

**Position Paper**

# **Child Labour in Jordan**

## **Reality overid**

**Jordan Labor watch,**

**Phenix Center for Economic and Informatics Studies**

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### **Introduction**

The World Day against Child Labour, celebrated annually on the 12<sup>th</sup> of June, constitutes an opportunity to examine the most recent indicators pertaining to child labour in Jordan, and evaluate the current policies aimed at its reduction. Combatting child labour is one of the key aspects in the promotion of human rights, mainly because childhood should be reserved for education and growth, and children should be allowed to live their lives in accordance with this principle. In the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted in 1989, children are defined as “all persons under the age of 18.” Accordingly, the complete elimination of child labour is enshrined as one of the four fundamental principles and rights at work as set out in the ILO Declaration of 1998, and is prioritized in the 17 Goals of the Sustainable Development Agenda for 2030. Notably,

the seventh target of SDG 8, regarding decent work and economic growth, calls for “immediate and effective measures” to be taken towards “the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labour, including recruitment and use of child soldiers, and by 2025 end child labour in all its forms.”

Despite the importance of the efforts, programs and projects which have been and continue to be carried out by public institutions, international organizations, and CSOs in Jordan and throughout the world, aimed at rehabilitating working children, bringing them back to school, and ensuring their integration into the education system, the share of children engaged in the labour market is increasing. In this regard, a distinction is made between two age categories: That of children below the age of 16, who

should not be employed under any circumstances, and that of children aged between 16 and 18, who may be permitted to work, but only in non-hazardous occupations, that is, which do not compromise their health and well-being.

## Statistical Indicators

Figures on child labour vary between regions and individual States. According to the ILO, in 2016 the total number of working children was 168 million, 85 million of which were engaged in hazardous occupations. The largest number of child labourers (78 million) was concentrated in the Asia-Pacific region.

The latest study conducted by the ILO, in cooperation with the Ministry of Labour and the Centre for Strategic Studies, showed that the number of children working in the Kingdom was approximately 76,000, of which 70,000 fit the definition of child labour set out above, and 45,000 were engaged in hazardous occupations.

As mentioned above, the definition of a child labourer includes all working children under the age of 16; but also all 16 to 17-year-olds working more than 26 hours a week, and all those under the age of 18 who are engaged in hazardous occupations. These include all those involving the use of dangerous machinery and equipment, the use and manufacture of explosives, working with fire, gas, or chemicals, security and guard jobs, physically demanding work, loud noises, extreme temperatures, mining and underground work, as well as working in

hotels, restaurants, and clubs. These indicators also suggest that child labour in Jordan has more than doubled since 2006, when 33,000 children were estimated to be engaged in the labour market. Furthermore, it is important to note that 80.8% of child labourers in Jordan (approximately 60,800) were found to be Jordanian, while the remaining 19.2%, or 15,200, were either Syrian or possessed other nationalities. Lastly, 11.7% of working children were reportedly female.

## National Legislation

On the issue of child labour, Jordanian legislation complies with the standards set forth in the relevant international conventions. In this regard, Jordanian Labour Law No.8/1996 and its amendments prohibit the employment of children: Article 73 expressly prohibits the employment of all children under the age of 16 under any circumstances, while Article 74 of the same law prohibits the employment of persons under the age of 18 in hazardous or harmful occupations. This is in line with the international standards alluded to above, concerning the reduction and elimination of child labour, most importantly the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which emerged in 1989 and came into force in 1990, but such ILO Conventions as the Minimum Age Convention No. 138, Convention No. 182 on the Prohibition of the Worst Forms of Child Labour, and the Forced Labour Convention No. 29.

## Causes of Child Labour

Despite the clear provisions in Jordanian law prohibiting the employment of children under 16, as well as the employment of children aged 16 to 18 in hazardous occupations, reality often overrides policy. This is shown by the number of children engaged in the Jordanian labour market, and the most recent statistical indicators, together with other official and unofficial figures shared among policy makers, researchers, specialists, and national and international institutions paint a more realistic picture of the phenomenon of child labour in Jordan.

The rise in child labour in Jordan is owed to several factors. Some of these are endogenous, having to do with Jordan's own social and economic realities and dynamics, while others are exogenous, such as the inflow of hundreds of thousands of refugees into the country over the past years. Social inequality and a lack of social justice have largely been a consequence of fiscal and economic policies, placing a strong emphasis on liberalization, having been implemented with little regard for their social consequences. This produced a decline in living standards within several strata of the Jordanian population, especially among the poor. Official figures indicate that poverty rates in Jordan increased from 13.3% to 14.4% between 2008 and 2010, and had risen to nearly 20% by 2014 (a fact which was not reported by the government), while the percentage of those living in "transient poverty," meaning that they live in poverty for a minimum of three months a year (that is, the lower middle class) has reached 18.6%

of the population, according to World Bank figures. Unfortunately, as of June 2017, no new figures have been released regarding poverty levels in Jordan. This is especially relevant since working children usually come from poor families who are forced to push them into the labour market out of a need for additional income or an inability to continue supporting their education.

Furthermore, a quick look at some of the relevant social indicators paint an overwhelmingly negative picture of working and living conditions in Jordan. Nearly 72% of workers are paid monthly wages of 500 Dinars or less, which is particularly concerning given how low wages have been shown to contribute to the rise in child labour. In addition, unemployment rates have risen substantially, reaching 18.2% during the first quarter of 2017, and annual drop-out rates at the primary level currently stand at approximately 0.5%, exceeding 1% in some regions. These are undeniably some of the factors which contribute to the perpetuation of child labour.

The Syrian refugee crisis has also contributed to the rise in child labour in Jordan. As mentioned previously, a large number of Syrian children are engaged in the national labour market – approximately 11,100, or 14.6% of the total number of child workers. In spite of the assistance and basic services provided to Syrian refugees by international organizations, such efforts have not been sufficient to ensure decent living conditions, and many families continue to see themselves forced to put their children to work.

## Negative Impacts on Individuals and Communities

Child labourers are often exposed to numerous hazards, such as heavy machinery, loud noises, poor lighting, and dangerous chemicals, and are vulnerable to work injuries due to the fact that they lack the physical fitness required by the nature of their jobs. According to the abovementioned ILO study, the average wage for working children in Jordan is 171 Dinars per month – 174 JOD/month among Jordanian children and 159 JOD/month among Syrians. Average wages also higher among young females, who earn, on average, 190 JOD/month, compared to 170 JOD/month among their male counterparts. Furthermore, approximately one-third of working children work more than 48 hours per week, while 55% work less than 36 hours per week. As for young girls, 90% were found to work less than 36 hours per week.

Child workers are also vulnerable to ill-treatment in the workplace, including physical and psychological abuse and, in many cases, sexual assault. As a result, working children often suffer from physical, social, and psychological disorders. In some occupations, many eventually suffer work injuries which leave them disabled. Working in physically and psychologically exploitative environments commonly breeds feelings of inferiority and indignation, which in some cases leads child labourers to rebel against social norms and values. Lastly, due to the fact that these children often bypass education and do not benefit from systematic training, their productivity levels remain low even in adulthood, and they are more likely to become part of a growing unskilled workforce.

## Recommendations

- There is an urgent need to revisit the economic policies implemented over the course of the past decades, including those still in force, which have led to a rise in poverty rates. The majority of child labourers come from poor families, which are driven by necessity to require their children to drop out of school and contribute to the household income.
- The international community must also fulfil its responsibility to assist Syrian refugees in covering the costs of basic goods and services, including their children's education.
- Boost anti-poverty efforts and implement more effective policies in this regard, notably by developing better social safety nets, capable of ensuring that the poor have access to decent living standards. It is also important to develop wage policies which account for the high prices of goods and services in Jordan.
- Implement mechanisms aimed at curbing drop-out rates, especially at the primary level.
- Boost the enforcement of the laws prohibiting child labour, notably by empowering official institutions to better supervise the areas where child labour is most common, establishing penalties for violators beyond the mere charging of small fines, and conducting awareness campaigns on the negative effects of child labour in schools and among families.
- Develop an accurate database on child labour in Jordan, to be updated regularly.