

Child labour and economy

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One of the most important aspects of international laws and conventions includes the defence of the rights of groups that have less access to sources of power. One of the most important of these groups is children. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), approved on 20 November 1989, is among the most important documents within the United Nations system that provides for the protection of children. Aside from this Convention, the creation of the United Nations Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) and the highlighting of the illegality of child labour in conventions approved by this body are indicative of the importance of concerns around children's rights and child labour.

Following the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, confronting the issue of child labour, as may be the case with many other concerns, the Convention on the Rights of the Child has been ratified with reservations which pose challenges to the implementation of the CRC. Iran signed the CRC in 1994, however it added a reservation to the first article which binds Iran to the Convention. This stated that 'The Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran reserves the right not to apply any provisions or articles of the Convention that are incompatible with Islamic Laws and the international legislation in effect.'

However, it should be noted that based on Article 176 of the Iranian Labour code, maximum punishment for employers who exploit children is 10 to 20 times the minimum wages and if repeated, 91 to 180 days in prison.

In order to better understand what is known as the 'child labour crisis' in Iran, it is best to engage in direct observation. What follows is part of my own personal experience:

Even when well-familiar with alleyways around Nematabad police station, one can easily get lost trying to locate the many unlicensed workshops which exploit immigrant and child labourers. These children have had no opportunity to study or play; they work for the lowest wages and have never even heard of insurance. Workshops reporting less than 10 employees to the Ministry of Labour are exempt from inspection and review.

With great difficulty the blacksmith workshop is found, a yard in ruin where in every corner a group is busy working. At the point of entry I noticed at least 20 children below the age of 15, who suddenly disappeared on my arrival. It appeared as though they had been taught well: "When a stranger enters the workshop, get lost". I spoke with a man who appeared to be the owner of the workshop. He denied the presence of any children at the workshop. After walking around iron filings for some time, I noticed a 16 year old boy who was sticking his head out from behind the garbage dump. His name was Ali and he told me if the workshop owner sees him speaking with me, he will fire Ali for sure. Under such conditions, and with great trepidation he responded to some of my questions. He began working at this particular workshop at the age of 10. He said: "I would love to study, but when?" His father has two wives and 17 children. All his siblings have to start working as soon as they begin walking. In Ali's words, they have to earn their own meal. Ali started working at five years old as an assistant to a tailor. Ali pointed out the man who he identified as the workshop supervisor. I asked him: "Why do you hire children for such heavy work?" He said: "I am not in charge of this workshop. The employer chooses the employees. I simply ensure children are not given difficult tasks."

At that very moment, my eyes fell on Ali, who would carry metal pieces on his shoulders from one side of the workshop to the other. He had told me earlier, his boss directly paid his monthly salary of 90,000 tumans (around GBP 200) to his father.

Arezou works at a sewing workshop. She is 13 years old and has completed her third year of primary education. At the same workshop, eight other girls between the ages of 10 and 15 are employed. Their employer is an Afghan man who has contracts with major clothing manufacturers. Arezou and her young colleagues cut the fabric, and the pieces are sent to another workshop for sewing. Arezou is very happy with her employer. She tells me that prior to this job she used to read fortune telling cards on the street, but ever since the workshop opened, she and the girls in her neighbourhood feel they are engaged in respectable work. Although she earns less than she used to, Arezou is grateful to not have to wander the streets. Before I was even able to ask my first question, the owner of the workshop told me "child labour is not a crime, it is something to be proud of, because I am helping them escape hunger. If I do not provide for this girl, will

¹ UNICEF-Iran, Convention on the rights of the child, http://www.unicef.org/iran/children_9305.html

² Islamic Republic of Iran, Labour Code, 1990, via the ILO http://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/natlex4.detail?p_lang=en&p_isn=21843&p_country=IRN&p_count=168&p_classification=01.02&p_classcount=2

you?” This was not the only time I was posed this question by workshop owners, and it was not the only time I struggled to find an answer.

Afghan child labourers in Iran start work at an earlier age on average than their Iranian counterparts and face greater degrees of poverty. In addition, they have no possibility to attend school, so as Jalal and Ali’s mother pointed out to me, it is better for them to work than wander the streets. Jalal and Ali are brothers, 10 and eight years old respectively. Both work in workshops and their father collects their salaries each month.

Jalal (10) works in a Samavar production workshop. He works 12 hours each week day starting at 8.30a.m.³ to receive 8,000 tuman a week (approximately GBP 18). Jalal has eight brothers and sisters who also work. He says he wishes to grow up and become a supervisor. In response to whether he would like to continue his studies, he says, “Let’s see what happens” as though he knows under such harsh conditions studying is nothing but a dream. Jalal states that if he ever had five million tuman, he would buy himself shoes and clothes and would enrol in a good school, a school with a large playground and football pitches. Then he will spend the rest of his money to buy a small motorcycle.

Jalal’s brother, Ali (8) works in a clothing workshop a few streets away. The air in the workshop is suffocating and fabric particles fill the air. A fan running in one corner of the workshop is the only ventilation. He says he is happy with his co-workers and employer, but his previous employer used to physically abuse him. Ali divides his salary between his mother and his father and keeps some for himself. In response to the question, what would he do if one day he found a wallet filled with money, he states, he would buy pizza and coke and will give 10,000 tumans to his father and 50,000 tumans to his mother. He adds that he would give them the rest of the money on a weekly basis so they would not suspect anything and instead think it is his weekly salary.

³ In Iran there are 6 week days.