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Contact address: Etiler Mahallesi 1275 Sokak No: 41 Basmane Konak/İzmir

Web: deritekstilkunduraiscileridernegi.wordpress.com

E-mail: deritekstilkunduraiscileri@gmail.com

Tel: +90 (554) 301-71-37

**The Report on Refugee Child Labour in the Pandemic**

**About Us:**

Our association was established in 2008 under the name of “Leather Workers’ Association”, was named “Leather Textile and Shoe Workers’ Association” at the general assembly held in 2011. Our association is a class solidarity organization carrying out activities with the slogan of “Don’t let remain a single worker without insurance, a single workplace without a union!” among the precarious and disorganized segments of the class.

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## Introduction

Having observed and witnessed that child labour and rights violations endured by refugee children have increased with the pandemic in Izmir, Turkey, the Leather Textile and Shoe Workers’ Association decided to monitor the influence of the Covid-19 pandemic on the exploitation of refugee child labour. We wanted to see how child labour is affected among refugee families who have become much poorer since the pandemic and reveal the violations of rights experienced by children forced to work due to their family conditions.

With this monitoring activity, the Leather Textile and Shoe Workers’ Association aims to prevent the pandemic-related increase in the exploitation of refugee child labour and urge the central and local governments to fulfil their obligations towards refugee children’s right to education.

As a methodology, we reviewed existing reports prepared by other non-governmental organizations and news stories that appeared in the media during the pandemic, in addition to interviewing refugee families living in Izmir. We reviewed experts’ statements in this field in the news, pointed out the results of the reports prepared by other non-governmental organizations and tried to determine the participation rates of refugee children in education and working life in the post-pandemic period.

Face-to-face interviews were conducted with the families of 100 refugee children living in Konak, Buca, Karabağlar and Bornova districts of Izmir, where refugees dwell intensively. The interviews were administered with both parents and children.

During the survey, status and registered-unregistered distinctions were not taken into consideration. Most of the refugees interviewed were Syrian refugees under temporary protection status. Refugees from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq were also among the refugees interviewed.

Survey interviews were held from 24 to 29 May 2021. During the survey studies, mask and distance rules were strictly observed.

For the survey, the families of 61 boys and 39 girls were interviewed.

Gender distribution is given importance during interviews.

Refugee children at the ages of 7-17 were interviewed. The average age of the refugee children interviewed was 12.

Our monitoring report analyses the issue within the framework of article 32 and 22 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (September 14, 1990), the Minimum Age Convention (No. 138) (January 23, 1998), and Convention No. 182 on Immediate Measures for the Prohibition and Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour (January 25, 2001) of the International Labour Organization (ILO).

## **Current Situation**

Coronavirus outbreak, which has affected the whole world and has been declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization, shows its effects.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The Covid-19 pandemic also showed its effects on the economy alongside becoming a public health crisis. The poor, unregistered, precarious, and casual workers of society have suffered the most from the damage caused by the pandemic in the economy. Refugees are at the forefront of these groups.

With the pandemic, many sectors throughout Turkey have had to stop work periodically or reduce their working capacity.

Sectors such as textile, shoe, industrial mills, and construction, where refugee and migrant workers work intensively, are at the forefront of the workplaces that interrupt production or reduce their capacity.

 Whereas refugee workers face unemployment, the incomes of almost all refugee families have either been cut or considerably reduced. In this period, refugee families are also struggling to meet their basic needs, and poverty has increased. “Sectoral Analysis of the Effects of Covid-19 on Refugees Living in Turkey” report published by the Association for Solidarity with Asylum-Seekers and Migrants (ASAM) in May 2020 revealed that the unemployment rate increased 70% amongst refugees during Covid-19. ASAM reported that 36% of the employees experienced a pay cut. 33% of the individuals stated that the payment of their bills was affected, 32% said that the rent payment was affected, and 26% of them said that the cost for basic needs was affected amongst refugee families. Despite the decrease in the income of many refugee families, the increase in their expenses puts them in economic trouble. 28% of refugees continue to live their lives with the handouts. Only 8% of them have a regular job. 24% of them earn their living from daily wage jobs.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Families of refugee labourers working in unregistered daily wage jobs as precarious workers were left to their fate by central and local governments during the pandemic. Since almost all of the refugee workers were employed informally (i.e., without health insurance and no taxes paid), they could not access the income support scheme of the Ministry of Labour. Moreover, refugees could not access the pandemic support amount of 1000 TL from the Ministry of Family and Social Policies, which provided the support only to Turkish citizens. In a limited number of provinces, refugees could access food support programmes from local governments and loyalty support groups affiliated with governorships. Even though various solidarity networks and non-governmental organizations reached refugees within this period, they could only offer one-time support. The fieldwork and media scans of our association in July 2020 revealed a similar situation.[[3]](#footnote-3)

##  **The Exploitation of Refugee Child Labour During the Pandemic**

 The economic loss experienced by refugees, long time unemployment and the fact that refugees cannot be part of the policies to decrease the effects of the pandemic have brought forth a new problem: increased exploitation of refugee child labour.

 As their income decreased and cut during the pandemic, refugee families expected their children to support the household budget or domestic labour.

 Refugee children detached or moved further away from education with the distance education process, and the conditions pushed them into engaging in precarious jobs.

We have observed that child labour, especially refugee child labour, has increased with the COVID19 pandemic, especially in the textile workshops in Konak Basmane, where our association is based, and in the shoe workshops in Işıkkent Ayakkabıcılar Sitesi.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Several reports published by the International Labour Organization (ILO) and UNICEF revealed that the COVID-19 crisis pushed millions of children into child labour.[[5]](#footnote-5)

At a webinar series organized by İstanbul Bilgi University Centre for Migration Research and Istanbul Bilgi University Child Studies Unit, ILO Turkey Program Officer Nejat Kocabay indicated that “as research clearly shows, child labour is one of the ways to compensate negatively for job losses in the fragile and vulnerable structure of unregistered employment. We frequently come across examples where the family makes use of any and all means by which the child can obtain money in the short term and support the family’s life.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

According to a report on “Pandemic and Children” by the Republican Peoples’ Party (CHP) Deputy Chairman of Human Rights, since last year, 10% more children have begun to work in the seasonal agricultural fields for an average of 60 to 70 lira (7,5 USD) for 10-12 hours per day.[[7]](#footnote-7)

“The Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Children under International Protection and Temporary Protection in Turkey” report of ASAM in April 2021 also revealed that refugee child labour has increased. According to the report, 15 out of every 100 children do not continue their education because they work in income-generating jobs during the pandemic.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Our observations in the field and the results of our survey corroborate these reports and the news stories in the media. Owners of small and medium-sized businesses preferred unregistered employment and therefore the exploitation of refugee child labour to avoid taxes and insurance payments, because they could dismiss refugee children more easily and have them work cheaper.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Another side of child labour is working from home. Child labour is also widely used in piecework sent from workplaces to homes, children have become workers along with their families. It is plausible to encounter the piecework system which is given to homes in Basmane where refugees live intensively.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Recyclable waste collection is another area that child labour has become more common with the pandemic. With the pandemic, refugee children have become more apparent, either with their families or alone, in front of garbage containers or on the streets.

Moreover, despite the fact that refugee children were forbidden to go out for a long time within the scope of pandemic measures, child labour increased. At all levels of the public administration ignored the rights and needs of children who are compelled to beg on the streets, sell handkerchiefs, water and small items, or try to collect paper, plastic and metal pieces in garbage containers, and their exploitation in workplaces.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Another invisible type of refugee child labour in pandemic in Turkey is domestic labour. The domestic workload of girls who cannot go to school due to the pandemic has increased even more.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Despite such evidence, there is no data on refugee and migrant child labour in the “Child Labour Survey Results 2019” report of the Statistical Institute of Turkey (TURKSTAT). The fact that the data in the report is not updated since 2012 prevents us from making any necessary policy analysis to address the issues round the exploitation of child labour.[[13]](#footnote-13) We can state that a child labour survey that does not include refugees and migrant families is far from reflecting the truth.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Magnitude and prevalence of child labour in Turkey have changed with the increasing number of refugee arrivals since 2011, mostly from Syria and from countries such as Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Somalia. Employers trying to reduce labour costs turned to employing refugee children to exploit their labour without paying for necessary health insurance payments and taxes.[[15]](#footnote-15)

We observed that refugee children worked in worse conditions than other workers, are forced to work longer hours for lower wages, receive late and underpaid salaries and face maltreatment and hate speech.

Refugee and migrant child workers are informally employed particularly in the textile and shoe sectors as well as in the fields of service, agriculture, animal husbandry, recyclable waste collection and construction.[[16]](#footnote-16)

According to the 2019 report by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs Organization (DESA), the total number of refugees and migrants in Turkey is close to 6 million. We can say that this number has increased with the refugees, immigrants and unregistered ones who came in the last 2 years.[[17]](#footnote-17)

There are about 3.6 million Syrian refugees in Turkey and 1,237,637 (33.7%) of this number are children between the ages of 5-18, the mandatory schooling ages.[[18]](#footnote-18) According to the latest figures announced by the Minister of National Education, 774, 257 (63%) of Syrian refugee children under temporary protection are enrolled in schools.[[19]](#footnote-19) There is no data on the numbers and school rates of refugee children from other countries in Turkey.

Speaking at the symposium titled “Migration, Refugees and Discrimination”, Ercüment Akdeniz, who is a journalist at the Evrensel Newspaper, said that the number of child workers has increased with migration, the average age of child labour has decreased to 6 years of age and working hours have increased.[[20]](#footnote-20)

The increasing number of refugee and migrant child labour is also reflected in occupational deaths. According to the Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) Assembly, at least 81 refugees and migrant children were killed in their place of work between 2014 and 2020. Only in 2020, nine refugee/migrant children died while working. All but one of the children were Syrian refugees.[[21]](#footnote-21)

## **The situation of Exploitation of Refugee Children Labour in İzmir**

43 out of 100 refugee families stated that an adult works at home regularly, while 36 families stated that no one works. 21 refugee families mentioned that the employed one works irregularly and goes to work when called.

All of the unemployed refugee families said they have been unemployed since the COVID-19 pandemic became effective. Of the 64 refugees who were working or working irregularly, 25 refugees stated that they were unemployed for almost 6 months during the pandemic, while 27 refugees stated that they were unemployed for more than 6 months (usually 8, 9 months) and have recently started working. All of the employed refugees also stated that their employers lack insurance registration.

When asked if the family income decreased during the pandemic, 55 refugee families said that their income had decreased, 36 families said that their income was ‘cut’. While 7 refugee families stated that it did not change, only 2 families stated that it increased. When compared to our previous question, it was observed that the income of refugee families who continued to work also decreased.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Despite the heavy economic losses during the pandemic, support was very limited. While 22 refugee families stated that they received one-time food package support through sub-governorships or municipalities, 16 refugee families stated that they received food package support or 100 TL market card support from various non-governmental organizations.

When asked if their children continued her/his education before the pandemic, 63 out of a hundred refugee families answered ‘yes’. This rate is almost at the same level as the national average. The schooling rate of 7–11-year-old children and girls was found to be higher.

When asked if their children worked before the pandemic, 23 out of a hundred refugee families answered ‘yes’ to the question. 15 out of 23 families stated that their children work regularly, while 8 of them stated that they work irregularly and/or part-time. It was also stated that almost all of the children were male and between the ages of 11-17.

When asked if their children continued distance education during the pandemic, only 35 out of a hundred refugee families answered ‘yes’. While the rate was 63 before the pandemic, it dropped to 35 during the pandemic.

It was recorded that the rate fell by almost half. Lack of technical equipment, lack of information and language barriers stand out among the reasons for not continuing distance education. It was observed that the children of refugees who continue to work during the pandemic can access distance education.

When asked if their children worked during the pandemic, 43 out of a hundred refugee families answered ‘yes’ to the question. The employment rate has almost doubled. 26 of 43 families stated that their children work regularly and 17 of them noted that their children work in irregular and part-time jobs. With the increase in the working rate, the working age decreased to 8 years old, and it was observed that girls participated in a working life (excluding domestic labour) at this time. A significant number of families with refugee children who were unable to attend distance education or work state that they were also looking for job for their children but were unable to find it. It was observed that children working part-time are also distanced from their education.

In response to the question “Which business line does your child work in?”, 10 of the refugee families stated that they work in a textile mill, 7 said they work in a shoe mill, and 9 families said they work in restaurants and buffets. They also stated that 10 refugee children collect recyclable solid waste with them or on separate streets. Other refugees replied that their children sell handkerchiefs on the streets, wipe car windows at traffic lights and beg.

Long-term unemployment in the family, the fact that the child finds a job more easily and the employer will give much less weekly earnings to child workers, the detachment from education and the thought that the pandemic does not affect ‘children’ are among the reasons for the families to easily accept their children to start working.

When asked, ‘How much weekly salary does your child receive?’, 16 refugee families said their children received 250-300 TL, while 10 refugee families said they received 350-400 TL. Other refugee families, on the other hand, said that it is vague and varies depending on the working days, working hours, the number of handkerchiefs sold, the amount of recyclable waste collected and so on.

Of the refugee families we asked about the working hours of the children, 26 families stated that their children worked 11-12 hours, 8 families said 6-7 hours, and 9 families stated that it was uncertain.

 It was observed that all the children who worked 11-12 hours worked in textile and shoe workshops or in restaurants and kiosks.

It was observed that the children whose families stated that their work hours were uncertain mostly worked on the streets.

To the question ‘Does the working child think of continuing his or her education after the pandemic?’ 12 of them answered ‘yes’ and 13 of them said ‘no’. 18 families answered ‘uncertain’.

This data reveals that refugee child labour, which has increased during the pandemic, might dramatically become permanent.

Refugee families were also asked about the violations of rights that their children are exposed to while working. 13 families said that there were times when their children could not get their full weekly salary, 12 families said that weekly wages were given late all the time, 11 families said that overtime wages were never paid, 7 families said that their children were exposed to physical violence and hate speech on the street, 4 families said that their children had an occupational accident while working, 26 families said that their working hours were too long and 13 families said that their children were working under unhealthy conditions.

It was observed that almost all the children who were exposed to physical violence and hate speech were children working on the street, while children who had an occupational accident worked in textile and shoe mills.

The employment of refugee children in the aforementioned jobs is prohibited by the provisions in the Turkish Labour Law No 4857 prohibiting the employment of “children in work that is harmful to their health, safety, or moral development,” as well as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Minimum Age Convention No. 138, and the Convention No. 182 on Immediate Measures on the Prohibition and Elimination of Worst Forms of Child Labour in the ILO, which Turkey is a party to.

The public administration does not implement the relevant provisions and does not provide the necessary support for children and their families, as required by Article 7, Article 17 and Article 30 of the European Social Charter.

## Our Policy Proposals

* The elimination of the exploitation of child labour is the fundamental duty of the state. Children’s health, development, education, and shelter needs should be met based on social rights without discrimination. Improvements should be made in social and economic fields, and poverty should be effectively fought based on human rights. Policies that create job opportunities and reduce unemployment for the families of child laborers should be implemented.
* The fight against the exploitation of child labour goes through the fight against poverty. The first condition of struggling with the exploitation of refugee child labour is granting refugee status to asylum seekers in Turkey. For this, the geographical restriction on the Geneva Convention on the Legal Status of Refugees (1951) should be immediately abolished and all refugees should be granted status without any conditions in accordance with the ‘non-discrimination’ principle of the convention.
* Social support practices implemented by the government and local governments to reduce the economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has recently increased the exploitation of refugee child labour, should also include refugees. Retrospective support should also be offered.
* Social security registration procedures of refugee and migrant workers should be facilitated, and if the employer does not apply, the application of the refugee and migrant workers to the Social Security Institution should be sufficient. Refugee quotas for workplaces should be changed based on reality. Social security registration inspections should be increased, and deterrent penalties should be given in the labour regions where refugee workers are intense.
* It should be insisted on the implementation of international conventions on child labour exploitation, to which Turkey is also a counterparty. The studies should not be behind closed doors, and practical and widespread studies should be carried out in the field. International organizations should impose sanctions on states that do not implement the conventions.
* Rights-oriented information and data should be generated to produce policy advocacy studies and social protection mechanisms aimed at eliminating child labour and refugee child labour.
* The data on child labour prepared by TURKSTAT for 2019 should be re-prepared and shared with the public, taking refugee and migrant child labour into account. Refugee and migrant children should also be included in the subsequent reports.
* In addition to public institutions, workers’ organizations, rights-oriented non-governmental organizations working in the field of refugees and children, universities and employers’ organizations should work together to prevent the exploitation of refugee child labour. Suggestions from all sides should be considered when developing solution proposals, and non-governmental organizations should have the right to inspect the implementation of solution proposals.
* The barriers to access to distance education, which has caused an increase in child labour during the pandemic, should be eliminated. Children should be supported in terms of the internet and technical equipment. To prevent child labour from becoming the new normal, children detached from formal education in the post-pandemic period should be immediately identified and reintroduced to education.
* Working harms children, both physically and psychologically. Special support should be given to child workers in this regard.
* MOREOVER, ALL TYPES OF CHILD LABOUR SHOULD BE PROHIBITED!
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11. Afet üstüne afet: mülteciler için pandemi ne demek?

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22. This question was asked based on the overall pandemic. Unemployed families’ incomes have decreased over time. Only salaries are taken as a basis within the scope of income. The Red Crescent Card is not included as income. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)