

CHILD LABOUR – MYTHS AND MANIFESTATIONS A JUVENILE JUSTICE PERSPECTIVE

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Children below fourteen years are to be protected from entering the job market. Any form of physical work for monetary gain is termed as labour. During my term as the Chairperson of the Juvenile Justice Board of Chennai district during the period 2001 to 2004, many cases of child labour were presented before us. Interestingly the cases were not those rescued by the Child labour department, but children who were victims of crime at workplaces. Years of listening to children rescued from trafficking and domestic labour besides other forms of exploitation clearly highlighted reasons for their condition.

MYTHS WERE BROKEN

Children themselves want to work –of course they do. When the education they receive, does not engage them purposefully, work is a preferred alternative. They learn skills- the truth is that they do not learn anything, as they are made to do menial work in these places, for a long time before they learn a few basic skills.

* They move to other work places which pays them marginally more, and hence do not have a stable learning environment to learn a skill.

* Parents send their children to work to alleviate their home condition. In reality hundreds of parents interviewed and visited preferred their children in schools. Only when they attained an age of 10 years, when they lost interest in their schooling and started skipping schools to form groups and gangs, did parents send them to work. They did not depend on the children's wages to support the family, rather were only concerned that their children stayed away from bad company under adult supervision

* Strict legislation and penalty will solve the problem. The legislations in our country if implemented effectively would have eradicated the menace long ago. However the real solution is social ostracism of families, products and organizations that involve child labour.

* Children are safe in domestic labour, and it is not hazardous. The hazard in an unprotected domestic labour setting is ten times more harmful than even an industry. Various instances of rape, violence and racism were brought to our Board for legal action.

Many forms of invisible victimization that were not explicitly warranting criminal action against perpetrating adults were Child Begging, Domestic Households, Family Bondage in work places and Criminal gangs.

CAUSES OF CHILD LABOUR THAT WE CAME ACROSS

* Run away from families due to abuse by parents or step parents – when they did not study or were reprimanded by schools for non performance. Non willingness to rejoin school, forcing the parents to consider other options like forced institutionalization or a workplace.

* Illiteracy due to cycles of poverty and lack of interest in attending school.

* Low nutrition levels in rural and urban slums, leading to reduced productivity of persons leading to lack of or partial employment.

SOLUTIONS BASED ON SUGGESTIONS FROM VICTIMS

- Vocation based curriculum with wide choices in non academic courses for children seeking them. Vocational education has to gain the desired dignity of consideration as in other developed countries.

- Learning spaces for children in the community, besides schools, where children can access learning aids, books and resource persons to help them write mandatory exams at their pace and learn without fear.

- Open and part time schooling for adolescents where they are given add on courses on life skills and civic responsibility Awareness among parent groups on the harmfulness of early exploitation and slavery.

- Fixing responsibility on the elected representative for declaring his/her village child trafficking and labour free.