

No end in sight for domestic child labor

Pointing to a rise in child labour in domestic units, the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) is seeking to bring households under the ambit of labour laws. India is estimated to have at least 13 million child labourers.

“There is growth in child labour, especially in the informal sector, the household units. The child labour law doesn’t cover this sector. We want the household sector to be brought under its ambit,” NCPCR chief Shanta Sinha told IANS in an interview.

The problem of child labour poses a serious challenge to the government. Despite several initiatives, the magnitude of the socio-economic problem has come in the way of its eradication.

Many poor children in India work at the cost of their education, spending their lives in poverty and dejection. But according to NCPCR, most cases go unreported.

Sinha says child labour in any form has to be totally banned as it contradicts the spirit of the Right to Education Act. “Under the Right to Education Act, no child can be employed anywhere – neither at home, nor at any factory or brick kiln. There has to be a total ban on child labour,” says the Magsaysay award winning activist.

As per 2001 Census figures, there are an estimated 13 million child labourers in the age-group of 5-14 years. Employers favour child labourers as they come cheap and can be easily coerced to work extra hours. They are in huge demand, specially in the diamond industry, fireworks industry and the domestic sector which includes household units, restaurants, dhabas and brick kilns.

Though the central government has broadened the coverage of child labour laws by banning children’s services as domestic workers and as workers in restaurants, dhabas, hotels, yet a lot of children across the country continue to work in such units.

The household units employ a large number of children, but have been exempted from the purview of the law. When asked about the condition of bonded child labourers, Sinha said: “I don’t have the statistics. Every child who is working is a bonded labourer.”

According to Unicef, “close to half the children leave school before reaching Grade 8 with higher dropout rates for SC (Scheduled Caste) children (55 out of 100) and the highest for ST (Scheduled Tribe) children (63 out of 100)”. It also states that children who are out of school are either part of the labour pool or at the risk of child labour, along with trafficking, early marriage and other violations.

Just like the plan for eradication of child labour, the issue of abolition of child marriage by 2010 under the National Plan of Action for Children 2005 has also gone for a toss due to lack of awareness. Sinha pointed out that lack of schools was the main reason for the failure to abolish child marriage.

On the status of implementing the Right to Education Act, Sinha said: “The biggest challenge is to get dropouts back to school and give them an age appropriate education which has been mandated by the act.” The clause of no-detention policy till Class 8 in the act has triggered confusion with states like West Bengal arguing it will impede proper evaluation of students.

But Sinha said: “It actually puts the onus on the schools to see that there is quality education in schools and they move from one class to another fully equipped with learning.”

She said the policy has been misunderstood by people involved with the education sector. “It doesn’t mean no assessment of the students. It means comprehensive and continuous education,” she added (India Current Affairs 30-1-12).