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# Why is child labour detrimental for children?

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## Why is Child Labour Detrimental for Children?

*All children, regardless of race or social and economic status, are entitled to enjoy their childhood years and to grow up fully and naturally. All have the right to love, education and protection.*

International Labour Organization (ILO), Geneva, 1998

### Introduction

There has been a long history of injustices and exploitation of children. Economic exploitation of children and child labour are one of the worst forms of child abuse and neglect in the world. In order to protect and promote children's rights, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Rights of a Child (CRC) in 1989 to facilitate the optimum growth and development of the child. Pakistan is a signatory to the CRC. Thus, through its Constitution, Pakistan has ensured child protection, yet the efforts to protect children's right are questionable. Article 11 (1) forbids slavery and states that no law shall permit or facilitate its introduction into Pakistan in any form. Article 11 (2) prohibits all forms of forced labour and traffic in human beings, similarly, article 11 (3) prohibits employment of children below the age of 14 years in any factory or mine or any other hazardous employment. Despite a recent series of laws prohibiting child labour and indentured servitude, children make up a quarter of the unskilled work force, and can be found in virtually every factory, every workshop and every field. They earn on average a third of the adult wage. Child labour is a result of different economic and social factors. It has its roots in poverty, lack of educational and economic opportunities, high rate of population growth, unemployment, uneven distribution of wealth and social customs and disregard for child rights.

This article discusses the prevalence of child labour in our society, provides an understanding of child labour, its causes and its effects on children and society and

suggests possible recommendations to bring an end to child labour.

### Prevalence of child labour in our society

According to the World Development Indicators Database (2006), Pakistan the sixth most populous country in the world with 155.8 million people, is ranked as a low income country. According to a study conducted by National Council for Child Welfare and Development (NCCWD) cited in Akhtar and Razzaq (2005) in 6 major cities of Pakistan, eight percent of the total working children are engaged as domestic servants. Thus, this number is consistent with the ILO and UNICEF studies as a Federal Bureau of Statistics (1996) study estimated 3 million child workers in Pakistan. At least half these children are under the age of ten. Certain industries, notably carpet making and brick making, cannot survive without them, while a large proportion of children are working invisibly in the informal sector.

Child labour is spread all over Pakistan but has the greatest impact in the north-west of Punjab especially Sialkot. Pakistan has a population of approximately 1 million and is an important centre for the production of goods for export to international markets, particularly sporting goods. Sialkot is one of the world's most important centres for production of sporting goods.

Child labour exists in Sialkot both in the export sector and the domestic sector. This fact has been well

documented and reported by the international media for several years but nothing has been done about it. In Pakistan, though it is clearly documented that child labour is against the law, the government is reluctant to do anything about it. Provision for education is very limited, due to the fact that very low priority is given to education in the national budgets. Education receives around 3% of the total gross domestic product. Gender and other forms of discrimination add to the lack of political will, gives a clear picture of the existence of child labour in Pakistan.

## What is Child Labour?

Not all work done by children is considered as child labour. Children's participation in work that does not affect their health and personal development or interfere with their schooling is generally regarded as being something positive. This includes activities such as helping their parents around the home, assisting in a family business or earning pocket money outside school hours and during school holidays.

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The term "child labour" is often defined as work that is done by children which restricts or damages their physical, emotional, intellectual, social or spiritual growth as children, and which denies them their right to develop, play or go to school. It refers to work that:

- ✧ is mentally, physically, socially or morally dangerous and harmful to children; and
- ✧ interferes with their schooling:
  - ◆ by depriving them of the opportunity to attend school;
  - ◆ by requiring them to work excessive hours and do heavy work.

In its most extreme forms, child labour involves children being enslaved, separated from their families, exposed to serious hazards and illnesses and/or left to fend for themselves— often at a very early age. (Adapted from: *Inter-parliamentary Union/International Labour Office, 2002*)

## Causes of Child Labour

Children start work when they are too young, or take on work that is hazardous, for many reasons. Children in developing countries, especially Pakistan, start working because their families need the extra income. Many end up working unpaid for their employers in exchange for food and boarding. In order to combat child labour, it is important to understand the forces that give rise to it.

### Poverty

Poverty is one of the main reasons of child labour. Due to economic crises, adult workers are not paid enough



to support their families, and sometimes even the wages from both parents' incomes are insufficient to keep their family housed, clothed and fed. Life consequently becomes a day to day struggle for survival of the poor. As a result, children start work instead of attending school, or leave school before completing their primary education to assist their families who are poor and cannot pay the basic costs of food and housing.

In some cases, it is also common to find families in which one or both parents are not earning anything, maybe because a parent has died or left home, or because adults are unable to get work.

### Cultural Context and Beliefs

In Pakistan, it is believed that children should share family responsibilities by assisting their parents with household chores or included in the family business or occupations such as farming and trading at an early age. Most of the children are also expected to assist their parents' financially. Gender is also a crucial factor as girls are mainly expected to look after their siblings and take care of the



house. This traditional attitude regarding work contributes to high incidences of child labour and places children in exploitative labour from which it is difficult to escape.

### Discrimination between girls

In most parts of Pakistan, gender is also a crucial factor: girls are discouraged from staying at school beyond puberty. They are pushed into adulthood much younger than boys, either into work or an early marriage before that have outgrown their childhood with caregivers not realizing the importance of playing and learning time.

### Cheap Labour

Child labour is cheap and easily available in developing

countries like Pakistan. Poverty driven children are an easy prey for those who seek to make a profit by exploiting this vulnerability. Employers find children more obedient and easy to control as they are unable to defend their rights and are easily convinced to do menial jobs for a much lower wage than adults.

### Inadequate Educational Facilities

Pakistan's literacy rate is the lowest in the South Asian regions. The Government of Pakistan, through the Education for All (EFA), provides free education and books in primary schools. Despite these efforts, the government has failed to reach out to the rural communities where this problem exists. In addition, weak infrastructure, lack of qualified teachers, teachers' absenteeism, corporal punishment and lack of learning materials push children out of school. Thus, children in the rural areas are left with little or no alternatives than to work at an early age. As a result, hard-pressed parents do not feel that the long-



term returns of education outweigh the short-term economic gain and skills acquired through child work. Therefore, many parents prefer not to send their children to school and believe it is better for their child to work as on the job training provides them the skills and experiences which is better than the education that does not guarantee employment.

### Inadequate Laws

In Pakistan, child labour persists because the laws that do exist are not strictly enforced and because social and political commitment is weak. Though the minimum age of child labourers is 14 years, children less than eight years old are found in labour all over the country.

### Worst Forms of Child Labour

Child labour prevails in many forms in Pakistan. Millions of children are found doing work that is hazardous, abusive and exploitative. The "worst forms" include children involved in slavery and forced labour, commercial sexual exploitation (prostitution or pornography), illicit activities (particularly the production or trafficking of drugs), and hazardous work that jeopardizes their lives, health or morals. The International Labour Organization (ILO) has set out the criteria for identifying them, as work that might expose children to:

- ✧ Physical, psychological or sexual abuse;
- ✧ Work underground, under water, at dangerous heights or in confined spaces;

- ✧ Work with dangerous machinery, equipment and tools, or which involves the manual handling or transport of heavy loads; and
- ✧ Work in an unhealthy environment which exposes children to hazardous substances, agents or processes, or to temperatures, noise levels, or vibrations which might damage their health.



### Impact of Child labour

Childhood is a stage that provides children with an opportunity to explore, learn and develop skills in order to understand and relate to the world around. However, children engaged in work at an early age miss out on this opportunity. Child labour is an obstacle to children's development and future prospects. In all circumstances, child labour impacts negatively on a child leaving a lifelong mark on their physical, emotional and social development.

#### Physical Development

Child labourers are far more vulnerable than adults because their bodies are still growing and are not yet fully formed. Most of the children are engaged in work that is heavy and intense and also because their is exposure to toxic and dangerous chemicals and objects. They experience poor physical health. These effects can be both immediate, like a burn or a cut, or can have consequences that last a lifetime, like suffering from a respiratory disease, endemic and parasitic diseases and accidents.

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#### Emotional Development

Child labourers frequently work in environments that are exploitative, dangerous, degrading and isolating. They often suffer ill-treatment, abuse and neglect at the hands of their employers. They are thus unable to interact and cooperate with others and to attain a real sense of identity and belonging. They often lack confidence and experience feelings of low self-esteem.

#### Social development

Children who work do not have the opportunity to participate in activities that are a crucial part of growing



up, such as playing, going to school and socializing with their peers. They have difficulty interacting with others and actively participating in and enjoying life. Children are consequently pushed into adulthood before they are ready.

## Recommendations

In order to combat the phenomenon of child labour and eliminate it from our society, it is important we address some of the major causes that are giving rise to this issue. Thus, the following is recommended:

- ❖ Propagating and developing strategies for reducing poverty levels by practical and local interventions.
- ❖ Knowing and understanding the rights and policies (Convention on the Rights of a Child, Constitution of Pakistan, International Labour Organization Conventions, Labour Policy 2002 etc) is the first step in preventing child labour and providing children with education so that their future can be a better one.
- ❖ All countries should set a legal minimum age for entry into employment. A precise and concise law is needed to regularize this. Proper implementing and monitoring mechanisms need to be established at the district, provincial and national level.
- ❖ The quantity and quality of formal and informal

education opportunities should be strengthened in order to reach out to children at high risk of child labour. Education must be flexible and broad in scope. It should be relevant and useful to the lives of the people. Alternative education programmes should be adopted for children who have little or no access

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to schooling.

- ❖ Design community-based social support systems and programmes to educate families about the alternative and safer employment options.
- ❖ A range of activities to protect children who are already at work, in some cases to support them and, in others, to withdraw them from work that is causing them harm.
- ❖ Challenging popular attitudes and prejudices that result in abuse, and encouraging the media and general public to confront exploitation, abuse and violence.

### About the Writer:

Ms. Cassandra Fernandes Faria is currently working as an instructor and a team member of Citizenship Rights and Responsibilities Project (CRRP) Team at Aga Khan University - Institute for Educational Development. She writes on social issues for various publications.

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