



INTERNATIONAL PROGRAMME ON THE ELIMINATION OF CHILD LABOUR
SAFETY AND HEALTH FACT SHEET
HAZARDOUS CHILD LABOUR IN AGRICULTURE
COTTON



BACKGROUND

Cotton plays a key role in the economies of the developing and newly industrialising countries: it provides a significant source of income for many millions of small farmers and is a valuable source of foreign exchange. It has always been a major part of the textile industry and makes up about half of all global fibre requirements. It has been worn at one time or another by most of the world's population: because cotton doesn't irritate sensitive skin or cause allergies, many types of clothing are made from it. Only about one-third of cotton fibre produced is traded internationally.

Cotton is grown in a wide range of climatic conditions and agricultural systems, from smallholder agriculture typical of developing countries to large-scale, highly mechanized production. The top five producers are China, India, Pakistan, the USA and Uzbekistan.

Although cotton is a perennial plant, it is treated as an annual and new seed is planted each season. The cotton plant is a small bush growing to a height of about one and a half metres. The cotton boll (the fruit) consists of three main parts: the lint, the seed and the fuzz. The lint are white fibres used for spinning into textiles. The seed, which is embedded in the lint, is crushed and the oil used for cooking oil, margarine, soap, cosmetics, pharmaceuticals, rubber and plastics. Cotton seed cake is a protein-rich concentrate feeding stuff for livestock. The fuzz - short hairs which stay attached to the seed - is used in bandages, cotton buds, automotive upholstery, x-rays, stock feed, ethanol, and mulch.

Cotton cultivation includes seed sowing, irrigation, hand weeding, applying pesticides for weed, disease and insect control, picking the cotton bolls, and transportation to the mill for ginning (separating the fibre from the seeds). The cultivation of cotton can be highly labour-intensive, especially when producing hybrid variations, as cross-pollination is done manually, and much cotton is picked by hand. Adult labourers mainly plough, sow and fertilize fields. Children are employed for sowing, inter-row cultivation, and picking. Children, mostly girls, often carry out cross-pollination activity.

A 2001-2002 survey of 486 children working on 22 farms producing hybrid cotton seeds in the Mahaboobnagar and Kurnool districts of India revealed that:

- 78% of the workforce were girls;
- 88% of the workforce were aged between six and 14;
- 87% of the families of working children came from lower castes such as tribal people and dalits (so-called 'casteless' or 'untouchables');
- 28% were migrant children, who lived in labour camps in groups of ten to 30. They had no fixed working hours, often labouring in the fields from five o'clock in the morning until six or seven o'clock at night. They then worked further in the employers' house after returning from the fields.
- Some 60% of the children attended school for a few years and then dropped out to work in the cotton seed fields. The remainder never attended school.

MAJOR SAFETY AND HEALTH HAZARDS

- Musculoskeletal injuries from repetitive and forceful movements, and lifting and carrying heavy or awkward loads
- Poisoning and long term health problems from using or being exposed to pesticides
- Skin irritation from handling tough fibres and leaves
- Injuries from contact with, or entanglement in, unguarded machinery or being hit by motorized vehicles
- High levels of sun exposure which can result in skin cancer and heat exhaustion

THE SCALE OF THE CHILD LABOUR PROBLEM

A study of cotton seed production in India revealed that:

- Cotton seed producers usually employed children on a long-term contract basis by paying advances or loans to their parents. A survey of 320 children working on cotton seed farms revealed that about 95% of the children were in debt bondage: the children were effectively working off their parents' debts in conditions of near slavery.
- 70% of the children employed in 1999-2000 worked in the same fields as the year before. Most of the children continued to work with the same employers because of debt bondage.
- On average, children were paid about Rs 18 (approximately 40 US cents) per day. This was about 30% less than the adult female and 55% less than the adult male wage rates in the market.
- Migrant children constituted up to half the labour force in some areas, and were recruited by middlemen called "labour organizers." The children stayed in labour camps and were given food by their employers.
- Agreements were often vague regarding working hours. Local children generally worked from nine to 12 hours per day, depending on the season. Migrant children generally worked at least four hours more per day.
- About 60% of the children working in cotton seed fields were school dropouts. 29% had never attended school.
- The use of pesticides in commercial cotton cultivation accounts for nearly 55% of the total pesticide consumption in India. Children were exposed to toxic pesticides such as endosulphan, monocrotophos, cypermethrin, and methomyl for prolonged periods.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT:

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