

## Child labor prevalent in north and Bekaa valley, says report

By Emma Gatten  
The Daily Star

BEIRUT: When Monzir was 14, the small shop his father owned in his home village in the western Bekaa began to lose business.

Monzir, already frustrated by his low grades, dropped out of school and looked for work to support his parents and two sisters.

"I felt I was wasting time by being in school," he told The Daily Star. He began to work in a shop, resigning himself to a future with few opportunities, and becoming one of thousands of children in the Bekaa region earning an average of just LL50,000 a week.

"My boss was tough, and it was difficult to live," he said. "I was living it as something that would never change, that I would never get further than this."

Monzir's experience is echoed across Lebanon, particularly in the Bekaa Valley and the north, among kids even younger and more vulnerable than him, according to a study released Wednesday by the International Labor Organization and Saint Joseph University (USJ).

The study – during which 1,007 working children in the north and the Bekaa, employed in a variety of industries including carpentry, automobile manufacture and hospitality, were interviewed – showed that 29.5 percent of working children in the north and 36.5 percent in the Bekaa were below 14, the legal minimum working age.

Roula Abi Habib-Khoury, the head of the department of sociology and anthropology at USJ and the lead researcher on the study, said one the



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most shocking aspects of the study was the normalcy with which child labor is treated in the areas it is most prevalent.

"You don't expect people to be so open about child labor, to see children working as they do," she said. "Child labor is part of their culture."

Both the ILO and UNICEF argue that the minimum working age should be raised to 15, as stipulated in a current draft labor law. However, domestic and agricultural work, sectors with high levels of child labor, are not covered by Lebanese labor law.

Child labor is inextricably linked to poverty and education, the research showed. In the north, where a person is nine times more likely to be below the poverty line than in the rest of the country, children are also six times more likely to be employed in child labor.

More than 33 percent of children in the workforce in the north and nearly 40 percent in the Bekaa could not read and write. This was despite the fact that, in the Bekaa, the majority of illiterate children had attended school for at least two years.

Like Monzir, many of the children the ILO spoke to said they had left school because they weren't succeeding or weren't interested, and considered taking up jobs in their childhood to be inevitable.

Speaking at Wednesday's launch, Fadi Yarak, the director general at the Education Ministry, said the ministry must work with local municipalities and communities to counter school drop-out levels, but acknowledged problems within the public school system.

"We call upon municipalities who have ideas to participate," said Yarak. "As a ministry, we have our doors open to everybody."

Lebanon has ratified several conventions on child labor, including the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1991, and was one of the first countries in region to sign up to ILO child labor conventions 182 and 138, in 2001 and 2003.

However, the incorporation of children within personal status laws makes it difficult to create clear-cut legal protections over child labor.

After two years of working, Monzir took it upon himself to seek further education, joining the Fourass Vocational Training Center, where he was taught key computer skills, enabling him to leave his shop job.

"Before training, I wasn't able to do anything. I had bare hands ... Now, I'm sure my future will be better," he said.