

## WHY DO FEMALE AND MALE CHILDREN WORK?

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**T**he International Labor Organization (ILO) estimates that over 200 million children are employed all over the world.

International recommendations consider the production of goods and services as an economic activity, even if these are intended entirely for own consumption. According to this definition, children's work on the family farm or in raising animals for consumption within the household is considered economic activity. A UNICEF report of December 1990 showed

that the number of children living below the poverty level is on the increase.

The report of the Arab Council for Childhood and Development of September 1993, "Child Labor in the Arab Countries," indicates that the vast majority of children's work in traditional societies must be classified as "unpaid activity within the household." This type of "economic activity" is considered a natural extension of the process of socialization and education. Very little literature is available on child labor in Arab countries; most information is found in international reports.

This paper is part of a larger study which was conducted on child labor in Jordan in 1994 for the International Group on Child Labor, Netherlands. The study was part of a report on child labor in Arab countries which was directed by Dr. Ashraf Bayoumi.

In Jordan, children are economically active in virtually all sectors of work. Especially in cities, they are active in visible sectors such as garages, carpentry shops, restaurants, and waste collection. Children also work in invisible sectors, agro-pastoral activities, domestic service, and housework. Regardless of the sector, children perform tiresome activities and are exposed to various kinds of exploitation; most often, their work is recognized neither by their families nor by laws and legislation.

The only available literature on child labor in Jordan consists of discussions of individual cases in newspapers whose purpose is to criticize the national welfare system. These articles represent each case as unique and do not discuss child labor as an everyday phenomenon. Proportionally, the greatest number of working children in Jordan come from Palestinian refugee families or from rural and nomadic communities. Although Palestinians in Jordan are granted Jordanian citizenship, they do not have access to the same services as regular Jordanians; for example, jobs in the public sector are difficult to get for Palestinians. As a result, their living conditions are bad and many Jordanian-Palestinian families suffer economic hardships. Jordanian child-labor laws do not cover all economic sectors in which children actually work. The law is silent on the issue of children who work in agro-pastoral activities and as domestic servants. And existing laws regarding child labor do not stipulate a penalty in case of violation.

Photography: Mona Eid, LAU student





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In what follows I will focus on working children in Jordan in two communities, one nomadic, the other urban. I will highlight the differences between work by boys and girls, respectively. The major reasons that force children to work are poverty, lack of access to education, and the low socio-economic return of education.

### **CHILD LABOR IN A NOMADIC COMMUNITY**

The traditional modes of production and ways of life of the nomadic community where the study was conducted have changed. In the past, men were involved in camel husbandry. Raising camels became impossible as pastures decreased. Many men joined the Jordanian army and police force. The nomadic community shifted from raising camels to raising goats and sheep, because the latter requires less grazing land. But since it is considered shameful for men to take care of sheep and goats, the responsibility for the animals became an exclusively female activity.

Since technology was introduced in agro-pastoral communities in the last 20-30 years, men were relieved from many traditional, tiring tasks; yet the responsibilities of women and their daughters have increased. For example, men take animal products to the city by trucks and cars, whereas women still have to process the same products by hand. The increasing

demand for cash income forces women to work more to satisfy the family's needs. Considerably more girls than boys in nomadic communities work outside the household. Many girls who do not attend school or drop out at an early age. Girls start performing "productive" work at the age of 8. Boys of the same age are encouraged to go to school in the hope that they will join the army after the age of 16 or 17; they are not doing the same work that their fathers and grandfathers used to do. Many boys also do not live with their families because of the seasonal migration far into the desert, in search of good pasture. During these migrations, the boys stay with relatives who live close to school.

Every morning, girls take the sheep and goats to the pastures. Then they help older women with daily and seasonal household chores. Most girls do not attend school. The lucky few who do will not get beyond 3rd or 4th grade. Girls are not sent to school because their labor is needed for the family's subsistence and because families do not find schools rewarding for girls.

A man from this community asked me how many years I had studied. "Ten, twelve? Can you tell me how much money you give to your family! My daughter, who is 13, takes care of 200 sheep and goats. Every year I sell 70 animals at the market, and I also sell the milk products that I get from my herd, so can you tell who is more "productive:" you, or my daughter!"

The work that girls perform in this community does not count as work according to laws, the families of the children and the

children themselves, although it really is work, though unpaid.

## **CHILD LABOR IN AN URBAN CONTEXT**

In urban areas such as Amman, the children who work outside the house are mostly boys. But children of both genders are involved in the substance economy and they are not paid in cash. It is also expected that child labor in urban areas entails more hardship and risk.

Many girls aged 8-14, as well as their mothers, are employed as domestic servants or they clean the houses of the wealthy. Most of them are Palestinians from refugee camps.

Most of the boys who work in the city are paid directly by their employers or somehow working in shops or grocery stores, assisting mechanics and carpenters, street-vending, collecting bus fares, etc. Girls who work as domestic servants usually do not receive their wages since the money is given directly to their families. Sometimes they are given tips (money, clothes, and more often food), which they take back home.

Invisible work by girls falls into many categories. For example, from an early age onwards, they participate in housework, care

for younger siblings, clean, and cook. Such work is not really considered work but rather as a normal component of a girl's upbringing. They do such housework not only for their families but also for other relatives. In most cases, girls are not allowed to do paid work outside the house. Women in Palestinian refugee camps do some embroidery, which they sell; then, the burden of housework becomes the daughter's responsibility.

Boys who work after school and during the holidays spend their money on things that their families cannot afford, and some contribute to family income. When boys drop out of school and work full-time, they often provide the family's major source of income. Many children start working to earn money to cover some of their educational expenses but end up working many hours, thus having little time or energy for school. Most of the interviewed children and their families expressed their desire to finish their education, but because of economic pressures they have to quit school.

## **CONCLUSION**

Working children are subject to different kinds of exploitation. Their labor affects their physical and psychological health, which has an effect on the family and the society as a whole.

Attempts to prevent children from work by force do not improve the welfare of their families unless alternative sources of income are developed. Children prevented from working will not necessarily have a better future if the educational system remains as deficient as it is in most of the less developed countries and if unemployment remains the fate of many of those who complete their education.

Socio-economic conditions and the loose application of the laws have made children subject to exploitation and have placed them in vulnerable positions vis-a-vis their families and their employers. It is essential to change the laws to include all sectors that employ child labor, such as domestic work, agricultural work, and even housework. The enforcement of these laws should be given priority. It is not enough to pick working children off the streets as so-called beggars. Rather, the socio-economic conditions of these children and their families should be studied and taken into consideration.

