

# Plight of runaway children

Dawn  
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children

LAHORE, Sept 2: The railway police help centres recovered from various stations 1,162 people, a majority of them runaways, during the first year of their service.

Most of the people from tender age to elderly are believed to have run away due to suppression by parents, other members of family and teachers.

Many of the runaway children fall prey to pimps, paedophiles, prostitutes, pushers and beggar-traders, as their interviews and study of the causes of leaving home and hearth have revealed a shocking state of society.

Of the 1,162 people recovered since July 2003, when the first such centre was launched at the Lahore Railway Station, only 30.64 per cent of the children had lost contact with the their families due to the negligence of parents or guardians. Either they had staggered away from their home inadvertently or were missed somewhere during journey. But the remaining children bade goodbye to their families under unbearable pressures and injustice.

Once a lost person is recovered by a help centre, he/she is first of all asked for the reasons for taking such a step.

About 23 per cent children revealed that they ran away from schools either due to burden of studies or fear of punishment for not being able to do their homework under the given domestic circumstances.

Muhammad Imran, 9, resided at Baldia Colony (Ghoray Shah), Lahore, when he was brought to the help centre. He said he didn't want to go to school and his parents beat him black and blue for that.

Eleven-year-old Muhammad Wasim was caught from the stairs of the platform No 2 at the Lahore Railway Station. He told the centre officials that he lived with his parents in Karachi and was a student of class V. The boy couldn't adjust well in school and his father often thrashed him for that.

He said he would be grateful if he was sent to his grandfather Bashir Ahmad, who lived in Wazirabad. The help centre handed over the boy to his grandfather after through investigation.

Another 10 per cent children disclosed that they had run away because their teachers were very harsh to them. Eight-year-old Shahzad, hailing from Mansehra, was found at the Karachi Cantonment Railway Station. He said he was sent to a seminary where a teacher, Hafiz Mushtaq

Ahmad, subjected him to severe punishments for not memorizing lessons in Arabic.

The centre sent for his teacher and advised him to treat him nicely. The boy was handed over to his parents on the condition that they kept their ward under parental watch and ensure he was not ill-treated at the seminary.

Zainul Muzaffar, 11, hailed from Jawad Colony in Narowal, but was found roaming at the Lahore Railway Station. Responding to queries, he said the Qari at his *madressah* gave him a thrashing for not learning lessons by rote. He said he couldn't bear it and ran away.

His father, who was contacted through the local police, assured that he would provide him a better teacher.

Children are often forced to do hard labour in remote areas where raw and rugged life deprives them of their innocence. About 13 per cent of the runaways were victim of such a drudgery.

Javed Iqbal, 11, reached the Lahore Railway Station from his home at Shadbagh. He told the officials that he was working at an electronics shop and couldn't bear the hardship and forced labour by the shop owner. The help centre summoned Shahid Mahmood and warned him against treating the boy harshly. On his assurance, the child agreed to go back and work with him.

Eight-year-old Lubna, a resident of Narang Mandi, Sheikhupura, said her parents sent her to bungalows to do manual work and she was often beaten up, though she sometimes wanted to play.

The centre called in her mother, who said she could not earn enough and had to get her some work. She was told that her daughter was still a minor and that it was too inhuman to send such a small child for work. The help centre also warned the owners of bungalows against violating labour laws.

Another cause, which drives children to say goodbye to their families, are parents themselves. It is learnt that many parents become cruel to children due to misery, poverty, illness and addiction. They award severe punishments to children over petty matters.

Lack of parental care is the third big reason for children to go in search of a better living. Eleven per cent of the children caught by the help centres stated this reason.

Aniqa, 13, daughter of Rashid Ahmad, was found crying at a

porch of the Lahore Railway Station. As passengers passed by watching her in a distressed state, a woman brought her to the help centre where a lady police was deputed to ask her agony.

She disclosed that she had been living with her elder sister Rabia in Lahore Cantonment. She said her sister was very cruel and punished her often for no reason. She also showed marks of torture on her body and declared that she would not go back to her at any cost.

About her parents, it was found that they lived in Mian Channu. Her father was contacted and summoned. He recognized his daughter assured that he would never send her again to any relative and bring her up properly.

There is no government organization or NGO, which can keep a check on children sent back to parents.

Muhammad Ramzan was only six when he was found wandering at the Lahore Railway Station's platform No 5. He said his mother beat him a lot for not doing work. The child, who hailed from Mandi Dhaban Singh, Sheikhupura, had run away from home and the help centre could not send him back with a constable.

There is a tendency among newly-wed women to run away in order to escape harsh attitude of their husbands.

About 12 per cent of them said they were treated very harshly and couldn't bear the thrashings by their husbands. Four per cent of the girls said they escaped because they were being married against their will.

The chances of the runaway children getting into the hands of human traffickers are high in the country.

The 16 help centres opened so far not only traced the lost and runaway children, but also recovered and returned property they had found from trains and railway stations. During the last one year, they are estimated to have found luggage, baggage, jewellery and wallets worth Rs3.2 million.

Recently, the Punjab Aqaf Department sought a similar system for opening help centres at shrines like that of Hazrat Data Ganj Bakhsh where people throng in millions. The social welfare department, however, declined a request by the Pakistan Railways for a follow-up pursuance of children sent back to parents so that they don't live under coercive conditions any more.—APP