

Rural Poverty Drives Child Labor in Laos Despite State Laws Prohibiting The Practice

Sunday 13 June 2021, by [GERIN Roseanne](#) (Date first published: 2 June 2021).

Ethnic minority families can't afford school and make kids toil in fields or watch over younger siblings.

Child labor remains widespread in Laos, particularly in ethnic minority communities in rural areas where minors forego schooling to perform agricultural work or stay at home taking care of younger siblings while their parents work on farms, undermining efforts to educate impoverished children, provincial teachers and education officials said Wednesday.

The International Labour Organization (ILO), the U.N. agency that deals with work-related issues, will mark World Day Against Child Labor on June 12, focusing on the elimination of child labor and taking place amid the COVID-19 crisis, which the ILO says has threatened "to reverse years of progress in tackling the problem."

The communist country's amended Labor Law of 2007 prohibits the employment of children under 14 years of age and bans the involvement of children under 18 years old in sectors that are dangerous to their health, such as mining, the production of chemicals or toxic substances, work involving gambling or alcohol, and overtime work. The law also limits the work hours for children ages 14 to 18 to eight hours per day and prohibits night work for those under 18 years of age.

In Save the Children's 2021 Global Childhood Report, Laos ranked 143 of 186 countries on an index reflecting countries' average levels of performance across a set of eight indicators related to child health, education, labor, marriage, childbirth, and violence.

The report found that 28.2 percent of children aged five to 17 performed labor in 2015-2020, while 23.2 percent of primary and secondary school-age children were out of school in 2015-2019.

"Parents do not understand that education is important for their children," said a teacher from a primary school in Borikhamxay province who declined to provide her name.

Her students between the ages of 10 and 12 and who are from ethnic minority families quit school to help their parents work on farms or care for their younger brothers and sisters at home while their parents work during the day, she told RFA's Lao Service.

"They just tell us that they want to take their children out of school for two to three days a week to take care for their younger brothers or sisters at home while the parents go to work at the fields."

If the educators refuse to allow the absences, parents will take their children out of school, she said, adding that some students in primary school levels four and five already had left school.

Driven by poverty

Some schools allow the students to bring their younger siblings with them to class and educators are willing to help take care of them, though parents remain opposed and insist that the students care for their brothers and sisters at home, the teacher said.

Students ages 10 to 12 from rural areas often quit school to perform these functions, only attending classes two or three days a week, said an official from the Education Department in Sekong province.

“Students in primary school levels four and five on up quit school mostly to work on farms with their parents, take care of younger brothers or sisters at home, and collect wood in the forest to burn for fire, even though the schools do not allow this,” he said.

Laos has 49 recognized ethnic minorities, with about 24 percent of the country’s population Mon-Khmer and 10 percent from the Hmong group, who also inhabit neighboring China, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam.

Ethnic minority students from ages 11 and 12 tend to leave school because their families are poor and they must help their parents make ends meet, said another teacher from Samouy district in Saravane province.

Some students are forced by their parents to leave school and get married at a young age to add another pair of hands for farm work, he said.

“Child labor mostly comes from students whose families are poor and don’t have money to send their children to school, so they make them quit and then find a job or work at the farm with their parents, while some are forced to marry,” he said.

School authorities try to help the students cope with juggling their studies and family obligations, but most parents insist that their children stop attending class and perform physical labor because of the poverty they face, he added.

Impact of the COVID-19 crisis

A child labor survey conducted in 2010 by the Lao government with support from the ILO found that 178,000 children — about 96,000 girls and 81,000 boys — were considered to be engaged in child labor in Laos, with two out of every three involved in hazardous work such as working on construction sites or in dangerous factories.

The majority of child labor occurred in rural areas, and about 90 percent of all child laborers worked in agriculture, forestry, or fishing, according to the survey’s findings. Seven out of 10 worked more than 49 hours per week.

When schools in Laos shut down amid the coronavirus pandemic, students assisted parents working on farms because they did not have access to the internet at home to continue their studies, said an education official from Phin district in Savannakhet province.

Some adults told their children to not go to schools when facilities reopened so they could continue to help with farm work, he said.

“They went with their parents to work at the farms during the COVID-19 outbreak, but some quit schools to help parents work at the farms or take care younger brothers or sisters at home while their parents worked on the farms,” he said.

Child labor is a challenging problem in the landlocked Southeast Asian country with 7.3 million people because of poverty and the belief among rural parents that education is not as important as working in the fields to generate income, said an official from an association that helps impoverished children.

"We tried to help them in terms of changing their mindset, but the problem still persists and nothing has changed," she said.

The association official, who declined to be named, suggested that the government come up with a plan or policy to stimulate parents' interest in keeping their children in school, so that adults understand that an educated workforce will boost economic development in rural areas and reduce the problem of child labor in Laos.

Laos celebrated Children's Day on June 1, a date on which most communist and post-communist countries have commemorated minors since 1950.

The country ratified the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1991, an international human rights treaty which sets out the civil, political, economic, social, health and cultural rights of children, including articles on the right to education and the right to protection from economic exploitation.

Roseanne Gerin

[*Click here*](#) to subscribe to ESSF newsletters in English and/or French.

P.S.

Radio Free Asia

<https://www.rfa.org/english/news/laos/child-labor-06022021165734.html>