

Child Labour in Egypt

The problem

Child labour is a global problem, but is particularly widespread in poorer countries like Egypt. The worst forms of child labour, as defined by the International Labour Organisation, are slavery, forced/unpaid labour, human trafficking, child pornography and prostitution. Egypt is mostly free of these types of child labour but other forms are prevalent; ie minors employed in jobs that are harmful to the health, safety and morals of children and that expose them to physical, psychological or sexual abuse.

The major contributing factor to child labour in Egypt is poverty and the declining economic conditions and rising inflation mean that the situation is only likely to worsen. It is also the result of an unregulated informal economy, inadequate social protection and poor quality educational systems. The phenomenon of working children is linked to parental illiteracy and a lack of public awareness about the importance of education.

The reasons given by child workers themselves in studies in Egypt are educational failure and a desire to learn a profession for boys, whereas girls cited economic factors like a wish to earn their own money or contribute to the family income. Female-headed households or ones in which the father was unable to work are much more likely to rely on the income of working children.

It is difficult to gather accurate statistics of the number of child workers in Egypt, but it is estimated at over 2 million/ Children from as young as the age of 4 work as street vendors, domestic workers, agricultural labourers and factory workers. They work in sewing clothes, dry-cleaning, printing, car mechanics. Children from 4 to 15 make up a quarter of the workforce in the leather tanneries in old Cairo. Hundreds of kids work in the 200 brick factories 50km south of Cairo, earning 25 LE (\$US4.50) a day loading bricks onto donkey carts. Hundreds of thousands more children go to school part-time and spend their afternoons and evenings working.

The work conditions vary widely: some employers provide meals and basic schooling while other children work long hours in heat, lifting heavy objects or bent over sewing machines, and are regularly beaten. Girls can face sexual harassment and abuse, causing psychological damage. Many children work ten or twelve-hour days.

Statistics

- * Around 11 million children in Egypt.
- * 2 to 2.5 million child workers between the ages of 6 and 15 in Egypt.
- * Approximately 78% are employed in countryside, most of these are female.
- * At least 1 to 1.5 million children currently employed in agricultural labour.
- * 12 - 14% of Egypt's children aged 6-14 are working, part or full-time.
- * Approx 21.9% of children aged 10-14 are working.
- * Children under 15 comprise around 7% of the total workforce in Egypt.
- * In rural areas: 40.4% of children under 14 are working.
In urban areas: 16.5% of children under 14 are working.
- * Of all working children, 84% live in rural areas and 16% in urban areas.
- * Boys make up 29% of the child labour force.
Girls make up 71% of the child labour force.
- * Approx 12% of Egyptian households contain working children.
- * 25% of working children are between the ages of 6 and 11.
- * 65% of child workers are still enrolled in school, 16% dropped out of school and 19% never attended school.
- * Child workers earn on average 1/4 to 1/3 of an adult wage.
- * 22-30% of the family's income is derived from the revenue of the working child.

Egypt's Child Law

The current regulations for the employment of minors stated in the Child Law are as follows:

** Age restrictions*

The employment of minors below 14 years is prohibited. Occupational training before the age of 12 years is also prohibited. However, the governor concerned (in each Governorate), in

agreement with the Minister of Education may permit the employment of minors aged 12-14 years in seasonal work which is not harmful to their health and growth and which does not conflict with regular school attendance.

** Hazardous Occupation*

Minors below 17 years are protected from employment in hazardous occupations.

** Working Hours*

Working hours must not exceed six hours per day. The minor should be allowed a period (or several periods) of at least one hour for rest and eating. Moreover, the minor must not work for more than four consecutive hours and must not be employed for extra time or during official holidays or weekends. It is also prohibited to employ minors between 8p.m and 7a.m.

** Health Regulations*

The employer is responsible for providing the following:

- Medical checkup for the minor upon employment to ensure his/her fitness for the job
- Annual medical follow up
- Daily glass of milk (200 grams)
- Safety measures in the work place

** Administrative Regulations*

Employers are legally bound to undertake the following regulations:

- Provide a working minor below the age of 16 years with a card indicating that he/she works for him.
- The card should have the minor's picture and must be stamped by the Labor Office
- Publicize a copy of the labor regulations
- Register regularly working hours and periods of rest
- Send to the official authority the names of minors employed and the names of the persons who supervise them

** Criminal Responsibility*

Employers who do not abide by these regulations are liable to fines ranging between LE 100-500. Multiple infringements are liable to multiple fines. An employer who hinders or deprives a minor from attending basic education, is liable to imprisonment for a period not exceeding a month or a fine ranging between LE 200-500. An employer would be considered as preventing or hindering the minor's education in the following cases:

- If the employer organizes working hours in conflict with school hours
- If work arrangements prevent the minor from continuing his/her education
- If the minor is employed in unhealthy working conditions or in undertaking work which affects his/her mental ability or physical development

Proposed Amendments to Child Law

On 4th March 2008, President Mubarek signed a proposal for amendments to the Child Law, an initiative of the National Council of Childhood and Motherhood. These increase the marriage age for girls from 16 to 18 and criminalize the abandonment of minors and their sexual exploitation. The amendments also stipulate that anyone who forces a child below minimum age to work will face a prison sentence of 3 to 6 months. These amendments have been presented to the People's Assembly and continue to be the subject of debate.

Case Study: Children in Cotton Co-operative Farms

Most of the child workers in Egypt are employed in seasonal work in the cotton fields, during the Summer holiday months of July and August. Their job is to control cotton leafworm infestations by checking the plants for eggs and removing the infected parts of the leaf by hand. Most are between the ages of 7 and 12, and are employed under the authority of the Ministry of Agriculture which fails to uphold the legal minimum age of 12 for seasonal farming work. The children are almost exclusively from the poorest families in rural villages. They are considered as better workers than adults because they are more obedient and easier to control, accept lower wages and are the right height for inspecting cotton plants. They earn on average 3 Egyptian pounds a day or US\$0.80.

The working conditions on these plantations fail to comply to international standards. The children work from 7am to 6pm, a total of 11 hours, seven days a week, with a one hour break in the middle of the day. Average daytime temperatures reach 40 degrees Celsius or above. They work in groups of 15 to 30 under the control of a hired foreman who grants their

access to water at his own discretion. Some foremen only allow their workers to drink water during a 15-minute break in the 6-hr morning shift. Children interviewed in studies complained of routine beatings with a wooden switch if they worked too slowly or overlooked leaves.

In addition, children are more vulnerable than adults to the effects of the hazardous pesticides to which they are exposed. Sometimes they return to the field immediately after pesticide spraying, sometimes within 24-48 hours after spraying, well before the recommended re-entry interval for the types of pesticides used in Egypt. Such exposure can cause poisoning, dizziness, vomiting, diarrhoea and disruptions to the nervous, endocrine and reproductive systems.

Convention on the Rights of the Child

** Article 32*

1. States Parties recognize the right of the child to be protected from economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child's education, or to be harmful to the child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development.

2. States Parties shall take legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to ensure the implementation of the present article. To this end, and having regard to the relevant provisions of other international instruments, States Parties shall in particular: (a) Provide for a minimum age or minimum ages for admission to employment; (b) Provide for appropriate regulation of the hours and conditions of employment; (c) Provide for appropriate penalties or other sanctions to ensure the effective enforcement of the present article.

** Article 37*

No child shall be subjected to torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

Current Solutions

Much of the current work being done with child workers is initiated by NGOs, such as UNICEF and the Red Crescent, who run literacy programs and vocational training to try to give the children skills that will enable them to find better work. They also operate shelters for street children and give free medical check-ups.

The National Council of Childhood and Motherhood, headed by Suzanne Mubarek, is pushing for education to be placed high on the government's agenda in order to combat child labour. Mrs Mubarek has stressed the need for better education and the empowerment of Egyptian women to enable girls to stay in school. The NCCM has launched an initiative to educate girls and a survey to monitor child labour and define and assess the reasons for this problem.

In regards to child cotton workers, the Agricultural Ministry has recently established training sessions to educate farmers on the use of pesticides and has banned certain pesticides from use. However, it has still done nothing to prevent the violation of child labour laws. Human Rights Watch calls on the Egyptian government to:

- uphold the minimum age and limit working hours.
- monitor the treatment of child workers.
- implement disciplinary action against the employers who mistreat their workers.
- monitor pesticide spraying and re-entry intervals.
- restrict availability of highly hazardous pesticides.

Real progress will only be made when the initiative comes from the government itself. First and foremost it must actually enforce the Egypt Child Law which remains ineffective as long as the government fails to apply it. Then it is the responsibility of the government to address the poverty that prevents families from being able to afford the education of their children and pushes children out of schools and into the workforce.