

# Left in the Dark: Child Labor in Saudi Arabia

A Commentary Paper

**Fawziah Rabiah-Mohammed**

RN Ph.D. Candidate  
Arthur Labatt Family School of Nursing  
Western University  
ORCID: 0000-0001-5079-6949  
Email: Falmalk2@uwo.ca

**Abe Oudshoorn**

RN Ph.D.  
Associate Professor  
Arthur Labatt Family School of Nursing  
Western University  
ORCID: 0000-0003-0277-8724

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### Abstract

There is a strong link between familial poverty and child labor with children who need to work at an early age often doing so to supplement the income needs of the family. It is noted that the root causes of poverty that lead children to seek early employment in Saudi Arabia extend beyond limited education or parental unemployment. Rather, child labor could be a manifestation of statelessness, with Saudi Arabia being one of the top 20th countries hosting stateless populations in the world. This commentary focuses on next steps of addressing child labor in Saudi Arabia and does so by confronting the deep interconnection with the issue of statelessness. Recommendations are provided to address these dual phenomena in the short and long term.

*Keywords:* Child Labor, statelessness, recommendations, Saudi Arabia.

### Child labor in Saudi Arabia

Child labor has been associated with poor health outcomes and low educational attainment, and in many cases is connected with or a pathway to further economic and sexual exploitation (UNICEF, 2021). Due to the related harms, reduction of child labor is a clear goal within the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 8.7 “Take immediate and effective measures to eradicate forced labor, end modern slavery and human trafficking and secure the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labour, including recruitment and use of child soldiers, and by 2025 end child labor in all its forms” (UN, 2021. p.1). There is a strong link between familial poverty and child labor with children who need to work at an early age often doing so to supplement the income needs of the family. Thus, a disadvantaged socioeconomic situation is often a root concern and can be attributed to income inequality, unemployment, lack of education, family dysfunction, or a result of political instability within the country (UNICEF, 2021).

Some few studies have been conducted around the issue of child labor in a Saudi context, recognizing that child labor exists among Saudi and non-Saudi children (Alromeh الرميح , 2011; Ministry of human resource and social development & International Labour Organization, 2020). However, the number of non-Saudi children engaged in child labor significantly exceeds the number of Saudis (Ministry of human resource and social development & International Labour Organization, 2020). Although Saudi children may choose to work for cultural reasons, poverty stands as the leading factor among non-Saudi child laborers (Ministry of human resource and social development, International & Labour Organization, 2020). With a focus of this commentary

on Saudi Arabia, it is noted that the causes of poverty that lead children to seek early employment in Saudi Arabia extend beyond limited education or parental unemployment. Rather, in the Saudi context, child labor could be a manifestation of statelessness, with Saudi Arabia being one of the top 20<sup>th</sup> countries hosting stateless populations in the world (Institute on Statelessness and Inclusion et al., 2018). Therefore, this commentary focuses on next steps of addressing child labor in Saudi Arabia and does so by confronting the deep interconnection with the issue of statelessness. Recommendations are provided to address these dual phenomena in the short and long term.

Saudi Arabia has attempted to solve the issue of child labor by taking a poverty reduction approach and enacting child protection policies, including minimum employment age (GOV.SA, 2021). Saudi law has set out the minimum age for employment as 15 years old as pronounced in the Royal Decree No. M/14 (Bureau of experts at the council of Ministers, 2014), yet child labor is a persisting issue in the country (Alromeh الرميح, 2011; Ministry of human resource and social development & International Labour Organization, 2020). To understand the root issues we can consider the only study found that focuses on child labor in Saudi Arabia, Alromeh الرميح (2011), which investigated the factors associated with child labor in AL Qassim province. In this study, of the children aged between 8 to 14 years old, 91% reported that they work for financial reasons where the majority of their earnings if not all goes to their families. More than half of children participating earned less than 50 SAR/day which is equivalent to \$17 CAN or \$13 USD. Despite the absence of cross-sectional studies that measure the scope and magnitude of the issue in Saudi Arabia, child labor is observed mostly among children who are born into stateless families (Al Eqtisadia الاقتصادية, 2022).

Although statelessness in Saudi Arabia occurs in different ways, two distinct pathways are discussed in this article due to information availability. The first is those who have been historic residents of the land now known as Saudi Arabia prior to the establishment of the Kingdom in 1932, what other regions might consider the Indigenous or tribal peoples of the land (Institute on Statelessness and Inclusion et al., 2018). Saudi nationality was not necessarily offered to all persons upon establishment of the Kingdom and therefore descendants of these people remain stateless. Secondly are new immigrants or descendants of immigrants with no national standing (Institute on Statelessness and Inclusion et al., 2018). Although stateless families from both these groups are issued identity documents, which is called 'black cards' for the native group and 'temporary residency' for the immigrant group (Institute on Statelessness and Inclusion et al., 2018), it does not allow them to access the same public services as their Saudi counterparts. The issue regarding document identities, either black card or the temporary residency, is that the holders of these documents are not always able to access the same rights as Saudi citizens. For example, stateless persons in Saudi Arabia face barriers to owning property (Saudi Gazette, 2013). Furthermore, the renewal of their identity documents is often a long and complicated process, leaving people at times both stateless and without current and valid identity documents otherwise used by stateless persons (Saudi Gazette, 2013).

Considering the marginalization of children within stateless families in Saudi Arabia, it is worth noting that they are not eligible to access most public sector services such as education, public healthcare, and the official labor market (Saudi Gazette, 2013). This impoverishes these families and their children and creates a motivation to seek income within the 'grey' market, that is outside of legal protections, including those willing to employ children below the legal working age of 15.

Working at a young age exposes children to exploitation and discrimination, which negatively impacts their physical and mental health. Childhood is a critical period of the human lifespan where children are supposed to be receiving education, making friends, exploring life, and learning basic skills under adult supervision. Early entry into unregulated labor leads to lifelong delays in development and creates high risk for morbidity and mortality (OECD, 2018).

## Recommendations

If Saudi Arabia is to continue in progress towards the SDGs, while having a minimum working age of 15 is an important first step, the next step is to address those who are falling outside of these state protections. The issue of child labor in the Saudi context could be worsened by statelessness (UNHCR, 2012); thus, any plan to address child labor needs to get to the root issues of how Saudi society will consider stateless persons going forward. These two policy issues are under the jurisdiction of different ministries yet you cannot solve one without addressing the other. The National Policy for Preventing Child Labor aims to improve social assistance strategies and promote child labor awareness (Saudi Gazette, 2021). As a short-term goal, the National Policy for Preventing Child Labor should be expanded to include all children within the kingdom regardless of their nationality or identity documents, whether they hold a valid identity card or not. Compulsory education is another strategy that allows all children, Saudis and non-Saudis, to spend considerable time in school instead of being vulnerable to unregulated labor. Through the school system, the social and health conditions of students can be monitored and vulnerable families can be identified and supported systematically.

Another initiative that presents promising outcomes to tackle the issue of child labor is the National Family Safety Program. This program provides individuals and communities with focused services that are designed to deal with child abuse and victims of violence (UNDP, 2021). Promoting access to working children and their families to benefit from such a program is critical in that it allows the program to be utilized by the most marginalized population and can enhance not only the working children's conditions but also their families.

Rectifying the situation of stateless families can lift them out of poverty by allowing greater access to public services. This, in turn, can automatically ensure better outcomes for their children and reduce the pressure of needing to work to make ends meet. Stateless families have lived for decades and put down roots within Saudi Arabia. Many are within third and fourth generations of living in the Kingdom. Urgent solutions should be taken to end statelessness and explore pathways to citizenship for as many residents as possible. A long-term solution could include the Saudi General Directorate of Passports creating an expedited process of issuing citizenship to any member who belongs to this population including those who do not hold a valid identity document, and their children.

## Conclusion

Child labor and statelessness are two different social issues, yet they are inextricably entangled, and their ramifications are that children are suffering within the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. If we ensure a fair distribution of resources for all people who reside in Saudi Arabia with or without valid identity documents, the offspring of stateless families can have better opportunities to grow



in a healthy and prosperous environment. These children will then become those who contribute in a positive way to the economy and to the broader society, rather than living the burden of impoverishment. Only by confronting the issue of stateless persons can Saudi Arabia truly hope to end all child labor within the borders of the Kingdom.

### *About the Authors*

Fawziah Rabiah-Mohammed, Ph.D. Candidate, Arthur Labatt Family School of Nursing, Western University. ORCID: 0000-0001-5079-6949. Corresponding author: Falmalk2@uwo.ca

Abe Oudshoorn, RN, Ph.D, Associate Professor, Arthur Labatt Family School of Nursing, Western University, [aoudshoo@gmail.com](mailto:aoudshoo@gmail.com). ORCID: 0000-0003-0277-8724

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