



The nature, extent and patterns of child labour: a comparison between a rapid onset emergency and a protracted crisis

Photo: Plan International

*The nature, extent and patterns of child labour can drastically change in an emergency or crisis setting. In the Philippines, child labour increased in the aftermath of Super Typhoon Haiyan in 2013, while the onset of the Syrian war in 2011 increased child labour in Lebanon. In both countries, the widespread social and economic impact of the crises led to an increase in child labour and its worst forms.*

**Child labour prior to the crisis**

**Background**

In November 2013 Super Typhoon Haiyan left large parts of the Visayas region in Philippines devastated. It killed more than 6,000 people, displaced 4 million, and destroyed the homes, land, infrastructure and services of up to 14 million people.

Prior to the typhoon, children in the affected areas most commonly worked in agriculture including harvesting, planting, fishing, and coconut and sugar cane plantations. In urban areas, child labour was found in services such as hotels, restaurants, transport and retail, as well as in industries such as manufacturing, construction, recycling, waste collection and disposal. Common forms of child labour across both urban and rural areas included jobs in transport hubs, driving pedicabs and tricycles, and in construction.

Migration and trafficking from rural to urban areas was high among adolescents: girls commonly moved to work as household helpers and adolescent boys would be found working as day labourers, for example, in construction. Other worst forms of child labour included forced domestic labour, (online) sexual exploitation and illicit activities.

**Background**

Child labour was prevalent in Lebanon and Syria prior to 2011 but not to the extent seen after the onset of the Syrian war. Lebanon currently hosts 1.5 million Syrian refugees, more than half of whom are children and adolescents below the age of 18 years.

Prior to the war, the child labour rate in Syria was 4 per cent (5 per cent male, 3 per cent female). In both Syria and Lebanon, child labour most commonly occurred in agriculture. Child labour could be found as part of family businesses and in manufacturing, trade, hotels, restaurants and construction. Sex trafficking has long existed in Syria and Lebanon, although there are gaps in the data on child trafficking.

The Syrian war, combined with the political and economic crisis in Lebanon, has had a severe impact; Syrian families are struggling to earn a living, stay together and meet their basic needs for things like food and shelter. There has been significant strain on resources and infrastructure, affecting both refugees and vulnerable families in hosting communities. More recently, the COVID-19 crisis and the explosion in Beirut on 4 August 2020 have both exacerbated the vulnerable situation of thousands of families in Beirut and the wider nation.

### Prevalence of child labour

- After the typhoon, increased levels and severity of child labour were observed in affected communities. This included a rapid escalation of some worst forms of child labour such as scavenging at garbage disposal sites, domestic labour, transporting (goods and people), and hazardous child labour in agriculture.

### Changing nature of child labour

- More hazardous conditions for children, particularly in agriculture and plantations where tasks such as cutting down sugarcane or trees, and clearing debris, made work more dangerous.
- Traditional gender roles were reinforced. Girls and boys were forced to take on more adult roles as their vulnerability increased. Girls more often took on cleaning, cooking and caring for siblings, and boys more often helped parents with household repairs and income-generating activities.
- Pre-existing trafficking routes from rural to provincial to regional and/or national locations were reportedly exacerbated.
- Pre-existing forms of sexual exploitation were also reportedly exacerbated, such as the sex trade in streets, markets, hotels, guest houses, homosexual and transgender child prostitution rings and cybersex rings newly established in bunkhouses; sexual exploitation/early marriage by older foreign men (with cyber aspects to the sale of children); and survival sex with local military present on emergency response and exercise duties.

### Prevalence of child labour

- The Syrian war in Lebanon led to worsening conditions of both Syrian refugees and vulnerable host communities. UNICEF found that child labour increased by three times between 2009 and 2016 due to combined factors of poverty; high unemployment as an indicator of a strained economy; poor infrastructure, limited electricity and water services; and limited economic safety nets for families.

### Changing nature of child labour

- Research showed that refugee children were disproportionately affected by child labour: children from Syria outnumbered children from other nationalities in child labour. At the same time, an increasing number of children from Lebanon worked alongside refugee and migrant children from neighbouring countries such as Iraq and Palestine, to supplement family income as a result of a declining economy.
- Some studies found child labour to be more prevalent among boys, but practitioners warned that many girls work in “invisible” types of work including domestic work. Girls as young as five years old were found to be working alongside their families on farms, and adolescent girls were in (unpaid) domestic labour within homes, often at high risk of (sexual) abuse and exploitation.
- Child labour is seen in the same sectors as prior to the crisis, but increasingly involves harmful tasks and conditions for children – for example, in agriculture where forced and bonded labour is increasingly prevalent among Syrian refugees. Children and adults are forced to work on the farms of landowners in return for a place to live.

### **New push and pull factors of child labour**

- The number of single mothers and adolescent couples living alone rose after the disaster, as a result of abandonment or in an attempt to access relief or livelihood assistance. Household poverty, increased household or care work, and teenage pregnancy formed key drivers of school dropout and increases in child labour among adolescent girls.
- After the typhoon it was observed that in some areas, child labour was higher paid than before the disaster due to the shortages of wage labourers. Landlords requiring labour had to compete with humanitarian “cash for work” programmes, resulting in increased daily rates, which was a pull factor for child labour, particularly among adolescents.

### **New forms of child labour**

- New forms of harsh and dangerous labour that did not exist prior to the emergency included mostly worst forms of child labour. In some towns, new forms of commercial and sexual exploitation were reported; children and adolescents were engaged in dangerous forms of deep-sea fishing.
- Children were involved in work related to the humanitarian response, including: clearing debris, house repairs, lining up for (food) distributions and carrying relief goods, scavenging and waste collection, and selling.

### **New push and pull factors of child labour**

- The major and compounding economic pressures on Syrian and other nationality refugee families and on vulnerable Lebanese families to meet basic needs, has led to school dropout among children and a push into unregulated work, often in very poor and hazardous working conditions. The latest economic blockade on the country, the COVID-19 pandemic and the Beirut explosion have led to additional school dropout and child labour.
- A major child labour push factor among Syrian families are the restricted rights to employment for refugees. Limited opportunities to find decent work, access social protection and other services leaves vulnerable families with limited options. The serious and severe economic deterioration of the Lebanese economy has led to increasing competition on the formal and informal labour market.

### **New forms of child labour**

- Street children were uncommon in Syria before the refugee crisis; however, numbers in Lebanon are rapidly increasing. Most children who are living and working on the streets originate from Syria; some arrived before the war, but the majority arrived since the onset of crisis. Children seen on the streets are much younger than they would typically have been before the crisis.
- Forced and bonded labour has been reported, particularly of Syrian children working in agriculture and on the streets, to pay for rent, clear debt, or as part of their involvement in armed/ political groups. Most Syrian refugees live in informal tent settlements in agricultural areas where the landlords (shaweesh) form families, including children, to work on local farms, in restaurants or at auto repair shops in return for the right to live on their land.

- Anecdotal evidence also linked child labour more directly to the humanitarian response, in particular during livelihoods programmes and reconstruction efforts:
  - ◀ In some “cash for work” schemes there were reports of adults signing up for the work, but children undertaking the work.
  - ◀ Children were reportedly involved in the production of construction materials for reconstruction efforts.
  - ◀ Child labour was observed in the clearing of destroyed coconut trees along the coast, commissioned by the Coconut Authority (which was supported by humanitarian actors).
- Child marriage has become a survival strategy for many financially desperate refugee families, and vulnerable Lebanese families. Young girls face a number of risks as they are married to men for money and a false sense of protection.
- Although barely reported, commercial and sexual exploitation of children and adolescents is increasing as a result of the refugee crisis. Trafficking rings are reportedly trafficking minors and young women between Lebanon, Syria and other countries in the region. Anecdotal evidence from practitioners in Tripoli points to adolescent boys sexually exploiting (very) young girls in return for small amounts of cash or goods.

## Changes in the systems that respond to child labour

The emergency placed a major strain on families and communities, as well as on the existing infrastructure, services and systems needed to effectively respond to child labour. Social welfare services were tasked with providing a huge range of response services for children and adults; yet, their capacity to identify and refer children at risk of, or already in, child labour was severely affected in the first months of the emergency response.

Local child protection and gender-based violence referral pathways were established, connecting key government and non-governmental service providers. However, the availability and coverage of quality services for children in child labour remained limited. Other constraints were the lack of a centrally coordinated child labour monitoring system to record and respond to cases of child trafficking and other worst forms of child labour; the lack of staff to manage anti-trafficking desks across sea, air and land transport hubs in the affected areas; and a lack of shelters or safe havens for women and children in child labour.

The Syria crisis has increased strains on families and communities, as well as on the existing infrastructure, services and overall economy in Lebanon. The capacity of formal systems to protect children from child labour has not been sufficient to cope with the refugee crisis, and with the more recent deterioration of the Lebanese economic system.

Informal systems of Syrian and Lebanese communities and families bear a substantial burden to protect children where formal systems have had limited responses for child labour and where the number of child labourers has exceeded existing capacities. Education systems in Lebanon have not coped with the increased numbers of children needing formal education. Prior to the war more than 90 per cent of children attended school in Syria. In 2018, fewer than half of all school-aged Syrian refugee children in Lebanon were enrolled in formal education. More recently, there has been a significant increase in dropout among Lebanese school children too.

Prior to the typhoon major child labour programmes were implemented by various agencies, although these were either limited to specific industries or did not cover the affected areas.

In July 2014, eight months after the typhoon made landfall, an inter-agency child labour workshop was held, bringing government, development and humanitarian actors together to design a comprehensive prevention and response strategy.

Child labour prevention and response mechanisms have been insufficient. Child protection services have been overwhelmed with high caseloads and hindered by a lack of alternatives to child labour including family-based care, sustainable economic support and suitable informal and vocational education. Loopholes in the legal framework leave 12- and 13-year-old children vulnerable to child labour as they are not required to be in school. Funding shortfalls and short funding cycles across sectors have meant that a coordinated and strategic response has been extremely challenging, with limited long-term solutions being implemented.

More information and resources are available at:

<https://alliancecpha.org>

<https://alliancecpha.org/en/child-protection-hub/child-labour-task-force>