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Child Labour of Unaccompanied Migrant Children on the Peripheries of the European Regime: Protected or Invisible?

This paper explores the largely overlooked phenomenon of child labour among unaccompanied and separated children travelling from Asia and Africa toward Europe via the Western Balkan route. Drawing on qualitative field research conducted in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, the study reveals that a substantial number of children engage in informal, hazardous, and exploitative work both during their journey and upon arrival in Serbia. Many undertake jobs classified as the worst forms of child labour, including dangerous physical labour, work with a high risk of injury, and involvement in illicit activities. Restrictive migration and asylum policies across transit countries push children into deep informality, leaving them invisible to protection systems and highly vulnerable to abuse by employers. Findings also show that national protection systems rarely identify child labour unless linked with suspected trafficking, resulting in inconsistent, insufficient, and reactive responses. The study highlights the urgent need for a child-rights-based approach that prioritises protection over securitisation within European migration governance.

Keywords: child labour, unaccompanied children, Balkan route, protection systems, informality, European peripheries

Злоупотреба дечјег рада код непраћене деце у миграцијама на периферијама европског режима ирегуларизације: заштићени или невидљиви?

Овај рад истражује недовољно проучену појаву злоупотребе дечјег рада код непраћене и раздвојене деце која путују ка Европи западнобалканском рутом. На основу квалитативног истраживања спроведеног у Србији и Босни и Херцеговини, налази показују да је велики број деце укључен у неформалан, ризичан и експлоатативан рад током пута и по доласку у Србију. Деца најчешће обављају послове који спадају у најгоре облике дечјег рада – опасне физичке послове, послове са високим ризиком од повреда, али и активности повезане са кривичним делима. Рестриктивне миграционе и азилне политике гурају децу у дубоку неформалност, чинећи их „невидљивима“ за систем заштите и изузетно рањивим на злоупотребе послодаваца. Системи заштите ретко препознају дечји рад осим када је удружен са сумњом на трговину људима, што резултира недоследним и недовољним интервенцијама. Студија указује на потребу за приступом заснованим на правима детета, који би заштиту поставио изнад секуритизације у европском управљању миграцијама.

Кључне речи: дечји рад, непраћена деца, миграције, балканска рута, системи заштите, неформалност, периферије Европе

INTRODUCTION

The last decade has seen an enormous surge of migrants and refugees in Europe. Data shows that around 281 million people were international migrants, while 84 million were forcibly displaced (UNHCR 2023). Immigration has increased by 78% over the last decade, reaching the number of 94,7 million people who have been forcibly displaced, with more than half being children, and 1 million born as refugees (WHO 2023).

Traditionally, children account for around 40% out of the total number of refugees and are forcibly displaced. According to the most recent data from IOM, UNHCR, and UNICEF, 41,779 children arrived in Greece, Italy, Spain, Bulgaria, Cyprus, and Malta in 2024, which was 25% fewer than the total number of child arrivals in 2023 (55,704). Among children, there is a significant number of unaccompanied and separated children – the report from international organisations mentions that more than

half of the children who arrived in Europe in 2024 were unaccompanied (UNHCR, UNICEF & IOM 2025). However, it is important to emphasise that these numbers should be interpreted and used with caution – most official data show the number of children who were formally registered and initiated the process to legalise their status. A significant number of children, especially unaccompanied, are not registered and are moving from country to country, “invisible” to the official protection systems. Some reports show that only during 2021 and 2023, some 51,433 migrant children have disappeared after arriving in European countries (Mentzelopoulou 2025), marking a significant increase from the period 2018-2020 when 18,000 children were considered missing upon entering Europe (MacGregor 2021). Many children decide to make themselves invisible to the protection systems – especially those who are unaccompanied – mostly due to extremely restrictive asylum policies in Europe.

The large influx of refugees into Europe beginning in 2015 activated both national and supranational governance mechanisms. To regulate asylum across Member States, the European Union relies on the Common European Asylum System (CEAS), a legal framework that establishes minimum standards for asylum procedures within the EU (Czymara 2021). Adopted by the European Parliament in 2013, CEAS includes the revised Dublin Regulation, the Asylum Procedures Directive, and the Reception Conditions Directive. The Dublin Regulation governs the allocation of responsibility for examining asylum claims among EU Member States. Its core principle stipulates that the first EU country an asylum seeker enters is responsible for registering and processing the asylum application (Heizmann & Ziller 2020). The 2013 revision strengthened certain safeguards, including the right to a personal interview, the right to receive information, and the right to appeal a transfer decision. EU Member States are also obliged to assess the risk of inhuman or degrading treatment before transferring an applicant to another state (APC 2015).

Despite this legal architecture, the primary focus of EU institutions and Member States, as reflected in policy and practice, has been on protecting state borders and implementing legal mechanisms and international agreements to prevent refugee arrivals to the EU. The political concept of “Fortress Europe” (Marino & Dawes 2016, 2) explains these dynamics with the EU’s post-2015 orientation toward restrictive migration governance through the use of legal procedures that limit or complicate access to asylum, physical barriers such as border fences and maritime patrol operations in the Mediterranean, and “virtual walls” embodied in surveillance technologies and border control systems designed to prevent people

on the move from entering or traveling across Europe (Žegarac, Marković & Burgund Isakov 2022).

In these conditions of prolonged insecurity, restricted mobility, and systemic exclusion, work becomes a central mechanism of survival for many unaccompanied and separated children. As they move through spaces where formal protection is absent and basic needs cannot be met, children increasingly rely on informal labour markets to secure food, shelter, and resources necessary to continue their journey (Marković 2024). This makes them highly susceptible to exploitative, hazardous, and underpaid work, often carried out in hidden or unregulated sectors with minimal oversight. For many, engaging in informal labour is not simply a choice but a structural consequence of irregularized mobility: children must earn money to finance their onward movement, repay debts to smugglers, or support family members left behind. The combination of border violence, legal precarity, and limited access to services pushes them deeper into informal economies where risks of abuse multiply.

This paper aims to examine how unaccompanied and separated children become involved in informal and exploitative work on the migratory journey, and to analyse the role of informal intermediaries and “grey zones” of protection that emerge on the peripheries of the European regime. By drawing on qualitative data from field research, the article seeks to map the social, economic, and institutional dynamics that facilitate children’s entry into informal labour; to identify the actors who mediate this process, including peers, community members, smugglers, and frontline professionals; and to explore how gaps within formal protection systems enable the normalization of child labour as a survival strategy. The paper will use the definition of a child as stated in Article 1 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child: a child means every human being below the age of eighteen years (UN CRC 1989).

CHILD LABOUR AND MIGRATION PERIPHERIES

Children have contributed to the family and societal economies throughout history, working in different industries. Particularly during industrialisation, child labour has been completely legalised and expected. The rapid expansion of industrial technologies created an increased demand for labour, which, in turn, led both families and broader society to expect children to enter the workforce at very young ages and contribute economically to their households and communities (Cunningham & Viazzo 1996). Much of the scholarly literature highlights that industrialisation fundamentally reshaped childhood by exposing children to harsh and exploit-

ative working conditions that, by today's standards, were closely comparable to forms of servitude or slavery (Hutchins & Harrison 2013). Many European countries and the USA have had children working in very harsh conditions, as some jobs were performed only by children.¹

The experiences of the industrialisation period and the slow sociological shift in views of childhood, from a preparation period for adulthood to a period of love and protection, prompted the first regulations to protect children from workplace exploitation. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), adopted in 1989, establishes the foundational international framework for protecting children's fundamental rights, including protection from child labour and its worst forms. Over time, the CRC has been expanded through three Optional Protocols. However, for children on the move, a particularly relevant instrument is General Comment No. 6 (2005), which outlines states' obligations toward unaccompanied and separated children outside their country of origin.

The ILO Convention No. 138 on Minimum Age for Employment (1973) requires states to set a minimum working age that is not below the age of compulsory schooling – generally 15 years, or 14 in developing countries. The Convention also permits “light work” for children aged 13–15 (or 12–14 in developing countries), provided that such work is not harmful to their health or development and does not interfere with schooling. Article 3 further allows employment from age 16 only, under strict safeguards that ensure full protection of the child's health, safety, and morals, and only if adequate training and education have been completed. Conversely, the minimum age for hazardous work – defined as work likely to jeopardise health, safety, or morals – must not be lower than 18.

The ILO Convention No. 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour (1999) specifies categories of work which must be absolutely prohibited for children. These include all forms of slavery-like practices (such as sale and trafficking of children, debt bondage, servitude, forced labour, and forced recruitment for armed conflict); the use of children in prostitution or pornography; involvement in illicit activities such as drug production and trafficking; and work that is inherently dangerous or carried out in conditions likely to harm the child's physical, mental, or moral well-being. States are required to identify hazardous occupations within their national

¹ The most notorious being the work of “breaker boys” in the mining industry where children were tasked with manually removing impurities from coal. Because the work required small hands and nimble fingers, it was performed almost exclusively by children (Whittaker 2004).

context, with particular attention to work involving physical, psychological, or sexual abuse; work underground or underwater; work at dangerous heights or in confined spaces; and work in environments with unsafe equipment, harmful substances, or extreme conditions.

With this foundation, individual countries began adopting national legal mechanisms to protect children from different forms of work that affect their well-being and education. Protection is organised around the notion that child labour appears within the intersection of educational, social, and economic factors. Its occurrence is closely linked to patterns of school attendance and academic performance, to broader social dynamics such as societal norms and families experiencing functional difficulties, and to structural economic pressures, including poverty, labour demand, and economic instability (ILO 2018).

In Serbia, the minimum age for employment is set at 15 years (Labour Law, article 24), and the same law prescribes general conditions for the employment of persons under the age of 18 (article 25). The age limit coincides with the age for mandatory education, giving the education system a primary preventative role in this area. Primary schools can monitor the school attendance and dropout rates as one of the indicators of child labour is irregular school attendance, especially seasonal absences from school, as families migrate for seasonal work (Baronijan et al. 2012). The protection system for children involved in child labour in Serbia relies on social protection and the labour inspectorate. Labour inspectorates are responsible for implementing measures against employers and referring cases to social work centres. Centres for social work can implement several interventions once the case of child labour is identified: guardianship, alternative care (accommodation in a foster family or social protection institution), and initiation of proceedings in criminal and family protection.

However, for Centres for Social Work to perform the interventions, there must be an official concern registered or a referral made by the school, Labour Inspectorate, or another institution/organisation/individual. The data show that neither the educational system nor the Labour Inspectorate has referred cases to Centres for Social Work in the past five years (Žegarac 2021; Republički zavod za socijalnu zaštitu 2023). The protection of unaccompanied and separated children in migration follows the same rule, based on the principle of social protection that interventions are the same for all the children regardless of their individual differences (Marković 2024).

How do this protection mechanisms translate to the protection of children in migration? The basic idea of the CRC and international convention

is the universality of protection – the same policies apply to all children regardless of their legal status or nationality. However, the specific policies regarding the protection of national borders often collide with this notion. At the beginning of the European “refugee crisis” in 2015, the Balkan countries provided efficient and collaborative transit for newcomers, with, from time to time, unilateral policies to prevent movement outside the established rules on speed and direction. This type of movement was (more or less) coordinated with the EU; however, over time, individual countries within the EU (Hungary led and others followed) began enforcing stricter policies to prevent it. The culmination of these policies is marked by the infamous EU-Turkey deal in 2016, which led to the Balkan countries employing violent pushback from EU territory into non-EU states. Croatia, as an EU country, was the leading example, pushing newcomers back across the border with extreme violence into Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, prompting people to move erratically across the borders of Western Balkan countries (Hameršak et al. 2020). Turkey is also important to mention, even though it is not formally part of the “Balkan route”; it functions as a central transit zone and a strategic buffer, shaping mobility toward Southeast Europe.

In these political, legal, and protection systems, unaccompanied and separated children are also moving, without protection from people they trust or care about. They are presented in the literature as “most vulnerable” among children on the move, facing heightened risks of violence, smuggling, trafficking, and various forms of exploitation (Marković 2019). Given the heightened risk and the lack of informal protection from parents and/or families, it is reasonable to assume that formal protection mechanisms² should step in and protect these children. However, literature shows that the formal protection mechanisms fail unaccompanied children and are secondary to the policies aimed at border control.

When it comes to child labour and migration, literature is very scarce on all the aspects surrounding this phenomenon: from frequency, children’s experiences, the risks and protection of unaccompanied children who are forced to flee their countries and are moving across state borders. Most of the literature focuses on voluntary migration of children from ru-

² In theory and practice of social work, formal support refers to services and interventions provided by government institutions, professional organizations, or licensed providers within the social protection system, while informal support encompasses the assistance offered by family members, relatives, friends, neighbours, and other significant people in the client’s life (Matković & Stanić 2014; Žegarac 2015).

ral to urban areas of countries, or on migration for work to a neighbouring country prompted by poverty (Bahar 2014; Mulugeta & Eriksen 2020; Udayar et al. 2021). The limited literature on forced migration of unaccompanied children and their work shows that children are mostly using informal networks for protection on the labour market - usually smugglers, friends and acquaintances. However, most of the literature focuses on human trafficking, completely disregarding the risks that child labour itself carries for unaccompanied migrant children.

All the efforts to control movement and protect the borders put unaccompanied and separated children at a heightened risk, pushing them deep into the informality, making them invisible to the formal protection systems. On the journey, they face violence from border police (they are usually treated as single men), smugglers, and other migrants; pushbacks; denial of access to asylum procedures; detention; severe mental health challenges; overcrowded and inadequate accommodation; and insufficient services (BCHR et al. 2017; Save the Children et al. 2017; Panico & Prest 2019). Despite extensive documentation of the violence, structural barriers, and protection gaps these children encounter, little is known about how unaccompanied and separated children sustain themselves financially while navigating such hostile environments. This gap is important to acknowledge, given that economic survival strategies play a crucial role in exposing children to exploitation, shaping their mobility trajectories, and positioning them within “grey zones” beyond institutional oversight. A more systematic understanding of these practices is therefore essential for explaining how children negotiate movement under conditions of irregularity and for designing protection responses that address the realities of their lived experience.

METHODOLOGY OF THE RESEARCH

This study is embedded in a wider research project undertaken as part of the author’s PhD dissertation. The entire research combined quantitative and qualitative methods. However, only part of the qualitative research will be presented here, focusing on themes related to the focus and scope of this paper.

Field research was conducted in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina from March to July 2023. The methodology included focus groups and interviews with professionals involved in the protection of migrant children in Serbia, and with unaccompanied and separated children in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The aim was to understand and analyse the experiences of children with work along the route – from their countries of

origin to Serbia. So, the analytical focus was on their journey and in Serbia, and for that reason, the experiences of working in Bosnia and Herzegovina were not collected. The reasons to perform part of the research in Bosnia and Herzegovina were twofold.

Firstly, during field research, 28 children were registered in official asylum centres in Serbia. To provide a more robust and diverse sample, a decision was made to collect data from children in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which, at the time, was the most common route for children to reach the EU.

Secondly, children in Serbia reported having no work experience while in the country. However, drawing on prior research (Žegarac, Marković & Burgund Isakov 2022), this absence of reporting was recognised as possibly reflecting children's use of a well-documented protection mechanism called "fawning". This strategy involves denying or avoiding discussions of negative experiences in the (current) host country while still residing there. This behaviour is typically driven by fear of deportation, limited knowledge of the legal norms and previous negative experiences with protection systems along the migration route. To address this potential under-reporting and obtain more reliable data on work experiences in Serbia, part of the fieldwork was deliberately performed in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The rationale was that children who are not residing in Serbia would be more open and feel safer discussing their experiences working in Serbia.

The focus group and interview guide for professionals was structured around seven thematic areas: the prevalence and characteristics of child labour; the protection system for unaccompanied and separated children; cultural context; risks and protective factors; interventions; professional knowledge and skills; and recommendations. Participants in this component of the study were professionals from a range of institutions, with varying levels of experience and diverse gender backgrounds. Data were collected from 37 professionals through 12 in-depth interviews and 4 focus groups with 25 participants. The sample included representatives of key state institutions such as Centres for Social Work, the Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs, the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration, the Institute for Social Welfare, the Centre for Human Trafficking Victims Protection, and two social welfare institutions providing accommodation for unaccompanied minors in Niš and Belgrade. In addition to governmental actors, professionals from UN agencies and international and national NGOs participated in the study. These organisations provide direct assistance and support to unaccompanied and separated

children both within official reception/accommodation facilities and in informal gathering places known as “squats”.

The focus group protocol for unaccompanied and separated children combined thematic questions with vignette techniques. Vignettes – short, contextually grounded stories about a fictional character or situation – are widely recognised as an effective method for eliciting children’s perspectives (O’Dell et al. 2012). They provide emotional distance between the scenario and the respondent (Budd & Kandemir 2018), thereby creating a “non-personal and less threatening atmosphere” (O’Dell et al. 2012, 2, Palaiologou 2017). For this research, vignette examples were developed based on the author’s prior professional experience. Given the limited literature on the examined phenomenon and to ensure the relevance and accuracy of the scenarios, the researcher established a youth advisory board composed of three young people who had arrived in Serbia as unaccompanied minors who participated in refining the vignette stories.

The final protocol for focus groups with unaccompanied and separated children consisted of four sections: (I) risk and protective factors; (II) agency; (III) characteristics of child labour; and (IV) knowledge of rights and experience with support systems. Each section was paired with a tailored vignette used to initiate discussion. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with unaccompanied and separated children and youth who had experience of working either during their journey or in Serbia. The interview guide also contained four thematic areas: work experiences, risks and support, agency, and knowledge/experience of support systems.

A total of 44 children participated in the focus groups and interviews; 28 were residing in Serbia and 16 in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Sampling methods included purposive sampling and snowball sampling. Children recruited for focus groups were selected through official institutions – the Centre for Social Work and the Serbian Commissariat for Refugees and Migration. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the responsible Centre for Social Work employed guardians through World Vision International (an international NGO), so recruitment and support were provided by its employees. Children and youth recruited for interviews were identified through snowball sampling, whereby participants recommended peers they knew to have work experience. All participating children were male, with an average age of 16 years, originating from Afghanistan (n = 42), Syria (n = 1) and Morocco (n = 1).

In accordance with ethical standards and the approval of the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Political Science, University of Belgrade, all preparatory steps for conducting interviews and focus groups with unac-

accompanied and separated children followed the required legal and ethical procedures in both Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. In Serbia, unaccompanied and separated children are accommodated in asylum and reception centres under the authority of the Serbian Commissariat for Refugees and Migration but are under the guardianship of the Centre for Social Work Šid. Following the guardian's signed consent, children themselves provided written informed consent outlining the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw at any time. All consent forms were translated into languages the children understood (Farsi, Dari, Pashto, and Arabic). For participants with limited literacy, the interpreter present at all interviews and focus groups read the consent form aloud to ensure full understanding before signature. The data collection process relied on interpreters in both Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, all of whom were given instructions regarding their role in the research prior to engaging with the children.

RESULTS

The data analysis process involved transcribing audio recordings of focus groups and interviews verbatim and analysing them using thematic analysis. The analysis was performed using the software MAXQDA (Verbi 2020), in which the initial and focused coding was performed. The coding was done by identifying the main themes and then extracting the subthemes accordingly. The themes relevant to this paper that will be presented are: general characteristics of child labour, the circumstances surrounding child labour, and protection systems in Serbia. All themes will be described, along with the appropriate subthemes identified. Some findings will be illustrated with direct quotes from the participants, with a note that all participants have been assigned codes to protect their identities. All quotes from child participants are coded as UAC (Unaccompanied and Separated Children), whereas PROF denotes those from professionals.

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF CHILD LABOUR

Research shows that the frequency of work among children travelling to Europe using the Balkan route is high. Professionals usually state that they rarely talk to children about their experiences with work. Children, however, state that *“almost everyone is working on the journey”* and that far more children have been engaged in some form of work since 2015 than those who have not. *“99% of children work, because without work, you cannot do anything”* (FG4_UAC_M5)

Children and professionals most frequently identified similar reasons for why children engage in work during migration: to earn money needed to continue their journey; to provide financial support to families who remain in the country of origin; or to repay debts incurred by their parents to finance the child's travel. Children, however, more often than professionals, emphasised the need to cover daily living and survival expenses along the route – such as accommodation, food, clothing, footwear, and mobile phones – as well as the desire to *“build a better future for themselves”*.

Discussions with children show that children are, during their journey, involved in informal and unregistered work, in hazardous labour that endangers their wellbeing, health, morals, and education. In Serbia, children are often involved in some of the worst forms of child labour, most notably work for smugglers and criminal activities related to the distribution of illicit substances. Along the migration route, children most commonly work in the construction sector (on construction sites, in factories producing construction materials, or in stone- and tile-cutting), in the textile industry, and in hospitality, typically in back-of-house roles such as dish-washing or basic food preparation. They also work in bakeries, performing tasks related to pastry production and baking. Agricultural work is widespread, particularly seasonal fruit and vegetable harvesting in Greece and Serbia. Other frequent activities include collecting recyclable materials and waste, as well as woodcutting.

I do not know... whether it is bakeries, kiosks where they make hamburgers and similar things – that is mostly what they do here in Belgrade. The most common places are car washes... and I know many who have worked in construction here in Belgrade as well. And, for example, I know that in Sjenica and Tutin many of them go to seasonal summer jobs, such as cutting wood, chopping, picking raspberries, or helping with gathering hay. (FG4_PROF_M1)

There were also examples of good practice in Serbia regarding the employment of adolescents aged 15 – 18 in conditions that met standards of decent work. Several professionals mentioned cases of children aged 15 or older who were engaged by non-governmental organisations as interpreters, or examples of summer placements of high schoolers in IKEA. However, most children work in extremely difficult circumstances – long working hours (12–14 hours), without contract, without healthcare and with extremely low salaries.

On the journey, Iran and, especially, Türkiye have the biggest market for child labour, where children are always involved in hazardous labour with a big risk for injuries and even death. Children work on construction sites or in factories, where they operate dangerous machinery to process construction materials, including stone and ceramic tile. At the same time, one of the respondents was involved in the manual manufacturing of cutlery in a factory. They often reported that their friends and colleagues would fall from high heights on construction sites, or get injured on industrial machines, some of them showing scars on their hands from working with dangerous machines.

...In Turkey, you can work wherever you want; employers do not care whether you are a child. Especially if you know the language, all the workplaces are open for you. And in Iran, we are perfect for work as we speak the language.³ (FG4_UAC_M8)

CIRCUMSTANCES SURROUNDING CHILD LABOUR

Most children consider working an obligation to their families who stayed in their countries of origin. Given that most of the children in this research were the oldest male children in their families, they think it is mandatory to provide for their families while travelling and that it is important to reach the “country of destination” as soon as possible to continue working and send more remittances. This puts them in a situation where the selection of work is very limited, and, considering that they are usually invisible to formal systems of protection, they are susceptible to violence and abuse by employers who often misuse their situation and create conditions of work that are exploitative.

Maybe for you Europeans it is difficult to understand what it means to be separated from your family for seven years, talk only on the phone under the condition that there is reception. I will accept any job that I am offered; to send money to my mother and father, I feel responsible for the better life of my family. It is my burden, and I accept it. (FG5_UAC_M1)

To find work, children mostly rely on other children, sometimes on other adults – such as relatives or acquaintances they met during the journey. There is a significant misalignment between professionals’ statements

³ Children coming from Afghanistan speak Dari language which is very similar to the Persian language spoken in Iran.

about how children find work during the journey and the actual children's experiences. Professionals believe that children find work through smugglers, and that working is always somehow connected to the risk of trafficking. According to the professionals interviewed, in such situations, children are often not paid for their work; instead, all the money they earn is handed over to smugglers in order to repay travel debts, while the children are provided only with basic food and shelter for survival. Children, however, reject this portrayal, insisting that "*the smuggler's job is only to take people across borders*", and that they find work on their own. A smuggler who would help a child secure a job was described as an exception, and a positive one:

We have to work to cover our own needs. Sometimes it happens that a smuggler is so good that he helps you find a job, but that is rare. (FG3_UAC_M5)

In countries where they speak the language, children often seek employment independently by walking into various small businesses, most commonly bakeries, hair salons, or retail shops, where they are assigned, tasks related to cleaning or maintaining the premises, usually out of customers' sight.

In Serbia, however, the process of finding work is different, as children reside in official accommodation facilities. Professionals reported that children had found jobs with the consent of their guardians and staff in the institutions where they were placed, either through direct contact with employers (e.g., for agricultural work such as fruit picking), through other migrants within asylum and reception centres, or with the assistance of institutional staff.

...What I saw both in Sjenica and here in Krnjača is how they would get work. An employer would literally come to the camp gate, speak either to someone from the security or directly to one of the minors when they saw them leaving the camp, and say: 'Do you want to work?' And then words spread among them. So, every new arrival already hears from other minors where they can get work. (FG1_PROF_M1)

Regarding relations with employers, more than 80% of the children who participated in the study reported negative experiences. Employers commonly subjected them to physical and psychological abuse, often through threats to report them to the police, by restricting their movement

within employer-provided accommodation, or by imposing punishments for perceived “mistakes” at work. These punishments ranged from verbal and physical assault to reducing their already very low wages:

At that moment, they do not treat you even like a robot anymore - but like an animal. (KI_UAC_M1)

Children also explained that when they “protested” about not being paid, employers would expel them and threaten to report them to the authorities because of their irregular status. Such treatment placed children in situations of powerlessness and intense fear of deportation, as well as fear of losing the progress they had made on their journey. As a result, children tended to comply with the employer’s decisions and search for another job.

PROTECTION SYSTEMS IN SERBIA

Professionals working with unaccompanied and separated children were aware that many of them were engaged in work, including their formally appointed temporary guardians. Although this work was informal and unregulated, guardians often took responsibility for monitoring children’s safety at the workplace, recognising that earning money was essential to their onward movement, so these situations were rarely reported to institutions.

Guardians know it is informal work, but it is necessary; without that income, the child cannot move on, so it does not get reported further. (KI_DR_Ž5)

Professionals also pointed to systemic challenges within the child protection sector, particularly the heavy reliance on project-based staffing, weak coordination between institutional and project actors, and a lack of adequately trained and sensitised personnel. In some cases, frontline workers did not meet the required qualifications, which hindered consistent monitoring and response. Many interviewees noted that the system often failed to intervene even when children were involved in hazardous forms of work. These circumstances contributed to a sense of powerlessness among professionals, who frequently felt that their “*hands were tied*”, particularly when children clearly expressed a desire, or perceived necessity, to work. When children are believed to be working with smugglers, professionals reported unclear procedures and a lack of feedback

from institutions after filing concerns. This eroded trust in formal mechanisms, especially among NGO workers.

It is an open secret that some children work with smugglers; everyone knows it. However, few of us have the authority to intervene beyond reporting our concerns. Very often, we all know that a child is in trouble, the case is reported, and still, as a civil society organisation, we receive no feedback whatsoever. (FG1_DR_Ž3)

Underlying many professional accounts was the perception of Serbia as a “transit country” which often led to a minimalist or procedural response, sometimes justified by the assumption that the child would soon leave the country. Assistance was therefore described as dependent on personal relationships among professionals rather than on clear institutional pathways. It was also very common that professionals struggled to differentiate between hazardous child labour and trafficking. In such situations, practitioners typically contact the Centre for Human Trafficking Victims. Nevertheless, representatives of the Centre are trained specifically to identify trafficking, yet they rarely recognise cases of hazardous child labour. Even when they do acknowledge hazardous child labour, they appear to conclude that the child is not a victim of trafficking and, consequently, do not report the case further to the competent Centre for Social Work.

Children, in contrast, reported very limited contact with protection systems and expressed deep mistrust that official institutions could or would protect them if something went wrong at work. Their past experiences with authorities, either in countries of origin, along the route, or in Serbia, were predominantly negative or extremely limited. This contributed to a strong sense of self-reliance and avoidance of formal reporting channels.

We hide even from animals, so of course we would never report a problem at work to anyone. (FG3_UAC_M5)

DISCUSSION

This research indicates that a substantial number of unaccompanied and separated children are exposed to work along the migration route, starting from their countries of origin (most commonly Afghanistan) and continuing through Serbia. Many of them are involved in some of the worst forms of child labour, including hazardous work and activities associated with criminal offences such as human smuggling and the distribution of

psychoactive substances. Children travelling along the Western Balkan route and through Serbia frequently engage in work involving dangerous machinery, unsafe environments, and high-risk tasks that pose significant threats to their health, well-being, and moral development.

Children most frequently work in Türkiye and Iran along the route to Serbia, and to a lesser extent in Greece, after the closure of the EU borders in 2016. In addition to the length of stay and the opportunities for informal employment, language proficiency plays a major role in enabling children to find work. In Iran, the children interviewed reported that it was relatively easy for them to secure employment and exercise greater control over the type of work they undertook, precisely because they spoke the local language. Research further indicates that unaccompanied Afghan children are considered “ideal” labour for Iran’s informal labour market: they often have prior work experience from their country of origin, and their lack of legal documentation prevents them from using formal mechanisms of protection if exploited at work (Ahmady 2023). In Türkiye, children also find work relatively easily due to the tolerant social attitude toward child labour and the highly developed informal labour market for migrants and children. The informal sector accounts for nearly 46% of the Turkish economy (Icduygu 2006), making it a highly accessible avenue for those without legal status or those who, for various reasons, need to work outside formal structures (Galli 2001; Fatima 2018). Nevertheless, relatively few studies examine the labour of migrant children with irregular status in Türkiye, as most existing research focuses on Syrian refugee children under temporary protection.

The children in this study demonstrated a clear awareness of the circumstances of their work. They know their work is illegal and would prefer to work legally. Nevertheless, the restrictive nature of national migration policies forces them into informal labour markets. In practice, the only available administrative procedure for many is to apply for asylum, which is primarily used to register and control population flows rather than to enable individuals to exercise rights. European asylum systems have not been able to process claims efficiently, thereby causing children and adults to wait often months, sometimes years, for a decision on their claim. Many states prevent people from even submitting an asylum request; instead, they deport them to countries where they previously stayed or push them back directly from the border if they do not have documents. Such practices violate the principle of non-refoulement, which prohibits returning an individual to a place where they may face harm (Kovačević 2020). Since 2015, the EU has intensified efforts to restrict access to its

territory by expanding and tightening existing migration-control policies. The 2016 EU–Türkiye Agreement further strengthened border control, with Türkiye committing to prevent departures toward EU member states in exchange for substantial financial assistance and political concessions (Heck & Hess 2017). As a result, migrant children face significant barriers to legalising their status in any country along the route.

Children typically find work through peers or members of their national community, contrary to the widespread belief among many professionals that smugglers arrange jobs for children and retain their earnings to cover the cost of onward travel. While networks of co-nationals vary in strength along the route, they play an important role in connecting children with employment. This finding does not align with earlier research (REACH 2017) nor with assumptions held by many professionals interviewed in this study, who believe that smugglers organise children’s work in transit countries and subsequently exploit them in the destination country to recover the cost of the journey.

An analysis of system interventions shows that a significant number of cases involving child labour remained unnoticed, overlooked, or inadequately identified. Even in cases that were detected, institutional responses did not follow the established procedures for addressing such situations. Professionals reported feeling powerless in these circumstances and expressed uncertainty about the purpose and effectiveness of the available interventions and systemic mechanisms. Among unaccompanied and separated children, child labour is typically recognised as a concern requiring system intervention only when it co-occurs with other problems – most often trafficking. This mirrors the broader national pattern of response to child labour in Serbia, suggesting that frontline workers across protection systems lack sufficient knowledge and are not adequately sensitised to identify this phenomenon.

CONCLUSIONS

Research on child labour among unaccompanied and separated children travelling from Asian and African countries toward Europe through Serbia since 2015 remains scarce within the broader field of migration studies. This study aimed at collecting and analysing the experiences of unaccompanied and separated children on their journey to Serbia and in Serbia. Focus groups and interviews with 44 unaccompanied children and 37 professionals involved in the protection of children were performed to get insight into the experiences and protection mechanisms from child labour.

The findings of this study show that these children are involved in various forms of labour both along the route to Serbia and within Serbia itself, most of which fall under the category of the worst forms of child labour as defined by international conventions. Children perform hazardous work that involves operating machinery with a high risk of serious injury, working in unsafe and developmentally harmful environments, and enduring excessively long working hours. Given that their very movement is shaped and constrained by restrictive migration policies, almost all the children in this study worked informally, “under the radar”, beyond the reach of protection systems and left largely at the mercy (and often the exploitation) of employers.

A child-rights-based approach in the contemporary context of migration along the Western Balkan route is applied only sporadically and inconsistently. Although the countries on this route have ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child, their policies prioritise securitisation, making it extremely difficult for children to regularise their stay or continue their intended journey. This, in turn, exposes them to informal and exploitative labour, including the worst forms of child labour. Such work takes place in an environment marked by a pervasive fear of deportation, affecting both children and adults alike, and leaving no adequate mechanisms to address the specific vulnerabilities of children. Children are not treated “primarily as children”, which constitutes a fundamental principle of the Convention and of the child-rights-based approach. On the contrary, they are placed in an even more disadvantaged position than adults: they are paid less, face limited access to safe forms of livelihood, and are pushed into work that endangers their health, safety, and well-being.

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