

## Towards the Eradication of Child Labor in Pakistan

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In Pakistan, a country where roughly half of the child population lives below the poverty line, child labor is a pressing and deeply entrenched phenomenon. This article will describe the problem of child labor, and present the various attempts at eliminating child labor spearheaded by the Society for the Protection of the Rights of the Child (SPARC), a leading nongovernmental organization in Pakistan. After assessing the utility of SPARC's efforts, the paper will present several recommendations that can help reduce the extent of child labor in Pakistan.

### Child Labor in Pakistan

In the sixth edition of the annual report of the Pakistani Society for the Protection of the Rights of the Child (SPARC), a leading nongovernmental organization in Pakistan, SPARC warns that the situation for children in the country is not improving, particularly in the case of child labor and school attendance.<sup>1</sup> The report, titled *The State of Pakistan's Children: 2002*, analyzes and documents the situation of children in Pakistan measuring children's everyday conditions against international commitments and standards. The report provided the following statistics on child labor in Pakistan:

- The Federal Bureau of Statistics (FBS) found that the number of working children in Pakistan is approximately 3.5 million. Officially, children make up about 7% of the total work force. However, government statistics omit children under age 10 and those

working in family and small businesses which are not registered with the government. However, given that 23 million school-aged children are not attending school, SPARC believes that the actual number of child laborers "must be higher than suggested by official figures."<sup>2</sup>

- In 2003, UNICEF estimated that eight million children under the age of 14 are engaged as laborers, mostly in brick kiln factories, carpet weaving centers, agriculture, small industries, and domestic services.
- The FBS Survey shows that of all children working in Pakistan, about 73% (2.5 million) are boys and 27% (950,000) are girls. Some 2.1 million children are between 10 and 14 years of age and the rest are between five to nine years of age.
- The survey also concluded that more than 2.9 million children work in rural and 400,000 in urban areas, making the ratio of rural to urban child laborers 7:1. In the provinces there is the following distribution: Punjab province, 1.94 million (60%); North West Frontier Province (NWFP), 1.06 million (32%); Sindh Province, 298,000 (.09%); and Balochistan Province, 14,000 (.004%).
- The survey found that 71% of the total working children are engaged in agriculture, sales, services, mining, construction, manufacturing, domestic service, and transport sectors. About 46% work more than

35 hours per week, while 13% work more than 56 hours per week.

The SPARC report “emphasizes the high incidence of child labor as the most pressing child rights issue which is directly linked to the state of education in the country,”<sup>3</sup> making note of several problems linked to the prevalence of child labor:

First, in Pakistan almost half of the total child population lives below the poverty line “with little hope of escape, given the present insufficient allocation of resources needed for their physical, mental and emotional well-being.”<sup>4</sup> The social divide, which favors the distribution of government-funded services in favor of the upper class, is of paramount significance. Government policies need to address the underlying question

**Child labor is a socially acceptable phenomenon in Pakistan.**

of disparity to ensure that all sectors with the greatest positive impact on children’s development and future are protected from expenditure cuts, and that any existing expenditures

are allocated fairly across all the population.

Second, section 89 of the Pakistan Penal Code empowers parents, teachers and other guardians to use corporal punishment in order to discipline and correct the behavior of children under the age of 12. Corporal punishment is cited as a major contributor to the “alarming school dropout rate in Pakistan.”<sup>5</sup>

Third, in rural areas, schools are usually inadequate or inaccessible. The cost of books and supplies are not affordable to many families, who are said to prefer the “present value of the income a child earns by working, as opposed to the future value of education.”<sup>6</sup>

Fourth, child labor is a socially acceptable phenomenon in Pakistan. Whether in family businesses or in families bonded to their employer, children are expected to contribute to the family welfare. Child labor is seen as an apprenticeship that can help to prepare the child better for the future than would a formal education. Contributing to this attitude is the fact

that the educated sector suffers from a high unemployment rate.

Fifth, business profit and competitiveness perpetuate child labor. Employers argue that children are cheaper to employ, easier to control, and can sometimes be as productive as adults. For example, carpet-weavers, who employ 1.2 million children, claim that children’s fingers make them more skilled than adults. A study revealed that over 80% of carpet workers in Punjab province were children under the age of 15.

Finally, although bonded child labor (debt incurred by a child’s parents or guardians which binds a child to an employer in a condition of servitude to pay off the debt) is illegal under Article 11(2) of the Constitution of Pakistan, bonding was not acknowledged by the government of Pakistan until recently.<sup>7</sup> The Bonded Labor (Abolition) Act 1992 was the first law to officially recognize the existence of bonded labor and cancelled all bonded debt. However, the new law “has not had a noticeable effect.”<sup>8</sup> Although the government does not keep statistics on bonded labor, the United Nations estimates that there are millions enslaved as bond laborers in the country. Debts are passed down from parents to children. Illiteracy can keep the workers from knowing their rights, so booklets published on the subject by NGOs may be useless unless the population can be educated as to their rights by other means.

### SPARC’s Activities in Pakistan

At the suggestion of UNICEF’s program officer in Islamabad, SPARC’s formation was modeled on that of Defense for Children International. SPARC reports a good relationship with its donors and does not lack funding, supported by the Canadian International Development Agency, the Norwegian Agency for Development, the United Nations, and the International Labor Organization, among others. Most of SPARC’s publications are available in English and in Urdu, three major books out of which “can be said to be the first of their kind,”<sup>9</sup> including one on child labor. SPARC has also produced a documentary on the subject and is

working on a second documentary on child prostitution in Lahore's red light district.

Through the International Labor Organization (ILO), SPARC has become one of the initial partners in the International Program for the Elimination of Child Labor (IPEC) under its Mini Program. In 1995 SPARC printed its first brochure on child labor—a poster titled 'Stop Child Labor' with the help of UNICEF, and two audio-cassettes on the state of child labor in Pakistan with the financial assistance of ILO IPEC.

In addition, SPARC drafted a bill to amend the Constitution of Pakistan to set the legal age for employment in Pakistan to age 16. Introduced by National

Assembly member Shahid Khaqan Abbasi, the bill unfortunately was not passed.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, SPARC has continued to ask successive governments to upgrade their laws to set a legal age limit for employment in Pakistan,

although they have not yet been successful in doing so.

Individual studies on child labor have also been conducted and published by SPARC. In 1996, for example, the organization conducted a survey of 400 "randomly selected"<sup>11</sup> working children under the age of 18, from 20 different localities and two villages in the periphery of Islamabad. Given these 'random selection' criteria, one problem becomes apparent from the very outset—employers had to give approval for the children to participate.

SPARC has also published a handbook on the legal provisions of various laws concerning child labor, titled: *Child Labor: The Legal Aspects* in 1997 and 1998 to create awareness and encourage

the government to make efforts to implement all laws related to child labor.

In addition to publications and documentaries of the child labor situation in Pakistan, SPARC participated in a Global March Against Child Labor traveled through Pakistan. The March passed through 26 countries in Asia, and on its first day in Pakistan in April 1998 attracted a crowd of more than 10,000 people on Lahore's Mall Road. The government of Pakistan also showed support for the March, placing supplements in major newspapers, and in issuing welcoming statements from the President and Prime Minister of Pakistan.

After the March, SPARC started to hold meetings across the country on child right's issues, and particularly on the subject of child labor:

One major consultation was held in June 1999 in Islamabad and asked what Pakistan was doing to abolish child labor. The consultation was

held for international organizations working in the children's rights arena and for the diplomatic community in Pakistan. Government officials were invited to respond to queries.

On September 8 and 9, 1999, SPARC organized its first ever International Conference on the State of Child Labor in South Asia, and its deliberations were published in a book titled, *The State of the Child Labor in South Asia*.

In June 2000, SPARC organized a meeting in Lahore on the ILO Convention on the Worst Forms of Child Labor, which Pakistan subsequently signed and ratified in August 2001.

SPARC contends that the government of Pakistan must play a more active role in fighting child labor, especially given the limited resources of the NGO community. Millions of dollars are



*Typical Classroom in privately funded school for girls, Punjab Province, Pakistan Feb. 2004. D. Denice seated next to teacher at front table.*

spent on ‘models,’ but the government is not moving beyond them to implementing actual widespread programs. The organization believes that there is an acute need to invest more in the social sector on the part of the Pakistani government.

### **Analysis of SPARC’s Activities and Impact on Child Rights**

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While SPARC has made a wide range of efforts, they have been primarily through research and advocacy. The organization has conducted interview studies, issued publications on child labor statistics, and used conferences, public marches, posters, and brochures to generate public awareness of the problem.

SPARC should be commended for its efforts. The fact, however, remains that hardly a dent has been made in the actual rates of child labor in Pakistan. The organization needs to show some muscle in its efforts and convince the Pakistani government to pass and enforce legislation aimed at significantly reducing and, ultimately, abolishing child labor.

In addition, all further work on the subject must emphasize the importance of access to free and compulsory education, a fundamental right of children that is not realized in Pakistan. Budget allocations for education are only 2% of the GDP and are not utilized efficiently. Planning, monitoring, textbook materials, building structures, and human resources are all sorely lacking. This is not only in the interest of Pakistani children and development NGOs, but also in the interest of major Western nations.

### **Recommendations**

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Poverty levels in Pakistan appear to necessitate that children work in order to allow families to reach their target take-home pay. While the lack of economic opportunity for adult employment in Pakistan needs to be studied and taken into consideration in any plan to eradicate child labor, the following paragraphs will discuss policies that directly target the problem of child labor.

Richard Blackhurst, for example, a noted trade economist, states that imposing tariffs on imports—either for particular products (carpets, soccer balls, etc.) or in general—would reduce the number of jobs available to children in those industries.<sup>12</sup> Blackhurst’s suggestion, however, would cause many children to instead seek alternate employment in the informal non-traded services sector where wages are lower, such as employment as maids, nannies, and street vendors. If children work to achieve a target weekly wage, then it would be likely that they would work more hours in new lower paying jobs. In other words, increased trade restrictions could in fact lead to an increase in child labor.

Ideally, child labor in its hazardous and exploitative forms should be completely eradicated. The Pakistani government ratified the International Labor Organization (ILO) Convention on the Worst Forms of Child Labor (182) in August 2001 and it is obligated to take steps to remove children from these occupations. The U.S. Government should use its influence with the Pakistani regime, and particularly its relationship with President Pervez Musharraf, to influence the enforcement of this convention.

In addition, the Pakistani government formally presented the National Plan of Action of Child Labor by the cabinet in May 2000. The *Education Reform Action Plan (2001-2005)* recognized that education provides capabilities and entitlements to children at risk. It also suggested that within the ESR Action Plan (2001-2005), educational opportunities will be enhanced through launching of formal and non-formal literacy/education programs for child laborers.<sup>13</sup> Pakistani children should have access to free primary school education, yet education in Pakistan is essentially a provincial affair.

The United States should help improve the public education system, as has also been recommended in the *9/11 Commission Report*. According to the report,

Sustaining the current scale of aid to Pakistan, the United States should support Pakistan’s government in its struggle against extremists with a

comprehensive effort that extends from military aid to support for better education, so long as Pakistan's leaders remain willing to make difficult choices of their own.<sup>14</sup>

Satloff suggests that the American school system currently utilized overseas in 132 countries is already playing a vital role in the international culture wars and deserves more support.<sup>15</sup> The 185 schools that have spread over 132 countries, educating the countries' elite classes, can make a difference among the elite. Yet, much more needs to be done to further the lack of educational opportunities in countries like Pakistan for the general population.

Although U.S. funding for the Pakistani education system through USAID/Pakistan has recently been increased, it should be expanded to include programs geographically located throughout Pakistan.<sup>16</sup> According to the Government of Pakistan's Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) entitled

*Accelerating Economic Growth and Reducing Poverty: The Road Ahead*, "the education service industry in Pakistan is faced with a multitude of challenges from lack of infrastructure and facilities to severe shortage of qualified and trained teachers."<sup>17</sup> Pakistan's *Education Sector Reform (ESR) Action Plan (2001-2005)* is embedded in its PRSP. An 'Education For All' (EFA) Plan of Action (2001-2015) and EFA Fast Track Initiative has been developed with development partners to enhance quality and coverage in education. A list of education projects funded by Pakistan's development assistance partners contains a wide

variety of projects, many of which are province-specific.<sup>18</sup>

Cohen states that both the American and Pakistani governments are aware of the collapse of Pakistan's education system, but they tend to look at different dimensions of the problem. Washington focuses primarily on *madrassas*, seeing them as breeding grounds for terrorism. The Pakistani government offered a three-year grant package for registered madaris beginning in 2002-03 in an attempt to develop uniformity of curriculum and through the introduction of general education subjects in *madrassas*. Thus, although the U.S. aid package included a multi-year \$100 million educational program, as of 2003,

only \$21.5 million of American aid was directed at primary education and literacy—about half the cost of an F-16. And of this, aid experts note, a large percentage of this amount would be swallowed up by administrative costs.<sup>19</sup>

(Recently, USAID has increased its total estimated funding for education to \$265 million for the six-year strategic plan period from 2002-2007. FY 2005 funding

was in the amount of \$66 million.)<sup>20</sup>

Multinational Corporations wishing to operate in Pakistan should be required to provide wages for its employees high enough that families can afford to send children to school. Furthermore, they should be required to donate funds by province-sector to help organize primary schools for children in Pakistan. Elite women within each province could be identified who would assist in the administration and development of such schools. This would help to establish schools, and enable them to be



*Both primary and secondary school aged girls attended this private school, Feb. 2004. These girls boarded at the privately funded school and likely would have been child laborers had it not been for their elite sector benefactors. This school could be used as a model to be funded by Multinational Corporations in Pakistan.*

developed in a culturally acceptable manner, at reasonable cost.

Private model schools already in existence should be copied for their low-cost factors. For example, there is a primary school for girls in a rural area in Punjab province which utilizes a landowner's property and building and functions as a school. Approximately 400 day students and 40 boarding students live and study in sparse but clean facilities. Food, clothing, and funds for textbooks are donated by local women, and this school has operated for almost 10 years without government subsidies. Access to well-trained teachers, however, remains a problem. A centralized agency offering to train teachers for schools run by elite sector benefactors might be an excellent way to offer universal access to primary education in Pakistan's rural village areas.

## Conclusion

It is estimated that Pakistan employs more than 3.3 million children in its formal economy. Projects like Pakistan's SPARC, which can target only thousands of children, can hardly be expected to eradicate the problem. While the government of Pakistan is signatory to the convention on the Rights of the Child and has stated its commitment to its implementation, child labor has been socially acceptable in Pakistan—a tradition that continues to be a barrier to its elimination. Parents continue to see child labor as a suitable apprenticeship opportunity, and they tend to opt for employment today in order to realize immediate family income needs, rather

than investing in education that promises increased future productivity. To eradicate child labor, Pakistan must first ensure more employment opportunities for its adult working population, which is plagued by a high number of educated unemployed workers. To that end, multinational corporations need better incentives to relocate and offer jobs to Pakistani nationals.

U.S. lawmakers have attempted to introduce bills that would prohibit the import of products made with the help of child labor.<sup>21</sup> However, these bills may not serve to eradicate child labor and may, instead, increase the incidents of child labor.

Foreign assistance has been directed at the education sector, but the authorities have failed in the past to make optimum use of these funds or fairly distribute them. SPARC's report, *The State of Pakistan's Children: 2002*, emphasizes the high incidence of child labor as the most pressing child rights issue in Pakistan and links it directly to the state of education in the country.<sup>22</sup>

Finally, grassroots efforts utilizing local elite women to organize and fund schools combined with centralized teacher training could be encouraged to develop schools which are culturally acceptable, efficiently managed, affordable, and well-attended.

**To eradicate child labor, Pakistan must first ensure more employment opportunities for its adult working population**

1 U.N. Wire, "NGO Says Child Rights Situation Stagnant; US Pledges Funds," June 6, 2003. Available at [www.unwire.org/UNWire/20030606/34117\\_story.asp](http://www.unwire.org/UNWire/20030606/34117_story.asp)

2 "Child Labor" SPARC, Islamabad, Pakistan, pg 1. Available at [www.sparcpk.org/CRS-CL%20in%20Pakistan.htm](http://www.sparcpk.org/CRS-CL%20in%20Pakistan.htm)

3 "The State of Pakistan's Children 2002," Society for the Protection of the Rights of the Child, 6th edition. Available at [www.sparcpk.org/publications](http://www.sparcpk.org/publications)

4 Ibid, pg 2.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid. Bonded laborers in the brick kiln industry successfully brought a case against a brick kiln owner and in 1989 a Supreme Court decision limited case advances (peshgi) to one week's wages.

8 SPARC Website report on Child Labor, pg. 2. Available at [www.sparcpk.org](http://www.sparcpk.org)

9 Ten Years Report: SPARC, Islamabad, Pakistan, pg 7. Available at [www.sparcpk.org](http://www.sparcpk.org)

10 Ibid, pg 12.

11 Children were selected on the basis of their willingness, availability, and their employer's willingness for the children to participate in the survey therefore the survey could not be considered a true random sampling.

12 Ibid.

13 Pakistan Education Sector Reform Action Plan (2001-2005), pg 132. Available at [www.moe.gov.pk/esrbook/ch.7.doc](http://www.moe.gov.pk/esrbook/ch.7.doc)

14 The 9/11 Commission Report, United States Printing Office, 2004, pg 387.

15 Robert Satloff, *The Battle of Ideas in the War on Terror* (Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy), pg 41.

16 USAID/Pakistan, which began its program in 2002 after a seven-year pause due to US-imposed nuclear non-proliferation sanctions, states its largest commitment in Pakistan will be in education and plans to spend \$67 million to improve basic, higher and vocational education in Pakistan in FY 2005. It was limiting its programs to Balochistan, Sindh and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). On July 7, 2005 the US Government announced it will include the Islamabad Capital Territory Area in providing \$14.9 million (Rs. 894 million) funding 7000 government schools for school improvement to launch the USAID-funded School Improvement initiative under the Education Sector Reform Assistance Program. . Funding has been increased and USAID's current 6-year, strategic plan period (2002-2007) is \$265 million (\$178 million for basic education and \$87 million for higher education). Available at [www.usaid.gov/pk/education/background/index.htm](http://www.usaid.gov/pk/education/background/index.htm)

17 Pakistan Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper, IMF Country Report No.04/24, December 2003, pg 67. Available at [www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/scr/2004/cr0424.pdf](http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/scr/2004/cr0424.pdf)

18 The Ministry of Education, Government of Pakistan identifies the following Development Assistance Partners: USAID, Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ), Asian Development Bank (ADB), UNICEF, World Food Program (WFP), Norwegian Agency for Development Corporation (NORAD) and Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). Available at [www.moe.gov.pk/donorassistance.htm](http://www.moe.gov.pk/donorassistance.htm)

19 Stephen P. Cohen, *The Idea of Pakistan*, (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2004), pg 314.

20 Available at [www.usaid.gov/pk/education/background/index.htm](http://www.usaid.gov/pk/education/background/index.htm)

21 These bills include *The Harkin Bill, the International Child Labor Elimination Act, the Child Free Consumer Information Act, and the Sanders Amendment*. See SPARC's "Ten Years Report, pg 16.

22 "Child Rights in Pakistan: 2002.", pg 2.