



## ISSUES OF FORCED LABOR OF MINORS IN THE LAWS OF UZBEKISTAN

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**Abstract:** *Forced labor, particularly involving minors, remains a critical concern in many countries. Uzbekistan, a nation with a complex history in labor practices, has made significant strides toward reforming its legal framework to protect minors from forced labor. This article examines the legislative measures Uzbekistan has implemented to combat forced labor among minors, assesses their effectiveness, and identifies ongoing challenges and areas for improvement.*

**Keywords:** *Forced labor, minors, Uzbekistan, labor laws, child protection, International Labour Organization, enforcement, agricultural sector.*

Forced labor of minors represents one of the most egregious violations of human rights, as it exploits the vulnerability of children and deprives them of their fundamental rights to education, health, and development. Globally, the issue has garnered significant attention, with international organizations, governments, and civil society groups working tirelessly to combat this scourge. In Uzbekistan, the problem has been particularly pronounced, given the country's historical reliance on child labor in its agricultural sector, especially in cotton harvesting.

**Historical Context:** Uzbekistan, a major cotton producer, has long been associated with the use of child labor in its vast cotton fields. During the Soviet era, cotton was termed "white gold" due to its economic significance, and this importance persisted after independence in 1991. The practice of mobilizing children, often en masse, to participate in the cotton harvest became institutionalized, with schools closing for weeks to send students to the fields. This practice not only disrupted education but also exposed minors to harsh working conditions, with long hours and minimal compensation.

**International Response and Pressure:** The widespread use of child labor in Uzbekistan's cotton industry did not go unnoticed on the international stage. Human rights organizations and labor groups, including the International Labour Organization (ILO) and Human Rights Watch, brought significant attention to the issue. The international community, including major clothing brands and retailers, began boycotting Uzbek cotton, pressuring the government to take decisive action.

**Legal Reforms and Commitments:** In response to this international outcry and the negative impact on its economy and global image, Uzbekistan's government initiated a series of legal reforms aimed at eradicating forced labor, particularly among minors. These reforms included the ratification of international labor conventions, amendments to domestic labor laws, and the introduction of new regulations specifically targeting the exploitation of children.

The Uzbek government also demonstrated its commitment by engaging in dialogue with international organizations and allowing independent monitoring of the cotton



harvest. These efforts were aimed at ensuring compliance with international labor standards and protecting the rights of minors.

**Focus of the Article:** This article delves into the intricacies of Uzbekistan's legal framework concerning forced labor of minors. It examines the evolution of laws and regulations designed to protect children from exploitation, the effectiveness of these measures in practice, and the challenges that persist in fully eliminating forced labor in the country. While significant progress has been made, particularly in reducing the prevalence of child labor in the cotton industry, the article also highlights ongoing issues, such as enforcement gaps, socio-economic factors, and cultural norms that continue to pose challenges to the complete eradication of forced labor among minors.

By analyzing the successes and shortcomings of Uzbekistan's approach, this article aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the current state of forced labor among minors in the country and offer insights into potential strategies for further improvement.

The legal framework of Uzbekistan concerning forced labor is governed by several key documents:

**The Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan:** The Constitution guarantees the rights of every individual to free labor and prohibits forced labor. Article 37 explicitly states that "forced labor, except in cases specified by law, is prohibited."

**The Labor Code of Uzbekistan:** The Labor Code is the primary legislation governing labor relations in Uzbekistan. It outlines the conditions under which minors may work and explicitly prohibits forced labor. The Labor Code also sets the minimum working age at 16, with certain exceptions for lighter work starting at age 14 with parental consent.

**The Law on the Protection of the Rights of the Child:** This law provides a comprehensive framework for protecting children's rights in Uzbekistan. It emphasizes the prohibition of any form of exploitation, including forced labor, and mandates state protection of minors from such practices.

**International Conventions:** Uzbekistan is a signatory to several international conventions that address forced labor, including the International Labour Organization (ILO) Conventions No. 138 on Minimum Age and No. 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour. These conventions obligate Uzbekistan to take measures to prevent the involvement of minors in forced labor.

**Implementation and Enforcement:** While the legal framework is robust on paper, the effectiveness of these laws depends on their implementation and enforcement. Uzbekistan has taken several steps to strengthen enforcement mechanisms, including:

**Establishing Monitoring Bodies:** The government has established various bodies to monitor compliance with labor laws, including the National Commission on Forced Labor, which is responsible for overseeing efforts to eliminate forced labor.

**Collaboration with International Organizations:** Uzbekistan has worked closely with the ILO and other international organizations to improve its labor practices. This collaboration has led to significant progress, particularly in reducing the use of forced child labor in the cotton industry.

**Public Awareness Campaigns:** The government has initiated public awareness campaigns to educate the population about the dangers of forced labor and the rights of



minors. These campaigns are crucial in changing societal attitudes and reducing the prevalence of forced labor.

**Challenges and Areas for Improvement:** Despite the progress made, challenges remain in fully eradicating forced labor of minors in Uzbekistan:

**Rural Areas and Agricultural Sector:** Forced labor, including that of minors, remains more prevalent in rural areas and the agricultural sector. The seasonal nature of agricultural work, combined with economic pressures, often leads to the involvement of minors in labor activities, sometimes under coercive conditions.

**Enforcement Gaps:** While laws are in place, enforcement can be inconsistent, particularly in remote areas. Corruption and lack of resources can hinder effective enforcement, allowing forced labor practices to persist.

**Socio-Economic Factors:** Poverty and lack of access to education are significant factors that contribute to the continued involvement of minors in forced labor. Addressing these underlying issues is essential to eliminating forced labor entirely.

**Cultural and Social Norms:** In some communities, the involvement of minors in work is seen as a norm, particularly in family-run agricultural businesses. Changing these deep-seated cultural practices requires ongoing education and societal change.

Uzbekistan has made considerable progress in addressing the issue of forced labor of minors through its legal framework and international cooperation. However, challenges remain, particularly in rural areas and the agricultural sector. Continued efforts are needed to strengthen enforcement, address socio-economic factors, and change cultural norms to fully eradicate forced labor of minors in Uzbekistan.

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