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## BONDED AND CHILD LABOR IN PAKISTAN: INTERVIEW WITH HUMAN RIGHTS PRACTITIONER PIRBHU LAL SATYANI

*Mr. Satyani is a Humphrey/Fulbright Fellow at American University Washington College of Law. He is from rural Pakistan and worked at the grassroots level with Thardeep Rural Development Program, a local nongovernmental organization focused on child labor, poverty, and education. At Thardeep, Mr. Satyani was responsible for research and advocacy on issues related to child labor. He managed a five-year project that Save the Children UK supported from 2007 to 2012, engaging with children in the workforce in four districts of Sindh, Pakistan. The purpose of the project was to phase out 20,000 working children from hazardous labor conditions and provide them with access to quality education. In order to supplement the incomes children were bringing home to their families, Mr. Satyani's program also focused on diversifying economic opportunities in impoverished rural communities so that children would not feel compelled to work. The Thardeep program provided support to government schools, increased the number of teachers, and established non-formal education (NFE) centers in communities with limited access to government schools and qualified teachers. Mr. Satyani designed and led advocacy campaigns to support these projects; arranged policy dialogues between government and community stakeholders; worked with the government to improve enforcement mechanisms for laws, including the Employment of Children Act of 2001, the Child Protection Authority Act of 2011, and the Bonded Labor System Abolition Act of 1992; issued recommendations to parliamentarians, policymakers, other NGOs, and the media; and built capacity and raised awareness in rural communities among children and parents.*

**HRB: Can you tell us about the Thardeep child labor project?**

The purpose of the five-year project was to phase out children from the labor sector, including industries such as agriculture, livestock, carpet making, and domestic labor. We conducted our work in four rural districts throughout Pakistan and found that thirty-six percent of children living in these districts engaged in these industries. The goal was to encourage the 20,000 children previously employed at young ages in dangerous conditions to enroll in schools. When there were already government schools in these rural districts, we provided teachers, stationary, and other resources to support its operation. In villages with no schools, we created non-formal education centers (NFEs). Thardeep also worked with village communities to create children and women's organizations and provide them with livelihood opportunities and vocational training.

**HRB: What are the predominant causes of child and bonded labor in Pakistan?**

Child labor is a product of poverty and the absence of quality education. There are few employment opportunities for poor families, and the family sizes are typically large. Unemployment and inflation have increased alongside the increase in child labor in Pakistan. Many families become indebted to landlords and



*Pirbhu Lal Satyani*

contractors and they, as well as the children, enter into bonded labor agreements. The public education system in Pakistan is also very weak. It is poorly monitored and corruption is pervasive. Schools lack facilities, such as electricity, water, proper sanitation, and things like furniture and stationary.

Although Pakistan has good laws to curb child labor, there is no mechanism or child protection system at the village level to address these issues. For example, the provincial assembly passed the Sindh Child Protection Authority Act in 2011, but the government has done nothing to enforce it. The District Vigilance Committees (DVCs), which were created under the bonded labor abolition system in 1992, have similarly been inactive. As a result, twenty-five million children are out of school, and almost half of them are engaged in labor.

**HRB: Why do so many young people have limited access to education?**

Bad politics, bad governance, and mismanagement. Our education system is politicized. The hiring and firing of teachers always happens along political lines. In my districts, I have seen seventeen schools in a single village while many other villages have no schools at all. We need a complete transformation to separate education and politics. In a number of villages, there are school buildings but no teachers. Therefore, children may have to travel far away to get to the closest school. Girls, because of gender barriers and cultural issues, are not permitted to make this journey. In Pakistan, girls have a lower literacy rate than boys because the distance children must often travel to school prevents girls from attending. Many families also do not want their daughters getting an education in the same school as boys. There are also very few female teachers in the rural areas in Pakistan. Poverty and the weak governmental education system are pushing more children into religious schools, called *Madrasas*, because they provide food.

**HRB: What is the relationship among priorities to enforce existing laws, engage directly with communities on income-generation projects, and provide access to quality free education?**

Each priority is equally as important and interdependent. Without one of these approaches, we cannot address the issue of child labor in Pakistan. Our research studies confirm that the ratio of child labor is higher in areas where people are poor and the education system is weak or absent. Introducing new laws is insufficient. We must understand the needs of poor families. They want their children to attend school and not to work, but they are compelled by poverty to send their children to work. For example, in some villages, communities told us that their children were sick or disabled. We were able to help get them the immediate health care they needed, although this was not part of the project. Families' biggest concern is survival, and they do not know how to survive if their children stop earning money. They also do not see a big change as a result of education. They are concerned that if they invest in a child's education, there is no guarantee that the child will get a job.

**HRB: How does a non-formal education center (NFE Center), like those set up by Thardeep, meet the needs of a community lacking a formal education system?**

The term formal education refers to the structured educational system provided for children by the Pakistani government. Informal education can be good in cases when and where there is a need. However, it cannot replace formal education entirely. Typically, the term informal education is used to refer to adult literacy and continuing education programs. We used this model for underserved and working children. We can accommodate children who have not yet received an education by teaching grades one through five in three years. This model worked well for girls and working children because the schools were closer to home, we employed local teachers, and provided flexible class times. It is important that every child get an education, so, while we are working on getting children out of the labor industry, it is important that the education provided be feasible, flexible, and convenient. This can be done through informal education. Oftentimes, governments cannot do this alone, but civil society, NGOs, and the international community can be instrumental in increasing the literacy rate and decreasing child labor, both through formal and informal education mechanisms.

**HRB: How can a project like yours work to ensure that it is sustainable in the community?**

When Thardeep initiated the child labor project in 2007, we decided that we would become the leading organization in Pakistan working on child labor issues. We created NFE Centers in areas where there were not adequate government schools. At the end of five years, however, the funding stopped and we could not continue to run the NFE Centers. The systems that we developed in five years could not be maintained without funding. NGOs are donor-driven, so they are only able to work on small projects for a short period of time, though the issue of child labor in Pakistan is vast and ongoing. Given the financial constraints, NGOs can only create models to show the government best practices. It is the government's responsibility to replicate these models and initiate long-term programs. For example, the government should be creating livelihood opportunities, such as

providing soft loans without interest to poor families who wish to start their own businesses. The donor agencies that support NGOs and governments should also think about investing in long-term projects to build the child protection system at the local level in Pakistan. This mechanism could include social and legal protection, health, education, training, and livelihood opportunities.

**HRB: What can the government do to address the issues that your program identified in its five years of operation?**

Ultimately, the government is responsible to take care of these children. NGOs cannot do it all. In my advocacy to the government, I asked that the government simply implement the laws that exist and, where there are gaps in the law, amend them. The government has moved too slowly, and in the meantime, the community has needs. They need livelihood support and quality education for their children. The government should make the issue of education a top priority and increase the budget and resources for quality education. The government should also depoliticize the education system. It's time now to implement the free and compulsory education model in every village, district, and province for every child through grade ten. I am sure that once the government prioritizes providing quality education, the community will begin to see the importance of education and will want their children to be educated.

**HRB: What legal mechanisms are available to push the government to take ownership of rural children's education?**

We can use a combination of domestic and international law. Pakistan has ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). We also have domestic laws: the Employment of Children Act, the Child Protection Authority, and the Child Marriage Act. The issue is enforcement. As a civil society, we can arrange a dialogue, conduct capacity building trainings, and use the news media. These are our tools. We can engage the community, parents, and children. They should be able to ask the government for what they need. During this project, we worked on passing the Child Protection Authority Bill by engaging a dialogue between children and the parliamentarians. The children communicated their specific needs to the parliamentarians, and this helped the bill get passed in 2011. Under this bill, there should be child protection officers from the government present at the local level, but we know that civil society organizations will need to push the government to ensure implementation. We have also submitted a report in the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child and a Universal Periodic Report on the platform of the Child Rights Movement, alongside the report from the government of Pakistan. We pointed out the laws currently in place and said that we do not have enforcement. We pointed to widespread corruption. The UN member countries gave hundreds of recommendations for Pakistan to promote child protection, gender equality, and education. The government responded positively that they would work to implement the laws in place and promote child rights, but progress has been slow.

*Megan Wakefield, Content Editor of the Human Rights Brief, conducted this interview with Purbhu Lal Satyani on March 4, 2014. Megan Wakefield is a 2014 J.D. Candidate at American University Washington College of Law.*