

WORLD DAY AGAINST CHILD LABOUR LOST CHILDHOODS

LAILA KARIM

BACK in 1972, my husband brought home Mugal, a boy of about 10 or 11, to assist me in household chores. Mugal's father handed him over to us saying, "I am giving my only son to you for his future." Perhaps my husband's office assistant had promised that one day Mugal would be placed somewhere in the government pay roll - a common practice in those days, particularly in government households. Even the office peons, *chhaprashtis*, *pankha* pullers (dedicated staff sitting outside the room who pulled a special kind of ceiling fan with a long rope) used to perform household jobs.

Major tasks of Mugal included taking our one and a half-year old daughter to walk in the lawn, playing with her, and helping me in daily chores. After a few months, I found things going missing; biscuits given to him for my daughter (I now feel ashamed writing this) and keys of my jewellery drawer were found in one of his pockets. I was furious; I beat him and called his shocked father to take him back. It was a relief to be rid of him. In the past forty five years, the world has changed. From a housewife I became a development worker, speaking out and fighting for the rights of children since 1986. Today, Mugal's face and that incident haunt me often.

I feel guilty when I have to compromise with real life situations. I failed to knock at the door of my neighbour when

she was shouting and screaming at the little girl working as a domestic helper. Only later did I learn from her employer that she often weis her bed. She was tiny. She was expected to wake up early in the morning to finish the kitchen work, make *rots*, clean utensils, prepare the breakfast table; any deviation would cause problems to the family members, particularly the school going children. The girl, an orphan, has no time of her own, and nowhere else to go. This is her fate. As an obligation, the employer married her off later. But she came back again - this time more timid and a flawless domestic aid. No longer an embarrassment for the family.

Do we even know how many these children number to? No, because they live inside our four walls, working 15/16 hours a day; they sleep on the kitchen floor or in the balcony corner, even guest bathrooms.

Before buying a piece of furniture, we decide where to put it. But when we bring a young child for our personal comfort, not many of us consider a place for him/her. Sometimes they become news items, drawing our attentions when things go grossly wrong - when they are tortured, sexually abused, about to die or killed in most bizarre ways.

Tk. 5/6 per thousand pieces As a development worker, I can testify that things haven't changed that much despite the policies, laws in hand, and the international treaties and goals we signed. Our relentless roundtables, talks

and speeches, rallies and campaigns, and work in the field have yet to bring a visible change in the scenario. We are yet to come out from this medieval practice that causes harm not only to the child, but ties the family to an inter-generational poverty trap. We are nurturing this practice as it fits our need and add some extra to the profits.

In past 45 years, the range of their work and places has expanded. Now children work not only for our comfort, but have become a part of our profit making. The number has risen to millions and their little hands are everywhere. In Kurigram, these little hands are rolling *bidi* (handmade cigarettes) for wages of Tk. 5/6 per thousand pieces rolled. Their small fingers are just right to do the job well and fast. We see them in the workshop and glass factories; in the saw mills, in the rivers catching fish fries; market places; or hanging on to the human haulers or tempos. The little hands are making colourful balloons for our birthdays, tiffin boxes for our children. The list is endless. We see them in thousands in the old part of Dhaka city - Lalbagh, Kamrangir Char - and in other cities and towns. The prevalence is higher in the urban areas (9 percent) than in the rural areas (5.1 percent). In Dhaka city, it is higher, at 16.6 percent, than the national level of 6 percent. The highest concentrations are in Ward 61 (over 30 percent) and in ward 71 (43.85 percent) of Lalbagh Thana.

The Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) report 2013-2015 states that over

34 lakh children are engaged in child labour - about half of them directly engaged. Twelve lakh children are doing harmful work and 2.6 lakh of them work in extremely hazardous and harmful situations. They are forced to leave home because of natural calamities and due to familial troubles. Like Mugal, they are also taken away from their village homes and parents with the promise of a number of non-enrolments and drop-outs, children on the streets, child trafficking and alarmingly, over child marriage (Child Equity Atlas).

We want to see action and implementation of the above laws, policies and protocols to realise our goal of no child having to work before the age of 14 and the removal of children from hazardous labour by 2021, a new deadline of the National Child Labour Elimination Policy 2010-2015, and the formulation of the National Plan of Action (NPA) to meet the deadlines of Vision 2021.

Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) is our mandate. We made our obligations by signing it in 1989. Let's keep the promise to these children - they occupy about half of our total population. Otherwise we can't reach our ambition to be a middle income country by 2021. Let children have their childhood and grow well with education, be healthy, have leisure, and be protected from harm. Say no to children working for the comfort and profit of adults.

The writer is a development worker.