**[Hazardous childhoods](https://www.dawn.com/news/1766162/hazardous-childhoods)**

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EARLY last month, the federal government allocated circa Rs97 billion for ‘Education Affairs and Services’ for the financial year 2023-24; while this figure represents a modest 5.5 per cent increase over last year’s Rs91.7bn, it represents a dismal 1.7 of the GDP, reported as the lowest in the region. This is a damning indictment of the nation’s priorities, demonstrating Pakistan’s year-on-year disdain for investing in its future and its people, and placing the country at risk not only of domestic failure in the form of a future labour pool ill equipped to address the multifarious challenges the country is expected to face but also of standing in breach of its international legal obligations.

Presently, a significant proportion of Pakistan’s children are engaged in some form of child domestic labour. According to studies conducted by the International Labour Organisation (ILO), one in every four households in the country employs a child — predominantly girls between the ages of 10 and 14 — in domestic work, and while credible national statistics on the issue are difficult to obtain, recent estimates from Punjab — the country’s most populous province — suggest that 3.8 million children within its territorial jurisdiction are involved in some form of labour, with almost half of them exposed to hazardous working conditions.

Child labour demonstrably harms a child’s physical, intellectual, and emotional development, compromising their future contributions to society and the economy upon their adulthood and contributing to systemic and generational inequity and poverty. According to Unicef, “child labour compounds social inequality and discrimination. … [It] limits access to education and harms a child’s physical, mental and social growth. Especially for girls, the ‘triple burden’ of school, work and household chores heightens their risk of falling behind, making them even more vulnerable to poverty and exclusion.” As such, contrary to popular belief that such children are contributing to their — and by extension their families’ — economic uplift, child labour actually results in trapping them in poverty.

Numerous studies have demonstrated a negative correlation between engagement in children’s education and their engagement in child labour; these studies show that an increased incidence of child labour corresponds to depressed school enrolment, lower attendance, and more frequent dropouts.

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Even in the case of children continuing their education while simultaneously being engaged in child labour, there is an increased likelihood of such children falling behind their peers in terms of their educational, intellectual, and emotional development, with negative outcomes demonstrated for their leisure — a key component of healthy psychological development — and health. This represents a woefully inadequate investment in the human capital such children characterise, crippling Pakistan’s future workforce — a matter which should be of considerable concern to policymakers given Pakistan’s present and future demographics.

The 2017 census indicated that up to 40pc of Pakistanis are under the age of 15, with the national median age estimated at 19 years, and if significant efforts are not made to ensure that this segment of the population is invested in — particularly at an age when such investments would yield more impactful results — the Pakistani workforce of the future will be inadequately equipped to meaningfully participate in society and the economy.

In this context it is important to note that Pakistan has yet to ratify a number of key ILO conventions which protect children from being exploited for their labour. While the country has ratified the ILO Minimum Age Convention, 1973 (No 138) and the ILO Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No 182) — though the domestic implementation of these legal obligations is patently lacking — it has yet to ratify the ILO Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No 189). This obliges state parties to set a minimum age for domestic work in line with the 1973 and 1999 conventions.

Further, Pakistan’s intra-national incidence of child labour also contravenes the provisions of major international conventions — such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR); the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR); the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR); and the Convention on the Rights of the Child — all of which Pakistan is party to and which place binding legal obligations upon the state to protect its citizenry, including its children.

The UDHR, the ICCPR, and the ICESCR all place a clear obligation on states to prohibit the economic exploitation of children through various forms of child labour. The UDHR mandates the right to free and compulsory education. Similarly, the ICCPR and ICESCR also oblige state parties — including Pakistan — in this regard; both conventions call on states to accord necessary protection measures for children, which understandably preclude their exploitation through child labour. The UN Sustainable Development Goals — to which Pakistan is also signatory — also call upon states to “[t]ake immediate and effective measures to … secure the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labour … and by 2025 end child labour in all its forms”.

Merely signing international treaties — such as the ILO conventions — without taking meaningful steps to implement the obligations therein is hardly a panacea for Pakistan’s child labour problems; as the data demonstrates, a significant proportion of the country’s youngest — and most vulnerable — citizens are already engaged in and exploited by child labour, despite Pakistan’s ratification of a number of such international legal instruments.

Under Article 25-A of the Constitution of Pakistan, the state is obligated to provide free and compulsory education to all children of the age of five to 16 years. Devising measures and implementing this right both at the communal and the federal level would go a long way in tackling child labour practices in Pakistan, to begin with.

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