

Transform Sri Lanka into a

CHILD LABOUR FREE ZONE



By Jayashika Padmasiri



Ratnapura District which is known as the 'city of gems' in Sri Lanka is also widely known for something else apart from the tea and rubber plantations. This dark cloud that hangs over Ratnapura is child labour, which steals all the glamour of the gems from the city and leaves it as a place full of dark mines that leeches the childhood of thousands of children. Identifying this situation the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and Ratnapura District Secretariat launched the pilot project to eradicate worst forms of child labour by 2016 from the country in Ratnapura. This was initiated following the international agreement in 2010 to prioritise elimination of the worst and hazardous forms of child labour by 2016 and to make Sri Lanka a child labour free zone.

According to the Sri Lanka Child Activity Survey conducted in 2008/2009 by the Department of Census and Statistics and Ministry of Finance and Planning out of the total population an estimated 2.5% (107,259 from 4,338,709) are engaged in child labour. In this report it is explained that 1% (43,343) children are engaged in non-hazardous forms and another 1.5% (63,916) children in hazardous forms of child labour in Sri Lanka.

"School attendance among these is about half (53.4%), with the figure dropping to around 30% among those doing hazardous work. While a much larger

number of children are engaged in family chores and work for less than 15 hours a week, the defined child labourers are engaged for longer hours in work as street and mobile vendors and servers, domestic helpers, agricultural and related workers, and labourers engaged in mining, construction, manufacturing, transport and similar. Nationally, over 60% work in agriculture and fisheries, nearly 20% in mining, construction, manufacturing, and transport and about 17% in street jobs. Almost 70% of child labour is male and 30% female. Over 30% of children doing hazardous work are without parental care. In addition to lack of regular schooling, child labourers are often prone to illness and safety risks and lack of care, and tend to be over-worked, under-paid and emotionally abused," the report of the Sri Lanka Child Activity Survey states.

This is the current state of the country we are living in: a country where children earn money to support their families as the cost of living is too high and unbearable. Little untrained hands (that should be holding school books) have to put aside their books and pitch in to support their families struggle to make ends meet, since the majority of the public (mainly including parents and guardians) cannot afford to live with the current economic and social problems that are resting on their dinner tables. Ratnapura is just one district where child labour is taking place from the many other districts. Child labour estimate in Ratnapura alone is 4,000 which includes children working in hazardous forms of employment too. Most girls in Ratnapura are today largely seen serving as domestic workers outside the area, while it is also reported that 55% of child labourers in Ratnapura fail to attend school.

Ratnapura District Secretariat Sunil Kannangara speaking about this situation told Daily Mirror that to eradicate child labour it is impossible for just the ILO or the district organisations promoting child development to function alone as individuals and that the whole administrative system has to work together while assisting this cause to transform Ratnapura into a child labour free zone.

"We have taken steps to inform and to advise children, parents, teachers, government officials such as Grama Niladari and Samurdhi officers, guardians of children and employers of organisations against child labour and regarding the necessity of school education in a child's life. We identify locations in Ratnapura where children are used as employees and try and stop those activities while also putting up billboards at those locations against child labour and promoting legal action taken by ILO against those employers. Then we are planning to identify the vulnerable families who are using their children to find (or rather earn) money and to assist them economically through a social support scheme such as Divinagama or Samurdhi. This we believe would stop those families from sending out their children to earn money and instead to send them to school," Kannangara said.

Speaking further he added that to create a free child labour zone the economic problem of the country has to be addressed, while also creating an ideology amongst the people that it is wrong to use children as labourers.

"Some children who are working as child labourers cannot be re-sent to school. So we would rehabilitate those children. And there are some children who have missed many lessons from their education syllabuses at schools. We have special educational programmes for them, and later, by judging their progress we decide whether to send them back to school or not. One major challenge we are facing is identifying the locations where children are being used as employees. We have informed all Grama Niladari officers, ILO officers, family health officers and Samurdhi officers to let us know if they come across any child labourers. And then there are practi-

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cal issues too that we need to address, such as - if in a remote village the infrastructure is not developed, and if the school they have in the village is a junior school, then after completing the junior years in that school, those children are not able to continue their education because of the transportation problem. So because of that to eradicate child labour completely from Sri Lanka we need the assistance of all administrative sectors: economic development, infrastructure development, social schemes to enhance the living standards of families all need to come together to make Sri Lanka a child labour free zone," he said.

The legal punishment for employing child labourers is a payment of Rs. 10,000 as compensation along with one year imprisonment. However, whether the Rs.10,000 payment is sufficient for such a serious crime is something that the authorities responsible for forming and implementing laws should seriously contemplate.

So far from the research conducted in Ratnapura in relation to child labour in November 2013 it is revealed that currently there is heightened awareness that child labour is an offence and that strict actions are taken against people involved in child labour in the society and that as a result of this awareness there are no instances of forcing children to work by either parents/ guardians nor by the employers. It is also reported in this research though awareness created has resulted in significantly reducing the number of children going to work; it has not resulted in children going to school instead. It is also highlighted in this report that "education" is not identified as a basic essential like food, water and shelter among parents and

children though the social support system understands the importance of education and is advocating it.

"Economic situation of the family also plays a pivotal role in school attendance: the commute to a school that is 6 kms away from home poses challenges such as bus fare of Rs 120/- per day plus the fact that the family cannot afford shoes. Children feel inadequate - in not having the proper clothes and shoes to be on par with their peers. Though some children see value in education, they don't know how to pursue it. Children are aware that they are not entitled to work; nevertheless they are not aware that school is mandatory," was amongst the findings of this research which had ultimately arrived at the conclusion that it is the child that decides to work, or not work, due to varied economic and social issues.

A working child is identified if he or she is involved in any form of the economic activity for a payment, profit or family-gain. Some of the main hazardous forms of child labour taking place in our society today are: any type of work involving the slaughter of animals or the cutting or chopping of the flesh of animals, production, transportation or sale of alcohol, work involving the harvesting of tobacco, the manufacture, transportation or sale of tobacco products; any type of work in a club, liquor bar or casino, the manufacture, transportation or sale of explosives; mining, quarrying; work connected with armed conflict, the collection or disposal of garbage or sewage or the scavenging of garbage, work involving the manufacture or sale of fireworks; the accompanying of tourists whether as guides or otherwise.

Eradicating child labour from Sri Lanka and transforming our island-nation into a child labour free zone is a necessity to create a better childhood for our children. It is not something we should do, but something we must do, not just to enhance the living conditions of our children today, but also to strengthen their lives tomorrow. So let's transform Sri Lanka into a child labour free zone and let our children grow as deeply rooted steady trees that will sparkle in the sunshine and dance in the cold rain.

