

## The Republic of Deficiency: Why Do Child Labor Tragedies Keep Repeating in Egypt?



The recent tragedy on the Regional Ring Road in Monufia, which claimed the lives of several young girls, was neither the first of its kind—nor, tragically, the last. As Egypt’s Minister of Transport and Industry, Kamel al-Wazir, toured the site following the incident, another accident occurred—this time live on air.

Just a week after that inspection, which exemplified the arrogance and disregard for Egyptian lives in the so-called “New Republic,” a new crash on the same road claimed nine more lives and left many injured.

Only then did the president intervene, projecting concern for the lives lost in vain—bodies strewn across asphalt, normalized on what many now call the “road of death.” He ordered the closure of sections of the road undergoing maintenance and upgrades.

This highway is among the president’s pet projects—a 365-kilometer artery linking the Delta, Upper Egypt, and Greater Cairo. It’s touted as a cornerstone of the country’s revamped infrastructure, a venture that has plunged Egypt into billions of dollars in debt.

One could argue, of course, that road accidents aren’t unique to Egypt; such tragedies occur worldwide. Indeed, in 2024, Egypt recorded a 10% decrease in road accidents compared to the previous year.



### The Funeral of the Monufia Girls—Victims of the Regional Ring Road

Yet hidden beneath these statistics is a stark reality: of the 68,000 people who have died on Egyptian roads over the past decade, many were children—children who should have been in school or at play, not working to survive.

What drove them to death rather than to the classroom like their peers? Why did 19 young girls lose their lives for a daily wage of 130 Egyptian pounds—barely \$3—an amount that can scarcely cover a private tutoring session or the cost of a study guide?

Poverty has long driven children in Egypt out of classrooms and into the labor force. Some leave school entirely; others attempt to juggle both.

Under President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi’s rule, the past decade of the “New Republic” has seen a cascade of policy failures that only deepen this vicious cycle. Constitutionally mandated to allocate 6% of the national budget to public education, the government has never met even half that figure. In 2023, the education budget stood at 230 billion pounds—less than a third of the required 710 billion.

Poverty, exacerbated by debt and inflation, has intensified. While the government has not released updated poverty data since 2020, a 2024 World Bank report estimates Egypt’s national poverty rate at 33.5% in 2022, with 66% of the poor living in rural areas—where child labor and road fatalities are most prevalent.

Fragile Labor and Disposable Lives

The fragrance chain “Mazaya” is among the most prestigious in Egypt, with some perfumes retailing for as much as 35,000 pounds—over \$500. There are millions of Egyptians who can afford such luxuries.

The brand boasts over 25 stores nationwide and continues to expand. But these millions are mirrored by tens of millions more for whom such a shop might as well not exist—people whose daily struggle is to secure their next meal, not a bottle of perfume.

In 2024, the BBC aired a documentary exploring child labor in rural Egypt—specifically children harvesting jasmine for export to global fragrance companies. Egyptian jasmine is prized for its quality and aroma. The work is seasonal, grueling, and nocturnal—flowers must be picked before dawn to preserve their scent.

The documentary depicts children earning less than a dollar a day for their labor, without contracts, protections, or oversight. Child labor remains illegal in Egypt, yet enforcement is nonexistent.

If these children are fortunate, they won’t drown in an irrigation canal or die in a road accident. But even the “lucky” ones may suffer illness or injury from their labor.

In 2022, a “qanater ferry” accident claimed the lives of children who had just finished a day’s work at a poultry farm for 50 pounds—a little under \$3. A pickup truck carrying 23 children (13 boys and 10 girls) plunged into the Nile. Seven died, and some bodies weren’t recovered for over a week.

That same April, in Beheira governorate, eight children aged 12 to 15 drowned after the tuk-tuk transporting them from a potato farm overturned into an irrigation canal. They were on their way home to eat suhoor during Ramadan, having earned the same paltry wage—50 pounds or less.

Beyond child labor lies another systemic failure: informal and seasonal labor. Article 76 of Egypt’s new labor law obliges the state to regulate and protect this workforce, including by establishing welfare and insurance mechanisms. Yet no action has been taken.

### Girls as Routine Casualties

Among the most vulnerable to these disasters are young girls. In the Monufia village of Sanabsa, 19 school-age girls—most of them minors—perished. The tragedy, while horrifying, is not unique. It reflects a deadly, recurring pattern.

In May 2024, after finishing their middle school exams, a group of 15-year-old girls accompanied by an older woman headed to seasonal jobs at agricultural

export firms. For the companies, these girls were a goldmine—cheap labor without contracts, protections, or accountability. For the girls, it was a way to help their families and themselves.

Their work was technically illegal—Egypt prohibits child labor under 14, and under 18 only under strict conditions. Yet the practice persists, sanctioned in effect by a government that sees it as a coping mechanism for the poverty its own policies have fueled. On this day, however, fate intervened: their microbus plunged into the Nile from the “Abu Ghaleb ferry,” killing 17 of them.

This wasn't just another road tragedy—it was a window into a broader phenomenon. Media coverage focused on the driver's recklessness—he'd left the vehicle unsecured during an argument. Police reports detailed maintenance lapses. But no one asked the real questions: Why were these girls working during their school break? Who was responsible?

The culprits named in the investigation included the driver, two ferry workers, the ferry's owner, and a local official. But the real omissions are telling. Egypt's Ministry of Manpower, the agricultural company that employed the girls—none were held accountable. No media outlet linked the tragedy to Egypt's broader epidemic of child labor.

The question everyone should be asking is: What forces these girls into such dangerous, illegal work in the first place?

Answering that truthfully would mean indicting a decade of state policies that have immiserated rural Egyptians. Instead, media narratives divert attention—focusing on driver error or logistical failures. Minister Kamel al-Wazir, in defending himself after the Monufia tragedy, claimed, “If the driver is a drug addict, what can I do to stop that?”

But these are not freak accidents. In just the past three years, multiple vehicle crashes have killed groups of child laborers en route to or from work.

According to a 2025 report by the New Woman Foundation, between January 21 and April 23, there were 25 such incidents in Upper Egypt and the Delta, resulting in 305 injuries—including 81 minors—and 44 deaths, of which 12 were children.

These tragedies reveal a chilling pattern. The government blames “human error” or insufficient road maintenance. Yet what emerges clearly is a single, repeating catastrophe: children dying en masse—especially in rural and Upper Egypt. The victims are disproportionately girls, in a country that annually dedicates entire campaigns to “empowering women.”

This is not a republic of development. It is a republic of deficiency—where



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perfume bottles are more valuable than children's lives.

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