

The Uncared For

Mehnaz Feroze

Teaching at a drop-in center for child domestic labour is different from teaching elsewhere. These children are not just from poor households but from households where children are made aware of the poverty; these children are not scolded by their parents for being naughty like other children are, they are scolded by their employers for small mistakes that they make while working. Childhood is just a word for them; their experience of childhood was aborted before its time.

Zubair and his sister Nasreen were my students. Nasreen used to work at someone's house. For some days the two did not turn up at the center. I decided to go to their house to find out what the matter was. What I found out was a heart-rending but common story. Their mother had undergone surgery and was still recuperating from that, so Nasreen was now doing her own share of work and also working at the houses her mother used to do.

They had to take care of their employers particularly because the mother owed them some money. She did not want them to think that she had run away with their money; that is why the daughter had to go in her place now. Little Zubair was working at a barber's shop for Rs.100 a day. Since the sister was not going to the drop-in center any more, he too felt unmotivated to go. Like all mothers, their mother wanted them to study, but....

I convinced Zubair to attend school so that he can earn more than what he is earning right now. Nasreen has also returned to the center. She is attending school and is learning to stitch.

How many a children roam the streets aimlessly after work, because no one ever took them by the hand and led them to a school, no one ever made them see the point of it all...because no one ever cared enough...

The author is a teacher at the Idara Taleem o Aagahi drop in center, non-formal school for children working as child labourers, in Rawalpindi