

As they fill sacks of metal: child labour in Lebanon

While weekends are the perfect time to catch up on sleep, Youssef's days off are sleepless as his nights are disrupted by body aches and worry.

"I hear my friends play football outside [the tent], but I feel too exhausted to get up and join in."

Chasing a ball on a Sunday is no longer possible due to Youssef's job. The 12-year-old carries 25 kilograms of metal for a living. For ten hours a day on average, Youssef sits in front of a scrap heap sorting metals and plastic, before putting them in heavy sacks in a plastics factory. He can only get a 30 minute 'sandwich break' if he fills a satisfactory number of bags.



Credit: Save the Children

"The smell can be suffocating but I have to do it," says Youssef, who arrived from Syria with his family in 2014.

Youssef realises that his sense of responsibility is premature. It doesn't take too long for him to confirm that he "would quit work and go back to school immediately," only to look around and remember that this is only a 'dream'. In fact, like Youssef, half of refugee children in Lebanon are out of school.

"When I was six, my parents enrolled me in school; however, I had to drop out after only one month to find work opportunities and help support my family." Today, Youssef's father cannot work due to a severe injury and all his mother's efforts to find a job have failed.

Youssef likes to hold on to his hope that he would go back to school one day, but just like thousands of working children who shoulder the responsibility of breadwinner at a young age, he feels that this might never happen. "It is always there, yet not quite possible."

In Lebanon, numbers conflict when it comes to child labour, as many families continue to be forced by several factors, mainly economic, to rely on their children to make ends meet. Until the law is implemented and child labour is seriously tackled, including its root causes, Youssef and his friends will continue to fill sacks of metal.

My brother and sisters need milk, medicine and food. I wouldn't have worked if one of my parents was able to provide for them