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Poverty forces Afghan Children to work for food

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Instead of going to school and enjoying simple childhood times, many Afghan children have to work hard every day to earn a living for their families.

Several years of civil war and extreme poverty in Afghanistan forced many families to stop sending their children to schools.

While millions of Afghan children have returned to school following the collapse of the Taliban regime in late 2001, tens of thousands of school-age youngsters, restricted by economic hardship, must still work on the streets of the Afghan capital, Kabul, to sustain their families.

“I would love to go to school, but I can’t. There is no one else in my family to work except me,” says Fahima, a 9-year-old girl selling homemade breads on a food pat in front of Kabul municipality in Dehe Afghan area of Kabul city.

“I was in third school, but last year I failed because I was working on the streets all day,” she explaining that, with a disabled father and two sisters and a younger brother to feed, her priority was her family.

An estimate by UNICEF says that around 40,000 children are now working on the city’s streets.



Many of the children lost the breadwinners in their homes or were put on the street to work, most of them as shoeshine boys or porters, washing cars, burning incense, selling small items or collecting metal. Others still resort to begging, but rarely admit it, considering such acts shameful.

But such street children are hardly new in the war-ravaged city of some three million. The children, both male and female, often assume the duty or responsibility of earning income for their families after the main breadwinners are killed or disabled.

For many children in Kabul, the families are unable to provide even the basics. To support the family, the children have to work to earn something for food, often under particularly dire conditions.

And while hazardous child labor had not been as commonplace as in other countries in the region, UNICEF remained concerned that children who have to work in some way to assist their families did not have access to education and health care.

It is precisely such issues that Aschiana is working to address. “We are trying hard to cut the number of poor children working on the streets, and fortunately we have had some success,” A source of the NGO’s street-working children centre said in condition of hiding his name.



Since 1995, they have trained 2,600 street children in a variety of vocational fields including carpentry, painting and mechanics, he said, noting they were still working with close to 3,000 children in such areas.

According to UNICEF, in order to better assist children who do work, or who live in vulnerable families, Afghanistan needed a strong social care system. “The fact that so many children have to work in the first place is an indication of the economic hardship and stress faced by many Afghan families,” the UNICEF official said.

The country needed more long-term support to tackle the issue of child labor in the war-affected country. It would be naive to think that the issue of working children can be solved in a short period of time.