is: in work involving a labour transaction); moreover no less than three-quarters of these working children (thus, more than half of all children) were working 'illegally', i.e. regularly employed in activities which because of their nature, their timing or their duration are officially prohibited in the Dutch labour law. In the 13-14 age group the proportion of children working illegally (59 percent) was higher than among older children. A more recent study undertaken by the National Institute for Budget Research showed a similar picture for 1999: rates of (part-time) labour force participation



*Carving wooden souvenirs for tourists after school, Ubud, Bali (Jakarta Post)*

begin at about 10 percent (all of it illegal) among 10-11 year olds and rise steadily by about 10 percent with each additional year, so that a majority (50-60 percent) of 15-16 year olds are regularly employed. These figures may surprise some readers, but are not unusual; studies in Britain and the United States have reached similar conclusions. Part-time employment is part of the experience of the majority of 'northern' school-children and in fact - although it is not a very useful statistic - the estimates of labour force participation of children under 16 are higher for these countries than those estimated for Indonesia, Bangladesh or most other countries of the 'south'.

A more useful comparison between the two countries would underline that during the 20th century progress against (full-time, harmful or abusive) child labour has been made in both countries, not because of child labour legislation (which as we have seen, neither government seems able or interested to enforce) but above all by the expansion of access to education. Most working children in Indonesia (like virtually all in the Netherlands) go to school, but alongside them we find a minority (perhaps 10 percent) who are employed full-time, often under harmful or exploitative conditions, and thus should be a target for child labour campaigns.

What was achieved in the Netherlands (and other 'northern' countries) is therefore not the abolition of child employment, but its transformation: from full-time to part-time, from work which prevents education to work which is combined with school, and from relatively harmful or exploitative to relatively harmless work<sup>(1)</sup>. It would therefore seem quite hypocritical to insist - as some well-meaning campaigners in northern countries tend to do - that children must be completely removed from labour markets.

Prohibitions on child employment have never been effective, in the North or the South. In fact, two new and almost universally-accepted international conventions offer a more reasonable, feasible and sensible basis for addressing the serious abuses of children's capacity to work in Indonesia and many other countries. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), enthusiastically signed and ratified by Indonesia (and all other UN member states excepting the United States and Somalia) does not prohibit child employment; it establishes the child's right to education, to protection from economic exploitation and from involvement in work harmful to the child's development. It also establishes the principle that in any matters affecting children, the 'best interests of the child' should be a primary consideration, and further that children have the right to have their own views heard in such matters. Interestingly, when children have been asked their views on such matters they usually insist on their right both to an education and to work, and to earn money, if they want to or if they need to; they also, like adult workers, tend to stress the value of 'work with dignity'. Secondly, the ILO members after many years of heated debates at regional and international level in 1999 unanimously adopted Convention 182 on elimination of the 'worst forms of child labour', defining these to include prostitution, forced labour, use of children in criminal activities and a final category of any kind of work which, by its nature or the

manner in which it is carried out, is likely to harm the child's development; this last category is to be identified and defined by each member state, with the help of some guidelines attached to the Convention. These two conventions provide a basis for setting priorities, for addressing the most harmful forms of child labour first as a matter of urgency, and for addressing child labour problems without double standards or hypocrisy, in ways that respond to the needs and interests of children, and without insisting that they be chased completely out of labour markets.

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