



**General Secretariat
Social Affairs Sector**

Child Labour in the Arab Region

A Quantitative and Qualitative Analysis

Executive Summary



**Food and Agriculture
Organization of the
United Nations**



Arab Council for Childhood and Development



**International
Labour
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CHILD LABOUR IN THE ARAB REGION

A Quantitative and Qualitative Analysis

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The Women, Family and Childhood Department is considered the main mechanism responsible for the empowerment and protection of women, ensuring the rights of children, protecting them and improving their circumstances, and empowering families. The Department has three divisions and is concerned with development, particularly sustainable development, and plays the role of Technical Secretariat for the Arab Women's Committee, the Arab Family Committee and the Arab Childhood Committee. It was established by a resolution from the Arab Foreign Ministerial Council in line with other relevant international organizations

www.lasportal.org

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Foreword

Child labour has long been a feature of economic life in the Arab region, particularly in agriculture, small traditional craft shops, and informal industries such as garment and carpet making, as well as some construction-related activities. Children have worked irrespective of times of conflict, political unrest or economic shocks. However, over the past ten years, during which the region has witnessed high levels of armed conflict resulting in the mass displacement of populations – both within and between countries – the situation has certainly worsened.

Children, society's most vulnerable members, have been particularly affected. They have been increasingly drawn into the worst forms of child labour and face serious and worrying exploitation, abuse and violation of their rights. These forms include the kinds of hazardous work found in agriculture, services, and industry, as well as the multiple dangers associated with working on the streets. The region has witnessed an alarming rise in the direct and indirect use of children in illicit activities, such as prostitution, and in armed conflicts – often under forced or bonded labour conditions.

It is important to note that child labour has already received significant attention in the region in that governments have endorsed relevant international and regional treaties and Conventions, and national strategies and action plans have been developed. However, many warning signs suggest that the region's progress towards eliminating child labour – especially its worst forms – is at risk. This is especially true in the midst of continuing political and social instabilities.

Therefore, there is an urgent and immediate need to safeguard children in the Arab region, whether their serious exploitation is a result of pure economic issues or in combination with conflict and displacement. Arab countries need to realize that child labour poses immediate and future challenges not only to children themselves, but also to their nations and communities, as well as the broader economy. It is now urgent to address both the root causes and repercussions of child labour, and to ultimately eliminate it, especially in its worst forms.

Reliable and up-to-date information on the situation of children's work and schooling is needed to guide the development and implementation of such measures. To this end, a major recommendation of the 20th Session of the Arab Childhood Committee (ACC) of November 2014 called on the League of Arab States (LAS), in cooperation with the Arab Council for Childhood and Development (ACCD) and stakeholders, to conduct a study on the size and profile of child labour in the Arab region.

The result is the study presented here, which details the main profile and trends of child labour witnessed over the past 10 years, within the context of the prevailing regional situation. Researchers faced many challenges while conducting this study, specifically a shortage of available data and statistics on child labour in the Arab region. This was especially the case with countries experiencing crises. Nonetheless, the study compiles the most up-to-date relevant data, especially of a qualitative nature.

As a follow-up measure, LAS member States are encouraged to step up data collection on children's employment and to develop their own National Action Plans to combat the worst forms of child labour. This should set the stage for the development of a regional strategy that addresses this unacceptable humanitarian problem and programmes designed to ensure the rights of children and safeguard their future, as our children are also our future.



General Secretariat

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Executive Summary

The Arab region has witnessed a large wave of armed conflicts and population displacement in recent years, believed to have brought with it an upsurge of child labour – the magnitude of which is yet to be fully measured. The impact of armed conflict has exacerbated pre-existing levels of child labour found in rural and urban areas across the Arab region, typically driven by economic vulnerability, poor education and certain social norms.

This presumed rise in child labour comes amid global efforts to eradicate this harmful phenomenon, while Arab governments make notable efforts to align their national, legal and institutional frameworks to international standards. The present study addresses child labour in the Arab region, comprised of the 22 member countries of the League of Arab States (LAS), divided between the 12 countries of the ILO Regional Office for Arab States (ILO ROAS) and the 10 Arab countries in Africa.

Regional disparities make it difficult to provide a common picture of the magnitude and trends of child labour across the region, especially given the absence of overall regional estimates of child labour. Nevertheless, Arab countries face many common socioeconomic issues and challenges in relation to child labour, such as: improving labour inspection capacity; increasing research and data collection on child labour; eliminating the worst forms of child labour (including trafficking, slavery, commercial sexual exploitation, use of children in armed conflict and hazardous work); and identifying and tackling hidden forms of child labour such as unpaid household services and domestic work, mainly affecting young girls.

Methodology

Based on available national data and country studies (from 2006 to 2016) and in addition to key informants, this report provides an overview of the main characteristics of child labour in the Arab region by economic sector and examines the effects of armed conflict and population displacement. The study relies on four main methodological pillars:

- 1) a literature review on child labour in the Arab region, complemented by in-depth interviews with key informants;
- 2) a 2017 study based on available data sources conducted by Understanding Children's Work (UCW) – Child labour in the Arab States: A descriptive analysis – which highlights child labour trends and characteristics among two age groups (5–14 and 15–17 years) in ten Arab states;

- 3) a questionnaire sent to member countries of the League of Arab States;
- 4) eight targeted sections or boxes highlighting particular aspects or cases of child labour in the Arab region by topic, country or sector.

General trends and characteristics

The poorest countries in the Arab region show the highest rates of child employment, which reflects a global trend verified by the latest ILO Global Estimates (2017). The general trends of child employment in the region can be summarized as follows:

- Child employment increases with age, with higher employment rates in the 15–17 age group than the 5–14 age group. Special attention should be paid to the high incidence of hazardous work among adolescents aged 15–17.
- Child employment rates are higher among boys. However, it should be noted that surveys might fail to capture hidden forms of child labour among girls, such as domestic work and unpaid household services, which merit further research and enquiry.
- Child employment rates are generally higher in rural than in urban areas.

The main characteristics of child employment in the Arab region can be summarized as follows:

- Concerning the status of employment, unpaid family work is most common among children aged 5 to 14 years old, girls, and in rural areas, while paid non-family work is more common among children aged 15 to 17, among boys, and in urban areas.
- Children aged 15–17, particularly males, tend to work longer hours than their respective counterparts. On the other hand, working children who attend school tend to work less than those who do not go to school.
- Children in urban areas tend to work longer hours than rural children. But it should be noted that agricultural work is highly labour-intensive, but seasonal.

Trends and working conditions by sector

- Child labour in the Arab region is mostly found in agriculture, followed by services and industry. Country-level data also point to the following trends:
- A higher prevalence of child labour in agriculture is found among children aged 5–14, while the sectoral distribution of children aged 15–17 is more varied and shows a higher incidence of work in services and industries compared with younger children.
- For girls, the sectoral distribution of activity varies greatly between countries,

depending on the specific nature of local economies, bearing in mind that household surveys are often not able to capture certain types of hidden work performed by girls.

Agriculture: Small-scale farming

The majority of children in the agricultural sector are unpaid family workers, especially children aged 5–14. Child labour in agriculture is mainly related to small-scale farming, where cheap intensive labour is in high demand, especially on family farms that depend on the contribution of children. A closer look at child labour in agriculture in Lebanon, Morocco, Egypt and Yemen highlights the following push factors: household poverty, low parental education, certain social norms, lack of access to education or lack of enforcement of compulsory education, lack of access to water and electricity networks, and lack of social security.

Agriculture was found to be one of the most hazardous sectors of activity. Children working in this sector are at risk of being exposed to the following hazards, which vary in degree and in combination, depending on the activity: exposure to chemicals, pesticides, dust and smoke; carrying heavy loads; working long hours; repeatedly bending and standing; working at heights; working in isolation; long hours of exposure to the sun and other climatic conditions; and working with dangerous tools and farm machinery, often with a lack of protective gear or access to first aid.

Children working on family farms often lack social and legal protections. Countries can choose to apply certain exemptions allowed under Article 5 of the Minimum Age Convention, 1973 (No. 138), and exclude some children from the legal provisions on the minimum age for work. It should be noted, however, that such exemptions do not apply to any form of hazardous work. In remote rural areas there are further issues regarding the limited capacity of labour inspectors and the lack of geographical coverage, often leaving rural children labour out of the purview of government oversight.

Industry and services: The informal sector

Child labour in the secondary and tertiary sectors is generally informal work, which is particularly prone to child labour since, by definition, it escapes regulatory and inspection oversight. Child labour in the industrial sector is characterized by paid, non-family work, while the status of employment is more diversified in the services sector, with a relative predominance of paid, non-family work.

A closer look at children in informal employment in Jordan, Morocco and Iraq highlights the following determinants of child labour:

- poverty such that the household relies on the additional income generated by setting

- children to work, especially among refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs);
- education is considered of limited value in the absence of future prospects for decent work;
 - limited labour inspection capacity; and
 - from an employer's perspective, children represent low-cost labour and are easier to manage.

Children working informally face various hazards depending on the type of activity, such as long hours of work, dust and pollution hazards, injury and security risks, carrying heavy loads and working without protective clothing. Based on the country studies presented here, the majority of children working informally in industry and services do not attend school.

As for young girls (usually under the age of 16) found in domestic work, they face a disconcerting situation due to risks of seclusion, lack of school attendance, and the potential for their rights as children to be violated. In Tunisia, girls were found to be subject to strenuous working conditions and physical abuse from employers. They were also isolated from their families and friends, and poorly paid. The ILO has highlighted the need to improve data collection in order to measure the extent and nature of children's involvement in domestic work across the Arab region, and has called for a strategic policy response to address such child labour.

Child labour in armed conflict

Children are often the main victims of armed conflicts and population displacement in the region. Child labour is on the rise among refugees and internally displaced populations, as well as among host communities in Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq. Refugee and displaced children can be found working in a number of sectors of activity, with a notable rise in street work, bonded labour, early marriage, and commercial sexual exploitation. Child labour among refugee and displaced children is mainly a financial coping mechanism for families who face extreme poverty or where adults are unemployed. Refugee and displaced children also work for longer hours and lower pay than local children.

The UN Secretary-General has reported a rise in the recruitment and use of children by armed groups, among both local and refugee populations. This is certainly the case in Yemen, Syria and Iraq, where the majority of recruited children are generally boys. However, there is an emerging tendency to recruit more girls, as well as children below the age of 15. Hundreds of children across the Arab region are also held in detention – and even tortured – on the grounds of being involved in armed groups. According to the Secretary-General's report, the factors contributing to such child recruitment are relatively

attractive salaries, religious and ideological influences, propaganda, and sometimes pressure and coercion by their communities. Enlistment is not always voluntary, and there is an increasing trend in forced or deceitful recruitment. Another major concern is the vulnerability of girls to forced marriage, trafficking and sexual abuse.

Moreover, children living in conflict zones are the greatest victims of the humanitarian crisis. In addition to the extreme conditions of poverty, health and security threats, and the damage to their education, these children are being forced into the kinds of activities associated with armed conflict situations, such as smuggling goods across borders or between fighting zones, collecting oil waste, performing funerary work (collecting body parts for burial), household work, and fetching water or collecting food from fields and landfills, which are even more dangerous in cases of violent conflict.

Policy recommendations

Child labour arises in vulnerable communities that suffer from poverty, unemployment, poor infrastructure, and lack of access to education and social protections. Exposure to shocks such as armed conflict and population displacement increases the vulnerability of households and exacerbates those factors that lead to child labour. Amid the current refugee crisis, strengthening national protection frameworks will benefit both refugee populations and host communities. This calls for a set of nine cross-sectoral policy interventions distributed between three general policy objectives:

Policy objectives	Areas of intervention
Improved governance framework	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. National laws and regulations 2. Governance structures
Protection from economic and social vulnerability	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. Labour market policies 4. Social protection 5. Access to basic services, including education 6. Education and awareness-raising programmes
Protection from the impact of armed conflict	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 7. Humanitarian and refugee and displaced assistance programmes 8. Protection of children from recruitment and use in armed conflict 9. Rehabilitation and re-integration of children used in armed conflicts