

Syrian Network For Human Rights  
الشبكة السورية لحقوق الإنسان



Euro-Mediterranean  
Human Rights Monitor

## Child Labor

# Among Syrian Refugee Children in Jordan



## Executive Summary

To date, the Syrian civil war has produced more than 4.8 million refugees, of whom nearly 1.3 million (including 668,000 children) fled to Jordan<sup>1,2</sup>. In addition, Jordan has received about 16,000 Palestinians who had been living in Syria, 41 percent of whom are children.

However, little assistance is available to help refugees with the increasing cost of living, pushing many families to send their children to work—both jeopardizing their education and subjecting them to exploitation by employers looking for cheap labor. At least 60,000 child refugees from Syria are now working in Jordan.

The International Labor Organization (ILO) defines child labor as the work of a person under the age of 18 that is paid or volunteer, permanent or temporary, and is harmful mentally, physically, socially or morally, as well as prevents him or her from attending school.

Testimony and other data collected for this report show that many refugee children from Syria now living in Jordan are forced not only to work, but to work long, arduous hours—frequently more than eight hours on most, if not all, days of the week. Wages range from 90-150 dinars per month (US\$127-211), much less than the minimum wage stipulated in Jordanian labor law. Children in the labor market also are exposed to dangerous, sometimes violent, working conditions.

The Euro-Med team gathered information for this report through visits to workplaces in northern Jordan and the Jordan Valley. Interviews were conducted with child laborers themselves and their families, as well as employers and staff of organizations relevant to the work of refugee children, including the Jordanian Ministry of Labor, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the UN Relief & Works Agency (UNRWA).

The goal of this report is to document the exploitation of refugee children in Jordan, identify the parties responsible, and hold to account the government and international organizations charged with protecting them.

## **Background: Syrian refugees in Jordan**

Since the outbreak of the crisis in Syria in March 2011, the neighboring countries of Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey have received the majority of the refugees. Of the more than 4.8 million refugees who have fled Syria to date, 1.3 million ended up in Jordan, of whom 638,633 are registered with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)<sup>2</sup>. UNRWA is charged with caring for Palestinian refugees from Syria and thus are registered separately.

This flow of refugees reached its peak during the first four months of 2013, when the monthly average was about 50,000. At the end of 2014, Jordanian authorities closed the country's land border with Syria and allowed only the passage of exceptional humanitarian cases.

Ten percent of the refugees live in the following camps: Zaatari (the largest), Cyber City, Mrajb El-Fahoud and Zarkaa<sup>6</sup>. Most of the refugees are found in the towns and villages of northern Jordan, with smaller numbers in the center of the country<sup>7</sup>.

Some families move between the Jordan Valley in the winter and the north in the summer, living in tents as they try to get seasonal agricultural work.

As a result of the inadequacy of international aid, most of the refugees suffer from extremely difficult living conditions, with several families frequently sharing one apartment. Since the beginning of the Syrian crisis, rents have increased more than 200 percent<sup>8</sup>.

The Kingdom of Jordan is not a signatory to the UN's 1951 Refugee Convention, but it did sign a 1997 memorandum of understanding with UNHCR, which was modified in 2014. Under this memorandum, UNHCR is allowed to provide international protection and assistance to non-Palestinian refugees in the country, and Jordan agreed not to expel individuals accepted by the commission as asylum seekers (provided they respect all local laws and regulations). In addition, the agreement protects ethnic and religious refugees, recognizes their right to work in accordance with laws and regulations applicable to foreigners, and requires the Jordanian government to provide housing, clothing, food and medical treatment to all non-Palestinians.

In order to work, Syrian refugees in Jordan must obtain a permit and are restricted to professions open to expatriates. Eleven sectors are closed to foreigners, including teaching, medicine, administration and accounting. To assist with the large influx of refugees, UNHCR formed a joint mechanism with the Jordanian government to deliver food, water and sanitation, shelter, health care and security.

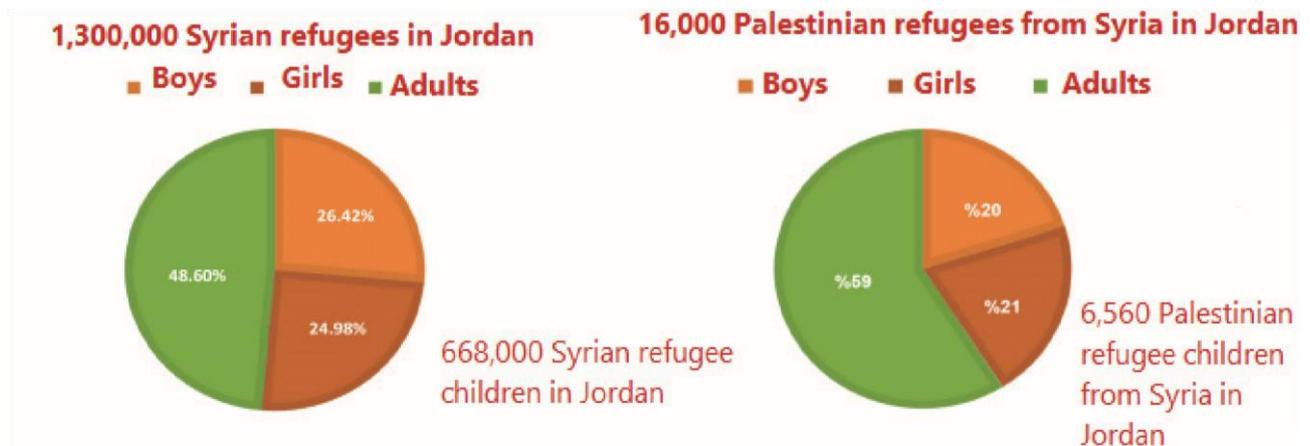
However, as stated earlier, Palestinians who fled from Syria are treated differently. UNRWA is the agency charged with providing aid to Palestinian refugees, and this population is not covered by UNHCR agreements. Since April 2012, Jordan has not accepted any further Palestinian refugees, due to demographic concerns (they already constitute 40-50 percent of the country's population) and its position that Israel is responsible for a solution under UN Resolution 194 (which guarantees Palestinians' right of return to their original homeland).

As a result, Palestinians coming from Syria often resort to fake IDs or use illegal smugglers, risking arrest and deportation. Recently, Jordanian officials implemented biometric screening of refugees from Syria, with both the government and UNRWA conducting iris scans before issuing cards needed to get food and other services.

Approximately 520,000 Palestinian refugees were registered with UNRWA in Syria before the outbreak of the civil war in 2011, and about 16,000 managed to enter Jordan<sup>11</sup>.

## Statistics

Slightly more than half (51.4 percent) of Syrian refugees in Jordan are children—almost 668,000<sup>3</sup>. Nearly half (48.6 percent) are girls. Likewise, 51 percent of the estimated 6,560 Palestinian children are female.<sup>13</sup>



When research was conducted in 2007, prior to the outbreak of the civil war, there were 33,000 child workers in Jordan. However, today, government data suggest Syrians make up 70 percent child labor in Jordan, accounting for about 60,000 of under-age workers<sup>14</sup>.

Shirin El-Tayeb, head of the Child Labor Department in the Jordanian Ministry of Labor, told the Euro-Med team it is difficult to determine the degree and conditions of the problem due to the lack of sufficient inspectors.

However, she said 1,273 working children were identified during 2015, including 516 Syrians. In 2014, the total was 887, of whom 426 were Syrian<sup>22</sup>. The largest numbers are found in the northern cities, including Amman, Irbid and Zarkaa.

## Causes/motivations

The primary dynamics that cause Syrian refugee families in Jordan to allow and even encourage their children to work are:

### **The high cost of living and the lack of sufficient income**

Due to the large influx of refugees, the international organizations, especially UNHCR, have not been able to provide the necessary assistance. According to UNHCR data, the commission was able to provide cash assistance to only 25,000 Syrian families in Jordan in 2015<sup>16</sup>. Since each family consists on average of five members, this means only 125,000 Syrian refugees—or 10 percent of the total—received cash assistance.

The situation is even worse for the Palestinians from Syria now living in Jordan. According to UNRWA, which provides cash assistance in the amount of \$40 per person per month and \$25 a month for rent, 80 percent of Palestinian Syrians are in need of aid<sup>17</sup>. Thirty percent of these families are led by women due to the husbands' death, disability or deportation.

In light of inadequacy of international aid, that is supplied to sustain the basic necessities of life for Syrian and Palestinians-Syrian refugees in Jordan, the absence of sufficient income compared to the rising costs of living are considered key factors of the growth of “child labor” phenomena amongst the refugees. The children are found to be compelled to work in order to afford monthly expenses of rent, bills and essential household needs.

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On a farm in the Deir Alla area in the central Jordan Valley, the Euro-Med team met with the family of a 9-yearold Syrian boy, Majd. He has gone to work helping his brothers and father pick fruit on a local farm in exchange for a half dinar per hour.

In Syria, Majd was a good student; however, in Jordan, there are insufficient schools in his area. The farm where the family lives is 5 km away from a main street. When they first arrived in Jordan, they found shelter in a tent on the farmer's land in exchange for low-wage work. Despite the fact that Majd's father was a teacher in Syria, he was forced to do manual, agricultural work in Jordan, since the teaching profession is closed to foreigners.

## 1. Lack of sufficient school capacity

There are currently about 60,000 Syrian children in Jordan who are unable to attend school due to lack of seats and money for books and other supplies, according to Mohammad Rafiq Khan, a child-protection official with UNICEF.

This is one reason why they end up on the streets, working.

According to Minister of Education Mohammad Thunaibat, Jordan spent about 250 million dinars (US\$352 million) in 2015 on education for Syrian refugees. The government has built 5,000 new classrooms since the beginning of the refugee influx, accommodating about 126,000 Syrian children. Nevertheless, Thunaibat says 98 schools have been converted to double shifts, to be followed by another 100 in 2016.

The Jordanian government says it spends equally on Syrian and Jordanian students—or 25 dinars (US\$35) for each student at the secondary level. In addition, UNHCR and other international organizations provide educational opportunities in the camps; however, only about 10 percent of Syrian refugees in Jordan live in these “settlements,” which means most of the children do not have access.



In Balqa governorate (south of Amman), the Euro-Med team met Hussein Hoad Al-Ahmad, 14, who is the sole breadwinner for his family of eight. He works by cultivating and harvesting vegetables in exchange for one dinar per hour. Hussein began working at the age of 12, since his family was forced to take refuge in Jordan after his mother was injured from a missile in Syria. He has only completed the seventh grade.

Hussain told the team that the main reason he cannot attend school is the difficult living conditions. He dreams of completing his education once his family can live in a safe, stable place and he does not have to work.



Meanwhile, he works in the summer and spring at Mafrak Farms picking fruit, and in the winter his family moves to warmer areas of Jordan Valley, where he lives with his family in a tent to take care of another farm. While the team talked with Hussain, we noticed that workers were spraying crops without protective gear.



On a farm in the Karama area in the Jordan Valley, the Euro-Med Monitor team met with another Syrian refugee, Ahmed Shahir, a man in his 60s who is responsible for a group of families, including children and grandchildren, who live in tents and work for a pittance.

According to Shahir, all of the children work on the farm, male and female, beginning at age 9, harvesting crops. Wages range between a half and one dinar per hour. Insufficient aid and seasonal travel make it difficult for the children to attend one school.

When asked if he has ever observed worksite inspections by the Ministry of Labor, Shahir said he had not seen it happen.

Still another reason for the failure to attend school among the refugees is a frequent lack of identity papers and a fear of exposure.

## 2. Working conditions

Employers hire Syrian children instead of adults since they will work longer hours with lower pay and no complaints. Some families agree to hire out their children for a fee agreed upon with the employer.

O.N., a cafeteria owner who hires Syrian refugee children, told the Euro-Med team he prefers hiring them over Jordanians for these reasons. “Instead of two Jordanians, I hire a Syrian,” he said. O.N. added that he has never been inspected by anyone from the Ministry of Labor, and that even if he was to be, “the fine is not that big.” When asked whether his child workers get days off, he said, “No. I don’t recall any of them asking for a day off. But we treat them well.”

Communication between employers and workers is usually the job of a “shawish,” a person employed to recruit and manage Syrian workers. The Euro-Med team met with one shawish named Hussein, who works in the Balqa governorate in Jordan. He is responsible for almost 40 workers, including 14 families. Hussein receives 15 dinars a day (US\$21) from the employer in exchange for fulfilling his responsibilities.

Hussein recruits Syrians between the ages of 13 and 18. These children receive 1dinar (\$1.41) for every hour of work and receive a weekly payment from the shawish. If the employer



doesn’t pay, he must do so from his own pocket. This is a hazard of the job, since Hussein says he has been fooled by employers in the past, forcing him to pay workers at his own expense.

### Syrian refugee children are subjected to:

- Long working hours

A 2014 study conducted by the International Labor Organization in the governorates of Amman, Mafraq and Irbid found that about 80 percent of the Syrian children surveyed worked six to seven days a week without any breaks. Nearly half (46 percent) of the boys worked more than 44 hours a week.

The result is exhaustion and other physical effects; 63 percent of the children reported feeling overwhelmed and extremely fatigued.



The Euro-Med team met with a 14-year-old Syrian named Abdul Ghani in the village of Qweismeh, south of the Amman industrial area. Ghani delivers beverages to customers 12 hours a day—from 7 in the morning until 7 in the evening. He earns only 44 dinars weekly (\$62), which he then turns over to his father to help support the family of eight. During each 12-hour shift, his employer offers only one meal.

The boy, who barely found time for our interview, looked tired as he told us he began working three years ago when his family came to Jordan. He first worked in a mechanic's shop from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m., 14 hours a day, for 40 dinars (\$56) a week. Ghani also told us that before he and his family fled to Jordan, he had regularly attended school. Some of his brothers managed to attend Jordanian schools, but Ghani was forced to work alongside his father to help support the family.

- **Low wages**

Despite the long hours, most Syrian children are paid less than the minimum wage stipulated in Jordanian law (190 dinars per month for a native worker and 150 dinars for foreign nationals).

A study conducted by the ILO found that the wages for Syrian children in Jordan range between 6 and 7 dinars per week, 69 to 150 per month. In addition, while

many of the children work more than eight hours per day, most are denied overtime wages.

Syrian child workers also frequently do not receive their wages on time, often getting paid as much as 20 days past the due date. Others are deceived and are never paid at all. Research conducted by UNICEF in Zaatara, the largest Syrian refugee camp in Jordan, found that a quarter of child workers had not been paid for their work.



The Euro-Med team interviewed Saleem El-Moaly, 14, who sells agricultural products on the main street linking Al-Balqa with Amman. Saleem works up to eight hours a day, from 7 a.m. until he sells all of his products. He is paid 2 dinars a day (\$2.82) only if he sells everything.

“I won’t get paid a penny from my employer if I don’t sell all the products I have,” he said. “I don’t go to school; even back in Syria I didn’t attend school. My family is made up of nine members and all of us work, including my younger brothers.”

The tented area in which Saleem and his family live is located five kilometers from the nearest commercial area with shops.

The Euro-Med team also met Saad, a 9-year-old Syrian child, and his father, Abu Tamer, who live in a tent with no furniture or basic services like water and electricity. They are from a family of 12 who came to Jordan from the province of Idlib in Syria in 2012.

Since then, the family has moved around the country in search of warmth and employment, usually on farms or grazing sheep.



“We get 140 dinars per month. How can 140 dinars support a family of 12?” asked Abu Tamer. “My sons work for an owner of sheep herds. They work long hours and spend the night in an inhumane room to guard the sheep. The employer agreed to pay them 250 dinars for the month, but he only gave them 70.”



Abu Tamer said Saad and his brothers do not attend school because of their dire need for money to provide for their basic needs, and because of the instability of their living arrangements due to their need to move between the Jordan Valley and the north in search of work.

“Unfortunately, we have become an illiterate generation,” he said. “My children do not go to school; it’s hard to go because we move every two or three months. All my children were in school when we were in Syria.”

- **Hazardous working conditions**

Syrian children work in various settings, such as shops, restaurants, farms, factories, construction sites and auto garages. Most lack safety and occupational health equipment, creating a dangerous environment.

In an ILO survey, 36.9 percent of respondents (368 children) admitted to suffering work injuries requiring medical intervention. Of those, 4.8 percent became permanently unable to return to work.

In another survey of children doing agricultural work in the Zaatari refugee camp, UNICEF found that 89 percent of males and 65 percent of females reported exposure to high temperatures throughout the day—often leaving them susceptible to sun strokes. 82 percent of the children were exposed to smoke and dust that affected their breathing, 17 percent said they had been forced to operate hazardous equipment or in tight spaces, 11 percent suffered electric shocks, and 9 percent

were forced to work without effective lighting or were exposed to pesticides and hazardous chemicals.

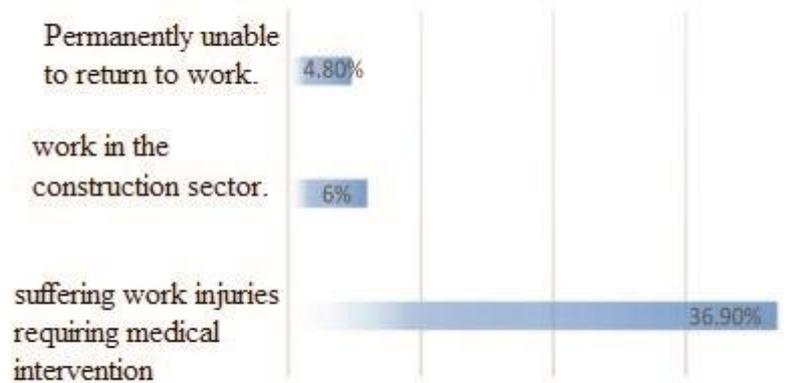
Many other children work in even more dangerous environments, like construction sites and factories, where they were often forced to operate hazardous machinery, carry heavy equipment or work at high elevations. According to Jordanian Ministry of Labor inspectors, 6 percent of Syrian children work in the construction sector.

In addition, working children sometimes are exposed to verbal, physical or sexual violence. According to the UNICEF study, a quarter of working children said they had been subjected to verbal abuse, while about 15 percent of them said they had suffered physical violence. Five percent revealed they had been the victim of some form of sexual abuse on the job.

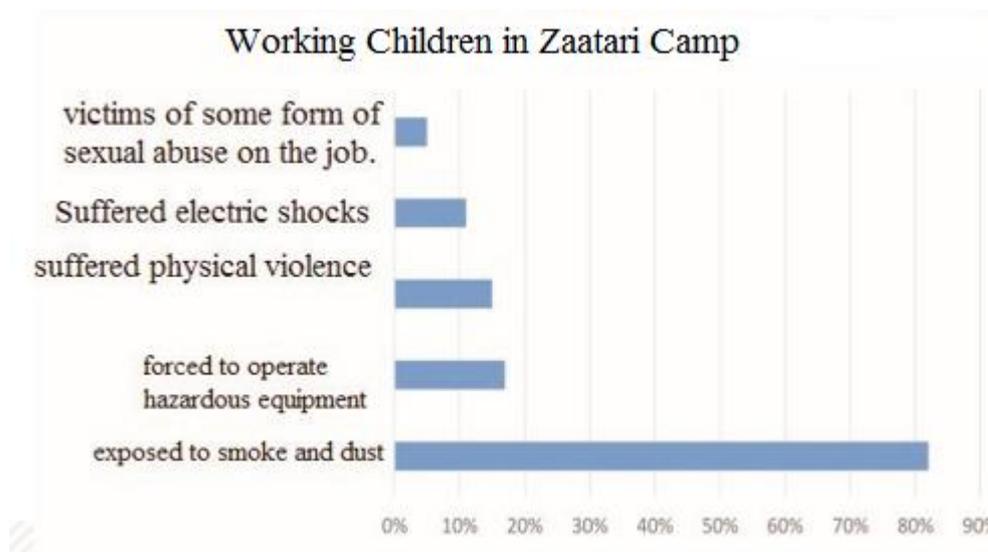
Linda Kalash, director of the Tamkeen Center, which provides assistance to workers in Jordan, told Euro-Med about two female Syrian domestic workers, both younger than 18 years old, who worked long hours for just 100 dinars a month.

Another case is Zine El Abidine, 15, who works in a cafe in the city of Mafraq in eastern Jordan. She said she was verbally abused, without being able to respond for fear of being fired. The girl's father was wounded in a bombing in Syria before coming to Jordan with his family about two years ago.

Survey, 368 children working children in Jordan



Source: ILO & Jordanian Ministry of Labour



## Jordanian policies and practices

Jordan was one of the first states to ratify the International Convention for Child Rights in 1991. Article 32 stipulates the right of children to be protected from work that is exploitative, is physically hazardous, interferes with education, or affects their physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development. The convention also

mandates that states are responsible for setting a minimum age for employment and enforcing appropriate regulations governing hours and working conditions.

The country's government also ratified the convention's two additional protocols that focus mainly on preventing the recruitment of children in armed conflict, and on prohibiting trafficking in women and children

**Jordan has been a member of the ILO since 1956, and has signed 24 of its treaties, including:**

- Convention No. 182, setting the minimum age for employment (15, when compulsory education is completed) and prohibiting hazardous work by children 16-18 years old.
- Convention No. 138, prohibiting the worst forms of child labor, as well as confirming children's right to free, basic education; rehabilitation; and integration into society.

Locally, Article 73 of Jordanian labor law bans the employment of children under the age of 16. The article states, "With regard to the provisions relating to vocational training, it is not allowed in any case to hire a minor under the age of 16." In 1997, Jordan also adopted a list of 29 dangerous professions off limits to children under 18.

Practically, the responsibility for addressing child labor falls on the Jordanian Ministry of Labor. In collaboration with the International Labor Organization, it created a special department in 2001 to police child employment. According to its head, Shirin Al-Taib, the number of ministry inspectors in 2015 was 230, with none allocated specifically to child labor. Yet in its 2014 annual report, the ministry claimed to have launched inspections of cafes, restaurants and vehicle repair shops.

Kalash, director of the support center that provides legal assistance to workers, states that the biggest challenge in Jordan isn't the law itself, but the lack of implementation.

The Jordanian Ministry of Labor usually delays issuing periodic and annual reports, which weakens the level of oversight by failing to document the extent of child labor. For example, the most recent annual report of the Jordanian Ministry of Labor was for the year 2014. Typically, the annual report is released almost a year and a half after it is complete.

The ministry also delays, or in some cases refrains from publishing, statistics and other information. Journalist Heba Abidat, who covers Syrian refugees in Jordan, said in an interview with Euro-Med that the Ministry of Labor fails to publish data transparently for the press. This observation also applies to the Ministry of Education and its statistics on the number of Syrians and Syrian students of Palestinian origin, which hinders the ability of organizations to understand the extent of service gaps.

## **Actions against employers hiring child workers**

The Ministry of Labor is charged with punishing employers that violate Jordanian law by employing children. It faces several challenges:

A. limited number of inspectors, and therefore limited inspections of worksites.

B. Weak penalties for violations. Punishment is relatively minimal fines. In accordance with Article 77 of the Jordanian labor law, employers caught employing children can be fined no more than 500 dinars (US\$704)—far less than the income from child employment.

More importantly, fines rarely are levied. Instead, employers typically receive a warning or advisory notice. According to the 2014 annual report of the Ministry of Labor, 794 warnings and 335 advisories were issued to employers that year—compared to 285 fines. In contrast, says Mohammad Rafiq Khan, director of child protection for UNICEF, fines are common against employers found to have illegally hired Jordanian children

C.Children working in family-owned establishments or the agricultural sector, where many Syrian children toil, are not protected under law. Agricultural work is particularly dangerous, requiring children to work long hours in harsh temperatures, while exposed to pesticides and other chemicals. Due to the presence of large numbers of older workers, children often also are harassed physically or even sexually.

D.When several working children are seized at one time, the Ministry of Labor and other concerned bodies do not sufficiently investigate whether they are victims of human trafficking.

When inspectors find a child worker, the ministries of social development and education investigate the circumstances. When a family's difficult economic or social conditions are found to be the reason for the child's employment, he or she is placed in a foster home.

According to Fawaz Ratrout, a spokesman for the Ministry of Social Development, a number of Syrian children have been placed in foster homes. Children are returned to their families only if the government confirms they can be cared for without return to the labor market<sup>25</sup>. Role of international organizations

UNHCR and UNICEF have the primary responsibility for monitoring and limiting child labor among Syrian refugees in Jordan.

UNHCR is charged with providing assistance that is adequate to support a decent life for registered Syrian families. However, refugees told the Euro-Mid team that the monthly allowance they receive is insufficient for them to cope with the cost of sending their children to school and other expenses.

As for UNICEF, its child protection manager in Jordan, Mohamed Rafeq Khan, told Euro-Med that the agency provides 20 dinars (US\$28) in monthly cash assistance per child to 56,000 of the neediest Syrian refugee families, so that their children can attend school and not work.

In addition, UNICEF provides literacy and other educational programs for child workers in the Za'atara camp in cooperation with Save the Children. "We can't prevent child labor among Syrian children completely, because it is the parents' decision," said Khan. "But we hope to give these children some soft skills that will help them when they grow up." Some Jordanian organizations also offer support to Syrian children designed to motivate them to attend school. For example, in Irbid and Mafraq, the Islamic Center Charitable Association and the Islamic Relief Organization provide 30 dinars monthly to 7,000 Syrian refugee children. However, to receive it, they must be enrolled in school.

## Recommendations

### **Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor and the Syrian Network for Human Rights call for the following actions:**

#### **\* The Jordanian Ministry of Labor should:**

- Increase the number of inspectors assigned to monitor child labor.
- Intensify inspections of the agricultural sector.
- Equalize the treatment of Syrian and Jordanian children and the sanctions imposed on employers who violate the law.
- Strengthen penalties on employers who hire children.
- Publish annual statistics on child labor.
- Enable more Syrians to earn a legal income by lifting the restrictions on foreign labor.

#### **\* The Jordanian Ministry of Education should:**

- Build the infrastructure and classrooms needed to provide school seats to all Syrian refugee children.
- Create vocational and technical education opportunities for Syrian children 16-18 years old if they cannot be integrated into government schools.

#### **\* The UNHCR should:**

- Increase the cash assistance provided to Syrian refugee families to match the cost of living.
- Cooperate with UNRWA to pressure Jordanian authorities to treat Palestinian children from Syria equally to Syrians.

**\* UNICEF should:**

- Better fulfill its responsibility to protect the rights of refugee children from Syria by:
  - Increasing educational programming, especially primary and alternative education.
  - Expanding the financial support it provides to the neediest families, including Palestinian children from Syria.
  - Asking the Jordanian government to improve the economic and social conditions for refugees, thus decreasing the need for children to work.

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