**Modern Forms of Slavery in Pakistan**

Bonded labour is illegal in Pakistan, yet, as per according to the 2023 Global Slavery Index, 2.3 million people are working in conditions labelled by observers as modern slavery. The forms of slavery included women sex trafficking, child sex trafficking, forced labour, bonded labour or debt bondage, domestic servitude, and forced child labour.

Trafficking in persons is a major human rights violation in Pakistan. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) says Pakistan is one of the key sources, destinations, and transit countries for human trafficking. The most common form of trafficking in Pakistan is bonded labour, which is a form of modern slavery.

Article 11 of the Constitution of Pakistan prohibits slavery and forced labour in any form. It also bans human trafficking and employment of children below 14 years of age, etc.

The country has enacted a law – Prevention of Trafficking in Persons Act 2018 (PTPA) – to ensure that those involved in trafficking are subject to a fine of one million rupees or a jail sentence of at least seven years. It also formed a task force to curb the menace and has also ratified the conventions of the International Labour Organization on the Abolition of Forced Labour, the Worst Forms of Child Labour, and the Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining.

The Supreme Court of Pakistan outlawed bonded labour and cancelled all existing bonded debts, and forbade lawsuits for the recovery of existing debts in September 1988. It led to the enactment of the Bonded Labour (Abolition) System Act 1992. Provincial legislatures followed suit.

But despite the existence of these legislative tools and social rights, workers lack the capacity and resources to materialize their rights. In 2021 alone, more than 20,000 cases of bonded, forced and child labour were registered, with many more going unreported. High interest loans, surreptitious deductions, and doctored accounts cripple these labourers further, while their already desperate living conditions degrade even further. An agonizing helplessness blankets them as debts escalate year after year. Families torn apart, lives shattered—some surrender, paying the ultimate price of despair through suicide.

The reasons for the persistence of bonded labour are manifold. These include Pakistan’s dire economic situation, which has been exacerbated by the impacts of climate change. The 2022 floods caused damage of approximately USD 30 billion to Pakistan’s economy and deprived millions of already vulnerable people of their livelihood. Thus, many of those struggling to make ends meet turn to the large unregulated informal economy with no option but to enter into dubious forms of employment that make them a victim of bonded labour.

Also financial institutions rarely extend formal credit facilities or loans without the security of collateral and proper documentation. As an effective judicial system to enforce credit contracts is lacking, these institutions refrain from giving loans where the probability of recovering even the principal is low. Shortcomings in the enforcement of social welfare programmes and social safety laws for the vulnerable groups add to the high risk of bonded labour for underprivileged strata of society. Victims of bonded labour also face barriers in accessing legal recourse with regard to both the criminal justice system and labour department. And finally, the vulnerability of labourers increases when they do not form a united front. Already in the formal economy, Pakistan’s fragmented trade union movement struggles to ensure bargaining models of industrial relations (where labour and management are two parties agreeing on a contractual framework). Lack of collective bargaining in the informal economy denies labourers any possibility of presenting their views and needs, which subsequently enables a systematic violation of their rights through bonded labour.

Workers’ organisations are trying their best to break free the bonded labourers and prevent others from falling into the bonded-labour trap. Labour Education Foundation (LEF) is among these organisations, which strive across the country to break the shackles of bonded labour, sensitize and train the workers – particularly those employed in brick-kiln industry, home-based and garment factories – about their rights, builds their capacity and provides them legal aid in claiming these rights.

Founded in 1993, LEF has been active in empowering workers across Pakistan, facilitating the formation of 23 new trade unions and providing crucial training to over 6,000 members in basic trade unionism and leadership. Through legal support and advocacy, hundreds of workers have been assisted in cases of bonded labour, ensuring their rights are upheld. Its efforts extend beyond mere representation. It has worked tirelessly to educate and support marginalized groups, including working children and home-based working women, enabling their integration into formal systems and empowering them to negotiate fair wages and better working conditions.

In addition to its advocacy and capacity-building work, the LEF has demonstrated an unwavering commitment to humanitarian causes, particularly in response to natural disasters like floods. With a nationwide network, the foundation swiftly mobilized resources to provide immediate relief to flood-affected communities, including cash grants, winter essentials, medical assistance, and agricultural support. By addressing the urgent needs of vulnerable populations in districts across Pakistan, the LEF exemplifies a holistic approach to social justice, combining advocacy with direct intervention to uplift and empower those most in need.

To successfully abolish bonded labour, advocacy organizations should emphasize an approach that includes all primary stakeholders, including employers. A comprehensive set of measures is needed to tackle the root causes that force desperate people into bonded labour:

(1) Bonded labourers should be connected to the existing national and provincial social safety networks and programmes.

(2) Alternative employment opportunities must be created in the formal economy for bonded labourers or for those who are likely to fall victim to bonded labour. The abolishment of bonded labour should be a part of policies designed to curb the growing informal economy in Pakistan.

(3) The availability of affordable credit needs to be improved to reduce labourers’ reliance on advances from employers that lead them to bondage.

(4) Awareness and sensitization of the general public is another important aspect. The general public must know that bonded labour is illegal and hence effectively demand abolishing the practices leading to bonded labour.

(5) Trade unions should include the bonded labour issue in their existing efforts to organize informal workers and devise a comprehensive strategy for organizing bonded labourers.

(6) Sensitization and continued capacity building of government functionaries is also critical to abolish bonded labour.

(7) And finally, the victims of bonded labour must be provided with opportunities to reintegrate into society. This can be achieved through economic inclusion, skill development, vocational training and educational outreach. LEF’s adult literacy centres may provide a blueprint for the purpose.

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