



Murdering Education

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The renaissance of child labour in Europe

by Bibbi Abruzzini

Ten-year-old Sandeep works in a sari embroidery factory in New Delhi. With his monthly earning of 4,000 Indian rupees he funds his studies, an extra-income that helps his family to survive. With his fast little hands he meticulously sews multi-coloured and glittering decorations on Indian saris. The factory is closed on Saturdays when Sandeep is allowed to go out with limited - and precious - pocket money. Under the burning summer sun, he sets out on the fields to play cricket with a homemade bat, or to relax under the shadow of a tree, free from any tension.

Sandeep is only one of the 215 million children worldwide involved in child labour. The tiresome work doesn't deter him from studying - once he sets the needles aside he devoutly finishes his homework, realising that he cannot just focus on education.

"If I just go to school I cannot bring money to my mother", he said.

Even though most child labour is found in developing countries, industrialised countries - Europe included - are not entirely free of it either. Child labour is a re-emerging phenomenon that is affecting the education system.

By entering the labour market prematurely, children are deprived of effective education - education that is a development tool and a way out of a cycle of poverty. In Europe this form of exploitation is rising from its ashes.

In 2011, a local Italian government report warned that in the Campania region, more than 54,000 children left the education system between 2005 and 2009 - 38% of them were less than 13 years old. The mayor of Naples compared the situation to that of the end of the Second World War when children worked 12 hours a day.

The association Il tappeto di Iqbal (Iqbal's carpet), has rescued many children trapped in the vices of Naples's ghettos. The association is named after Iqbal Masih, a Pakistani labour child who escaped from servitude at the age of 10, becoming an international figurehead for the Bonded Labour Liberation Front (BLLF). Unfortunately, his freedom was short lived as the boy was murdered with a 12-gauge shotgun at the age of 12.

In Central and Eastern Europe, the International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC), under the auspices of the International Labour Organisation (ILO), has provided direct services to over 19,000 child labourers and children at risk since 2000. Whether it be those working in sari embroidery factories or the children in Naples, all of them have something in common - no access to proper education.

As child labour returns to the Old Continent, Europe should simultaneously address shortfalls in education access and its quality. School should not be an option, thus they should be built around systems that provide support to families in need. Changes have to be made as the phenomenon comes closer than European society may think.

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