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# Extreme Forms of Child Labour in Turkey

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*Two little known forms of child labour in Turkey are examined. The process through which these children are made to work has parallels with the experiences of slaves. First, a long-standing practice from Northwestern Turkey of parents hiring children to better-off farmers is examined. Further, a more recent problem is examined where children are trafficked to big cities and forced to join criminal rings. Both forms of child labour are consequences of poverty. The factors that give rise to child trafficking and parents letting their children be trafficked are extreme poverty and internal displacement of families. © 2008 The Author(s). Journal compilation © 2008 National Children's Bureau.*

## Introduction

The literature on working children or children who are forced to work in Turkey is growing both in terms of size and coverage. The literature now extends from children who work on the streets in urban areas to children who collect waste material that can be re-cycled from garbage bins, to children who accompany their parents to cotton fields in the south of the country (Acar and Baykara, 2007; Atauz, 1990). Most published work uses the legal definition of a child (a person under 18 years of age) in line with the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Sometimes it is not possible to identify the ages of the children studied.

The coverage, however, does not necessarily reflect the scale or urgency of the matter, or the number of children at risk. A relatively large number of studies focus on children who work on the streets in urban areas (Duyan, 2005). These children are traditionally the most visible working children and the visibility often translates into public attention, in turn becoming an issue that the public administration has to address. A few tragic events over the last decade, such as the killing of an army officer or one of the country's wealthiest industrialists in a cemetery, made 'street children' almost a household term. In the former case, several youths under the influence of solvents were responsible for the death of the officer. In the latter, there was actually no proof that 'street children' were involved but the press found a convenient scapegoat. These events and very exaggerated and ill-informed media attention led to further public scrutiny in the last five years including a Parliamentary Investigation, which resulted in a relatively comprehensive report on the conditions of children working on the streets.

The gaps in the literature reflect how not being visible translates into lack of attention, as in the case of cotton-picking children who work alongside their parents for extended periods of time. The gap also reflects the fact that 'hard-to-reach' children are the least often studied – the well-known bias of 'convenience samples' in the social sciences. Among these neglected children are children who are forced to work in slave-like conditions.

In this study, we focus on the less visible and less-studied forms of child labour. The process through which these children are made to work has parallels with the experiences of slaves in history or people who work under slave-like conditions elsewhere today. The process through which the child labour examined in this study becomes possible involves parents abandoning their parental responsibilities and duties, and hiring their children away to complete strangers. Just as with slave trades, the transaction results in income for the selling party and in misery for the child. Again, just as with slave trades, the transaction and the ensuing labour violate the fundamental rights of the child. The violation is often not a short-lived issue but rather a long-term loss of fundamental rights.

The kind of child labour that can be described as work under slave-like circumstances is a serious matter and therefore needs close attention. Here, a long-standing practice from Northwestern Turkey of hiring children to better-off farmers is examined first. Here, it is poor parents who hire their child, invariably a boy, away. This practice appears to be disappearing but new forms of child hiring are emerging in other areas. One such pattern can be found in recent reports regarding children who are hired to streetwise employers who take the children away to large urban areas and make them work on the streets or in criminal rings. This is sometimes carried out with the consent of the parents. Here, the main actor is a person who lure boys away from home into a very difficult life.

In all of these examples, there is very little or no reliable information available in the literature or from official sources such as the Statistics Institute or the police. Forensic implications of the individual cases, institutional tendencies to protect the institution in cases of negligence and inaction, and sometimes attempts to protect the children in question lead to withholding of information or possibly official cover-ups. Therefore, we rely primarily on secondary data sources, journalistic reports and a few interviews with well-placed informants to describe the state of affairs. We then examine the factors that are associated with child labour in general and extreme forms of child labour. A large number of children in Turkey are faced with these issues on a daily basis. The article concludes with a call for a coherent rights-based policy.

## Background

Turkey has a large population, now estimated to be around 72 million. The population is clearly young, with a median age of 22. The economy has had a major crisis every five years until recently. Current economic 'stability' involves about 20 per cent unemployment. During the 1990s, persistently high rates of inflation reduced the purchasing power of most families in Turkey (Government of Turkey and UNICEF 1998). The unequal income distribution became even more unequal and poor families were clearly the hardest hit: households living in poverty were estimated to be around 30 per cent in the mid-1990s. Current unofficial estimates put the rate around 50 per cent. Within the population living under very difficult economic circumstances, children often suffer the greatest brunt of deprivation (Libal, 2001).

The situation becomes clearer if economic growth and human development indices from the 2000s are considered together. In comparative terms, Turkey has a sizable economy – it was the world's 21st largest economy in 2004. However, the growth of the economy has not improved the lives of all. Official estimates indicate that more than 20 million people are poor and about 25 per cent of families and 38 per cent of pre-school children live under the

poverty line. The UNDP Human Development Index captures the difference between economic growth and welfare indicators. Turkey ranks low particularly on indices related to child welfare.

In history, child labour has been common (ILO 1996). Traditional life in Turkish rural areas always involved children contributing to household work. In the case of farm labour, children were effectively considered as part of the labour force. Large-scale migration, beginning in the 1950s, from poverty-stricken rural areas to urban areas, did not improve conditions for most children. Migrant families faced problems related to housing, employment and earning an adequate income. Most children had no option other than joining the labour force to supplement the family income (Acar, 2000). By the mid-1990s, almost one of ten children were working. More specifically, the 1994 Child Labour Survey indicated that of the 11.9 million children between six and 14 years of age, 1.07 million were working (Duyan, 2005). Recent economic changes included a shift away from agriculture to a more industry-focused economy. The majority of the population now live in urban areas. This shift has not altered the living conditions of most children, given the high rate of poverty and unemployment in urban areas.

### Children for hire in the 'Child Market'

If children are considered part of the farm labour force, perhaps it is not too surprising that there is a marketplace for child labour. Until recently, a 'Child Market' (*Cocuk Pazari*) operated in Bafra and Alacam, and possibly in similar fashions in nearby towns. There is very little documentation in the literature of what appears to be long-standing practice of parents hiring children to better-off families in some small towns in the province of Samsun, in Northwestern Turkey. Existing information indicates that the market operated for a long time and children from poor and large families in villages located in mountainous areas of the province were hired by the families in nearby villages located on the plains. There was always a need for cheap labour on the plains and children from poor mountain families provided a convenient and cheaper labour force.

The hiring was based on an unofficial agreement between respective parents that a child – invariably a boy – will stay with the hiring family for an extended period of time. Payments were made on a monthly basis to the parents and not to the boy. The practice was considered by the locals as completely acceptable and normal. In their view, the benefit was mutual: this practice was not very different from any other mutually beneficial business transaction (Kantoglu, 1998).

Depending on the family's circumstances, the hiring might involve more than one child. For instance, two boys from a family with five children in a mountain village near Bafra were hired one after another when they were about eight to ten years old. The older brother was hired by a car mechanic and the younger by a farmer. It is common in Turkey for disadvantaged parents to send their sons to mechanics' shops and have them start working early. It is also common for boys who have difficulty with staying in school for financial and/or academic reasons to start working early as mechanic's apprentices. This practice is often considered beneficial for the boy because he gains marketable skills and the prospects of steady gainful employment. The younger boy was asked to work as a shepherd and a small monthly payment was delivered to the father. His father asked the hiring parents to treat his son well

and also send him to school. By 1998, when Kantoglu's research was published, the boy had been enrolled in a local elementary school for two years. The report also revealed how difficult this transition was for the younger boy and how emotionally shaken the eight-year old was in his relatively more comfortable 'new home'.

Hiring agreements often took place at the 'Child Market'. The father took the child to the market so that potential employers/fathers could see and examine the child. After the agreement was made, the child might or might not go back home to prepare for his new life. It is also not clear what happened if the new 'home' proved to be unfit for the child to stay or whether there had been instances where the boy ran away either back to his parents or to some other location. It is also not clear how long the hiring arrangement lasted.

This practice of hiring or trading children came under close scrutiny from the governor's office in Samsun and neighbouring provinces, and there were indications that the Child Market ceased its operation in Bafra by the end of the 1990s. It is not clear, however, whether the practice has completely been eliminated in Northwestern Turkey.

### Children trafficked to the cities

Towards the end of the 1990s, there was an increase in the number of children involved in grab-and-run type robberies on the street and burglaries in major cities, particularly in Istanbul and Diyarbakir. There was a parallel increase in substance abuse and addiction (Ögel and Alsoy, 2007). The Istanbul police administration, whilst not denying that there was an increase in the numbers, rejected claims of a major increase. However, in following years, there were occasional reports in the media regarding trafficking of children by organised crime for the very cases that appeared to be on the increase. The Ankara Trade Chamber released a report on children being forced to work on the streets in 2004. Beginning in 2004, investigative journalists uncovered well-organised trafficking operations by gangs or rings located in major cities (Tezel and Bel, 2004).

The picture emerging from these records were consistent with the observations of social workers and psychologists in social services practice, and researchers studying migration-related issues. The children who were involved in many cases of crime on the streets were aged 11–12 or older, physically strong enough to stand the harsh conditions they were forced to endure. They did not have family in the area and did not know anyone in the area other than the group they were working with. They did not have contact with other young people involved in crime in the same area, again indicating that they were newcomers. Some of them did not speak Turkish well. Further reports indicated that some of these children were forcibly trafficked from their cities of origin, particularly in Southeastern Turkey where internally displaced families were having a very difficult time surviving, let alone keeping children off the streets. For some families, survival included letting children earn some money through petty crime. For others, even hiring children to organised crime became an option.

One example illustrates this emerging pattern: two men were arrested for forcibly trafficking six children from Diyarbakir to Istanbul. Three of the children (aged 13, 15 and 16) were actually 'hired' from their parents for a small amount of money. The other two boys, both 13, were first lured into coming to Istanbul but then changed their mind. They were

threatened with a knife, taken to the train and were kept in the train compartment during the entire journey. The parents of one of the kidnapped boys heard about what had happened and contacted their older son who lived in a province located on the railroad. The brother informed the police and boarded the train with them to identify his kidnapped brother. One of the two men was arrested but the other one escaped with the other boys, only to be later arrested in Istanbul. The boys with him denied any charges and tried to convince the police that they were only taking a trip to see Istanbul (Tezel and Bel, 2004).

Presently there are no reliable estimates of the numbers of children who were trafficked to the cities and very little documentation of their working and living conditions. Interviews with psychologists who have worked with these children (in or outside of the legal system) suggest that the more challenging or dangerous the task (e.g. breaking into a flat in daytime), the more likely is the child to use substances to brave the risks involved. The substances are provided by the person(s) who run the criminal ring and the addiction that often ensues is the fault of the ringmaster. As with most criminal groups, a child cannot leave the criminal ring without the consent of his master. Further work is clearly needed to address the needs of these children and intervene in the trafficking mechanisms that take them into a form of slavery.

### Children working on the streets

There is still an absence of scholarly work on the lives of these children working and living in slave-like conditions but we can examine two better documented forms of child labour in Turkish urban areas. As noted earlier, children working on the streets, particularly as beggars, simit (bread) vendors or shoe-shiners, are well-known for at least three generations. A more recent activity for children working on the streets is selling paper tissue, gum or similar handy items. There are no reliable estimates of the number of children living and working on the streets of big cities. Government estimates are markedly low – often because the institutional approach relies on very stringent criteria – and non-governmental estimates are much higher (250 000 children by the end of the 1990s according to Libal, 2001). Until detailed work is carried out to estimate numbers, it would be very difficult to assess how widespread the practice is.

Atauz (1990) reports the linkage between families as a whole struggling with hardship in trying to integrate into a new life, and children working in the street. Duyan (2005) identifies poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, extended family structures, poor family function and migration as major factors. The work experience often involves vulnerability to exploitation and various forms of violence (Duyan, 2005). For most children, work displaces time for leisure activities and leaves little time to rest. Most children work very hard and beyond their capacities. This often leads to ill-health and psychological problems. Work also leads to a degree of isolation from peers and the local social milieu (Acar, 2000; Bulut, 1996).

### Children collecting recyclables

A considerable number of children who are working on the streets in many cities sort and collect recyclable waste material from garbage bins. Collecting recyclable waste material is certainly not unique to Turkey (Medina, 1997) but it has emerged in the last 20 years as a very difficult form of child labour. The collection of such material becomes particularly

difficult when a given collector visits many garbage bins throughout the day and collects the material in a big bag attached vertically to a metal cart. When the cart is partly or fully loaded, pulling the cart becomes back-breaking work. The collector has to navigate through the streets and traffic, in all weather conditions, and the job becomes even more difficult (Altuntas, 2003).

A recent estimate puts the total number of recyclable waste collectors, adults and children combined at around 200 000 (Soykan, 2007), with around 10 000 working in the capital city Ankara (Alkan, 2007). Several studies have recently been conducted on the working conditions of recyclable waste collectors (Acar and Baykara, 2007; Altuntas, 2003; Saltan and Yardimci, 2007). These not only illustrate how difficult this type of labour is for children, but also reveal, to some extent, the dynamics leading large numbers of adults and children to collecting recyclable waste. An emerging pattern is the linkage between poverty and internal displacement because of forced migration from Southeastern Turkey to all major cities in the country, a process long-neglected by researchers (Alptekin and Sahin, 2001).

### Factors related to extreme forms of child labour

There is now clear evidence linking poverty to child labour. In a large-scale study, Tunali (1996) found that age and gender, parental education and residential region were related to child labour among children aged 6–14 years (i.e. elementary school years). In particular, older male children and those with lower parental education were more likely to work. Dayioglu (2006) investigated the determinants of child labour in urban Turkey, particularly low household income or poverty as a root cause. She found that children from poorer families were clearly at a higher risk of employment. This finding was confirmed using various measures of household income. Not surprisingly, then, extreme forms of child labour are clearly linked to extreme poverty. The two forms examined here illustrate how poor parents can give up their children in return for a relatively small amount of money even though there are no guarantees regarding the child's well-being. Poverty has increased in Turkey, affecting almost half of the population, and recent work indicates that concentrated urban poverty is a particular problem in major cities (Sonmez, 2007).

The extent of the problem has been underestimated for several reasons. One major obstacle has been the transformation of the welfare regime (Bugra and Keyder, 2006) and the changes in the way public administration views and addresses public issues. A related obstacle has been the dominance of the public administration in public life and the lack of agency on the part of local stakeholders, including non-governmental organisations, voluntary community groups and the private sector. The lack of other stakeholders in public processes translates into a lack of diversity of opinion, unlike in England (Broadhead and Armistead, 2007), and allows the public administration to defer action with little pressure for accountability. Another major obstacle has been the ethnic and political nature of the dynamics leading to concentrated poverty. This obstacle is reviewed below.

### *Internal displacement due to forced migration*

A number of studies now link forced migration to a large number of major problems, the primary one being poverty (Alptekin and Sahin, 2001; Kurban and others, 2007). In the

latter, Kurban and her colleagues describe the internal displacement as follows: 'Some 1 million men, women and children were forcibly uprooted from rural areas in the east and south-east of the country as a result of the armed struggle from 1984 to 1999 between the forces belonging to Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which now uses a different 'official' name, and the government forces. Large numbers fled to urban areas all over the country where they have long experienced poverty, poor housing, joblessness, loss of land and property, limited access to physical and mental healthcare services, and limited educational opportunities for their children'.

Given the very sensitive, politically charged and almost 'untouchable' nature of the topic, a debate on the impact of forced migration has not taken place until very recently and research on the impact of internal displacement due to forced migration (IDFM) has been very slow to emerge. A number of studies now link internal displacement to psychological problems (Aker, 2002; Bayram, 1998; Sahin, 1995). Gün (2007) has recently performed the same specifically for children and adolescents. The impact of IDFM on the entire country or on the specific regions where the displaced used to live is more difficult to assess, but is perhaps as large as the impact of land enclosures in the British context (Humphries, 1990). A rough indicator can be the increase in the size of the population. Diyarbakir was the city closest to the homeland of the displaced and suffered the largest impact of IDFM: its population increased by 20 per cent and the crime rate increased even more.

Yükseker (2007) reviews sociological work on the impact of IDFM in some detail. Unlike in the previous waves of migration, families who were forced to migrate to urban areas were not able to find available free land to build their own makeshift homes. In the new urban economy, regular jobs with social security were not available for newcomers. Thus, there was very little room for social mobility and newcomers often became the poorest of the urban poor. Survival in the city was particularly difficult for this internally displaced group because their relationship with their villages had been completely severed, with no resources to draw upon, and they had no preparation or transition – their displacement was sudden, traumatic and involuntary.

Women and children appear to be the most disadvantaged groups as the displaced join the crowds of urban poor. If men cannot find employment, then women and children end up bearing the responsibility to earn some income and become part of the paid labour force. Yüksekser (2007) reports that women have had to undertake the greatest responsibility in meeting the family's basic needs. The new life alters the balances at home and can strain the relationships between the spouses and, therefore, may lead to domestic violence. Domestic violence and strained relations at home often push children onto the streets (Duyan, 2005). On the basis of her review, Yüksekser identifies IDFM as one of the major factors leading to the increase in child labour in the 1990s. Several studies indicate that children working on the streets of Istanbul report coming from internally displaced families and that they needed to work because their parents could not find employment, dropping out of school in the process. Altuntas (2003) reports a similar pattern for working children in Ankara. A large number of school-age children report working on the street to contribute to family income and coming from internally displaced families.

The evidence thus indicates that IDFM is a major factor to consider in child labour and particularly with regard to extreme forms of child labour. There appears to be a direct relationship between urban poverty, the inability of parents, particularly the fathers, to find regular



employment and children having to work on the streets. Urban poverty is a major reason for school dropout and school failure, and there might be a reciprocal link between child labour and school problems.

## Conclusions

In this study, less visible and less documented forms of child labour were examined. These forms of child labour deprived children of their fundamental rights and effectively placed them in slavery. The long-standing practice from Northwestern Turkey of hiring children to better-off farmers appears to be disappearing. However, the trafficking of children from Southeastern Turkey to major cities to a criminal environment appears to be on the increase. The particularly troublesome aspect is that the trafficking is sometimes carried out with parental consent. Parents are hiring or, in effect, selling their sons to criminal employers. Both forms of child labour are consequences of poverty. In the light of scholarly work on the lives of children working on the streets across the country, the circumstances that give rise to child trafficking and parents letting their children be trafficked appear to be related to extreme poverty and internal displacement of masses from their villages.

Debate and research on the impacts of IDFM have only just started because of the very sensitive nature of the topic. So far, state agencies have been eager to engage in improving services without an explicit recognition of forced migration as a root cause. The current volatile political climate in the country will probably not foster more debate on the impact of internal displacement on families and children in particular. Poverty and IDFM are clearly major factors to consider from a policy vantage point. Reducing poverty and mitigating causes of poverty alone, however, may not be effective in reducing and ultimately eliminating child labour. There is a clear need in Turkey for social policy on child labour and on children's issues in general. The relevance of social policy is evident with respect to migration-related problems. As noted earlier, internal migration has been a persistent reality and it has direct relevance to child labour. If the state fails repeatedly to generate a policy to address migration-related problems, the failure is not a policy failure but a failure on the part of the state institutions and public administrators. The current practice of policy-making treats childhood essentially as an educational matter and very quickly excludes children outside of the school system as a residual category. A related point is the still marginal status of children's rights in service delivery and most policy discussions. A rights-based policy for children is urgently needed particularly for children at greatest risk.

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