**Challenge child labour**

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Monday, Aug 28, 2023

The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) is one of the very few organizations in Pakistan that raises its voice against child labour and violence against minor workers. In Islamabad, Nasreen Azhar and Saadia Bukhari of the HRCP keep inviting interested people to discuss human rights violations; one such consultation took place on August 22 to highlight child labour in Pakistan.

Since such events receive scant coverage in electronic, print, and even on social media, this column shares some of the ideas discussed. First, it is no secret that child labour is rampant in Pakistan. A study by the ILO has revealed that one in every four households in Pakistan employs a child in domestic work and many of them are just 10 or 12 years old. Like in most other countries, there are laws prohibiting child labour in Pakistan but their weak implementation is one of the root causes for rampant child labour in the country. There is also a high level of cultural acceptance that makes it a social routine. Recent incidents of physical and sexual abuse of domestic workers across Pakistan have once again brought this issue into limelight.

Hassan Mangi from the Ministry of Human Rights linked child labour with widespread malnutrition among underage children as most domestic workers do not receive the required amount of food for their mental and physical growth. As a result, they remain stunted and even when they grow up they are unable to challenge their employers for mistreatment meted out to them. Girl children are even more vulnerable to such abuse and exploitation. A majority of parents who leave their children for domestic work are extremely poor and mostly illiterate. Children themselves have no say in such decisions that their parents impose on them.

Mangi explained that his ministry was trying to develop a mechanism to eradicate child labour but there are insurmountable obstacles on the way. For example, there is no accountability of employers who hire such children unless an incident of abuse becomes public. He suggested that the government must allocate funds for rehabilitating such children to schools where they should be at their age. Poor parents can’t send their children to schools unless they have enough to feed their family. So, poverty alleviation should be one of the primary tasks without which child labour is likely to continue.

Senator Sehar Kamran is a vocal advocate of human rights and has been advocating the inclusion of civic education in school syllabi in Pakistan. She is of the view that just pumping money will not help unless a proper mechanism is in place to prevent child abuse that has gained an enormous proportion. It is a major crisis that needs immediate attention and all families that indulge in offering and using child labour should face the music. Since education till the age of 16 is compulsory by parliamentary legislation, the government must ensure that this law prevails.

Again, she highlighted that without poverty alleviation the dream of sending every child to school will remain elusive. Implementation of laws is directly linked with the seriousness of political and social will that is in short supply; as even families of bureaucrats, judge, and religious leaders such as spiritual charlatans not only use child labour, they abuse, exploit, and torture them as well. Rapes and other sexual abuses of minors have become pervasive. Social awareness campaigns may help, but the governments from federal to local and provincial levels need to do much more.

Anees Jilani of Society for the Protection of the Rights of the Child (SPARC) is another indomitable fighter for children’s rights in Pakistan. He has been advocating for a complete eradication of child labour in the country for decades. He suggested that naming and shaming the culprits of child abuse and exploitation in child labour may be just one tactic but this is unlikely to help unless a complete social boycott of the culprits is exercised. He thinks the state does have the capacity to enforce fundamental rights but it fails for its own lack of will. He strongly advocates civic education in all schools and colleges across Pakistan.

Anees Jilani highlighted the significance of educating every citizen for implementing laws be they for compulsory education, against child labour, or to prevent child marriages. The media must play its due role not just by highlighting the cases of abuse and torture but also by allocating more time to social issue rather than just political matters. The cases of Fatima and Rizwana are just a tip of the iceberg as abuse – both physical and sexual – is more common than people think. He blamed successive governments for restricting civil society organizations (CSOs) in their scope of work.

Shazia advocate carried the discussion forward by agreeing with Anees Jilani that if a state does not allow CSOs and NGOs to work freely, it ends up with a limited social space for concerned citizens. Advocacy is vital for any dynamic society and in the absence of such voices the situation moves from bad to worse. The ICT Domestic Workers Act is in place but the concerned offices and their staff are least bothered about implementing the Act. Each office throws the ball to another’s court and refuses to act in a decisive manner.

Fauzia Yazdani is another strong voice on this front who has been regularly contributing to the struggle against child labour and for the protection of fundamental rights. She cited a couple of incidents to support her point about how dangerous it is for children under 16 to work. She highlighted the importance of family planning as a major issue as even advertisements for promoting family planning have nearly disappeared from the media. CSOs and NGOs are finding it difficult to work and children are left with no education; dropouts from schools are common.

Alya Syed exposed the criminal response from the state to deal with child abuse and exploitation. State functionaries try to hide facts and protect criminals as has been evident in many recent cases. When NGOs highlight such cases the state is not entirely happy and its officials question the integrity of social workers and human rights defenders. Raising our voices is the only solution as Pakistan has become a graveyard of laws that remain on paper without implementation. The HR ministry should step up its efforts as it is also responsible for many lapses.

Raza Ali also spoke about exploding population and the ineffectiveness of oversight bodies against child labour. As politicians keep targeting each other, child trafficking has increased and the labour department is sleeping. He pointed out that boys are more abused in factories and workshops. CSOs would do better by getting to know the relevant laws in detail as we are all accountable. He also stressed on collecting accurate data on a countrywide basis about child labour. Government officials who indulge in using child labour must lose their jobs, he suggested.

Pervez Tahir – renowned economist and human rights defender – highlighted the unjust distribution of resources as a major cause of child labour. There is a wide income gap that aggravates the living conditions for the lower socio-economic strata. Most human development indicators are dismal and a small proportion of rich people are responsible for most exploitation in society. Pakistan needs to control the population explosion so that compulsory education could become a reality. The government and the state must be challenged in courts if they fail to implement Article 25-A of the constitution.

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