

## **Poverty Drives Child Labour in Kyrgyzstan**

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Hardship forces children to neglect schooling and go out to work.

“Make way, make way!” the thin-looking teenage boy calls as he manoeuvres a barrow piled high with vegetables through the crowds at the Farmer’s Market in Bishkek, capital of the Central Asian state of Kyrgyzstan.

Just 15, Nurlan gives the impression he is an old hand at this heavy work, which he is – he has been doing it for two years.

His day begins at five, so that an hour later he has hired a barrow and can get started. He carries purchases weighing up to 100 kilograms from market stalls to customers’ cars, and sometimes to another market 20 minutes’ walk away.

Depending on the time of year, there are between 150 and 200 adolescents working as porters at this one market alone, a pattern repeated across Kyrgyzstan. Although the youngest work at this market is 14, children under ten are known to be working elsewhere.

Nurlan’s story is fairly typical. As his father is an alcoholic, his mother Kenje has been left to look after four children of whom he is the eldest. Two years ago the family left their village in the Chui region, north of Bishkek, and moved to the capital Bishkek in hope of better prospects.

“When my mum brought me and my brothers to Bishkek, I immediately started looking for work as I wanted to help my mum,” Nurlan recalled. “My uncle suggested I work as a porter at the vegetable market as he said there were good earnings to be made there. Of course, he warned me it would be hard work but that didn’t worry me as I had to earn money.”

Although he accepts that the work is tough, Nurlan resents the degrading manner he is treated.

“In the time I’ve worked as a porter I’ve become used to being treated like a loaded donkey. I take orders from clients without a word of protest,” he said. “I want to break free from this humiliating situation and save some money, get an education and find another job. But for now I’ll have to put up with it.”

Nurlan should be in fifth grade at secondary school, but dropped out a year ago to work full-time. He would have liked to continue in school but realises that will not happen any time soon.

His family relies heavily on the five or ten dollars a day he brings home. With his mother’s income from selling snacks at the market, the household has a total income of around 175 dollars a month, of which 55 dollars goes on rent.

Kenje said she regretted not being able to send Nurlan to school, but said there was no going back to her village where her husband “sells everything in the house to buy alcohol and beats the children”.

“Here, all together, we can get out of poverty,” she said. After the interview was conducted, she managed to get a better-paying job as a seamstress and the family’s situation improved a little.

### **FOUR OUT OF TEN CHILDREN MAY BE WORKING**

The data on children at work is still only partial. The only official statistic available dates from 2007 and indicates that more than 40 per cent of children in Kyrgyzstan were working. What this does not show is how many are working part-time and still attending school.

A survey conducted by the El Pikir polling organisation with funding from the United Nations children’s agency UNICEF showed that more than 40,000 children – around four per cent of the school-age population – were not in school regularly or at all in 2007. Some non-government groups believe the real figure is three times that number, meaning that some 14 per cent of children are missing out on education.

The Bishkek office of the International Labour Organisation, ILO, told IWPR that information gathered by a number of NGOs suggested that 120,000 children – three times the number given by El Pikir – were missing out on education. (See [Kyrgyzstan: High Cost of “Free” Education](#) on school drop-outs.)

“There are no official statistics on children at work,” Irina Karamushkina, a newly-elected member of parliament who previously served as deputy education minister, said. “Many high-ranking officials, including regional education heads, fear that if they provide accurate figures, they’ll lose their jobs. So no

one has counted these children.”

The Kyrgyz constitution bans the use of child labour, and the country has ratified the key international documents covering the issue – the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the ILO Convention Concerning the Minimum Age for Admission to Employment, and the ILO Convention Concerning the Prohibition and Immediate Action for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour.

National legislation is clear – employers may not take on anyone under the age of 16, or 15 in certain exceptional circumstances.

The problem is that children, just like adults working in the black economy, operate under the radar. They are paid less than adults and more compliant as they are unaware of their rights.

“These boys working as porters at markets don’t sign contracts with their employers, they just have a verbal agreement, because the law prohibits child labour, particularly its worst forms, and this job requires the child has to carry heavy loads,” the ILO’s Amina Kurbanova told IWPR.

Other common jobs done by children include sweepers, market sellers and in car wash. As Kurbanova pointed out, some of the more alarming cases involve children doing dangerous work like coal mining and scavenging scrap metal from disused uranium waste dumps.

### **CHILD LABOUR COMMON IN RURAL AREAS**

One of the main areas of child employment, and one of the hardest to police, is agriculture, where it is not always clear whether a child is are simply performing the odd task for its parents – perfectly acceptable by most standards – or is routinely working long hours in arduous jobs.

Karamushkina said that while some children were keen to help their families, it also happened that “they want to attend school but their parents force them to work”.

As Karamushkina pointed out, children worked informally even when Kyrgyzstan was part of the Soviet Union, particularly when extra hands were needed on the state’s cotton and tobacco plantations.

Retired history teacher Kokysh Sagynalieva said chronic hardship was changing attitudes to child labour for the worst.

“Previously, a child who helped parents or relatives was learning skills that would prepare him for adult life,” she said, noting that it was considered normal for children to perform household tasks. “The children were rewarded for work, but there is a line between help and exploitation. Unfortunately, recent years... have seen a rise in mass poverty, and the line has become blurred in adults’ minds. Now children are literally forced into slave labour. Who is to blame? The state? The parents? The people who exploit children? Maybe all of them.”

Nurbolsun, a 15-year-old from the village of Ken-Aral in the northern Talas region, is a typical occasional child worker in the countryside. He normally goes to school, but drops out completely during the spring sowing and autumn harvest seasons.

“In autumn and spring, all my classmates are out in the fields,” he said, noting that even teachers do not go to school during those seasons.

Nurbolsun works on the family bean plot, its main income source, looks after the livestock and harvests the potato crop.

“I’ve been working in the fields since I was maybe seven or eight,” he said. “Now all the work round the house falls on me.... I’m not going to classes right now, no time for that.”

Nurbolsun is unusual in that he comes from an educated family. His father trained as an economist but works on the farm because he cannot get professional work, while his mother is a primary teacher, a job that does not pay much money. They support five children and a grandmother, who gets a small pension.

Nurbolsun’s late grandfather was a school headmaster, and he himself once hoped to follow in his footsteps. Although he used to enjoy school, he now sees he has missed so much that his education will be limited, and now plans to set up a small business like a café or acquire some land of his own when he is old enough.

Experts warn that this pattern of absenteeism will produce a poorly educated generation and reduce literacy rates, thus restricting opportunities for people to rise out of poverty.

“Uncontrolled labour practices have a damaging effect on educational standards, and in some cases also on children’s health,” human rights activist Yelena Voronina said.

## PAST GOVERNMENTS TOO SOFT ON EMPLOYERS

At the moment, most work on child labour is done by non-government pressure groups. But experts agree that tackling the problem requires concerted efforts by government agencies and a realisation by parents that routine manual labour is different from occasional voluntary help.

Karamushkina said the issue of child labour in agriculture was so sensitive that political will faltered when it came to enforcing the rules. Local government was often afraid to put pressure on farms and other businesses, and these in turn had a vested interest in using cheap labour.

“No one will take the risk of issuing a decree, as this document would then need to be implemented,” she said.

Aziz Ahmedov, head of the labour ministry’s Youth Labour Exchange, said very few cases had ever been brought against employers for the illegal use of child labour.

“There are now a range of state [health and safety] inspections, but the reality is that at markets and in other economic sectors, children perform a substantial amount of work and carry weights unsuitable for minors. All this happens with impunity,” Ahmedov said.

A member of a youth group who asked to remain anonymous said corruption was so commonplace that penalties were easily evaded.

“Even if [an employer] is found out during an inspection, he can always bribe his way out,” he said.

Karamushkina said a number of government agencies needed to be involved – the ministries of health, education and youth affairs, and above all the labour and employment ministry’s department for child protection. But she claimed the latter department was not doing enough; it “attends round-tables and speaks, but nothing happens beyond that”.

Karamushkina said the new government currently being formed would definitely have child labour on its agenda, and warned that if the child rights department continued to fall down on its duties, she would use her position in parliament to lobby for the new post of special presidential representative for children’s rights by the president.

She said there were practical solutions for covering labour shortages at peak times in the farming cycle, for example by recruiting university and college students as temporary workers.

For Cholpon Jakupova, head of the legal advice group Adilet, the bottom line is that all children should be in school.

“Free schooling is not just a right but also an obligation for every child. Those who prevent this legal obligation from being fulfilled are breaking the law and should be held to account,” she said.

However, the key contributory factor – poverty – is not something the Kyrgyz authorities will be able to address rapidly. Caught in an ongoing economic crisis, the new government faces the additional cost of rebuilding areas of southern Kyrgyzstan devastated by ethnic violence in June.

The names of some interviewees have been changed to protect the identity of minors.

### **Asyl Osmonalieva and Gulzat Abdurasulova are IWPR trained journalists in Kyrgyzstan.**

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