

# Where have all these young boys come from

**Zulfiqar Shah** talks to some working children to find out their problems that compelled them to work when they should

**Y** have been studying

Asir, 9, is among three young helpers who provide tools to their *ustad* in an automobile repair shop on main Jamshed Road in Karachi. These innocent boys with greased greyish clothes come early in the morning at the makeshift shop and return home often after midnight. This is how these young boys spend their days.

They live in small homes in the different slums of the city. Each boy returns home with a meagre amount of not more than Rs. 20 in pocket. Their job is to pull up the heavy car jacks, open up other automobile parts and help their *ustads* all the way in repairing old vehicles.

They are not only forced to work hard on nominal wages but are often also verbally abused by their *ustads* and beaten up on minor mistakes. "Once I gave a wrong tool to my *ustad*, he got angry and suddenly threw it back at me. It hit me on my head," Yasir tell *TNS*, showing a wound mark just above his left eyebrow.

Yasir dislikes it when his *ustad* calls him nasty names. "It is really humiliating but I have to bear all this because of my family's economic problems," he adds. Unfortunately, Yasir is one of the main supporters of his family of six including three younger sisters, living in a slum near Shanti Nagar, in Gulshan-e-Iqbal. His father works as a helper with a mason, and earns hardly Rs. 100 a day.

Yasir has never been to school. He says he always used to dream of going to school, instead of working with a mechanic, but now his aim is to become a good mechanic like his *ustad* Billa. The other two



**Small shoulders, huge responsibilities: Children working to sustain their families.**

boys also have similar stories to tell.

A few meters from the mechanic shop is a restaurant. Here Aziz, 8, works gets a meagre Rs. 15 for an entire day's labour. He says he started off by getting two meals a day for his work but now the restaurant owner pays him this small amount instead.

He washes the dishes all day, using a cheap brand of washing chemical which hurts the skin of his hands quite badly. "Yes, it hurts, but I have to do the work," says Aziz. "My mother applies hair oil on my hands but then the next day my hand hurts again," he adds.

Ironically, most mechanics and restaurant owners in Jamshed Road and adjoining areas, employ young boys as helpers on nominal wages. According to estimates, the number of working children, aged between four and fourteen, in Pakistan is more than 11 million. Some estimates suggest that about 20,000 children under the age of 14 work in vehicle repairing shops alone throughout Karachi.

Children work for a number of reasons, and the most important is poverty. Though children are not well paid, in most cases they are still the major contributors in family incomes. "My mother buys two kilograms of flour with my daily earnings,"

says Naeem 10, who works in a gas welding shop. "She is happy that at least I am earning some money to help my family to survive."

Aziz, however, had to work because his poverty-stricken family could not even feed him. "My mother told me that while working for a hotel, I would at least be fed," says Aziz, who with his fragile body, seems to be in real need to be fed. He says his father works in a factory for Rs 2000 per month and so he has to work for the sustenance of his family.

Poverty is synonymous with child labour. According to a recent report of the Social Policy and Development Centre, almost one third of the population of the country is poor. That translates into 46 million people currently living below the poverty-line. One out of three families is living in poverty. Much of Pakistan's poverty is chronic, with almost 70 per cent of the country's poor households being headed by illiterates, elderly people, or females.

A study conducted by the Pakistan Institute of Labour Education and Research (PILER) also suggests that poverty is the root cause of child labour. The survey report of 185 working children reveals that 82 per cent of them belong to households living below the poverty line. The average size of

such households is 7.6 as compared to the national average of 6.30.

According to the report, 53 per cent of the parents of the working children replied in positive when asked whether they knew that their children were working in hazardous conditions. But they said they were compelled to send their children to work to make both ends meet. The report also mentions that 42 per cent employers say they employ children because they cost less. Another 39 per cent say they employ children because they are more competent for the job.

Unfortunately, the children compelled to work face extremely harsh working conditions. Doctors claim eye infections, TB, asthma, pain in joints and lung infections are common complaints among working children.

The reasons are that they have to go through extreme exploitation, toiling for long hours for minimal pay. Their work under severe conditions shunts their physical and mental development. They have to go through mental as well as physical abuse and often end up with severe diseases and mental disorders even before they reach their youth. They are vulnerable to all kinds of injuries and diseases.

Of the 185 working children

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surveyed by PILER, 181 said they worked right through the day with just a half an hour lunch break. 42 per cent reported sustaining injuries during work, 75 per cent said their bodies ached and pained after a full day of work and 70 per cent said they started feeling tired after just 2-3 hours of work.

"Child labour is a common issue for most developing countries," says Zia Ahmed Awan, president of the Lawyers for Human Rights and legal Aid (LHRA) an NGO working for the rehabilitation of destitute children and women. "But the lack of political will and an insensitive approach is adding to the problem in Pakistan. No one takes responsibility," he adds.

Unfortunately, the laws restricting child labour are widely violated or ignored. The children act 1991 prohibits employment of any child under the age of 14 in hazardous sectors and also sets some rules for working in non-hazardous occupations. But the law is not being respected.

Surprisingly, there is also a lack of awareness about the existence of any such laws. A recent survey shows that 98 per cent of the employers and 80 per cent of the parents of working children are unaware of the existence of any laws prohibiting child labour. Sadly, most of the children are employed in the informal sector so implementation of laws is a very difficult task.

The complete eradication of child labour as per United Nations Convention on the Rights of Child (CRC) is necessary as Pakistan is a signatory of the CRC. Article 32, of the convention specifies that "the state parties recognise the right of the child to be protected from exploitation and from performing any work that is likely hazardous or to interfere with the child's education or be harmful to the child's health or physical mental, spiritual, moral or social development."

It is the duty of the government to come up with concrete measures to solve the problem. The government needs to educate and provide basic facilities to the people. There is also a need to launch programmes under which poor children can learn and earn at the same time. ♦