

2025, Vol. 6(3), 889-910
© The Author(s) 2025
Article reuse guidelines:
<https://dergi.bilgi.edu.tr/index.php/reflektif>
DOI: 10.47613/reflektif.2025.248
Article type: Research Article

Received: 09.05.2025
Accepted: 08.09.2025
Published Online: 14.10.2025

Tuğba Kontaş Azaklı*

The Situation of Young Children (0-6) in Seasonal Agricultural Migration in Türkiye

Türkiye’de Mevsimlik Tarım Göçüne Katılan 0-6 Yaş Çocukların Durumu

Abstract

This study examines the experiences and vulnerabilities of children aged 0–6 who accompany their families during seasonal agricultural migration in Türkiye. Based on a qualitative case study conducted hazelnut-producing regions of the Black Sea, the research focuses on the developmental, educational, and social challenges faced by young children living in precarious, mobile conditions. Data were gathered through interviews with migrant mothers, field observations, and discussions with labor contractors and local stakeholders. Findings show that children in migratory agricultural settings face overlapping deprivations. These include limited or no access to early childhood education, disrupted caregiving, unsafe environments, and inconsistent health services. Mothers face significant stress as they balance caregiving with long working hours. The study highlights how public policies and local services largely overlook the needs of these children, rendering them invisible in formal interventions. It calls for context-sensitive, age-appropriate support systems that uphold the rights and developmental needs of young children in agricultural labor contexts.

889

Öz

Bu çalışma, Türkiye’de ailelerine eşlik ederek mevsimlik tarım göçüne katılan 0–6 yaş arası çocukların deneyimlerini ve kırılganlıklarını incelemektedir. Karadeniz’in fındık üreten bölgelerinde yürütülen nitel bir vaka çalışmasına dayanan araştırma, hareketli ve güvencesiz yaşam koşullarında yaşayan küçük çocukların karşılaştığı gelişimsel, eğitsel ve sosyal zorluklara odaklanmaktadır. Veriler, göçmen annelerle yapılan görüşmeler, saha gözlemleri ve tarım araçları ile yerel paydaşlarla yapılan görüşmeler yoluyla toplanmıştır. Bulgular, göçmen tarım bağlamında yaşayan çocukların, sınırlı veya hiç olmayan erken çocukluk eğitimi, kesintiye uğrayan bakım rutinleri, güvensiz çevreler ve düzensiz sağlık hizmetleri gibi örtüşen yoksunluklarla karşı karşıya kaldığını göstermektedir. Anneler, uzun çalışma saatleriyle birlikte çocuk bakımı yapmaya çalışırken yüksek düzeyde stres yaşadıklarını bildirmiştir. Çalışma, kamu politikaları ve yerel hizmetlerin bu çocukların ihtiyaçlarını büyük ölçüde görmezden geldiğini vurgulamaktadır. Ayrıca, tarımsal işgücü bağlamında küçük çocukların haklarını ve gelişimsel ihtiyaçlarını gözetken bağlama duyarlı ve yaşa uygun destek sistemlerinin önemini ortaya koymaktadır.

Keywords

Seasonal agricultural migration, Early childhood vulnerability, Children’s rights, Care ethics, Gendered care work

Anahtar Kelimeler

Mevsimlik tarım göçü, Erken çocuklukta kırılganlık, Çocuk hakları, Bakım etiği, Cinsiyetlendirilmiş bakım emeği

* Ordu University, tugbakontas@hotmail.com, ORCID: 0000-0002-1919-842X.

Introduction

In recent years, global concerns over the ethical and sustainable functioning of agricultural value chains have brought renewed attention to the rights and welfare of workers, particularly those in precarious and migratory forms of labor (European Commission, 2023). While regulatory frameworks—such as due diligence laws on human rights in supply chains—have begun to address issues such as child labor and exploitation, much less attention has been given to young children who accompany their families during seasonal agricultural migration (ILO & UNICEF, 2021; 2023; UNICEF, n.d.). These children, typically under the age of six, often remain invisible in both academic research and policy interventions, despite facing heightened risks of deprivation, disrupted development, and a lack of access to early education and care (Nieuwenhuys, 1996).

Early childhood is a period of rapid cognitive, emotional, and physical development, during which access to stable caregiving, safe environments, and educational opportunities is critical (UNESCO & UNICEF, 2024; UNICEF, 2021). However, children in migratory agricultural settings are frequently excluded from early childhood services, either because of their mobility or institutional neglect. These raise pressing ethical questions about who is considered worthy of public investment and protection in food systems shaped by seasonal labor (Folbre, 2001; Tronto, 2013).

In Türkiye, seasonal agricultural migration remains a significant labor phenomenon, especially in the Black Sea region, where hazelnut production heavily relies on low-income, often internally displaced families (Uzun & Sahan, 2020). While public discourse on seasonal migration has increasingly focused on schooling and child labor, the everyday experiences of younger children, who are neither enrolled in school nor engaged in labor, remain undocumented and unaddressed (Uyan Semerci & Erdoğan, 2017). These children live at the intersection of economic marginalization, invisible care work, and fragmented policy coverage. In Türkiye, children from families engaged in seasonal agricultural labor are disproportionately affected by poverty and structural exclusion (Hasell et al., 2022; Konaş Azaklı, 2021). They often lack access to basic services, including safe housing, clean water, early education, and healthcare (UNICEF, 2016; Uyan Semerci & Erdoğan, 2017). According to the latest global estimates published by the International Labour Organization (ILO) and UNICEF, over 160 million children are engaged in child labor worldwide, with a significant proportion working in the agricultural sector (ILO & UNICEF, 2021). In Türkiye, recent data indicate that approximately 720,000 children between the ages of 5 and 17 are part of the labor force, and many of them are employed in seasonal agricultural work (TURKSTAT, 2020). Seasonal agricultural migration is primarily driven by poverty and functions as a crucial source of income for low-income families, who relocate to different regions based on the agricultural calendar (Development Workshop, 2013). However, seasonal migration patterns are not uniform across families. While some households engage in short-term migration for one or two crops, others spend up

to six months away from their permanent homes, following multiple harvest cycles across different regions. An emerging trend in which certain groups, particularly Kurdish migrants and Syrian refugees, have transitioned from temporary, seasonal mobility to permanent settlement in agricultural tent camps. This process, described as “rural ghettoization,” reflects the transformation of seasonal encampments into year-round, segregated living spaces (Pelek, 2020). Such developments exacerbate social exclusion and deepen the care deficits experienced by young children living in these unstable environments. Field research conducted in regions with intense seasonal migration reveals that tens of thousands of children are employed during harvest seasons, particularly in labor-intensive crops such as hazelnuts (Development Workshop, 2013). These findings highlight the high rates of child involvement in agricultural production cycles under migration-related conditions. While various legal instruments and policy interventions have been implemented at national and international levels to combat child labor, enforcement gaps and structural inequalities persist. Türkiye has ratified ILO Convention No. 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour and committed to eliminating child labor in seasonal agriculture by 2015 (ILO, n.d). In 2018, the Turkish government declared a “Year Against Child Labour,” launching a set of social policies to prevent the exploitation of children in labor (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Labour and Social Security, 2017). However, studies and reports confirm that child labor continues, particularly among children from socioeconomically disadvantaged households (Ural ve Konaş Azaklı, 2019). Despite these efforts, the impact of seasonal agricultural migration extends beyond working children and disproportionately affects younger children, particularly those aged 0–6. Literature reveals that children in migratory contexts often face disruptions in access to basic services such as education, health-care, and safe living conditions (Ağyar & Malik, 2022; Çevlik et al., 2022; Marandi & Patel, 2022; Sengupta & Guchhait, 2022; Uyan Semerci & Erdoğan, 2017). However, the rights and well-being of children in early childhood remain largely invisible in both academic research and policy agendas. This study aims to move beyond a limited scope on child labor by making visible the multifaceted forms of deprivation experienced by younger children in the context of seasonal agricultural migration, particularly in relation to care, development, and protection. Studies have shown that younger children in particular, spend long periods in unsafe encampments without supervision, whereas older siblings may be forced into agricultural labor or experience repeated interruptions in schooling (İltus, 2013; İş & Özkan, 2024; Uzun & Sahan, 2020). This deprivation is further intensified by exposure to dangerous work environments, poor nutrition, and pesticide-related health risks (Şimşek & Koruk, 2011).

While several studies in Türkiye (e.g., Uyan Semerci & Erdoğan, 2017; İş & Özkan, 2024; Development Workshop, 2013) have examined child labour in agricultural contexts, these works predominantly focus on school-aged children and adolescents. The early childhood group (0–6 years), who neither participate in wage labour nor are enrolled in formal schooling, remains largely absent from both empirical research and policy debates. This absence is striking, as agrarian and migration studies show that the conditions experienced dur-

ing early childhood—such as unstable housing, lack of safe play and learning spaces, and disruptions in caregiving—can set the trajectory for long-term developmental and educational inequalities (UNESCO & UNICEF, 2024). By centring the 0–6 age group, this study addresses a critical blind spot in existing literature and policy, linking early childhood vulnerability to broader questions of agrarian labour sustainability, care justice, and intergenerational equity.

This study seeks to fill this critical gap by focusing on the lived realities of children aged 0–6 years within Türkiye’s seasonal agricultural migration system. Drawing on a qualitative case study based in Ordu Province, this research investigates how mobility, labor demands, and structural neglect shape early childhood experiences in rural agricultural settings. In doing so, this study contributes to a growing body of literature that calls for rethinking agricultural sustainability not only in terms of labor rights and productivity but also through the lens of care, justice, and intergenerational well-being (Lemke & Bellows, 2015).

Guided by theories of care ethics and the sociology of childhood, this study considers young children in migrant labor systems not merely as dependent individuals but also as socially embedded individuals whose rights and developmental needs are consistently overlooked. By focusing on the experiences of children in precarious agricultural settings, the analysis aims to reveal how broader structural factors—such as mobility, lack of policy, and fragmented caregiving—significantly shape early childhood from ethical and political perspectives.

The aim of this study is to examine the everyday realities of children aged 0–6 years in the context of seasonal agricultural migration in Türkiye, with a particular focus on their access to care, early education and protection during hazelnut harvest in Black Sea Region. In addition to examining the caregiving dynamics and developmental risks faced by young children in seasonal agricultural migration, this paper also aims to propose policy recommendations to address these challenges and inform more equitable early childhood interventions.

The central research question guiding this study is as follows: *How do children aged 0–6 years experience care, development, and protection during seasonal agricultural migration in rural Türkiye, and what structural factors shape these experiences?*

Theoretical Framework

Building on these perspectives, this study explicitly constructs a conceptual bridge between critical agrarian studies (Bernstein, 2010) and the three theoretical approaches—feminist political economy (Razavi, 2009), care ethics, and the sociology of childhood (Katz, 2004)—to capture the intersecting dynamics of labor, care, and early childhood in seasonal agricultural migration contexts. This integrative approach enables a more nuanced understanding of how structural inequalities in agrarian labor systems shape caregiving arrangements and developmental trajectories during early childhood.

The analysis in this study draws on interdisciplinary perspectives on feminist political economy, care ethics, and the sociology of childhood. These frameworks offer critical insights

into how labor systems, particularly in agricultural contexts, rely on unpaid care work while failing to recognize or support the caregiving needs of young children. By situating the experiences of children aged 0–6 within these theoretical debates, this study seeks to move beyond conventional approaches that narrowly focus on child labor and instead emphasize the structural neglect of early childhood care and protection.

Feminist Political Economy and the Global Care Chain

Feminist political economy scholars have long argued that economic production systems are deeply intertwined with reproductive labor, particularly the unpaid care work provided by women (Fraser, 2014; Razavi & Staab, 2012). Care work, including child-rearing, emotional labor, and household maintenance, constitutes an essential yet undervalued foundation for the functioning of market economies. However, this labor remains largely invisible within policy frameworks that prioritize wage-based work while externalizing the costs of social reproduction onto families—primarily onto women.

In the context of global migration and labor mobility, Hochschild's (2000) concept of "global care chains" underscores how caregiving responsibilities are often displaced across borders, with women from economically disadvantaged backgrounds filling these roles under precarious conditions. While much of the global care chain literature focuses on transnational domestic work, similar patterns are evident within internal migration systems, such as seasonal agricultural labor in Türkiye. Here, the sustainability of agricultural production depends on the availability of low-paid labor, but the care needs of the laborers' children, especially those under six years old, remain systematically neglected.

893

Care Ethics and the Concept of Care Deficit

The ethical dimensions of caregiving have been central to care theory, particularly within the works of Joan Tronto (2013) and Daniel Engster (Engster & Metz, 2014). Tronto's notion of the "care deficit" describes a societal failure to ensure adequate caregiving for those who depend on it. This deficit is not simply a result of individual shortcomings but emerges from structural inequalities that shape who provides care, under what conditions, and with what recognition and support.

In agricultural migration contexts, care deficits manifest as an absence of institutional mechanisms that address the early developmental, emotional, and physical needs of young children. The moral failure, as articulated by Tronto, lies in the broader system's lack of attentiveness and responsiveness to these needs. Engster and Metz (2014) further argue that social justice must encompass the fair distribution of caregiving responsibilities and resources, moving beyond market equity toward what they define as "care-sensitive justice."

Field observations also revealed that, alongside mothers, older siblings—particularly girls—were frequently responsible for the day-to-day care of younger children in the tents, a dynamic that can be understood as an extension of the unpaid reproductive labor within the household and, in some cases, as a variant of child labor. This underscores the need to frame caregiving in seasonal agricultural migration not only as a gendered burden for women but also as a form of intergenerational labor shaped by structural inequalities.

Structural Neglect and the Invisibilization of Early Childhood

The concept of structural neglect is central to understanding how certain groups—especially young children—become invisible within policy designs and labor regimes. Folbre’s (2001) analysis of “the invisible heart” critiques the ways in which economic systems rely on the unpaid caregiving labor of women while systematically devaluing this contribution. Although numerous policies and interventions target child labor, they often fail to consider the specific vulnerabilities and rights of children who are not yet of working age but who live within the same exploitative environments.

In migratory agricultural systems, this invisibility is reinforced by the adult-centered focus of labor and welfare policies, which tend to prioritize labor productivity and child labor prevention while overlooking the developmental rights of younger children. This study draws on these feminist and care-centered critiques to argue that addressing early childhood vulnerability in migratory labor settings requires rethinking social protection through the lens of care ethics and structural justice.

This study argues that interventions focusing solely on labor conditions and child labor prevention fail to address the underlying care deficit that sustains agricultural production. Without recognizing and supporting the caregiving labor on which these systems rely, such approaches risk reproducing the very cycles of deprivation they seek to eliminate.

Materials and methods

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach informed by ethnographic sensibilities, aiming to understand the lived experiences of young children (0–6) in the context of seasonal agricultural migration in Türkiye. Data were collected through field-based semistructured interviews, informal conversations, and direct observations conducted during the hazelnut harvest season in Ordu Province. Anchored in care ethics and the sociology of childhood, this study focuses on the ways in which mobility, poverty, and fragmented caregiving structures shape children’s access to early education, health, safety, and emotional well-being. The re-

search prioritizes a child-centered lens, emphasizing the social invisibility and policy neglect of this age group within labor-driven agricultural systems.

Study Area and Group

The study was conducted in a rural district in the Black Sea Region, which is a major hub for hazelnut production in Türkiye. The participants included migrant mothers, local caregivers, agricultural labor contractors, and local stakeholders. A total of 35 in-depth interviews were conducted with mothers of children aged 0–6 years, along with observations of children’s living and care environments in temporary shelters and agricultural fields.

Data collection tools

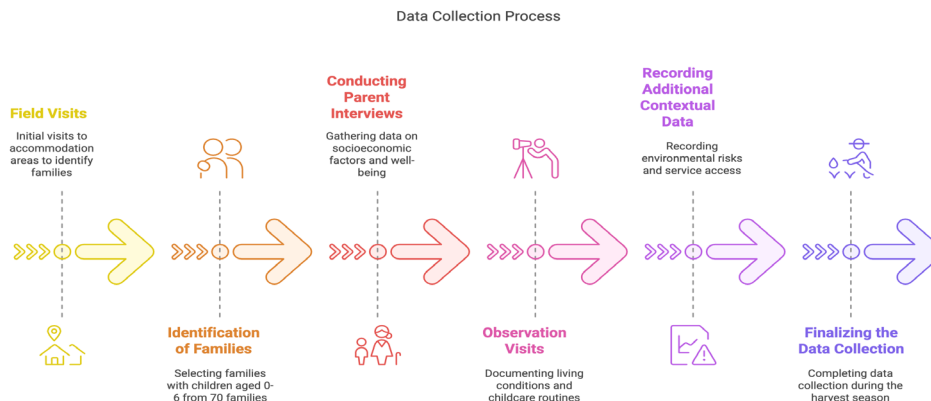
Data were gathered over a four-week field period during the peak migration and harvest seasons. Semistructured interviews allowed for flexibility in exploring participants’ narratives, whereas field notes and direct observations captured environmental conditions, caregiving practices, and child safety contexts. Informal conversations with agricultural intermediaries and local authorities provided further contextual understanding. The data were gathered via the following tools:

1. *Parental Interview Forms*: Structured interview forms were designed to collect detailed information about families’ socioeconomic conditions, living arrangements, and the care and developmental needs of their children aged 0–6 years.
2. *Observation Record Forms*: Observation forms were used to systematically document the living conditions and daily routines of the children. The researcher recorded notes on the physical environment, safety, hygiene, and overall quality of the accommodation areas during the field visits.

Data collection process

Fieldwork was conducted in multiple stages over a four-week period during the hazelnut harvest season. Initial visits were made to the accommodation areas to identify the presence of families with young children. Out of 70 families residing in these areas, a sample of 35 families with children aged 0–6 was selected. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with parents to collect information on caregiving practices, socioeconomic conditions, and children’s well-being. In addition, detailed observational notes were recorded to document living conditions, environmental risks, and the availability of basic services. Data collection was finalized toward the end of the harvest period, capturing the full cycle of daily routines and migration-related challenges. Figure 1 provides a visual summary of the data collection procedure.

Figure 1
Data Collection Process



Data analysis

All the interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed via thematic analysis. The coding process was guided by both inductive and theory-driven approaches, particularly drawing on themes from care ethics and childhood sociology. MAXQD-A software was used to manage and organize the data. To ensure credibility, coding was cross-checked by a second researcher, and themes were refined through iterative discussion and memo writing.

Ethical Approval

This study involved field-based observations and informal interviews with adult participants regarding their caregiving experiences in public and semipublic settings. At the time of data collection, formal ethical approval was not required by the author's institution for noninvasive observational research. However, all research activities were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the Declaration of Helsinki. Informed verbal consent was obtained from all participants, and pseudonyms were used to ensure anonymity. No personal identifiers were collected, and particular care was taken to avoid harm, coercion, or intrusion during interactions.

Results and Discussions

As shown in Table 1 during the harvest season in 2023 (August-September), 63 children between the ages of 0-6 years migrated for seasonal agriculture to the research area. Of these,

26 were between the ages of 0–3, and 37 were between the ages of 4–6. Families with children between the ages of 0–6 years have an average of 4.6 children.

Table 1

Age Distribution of Children Aged 0–6 Participating in Seasonal Agricultural

Age Group	Number of Children	Percentage
0–3 years	26	41.3%
4–6 years	37	58.7%
Total	63	100%

Among the families that participated in seasonal agricultural migration during the 2023 hazelnut harvest in research area, the majority originated from the southeastern province of Şanlıurfa (57%), followed by Konya (20%) and Gaziantep (17%). Smaller proportions came from Adana (3%) and Hatay (3%).

Among the 35 families who participated in this study, 22 reported migrating to multiple agricultural regions across Türkiye throughout the year. In addition to hazelnut harvesting in Ordu, various other labor-intensive agricultural tasks, such as harvesting, weeding, and pruning, have been performed. As summarized in **Table 2**, these activities involve a wide range of crops, including but not limited to potatoes, citrus, watermelon, chickpea, beans, garlic, apples, cotton, peanuts, and greenhouse vegetables. The movement patterns of these families reflect a broader structure of labor circulation embedded in Türkiye's agricultural value chain, exposing young children to highly mobile and unstable living conditions across different climatic zones and work environments.

897

Table 3

Distribution of Children Aged 0–6 by Accommodation Area

Accommodation Area	Number of Children Aged 0–6
Area 1	16
Area 2	26
Area 3	2
Area 4	19
Total	63

Table 2

Agricultural Tasks and Crops Participated in by Families

Task Type	Crop Examples
Harvesting	Potatoes, Cotton, Apricot, Citrus
Weeding	Lentil, Chickpeas, Beans
Pruning	Apple, Greenhouse Vegetables, Garlic

Note: Based on participant reports from 22 families engaging in multiple migration routes (2023).

As shown in **Table 3**, the highest number of children aged 0–6 years was concentrated in Area 2, followed by Area 4. Area 3 hosted only two children, despite being the safest in terms of physical condition.

Living Conditions and Risks in Accommodation Areas

Accommodation areas observed during the hazelnut harvest season were marked by infrastructural inadequacy, health hazards, and serious safety risks for children aged 0–6. The majority of families lived in tents placed near rivers or roadsides, often without access to clean water, electricity, or sanitation. In Area 2, the most populated site, children were seen playing unsupervised near a fast-flowing river and sleeping in makeshift shelters vulnerable to flooding. The spatial distribution of the two accommodation areas (Accommodation Area 1 and Accommodation Area 2) where migrant families resided during the harvest season is illustrated in **Figure 2**.

Several families stayed in vehicles due to the lack of available land to pitch tents. Only two of the four areas had trash bins, and even these were not emptied regularly, leading to insect proliferation and increased exposure to allergens and disease vectors.

As shown in **Figure 3**, Area 3 hosted only two children, despite offering relatively safer physical conditions due to its natural boundaries and distance from major traffic zones. However, field observations highlighted persistent environmental risks in this area, including standing water, mold, low nighttime temperatures, and the absence of fencing around open sewage infrastructure.

Extensive hazards were documented through field notes, including across the accommodation sites, including standing water, mold, cold nighttime temperatures, and a lack of fencing around open sewage infrastructure. One mother in Area 4 reported that her child had died in a car accident while migrating for the onion harvest in the previous year. Another mother shared her experience of giving birth during the harvest season and suffering a traffic accident on the way back from the hospital to the tent area. These incidents reflect how families' migratory routes and precarious living conditions expose children to chronic environmental and health risks, with limited access to emergency services or healthcare. As illustrated in **Figure 4**, Accommodation Area 4 is positioned adjacent to active agricultural lands and secondary traffic roads, which further exacerbates these vulnerabilities by increasing exposure to traffic hazards and reducing spatial safety for children.

These findings align with international research which highlights that, children living in seasonal agricultural migration settings face severe risks to their health, safety, and well-being due to inadequate living conditions, poor sanitation, and the absence of effective institutional protection (Richter et al., 2006; Bennett et al., 2014; Betancourt et al., 2013; McLaurin & Liebman, 2012; Yadav & Sengupta, 2009). Studies from diverse migratory labor contexts—including rural South Africa, the Indian construction sector, and agricultural regions in Mexi-

Figure 2

Spatial Layout of Accommodation Areas 1 and 2, Showing Proximity to Water Bodies and Traffic Roads.



899

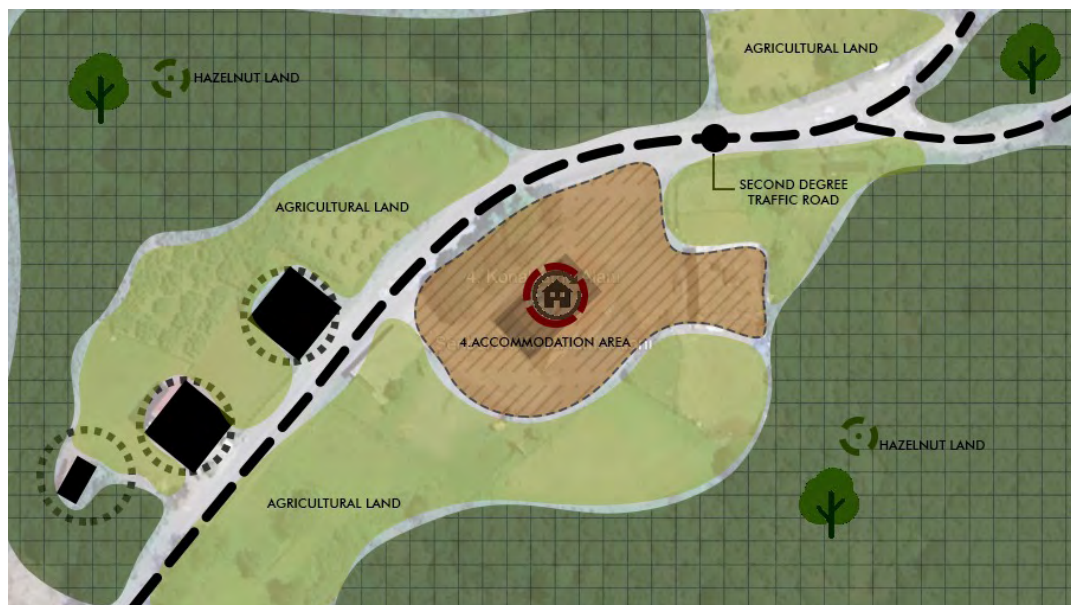
Figure 3

Spatial Layout of Accommodation Area 3, Illustrating its Relatively Safer Location Due to Natural Boundaries and Distance from Major Traffic Zones.



Figure 4

Spatial Layout of Accommodation Area 4, showing its Proximity to Active Agricultural Lands and Secondary Traffic Roads.



co—demonstrate how children in these environments often remain excluded from formal systems of care and social protection, even though they share the same physical spaces as working adults (Richter et al., 2006; Betancourt et al., 2013; Dreby, 2007).

The reliance on informal, family-based caregiving within these precarious environments—marked by a lack of stable housing, access to clean water, sanitation facilities, and child-safe spaces—leaves young children particularly vulnerable to environmental hazards, disease exposure, and developmental neglect (McLaurin & Liebman, 2012; Yadav & Sengupta, 2009). This situation reflects a broader structural injustice where the fundamental rights of children to adequate shelter, health, and protection—clearly defined under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989)—are systematically violated in the context of seasonal migration.

As Nieuwenhuys (1996) emphasizes, the invisibility of these children within labor regimes allows for the normalization of their deprivation, positioning their care as an unacknowledged externality of agricultural production systems. Tronto's (2013) ethics of care framework further underscores the moral failure of societies and institutions that benefit from migratory labor while neglecting their responsibilities toward the youngest and most dependent members of these laboring communities.

Limited Access to Early Childhood Education and Awareness

The findings of this study reveal a stark lack of access to early childhood education (ECE) among children aged 4–6 years in seasonal agricultural migrant families. Among the 37 children eligible for free public preschool education, only one was found to have attended such a program in their city of origin. None of the children accessed early education services during the migration period. Although a small number were temporarily enrolled in a local summer school initiative during the hazelnut harvest, the program was limited in scope, informal in structure, and unavailable to most families due to transportation and communication barriers.

The majority of parents demonstrated low levels of awareness regarding the existence, value, and rights-based status of early childhood education. The interviews revealed widespread misconceptions, such as the belief that ECE is necessary only for children once they begin primary school or that formal services are not available to migrant families. One mother stated, “I didn’t know they could go to school before first grade. We are always moving. Even if there is a school, we don’t know where to go or how to ask.”

This lack of access reflects broader global patterns where children of migrant laborers frequently remain excluded from formal education systems due to structural barriers, mobility, and the absence of targeted early childhood policies (Richter et al., 2006; Bennett et al., 2014; Betancourt et al., 2013). Early childhood is recognized as a critical developmental window, and missing structured education during this period can result in long-term adverse effects on cognitive, emotional, and social outcomes (UNESCO & UNICEF, 2024). However, in many migratory labor contexts, the implementation of educational rights for young children remains weak, and early learning opportunities are often inaccessible for families engaged in seasonal work.

Studies across different migratory settings have shown that limited access to childcare and preschool services—especially for children under the age of six—exacerbates existing inequalities and contributes to the intergenerational transmission of social exclusion (McLaurin & Liebman, 2012; Dreby, 2007). As Becot and Inwood (2024) highlight in the context of farm-based economies, unrecognized childcare demands significantly shape family labor dynamics and often lead to the policy invisibility of young children’s educational needs.

In Türkiye, as in many other migratory labor systems, the exclusion of young children from educational services is frequently perceived not as a structural policy failure but as an unavoidable consequence of mobility and seasonal work patterns (Uyan Semerci & Erdoğan, 2017). Additionally, parental educational attainment—which is often low due to longstanding patterns of marginalization—further constrains both awareness of and access to preschool opportunities (Uzun & Sahan, 2020). This continued invisibility of young children reinforces a cycle of deprivation and exclusion, undermining their right to education and development as outlined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989).

Infant care and feeding practices

Infant care has emerged as one of the most vulnerable dimensions of seasonal agricultural migration. Mothers of infants reported significant difficulties in providing basic nutrition and developmental care during the harvest season. The demands of agricultural labor, combined with inadequate shelter conditions and a lack of access to formula, severely disrupted breastfeeding practices. In the absence of appropriate alternatives, babies are typically fed cow milk, diluted tea, or starch-based fluids. These improvised feeding strategies, while rooted in necessity, increased the risk of gastrointestinal issues, malnutrition, and developmental delays.

The daily routines of mothers—whether working in fields or managing intense domestic labor—allow minimal time for direct infant interaction. Many described themselves as “too exhausted to play or talk,” explaining that caregiving was limited to essential needs such as feeding or hygiene. As one mother put it, “After coming back from the field, I have to light the fire, bake bread, and do the laundry—by the time I finish, I am so exhausted that I don’t even have the energy to answer my children’s questions.”

In several cases, older children, themselves of preschool or early school age, were responsible for caring for their infant siblings throughout the day.

Similar dynamics have been observed across various global agricultural and construction labor contexts, where the caregiving responsibilities of women remain institutionally unsupported and socially devalued (Betancourt et al., 2013; Bennett et al., 2014). In these systems, mothers frequently perform an unrecognized “double shift,” engaging in long hours of physical labor while simultaneously bearing the burden of childrearing in environments lacking even basic infrastructure and support (McLaurin & Liebman, 2012). The realities observed in this study echo these patterns, as mothers attempt to balance caregiving and agricultural labor under exhausting and often unsafe conditions, without external assistance or relief.

From the perspective of care ethics, this reflects a profound “care deficit” (Tronto, 2013), whereby societies and economic systems rely on the unpaid reproductive labor of women while offering minimal institutional recognition or support. The effects of this deficit are particularly severe for infants and toddlers, who are deprived not only of material resources but also of sustained emotional interaction essential for secure attachment and brain development (Yadav & Sengupta, 2009). In the context of seasonal agricultural migration, access to pre-school education is not merely an educational provision but a crucial developmental intervention. Early childhood education offers structured learning, socialization opportunities, and stable daily routines that can buffer the adverse effects of instability, unsafe living conditions, and limited access to age-appropriate learning materials. Participation in pre-school has been shown to strengthen school readiness, improve language and cognitive skills, and foster socio-emotional resilience, thereby playing a critical role in breaking cycles of intergenerational disadvantage (UNICEF, 2021; Britto et al., 2017). In migratory labor settings, ensuring access to pre-school is therefore a matter of both educational equity and child protection.

The lack of public health services—such as child wellness visits, breastfeeding support, or nutritional screenings—exacerbates these vulnerabilities and demonstrates the institutional neglect of caregiving families in migratory labor systems.

These findings underscore the urgent need to reframe early childhood care as a shared societal obligation rather than a private maternal duty, especially in contexts where state and employer systems benefit directly from the family-based labor model without assuming responsibility for the well-being of children.

Exposure to Inappropriate Social Environments

Field observations and interviews revealed that children living in seasonal agricultural migration camps are routinely exposed to environments and behaviors that are developmentally inappropriate and potentially harmful. In overcrowded tent areas, families share limited space for sleeping, dressing, and performing daily routines. Children are exposed to adult behaviours such as changing clothes, and using coarse language in close proximity. Many families were observed smoking inside closed tents, with infants and toddlers present. In Area 2, instances of alcohol consumption and verbal aggression among adults occurred openly, with children playing nearby or within earshot.

This blurred boundary between private and public life creates a context in which children internalize behaviors that are not age-appropriate. Physical punishment was observed or reported in multiple families and appeared normalized among both caregivers and children. Some children replicate these behaviors through aggressive play, physical force or offensive language with peers. One mother stated, “They do what they see. They hit each other when they fight, just like the adults.”

These observations are consistent with prior studies across migratory labour contexts, which highlights how unstructured, unsupervised, and overstimulating environments significantly increase psychological and behavioral risks for children (Richter et al., 2006; Betancourt et al., 2013; Dreby, 2007). Children who are left without adequate supervision, particularly in overcrowded and unsafe settings, are more likely to experience emotional dysregulation, exposure to trauma, and the normalization of aggressive or harmful behaviors (Nieuwenhuys, 1996). Such conditions foster cycles of emotional neglect and behavioral instability that can have long-term developmental consequences.

From a child rights perspective, these living conditions are fundamentally incompatible with the rights to safety, care, and psychological integrity as articulated in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989). Tronto’s (2013) care ethics framework further positions this neglect as a moral failure of attentiveness and societal responsibility, exposing how the burdens of care are displaced onto families without systemic support.

Importantly, the persistence of these inappropriate and unsafe environments is not solely a product of poverty but reflects a deeper structural neglect, where no public institution

assumes accountability for ensuring protective and nurturing conditions for the children of migrant laborers. This systemic invisibility allows agricultural labor regimes to externalize the costs of care, leaving children vulnerable to both physical risks and emotional harm that remain unaddressed within policy discourses (Bennett et al., 2014; McLaurin & Liebman, 2012).

Parental interaction and the gendered care burden

One of the most striking findings of this study is the limited and fragmented interaction between parents—particularly mothers—and their young children in the context of seasonal agricultural migration. Mothers in migrant families are burdened with multiple, overlapping responsibilities: agricultural labor during the day and intense domestic duties such as cooking, cleaning, collecting firewood, and laundering in the evenings. Fathers, although present, rarely reported participating in caregiving activities, often citing physical fatigue or adherence to traditional gender roles.

This unequal distribution of labor severely restricted mothers' ability to engage in responsive caregiving, emotional support, or educational stimulation. As one mother explained, "I see my children in the morning when I dress them and at night when I put them to bed. That's all I can manage." Despite their physical proximity, parents and children often remained emotionally distant due to constant time scarcity and exhaustion. In several households, children are left to entertain or regulate themselves for extended periods of the day, often through peer interaction or unsupervised play.

This pattern reflects what Tronto (2013) conceptualizes as a systemic "care deficit," wherein the structural conditions of migratory labor systems erode the capacity of families—especially women—to meet the relational and developmental needs of their children. The overburdening of mothers with both productive labor in the agricultural sector and reproductive labor in caregiving roles underscores the failure to recognize care as a shared social responsibility rather than a private, maternal obligation (McLaurin & Liebman, 2012; Yadav & Sengupta, 2009). The near-complete invisibility of paternal caregiving in these contexts further reinforces entrenched gender norms and amplifies the emotional and physical burdens carried by women.

From a feminist political economy perspective, the reliance on unpaid caregiving labor within seasonal migration systems mirrors broader global patterns where the reproduction of the labor force is sustained by women's invisible and unsupported contributions (Betancourt et al., 2013; Bennett et al., 2014). As Fraser (2014) argues, the privatization of care under post-family wage regimes systematically devalues caregiving labor, while Engster and Metz (2014) emphasize that justice requires the public recognition of and responsibility for care work as a societal necessity. Similarly, Hochschild's (2000) concept of "global care chains"

and Razavi and Staab's (2012) analysis of the global political economy of care demonstrate how the burdens of caregiving are often displaced onto marginalized women, particularly in low-wage and migratory labor sectors.

The findings of this study echo these international patterns, showing that in many rural labor contexts—including seasonal agricultural migration—caregiving remains institutionally unsupported, socially devalued, and extracted in the pursuit of agricultural productivity. Without structural recognition and redistribution of caregiving responsibilities, these systems perpetuate intergenerational cycles of exclusion and deprivation for the youngest members of migrant labor families.

General discussion and implications

This study provides a comprehensive analysis of the interrelated vulnerabilities faced by children aged 0–6 within the context of seasonal agricultural migration in Türkiye. These risks—ranging from poor living conditions and lack of early education to health neglect and inadequate caregiving support—are not incidental or isolated. Rather, they are produced by the intersection of precarious labor conditions, absent or fragmented public services, and deeply gendered caregiving arrangements. Similar dynamics have been documented in multiple international contexts, including informal labor housing in South Africa (Richter et al., 2006), construction camps in India (Betancourt et al., 2013), and rural migrant households in Mexico (Dreby, 2007), suggesting that this phenomenon is part of a broader structural neglect within global migratory labor regimes.

Although young children are not formally part of the labor force, their well-being is profoundly shaped by the working conditions and social position of their families. In many cases, children live in the same spaces as working adults, yet remain outside formal protection systems. The reliance on family-organized, makeshift care arrangements—combined with the absence of safe housing, clean water, healthcare, or education—signals a critical failure of public institutions to uphold their obligations toward the most vulnerable. These patterns reflect international findings that caregiving responsibilities in such contexts fall almost exclusively on mothers, who are overburdened with both productive and reproductive labor, often without support or recognition (McLaurin & Liebman, 2012; Yadav & Sengupta, 2009; Betancourt et al., 2013).

From a care ethics perspective (Tronto, 2013), this represents a systemic “care deficit,” where societies fail to meet the basic developmental and emotional needs of children. Moreover, from the standpoint of feminist political economy, this situation reflects how the reproduction of the labor force is sustained through the unpaid and unsupported caregiving work of women—who are both essential to and excluded from economic value chains (Fraser, 2014; Hochschild, 2000; Razavi & Staab, 2012). These findings support a growing body of

literature arguing that sustainability in agriculture cannot be defined merely in economic or ecological terms but must also incorporate justice, care, and intergenerational well-being (Pelek, 2020; Lemke & Bellows, 2015).

Importantly, the invisibility of children in early childhood—particularly those under six years old—raises significant ethical and policy challenges. Despite Türkiye’s legal commitments to child rights under international conventions (UNCRC, 1989), the findings of this study highlight serious gaps in practice and implementation for children in mobile and socioeconomically marginalized families. The normalization of logistical barriers as explanations for exclusion must be critically examined. The lack of early intervention mechanisms, parental support programs, or mobile education and health services reflects an adult-centered, productivity-driven policy paradigm that leaves young children behind (Becot & Inwood, 2024).

Ultimately, this study calls for a rethinking of how childhood, migration, and agricultural labor are conceptualized in both research and policy. The rights and needs of children under six should not be considered peripheral or secondary simply because they are not workers. On the contrary, they are a litmus test of a society’s ethical foundation and the long-term sustainability of its social and economic systems. How we care for children in migratory labor contexts reflects not only our policy choices but also our collective moral compass.

Conclusion

This study reveals the critical and multifaceted risks faced by children aged 0–6 in the context of seasonal agricultural migration in Türkiye. Drawing on field observations and in-depth interviews conducted during the hazelnut harvest season, the findings illustrate how deeply embedded structural factors—such as inadequate infrastructure, unsafe living environments, fragmented policy coverage, and gendered caregiving arrangements—shape young children’s early experiences of exclusion, neglect, and deprivation. Although these children are not directly engaged in labor, they are among the most affected by its consequences, facing chronic risks to their health, safety, emotional development, and access to education.

These vulnerabilities do not stem from individual parental decisions or temporary logistical obstacles. Rather, they reflect a broader structural neglect and the systemic invisibility of young children within agricultural labor regimes and social policy frameworks. The persistent exclusion of these children from formal education, health services, and child protection mechanisms represents a failure to uphold the fundamental rights guaranteed by international conventions such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989).

Moreover, the disproportionate caregiving burden placed on mothers—without corresponding institutional recognition, redistribution of responsibilities, or material support—further exacerbates this exclusion. This situation echoes what Tronto (2013) conceptualizes as a “care deficit,” where reproductive labor is essential to sustaining the labor force yet re-

mains unpaid, unsupported, and invisible. These findings also align with global research showing that the reproduction of the workforce in migratory and rural labor settings is sustained through the unrecognized contributions of women's caregiving work (McLaurin & Liebman, 2012; Betancourt et al., 2013; Bennett et al., 2014).

This situation also reflects prevailing gender norms in seasonal agricultural communities, where fathers tend to be less engaged in early childcare and less motivated to discuss it; however, this gendered participation also constitutes a methodological limitation of the study. To address these challenges, the study proposes a set of multilevel policy and programmatic recommendations that prioritize the rights, well-being, and developmental needs of young children in migratory labor contexts.

Policy and Practice Recommendations

- Seasonal agricultural migration programs must recognize the presence and rights of children aged 0–6; early childhood should be prioritized not only for child labor prevention but also for care and protection.
- Free, culturally responsive mobile crèches and temporary preschool services, aligned with national standards, should be provided during harvest seasons.
- Minimum infrastructure standards must be set for seasonal settlements, including clean water, safe sanitation, electricity, and child-safe spaces; risks should be mitigated and monitored.
- Mobile health teams should provide sustainable immunization, nutrition screening, and maternal-child health services throughout the migration cycle.
- Care-sensitive social protection policies (e.g., caregiving allowances, paid rest days) should be developed to support mothers' caregiving work; paternal involvement should be encouraged.
- Coordination among municipalities, education, and health sectors must be strengthened to track migrant children and ensure access to services.
- Agricultural companies and stakeholders should co-finance early childhood services; successful public-private partnership models should be documented and scaled up.

Safeguarding the rights and well-being of young children within seasonal migration systems is not only a humanitarian obligation but also a reflection of the ethical integrity and long-term sustainability of agricultural and social systems. Ensuring that no child is left behind—regardless of their mobility status or economic background—requires systemic reforms grounded in principles of care, equity, and intergenerational justice.

Conflict of Interest Statement:

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest. This study was conducted independently and does not involve any financial, personal, or professional relationships that could be construed as potential conflicts of interest.

References

- Ağyar, E., & Malik, R. (2022). Challenges in accessing education and health services for children in seasonal agricultural migration: The case of Şanlıurfa. *Turkish Journal of Population Studies*, 4(1), 20–35. Retrieved from <https://tujpa.com/index.php/journal/article/view/54>
- Becot, F. A., & Inwood, S. M. (2024). Children needs and childcare: an illustration of how underappreciated social and economic needs shape the farm enterprise. *Agriculture and Human Values*, 1-20. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10460-024-10594-z>
- Bernstein, H. (2010). *Class dynamics of agrarian change* (Vol. 1). Kumarian Press.
- Bennett, R., Hosegood, V., Newell, M., & McGrath, N. (2014). Understanding family migration in rural south africa: exploring children's inclusion in the destination households of migrant parents. *Population Space and Place*, 21(4), 310-321. <https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.1842>
- Betancourt, T., Shaahinfar, A., Kellner, S., Dhavan, N., & Williams, T. (2013). A qualitative case study of child protection issues in the indian construction industry: investigating the security, health, and interrelated rights of migrant families. *BMC Public Health*, 13(1). <https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2458-13-858>
- Britto, P. R., Lye, S. J., Proulx, K., Yousafzai, A. K., Matthews, S. G., Vaivada, T., ... & Bhutta, Z. A. (2017). Nurturing care: Promoting early childhood development. *The Lancet*, 389(10064), 91–102. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(16\)31390-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(16)31390-3)
- Çevlik, Z., Yılmaz, B., & Kaya, S. (2022). Seasonal agricultural labor migration and early childhood development: Challenges faced by seasonal agricultural worker families and their children. *Atlas Journal*, 8(47), 1304–1323. <https://doi.org/10.51458/atlas.1135585>
- Development Workshop, (2013). *Basic research on children aged 6–14 affected by seasonal agricultural migration* (2nd ed.) [in Turkish]. Ankara: Kalkınma Atölyesi Publications.
- Dreby, J. (2007). Children and power in mexican transnational families. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 69(4), 1050-1064. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2007.00430.x>
- Engster, D., & Metz, T. (Eds.). (2014). *Justice, politics, and the family*. Routledge.
- European Commission. (2023). Global value chains: Potential synergies between external trade policy and internal economic initiatives to address the strategic dependencies of the EU (Executive Summary, EXPO_STU(2023)702582). Policy Department, Directorate-General for External Policies. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2023/702582/EXPO_STU\(2023\)702582_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2023/702582/EXPO_STU(2023)702582_EN.pdf)
- Folbre, N. (2001). *The invisible heart: Economics and family values*. New Press.

- Fraser, N. (2014). *After the family wage: Gender equity and the welfare state*. In D. Engster & T. Metz (Eds.), Justice, politics, and the family (pp. 88–108). Routledge.
- Hasell, J., Roser, M., Ortiz-Ospina, E., & Arriagada, P. (2022). *Child poverty and development statistics*. Our World in Data. <https://ourworldindata.org>
- Hochschild, A. R. (2000). *Global care chains and emotional surplus value*. In W. Hutton & A. Giddens (Eds.), On the edge: Living with global capitalism (pp. 130–146). Jonathan Cape.
- International Labour Organization (ILO). (n.d.). Ratification of C182 - Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No. 182): Türkiye. Retrieved April 2025 from: https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=1000:11300:0::NO:11300:P11300_INSTRUMENT_ID:312327
- ILO & UNICEF. (2021). *Child labour: Global estimates 2020, trends and the road forward*. International Labour Organization and United Nations Children’s Fund. https://www.ilo.org/global/publications/books/WCMS_797515/lang--en/index.htm
- ILO & UNICEF. (2023). *Ending child labour: The role of due diligence in responsible business conduct*. International Labour Organization and United Nations Children’s Fund. https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/%40ed_norm/%40relconf/documents/meetingdocument/wcms_869573.pdf
- İltus, S. (2013). Realities of life for children of seasonal migrant workers. *Early Childhood Matters* (121), 5-7.
- İş, E., & Özkan, B. (2024). Evaluation of the problems experienced by children of seasonal agricultural workers in basic education during the education process, according to the opinions of administrators and teachers. *Ekev Akademi Dergisi*, 98, 62–74. <https://doi.org/10.17753/sosekev.1426395>
- Katz, C. (2004). *Growing up global: Economic restructuring and children’s everyday lives*. U of Minnesota Press.
- Kontaş Azaklı, T. (2021). Gezici mevsimlik tarım işçilerinin 36-72 aylık çocuklarına yönelik geliştirilen aile eğitim programının ve okul öncesi eğitim etkinliklerinin etkilerinin incelenmesi (Doctoral dissertation, Marmara Üniversitesi (Turkey)).
- Lemke, S., & Bellows, A. C. (2015). Sustainable food systems, gender, and participation: Foregrounding women in the context of the right to adequate food and nutrition. In *Gender, nutrition, and the human right to adequate food* (pp. 254-340). Routledge.
- Marandi, S., & Patel, S. (2022). Seasonal migration and its influence on children’s education: A study from the select village from the Santhal Pargana of Jharkhand. *International Journal of Research and Review*, 9(10). https://www.ijrrjournal.com/IJRR_Vol.9_Issue.10_Oct2022/IJRR57.pdf
- McLaurin, J. and Liebman, A. (2012). Unique agricultural safety and health issues of migrant and immigrant children. *Journal of Agromedicine*, 17(2), 186-196. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1059924x.2012.658010>
- Nieuwenhuys, O. (1996). The paradox of child labor and anthropology. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 25, 237–251. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.anthro.25.1.237>
- Pelek, D. (2020). Ethnic residential segregation among seasonal migrant workers: from temporary tents to new rural ghettos in southern Türkiye. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 49(1), 54–77. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2020.1767077>

- Razavi, S. (2009). The gendered impacts of liberalization: towards “embedded liberalism”?. In *The Gendered Impacts of Liberalization* (pp. 1-34). Routledge.
- Razavi, S., & Staab, S. (Eds.). (2012). *Global variations in the political and social economy of care: Worlds apart* (Vol. 8). Routledge.
- Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Labour and Social Security. (2017). *National programme on the elimination of child labour (2017–2023)*. Ankara: Ministry of Labour and Social Security, Directorate General of Labour. ISBN: 978-975-455-269-0.
- Richter, L., Norris, S., Swart, T., & Ginsburg, C. (2006). In-migration and living conditions of young adolescents in greater johannesburg, south africa. *Social Dynamics*, 32(1), 195-216. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02533950608628724>
- Sengupta, S., & Guchhait, S. K. (2022). Seasonal Migration and Child’s Schooling: A Survival Approach. *Contemporary Voice of Dalit*, 0(0). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2455328X221131663>
- Şimşek, Z., & Koruk, İ. (2011). The effects of migratory seasonal farmwork on psychomotor development and growth among children ages 0–5 years in Southeastern Anatolia. *Turkish Journal of Public Health*, 9(3), 157-165.
- Tronto, J. C. (2013). *Caring democracy: Markets, equality, and justice*. NYU Press.
- Turkish Statistical Institute (TURKSTAT). (2020). Child labour force survey results, 2019. Turkish Statistical Institute. <https://data.tuik.gov.tr/Bulten/Index?p=Child-Labour-Force-Survey-2019-33807>
- UNCRC. (1989). United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child>
- UNESCO & UNICEF. (2024). *Global report on early childhood care and education: The right to a strong foundation*. Paris: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF). <https://doi.org/10.54675/FWQA2113>
- UNICEF. (2016). The impact of seasonal migration on the rights of children in Türkiye. <https://www.unicef.org>
- UNICEF. (2021). Access to early childhood education for vulnerable children. <https://www.unicef.org>
- UNICEF. (n.d.). Child rights and business: Global supply chains. United Nations Children’s Fund. Retrieved April 23, 2025, from <https://www.unicef.org/childrightsandbusiness/workstreams/global-supply-chains>
- Ural, O., & Konaş Azaklı, T. (2019). Gezici mevsimlik tarım işçisi aileler üzerine etnografik bir araştırma: Şanlıurfa örneği. 6. Uluslararası Okul Öncesi Eğitimi Kongresi Bildiriler Kitabı (ss. 181–191).
- Uyan Semerci, P., & Erdoğan, E. (2017). I am not saying I grew up on my own: Research findings of the project on improving the living conditions of children of seasonal migrant agricultural workers in Adana from the perspective of child well-being. Istanbul: Istanbul Bilgi University Publications.
- Uzun, A., & Sahan, G. (2020). Evaluation of teachers’ views on the education of seasonal agricultural worker mothers and their children. *The Journal of Academic Social Science Studies*, 14(84), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.29228/jasss.45390>
- Yadav, S. and Sengupta, G. (2009). Environmental and occupational health problems of child labour: some issues and challenges for future. *Journal of Human Ecology*, 28(2), 143-148. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09709274.2009.11906230>