

# Indian child workers and poverty sociology essay



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As I visit my country- Pakistan, I see children on the streets begging, some selling flowers and newspapers to the people on the road. When I pass a car mechanic shop, I see boys as young as 5 years old covered in car grease fixing engines. While passing a street restaurant, I see young boys taking orders from customers. At the rubbish disposal site, I see young boys scavenging through waste to find food sometimes, or scrap metal. As I visit my relatives back home, I see Elizabeth, a twelve year old working as a domestic servant in the house, mopping floors and cleaning bathrooms. Child workers are everywhere in Pakistan, the critics of this claim need to open their eyes and heart to feel the troubles of their less privileged fellow countrymen. The factors contributing to child labor are interconnected; however it is mainly due to poverty and lack of education, that children are coerced into the labor force.

In the Human Development Report, conducted under the United Nations Development Program, the human development index was measured to compare Pakistan to other countries in the world. According to the Human Development report (2009), “ The HDI provides a composite measure of three dimensions of human development: living a long and healthy life (measured by life expectancy), being educated (measured by adult literacy and gross enrolment in education) and having a decent standard of living (measured by purchasing power parity, PPP, income). The index is not in any sense a comprehensive measure of human development. It does not, for example, include important indicators such as gender or income inequality nor more difficult to measure concepts like respect for human rights and political freedoms. What it does provide is a broadened prism for viewing

human progress and the complex relationship between income and well-being.” In 2007, among the 182 countries examined, Pakistan was the 141th regards to the HDI value. This clearly indicates the grave economic situation of Pakistan. According to the CIA World Fact book (2010), Pakistan has a GDP per capita of \$2, 600 and it is ranked 171 compared to other countries. With poverty rates as high as 24% and unemployment rate 15. 2%, marked as 153 compared to the world, it is obvious that Pakistan is going through an economic downturn. According to Unicef (2009), “ Food and economic crises have increased food insecurity. Prices of essential food items rose over 35 per cent in 2007-08, compared to an 18 per cent increase in labour wages”, the ongoing struggle to make ends meet is breaking the back of the poor. With a population of 175 million people, Pakistan is ranked 6th around the world in terms of population. 36% of the population of Pakistan lives in cities, the rest of the 64% lives in the rural parts of the country. Chaudhry, Malik and Hassan (2009) have examined that Punjab, one of the four provinces of Pakistan constitutes 56% of the country’s population and a 36% of Punjab’s population is accounted being poor. Poverty is one of the main contributing factors of child labor in Pakistan, with almost a quarter of the nation’s population struggling to make ends meet, the children of poverty stricken families are left to no resort, but to mend their lives by helping their families in earning a living. ADB (2010) considers poverty the main source of child labor in Pakistan. According to Unicef (2009), it is estimated that Pakistan has about 3. 3 million children aged under 14, working as child laborers. However, according to the United States Bureau of International Labor affairs (2010), it is stated that the rough estimate of child laborers in Pakistan could be from 2 million to a staggering 19 million. This could be due to the inability

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to address the issue of child labor and not performing surveys to determine up to date statistics. Ahmed (July 13, 2008) cites this issue by commenting that the latest survey on child laborers was conducted 14 years ago and the population has increased by 30 million since then. Child laborers have their childhood stolen away from them; forced to work for long hours, these children don't have time to play or study as other privileged children of Pakistan. The United States Bureau of International Labor affairs (2010) cites the state of child laborers working in carpet industries which thrive on the nimble hands of these children, " The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan states that work units in rural areas have more child labor than urban areas. In these village units, the children are mostly girls, some only six or seven years old; boys are barely eight. Working conditions are poor, lighting and ventilation inadequate, hygienic conditions substandard, and the work area hot and humid. Workers complain of coughs and sickness. The workers usually work 10-hour days, with no holidays and are paid on a piece-rate basis. Child workers pay is as low as 10 rupees (approximately 37 cents) per day; teenagers, however, earned 20-30 rupees (74 cents to \$1. 13) per day, and can even get 50 to 75 rupees (\$1. 87 to \$2. 81) per day for superior quality carpets." With a meager amount of wages and the vulnerability of getting sick, these child laborer's plights fall on deaf ears. Frequently abused and punished by their employers over small mistakes or delays in handling the work, these poor children's miseries are never ending; " Child weavers suffer work-related injuries and illnesses, such as injuries due to sharp instruments, respiratory tract infections, and body aches. They also remain uneducated, 42 percent never having attended school and 58 percent having dropped out" (ILAB, 2010). One of the old and the harshest realities of

bonded child labor is that the child laborer is indebted to its master till the bondage debt is repaid. Although bonded child labor is prohibited by the Pakistani law, but people find loopholes to find their way out. According to ILAB (2010), “ Bonded labor has long been a feature in brick kilns, carpet industries, agriculture, fisheries, stone/brick crushing, shoe-making, power looms, and refuse sorting. The Bonded Labor Liberation Front estimates that eight million children are bonded in Pakistan. Half a million are allegedly bonded in the carpet industry alone.” Silvers (1996) writes that the hypocritical masters of the bonded child laborers use exploitive methods to employ these children, it is compliance, long productivity hours and inexpensiveness that make these children a lucrative deal. A documentary by SPARC, a NGO working to raise the plight of child laborers shows Hyderabad, a city famous for its glass bangles. However, little is known that these bangles are made in factories that employ children. These child laborers work up to 16 hours a day for less than a dollar, in front of the scorching heat of the furnaces. Consequently, they develop diseases such as asthma, Bronchitis and TB. In another scene, Javaid- a scavenger ploughs through rubbish to pick anything he finds valuable enough to sell and earn a living off; he says his parents find it difficult to support the big family, that’s why he feels an obligation to help out with the earnings (SPARC, 2008). Silvers (1996), writes that children in rural parts of Pakistan are indoctrinated to work to help the family. The mindset of bondage is embedded in to the young minds at a very early age, thus these children don’t find it wrong, but rather look up to it, unaware of what lies ahead of them. A twelve year old girl named Irfana worked under bondage before being set free; she reported that her master would treat them like ‘ livestock’. Girls were often raped and

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the boys were severely beaten. Bonded labor is usually owned by feudal land owners and in Pakistan; most of these feudal landowners are working in the government or have a very strong backing. Bokhari (July 24, 1996) states, "If bonded labor has a long history, it also has strong political backing in Pakistan. Many critics claim that almost two-thirds of the members of the federal parliament in Islamabad and the four provincial legislatures are landowners who would resist any plans that are seen as hostile toward their fellow landowners. " Most of the members of parliament in the Sindh [provincial] assembly belong to the Zamindar [landowners] class and it is in their interest... not to raise their voices against the bonded labor," says Ali Hasan, a journalist .... "

Poverty is one of the factors that root from illiteracy. Unicef (2009) states that " HYPERLINK " javascript: void(0);" PakistanHYPERLINK " javascript: void(0);" s per capita expenditure on health is only US\$18, of which US\$4 is public expenditure, compared to the recommended US\$45. Less than 2. 5 per cent of GDP is spent on education, compared to HYPERLINK " javascript: void(0);" the recommended 2. 8 to 3. 6 per cent." According to the Unicef , from the year 1998 to 2007, only 1% of the central government expenditure was allocated to health, 2% to education and 16% to defense (2009). Poor access to quality education in the weak primary education system contributes to child labor. Primary education has been made compulsory in Provinces like Punjab, Sindh and NWFP, little is done to enforce the law. Either there are not proper facilities to accommodate children or lack of teachers in some areas. The most affected by this dilemma are the inhabitants of the rural parts of the country;

primary school gross enrollment is 71%, with a large dropout rate (Unicef, 2009). According to Levi (1971), "...poverty has frequently been cited as a cause of primary school dropouts both because poor families cannot afford school fees or other expenses and because it is necessary for children to work to help support the family. The extent of the traditional agricultural sector may better reflect the need for child labor than does GNP per capita. Countries which have a greater segment of their population in the subsistence sector may have both lower incomes and a greater need for child labor." This proves the mindset of the parents who take their children out of schools or who don't send them to school at all. The main reason behind it being, that they cannot afford to run large family expenses on their own. High birth rate is considered an asset for the families, who look forward for the child to grow up and help out with family expenditures. In a survey conducted on Punjab, a total 3, 708 questionnaires were filled in 309 households. Literacy of the household, irrelevant of the degree of literacy has a 'negative effect' on child labor in the family (Siddiqi, 2009). In another analysis from the Pakistan Integrated Household Survey, conducted under the patronage of the World Bank in 1991, as a part of Living Standards Measurement Survey; 4, 800 households were covered in 300 communities, divided between rural and urban localities. It was found that the cost of primary schooling is Rs 126 a year for a child who doesn't work and Rs 165 for a child who works. Lower school attendance was accounted for high transportation costs. In comparison to working and non-working children, the factors contributing to child labor were found to be lack of education among adults, less landownership and low per capita expenditure. It was also found that greater the distance of a community from other populated areas, the

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higher the chances of child labor. Among the samples, 61% had attended schools. From the total number of boys sampled, 81% has attended school at some stage and out of the girls proportion sampled, on 39% had ever attended school. In the final analysis, the primary schooling cost was directly proportional to the probability of the child working and indirectly proportional to school attendance. Education and child labor are interconnected, “ The International Labor Organization considers improvement in access to schools and school quality to be the most effective way of reducing child labor in less developed countries” (Hazarika and Bedi, 2003)

The Employment of Children Act of 1991 prohibits the use of child labor in hazardous works and environments. The Bonded Labor Act of 1992 abolished bondage labor and any bonded labor before the law was ordered to be set free. According to ILAB (2010), “ In Pakistan, a “ child” is defined as a person younger than fifteen. The legal minimum age for employment is 14 for shops and commerce, industry, and work at sea, and 15 for mines and on railways.” Though the laws are present, the enforcement has not been adequate enough to tackle the problem. “ Enforcement of child labor laws in Pakistan is hampered by the lack of manpower and expertise in the Department of Labor and a general acceptance of child labor, according to Professor Omar Noman” (Ibid). The plights of the child workers usually go unheard, Tariq, a Bondage Labor Liberation Front worker inspected a carpet factory where bonded child laborers as young as eight and nine year olds work. The findings were then reported to the Police sergeant in charge, “ Tariq told him about the conditions in the workshop, about the children. The sergeant was perplexed. “ Is this a crime?” he asked. “ No one has ever



complained before. What do you want us to do about it?" Tariq suggested sending officers to investigate, along with a medical-services crew for the children. The sergeant left to consult his superior. Two minutes later he returned with the superintendent, a gracious, mustachioed man of fifty. " We are not unsympathetic to your complaint," the superintendent informed Tariq. " But the place you describe is registered as a home enterprise. It is run by a small landowner, and the workers are his immediate family. Family businesses are exempt from the labor laws. This enterprise is not illegal." The superintendent opened a binder and showed Tariq the workshop's registration certificate. Tariq attempted to correct him, but the superintendent said, " What you say may or may not be true. Unfortunately, our jurisdiction does not include child labor. I have no authority to investigate a private workplace. I have no evidence that the children are working there against their will or that their lives are in jeopardy. The mechanism for doing what you ask simply does not exist here." (Silvers, 1996)" Police, with bureaucrats are involved in corruption and turn a blind eye on the child labor issue in Pakistan. Although the laws are present against it as the government lauds, but very little action is taken to enforce it. The lack of acknowledgment from the government and people is the result of the situation regarding child labor in the country.

Some economists argue that the third world nations benefit from sweatshop jobs, by offering world's poor release from malnourishment and destitution. Low wage factories that employ children to make clothes and shoes for foreign market are a first step towards prosperity in developing countries. However, these sweatshop workers are paid low wages for long working

hours. They don't have any labor rights or unions to discuss their rights. Often child workers are abused so to force them to work for long hours. Prosperity is not measured by the low earnings from these sweat shops, it is by educating the child. Although, the child laborer brings little money back home, however, the child is deprived off its right of education and the right of living a normal childhood. It is the responsibility of the government to ensure that all children get basic education and their human rights should not be violated. Bringing prosperity to a developing country is by uprooting corruption, which lets child laborers take this step to trade their childhood and innocence with the burdensome labor for petty wages.

Due to a combination of factors, such as ignorance from the parents of not educating their children, selling them as bonded labor, poverty, corruption of the government and the employers. Child labor is detrimental to the society of Pakistan. It robs the child off its right of education and hence getting higher paying jobs. Child labor is a temporary solution to poverty and not the ultimate solution.