

## Literacy programme for working children

It is natural for a child to dream about a bright future. But there are many stories to tell when a child like Shaheenara says, "I want to be educated to end the miseries of life," reports BSS

Shaheenara is a domestic worker in Pachlaish area of Chittagong district. She doesn't like her job at all because the employers beat her almost everyday. "They even beat me if I don't play with their child" Shaheenara complains in tears.

For Shaheenara Basic Education for Hard To Reach (HTR) Urban Children Programme is a source of respite, freedom and inspiration.

She said her most favourite time now is the time that she passes in the classroom of HTR at Sundabipara centre at Pachlaish Samaj Unnayan Kendra (SUK), a Non Government Organisation runs this centre, which is one of the hundreds being implemented under a government programme.

Education Ministry took up the project in 1998 with the financial support from UNICEF, Government of Sweden and DFID. The project was designed to meet the educational needs of the working children. The government is executing the programme through different Non-Government Organisations in six urban areas.

The teachers at these learning centres play a vital role in the success of this programme. They not only teach the students by creating friendly atmosphere, but also make frequent visits to the house of their students to monitor their progress and communicate with their families. At times they also visit the workplace of the students to maintain the communication link with the employers.

A teacher at the Sundabipara centre, Nileema Bhattachariya said that she had to work very hard to convince the Shaheenara's employers to let her come to the centre. "I had to visit almost daily for a month to convince her employers and her mother to allow the girl to join this education programme," she said.

When asked what she would want to become when she will grow up, a confident Shaheenara said "I want to become educated that's all. I believe that it will bring an end to my present sufferings."

The opportunity for education for Shaheenara is like opening up a window to the brighter side of her life. Her teacher at the center said Shaheenara sometimes even doesn't listen to the restrictions of coming to the centre. "She has developed a confidence that this school will work as staircase to become self-reliant in life," Ms Bhattachariya said.

Same is the case with Jesmin who works at a local hotel along with her father. She said she wanted to become a doctor in life.

Actually while talking to the children one would feel that HTR project has certainly sparked off a light inside them. It has created a

firm belief among the children that the society has a willingness to offer them something better and their guardians would continue to create more facilities for them to become worthy in life.

Jesmin confidently said that she feels her parents would continue her education if she can end her learning at the HTR school. The children indeed are showing big signs of change even by having such limited chance of education.

It is infusing a sense of consciousness into these working children who would otherwise had a very low self esteem living in hazardous and unfavourable working atmosphere.

Ten-year old Shaheen said that he could now sign his name and read Bangla. "You know if you give thumb print instead of knowing how to sign your name your property could be cheated of from you," he said.

Shaheen seems to have developed a kind of strong dislike against corrupt practices and corrupt people. He said he wants to be in police and send all criminals to jail to remove corruption from the society.

Hashu Akhtar, 12, of Kuttuli area of Chittagong is now a student of class five. She was a domestic worker when she started her studies in the first batch of the HTR programme. Her guardians admitted her into the primary school when she wanted to continue her education at the end of her learning at the HTR centre. "My mother started working to support my education plans. All of my family members now give moral support to continue my education," she said.

When asked what she would do if her parents arrange her marriage right now and she has to give up education plans, Hashu Akhtar replies "They can not do it until I am eighteen".

The project is successful in creating demand for education among the students of the HTR learning centre. Mohammad Jamaluddin who was also a batch mate of Akhtar couldn't continue his studies at primary school because he had to work in a yarn factory to support his family.

"I have a pay raise after I completed my learning at the HTR centre in 2000. But I do not want to continue my job rather I would like to enrol myself in a primary school."

The HTR Project was developed against the backdrop of the mounting child labour debate in the country, triggered by the threat of enforcement of Harkin Bill.

The lessons from the much talked-about project for child garment workers in Bangladesh - which started in 1995, the year of the conclusion of the Memorandum of Understanding between UNICEF, ILO and BGMEA (Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association) - were used to develop this project.