

Ali's Story*

Ali lives in Souf Camp. It is one of six emergency camps built in Jordan since 1948 for Palestinian refugees. Through the years, over 1.8 million people have arrived in the camps.

Hard at Work

Every day, Ali works at a falafel restaurant. He fries chickpea patties, makes sandwiches, and cleans up. He works 8 hours a day during the school year and 12 hours a day during his summer break. While Ali works, he can see his friends laughing as they kick a soccer ball on the dusty streets. He wants to join them, but cannot. Ali knows that he must work to help his family make ends meet, because severe back and eyesight problems prevent his father from working.

For Ali, working long hours every day means more than having less time to play and be a teenager. Working has also been dangerous—two years ago Ali nearly lost his hand when he dozed off while grinding chickpeas. Luckily, he was rushed to the hospital and his hand was saved.

A Dim Future

The situation of the 17,000 people living in Souf is difficult. Job opportunities are limited, and most refugees take temporary jobs at neighboring farms—picking olives and working the land. For the 3,400 teenagers in the camp, there are few places to meet and socialize. Their prospects of getting a good job when they become adults are bleak. Boys and girls rarely mix, and many girls marry before they turn 18.

A Ray of Hope

When a project designed to teach teenage boys and girls about filming, editing, and scriptwriting was launched at Souf Camp to encourage self-expression and youth participation, it was greeted with much enthusiasm.

“This has been an eye-opener for the kids,” says project director Bashar Sharaf. “Because they are used to rote learning in their schools, they found it difficult at first to express themselves and speak to the other sex, but they soon overcame their shyness, and spoke freely about issues which concerned them.”

Teens' Tale

The participants began by brainstorming a good topic for their film. In the end, they chose to make a film that would feature the plight of children who have to work to support their families. The teenagers chose Ali as the main character. Then they wrote the script, filmed images of life in the camp, and did the editing and translation.

* Source: UNICEF Voices of Youth, http://www.unicef.org/voy/explore/sowc06/explore_2475.html

“This documentary is a personal view. We wanted to reach out, make people living outside the camps know what our lives are like,” says Ali. “It’s tough, but what’s even tougher is having young people my age pass by and stare because I am not doing the same things that they are doing.”

A World of Young Workers

Ali is one of the more than 40,000 working children between 7 and 18 years old who live in Jordan. Worldwide, an estimated 246 million children are engaged in child labor. Nearly 70 percent of these children work in hazardous conditions, including working in mines, working with chemicals and pesticides in agriculture and working with dangerous machinery. The International Labor Organization (ILO), in its Convention No. 182, says that the worst forms of child labor include those that harm the health, safety, or morals of children.

Although working children are everywhere, they mostly remain invisible—toiling as domestic servants in homes, working behind the walls of workshops, and hidden from view in factories. Some 73 million of them are less than 10 years old.

Risky Business

Working children are more at risk for illness and injury on the job than adults for two reasons:

- Children are less physically mature, so heavy labor can affect their developing bodies.
- Children are less likely to be aware of dangerous situations, and so are more likely to get hurt. Working children do not have the same opportunities for rest and recreation that nonworking children do.

In addition, they are often denied an education that would prepare them for work in less dangerous jobs when they become adults.

Directions:

Using the information in the previous article, answer the following questions:

1. What are the main problems that Ali has faced as he works to support his family?

2. Do you think working in the restaurant should be considered “hazardous” labor? Why or why not?

3. Do you think Ali gets any benefits from working? Why or why not?

4. How might the film project help Ali and other young people in the camp?
