

Untaught among the ed

Hundreds of children are working in the University campus for long hours and



By Aoun Abbas Sahi

It's the innocent and exhausted face of a boy born in his parents' house and condemned to become a breadwinner of the family at the tender age of ten. The child is a living picture of a

depressed society. If, on a hot summer day, you look into his eyes — they will look back at you with a question — a bitter one — “Why its only me to be treated this way.”

Ten-year-old Ashfaq, a resident of Bahawalpur, has been working at the Punjab University hostel canteen for the last two

years. He is eager to talk to any person who asks him twice. His father is blind and his elder brother has fled from home. Now he is the only person in the family who is dragging the cart of livelihood of seven member family— four sisters and his parents. Fifteen hours hard and ‘inhumane’ service yields seven hun-

dred rupees per month for his family, therefore, he tries not to spend even a single rupee on his own needs to save maximum

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money for his family.

“The fare to my native town is Rs 200, so I go home once in every three months to meet my loved ones,” Ashfaq says and adds, “I want to save more and more money so that I can meet my family’s needs.”

He speaks as he can only speak about his miseries and can

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do nothing practically to get out from this desolation due to certain pressures from family and society. "I want to be a school teacher but how, I don't know," said Ashfaq with his twinkling eyes, which have become tire-some due to months of sleeplessness.

Hundreds of Ashfaqs are living and working for inhumane hours, in the environment of an educational institute — Punjab University. These children are providing room service in the hostels. Every hostel is a triple storey building. On average, they have to go up and down the hostel about twenty times in a day.

No one is ready to ponder upon their problems and dejection. The problem is that when these poor children find themselves among such highly qualified people, they also want to study. The children idealise the university students and see them as a role model for themselves but when they are ill-treated by those they idealise these children are badly hurt and many psychological and moral problems arise.

"We are well aware of this problem and also want to solve it but we have our own limitations. The university cannot solve all the problems. However, we will welcome and appreciate if any

NGO or welfare organisation steps forward to eliminate this problem," says Chairman Hall Council, Dr. Mugheesuddin Sheikh.

"The university administration cannot impose upon the owners of the canteens there not to appoint a child as a worker but ethically they are bound to treat them humanely," he said.

A number of children have been working in the canteen for a long time now. They do not want change in their social status and are quite contended with it as they have accepted it as their destiny. Children also know that it is better to work for a canteen where they are catering to a lot of people than work as domestic servants. Here they have company of other children as well.

The shop owners and canteen staff say they are helpless because they are bound to provide things to students on control rates. They employ children because they work on lower wages as compared to adults and do more work as well. The university management or any other authority never directed them not to appoint children as service people.

According to Article 11 of the Constitution of Pakistan, no child below the age of 14 years can be

engaged in any factory or mine or any other hazardous activity. And Child Rights Convention (CRC) defined a child as any person below the age of 18 years.

Labour is usually forced upon children but in some cases children work willingly to support their family or themselves. This is a major problem in developing countries. According to International Labour Organisation, there are about 250 million children between ages 5 and 15 who are engaged in labour in different countries of the World. Of the 250 million working children 61% belong to Asian Countries, 32% to Africa and the rest belong to other parts of the world.

Why child labour is so rampant in our country? The first reason why child labour is preferred over over adult labour is that they are easier to order around, get lower wages and do more work than adults. Secondly, parents force children to work by saying that there is no job for educated people. Unemployment of educated persons could be a cause. A third factor is that in many cases the head of a family might be dead or ill. So children have to work to repay loans taken by their parents.

They are looking towards the various non-government organisations to step forward to play their role. The NGOs can provide funds and skills to students, educate and train these poor children.

We see no difference between the conditions of children work-

ing in a workshop and in university campus. Then what is the difference between literate and illiterate communities of a society. The university is a place housed and visited by postgraduate, M.Phil and Ph.D students from whom we expect sensitivity to their surroundings.

It is true that these children are helpless economically. If they do not get job in campus, they will find it somewhere else. However, few steps can minimise the problems of these children working in the university premises. First, the duty hours and wages of these children should be reasonable. Secondly, they should be treated as children and the owner should be responsible for their moral training. Thirdly, the university management and students should step forward to educate these children.

This is an era of globalisation and awareness. Nations with ignorant and deprived population cannot survive on the globe. In Pakistan, there are 3.3 million economically active children between the age of five and 14 years. Three out of 10 children aged between five and nine in Pakistan do not go to school. Only one out of two are fortunate to reach grade 5. In this situation, there is a dire need to take out time to educate these children, to help them be productive part of the nation. For this purpose government and society should both work shoulder to shoulder to meet this challenge.