

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	1525
Land:	Irak
Kilde:	US Department of Labor
Titel:	Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor
Udgivet:	23. september 2023
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	9. februar 2024

Document #2098523

USDOL – US Department of Labor (Author)

2022 Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor: Iraq

Minimal Advancement – Efforts Made but Continued Practice that Delayed Advancement

In 2022, Iraq made minimal advancement in efforts to eliminate the worst forms of child labor. The Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs' Child Labor Unit identified 109 children under the age of 15 engaging in child labor and 604 children under the age of 18 working in hazardous conditions, although it is unknown whether these children were provided with social services after they were identified. Despite this effort, Iraq is assessed as having made only minimal advancement because it continued to implement a practice that delays advancement to eliminate child labor. During the reporting period, Iraqi and Kurdistan Regional Government authorities inappropriately detained or punished children allegedly affiliated with ISIS—some of whom were victims of forcible recruitment or use. Children in Iraq are subjected to the worst forms of child labor, including in commercial sexual exploitation, sometimes as a result of human trafficking, and in forced begging. The government also did not provide information on its criminal law enforcement efforts for inclusion in this report. In addition, it continues to lack social programs that focus on assisting children involved in child labor, including demobilizing and reintegrating child soldiers.

I. Prevalence and Sectoral Distribution of Child Labor

ecoi.net description:

Annual report on child labor
(covering 2022)

Country:

Iraq

Source:

[USDOL – US Department of Labor](#) (Author)

Original link:

Table 1 provides key indicators on children's work and education in Iraq. Data on some of these indicators are not available from the sources used in this report.

Children	Related Entity	Age	Percent
Working (% and population)		5 to 14	4.8 (Unavailable)
Attending School (%)		5 to 14	78.4
Combining Work and School (%)		7 to 14	4.2
Primary Completion Rate (%)			Unavailable

Table 1. Statistics on Children's Work and Education

Primary completion rate was unavailable from UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2023. (1)

Source for all other data: International Labor Organization's analysis of statistics from Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 6 (MICS 6), 2018. (2)

Based on a review of available information, Table 2 provides an overview of children's work by sector and activity.

Sector/Industry	Activity
Agriculture	Farming, including the production of dairy products (3,4)
	Fishing, activities unknown (3)
Industry	Construction, † activities unknown (5)
	Making bricks, including transporting bricks and working in kilns (3,6-8)
	Working in factories, producing glass, household cleaners, paint, steel, garments and textiles, perfume, and electrical materials, and recycling plastic (6-8)
	Street work, including selling goods, pushing carts, cleaning cars, and begging (6,8-11)
Services	Working at gas stations† and auto repair and other shops (6)
	Working in landfills, scavenging and collecting garbage † and scrap metal (7,12)

Original link:

<https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/resources/reports/child-labor/iraq>

Document type:

Periodical Report

Language:

English

Published:

26 September 2023

Available on ecoi.net since:

10 October 2023

Document ID:

2098523

Sector/Industry	Activity
	Domestic work (6)
	Working in hotels, restaurants, bars, nightclubs,† and brothels (6,9,10)
Categorical Worst Forms of Child Labor‡	Use in illicit activities, including cross-border smuggling and drug and weapons trafficking (3,6,8-10,13-15)
	Forced domestic work (6)
	Forced begging (3,13,16-19)
	Commercial sexual exploitation, sometimes as a result of human trafficking (3,6,13,16-21)
	Recruitment of children by non-state armed groups for use in armed conflict (22)

Table 2. Overview of Children's Work by Sector and Activity

† Determined by national law or regulation as hazardous and, as such, relevant to Article 3(d) of ILO C. 182.

‡ Child labor understood as the worst forms of child labor *per se* under Article 3(a)–(c) of ILO C. 182.

There is evidence that child labor in brickmaking in Iraq is widespread. (3,6,7) Brickmaking exposes children to hazardous working conditions such as high heat, polluted air, exposure to the sun, and carrying heavy loads. (7) These children often lack protective equipment and are sometimes housed on the factory compound. (7) Reporting indicates that the Kurdistan Workers' Party and ISIS recruited and used children in armed conflict in 2022. (22) Girls were also subjected to commercial sexual exploitation through temporary marriages. (14,20) Iranian-aligned militia groups have profited from and protected "marriage offices" operated by clerics who facilitate the commercial sexual exploitation of children through "temporary marriages." (14,16,18) In addition, Syrian girls from refugee camps in the Kurdistan Region were sometimes forced into early or temporary marriages with Iraqi or other refugee men; some Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) authorities allegedly ignored or accepted bribes to ignore such cases, including those in which girls were sold multiple times. (14) Research found that women and girls in IDP camps whose family members have alleged ties to ISIS endure sexual exploitation, sex trafficking, and abuse by armed actors residing in the

camp, security and military officials, and camp personnel controlling access to humanitarian assistance and services. (17)

Children in Iraq face numerous barriers to accessing education, including displacement, the lack of local schools, the use of schools as shelters by IDPs, costs of transportation and school supplies, and the lack of sufficient educational facilities. (3,5,10) Sources report severe teacher shortages in Sinjar district as the result of teachers being displaced. (3) Insufficient access to transportation and destruction of schools during the conflict with ISIS also continued to limit access to education; according to UNICEF, over half of the schools in Iraq require repairs. (3) Children of parents whose marriages were informal due to the woman being a minor, some displaced persons, and some children with suspected ties to ISIS lack identification documents required for school enrollment. (3,23,24) Displaced children and refugee children are especially vulnerable to educational barriers, including the cost of transportation and school supplies, the lack of documentation, and host community children being given priority for classroom seats. (3) Secondary and higher education systems sometimes refuse to accept students who previously studied at schools that used the Latin rather than Arabic alphabet; many of these students drop out as a result. (3) Children with special needs had limited access to education due to a lack of specialized teachers and school infrastructure. (3) UNICEF reports that, while almost 92 percent of children enroll in primary schools, only half of children from economically disadvantaged families complete primary school and less than a quarter complete secondary education. (25)

II. Legal Framework for Child Labor

Iraq has ratified all key international conventions concerning child labor (Table 3).

Convention	Related Entity	Ratification
ILO C. 138, Minimum Age		✓
ILO C. 182, Worst Forms of Child Labor		✓
UN CRC		✓
UN CRC Optional Protocol on Armed Conflict		✓
UN CRC Optional Protocol on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography		✓

Table 3. Ratification of International Conventions on Child Labor

The government has established laws and regulations related to child labor (Table 4). However, gaps exist in Iraq's and the KRG's legal framework to adequately protect children from the worst forms of child labor, including the requirement that force, fraud, or coercion be present for child trafficking crimes.

Standard	Meets International Standards	Age	Legislation
Minimum Age for Work	Yes	15	Article 7 of the 2015 Labor Law (26)
Minimum Age for Hazardous Work	Yes	18	Article 95 of the 2015 Labor Law (26)
Identification of Hazardous Occupations or Activities Prohibited for Children	Yes		Articles 95 and 98 of the 2015 Labor Law; Ministry of Labor's Instruction 19 of 1987 (26,27)
Prohibition of Forced Labor	Yes		Articles 9 and 11.2 of the 2015 Labor Law (26)
Prohibition of Child Trafficking	No		Articles 1 and 6 of the Law to Combat Human Trafficking (28)
Prohibition of Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children	No		Articles 399 and 403 of the Penal Code (29)
Prohibition of Using Children in Illicit Activities	No		
Minimum Age for Voluntary State Military Recruitment	Yes	18	Section 6(2) of the CPA Order 22 (30)
Prohibition of Compulsory Recruitment of Children by (State) Military	N/A*		

Standard	Meets International Standards	Age Legislation
Prohibition of Military Recruitment by Non-state Armed Groups	No	
Compulsory Education Age	No	Articles 8.1.1 and 11.1 of the Education Law; Article 1.3 of the Law on Compulsory Education (31,32)
Free Public Education	Yes	Article 34.2 of the Constitution; Article 9 of the Education Law (31,33)

Table 4. Laws and Regulations on Child Labor

* Country has no conscription (30)

‡ Age calculated based on available information (31,32)

Article 117 of the Constitution of Iraq recognizes Kurdistan, which comprises the provinces of Dohuk, Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, and Halabja, as a federal region. (33-36) Article 121 grants the Kurdistan Region the right to exercise legislative, executive, and judicial powers. (33) The Iraqi Kurdistan Parliament must endorse any laws that the Government of Iraq passed after 1991 for such laws to enter into force in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region. (34-36) Under the Iraqi Education Law and under the Law on Compulsory Education, children are required to attend primary school for only 6 years, which is typically up to age 12. (31,32) This leaves children ages 12 to 15 particularly vulnerable to child labor, because they are not required to be in school, yet they are not legally permitted to work. (37) However, in Kurdistan, compulsory primary education is 9 years, typically to age 15, in accordance with international standards. (50)

In Iraq, Article 1 of the Law to Combat Human Trafficking requires force, fraud, or coercion to be present as an element to constitute the crime of child sex trafficking, which is inconsistent with international standards, including Article 3 of the Palermo Protocol. (28) As the Iraqi Kurdistan Parliament endorsed the Iraqi Law to Combat Human Trafficking, the human trafficking standard in the Kurdistan Region is also not in compliance with international standards. (38) In addition, while

the KRG's laws meet international standards for the prohibition of commercial sexual exploitation under Articles 91.3(b), 91.4, and 97 of the 1987 Labor Law, Iraq's laws do not prohibit the use of children in prostitution and do not clearly prohibit the use, procuring, and offering of children for the production of pornography or pornographic performances. (27,29) Furthermore, Iraq's laws do not prohibit the use of children in illicit activities, while the KRG prohibits such use under Articles 91.3(c), 91.4, and 97 of the 1987 Labor Law. (27) Moreover, Iraqi law does not prohibit recruitment and use of children by non-state armed groups.

III. Enforcement of Laws on Child Labor

The government has established institutional mechanisms for the enforcement of laws and regulations on child labor (Table 5). However, gaps exist within the operations of enforcement agencies that may hinder adequate enforcement of their child labor laws.

Organization/Agency	Role & Activities
Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (MOLSA)	Enforces child labor laws and regulations through its Child Labor Unit. (10)
	Conducts research on child labor through its Childhood Welfare Authority. Receives complaints of child labor cases. (10) The Kurdistan Regional Government's (KRG) MOLSA (KMOLSA) also enforces child labor laws and regulations. (10)
Ministry of Interior	Enforces criminal laws on the worst forms of child labor. Collaborates with MOLSA, the Iraqi Industries Federation, and the Confederation of Trade Unions to conduct inspection campaigns. (10) Maintains a hotline for victims of human trafficking, with calls routed directly to the Ministry's Anti-Trafficking Directorate. (10) KRG's Ministry of the Interior also enforces child labor laws and regulations, investigates cases of commercial sexual exploitation and human trafficking, and includes a Counter Trafficking Directorate. (10,38)

Table 5. Agencies Responsible for Child Labor Law Enforcement

Labor Law Enforcement

In 2022, labor law enforcement agencies in Iraq took actions to address child labor (Table 6). However, gaps exist within the operations of the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (MOLSA) and the

KRG's Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (KMOLSA) that may hinder adequate labor law enforcement, including an insufficient number of labor inspectors.

Overview of Labor Law Enforcement	2021	2022
Labor Inspectorate Funding	Unknown (6)	Unknown (8)
Number of Labor Inspectors	Unknown (6)	Unknown (8)
Mechanism to Assess Civil Penalties	Yes (26)	Yes (26)
Training for Labor Inspectors Provided	Yes (6)	Yes (8)
Number of Labor Inspections Conducted at Worksite	Unknown (6)	Unknown (8)
Number of Child Labor Violations Found	Unknown (6)	713 (8)
Number of Child Labor Violations for Which Penalties Were Imposed	Unknown (6)	Unknown (8)
Number of Child Labor Penalties Imposed that Were Collected	Unknown (6)	Unknown (8)
Routine Inspections Conducted	Unknown (6)	Unknown (8)
Routine Inspections Targeted	Unknown (6)	Unknown (8)
Unannounced Inspections Permitted	Yes (26)	Yes (26)
Unannounced Inspections Conducted	Unknown (6)	Unknown (8)
Complaint Mechanism Exists	Yes (6)	Yes (6)
Reciprocal Referral Mechanism Exists Between Labor Authorities and Social Services	Yes (6)	Yes (6)

Table 6. Labor Law Enforcement Efforts Related to Child Labor

In 2022, MOLSA's Child Labor Unit conducted 328 inspections throughout the country. Additionally, MOLSA identified 109 children under the age of 15 engaging in child labor and 604 under 18 years old. (8) It is unknown if or how MOLSA or other agencies supported these children after they were identified. MOLSA officials have stated that enforcement of child labor laws remains weak and ineffective due to insufficient penalties to deter violators. (8) Although the number of labor inspectors is unknown for 2023, 2019 reporting indicates that Iraq employed 98 labor inspectors. (8) Research indicates that Iraq does not have an adequate number of labor inspectors to carry out their mandated duties. (6,39,40)

KMOLSA did not provide information on its labor law enforcement efforts for inclusion in this report. Reporting indicates that KMOLSA and the KRG's Ministry of Interior were responsive to complaints of child labor in the Kurdistan Region but would only conduct child labor inspections in response to a complaint. (6,8) KMOLSA indicated that funding is insufficient to carry out its duties. (3)

Criminal Law Enforcement

In 2022, criminal law enforcement agencies in Iraq took actions to address child labor (Table 7). However, gaps exist within the operations of enforcement agencies that may hinder adequate criminal law enforcement, including inadequate and ineffective planning for prosecutions.

Overview of Criminal Law Enforcement	2021	2022
Training for Criminal Investigators Provided	Unknown (6)	Unknown (8)
Number of Investigations	Unknown (6)	Unknown (8)
Number of Prosecutions Initiated	Unknown (6)	Unknown (8)
Number of Convictions	Unknown (6)	Unknown (8)
Imposed Penalties for Violations Related to the Worst Forms of Child Labor	Unknown (6)	Unknown (8)

Overview of Criminal Law Enforcement	2021	2022
Reciprocal Referral Mechanism Exists Between Criminal Authorities and Social Services	Yes (6)	Yes (6)

Table 7. Criminal Law Enforcement Efforts Related to Child Labor

In 2022, authorities continued to inappropriately detain or punish children allegedly affiliated with ISIS—some of whom were victims of forcible recruitment and use. (14,22,41-45) The government also did not investigate or hold anyone criminally accountable for allegations of unlawful recruitment and use of child soldiers. (14,19) Some victims of human trafficking, including children who were forcibly recruited and used, are punished for unlawful acts their traffickers compelled them to commit. (14,36,46) In addition, an NGO reported that police occasionally detained children engaged in street begging and kept them in custody before releasing them; police did not screen these children as possible victims of human trafficking or refer them to appropriate protection services. (9,14)

Although the Ministry of Interior has reported in the past that it investigated police officers for involvement in sex trafficking, research indicates that security and management personnel in IDP camps continue to be complicit in the sexual exploitation and trafficking of girls. (6,13) Moreover, research indicates that children are sentenced to up to 8 years in prison for prostitution, rather than being treated as victims of trafficking or commercial sexual exploitation of children. (47) Additionally, the government did not provide information on its criminal law enforcement efforts for inclusion in this report.

IV. Coordination of Government Efforts on Child Labor

The government has established a key mechanism to coordinate its efforts to address child labor (Table 8). However, gaps exist that hinder the effective coordination of efforts to address child labor, including a lack of coordination among agencies.

Coordinating Body	Role & Activities
Interministerial Committee on Child Labor	Coordinates overall government efforts to address child labor, researches on policies regarding child labor, and designs and manages projects. Members include representatives from MOLSA and four other ministries. (9) The committee does not sufficiently coordinate among agencies to effectively

Coordinating Body	Role & Activities
	process cases of children suspected of having ties to ISIS or children who are victims of human trafficking. (8) However, the committee continued to coordinate with the UN to address grave violations of children's rights in 2022. (8)

Table 8. Key Mechanism to Coordinate Government Efforts on Child Labor

V. Government Policies on Child Labor

The government has established policies related to child labor (Table 9). However, policy gaps exist that hinder efforts to address child labor, including covering all worst forms of child labor, including forced begging and commercial sexual exploitation.

Policy	Description & Activities
Child Protection Policy (2017–2022)	Outlined a comprehensive approach to addressing child protection, including addressing child labor through prevention, protection, and rehabilitation programs, such as a poverty alleviation initiative and educational and mental health services. Included a component to provide rehabilitation and reintegration activities for children previously engaged in armed conflict and children who experienced trauma during the period of ISIS occupation. (10,48) The policy did not specifically cover other worst forms of child labor present in Iraq, including forced begging and commercial sexual exploitation. (48)
National Plan on Combating Human Trafficking in Iraq	Aims to address human trafficking by outlining steps to be taken by authorities represented on the Central Committee to Combat Trafficking in Persons. Focuses on prevention, protection, prosecution, and regional and international cooperation, and includes considerations for child victims. (49)

Table 9. Key Policies Related to Child Labor

Research was unable to determine whether activities were undertaken to implement these policies during the reporting period. Additionally, research was unable to identify any child labor policies in the Kurdistan Region. (6)

VI. Social Programs to Address Child Labor

In 2022, the government funded and participated in programs that include the goal of eliminating or preventing child labor (Table 10). However, gaps exist in these social programs, including the inadequacy of programs to address the full scope of the problem.

Program	Description & Activities
Informal Education†	Government-supported informal education systems, including evening school programs and accelerated education that encourages children ages 12 to 18 who have dropped out of school to continue their education. (10) Research was unable to determine what steps were undertaken in 2022 to implement this program.
Conditional Subsidies Program†	Provides assistance to low-income families for children to stay in school and out of the workforce. (6) Active in 2022. (8)

Table 10. Key Social Programs to Address Child Labor

For information about USDOL’s projects to address child labor around the world, visit <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/ilab-project-page-search>
† Program is funded by the Government of Iraq.

The Government of Iraq did not provide protection services to demobilized child soldiers of ISIS or the Popular Mobilization Forces in 2022. Failing to reintegrate former child soldiers leaves them vulnerable to re-victimization or re-recruitment into armed groups. (46) Likewise, research was unable to find evidence of specific active programs to support children subjected to commercial sexual exploitation or other worst forms of child labor, including child soldiering. Existing programs do not sufficiently address the lack of access to education in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region. Government-run shelters are reportedly unable to house child victims, sending them to MOLSA orphanages instead, due to a lack of funding and suitable accommodations. (19,47)

VII. Suggested Government Actions to Eliminate Child Labor

Based on the reporting above, suggested actions are identified that would advance the elimination of child labor in Iraq (Table 11).

Area	Suggested Action	Year(s) Suggested	
Legal Framework	Ensure that the laws comprehensively prohibit child trafficking in all parts of Iraq, including the Kurdistan Region, and do not require force or coercion for their application, in accordance with international standards.	2015 2022	-
	Ensure that the law criminally prohibits the use of a child in prostitution and the use, procuring, and offering of a child for the production of pornography and pornographic performances.	2019 2022	-
	Ensure that the law in Iraq criminally prohibits the use of children in illicit activities, including in the production and trafficking of drugs.	2015 2022	-
	Ensure that the law criminally prohibits the recruitment of children under age 18 by non-state armed groups.	2013 2022	-
	Raise the compulsory education age of 12 years in Iraq to age 15, the minimum age for work.	2009 2022	-
Enforcement	Ensure that children are not arrested, detained, tortured, or denied services on the basis of their or their family members' perceived ties to ISIS.	2015 2022	-
	Ensure that armed groups that recruit and use children are held criminally accountable.	2016 2022	-
	Ensure that allegations of sexual exploitation and trafficking of girls in IDP camps by government officials are investigated and those responsible are held criminally liable.	2019 2022	-
	Publish labor law enforcement information, such as labor inspectorate funding, number of labor inspectors, number of labor inspections conducted at worksite, number of child labor violations for which penalties were imposed, number of child labor penalties imposed that were collected, whether routine inspections and targeted inspections were conducted, and whether unannounced inspections were conducted.	2011 2022	-

Area	Suggested Action	Year(s) Suggested	
	Employ at least 690 labor inspectors to provide adequate coverage for the labor force of approximately 10.3 million people and ensure adequate funding to enforce legal protections against child labor.	2011 2022	–
	Ensure that children who are victims of trafficking are not imprisoned and are granted access to social services providers and humanitarian assistance.	2021 2022	–
	Ensure that routine labor inspections are carried out in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.	2019 2022	–
	Ensure that labor inspectors and criminal investigators receive training on child labor and that they have sufficient resources to carry out their duties.	2016 2022	–
	Ensure that children picked up by authorities for begging are screened for trafficking indicators.	2021 2022	–
	Publish information on criminal law enforcement on the worst forms of child labor in Iraq and the Iraqi Kurdistan Region.	2013 2022	–
	Ensure that the Interministerial Committee on Child Labor effectively coordinates among agencies to process cases of children suspected of having ties to ISIS or children who are victims of human trafficking.	2022	
Government Policies	Renew the Child Protection Policy in Iraq and adopt a child labor policy in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region for other worst forms of child labor present in Iraq, including forced begging and commercial sexual exploitation.	2018 2022	–
Social Programs	Implement programs to ensure that children are discouraged from enlisting in armed groups and receiving military training.	2015 2022	–
	Ensure that universal access to education is consistent with international standards, including for refugee and internally displaced children and children with special needs, and that programs address barriers to education, including the lack of teachers, the destruction and lack of local schools, costs of transportation and school supplies,	2013 2022	–

Area	Suggested Action	Year(s) Suggested
	and lack of infrastructure, especially during school closures. Ensure that the lack of identification documents does not hinder access to education, including for IDPs and refugees, children with suspected ties to ISIS, and children born of “informal” marriages.	
	Implement programs to address child labor in relevant sectors in Iraq, such as the provision of services to children in commercial sexual exploitation, to demobilize and reintegrate children engaged in armed groups, and to provide informal education programs and shelters for human trafficking victims.	2009 – 2022

Table 11. Suggested Government Actions to Eliminate Child Labor

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Austrian Red Cross
Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and
Asylum Research and Documentation
(ACCORD)

Wiedner Hauptstraße 32, 1041 Wien
T +43 1 589 00 583
F +43 1 589 00 589
info@ecoi.net

Contact
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ecoi.net is run by the Austrian Red Cross (department ACCORD) in cooperation with Informationsverbund Asyl & Migration. ecoi.net is funded by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, the Austrian Ministry of the Interior and Caritas Austria. ecoi.net is supported by ECRE & UNHCR.

