

Child labour

A long way to go

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Programmes to phase out child labour and set up schooling facilities for working children remain greatly limited in scope.

An area of special effort is the soccer industry of Sialkot which provides livelihood to 75,000 families. Several thousands of the under 15 population in the district still stitches footballs — earning Rs 30/- to Rs 50/- per ball. The pressure of multinational importers of Pakistani football, involvement of international organisation like ILO and Unicef and the availability of foreign funding should now lead us to some systematic action.

According to ILO, some 800 stitching centres to ensure non-involvement of children have been set up and 93 per cent of production have been shifted there. Seven monitoring teams have been visiting these centres

Hand injuries among the child labourers are common. They are also liable to backaches, urinary tract trouble, jaundice, weakening eyesight and pain in joints. Longer term affliction includes Asthma, TB and lung infection. Ali Nawaz Malik reports on the hazards, these child workers are faced with along with lamenting the situation of their fundamental rights

at regular intervals to ensure no child is working there. Still the hopeful signs are away.

Despite the ILO monitoring, child labour remains substantially intact. The children are only being briefly removed from the stitching centres ahead of monitoring visits, and some of the child labour have also only moved out of Sialkot. As a result in April 1999, ILO too certified only three manufacturing units as child labour free.

There has been a doubtless

progress. But the industry has not become child labour free as targeted. If 7000 children are withdrawn as calculated, that left some 6000 still in plus, more than 5000 other class as irregulars. Many families say going to the stitching centre does not suit them anyway. Their younger members have to do other daily chores such as tending cattle besides stitching footballs. Also, those withdrawn do not all go into informal schools. Some 60000 children in district are still out of

schools.

Carpets are the other sector where foreign importers pressure caused stirrings. The manufacturers and exporters association here and ILO have signed an agreement in April 1998 for rehabilitation of child weavers. Foreign NGOs such as the German Care and Fare, has also come in action. It is claimed that as many as 30,000 children have so far been withdrawn from the carpet industry.

Some advance is made in another major export industry — Sialkot's surgical instrument manufacturing. Close to a third of its work force have comprised children, many involved in such aspects as grinding, filing and polishing metal cutting heat treatment and sand blasting of the instruments. There are still a large number of them — 6,300 according to one conservative estimate working at cottage level. According to a report, over 8,000 children in Sialkot are working in unsafe condition making surgical instruments. They are paid Rs 300/- to Rs 1500/- per month.

Outside these internationally focussed sectors, child labour for the most part remains unbroached. In the rural areas, about half the child population is actively involved. One third work for the family. Of the other, in the 10-14 age group 12 per cent the girl and 6 per cent of the boys and in the 16-17 age group 14 per cent of the girls and 18 per cent of the boys are in paid employment. Average working time is estimated at 44 hours for boys and 34 hours for girls.

About one half of all bonded

labour mostly on farms and in brick kilns is estimated to comprise children.

Usually they work from 8 am to 6 pm with a lunch break. They are paid Rs 500/- to 1000/- per month. The workshop is usually a one room hut with a ventilator for sunlight and air. A wooden board on bricks serves as bench for the loom operation. Other children work sitting or squatting on the ground or even standing.

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An estimate put the number of child workers at 25,000 in brick kilns and 10,000 in carpet industry. In cities and suburban areas also child labour goes on virtually unchecked.

In Lahore, 16,000 children below 14 work in 4240 workshops the bulk of them in 8-14 age group. They earn between Rs 200/- to 1320/- monthly for 10 to 12 hours of work. Nearly half of them say they find no time to play, and almost all want to leave working.

Some 82 per cent of the families of these child labourers live below poverty line. In the industrial town of Gujranwala, there are about 10,000 working children — half of them in carpet, brick making and such other establishment. They work for up to 18 hours for wages as low as Rs 500-600/- per month. A large number of them are debt bonded.

Child labourers are a common sight now. They work in bakeries and restaurants, in shops and stores, at tailoring steel works and shoe-making, in furniture, mechanical engineering and auto workshops and in factories and brick kilns. They are mostly employed in informal sectors, but substantial number of them is also in the organised sector.

No establishment conforms with the legal requirements of employing children, such as displaying official permission to do so, obtaining a fitness certificate of the child, abiding by the 7 hour work limit with an hour for lunch.