

## OF MICE AND MEN

By Hafizur Rahman

✓ ONE of the most painful and soul-searing problems facing society in Pakistan is that of sexual abuse of children. It leaves child labour far behind, although even that was not easily accepted by our public as something degenerative, and many people thought it had a good side to it. Yes, you'll be surprised. I'll give you an example.

Here, in Islamabad, in the private school where my grandchildren study, boys and girls of Class Seven or Eight were prescribed the subject of child labour on which they were required to write their views and then read them out in a debate. More than half the children did not think it odd to write in favour of child labour and extol its benefits. And none of the teaching staff thought it wrong to suggest a topic that might tempt impressionable minds to express themselves in support of a pernicious practice. And this in the capital's most expensive and prestigious school. I hope they don't choose sexual abuse of children for a debate next time and ask the students to write for or against it!

I have been drawn to this subject by the recent news of a workshop held in Islamabad about national consultation for developing a policy and plan of action against sexual abuse and exploitation of children, orga-

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nized by the National Commission for Child & Women Development, and following it, the publication of an excellent article by Dr Amin A. Gadit in *Dawn* a few days ago with the frightening caption "Child abuse is rooted deeper than you think." Both affected me, but in different ways.

The news of the workshop appeared in the dailies through a very badly drafted story circulated by a news agency. Apart from the usual details about who said what (instead of more positive reporting) it quoted Muhammad Younus Khan, Federal Secretary for Social Welfare and an old friend, as saying, "The government is taking strict measures to check child sexual abuse," and "it is making each and every attempt to curb the menace." This aroused my ire and indignation, for it was symptomatic of what ministers and senior officers are trained to announce in public or tell the media in interviews about what the government is doing in respect of a nagging national problem.

Giving the government the benefit of doubt, and admitting that despite reading five daily newspapers every day I may have missed reports of action taken by it in pursuance of "each and every attempt to curb the menace," I request readers of this column to kindly let me know if they have come across any of these each and every attempts anywhere in Pakistan. Actually it was praiseworthy of the government to take notice of this sensitive and dreadful problem, and it need not have indulged in dubious publicity in the workshop. But if drastic action has been taken somewhere and I am unaware of it,

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and if it is pointed out to me by anyone, I shall at once apologize to Younus Khan who is a very fine man otherwise.

I again say that it was public-spirited act of the government to invite experts to discuss this subject because it has almost been considered socially taboo to even mention it, although non-official organizations and social welfare bodies in the big cities have been trying their best to draw public attention to it. I have thought over it for the last many days, and, frankly, I am at my wits' end as to what anyone can do to reduce the incidence of child abuse and connected exploitation.

You see, child labour is there for everybody to see. Even when work is taken from children behind closed doors there is someone or the other who is witness to it and can report to the authorities or to social workers if he or she is so minded. But sexual abuse of little boys and girls is a secret act, indulged in furtively, with the victims threatened with dire consequences if they dare to tell anyone about it. Who can stop it?

According to a report issued by LHRLA, the Lawyers for Human Rights & Legal Aid, over 490 cases of child abuse were recorded during the year 2000 on the basis of newspaper stories. Hardly. In fact I would say the true position must be ten times worse, even twenty times worse. And this is borne out by what Dr Gadit has to say in his article which paints a terrible picture of the actual state of affairs, although even that is not the whole truth. As it is I haven't the heart to give the detailed breakdown, which also involves murder of little girls after gang-rapes, contained in LHRLA's

report.

The trouble is that child sexual abuse is a world-wide phenomenon. How would one categorize the effects of modern civilization that permit the showing of actual images about this inhuman practice over the pornographic sections of internet, that much-vaunted apex of scientific advancement? What kind of human intellectual development is this which cannot love the children of mankind and protect them from its lecherous and perverted members? Viewed in that context the problem in Pakistan may not be that grievous. But then, it has some aspects that may not be found in the more advanced countries of the world.

→ For instance, as Dr Gadit points out, in the rural areas of Sindh and Punjab boys are kept by some landlords as a so-called prestige symbol and treated as sex slaves. In Pir Vadhai, a suburb of both Rawalpindi and Islamabad devoted to road transport, runaway and kidnapped children are used by owners of petty hotels to provide sex service to their clients. And we all know what goes on in prisons where teenage inmates are housed in the same place as hardened criminals, and the sexual abuse off-shoot of child labour employed in motor workshops and the like.

What is to be done? All that one can suggest is exemplary and enhanced penalties for offenders, but that is no solution to the basic problem, apart from the fact that there are certain areas where the law cannot reach. How is society or religion or the law to purge the human mind of base obsessions, perverted tastes and dirty ideas? Frankly I am left totally dismayed.