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Garments Children Education Programme

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JULEKHA is now 11 years old. She used to work in a garments factory before she was enrolled in a BRAC run school in Rampura area 18 months ago. As a garment helper Julekha used to get a salary of Tk. 500 per month. She was totally illiterate before but now she is in class II. She also works part time. "Yes, I work as a maid in a house. One of the teachers found this job for me. No, the employer does not stop me from coming to school. Yes, I want to continue here. I want to be educated," she said.

A confident looking Mostafa (13) has a similar story to tell. "I was illiterate before but now I can read and write so many things. I want to learn more. 'It's very enjoying here, better than the tough life in the garment factory. I get the opportunity to play with others.' But Mostafa's parents do not feel the same way. They want him to leave school and get a job somewhere to earn for the family. But Mostafa is determined to continue education as long as it is possible on his part.

Shahina was only 6 years old when she entered a garments factory in search of a livelihood. It was a 15 hours a day routine for which she used to get Tk. 400 per month. Now she is 9 years old and attending the education programme for the last one year. Her parents are not happy about her going to school. They want her to take a job and earn more for the family. "But I enjoy coming here. Earlier I had to work 7 days a week. The employer used to deduct money from my salary if I failed to go to work one day," Shahina said. All of her 5 brothers also work to support the family.

But there are parents with different attitude about the education programme. For example, the parents of Amina (12) are happy that their daughter is going to school. Her father is a rickshaw puller and her three sisters also work.

All the above children along with 4500 others are now studying in BRAC and GSS run schools set up specially for the under-aged children (below 14) retrenched by the garments factories three years ago. The education programme was started in compliance with the terms stipulated in the MOU between UNICEF, ILO and BGMEA (Bangladesh Garments Manufacturers Exporters Association).

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The genesis of the education programme for the retrenched under-aged children dates back to July 4, 1995, with the signing of a Memorandum Of Understanding (MOU) between UNICEF, ILO and BGMEA on the basis of a consensus to place children below 14 years of age, who were working in various garment factories at the time, in schools specially set up to provide education programme for them until they attained the age of 14. This MOU was initiated by UNICEF, ILO and other NGOs when the issue of child labour, particularly those in the garments sector, came into limelight after the introduction of the Harkin's Bill (The Child Labour Deterrence Act of 1993 submitted to US Senate by Senator Tom Harkin) in the USA. The bill proposed to ban import of commodities from countries that employ under-aged children to produce those commodities.

As under-aged children were working in the garments factories of Bangladesh at that time, the owners felt threatened by Harkin's Bill and began to terminate the child workers apprehending large-scale cancellation of export orders from the American buyers. It created a situation where confusion and rumors began to proliferate and thousands of children suddenly found themselves deprived of the opportunity to earn their own bread.

Here it needs to be mentioned that the issue of child labour, which exists in many forms in Bangladesh, has never been addressed comprehensively by state or society. The MOU stipulated setting up of a number of schools in Dhaka and Chittagong where under-aged child workers would be placed to receive appropriate education until attaining the age of 14, when they would be re-employed in any of the garments units belonging to the BGMEA members.

In accordance with the MOU, UNICEF agreed to contribute US\$ 175,000 for the year 1995 and additional support subsequently to keep the programme going. Each retrenched child, once placed in the school programme, was to be given Tk. 300 per month as stipend.

Through an elaborate and painstaking census system BGMEA, with support from UNICEF, ILO and the

US Mission in Dhaka, identified over 10,000 under-aged children after surveying all the garment factories under its purview. BRAC and GSS, two non-government organizations, set up special schools for the children retrenched by BGMEA.

GSS set up 97 schools within December 1996 and enrolled 3917 children in the education programme. BRAC set up 161 schools in Dhaka, 5 in Gazipur, 41 in Narayanganj and 49 in Chittagong enrolling a total number of 5826 retrenched children. As the education programme continued through 1997, a large number of children, more than 63% according to one estimate, left the programme after attaining the age of 14 and went back to work, mostly in the garments sector. Some children, however, dropped out because of the economic factor, as their income greatly substantiated the family income.

Skill development was considered to be a part of the education programme of necessity by UNICEF and other concerned parties. Accordingly the first agreement was signed on 30 June 1997 between UCEP and UNICEF, and 282 children were enrolled in the regular courses in UCEP. These children received both general education and vocational training in garments, garments finishing and wool knitting. Most of the children after attaining the age of 14 were provided with suitable jobs. Under the second agreement separate course arrangements have been made. UCEP bought new machinery and equipment from its own sources and offering courses on garments, wool knitting, electronics, carpentry and auto electricity. The courses on electronics and auto electricity are of 1 year duration. UNICEF bears all expenses of education, tiffin money, conveyance and tuition fees of each ex-garments student. Representative from ILO and BGMEA visit the institute from time to time to monitor the progress of training.

From a heart to heart talk with the children and some of the parents during a recent visit to the BRAC and GSS run schools and UCEP skill development center, it transpired that nearly 100 per cent of the retrenched children wanted to attend school as long as it was possible. They worked hard in school. On the

other hand, parents remained divided on the issue of education and only the hard-pressed parents having 5 to 6 children wanted their children to leave school. When told that the children would, at best, earn Tk. 500 to Tk. 600 from a job, which would be only Tk. 200 to Tk. 300 more than the stipend to Tk. 300 they were already receiving, the silence of the parents expressed loudly that for an extremely poor family Tk. 300 makes a lot of difference.

With the transition of majority of children from school to work (5407 according to one survey) the number of schools was also reduced. At present 232 schools exist in Dhaka and Chittagong where the education programme continues, with the total enrollment of 4307 children. The interest shown by the children in continuing education and their performance in school added a new dimension to the whole scenario. In response to that UNICEF has agreed to contribute further towards the cost of stipends to children beyond the age of 14 as an interim arrangement for a specific period.

Recent studies of the MOU children show attainment and achievement levels on par with or above similar groups in 'Normal' School.

But a new concept of 'Earn and Learn' is being given enough consideration in order to find a mechanism to help children continue education while they would be earning a livelihood as well. The education programme for the under-aged garment factory workers can perhaps work as an eye-opener, showing immense potential for improvement, improvisation and replication in other sectors where children are employed. The MOU is considered by many as a small step towards a wider possibility in solving the perennial problems of illiteracy, unemployment and child labour. May be the initial endeavour demanded huge investment in terms of money, energy and other resources, but it is hoped that similar ventures in future would cost less and give better dividends. For that, greater participation of the entire community, individuals, private organizations, and government and non-government agencies, sharing the common goal of eliminating child labour in Bangladesh, is necessary.