Child Labor in Azerbaijan: Policy and Practice

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Children's rights are a crucial part of international human rights law. These rights outline how children must be treated and protected from mistreatment and abuse. Since gaining independence from the Soviet Union, Azerbaijan has taken steps to protect children through national laws and state programs. The country has also agreed to comply with global standards, most notably by signing the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). By ratifying the CRC, Azerbaijan made an international commitment to protect children's rights. However, the key question remains: to what extent do Azerbaijan's laws and policies effectively prevent child labor exploitation?

The Azerbaijani government does conduct some monitoring and has organized programs to provide job opportunities and assistance for children. However, this approach reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of the problem. It treats child labor as if children merely need employment opportunities, rather than recognizing that children need protection from labor exploitation. While it is true that child labor may financially help families, this perspective risks normalizing exploitation. The deeper issue is that enforcement and monitoring systems remain weak, and genuine accountability is lacking. Although laws and policy documents exist, there is a significant gap between the written policies and their actual implementation.

Mammadova highlights this lack of implementation, noting that even though laws exist, authorities often fail to treat child labor as a serious violation. When police officers do not recognize child labor as a crime, it suggests insufficient training and a lack of adherence to the principle that "no one

is above the law." The failure to consistently enforce child protection laws implies that child labor may be viewed socially as normal in some contexts. This reveals a broader systemic issue: the state has not successfully translated legal protections into real safeguarding mechanisms for children.

Media reports in Azerbaijan and beyond continue to show that child exploitation remains a widespread issue, despite existing laws. These reports identify specific patterns of exploitation, groups at risk, and common locations where child labor occurs. According to Mammadova, the number of child labor cases has not significantly decreased, and in many cases, children resort to begging as their only option. This indicates a lack of progress and suggests that child labor contributes to the cycle of poverty. The most severe forms of child exploitation include forced begging and sexual exploitation—both of which constitute serious abuse and forms of human trafficking.

Child labor is most common in certain economic sectors. Many children work in agriculture and service-related jobs, such as helping in shops or selling goods. These tasks can be physically demanding and pose serious health risks, potentially affecting children's development. Also, many children perform heavy household labor and physically strenuous tasks. These jobs are often informal and lack contracts, making them illegal and unsafe for children.

The COVID-19 pandemic worsened the issue between 2020 and 2023, as reported by multiple sources. School closures during the pandemic increased the number of children entering the workforce to support their families during economic hardship in Azerbaijan. The pandemic did not create new forms of child labor but expanded the scale and increased risks for already vulnerable children. Those who were previously at risk faced even greater danger of exploitation.

Additionally, during the pandemic, the Azerbaijani state’s lack of strong social protection programs was evident. International organizations called for social justice measures for children, but support remained insufficient. This left many children exposed to exploitation across the country. It is mistaken to assume that when the pandemic ends, children will automatically return to school and recover. The effects of interrupted education and forced labor can have long-term consequences.

Consequently, the ongoing violation of child rights in Azerbaijan creates significant obstacles to the full implementation of the CRC. To address this, the government must strengthen enforcement by training police officers to recognize child labor as a serious crime and respond appropriately. Families in need should receive financial support on the condition that their children attend school, with particular attention to refugees, migrants, and orphans. On top of that, long-term solutions should focus on reducing poverty by creating stable employment for adults and providing financial assistance that helps families become economically independent. Strengthening child rights enforcement would not only protect children but also improve Azerbaijan’s international reputation by demonstrating real commitment to global human rights standards.