

Rights of Bonded Laborers at Brick Kilns: A Social Protection Perspective from Pakistan

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THE brickmaking industry in Pakistan hosts a major concentration of grassroots and semi-urban population and provides a source of livelihood to some of the most vulnerable and poorest sections of society, many of them being migrant or seasonal workers. This industry contributes 1.5 percent¹ to the gross domestic product (GDP) and provides livelihood to about two million people² largely as informal sector.

This industry is a risk-prone, informal manufacturing sector in terms of accessibility, information and response relating to work situation, demographics and conditions of workers deployed there at work. As per information shared by the Department of Labour and Human Resource of the Provincial Government of Punjab, it is estimated that an average of thirty to thirty-five families are deployed at each brick kiln and with an average family size of seven (with at least three of the family members being children). Hence, two hundred ten people on the average are covered per brick kiln, or two thousand one hundred people for every ten brick kilns.

An inter-generational poverty cycle is a major characteristic of the families deployed at the brick kilns in Punjab and Sindh provinces. Children working at the brick kilns alongside their parents and other family members are exposed to safety and protection-related risks and have minimal access to health, hygiene, safe drinking water, and education facilities. Working conditions at the brick kilns are also hazardous to human health and the brickmaking process has many steps that are not suitable for children.

A pattern of unethical practices prevails at most brick kilns where children participate in brick making process, with minimal access to good nutrition, and recreational facilities. Parallel to that scenario is an increasing market for bricks with no procurement-related standards applied for reducing children's entry into work in the brick kilns.

In Pakistan, the lack of financial credit in the brick kiln sector along with the system of employment contract in the informal sector provides significant reason for bondage. Millions of workers are bonded to their

employers, forced to work for low or no wages because their earnings are retained by the employer (or a middle person) to repay an outstanding debt. Caused by multiple factors (economic, social, as well as cultural), debt bondage thus remains a complex phenomenon based on relationships of domination and alienation.

Brick kiln workers are confronted with the challenge of meeting basic sustenance needs. Due to this lack of investment in human capital, child workers do not acquire the necessary skills to break the cycle of poverty, and repeat the same cycle as they become adults. As a result, the cycle of illiteracy and lack of skills ties into the cycle of poverty, debt, vulnerability and dependence. In this way the cycle of poverty continues from one generation to another and so does the bonded child worker.

Eleven million bricks are produced in a month on the average. The total number of workers in one kiln averages around eighty male and female adults. Children who come to the workplace with their parents are not considered employed by the brick kiln owners.

Majority of the children at the brick kilns are prevented from going to school as they contribute a substantial amount to the family income by working. Most families are of the view that schools alongside the brick kilns are not sustainable and they do not add value to the children's development. Also, the income of these families would not be able to support the cost of education.

The World Vision Pakistan piloted a **research-based advocacy initiative** to determine the scope of ethical production and procurement of bricks and to delineate ethical production and procurement strategies that could contribute towards a decent work environment for the protection of worker's rights including children's protection and well-being at the brick kilns. The project provided the layout towards a long-term process of policy review and strategic interventions through stakeholders' dialogue, and advocacy towards decent working conditions and safeguarding of the rights and well-being of children and youth engaged as a supplementary workforce of their families.

Profile of Bonded Laborers (Households) at Brick Kilns

Households in debt bondage at brick kilns are generally those of uneducated, low skilled workers with an average of seven members. The entire household

is involved in brick making - with the head of household and the spouse making their children, both boys and girls, work in the various stages of the brick making process.³

Each household has an average of 2.2 children with age ranging from seven to seventeen years working at the brick kilns. Female child workers outnumber the male child workers (55 percent girls; 45 percent boys).

Poor families supply child labor to the brick making industry to enhance their weekly wages while they remain unaware and unable to invest in their children's education. They compromise on enhancing their future income by foregoing the education of their children and by choosing to maximize their present rather than future income, which involves higher opportunity cost of schooling and investment of time. As a result, the intergenerational patterns of illiteracy and debt bondage are inherently present.⁴

The Provincial Government of Punjab has found in an assessment the existence of a total of six thousand five hundred brick kilns in the twelve districts of the province, with six thousand to nine thousand children serving as child workers and engaged in the worst forms of child labor.⁵

Situational Analysis at Brick Kilns

Under the Punjab Prohibition of the Employment of Children Act of 2014, no child under fourteen years can be engaged to work.

The Provincial Government of Punjab has already declared in 2012 an Education Emergency in the province that required the enrolment of out-of-school children belonging to families engaged at brick kilns including child workers. This initiative implemented the 2010 constitutional amendment that added a right to education provision (Article 25A) in the Constitution of Pakistan.⁶

Though children are mostly involved in handling of mud and clay and making of raw bricks, their presence within the vicinity of the brick kiln and exposure to the baking process in several instances has high risks involved.

The field research of World Vision in Tehsil Chunian, District Kasur, Punjab province shows the following data:⁷

Table 1. Key Findings on Households

Workforce per household	5-6 persons
Bricks produced per day	Adults: 500 per day Family total: 1,900 bricks per day
Hours	Children & Adults: 10-12 hours/day, 6 days/week
Wages	Household wages per day (with 3.8 members) 1,140 Pakistani Rupees (around 11 US dollars) per day
In-kind payments	Shelter, electricity, water
Current debt	For 29 families: 3,009,000 Pakistani Rupees (almost 30,000 US dollars) Average per family: 103,759 Pakistani Rupees (a little over 1,000 US dollars)
Reasons for Debt	Most advances are taken to pay for basic necessities, medical expense, off season necessities and, to a lesser extent, weddings
School going children	Out of 109 children, 25 percent attend school, or 28 children
Micro finance credit	None of the thirty household respondents have been approached by micro finance companies
Future plans	66 percent of the parents want their children to stop working at the brick kilns in the next three years
Residence	83 percent live at brick factory site while 17 percent live in the village
Wives working at brick kilns	93 percent of the wives work at same brick kiln

The research also shows the following findings:⁸

1. At least 47 percent of the workers claimed that safe drinking water was available at the work place, while 53 percent thought otherwise;
2. 66 percent of the children saw themselves continuing the work in the brick kilns;
3. Over 50 percent of the children work for more than fifty-five hours per week;
4. At least 86 percent of the children have cited family restriction as major reason for not attending schools in the target area.

Education Facilities

The Provincial Government of Punjab established a total of two hundred non-formal educational centers near the brick kiln units. One hundred eight of which are in Kasur and sixty two in Lahore Districts. These schools were established by the provincial government under its Annual Development Scheme project: Elimination of Bonded Labour at Brick Kilns (EBLIK). Also, thirty non-formal schools were established with the assistance of International Labour Organization (ILO) and handed over to Pak Swedish Teachers Association, and another thirty schools were handed over to Bunyad Literacy Community Centers in 2010. A phase two of the EBLIK project has started since 2014.

Promoting Ethical Production at Brick Kilns

Producing ethically means making sure that decent working conditions and international labor standards are secured during the manufacturing of products including sourcing of materials. The decent work approach of the ILO is a tripartite and gender mainstreamed strategy integrating the concept of productive and freely chosen work, rights at the work place, social protection including access to health, education and other forms of insurance systems as well a process of social dialogue among the principal stakeholders and partners to achieve the above goals. It highlights implementation of the core labor standards including prevention of child labor and forced labor, abolition of bonded labor and setting up of minimum age for entry into work, equal opportunity and treatment at work, social security and social dialogue, etc.

Almost none of the brick kilns qualify under the parameters of ethical production: insufficient knowledge and awareness on decent working condition affects rights-based or ethical production parameters. Recurring gaps are evident in addressing the following issues: elimination of child labor, excessive working hours, hazardous working conditions coupled with minimal or non-existing facilities for education, health, sanitation, safe drinking water, provision of minimum wages, provision of occupational safety gear, and access to justice as their basic human rights.

Preventing children from working at the brick kilns is likely to ease the labor market as it will provide job opportunities for adult workers.

This would also help to decrease the unemployment rate and consequently reduce the poverty ratio.

The corporate governance parameter is a tool used for promoting ethical standards and practices at the work place and for promoting awareness of basic rights at the work place and community level. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) incorporates all forms of rights at the work place and aims at improving business ethics that need to be integrated with special emphasis on child protection through education and awareness raising, etc. The most significant issues addressed by CSR include the following:

- Health & Hygiene;
- Education;
- Advocacy of Human Rights and Human Rights Education at Work;
- Economic Protection and Infrastructure Development;
- Environment Protection;
- Community Development and Rehabilitation.

Promoting Child Rights through Sustainable Procurement Process

The research project reviewed over twenty models of procurement policies including the Public Procurement Regulatory Authority (PPRA) rules for procurement and the policies of corporate sector, donors and international agencies operating in Pakistan. The findings of the research project were validated by the public and private stakeholders at various high profile meetings.

One proposal was the strengthening of the ethical procurement measures through communication programs, capacity-building initiatives, and advocacy and awareness-raising sessions. Another proposal was the adoption of an advocacy plan for consensus-building on using the supply chain process as a measure to eliminate child labor in the brick kiln industry and promote sustainable procurement parameters.

Based on the proposed measures in the research report, advocacy sessions on the following topics were held to capacitate diverse stakeholders:

1. Advocacy on ethical procurement with international agencies and donors;
2. Development of minimum standards for procurement in the brick kiln industry; and

3. Advocacy on minimum standards for procurement with construction and insurance companies.

Since the business community and corporate sector largely follow traditional procurement policies, the concept of sustainable procurement started to be introduced to this sector. This new concept links social protection and environmental factors with that of economically-driven motives. Under this new concept, the benchmarks for minimum procurement standards would cover child-friendly environment, minimum wage, provision of occupational safety measures, access to health, education facilities, safe drinking water, sanitation facilities and social protection facilities for the workers.

Most of the procurement policies of multinational organizations and large public sector companies do not qualify under the benchmarks for sustainable procurement policies. They are therefore being encouraged to enhance their advocacy and communications strategies toward adoption of sustainable procurement policies as core disciplines that incorporate social protection measures besides economic benefits and environmental protection. Social protection measures are missing from the procurement policies of the corporate sector. The inclusion of these measures in the form of essential health care, insurance, educational benefits, workers' benefits (such as leaves, working hours and monthly wage rates etc.) would strengthen child protection and workers' well-being at the place of work.

The private (including the bricks market vendors and middle persons) and public sectors need to be appropriately educated on the significance of a coherent and consistent procurement policy and guidelines for their business and marketing communications during the implementation of development projects including those requiring construction of social infrastructures, schools, health care units, housing schemes, community centers, roads, bridges and even business complexes. A sustainable procurement policy can be used as a strategic tool for negotiations with other partners especially during the development of programs and facilitate the social inclusion of community needs and those of the workers involved. Human development and social protection needs of the community and workers including their educational needs are thus taken care of as a result of effective and sustainable procurement measures undertaken.

Campaign and Communication Strategy

A media-driven communication strategy was piloted to influence diverse stakeholders using a video documentary on rights at the workplace. The video documentary was used as a pilot approach to explore the links between the work done by the public and private sectors.

The video documentary, entitled “Promise for a Better Future,” was developed in 2014 as a strategic tool for developing a process of leadership dialogue on how to implement global labor standards at the brick kilns. The video documentary project was an evidence-based initiative to address basic education needs of all child workers at the brick kilns and provide vocational training to the youth. Moreover, it also promotes the critical importance of addressing social protection needs through social security cards for health safety benefits and other social benefits for workers and their families. The Departments of Education and Labour represented by their senior management provided ample documented evidence to build a case for educating the public on the fundamental human rights of workers and especially children deployed at the risk-prone brick kiln industry in Pakistan. The documentary was screened over different time intervals during the March-May 2014 period, first at a special advocacy session for senior representatives of government, donors, international agencies and the corporate sector including workers and employers organizations, and at separate sessions organized for national agencies engaged in child rights work, senior managers and regional heads of the institution that implements the project - World Vision Pakistan and its field staff including trainers, psychologists and school teachers involved in its child protection and education programs.

Another initiative involved the brick kiln owners that formed the ethical product market. They were invited to help strengthen occupational safety and protection standards for children and workers at their brick manufacturing units. This initiative was aimed at knowledge-building on the multi-dimensional integration of CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) aspects with socio-economic empowerment opportunities for the workers in the production process.

A hall mark achievement of the initiative was the Child Well-being Campaign (CWB Campaign) organized in collaboration with Brick Kilns Owners Association, Pakistan to promote child-friendly brick kilns in Lahore, Punjab province. This advocacy-based educational campaign was a

unique model being accompanied by close coordination with the brick kiln owners and the Pakistan Workers Federation. It was also organized for children residing in the remote communities of small villages bordering India in the outskirts of Lahore. The CWB Campaign was undertaken during over a period of two and a half months (April - June 2014 period) including the mapping exercise.

This CWB Campaign was organized to strengthen the human rights education of workers and their children deployed at the brick kilns and to provide them access to basic tools for safety and care at the work place. A major dilemma prevailing in the implementation of core labor standards in Pakistan is that most of the campaigns and awareness-raising initiatives were organized as standalone initiatives and do not create a knowledge-building impact among the target group. Through the CWB Campaign, child and adult workers including those engaged in hazardous steps of the brick making process were educated regarding their rights to human dignity, work place safety measures and the benefits of adhering to a risk-free work environment. The CWB Campaign was both an advocacy and educational campaign, to bring increased coordination between the workers and employers' representatives in order to preserve the rights of the workers and their children.

The feasibility of the CWB Campaign was determined through a mapping exercise using field survey. The mapping exercise covered brick kilns that were selected based on a number of criteria: secure access, coordination with and consent of the brick kiln owners; and existence of basic administrative requirements including registration of the brick kilns with the provincial government authorities and the social security institute. The mapping exercise included the following information: dis-aggregated household data, and data on workers (working hours, task distribution, deployment of children of different age groups in brickmaking, hazardous features of brickmaking process, and wage distribution). In addition, the mapping exercise also took into account the extent of awareness of basic rights to education, health and other facilities of the workers and their families and children. This provided a basis for determining the need for human rights education for them.

The human rights education activities under the CWB Campaign took the form of community-based networking, awareness-raising sessions, and promotion of easy access of workers and their families to basic and essential

social amenities such as social protection benefits and equal remuneration for women workers, prevention of child and bonded labor, terms of contract, labor and wage differentials, and loans.

Occupational Safety Kits comprising of gloves and face masks were provided to one hundred representatives of the brick kiln workers. These kits were distributed among selected group of workers who were engaged in the process of stacking and baking of bricks and unloading bricks from the kilns. During the process, workers were informed of the risk of the hazardous steps in brickmaking and what measures and precautions were necessary in order to prevent themselves from work-related injuries and health risks such as skin and lung infections, breathing problems, burns, etc.

Special sessions were designed for knowledge-building and education of selected workers regarding the use of occupational safety gears. They were demonstrated when, where and how to use the gloves and masks in order to prevent any risks related to hazardous steps involved in baking and stacking of baked bricks. A large number of other workers at the brick kilns, who were involved in other less hazardous steps of brick-making also attended the sessions along with the employers in order to have an enhanced level of understanding of how workers' rights and basic safety needs were to be addressed.

Through this campaign, ten locations in Lahore were promoted as Child-Friendly Brick Kilns with the vision of improving the working conditions of children and older workers and of strengthening a support mechanism towards their protection and well-being through a multi-input collaborative model. The campaign accomplished the following:

1. Ten brick kiln units were identified and mapped for knowledge-building and awareness on child rights at brick kilns;
2. Ten awareness sessions for workers were organized on how to use occupation safety gears;
3. One hundred workers included those involved in stacking of bricks inside the kiln, baking of bricks and unloading of bricks from the kiln were provided with occupational safety gears consisting of masks and gloves;
4. Four hundred families at ten brick kilns (reaching two thousand eight hundred persons) participated in the distribution of materials and knowledge-building sessions;
5. Distribution of one first aid kit for each brick kiln location aimed at benefiting one thousand four hundred persons;

6. Distribution of recreational kits – one cricket kit per brick kiln to promote children’s right to play;
7. Strengthening of early childhood education by providing free early childhood education books and stationary.

Table 2. Beneficiaries Details– CWB Campaign to Promote Child Friendly Brick Kilns

Item	Boys	Girls	Youth	Adults	Families	Total
Dental kits	400	200	400	400	200	1,400
Occupational Safety (OS) Kits	-	-	20	80	100	100
First Aid Kits	400	200	400	400	200	1,400
Recreational Kits	400	200	400	-	10	1,000
Thematic Mugs	20	15	10	35	80	80
Awareness Raising session on Use of OS Kits	200	100	200		200	500

Child Well-being Campaign

The CWB Campaign links social dialogue to the corporate social responsibility concept and governance ethics at brick kilns.

The development perspective regarding the elimination of child labor and bonded labor at brick kilns is based on the principles of advocacy and rights-based education on safeguarding the rights of workers and effective liaison between the workers and employers. To support the same and accelerate the process, a human rights education and awareness-raising program is needed in addressing the continuing issues within the labor market especially in the brick kiln industry.

Strong sustainable institutional measures and action programs are needed for the effective protection of workers’ rights and the education on these rights of those working at the brick kilns. These measures and programs may also include the following:

1. Advocacy, through tripartite dialogue and consultations with government is deemed instrumental in putting forth a socially cohesive strategy for promoting ethical product market as well as



(Photos by Ayesha Aftab)

ethical procurement standards and the minimum benchmarks in the brickmaking supply chain;

2. Institutional priorities of stakeholders for promoting the well-being of children need to be advocated amicably through strategic engagements with government agencies such as the Departments of Labour, Education and Social Welfare and of Health, etc.;
3. Removal of child labor from the brick kilns is likely to ease the labor shortage as it will provide job opportunities for adult workers. This will help in decreasing the unemployment rate and also result in reducing poverty;
4. Strengthening of public-private partnerships especially with tripartite partners for future interventions and under the human rights/economic rights portfolio;
5. Advocacy must be supported with service provision to the targeted communities/stakeholders in order to fetch a stronger impact.

- Therefore, improving working conditions at brick kilns would add value to the programs;
6. Children and youth at the brick kilns do not have access to education, health or safe drinking water facilities that cause their vulnerability; they are also vulnerable to risks related to child abuse, protection, and have no means to improve their living conditions. Hence a child wellbeing program at brick kilns needs to be strengthened in the long term and also made sustainable;
 7. Child/bonded labor issues at brick kiln should be addressed through CSR-based models approach
 8. Short-, medium- and long-term goals should be defined to enhance the impact of advocacy on eliminating child labor;
 9. A collaborative model is recommended to influence tripartite stakeholders.

Concluding Note

The process of human rights institutional development is gaining momentum in Pakistan with both private and corporate sectors playing effective roles through their partnerships in implementing rights-based education and development programs for vulnerable communities such as brick kiln workers. It is now significant that the two governing features shaping the implementation of labor standards, i.e., human rights education and accessibility of development services, are well-aligned for greater and multilateral impact in the sector.

The achievement of decent work conditions in the brick kiln industry is dependent on how the stakeholders build bridges towards effective and consistent implementation of labor standards and facilitate sustainable marketing strategies for the same purpose. Parameters and modalities of human rights education toward promoting labor rights must be structured around the phenomenal concept of social protection and equitable employment conditions. The role of human rights education and institutional reforms would carry greater value with the integration of multi-input services becoming increasingly accessible. Public-private partnerships for providing access to such services like rehabilitation of non-functional school facilities located nearby brick kilns, provision of transportation facility, availability of school packages, food for education schemes, teacher training facility,

introducing human rights education curriculum, induction of a monitoring and quality assurance committee for education services would offer more impact leading to multi-input reforms. Therefore, a swiftly moving pattern of corporate governance would be significant for providing the essential model for rights-based development. Harmonized coordination among stakeholders implementing the community development model and engaged in providing improved services based on ethical benchmarks would inspire a well aligned pattern of corporate governance. Such measures would provide the basis for accelerated and qualitative corporate development program.

Endnotes

1. Bisharat Ali, "Brick Kilns & Bondage," *PILER Report on Labour Rights in Pakistan*, July 2010, page 91.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Saifullah Khairi, *Strengthening Child Protection through Ethical Production and Procurement of Bricks* (Islamabad: World Vision Report, 2014).
5. From the notes of the author on a meeting with Department of Labour, Punjab Province on the state of bonded labor in the brick kilns of the province.
6. Article: 25A Right to Education
The State shall provide free and compulsory education to all children of the age of five to sixteen years in such manner as may be determined by law.
7. Khairi, op. cit.
8. Ibid.