

## Globalization & Child Labour Situation in South Asia

Imran Naseem\*

### Abstract:

*Globalization should be beneficial in the long term. Developing countries through increased FDI and better access to world markets, should boost their exports, benefit from advanced techniques and skills, improved productivity, and increased number of productive jobs in the modern sector of the economy. With the increased rate of investment, MNCs are expected to rapidly increase the rate of jobs as compared to their relatively few jobs at present. Thus, income levels would also improve and would release economic pressure from poor families to depute their children to labor. Globalization should reduce the incidence of child labor in developing countries in the long run. Most child laborers come from poor families in South Asia like in other parts of the world. However, poverty is not the only reason children work, nor it is as central as many people think. Recent studies that examined the poverty role in child labor revealed that factors, such as education being low on the parents' priority list, especially in case of girls, and low standard education systems contribute equally to child labor, instead the poverty alone. Poor parent, illiteracy, socio-economic scenarios, poor education infrastructure, low awareness levels, high percentage of adult unemployment and under-employment are amongst the child labor generating factors. Perception of an early adulthood in South Asia also influences increased child labor. Expecting children of 10 years age to equate with adults in physical performance is another influential factor in many countries. Agriculture, child domestic labor (CDL), debt bondage, hazardous and export industries, child trafficking, and informal sector are some common platforms for child labor in South Asia. About 7.2% of South Asian children between 5 to 14 years are laborers. On the basis of officially available statistics, it is estimated that in South Asia out of a total of 300 million children, aged between 5 to 14 years, 21.6 million children are laborers. In Bangladesh, out of 35.06 million*

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\* Imran Naseem, PhD Research Scholar, Dept. of International Relations, Qurtuba University of Science & IT, Peshawar Campus.  
Email: [imrannaseempk@hotmail.com](mailto:imrannaseempk@hotmail.com)

*children (5-14 years), 5.05 million children are working. Similarly in India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, out of 210, 6.23, 40, and 3.18 million children, 11.2, 1.66, 3.3 and 0.48 million children are working respectively.*

### **Child Labour Situation in South Asia<sup>1</sup>**

Govind, a former child laborer from Nepal and a current activist with the South Asian Coalition Against Child Servitude (SACCS) in India says, "We want a world where the same system works for *all* children. I have heard that some people are talking about the right of children to work. I do not understand how those people are thinking against the feelings of children. Are they ready to send their own children to work? Who gave these people the right to make children their way of business?<sup>2</sup>"

Most child laborers come from poor families in South Asia like in other parts of the world. However, poverty is not the only reason children work, nor it is as central as many people think. Recent studies that examined the poverty role in child labor revealed that factors, such as *education being low on the parents' priority list*, specially in case of girls, and *low standard education systems* contribute equally to child labor, instead the poverty alone. Poverty is the main common *excuse* for the use of child labor. In reality, the irreplaceability of child labor is only a myth which has been proved. Conversely, education is an essential measure to eradicate poverty. Child labor perpetuates poverty. Although economic development helps in reducing child labor, poverty is not the essential ingredient for child labor or it does not bar children from attending school. The world-wide picture varies. In some countries only selected children are singled out to attain education. Some states, like Kerala in India, within less developed countries have successfully addressed child labor issue. Ratio between poverty and child labor varies in different countries like Yemen and Lebanon where 18.5% (10-14

years) and 45.3% (6-14 years) children were laboring in 2001 whereas the former ranks as low-income and the latter as upper-middle income country<sup>3</sup>. While Yemen and Lebanon are not South Asian countries, similar examples can be easily traced in the region. For example, the incidence of child labor in Sri Lanka was only 15% in 1999 although it ranked in low-middle income levels<sup>4</sup>. *While economic growth and reduced child labor mutually benefit, their relationship is not always linear.* Thus, child labor and economic development have two way relationship. The same is assumingly true for the world. About 7.2% of South Asian children between 5 to 14 years are laborers. On the basis of officially available statistics, it is estimated that in South Asia out of a total of 300 million children, aged between 5 to 14 years, 21.6 million children are laborers<sup>5</sup>. In Bangladesh, out of 35.06 million children (5-14 years), 5.05 million children are working<sup>6</sup>. Similarly in India<sup>7</sup>, Nepal<sup>8</sup>, Pakistan<sup>9</sup>, and Sri Lanka<sup>10</sup>, out of 210, 6.23, 40, and 3.18 million children, 11.2, 1.66, 3.3 and 0.48 million children are working respectively.

Poor parent, illiteracy, socio-economic scenarios, poor education infrastructure, low awareness levels, high percentage of adult unemployment and under-employment are amongst the child labor generating factors. Perception of an early adulthood in South Asia also influences increased child labor. Expecting children of 10 years age to equate with adults in physical performance is another influential factor in many countries. Agriculture, child domestic labor (CDL), debt bondage, hazardous and export industries, child trafficking, and informal sector are some common grounds for child labor in South Asia. Following passage gives a brief description of some of these sectors.

### **Child Domestic Labor**

Child labor prevails in across the South Asian countries. Child Domestic Labor is traditionally acceptable practice in South Asia. In accordance with ILO Convention 182 on Worst Forms of Child Labor, CLD incorporates work at third party house where exploitation takes place, trafficking, slavery or slavery like practices, hazardous environment detrimental to child's physical, mental, and psychological health. Bangladesh accommodates about 300,000 Child Domestic Labor<sup>11</sup>. In India, 20% of all children under 14 years working outside the family home are in domestic service<sup>12</sup>. Nepal is home to some 62,000 child domestic workers who are under 14 years of age<sup>13</sup>. In Pakistan, some 264,000 children are working in personal and social services<sup>14</sup>. Known child domestic laborers in Sri Lanka are about 100,000<sup>15</sup>.

### **Children Working in Hazardous Industries**

The ILO Convention No. 182 (Article 3d) defines hazardous child labor as 'work which, by its nature or the circumstances in which it is carried out, is likely to harm the health, safety, or morals of children'. *Two million children in India<sup>16</sup> are working in hazardous industries like brick manufacturing, fireworks manufacturing, glassware production, lock making, and stone quarrying.* Carpet, biri, transportation, production, and construction industries constitute hazardous sectors in Nepal. More than 40 hazardous occupations involve child labor in Bangladesh, an ILO study reveals<sup>17</sup>. It further revealed that consequences of *child labor were usually harmful for the physical and mental development of children, except light work.* In Pakistan 7% and 28% of *child laborers suffered from illness/injuries frequently and occasionally respectively<sup>18</sup>.*

Most injuries to children are incurred in agriculture except in Sri Lanka<sup>19</sup> where 90% children suffered no health or safety hazard

according to a report. In agriculture, children work with sharp tools and power machinery, handling and spraying of agrochemicals; caring for farm animals and herding sheep; crop picking and weeding; collecting fodder; and loading are some other tasks that children perform in this sector. Children in carpet weaving industry work with yarn preparation, wool sorting, washing, hand spinning and weaving, dyeing and trimming etc. Children working in ceramics and glass factories are exposed to sorting and cutting glass, firing ceramics, coloring glass, drawing molten glass, carrying hot glass etc. Children who are working in abattoirs & processing, and in butcher shops are involved in slaughtering of animals, cutting of carcasses, removing hair and skin of dead animals, cleaning pens, carrying carcasses, and use of water heating vessels, etc. Children who work in deep sea fishing are involved in diving to depths of 60 meters to beat on coral reefs to scare fish into nets. Children exposed to street work are supposed to hawking and vending goods, carrying drugs, selling newspapers, polishing shoes, begging, clearing car windows, red-light performances, delivery goods, and being messengers etc<sup>20</sup>.

### **Children Working in Export Industries**

Child labor is heavily prevalent in export industries in South Asia. *Carpet and footwear in Pakistan and India, surgical in Pakistan, garments in Bangladesh<sup>21</sup> are the main export industries. Nearly 3 million of child labor exists in handmade carpet industry of South Asia. Trafficked children are subject to forced labor or sold into debt bondage<sup>22</sup>.*

They face respirator diseases, deformities due to sitting in cramped loom sheds also impairing vision, and malnutrition. Rugs have a large share in export products of South Asia and also have huge number

of employees from poor background. The cycle of extreme poverty can not be broken till the exploitation of child is not addressed<sup>23</sup>.

The historical 'nimble fingers' excuse in hazardous industries like glass manufacturing, gem polishing, mining and specially in the carpet industry is negated through research studies including ILO's empirical study of over 2,000 carpet weavers<sup>24</sup>.

Child labor in garment industries of Bangladesh has been decreased to about 1% in 2003<sup>25</sup> from 43% in 1995<sup>26</sup>. About 206,194 children are full time employees in Pakistani carpet industry which is 95% exports oriented<sup>27</sup>. Studies negate the theory that for a thriving industry child labor is an essential ingredient, instead economic growth and technological advancements are. *History shows that replacement of child labor with universal education contributes towards economic growth. While education is pivotal for development, child labor depicts an under investment in education and thereby in the future of nation. The universal completion of free education of good quality has been identified as the key to economic growth.* Hence, 246 million children are denied their right to education as long as they continue to work. One wonders the achievement of universal education in the presence of this huge child labor force which also hinders the human capital development, which in turn is responsible for low productivity and income. The positive relationship between reduced child labor, increased school attendance and economic growth is well recognized through research studies in the developed countries. Education has played important role in rapid economic growth of many countries in East Asia, such as Korea<sup>28</sup>. One can safely assume the application of the same practice in South Asia for similar results.

### Child trafficking

Both, internal and external trafficking is prevalent in South Asia routing from Bangladesh and Nepal to Pakistan and India, and from there to the Middle East and South East Asia. Trafficked children are victims of sexual and labor exploitation. However, whereas much attention is given to external trafficking over the past few years, internal trafficking is more prevalent in South Asia. Similarly labor exploitation carries greater volume than the sexual exploitation. Trend in trafficking is from rural to urban and to other country or region. Indicators link this practice with poverty. Other factors include increasing rate of unsafe migration, weak law enforcement, physical abuse, forced marriages, ill treatment, and alcoholism etc. Armed conflicts in Nepal and Sri Lanka show an increased vulnerability of children and women to trafficking<sup>29</sup>.

Similar trend is assumed to be true in Pakistan coupled with easy prey to radical tendencies. Likewise, gender inequality, commonly observed throughout the region, is also a factor contributing towards increased trafficking in South Asia.

Trafficking victims are often sold to many hands in chain from one form of exploitation to another. For example, *many carpet weaving girls in Nepal are trafficked into the sex industry in India*<sup>30</sup>.

While internal trafficking data is not available for Bangladesh<sup>31</sup>, India<sup>32</sup>, and Nepal<sup>33</sup>, Pakistan<sup>34</sup> and Sri Lanka<sup>35</sup> are home to some 100,000 and 5,000 unfortunate victims of internal trafficking respectively. Research reveals that about 13,220 children were smuggled out from Bangladesh between 1990 and 1995<sup>36</sup>. India annually receives from 12,000 to 50,000 women and children who are trafficked from neighboring countries to serve in the sex trade of India<sup>37</sup>. About 12,000 girls are annually trafficked from Nepal to neighboring countries<sup>38</sup>.

Bangladesh has been the source for some 200,000 women and children who were trafficked to Pakistan during 1990 and 2000<sup>39</sup>. Pakistan in turn has been the source for some 19,000 boys who have been trafficked to the Middle East to serve as camel jockeys<sup>40</sup>. Similarly sporadic external trafficking is also evident in Sri Lanka<sup>41</sup>.

### **Child Bonded Labor**

Bonded labor is still affecting millions in South Asia, although legislation against this menace is in place except Bangladesh. Children inherit this slavery as they are enslaved against the loan taken by their parents. Bonded labor is a worst form of child labor as it hinders economic growth, increases poverty, undermines human capital development, restricts labor productivity, and badly mars the human rights picture. Extremely poor families are deprived of fruits of the development projects and entrapped in their socio-economic compulsions, increasing their vulnerability to bondage. In addition to their vulnerability to social exclusion and discrimination, migrants, minorities and low castes are also easy victims of forced labor mafia. Carpet weaving, brick kilns, mining, rice mills, match factories, stone cutting, quarries, and commercial sexual exploitation are the main sectors involving bonded labor other than the traditional agricultural production systems which are commonly based on casual wage labor and sharecropping<sup>42</sup>.

### **Impacts of globalization on child labor?<sup>43</sup>**

“Globalization is a term used to describe the increased liberalization and rapid expansion of world trade and investment. It has gathered speed at an unprecedented rate in recent years, forcing countries to be increasingly interdependent, and leaves them only the option of either



adapting rapidly in order to benefit from the prospects of growth and development that it holds out, or condemning themselves to an irreversible process of political, economic and social marginalization. *For the developing countries, where over 95 per cent of the world's working children are to be found, adaptation to a globalizing economy basically means two things: first, they must be able to expand their exports; and second, they must be able to attract a greater volume of direct foreign investment*".<sup>44</sup> The set trend shows that major inputs in both these areas come from the developed countries. Since there are very few specific case studies from which to draw any serious conclusions on the relationship between globalization and child labor, the research conducted and presented in ILO in 1997 reflects light on four very core questions like<sup>45</sup>.

*(i) Is child labor indispensable to the competitiveness of developing countries' industry in international commercial markets?*

An ILO survey in India on the hand woven carpet industry answers this question in negative as final profit achieved with employment of child labor is surprisingly small i.e. 5-10%. Carpet importers in America reflected the possibility of the continued buying trends from India as far as the price is not increased by more than 15%. Thus the irreplaceability of the child labor for economic reasons is rejected by the study as a myth. This small added cost of hiring adults can easily be absorbed.

*(ii) Does child labor give developing countries a competitive advantage in international trade?*

OECD study negates this impression as unfounded. Nothing substantiates the myth that child labor intensive economies achieved better export results than countries with high labor standards, rather the incidence of child labor is already taking toll on many such countries

facing decreased exports due to restrictions and sanctions imposed by other countries on the products made with child labor. Hand-woven carpet export from South Asia dramatically decreased since mid 1980s in the same background which fell from 229 million dollars to 152 million dollars since 1983 till 1993. Furthermore, child labor undermines intellectual development of the child, an imperative for becoming productive adult. This further implies that lack of skilled manpower puts a country on a position of disadvantage in a fierce global competition. Hence, heavy investment in the human resource development is an imperative.

*(iii) Does child labor create an obstacle to direct foreign investment?*

Answer, surprisingly, is negative again. Multinational corporations seldom care for the means or manners of production; they do care for the profit. Hence their decisions to invest are determined by investment friendly policies, positive attitude of the governments for foreign investors, stable economic and political scenarios, and free repatriation of profits etc. Conversely, developing countries with high labor standards would avoid the adverse repercussions on the flow of direct foreign investment.

*(iv) Is globalization likely to bring about increased use of child labor, or will it in fact reduce it?*

Globalization should be beneficial in the long term. Developing countries through increased FDI and better access to world markets, should boost their exports, benefit from advanced techniques and skills, improved productivity, and increased number of productive jobs in the modern sector of the economy. With the increased rate of investment, MNCs are expected to rapidly increase the rate of jobs as compared to their relatively few jobs at present. Thus, income levels would also

improve and would release economic pressure from poor families to depute their children in labor. Globalization should reduce the incidence of child labor in developing countries in the long run.

The following observation, however, should also be taken in account while considering the above reasoning<sup>46</sup>.

- (i) If not MNCs or their direct subsidiaries, the sub-contractors of these subsidiaries often employ huge child labor. Moreover, large export oriented national enterprises extensively practice sub-contracting. Consequently, sub-contracting hinders child laborers' access to the positive effects of direct job creation by the subsidiaries of MNCs.
- (ii) Radical measures in globalization should be avoided, as stabilizing economy, balancing external debt and controlling inflation rates would require continued reform process and economic adjustment before any such country starts benefiting from globalization in terms of economic growth and job creation. Abrupt massive lay-offs, or immediate withdrawal of government subsidiaries could increase the number of families in absolute poverty, thus the child labor.

Measures for extracting benefits of globalization can be helpful sustaining economic growth, however, they will still fall short of overcoming in under-employment or eliminating poverty completely as the majority would continue to stick with traditional means of livelihood for long time. This necessitates that developing countries also invest in traditional agricultural productive systems and the urban informal sectors in order to eliminate child labor<sup>47</sup>.

The links between national, regional and global investment in eliminating child labor are particularly important in a world where

globalization is impacting upon markets and work. Globalization is generally considered to have resulted from policies of economic liberalization and deregulation; the breaking-down of barriers that hinder inter- state trade; cheaper telecommunications and transportation that have opened up new markets and increased mobility; speedy transactions; and increasingly vertically integrated supply chains. These in particular have influenced the labor market and employment opportunities in those developing countries that have moved (or been in a position) to take advantage of them. This is particularly true in Asia, where the reputation of diligence and reliability is long-standing and the temptation to move production or services offshore has been relatively limited. Where the competition for the perceived increased returns available in globalized markets is keen, however, it is that unscrupulous parties will seek a comparative advantage by exploiting child labor. The lower costs of employing children and their inability to negotiate fair terms or conditions make children particularly vulnerable to exploitation. Commentators point out that this may contribute to the evidence that the gains to child well-being have slowed down in the era of globalization<sup>48</sup>. *Ironically, research also shows that education is of vital importance in harnessing the potential positive impact of globalization. Upgraded working methods and quality control, more sophisticated management procedures and documentation, and better understanding of and compliance with legal frameworks have increased – and will continue to increase – the demand for literate, educated workers even at the level of the family business. This also has implications for child labor and for family decision-making about educating children*<sup>49</sup>. Consideration of the links between child labor and globalization is again taking place within the broader conceptual framework of Decent Work. The World

Commission on the Social Dimension of Globalization<sup>50</sup> has recommended that “decent work for all should be made a global goal and be pursued through complementary national and international policies”, noting that addressing the need to speed up the creation of jobs in all countries would help reduce social tensions in a country and economic friction between countries. The Commission has emphasized that the benefits of globalization can only reach everyone if the informal economy – where many child laborers are found – is brought into the economic mainstream where property and workers’ rights are protected, and where increased productivity and access to markets are more likely to result. The Commission noted that the socio-economic platform on which the global economy will be built must include the eradication of poverty and the attainment of the MDGs, the realization of which is intrinsically linked to the elimination of child labor.

## End Notes:

- 1 The scope of this overview is limited to Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Pakistan.
- 2 Know Child Labor, <[http://www.knowchildlabor.org/child\\_labor/child\\_labor\\_and\\_human\\_rights.php](http://www.knowchildlabor.org/child_labor/child_labor_and_human_rights.php)>, (12/4/2008)
- 3 US Department of Labor, Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor, (Bureau of International Labor Affairs, 2004), pp. 233 and 432; Country Groups are based on World Bank groupings.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 ILO, <<http://www.ilo.org/public/english/region/asro/newdelhi/ipec/responses/index.htm>>, (3<sup>rd</sup> November, 2009)
- 6 Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), "Report on national child labor survey 2002/03" (Dhaka, 2003), survey undertaken with the support of the ILO.
- 7 Registrar General, Government of India, "Census of India, 1991, Working children in India: An analysis of the 1991 census data".
- 8 Central Department of Population Studies, Tribhuvan University: Child labor situation in Nepal — Report from migration and employment survey, 1995/96 (Kathmandu, 1997), survey undertaken with the support of the ILO.
- 9 Federal Bureau of Statistics, National child labor survey in Pakistan (Islamabad, 1996), survey undertaken with the support of the ILO. This figure does not include children engaged in economic activity occasionally or on a part-time basis.
- 10 Department of Census & Statistics, Ministry of Finance & Planning: Child activity survey (Sri Lanka, 1999), survey undertaken with the support of the ILO.
- 11 UNICEF, "Child domestic workers", (Florence, 1999).
- 12 UNICEF, "Child domestic workers in south Asia", (Kathmandu, 2001).
- 13 "Child Domestic Workers", *Op. Cit.*
- 14 "Child domestic workers in south Asia", *Op. Cit.*
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Figure provided to ILO by the Ministry of Labor, Government of India.
- 17 W. Rahman, "Hazardous child labor in Bangladesh", Department of Labor in collaboration with the ILO (Dhaka, 1996).
- 18 Federal Bureau of Statistics, "National child labor survey in Pakistan" (Islamabad, 1996).
- 19 Child activity survey (Sri Lanka, 1999)
- 20 Forastieri, Valentina. *Children at Work Health and safety risks.*(ILO.2002
- 21 This figure is based on a sponsored project survey conducted in the carpet industry in the province of the Punjab in 2001. The Punjab had 107,065 children below the age of 15 years and 57,890 children between the ages of 15 and 17 years working full time in the carpet industry. The Punjab accounts for about 80 per cent of Pakistan's total carpet production. Since carpet weaving is a

hazardous activity, the desired age for workers is more than 17 years. Therefore, the extrapolated figure for Pakistan would come to 206,194.

22 Rug Mark, <<http://www.rugmark.org/index.php?cid=29>>, (31/5/2008)

23 Ibid.

24 ILO-IPEC, "Child Labor: Targeting the Intolerable", (Geneva, 1998), Section 1, <<http://nird.org.in/clic/Rrd112.html>>; (23/3/2005).

25 IPEC: Addressing child labor in the Bangladesh garment industry 1995/01, A synthesis of UNICEF and ILO evaluation studies of the Bangladesh garment sector projects (Dhaka, 2004).

26 IPEC monitoring reports.

27 This figure is based on a sponsored project survey conducted in the carpet industry in the province of the Punjab in 2001.

28 Know Child Labor,

<[http://www.knowchildlabor.org/child\\_labor/child\\_labor\\_and\\_human\\_rights.php](http://www.knowchildlabor.org/child_labor/child_labor_and_human_rights.php)>, (12/4/2008)

<sup>29</sup> "Helping Hands or Shackled Lives? Understanding Child Domestic Labor and Responses to It", *ILO/IPEC*, Geneva, June 2004)

30 Rug Mark, <<http://www.rugmark.org/index.php?cid=29>>, (31/5/2008)

31 Joint study conducted by the Ministries of Home, Social Welfare and Women and Children Affairs.

32 US Department of State: Country report on human rights practice 2000 (February 2001).

33 Rapid assessment by IPEC (2001).

34 Estimation by an NGO, Lawyers for Human Rights and Legal Aids (LHRLA) (2002).

35 IPEC Project for Combating Child Trafficking for Labor and Sexual Exploitation, estimation based on a number of reports.

36 Joint study, Op.Cit.

37 Country report on human rights practice 2000. Op. cit.

38 Rapid Assessment, Op. Cit.

39 LHRLA, Op. Cit.

40 Ibid.

41 IPEC Project, Op. Cit.

42 Excerpt from:

<<http://www.ilo.org/public/english/region/asro/newdelhi/ipsec/responses/index.htm>>, (12/12/2007)

43 Please refer to ILO-IPEC 2004 Implementation Report (Part II, paper 1, pp.52-56) for more detailed reading on this subject.

44 Workshop No. 2 - Globalization, Liberalization And Child Labor, *Op. Cit.*

45 ILO,

<<http://www.ilo.org/public/english/comp/child/conf/amsterdam/workshop2.htm>>, (22/9/2007)

46 Please refer to ILO-IPEC 2004 Implementation Report (Part II, paper 1, pp.52-56) for more detailed reading on this subject.

47 Workshop No. 2 - Globalization, Liberalization And Child Labor, *Op. Cit.*

48 Cornia, G A (ed.): "Harnessing globalization for children: A report to UNICEF", (New York, UNICEF, 2003).

49 Johnsson, R: "Globalization and child labor: A review of literature", (ILO-IPEC, Geneva, December 2003), p.15.

50 World Commission on the Social Dimension of Globalization: A fair globalization, Creating opportunities for all, (ILO, Geneva, 2004).