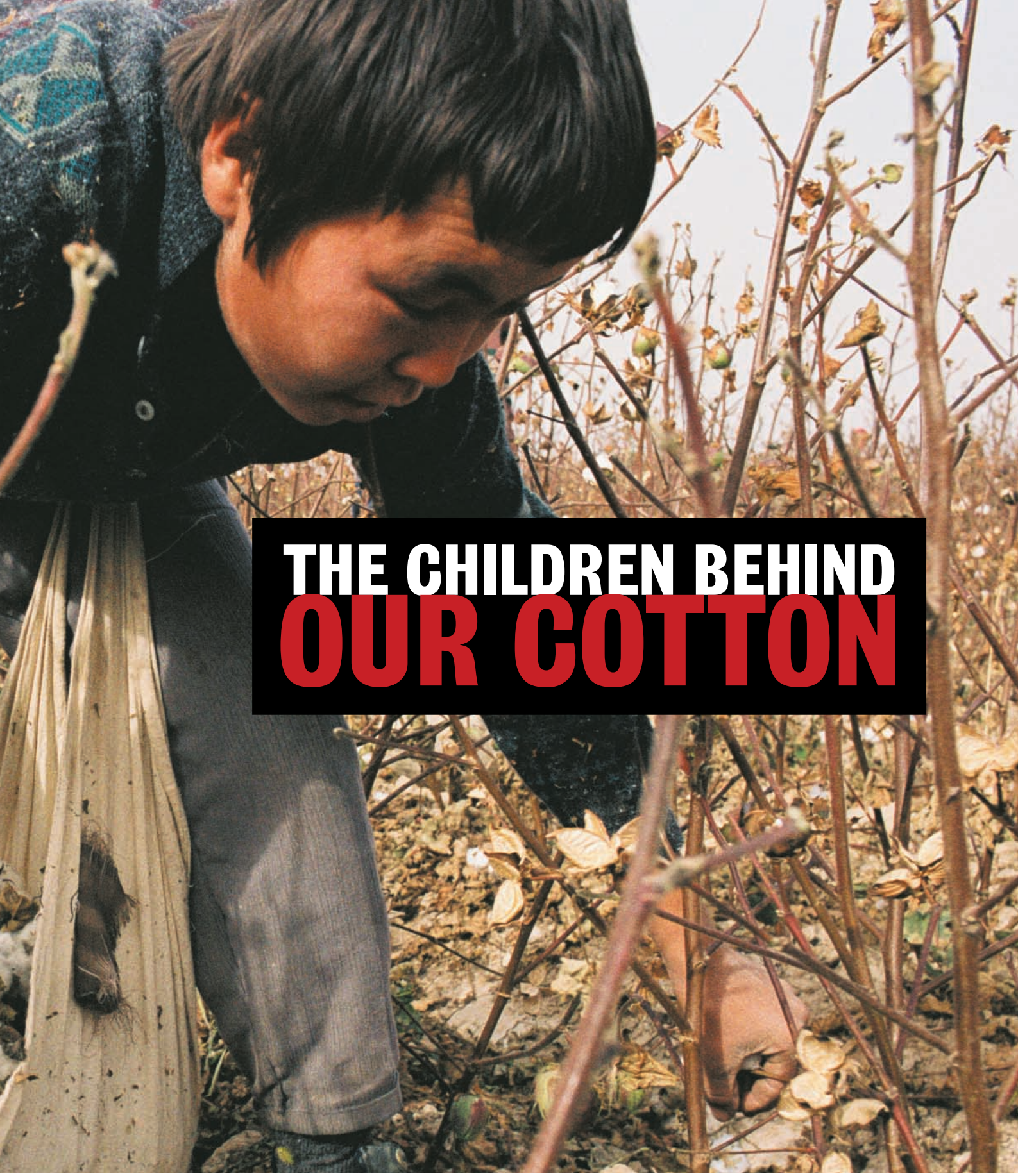

THE CHILDREN BEHIND OUR COTTON

ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE FOUNDATION

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CONTENTS

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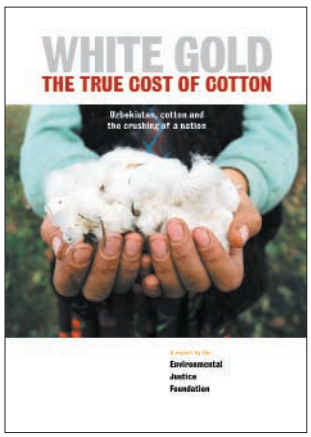
Glossary

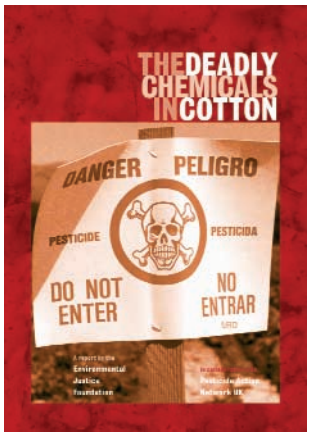
Bt cotton: cotton plants that have been genetically modified by the insertion of one or more genes from *Bacillus thuringiensis*, a toxin-producing bacterium found naturally in soils, to destroy the bollworm, a major cotton pest. Also known as transgenic cotton

Conventional cotton: cotton produced using a heavy input of chemicals to control pests; accounts for most cotton production worldwide

Fairtrade certified cotton: cotton that has met the international Fairtrade standard for production of seed cotton, and is therefore eligible to carry the FAIRTRADE Mark – an independent product-certification label that guarantees that cotton farmers are receiving a fair and stable Fairtrade price and premium, receiving pre-financing where requested, and benefiting from longer-term, more direct trading relationships.

Organic cotton: cotton grown without the use of pesticides or chemical fertilisers, whereby natural-predator populations are nurtured and crop rotation is used to halt the development of cotton-pest populations and avoid excessive soil depletion. An organic garment must be made up of at least 95% certified organic fibre.





EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

ABOVE: *Children work in hybrid cottonseed fields in Andhra Pradesh, India for less than a dollar a day, while the country's cottonseed industry is worth around $1.3 billion annually.*
© EJF

- Six of the world's top seven cotton producers have been reported to use children in the field. Forced child labour – a clear contravention of the International Labour Organisation's (ILO) Convention on the Worst Forms of Child Labour – is disturbingly common[1].
- Children are recruited, at the expense of their schooling, for numerous exacting, dangerous and tedious tasks, from hybrid cottonseed production to pesticide application and pest control. Children are also involved in the harvest; since the crop can be hand-picked by underpaid or free labour, there is little incentive for mechanisation of the industry.
- The conditions child labourers endure in helping to produce the cotton products sold on international markets are often brutal. They may be subjected to beatings, threats of violence and overwork. Shocking cases of sexual harassment and abuse of girls have been reported in some major cotton-producing countries.
- Many children in the cotton fields are exposed to what is termed *hazardous* child labour, which can result in them being killed, injured or made ill as a result of their work (agriculture is one of the three most dangerous sectors in which to work, along with mining and construction). In some regions, children regularly work in the cotton fields during, or following, the spraying season when levels of pesticide residues are high. The effects of pesticide exposure in adults are extensive and often fatal, ranging from temporary loss of sight to respiratory problems. Young bodies are particularly susceptible to chemicals, given that their internal organs are still developing. Many of the health problems resulting from working in the cotton fields may not show up until the child is an adult.
- For many child cotton workers, their contribution to this multi-million-dollar industry goes uncompensated. Children are often trapped in debt-bondage due to loans

ABOVE: *Boys in a Malian cotton field.*
© AMADIP/EJF

extended to their impoverished parents, while others are only guaranteed payment – usually pitiful sums – at the end of several months' work.

- Since the agricultural sector tends to be less regulated than other industries, adequate legal protection is often lacking, and child labourers – often far from home and family – usually have no official means to complain.
- While the growth of ethical consumerism has prompted a rising interest in organic and Fairtrade cotton, and conditions in textile factories have come under harsher scrutiny, little attention has so far been paid to conditions in conventional and Bt cotton fields. Retailers need to be aware of who is handling the cotton at every stage of the process. The failure of producers, traders and, in particular, retailers, to track their supply chain means that products made using child labour can easily enter western consumer markets. At the same time, the opacity of the supply chain allows retailers to avoid seeking direct assurance that their products are free from child labour, and denies the consumer an informed choice. However, market leaders in tracking supply in the cotton-garment industry are now emerging and proving to the market that supply can be cheaply and effectively monitored – if the will to do so exists.
- Practical measures can swiftly be taken to address transparency of sourcing, with a labelling scheme established that identifies the country of origin of the cotton as well as the country of manufacture. The onus falls on actors at various stages of the supply chain – on consumers to demand clear labelling from retailers; retailers to require transparency from textile companies; and cotton traders to clarify the sources of their supply. Meanwhile, international pressure must be brought to bear on all countries that have yet to ratify and implement ILO Conventions on child labour. Consumers and retailers at each end of the financial scale can use their purchasing power to ensure that children are not paying a terrible price for our clothes and goods. In particular, European and North-American consumers, accounting for around 75% of world clothing imports, have enormous potential to influence the way in which this industry operates.

'Most working children in the world are found on farms and plantations, not in factories, sweatshops or urban areas. If we want to eliminate the worst forms of child labour, greater effort needs to be made to address child labour in agriculture.'

International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC)[2] / Jennie Dey DePryck, Chief of FAO's Rural Institutions and Participation Service[3]

INTRODUCTION

An estimated 99% of the world's cotton farmers live and work in the developing world[4]. These farmers – responsible for 75% of global cotton production[5] – are predominantly members of the rural poor, often cultivating cotton on plots of less than one-half hectare[6], or on part of their farms as a means of supplementing their livelihoods[7]. Almost two-thirds live in India and China[8].

Of the top seven cotton producers, all, apart from the United States, have been reported to use children in the field. Forced child labour – a clear contravention of the International Labour Organisation's (ILO) Convention on the Worst Forms of Child Labour – is disturbingly common.

Exploited, abused and intimidated, countless children across almost every continent labour every day under the world's extremely lucrative cotton production industry, worth an estimated US$32 billion in 2006[9]. They spend from dawn to dusk, often in harsh weather, performing back-breaking, dangerous and tedious tasks. Comfort and care are alien: they can be far from homes and families – in some cases having been trafficked across borders – enduring deplorable conditions. For their adult-like input, they receive little or no compensation, while school is out of the question.

ABOVE: *Picking raw cotton in Korla in northwest China's Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, where cotton is the major crop.*

Children are recruited – under a myriad of conditions and complex circumstances and by a number of different actors – for a variety of tasks, from hybrid cottonseed production to pest control. In many countries, since the crop can be hand-picked by underpaid workers or free labour, there is little incentive for mechanisation of the industry.

The work itself is difficult enough, but the conditions child labourers endure in helping to produce the cotton products sold on international markets are often a horrific extension of their arduous labour. Children may be subjected to beatings, threats of violence, and overwork. Shocking cases of sexual harassment and abuse of girls have been reported in India, China and Pakistan.

In addition to the physical strain of the labour, growing bodies are vulnerable to profound health and safety risks. In Africa and South and Central Asia, children regularly work in the cotton fields during, or following, the application of pesticides, when harmful chemical residues are present[10]. The well-documented effects of pesticide exposure in adults include vomiting, headaches, disorientation and respiratory problems. Unconsciousness, convulsions and even death can result. Young bodies are particularly susceptible to chemicals, given that their organs are still developing.

For the many child cotton workers effectively subsidising the cotton industry, their contribution goes uncompensated. In South Asia, children are often bonded by loans given to their parents, while others are only guaranteed payment – usually pitiful sums – at the end of several months' work, effectively trapped in debt-bondage by unscrupulous farmers and middlemen. The Uzbek regime – sustained by its multi-million-dollar cotton industry – forces children to hand-pick the crop during the harvest season, for which they receive little or no pay, working to exacting and unreasonable quotas, at the expense of their education. The use of child labour also has a debilitating economic impact on adults. If children do get paid, their wages are lower than adults, whose bargaining power is consequently undermined. Depriving future generations of education, and exposing them to potential major health problems, thereby creating a long-term socio-economic burden, further belies the notion of 'cheap' labour.

The agricultural sector tends to be less regulated than other industries, which means that adequate legal protection is often lacking, and child labourers usually have no official means to complain. Some children are sent far away from home to work on farms, leaving them separated from immediate family, and socially excluded, with little or no support if the conditions are harsh[11]. In some cases, children are not even formally registered as workers, but work with their family to ensure the high daily work quotas demanded by land owners are met, in many cases impossible to achieve without the extra hands[12]. Children can also be hired through subcontractors, making it easier for farmers to turn a blind eye to ages and working conditions. These middlemen may exploit the children even further by charging excessive amounts for food, transport and accommodation, and by holding back wages[13].

The context of child labour is complex, but much more can be done by the various actors in the supply chain to help eliminate it. Consumers, who have enormous potential to influence the way in which this lucrative trade is conducted, need to be aware that if they are paying low prices for their clothes, it is likely that someone in the supply chain is being exploited. The link between children in the fields and consumers in the West cannot be avoided: China is the source of nearly one-third of textile imports into the EU, followed by Turkey and India – three countries that have been implicated in child-labour practices.

The obvious and pronounced failure of manufacturers and retailers to track their supply chain means that products made using child labour can – and do – easily enter the major western consumer markets. At the same time, the opacity of the supply chain allows retailers to avoid seeking direct assurance that their products are free from child labour (or other abuses), and denies the consumer an informed choice.

Nonetheless, market leaders in tracking supply in the cotton-garment industry, such as Continental Clothing, are now emerging and proving to the market that supply can be cheaply and effectively monitored – if the will to do so exists.

Child labour defined, and child rights

A child's right not to engage in exploitative labour is set out in a number of conventions, among them the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), ILO Convention No. 138 on Minimum Age for Employment, and ILO Convention No. 182 on Immediate Action and Prohibition of the Worst Forms of Child Labour[14].

Child labour, according to International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions, is work that harms children's well-being, and hinders their education, development and future livelihood[15].

The ILO has undertaken to eliminate what are termed the *worst forms of child labour* as defined in Article 3 of ILO Convention No. 182, which include slavery; pornography and prostitution; the involvement of a child in other illicit activities; and 'work that is likely to harm the health, safety or morals of children'. This last category is generally termed "hazardous child labour", and is particularly applicable to children working in cotton fields.

The ILO underlines that not all work that children undertake in agriculture is bad for them, or would qualify as work to be eliminated under Conventions 138 or 182. Age-appropriate tasks that are low-risk and do not interfere with a child's schooling and right to leisure time can be a normal part of growing up in a rural environment. Many types of work experience for children are recognised to be positive, providing them with practical and social skills for the future[16].

The ILO also promotes youth employment in agriculture (15 years and above; 14 in the case of developing countries) as long as the adolescents are employed under "decent conditions of work", including good health and safety standards and acceptable hours and remuneration.

Article 32(1) of the Convention on the Rights of the Child calls for the recognition of the right of children to be protected from economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous, to interfere with their education, or to be harmful to their health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development[17]. ILO Convention 182 requires ratifying nations to, among other conditions, remove children from abusive child labour and provide them with rehabilitation; facilitate social reintegration; and ensure access to free basic education[18].

ILO figures for child labour do not include children younger than five years of age, as they are considered too young to be engaged in work, but abuses may still exist[19]. The ILO estimates that child labourers number 218 million worldwide, 126 million of whom are engaged in hazardous work[20], while an estimated 5.7 million children are trapped in forced and bonded labour, representing up to 50% of all victims of forced labour[21]. As many as 132 million working children aged 5-14 are found in agriculture[22].

World's Major Cotton Producers

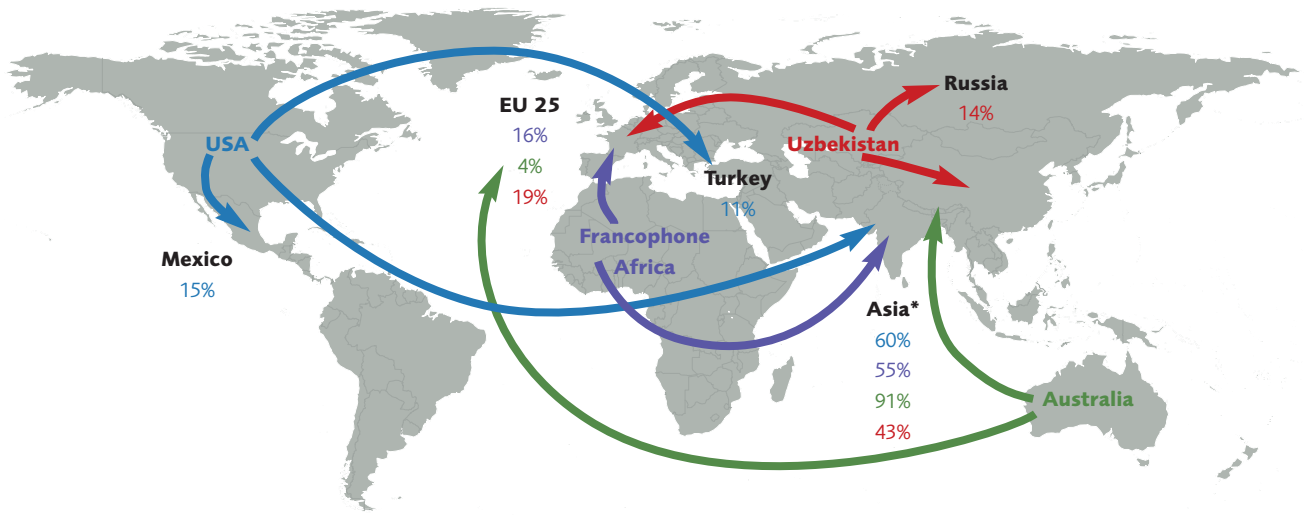
Country	Production[23] (1000 metric tons)	Percentage of world production (approx.)	Value of lint on world market[24] (USD$bln)	ILO Conventions 138 and 182[25]	Child Labour in Cotton	Child's Wage (USD)
China, Peoples Republic of	7729	30	12.1	Ratified (1999 and 2002)	Yes	13 cents per kilo picked, which goes to their school
India	5117	20	8.0	Not ratified	Yes	Up to $1.50/day
United States	3953	15	6.2	138 not ratified; 182 ratified (1999)	No	N/A
Pakistan	2395	9	3.8	Ratified (2006 and 2001)	Yes	0 if trapped in debt bondage; $3.30-$10 per month in the field, if not bonded; $1.60/12 hours in ginning factory
Brazil	1524	6	2.4	Ratified (2001 and 2000)	Yes	Unavailable
Uzbekistan, Republic of	1154	4	1.8	Not ratified	Yes	Up to five cents/kilo
Turkey	740	3	1.2	Ratified (1998 and 2001)	Yes	$131/two months
Other	3571	14	5.6			
Total	*26,183*	*100*	*41*			

'We can't afford adult workers. They charge three times more than child workers...I can employ adults if companies pay me more.'

BT COTTON FARMER IN ANDHRA PRADESH[26]

A Summary of Cotton Exports in 2005

As illustrated below, Asia is a major recipient of Uzbek and African cotton exports, while 19% of Uzbekistan's cotton exports end up in the EU.
Source: Infocomm, UNCTAD, www.unctad.org/infocomm



* Including China, India and Pakistan but not Central Asia

An Insatiable Demand for Cotton

Cotton is a major consumer product: the primary product manufactured from cotton fibre is clothing, which accounts for some 60% of the world's total cotton production, with a further 35% used to make home furnishing, and the remainder for industrial products[27]. European and North-American consumers account for around 75% of world clothing imports (worth $276bn)[28], with the UK and Germany the biggest EU importers of textile products in 2005[29]. Textile and clothing imports into the EU were worth around EUR74 billion in 2005[30], with China providing the bulk, followed by Turkey[31].

'I belong to the farm so I work on the fields. I don't earn any money, and I didn't know I was supposed to be paid…Sometimes the thermometer goes over 40 degrees.'

A ninth-grade pupil in south Tajikistan[32]

RIGHT: *A boy hoeing to create irrigation channels in a conventional cottonseed field in an Andhra Pradesh village, earning Rs 30 (76 cents) a day.*

ALL IN A DAY'S WORK

Hard labour

Typically, cotton's child labourers – some as young as five – rise in the early morning to face a day of demanding work, manually picking the cotton, and carrying the harvest in heavy loads on their backs. They sow; weed the fields; remove cotton pests; and in some cases, spray the crops with hazardous pesticides (See "Growing Bodies under Attack"). Roughly one million children are hired by Egypt's agricultural cooperatives to manually clear the cotton crops of worms[33]. In India, hundreds of thousands of children – most of them girls – spend long days under the hot sun cross-pollinating cotton. Hybrid cottonseed production is a highly labour- and capital-intensive activity, requiring about 10 times more work and almost five times more capital than conventional cotton[34]. As part of the production process, children also work in ginning factories, where they have been reported to complete 12-hour shifts, and are exposed to dust and blazing sunlight, for meagre wages without any social security or protection. Their work, which includes throwing cotton into machines, is often heavily physical[35].

Living conditions at the end of a gruelling day provide little comfort. In Uzbekistan, older children and those conscripted to work in remoter areas are forced to stay in dormitories, on farms, or in classrooms, at times drinking contaminated irrigation water, with insufficient food[36]. A group of Malian children on a plantation in Ivory Coast reported that, after beginning work at 6am, they were forced to wait until 2pm for their first meal, in a 12-hour workday[37]. They slept together in one room, using damp banana leaves as mattresses. In Gujarat, girls live in sheds, sleeping on the floor and washing in the open[38].

'I work so hard during the day that coming back home I am so tired that I cannot do my homework, sleep hangs on my eyelids.'

A 13-year-old from Ragun, Tajikistan[39]

Physical abuse

'The owner used to beat us if a single plant got missed. He used to beat us with pipes. We would get up at 4 in the morning and work for 12 hours a day…The partner of my farm owner used to switch off the lights at night and forcibly carry the girls sleeping on the floor, on to his cot.'

A boy in India who trekked home to Rajasthan after suffering abuse in Gujarat's Bt cotton fields[40].

Physical beatings and threats routinely accompany the work in many cotton fields. Under these conditions, children are unsurprisingly intimidated into staying on farms, fearful of the consequences of trying to leave. In Uzbekistan, those who fail to meet state-imposed quotas, or pick poor-quality cotton, experience verbal or physical abuse, detention, or are told that their school results will suffer[41]; physical abuse is common for children across West Africa[42]. Girls in India, Pakistan and China have been reported to suffer sexual harassment and even rape[43]. A recent exposé by India's TIMES NOW television channel, of child trafficking from Rajasthan to Gujarat's Bt cotton fields, featured horrific accounts of abuse from children they encountered[44]. Sexual exploitation of young girls in the fields – reportedly by farm owners, their relatives or co-owners of the farms – is said to be 'rampant', and largely unreported[45].

Girl on Bt cotton seed farm in North Gujarat, September 2006

Child labourers at risk

Around 22,000 children die every year due to work-related incidents (across all sectors), while child labourers are involved in an estimated 17 million non-fatal accidents per annum[49].

Gender Division

The gender divide is less evident in cotton production in comparison with other sectors that involve child labour, though some distinct patterns can be seen depending on the type of task and region. In Burkina Faso, while girls normally leave for cities and towns to work as domestic servants, boys are considered more suitable for cotton-field labour[46]. In India, by contrast, most children working in the fields are girls, accounting for around 67% of the children working in cottonseed production[47]. Cottonseed producers claim girls have greater dexterity and patience, and are more obedient and diligent, while employers in Andhra Pradesh have pointed to the availability of girls, with boys more likely to go to school[48]. In other cases, no distinction can be found. In Central Asia and China, for example, whole school classes are sent to the fields to pick cotton, regardless of gender.

Child's work

'We had to work until we felt weak.'

Boy from Burkina Faso[50]

Brazil
● Manually harvest the cotton ● Carry bags on their backs, and load them onto trucks ● A small number assist with mechanised harvesting **Period** Unavailable **Age group** Unavailable

Burkina Faso
● Sow ● Weed ● Harvest ● Herd animals **Period** Usually contracted to work for full year; 6am-6pm, 7 days/week **Age** Boys 10+

China
● Pick cotton ● Carry heavy loads (quotas are equivalent to 22 kilograms/day[51]) **Period** Sept/Oct; 6am-dark **Age** 6-18

Egypt
● All stages of production, most significantly in cotton-worm removal **Period** Usually from May; 8-11 hours/day, with lunch break, 7 days/week **Age** 7-12

India
● Cross-pollinate plants, emasculating and pollinating by hand ● Pull cotton from husks ● Weed ● Carry water **Period** July/Aug to Oct in Gujarat; 9-12 hours/day without breaks, some starting at 4am ● Migrant children in Andhra Pradesh generally 11-13 hours/day; local children 9-10 hours[52] ● Mid-Aug to Oct for about 100-120 days in Tamil Nadu **Age** 9-14 in Gujarat; 14+ in Tamil Nadu

Kazakhstan
● Weed ● Collect worms ● Gather cotton **Period** 7 days/week[53]; 10-12 hours/day: 7/8am-10pm in summer, 9am-8/10pm in autumn, with a one-hour lunch break[54] **Age** 7-16, some younger

Mali
● Plough ● Tend to seedbeds ● Hoe ● Harvest ● Look after cattle ● Help with distribution **Period** June-Aug, Oct-Dec[55], younger children look after cattle all year round, others 7-8 months/year; 8- to 10-hour days with one hour for lunch[56] **Age** 5-18

Pakistan
● Prepare land for cultivation (picking the remains of previous crop) ● Sow ● Weed ● Water fields ● Spray pesticides ● Pick cotton ● Cut cotton bushes ● Spade work ● *In ginning factories* Open bags of cotton; spread cotton on platforms; throw cotton into machines; push bales out of factory; remove cotton seed **Period** 8 months/year; some reports of 7am-6/7pm without breaks; others of freed children working 2-5 hrs/day and bonded children 4-7 hrs ● 12-hour shifts in gins **Age** 7+

Tajikistan
● Gather cotton ● Weed **Period** About 2 months/year[57]; 5 hours/day or more[58], beginning from 6am **Age** Roughly 12-18

Turkey
● Pick cotton ● Fill and carry full sacks and load them onto trucks ● Hoe ● Apply pesticides **Period** May-Nov, for up to 60 days; majority work 12-15 hours/day, with lunch break **Age** 6-17

Turkmenistan
● Pick cotton **Period** Sept-Nov **Age** Approx 10+

Uzbekistan
● Spray pesticides ● Weed ● Pick cotton **Period** Up to 3 months/year, from beg June-end Oct, 7am-5pm **Age** 7+

A child's cotton wage

'What are our wages? I don't know. I have never been to a town, I haven't seen any school, and don't know about books.'

Eight-year-old boy, Pakistan[59]

Andhra Pradesh, southern India

Child cotton workers are paid Rs 15-40 (40 cents to $1) per day, around 30% less than adult women and 55% less than adult men. Advance wage arrangements are supposed to be binding for one season's work only, but often children are left in debt at the end of the season, and return to the same farm for many years in debt-bondage[60].

Benin

Aged between six and 17, children who migrated to the main cotton-producing region in the north of the country earned about US$105 for a season's work in 2003, suffering harsh conditions, and working on average 10 hours a day, without adequate nourishment[61].

Burkina Faso

Cotton labourers earn far below the country's minimum wage. The youngest children, in charge of herding animals, earn as little as 75 euro/year. Older children may earn 90 to 105 euro per year (compared to adult wages of about 100-150 euro) if they stay for a full season, although bosses may renege on the agreed wage, paying instead for the amount of work done; payment – sometimes in the form of a bicycle – usually turns out to be less than what was promised[62]. If a farmer claims to have not made enough from the harvest, the children must stay and work for another year before receiving any money[63].

China

Cotton farmers in one province are reported to have paid 1 Yuan (roughly 13 US cents) for each kilogram of cotton to schools for their pupils' labour. Some schools charged the children who did not take part in the harvest, or forced them to pay for not meeting quotas[64].

Egypt

Earnings fluctuate over the course of a season, but the average daily wage has been estimated to be about three Egyptian Pounds (about 50 US cents)[65]. These low wages are often insufficient to meet families' food costs, and are far from proportionate to the work performed, particularly considering the harsh conditions endured. Egyptian NGO Land Center for Human Rights (LCHR) found that when a child suffers an illness, such as heatstroke, the family must pay the cost of medicine, which can equal one month's wages. Money can also be deducted for the time off needed to recover[66].

Gujarat, west India

Working for India's largest cottonseed producer, children are paid daily wages of Rs 40[67]-52[68] (approx. US$1-1.30), which is settled with the parents. Deductions are taken from this amount to cover provisions supplied at the workplace, one-way transport to the fields, as well as any expenses incurred for medicine[69]. If children leave in the middle of the season, they will not receive anything for the work they have done.

Kazakhstan

Picking 20-50 kg of cotton lint earns children in the south of the country – mostly migrants from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan – about $1-2 at the end of a 12-to-15-hour working day before joining their families to share a room with 10-15 people[70].

Mali

A number of child labourers, sent to the fields by impoverished parents, receive a small bull in return for seven to eight months' work for cattle owners. Other children work seasonally, missing school, to provide their families with a few bags of grain[71]. Children who work directly for their parents receive a new outfit and pair of shoes once the cotton has been sold[72].

Pakistan

Where children are bonded to the fields through family debt, they may not be paid at all for their labour. Those who do get paid are reported to receive as little as 200 to 600 Pak Rupees ($3.30-$10) per month[73] for long days in the sun, exposed to pesticides and other health risks. In cotton factories, one child reported receiving PKR 65 ($1)/12 hours for typically intense physical labour; his father received double that amount for the same length of time[74].

Tajikistan

In a country where cotton is the main cash crop, accounting for roughly 11% of GDP[75], children have been reported to harvest 40%, for which they may receive $20 for three to four months' work[76], if they are paid at all: a number of schools in one major cotton-growing district are said to have deployed children as free farm labour, 'because farmers were no longer prepared to work for little or no money, or to accept payment in kind in the form of dried cotton stalks, used as fuel in the Tajik countryside'[77].

Tamil Nadu, India

Working 12 to an acre during flowering season, girls in cottonseed production spend very long hours in the field emasculating and pollinating flower buds by hand to earn around Rs 60 ($1.50) per day[78].

Turkey

Wages have been reported by ILO-IPEC to be 10 percent of the value of the cotton. A child's average earnings for the 2002 harvest were $131.10, based on the amount of cotton picked, which varies depending on the child's age and physical strength. Wages of 90.1 percent of the children surveyed were turned over to parents, with only 2.2 percent of children able to choose how they disposed of their income[79].

Turkmenistan

Schoolchildren and students have traditionally received very little, if anything, for their hard work. Reports have emerged from the 2007 harvest that while children are generally no longer instructed by the state to work in the cotton harvest, teachers and other professionals – bound by local officials and employers – were hiring children under 18 to work the fields in their place, for which they paid $1.20-$1.50 a day[80].

Uzbekistan

Children earn in the region of five cents for each kilo of cotton they pick[81]. Money due to them is reduced for low-quality, damp cotton[82], while some children claim that they are not paid anything at all once deductions for food supplies and transport are made[83]. It has been estimated that child-labour costs constitute only 4% of the overall cotton revenue children produce[84].

Out of school

'At these summer camps, the schoolchildren worked liked adults from six in the morning onwards.'

Mirzo Fathulloev, head of the department for laws relating to minors, Khatlon regional prosecutor's office, Tajikistan[85]

It goes without saying that children at work are absent from the classroom. An average of around 40% of child cotton workers in recently surveyed areas of Mali attends school[86]. In Central Asia, state and local authorities have actively sanctioned the removal of children and teachers from classes – in some cases for three months of the school year – to meet the unrealistic state-imposed harvest quotas[87]. In May 2007 in Tajikistan, schoolchildren were sent to work in the fields for no money under the guise of summer 'holiday camps'[88], while in the autumn 2006 harvest in the Kyrgyz Republic, reports emerged that classes were cancelled and school children sent to the fields[89]. Chinese schools in cotton-producing provinces, often chronically under-funded[90], have been responsible for sending tens of thousands of children to pick the crop, as part of 'work-study' programmes, with those not finishing the work having to pay for the shortfall[91]. In 2006, some 800,000 secondary school and university students in China began their academic year in September by picking cotton[92]. Schools have been reported to use the revenue to fund education expenses as well as to aid less advantaged pupils[93]. In West-African countries, children sometimes work all year round[94]. Where children migrate with families, schooling is clearly sacrificed: in Turkey, for example, the cotton season runs from May to November, overlapping with the school year. As a result, many end up not going to school at all[95].

Growing bodies under attack

Identified as one of the three most dangerous sectors in the world in which to work[96], agriculture exposes children to many threats to their health and safety. They are required to use tools and machinery designed for adults; risk damaging their growing spines and limbs from heavy lifting, awkward postures and repetitive work; and come into direct contact with pesticides, fertilisers and crop dust, which are dangerous to their immature bodies[97], and which bear a high risk of long-term chronic health effects[98]. Many of the health problems resulting from working in the cotton fields may not show up until the child is an adult. Children are forced to work physically harder than their bodies can manage, and endure back injuries and permanent handicaps, but rarely receive medical care for their injuries[99]. The UN expressed concern in 2006 about the risk to school-age children involved in Uzbekistan's cotton harvest of contracting serious health problems including intestinal and respiratory infections, meningitis and hepatitis[100].

Child labourers across Asia and Africa are exposed to extreme temperatures. While in some regions, tasks are carried out in gruelling heat – making children susceptible to dehydration and sunstroke – the cotton harvest in other parts of the world is approaching winter. When November temperatures drop to freezing, children in Central Asia are still in the fields, without appropriate equipment and clothing[101].

Cotton uses more insecticides than any other single crop[102]; it is responsible for the release of more than $2 billion of chemical pesticides each year, of which at least $819 million are considered toxic enough to be classified as hazardous by the World Health Organization[103]. In parts of Uzbekistan, Pakistan, Turkey and India, children apply pesticides to the crop[104], while in many cotton-producing countries, children regularly come into contact with pesticides, or work in the cotton fields during, or following, the spraying season, when residue levels are high[105].

© GRDO

'Some agricultural activities – mixing and applying pesticides, using certain types of machinery – are so dangerous that children should be clearly prohibited from engaging in them.'

Parviz Koohafkan, Director of FAO's Rural Development Division[112]

Poison Pesticides

How they operate: Pesticides are designed to kill, repel or inhibit the growth of living organisms, by impairing the functioning of biological processes essential for life, such as the nervous and reproductive systems[106]. These processes are very often similar among different organisms, whether insect or human. Pesticides are particularly toxic to children, since their bodies are inherently more vulnerable to the negative impacts of pesticides, due to their smaller size, differing metabolism, and rapidly growing and developing organ systems[107].

Symptoms and effects of exposure: Pesticide poisoning in adults has been known to induce headaches, vomiting, tremors, lack of coordination, difficulty breathing, loss of consciousness, temporary loss of vision, seizures and death[108]. Chronic effects of long-term exposure include impaired memory and concentration, disorientation, severe depression and confusion[109]. A recent study in California suggests that exposure to two pesticides may make women more likely to give birth to children with autism[110]. The vast majority of children EJF encountered on an October 2007 fieldtrip in Andhra Pradesh reported unpleasant side-effects, including fainting and vomiting, from working on plants laden with pesticides, while incidence of asthma, allergies and skin cancer from work in the cotton fields has been reported in Brazil[111].

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HOW DID I END UP HERE?

'We can't afford adult workers. They charge three times more than child workers...I can employ adults if companies pay me more.'

BT COTTON FARMER IN ANDHRA PRADESH[113]

'For Rs 10, they do work worth Rs 100 for us!'

FARMER FROM ANDHRA PRADESH REFERRING TO GIRLS WORKING ON THE FARM[114]

© EJF

The majority of cotton is produced in the world's developing countries[115], where rural poverty undoubtedly propels children to the fields. Impoverished parents may be forced to send their children to work to supplement family income[116]; cannot afford to send their children to school; or require their assistance on family farms[117]. The use of child labour can reinforce poverty through its neglect of education, while also pushing down general wage levels and leaving adults unemployed, as has been found in cottonseed production in India[118].

However, the circumstances under which children worldwide end up in cotton production are far from straightforward; they cannot simply be explained by rural poverty, given the varying social contexts in the nations that employ child labour. Social exclusion, inadequate employment and educational opportunities[119], and discrimination in societies that tolerate violations of child-labour laws are all factors in child labour. Cultural norms can undermine perceptions of the long-term value of education, especially for girls[120]. Economist Jayati Ghosh points out that four states – all cotton producers – that account for more than 40 per cent of all the officially recorded child labour in India (Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu) are among the richest in the country[121]. In Mali, where in some areas children represent approximately half of the workforce in conventional cotton production, farmers can't access credit facilities, lack sufficient adult labour and suitable machinery, and make little money from the crop, with prices pushed down due to developed-world subsidies[122].

On the demand side, children are said to be hired because they can be made to work longer hours for less pay than adult workers, and less than minimum wage[123]. They are also easier to abuse: they will rarely receive non-wage benefits, such as medical insurance; and they are less likely to join trade unions or insist that their rights be respected.

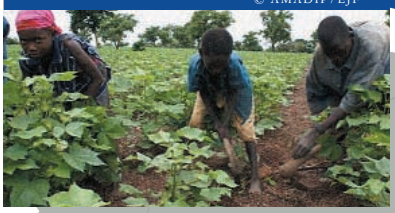
Child labour in cotton production worldwide

Much of children's work is covered in general agricultural statistics, which makes it difficult to establish a comprehensive overview of the extent of child labour in cotton production. Disaggregated data for child labour per commodity is generally not available, and where it exists it is often not reliable[124]. Also, while many studies have been conducted by international organisations on child labour in factories or other industries, cotton work in the fields has received less attention. It is therefore not possible to give an overall figure for how many child labourers are involved in cotton production, but the map on these pages, with figures obtained from NGOs on the ground as well as bodies like UNICEF, gives an indication of the scale in a number of countries.

West Africa

Poverty – exploited by traffickers – propels children to the cotton fields, frequently across borders and far from home, either with or without their parents' consent, where they must often remain for months on end before receiving payment. They endure extremely long hours, some working seven days a week, all year round; are commonly exposed to pesticides; are poorly nourished; and are often subjected to verbal and physical abuse when they become too tired to work. Some recall working through the night[125]. In Mali, economic, cultural and social reasons mean that in some regions, children represent approximately half of the workforce in conventional cotton production[126].

© AMADIP/EJF



Turkey

A 2003 survey by ILO-IPEC in Ankara identified thousands of children of migrant families working alongside their parents in a large cotton-growing area in the south, to the detriment of their education, with many dropping out of school altogether[127]. They worked 12-hour days, seven days a week, for an average of 47 days per year harvesting the cotton. More than 3000 children have been withdrawn or prevented from working in cotton-picking due to IPEC and government efforts[128]. However, newspaper *Milliyet* reported that in a class in one southeastern Anatolian city, 30 out of 35 pupils were out of school helping their parents with the 2007 harvest[129].

Egypt

© PA Photos

An estimated 1,000,000 children between the ages of seven and 12 are hired by Egypt's agricultural cooperatives to assist with cotton pest management every year. Employed under the authority of Egypt's agriculture ministry, they work 11-hour days, with a one-to- two-hour break, seven days a week. They face routine beatings from foremen, as well as exposure to heat and pesticides[130].

WEST AFRICA

BRAZIL

Brazil

Almost half of the country's 2.7 million child labourers aged 5-15 work in agriculture[131], with possibly thousands in cotton cultivation[132]. According to ILO Brazil, most child labour in cotton production takes place on small farms where the children manually harvest the cotton, and carry heavy loads on their backs. Some assist with mechanised cotton harvesting. The children face a number of dangers including exposure to chemicals, hard labour, accidents and illness, such as poisoning, asthma, allergies, cuts and skin cancer[133].

Turkmenistan

While the mass mobilisation of school children is said to have discontinued, local witnesses reported that pupils continued to work in the fields in the 2006 harvest to help families[134] or at the instruction of the *archin* (head of local council) via school directors, after classes[135]. Teachers also continued to be recruited[136] – some paying teenagers from low-income families to work in their place[137] – negatively impacting on an already weakened education system.

Kyrgyz Republic

Due to chronic poverty and unemployment, child labour is said to be widespread, especially in the southern regions, where cotton and other crops are cultivated[138]. Across different sectors, around 200,000 children are estimated to work instead of attending school, making them susceptible to serious illness and other dangers[139]. In 2004, almost all the children living in rural areas were said to work on plantations, helping their parents with a number of tasks including irrigation, weeding and harvesting[140].

Uzbekistan

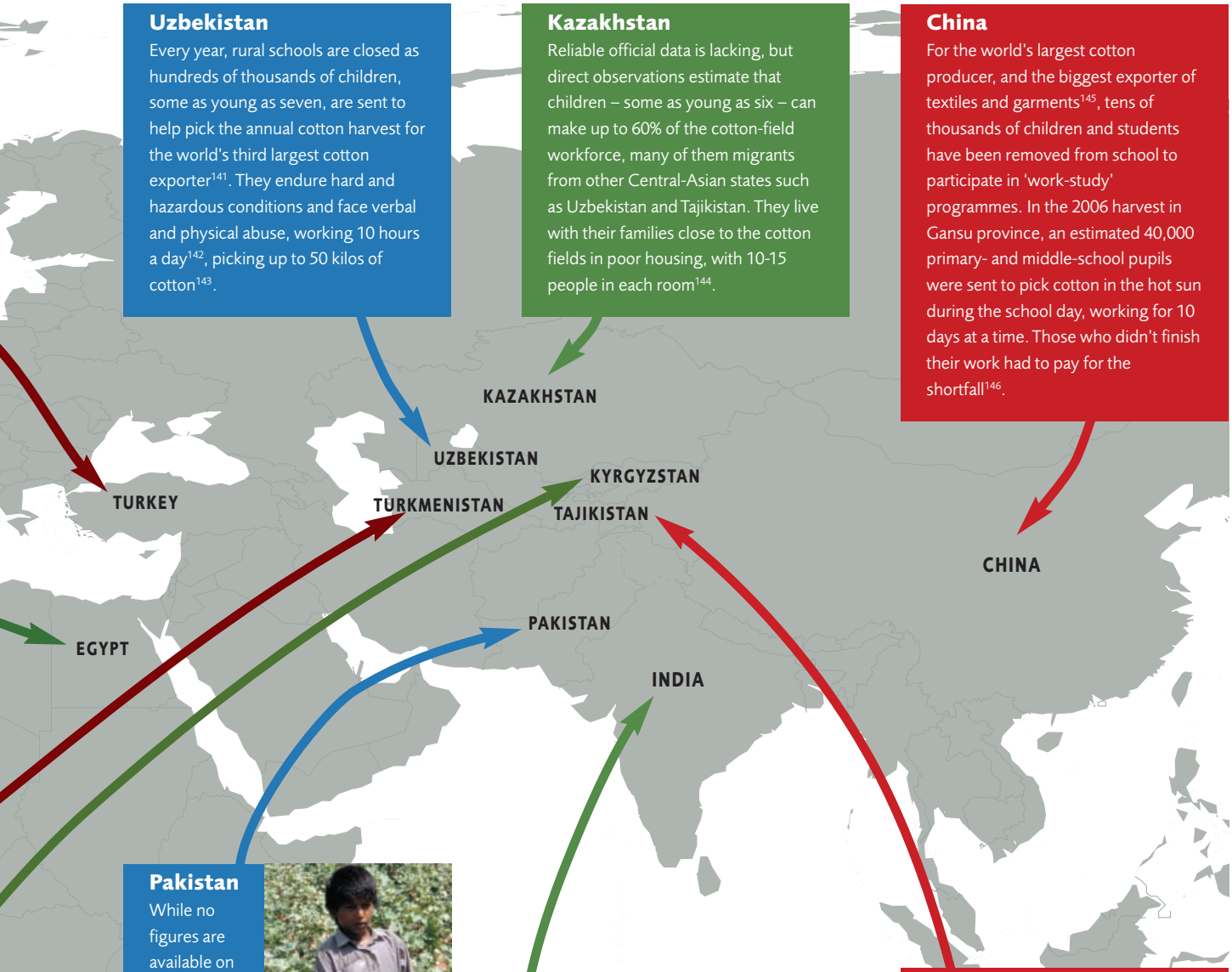
Every year, rural schools are closed as hundreds of thousands of children, some as young as seven, are sent to help pick the annual cotton harvest for the world's third largest cotton exporter[141]. They endure hard and hazardous conditions and face verbal and physical abuse, working 10 hours a day[142], picking up to 50 kilos of cotton[143].

Kazakhstan

Reliable official data is lacking, but direct observations estimate that children – some as young as six – can make up to 60% of the cotton-field workforce, many of them migrants from other Central-Asian states such as Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. They live with their families close to the cotton fields in poor housing, with 10-15 people in each room[144].

China

For the world's largest cotton producer, and the biggest exporter of textiles and garments[145], tens of thousands of children and students have been removed from school to participate in 'work-study' programmes. In the 2006 harvest in Gansu province, an estimated 40,000 primary- and middle-school pupils were sent to pick cotton in the hot sun during the school day, working for 10 days at a time. Those who didn't finish their work had to pay for the shortfall[146].

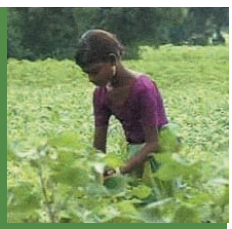


Pakistan

© Ann-Carin Landström, BLLF Global

While no figures are available on the number of children working in Pakistan's cotton fields, it can be deduced to be significant, given that hundreds of thousands are estimated to be trapped in debt-bondage[147]. Children may make up 39% of the workforce in the case of bonded families, and roughly 12% in families that aren't indebted[148]. Starting at around 7am, families work without breaks until evening in midday temperatures of up to 50°C, with no access to shade[149]. Many are bonded to the fields by family debt, incurred through advances by powerful landowners to struggling families. As a result, they receive no formal education, and have poor access to health facilities[150]. In cotton-ginning factories, children spend long days performing heavily physical work for low wages without any health and safety protection[151].

India

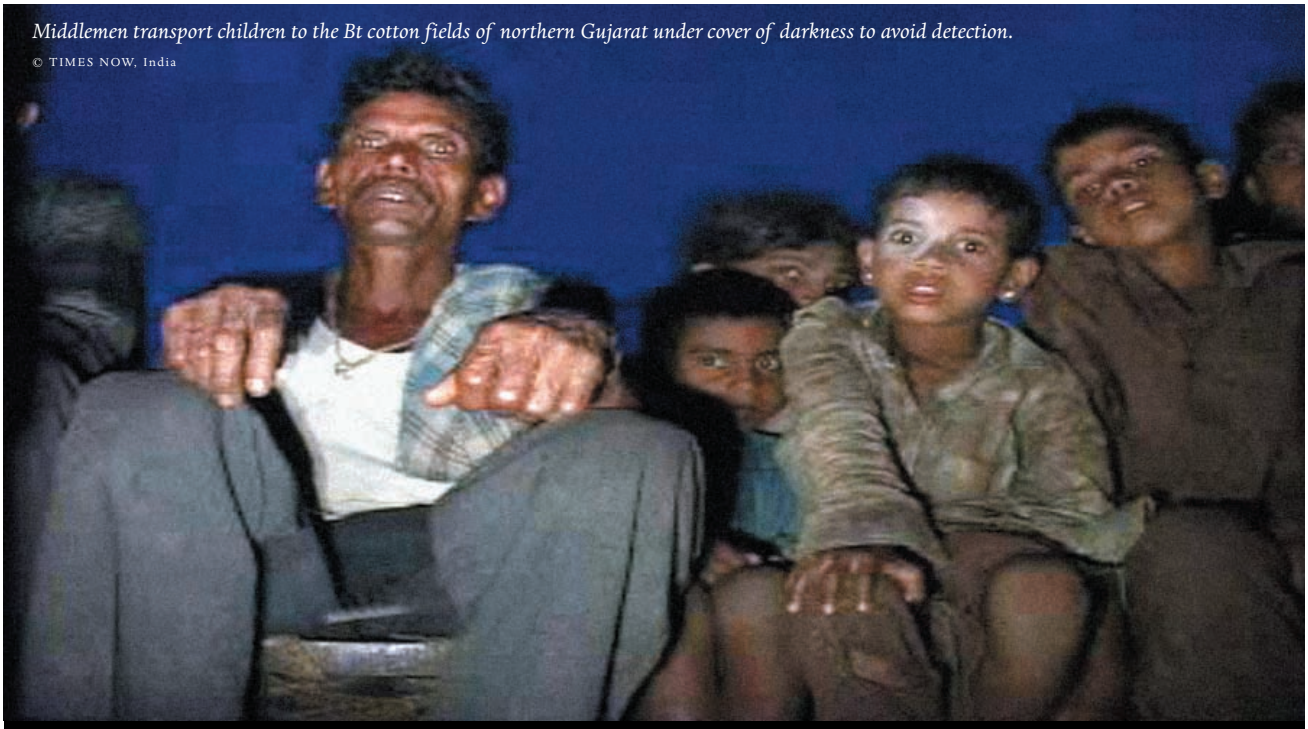


© TIMES NOW, India

More than 400,000 children – mostly girls – are involved in hybrid cottonseed cultivation[152]. They work between nine and 13 hours a day for up to four months per year (in cotton), missing out on schooling[153]. They toil under hot sun, exposed to pesticides and vulnerable to physical and psychological abuse, to cross-pollinate Bt cotton on seed farms in Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Gujarat (where almost 40% are below the age of 14[154]). In parts of south Rajasthan, most children aged 9-14 migrate to the fields for two to three months every year[155].

Tajikistan

Despite the country's ban on child labour, as much as 72% of schoolchildren in surveyed regions participated in the 2003 cotton harvest[156], the majority working two months a year, according to a survey conducted by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the "Pulse" Educational Reforms Support Unit[157]. Observers noted that out of some 210,000 cotton pickers in one region, 150,000 were schoolchildren from grades 6-11. Agriculture accounts for almost one-quarter of GDP[158]; however, as many adults, particularly males, have left the country in search of better economic opportunities, children and women are often forced to fill the gap in the labour force[159]. In 2007, police found evidence that local authorities instructed schools to send children to work in the fields, for little or no money, under the guise of summer 'holiday camps'[160].



Middlemen transport children to the Bt cotton fields of northern Gujarat under cover of darkness to avoid detection.

Children on the move for cotton: a growing concern

India

The demand for malleable labour to meet the booming Bt cotton industry in north Gujarat, which uses children for cross-pollination work, has led to the migration of most children aged 9-14 from the tribal area of south Rajasthan for two to three months every year[161]. Dozens of trucks, crammed with minors, cross over the border to Gujarat every night, under the cover of darkness, during peak season[162]. A recent study in Tamil Nadu has also reported the trafficking of children from Andhra Pradesh for cottonseed cultivation[163].

BELOW: *An average of 50 trucks a night cross over the border to Gujarat in peak season, filled with children being brought to work in Gujarat's cotton fields[176]. This group was intercepted at one of the inter-state border check posts set up by the Dakshini Rajasthan Majdoor Union last year.*

West Africa

While a long tradition of migration exists in West Africa, which is acknowledged to be important in certain cases of employment, education, foster care or well-being, the trafficking of young children – defined by the *Palermo Protocol* as "the recruitment, transport, transfer, harbouring or receipt of a child...for the purpose of exploitation" – has increasingly gained recognition as a serious concern[164]. Cotton farming is blamed for child trafficking to northern Benin[165], where, among other social factors, it is said to have proliferated with the decline in the price of cotton[166], the country's main export. Anti-Slavery International has reported that child-trafficking networks from Mali to Côte d'Ivoire date back to the early 1990s, rooted in the demand for cheap labour on its cotton plantations[167]. In November 2006, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) expressed concern at the exploitation of these Malian child cotton workers, blaming a lack of awareness coupled with the abuse of 'cultural and traditional beliefs'[168].

Researchers have, nonetheless, pointed to the difficulty in classifying clear cases of trafficking (given varying definitions and socio-economic and cultural contexts) for cotton in West Africa[169]. Children are likely to be exploited in some form, but many – through lack of education or access to alternatives – travel voluntarily (having been solicited) to work in the cotton fields[170]. In Burkina Faso – the largest cotton producer in sub-Saharan Africa[171] – a large proportion of boys migrate within the country to the major cotton-producing areas, working on small family farms[172]. A study in Eastern Burkina – where migration, particularly among very young children, was once the exception – estimates that at least 50% of the boys aged between 10 and 18 in the Piéla region had spent at least one year working away from home in the south of the country and in Benin[173]. Meanwhile, a recent report on cotton production in Mali highlighted the plight of children sent by impoverished parents to work for other farmers[174]. While other children worked on family farms, either to support parents, or through cultural tradition, those working away from home were particularly vulnerable to abuse, with farmers regarding them merely as one-half of a transaction[175].

Migration and trafficking

Studies conducted in Turkey, West Africa, India, Pakistan and Kazakhstan demonstrate that migration often leads children to the cotton fields[177]. Migrant families working seasonally constitute the majority of agricultural workers in Peru, also a cotton producer[178]. In the cotton-growing areas in southern Turkey, many children of migrant farm workers work alongside their parents, moving with them from their home villages according to crop cycles[179]. ILO-IPEC in Ankara has reported that exhaustive travelling; living outdoors in unsanitary conditions; poor nutrition; lack of access to health services; and the impossibility of continuing with their education 'all take their toll on these children'[180]. Children don't always travel with family: they move within and between West-African countries, and from across borders in India, sometimes through the agreement, or at the behest, of parents[181], or in some cases lured by middlemen with the promise of presents, without their parents' consent[182]. Children can work in cotton production for 12 months or more for the promise of a bicycle or their return ticket home. Isolated from their family, community and culture, children who migrate for work are often under traffickers' or employers' control, vulnerable to abuse and exploitation[183]. They become entirely dependent on their bosses, effectively working as bonded labourers, as payment can be held until the end of their 'contract'[184], and intimidated into staying through fear of being beaten.

ABOVE: *Many poor Hari families, exploited by powerful landowners, are exposed to temperatures of up to 50 °C as they work long hours in Pakistan's cotton fields.*

Bonded to the fields

Centuries-old local practices and social hierarchies that tolerate discrimination of certain groups are also at play. In parts of Pakistan, child labour is perpetuated through debt-bondage or other types of exploitation[186]. Though bonded labour is prohibited under Pakistani law[187], reports prevail about families working unpaid on the cotton fields of large landowners, sometimes for generations. These Haris, or debt-bonded, landless workers – many of them Dalits ('untouchables') – effectively live in slave-like conditions[188]. Many Haris are born into bondage, and never receive any kind of education, which leaves them unable to calculate their debt or the wages they earn. If not born into bondage, Pakistan's poorest, most marginalised populations may be driven by financial difficulties to seek help in emergencies from landowners who offer them *peshgi,* or advanced wages, and require their labour in return until the debt is repaid[189]. In India, too, many children are bonded to the fields. Loans are extended by seed producers to parents at a crucial time in summer, when work is unavailable, and when they are most likely to face financial problems[190]. Advance wage arrangements are supposed to be binding for one season's work only, but often children are left still owing at the end of the season, with some remaining in supposed debt and returning to the same farm for many years to clear it[191]. One study in 2003 found that the majority of these children are from the lower castes, while most farmers belong to upper castes[192].

'Our family's livelihood depends upon the wages of my father and me. As our area is barren, to earn our livelihood we always travel to Sindh province seasonally.'

FOURTEEN-YEAR-OLD, PAKISTAN[185]

A child's story

Life for a cotton labourer in Sindh province, Pakistan[193]: *I am eight years old. I have four brothers and sisters. My parents are peasants. We are sharecroppers. My mother told me that we have been living here for two generations. I, along with my parents and siblings, work in the cotton field. I support my parents in sowing, weeding and cotton-picking. All the members of our family are bound to be in the field from dawn to dusk. The land-owner told me that we have to pay him back 65,000 rupees* [roughly £500] *before we can move somewhere else...What are our wages? I don't know. I have never been to a town, I haven't seen any school, and don't know about books.* (Interview conducted by GRDO)

An eight-year-old weeding in a cotton field in Sindh Province, Pakistan, 2006

© EJF

'Children are being employed primarily because they can be paid very low wages and made to work very long hours.'

SUDHIR KATIYAR, WORKERS' RIGHTS ACTIVIST, INDIA[194]

State-orchestrated

Children and teachers in Central Asia are forced to participate in state-orchestrated labour for certain periods, with little choice but to join in order to avoid retribution. The cotton harvest has traditionally removed children from the schools for up to three months of the year[195], and in countries like Turkmenistan, teachers and teenage students have been compelled to assist, thus further impacting on children's education[196]. In Uzbekistan, despite the hard and hazardous work, threats of expulsion from school or other types of punishment keep many children in the fields[197]. Those who fail to meet their quotas or pick poor-quality cotton are reportedly punished by scolding, beatings or detention, or told that their school marks will suffer[198].

State-set prices

Governments in Central Asia control cotton production, dictating quotas and setting prices – often at a much lower rate than the world market – with farmers consequently struggling to pay their costs[206]. Workers have been consistently abused by authoritarian political systems in order to ensure the production of cotton at very low prices and to maximise the revenue of the state elite.

Squeezed by subsidies

World market prices and government support, notably to farmers in the US, China and the EU[207], cannot be discounted when examining the causes of child labour in cotton production. Many developing countries rely heavily on cotton for export earnings (e.g., cotton is Burkina Faso's primary source of foreign-exchange earnings[208]), but have to compete with subsidised farmers – paid for each additional bushel they produce – who dump their surplus on the international market, thereby lowering prices farmers in developing countries can obtain. According to Oxfam International, US cotton producers received US$4.2 billion in federal subsidies in 2004-05, while sub-Saharan Africa had lost more than US$350 million as a result of depressed world prices[209]. A

'Work-study' courtesy of the world's largest cotton producer

As the world's largest textile exporter[199], and biggest cotton producer, importer and consumer, China's cotton supply and demand have a significant impact on the world market, including on western consumers: its extensive production and re-export are helping to drive the provision of cheap clothes on the high street. But farmers in China's largest cotton-producing region, Xinjiang[200], have no choice regarding what they can grow, while they are forced to sell back the cotton at prices set by the government[201]. In Xinjiang and bordering Gansu province, tens of thousands of school children and students have been sent to the cotton fields during the annual harvest, under the auspices of 'work-study' programmes[202]. Though initially designed to offer students a degree of vocational training, these schemes are now reportedly extensively abused, and the China Labour Bulletin reports that in many cases, it has become impossible to distinguish work-study from child labour[203]. Though China has ratified relevant ILO Conventions, many child workers fall outside the domestic legal definitions of child labour[204]. It is impossible to accurately assess the extent of child labour in China, given that 'undisclosed information and data on the handling of child labour cases nationwide' is classified by the Chinese government as 'highly secret' (*jimi*)[205].

recent study by Oxfam America found that the removal of US cotton subsidies would push up the world price of cotton by 6-14%; the price West-African farmers receive by 5-12%; and would cause household income to rise by 2.3-5.7%[210]. The resulting additional revenue could help cover schooling costs, food supplies, health care and school fees for at least two million children living in extremely poor West-African cotton-growing households, and therefore remove or reduce the need for child labour and the cycle of poverty it helps perpetuate.

Low prices for cottonseed

Multinational and local companies selling seeds in India have also been accused of perpetuating child labour[211]. Some have related the dramatic losses farmers face to the introduction and use of Bt cotton, a genetically-engineered crop designed to be resistant to the bollworm[212].

Local seed farmers produce patented hybrid seeds owned by seed companies, which are bought back through middlemen. The price at which the farmers sell back the seed – the procurement price – is set by the seed companies[213], who sell the seeds on the commercial cotton production market for up to 12 times the procurement price[214]. But despite low, or falling, prices for farmers, input costs have been rising[215], while output has been declining due to crop failure[216], plunging them into crippling debt. The burden of mounting costs has brought suicide among cotton farmers to overwhelming proportions in some Indian villages, particularly in Maharashtra state[217]. Between 2001 and 2004, farmers' input costs were reported to have risen 10-15%, whilst the procurement price paid by the majority of seed companies remained unchanged[218]. Farmers consequently regard child labour as an efficient way of keeping costs down in order to retain competitiveness[219].

In the state of Andhra Pradesh, increased pressure from local and international NGOs has forced the cottonseed industry to address the problem of child labour in its supply chains, and some progress has been made through a joint action plan involving Bayer, Syngenta and Emergent Genetics (Monsanto)[220]. Due to reported problems with the implementation of the project, however, Indian NGO MV Foundation withdrew from joint inspections of farms[221]. Recent correspondence between Monsanto and Dakshini Rajasthan Majdoor Union (South Rajasthan Labour Union) about the problems of child labour in Gujarat's cottonseed industry gives little indication that the corporation intends to address the issue in that part of the country in the near future[222].

The high incidence of child labour has been blamed in the past for changing the working culture and social norms, making children, particularly girls, responsible for family income[223]. Organisations, such as the MV Foundation, argue that the problem of child labour will only increase unless seed companies adequately address the discrepancy between production costs and procurement prices.

Lacking legislation

Although almost every country has laws prohibiting the employment of children below a certain age, the legislation may exempt certain sectors, often where the highest numbers of working children are found. In 2006, for example, India strengthened child-labour legislation by widening its definition of hazardous work to include domestic labour and catering establishments, thus implementing a country-wide ban on children below 14 working in those sectors. The law – effective from October 2006 – fell short, however, of including agriculture[224], deemed by the ILO as one of the world's three most dangerous work activities, and which accounts for roughly 70% of the country's estimated 100 million child labourers[225]. Similarly, 2003 amendments to Egypt's labour law banning under-14s from working excluded children in agriculture[226]. In several countries, legislation is often not enforced[227].

'With prices we get from companies we cannot afford to employ adult labour. Though our costs are increasing every year companies are not coming forward to increase their procurement price…Our profit margins have come down drastically during last one decade but companies are able to increase their profit margin.'[228]

Forced or bonded labour

Both forced and bonded labour fall under ILO Convention 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour, while also being covered under other specific conventions. According to the ILO Forced Labour Convention, 1930, forced or compulsory labour is defined as 'all work or service which is exacted from any person under the menace of any penalty and for which the said person has not offered himself voluntarily'.

Bonded labour, which affects millions of children around the world, is a form of forced labour, but where the element of coercion results from a debt incurred. A family will receive an advance payment – sometimes a minimal amount – to hand a child over to an employer. In most cases the child cannot work off the debt, and may end up trapped in debt-bondage for years, with the family unable to raise enough money to remove the child. 'Expenses' and/or 'interest' are deducted from a child's earnings, adding to the impossibility that the debt will be repaid[229]. In some cases, the bondage is passed down through generations, where, for example a child's grandfather or great-grandfather owed a debt to an employer, with the understanding that each generation would provide the employer with a new worker – often with no pay at all. Bonded labour is outlawed by the 1956 U.N. Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade, and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery.

Focus on Uzbekistan

'We serve the state when we pick cotton.'

10-YEAR-OLD GIRL, NAMANGAN REGION[230]

Uzbek children – some as young as seven – are drafted as cheap or free labour during the annual cotton harvest. Although child labour is common in many countries, in Uzbekistan it is at the behest of the government and public employees. In short, thousands of children are ordered to pick a crop that provides millions of pounds in revenue to sustain a totalitarian regime.

Although prohibited under the Uzbek constitution, child labour among under-16s and compulsory labour for young adults is widespread. The President Karimov government denies that it is official policy, claiming that children volunteer out of loyalty to family or for the benefit of the community, and blame is apportioned to parents.

While it is true that traditionally, children in poorer rural households have worked to supplement family income by helping on family-owned plots, strictly-imposed quotas oblige families and whole villages to work the land. Under pressure to meet state-set quotas, local officials order schools and universities to close during the harvest, and require pupils and teachers alike to work in the fields. Failure to participate can result in fines, being held back in school, suspension or even expulsion. Recent reports have emerged that the National Security Service (SNB) was deployed in 2007 to ensure secondary-school pupils and university students participated in the harvest[231], with large convoys of buses ferrying teenagers under police supervision during school hours[232].

Children can miss up to three months' education as schools are closed and they are despatched to the cotton fields. They pick cotton during the autumn harvest, and weed the fields. In some areas, they have been required to apply pesticides to the growing crop with no protection.

'Even in Soviet times there was hot lunch for the cotton pickers. Here they have bread and tea in plastic bottles.'[233]

It's so hot in the fields and the chemicals burn your skin if they touch it.'[235]

© EJF

Local children are able to return home in the evening, but those conscripted to work in remoter areas are forced to endure poor living conditions near the fields, at times drinking irrigation water and with insufficient or poor-quality food to eat. Some children recount how they sleep in barracks with no electricity, windows or doors for weeks at a time, despite the end of the harvest coinciding with the onset of Uzbekistan's winter. Some have to pay for their own food; how much they get to eat depends on how much they earn in the fields.

Children can be left exhausted and in poor health after weeks of arduous labour. One human-rights organisation confirmed the deaths of eight Samarkand children and students while picking cotton over a two-year period; many more suffer illness and malnutrition[234]. The conditions can give rise to chronic diseases including intestinal and respiratory infections, meningitis and hepatitis. Those who fail to meet their quotas or pick poor-quality cotton are reportedly punished by scolding, beatings, detention or told that their school grades will suffer.

It is impossible to establish the precise number, but tens of thousands of children are likely to be involved for several weeks during the annual harvest. In October 2004, a minister with the public education department reportedly admitted that at least 44,000 senior pupils and students were harvesting the cotton. However, these official figures may fall far short of the reality: three years previously, 198,055 school children, and more than 13,000 (perhaps as many as 17,000) students were reported working in the Ferghana region alone[236].

Depending on their age and the stage of the harvest, children can pick between 10 and 50 kilos of cotton each day. Child labour is immensely profitable: a child may be paid in the region of five cents per kilo[237] for a product that is estimated to be worth around US$1.56 in 2007/2008 on the global marketplace[238]. Money is subtracted for low-quality or damp cotton. Some children claim that they are not paid anything once deductions for food, supplies and transport are made, and parents note that payment often falls far below the costs of replacing clothes damaged while picking cotton[239]. It is clear that the wealth of 'white gold' is not bringing benefit or development to the rural communities and children who shoulder the burden of the harvest.

Despite international condemnation of its policy of using child labour, and an appeal from 18 Uzbek NGOs for a ban on children harvesting cotton and for western traders to avoid buying Uzbek cotton, the practice continues. One expert cited production quotas as partly to blame: "As long as these are in place and as long as local appointed administrators feel their survival depends on meeting them, this [child labour] will continue".

In the absence of economic reforms and pressure from the international community, the exploitation of Uzbek children in order to meet the needs of the ruling elite will likely persist. The Fourth International Cotton and Textile Conference, held in Tashkent in September 2007, and attended by hundreds of participants from more than 30 countries, indicates the willingness of traders and other business interests to continue cooperating with the Uzbek regime for the sake of profit; therefore, EU sanctions must continue to be used to leverage change.

THE BUSINESS OF COTTON

'We buy our cotton from government agencies and don't know what happens in the fields.'

THOMAS REINHART, PAUL REINHART AG[240]

Cheap cotton clothing on the high street comes courtesy of a $32 billion industry that is being supported by child pickers earning pennies, who may receive almost 30 times less than the market price. Few clothing brands and retailers will admit to relying on the direct or indirect benefits of child labour. Large companies increasingly use the term 'corporate social responsibility'; however, little attention has been paid to the conditions beyond the factory level.

'Complex' supply chain

The failure of producers, traders and, in particular, retailers, to carry out comprehensive audits of suppliers, demand transparency, and track their supply chain means that products made using child labour can easily enter the main western consumer markets. When conventional cotton leaves the field, it passes through several hands before making its way to the end-consumer, but the often opaque nature of the supply chain provides retailers and suppliers with a convenient excuse. Hiding behind a 'complex supply chain' allows them to avoid seeking direct assurance that their products are free from child labour (or other abuses), thereby denying consumers the possibility of making more informed choices. It is entirely possible, particularly for major retailers, to establish the source of the cotton fibre. Market leaders in tracking supply in the cotton-garment industry, such as Continental Clothing, are now emerging, and proving to the market that supply can be cheaply and effectively monitored – if the will to do so exists.

Commercial exploitation

Where companies are aware of the existence of child labour in the supply chain, the practice continues. The cottonseed industry in India has demonstrated that it will only take responsibility when pressured to do so, and even then, its efforts have been lacking. In Andhra Pradesh, the number of children working in the sector has declined slightly (possibly due to initiatives to eliminate child labour, coupled with poor weather conditions that have affected the harvest[241]). However, in other states, like Karnataka, Gujarat (now the country's largest cottonseed producer) and Tamil Nadu, where Bayer and Monsanto are reportedly substantially increasing their seed sourcing, the problem has not been addressed[242]. In fact, a recent field report concluded that overall, the number of children employed in the sector in India is on the increase[243].

Seed companies are profiting from this army of underpaid labourers: the estimated size of India's seed market this year is around $1.3 billion — the sixth highest in the world[244]. Yet the children employed in hybrid seed production earn as little as 40 cents for an arduous 12-hour day. Studies estimate that if the extra production-cost burden for adult labour were to be carried by the farmer, it would lead to a decrease in profit margin by an estimated 65%; if the seed company carried the burden, their profit margins would decrease by roughly 1-7%[245].

Cotton traders

Cotton is one of the most traded agricultural raw materials[246]. Some of the world's largest cotton traders – Allenberg, Louis Dreyfus, Cargill, Dunavant, Plexus Cotton and Reinhart[247] – are privately owned, meaning they are subjected to limited public scrutiny, and since they are generally not familiar household names, are unlikely to experience consumer pressure to demonstrate their ethical standards. They have so far failed to acknowledge the conditions in the fields, and appear to operate on a 'don't know, don't care' basis[248]. Retailers and designers, for the most part, have equally failed to give much consideration to conditions in the fields.

Cleaning up cotton

Our desire for cheap cotton is forcing children into the fields, but rather than avoiding the material altogether, we need ethically and sustainably produced cotton that doesn't involve child labour. Cotton remains a highly important source of income to many countries, in particular in the developing world. The growth of ethical consumerism has prompted a rising interest in organic and fair trade cotton, which represents a crucial way forward.

Though certified organic cotton currently only represents around 0.1% of the cotton grown worldwide[249], the market for organic and fairly traded cotton – credited with being more transparent and sustainable options – has sky-rocketed in recent years. Global organic cotton-fibre supply grew by 392% between the 2000-01 and 2004-05 harvests, and is now produced in more than 20 countries[250]. Organic Exchange estimates that global sales of organic cotton products will leap from $583m in 2005 to $2.6bn by the end of 2008, reflecting a 116 percent average annual growth rate[251]. Fairtrade-certified cotton was launched in the UK in November 2005, and has since experienced substantial growth. In 2006, cotton sales soared by almost 4,000% in volume, and by around 3,000% in value[252].

Neither certified organic or Fairtrade cotton, which require compliance with ILO standards, permit child labour[253]. Companies are required to develop or contribute to policies that provide for the transition of any child found to be performing labour unacceptable under ILO conventions to quality education[254]. The premiums provided to farmers engaging in organic production can also have added benefits for children if invested sustainably. If education becomes more affordable, children are less likely to be pushed into the workforce[255].

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CONCLUSION

All around the world, children are working in appalling, unreasonable conditions to provide us with a product for which we are often paying unreasonably and artificially low prices. Most children in the EU have access to education, but in many developing countries, children are kept from school to toil in the cotton fields. Worse, they are exposed to dangerous work practices and hazardous pesticides, are sometimes parted from their families for long periods, and face significant risk of physical or sexual abuse. They are beyond the protection of UN and ILO conventions and national legislation.

The widespread use of child labour is effectively subsidising the lucrative cotton industry. The more powerful actors in the supply chain are profiting from the unfair prices many smallholder farmers in developing countries receive for their produce, and the low or nonexistent wages paid to child workers and their families. As the governments of developing countries attempt to pull their nations out of poverty through cotton, the production of the crop is having the opposite effect for farmers, who continue to struggle to make ends meet, with low prices compounded by a lack of finance and access to adequate machinery and labour. Children are carrying the burden of poverty and other socio-economic circumstances – being forced to work to support their families – as well as cultural norms that overlook their plight.

While it is difficult to trace cotton to its source, it is entirely possible – organic cotton brands have proven it is feasible. Consumers have enormous potential to influence the way in which the trade is conducted. Even if effective monitoring engenders significant costs, the potential to positively transform the lives of millions of children means they can legitimately be passed onto the consumer. Where companies are failing, regulations must be implemented. Organic and Fairtrade cotton are welcome initiatives in the drive towards child-labour-free cotton, but with a tiny proportion of the market, it is clear that political will, coupled with pressure on clothing suppliers, are crucial to ensure children are kept from the fields in the cotton industry. At the national levels, cotton-producing countries must guarantee the rehabilitation of children who have been removed from hazardous labour, and facilitate their transition to full education.

Most importantly, as long as retailers and consumers continue to purchase cotton products that fail to identify the source of the cotton, and are not guaranteed to have been made without child labour at any stage in the process, we continue to fuel this false economy that deprives children of their childhood, and developing countries of an educated future generation.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

Consumers

- Pick your cotton carefully: Refuse to buy cotton products without the certain knowledge and assurance from the retailer that they have been produced without causing environmental destruction or human rights abuse – specifically child labour.
- Call upon manufacturers and retailers to provide this assurance, and swiftly develop a clear labelling system that states the country of origin of the cotton fibre, and guarantees that neither child nor forced labour is used at any stage of the supply chain.
- Choose products that have been independently certified as organic or Fairtrade, or choose recycled cotton products wherever possible.

Retailers/Traders

- Collaborate with manufacturers, NGOs and local producers to develop an effective, transparent product-labelling system that guarantees that forced child labour has not been used at any stage of the supply chain, and that shows the country of origin of the cotton fibre.
- Take immediate steps to make as much information as possible available to customers about the origin of all cotton products (not only the country of manufacture of the item).
- Undertake an independent review of cotton suppliers, and seek assurances that the cotton is produced in accordance with international labour norms. When assurances cannot be provided, alternative suppliers should immediately be sought.
- Engage with civil-society groups in joint efforts to improve working conditions and remuneration on cotton farms.
- Actively support and move toward organic and fairly traded cotton, thereby responding to market demand while stimulating production and supply.

European Union and its Members

- Promulgate a regulation prohibiting the import into the EU of cotton and cotton-related products that have been produced using child labour.
- Directly engage the government of Uzbekistan in reforming labour conditions and environmental concerns in the production of cotton.

Governments

- Ratify and fully implement ILO Convention No. 182 on the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour; adhere to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- Support independent investigations of labour abuses. Provide an enabling environment for independent industry and labour rights bodies to monitor and report on labour conditions in the cotton sector.
- Work within the framework of the World Trade Organization (WTO) to introduce conditions on trade that would penalise manufacturers and producers who use or tolerate child labour.
- Consider incentive-based reforms, such as providing non-discriminatory subsidies to farmers who can demonstrate that they do not use child labour, thereby shifting the competitive advantage to responsible producers.

The European Parliament, Commission and Council of Ministers

- Pass a parliamentary resolution calling for a near-term EU prohibition – beginning with an immediate phase-out – on cotton products made using child labour, explicitly referring to Uzbekistan and additionally seeking the introduction of and promoting an EU-wide scheme for the labelling of imported goods to show that they have not been produced using child labour at any stage of the supply chain. This will build on the EU Parliamentary Resolution (July 05) calling for an end to exploitation and child labour in developing countries. The Parliament should consider developing a regulation to make this EU law.
- Promote the introduction via the WTO of a ban on child labour in trade.
- Seek direct critical address from national governments toward the cotton sector in Uzbekistan and its environmental and human rights abuses.
- Press the European Commission to investigate the creation of EU-level legal mechanisms, which will identify and prosecute importers within the EU importing products that allow the violation of core ILO conventions, including child labour. The use of child labour in the supply chain would be enough to constitute a violation.
- Seek the withdrawal of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development from future and existing cotton-related projects in Uzbekistan.

UN Agencies

- Ensure that within the context of the one UN system, greater co-ordinated efforts are made by ILO, UNICEF, FAO and IFAD to eliminate child labour in cotton production.

International Agricultural Partnership for Agriculture Without Child Labour

- Guarantee that the International Agricultural Partnership[256], launched in 2007, between ILO, FAO, Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR)/International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), International Federation of Agricultural Producers (IFAP) and International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering and Tobacco and Allied Workers' Association (IUF) recognises cotton as a central issue, and acts to tackle child labour in cotton production[257].

International Investment Houses, Banks and Foreign Investors

- Seek specific assurances that investment portfolios are not supporting manufacturers or retailers of cotton products that have involved child labour at any stage of the supply chain.
- Cease to invest in initiatives involving Uzbek cotton, and establish policies denying funds to projects that generate revenue for the Uzbek administration.
- Support civil-society efforts to increase transparency in cotton procurement.

International Cotton Advisory Committee (ICAC)

- Instigate a process of assessment whereby the social and environmental impacts of cotton production are evaluated for each member state, and findings made public to investors and importers.
- Support the development of a global labelling scheme that guarantees that products have been produced without the use of child or forced labour at each stage of the supply chain and production process.
- As a minimum requirement, work to ensure that the procurement and sale of cotton fibre or products on the open market be accompanied by the country-specific information.

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