

Tajikistan: Poverty Fuels Child Labour

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Tens of thousands of Tajik children wash cars, pick cotton and work on building sites in an effort to make ends meet.

Most mornings since she was eight years old, Tahmina has left the meagre comforts of her Dushanbe home and gone off to work.

Like thousands of other Tajik children, Tahmina's low-paying and physically demanding jobs have kept her family afloat but prevented her from attending school or having a normal childhood.

Now 15, she works at a Dushanbe market, walking around in all weather, selling pies cooked by her employer. Other jobs have included washing dishes at a canteen, though she was fired for breaking plates. She was also sacked from a housekeeping job, because she couldn't manage the heavy labour required.

At the market, she earns less than a dollar per day for tiring and unpleasant work, which comes with many dangers.

An IWPR correspondent saw Tahmina attacked by a group of hooligans who threw her pies to the ground then ran away. Her employer beat Tahmina and cursed at the girl, threatening not to pay her for the week's labour.

"I want to go to school like the other girls from our yard, but my mother has no money to buy me clothes and school items, and what I earn at the market is only enough to buy food for us, although we only eat bread with tea and soup without meat," said Tahmina, still crying after the unpleasant incident. "I dream of my brothers returning from Russia. Perhaps they will help us."

No one has heard from her three siblings since they went to Russia to find jobs. Tahmina's father was killed by a stray bullet on the streets of Dushanbe during the height of the civil war. Her mother, grief stricken at the loss of her loved ones, has taken to her bed and can no longer contribute to the family finances.

Stories like Tahmina's are common in Tajikistan where the after effects of war and economic collapse have sent tens of thousands of children into the labour market, despite laws prohibiting those under age 15 from working.

Tajikistan has also signed the international Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention – calling for immediate measures to eliminate child slavery, forced labour, prostitution, and work that harms the health, safety or morals of children - and in May amended its labour code in an effort to further protect young workers.

Experts say this has made little difference on the ground where exact numbers of underage children working are unclear since no official statistics are kept.

Well aware that most of the children have nowhere to turn, employers take advantage, exploiting the inexperienced and defenceless workers, secure in the knowledge they won't complain.

Jamshed Isroilov, 14, worked at a petrol station. When a customer filled up his tank and drove off without paying, he was fired and verbally abused by his boss. Worse still, he wasn't paid for the work he'd done.

"I didn't have any written contract with the boss, and so I couldn't get my money," said Jamshed, who in fact had a lucky escape from the petrol station where three men were later injured in a major explosion.

Popular work for boys is washing cars at city markets, restaurants and stadiums. Fifteen-year-old Farhod has been in the business for eight years and is now considered a professional, even employing his own band of 10-13 year olds.

"Initially I helped older boys to wash cars and received just two somoni (70 US cents) a day," said Farhod. "But in those hungry years the money helped our family to survive. Now I make a good wage and dream of saving up money to open my own small business."

Teenagers are also seen frequently on building sites around the capital lugging bricks, bags of cements, iron beams and boards to the second and third floors.

In dining halls and restaurants, young girls wash dishes or peel vegetables all day in cold water. Their hands are red and cracked and their fingers covered in cuts.

A new and unpleasant form of child exploitation has cropped up recently on the streets of Dushanbe. The director of the NGO Safe Childhood, Irina Shakirjanova, said adults are forcing children to beg for money then pocketing the takings themselves.

"The child beggars constantly pester you and follow you. They are special groups of young, physically strong guys, who control a certain territory of the city, making a profit from the sympathy of passers-by," said Shakirjanova.

Each autumn, those children who do attend school find their education abruptly halted when the cotton-picking season begins. Schoolchildren are responsible for bringing in much of the lucrative harvest, which takes from 60 to 90 days.

"The heads of farms do not pay the necessary attention to the health of pupils," said Ibaidullo Safarov, director of the Pulse Centre which supports educational reforms.

"Schoolchildren bring a meagre lunch with them, sometimes just stale bread and two tomatoes. Instead of hot tea they drink water from the ditch."

Kurbongul Rajabova, the head of Save the Children in Kulyab south Tajikistan, is not against children working if it does not damage their health, but suggests Tajik youngsters are being exploited.

"If the work does not teach them any trade in combination with school education or does not improve the children's situation, then this is abuse," he said.

Some experts say that legalising child labour is the solution.

“The time has come when the legislative structure of power, the parliament of the republic, needs to determine which work teenagers can do, and to protect and legalise child labour in the country,” said lawyer Rasul Boboev.

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