



Child Labor in the Cotton and Textile Sectors¹

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Abstract

Information on child labor in the cotton and textile sectors is scarce and fragmented. This article attempts to raise awareness on this issue by compiling and summarizing the available evidence on the magnitude and effects of child labor in the cotton and textile sectors and the actions put in place to eliminate it.

Introduction

Child labor is usually understood as work that harms children's well being and hinders their education, development and future livelihoods. According to the International Labour Organization³ (ILO), there are more than 300 million working children 5-17 years old worldwide, among whom more than 200 million are child laborers (IPEC 2006). Some of these child laborers work in the cotton sector, and some in the textile sector. The present article intends to serve as a platform for discussion of the issue of child labor in the cotton and textile sectors, with the ultimate goal of underscoring the relevance of eliminating child labor in general and in these sectors in particular. The article is a compilation and summary of the available evidence on the magnitude and effects of child labor in the cotton and textile sectors and the actions put in place to eliminate it.

Child Labor Defined

The ILO defines "working children" as those children who produce some economic output, over a reference period, for payment in cash or kind, or who are in self employment for profit or family gain in a business enterprise, a farm or a service undertaking (ILO 2008a). For example, fetching water, collecting firewood for their own homes, and doing paid domestic work in other households, are all counted as economic production. But child labor is a more restrictive definition than child work, and excludes all children working legally in accordance with the ILO Conventions 138 and 182.

The ILO adopts conventions that become binding international treaties after their ratification by member States. Among the ILO's international labor standards, there are 8 fundamental conventions covering the subjects that are considered as fundamental principles and rights at work: freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining, the abolition of forced and child labor and non-discrimination in employment and occupation. Two of the 8 fundamental conventions relate specifically to child labor – Convention 138 on Minimum Age and Convention 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour.

As per ILO Convention 138, "the minimum age shall not be less than the age of completion of compulsory schooling and, in any case, shall not be less than 15 years." However, this Convention includes some

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³ The ILO is the United Nations agency devoted to advancing opportunities for women and men to obtain decent work in conditions of freedom, equity, security and human dignity.

flexibility. For example, “a Member whose economy and educational facilities are insufficiently developed may, after consultation with the organizations of employers and workers concerned, where such exist, initially specify a minimum age of 14 years,” although ratification at 14 requires a member State to provide a written statement that it “renounces its right to avail itself of the provisions in question as from a stated date” (i.e. specifying a date after which the minimum age is increased above 14). Notwithstanding the general minimum age, Convention 138 also defines that “the minimum age for admission to any type of employment or work which by its nature or the circumstances in which it is carried out is likely to jeopardize the health, safety or morals of young persons shall not be less than 18 years.”

According to Convention 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour, the term “child” applies to all persons under the age of 18. This Convention supplements the Minimum Age Convention. It defines three categories of worst forms of child labor - commercial sexual exploitation, trafficking of children and all forms of slavery - and establishes the parameters for defining a fourth category of worst forms, namely hazardous child labor. “Hazardous child labor” is work in dangerous or unhealthy conditions that could result in the children being killed, or injured and made ill as a consequence of poor safety and health standards and working arrangements.

Schematically, child labor includes all types of work conducted by children 5-11 years old, non-hazardous work conducted by children 12-14 years for more than 14 hours but less than 43 hours per week, and all worst forms of child labor conducted by children 5-17 years (including hazardous work in specified industries and occupations and work for more than 43 hours per week in other industries and occupations). In essence, child labor is work that deprives children of their childhood, their potential and their dignity and is considered a violation of fundamental human rights (ILO 2008b).

Child Labor and Human Capital

Child labor can be analyzed from several perspectives, but most recent studies refer to it as a human capital problem, measurable by its impacts on education and health. A recent literature review conducted by the ILO concludes that:

“The work of children, their educational activities and their health conditions ... are the joint product of the entire set of mutually determining influences that constitute a place and time. ... [T]his results in large technical difficulties in measurement and analysis, and in the end it may be that any unidirectional answer is illusory.” (ILO 2008a)

According to this study, asking whether child labor “in general” has a negative effect on educational outcomes and/or health is misleading. The study indicates, broadly, that school and work make competing demands on children’s time and that increasing hours of work negatively affects schooling for age (SAGE)⁴ and scores on standardized learning assessments. However, the extent of the trade-off between school and work differs according to demographic group, time period, location and the presence of income support programs in the context of economic or other shocks.

Regarding the relationship between health and labor, the study concludes that child injury rates appear to be as high as or higher than adults’, but their severity, as measured by fatalities or the need for surgery, is lower on average; and that biometric evidence, as well as evidence from studies of concurrent or subsequent general health, is mixed.

Hence, the critical questions are what kind of labor, for how long, and for which children labor negatively affects their human capital. Not all work that children undertake is bad for them or would qualify as work to be eliminated under the ILO Minimum Age Convention or the Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention. Age-appropriate tasks that are of lower risk and do not interfere with a child’s schooling and leisure time can be positive, providing him/her with practical and social skills for work as adults. Improved self-

⁴ SAGE= Years of Schooling*100/(Age-E), where E is the age at which students typically begin school in the country in question. The greater the SAGE, the poorer the performance of the child at keeping up with his age cohort at school is.

confidence, self-esteem and work skills are attributes often detected in young people engaged in some aspects of farm work (ILO 2008c).

Child Labor in the Cotton and Textile Sectors

According to the ILO's International Program on the Elimination of Child Labor (IPEC), there are more than 300 million working children 5-17 years old worldwide, from whom more than 200 million are child laborers, and 126 million are engaged in hazardous work (IPEC, 2006). IPEC also estimates that about one-sixth of the world's child population aged 5-14 years, i.e. 191 million children, are involved in some kind of economic activity. Child labor among children 5-14 years old, which excludes all children working legally in accordance with ILO Conventions 138 and 182, amount to 166 million children, 45% of them doing hazardous work, i.e. 74 million children. The Asian-Pacific region is the region with the largest number of working children, 122 million in total. It is followed by Sub-Saharan Africa (49 million) and Latin America and the Caribbean (6 million). Due to data gaps, ILO does not provide estimates for the Middle East and North Africa and the group of industrialized countries.^{5,6}

The following occupations or processes, among others, have been documented to expose children to hazards to an extent that countries have prohibited the admission of children below 18 years (or a lower age, where indicated) to these occupations or processes by law (IPEC 2002a):

- Carpet weaving (14 years)
- Work in commercial agriculture (as opposed to subsistence agriculture)
- Work with machinery in motion (operation, cleaning, repairs, etc.)
- Work with pedal/crank operated equipment (16 years)
- Work in textile industries (specific tasks)

Child labor in the agricultural sector (agriculture, hunting, forestry and fishing) is of particular concern as agriculture is one of the most dangerous and under-regulated economic sectors worldwide for all workers, and it is the sector where more than two-thirds (69%) of all working children and over 70% of child labor is found – over 132 million girls and boys aged 5-14 years old (ILO 2007a; IPEC 2006). The major safety and health hazards for children laboring in the agricultural sector include (ILO 2008b):

- Musculoskeletal injuries from repetitive and forceful movements, and lifting and carrying heavy or awkward loads
- Poisoning and long term health problems from using or being exposed to pesticides
- Skin irritation from handling tough fibers and leaves
- Injuries from contact with, or entanglement in, unguarded machinery or being hit by motorized vehicles
- High levels of sun exposure which can result in skin cancer and heat exhaustion

Cotton production plays a key role in the economies of many countries: it provides a significant source of income for many millions of small farmers and is a valuable source of foreign exchange. It is also known that the cultivation of cotton can be labor-intensive and may involve the use of children work and children labor. In fact, the cotton industry received several allegations of employing child labor. However, reliable information on child labor in the cotton industry is still scarce, incomplete and fragmented.

In Ghana, seven out of ten working children aged 5-14 years are employed in the agricultural sector (ILO 2008d). A survey of 200 girl and 75 boy agricultural child laborers in Ghana indicated that cotton farming was the main farming activity for 3% of the boys and 4% of the girls (IPEC 2004c). The study also indicated that weeding was the most popular main farming activity among agricultural child laborers, involving 53% of the boys and 44% of the girls, followed by crop farming and looking after livestock (37% and 36%, respectively), cocoa farming (12% and 10%, respectively) and several other activities. The

⁵ The ICAC Secretariat raised the question about the reasons behind the data gaps –especially in industrialized countries- and is waiting for a response from ILO officials.

⁶ All estimates reported in this article are obtained from studies conducted by or reported in ILO publications.

categories used to classify the activities in that study do not seem to be mutually exclusive, since weeding is an activity required in the production of several crops, including cotton. As a result, the real magnitude of child labor in cotton farming in Ghana cannot be directly assessed from this study.

An example of the allegations of child labor in the cotton sector is a report by Human Rights Watch that indicates that about one million children (starting at the age of seven⁷) are hired by cotton-farming cooperatives in Egypt to inspect the cotton plants for leafworm eggs and manually remove the infected portions of the leaves during school vacations because they are thought to be the right height for inspecting the plants (Parekh, 2001). Egyptian government officials and private sector representatives openly dismissed the results of that report as nonsensical, especially after the fact that Egypt has a well-developed commercial pesticide industry.

Another allegation was posed by the survey administered by Physicians for Human Rights to 100 children engaged in the production of hybrid cottonseeds for seed companies in Andhra Pradesh, India, during the summer of 2001 (Mathews et al., 2003). Most survey participants (88%) were girls, ages 7 to 14. The survey found that children worked on average 12 hours a day, were frequently exposed to pesticides, and were not provided with safety equipment, and that children reported having frequent headaches and dizziness and skin and eye irritations after pesticide spraying. Furthermore, all children could not attend school during the cottonseed season, from May to February due to work demands. However, the article provides no information concerning the construction of the sample and no controls, and further technical considerations cast doubt on the results of this study. It is the understanding of the ICAC Secretariat that some child work is used in cross-pollination of cotton fields during two or three weeks a year, but it only involves a few hours in the late afternoon and a few hours in the early morning since cotton flowers are only open for a short period of time and cannot be pollinated around noon. Further, in India there is no reason for children to be doing this work rather than underemployed adults.

According to a report by the Group of Human Rights Defenders and Journalists of Uzbekistan (2008) based on 141 interviews conducted in October and November 2007, children 10-14 years old are forced to pick cotton for at least two months during the school year. The report indicates that children receive little pay and suffer from detrimental consequences for their health and education. Minister Ganiev, Minister of Foreign Economic Relations, Investments and Trade (MFER), and Ambassador Kamilov of Uzbekistan gave assurance to the ICAC Secretariat that the Government of Uzbekistan welcomed opportunities to maintain a dialogue with international organizations on the issue of child labor in the cotton sector and that the Government of Uzbekistan intended to invite representatives of international organizations to a round table discussion in Tashkent in the near future. The delegate of Uzbekistan to the Standing Committee of the ICAC emphasized that the allegations of state-sponsored forced child labor in the cotton sector of Uzbekistan are not true and that Uzbekistan is organizing a joint session with UNICEF and embassies in Tashkent to highlight the truth about cotton production practices. The ICAC Secretariat has been informed by ILO officials that the ILO office in Geneva received the instruments of ratification of Conventions 138 and 182 from the Government of Uzbekistan on 24 June 2008.

As the cited examples suggest, evidence of child labor in the cotton sector is scarce and fragmented, and there is lack of consensus on the soundness of the available reports. The cotton sector would benefit from more detailed studies for more countries, following international standards to facilitate cross-country comparisons and improve the transparency of the results. Child labor is a violation of fundamental human rights and should be addressed urgently.

The industry sector (mining and quarrying, manufacturing, construction, and public utilities) accounts for 9% of working children in the world. Child labor in textile workshops, carpet weaving and the garment industry pose serious risks to the health of children. The major safety and health hazards for children laboring in these sectors include (IPEC 2003):

- Musculoskeletal injuries from lifting and carrying heavy loads, and working in awkward postures doing repetitive movements
- Injuries from exposure to old machines and to loud noise

⁷ Egypt's legal minimum age is twelve for seasonal agricultural work.

- Respiratory diseases such as byssinosis, asbestosis and asthma from contact with airborne dusts of cotton, flax, soft hemp and other fibers
- Poisoning and long term health problems from exposure to dyestuff (that can cause bladder cancer), sodium, bichromate and potassium (that can cause chrome poisoning or chrome eczema), solvents used in the finishing process (that can cause dermatitis and chemical poisoning)
- Visual strain from inadequate illumination in the working place
- Some children in the carpet weaving industry are in bondage, and cases of physical and sexual abuse have been reported

According to a study by the ILO (IPEC 2004b), a number of countries employ children to weave carpets and assemble finished garments, shoes and leather goods from their homes under subcontracting arrangements, including Bangladesh, Colombia, Egypt, India, and Pakistan. By working at home, they are outside the reach of labor inspectors and trade unions, and abuses are frequent even in countries where the larger manufacturers follow laws and regulations and do not hire children. According to the same study, children can sometimes be found (illegally and unmonitored by any government or trade union officials) working in sweatshops alongside their parents in Los Angeles, Boston and other cities in the United States.

According to a survey conducted in the district of Lucknow, India, 18.9% of total workers in the zardosi industry, i.e. the handicraft production of colorful garments and other textile products, were child workers, and 14.9% of total working hours were child hours (IPEC 2007b). One of the arguments used by children's employers to employ children in the textile industry is the "nimble fingers" argument, according to which children are more suited than adults for some activities that require good mechanical coordination of the fingers. However, Levison et al (1998) dismiss as entirely fallacious the "nimble fingers" argument, as it finds that children are not more likely than adults to make the finest knots in the Indian carpet-weaving industry.

Child labor is a pressing issue in the informal weaving industry in Ethiopia (ILO 2006). Weaving is a family tradition in which young boys start by assisting their fathers or as apprentices and later become independent weavers. More than half of the child weavers are believed to be in the age group 12-15 (ILO 2006).

The Cambodian National Institute of Statistics (NIS 2002) estimates that 9.2% of all child workers work in the manufacture of wearing apparel, although no child worker is employed in garment manufacturing.

In Bangladesh, 311,000 child workers can be categorized as spinners, weavers, knitters, dyers or related textile workers, and they represent 4.2% of total working children (Bureau of Statistics 2001).

About 5,000 children are believed to work in wood, textile, and leather handicrafts in Kenya, and about 600 children are believed to work in textile garment and related trades, jointly representing less than 1% of total working children – about 930,000 children- (Central Bureau of Statistics 2001).

In Sri Lanka, an estimated 8,300 children are handicraft workers in wood, textile, leather and related materials, and an estimated 26,900 children are textile and garment trade related workers, jointly accounting for 3.8% of the total working children (Department of Census and Statistics 1999).

In Portugal, 3.8% of all child labor is employed in the textile industry, which constitutes the most popular manufacturing activity (Despacho do Ministro do Trabalho 2003). Child laborers 6-15 years old account for 4.1% of all children in that age range in Portugal.

In Argentina, there are 5,700 working children 5-13 years and 9,000 working children 14-17 years in the textile sector, jointly representing 3.2% of all working children –about 456,000 children (Organización Internacional del Trabajo 2006).

In Tanzania, it is estimated that 23.5% of all workers in textile manufacturing start paid work at age 17 or younger: 3.2% of working children start paid work at the age of 10 or younger and 20.2% do so at ages 11 to 17 (IPEC 2002b).

As evidenced by the cited reports, child labor is an important issue in the textile sector, and urgent action is required to eliminate it.

Actions to Eliminate Child Labor

All ILO member States have an obligation to promote and realize in good faith the fundamental principles and rights at work covered by the eight fundamental conventions even if they have not ratified any of them. However, ratification is expected as an assurance of the member States' commitment to their application.

The ILO's goal with regard to child labor is the worldwide elimination of its worst forms by 2016 in accordance with Convention 182 and the progressive elimination of all forms of child labor in accordance with Convention 138. The International Program on the Elimination of Child Labor (IPEC) is the ILO's largest technical cooperation program, working in more than 80 countries, with approximately 190 active field projects. The ILO relies on invitations from member States to work in-country to conduct assessments of labor conditions, and requires assurance that it will be able to work independently.

The ILO is pursuing a Global Action Plan to tackle child labor. It starts from the premise that effective elimination of child labor can only be achieved at the country level and that member States must be at the forefront of such efforts. IPEC has developed a range of technical tools to support its constituents in their child labor eradication efforts. The ILO also has a supervisory system based on a complaints procedure to ensure that labor standards are respected in practice and principle by member States.

The ILO's technical cooperation experience suggests the need for integrated actions in labor administration, education and family income assistance. This work is to be supplemented by a circle of coordinated interventions from a variety of stakeholders at national, state and community levels, including employers' and workers' organizations and other civil society organizations, international agencies, creditors and donors. Time bound eradication targets are essential for defining and maintaining priorities and the roles of different stakeholders.

It is important to point out that aside from being the right and humane thing to do, there are also significant economic benefits related to the elimination of child labor. For example, an ILO study estimated that eliminating child labor in developing economies could generate economic benefits nearly seven times greater than the costs, mostly associated with investment in better schooling and social services (IPEC 2004a).

Not all work that children undertake is bad for them or would qualify as work to be eliminated under the ILO Minimum Age Convention 138 and the Worst Forms of Child Labor Convention 182. Member States have the right to determine age-appropriate tasks that are of lower risk and do not interfere with a child's educational attendance and performance or right to leisure time. The ILO, in partnership with international agricultural organizations, is working to promote decent youth employment in agriculture.

In order to scale up work on eliminating child labor in agriculture, the ILO has developed a new International Partnership for Cooperation on Child Labor in Agriculture with key international agricultural organizations, including farmers' organizations (represented by employers) and agricultural trade unions (represented by workers).⁸ International agricultural agencies and organizations can play important roles

⁸ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO); International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD); International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) of the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR); International Federation of Agricultural Producers (IFAP) – representing farmers/employers and their organizations; International

in eliminating child labor in agriculture, especially hazardous work. These organizations represent an important conduit to the national level because of their close contacts with national ministries or departments of agriculture, agricultural extension services, farmers' organizations and cooperatives, agricultural producer organizations, agricultural research bodies and other organizations. The Partnership's initial objectives are to:

1. Apply laws on child labor
2. Take action to ensure children do not carry out hazardous work in agriculture
3. Promote rural strategies and programs aimed at improving rural livelihoods, and bring child labor concerns into the mainstream of agricultural policy making
4. Overcome the urban/rural and gender gaps in education, and
5. Promote youth employment opportunities in agriculture and rural areas

A recent trend in efforts to eliminate child labor in agriculture has been the emergence of multi-stakeholder initiatives concerning a specific crop and involving stakeholders along the food/commodity supply chain for that sector. Some focus mainly on direct action to assist children and their families, awareness raising and capacity building of local agencies. Others concentrate efforts on a national and global level and feature codes of conduct and labeling schemes to induce exporters and suppliers to ban the use of child labor and monitor its elimination. As an example, the national employers' organization of Azerbaijan has focused on combating child labor in cotton production through a national media campaign and the development of training and advocacy materials in Azeri aimed at sensitizing employers and other stakeholders (IPEC 2007a). IPEC has supported several such sectoral alliances in the past few years, including those created in the banana, cocoa, and tobacco industries.

According to the ILO's latest estimates (IPEC 2006), the number of child laborers fell by 11% globally between 2000 and 2004 and the number of children in hazardous work decreased by 26%. While this is encouraging, there are still 218 million child laborers worldwide, 126 million of which are engaged in hazardous work. Unfortunately, disaggregated world estimates of child labor per activity are not available. Nevertheless, child labor is a pressing issue and needs to be addressed urgently.

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Child Labor in the Cotton and Textile Sectors



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Objective

- Raise awareness on child labor in the cotton and textile sectors:
 - Evidence
 - Actions to eliminate it

Institutional Framework

- The International Cotton Advisory Committee (ICAC) is an association of governments of cotton producing and consuming countries.
- The International Labour Organization (ILO) is the United Nations agency devoted to labor issues.

Child Labor: Definition (ILO)

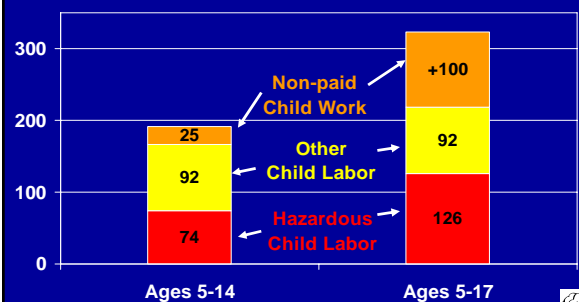
- Work that harms children's well being and hinders their education, development and future livelihoods.
- Not all working children are child laborers

Age Group	Paid Labor		Worst forms of child labor including Hazardous Work	Non-Paid Labor Excluding WFCL and HW
	Light work	Regular work		
Children below the minimum age specified for light work (5-11 y)	CHILD LABOR			
Children within the age range specified for light work (12-14 y)				
Children at or above the general minimum working age (15-17 y)				

Adapted from ILO 2008

Child Labor: ILO Estimates

Million Children



Child Labor in Cotton Production



Child Labor in Cotton Production

- **Egypt:** 1 million children hired to manually remove leafworm eggs from cotton plants. (HRW 2001)
 - Well-developed local commercial pesticide industry
- **Ghana:** 3% of child labor in cotton farming; 34% weeding (ILO 2004)
 - N=375; overlapping categories



Child Labor in Cotton Production (cont'd)

- **India:** children sick after spraying pesticide, work 12 hours/day, skipping school (PHR 2003)
 - N=100. Survey design? No controls
- **Uzbekistan:** All children 10-14 y.o. forced to pick cotton for 2 months during school year (GHRDJU 2008)
 - N=141. Unstructured Interviews.
 - Uzbekistan ratified C138 and C182 in 2008.



Child Work and Child Labor in the Textile Sector



Child Work in Textile Industry

- **Argentina:** textile sector (OIT 2006)
 - 5,700 children 5-13 y.o.
 - 9,000 children 14-17 y.o.
 - Add to 3% of all working children
- **Bangladesh:** spinning, weaving, knitting, dying (BS 2001)
 - 311,000 child workers
 - 40% of total working children



Child Work in the Textile Industry

- **Cambodia:** manufacture of weaving apparel (NIS 2002)
 - Children in this industry 9% of child workers in all activities
- **India:** district of Lucknow, zardosi industry (IPEC 2007)
 - Children 19% of total workers in the industry
- **Tanzania:** textile manufacturing (IPEC 2002)
 - 23.5% of paid industry workers are children



Child Work in the Textile Industry

	Kenya (CBS 2001)	Sri Lanka (DCS 1999)
Wood, textile, leather handcrafts	5,000 children	8,300 children
Textile garment and related trade	600 children	26,900 children
Sum as a % of Country's Total Working Children	1%	4%



Child Labor in the Textile Industry

- **Portugal:** (DMT 2003)
 - Total child laborers 6-15 y.o. 4.1% of all children 6-15 y.o.
 - Textile industry 3.8% of all child labor
- **Ethiopia:** weaving industry (ILO 2006)
 - Weaving is a family tradition
 - +50% of all child weavers are 12-15 y.o.



Actions to Eliminate Child Labor

Actions to Eliminate Child Labor

- ILO's member states
- ILO's International Program on the Elimination of Child Labor (IPEC)
- International Partnership for Cooperation on Child Labor in Agriculture
- Sector Initiatives:
 - National employers association in Azerbaijan against child labor in cotton production
- ICAC - SEEP: Research Project 2009



Conclusion

- Few comparable studies in the cotton and textile sectors available
- Further research is needed
- Child Labor needs integrated action
- Current initiatives need support



**International Cotton Advisory
Committee**