

Beyond Tayyaba: Tackling rural poverty to reduce child labour

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Following headlines about the abuse of a domestic worker in a judge's house in December 2016, **Abdur Rehman Cheema** and **Sultana Ali** analyse the wider problem of child labour in Pakistan. Drawing on their research in rural Sindh, they write that poverty is the primary reason that parents keep their children away from school, and outline the community-driven approaches that are being used to tackle the underlying cause.



The torture of Tayyaba, a ten year-old maid, at the house of a lower court Judge has [gained significant attention](#) in Pakistan. Though rarely reported, the abuse of children working as domestic labour is all too common and the issue requires deeper analysis.

Child labour is a global problem. According to an [ILO and Understanding Children Work](#) report (2015) 168 million children worldwide are in child labour, and around 85 million are in engaged in hazardous works. Of those aged 5-17 years, 16.7 million are in South Asia, with [5.8 million in India](#), [5 million in Bangladesh](#), [3.4 million in Pakistan](#) and [2 million in Nepal](#).



The International Labour Organization defines child labour as work that deprives children of their childhood, their potential and their dignity, and that is harmful to physical and mental development in the [ILO convention](#) of Minimum Age Convention (No. 138) and through the [Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention \(No. 182\)](#). The [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) states that every child has “the right to be protected from economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child’s education, or to be harmful to the child’s health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development” ([Article 32](#)).

So as the mantra goes “children are meant to learn not to earn”. But in Pakistan around 15 million of the 25 million school age children do some form of work. According to [the National Child Labour Survey Report 1996](#), about half a million of these children belong to the Sindh province. Unfortunately there are no more up-to-date statistics [as that was the last time a child labour survey was conducted](#). Nor is there another one on the horizon because as a result of the 18th Amendment to the Constitution of Pakistan child labour was designated a provincial issue and the Employment of Children Act 1991 was abolished.

The single greatest driver of child labour is poverty, and more specifically the fact that many families need their children to bring in additional income so they cannot afford to send them to school. This has been highlighted by the findings of research conducted under the [Sindh Union Council and Community Economic Strengthening Support \(SUCCESS\)](#) programme in Sindh, a six-year (2015-2021) programme funded by the European Union. In rural Sindh the majority of people are landless farmers who rely on their children to supplement the household earnings.



Figure 1: Children aged 7-14 working in agricultural Land in village Jaived Kaim Khani, Tando Allahyar, Sindh. Credit: Sultana Ali.

SUCCESS conducted a [Poverty Score Card survey](#) which was undertaken by the [Rural Support Programmes Network](#) (RSPN) and its partner organisations in the eight programme districts of Sindh. The results portray a grim picture: two-thirds of school age children (5-16 years) are out of school with the highest proportion of children out of school in district Sujawal (82.5%) followed by Jamshoro (75.7%), Tando Allahyar (71%), Matiari (69.6%), Dadu (68.6%), Tando Muhammad Khan (62.0%), Kambar Shahdadkot (57.3%) and Larkana (53.3%). The majority of these are engaged in the informal economy, from domestic and agricultural work to begging.

“I work on agricultural land on daily wages if I send my daughter to school who will take care of other children and who will perform household chores?” asks a women from village Balach Leghari in the district of Tando Allahayr, Sindh. The need for girls in particular to contribute to domestic work at home is a significant factor which prevents them from attending school in rural areas and the gender disparities were conspicuous in the results. In the overall sample only 25 per cent of girls attended school as compared to 60 per cent boys.



Figure 2: Siblings containing water at village Muhammad Ismail Mehrani Tando Allahyar, Sindh. Credit: Sultana Ali

These figures are even more concerning when broken down further: the majority of girls (83%) attending school were at primary level, followed by middle level (13%). Just four per cent of girls measured as attending school in the sample were studying at high school level. A ten year-old girl from a village Muhammad Ismail Mehrani, District Tando Allahyar explained she could not attend school:

“I work in fields and pick cotton along with my sister-in-law. At the end of day (after working 9 to 10 hours), we get paid PKR 50 or 60. My mother gives me 10 rupees and keeps the rest for household expenditure.”

This research highlights the specific conditions in Sindh but also reinforces the message that to eliminate child labour, we must tackle poverty. As the early 20th century American social worker Grace Abbott asserted,

“Child labour and poverty are inevitably bound together and if you continue to use the labour of children as the treatment for the social disease of poverty, you will have both poverty and child labour to the end of time.”

On the basis of this, the SUCCESS Programme aims to increase monthly income levels for 70 per cent of target households – i.e. 770,000 households in the eight programme districts – with a particular focus on women and children. This will be achieved using the Rural Support Programme’s social mobilisation approach to community-driven development (CDD) which centres around the belief that people living in poverty have the potential to help themselves; that they can better manage their limited resources if they organise and are provided with technical and financial support.

To take one example, the RSPs under the SUCCESS Programme will support communities to diversify their income sources through technical and vocational skills training delivered to 108,000 community members. In addition they will provide social guidance and financial assistance to the rural poor. So although reducing child labour is not the primary target, the programme is expected to reduce the magnitude of the child labour through its contribution to income, health, education and awareness levels of the targeted communities.

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