

FORCED CHILD LABOUR IN STREET WORK SECTOR IN UZBEKISTAN

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ABSTRACT	KEYWORDS
The problem of child labour in Uzbekistan has undergone significant transformation in recent years. While child labour in the cotton sector was previously a major concern, legal reforms and strengthened monitoring mechanisms have substantially addressed this problem. However, child labour has not disappeared completely and has increasingly become visible in informal economic activities, including street vending, car washing, carrying goods, begging and other forms of street work. These activities may expose children to exploitation, hazardous working conditions and deprivation of education. This article examines forced child labour in the street sector in Uzbekistan from human rights and criminal justice perspectives. It analyses the causes of forced child labour, the existing international and national legal framework, practical challenges in identifying and protecting child victims, and possible institutional and legal reforms. The research combines doctrinal legal analysis with empirical survey findings. The survey demonstrates the high visibility of children working in street settings and identifies poverty and parental exploitation among the main contributing factors. The findings also indicate that respondents largely support a comprehensive approach combining legal, social, economic and institutional measures.	Child labour, forced child labour, street work, child protection, human rights, criminal justice, Uzbekistan, social protection, informal economy.

Introduction

The problem of child labour in Uzbekistan has experienced a significant transformation over the last years. For a long period, Uzbekistan experienced widespread child labour in the cotton industry, where children were involved in the annual cotton harvest. Following international criticism and pressure, the country introduced legal reforms, strengthened monitoring mechanisms and implemented measures aimed at eradicating child labour from the cotton sector. Although child exploitation in the annual cotton harvest has been largely addressed, child labour has not disappeared completely. Instead, it has shifted towards the informal economy, where it has become more difficult to detect and prevent. Children are increasingly involved in street-based activities. Street vending and other informal activities may expose children to exploitation, hazardous working conditions and deprivation of education. Therefore, forced child labour in the street sector represents an important human rights and criminal justice issue that requires effective legal, social and institutional responses.

Children may be forced to work for various reasons. Financial hardship, parental exploitation and inadequate social protection are among the factors contributing to forced child labour. Compared with cotton harvesting, street-based child labour represents a relatively new challenge for Uzbekistan.

Uzbekistan has strengthened its legal framework aimed at protecting children from labour exploitation. In 2018, criminal liability was introduced for involving minors in begging. Furthermore, legislative amendments adopted in 2019 supplemented the Criminal Code with Article 148¹, establishing criminal liability for the use of a minor in work that may be dangerous to the child's health, safety or moral development. These reforms demonstrate the state's efforts to address child labour and align domestic legislation with international standards on children's rights. Despite these measures, significant challenges remain. Existing legal mechanisms have limitations when applied to informal forms of child labour. Limited enforcement, difficulties in victim identification, unclear legal interpretation and low prosecution rates may weaken the criminal justice response. The research therefore examines whether Uzbekistan's legal framework is sufficiently effective in protecting children from forced labour in street work and identifies the main factors contributing to this phenomenon.

The research uses a mixed-methods approach combining doctrinal legal research and empirical survey data. The doctrinal component analyses Uzbekistan's national legislation and compares it with international human rights standards, International Labour Organization conventions and relevant reports. The empirical component is based on a survey conducted in Uzbekistan concerning perceptions of child labour. Child labour and forced child labour should be distinguished from one another. Child labour generally refers to work that deprives children of their childhood, interferes with their education and may harm their physical or mental development, dignity or well-being. At the same time, not every form of work performed by children is automatically prohibited. International standards recognize limited forms of light work where appropriate age and safety requirements are respected.

The Minimum Age Convention, 1973 (No. 138), allows certain forms of light work for children between 13 and 15 years of age where such work is not harmful to their health or development and does not interfere with their education or vocational training. Forced child labour has a different legal character. The concept is derived from the interaction between international standards on forced labour and child labour. Convention No. 29 of the International Labour Organization defines forced or compulsory labour as work or service exacted from a person under the menace of a penalty and without voluntary consent. Convention No. 182 defines a child as every person under the age of 18. Accordingly, forced child labour can be understood as work performed by a person under 18 under coercion, threats or other forms of compulsion and without genuine voluntary consent. In street settings, coercion may take different forms. Adults may control children's earnings, establish daily income requirements, restrict their movement, use threats or physical punishment, or exert emotional pressure. Such practices may occur even where the person responsible is a parent or another family member. Street work is particularly difficult to regulate because it frequently occurs outside formal employment relationships. Children may engage in street vending, car washing, shoe cleaning, waste collection, carrying goods, begging and other informal activities.

The informal character of street work creates significant difficulties for labour inspection and child protection systems. A child working in a public place may not be formally registered as an employee, and therefore conventional labour protection mechanisms may not reach the child. The research indicates that international monitoring has identified street vending, tyre repair and begging among activities in which children may be involved in Uzbekistan. At the same time, reliable official statistics

concerning the precise number of children involved in street-based work remain limited. Therefore, the phenomenon requires improved data collection, systematic identification of children at risk and effective referral and protection mechanisms. Street work can also interfere with children's education. Long working hours, exposure to unsafe environments and economic pressure can reduce children's opportunities to attend school and participate fully in educational activities. This demonstrates that the problem is not limited to labour law but also concerns children's rights to education, health, development and dignity. The research identifies several factors contributing to forced child labour in street settings. Poverty is one of the most significant factors. Families experiencing financial difficulties may depend on children's earnings, while in some cases parents or other adults may directly exploit children's labour.

The empirical survey conducted as part of the research provides important evidence. A total of 29 respondents participated in the survey. 69% of respondents, or 20 out of 29, identified poverty as the main reason for forced child labour in street settings. 24.1%, or 7 respondents, identified parental exploitation as a significant factor. These results demonstrate that economic hardship is important but cannot fully explain the phenomenon. Weak social protection mechanisms and limited public awareness may also contribute to the persistence of the problem. When vulnerable families lack adequate support, children may become an additional source of household income. In such circumstances, economic dependence can create conditions in which children's rights are compromised. Another important issue is the perception of children working on the streets. Children may be viewed primarily as sources of income rather than as potential victims of exploitation. This perception may reduce reporting and delay preventive intervention. Therefore, effective prevention requires more than criminal punishment. It should also address the social and economic circumstances that place children at risk.

The empirical findings demonstrate that street-based child labour remains visible. 86.2% of respondents reported observing children regularly involved in street vending, roadside activities and other informal labour. This finding demonstrates the visibility of children working in public spaces, although it should not be interpreted as an official national prevalence rate. The research itself recognizes that the empirical sample is relatively small and is not sufficiently large or nationally representative to establish official statistics for the whole population of Uzbekistan. The findings should therefore be considered indicative rather than a comprehensive measurement of the prevalence of forced child labour. An important gap identified by the study is the difference between observation and intervention. People may observe children working in the streets, but observation does not necessarily result in reporting or preventive action. This indicates weaknesses in victim identification, referral mechanisms and cooperation between law enforcement agencies, educational institutions, social protection authorities and local communities. The problem is particularly challenging because street-based activities occur in informal spaces. Existing labour inspection mechanisms are mainly designed around formal employment relationships, while children working in streets may remain outside these mechanisms.

The international legal framework concerning forced child labour is developed through several instruments. The International Labour Organization's Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29), establishes the fundamental definition of forced labour. The Minimum Age Convention, 1973 (No. 138), regulates minimum age requirements, while the Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No. 182), requires measures against the worst forms of child labour. The Convention on the Rights of the Child also establishes broad obligations concerning children's protection, development, education

and freedom from exploitation. Together, these international instruments provide a framework requiring states to prevent exploitation, identify victims and provide appropriate protection and rehabilitation. Uzbekistan has developed corresponding national legislation. The Constitution, legislation on guarantees of children's rights, the Labour Code and the Criminal Code form important elements of the national child-protection framework. Article 148¹ of the Criminal Code represents an important legislative development because it establishes criminal liability for the use of minors in certain dangerous or morally harmful work. However, the research identifies limitations concerning its wording, its relationship with administrative liability and the absence of sufficiently clear interpretation concerning informal street work. The research therefore proposes strengthening the interpretation and application of the existing legal framework and improving mechanisms for identifying and referring child victims. One of the main challenges is that national legislation is largely designed to regulate formal employment relationships, whereas street-based activities frequently take place within the informal economy. Consequently, labour inspection and existing criminal justice mechanisms may not always effectively address exploitation occurring in public spaces. Another challenge concerns victim identification. Although children working on streets may be visible, identifying them as victims of forced labour requires an assessment of coercion, control, threats, economic pressure and other relevant circumstances. The research also identifies weaknesses in reporting and coordination. Effective protection requires cooperation between law enforcement institutions, social services, educational authorities, civil society organizations, local communities and families. The findings therefore demonstrate that the problem cannot be addressed through criminal law alone. Criminal accountability is one component, but it should operate together with preventive and social measures. The survey results strongly support a comprehensive approach. 72.4% of respondents, or 21 out of 29, selected a comprehensive, multi-layered approach as the most important reform. 20.7%, or 6 respondents, prioritized expanding social protection, while 6.9%, or 2 respondents, prioritized strengthening criminal law.

These findings provide empirical support for an integrated approach. Legal reform, social protection, education, family support, community participation and child-protection mechanisms should be interconnected rather than implemented separately. The research proposes establishing a National Action Plan for the Prevention and Elimination of Forced Child Labour in the Street Sector in Uzbekistan. The proposed approach combines public awareness, community participation, child protection, family rehabilitation and legal accountability. It also includes reporting mechanisms, victim identification, educational reintegration, social assistance and institutional coordination. Such a programme could provide a structured mechanism for identifying vulnerable children before exploitation becomes more serious. It could also strengthen cooperation between schools, social services, law enforcement institutions, local communities and families. Comparative approaches discussed in the research demonstrate the importance of combining different forms of intervention. Examples include specialized outreach and child-protection referral mechanisms and strategies that combine social assistance, education, labour inspection and targeted child protection. These approaches illustrate that forced child labour is a multidimensional problem. A purely punitive model may fail to address the economic and social conditions that contribute to child exploitation. Similarly, social assistance without effective identification and accountability mechanisms may not adequately protect children from coercion. For Uzbekistan, the proposed approach therefore combines preventive measures with legal accountability. Public awareness campaigns, community participation and

reporting mechanisms should operate alongside family rehabilitation, educational reintegration, social assistance and criminal accountability. Several measures are proposed by the research to strengthen the protection of children involved in street work. First, Uzbekistan could establish a national programme specifically addressing forced child labour in the street sector. Such a programme would coordinate the activities of relevant state institutions, educational organizations, social services, local communities and civil society. Second, victim-identification mechanisms should be strengthened. Professionals working with children should have clear procedures for recognizing signs of exploitation, coercion and forced labour. Third, referral mechanisms should be improved so that identified children can receive appropriate social, educational, psychological and legal assistance. Fourth, social protection programmes should be expanded for vulnerable families. Addressing poverty and family hardship is necessary because economic vulnerability is one of the major factors identified by the research. Fifth, educational reintegration should be strengthened. Children involved in street work should be supported in returning to and remaining within the education system. Sixth, criminal justice mechanisms should be clarified and strengthened where exploitation meets the relevant legal criteria. The research specifically recommends examining the legal framework concerning prohibited hazardous work and clarifying the application of Article 148¹ to informal street activities. Finally, public awareness should be increased. Communities should understand that children working in streets may be victims of exploitation and that appropriate reporting and referral mechanisms are available. Forced child labour in the street sector represents a complex human rights, social and criminal justice issue in Uzbekistan. Although the country has made significant progress in addressing child labour in the cotton sector and has strengthened its legal framework, informal street-based child labour remains a challenge. The research demonstrates that children working in streets may face exploitation, hazardous conditions and interference with education. The empirical findings indicate that street-based child labour is highly visible among respondents, while poverty and parental exploitation are identified as important contributing factors. The study also identifies a significant gap between the visibility of children working in public spaces and effective preventive intervention. Existing legal mechanisms are more strongly oriented towards formal employment relationships, whereas street work frequently occurs within the informal economy. The research therefore concludes that separate legal reforms are insufficient. Effective protection requires coordinated criminal accountability, victim identification, social protection, family support, education, institutional cooperation and community participation. The survey results reinforce this conclusion: 72.4% of respondents selected a comprehensive approach rather than relying exclusively on criminal law or social protection. The proposed National Action Plan seeks to combine these elements through public awareness, reporting mechanisms, educational reintegration, family rehabilitation, social assistance and legal accountability. The protection of children from exploitation is not solely the responsibility of one institution. It requires cooperation between the state, educational institutions, social services, law enforcement bodies, communities, families and civil society. Every child has the right to education, health, dignity, development and protection from exploitation. Addressing forced child labour in street settings should therefore remain an important element of Uzbekistan's continuing child-protection efforts.

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