**[Saving our children](https://www.dawn.com/news/1768283/saving-our-children)**

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BROKEN arms and legs, lacerations all over, wounds on the head, infections to the point where the life of the child is hanging in the balance. The [Rizwana case](https://www.dawn.com/news/1766621) is not the first of its kind. Tragically, it will not be the last one either. The question is: can we at least honestly try to make it the last case? Can anyone say that a child, any child, should be exposed to such brutality and outcomes? I appeal to everyone’s sense of humanity and justice to help move our society in the right direction.

Why do we need to employ children as domestic workers? I can understand that some households might find child servants to be more affordable, more manageable, easier to manipulate and less difficult to introduce into a household and more suitable for some tasks like babysitting, but these are exactly the reasons why children should not be working as domestic help. We do not want children to be in spaces that are not monitored by parents and others. We do not want them to be ‘manipulated’ and ‘managed’. Some households might treat their domestic workers very well. But this is besides the point. As a principle, we do not want children to be placed in environments where they can be exploited.

The dominant reason, various research reports say, why parents or guardians send children to work in homes is poverty. Children contribute to household incomes. But to put a child, potentially, in harm’s way, even if it generates some income, cannot be acceptable. Most people will find this to be a hard position but if a parent sends a child to be a live-in domestic help or even a part-time one, they bear some responsibility for what happens to the child. Yes, the bulk of the responsibility of any mistreatment will be on the perpetrators and the host family. But some of it will be parental as well.

So the reasons for the demand for child domestic workers and their supply are clear. They might even be understandable but they are not and should not be justifiable. Children should not be working before a certain age. They should be getting an education, having a childhood and growing up. This is as true of the children of the rich as it is of children born in poorer households.

All governments and all of us continue to fail the children of this country. Shame on all.

The laws in this domain are clear, though there is a need to harmonise them. And a tremendous need to implement them and to monitor the implementation strictly. All children, and there are no caveats or conditions in the Right to Education (Article 25-A) in our Constitution, should be getting an education at least till age 16. This is compulsory. Any activity that does not allow a child to get an education cannot be allowed to go on concurrently.

Children below the age of 15 (in Punjab) or 14 (in Sindh and KP) cannot be employed in any job. Again, there are no ifs and buts. No child below 18 years can be employed in any hazardous work.

But 20 million-plus children between the ages of five and 16 are out of schools and do not have access to educational opportunities. Twelve million or so children work, and around 300,000 of them work as domestic workers. These are unforgiveable failures of implementation. And it is not that one government or political party has failed to ensure implementation. All of them have. And despite assurances for justice in individual cases, all governments and all of us, as a society, continue to fail the children of this country even in such basic things as right to food, clothing, basic amenities, and access to quality education and health facilities. Shame on all of us.

If we are to ensure that our children are given the environment needed for their safety and growth and that our children get opportunities to grow and reach their potential, there are a lot of changes that need to happen. We need to ensure every child gets 10-12 years of education, we need to ensure they are not forced to work (domestic work or other work), are not forced to live away from parents/home for economic reasons (live-in domestic workers), they are not exposed to any kind of abuse.

This will need multiple tools. Employing children under 14 or 15 years is already illegal and education is compulsory. But there is no implementation. We need to ensure implementation, monitoring and strict compliance. We need to harmonise the laws as well. A child is a child till what age? Fourteen, 15 or 16? What is ‘hazardous’ work? If there is a violation of the law, what recourse is there? Do we have helplines and offices where we can complain? All of these issues need to be addressed.

But we need a lot more. We need society and state to commit to keeping our children safe and well and providing them with access to quality education and health facilities. This will require significant investment in changing mindsets of people who demand child domestic labour and parents who supply it. If people still do it, we need to criminalise such behaviour and catch and punish the culprits. Enough is enough. We need a larger and stronger safety net that provides income support to children in poorer households. We need compulsory provision of education to all. If all of these are not done, cases as the horrendous one we have just witnessed, will continue.

There should be justice for the victims but post-fact justice provision will not stop abuses from happening and will not eradicate the issue at the root level. For that, we need a much broader, deeper and serious effort to change the narrative completely, harmonise laws, improve data on compliance, and ensure 100 per cent compliance and zero tolerance for violations. Will society and state stand up for their children?

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