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SOS family



SOS children receiving vocational training



Vocational training at SOS



Kanishka Weerasinghe,
EFC's Director General

Shubha Murthi

September 7, 2019, 12:00 pm

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By Randima Attygalle

"I am nothing but a lama niwase lamaya. (child from the orphanage) I have no proper birth certificate, no means of securing decent employment, so here I am as a kade kolla (boy working in the shop)" laments Isuru Lakshan (name changed to protect the identity of the young person). Having left institutional care at the age of 18 with no skills or proper education, Isuru's world is today limited to the onions, condiments and rice sacks he weighs at the mudalali's shop. A gifted hairstylist, Erandi (name changed) is confident she will turn out to be a successful beautician only if someone

guides her. "Today I carry the label of pariwase lamaya (a child of Probation Care) says the 22-year-old Erandi who is reduced to a janitor at a small scale factory. These are not just stories of Isuru and Erandi but tales of woe of thousands of our own children leaving institutionalized care.

Our law requires youth in child care institutions who have reached the age of 18 to part with their care homes and live independently. No corresponding legal framework provides for the transition to independence or aftercare of these vulnerable youth. The only reference to aftercare is made in the National Alternative Care Policy (2019) and in the NCPA (draft) Guidelines for Child Care Institutions in Sri Lanka (2013). However, an implementation plan to realize measures spelt out in the policy including enabling access to vocational training and job placement among many other measures, is yet to be developed.

In a social setting where 'children' are cared for by parents until the completion of higher education and even beyond, the bleak future awaiting children with no parental care is beyond imagination. Lacking proper parental guidance, skills and education which meets employment demands, a large proportion of these youth become easy targets of predators of all kinds. In this backdrop, children who come under the wings of SOS Children's Villages (SOS CVs) across the world including here at home are more fortunate.

A global federation and the world's largest non-governmental organization, founded by Hermann Gmeiner in Tyrol, Austria in 1949, SOS Children's Villages work in 136 countries today protecting, caring and empowering children who have lost parental care or who stand at risk of losing it. Since its establishment in 1981 here at home, SOS Children's Villages in Sri Lanka have touched the lives of over 41,000 children and continues to reach out to children and communities providing family care, emergency care, temporary care, family strengthening, vocational training for youth and a range of ancillary services such as pre-schools and medical centres.

Promoting youth employability today is among the top priorities of SOS CVs. A strategic initiative developed under the banner of 'Generation Never Give Up', (an extension of the 18+ Programme) youth employability is also a further reflection of the organization's maxim 'Never give up on a child'. Based on the three pillars of Mentoring, Training and Practicing, the SOS global framework for youth employability is today committed to eliminating the bottlenecks which block the potential employment opportunities for youth leaving care. The recent advocacy event organized by SOS Sri Lanka galvanizing policy makers, employers, representatives from education and vocational training institutes and other relevant professionals and stakeholders was an intervention to spur a dialogue in this regard. A youth-driven initiative where care givers themselves rendered voice to their experiences, challenges and recommendations, the event was also patronized by National Directors of SOS from 14 Asian countries as means of sharing good practices. The initiative strived to influence policies and practices related to improving youth employability and employment for youth leaving care and to promote the rights of youth to employability and their skills development to secure gainful employment.

"You are special not because of anything else but because you, young people aspire to join the world of work and take the country forward," remarked the Director General of the Employers' Federation of Ceylon (EFC) Kanishka Weerasinghe delivering his key note address at the event. Remarking that the SOS initiative is aligned with the EFC's commitment of 'never leaving anyone behind', Weerasinghe invited SOS Children's Villages Sri Lanka and all other parties committed to the welfare of care

leavers to engage with the youth initiatives of the EFC- the nucleus of employers in the country with a membership of over 700 corporates today. Encouraging care leavers to explore training and job opportunities enabled by the EFC's progressive schemes such as 'Empowerme.lk' (an on line portal linking job seekers with employers), Employers' National Network of Youth Initiatives (ENNYI) and Junior Achievers (a collaboration with the Policy Development Unit of the Prime Minister's office), the EFC's Director General reiterated that all youth in the country should be empowered for gainful employment in the private sector. "Our approach is two pronged: to ensure that young job seekers acquire requisite skills for the modern world of work and to create opportunities for the youth exposing them to all aspects of good corporate governance." This approach, as Weerasinghe further elaborated, extends to young graduates as well as others who have been through the process of a formal higher education. He also vouched to help eliminate the bottlenecks in the journey of securing employment in the private sector by the youth leaving care.

Recollecting his first association with the SOS Children's Villages Sri Lanka as a prosecuting state counselor for the Attorney General's Department 26 years ago, the EFC Chief remarked that he was heartened by its gesture of taking a sexually exploited and a stigmatized young child under its care when all hope failed for her. Acknowledging that what he sees today as a further reflection of the organization's commitment to ensure a better future for children, Weerasinghe lauded the 'SOS products' that steered the event. "It is a manifestation of the capabilities, capacity and moreover the entrepreneurship of our youth," observed the senior professional who urged all EFC member companies to take ownership of the initiatives towards youth empowerment directed by the EFC and thereby become partners in 'sustainable work opportunities' championed by his organization.

The absence of an inclusive education very often impedes the employment opportunities for the less privileged youngsters and this becomes a double whammy on those leaving care, remarked the Deputy COO, SOS Children's Villages International, Shubha Murthi. "Unlike the time we were young graduates, today youngsters have to compete with a couple of hundred thousands and in this process less privileged get further marginalized owing to the absence of inclusivity in education." The SOS International's senior official further charged that policy makers of South Asia should take stock of the knowledge base of a country going beyond encouraging paper-based education. "Having many literates alone will not be welcoming," observed Murthi who called for a more holistic education in which skills will be fortified.

Lamenting that those who have been erred by certain educational trappings seek overseas employment as unskilled labourers or domestic workers, Murthi also called upon governments to create local job opportunities to retain them in the domestic workforce. Alluding to the SOS adage of 'never give up on a child', the senior official also urged youth leaving care never to give up in the potential world of work which she compared to a 'multi-cuisine' replete with bitter-sweet flavours. The observations and recommendations on employability shared by the care leavers directly with duty bearers at the event will be incorporated into a Road Map and followed up by the SOS Children's Villages Sri Lanka