



CHILDREN ON THE ROAD TO CRIME

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In Sri Lanka which boasts of nearly fifty years of Free Education from Kindergarten to the University and having one of the highest literacy rates in Asia, it is distressing to find thousands of children who should be in school, exploited by adults and even by parents, engaged in illegal pursuits which would ultimately lead them to crime. Traditionally children had been employed as domestic servants, pavement hawkers and menial labourers. With the new economic changes and the influx of tourists new and more dangerous forms of activities have emerged which encourage the young to defy the law and induct them to crime.

One of the principal factors if not the key one promoting child labour is underemployment or unemployment among parents. The parents of employed children and young persons are not against them being employed, instead they tend to encourage them. Parents in the low income group do not regard a child of 10 as a dependent but as a co-provider sharing family responsibility. A disabled or sick parent or a drunkard father will prompt a child to seek employment. It is clear that poverty and large family size draw children to the labour market. Very often it is the first or second child in a large family who seeks employment to support the younger siblings. Many of them do not have a criminal background and they do not always come from broken

homes, but the nature of their employment could pave the way to delinquency.

Listed below are some of the trades to which young children are forced into:

1. Pavement hawking.
2. Domestic employment.
3. Conductors in private vans.
4. Employed by adults in illicit brewing of liquor and taping of trees.
5. Employed by adults in illicit felling of trees and growing of ganja.
6. Employed in groups in fishing camps or "wadiyas".
7. Illicit gemming.
8. Employed as unskilled labourers in garages and bicycle repair shops.
9. Employed as cleaners, messengers, lifting heavy weights in hotels, boutiques and markets.
10. Professional Child Beggars.

The most common among these is the employment of children as domestic servants. A survey done among apartment dwellers in three suburbs of Colombo has revealed that one in every three middle class households employs a child as a servant. The reasons for this increase of child servants are not far to seek. Earlier young women of the age group 18-35 years and older women of the age 35-65 years used to come from the villages to the towns and suburbs as domestics. The younger group has now found more lucrative employment as house maids in the Middle East. The older group is also difficult to recruit because, these women say that they have to look after the children of their daughters who have gone to

the Middle East. Also many girls from Villages who would have normally taken to domestic employment, now find that there are more attractive avenues of employment open to them such as factory work specially in garment factories in the Free Trade Zone. Hence domestic labour is hard to find and very expensive. As a result the cheapest source of labour, children are exploited to the maximum.

Children are brought from villages or tea estates by an agent (who is invariably a relative) who is paid by the employer of the child. These children come from very poor and sometimes broken families. The typical background of a servant child would be a father who is an estate labourer and a mother who has deserted the family for another man or vice versa. Usually the parent who is left behind is too poor to cope with the situation as many of these families are very large. The agents then appear on the scene to take away the children to urban homes.

These children are not sent to school by their employers. They are given food and clothing but not paid regular wages — perhaps a meagre allowance. They work irregular hours and are given various types of jobs like cooking, washing clothes and cleaning. Some of these children maintain links with their families and may even send their meagre earnings to their parents. Some of them remain in employment because they are better off than if they were at home and also with the fervent hope that their employers will find a suitable job for them later on. But those aspirations are rarely realised.

Apart from the physical injury and sexual abuse which threatens a child servant he or she could be easily lured by circumstances to

indulge in petty thefts. These could be due to dire necessity or acts of revenge due to non payment of wages. There are many cases of such thefts committed by child servants or ex child servants who have run away from their employers. The life histories of some prostitutes show that they were employed as children in households, seduced by their masters or made pregnant by them and then driven away. Unable to face their families again these women have ended up as prostitutes sometimes with babies in arms. Statistics related to the whole island obtained from the police headquarters in Colombo regarding suicide by children and young persons reveal that a large number of them were domestic employees. It is clear that the employment of children as domestics will endanger their mental and physical health and very often place them on the path to delinquency.

Pavement Hawking: Walking around the street of the big cities one sees large numbers of children selling foodstuffs, trinkets, toys and lottery tickets along the crowded pavements. Their ability and youthful high pitched voices are their assets. More than half of them have migrated from the village and have their roots in the village. Others are slum or pavement dwellers. A large number of them are below 14 years of age. With the growth of TV advertising, increased demand for certain consumer items and free flow of goods, the number of children hawking on the pavement has increased considerably during the last few years. Since they can earn money and be independent and go back to their home in the evening (if they have any), many of the youngsters enjoy this type of self employment rather than being under an employer. But the real danger that threatens the future of these child hawkers is that they are exposed to



criminal elements which are a feature of urban pavement culture. There is evidence that unscrupulous adults and big mudalalies engage the services of such children in peddling drugs.

Employment of children of adults in the illicit brewing of liquor and illicit tapping of trees: The illicit brewing and sale of liquor has become almost a cottage industry in this country. It is widespread in the sense that it takes place in the alleys and by lanes of large towns, suburbs, villages, forested areas and even in the new development areas. Whole families are involved in it; the men prepare the brew and women and children do the distribution and sales. The children are employed in the hope that if they are arrested the magistrate will deal with them leniently. If a child is fined for an excise offence the man behind the scene will pay the fine and the child will go back to his trade. According to statistics received from the police headquarters the numbers of persons under 18 arrested for excise offences are as follows:

	1984	1985
Males	2975	2438
Females	345	339

The numbers arrested are only a fraction of those involved in the offence. Some of the big timers in the business are rich, and wealth can purchase influence, so that they have means of circumventing the laws. The children they employ, who should be in school are trained to defy the law and will eventually follow the same trade. They are forced by the nature of their trade to associate with disreputable acquaintances, thus opening fresh avenues for crime. Illicit liquor is as-

sociated with prostitution to attract more customers.

Employment of children by adults in the illicit felling of trees and growing of ganja:- These offences are prevalent only in remote villages and in the newly colonised townships all of which are in the vicinity of forests. When confronted by the police the adult offenders often remain in the background and the children are sent to face the law in the hope that they will be treated lightly. But the real danger is that from their early years the children are trained in illegal trades, and they are not even aware that they are committing an offence. In the case of ganja growing there is the added danger that the children will get used to the drug.

Children who work in fishing wadiyas: These children are taken from their parents by agents with promises of a rosy future elsewhere or are kidnapped on their way to school. The hundreds of children reported missing and not traced by the police are very likely toiling away as bonded slaves in some sunny beach. The children work in fishing camps in small remote islands off the north western or eastern coast and their whereabouts will never be known by their parents. They are employed by powerful traders to process fish in the blazing sun. They are not paid wages but are clothed and fed and they gradually learn the trade. They are virtually slaves and are never allowed to leave the camp. In one instance 8 small boys between the age 8 - 14 years were freed from a fishing camp by the Minister of Fisheries in the government.

Conductors in Private Vans: Since the privatisation of the transport system, private vans and bus owners began to employ boys usually between 14 - 18 years as criers

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and conductors in vehicles. A study was conducted by the Women's and Children's Unit of the Labour Department using a sample of 60 such boys. Forty two of them were between the ages of 17 and 18. Almost all of them admitted that they had received a few years of schooling and now they felt that their parents were too poor to maintain them any more. So they had no other choice but to take up this job so as to fend for themselves and help their parents. One boy of 12 years said that his father was dead and mother was a daily paid labourer. He had 3 younger sisters and his mother's meagre earnings were insufficient to support the family. So after 3 years of schooling he stopped his education and took up this work of collecting passengers for a van. He gave all his earnings to his mother. His only aim was to give his sisters a good education.

Many of them took to this job in order to tide over a difficult period till they found better and more stable employment. Some admitted that because of their poor educational standard they could not get anything better. Since there were very few young people over 20 employed in this manner it is known what these boys did when they attained that age. Some of these boys interviewed admitted that their employers exploited their labour. They had no regular hours or leaves for meals. They had to face abuse from the



public as well as from the employers.

Child Beggars: A recent study of the beggars of Sri Lanka has shown that begging has become a profession and that children are exploited for the purpose. In 1976 - 77, in the City of Colombo alone there were 1438 child beggars; but the numbers have increased rapidly since, due to the influx of tourists and the growth of organised begging using children to stir the sympathy of the public. Moreover, the fact that children have been stranded by the sudden demise of their parents due to natural disasters and terrorist violence, have contributed to the increase of the child beggar population. The child beggar is sometimes used as a tool by tricksters who are bent on collecting money by enticing unsuspecting people. The young beggars are trained to pretend to blind or dumb to evoke deep sympathy, to identify would be contributors and houses where would be sympathisers live. There are a number of children produced in courts for running behind tourists begging for money and other objects. From professional begging to crime is an easy path.

Although it is clear that in many instances the nature of employment is such that, it may well be the foundation of a delinquent career

yet the whole issue of child labour has received low priority, both by the state and by the rest of society. The reason for this is that child labour affects the lives of poor and destitute children who are inarticulate of whose voices are never heard.

The present laws dealing with the subject are outdated and modelled on colonial English legislation. Even the terminology and the types of employment given in the Legislative Enactments are no longer relevant. New legislation should be drafted in keeping with the recent socio economic changes and the new forms of exploitation of children that have emerged in the recent past. Legal controls should be publicised from time to time if they are to operate as restraints.

Above all the state should make every effort to ensure that the benefits of free education reaches the poor child; otherwise the whole system would be a mockery. Children of 10 and 12 are selling lottery tickets on the streets or engaged in domestic drudgery while the state provides free education and text books from kindergarten to the University.

Strict prohibition supported by publicity and media coverage will act as a positive disincentive. Among a literate population the use of the media and active community support through local grass roots organisations can change social values. ■