



### Social Existence, Protection and Care for Children Working in Agriculture

By: Hassanein Kishk and Mohmoud Mortada

#### **Introduction and Research Problem:**

Child labor is a critical social problem. Reports of the International Labor Organization point to the rising phenomenon of child labor on the international level. In 1996 the number of working children in the age group 5-14 was 250 million, of whom 120 million were working on full time basis. The largest number of working children is in Africa (41%) followed by Asia (22%). An ILO study points out that most of the working children are involved in agricultural production and fisheries, beginning work as early as five, six or seven years of age. They also work for long hours, often longer than the working hours of children in urban settings.

Girls join the work force earlier than boys and are therefore deprived of educational opportunities. Protection measures available to children in the agricultural sector are more modest compared to those available for workers in the industrial sector, where social security and compensations for injuries related to work are available. An ILO study in 1996 indicated that some agricultural activities are considered dangerous because they entail working with machines and biological and chemical ingredients. According to international conventions, children less than 15 years are not allowed to work. However, there are exceptions in Africa, Asia and Latin America where children are allowed to work at the age of 14. Moreover, children under the age of 18 are not allowed to work in dangerous activities.

Statistics on child labor are not accurate. It is known that child labor is concentrated in the agricultural sector and the share of rural areas of child labor ranged between 75-80% during 1986-92. It also tends to increase during specific seasons, when demand for the labor of children more than doubles. Most of the working children also go to school. Urban children working in the industrial sector or in workshops have received some attention in the last 10 years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. On the other hand, studies on children involved in the agricultural sector are very limited, despite the danger entailed in agricultural work and the threats it poses to the health and security of children.

#### **Importance and Goals of the Study:**

This is the first study of its kind on children working in the agricultural sector. It is important on two levels: an intellectual level, concerned with the production of knowledge on child labor and combining academic and field knowledge; and a practical level that pertains to community intervention in order to find solutions for the problem of child labor using political, legal, and cultural channels.

The study examines the following aspects of child labor:

1. Population and class characteristics of children working in the agriculture sector both on the macro and micro levels.
2. Reasons for child labor in agriculture.
3. Conditions and terms of child work in agriculture.
4. The need of working children for protection and care.

### **Methodology:**

Due to the limited number of studies on child labor, the current study employed a descriptive and exploratory approach in order to define the features of the phenomenon and determine children's needs of protection and care.

A purposive sample of working children in the agricultural sector was selected - because of the difficulty in identifying a random sample - taking some factors into account such as the age (6-15 years), patterns of work, whether or not they receive wages, gender, values, and cultures (Upper or Lower Egypt). The sample comprised 200 children: 105 male children (52.5%) and 90 girls (47.5%) from the governorates of Menia and Dakahlia as follows: 100 children from the villages of Bani Obeid and Abu Gharir in Menia and 100 children from the village of Tamay Al Zahaira and Al Zahaira in Dakahlia. The two governorates were selected because of their high rates of working children. Field work ran for 12 months. Questionnaire and interviews were drafted and research assistants were trained to use them

### **Findings:**

#### **I. Economic Exploitation of Children:**

1. Age: Findings indicated that 11.5% of the sample began work before the reached 7 years of age. In Dakahlia the proportion was 9% and rises to 14% in Menia. Working children less than 11 years old account for 82.5% of the sample: 62% in Dakahlia and 93% in Menia. Obviously, this violates provisions of the Child Law, particularly those stipulating that children should not take up jobs that harm their health. Findings indicated that 25.5% are involved in pesticides-related work.

2. Means of finding work: Securing child labor for agricultural work is associated with contractors who have long been involved in the business of recruiting workers for agricultural activities and exploiting them. Legislation forbids the employment of laborers through contractors (Article 20 of Law 137). And yet, data indicates that contractors persist; their presence is more evident in Dakahlia compared to Menia. Children who secure work through contractors constitute 33.3% of the study population in Dakahlia and 14% in Menia.

3. Wages: Findings indicate low level of wages earned by working children: 50.4% of the sample earn EP 4 or less per day and 93.6% earn EP 5. Wages are higher in Dakahlia with 81.2% earning EP 5 compared to only 3.1% in Menia, where 71.9% earn EP 3-4 and 25% earn less than EP 3. In Dakahlia those who earn less than EP 3 constitute 1.4% of the total sample.

4. Working hours: Both working hours and wages indicate the extent of exploitation. Findings reveal that 40% of the children work 6-9 hours a day and more than 18.5% work nine hours and more a day. The proportion rises to 30% in Dakahlia and declines to 7% in Menia. This may be attributed to the difference in agricultural crops in the two governorates. Again, this pattern of working hours is in clear violation of Child Law and the recommendations of the ILO (no. 146 of 1973).

5. Annual vacation, sick leave, breaks and injuries: The whole sample (100%) of working children who have weekend days, do not get paid for them. Only 9.9% reported that they are paid for official holidays. Paid holidays were totally absent in Menia and the proportion of children who had paid weekends accounted for 18.8%, rising to 41.2% in Dakahlia (some of the children in the Dakahlia sample work in cucumber greenhouses which is a regular sector), and declining to 3.9% in Menia. Children who have sick leaves do not exceed 7% of the sample, while 93% do not earn wages if they are sick and absent from work. The proportion rises to 100% in Menia. With regard to injuries during working hours, 15.5% said they are paid for the time they take off because of work related injuries while 84.3% said they are not. In general, the overwhelming majority of children are not paid for any vacation or weekly breaks or official holidays.

## II. Work Environment and Conditions

1. Nature of work: Findings reveal that 41% of the paid work is for picking cotton and 34.5% for picking the cotton worm, in addition to other activities related to livestock, moving and cultivating crops. Working for families usually involves feeding animals (59.9%), taking animals out for walks (1.5%) and other activities such as cleaning the barn and weeding seeds. The study reported that children join adults in almost all the activities including fertilization and cultivation of crops.

2. Work environment: Findings indicate that children work and live in the same agricultural environment and are affected by it.

3. Risks: Numerous risks are entailed in child work. These are:

Chemical risks: Findings revealed that 35% of the children had pesticides related injuries and 3% were poisoned. They also pointed out that there are no means of protection against pesticides to avoid their impact on children. In addition, 47% were exposed to fertilizers risks and cleaning barns exposes children to diseases transmitted by animals.

Biological risks: This is related to the pollution of the agricultural environment and contributes to the transmission of diseases to children such as schistosomiasis and ascarid. Findings indicated that 37% had schistosomiasis, 18.5% had dysentery and 57% had diarrhea.

Mechanical risks: Findings revealed that 77.5% had wounds related to using sharp tools and 25% were seriously wounded.

Physical risks: Most of the injuries (92.5%) were related to climatic conditions such as extreme heat. 45.5% reported having had a sun stroke; only 58.5% reported having a hat to protect them from the sun; 83.5% were exposed to extremely cold weather and 41.5% reported not having appropriate winter clothes.

Measures undertaken in case of injury: About 26.4% reported that nothing was done to them when they were injured; 37.7% had first aid help using some primitive and traditional methods.

4. Working hours, holidays, vacation and breaks: Working hours impact the physical, psychological and social growth of children. 40% of the children work 9 hours a day and those who work more than 6 hours exceed this figure, once again in violation of the Convention of Child Rights no. 198 and the Egyptian Child Law of 1996.

5. Initial and periodic medical check up and health care: 95.5% of the working children reported that they did not have an initial medical check up and 100% said that employers do not pay for medical check up and that expenses are borne by the child's family.

6. Availability of basic services: Findings indicate the availability of potable water (81.2%), tea and food (46.6% and 49%) on work sites. Only 24% of the sample receive a bonus on feast occasions; 29% of the employers offer drinking water, while 14% of the children bring their water with them or drink from the nearest canal or pump; 93% of the children use the open fields and spaces to evacuate bowels, while 4% wait until they go home. None of the working places had a toilet.

7. Night work: Of the total sample 17.5% of the children work in the evening after sunset; 7.5% do not eat during working hours and wait until they go home; 23.8% of the employers provide working children with one meal and 69.7% bring their meals from home.

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