

Full Length Research Paper

Child labor under the worst conditions: child laborers in cotton production in Turkey

Bulent Gulcubuk

Department of Agriculture Economics, Faculty of Agriculture, Ankara University Turkey.
E-mail: gulcubuk@agri.ankara.edu.tr. Tel: +90.312.596.1513. Fax: +90.312.318.53.60.

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As is the case throughout the world, child labor is a serious problem in Turkey. Healthy and happy new generations are among the prerequisites of a modern society. Among child laborers those in the agricultural sector stand out due to the conditions under which they work. Families who own no or only little land or do not earn enough from their own farm business to subsist move to seasonal work, where there is more agricultural work available, in order to earn a better living. Seasonal agricultural worker families take their children with them when they temporarily move for seasonal work due to economic and social necessity. As a result, children engage in agricultural work inappropriate to their age in order to contribute to the family income. In Turkey, more than 40% of child laborers work in agriculture. These children work intensively in cotton, hazelnut, citrus fruits, sugarbeet and tobacco production, especially hoeing and harvesting in different regions in Turkey. A substantial portion of children working under the worst conditions are younger than 15, and according to ILO regulations, not at working age and not supposed to engage in this kind of work. Most of these children who are totally deprived of education or who cannot continue or not start education due to seasonal work, live in especially the Southeast and East Anatolia Regions and live far from home for 4 - 7 months a year in tents lacking basic needs.

Key words: Agricultural Labor, child labor, child labor in agriculture, seasonal work, mobile labor.

INTRODUCTION

Child labor is not only an important problem in Turkey but in almost all developing and underdeveloped countries. Millions of children work legally (according to national laws) or illegally, under conditions that violate international norms, and that harm their physical, mental, educational, social, emotional and cultural development. Child labor is closely related to the population, level of education, economic development, employment and general development of a country. While the global public develops sensitivity to the abuse of child labor, the movement against child labor has become an unprecedented global issue in terms of speed and intensity. It has become a movement that has moved beyond political borders, languages, cultures and moral traditions. All groups in the civil society have gathered and announced that child abuse in work life needs to be ended. In Turkey, too, preventing child labor, finding solutions and

becoming sensitive to the problem has become a universal responsibility.

More than 40% of child labor in Turkey appears in agriculture. Agricultural work is one of the sectors that affects children most. The main dangers that threaten children in agriculture are: working long hours under the sun or in cold windy weather; using inadequate and unsafe tools and machines; exposure to dust from the field that is worked in, excessive heat and dangerous chemicals; working without personal protective equipment, carrying heavy loads, dangerous animals, poisonous insects, and snakes among others. According to the 2006 TUIK (Turkish Statistical Institute) Child Labor Study, the number of children aged 6 -17 in Turkey is 16 million 264 thousand, 60.9% of which live in urban areas and 39.1% in rural areas. While 84.7% attend school, 15.3% does not (2.491.000). Girls constitute 58.8%

(1.464.708) of children who do not go to school. Whereas 31.5% of working children attend school, 68.5% do not continue education. Of all working children, 40.9% (392.000) work in agriculture and 59.1% (566.000 kişi) in non-agricultural sectors. 53% are wage workers, 2.7% are self employed or employer, and 43.8% are unpaid family members. Of the 392.000 working children 51.8% are boys and 48.2% are girls. Of these, 182.000 are in the 6 -14 age range. Of the unpaid child workers, 79.5% works in agriculture. (<http://www.tuik.gov.tr/PreHaberBultenleri>).

Child labor is among the important problems in Turkey to be solved. ILO Convention 182 calls for prohibition and immediate action for the elimination of the worst forms of child labor by all children under age 18. The Government of the Republic of Turkey signed this convention in 2001. Stakeholders, The Ministry of Labor and Social Security (MLSS), labor and employers' unions, and the public have identified 3 worst forms of child labor in Turkey, namely, children in seasonal and/or mobile agricultural work, in small and medium sized manufactories and in the street. (www.ilo.org). According to TUIK data, in rural areas approximately 1 million families (30.2%) do not own any land and have to work on others' land to earn their living. As no definite data is available on the number of children among these families children are estimated to constitute 25 - 30% of that population. In terms of socio-economic indicators, Turkey is in the process of transformation from a mainly agricultural economy to an industrial economy, and from a rural population to a more urban structure. This process is characterized by negative side effects and one of which is observed in the labor force in agriculture and other sectors. The basic factors that cause child labor in especially agriculture are:

- Migration,
- Imbalanced income distribution,
- Insufficient education, unequal opportunities in education,
- Population growth,
- Unemployment,
- Poverty,
- Adult unemployment,
- Inadequate legislation and ineffective law enforcement,
- Employers' demand for child labor,
- Unpaid family labor, and
- Employment in agriculture.

Families that own too little land or who earn too little from their enterprise to make a living, and/or who own no land temporarily move to regions where there are more agricultural employment opportunities and seek employment there in order to earn a living. Due to the nature of agricultural production, these workers work and live under hard conditions. While moving to the region of employment, seasonal workers take their children with them due to economic and social necessity. Thus, children are found to work in agricultural jobs that are

inappropriate to their age so as to contribute to the economy of the family. In Turkey, seasonal/mobile worker migration is mostly toward regions where the more industrial crops, such as cotton, tobacco and sugarbeet, are produced.

Seasonal child workers for the majority include children who do paid work, generally with their family or on their own, for another. These children mostly move from their villages and towns in certain regions to other areas for a period of 4 - 7 months to engage in seasonal jobs such as hoeing, weeding, harvesting in crop production. They form the group that is affected most by issues of transportation, accommodation, food, water and sanitation, health, and education among others. In terms of child labor, agriculture is an informal work area and sector, and as such child workers do not have job security/safety, are not paid when they are ill or injured, and cannot demand protection in case of employers' negative treatment. Child labor in agriculture can be divided into two categories. The first group comprises children who do paid or unpaid work in their family firm or another firm within their own locality. When they find employment they work during the day and spend their evenings and days without work at home. Their work and accommodation conditions depend on the structure of their continuous place of settlement. The second group includes children who move for 3 - 7 months to other regions for seasonal work together with their families or siblings, and relatives. These children live in plastic tents without electricity, water, and other sub-structure. They do not have any profession or skill that they can use apart from their labor and they form the group of children who work under the "worst conditions" in agriculture because they have to carry water, gather firewood, harvest cotton and pick fruit, hoe, and weed as well as their strength allows, sometimes alone or with all their family members and work at a tempo that is hard to bear. These children who are deprived of education or receive minimum education lead their life under the worst conditions.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This article presents the findings of a study conducted in the city Karataş in the province Adana by Gulcubuk (2003) to illustrate the worst conditions under which children work in cotton production as seasonal workers. The study carries the features of a pilot study that shows child labor under the worst conditions. The main material of this study consists of the data obtained from questionnaires administered to children doing seasonal work in cotton production Karataş in the province of Adana. In addition, relevant literature and previous studies were reviewed, and statistical information as well as laws and regulations were examined.

The target groups in the study were children aged 5-17 working as seasonal workers in cotton production in Karataş, Adana. The children were reached via their parents. The universe of the study was formed by the children who come to Adana with their families from different regions of Turkey for seasonal work. These families settle in villages. In this study, the children who live with their families in tents in 8 different villages- to which the most seasonal migration takes place and where the most cotton is produced- were

included. The number of children included in the study is 6387. Children were usually interviewed in the evenings (after work).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Children of families who spend 4 - 7 months per year away from home to hoe and harvest cotton (and do other jobs as well) form the group of children that work under the worst conditions of work life in terms of physical, psychological, and educational terms. The findings of the above study are summarized below.

1. In the sample study, 47.1% were boys and 52.9% were girls (N = 6387). Of these children 66.4% were in the "5 - 14" ve and 33.6% in the "15 - 17" age range group.
2. Seasonal agricultural work is not only done by villagers but also by urban people. Of the children in the study 50.8% were born in the city, and 49.2% in the village.
3. Seasonal work related migration is observed to be the most widespread in Southeast Anatolia and 58.5% of the children were born in provinces of this region (Adiyaman, Sanliurfa, Diyarbakir, Gaziantep).
4. Children came mostly from crowded families. Especially in rural families the number of children was slightly higher. More than half of the children (67.6%) had at least 6 siblings. The average number of siblings per child (including the child itself) was 6.6.
5. In seasonal agricultural work, education is a serious problem for especially children because seasonal work is concentrated in the period of May-November and children either cannot attend school at all, or cannot attend fully or complete their education after a certain level.
6. Of the children 47.2% were literate, 34.2% were "primary school graduates". The ratio of illiterate children was 12.2%.
7. The ratio of children who did not complete primary education due to seasonal work in agriculture was 20.0%.
8. 75.8% of the children worked at least 12 hours a day. This ratio was slightly higher for girls (76.9%). Children were calculated to work 11.7 hours per day on average. These working hours are usually imposed by the children's parents and outside children's will because the aim is to increase the family income. The great majority of the children (99.3%) worked every day, and 0.7% worked 5 days a week. Moreover, it was found that of those children who worked everyday, 100% of the boys worked everyday, and of the girls 98.7% worked everyday.
9. Children of families who try to earn a living through seasonal agricultural work in had conditions start working at a very young age, the average starting age being 9.4. This average age was 9.2 for boys and 9.6 for girls.
10. As children do seasonal work in agriculture in order to contribute to the family income, their wages are mostly taken by their parents. As expected, 90.1% of the children gave their wages to their father or mother.
11. The economic conditions and insufficient means available to families who do seasonal agricultural work also affect the general life conditions of the families and

as such the birth conditions of their children. It was found that 77.4% were born "at home", 17.4% in a hospital, and 2.8% "in the field during work". That is, 80.2% of the children were born under unhealthy conditions.

12. Among seasonal agricultural workers, children are affected most by the inappropriate and unhygienic conditions of the environment and accomodation. These conditions directly affect children's immunity. When the children's immunity to diseases that can be prevented through vaccination was examined, it was found that 52.4% of the boys and only a quarter of the girls were vaccinated regularly.

13. In the study, 30.5% of the children reported to have contracted a serious disease (n=1945). Of these, 6.2% had had a "kidney disease", 3.1% "rheumatism", 1.5% "heart disease". Though, it is interesting to note that 89.2% of the children in this group did not know the name of the disease they had. In addition, 12.5% of the children had experienced a work accident. Of the children, 5.6% smoked (n=357), 4.9% (n = 312) were night blind and 5.5% (n=351) had the habit of eating earth, clay, paper and other such materials.

14. Harvesting cotton is one of the most risky work types that children should be prevented from doing. The main physical risk factors in this work are excessive exposure to sun, contact with empty pesticide packages, work accidents, carrying heavy loads, bites by insects, snakes, scorpions and other pests. Among psychological factors are long working hours, monotony, insufficient sleep, deprivation of education, insufficient play time and opportunity to make friends. Due to these factors the children become exhausted, indifferent, fed up, introverted and develop feelings of "worthlessness" and fatalist attitudes.

15. During the study, children were asked "whether they had ever heard of children's rights", which only 20.7% answered with "yes". This percentage is 25.4% among boys and 16.5% among girls. These children's notion of children's rights did not originate from formal sources like laws, regulations or conventions but rather from informal sources such as what they heard their family or people around them saying. The key phrases these children used while referring to children's rights were "compulsory education", "the prohibition of child labor" and "insufficient play grounds".

16. In the study the children were asked the question: "In whose place would you like to be in life?" 67.5% of the boys and 63.6% of the girls could answer this question. The professions and people they felt empathy with were "teaching" (25.6%) in the first place and "singers" (15.4%) in the second.

17. Of the children working in cotton harvesting, 58.2% wanted to become "teacher", 26.8% "doctor", and 7.3% "sportsman" when they grow up. In fact, the responses to the question are an interesting reflection of the children's social values. The popularity of fields like teaching, medicine and sports reflects the children's subconscious desire for a high status profession instead of the hard conditions of their present work.

18. The children who exhibited some awareness of the problems were asked the question "How do you think can these problems be solved?" 74.7% could answer this question (n=4771). The responses were "families being rich-wealthy" (23.1%), "creation of permanent employment opportunities in their hometown" (21.5%), "the state's providing services in education, healthcare, substructure, etc. in their hometown" (13.8%), "meeting the basic needs in the place they work, for example, accommodation, substructure, healthcare, etc." (12.4%) and "the use of machines in cotton harvesting" (12.4%). 16.9% of the children were pessimistic about the future and said that "no matter what is done, there is no solution".

19. One of the most important issues in seasonal agricultural work is the nature of the place and the material of accommodation. Seasonal workers usually settle in empty, open, areas remote from the village. Factors that determine choice of place are proximity to water sources, work filed and fuel to burn. 36.4% of the families settled in places near water sources. There were no families who, even temporarily, settled in a town or village during seasonal work. This situation can be accounted for in two ways. First, the local population of a town or village may not welcome the seasonal workers and allow them to settle. Second, the seasonal workers may not be able to integrate their life style in a permanent settlement or may hesitate to attempt to do so.

20. In the study, 83.3% of the seasonal worker families lived in "nylon" tents and 14.3% in "cloth" tents. Each tent accommodated 6 individuals on average.

21. Seasonal workers in agriculture temporarily live in tents deprived of basic human needs (substructure) and under insufficient conditions. For example, 79.8% of the families did not use have electricity. The basic human need, water, is the most important problem of seasonal workers in agriculture and they mostly obtain their water from tankers, the cleanliness and water quality of which totally depends on the personal sensitivity of the employer.

22. Another health risk that threatens seasonal workers in agriculture is the presence and quality of toilet facilities. 59.5% of the family heads stated that there was no toilet facility in the place they lived and that they met this need in the open air in the field, 36.5% said they had made toilets with walls of nylon and that the waste accumulated in covered holes in the ground, and 2.7% said they had made toilets with nylon walls but that the waste accumulated in uncovered open holes in the ground.

23. Of the fathers of the working children in the study, 62.9% were found not to be registered with any social security institution (agricultural or non agricultural), 6.7% to be registered with the SSI (Social Security Institution) – worker status, 1.5% to be registered with the Bağ-Kur (Social Security Institution of the Self Employed) – agricultural status, and 29.0% to possess a so called "green card" (given by the state to the socially worst off to

receive free healthcare among others).

Under the Constitution of Turkey, women, youth and children are protected.

Article 50 of the constitution states:

"No one shall be required to perform work unsuited to his age, sex, and capacity. Minors, women and persons with physical or mental disabilities, shall enjoy special protection with regard to working conditions. All workers have the right to rest and leisure. Rights and conditions relating to paid weekends and holidays, together with paid annual leave, shall be regulated by law." From this perspective, child labor in agriculture is a prohibited type of labor.

Article 71 of labor law 4857 on the age of employment and prohibition on employment of children states:

Employment of children who have not completed the age of fifteen is prohibited. However, children who have completed the full age of fourteen and their primary education may be employed on light works that will not hinder their physical, mental and moral development, and for those who continue their education, in jobs that will not prevent their school attendance. The job the child performs must not bar him for attending school and from continuing his vocational training, nor impair his pursuance of class work on a regular basis. <http://www.turkishlaborlaw.com/content/view/27/77/>.

On the other hand, the Law on Primary Education includes regulations concerning child labor. Article 59 of this law states that it is prohibited to children at primary school age who do not attend school to do paid or unpaid work in public or private employment, or any other place requiring work. As it is seen here, laws have restrictions in terms of child labour. However the main problem is that there is no implementation. Both employers and public institutions are insensitive and unsatisfactory about this issue. Shortly after the adoption of The Convention of Children's Rights in the UN, the "World Summit for Children" took place. At this summit, world leaders adopted the Declaration on the Survival, Protection and Development of Children and a Plan of Action for implementing the Declaration, including 27 goals. One of these goals is the protection of especially children living under hard conditions. The World Summit for Children became a source of inspiration to International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labor (IPEC). Turkey was among the first 6 countries to join the program that started in 1992. One of the most steps toward the elimination of child labor was ILO Convention 182 The Worst Forms of Child Labour "Agreement for Urgent Action to Prohibit and End Intolerable Forms of Child Labor". This agreement is one of the 8 ILO agreements on basic rights.

This convention has provisions for eliminating of child labour and not preventing education opportunities. The convention aims to eliminate especially the worst forms of child labour. However there are still ten thousands children, who work under the worst forms as there is not satisfactory control and sanction. Child labor is a complicated issue observed worldwide, the prevention and elimination of which needs to be achieved soon. Which-ever form it takes, child labor concerns all individuals and its elimination requires the active and systematic contribution of all groups in the society. Child labour is a very serious human rights problem in terms of social and economic aspects in all over the world. According to estimations there are about 250 millions children that work and are deprived of satisfactory education, health services and fundamental freedoms in all over the world. Personally children pay for this situation but it affects also countries. Distribution of child labour in all over the world as follows: 61% in Asian countries (except for Japan), 32% in African countries and 7% in Latin countries. On the other hand there were about 300.000 children from 15 to 17 years old that work in agriculture sector in the US in 1996.

All over the world, agriculture is the foremost sector in which child labor is the most widespread. 70% of child workers work in agriculture. Children in agriculture work in coffee, fruit, sugarbeet, sugarcane, rice, tobacco, tea and cotton production and animal husbandry and shepherding (ILO/Newsletter, 2007-3). According to a research-conducted in some countries where we see cotton farming-by Environmental Justice Foundation (2007); children work for 12 h in a day in cotton farming during the whole year in Burkina Faso. Children work for 14 h a day during 5 months in China, 10 h a day in Mali during 8 months, 10 -12 h in a day during 6 months in Kazakhstan, 5 -14 h in a day during 2 - 4 months in Tajikistan. More examples can be given about this issue. Common point of this issue is that age group of children is from 7 to 15 in all countries including Turkey. These children work under very hard conditions in cotton hoe, agricultural spraying, fertilizing, harvest and transport. Anonymous (2007). Agriculture is one of the most dangerous areas of work for children. Especially girls suffer from the workload. Working girls are usually an invisible part of the agricultural labor force and occupy a disadvantageous position because they carry the household work in addition to agricultural work. Children's starting work life at an early age in especially agriculture is a serious political and social problem in Turkey. The problem has several dimensions which increase due to factors such as poverty, education, demand for cheap labor, migration, child abuse, abandonment, invisibility of labor, lack of awareness and unemployment.

Families who do not earn enough from their own enterprises, who own no or little land and unemployed and poor families in cities attempt to find seasonal employment in agriculture by moving to regions that offer

more opportunity to find such jobs (Yıldırak et al., 2003). Due to their physical conditions and their social status, children are affected most in this type of work. Without solving the child labor problem it is not possible to talk of a country's development. In order to reduce child labor in agriculture and completely eliminate it, even if this can only happen in the long term, the following points are important.

- Creation of sensitivity to the issue.
- Increasing the sensitivity of the relevant institutions and organizations.
- Solving the problems of child laborers in agriculture is not the responsibility of one single institution or organization. The solution to the problems lies in coordinated activity by all related institutions and organizations.
- The system of intermediation in agriculture, if it is made to function properly, can be having a facilitative role in solving the problems.
- The most important problem of children working in agriculture is discontinuity in their education. The school enrollment of children who did not complete their education or who never went to school is of great importance for their future. This is among the responsibilities of the Ministry of Education and its related organs. *Creating the opportunity to attend boarding schools and other institutions for children who are deprived of education, and changing the behavior and attitudes that block the education of these children by developing educational programs will be an important step forward. Or at least the academic year should be adjusted to the agricultural work season for children who work* (Yıldırak et al., 2003).
- It should be closely inspected whether or not compulsory education is followed.
- The operation of social security networks should privilege children.
- Preventive measures should be taken for children's health and rehabilitation.
- Non agricultural employment opportunities could be created for young people in agricultural or rural areas.
- Child labor policies should be turned into action plans at the local, regional, and national level to eliminate the problem.
- Families should receive effective and traceable support for the education of their children.
- Local governments can become more sensitive to the issue.
- Activities aimed at increasing parents' knowledge and awareness of the problem can be organized.
- The children of seasonal workers in agriculture do not have enough access to healthcare. To solve these problem health care units which have mobile healthcare teams should be established and become active in the relevant areas and fields.
- Arrangements should be made to improve the quality of the accommodations of mobile workers in agriculture, and thus, their children. This seasonal life style in primi-

tive tents that exposes its inhabitants to several serious hazards should be improved. The necessary conditions for the building of fundamental substructure facilities such as electricity, water, and sanitation should be created and buildings that include these facilities need to be constructed.

- In Turkey, adequate laws and regulations exist related to the issue of child labor. The effective enforcement of the present laws and international agreements signed is of importance to ensure a healthy future for children. Rather than the presence of laws, their enforcement should be the concern.

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