

Tajik Children Labour to Feed Families

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Some argue that in a country as poor as this, people have no option but to send children out to work. Rustam has to get up at dawn to drive the hundreds of animals under his care out to pasture. At the age of 14, he should be in school, but he has little other choice – he is one of the main breadwinners for a family of nine.

It is a familiar story in Tajikistan, where children in rural areas routinely have to work alongside adults to keep their households afloat. Increasingly, urban children from poor families are also doing manual jobs instead of going to school, raising concerns about what future these uneducated adolescents will have in a grim employment situation.

The young shepherd lives in Faizabad, a district some 50 kilometres east of the Tajik capital Dushanbe, and looks after the sheep, goats and cattle belonging to all 160 households in the village of Dubeda.

It is a long trek up to the mountain pastures – one-and-a-half hours each way – and Rustam stays there with the herd until seven in the evening. To sustain him through the day, he usually only has some bread, tea and “chakka”, the local soured milk, and occasionally cooks some potatoes or rice. He earns a few pennies a month for each animal in the herd, but if one of them dies the owner will demand around 100 dollars in compensation.

Rustam’s father used to be a shepherd himself, but has been partially disabled since breaking a leg in a bad fall in the mountains. These days he earns money at a local market by selling vegetables from his garden and chakka from the family’s cow. His wife, Rustam’s mother, died four years ago. Rustam’s elder brother also lives in the family home with his wife and child, as does his unmarried sister. They all work on the family plot, but they still need the extra income from the Rustam’s shepherding work.

Recently, Rustam has been joined by his younger brother, Farrukh, who is only 12 but comes along to help out with the animals. Sometimes they take turns – last year Rustam hardly went to school at all, but this year he and his brother alternate, one going to classes while the other tends the flock.

POVERTY, PARENTS’ ABSENCE DRIVES CHILDREN TO WORK

Across Tajikistan, thousands of children like Rustam and Farrukh are missing out on an education. On September 1, the start of the new school year, around 1.7 million children entered primary education. By the time they reach adolescence, many will be dropping out to act as porters at markets, work in the fields and do other manual jobs. Others skip classes only at specific times of year, such as the autumn cotton harvest when everyone goes off to help.

A UNICEF study published last year said around 200,000 children out of aged five to 15 were working in some capacity, and of those, 20,000 did not go to school at all. Sabohat Alimova of the Aurora group, an association dealing with adolescents, reports that 3,000 cases of child labour were identified in the capital

alone so far this year.

By contrast, the education ministry insists a mere 700 children nationwide failed to attend school last year.

Farming families have traditionally been large, and even in Soviet times the children would help out on the land. However, child labour became more prevalent during the economic collapse and civil war that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early Nineties.

Local observers say the problem really took off in 1994 and 1995, at the same time as many Tajiks started going abroad to find work. As large numbers of fathers and elder sons left to look for jobs in Russia and other countries, wives and younger children had to step in to do the work.

Officials put a figure of 500-800,000 on the number of Tajikistan nationals working abroad, but other experts say there are at least 1.5 million, out of a population of just seven million

There is a close correlation between this absent labour force and the number of children now in work. The local coordinator of an International Labour Organisation, ILO, programme to reduce the worst forms of child labour, Muhaye Hosabekova, said, "Eighty per cent of children in work are either in one-parent-families, or a parent has become a labour migrant. The most terrible thing is that labour migration divides families, and society begins with the family."

RISE IN URBAN CHILD LABOUR

Tajikistan's Labour Code prohibits the hiring of minors, defined as anyone under the age of 15. The legislation does, however, allow 14-year-olds to do part-time jobs outside school time and with the consent of a parent or guardian. Tajikistan has also ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention on the Minimum Age for Admission to Employment, and the International Labour Organisation resolution calling for the elimination of child labour. (IWPR reported last year on a case in which prosecutors looked into the practice of employing minors to work on cotton farms - see **Tajik Prosecutors Investigate Child Labour Claims**, RCA No. 501, 13-Jul-07.)

Even so, children at work are a common sight in Tajikistan. While children of both sexes help their families out in the countryside, the emergence of urban workers - most of them boys - is a more recent phenomenon. Young lads, some of them street children, can be seen pushing heavy barrows around the markets, washing cars by the roadside, changing banknotes into smaller denominations, and corralling passengers into the shared minibus taxis which have all but replaced other forms of public transport.

Many of the kids hanging around markets to earn tiny sums of money have come into town from the surrounding countryside, where their fathers may have joined the exodus to Russia. They live on the street and are often near-illiterate because they have missed so much school time.

Just 14, Anvar has not been to school in the last two years. Instead, he is a conductor on a minibus taxi, collecting fares for the driver. He explains that he has no time for studying as he has to support his mother, elder sister and two younger brothers. His father went off to Russia three years ago. The first year he sent

money home regularly but that has dried up since then and returning migrants say the man has a new wife and a baby.

Like many boys forced to take jobs, Anvar has a strong sense of his responsibilities as the senior male breadwinner in the household.

“I’m salting away half my earnings so that my sister can continue her studies once she finishes school in a year’s time,” he told IWPR. “Then she should become a nurse so she can cure Mum, who’s been ill a lot since she heard our father got married.”

Getting his sister into the medical institute will probably take more money than Anvar can save, but he reckons he has fixed it with a lecturer from the college he once had as a passenger in the taxi.

The extent of child labour is a matter of concern for many experts, although some argue that widespread poverty and the limited expenditure the government can afford mean families have few other viable options.

“Many parents encourage their children to work because it will bring in cash,” said Umed Rahimdodov, director of the Institute for Labour and Social Protection in Dushanbe. “In doing so, they are violating their own children’s rights.”

FEW STATE RESOURCES TO SUPPORT VULNERABLE FAMILIES

The government pays benefits to vulnerable groups such as large families and households where one of the parents is dead. But the monthly payment of 20 somonis is equivalent to 20 loaves of the local unleavened bread. Families with more than two children in school also an allowance, but this comes to no more than 40 somonis per child annually.

Tajikistan is Central Asia’s poorest country and the government struggles to raise tax revenue, so there is little available to provide benefits in cash or in kind, such as school uniforms and lunches.

According to Alimova, it is always economic factors that prompt children go out to work and miss out on education.

“If the parents cannot feed themselves or their children, if a child cannot go to school he or she will go to work. Employers have an interest in taking children on as they can pay them a pittance and avoid issuing a contract,” she said. “Yet international documents ratified by Tajikistan enshrine the child’s right to life and education. When children work instead of studying, it is a violation of their rights.”

There are child protection agencies in every town and district of the country, but they have few staff and are poorly paid.

Manzura Salomova, the secretary for children's affairs at the Dushanbe city administration, says her office does identify child labour cases but lacks the legal tools to stop minors working.

"In the first six months of 2008, we conducted raids which revealed 623 [working] children, mostly from various other parts of the country. We have a discussion with them, but then we let them go because we don't have the right to hold them for longer. We call in their parents and sometimes fine them, but it isn't a large penalty and they can easily pay it. Then the children carry on working anyway."

A NECESSARY EVIL?

Some argue that there is little sense in trying to stop children working given the harsh realities of life in Tajikistan.

Firuz Saidov, an analyst with the Centre for Strategic Studies, an institute attached to the presidential administration, says many parents cannot do without the extra income.

"Tajikistan has its own specific features," he argued. "If children work the family land or help the parents on the allotment and earn some money, it's because they have no other option, and no one should ban them from doing so. That kind of work cannot be considered child labour exploitation."

Many parents do not see much point in educating their children, especially since schools are often not up to scratch and the outlays for uniforms and books can be high.

Saadat, a 32-year-old with two children in school, said, "Many schools don't have enough teachers, and classes run only two hours a day instead of six. In cases like that, what can the children get out of school – will they get the education they need at all?"

Yet many young people caught up in work do place a high value on education.

Firuz is now working legally, but when he started two years ago, he was just 14. He earns four or five dollars a day pushing a barrow found the Shohmansur market in Dushanbe, but he would love to go back to school.

Realistically, the chances of him doing that are slim – he is far behind with his education and reads and writes poorly, and in any case feels he cannot abandon his three younger siblings. His mother has a job at a cotton mill, but her wages are low and are often issued only after several months' delay.

Some of Firuz's friends have managed to keep attending school when they can, but they feel they have little chance of going to university.

NO EASY SOLUTIONS

The risks for Tajikistan are high – the once universal education provided by the Soviet authorities is now badly underfunded, and the thousands of teenagers who drop out will have few opportunities in an already hard-pressed economy.

With no prospect of a major economic upturn in sight, child labour looks likely to persist.

UNICEF's Hosabekova believes economic assistance might work. "Their mothers should be offered alternatives to child labour, for example small grants and microcredits on good terms to allow them to start up a business and earn money," she said.

Alimova thinks parents should have the consequences of their actions spelled out to them, saying, "Doctors and psychologists should explain to them the negative effects that labour has on children's physical health, mental and spiritual development, and whole future."

One recurring theme in IWPR's interviews with working children is that they are often prepared to sacrifice their own education for the sake of their brothers and sisters.

Rustam, the young shepherd, is keen for his brother not to miss out as he has done, and plans to end the current arrangement where they swap around the roles of schoolboy and shepherd.

"I'm probably going to dump school altogether," he said. "My little brother is doing well at school, but if we go on like this and he starts doing badly, he might not make a success of it."

Rustam's solution is to join the exodus of migrants as soon as he can. "Once I get a passport, I'll go off to Russia with my big brother," he said confidently. "First we'll make some money and get our sister married off, then I'll buy a car and drive passengers around."

(The names of children interviewed for this story have been changed.)

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