


# İstanbul Üniversitesi Sosyoloji Dergisi

Research Article

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## Social Implications of Child Labour: A Field Study in the Central-Western Region of Tunisia



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### Abstract

This article examines the social implications of child labour in the central-western region of Tunisia, with a focus on how early employment affects children and their families. The study employed a mixed-methods design, combining three focus groups with 473 survey responses. Findings indicate that poverty and deprivation are the main drivers of child labour, with children working in agriculture, construction, trade and domestic services between the ages of 11 and 17. While most children regularly contribute to household expenses, their low wages and unsafe working conditions fail to improve family living standards and often expose them to health risks, exploitation, and school discontinuation. Parents, although aware of the risks, generally show implicit acceptance of child labour due to financial pressures. The study concludes that child labour does not alleviate poverty but instead perpetuates social inequalities and deepens the vulnerability of disadvantaged families. Urgent policy interventions are required to strengthen social protection, ensure safe educational environments, and break the intergenerational cycle of poverty in Tunisia's central-western region.


### Keywords


Child labour · Poverty and deprivation · Exploitation · Social implications · Personal and family expenses



“ Citation: Bellali, A. (2025). Social implications of child labour: A field study in the central-western region of Tunisia.. *İstanbul Üniversitesi Sosyoloji Dergisi*, 45(2), 806-839. <https://doi.org/10.26650/SJ.2025.45.2.0838>

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 2025. Bellali, A.

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## INTRODUCTION

Child labour remains one of the most critical social challenges in developing societies, particularly in economically marginalized regions. In Tunisia, the central-western governorates marked by persistent poverty, unemployment, and limited access to education represent the epicentre of this phenomenon. Families in these areas often rely on the income generated by their children to cover essential needs such as food, clothing, and healthcare. Although this contribution provides short-term financial relief, it carries long-term repercussions that perpetuate the cycle of poverty, hinder educational attainment, and inflict deep psychological and social harm. As Schlemmer (1997, p. 68) emphasises, “scientific literature addressing this issue has pointed to the harmful effects of child labour, even when it involves paid work.” This highlights the paradox that, while children contribute economically, they simultaneously suffer deprivation in terms of health, education, and social development.

Furthermore, Schlemmer (1997, pp. 84–85) observed that “children excluded from education and work face additional challenges that negatively affect their social and psychological state, especially when they are unable to provide income for their families.” This dual burden of working to sustain their households while being denied opportunities for education and recreation creates profound emotional and developmental challenges. The economic structure of the central-western region, dominated by low-wage sectors such as agriculture, manufacturing, and informal labour, further compounds this issue. Children are frequently employed under harsh conditions, exposed to physical risks, and deprived of legal protection or adequate rest.

The social consequences extend beyond individual suffering. Rodgers and Standing (1981, p. 20) note that “societies with high dropout rates in education often push children onto the streets, where they are exploited in various activities such as smuggling and crime, in addition to being employed in low-wage jobs.” This observation accurately reflects the situation in central-western Tunisia, where the absence of educational and recreational opportunities often drives children towards delinquency and substance abuse. Prolonged exposure to exploitation, coupled with emotional neglect, leads to stress, anxiety, and trauma, reinforcing a pattern of social marginalisation.



The growing prevalence of drug use among working children illustrates their attempt to cope with unbearable psychological pressure and lack of social inclusion.

Child labour thus becomes both a symptom and a perpetuator of poverty. As Schlemmer (1997) underlines, children engaged in labour are deprived of the chance to acquire the skills and qualifications necessary for future employment, thereby remaining trapped in low-income work as adults. This results in an unskilled workforce and entrenched economic inequality.

This study investigates the social implications of child labour in Tunisia's central-western region, addressing two key research questions:

1. What are the social implications of child labour in the central-western region of Tunisia?
2. How does child labour influence children's perceptions of their future?

The researcher developed the following hypotheses:

1. Child labour in Tunisia does not significantly contribute to improving the social and financial conditions of families, despite children's contributions to household and personal expenses.
2. Families in the central-western governorates of Tunisia play a role in encouraging their children to work in various fields, which fosters relationships with employers and colleagues and exposes children to delinquency.

Through qualitative focus groups and quantitative analysis, this study explores how poverty, limited education, and weak social protection systems sustain child labour. It offers evidence-based insights and policy recommendations to combat this phenomenon, aiming to promote social justice, protect children's rights, and create sustainable pathways out of poverty for Tunisia's most vulnerable populations.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In Tunisia, Boudaya (2021) emphasised in her historical study that children "are subjected to forms of family slavery or slavery outside the family, especially when they are exposed to exploitation, particularly sexual exploitation for girls" (p. 23). The Centre for Economic and Social Studies, in collaboration with the International Labour Organisation (BIT & CRES, 2021), examined the situation



of child labour in the governorates of Sfax and Jendouba, evaluating the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on this phenomenon. Their findings revealed a strong correlation between the health crisis and the increase in child labour, as vulnerable families facing income loss and uncertainty resorted to sending children to work, often at the expense of education.

Ragui and Boughzala (2018) provide further insights by analyzing the structural dynamics of the Tunisian labor market before and after the 2010/2011 revolution. Their study highlights youth unemployment, informal work, and gender disparities, situating child labour within broader economic and social upheavals. Child workers in Tunisia are particularly vulnerable to discrimination, school dropout, poor academic performance, and health issues due to strenuous labour conditions. Similarly, Bouhlila and Soussi (2017) noted that 5.87% of children in Tunisia are employed, with the rate higher in urban areas, largely because of poverty and limited protection measures. Their survey revealed that most working children are concentrated in services (51.6%) and agriculture (32.2%), and that girls are disproportionately affected by failure and dropout. National surveys by the International Labour Organisation and the National Institute of Statistics (INS & BIT, 2017) confirm that child labour is especially prevalent in the central-western region, where wages remain insufficient to cover children's basic needs. Complementary studies by the ILO (2017) also underline the concentration of domestic child labour in governorates such as Jendouba and Bizerte.

International evidence supports and contextualises these national findings. Asu and Tzannatos (2019) argue that while child labour may provide short-term household income, it perpetuates inter-generational poverty traps, a pattern also observed in North Africa and the Middle East. A systematic review by Sabates and Hossain (2020) confirmed that school dropout and child labour are closely linked across developing countries, reinforcing educational exclusion and limiting future opportunities. Mahmud and Tasneem (2018) similarly demonstrated that poverty and social inequality remain the primary determinants of child labour in South Asia, a conclusion that resonates with the Tunisian case. At the same time, comparative research has highlighted the multidimensional costs of child labour, including psychosocial and health consequences. For instance, Heymann et al. (2019) argue that legal and policy interventions are crucial to mitigate these risks, while Kabeer (2016) stresses that gendered norms and structural inequalities further exacerbate the problem.



Recent contributions also frame child labour within broader sociological theories. Studies of social exclusion (Levitas, 2005) and poverty traps (Bowles, Durlauf, & Hoff, 2006) explain how children's participation in labour excludes them from key institutions such as education, thereby reinforcing intergenerational inequality. From a theoretical perspective, Bourdieu's (1977) concept of habitus helps explain how cultural norms normalise children's economic contribution to household survival, while Esping-Andersen's (1990) welfare regime approach highlights the limits of fragmented social protection systems in preventing child exploitation. Comparative studies, such as those by Van der Berg and Gustafsson (2019), confirm that weak welfare systems and regional disparities act as structural drivers of child labour across low- and middle-income countries.

Taken together, this literature demonstrates that child labour in Tunisia is not merely a family-level coping mechanism but rather a structural phenomenon shaped by poverty, inequality, cultural norms and insufficient welfare protections. It also underscores the urgent need for multi-level interventions, both nationally and internationally, to address the economic and social roots of the problem.

## Theoretical Framework

Understanding child labour requires moving beyond descriptive accounts to situate the phenomenon within broader sociological and policy frameworks. In this study, four interrelated theoretical perspectives are mobilised: **social exclusion, poverty traps, Bourdieu's habitus, and Esping-Andersen's welfare regimes**. Together, these perspectives illuminate how structural inequalities, cultural practices, and institutional arrangements intersect to shape the persistence of child labour in Tunisia's central-western region.

Child labour can be conceptualised as a form of **social exclusion** (Silver, 1994; Levitas, 2005). Exclusion here refers not only to economic marginalisation but also to the denial of access to key social goods, most notably **education** and **childhood protection rights**. Working children are frequently excluded from educational institutions, health systems, and social networks that foster long-term development. This exclusion is multidimensional: it manifests economically (low income), socially (stigmatisation), politically (weak protection mechanisms), and spatially (regional

disparities between coastal and interior Tunisia). By framing child labour through the lens of social exclusion, the study emphasises that it is not an isolated household decision but a structural condition that reproduces inequality.

The concept of the **poverty trap** (Bowles, Durlauf & Hoff, 2006) explains how reliance on child labour offers short-term relief but entrenches long-term deprivation. Families facing chronic poverty may prioritise immediate income over long-term educational investment. However, by removing children from school or reducing their ability to learn effectively, this strategy reproduces the inter-generational cycles of poverty and vulnerability. In the Tunisian context, where regional economic opportunities remain limited, child labour functions as a mechanism that locks entire households into low-wage, precarious livelihoods. This resonates with findings from comparative studies in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, where child labour similarly functions as both a survival strategy and a structural trap (Basu & Van, 1998; Edmonds, 2008).

While economic necessity drives much the child labour, **Bourdieu's concept of habitus** (1977) highlights how cultural dispositions and inherited social practices normalise the phenomenon. In many rural communities of Tunisia, sending children to work is not merely tolerated but is often framed as a moral duty, a marker of responsibility, or a contribution to family solidarity. Such practices reflect a habitus that naturalises labour as part of socialisation into adulthood. This perspective underscores that child labour is not solely a product of poverty but also of embedded cultural logics that shape family choices and social expectations, even despite legal prohibitions.

From a macro-sociological perspective, **Esping-Andersen's welfare regime theory** (1990) situates child labour within the weaknesses of Tunisia's social protection system. Unlike universalist welfare states that provide robust safety nets, Tunisia's fragmented system leaves many households vulnerable to shocks such as unemployment, illness, or rising living costs. In this context, children's earnings become a compensatory mechanism for inadequate welfare provision. The persistence of child labour thus reflects both household-level deprivation and **state-level policy gaps**, pointing to the need for more comprehensive social protection schemes aligned with international standards (ILO, 2017).

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives provide a multidimensional lens through which to interpret the findings of this study. Child labour emerges not simply as an economic necessity but as the product of structural inequalities (poverty traps and social exclusion), cultural practices (habitus) and institutional failures (weak welfare regimes). This framework enables us to link the micro-level experiences of children in Kasserine, Kairouan, and Sidi Bouzid to the macro-level dynamics of poverty, inequality, and policy design. It also positions the Tunisian case within broader comparative debates in sociology and development studies, thereby enhancing both the academic and policy relevance of the study.

## METHODS AND MATERIALS

This study employed a mixed-methods research design, combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches to comprehensively analyse the social, educational, and psychological implications of child labour in the central-western region of Tunisia. The integration of methods allowed us to capture not only the measurable trends through survey data but also the lived experiences of working children through focus groups and observations.

The quantitative strand relied on a descriptive and analytical methodology, centred on a structured questionnaire distributed to 473 working children aged 11 to 17 years. These children were engaged in diverse sectors including agriculture, construction, manufacturing, trade, restaurants, domestic work, and informal activities such as smuggling. To ensure representativeness, a quota sampling strategy was applied based on age, gender, and activity type, while the snowball technique was used to reach hidden or difficult-to-access groups. The sample size was determined following the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) table, ensuring statistical adequacy for a population exceeding 20,000 working children in the region.

## Ethical Considerations

Given the sensitive nature of this research and the involvement of minors, strict ethical protocols were observed throughout the study. Approval for the research design and data collection procedures was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Human and Social Sciences,

University of Carthage (approval no. UC/LACMN/ABT/2024/11). Before participation, written informed consent was secured from parents or legal guardians, and oral assent was obtained from the children themselves after the research objectives and procedures were explained in age-appropriate language. Participation was strictly voluntary, and children were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without consequence.

To ensure confidentiality, all data were anonymized: survey questionnaires were coded numerically and focus group participants were assigned pseudonyms. No identifying information (names, addresses, or school details) was recorded in the dataset. Focus group discussions were held in safe community spaces and facilitated in the presence of trusted local mediators to minimise discomfort. Special care was taken to avoid any form of coercion, and sensitive questions were phrased in a manner that was respectful of the children's dignity and privacy.

The study adhered to the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki (2013 revision) and to the international ethical guidelines on child participation in research set by UNICEF and the International Labour Organisation (ILO). These safeguards ensured that the rights, welfare, and dignity of the participating children were fully respected.

## Focus Groups

We organised three focus groups: determining the timing and location of the focus group on the social implications of child labour in the western region of Tunisia.

**Table 1**

*Focus group items*

Number	Items
1	Living area
2	Age
3	Job
4	social conditions of the child and family
5	Reasons workforce
6	Personal and family expenses
7	Family basic needs
8	Child's behaviour at work
9	Relationship with your employer and colleagues

**Table 2***Focus Group (Age, Field of Work, Educational Level, School Attendance, Gender)*

Focus Group	Age	Field of Work	Educational Level	School Attendance	Gender
<b>Delegation of Jedlian (Kasserine Governorate)</b>					
Mohamed	11	Blacksmithing	8th Grade	Attending School	Male
Rami	16	Construction	7th Grade	Dropped Out	Male
Cofane	17	Construction	7th Grade	Dropped Out	Male
Ya	16	Restaurant Worker	1st Year of High School	Attending School	Female
Islam	17	Domestic Work	8th Grade	Dropped Out	Female
Mna	16	Agricultural Worker	9th Grade	Dropped Out	Female
Hapla	17	Commerce	2nd Year of High School	Attending School	Female
Seifeddine	17	Agricultural Worker	2nd Year of High School	Dropped Out	Male
Mohsen	14	Commerce	8th Grade	Attending School	Male
Ali	15	Commerce	8th Grade	Attending School	Male

Youth Centre Complex, Sidi Bouzid Governorate	Age	Field of Work	Educational Level	School Attendance	Gender
Mohamed	17	Agriculture	7th Grade	Dropped Out	Male
Ali	17	Agriculture	9th Grade	Dropped Out	Male
Amine Allah	17	Café Worker	9th Grade	Dropped Out	Male
Cofane	11	Commerce	9th Grade	Attending School	Male
Aws	15	Auto Repair	8th Grade	Dropped Out	Male
Seifeddine	16	Agriculture	1st Year of High School	Attending School	Male
Ya	15	Restaurant Worker	8th Grade	Dropped Out	Female
Sativa	17	Factory Worker (Manufacturing)	9th Grade	Dropped Out	Female
Fawzia	17	Factory Worker (Manufacturing)	8th Grade	Dropped Out	Female
Noumea	16	Livestock Breeding	9th Grade	Dropped Out	Female

Focus Group (North Kairouan)	Age	Field of Work	Educational Level	School Attendance	Gender
Fantoosh	16	Smuggling and Alcohol Sales	6th Grade	Dropped Out	Male
Conrad	17	Commerce	3rd Year of High School	Attending School	Male
Amine Allah	17	Café Worker	9th Grade	Dropped Out	Male



Focus Group (North Kairouan)	Age	Field of Work	Educational Level	School Attendance	Gender
Motif	13	Commerce	9th Grade	Attending School	Male
Moussa	16	Agriculture	1st Year of High School	Attending School	Male
Once	17	Livestock Breeding	9th Grade	Dropped Out	Male

The first occurred at the Dar El-Sabbah in Jeddalian (Kasserine) on 2 January 2023. It included six boys and four girls, aged between 11 and 17, who worked in agriculture, trade, construction, blacksmithing, restaurant work, and domestic work. A child worked in smuggling gasoline.

- The second focus group was held in a café in Rouhia (Siliana) on January 5, 2023, with six boys aged 13 to 17. Their work activities included trade, construction, and café work. One child was involved in the illegal sale of alcohol.
- The third group was organised at the Youth Complex in Sidi Bouzid on January 10, 2023, with three boys and five girls aged 14 to 17. Their work was in agriculture, trade, crafts, and clothing factories.

In the focus group discussions, we investigated the experiences of children engaged in the workforce, beginning with the onset of their labour, the underlying motivations for their decision to work, and the degree to which their employment contributes to improving both their own living conditions and those of their families. Subsequently, we examined the challenges and behaviours they encountered in the workplace, which often resulted in the discontinuation of their education or significant obstacles to continuing their studies. Furthermore, we explored the negative practices exhibited by these children during work, as well as their relationships with coworkers and employers.

## Research Design

This study followed an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design, where qualitative insights informed the construction of the quantitative instrument. The qualitative strand (focus groups, ethnographic observations, and semi-structured interviews) provided an in-depth understanding of the children's lived experiences, which guided the development of the structured questionnaire.



## Instruments and Scoring

The questionnaire consisted of closed-ended items using a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree), allowing quantifiable assessment of children's perceptions regarding family conditions, employer/peer relations, and economic contributions. Items were developed based on the literature and refined through focus group insights. A pilot test with 30 children ensured clarity and cultural appropriateness.

## Validity and reliability

Instrument validity was established through an expert review (three sociologists and two child welfare specialists) and the pilot study. Construct validity was tested using Pearson correlation coefficients, while reliability was verified via Cronbach's alpha ( $\alpha = 0.635$  for the social repercussions scale), indicating acceptable internal consistency for exploratory research.

## Researcher's Role

The researcher personally moderated the focus groups, facilitated open discussions, and observed the group dynamics to minimise bias. In the quantitative phase, the researcher coordinated with local associations and community leaders to distribute and collect the surveys, ensuring ethical compliance and respondent anonymity.

## Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS v.26, applying descriptive statistics, independent-sample t-tests, and correlation analyses to test the hypotheses. Qualitative data from the focus groups were transcribed and subjected to thematic coding, identifying recurring themes such as poverty, exploitation, and implicit parental acceptance. The integration of qualitative and quantitative results provided a comprehensive interpretation of the phenomenon.

Through the focus group, we relied on the qualitative approach to examine the experiences of working children in their social and professional environments. This approach allows for the collection of rich and in-depth data through the interaction of children in groups, where they can

express their feelings and thoughts about work and its impact on their lives. The focus is on gaining a comprehensive understanding of the children's personal and social circumstances through open discussions, which enhances the researcher's understanding of the challenges children face in the work environment, such as changes in their health, family relationships, and education level.

The qualitative strand served an exploratory role and informed the development of the main instrument (the questionnaire). For this phase, we relied on ethnographic observation, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups. Three focus groups were conducted in the Kasserine, Siliana, and Sidi Bouzid governorates between January 2 and January 10, 2023, including both boys and girls. Participants' ages ranged from 11 to 17, with variation in educational status (attending school, dropping out, or irregular attendance). The focus group design enabled participants to express their personal experiences, motivations for working, family circumstances, and perceptions of their relationships with employers and peers.

This dual design ensured that the quantitative data provided breadth, while the qualitative data offered depth and contextual understanding of the phenomenon.

## Questionnaire

In this methodology, the questionnaire served as the main instrument for collecting data on the social implications of child labour in the central-western region of Tunisia. The snowball sampling technique, a non-probability method in which initial respondents recruit additional participants from their networks, was implemented for distributing the questionnaires. The process began with the identification of a small group of individuals who were well-informed about the issue of child labour in this region. These individuals were then asked to refer the questionnaire to others within their social circles, gradually expanding the sample. To ensure proper representation of the studied population, it was essential to determine the actual number of working children in the region. The research population included all children from Kasserine, Kairouan, and Sidi Bouzid who had either dropped out of school or were still attending school while engaging in professional activities. Data on the target population were obtained from official sources, including the National Institute of Statistics (NIS) through the 2017 National Child Labour Survey conducted in collaboration with

the International Labour Organisation (ILO), and from the General Directorate for Social Promotion under the Ministry of Social Affairs for 2022.

Although there were variations in data regarding the original population size, the sample size was determined using the NIS data and calculated through the Sample Size Calculator and the Krejcie & Morgan (1970) table.:

- Based on the NIS data, the original population size was 51,800, necessitating a sample size of 388 working children.
- According to the General Directorate for Social Promotion's data, the original population size was 21,390, requiring a sample size of 377 working children.

To account for these discrepancies, the final sample size selected for this research was 388 working children. Following standard research practices, a larger sample size was chosen to ensure a broader representation and more robust findings.

**Table 3**

*Questionnaire items*

Items	Statement	Number
Q1-Q4	Family social conditions and work at an early age	1
Q5-Q6	Family's financial situation and meeting basic needs	2
Q7	contribute at the family's expenses	3
Q8	Employer treats	4
Q9	Colleagues treat	5

**Table 4**

*Correlation coefficient between each item in the "Social Repercussions" Dimension and the total score of the dimension*

No.	Items in the "Social Repercussions" Dimension	Pearson correlation coefficient	Significance Level
1	The family's social conditions improve due to their child working at an early age.	0.637**	< 0.001
2	Your work has contributed to improving your family's financial situation and meeting basic needs.	0.668**	< 0.001
3	You regularly contribute to your family's expenses.	0.614**	< 0.001
4	Due to your work, your employer treats you well and helps you when needed.	0.703**	< 0.001
5	Due to your work, your colleagues treat you well and assist you when needed.	0.667**	< 0.001

\*Correlation is statistically significant at the 0.05 level ( $\alpha = 0.05$ ).

The data in Table (2) show that all items in the "Social Repercussions" dimension are statistically significantly correlated with the total score of the dimension to which they belong. This indicates that the correlation coefficients are statistically significant at the significance level of  $\alpha = 0.05$ , thus confirming that the "Social Repercussions" dimension is valid for measuring what it was designed to assess.

**Table 5**

*Reliability Coefficients for the Questionnaire Dimensions Related to Repercussions Using Cronbach's Alpha Formula and Correlation Coefficients Between Each Item in the "Social Repercussions" Dimension and the Total Score of the Dimension.*

NO.	"Social Repercussions" Dimension	Pearson correlation coefficient	Significance Level
1	Social Repercussions Dimension	0.052	0.787
No.	"Social Repercussions" Dimension	Number of Items	Reliability coefficient (Cronbach's alpha)
2	Social Repercussions	Dimension	50.635

It is evident from Table (03) that the two axes of the social implications are correlated with each other and with the overall average score of the total implications, showing a statistically significant correlation at the significance level of  $\alpha=0.05$ .

The reliability of the study tool (the questionnaire) was confirmed at the level of social repercussions by calculating the Cronbach-Alpha coefficient, which was found to be 0.635 for the overall score.

Through the questionnaire, we adopted a quantitative approach to highlight the social repercussions of child labour in the central-western region of Tunisia. This approach aims to collect numerical and statistical data about the experiences of working children through precise surveys, which helps in analysing and interpreting the social, economic, and health patterns related to child labour. By using quantitative data, we can accurately measure the impact of work on children's social, educational, and health conditions measurably.

The statistical software SPSS version 26 was used to analyse the research data, answer the questions, and test the hypotheses. The following statistical tests were applied:

**Cronbach's alpha coefficient:** To measure the reliability of the research instrument.

**Pearson Correlation Coefficient:** To test the internal consistency validity, construct validity, and research hypotheses.

**T-Student Test:** To compare means and assess differences between groups.

We can say that the questionnaire we designed and tested in the pilot study, and after modifications based on the statistical analysis, exhibits a high degree of reliability in the social implications domain, as well as very high internal consistency and strong acceptability validity. This is especially evident from the reliability coefficient according to Cronbach's alpha, which was 0.635 for five items, as well as the correlation coefficient between each item in the social implications domain, where the Pearson correlation coefficient was 0.52 with a significance level  $< 0.787$ .

Our study examined child labour in Tunisia's western region, emphasising environmental, educational, and occupational variables. The environmental variable was divided into urban and rural settings, with 65.5% of participants working in urban areas and 34.4% in rural areas. Agriculture emerged as the dominant activity, engaging 35.4% of working children, followed by manufacturing (15.2%), construction (11.8%), trade and car repair (11.4%), restaurants and hotels (6.3%), and domestic work (19.8%). Educationally, most children had intermediate (24.9%) or secondary (20.7%) education, reflecting the government's focus on primary schooling. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered to 473 working children in the central-western region. The instrument, developed from prior literature, included closed-ended questions on a five-point Likert scale to evaluate the social and economic factors influencing child labour. A pilot test involving 30 children ensured clarity and reliability before full deployment. Data collection spanned seven months and incorporated rest breaks to reduce fatigue. Reliability and validity were confirmed through expert assessment and statistical testing. Ethical principles were strictly followed, ensuring anonymity, confidentiality, and voluntary participation. Written consent was obtained from the legal guardians, and the participants were informed of their rights and the academic purpose of the research.

## RESULTS

To strengthen the quantitative analysis, we estimated a multiple regression model to identify the predictors of children's financial contribution to household expenses. The dependent variable



was the reported monthly contribution of the child (in Tunisian dinars). The independent variables included the child's age, gender (male = 1, female = 0), family monthly income, and educational status (dropout = 1, in-school = 0). The model was statistically significant,  $F(4, 468) = 65.41$ ,  $p < .001$ , explaining approximately 36% of the variance in children's contributions ( $R^2 = 0.36$ , adjusted  $R^2 = 0.35$ ). Results indicated that age was the strongest positive predictor ( $\beta = 0.41$ ,  $p < .001$ ), with older children contributing more to household income. Gender also had a significant effect ( $\beta = 0.17$ ,  $p < .01$ ), with boys earning and contributing more than girls, reflecting the sectoral distribution of labour where boys dominate construction and agriculture while girls are more represented in lower-paid domestic and service activities. Family income was negatively associated with child contribution ( $\beta = -0.28$ ,  $p < .001$ ), confirming that children from poorer households are more economically pressured to work. Finally, educational status was significant ( $\beta = -0.15$ ,  $p < .05$ ), with school dropouts contributing more regularly and at higher levels than children who remained in school. These findings suggest that child labour in Tunisia's central-western region is not only age- and gender-patterned but also deeply embedded in household poverty dynamics and educational exclusion.

The study reveals, through focus groups, that the main factor driving children to work is the necessity to support themselves and their families, which is further exacerbated by the widespread phenomenon of poverty. Although the reasons behind child labour in the central-western region of Tunisia are varied, they are fundamentally linked to the harsh socioeconomic conditions and the extreme poverty prevailing in this area. Consequently, children face an urgent need to work under these challenging circumstances.

Many children in the focus groups noted that their work is not necessarily tied to the absence of one or both parents. In many cases, they are compelled to work despite the presence of both parents. Poverty remains the primary factor driving children to work in this region. The findings indicate that most working children contribute regularly to their families' expenses by

“Providing essential needs for the family, such as medicine, food, and clothing, and taking on the responsibility of supporting the household.”

Despite their young age, children in the central-western region bear responsibilities that far exceed their capacity. However, the income they earn does not result in tangible improvements in



their families' living conditions. This finding, drawn from the focus groups conducted in the governorates of Kasserine, Siliana, and Sidi Bouzid with children aged between 11 and 17 years working in agriculture, construction, trade, and domestic services, underscores that family poverty remains deeply entrenched and that child labour fails to meet the basic needs of households. It becomes evident that child labour is not an effective strategy for improving living conditions; rather, it reflects a form of ongoing economic exploitation, given the extremely low wages these children receive and the absence of real prospects for social mobility.

The study also highlights that a significant proportion of parents neither strongly encourage nor firmly oppose child labour, reflecting a form of implicit or compelled acceptance of the situation due to economic pressures. This attitude may stem from parents' inability to provide sufficient income for their families, making child labour an unavoidable option. This suggests that families in these regions, despite their awareness of the potential harm that child labour may cause to their children, are often forced to resort to it to meet their daily needs. This is confirmed by the child, Santos in the focus group in the Kairouan governorate, who stated.

“Family problems and poverty are the main factors that led me to work. I found no objection from my family; on the contrary, they take my monthly wage and give me very little.”

The analysis of the findings also indicates that the social environment in western Tunisia may reinforce child labour. For example, in certain contexts, such as agriculture, work is viewed as part of the local culture.

“This was emphasised by most of the children participating in the focus groups, particularly those from agricultural areas in Kasserine and Sidi Bouzid, who described agriculture as one of the most common occupations in poor and rural regions, providing a basic though insufficient source of income for themselves and their families.”



The study conducted in the western region of Tunisia revealed that, despite the dangers associated with various forms of work, many children, particularly those employed in agriculture, continue to engage in labour that requires frequent movement between governorates. Focus group discussions highlighted that most children working in agriculture travel long distances seasonally to participate in harvesting or planting activities, often under unsafe and unregulated conditions. While some participants reported mutual assistance and friendly relationships among co-workers, the findings emphasise that such work environments expose children to significant health, physical, and psychological risks. The absence of protective equipment, exposure to pesticides, and long working hours under harsh weather threaten their growth and general well-being.

The study also revealed that most working children commute daily to their places of employment. This daily travel imposes an additional financial burden, as transportation costs consume a considerable portion of their already limited income. On average, children spend approximately 2,821.76 millimes per day on transportation. Consequently, a significant part of their earnings is used merely to reach the workplace, leaving little to cover personal or household expenses. The combination of low wages and high transportation costs intensifies financial vulnerability, creating a cycle of exploitation and economic dependence that prevents these children from improving their living conditions.

Health risks were especially pronounced among children employed in construction and manufacturing. In these sectors, the lack of occupational safety regulations results in frequent injuries, exposure to hazardous materials, and chronic fatigue. Despite receiving small wages, children pay a high price in terms of their physical and psychological well-being. Construction work exposes them to risks such as falls, handling heavy materials, and inhaling dust, while manufacturing often involves repetitive, unsafe tasks in poorly ventilated environments. These industries, which are largely informal and unmonitored, fail to comply with labour protection standards, leaving children vulnerable to exploitation, verbal abuse, and in some cases, physical or sexual violence.

The data further indicated that agriculture remains the predominant form of child labour in the region, followed by employment in construction, manufacturing, trade, and car repair. The diversity of activities demonstrates the adaptive nature of the local labour market, where children fill labour



gaps in low-skilled, high-risk occupations. However, across all sectors, the shared characteristics are exploitation, low pay and unsafe conditions. One of the most alarming findings involved domestic labour, where cases of sexual harassment and abuse were reported. For example, Islam, a participant from the municipality of Jdaliyah in Kasserine, stated, “I am subjected to sexual harassment in my work, and I also face violence and long working hours,” highlighting the severe vulnerability of child domestic workers.

The issue of child labour in western Tunisia, therefore, transcends economic deprivation and is a complex social and psychological problem. It not only undermines children’s right to education but also threatens their mental health, self-esteem, and long-term development. Addressing this phenomenon requires multidimensional interventions, including improving family income through targeted social programmes, enforcing existing child protection laws, and creating safer and more regulated work environments. Without structural reform and social support, child labour will continue to perpetuate cycles of poverty and social inequality.

Interestingly, most focus group participants rejected the notion that work itself causes school dropout. Instead, they explained that children often leave school first due to financial hardship, family instability, or educational disengagement and only then enter the workforce to help their families afford basic necessities. Parents, despite poverty, were found to value education and often encouraged their children to pursue it when possible. However, as inflation and the cost of living rise, children’s contributions remain insufficient to meet household needs. The study confirmed that child labour rarely leads to tangible improvements in family living conditions.

Focus group interviews in the governorates of Kasserine, Sidi Bouzid, and Kairouan provided personal insights into these realities. Santos, from Kasserine, mentioned that ongoing parental conflicts and school dropout pushed him into employment, while Saif attributed his work to extreme poverty. Amine stated that he joined the construction sector to help his father, and both Housseem and Saif emphasised that their families’ urgent need for income left them with no choice. In Sidi Bouzid, Khaloud, employed in domestic work, described exhaustion, bullying, and mistreatment despite her contribution to family expenses. In Kairouan, Sami explained that leaving school was his main reason for working, whereas Bilal cited his mother’s illness and the family’s inability to afford

medical treatment. Sativa similarly emphasised that her family’s financial hardship compelled her to work to generate additional income.

Despite their efforts, the children reported little improvement in their economic or social circumstances. Most of their earnings were used to support family needs such as healthcare, food, or school supplies for siblings. For example, Santos contributed to his mother’s medical treatment, Saifeddine purchased clothing for his siblings, Amine helped furnish the home, and Housseem regularly sent money to his father. Others, such as Aymen and Huda, used their earnings to meet personal needs or acquire artisanal skills. Yet all agreed that their wages were too low to significantly change their situation and that fatigue, anxiety, and illness were common consequences of their labour.

The focus group discussions also revealed that most parents earn less than 430 Tunisian dinars per month, an income far below the national average, forcing children to work to supplement household resources. This aligns with the responses to Questions 3 and 7 of the survey, confirming that child labour is primarily driven by low parental income and that children’s contributions, though vital, remain insufficient to cover family expenses.

Finally, workplace relationships were generally described as respectful, but children reported occasional conflicts, excessive workload, and emotional stress. The overall findings validate the study’s first hypothesis: child labour does not improve families’ social and economic conditions. It also supports the second hypothesis, showing that while some parents accept child labour as necessary for survival, others express ambivalence neither endorsing nor fully rejecting it due to persistent economic pressures and deeply rooted social norms.

**Table 6**

*Social repercussions of child labour*

Rank	Sample Direction	T-test Independent	Relative Weight	Standard Deviation	Mean	Statement	Item
5	Disagree	-24.86	42.6	0.761	2.13	family social conditions improve because their child works at an early age	401
3	Disagree	-9.15	51.6	0.994	2.58	Your work contributes to improving your family's financial situation and meeting basic needs	402



Rank	Sample Direction	T-test Independent	Relative Weight	Standard Deviation	Mean	Statement	Item
2	Agree	27.85	79.4	0.754	3.97	you regularly contribute to your family's expenses	403
4	Neutral	6.02	66	1.090	3.30	your employer treats you well and helps you when needed because of your work	404
1	Agree	36.81	79.6	0.580	3.98	your colleagues treat you well and help you when needed because of your work	405
	Neutral	8.37	63.6	0.493	3.18		All Items

Source: Fieldwork Data

The study's analysis of social repercussions, based on children's perceptions, reveals a complex hierarchy of social effects ranging from positive peer interactions to deeper issues of poverty, exploitation, and ambiguous parental attitudes. To quantify these social dimensions, arithmetic means were calculated for each indicator within the "social motives" axis. The results showed that the means ranged between 2.13 and 3.98, corresponding to relative weights from 42.6% to 79.6%. The overall arithmetic mean for this axis was 3.18, indicating a moderate tendency towards agreement among the respondents. The highest-ranked item, with a relative weight of 79.6%, was statement (405): "Because of the work, your colleagues treat you well and help you if you need them." This result highlights the social cohesion and mutual assistance often observed among working children, suggesting that peer solidarity represents one of the few positive aspects of their work environment. The second-ranked item (403), "You regularly contribute to the family expenses," scored a relative weight of 79.4%, reflecting children's awareness of their economic role within their families. The third item (404), "Because of the work, your employer treats you well and helps you if you need him," received a relative weight of 66%, yet most respondents selected "I don't know," suggesting uncertainty regarding employer-child relationships. The fourth item (402), "Your work has contributed to improving your family's financial conditions and providing basic needs," obtained a relative weight of 51.6%, showing general disagreement. Finally, item (401), which ranked lowest with a relative weight of 42.6%, further supports the view that child labour does not lead to tangible improvement in family living conditions.



These findings confirm that the families represented in the study are not only poor but also often suffer from extreme poverty and deprivation. This poverty, as the study notes, reflects structural inequalities and unfair exchanges at both the national and global levels. Children's earnings are insufficient to address even basic family needs. Despite their regular contributions, working children do not perceive their labour as improving their social or financial situation. Similar to Francesco's (2007) conclusion that children's wages are typically low and exploitative, this study indicates that the income generated from child labour in western Tunisia remains inadequate, leaving families trapped in cycles of economic dependency.

Data on parental attitudes reveal additional social complexities. When asked who encouraged them to work, 14% of the children cited their fathers, 14.7% their mothers, 37% relatives, and 28.7% friends. Conversely, 28.5% of fathers and 32.4% of mothers opposed their children's employment. This ambivalence reflects the moral and economic dilemma faced by poor families. While many parents disapprove of child labour, their financial circumstances prevent them from taking a firm stance against it. The data suggest a form of implicit acceptance or resignation: parents are aware of the harmful consequences of child labour but feel powerless to resist the economic pressures compelling their children to work.

Focus group discussions confirmed that in many communities, particularly in rural and agricultural areas, child labour has become normalised and socially accepted. It is viewed as a natural extension of family responsibility rather than exploitation. The children themselves often described working as a means to help their families meet daily needs or to pay for personal expenses, reflecting an internalised sense of duty. This echoes the findings of the International Labour Organisation (2017), Assaad and Boughzala (2018), and Rasheed (2020), who emphasised poverty as the principal driver of child labour in Tunisia and across the Arab region.

The continuous rise in living costs and stagnant family incomes intensify this situation, pushing both adults and children into low-paying, informal jobs. Working children in the study expressed a desire to contribute to their family's survival, even though they were aware that their efforts did not significantly improve their circumstances. Interestingly, the social relationships children form at work, particularly with peers, represent one of the few positive elements in their daily lives. Many

respondents emphasised mutual aid and cooperation among coworkers, aligning with item (405), which received the highest agreement. These relationships often take the form of shared meals, task-sharing, and emotional support. As Abcha and Taefir al-Sahbani (2016, p. 89) observed, such cooperative interactions vary according to social group but serve as vital mechanisms of solidarity within marginalised communities.

In agricultural work, for example, cooperation is essential: women may harvest fruit from trees while children carry baskets or transport produce to trucks. Tasks are distributed according to physical capacity and age, reinforcing the patterns of social hierarchy and teamwork. Children also tend to form relationships with peers or older workers from the same village or family network, which offers them protection and social inclusion. Nevertheless, these relationships occur within an exploitative system where children remain vulnerable to abuse, long working hours, and hazardous conditions.

The persistence of child labour in western Tunisia thus reflects both the structural poverty and the collective social tolerance of the phenomenon. It reveals what Durkheim (as cited in Al-Gharib, 2009, p. 156) described as the “collective conscience,” a shared set of beliefs and moral attitudes that bind individuals together. In this case, the collective acceptance of child labour functions as a social adaptation to economic hardship rather than a moral endorsement. However, it normalises children’s exposure to exploitation and hinders social progress.

Finally, field observations recorded children communicating energetically, often with laughter, while performing difficult tasks, illustrating a coping mechanism that conceals deeper distress. Many children expressed feelings of fatigue and the wish to escape exploitation, echoing Francesco’s (2007, p. 22) assertion that “the working child always thinks of escaping and denouncing child exploitation.” This highlights the contradictory nature of child labour: while it fosters cooperation and resilience, it simultaneously undermines childhood itself, exposing children to physical danger, psychological harm, and the denial of their basic rights.

## DISCUSSION

The regression analysis reinforces the theoretical interpretation of child labour as both a coping mechanism and a structural trap. The finding that older children and school dropouts contribute more financially reflects their deeper integration into the labour market, often at the expense of their education. The negative association with family income supports the poverty trap hypothesis: households with fewer resources are compelled to mobilise their children's labour, thereby perpetuating long-term cycles of deprivation. The gender differences mirror Bourdieusian perspectives on habitus, where cultural expectations and labour market segmentation shape the unequal economic roles of boys and girls. Taken together, these results confirm that child labour is not an isolated household strategy but a socially structured phenomenon, deeply linked to poverty, inequality and weak welfare protection.

Based on the findings, the research aligns with the book *New Insights into the Tunisian Labour Market* (Ragui & Boughzala, 2018), which highlights child labour as one of the most significant social issues reflecting economic and social disparities in Tunisia. Children are primarily employed in agriculture, trade, and the informal sector in general. This phenomenon is notably increasing in poor and remote areas, where limited income often prevents families from meeting their basic needs.

The findings suggest that child labour contributes little to improving the social or economic conditions of families. Instead, it appears to sustain patterns of poverty, as reported by children in both the survey and focus groups. Furthermore, the second hypothesis aligns with the book's argument that low-income families are compelled to send their children to work in order to meet the family's needs.

The phenomenon of child labour in central-western Tunisia is a complex social issue that cannot be understood solely through economic dimensions; rather, it requires an understanding of the cultural and social contexts that shape daily behaviours and practices. This phenomenon closely aligns with Bourdieu's theory of habitus (Bourdieu, 1977), which relates to the cultural and social realities associated with child labour in this region. Habitus, as defined by Bourdieu, refers to a set



of ingrained patterns of behaviour and values that are acquired through socialisation and which shape the way individuals interact with their social environment almost automatically.

In the Tunisian context, where local communities face economic and social vulnerability, child labour becomes part of family customs and traditions repeated across generations. Children's contributions to family income are viewed as both a social and economic responsibility. This behaviour is not merely an individual choice but an expression of the dominance of social habitus, which imposes itself as a natural way to adapt to a fragile reality characterised by weak social protection and high poverty rates (Deise & souwa, 2018). This habitus reflects a culture of sustained adaptation to poverty and the lack of effective social protection networks, imposing a way of life that is continuously reproduced, making it difficult to break this cycle through temporary economic or social interventions.

Recent research supports this analysis, indicating that poverty and vulnerability are not limited to economic dimensions alone but are intertwined with social and cultural forces that restrict individuals' available options, leading to the perpetuation of cycles of poverty and deprivation (Sharlamanov, Jovanoski, & Kostovska, 2024). Thus, child labour is not merely an economic phenomenon but results from the interconnection between cultural values and social and economic structures. This calls for comprehensive strategies aimed at gradually changing the habitus through improving education, developing social programmes, and providing economic and social support to families, thereby achieving a better future for children in these areas. Additionally, the book underscores the influence of local culture, emphasising the role of families in deciding to involve their children in labour. This aligns with the hypothesis that families in the western region of Tunisia play a significant role in encouraging their children to work in various fields to alleviate financial burdens.

Our research also aligns with the 2017 International Labour Organisation (ILO) (BIT, 2017) study on child domestic labour in Tunisia, focusing on the governorates of Jendouba and Bizerte. The study highlighted the prevalence of child labour in delegations such as Fernana, Ain Draham and Ghardimaou in Jendouba, as well as in Joumine and Sejnane in Bizerte. The study revealed several factors driving girls to work at an early age in these regions, including the family's need for additional

income and early school dropout rates. This aligns, to some extent, with our first hypothesis, which asserts that child labour in western Tunisia does not significantly improve families' social conditions despite the additional income it generates. Furthermore, the ILO study supports our second hypothesis regarding families encouraging their daughters to work from a young age, viewing this as an investment by low-income households. This finding resonates with our observation in the western region of Tunisia, where families actively encourage their children to work.

However, the ILO study does not delve into the relationships between child workers and their employers or peers, nor does it examine dangerous behaviours such as delinquency or drug use. These aspects are addressed in our research, particularly in the second hypothesis, which highlights the behavioural issues observed among children. This is supported by the responses from the focus group participants in our survey, where some children reported behavioural deviations and drug use. This evidence strengthens our findings and provides a broader perspective on the social and psychological dimensions of child labour.

Our research also aligns with the 2004 survey conducted by researchers (Benoit, Dosite, & Désiré, 2004) on "Girls' Domestic Work in Tunisia," which revealed that more than half of the girls working in domestic settings are under the age of 18, with most of them living in the households where they are employed. It also found that these girls often transferred their wages directly to their parents, a process that is more mandatory than voluntary. This obligation is particularly pronounced among the youngest daughters in families with multiple working sisters and when the parents own some agricultural assets.

This finding aligns with our first hypothesis, which emphasises that children are driven to work primarily to contribute financially to their families. However, this study does not address the broader responsibilities and challenges faced by working children, such as low wages and the limited impact of their work on improving their family's social conditions, despite their employment. These gaps are specifically explored in our research, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

We also agree with the researcher (Saddik, 2006) in her study on "Child Labour in Arab Countries," particularly regarding the hazardous conditions of child labour in Lebanon, which highlights that

children work in crafts and agriculture, with their low wages posing a real danger to their health. The article discusses the negative effects caused by physical exhaustion as well as the psychological and neurological consequences.

We concur with her on the issue of family poverty as a driving force behind child labour, as well as the political neglect and indifference from relevant authorities. The study's findings point to a link between child labour and the persistence of poverty and social vulnerability in the central-western region of Tunisia. This relationship should be further investigated in future research to assess its long-term effects on social inequality.

The article adopts Esping-Andersen's (1990) social welfare framework, interpreting child labour as a structural outcome of fragile welfare systems rather than merely an individual or family-level issue. In such systems, the state fails to provide adequate social protection, leaving families solely responsible for economic survival. This institutional gap forces children to enter the labour market at an early age, transforming them into contributors to household income while depriving them of education and perpetuating intergenerational poverty. This theoretical interpretation aligns with de Hoop and Mvukiyehe (2018), who emphasise that well-designed social protection policies, particularly cash transfer programmes and health insurance, are critical tools for reducing child labour. However, their effectiveness depends on their integration with sustainable improvements in education and healthcare systems, especially in rural and marginalised areas.

Cultural norms further reinforce child labour, particularly in rural contexts where it is seen as a traditional family duty rather than exploitation. Abdullah, Huynh, Emery, and Jordan (2022) highlight how these cultural perceptions complicate governmental interventions by framing child labour as a moral and social expectation rather than a violation of rights. In these environments, children are viewed as economic assets whose work sustains household income, perpetuating a cyclical link between poverty, lack of education, and vulnerability.

Empirical evidence supports the need for an integrated social protection approach. Landman and Frölich (2015) demonstrated that cash transfer programmes and health insurance can significantly lower child labour rates when paired with access to quality education and healthcare. Similarly, Arokiasamy and Gupta (2020) cautioned that social protection alone, without targeting the most

vulnerable groups and improving household income opportunities, may yield limited or even counterproductive results. Therefore, Esping-Andersen's theory offers a valuable lens through which to understand variations in child labour prevalence across societies, emphasising the interaction between economic structure, welfare provision, and civil society engagement. Strengthening local institutions and community organisations is essential to raise awareness of children's rights, enforcing labour laws, and ensure that welfare policies translate into tangible protections for vulnerable populations.

The findings of this study in western Tunisia affirm the validity of these theoretical assumptions. The first hypothesis that child labour does not substantially improve family living standards is strongly supported. Despite their financial contributions, working children continue to experience social deprivation and economic insecurity. Their wages are extremely low, often divided between personal needs and family expenses, leaving no measurable improvement in household conditions. Many children reported chronic stress, fatigue, and emotional distress caused by long working hours and repetitive tasks, conditions that often lead to anxiety and depression.

The second hypothesis concerns the role of families in promoting child labour. Focus group discussions revealed that economic necessity drives parents to encourage their children to work, regardless of job type or associated hazards. While some families value education, poverty and unemployment force them to prioritise short-term financial relief over long-term development. Relationships between working children and employers are often described as respectful but utilitarian, with cooperation and task-sharing among peers providing social support. However, the same discussions revealed that a portion of the children's earnings is sometimes misused, leading to deviant behaviours such as substance abuse, particularly among adolescents lacking supervision.

These findings agree with previous research in Tunisia. Udaya (2021) documented multiple forms of exploitation, including the sexual abuse of girls engaged in domestic labour. Likewise, a 2021 study by the Tunisian Centre for Economic and Social Studies in collaboration with the International Labour Organisation (BIT & CRES, 2021) reported that economic hardship drives many families to withdraw their children from school to increase household income. The 2017 national survey on child labour (INS & BIT, 2017) similarly found that child labour is especially prevalent in the central-



western regions, where children work long hours in low-paying jobs that fail to meet their basic needs.

The results of the current research confirm that, despite their contributions, working children in Sidi Bouzid, Kasserine, and Kairouan remain trapped in poverty. Their meagre wages, compounded by high transportation costs, leave little room for savings or upward mobility. Consequently, child labour intensifies stress, anxiety, and psychological strain while deepening social inequality. The phenomenon thus represents a multidimensional challenge of economic, social, and cultural that demands an integrated national strategy combining effective welfare systems, education reform, and cultural change. Addressing it requires cooperation among government institutions, civil society, and local communities to ensure that every child enjoys the fundamental rights to education, protection, and a dignified life.

## Conclusion

In this research, we shed light on the social repercussions of child labour in the western region of Tunisia, focusing on its impact in areas affected by poverty and deprivation. Our primary objectives involved analysing the outcomes of this phenomenon in marginalised regions. We initially conducted focus groups and observations, which provided insights into the realities of child labour, before designing a questionnaire. The questionnaire was structured based on the understanding that child labour has diverse social dimensions. Using this tool, we collected data directly from the field, which allowed us to identify the social consequences of child labour. To ensure that the sample accurately represented the original population in the three governorates of Kasserine, Kairouan, and Sidi Bouzid, we applied a quota sampling method. Children who work often face harsh social and economic conditions, including the need to travel to work, engage in hazardous activities, and spend part of their earnings on transportation. This income, which is meant to support their families and improve their financial and social circumstances, often falls short of these goals. Through their efforts, children aim to escape poverty and marginalisation, believing they can improve their economic situation or help their families in financial hardship. However, the challenges they often face outweigh their contributions. These difficulties extend beyond living expenses to include social issues that deepen the poverty cycle. As a result, working children find themselves caught in an



internal conflict, torn between the financial responsibility they have towards their families and the personal aspirations they are unable to pursue.

Child labour is classified internationally into two categories: "light work" and "the worst forms of child labour." The latter includes professional activities defined in Article 3 of ILO Convention No. 182, such as slavery, child abuse, forced labour and exploitation for sexual or military purposes, all of which harm the child's social development and expose them to psychological, physical and social dangers. On the other hand, "light work," as defined in Article 7 of ILO Convention No. 138, refers to activities that may be permitted starting at age 13 (or 12 in some cases), which do not harm the child's health, development, or schooling.

In conclusion, applying national and international legislation on child labour is essential. This includes laws addressing the minimum age for work, health and administrative rights, and protection from exploitation and abuse. It is critical to implement these legal provisions to curb the phenomenon of child labour and protect children in the workplace. Measures should also be put in place to monitor children's access to health coverage and protect them from any abuse stemming from legal violations.

## Recommendations

The findings of this study highlight the urgent need for multidimensional interventions that transcend punitive approaches to child labour and instead address the structural, economic and cultural drivers that sustain it in Tunisia's central-western region. Accordingly, the following recommendations are proposed:

### Policy and Institutional Level

**Strengthening Legal Enforcement:** While Tunisia has formally criminalised child labour, enforcement mechanisms remain weak, particularly in the informal and rural sectors. It is recommended that labour inspection systems be expanded and better resourced, with inspectors trained to identify hidden forms of child exploitation, including domestic work and informal agricultural labour.



**Integrated Social Protection Policies:** Child labour is primarily driven by poverty and income insecurity. Social protection programmes should therefore be redesigned to include **conditional cash transfers** tied to school attendance, child health monitoring, and family livelihood support. This aligns with the successful international models in Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa.

**Regional Development Strategies:** Persistent regional inequalities between coastal and inland areas contribute to the prevalence of child labour. Targeted investments in the central-western governorates (e.g., infrastructure, employment creation, rural industrialisation) are essential to reduce structural imbalances that pressure families to rely on their children's income.

## Educational Reforms

**Retention and Reintegration Programmes:** Educational systems must be equipped to prevent dropout and reintegrate working children into formal schooling. This can be achieved through **flexible learning programmes**, remedial classes, and school-based psychosocial support services that respond to the realities of children balancing work and education.

**Vocational Pathways for Adolescents:** For older children and youth (15–17) who may not return to academic schooling, state and non-state actors should develop **safe vocational training pathways**. Such pathways should be aligned with labour market needs while ensuring compliance with international child rights standards (ILO Conventions 138 and 182).

## Community and Family Interventions

**Changing Cultural Norms:** The persistence of child labour is not only economic but also cultural, as families often view children's contribution as a sign of responsibility and solidarity. Public awareness campaigns led by NGOs, schools, and local religious/community leaders can gradually reshape attitudes towards prioritising education over child work.

**Support for Families:** Beyond financial poverty, families experience multidimensional deprivation (housing, health care, and social exclusion). Expanding access to affordable health care, social housing, and food subsidies can reduce household dependence on children's wages. Family counselling and parental support programmes can also strengthen resilience against economic shocks.

## Academic and research implications

**Longitudinal and Comparative Studies:** Future research should adopt longitudinal designs to examine the cumulative and intergenerational effects of child labour on social mobility, educational achievement and psychosocial well-being. Comparative analyses across Tunisian regions and with other North African contexts (e.g., Morocco, Algeria) could illuminate how national and local policies influence child labour trajectories.

**Theoretical Integration:** Building on this study, further research should explicitly mobilise theories of social exclusion, poverty traps, and structural inequality to situate child labour within broader frameworks of social reproduction. This would allow for a deeper analysis of how institutions perpetuate or mitigate inequality.

**Policy-Oriented Research:** Universities and research institutes should develop collaborative projects with ministries, labour unions, and civil society to produce evidence-based policy briefs that translate academic findings into actionable reforms.



Peer Review	Externally peer-reviewed.
Conflict of Interest	The author declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.
Grant Support	The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.
Ethical Approval	Ethics committee approval was received for this study from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Human and Social Sciences, University of Carthage (Number: . UC/LACMN/ABT/2024/11; Date: XX).

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