

Child labour: a complex issue

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The issue of child labour is complex. It is not only an economic but a social issue as well. It has gained considerable importance in recent years, particularly after the signing of Uruguay Round Agreement. A changing economic condition leading to a high rate of unemployment in several European countries, especially amongst unskilled workers and declining real wages of similar category of workers in the US, have generated pressures from the trade union of these countries on their respective governments for remedial actions.

Trade sanctions are being recommended in some developed countries against the exports of developing countries, which use child labour. Many, including developing country governments, see this as a disguised protectionist device. Trade sanctions would do little more than assuage the conscience of developed country's consumers but grinding poverty and lack of affordable schooling may leave many children in developing countries with no choice but to work. Forcing children out of factories before they have better alternatives risks pushing them into more dangerous jobs or deeper into penury. Thus, simple solutions to this complex socio-economic problem can sometimes do more harm than good.

In combating the problem of child labour, a distinction must be made between child 'work' and 'exploitative' child labour; and due account of the economic, social and cultural factors underlying child labour must be given. Child 'work' is a part-time or occasional work wherein a child is found working in his family enterprises or farm, or even doing some occasional work. This type of work is not necessarily exploitative or detrimental to the child's development. It may sometime help young people acquire skills and build confidence. Children who work too young, for too long hours, for too little pay, in hazardous conditions or under slave-like arrangements; on the other hand, characterise child 'exploitation'. UNICEF adds that exploitation also occurs when children's work entails too much responsibility; it hampers their access to education and is detrimental to their full social and psychological development.

Child labour is, of course, not desirable and should be discouraged. Nevertheless, it is global rather than a national phenomenon. In 1995, nearly 85 million children between 10 and 14 years were officially reported to be

working around the world. The problem is, however, more serious in developing countries and highest concentration of child labour is found in the Asian countries, with the South Asia taking the lead. It is very difficult to come out with exact number of child labour since most of them work in unregulated and unmonitored parts of the economy.

However, some estimates of child labour put 45 million for India, 3.5 million for Pakistan, 9 to 12 million for Bangladesh and 2.9 million for Indonesia. In Latin America, some estimates suggest that about one-quarter of the children may be working. Spain has 110,000 child workers engaged mostly in agriculture. Italy has the highest rate of child labour in Western Europe. In Pakistan, child labour is estimated at 3.4 million, of which 2.5 million; (74%) are boys and 0.9 million (26%) are girls. About 71 per cent of the 3.4 million employed children are engaged in ele-

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mentary occupations relating to agriculture, sales and service, mining, construction, manufacturing and transport sector. Craft and related trade activities are the next major occupational group, which absorbed about 20% of the working children.

The cause of child labour in Pakistan is very coiled. While poverty is considered to be the fundamental reason for child work, there are numerous other factors, which have contributed to the persistence of child labor in Pakistan. These include non-availability of educational institutes, poor quality of education, low probability of getting jobs after completing education, large family size, illiterate parents, high dropouts and absence of social safety net.

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educational institutions is yet another factor, which discourages students to go to school. Besides long distance of schools from home in rural areas, about one-quarter of existing schools are shelterless. Where a school exists, normally it comprises of two rooms accommodating at least five classes and managed by two teachers. The situation is further aggravated by the low quality of education and its irrelevance to the labour market.

Existence of a large number of illiterate parents is another cause of child labour in Pakistan. More than 50 million adults are illiterate; therefore, it is no wonder that 25 million children are not enrolled in primary school. These parents have no or little desire to educate their children. The indifferent attitude of the society towards education can be gauged by the fact that the people seem to have less or no concern about the non-availability of schools, their standard, quality of education, dropouts, etc.

Child labour is, therefore, seen as a normal function of labour market and is justified on the ground of poverty.

Another most important cause of child labour in Pakistan is the lack of any formal social security mechanism. In case of death or major sickness of an adult working member of a family, children have no alternative but to forego education and join the labour market. Although the Islamic system of Zakat and Usher exists but its ability to reach the targeted and vulnerable

group is limited.

Finally, the large family size (6.8) is an important determinant of child labour in Pakistan. Large family reduces children's educational participation and progress in school and reduces parent's investment in education. It is likely that in such a situation children will work to supplement income.

The above discussion clearly suggests that the existence of child labour is a complex phenomenon. Unless the government tackles the above socio-economic factors, child labour will continue to exist. Elimination of these factors will certainly take time and require money. It is, therefore, clear that child labour will decline only gradually as the labour productivity and income of adults increase overtime. Since child labour is a manifold problem, therefore, the issue should be viewed sympathetically, especially since the alternative to using child labour is exacerbation of poverty and hunger.