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# Syrian Child Labor in Southeastern Anatolia within the Context of the Transition from Productive Extended Families to Consumptive Nuclear Families

**Abstract**

This study goes beyond explaining Syrian migrant child labor solely in terms of economic deprivation and offers a multi-layered analysis within the framework of transformation in the family structure, social reproduction processes and the subjectivity of childhood. Child labor is addressed not only as a phenomenon that emerges in Syrian migrant families out of concern for livelihood, but also as a historical and cultural practice that gains meaning through intra-family responsibility relations, cultural norms and perceptions of childhood. In the study, the inclusion of children in the labor market is evaluated both as a result of a structural necessity and as a reproduction of historical norms within the family. While child labor is evaluated as an element of social reproduction, it is also examined as a field of agent where children actively participate in this process and reposition themselves. In this context, the study takes a holistic approach to Syrian child labor in Southeastern Anatolia at the intersection of migration, family and class dynamics. This study is literature review that various data, statistics and the results obtained from similar studies written on the subject. In addition to these, the researcher has worked as a humanitarian aid worker in various non-governmental organizations in Gaziantep, Şanlıurfa and Mardin and has blended the cases, events and situations he has witnessed in the last decade with the content of the study with a reflexive method.

**Keywords:** Extended Family, Nuclear Family, Migration, Child Labor, Reproduction.

# Üretici Geniş Aileden Tüketici Çekirdek Aileye Geçiş Bağlamında Güneydoğu Anadolu'daki Suriyeli Çocuk İşçiliği

**Öz**

Bu çalışma, Suriyeli göçmen çocuk işçiliğini yalnızca ekonomik yoksunlukla açıklamanın ötesine geçerek, aile yapısındaki dönüşüm, toplumsal yeniden üretim süreçleri ve çocukluğun öznelliği çerçevesinde çok katmanlı bir analiz sunmaktadır. Çocuk işçiliği, Suriyeli göçmen ailelerde yalnızca geçim kaygısıyla ortaya çıkan bir olgu olarak değil; aynı zamanda aile içi sorumluluk ilişkileri, kültürel normlar ve çocukluk algıları üzerinden anlam kazanan tarihsel ve kültürel bir pratik olarak ele alınmaktadır. Çalışmada, çocukların iş piyasasına dâhil edilmesi hem yapısal bir zorunluluğun sonucu hem de aile içi tarihsel ve kültürel normların yeniden üretimi olarak değerlendirilmiştir. Çocuk emeği, toplumsal yeniden üretimin bir unsuru olarak değerlendirilirken; çocukların bu sürece aktif biçimde katıldığı ve kendilerini yeniden konumlandırdığı bir özneleşme alanı olarak da incelenmektedir. Bu bağlamda, çalışma, Güneydoğu Anadolu'daki Suriyeli çocuk işçiliğini göç, aile ve sınıf dinamiklerinin kesişiminde bütüncül bir yaklaşımla ele almaktadır. Çalışmanın dayanak noktaları ise, alanla ilgili çalışmalar, çeşitli veriler, istatistikler ve buna dair yazılan benzer çalışmalardan elde edilen sonuçlardır. Bunlara ek olarak araştırmacı alanda, Gaziantep, Şanlıurfa ve Mardin'de çeşitli sivil toplum kuruluşlarında bir insani yardım çalışanı olarak görev almış ve son on yılda karşılaştığı örnek vakaları, olayları ve tanık olduğu durumları düşünümsel bir yöntemle çalışmanın içeriğiyle harmanlamıştır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Geniş Aile, Çekirdek Aile, Göç, Çocuk İşçiliği, Yeniden Üretim.

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## 1. Introduction

In recent years, Syrian child labor in Turkey has become a pressing subject of academic inquiry, particularly in the context of forced migration, precarity, and informal labor markets. Numerous studies have framed the issue largely within the scope of economic deprivation and poverty-induced survival strategies (İçduygu & Diker, 2017; Erdoğan, 2020). However, this narrow economic lens often overlooks the embedded cultural, familial and historical dynamics that shape child labor practices, especially within communities undergoing rapid socio-spatial transitions. This study aims to extend the discussion by situating Syrian child labor within the broader transformation from productive extended family structures, common in rural Syrian contexts, to consumer-oriented nuclear family formations typical of urban settings in Southeastern Anatolia. In doing so, it not only addresses a significant gap in the literature, but also connects child labor to deeper processes of social reproduction and the evolving subjectivity of childhood.

While existing research has primarily focused on the structural vulnerabilities faced by migrant families, such as lack of legal status, inadequate housing, or barriers to education (UNICEF, 2021; Çelik & Mutluer, 2019), this study highlights how child labor is also a continuation—and reconfiguration—of historical family-based labor roles. It brings a layered understanding by analyzing how familial expectations, intergenerational obligations, and culturally shaped perceptions of childhood contribute to children's participation in the labor force. By integrating theoretical insights with the author's decade-long field experience in humanitarian work across Gaziantep, Şanlıurfa, and Mardin, the study offers a reflexive and context-sensitive approach. Thus, it contributes to the literature not only by offering a sociologically grounded analysis of child labor, but also by emphasizing children's agency in negotiating their roles within changing family structures.

Modernization and urbanization processes have accelerated the transition from the traditional "extended producer family" model to the urban "consumer nuclear family"; however, this transformation has not been experienced simultaneously and equally across all social groups. Rural-origin migrant families find themselves in a vulnerable position economically and culturally, and child labor has become a clear indicator of this vulnerability.

Child labor is a highly complex phenomenon, particularly among migrant communities, from both an economic and social perspective. Syrian refugee families with working children in the Southeastern Anatolia Region stand out as one of the main areas where child labor is reproduced. The phenomenon of migration is not limited to the relocation of individuals; it also leads to various transformations in both the family structures and social relationships of migrant communities (Aytaç & Kılınç: 2021). In this process, families who have moved from rural to urban areas have shifted away from their roles as agricultural and livestock producers and begun to live within the framework of the consumer-oriented nuclear family required by urban dynamics[1]. In this context, the roles within the family and the perspective on child labor are also being maintained through new forms.

[1] Development Foundation of Türkiye – Welthungerhilfe, "Creating a Protective Environment for Children Project Baseline Report", Unpublished Institutional Report, 2024.

Viewing child labor solely as an economic necessity may lead to overlooking the social and cultural dimensions of this issue. Children's contribution to the family economy has been given meaning by social norms and cultural practices that have existed since ancient times; this situation continues in various forms in families who have migrated from rural to urban areas. Therefore, child labor is a multidimensional problem that cannot be explained solely by reasons such as income deficiency or poverty.

In this context, a comprehensive examination of changes in family structure, social reproduction processes, and how the concept of childhood is socially constructed is necessary. Child labor is closely related to family dynamics at the micro level and to economic, cultural, and social structures at the macro level (Gül & Öztürk, 2020). This study aims to analyze the interaction between intra-family labor relations, cultural norms, and global economic systems by examining Syrian child labor from a multi-layered perspective, focusing on children who lived in rural areas before migration and migrated to urban areas in Southeastern Anatolia after the war.

In order to understand this multi-layered and dynamic structure, the theoretical framework explaining how child labor and transformations in family structures took shape, in light of social theories explaining the reproduction of social life and family relations, is as follows;

In this study, Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus is used to analyze the suitability of immigrant family structures for child labor. In this context, Kalaylıoğlu's (2014) study, which focuses on the experiences of Iranian immigrants in Ankara and shares similar characteristics with this topic, demonstrates how habitus is shaped by concrete experiences and how children are involved in economic roles within the family (pp. 190–192). Within this framework, child labor emerges not only as an economic necessity but also as a means of cultural continuity.

In their works criticizing the institution of the family, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels place these practices in an ideological context. Engels (1976) defines the modern family as a means of reproducing private property, noting that values such as “love” and “loyalty” within the family serve to legitimize the class structure (pp. 342–345). As Marx and Engels argue in The Holy Family, emotional bonds within the family function as an ideological mask that conceals economic reality (pp. 103–104). This approach shows that migrant child labor is not merely a survival strategy, but also part of structural reproduction.

Immanuel Wallerstein's world-system approach plays an important role in conceptualizing migrant child labor. Ayata and Karataş (2023) relate the phenomenon of migration to Wallerstein's systems theory, defining migrant labor as a strategy dependent on the periphery in the global capitalist system (pp. 386–388). This definition reveals that child labor is not merely a phenomenon related to local dynamics but is also connected to the invisible functional elements of the global division of labor.

When viewed from the perspective of Critical Childhood Theory, Erdoğan and Vakıf (2020) consider children not merely as passive objects that need to be protected, but as active subjects who experience social processes (pp. 52–55). Therefore, the fact that a migrant child begins working at an early age demonstrates that they play an active role in the processes of constructing social status, belonging, and identity.

In this context, the study aims to understand migrant child labor in its social, economic, cultural, and ideological dimensions by bringing together multi-layered theoretical approaches. The

framework provided by the paradigm offers a comprehensive basis for conceptualizing the relationships between migration, family structure, childhood, and social reproduction.

## 2. Literature

### 2.1. The Ideological Function of the Institution of the Family

When it comes to sociological analysis, viewing the family solely as an economic or biological unit is rather superficial. In fact, the family is a highly complex and multi-layered social institution, particularly notable for its ideological functions. Marxist theories position the family as a fundamental tool for the continuation of the capitalist system. As emphasized in Engels' study, the family provides the human resources needed by capitalism, supports the reproduction of labor power, and plays an important role in the internalization of social norms by individuals (Engels, 1976, pp. 24–28).

When it comes to child labor in migrant families, this situation cannot be explained solely as an economic necessity. Within the ideological mechanisms of the capitalist order, child labor emerges as a legitimate and natural practice within the family. Althusser's concept of “ideological state apparatuses” is particularly explanatory here; as an ideological apparatus, the family shapes individuals into a form suitable for the social order and division of labor, thereby ensuring the continuity of production relations in the labor market (Althusser, 1971, pp. 162–165).

Marx's analyses of the family provide a fundamental theoretical framework for understanding migrant child labor in terms of the reproduction of labor power and the normalization of the division of labor within the family (Marx, 1992, pp. 277–280). According to Marx, the family not only raises new generations but also transfers the labor force necessary for the continuation of capitalism between generations. In this context, the participation of children in the labor force at an early age provides a functional structure for the reproduction of labor within the family.

Research conducted in Turkey also reveals that migrant families do not view child labor solely as an economic necessity. For example, Yıldız and Gümüş (2019) note that child labor among migrant families in southeastern Anatolia is a practice that strengthens family solidarity and reproduces social norms (pp. 90–95). Thus, child labor not only contributes to the family budget but also functions as an ideological mechanism in the continuity of social order.

In this context, Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital also provides an important tool for understanding the ideological function of the family institution. The family transmits social expectations and norms to children; this process provides a framework that facilitates children's internalization of their roles and positions in the labor market (Bourdieu, 1986, pp. 50–54). Therefore, the participation of immigrant children in the labor force can be understood not only as an economic necessity but also as part of the ideological reproduction of the family institution.

Another dimension of the ideological function of the family institution is the reproduction of gender roles. Feminist theories point out that women's and children's labor in the family is rendered invisible and that this labor is indispensable for the sustainability of capitalist production relations (Federici, 2012, pp. 32–36). In this context, child labor in migrant families also plays an important role in reinforcing both economic and gender norms.

In general, the ideological function of the family institution provides a fundamental conceptual tool for understanding the complex nature of migrant child labor. The family is not merely an economic unit; it is an ideological space where labor and social norms are reproduced. In this framework, child labor plays a critical role in ensuring the continuity of family norms and their relationship with the labor market.

### 2.2. Economic and Cultural Framework

It is clear that economic necessity is an important factor in understanding child labor among migrants; however, reducing the issue to economic conditions alone fails to fully explain the complexity of this phenomenon. Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and cultural capital provide an important theoretical framework for analyzing the dynamics of child labor in migrant families. Bourdieu defines habitus as patterns of behavior that are passed down from generation to generation and determine how individuals perceive the social world and respond to it in practice (Bourdieu, 1977: pp. 72-74). Therefore, the phenomenon of migrant child labor is not limited to economic necessity; it is also related to the reproduction of social class and the transfer of cultural capital. The early participation of children in the labor market serves as a functional tool for maintaining the current class position of migrant families (Bourdieu, 1990, pp. 52–54). In this context, economic deprivation, combined with the reproduction of cultural capital, perpetuates child labor. Therefore, the participation of children in the workforce in migrant families is not only an economic necessity but also a reflection of social customs and family culture.

A study conducted on Iranian migrant families in Ankara revealed that the participation of children in working life at an early age plays a critical role in the reproduction of family culture and social capital in the urban practices of families (Kalaylıoğlu, 2014: pp. 190–193). In this context, cultural capital cannot be limited to education or knowledge alone; cultural capital is also closely related to the body, work discipline, and social practices. As Bourdieu emphasizes, bodily habits and work culture play an effective role in the reproduction of social position (Bourdieu, 1986: pp. 47-49). In this context, the early inclusion of migrant children in the workforce provides economic support to the family while also enabling the use of physical capital in urban conditions in a manner related to cultural capital.

Research conducted in Turkey also points to similar results. Özbay's study in Istanbul shows that not only economic factors but also social environment and cultural norms play a role in the early participation of migrant children in the workforce (2015, 144–148). Yıldız and Gümüş's study on migrant families in Southeastern Anatolia highlights that the family structure is not only an economic necessity but also helps maintain cultural continuity (2019, 87–92). In this context, it is evident that child labor is not only an economic necessity but is also related to social and cultural practices.

Studies in the international literature also show similar results. For example, Raffaelli and Ontai’s (2004) study on families migrating from Latin America to the United States found that both family culture and economic necessity play a role in children starting to work at an early age (pp. 1089–1092). Field studies conducted in Africa and Asia also show that economic necessity and cultural norms jointly shape children's participation in the labor force (Levison & Bhalotra, 1999, pp. 42–47; Edmonds, 2008, pp. 133–137). In particular, Edmonds' study in India reveals that the economic contribution of children in low-income families increases their social

status within the family and their individual self-esteem (2008, p. 135). In this context, cultural values and economic needs are not independent of each other but rather emerge as intertwined elements. Therefore, migrant child labor should be considered not only as a result of poverty but also within the framework of the reproduction of cultural norms and social expectations.

Studies on the social acceptance and normalization of child labor have indicated that it is closely related to cultural codes and social norms within the family. In Bourdillon's study on this subject, it is stated that in communities where child labor is socially accepted or considered necessary, these practices become more permanent and widespread (Bourdillon, 2006, pp. 210–213). Therefore, child labor operates as a cultural mechanism both within the family and at the societal level. In this context, explaining child labor solely through individual choices is insufficient; behind this phenomenon lies a network of social order and relationships.

In general, economic, cultural, and social dynamics form an inseparable whole in understanding migrant child labor. Bourdieu's conceptual framework stands out as a powerful tool in analyzing this multi-layered phenomenon. Children's participation in the labor force is not only related to economic deprivation but also to cultural norms, social expectations, and internalized practices of habitus.

### 2.3. The Global Capitalist Context of Migrant Child Labor

Looking at the issue of migrant child labor solely through local dynamics leads to a rather superficial approach. In fact, this phenomenon is complex in nature and intertwined with the unequal functioning of the global capitalist system. Wallerstein's world-system theory provides an important framework here. Wallerstein defines regions as core, semi-periphery, and periphery, and highlights the hierarchical structure between them. According to this theory, child labor is particularly concentrated in peripheral and semi-peripheral regions (Wallerstein, 1974, pp. 61–65). Migrant child labor emerges as one of the cheap, flexible, and invisible forms of labor required by global capitalism, particularly in peripheral and semi-peripheral regions (Ayata & Karataş, 2023, pp. 386–390).

From this perspective, it is insufficient to limit the phenomenon of migrant child labor to individual or family economic necessities. As Basu also points out, child labor pushed into the labor market is directly linked to the inequalities created by international division of labor and capital movements (1999, pp. 77–80). Thus, the capitalist system systematically uses child labor as a source of cheap labor. In this context, Kabeer addresses migrant child labor as a result of social exclusion and economic marginalization on a global scale (2000, pp. 45–48).

International organizations have also presented reports supporting these findings. For example, the ILO report shows that the areas where child labor is most prevalent are mostly economically marginalized regions of global capitalism (ILO, 2017, p. 15). UNICEF emphasizes that migrant children join the workforce at an early age due to difficulties in accessing education, health, and social services in their new countries of residence, highlighting that this is a reflection of global inequalities (UNICEF, 2013, p. 24).

Furthermore, the relationship between migrant child labor and sustainable development goals is also noteworthy. SDG 8 (Sustainable Development Goals 8) of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals aims to eliminate child labor. However, it does not seem possible to achieve these goals without taking into account the specific conditions faced by migrant children (UN,

2015). This is because the working conditions of migrant children are related to both international policies and local practices, while existing structural inequalities increase the vulnerability of these children.

In this context, migrant child labor is an invisible yet indispensable resource within the global capitalist economy, particularly in informal sectors such as agriculture, small-scale production, and the service sector (Kabeer, 2000, pp. 45–48). This invisibility necessitates the evaluation of child labor as an economic, social, and political issue. Thus, migrant child labor emerges as a multi-layered and dynamic phenomenon at the intersection of the structural inequalities of global capitalism, the international division of labor, and local conditions. Therefore, the solution to this problem can only be achieved through comprehensive approaches developed within the context of global economic structures and policies, rather than through local interventions alone.

### 2.4. Migrant Child Labor in the Context of Critical Childhood Theory

An important aspect that is often overlooked in discussions of child labor is how children experience and interpret these experiences from their own perspective and how they develop strategies to resist the current conditions. Critical childhood theory positions children not merely as passive objects but as active subjects in their social world (James & Prout, 1997, pp. 6–8). This approach provides an important theoretical framework for understanding the experiences and resistance practices of migrant worker children in particular.

Erdoğan and Vakıf's (2020) qualitative research with migrant children in Turkey revealed that children do not view their work experiences solely as a necessity; rather, these experiences also play a decisive role in their social belonging, self-confidence, and identity development processes (pp. 52–58). Despite the difficulties in the work environment, children are empowered by the pride and sense of responsibility that comes from contributing to their families, which contributes to their subjective empowerment processes. In Harunoğulları's study, “poverty, unemployed parents, number of siblings, and the desire to support the family were found to be among the factors affecting Syrian child labor” (Harunoğulları, 2016, p. 29). Therefore, it is possible to say that, in addition to economic poverty, reasons such as the desire to support the family are among the fundamental factors in the emergence of migrant child labor.

The international literature also points to similar results. For example, in Punch's (2003) field study with child workers in Latin America, it was found that children's participation in working life at an early age had significant effects not only economically but also in terms of social relationships and social belonging (pp. 40–45). Through the social interactions they develop in workplaces and public spaces, children experience active participation in the social structure they are part of, and this affects their sense of social belonging.

When examining children's resistance practices in the labor market, these are often manifested not through macro-level conflicts but through micro-level strategies that emerge in daily life. Horton and Kraftl (2006) report that these small-scale acts of resistance developed by children against their working conditions give rise to practices such as absenteeism, slow work, and task sharing (pp. 111–113). Such behaviors demonstrate that children express themselves subjectively despite the structural constraints they face.

Resistance practices in migrant child labor can be observed not only in the workplace but also in family relationships and social environments. While fulfilling their responsibilities to their families, children also develop an awareness of their own rights (James & James, 2008, pp. 91–94). At this point, it should not be overlooked that children should be regarded not only as economic tools but also as individuals who demand rights.

Studies focusing on children's participation in the workforce also reveal the psychosocial effects of these experiences. In addition to the negative aspects of stress, fatigue, and disengagement from education experienced by child workers, some positive outcomes, such as the skills and sense of responsibility gained from the work experience, have also been reported (Tisdall, 2012, pp. 58–62). Therefore, the phenomenon of child labor should be approached as a multidimensional and complex social process.

In conclusion, the work experiences of migrant child workers are of critical importance for understanding their social position, identity development, and resistance strategies. Critical childhood theory suggests that children's voices should be heard and their subjective experiences taken into account in policy-making processes. Therefore, the issue of migrant child labor should be addressed in a multidimensional manner, taking into account not only economic and structural policies but also children's individual experiences and resistance practices.

## 3. Methods

This study was designed using qualitative research methods and is informed by the researcher’s extensive field experience in the Southeastern Anatolia Region. The research consists of two main components: five case analyses and a comprehensive literature review. Since 2014, the researcher has worked directly with Syrian refugee children and families through various non-governmental organizations in the cities of Gaziantep, Şanlıurfa, and Mardin. These experiences—particularly related to child labor, exclusion from education, and intra-family responsibility dynamics—provided not only observational data but also allowed the researcher to adopt a reflexive position throughout the research process. In line with Bourdieu’s principle of reflexivity, the researcher’s relationship with the field was explicitly integrated into the analysis. The researcher’s social position, institutional experiences, and influence on knowledge production were critically evaluated, thereby challenging the conventional subject-object dichotomy (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, pp. 68–72). This approach shaped both the interpretation of the data and the rationale behind case selection.

The five cases presented in the study are derived from real-life observations made by the researcher during fieldwork and are closely related to the study’s core themes. These cases include children working as street vendors, in informal manual labor, in begging, in seasonal agricultural work, and in small repair workshops. All cases have been anonymized and restructured for ethical considerations. The children range in age from 9 to 15, with four boys and one girl represented. Each case presents a detailed narrative of the child's working environment, the family’s approach to child labor, and the child’s own understanding of their situation. The narratives were analyzed using techniques commonly applied in qualitative research, such as real case storytelling, narrative-based analysis, and participant reflection (Patton, 2002, pp. 40–45; Merriam, 2009, pp. 23–28). These accounts, along with the researcher’s observations, were subjected to thematic coding and examined through the lens

of family structure, social roles, and processes of social reproduction. Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and forms of capital were also used as guiding tools in contextualizing the case analyses.

In addition, secondary quantitative and descriptive data were used to support the analysis. Reports and statistics published by organizations such as the International Labour Organization (ILO), UNICEF, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM), and the Turkish Statistical Institute (TÜİK) were analyzed using content analysis methods. These data contributed to the study by providing insights into the sectoral distribution of child labor, age-related working patterns, families' socioeconomic profiles, and regional disparities. This multi-layered methodological approach enabled the study to consider child labor not merely as an economic necessity, but as a form of social regulation reproduced within the everyday practices of migrant families.

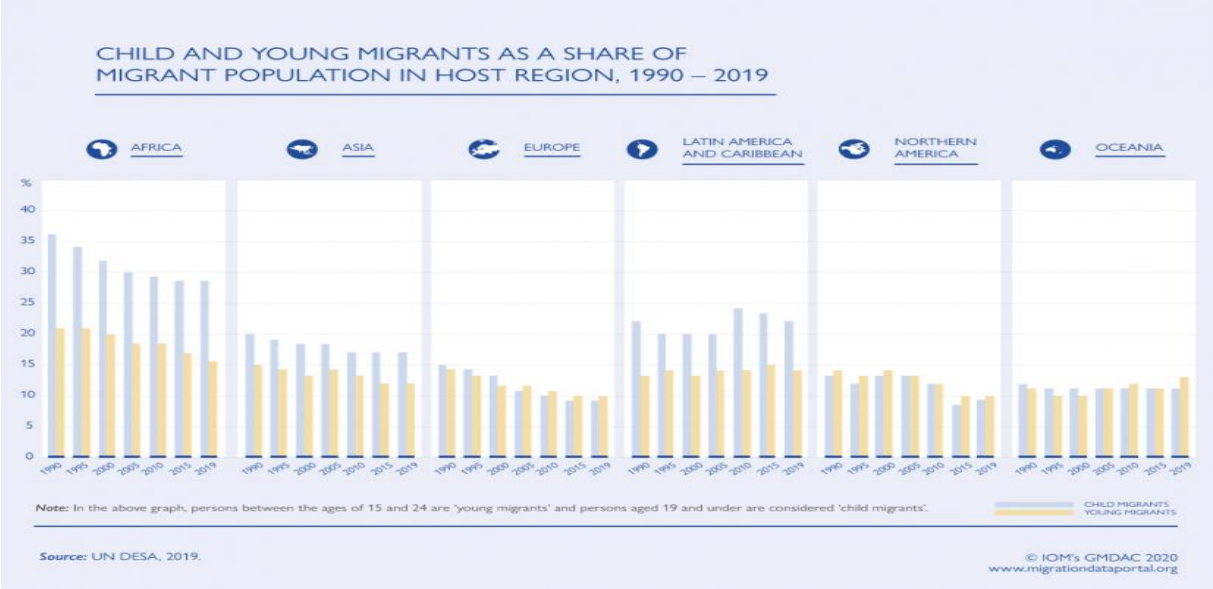
## 4. Migrant Child Labor Worldwide

When various data on migrant child labor are examined, it is found that worldwide, as of 2020, the number of migrant children under the age of 18 constitutes 12% of the total number of migrants, while 7% of the total migrant population in Europe consists of children under the age of 15.[2] According to United Nations (UN) data, the total number of migrant children under the age of 18 worldwide is 37,858,131.[3] According to a report[4] published by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in 2020, covering the period between 1990 and 2019, the ratio of migrant children to the total number of migrants has remained at 10% or above in all continents.

The table below[5] clearly shows the ratio of child migrants to the total number of migrants by continent and year in five-year periods.

[2] https://migrationdataportal.org/themes/child-and-young-migrants (Retrieved 16 June 2025)
[3] https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/data/estimates2/estimates19.asp (Retrieved 16 June 2025)
[4] https://gmdac.iom.int/massive-data-gaps-leave-migrant-refugee-and-displaced-children-danger-and-without-access-basic (Retrieved 17 June 2025)
[5] https://migrationdataportal.org/themes/child-and-young-migrants (Retrieved 17 June 2025)

**Table 1:** Ratio of Child Migrants to Total Migrants by Continent and Year




Source: International Organization for Migration

The International Labor Organization (ILO) reports that there are approximately 160 million child laborers worldwide.[6] According to this report, there are 89.3 million child laborers aged 5-11, 35.6 million aged 12-14, and 35 million aged 15-17. Approximately two-fifths of these children are engaged in hazardous work.

## 5. Migrant Child Labor in Türkiye

Looking at the current situation in Türkiye, various international civil society and humanitarian aid organizations began entering Türkiye in 2013 in order to cope with the humanitarian aid crisis that resulted from the mass migration following the events that began in Syria in 2011. In addition, local civil society organizations, development agencies, and public institutions also began to work intensively in the field of migration. However, it should be noted that, despite interventions and aid from all sides in the fourteenth year of migration from Syria, there are still various unresolved sociological problems, as well as situations involving difficulties and rights violations related to migration. One such situation is the lives and circumstances of Syrian child laborers. Syrian migrant children work in industrial sites, repair shops, restaurants, various shops, and on the streets. Some of these children belong to families where the parents are unable to work at home and are striving to sustain the family through their labor. However, others are children who are made to work by parents who believe it is necessary for the children to engage in income-generating activities, even though there are adults in the household who could work.

According to current data on UNICEF's official website, Turkey has the largest child migrant population among Central Asian and European countries. In this context, there are 1,404,194 child migrants in Turkey.[7] This number is nearly three times the population of European

6 https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@ed_norm/@ipec/documents/publication/wcms_797515.pdf (Retrieved 17 June 2025)

7 https://www.unicef.org/eca/emergencies/latest-statistics-and-graphics-refugee-and-migrant-children (Retrieved 20 June 2025)

countries such as Iceland, Malta, and Luxembourg. Given that the total number of migrants in the country is around 3 million, this figure indicates that nearly half of the migrants are children under the age of 18. Therefore, Turkey, which has no experience of such a serious mass and permanent migration in the last century, has been caught unprepared for migration, and this has been one of the factors contributing to the extremely difficult lives experienced by migrants here.

Child rights-based institutional approaches play an important role in explaining migrant child labor. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which came into force in 1989, provides a framework that guarantees children's fundamental rights to life, development, education, and protection. However, these rights generally remain on paper when it comes to migrant children. Indeed, in a 2019 study conducted by Atasü-Topçuoğlu on the rights and social participation of migrant child workers in Turkey, it was revealed that these children's access to education, social life, and public participation is highly limited; language differences, social prejudices, and exclusionary policies reinforce this limitation (Atasü-Topçuoğlu, 2019, p. 420).

In their study on the labor of Syrian migrant children, Bahadır and Demiral emphasize that children's work is often seen as a “necessity” in the family, and that boys in particular are pushed into the streets to contribute to the household income. The same study reports that if girls are not employed in the labor market, they mostly live in the role of providing unpaid labor within the home, which is also related to gender roles (Bahadır and Demiral, 2019, p. 393).

Okyar and Öğüt state that, unlike in modern Western societies, Syria has an extended family structure and that the traditional family structure is an important element (Okyar and Öğüt, 2022, p. 119). In this context, Turğut states that in societies with traditional family structures, children are seen not only as continuing the family line and providing social security for their parents in the future, but also as cheap labor. In the continuation of his work, he states that, unlike the modern nuclear family perception, children are regarded as “little adults” by their families and, depending on the conditions they live in and the mode of production, are either included in the labor market after undergoing a certain training within the family or alongside a craftsman (Turğut, 2017, pp. 102-103). In this context, the visibility of Syrian children in the labor market after arriving in Turkey is also related to the cultural framework of the extended family structure. Indeed, the same situation applies to Turkish families who go to seasonal agricultural work in the Southeast. Children go to seasonal migrant agricultural work with their extended families from March to November and are considered a labor force along with all family members (Kansu, 2025, p.102). This approach is, of course, not limited to families who go to seasonal agricultural work. Indeed, TUİK reports that there are 720,000 Turkish child workers.[8]

One of the factors contributing to child labor among migrants is the existence of informal employment. The overall informal employment rate in Turkey reaches 30% (Çelik, 2023, p. 99). A report[9] published by UNICEF in 2023 on this issue states that informal employment fosters unregulated and insecure working conditions for migrant children, which lack a legal basis. Migrant children are seen as cheap and “trouble-free” labor by employers, while their families

[8] https://data.tuik.gov.tr/Bulten/Index?p=Istatistiklerle-Cocuk-2019-33733 (Retrieved 20 June 2025)
[9] https://www.unicef.org/turkiye/çocuk-işçiliği-0 (Retrieved 20 June 2025)

also view them as a source of labor. Therefore, there is a normalized and internalized perspective, both economically and culturally.

### 5.1. Migrant Child Labor in Southeastern Anatolia: Cases and Experiences from the Field (Gaziantep, Şanlıurfa, and Mardin)

The researcher has worked for many years in various local and international non-governmental organizations in both urban and rural areas of cities such as Gaziantep, Şanlıurfa, and Mardin. In this context, during the course of his work in these areas, he came into contact with a large number of Syrian child laborers.[10] The experiences, connections, and real-life stories of these children that the researcher conveyed through a reflective method during their fieldwork contribute significantly to the field-based nature of this study. In this context, numerous life stories have been recorded that provide a deeper understanding of the conditions that lead to child labor, family dynamics, and structural fractures related to migration.

During his time working in the humanitarian aid field, the researcher witnessed some children being injured by shrapnel, suffering limb loss, or experiencing severe physical trauma during the war. It was common for parents to suffer from physical ailments (such as back and neck hernias) due to the difficulties they experienced during the post-war migration process, which forced their children to participate in the production process due to financial concerns. However, there were many cases where children were forced to work due to the family's approach and cultural practices, apart from such compelling reasons. During fieldwork, it was observed that some of these children were forced to work in fields, restaurants, textile workshops, repair shops, or on the streets selling handkerchiefs/water or begging. Investigations revealed that a common characteristic of these families was that they had migrated from rural areas in Syria and that the use of children's labor was considered “natural” and “normal.”

In 2015, while working for a non-governmental organization in Gaziantep, the researcher identified a girl (Case 1) who was selling handkerchiefs and water on the street. The case was registered by the organization's protection unit and the necessary procedures were followed. Case 1, who was provided with access to various psychosocial support activities organized by the institution for children, stated that she had lost her father in the war and that she had managed to come to Turkey with her mother and two siblings, albeit with great difficulty. Her mother had agreed to become the second wife of a Syrian man she had met through an acquaintance in order to survive. Case 1, who was 11 years old at the time and whose other siblings were very young, was forced into street vending at the request of both her stepfather and mother and began bringing home the money she earned at the end of the day. In case interviews with her family, they stated that the child was now old enough to earn an income and should be held responsible for the livelihood of the family, like her father and other siblings at home. Indeed, it was stated that if they were in Syria, children of this age would already be given tasks such as herding animals and working the land. Thus, the family presented a framework that considered the use of child labor as a form of labor force to be sustainable in

[10] Note: All legal procedures relating to the child workers in question have been completed, and the necessary notifications and follow-up procedures have been carried out with the relevant public institutions.

an urban environment as well, albeit in a different form and setting. By the end of 2015, when the researcher left Gaziantep, Case 1 was still selling handkerchiefs.

Another case (Case 2) identified in Gaziantep during the same period was that of a 14-year-old Syrian boy who was found working in a car repair shop. During an interview for the boy, his mother stated that they had come to Turkey in 2013 with his father, grandfather, and siblings. He said that he was the eldest child in the family and that he had worked with his father in their own car repair shop in the town where they lived in Syria. He mentioned that after arriving there, it was difficult for his father to find work, but he himself could easily find work even at a low wage. In the case interview with his father, he stated that he was responsible for taking care of the house with his son and that he had already taken his son out of school to work with him while they were in Syria.

Another case (Case 3) that is structurally similar to the other stories is as follows: In 2016, while working for another international non-governmental organization in Şanlıurfa, the researcher met 9-year-old Syrian boy, who was participating in Turkish language learning and music workshops at a community center serving refugee children and youth. Case 3's family was forced to flee the war zone when Case 3 was 7 years old. After a journey of about ten days, they reached a shanty town in Şanlıurfa. During this process, they had to travel by car and walk for miles due to the war environment and dangerous organizations in Syria. Case 3's father works as a painter and decorator but is unable to bring home a regular income. Due to the presence of a newborn baby and other very young children in the home, and the fact that it is not culturally acceptable for the mother to work, Case 3 the eldest child at the age of 9, stopped attending the community center and started working at a barber shop. His younger brother, 7-year-old M., also started selling handkerchiefs on the street after a while. During the interview with the parents, they stated that the children had to work because their father had also gone to work in the fields at that age and earned money to help support the family. The family later moved to Mardin to live with their relatives. Five years later, in Mardin, the researcher happened to come across 14-year-old Case 3, who was working in a market, and his 12-year-old brother M., who was still selling handkerchiefs on the street, exposed to all kinds of risks. The siblings, who had started buying and smoking cigarettes with part of the money they earned, stated that they were supporting their family and that smoking was appropriate for them since they had grown up.

Another child whose story the researcher witnessed while working in a district of Şanlıurfa in 2017 was 13-year-old Case 4. When Case 4 was 10 years old, he and his family tried to flee to the Turkish border from cities captured by ISIS. Case 4's family was left behind due to their younger siblings and the belongings they had hastily taken with them, and they were captured by ISIS militants. When Case 4, reached a "safe" plain and looked back, he witnessed his family being shot, and with the help of others who were there, he was able to reach his uncle, who was waiting for them at the Turkish border. His uncle registered Case 4 as his own child in official documents for fear that the child would be taken away from him and obtained an identity card for him. After months of participating in various activities at the community center, Case 4, who had experienced great trauma, shared his story with officials he trusted and revealed that the parent he knew as his father was actually his uncle. Case 4's current situation was reported to the relevant public institutions, which provided all necessary psychological and protective support and initiated a therapy process with his "family." However, a year later, the

researcher and Case 4 happened to meet at the labor market early in the morning. He and his uncle (who was officially his father) were waiting for an employer to offer them a day's work. In a brief conversation with Case 4, there, he said that his uncle and uncle's wife had told him that it was time for him to start working. When asked what kind of work they did, he said that they generally did manual labor or construction work. In a conversation with his uncle, he said that it was time for Case 4 to start working, and that they would even marry him off when they found someone suitable. Indeed, his uncle had said that when he was that age in their village, he did all kinds of work to support the family and was married off. For this reason, his uncle saw no problem in making him work. For about a year, there was no news from Case 4. In 2019, Case 4's friends shared some tragic information about him. After working in construction for a certain period of time, Case 4 was married off by his uncle at the age of 15 to a 14-year-old Syrian girl who had lost her parents. Subsequently, Case 4 and his uncle moved to Şanlıurfa, where Case 4 continued his life as a regular manual laborer in high-rise construction sites with his uncle.

By 2018, the researcher had started working at an organization operating in Mardin and its districts. Here, 12-year-old Syrian Case 5, who was working with his family in a field, was identified during fieldwork. In interviews with Case 5 and his family, they stated that they lived in a suburb of Mardin and earned some money by working together as a family in vineyards and gardens during the harvest season. During non-harvest periods, while adult men worked in manual labor for daily wages, 12-year-old Case 5 sold water at traffic lights. The family explained that women and girls could only work in household chores outside of family farm work, but that 12-year-old Case 5 and other men had to work in any job that could bring income to the family. A year later, an investigation revealed that Case 5 had started working as an apprentice for a plumber.

Civil society organizations working in the field of migration, researchers, and academics conducting fieldwork have witnessed many children with similar stories. At a meeting in 2019 attended by public institutions and various local and international civil society organizations, an official shared that 250 Syrian children were selling handkerchiefs or begging on the streets in the Artuklu district of Mardin alone. However, as mentioned above, Syrian children do not only engage in activities such as selling handkerchiefs or begging on the streets. Perhaps because this is the most visible form of labor in social life, rough estimates of such cases are known. There are also a significant number of children working without registration in various textile workshops, restaurants, car repair shops, construction sites, and agricultural work.

With regard to children working in rural areas, the International Labor Organization (ILO) has reported[11] that the number of children working in rural areas is three times higher than those working in cities. In this context, reports[12] indicate that around 2,600 Syrian families live in shacks built for maintenance and irrigation in the fields of the plains of Mardin and Şanlıurfa, which are referred to as "Kuyubaşı." Therefore, the number of children living with their families and working in jobs such as field maintenance and irrigation is significant. Every member of the families living in these houses is considered an employee of the field owner. According to

[11] https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@ed_norm/@ipec/documents/publication/wcms_797515.pdf (Retrieved 20 June 2025)

[12] Development Foundation of Türkiye – Welthungerhilfe, "Creating a Protective Environment for Children Project Baseline Report", Unpublished Anonymous Report, 2024.

current figures, the average annual income per household is very low, ranging from 50,000 to 80,000 Turkish lira, and all family members work in these fields. During informal conversations with these families during field visits, they stated that they could not afford their rent and other fixed expenses in the cities, and therefore were forced to live in a field with no neighbors nearby. The children of these families help their parents under harsh conditions to irrigate and maintain hundreds of acres of fields. They may be required to perform many physically demanding tasks, such as transporting and relocating irrigation pipes, clearing weeds from fields, and transporting necessary materials.

Therefore, Syrian children work in many areas, including agriculture, industry, street vending, begging, etc. The acceptance of child labor as “normal” and “natural” within the family, in line with cultural and social norms that perpetuate the traditional extended family structure, particularly the expectation that boys are responsible for the family's livelihood, the exploitation of children as cheap labor by employers, the ease with which children can find work compared to adult migrants, and the emotional appeal of children engaging in street vending or begging, the fact that migrants are employed at lower wages than local workers and therefore cannot make ends meet are among the main factors driving Syrian children into the labor market. This situation also means that children are unable to live in accordance with the rights enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child and, at the same time, are exposed to all kinds of risks and abuse.

Forced migration and conflict have significantly transformed family structures, particularly among Syrian families who have relocated to Turkey. The normalization of child labor within these families is closely tied to attempts to reconstruct the productive extended family model within urban settings. The cases analyzed reveal that children are not regarded as individuals in their own right, but rather as contributors to the household economy. These children continue to assume both traditional roles (e.g., herding, farming) and adapted urban roles (e.g., street vending, apprenticeships, construction work), thereby sustaining the productive identity of the extended family in a new socio-economic context. In this regard, child labor is legitimized not only by economic necessity but also through inherited cultural norms.

However, this reconstruction stands in stark contrast to the consumer-oriented nuclear family model prevalent in urban life. While the traditional extended family incorporates children into the labor force at an early age, the modern nuclear family perceives childhood as a protected and developmental phase. This tension becomes especially apparent in the integration processes of migrant families. The cases demonstrate that the productive child model from the extended family structure continues to persist in post-migration urban environments. This persistence not only exposes children to serious developmental, psychological, and social risks but also highlights families’ efforts to replicate traditional family dynamics as a strategy for survival in a new and often precarious setting.

## 6. Conclusion and Suggestions

In this study, the phenomenon of Syrian migrant child labor in Southeastern Anatolia is examined in the context of family structure transformation and the social construction of childhood. The historical and cultural continuity of child labor is analyzed alongside its transformation in the changing structural conditions following migration. The main finding is that child labor is not a new problem arising from migration, but rather a practice that has been

internalized and socially accepted, thus continuing to exist. In Syrian families who push their children into the workforce, child labor is seen not only as an economic necessity but also as a natural and necessary part of social life; this acceptance is strongly influenced by experiences of rural life and extended family structures prior to migration.

The structural transformation that accompanied migration has changed the nature of this practice. Child labor, which was part of a collective production relationship based on solidarity in rural areas, has been integrated into wage-based and fragmented labor markets in cities, taking on a different social and economic appearance. In relation to the collective burden sharing offered by the extended family structure, migrant families have regarded the exploitation of child labor as normal, even though they live in nuclear families in cities after migration. The important point to emphasize here is that child labor is not a new behavior emerging in the city; rather, it is an existing cultural understanding that has been reshaped in the urban environment.

In this context, child labor is not only a result of economic deprivation but also of family roles, values, and social norms. Children are not merely “helpers” within the family; they also gain legitimacy as figures who take on responsibilities and contribute. Therefore, child labor should be evaluated not only as an economic or legal problem, but also as a mechanism that ensures social reproduction and the continuity of cultural norms.

On the other hand, new social environments for Syrian families who have moved to urban areas with migration create new tensions and dualities regarding the productive roles of children. On the one hand, child labor is seen as a fundamental means of sustaining the family's livelihood; on the other hand, this situation conflicts with urban society's norms regarding childhood and education. In this context, Syrian child workers face an identity dilemma between culturally accepted roles on the one hand and the norms of “appropriate childhood” in the city on the other.

Another important finding of the study is that children do not passively participate in this process but actively construct their roles by developing different strategies. Child laborers are not merely exploited or marginalized individuals; they are actors who shape their processes of subjectification through their work experiences, social networks, and family responsibilities. Therefore, analyses of child labor must be approached from a multidimensional perspective that encompasses not only structural inequalities but also children's practices of subjectification.

In conclusion, the phenomenon of Syrian child labor must be conceptualized not as a direct result of migration but as a cultural continuity that changes form and context with migration. Although changes in family structure have influenced the shaping of this practice, the main determining factor is how child labor is culturally interpreted and how this interpretation is reproduced in urban life. This reality makes it necessary to approach child labor not only as a phenomenon that must be prevented, but also as a social process that must be reevaluated in the context of social structures and cultural norms.

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