

## **Protecting the Health of Working Children: Doing the Very Least!**

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## Introduction

Child labor is an age-old and persistent phenomenon. Even if successive local and global governments have failed to eliminate it, it is paramount to protect children engaged in work from the health risks they face through community protection plans and free health care. This paper stems from the belief in the necessity of child physical and mental health and well-being. It adopts a realistic approach that coexists with the difficulty of reducing child labor, and calls for the bare minimum of providing health protection for children through concerted efforts of the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Social Development.

In 2016, the number of working children in Jordan reached about 76,000, constituting 1.89% of children in the age group of 5 to 17 years, including 70,000 children constituting 1.73% of the aforementioned age group, whose work fits into the category of child labor.<sup>1</sup> The latter is defined as work done by children under the minimum legal age, as defined by national legislation and in accordance with international standards. Involvement in this type of work may consequently deprive those children of education or add a heavy burden on their studies.<sup>2</sup>

The statistical survey indicates that the number of working children in the Kingdom has doubled from 33,000 in 2007 to nearly 70,000 in 2016, with nearly 45,000 occupying hazardous jobs (Figure 1), distributed as follows (Figure 2): 29% in wholesale and retail trade and vehicle repair, 28% in agriculture and forestry, 11% in the manufacturing and construction industries each, and the rest in various other jobs.<sup>3</sup>

Article No. 8 of the Jordanian Labor Law<sup>4</sup> of 1996 prohibits the employment of children under the age of 16 in any form, while allowing the employment of children between the ages of 16 to 18 in specific professions, upon the approval of the Ministry. The law also warns against child labor in high-risk professions and those involving chemicals for instance. Moreover, the Jordanian law stipulates in Article 77 that the employer who violates the provisions relating to child labor shall be punished by paying a fine ranging from 300 to 500 Jordanian Dinars, and the penalty shall be doubled in case of repetition.

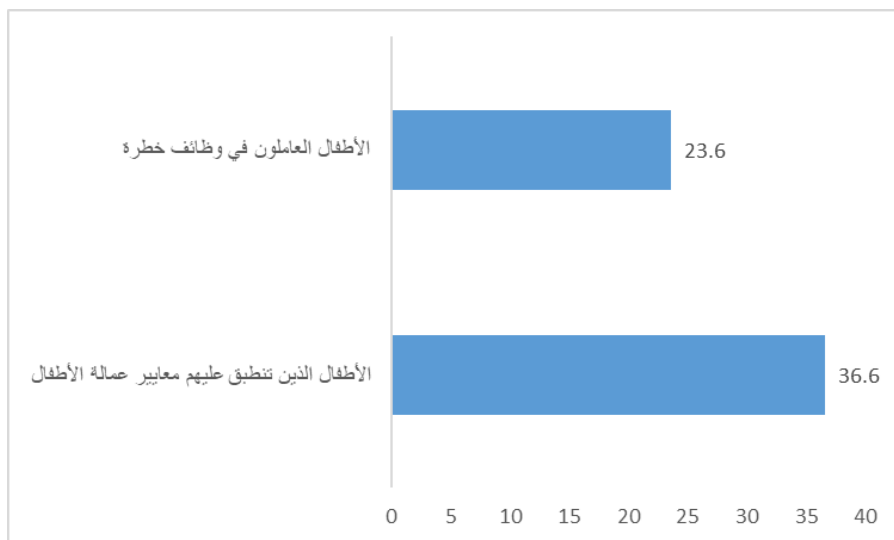
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<sup>1</sup> Musa Shteiwi, Walid Al-Khatib and Saad Ahmed. National Survey of Child Labor in Jordan, Center for Strategic Studies, International Labor Organization and Department of Statistics, 2016. [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---arabstates/---ro-beirut/documents/publication/wcms\\_510520.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---arabstates/---ro-beirut/documents/publication/wcms_510520.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> United Nations, World Day Against Child Labour, n.d. <https://www.un.org/en/observances/world-day-against-child-labour/background>

<sup>3</sup> Jordanian Ministry of Labor, "Inspection Department for Reduction of Child Labour," 2022 [https://mol.gov.jo/EN/Pages/Child\\_Labor](https://mol.gov.jo/EN/Pages/Child_Labor)

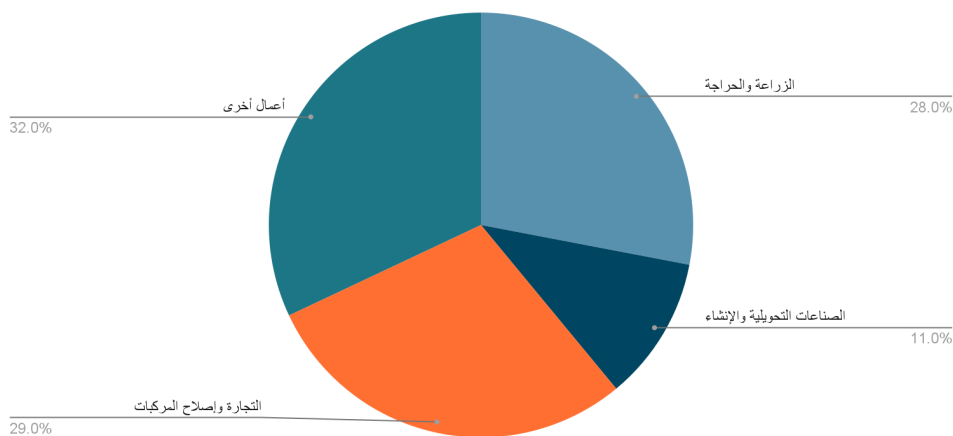
<sup>4</sup> Ibid.



**\*\*Translation:**

- Children occupying hazardous jobs
- Children fitting the criteria of child labor

Figure 1: Indicators of the 2016 survey according to the number of working children. Source: National Child Labor Survey Statistics 2016.



**\*\*Translation:**

- Agriculture and forestry 28.0%
- Manufacturing and construction 11.0%
- Trade and vehicle repair 29.0%
- Others 32.0%

Figure 2: Percentage distribution of hazardous work. Source: Statistics of the National Child Labor Survey in 2016

Hazardous work is defined as work that is harmful to the child's physical, social, and psychological development, such as working underground, underwater, in high places, using dangerous machines and devices, working with chemicals and explosives, or working long hours<sup>5</sup>.

### **Child labor is on the rise after COVID-19**

The above statistics show child labor numbers prior to the pandemic, and before the economic situation has worsened. The Workers House's report forecasts a surge in the number of working children<sup>6</sup> in light of the difficult conditions caused by COVID-19 and its aftermath, as it correlates with the number of unemployed people overall, be them day workers or self-employed.

Nowadays, the pandemic and its consequences have caused a decline in opportunities for many families that have plummeted below the poverty line after losing their sources of income and shrinking job markets. The number of those families is expected to reach 400, and the circumstances they are facing will drive them towards using their children to sell on the streets or in jobs that adults may not be able to do, either due to low pay or the employer's preference to employ children as they require lower wages than adults.

The Higher Population Council<sup>7</sup> agrees with the aforementioned alert because the sound measures that the government initiated to limit the spread of the pandemic, such as closures, quarantine, and others have exacerbated the economic situation. According to the Higher Population Council, the pandemic undermined the work done thus far towards the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially those pertaining to child labor reduction, because the impact of the pandemic on children in poor or economically fragile families may last a lifetime.

### **Lifelong physical and psychological pain**

The most serious impact of child labor is that on health, whether physical or mental. If governments cannot eliminate and reduce child labor, then governments and agencies in the field of child protection must work to provide healthy and safe environment for children, especially for those who occupy hazardous jobs.

Working children are more likely to suffer from many health issues, either due to the difficulty of the work they perform or the lack of experience and knowledge of the work and the risks involved. These children are more likely to suffer wounds and fractures due to the thinness of their skin and the fragility of their bodily structure. They are also highly exposed to respiratory diseases as a result of inhaling toxic substances. This is in addition to accidents that cause permanent disabilities that restrict them physically and mentally for life.

Ahmed, who is 15 years old, lost three fingers while doing maintenance on the falafel-making machine in the shop where he works. The most he got was a financial settlement of 4,000

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<sup>5</sup> United Nations, World Day Against Child Labour. Previous reference.

<sup>6</sup> Workers' House, "Jordan joins the world in celebrating the World Day against Child Labour." Higher Population Council, 2022. <https://www.hpc.org.jo/en/content/jordan-joins-world-celebrating-world-day-against-child-labour>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

Jordanian Dinars, which did not compensate for the inadequacy he felt after that accident.<sup>8</sup> There are many similar cases of children exposed to serious injuries without legal protection to cover them. Most families of working children and employers know they are violating the law, so no one reports such injuries. At best, the issue is settled financially; most of the time, even this compensation is not delivered.

In another case, a 12-year-old boy, also named Ahmed, who works in the vegetable market, had his feet damaged due to several injuries incurred during his work. Ahmed says: "The most difficult thing is the work of the "Al-Hisba" because it is mainly loading and unloading, and the weights are heavy on my body. I cannot bear that, and it hurts my back." Due to helplessness and fear, these weights add heavy mental burden to his fragile body. "The market is scary and full of bad people. Sometimes I work, and they fool me by not giving me my rights. I feel I am subject to injustice, but I am too young to hold them to account, so I remain silent!"<sup>9</sup>

Aside from the physical injuries and diseases that may cause harm to children, there is a psychological impact that does not go away. Working children are more vulnerable to forms of violence, such as bullying and marginalization, because they are the weakest link in the labor market, as Ahmed stated, and some reports refer to the exposure of working children to harassment in various forms. For example, the Jordanian Labor Observatory noted that 15-year-old Reda was molested at his workplace in a grocery store, where his mother noticed a change in his behavior with all members of his family and linked this to the presence of blood spots and discharges on his body.<sup>10</sup> The possibility of children being subjected to harassment increases during child labor, which negatively affects their mental development and behavior in the years to come.

It was also found that working children are exposed to many psychological impacts, including irritability over the simplest things, difficulty in dealing and coexisting with family, developing a preference for isolation and avoiding conversation with others, anxiety, tension, aggression, panic, fear, depression, frustration, and deviant behaviors such as smoking.<sup>11</sup>

Of course, children involved in child labor drop out of school and have their cognitive, emotional, and social development severely impacted. Their ability to read and write decreases, they lose respect for family ties, their acceptance of themselves and others declines, and their ability to distinguish between right and wrong regresses.<sup>12</sup> Thus, child labor impacts the expected personal growth in childhood, depriving children of the care necessary to grow properly to fulfil physical, mental, and psychological needs.

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<sup>8</sup> Ohood Mohsen, "Child Labor in Jordan... The Assassination of Innocence with the Claws of Poverty and Weak Censorship", Amman Net, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3VD3FDE>

<sup>9</sup> Sally al-Akhras, "Frail bodies.. Children of Barrows and usurped rights", Amman Net, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3XboDej>

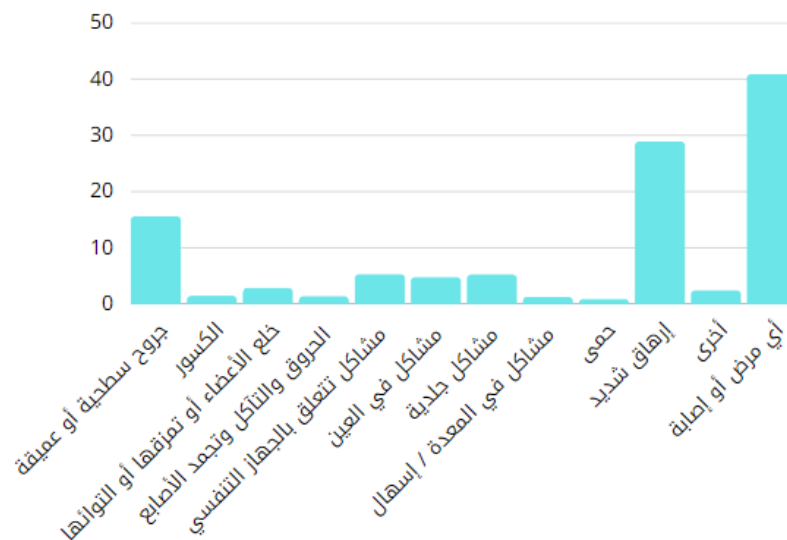
<sup>10</sup> Huda Muhammad Ibrahim Al-Laithi and Shaima Abdel-Aziz Al-Dali. The social, health, psychological, educational and economic effects of child labor (a field study in Qalyubia Governorate). Al-Azhar University, 2016. <http://labor-watch.net/ar/read-news/152322> Same reference<sup>11</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Houria Sharqi and Naima Berabih, The Psychological and Social Effects of Child Labor, Al-Qabas Journal for Social and Psychological Studies. <https://www.asjp.cerist.dz/en/downArticle/724/2/4/149390>

A study conducted in 2010 by the National Council for Family Affairs summarizes some of the psychological and social effects of child labor in Jordan, which include social weakness and risky behaviors such as drug abuse, physical and sexual abuse of children, bullying, exposure to financial exploitation, and the inability to balance between study and work, which has detrimental affects on the child's academic achievement.<sup>13</sup>

The nature of health and psychological risks and their effects vary according to the type of work and the gender of the child. There are no studies in Jordan that specifically refute this aspect. We know that females constituted 11% of the child labor force in Jordan in 2016.<sup>14</sup>

However, the report of the International Labor Organization in cooperation with the Department of Statistics in the Child Labor Survey 2017, indicated that 40.8% of children who worked at any time during the year preceding the survey suffered from a disease or were injured due to work, while the percentage of those who were subjected to severe exhaustion reaching 28.81%, and those who suffered from superficial or deep wounds to 15.35% (Figure 3).<sup>15</sup>



\*\*Translation:

Superficial cuts/ injuries – Fractures – Dislocation/ sprains – Burns, corrosions, and frostbites – Respiratory-related problems – Eye problems – Skin problems – Stomach problems/ diarrhea – Fever – Extreme fatigue – Others – Any illness/ injury

<sup>13</sup> Ayman Muhammad Hamdan Mansour, Ikhlas Abdul Raouf Al-Jamal, Rima Ibrahim Matrouk, Maram Abdel-Wahhab Al-Nawaisa. Studying the effects of child labor in Jordan (physical, social, and psychological). National Council for Family Affairs, 2010. <https://ncfa.org.jo/uploads/2020/07/16d8fda9-9b85-5f1ffc46b7c9.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> Workers' House, International Day Against Child Labor, previous reference.

<sup>15</sup> Dayioglu, Meltem, Working Children in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan (Results of the National Child Labor Survey 2007), Middle East University, 2009. [https://static.s123-cdn-static-d.com/uploads/3837866/normal\\_5f81990dcf6ba.pdf](https://static.s123-cdn-static-d.com/uploads/3837866/normal_5f81990dcf6ba.pdf)

Figure 3: Percentage distribution of hazardous jobs. Source: International Labor Organization report in cooperation with the Department of Statistics for 2017.

### **Efforts to address the health risks of working children**

The failure of protecting working children from health risks are not due to a legislative defect. On the contrary, Jordan ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child issued by the United Nations General Assembly in 1989. It confirmed its desire to reduce child labor through ratification in 1997 of the International Labor Convention No (138) of 1973 regarding the “minimum age for employment”. In 2000, it sanctioned the International Labor Convention No (182) for 1999 concerning the “Prohibition of the Worst Forms of Child Labor”, which called for the immediate elimination of the worst forms of child labor.

However, official efforts to implement the law are unable to contain the phenomenon of child labor or protect them from health risks. Because the first obstacle, according to Haitham al-Najdawi, Director of Inspection at the Ministry of Labor,<sup>16</sup> is the fear of the child, parents, and employer from declaring the child’s work for it violates the law. Thus, working children and the accidents they are exposed to are not being reported. Another reason would be that the legal procedures are very long and do not guarantee the child's best interest after years of waiting, as in the aforementioned case of Ahmed, who lamently lost his fingers. Therefore, finding a mechanism and method that allows receiving protection and health care without fear of the consequences of this illegal phenomenon is necessary.

While the Ministry of Labor continues its inspection efforts, the phenomenon continues despite the Ministry of Justice providing legal cover to protect children from work. International institutions are also working on this matter.

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) launched a program in 2020 to reduce forms of child labor in Zarqa and Amman.<sup>17</sup> This is done by helping hundreds of children leave dangerous work environments and get back to education and training, in addition to providing their families with support packages to address and reduce the economic burden, one of the root causes that originally pushes families to resort to child labor.

The program, implemented by Rowad Al-Khair Association, a partner of UNICEF, brings together the Ministry of Labor, local organizations, and municipalities to eliminate risky child labor, and educate society about its negative effects on children in the present time and future. The International Labor Organization, UNICEF, and Save the Children, are implementing the “Child Protection from Child Labor” program, which aims to protect children and adolescents in Jordan from the worst forms of child labor by working on the causes leading to it to ensure a better future

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<sup>16</sup> Al Mamlaka, “Ministry of Labor: A fine of up to 500 dinars for those who employ people under the age of 18.” Al Mamlaka TV, 2021. <https://bit.ly/3ldbaOS>

<sup>17</sup> UNICEF, UNICEF launches programme to end child labour in Zarqa and Amman, 2021. <https://www.unicef.org/jordan/press-releases/unicef-launches-programme-end-child-labour-zarqa-and-amman>

for them through education.<sup>18</sup> However, the main concern of this paper remains the provision of protection and health care for working children.

### **Recommendations**

Protecting working children from health risks is a legal, societal, and moral responsibility. The government has so far tried to address it from the legal perspective. Still, it falls short in curbing such a widespread social phenomenon, especially with the exacerbation of the urgent economic needs of families. Therefore, government agencies, represented by the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Social Development, civil society institutions, and international organizations could join efforts to provide health protection for working children in Jordan.

Although this paper does not justify child labor, it acknowledges it is an existing phenomenon that is difficult to eradicate. Therefore, this phenomenon can be contained so that the percentage of child labor in hazardous jobs is reduced, decent life is achieved for children in a safe society, and their skills are enhanced to enter the labor market in a safe way.

1. Highlight the negative health and psychological impact of child labor, so that the Ministry of Health carries out awareness campaigns on social media platforms to educate parents and children about the health risks of their work and the importance of acquiring skills safely for their health and psychological wellbeing. Donors concerned with child protection could also provide some support required for this purpose.
2. Intensify the efforts of the Ministry of Social Development and civil society organizations to reduce child labor in hazardous work by training children in digital or manual skills to enable them economically in a suitable and healthy manner. The objective should be the acquisition of major skills that will help them build a sustaining job in the future. This measure can target children between 16-18 years old who can legally work in appropriate conditions. These pieces of training can help these children when joining the labor market as a result of their early acquisition of digital skills. There may be an opportunity to establish partnerships or to obtain private financing for this purpose.
3. Provide a health protection mechanism for working children by the Ministry of Health to ensure the provision of routine health care necessary to shield them from diseases and ensure their safety. The Ministry of Health can allocate one day each month to benefit children working in its health centers.
4. Explore the economic endorsement of the community protection network for children and their families to reduce the economic destitution that drives families to send their children to work.

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<sup>18</sup> UNICEF, A call for renewed collective commitment to ending worse forms of child labor by 2025, 2021. <https://www.unicef.org/jordan/press-releases/call-renewed-collective-commitment-ending-worse-forms-child-labour-2025>





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من السفارة الأمريكية في الأردن.