


# BONDED LABOUR REPORT: SINDH



SPECIAL REPORT

GLOBAL HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENCE  
WORLD SINDHI CONGRESS

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Image source: International Dalit  
Solidarity Network

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# INTRODUCTION

The agricultural industry makes up 18.9% of Pakistan's economy and absorbs 42.3% of the labour force. [1] Not only is this sector integral to the country's economy but its importance is also rooted in Pakistan's history, dating as far back as the days in which the East India Company secured its revenue base in the sub-continent. The evolution of the industry is representative of societal and technological developments, such as the green revolution, mechanisation of the sector, and changes in market orientation.

Understanding the correlation between the two, historically and developmentally, is required to cognise what specific conditions have encouraged the growth of oppressive systems like bonded labour within the agricultural industry, particularly in Sindh. For instance, the acute water shortage in Balochistan led to the development of a more extensive and formal agricultural production system whose features do not generally encourage bondage.[2] Similarly, the poverty within Sindh is central to the vast bonded labour system there.

Bonded labour, also known as debt slavery, is a form of forced labour within which an individual pledges "pledged to work either for a money lender or a landlord to repay a debt or loan." [3] This personal service, which can either be carried out by the debtor themselves or by someone under their care, acts as a security for the loan they received. These debtors are often tricked into agreeing to exorbitant interest rates and then trapped in the lender or landlord's service due to unspecified or unlimited work durations to pay off this debt. The work is done for little pay or no pay at all. [4]

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[1] Government of Pakistan, "Pakistan Economic Survey 2017-18," Government of Pakistan Finance Division, accessed April 1, 2022, [https://www.finance.gov.pk/survey/chapters\\_18/02-Agriculture.pdf](https://www.finance.gov.pk/survey/chapters_18/02-Agriculture.pdf).

[2] Maliha H. Hussein, Abdul Razzaq Saleemi, Saira Malik and Shazreh Hussain, Bonded Labour in Agriculture: a rapid assessment in Sindh and Balochistan, Pakistan, accessed 12 October 2022, [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\\_norm/---declaration/documents/publication/wcms\\_082026.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_norm/---declaration/documents/publication/wcms_082026.pdf)

[3] UNICEF Office of Research- Innocenti, "The Glossary," [www.unicef-irc.org/php/Thesaurus/Glossary\\_Display.php?GLOSS\\_ID=102&PoPuP=No](http://www.unicef-irc.org/php/Thesaurus/Glossary_Display.php?GLOSS_ID=102&PoPuP=No), accessed October 15, 2022, [https://www.unicef-irc.org/php/Thesaurus/Glossary\\_Display.php?GLOSS\\_ID=102&PoPuP=No](https://www.unicef-irc.org/php/Thesaurus/Glossary_Display.php?GLOSS_ID=102&PoPuP=No).

[4] UNICEF Office of Research- Innocenti, "The Glossary."



# HISTORY

Historically, bonded labour and debt slavery have been prevalent in underdeveloped areas of the Sindh province, especially in the agriculture sector. The data on the number of bonded labourers in the province varies; some human rights groups reported landlords keeping 4,500 bonded labourers while the trade federation noted that nearly 2,00,000 families were kept to work under debt slavery in the brick kiln industry. [5]



Children are also forced to work with parents in these situations, with reports showing 13 million children involved in child labour nationally, and approximately 4 million children in the Sindh province, especially in the agriculture, brick kiln industries and carpet weaving industries.[6] In the time frame from 2013 to 2021, 3,329 children along with their family members have been released from the custody of landlords in the agriculture sector.[7]

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[5] Slavery in India's Brick Kilns & the Payment System – Way forward in the fight for fair wages, decent work and eradication of slavery, September 2017, <https://www.antislavery.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Slavery-In-Indias-Brick-Kilns-The-Payment-System.pdf>

[6] Shoukat Ali Mahar and Abdul Jaleel Mirjat, "Child Labor in Agricultural Sector Hyderabad Sindh, Pakistan," *Arts Social Sci J* 10, no. 1 (September 2019), <https://doi.org/10.4172/2151-6200.1000445>.

[7] ANI, 1.7 million bonded labourers in Pakistan's Sindh, 700,000 are children: Report, June 13, 2022, <https://www.aninews.in/news/world/asia/17-million-bonded-labourers-in-pakistans-sindh-700000-are-children-report20220613205817/>

According to Eric V. Edmonds, Pakistan's carpet weaving sector is centred in the Sindh and Punjab provinces of Pakistan.[8] The chief operations of the industry are performed through individual home looms rather than in larger factories, therefore operating without formal industry structures. It has been reported that many children work within this sector, usually without pay as supporters inside their own homes.

The 2003 study 'Child Labor in Agricultural Sector Hyderabad Sindh, Pakistan' reports that there are 5.2 million children working in the agricultural bonded labour system in Pakistan.[9] 1.8 million children work in this sector in Sindh, and the Hyderabad District alone accounts for 410,000 of those children.[10] One of the primary reasons attributed to the sustenance of such a system is the rampant poverty in the area since it prevents parents from sending their children to school. Financial difficulties also lead to their preference for sending their children to work in the agriculture sector, as it contributes to the family income.[11]



[8] Eric V. Edmonds, "Should We Boycott Child Labour?" (Department of Economics; Dartmouth College and NBER, 2003), <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/151544657.pdf>

[9] Mahar and Mirjat, "Child Labor in Agricultural Sector Hyderabad Sindh, Pakistan."

[10] Mahar and Mirjat, "Child Labor in Agricultural Sector Hyderabad Sindh, Pakistan."

[11] Mahar and Mirjat, "Child Labor in Agricultural Sector Hyderabad Sindh, Pakistan."

# SOCIAL ISSUES

The main issue with fully understanding the issue of bonded labour in Pakistan is that official and political circles have been reluctant to accept the fact that the system exists in the agriculture sector in Sindh and Balochistan. This reluctance stems from several factors. First, the bonded relationship tends to be generally perceived as a contractual business relationship. The tenant-landlord relationship is highly varied: not all tenants serve under conditions of bondage and even the definition of bondage itself is coloured by the spectrum of arrangements in the agriculture sector.



Official mechanisms put in place by the government to detect cases of bondage are generally not very successful due to the intricately bound economic and social relationships in the agriculture sector. As such, the government, particularly in Sindh, has declared that reports show no evidence of bonded labour.



# INTERNATIONAL LAWS

Internationally, the Forced Labour Convention of 1930, which was ratified by Pakistan in 1957, defines forced labour as “all work or service which is exacted from any person under the menace of any penalty and for which the said person has not offered himself voluntarily.”[12] The Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work adopted in 1998 and amended in 2022, “obligates member States to respect, promote and realize the freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining, the elimination of all forms of forced or compulsory labour, the effective abolition of child



labour, and the elimination of discrimination in respect of employment and occupation.”[13] This is applicable to all members of the International Labour Organisation, of which Pakistan has been an active member since 1947, and has ratified all eight of the Fundamental Conventions.[14]

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[12] International Labour Organization, “Convention C029 - Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29),” [www.ilo.org](http://www.ilo.org), 1930, [https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=1000:12100:0::NO::P12100\\_ILO\\_CODE:C029#:~:text=The%20illegal%20exaction%20of%20forced](https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=1000:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C029#:~:text=The%20illegal%20exaction%20of%20forced).

[13] Maliha Hussein et al., “InFocus Programme on Promoting the Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work Bonded Labour in Agriculture: A Rapid Assessment Special Action Programme to Combat Forced Labour,” March 2004, [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\\_norm/---declaration/documents/publication/wcms\\_082026.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_norm/---declaration/documents/publication/wcms_082026.pdf).

[14] International Labour Organization, “About Us (ILO in Pakistan),” [www.ilo.org](http://www.ilo.org), accessed October 19, 2022, <https://www.ilo.org/islamabad/aboutus/lang--en/index.htm#:~:text=Pakistan%20has%20been%20an%20important>.



# NATIONAL LAWS

Legally, Article 11 (2) in the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan outlaws forced labour.[15] Courts also grant freedom to bonded labour under Section 491 of Criminal Procedure Code and Habeas Corpus.[16] The Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act of 1992 provided more specificities for forced labour as seen in bonded labour structures. It defined the bonded labour system as a structure of partially or entirely forced labour, under “which a debtor enters, or has, or is presumed to have, entered into an agreement with the creditor.”[17] It goes on to list certain conditions of the bonded labour system, characterising it as instances wherein the labourer is bound to the agreement due to economic indebtedness, advance (peshgi) received by him or his family, or social considerations. Some conditions that are found in such a system are (a) labourer receiving nominal or no wages, (b) sequestration of the labourers’ freedom of employment, (c) forfeiture of their right to move freely, (d) loss of the labourers’ right to “appropriate or sell” their property, or the product of their work. Bonded labour is defined as services which are delivered under the system, and a bonded labourer is a labourer who carries a bonded debt. [18]

The Act abolishes all such systems, calling for the freeing of every bonded labour, and nullifying any existing agreement that perpetuates this system. It also restricts the future use of any advance that obligates individuals to partake in any form of forced labour. The labourer’s bonded debt was deemed to have been “fully satisfied” upon the commencement of the Act.[19] If any bonded labourers’, or their families, property had been forcibly possessed before the implementation of this Act, it had to be returned within 90 days.[20]

[15] National Assembly of Pakistan, “The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan,” February 28, 2012, [https://na.gov.pk/uploads/documents/1333523681\\_951.pdf](https://na.gov.pk/uploads/documents/1333523681_951.pdf).

[16] Nida Mujahid Hussain, “Unbroken Chains: The curse of modern day slavery in Sindh”, October 05, 2018, <https://www.geo.tv/latest/213723-unbroken-chains-the-curse-of-modern-day-slavery-in-sindh>

[17] MOJ of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, “Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1992,” The Pakistan Code, March 11, 1992, <https://pakistancode.gov.pk/new/UY2Fqajw1-apaUY2Fqa-apmYag%3D%3D-sg-iiiiiiiiiiiiij>.

[18] MOJ of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, “Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1992.”

[19] MOJ of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, “Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1992.”

[20] MOJ of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, “Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1992.”

There were also punishments specified for those who enforced bonded labour in the wake of this Act: a minimum fine of 50,000 rupees, or imprisonment for at least two years, but no more than five years, or both. Additional penalties were defined for the extraction of bonded labour, failure to restore previously possessed property, and abetment in the offences mentioned above. It also holds companies accountable if they are found guilty of participating in the system and every person responsible for the company's conduct during the offending instance.[21] The Sindh Assembly passed their act abolishing bonded labour, ‘The Sindh Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act’ in 2016. The definitions and categorizations of bonded labour crimes were the same as those determined in the 1992 act, where the main difference between the two is the duration of imprisonment, with the Sindh Act prescribing more extended periods of incarceration.[22]



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[21] MOJ of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, “Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1992.”

[22] T June, “Provincial Assembly of Sindh Notification Karachi, March 28 2016, <https://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/docs/ELECTRONIC/104999/128253/F-973926677/PAK104999.pdf>.

# FIGHT AGAINST BONDED LABOUR

## *Legal Impact*

Though the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1992, was a step forward in the protection of bonded labourers in Pakistan, the 1996 constitutional petition filed brings into question its effectiveness. The main issues outlined in Constitution concerned the “release [of] forced agricultural [...] bonded labour including women and children, detained by [respondents number 12 and 13].”[23] Furthermore, the petition called for an inquiry into the continued practice of bonded labour in the Sindh province, and whether or not Act III of the 1992 Abolition Act addressed

agricultural bonded labour systems and their issues specifically.[24] The last hearing for this case was on the Larger Bench of the Supreme Court, presided by the HCJ, on the 9th of March, 2007, and the case is still pending.



[23] The Supreme Court of Pakistan, “Const.P.69/1996,” Supreme Court of Pakistan, May 5, 1999, [https://www.supremecourt.gov.pk/HR\\_Cases/11thfinal/CP69of1996.pdf](https://www.supremecourt.gov.pk/HR_Cases/11thfinal/CP69of1996.pdf).

[24] The Supreme Court of Pakistan, “Const.P.69/1996.”

After the introduction of the Sindh Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act in 2015, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) demanded reports from the Sindh government to guarantee that the accord was put into practice.[25] As of 2021, no details or data were given, except a statement made by Veerj Kolhi, an advocate of High Court Sindh, that “we accept that there is an issue with regard to implementation of the law, but we have now expedited the exercise to enforce it as soon as possible.”[26] Therefore, it can be said that even though the law prohibits the practice of bonded labour, the government’s efforts to observe and report extant cases actively have to be evaluated. Besides this, many activists are concerned that freedom from violence alone is not enough; the State must provide economic assistance by increasing availability within the job market and financial stability. Without the guarantee of their survivability, and alternative routes to economic independence that reduce the need to take out loans, the chances of reverting to the same patterns is highly probable.

Following a petition filed by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP), 43 bonded labourers were released in Ornach in the district of Khuzdar, where they had been working for a local landlord as agricultural labour.[27] The labourers are from Hyderabad’s Hindu community, where a relative had approached HRCP’s Hyderabad office to lodge a complaint concerning their situation. The complaint was then forwarded to HRCP’s Quetta office. Subsequently, HRCP filed a petition with the Balochistan High Court, where a division bench comprising Justice Hashim Khan Kakar and Justice Nazeer Ahmed Langve ordered the deputy commissioner of Khuzdar to recover the labourers and produce them before the court.

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[25] Hafëez Tunio, “Bonded Labour Trapping Thousands,” *The Express Tribune*, July 1, 2021, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2308396/bonded-labour-trapping-thousands>.

[26] Tunio, “Bonded Labour Trapping Thousands.”

[27] HRCP, “43 Bonded Labourers Released from Khuzdar after HRCP Petition,” Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, November 20, 2021, <https://hrcp-web.org/hrcpweb/43-bonded-labourers-released-from-khuzdar-after-hrcp-petition/>.



Following this, the High Court directed that they be returned to Hyderabad.[28] The former lawyer and activist Ram Kolhi was at the forefront of the fight against bonded labour in Sindh, and is said to have assisted in the emancipation of 80 to 100 families in collaboration with the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan and other locals.[29]

He alleges that during a proceeding when a landlord claims that he has given an amount to a Hari, it is seldom pointed out that the law prohibits it. The SBLCAA 2015 grants the bonded labourer the right to their confiscated property through clauses of Section 6. Unfortunately, in multiple cases, it has been witnessed that no action has been taken in this regard.[30] Under the Act, the suspect or enforcer is given a sentence ranging from two to five years and is to pay a fine of no less than Rs 100,000.[31] There is a dire need for social awareness, updating the laws to maintain relevance, political will for future legislation, consultation, and advocacy to ensure that the underprivileged and oppressed get their rights through the legal framework.

## ***Provincial Consultation on Bonded Labour***

The Provincial Consultation on Bonded Labour was held on 23rd December 2021 by the Labour Education Foundation. In this consultation, the executive members of the Pakistan Bhatta Mazdoor Union and representatives of the Brick Kiln Owners Association of Pakistan attended to discuss issues in the brick kiln industry.[31] The government officials from Employees Old-age Benefits Institution, Treaty Implementation Cell Human Rights and Minority Affairs Punjab, along with civil society organisations and trade union leaders, partook in the consultation to mitigate the dilemma of the brick kiln industry in Pakistan through constructive dialogue and suggestions of a possible way forward.[32]

[28] HRCP, "43 Bonded Labourers Released from Khuzdar after HRCP Petition."

[29] Nida M Hussain, "Unbroken Chains: The Curse of Modern Day Slavery in Sindh," [www.geo.tv](http://www.geo.tv), February 2018, <https://www.geo.tv/latest/213723-unbroken-chains-the-curse-of-modern-day-slavery-in-sindh>.

[30] Hussain, "Unbroken Chains."

[31] Hussain, "Unbroken Chains."

[31] Labour Education Foundation (LEF), "Provincial Consultation on Bonded Labor," [www.lef.org.pk](http://www.lef.org.pk), 2021, <https://www.lef.org.pk/>.

[32] LEF, "Provincial Consultation on Bonded Labor."

# NON-GOVERNMENTAL EFFORTS

## *Domestic NGOs*



Pakistan Institute of Labour Education and Research (PILER) is dedicated to promoting a democratic and effective labour movement.[34] It does so by mobilizing and organising all workers and communities around issues of labour rights. These rights are broadly defined to include public services such as education, health, and shelter, which are determined to be essential requirements for a decent livelihood. Furthermore, they assist in training and educating workers to ensure an effective and sustained

mobilisation and organisation of workers in formal and informal economies.[35] PILER also undertakes advocacy activities as well as research. In the recent past, PILER has successfully campaigned with trade unions and other labour rights organisations to secure compensation for various victims.[36] It is also mobilising the partner organisations to work towards a binding agreement on workplace safety for the Pakistan textile and garment industry.[37]

[34] Pakistan Institute of Labour Education & Research (PILER), [www.hnsa.org.in](http://www.hnsa.org.in)

[35] PILER, "Piler – the Pakistan Institute of Labour Education & Research."

[36] PILER, "Piler – the Pakistan Institute of Labour Education & Research."

[37] PILER, "Piler – the Pakistan Institute of Labour Education & Research."

National NGOs are active in different sectors of the community to help bonded labours. For example, the Kaarvan Crafts Foundation, established in 2004, is working towards alleviating poverty by developing and sustaining avenues for economic and social empowerment for women entrepreneurs in urban and rural low-income communities of Pakistan. [38] Another organisation, Homenet, aims to develop and strengthen networks among home-based women workers and organisations working with them and facilitate their cross-learning and cooperation to empower women. Furthermore, it intends to develop a national policy for home-based workers and undertake advocacy with public representatives at all levels, working with the government, policymakers, and planners.[39]

The Labour Education Foundation (LEF) is an initiative of renowned trade union leaders, human rights, and women rights activists to organise, build capacity, and advocate for workers' rights, and provide informed input to trade unions and various civil society organisations for the promotion of workers' rights. LEF works closely with various national and international organisations to ensure labour rights in various industrial sectors, including textile and garments.[40]

## *International Efforts and NGOs*

The International Labour Organization (ILO) office was set up in Pakistan in 1970. ILO's work in Pakistan covers a wide range of activities: promotion of international labour standards; prevention and elimination of child and bonded labour; job creation through employable skills; mainstreaming gender equality; strengthened labour market governance; employment and livelihoods recovery in response to conflicts and crises;

[38] Kaarvan Foundation, "Kaarvan Crafts Foundation," [www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com), accessed October 19, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/KaarvanCraftsFoundation/>.

[39] HomeNet, "Home," HNP, accessed October 19, 2022, <https://homenetpakistan.org>.

[40] LEF, "Provincial Consultation on Bonded Labor."

expansion of social security schemes and social safety nets, especially in the informal economy, and the promotion of tripartism and social dialogue.[41] It is actively involved in the garment sector in Pakistan. Some active projects in the garment sector include a focus on labour standards in the global supply chains and Pakistan Buyers Forum.[42] ILO is also set to launch the Better Work Programme in Pakistan.[43]



*Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ)* has been active in Pakistan since 1963. Its priority areas in Pakistan are sustainable economic development, good governance, and energy.[44] It is working on various projects within these thematic areas. In the textile sector, GIZ supports the Pakistani Government in ensuring labour and environmental standards are upheld. There is an Implementation Agreement to support two projects, and one is on “Improvement of Labor, Social and Environmental Standards in Pakistan’s Textile Industry (TextILES)”.[45]

*The Sustainable Trade Initiative (IDH)* IDH is active in Pakistan in the area of sustainable production. Their main projects are focused on textile and apparel, where IDH collaborates with partners such as the Pakistan Buyers Forum and the Better Cotton Initiative.[46]

Additionally, international NGOs partnered up with local organisations such as *Encourage the Human Development (EHD)* and *Labour Education Foundation (LEF)* to work directly with brick kilns workers in two different areas of the Punjab province in Pakistan.[47]

[41] International Labour Organization, “International Labour Organization,” Ilo.org, 2019, <https://www.ilo.org/global/lang--en/index.htm>.

[42] ILO, “International Labour Organization.”

[43] ILO, “International Labour Organization.”

[44] GIZ, “Home,” Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), n.d., <https://www.giz.de/en/html/index.html>.

[45] GIZ, “Home.” Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), n.d., <https://www.giz.de/en/html/index.html>.

[46] IDH, “IDH - the Sustainable Trade Initiative,” IDH - the Sustainable Trade Initiative, 2015, <https://www.idhsustainabletrade.com>.

[47] “Combating Bonded Labour in Pakistan,” The Norwegian Human Rights Fund, 2020, <https://nhrf.no/article/2021/combating-bonded-labour-in-pakistan>.



LEF and EHD work to provide training and education for brick kiln workers and their families, legal support, and organise campaigns to abolish exploitative work practices and debt servitude and advocacy work to raise the minimum wages for workers. Both organisations are essential in supporting and facilitating increased registration for social services amongst illiterate workers.[48]

These two organisations work in close collaboration with unions representing brick kiln workers. Encourage the Human Development founded the first brick kiln trade union for brick kiln workers in an international NGO's funded project and registered seven brick kiln unions and one federation between 2013 and 2017.[49] Labour Education Foundation works closely with Pakistan Bhatta Mazdoor Union – a brick kiln trade union who are vital in defending the rights of workers vis-à-vis employers and brick kiln owners and conducts collective bargaining on behalf of workers.[50] In 2020, both organisations had some great successes in their work. LEF's advocacy and collaboration with the Pakistan Bhatta Mazdoor Union resulted in wage increases for 18,000 brick kiln workers in accordance with the local law on minimum wages. The lack of implementation of this law has been one of the main issues for impoverished brick kiln workers.[51] In the Multan district in southern Punjab, EHD's efforts were crucial in restarting the local inactive district vigilance committee – a mechanism created to support the local administration in their efforts to identify, access, and rehabilitate bonded labourers and abolish the exploitative practices of bonded labour.[52]

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[48] "Combatting Bonded Labour in Pakistan," NHRF.

[49] "Combatting Bonded Labour in Pakistan," NHRF.

[50] "Combatting Bonded Labour in Pakistan," NHRF.

[51] "Combatting Bonded Labour in Pakistan," NHRF.

[52] "Combatting Bonded Labour in Pakistan," NHRF.

# QUESTIONNAIRE

## 01 *How commonly is bonded labour practiced in Sindh Area?*

Bonded labour, or modern slavery, is particularly common in lower Sindh, including Badin, Sanghar, Tando Allahyar, Mirpurkhas, Mithi, Umerkot, Shaheed Benazirabad and Hyderabad districts.[53] "More than 3,000 cases have been informed in 2020 in comparison to 1,700 cases in 2019," said Akram Khaskheli, president of the Hari Welfare Association - an organisation which works for peasant rights in Sindh. [54 ]

## 02 *Who are the landlords that engage in such practices?*

The most usual pattern for bonded labour in Pakistan is for a landlord or an employer to give a loan to labourers, in advance of the work done, on the understanding that this payment or peshgi would be paid back by providing labour.[55] Although, the loan is repayable over a period of time in theory, borrowers often cannot pay



it back in practise and get trapped in a vicious cycle of debt and forced labour.[56] Landlords exercise exclusive rights over the labour power of those who are indebted to them and they restrict labourers from taking up extra work at other places.[57] They also control or manipulate other spheres of their lives.[58]

The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan mentioned that “influential politicians and their relatives owned these brick kilns mostly.[59]

[53]Tunio, “Bonded Labour Trapping Thousands.”

[54]Ibid

[55]Ayaz Qureshi, “Bonded Labour in Pakistan - Allegra,” Allegra, November 4, 2016, <https://allegralaboratory.net/bonded-labour-in-pakistan/>.

[56]Qureshi, “Bonded Labour in Pakistan.”

[57]Ibid

[58]Ibid

[58]Faras Ghani, “The Spiralling Debt Trapping Pakistan’s Brick Kiln Workers,” Al Jazeera, October 21, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2019/10/21/the-spiralling-debt-trapping-pakistans-brick-kiln-workers>.

*Is there any period after the debt payment that they are considered debt free?*

Ansar Ali mentions that as a tenant on a farm, both he and his wife work for almost 16 hours a day for seven days a week.[60] Ali spends most of his time on the farm and looks after the cattle, his wife works as a domestic help in the landlord's household who employs them.[61] Together, they are paid 3,000 rupees (\$20, €18) monthly which is not sufficient. Ali still has to borrow extra money from the landlord to put food on the table.[62] The landlord lends him additional funds in times of desperation like a medical emergency or any other family obligations.[63] Over the years, debt of the family has increased manifold and Ali has no clue how he is ever going to repay all of it.[64] "The deeper you get into the debt trap, the less hope there is you can ever get out of it," he told DW.[65] There is a feeling of hopelessness that can be seen when he mentions that "It's a life of slavery I will probably never get out of." [66]

Additional 'costs' of living such as housing, clothing or offering food is added into the debt and the debt keeps on increasing which makes the bondage last for a lifetime and even for generations.[67]

Family debt is transferred from one generation to another even if the main earner has suffered permanent disability or died due to the hazardous description of the work.[68] It is witnessed that children work as main earners to pay off the debt for their incapacitated or dead elders.[69]

*Under what conditions are bonded labour kept? What human rights violations are they subjected to?*

[60] Shahzeb Jillani, "Life of Slavery — the Perpetuation of Bonded Labor in Pakistan | DW | 25.12.2019," Deutsche Welle, December 25, 2019, <https://www.dw.com/en/life-of-slavery-the-perpetuation-of-bonded-labor-in-pakistan/a-51792298>

[61] Jillani, "Life of Slavery — the Perpetuation of Bonded Labor in Pakistan."

[62] Ibid.

[63] Ibid.

[64] Ibid.

[65] Ibid.

[66] Ibid.

[67] Government of Punjab, "Bonded Labour," Labour & Human Resource Department, accessed October 15, 2022, <https://labour.punjab.gov.pk/bonded-labour>.

[68] Government of Punjab, "Bonded Labour."

[69] Qureshi, "Bonded Labour in Pakistan."

The practice of debt bondage in Pakistan is also known as Peshgi system and it may be taken for multiple reasons.[70] Sometimes, workers are in desperate need of food or money; in other cases, they see it as a form of security against unemployment: this loan ties them to a specific employer who is perceived to have a commitment to continue employing them.[71]

The control exercised over bonded labourers amounts to ‘ownership rights’ for the landlord.[72] In the case of agriculture, and to an extent brick making, the control exerted by the ‘employer’ is considerably amplified because workers and their families often stay ‘on site’ and are therefore not only regularly susceptible to abuse but also face the threat of expulsion, leading to a loss of accommodation.[73]

The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan mentions a high mortality rate among children who work at brick kilns.[74] The workers live in terrible conditions, the water they use to mix the soil gives them skin diseases and the unsafe fumes from the black smoke during the brick-making process causes asthma which increases the risk of contracting tuberculosis.[75] There are no facilities like a proper toilet at the kilns or where the workers live.[76]

05

*What kind of discrimination are specific to genders (male/ female) when it comes to bonded labour?*

Dalit women are predominantly susceptible to violence and discrimination.[77] They are denied access to justice because of their socio-economic status and severely unfair social, economic, and political power equations.[78] Women and girls from caste-affected communities encounter multiple forms of violence which includes sexual violence, trafficking, abduction, abuse, forced labour and slavery.[79]

[70] Government of Punjab, “Bonded Labour.”

[71] Government of Punjab, “Bonded Labour.”

[72] Qureshi, “Bonded Labour in Pakistan.”

[73] Ibid.

[74] Ghani, “The Spiralling Debt Trapping

[75] Ibid.

[76] Ibid.

[77] International Dalit Solidarity Network, “Caste, Gender and Forced & Bonded Labour,.” International Dalit Solidarity Network, June 2015, <http://idsn.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Caste-Gender-and-Modern-Slavery1.pdf>.

[78] IDSN, “Caste, Gender and Forced & Bonded Labour.”

[79] Ibid.



Dalit women are specially used as debt slaves in brick kilns, agriculture and textile industries.[80] They are heavily involved in slavery which is caste based including forced prostitution and manual scavenging which is the removing of human excreta from dry latrines, railroad tracks and sewers by hand.[81]

Members of the affected communities experience systemic discrimination, and often severe violations of their civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights.[82] Despite longstanding constitutional, legislative and affirmative action measures in caste-affected countries, there is lack of implementation which results in persistence of gross human rights abuses.[83]

### *Has the Bonded Labour Abolition Act been able to curb the social evil? Has it been properly enforced?*

The Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act 1992 has outlawed bonded labour but a law becomes irrelevant when it is not effectively enforced.[84] Public officials and law enforcers are inhibited by powerful owners to take any positive action and discourage the workers from reporting it as a crime.[85]

The Government of Pakistan recognises that bonded labour is a major issue but it has failed to enforce legislation for ending it such as the Bonded Labour (Abolition) Act of 1992.[86]

### *Has the Pakistan Government taken initiatives to ensure that the legislation is implemented properly?*

It is because of the prevalence of the existing system that includes landlords in powerful positions in the political structure that effective reforms are prevented making bonded labour pervasive.[87]

[80] IDSN, "Caste, Gender and Forced & Bonded Labour."

[81] Ibid.

[82] Ibid.

[83] Ibid.

[84] Syeda G. Fatima and Abdul Qadir, "Breaking the Bondage: Bonded Labour Situation and the Struggle for Dignity of Brick Kiln Workers in Pakistan" (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, December 2013), <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/pakistan/10382.pdf>.

[85] Syeda G. Fatima and Abdul Qadir, "Breaking the Bondage: Bonded Labour Situation and the Struggle for Dignity of Brick Kiln Workers in Pakistan" (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, December 2013), <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/pakistan/10382.pdf>.

[86] HRW, "Contemporary Forms of Slavery in Pakistan" (Human Rights Watch, July 1, 1995), <https://www.hrw.org/report/1995/07/01/contemporary-forms-slavery-pakistan>.

[87] Hussein et al., "InFocus Programme."

**08** *Do bonded labours have proper awareness about their rights in terms of bonded labours?*

Most of them are unable to read so they have no way of figuring out what is being added to their accounts, he added.[88]

**09** *Has there been proper rehabilitation of the freed labour?*

In the history of development projects in Pakistan, a colony was started for the rehabilitation of bonded labour families in areas for the first time.[89] Women received training in cot weaving, carpentry, knitting and first aid training.[90] Today, 85 per cent of the women beneficiaries are self-employed and have access to enhanced income-generating employment opportunities, 50 per cent of the 450 children who were enrolled in non-formal education centers are sent to formal schools and enjoy medical care.[91] 500 men and women have benefitted through Employment Information Centres where they were referred for traineeships and employment in nearby industries.[92]

**10** *Have international organisations paid heed to this issue and made efforts to shun the practice?*

After the success of PEBLISA, the government took technical support of ILO and initiated a more focused programme to encourage the removal of bonded labour in Pakistan (PEBLIP).[93] It was proposed to address policy and capacity development issues through up and downstream involvements across the country.[94] Increased budgetary allocations to programmes on the elimination of bonded labour by provincial governments were the major outcomes.[95]

[88] Ghani, "The Spiralling Debt Trapping."

[89] Government of Netherlands, "Promoting the Elimination of Bonded Labour in Pakistan (PEBLIP)" (ILO, March 1, 2007), [https://www.ilo.org/islamabad/whatwedo/projects/WCMS\\_125694/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/islamabad/whatwedo/projects/WCMS_125694/lang--en/index.htm).

[90] Ibid.

[91] Ibid.

[92] Ibid.

[93] Ibid.

[94] Ibid.

[95] Ibid.

*How are NGOs in Pakistan working to abolish bonded labour in the society? What kind of problems do NGOs face while they work in the area?*

Two of NHRF's grantees in Pakistan, Labour Education Foundation (LEF) and Encourage the Human Development (EHD), work with brick kilns workers directly in two areas of the Punjab province in Pakistan.[96]

LEF and EHD work to provide education and training to brick kiln workers and also provide legal support, organise campaigns to abolish exploitative work practices and debt servitude. They also aid in advocacy work to raise the minimum wages for workers.[97] Both organisations are essential in supporting and enabling increased registration for social services amongst illiterate workers.[98]

LEF's advocacy and collaboration with the Pakistan Bhatta Mazdoor Union resulted in wage increases for around 18,000 brick kiln workers in agreement with the local law on minimum wages.[99] The lack of executing this law has been one of the main issues for disadvantaged brick kiln workers. In the Multan district in southern Punjab, EHD's efforts were vital in restarting the local inactive district vigilance committee – a mechanism shaped to support the local administration in their efforts to identify, free and rehabilitate bonded labourers and to eradicate the unfair practices of bonded labour.[100]

Ghulam Fatima, founder of the Bonded Labour Liberation Front has been shot at, given electric shocks, arrested, beaten and put behind bars.[101] But she says all those incidents gave her more courage to fight for these workers.[1]

[96] "Combatting Bonded Labour in Pakistan," NHRF.

[97] "Combatting Bonded Labour in Pakistan," NHRF.

[98] NHRF, "Combatting Bonded Labour in Pakistan."

[99] NHRF, "Combatting Bonded Labour in Pakistan."

[100] NHRF, "Combatting Bonded Labour in Pakistan."

[101] Ghani, "The Spiralling Debt Trapping."

[102] Ghani, "The Spiralling Debt Trapping."

*Has strict action been taken against the offenders who continue to engage in bonded labour?*

Human Rights Watch/Asia interviewed seven bonded laborers who attempted to seek redress against their mistreatment and were detained by local police either under false charges or without any charge at all.[103] The arrest of bonded laborers is not only unfair but is also routinely carried out in clear violation of basic principles of due process provided as mentioned in Pakistani and international law.[104]

The Government of Pakistan is accountable for the maintenance of the bonded labour system and it has failed to implement legislation which bans it.[105] The police have not arrested employers while bonded labourers have faced punitive arrest.[106]

The police use the coercive apparatus of the state to severely arrest bonded labourers.[107] For example, bonded laborers who file charges against any employer, attempt to unify other workers, depart from their place of work or are disliked by any particular employer can be arrested and put into a jail or lockup.[108] 32 bonded laborers interviewed by Human Rights Watch/Asia had been detained under such circumstances which is in clear violation of basic principles of due process.[109]

[103] HRW, "Contemporary Forms of Slavery in Pakistan."

[104] HRW, "Contemporary Forms of Slavery in Pakistan."

[105] HRW, "Contemporary Forms of Slavery in Pakistan."

[106] HRW, "Contemporary Forms of Slavery in Pakistan."

[107] HRW, "Contemporary Forms of Slavery in Pakistan."

[108] HRW, "Contemporary Forms of Slavery in Pakistan."

[109] HRW, "Contemporary Forms of Slavery in Pakistan."



# CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

The bonded labour is widespread in Sindh in agricultural, brick kiln and industrial sectors particularly in small industry such as carpet weaving and others. Most vulnerable and destitute sections of society are the main victims. The poor religious minority communities make an overwhelming number of bonded labour compared to their proportion in the population. The characteristic feature of the bonded labour is that when an individual becomes the bonded labour, the whole family falls in the trap. Although, numbers are hard to get, but it is suggested that as high as 200,000 families are in the yoke of bonded labour. If the family unit is considered as 5 persons, this makes a million people. In reality, bonded labour is modern day slavery, that impacts the lives of everyone in the enslaved family. They are forced to live in inhumane conditions, suffering violence, humiliation and malnutrition. Additionally, children are denied education and are forced to labour and the women, particularly young girls of religious minority communities suffer sexual violence. The perpetrators are generally rich, politically dominant or have connections to the political higher ups. In spite of all the violence and suffering, the families are worried that by reporting the consequences will be much more severe. In the absence of any hope from the judicial system and meaningful societal support they are condemned to live as slaves.

Bonded Labour is a menace for hundreds of thousands of men, women, children and elderly in Sindh, that needs to be addressed seriously. There have been legislation and legal developments on part of the government but more action needs to be taken to implement the same. International framework is also in place but more awareness and implementation need to be the priority.

It is equally important to rehabilitate all who were subjected to bonded labour. Proper efforts by the government are required to keep tabs about whereabouts of bonded labour and provide them with resources such as medical, psychological care and economic assistance to name a few.

Few recommendations that can be incorporated:



- Stringent enforcement of the Bonded Labour (Abolition) Act along with establishing a police force that enforces these laws should be established.
- Prosecute law employers who have held workers in bonded labour.
- Publicize all debts related to bonded labour are cancelled and inform them that they do not need to pay any money to the landlords
- Halt all punitive and arbitrary arrests of bonded labour.
- Withdraw export licenses from companies which make products under conditions that do not conform to labor laws.
- Cooperate with the World Bank to establish and fund programs with local NGOs to implement the concerned legislations.

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