**Combating Child Domestic Labour**

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The true character of a society is revealed in how it treats its children, says Nelson Mandela. Taking this very popular saying into account, where we stand today is profoundly troubling, to say the least. Pakistan is home to approximately 22.8 million out-of-school children.

Similarly, the UN report, released in June this year, noted that about 3.4 million children are trapped in child labour in Pakistan. This wouldn’t be out of place to say that these children are living with sheer denial of their rights guaranteed under Article 25-A of the Constitution of Pakistan, 1973.

Adding more to this gloomy picture, it is essential to mention how many children are subjected to one or another form of abuse every day. This past week, Sahil, an organization advocating for the rights of children in Pakistan for a couple of decades, released a report titled Six Months Cruel Numbers 2023.

According to the report, a total of 2,227 children experienced some form of abuse in the first six months of the year. Hence, around 12 children were abused every day during this period. What these facts and figures tell us may be a lesser evil than reality. The naked truth is that many cases go unreported.

Reliable data plays a key role in painting a perfect picture of any issue

While there remains much to be mentioned, I hope the picture of how our society treats children got pretty much clear.

We do not learn from the past mistakes of other people and suddenly become ourselves kind of individuals whom we have disliked or even cursed at one point for their inappropriate behavior meted out to children. For example, had the judge and his wife Somia Asim, who brutally tortured a young girl working at her home, not seen, watched or heard about such cruel cases of child torture earlier? Ask them and they will tell many stories reported in the media before their act of brutality. Then how come Somia Asim forgot and tortured the young girl at the connivance of her husband?

We do not learn from the past mistakes of others indeed. Morally, I feel it necessary to drop the victim’s name and would be referring to her here as a ‘young girl’ when I have to. The very case of the young girl not only yet again brought to the fore the perpetual violence on children but it also brought another issue to the limelight which has always been a proverbial elephant in the room. That is Child Domestic Labour (CDL). Much has been said about CDL since the case of a young girl took place. There have been even calls from some civil society members and non-governmental organizations, seeking to criminalize CDL.

On 29th August, 2023 Sustainable Social Development Organization (SSDO) Pakistan, Group Development Pakistan (GDP) and the National Commission on the Rights of Children (NCRC) collectively organized a Stakeholders’ Consultation on CDL at the heart of the country.

It is a welcome step. CDL is finally on the radar. However, several key aspects need to be taken into consideration to combat, and criminalize, CDL. Firstly, it merits mentioning that combating CDL is a more difficult task than fighting any other crime against children. It is not as simple as cases of other forms of child abuse. It requires a multi-dimensional approach.

Secondly, CDL has less pull factors and more push factors. A child opting to become CDL is forced by several socioeconomic factors. Less fortunate parents and guardians may involve their children in more dangerous practices to have them bring home a few hundred rupees. Without thinking over an effective solution for push factors, and not coming up with alternatives, efforts aimed at curbing CDL will remain solely futile. Thirdly, CDL involves not a single person rather a child is facilitated to be trapped in CDL by the consensus of several people.

I prefer to use the pronoun ‘she’ because in the majority of cases, girls are trapped in CDL. She; her parents or guardian(s) and a couple at the home where she works are the ones who make a case of CDL normally happen. If criminalized, who will be penalized: parents or guardians of hers or couple or only husband or only wife? Understandably, no agreement exists to clearly show either the husband or wife hired her as CDL. Fourthly, who will be the complainant? The family that willingly pushed her into CDL?

This needs to be clearly defined. Moreover, large-scale awareness campaigns both on mainstream media can also prove fruitful. CDL happens to be in well-educated and well-off homes. They all have access to social media. Awareness campaigns on social media can bring a positive shift in this regard. Number of community schools should be increased. Basic education in community schools, with proper accountability mechanisms in place, if incentivized, may work. To make it happen, the government can partner with UNICEF and other NGOs.

For instance, in KPK, UNICEF is running a program Alternative Learning Pathways (ALP) in various districts. The program aims at imparting basic education to out-of-school children. Last but not least, reliable data plays a key role in painting a perfect picture of any issue. It must be discovered how many children are trapped in CDL and in which areas of the country. Mobile application with a location feature to report CDL from the neighbourhood, ensuring strict anonymity of those reporting it, can be of help in this regard. Let’s work against CDL wisely.

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