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Finding alternatives to the market

Leather tanning is an ancient profession, in which animal hides are tanned and used to make leather products. Kasur is among the largest tanning centers in Pakistan, and due to the penetration of toxic waste from tanneries into its water and soil, the city is also one of the most polluted in the country.

Witnessing for the first time, the involvement of children at a tannery was, to say the least, unnering-first in April 1999, and the second three years later. The pungent smell of formalin, at the edge of the stench of animal skin leaves one gasping for fresh air; appallingly two boys, ages roughly 9-11, placed this chemical soaked skin into a wheelbarrow, and transported it from one work station to another. The scene that followed puts the fate of working children in Pakistan in a nutshell.

Upstairs, under the burning sun, a child not more than six years gave *gharoo* on

a roof, blackened with chemical. Barely able to open his eyes, he looked up at us in a state of drowsy numbness. Detached and disinterested in what was going on around him, all he seemed to know was that he must blindly do what he was made to, for it was the will of his *ustad* and the decision of his family. As far as he was concerned, it was simply his lot in life.

A tannery child's workday sometimes exceeds eight hours, with a small break for lunch. Most of these children are residents of the tannery area, where average family size is eight, and average income per family is only 4,000 rupees, which too minimal for a comfortable survival in present times. To the layperson, a working child clearly represents poverty and a family's obligation to send a child to work. But after several years of experience, NGO Sudhaar discovered that the phenomenon of poverty is used as too easy an excuse to explain, and excuse to many practices. This excuse is used by not only families of working children and their employers, but by the government too, to justify poor implementation of child labour laws.

"Child labour is not an isolated problem. It is the outcome of social, economic, and traditional factors inter-related in complex ways." Dependence on the earnings of the child is of two kinds-genuine and acquired. It is in the case of genuine



Due to their pliable nature and lack of awareness, children conform more easily than adult workers do. —Photos by the author

dependence—that the child's income of Rs300-400 becomes the difference between survival and impoverishment. This happens when the main bread-earner does not provide money in cases like parent's divorce, death, second marriage, or drug addiction. However in most cases, the earnings of children contribute very little to household income, and form only between 15-20 percent of total earnings.

Such is acquired dependence, where the family is not in absolute poverty, and then over time develops dependence. Such factors, according to Sudhaar, range from the "lack of an alternative, disillusionment with the education system, future job security through the learning of a skill, or simply greed and a habit of living beyond legitimate means." At this tannery in district Niaz Nagar that I first visited three years ago, some of the children have now grown up, still

doing what they did in the past. Others that day had not come to work because it had rained the day before, in which case work, such as the spraying of leather is avoided as humidity poses a risk to the quality of the leather. Another change was that, although children were still employed, outside hung a notice reading "children below the age of twelve not allowed".

It is claimed that proportionately lesser number children are now entering the labour force, partly due to a slump in the leather market, and partly due to an increase in awareness. Work is given by tannery owners to contractors, or supervisors on a contract basis, and as contractors are paid for a job in lump-sum, they save money by hiring children between ages 6-12, the cheapest labour available.

Children are employed mostly in smaller tanneries where production methods are non-

mechanised. Prior to its finished state, leather undergoes more than 20 stages of processing. Children are mainly involved in the cleaning and drying of leather, and in the spraying of leather with chemical formaldehyde (formalin), which—simple as they may sound—entail great danger. Accidents range from minor cuts to fatalities.

Due to their pliable nature and lack of awareness, children conform more easily than adult workers do. Children are often sent into chemical-filled drums to retrieve pieces of leather stuck to the sides. Naved is one such child, who does "*thol ka kaam*". There have been reports of children having been caught in these huge rotating drums, and being crushed to death, others have suffocated to death from concentration of poisonous gases and fumes. Some years ago, Maqsooda's five-year-old son slipped, fell into an unfenced chemical pit and drowned. Most accidents occur, because of negligence and disregard for safety precautions by employers. Also, some of the youngest children are made to spend the most time in the sun, in temperatures that go up to 45 degrees.

Fact has established, that educated children have higher lifetime earnings than illiterate workers; their health and safety improve if they do not enter the labour force at an early age, and that the educated are more likely to be productive than illiterate workers. Sudhaar has been working on the issue of child labour in Kasur since 1994, and has among its objectives a zero percent growth in the child labour market. 10-year-old Shehzad Riaz, used to work in a tannery; he now works at a motorcycle workshop in the afternoon, and in the morning comes to study at one of Sudhaar's non-formal schools.

But what does education actually do for the child? Children must be provided with an education not from the social, economic, or humanitarian perspective alone, but also because school is the provider and sustainer of a child's window, towards the fundamental human need for aspiration. And more so, for the working child who has otherwise been deprived of it and exposed to harsher realities. It is the sense of a "higher purpose" in life that school provides, against the child's all-consuming task of bringing home money to fill one's stomach and simply resigning to what seems to be one's destiny. Amir Ahmad, 9, goes to school

(Sudhaar's 'Chaanan 1') in the morning, then goes to work at a furniture factory, and from five to nine in the evening sells *rotis*. He says that his mother beats him when he plays, but likes to come to school and likes to learn English most of all.

As an initial intervention, Sudhaar adopted non-formal primary education for working and non-working children, as a means of phasing out child labour in Kasur. Despite the ongoing individual success of its schools, however, Sudhaar discovered that non-formal schooling is not a sustainable alternative. Input required is far greater in proportion to output. With the resources that were catering to 1,200 children in non-formal schools, it was possible to cater to 6,000 children in municipal and government schools. Also, although children from non-formal primary schooling are later mainstreamed into formal schools, due to the stark difference between the two school systems, the child is unable to adapt to formal education.

After signing a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Kasur Municipal Committee in 1998, Sudhaar began work with selected municipal and some government schools. Under this programme, via School Management Committees and School Councils, 25 schools have now been organised in Kasur, taking on activities, such as improving school infrastructure, teachers training programmes, providing evening classes for working children, improving the quality of education in schools, improving the examination system, and establishing a school monitoring and information system.

In essence, the programme empowers and helps to organise and train locals, and is gradually phasing out the intervention of foreign donors. Part of its success can be gauged from the indicators that Sudhaar is presently not contributing any financial support for infrastructure improvement in municipal schools. Evening classes have been started for working children, and the Private Schools Welfare Association, also, many government schools, who had initially opposed Sudhaar's interventions, are now approaching Sudhaar to work with them for the training of teachers, and improving the quality of education in their schools.

Although the battle is far from being won, this approach acquired after much trial and error, proves to be sound. In the end it is not whether a child actually ends up being a doctor, soldier, engineer, or teacher. But it is because of school that the child was allowed a certain degree of freedom from the overwhelming harshness of social and economic lack, and because of a sound education in the school environment, learned a heightened sense of respect for himself and for life.

child labour
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By Rabla Ezdi

Photo

childlabour



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