

School just a dream for many Afghan children, working hard for low pay

KABUL, Afghanistan — Thirteen-year-old Sami Rahimi gets up at 5 a.m.

Before the sun has even risen, Sami is pushing a dented wheelbarrow through the dark streets. He gathers water from a well and takes it back to the bakery where he works.

By 6 a.m., the stone oven is glowing a fiery red. Dough is flung against the oven's curved walls. It bakes into the flat loaves known as khasa and the round loaves called kamachi.

Rahimi sweeps up and then sits cross-legged to begin the long hours of selling each loaf.

Working until dark six days a week, Sami earns about \$80 a month. It is enough to support his entire family — his disabled father, mother, three brothers and five sisters.

Sami has been at the bakery since he was 10. His uncle, who owns the bakery, began working at age 8.

“I’m happy I can support my family, but I would rather go to school and be an educated person,” Sami says. He is the only person in his family with a job.

The work bores him. He daydreams of graduating from a university and becoming a teacher or engineer. He wants to be an educated man, not a little boy who can barely read and sells bread.

Any Job To Survive

Child labor is common in [Afghanistan](#). Although children younger than 14 are not allowed to work full time, the laws are widely ignored. Employers want to hire children, whom they don't have to pay much, and families need the money, said Sami Hashemi, a child-protection expert for UNICEF, an aid organization.

Children as young as 6 work in brick making, carpet weaving, construction, mining and farming. Others beg, collect garbage or sell things on the street.

Families scramble for any job to survive, even if that means their children will work instead of going to school. “They must focus on today, not on a future for their children,” Hashemi said.

Nearly 2 million Afghan children between the ages of 6 and 17 work, at least 25 percent of Afghan children, Hashemi said, and the numbers are growing. Billions of dollars in aid is being sent to war-torn Afghanistan. Some of that money is being spent on mining and construction, two industries which hire many children.

A U.S. Labor Department report last year says many children are hurt or killed in construction jobs. They are forced to work in extreme cold or heat, carry heavy loads, smuggle illegal drugs or serve as soldiers.

Hashemi says, “Any human being, when he sees kids with a right to education and recreation working under these conditions, will be frustrated.”

Screaming For Customers

On the busy streets of Kabul, skinny kids dart in and around the cars in traffic. They tap at windshields and beg for money, and bother drivers to buy chewing gum, candy, maps, matches, scarves and toilet paper. They collect trash to burn for fuel, and pick through garbage heaps for rotting fruit or half-eaten food.

Taxi drivers pay small boys about 10 cents for each customer they bring.

Abdul Rafi’s voice emerges from his scrawny body as a croak. He says he wore out his voice screaming for taxi customers. He’s only 9, but he began working when he was 6.

Abdul is the oldest of three brothers, and it is up to him to find work. In Afghanistan, older sons are expected to support their families. Abdul is up every day at 5 a.m. for morning prayers. Then he rushes to the taxi stands amid the noise of donkey carts, creaky old Toyotas, and Afghan military trucks filled with gunmen. Most days, he barely earns \$3.

“I would rather just go to school,” Abdul says. “But my family needs the money, and I’m the oldest.”

He wants to be a soldier one day — a soldier who can read. He takes off four hours for class on school days, then runs back to catch the late-afternoon rush hour.

Billions Of Dollars "Wasted"

Sami Rahimi's uncle also supported his entire family when he started working in a bakery at age 8.

“Young boys have always worked in bakeries. That’s our tradition,” Mohammed says.

Mohammed blames Western aid groups for not doing more to help poor families and their children.

“Billions of dollars have come to Afghanistan,” he says, shouting to be heard over the noise of customers and the oven. “Where did it go? Wasted. Stolen. The system is corrupt, and the Americans are part of it.”

Billions of dollars flow into Afghanistan to help rebuild the country. Afghanistan has been at war for more than 10 years. Reports say that much of the aid money has been wasted or stolen.

Mohammed has promised Sami's father that the boy will be educated. "I don't want this boy to have my life stuck inside this bakery," he says.

Sami feels lucky he has a job, but his mind is focused on the future.

"I think always about my lessons," he says. "I think about my future, which is my education."

About once a week, he speaks with his mother on a borrowed cellphone. Sami hasn't been home in 45 days and misses his family.

By 10 p.m., he will curl up beneath a blanket on a bread rack and fall asleep beside the still-warm oven.