

Poverty Drags Kids Out of School

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Rebuilding schools may not be enough to stop children dropping out in order to earn enough to survive.

Nine year-old Ahmed Ali sells soft drinks by the roadside in Baghdad's wealthy district of Mansour. "I work to support my family," he says proudly. "It's good business, especially when I sell to American soldiers. They are very generous."

Ali says that he left school two years ago to provide for himself and his mother, encouraged by his father who had taken a second wife and couldn't afford to support two families.

"Be a man," Ali's father told him.

In the poorer district of Allawi, eight-year old Imam Fawzi has found herself a small corner in which she can sell pastries to passers-by.

Imam feels jealous of other girls her age who go to school, while she has to run out to the cars stopped at nearby traffic lights and beg their passengers to buy her wares.

"My parents are dead and my uncle prevents me from joining school because he has many children and cannot afford to support me, so I am selling sweets made by his wife," she says.

Ali and Fawzi are products of a trend that has been increasing ever since Iraq's economy began going downhill in the 1990s - children dropping out of school to work, or worse, turn to crime.

Emira (not her real name) is a primary schoolteacher who reports seeing some of her former pupils selling stolen goods.

"One of them is even working as a luggage thief," Emira said, adding, "I've made efforts for their sake, but they threatened to turn their families against me."

Attendance rates have slipped badly in recent years. According to a 2002 report by the ministry of education, a quarter of Iraqi children did not go to school. Girls were less likely to attend than boys, and both sexes fared worse in rural areas. If eight out of ten boys, and seven in ten girls, did not go to school in Baghdad, the attendance rate in the countryside dropped to seven and five out of ten, respectively.

The United Nations agency for children Unicef now says the number of Iraqi children not attending school has climbed as high as 65 percent.

These numbers are all the more shocking since Iraq once had what the UN describes as "one of the best education systems in the Arab world". The UN's Office of the Humanitarian Coordinator says that in the early Eighties, the primary school enrolment rate approached 100 per cent.

Educational officials attribute the rise to Iraq's hard-hit economy, as well as the absence of security. Parents are both afraid and unable to send their children to school.

The education process itself can be uncomfortable as schools lack electricity, making classrooms sweltering in summer and freezing in the winter.

Iraq's education minister, Alaa Abdel Sahib al-Alwan, told IWPR that the problem of "students dropping out of schools is related to the worsening economic situation, the difficult living situation under which most Iraqi families suffer [as well as] the deterioration in the quality of education and the school environment".

In a separate interview with Asharq al-Awsat newspaper on January 25, Alwan said the dropout rate has declined recently. "Now", he said, "we are witnessing regular attendance by students, who are keen to attend their schools.

But the minister is not leaving things to chance, saying that laws are being changed to force parents to send their children into the nation's classrooms.

"Compulsory education in Iraq is ongoing, and there is great commitment to it. The law used to apply compulsory education to children six years of age; now, however, we will extend it to children nine years of age."

Compulsion may help, but education experts also attribute the truancy problem to the poverty suffered by teachers. Iraq is one of several countries in the region in which the system of "private lessons" thrives. During regular classes, teachers withhold information needed to pass tests, so that pupils have to pay for after-school lessons.

"Parents cannot afford school costs, especially when [students] are forced to take private lessons, without which they would fail the tests," says Zamil al-Saidi, deputy head of Human Rights and Justice, an Iraqi non-governmental organisation which deals with educational issues.

Al-Alwan says that the ministry aims to modernise the curriculum and eliminate the private lessons system, which places a heavy burden on students' families.

The ministry also has ambitious plans to refurbish the educational system, he says, noting that of the 15,000 school premises across the country, 2,700 were looted and burned in the war. Eighty per cent of the rest need to be renovated – in some case torn down and rebuilt – because of three decades of neglect.

"We need to move quickly on rebuilding the schools, and our plan includes the construction of 4,500 new schools throughout Iraq and the renovation of 1,900 buildings. Once this work is completed, however, we will still have more than 12,000 buildings in need of complete reconstruction," the minister told Asharq al-Awsat.

Hassan Fathel, a civil engineer working as consultant to the ministry, told IWPR that the US and other militaries have already offered considerable help, "Coalition troops have exceeded our work in rehabilitating some schools and providing them with water and restrooms as well as adding new classrooms, even before we started our campaign."

However, refurbishing schools and changing the curriculum may not be enough to solve the economic

crisis that makes working children such an asset to their parents.

At one of Baghdad's tea-stands, a young boy serves the drinks as his father watches. One particular trick seems to work well - spilling tea on his clothes, and breaking into tears. He returns to his father with the money, all smiles.

"I don't make much from my work so I let my son work with me," the father says. "He is making good money. People give him money even they don't drink tea."

To bring children like this back to school, Baghdad will need more success stories such as that of Sabah Hadi, a civil servant who has benefited from a postwar pay rise.

"Now I can afford the cost of [my children's] schooling. The ministry has also distributed school bags and notebooks to them, so I hope they will be able to complete their studies. Knowledge and graduation are the most important things in life."

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