

Confessions of a Teacher

Faheema

I am a teacher at a drop-in center for children who work as child labourers. This way children who work can come in the afternoon, or whenever their work schedule permits them to come and attend school and acquire vocational skills at the drop-in center.

Sumaira was fourteen years old when her mother brought her to be admitted to the center. She worked as a domestic servant until 2.p.m. She had attended school up till class fourth and then had dropped out to help her parents support the family and to send her younger siblings to school.

I often wondered why Sumaira usually had a lost look on her face and would only speak in monosyllables. I would often try to talk to her to find out what lurked behind those troubled eyes.

It turned out that Sumaira was the eldest in her family. She wanted to attend regular school but had to drop- out and work for the family.

Sumaira is now in class fifth at the center. She is also learning to stitch. She is good at whatever she does, but her circumstances are a constant source of anxiety for her. One day she is worried about her siblings' well-being, the next day the beating she receives from her parents upsets her and sometimes it is her employers who are harsh to her for the slightest of mistakes. She tries very hard to shake off all these memories for the three hours that she is at school.

I have managed to gain her trust. Sumaira shares with me her frustrations and her sense of deprivation. She tells me how if her little sister wants the clip or toy that she has,

she gives it to her sister. All I can offer her is some moral support. I tell her she has to strengthen herself for her own sake and for the sake of all those other lives that are depending on her. I myself am not sure how she can do that.

Sumaira had been absent from school for some days. One day she came herself to tell me that she won't be coming to the center as she was unwell. She looked quite ill. I sent her to the doctor.

Later I asked the doctor about her and found out that stress was causing her illness; she was constantly brooding over her situation, over how her father would beat her, and why he did not earn money to support them all. Searching in vain to find the answers to these questions, Sumaira had fallen ill. The doctor also said that she needed complete rest. I knew that although she could take time off from the center, her employers where she worked as a maid would fire her if she didn't turn up for work for so many days.

I felt helpless in the face of Sumaira's teeming problems. All I could do was pray that God may soften her father's heart so Sumaira can lead a normal and happy life.

Faheema is a teacher at the Idara Taleem o Aagahi drop in center in Rawalpindi