

The kids aren't alright | The Express Tribune

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Despite all the hullabaloo surrounding Pakistan's unemployment rate, which stood at approximately 7% in the year 2018-19 as per the Labour Force Survey, a closer examination by demographer and pro-vice-chancellor at the Pakistan Institute of Development Economics, Dr Durre Nayab, revealed distressing details.

Firstly, that a mere 45% of individuals of working-age population were formally considered part of the labour force. This could mean that they were neither studying nor actively in search of employment at the time of the study. For females, this was especially pronounced — with a whopping 79% excluded from the sample, suggesting strong sociocultural impediments to their involvement.

Even more alarming, the unemployment rates of university graduates aged 15-29 stood at 31.2% — suggesting the failure of educational institutions to create a bridge between their students and the job market. This is largely due to a combination of poor skillsets (hard and soft) and a dearth of opportunities. Furthermore, 33.8% of individuals in the same age bracket were found to be neither employed nor enrolled — a grouping labelled 'disconnected' (from the system) by Dr Nayab. From among these, the situation for females was particularly disheartening, with 59.7% falling into the category.

It was also discovered that a substantial portion of work in Pakistan goes unpaid. For males, the rate is 13%; for females, a dismal 57%. Aggregated, this amounts to 23% of all labour — almost 1 in every 4 — uncompensated for their efforts. This was most pronounced in rural and urban agriculture. In the former category, 1 in every 2 workers was unpaid. In the latter, the figure was approximately 1 in every 3.

What's more, the average monthly wage of paid labour overall was found to be Rs21,326, and for females Rs15,461. The minimum wage, by law, is currently Rs25,000. This is made all the worse by the fact that workers were found to be putting in an average of 46.6 hours every week, 6.6 hours longer than the standard 40-hour workweek. For males, the figure stood at an average of 50.9 hours. These exploitative conditions must be resolved immediately by ensuring improvement and implementation of labour laws, as part of a larger initiative to strengthen civil society via formal approvals for student unions, labour unions, and civil society organisations pursuing democratisation on the ground, in real time.

In a conference hosted by PIDE this past November in Peshawar, experts emphasised that not only is Pakistan failing to capitalise on its youth dividend,

the situation is likely to worsen over time with the influx of technological advancements. These include robotics, ed-tech, artificial intelligence, general automation, agricultural technologies, biomedical sciences, and more — all of which will function to render a substantial proportion of jobs redundant.

The nature of work the world over is experiencing drastic changes, with traditional one-dimensional, task-based occupations under standardised hours being replaced by flexible, creative and dynamic ones that weave together elements of culture, entrepreneurship and knowledge production. There is a need, therefore, to rethink the role of educators — which ought to be triggering a sense of joy, wonder and excitement in them. As facilitators, teachers should be responsible for teaching students how to think (rather than what to) and to assist them in discovering their interests, aptitudes and ambitions before getting out of their way. This will naturally entail a radical departure from the current approach, based primarily on disciplining young minds into submission from a young age.

Pakistan's youth bulge is a ticking time bomb. With around 2 in every 3 under the age of 30, a series of crises in the form of rampant anxiety, depression and a sense of helplessness may brew within the youth — a process that, once off the ground, is likely to trigger instability on a massive scale. Let us correct course before it is too late.

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