

FORCED AND CHILD LABOUR IN THE COTTON INDUSTRY

Cotton is one of the most widely grown crops in the world. It is used in the clothes we wear, the fabrics in our homes and even as cottonseed oil in the food we eat. There are wide reports of forced and child labour within the industry, which means the products we buy here in Australia may be tainted with forced and child labour.

Facts about cotton

- Up to 99 percent of the world's cotton farmers live and work in developing countries, with almost two-thirds residing in either India or China¹.
- There are reports of child labour in some of the world's biggest cotton industries including China, India, USA², Pakistan, Brazil, Uzbekistan and Turkey³.
- An estimated 300 million people work in the cotton industry⁴ - one of the largest agricultural industries in the world.
- The world's biggest producers of cotton include China, India, USA, Pakistan, Brazil, Australia, Uzbekistan and Turkey^{5,6}.
- Cotton accounts for 16 percent of global insecticide use, more than any other crop⁷.

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THE ISSUE

Forced and child labour is alarmingly common in the cotton industry. Sometimes rural poverty means children must work long hours to support their families. Children as young as five years old can be recruited and sometimes forced to work in cotton fields or ginning factories (where raw cotton is processed) for little or no pay⁸. In many cases, this is at the expense of their education⁹.

They may endure terrible conditions including exposure to hazardous pesticides, physical and sexual abuse and long hours. Children can be left exhausted and in poor health after weeks of gruelling labour¹⁰. Exposure to these

What is child labour?

Child labour is work that deprives children of their childhood, their potential and their dignity; work that exceeds a minimum number of hours; work that is mentally, physically, socially or morally dangerous and harmful to children; and work that interferes with their schooling¹¹.

conditions can seriously impact on children's physical and psychological development and can prevent them from completing their education. A lack of education can keep children locked in a cycle of poverty¹².

Working conditions

Child cotton labourers receive little, if any pay. If they are paid, what they receive is often well below the minimum wage. In Gujarat, India, a child working on a cotton seed farm receives less than A\$1 per day¹³. Children may work up to 12 hours in extreme temperatures¹⁴. In Uzbekistan, children are made to work from early in the morning to evening, without sufficient food.

Exhaustion, heat stroke and malnutrition are common amongst child labourers¹⁵. Children are forced to work in unbearable conditions and in some cases stay in filthy, unheated, uninsulated field barracks, normally used to store crops or farm machinery¹⁶.

Physical and sexual abuse of child cotton labourers has also been widely reported¹⁷. School children can be given harvest quotas as large as 50kg of cotton per day and are beaten or threatened with bad grades or expulsion if they fail to meet their quota or pick low quality cotton¹⁸.

Health concerns

The spraying of cotton crops with toxic pesticides is incredibly common in most cotton producing countries. Child labourers may spray toxic pesticides or work in cotton fields during and after spraying has occurred. Many of the chemicals children are exposed to are dangerous nerve agents, designed to impede the nervous system in pests.

They can affect children causing tremors, nausea, weakness, and in serious cases paralysis and death¹⁹.

Studies also show that children who spray pesticides in cotton fields experience blurred vision, extreme dizziness, headaches, difficulty in concentration, trouble remembering, difficulty in understanding, feeling depressed and numbness²⁰.

WHERE DOES IT OCCUR?

A majority of the eight top cotton producing countries worldwide²¹ have been reported as using forced or child labour²², with reports of children as young as seven working below the minimum wage²³. Reports of child labour in Uzbekistan, India, China and Egypt occur on a disturbingly large scale. Together, these countries reportedly use millions of children each year to cultivate, harvest and process cotton.



1. Kazakhstan
2. China
3. USA²⁴
4. Uzbekistan
5. Azerbaijan

6. Turkey
7. Turkmenistan
8. Tajikistan
9. Egypt
10. Kyrgyzstan

11. Pakistan
12. India
13. Mali
14. Burkina Faso
15. Benin

16. Brazil
17. Paraguay
18. Zambia²⁵
19. Argentina

DIFFERENT FORMS OF CHILD LABOUR IN THE COTTON INDUSTRY

Child labour in the cotton industry occurs in a variety of different forms and at different stages of cotton production. Children working in cotton fields and ginning factories often endure terrible conditions which pose serious risks to their short-term and long-term health.

Bonded child labour

Bonded labour occurs when children must work in the cotton fields to repay a debt, which may have been incurred by a parent or guardian. This is particularly common in the Indian cotton industry²⁶.

Parents from impoverished villages, driven by necessity, receive advances or loans from seed producers in exchange for their child's labour for the duration of the cotton growing season; this debt is then used as a method of binding child workers and removing their freedom²⁷. Sometimes the debt is passed down through generations, inherited from grandparents and forcing entire families into servitude and poverty²⁸.

School work?

Every year between 1.5 and 2 million children in Uzbekistan are forced to work during the cotton harvesting season³¹. This practice is government sanctioned. Schools may be closed for around three months during the harvest and staff are tasked with ensuring children are working in the fields during this period.

Forced to work long hours, often without food; they suffer from hunger, exhaustion and heatstroke³². When they are finished picking cotton for the day, children must stay in filthy, unheated, uninsulated field barracks, normally used to store crops and/or farm machinery³³.

Government sanctioned child labour

This occurs when children are forced to work in the cotton fields by their own government authorities. Governments sanction the removal of children from schools and colleges; often for months at a time, in order to harvest the annual cotton crop to the detriment of their health and education²⁹. In some instances they are given unrealistic state mandated quotas of up to 50kg per day and are punished if they do not meet them³⁰. This practice has been reported in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and China.

Photo: Thomas Grabka



THE COTTON SUPPLY CHAIN



Cultivation

- Children plough, weed, sow, remove pests, spray toxic pesticides and are present in the fields during the spraying of toxic pesticides³⁴.
- Children cross pollinate plants by hand (in the production of hybrid cotton)³⁵.

Harvesting

- Children manually harvest cotton, fill and carry heavy sacks and load them onto trucks³⁶.



Ginning

- Children work in ginning factories without protective clothes or masks, where the air is contaminated with white cotton dust, which they inhale, causing respiratory problems³⁷.
- Children spread cotton on platforms, throw cotton into machines, push bales out of the factory and remove cotton seed³⁸.

Manufacturing

- There have been many reports of exploitative labour in the manufacturing industry around the world, where cotton products may be stitched into clothes and apparel that is sold around the world.



WHAT CAN BE DONE?

Companies have a responsibility to track the supply chains of the cotton in their products to ensure products bought and sold in Australia are not indirectly supporting the use of forced or child labour.

Companies must demonstrate what they are doing to address child labour in the cotton industry. They must work with their suppliers to improve standards, so children are not being harmed, and seek alternatives where source countries or companies refuse to be compliant.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

- Purchase cotton products made from an ethically certified cotton supplier.
- Educate yourself about a business' policies and practices in this area so you are satisfied that it is not involved in forced or child labour, either through its own activities or its supply chain.
- Ask the company about its policies and processes when you don't have clear information about what the company is doing to avoid involvement in forced or child labour.

For more information go to **dontradelives.com.au**

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