



International
Labour
Organization



▶ **Assessment of child labour in
the Yangon Region, Ayeyarwady
Region and Kayin State**

Executive summary

► Background

According to 2020 ILO-UNICEF global estimates, the number of children engaged in child labour globally has increased from 152 million in 2016 to 160 million in 2020.¹ This includes 63 million girls and 97 million boys. In Myanmar, the 2015 Labour Force Survey, conducted with ILO support, estimated that 1.12 million children between 5 and 17 years old were engaged in child labour, with over 600,000 involved in hazardous work. However, these figures do not capture the subsequent dual burden of the COVID-19 pandemic and the military takeover, which have caused tremendous socio-economic stress for many households.² Job losses, reductions to household income and decreased access to education have impacted the children of the poorest families the most.

This assessment provides a picture of child labour in the Yangon Region, Ayeyarwady Region and Kayin State, all of which have high concentrations of working children. The purpose is to understand the effects of COVID-19 and recent political crisis on child labour. It also maps available child protection and vocational training opportunities in these three areas, in addition to identifying labour market and training opportunities for vulnerable youth. Finally, it provides recommendations for appropriate awareness raising, advocacy and overarching key policy interventions to be pursued, when the situation allows. This mixed methodology assessment had a modest number of participants across three categories of informants (i.e. children and their guardians; employers' and workers' organizations; and wider community members) with a purposive sampling design. Therefore, the findings reveal insights and themes related to working children in the three assessment areas, but are not representative of all working children in Myanmar.

► Main findings

Most of the children interviewed in the three assessment areas are engaged in work due to financial difficulties in the family.

Most of the children interviewed are engaged in work primarily due to household money problems (71 per cent). This accords with wider research cited in this assessment showing that poverty underlies a growth in children engaged in work that has been exacerbated by COVID-19 and the political crisis. School closures due to the pandemic and the political crisis have also driven some children to work. Even after schools re-opened, many children did not return to school due to safety concerns resulting from the political instability in the country. In Ayeyarwady, children largely work in family businesses, whereas it is more common for children to be externally employed in Yangon and Kayin.

Many working children suffer injuries as a result of hazardous work.

Children are often subjected to hazardous work conditions and performed dangerous tasks. These include carrying heavy loads, using heavy machinery and dangerous chemicals, and working in dusty, noisy and hot environments. For example, nearly 90 per cent of interviewed children involved in construction carry heavy loads and over 80 per cent work long hours in the sun without a break. Respondents of all age groups have experienced accidents and injuries, with minor injuries being the most frequent, followed by bruises, bumps and swelling. Nearly half of the children interviewed in Kayin State have carried, pushed or pulled heavy loads and worked long hours in the hot sun without breaks.

¹ ILO and UNICEF, *Child Labour: Global Estimates 2020, Trends and the Road Forward*, 2021.

² United Nations Myanmar, *UN in Myanmar: Research Digest No. 9*, 2021.

Common injuries in specific sectors include minor injuries for children engaged in sea/river fishing (90 per cent) and bad bruises, bumps or swelling among car mechanics (83.3 per cent). Nearly 20 per cent of the 5–11-year-olds questioned have been subjected to some type of physical abuse, and 30 per cent of 12–17-year-olds have been psychologically abused. Despite these conditions, working children are generally in good physical health, although they report mental health symptoms.

A third of children in the three assessment areas are in domestic work, with others primarily in agriculture, manufacturing, and wholesale and retail trade.

Working children are engaged in a variety of activities, with over one-third of the surveyed respondents participating in domestic work. A distant second is participation in agriculture (accounting for about 16 per cent of working children), followed by manufacturing (13.8 per cent), wholesale and retail trade (13.1 per cent) and construction (12.4 per cent). The sectoral composition changes by age: while the share of children engaged in domestic work is high for all age groups, it is particularly high among children who are 12–13 years old (61.9 per cent). Younger children aged 5–11 are more likely to be found in agriculture, wholesale and retail trade and waste-picking than their older counterparts. Older children, between 14 and 17 years old, are more likely to be involved in construction and manufacturing. Boys are typically engaged in the most physically demanding job roles, while girls are usually involved in less physically demanding jobs with low wages. Children under 11 years old work in low skill jobs that require them to work at a fast speed, while children over 11 years old are often engaged in risky work outdoors.

Long hours and low pay are common among working children in this assessment, with girls generally earning less than boys.

Working times vary considerably by industry and job roles. Overall, the children interviewed work an average of 5.6 days per week. However, those involved in industries such as farming and fisheries work longer hours with few breaks. Children usually receive lower pay than adults, despite doing the same work, and girls are generally paid less than boys. Among the three areas studied, the daily payment rate for working children is highest in Kayin State and lowest in the Ayeyarwady Region. In general, according to the respondents, working children are subject to long hours, wage discrimination, bullying and exploitation. Social protection and labour protections are minimal, and there is a dearth of insurance covering cases of workplace injury.

More than half of working children in the assessment would prefer an education if they had the choice.

In general, most children interviewed made the decision to work (62.8 per cent), while nearly one-quarter reported that their mother made this decision for them. However over half of the children said that they would continue to pursue an education if given the chance. Most children preferred to attend school full-time (56 per cent), followed by working for money full-time (16 per cent) and continuing their current work (15 per cent).

Community knowledge, attitudes, and practices (KAP) regarding working children are improving.

Communities and employers appear largely unaware of laws and regulations related to child labour and the minimum working age set for employment. Some employers, notably in the agriculture sector, indicated that they prefer to employ children because they can be easily controlled, paid less, and do not frequently complain. Others engaged children who accompanied their parents to work due to safety concerns at home.

In general, children's involvement in child labour is accepted by communities, especially for those in financial difficulty. However, over 90 per cent of community respondents felt that work could be dangerous for children. Many also thought that helping at home is not an appropriate reason for stopping schooling, and believed that obtaining a good education should be respected, as it is important for future career prospects.

By contrast, over half of the parents interviewed felt that it is better for children to start working rather than to progress to secondary school. Around three-quarters of parents felt that boys benefit more from education than girls. Both community members and parents agree that working children should have the same rights as adults and that children should not be forced to work by their parents.

Charities and community groups have recently raised awareness of concerns around child labour, in addition to promoting education and vocational training opportunities. Although these options are increasingly popular, work and household chores are still considered a priority by many employers and families.

Many employers in the assessment areas tend to favour cheap, low-skilled and ad hoc workers.

The employers surveyed reported usually recruiting low-skilled workers who can be easily trained and paid low wages. Children are hired as daily wage and seasonal employees, often in areas close to their villages. Most employers are micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs), including farms, construction businesses, garment factories and tea shops, although the types of enterprises varies by region. Typical roles offered to children also vary according to traditional gender stereotypes. Some employers favour boys over girls due to their physical strength. However, girls are more popular in the farming sector as they are paid less than boys. Employers tend to value job experience and life skills – such as communication, hygiene and arithmetic – over educational attainment.

A mismatch exists between training courses and labour market demands.

Service providers – including community-based organizations (CBOs), technical and vocational education and training (TVET) providers, workers' organizations and community leaders – offer vocational training, awareness raising training, protection services, education and other services to children involved in child labour. However, services differ by region. Most courses are free of charge, except for those imparting higher level skills, such as computer training. Job placements tend to take place after participants complete vocational training. Yet respondents indicate that many courses are not relevant for the job market. In addition, no vocational courses were identified specifically for working children.



► Recommendations

Child labour is a complex phenomenon. This report shows the complexity of decision-making in families. Poverty, livelihood challenges and family issues – such as alcoholic family members and ill breadwinners – were listed as the major factors that contribute to children’s entry into the labour market. Other obstacles exist around children’s ability to access vocational and skills development training. These include a lack of parental consent to children participating in training, financial concerns and the limited availability of training opportunities.

An integrated approach is required to address the wide array of factors that contribute to child labour. In line with the assessment’s objectives, the recommendations below focus on awareness raising and key direct interventions, including referral mechanisms.

Recommendations for service providers

Employers’ organizations, trade unions, civil society organizations, training organisations, UN agencies, development partners and other agencies working on child protection provide important services that support efforts to tackle child labour. This report recommends that service providers:

- Develop targeted information messages for parents and employers that provide key information about child labour laws, particularly those related to hazardous work and working hours for children. Specify the types of tasks that are dangerous and exposure (for instance, to chemicals or fumes) that cause long-term health damage. Target information to parents and employers and offer age-appropriate targeted information for youth.
- Develop empowerment and confidence-building messages that increase children’s understanding of their rights as children and their future rights as workers. Inform employers of labour laws and the Child Rights Law, including the legal minimum age for work.
- Provide information on available education and vocational training for children and adolescents, and involve employers in the design of vocational training. Conduct assessments of labour market demands in light of changes related to the COVID-19 pandemic and the military takeover.
- Encourage partners and stakeholders to offer free literacy, numeracy and vocational training options for youth who leave school.
- Develop wide-reaching referral networks among service providers, community groups, employers and workers for the referral of child labour cases, including through local Child Labour Monitoring Systems (CLMS). Ensure that services, including paediatric and emergency medical care providers, are aware of child labour and are available to provide age-appropriate assistance and referrals for the children involved, including psychosocial health services. Conduct child-friendly outreach to inform children engaged in child labour about available services that can help them if they are hurt, feel unsafe, are abused, treated cruelly or forced to perform work that might injure them.
- Prepare children and adolescents to enter the labour market when they reach the legal minimum age for employment by building their capacities. Deliver life skills training (for instance, on decision-making, communications, basic literacy, numeracy, financial literacy, health and well-being, and fundamental rights) to equip children and adolescents to seek livelihoods that are safe and generate a decent income, and which could be incorporated into vocational training. Inform children and adolescents of existing apprenticeship and job training programmes.

- Implement worker and child protection programmes and develop model/pilot childcare options in target regions, including the evaluation and cost prototypes of programmes.

Recommendations for policy-makers (under social justice conditions)

The recommendations in this report focus on, subject to the necessary conditions being in place, the need for the adoption of policies that take an inclusive and holistic approach to tackle child labour issues and its root causes to:

- Ensure consistency in national child labour legislation and alignment with international standards.
- Find fiscal resources to conduct training and labour inspections on child labour.
- Allocate funding for interventions to increase the productivity of adult workers and, at the level of enterprises, to reduce demand for child labour.
- Allocate funding to early childhood education centres and childcare services.
- Offer free or subsidized vocational training services in all states/regions to enable eligible children to access these opportunities without leaving their families and support networks. Prioritize basic education for children who are not eligible for TVET.
- Assess existing social protection measures and address gaps to prevent child labour, help children remain in school full-time and prepare them for entry into the labour market when they reach the legal minimum age for employment.
- Develop, test and evaluate child labour prevention and protection interventions that are co-designed with relevant stakeholders.

Assessment of child labour in the Yangon Region, Ayeyarwady Region and Kayin State

This assesment report, launched to mark the World Day Against Child Labour (WDAKL) 2023, provides an in-depth picture of child labour in the Yangon Region, Ayeyarwady Region and Kayin State in Myanmar. It also maps current child protection and vocational educational services in these regions, as a basis for developing referral mechanisms, including labour market and training opportunities for vulnerable youth. For a number of years, the ILO Liaison Office has played a key role in the fight against child labour, and this report serves as an important tool to be used in the future. It provides recommendations for appropriate awareness raising, advocacy and overarching key policy interventions to be pursued, when the situation allows.

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