

The Plight of Children in Pakistan



House No 308, Main Sawan Road, Sector G-10/1, Islamabad
Contact: 03335210535, 03315066290, 0512354368

Outline:

- I. Introduction: Millions of children are living a pathetic life in Pakistan and deserve immediate care from the society
- II. Children's insecurity: abduction, rape, murder, etc.
- III. The condition of the street children
- IV. The condition of child labourers
- V. Lack of healthcare for children
- VI. Lack of proper education facilities for children
- VII. Effects of the children's plight on the society
 - a. Socio-economic woes are increased.
 - b. Drug addiction
 - c. Children are recruited for suicide attacks
 - d. Bad image of the country
- VIII. Suggestions for improvement of children's condition
 - a. International and domestic laws to be implemented
 - b. National Plan of Action
 - c. Child Protection Courts
 - d. Special arrangements for juvenile offenders
 - e. Provision of free education
- IX. Conclusion

The birth of every new baby is a message from God Almighty that He wants to continue the world. A child is undoubtedly Nature's masterpiece and a messenger of God to the people on the earth to tell the people about the mercy of God. Our children are our plenipotentiaries to the future world and the means of continuation of our own existence. However, it is also a fact that children are the most vulnerable segment of any society. The children in Pakistan are the most neglected and deprived segment of our society. Child labour, brick kiln bondage, domestic slavery, beggary, trafficking, prostitution, sexual abuse and many other crimes against children are perpetuated in Pakistan due to the negligence of the state as well as the apathy of the society in general. Children are abducted for ransom, recruited by criminals for organised crimes and used by terrorist outfits to commit suicide attacks. Those who escape from this outrageous fate are deprived of education, adequate nutrition, proper recreation and good healthcare save a small minority that belongs to well-off families. This essay will unfold the plight of children in our society, its effects on our socio-economic front and then make a few suggestions to ameliorate their condition.

Outline point: [Children's insecurity: abduction, rape, murder, etc.]

In Pakistan, a whopping 35 per cent of the population comprises children having ages up to 14 years. These 80.4 million children are the most vulnerable segment of our society. According to Roshni Helpline, around 3,000 children go missing every year in Karachi alone, and according to another NGO, Sahil, about a dozen children are sexually assaulted every day. The memory of Javed Iqbal who sexually abused and killed 100 children, all aged between 6 and 16, is a stark reminder of children's insecurity in our country. Another very prominent case, which took the Pakistani people by storm, was the Kasur child sexual abuse scandal. Pakistani media organisations estimated that 280 to 300 children, most of them males, were sodomised and raped in front of cameras. The scandal involved an organised crime ring that sold child pornography to porn sites. The rape and murder of a seven-year-old girl, Zainab Amin Ansari, in the same district Kasur in January 2018 was also a horrifying case. The perpetrator was identified as Imran Ali, who had raped and murdered seven minor girls in the vicinity previously.

These are just a few cases which reveal the vulnerability of the children in our society. These incidents, which came to the public notice thanks to the media, are just a tip of the iceberg. The real figures for these crimes against children are much higher than the figures which are reported in the media.

Outline point: [The condition of the street children]

There are millions of street children in our society who are the easiest prey for the criminals who abduct them and use them to perpetuate their heinous agenda against humanity. These children are used for beggary, street crimes and sexual acts. Some of them are maimed and some physically distorted to become more appealing beggars. They are not given two square meals a day while they remain posted at different locations to beg from daybreak to night. They suffer the worst mental and physical torture, but they cannot escape their handlers. Some of these abductees are trafficked to other countries where they are used for child sex or domestic slavery or for the illegal removal of organs for transplant. Highlighting the gravity of this crime, the Express Tribune's editorial of 28 March 2018 notes:

“The scale of the problem is unknown as there is no data gathering beyond the anecdotal; but given the known breadth encompassing a spectrum from child brides to forced labour it may be reasonably assumed that there are tens of thousands of instances in any given year.”

Outline point: [The problem of child labourers]

There are hundreds of thousands of children performing domestic tasks and working as farm labourers in rural areas. Other children work in the textile industry, construction, and automotive industry. Sometimes, these children work up to 16 hours a day, 7 days a week. These children do all sorts of odd jobs to keep the wolf from the door. In their hard chase for bread, they are exposed to indescribable perils. Many poverty-stricken parents themselves

lease out their minor children to wealthy people for domestic work in return for a loan they would never be able to repay. There being no proper implementation of the law to ban the employment of minors or to protect them from domestic violence, they are completely at the mercy of their employers. These children are often subjected to extreme mental torture, put in solitary confinement without food as punishment for minor mistakes in their daily chores, and sometimes beaten to death. According to the Institute of Social Justice, about 41 cases of child domestic workers were reported in the media between January 2010 and June 2013. Of these children, 19 died due to severe torture inflicted on them. In such cases, the employers easily get out of any legal complication by settling the matter with the parents in return for money.

Outline point: [Lack of healthcare for children]

One of the biggest problems of poor children is the absence of basic healthcare for them. Children's healthcare is not adequate in Pakistan even for the children of the better strata. In Pakistan, close to one child in six dies before the age of five. The nutritional status of children is very poor due to which 35 per cent of them are underweight, more than 50 per cent suffer from stunted growth and around 9 per cent from emaciation. Each day, around 1,100 Pakistani children under five years of age die of diarrhoea and water-borne diseases. According to a UNICEF report released in February 2018, Pakistan has the worst infant mortality rate in the world. A baby born in Pakistan faces 1 in 22 chances of death, while a newborn in Japan has only one in 1,111 risks of dying. Many children develop dangerous but curable diseases in the early years of their life resulting in physical disabilities, deformed bodies or severe mental disorders for not getting timely treatment.

Outline point: [Lack of proper education for children]

With a huge out-of-school population of 22.8 million children, Pakistan exhibits a glaring example of the worst negligence in providing basic education to children. Only 71 per cent of the children attend primary school in Pakistan. The best figures for the government's budgetary allocation for education are 2.2 per cent of

the gross domestic product (GDP); however, for more than a decade the nation has not been able to raise this amount above 2 per cent of the GDP. Poverty compels around 1.84 million children to get early education from religious seminaries which provide them boarding and lodgings along with education. The syllabi of these seminaries are not in line with the new age and the students educated in these seminaries are not fit for modern jobs in the new world. In the past, some of these religious seminaries were found to be the hatcheries of terrorists.

Outline point: [Effects on society: (a) socio-economic woes]

This disturbing state of affairs is affecting Pakistani society and the state in many ways. When tens of millions of unattended, illiterate, uncivilised children grow up to become adults; they only add to the socio-economic woes of the society. Hence, the society remains bogged down in the quagmire of socio-economic complications. These illiterate, poverty-stricken children grow up to become parents of many more children of their own sort, and the cycle goes on and on. All efforts of the government to improve the socio-economic conditions of the society fall flat and poverty keeps on rising. The IMF has projected a sharp increase in poverty in the country with up to 40 per cent of Pakistanis living below the poverty line in the years following the coronavirus. The poverty bomb can be stopped from exploding if the children are systematically pulled out of the vicious cycle of poverty.

Outline point: [Effects on society: (b) drug addiction]

Another very sorry state of affairs is that most of these uneducated street children start using drugs at a tender age and never grow up as healthy and normal human beings. According to United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, there are around 7.8 million addicts in Pakistan. It is also estimated that up to 44 tons of processed heroin are consumed annually in Pakistan. Very unfortunately, sometimes drug traffickers inject drugs inside educational institutions, often attended by the children of the elite class. These addicts always remain in need of money to buy drugs

for which they resort to street crimes and worsen the law and order situation in the country.

Outline point: [Effects on society: (c) children are recruited for suicide attacks]

Poverty compels many parents to send their children to religious seminaries to get an education. Though most of the seminaries are doing a commendable job by imparting religious education to the entrants, some were found to be involved in the indoctrination of their innocent students in order to use them to commit suicide attacks on peaceful citizens. Most of the suicide attackers, who killed and maimed thousands of Pakistanis in the last two decades, were under the age of twenty. Such suicide attacks also destroyed the image of Pakistan as a peaceful country depriving it of foreign direct investment worth billions of dollars. The foreign direct investment which was 3.67 per cent of the GDP in 2007 started to nosedive in the succeeding years because of the intense waves of terrorism and plummeted to barely 0.38 per cent of the GDP in 2012.

Outline point: [Effects on society: (d) bad image of the country]

One of the worst effects of the pathetic condition of the children is a bad image of the country in the world. Millions of out-of-school children, a plethora of socio-economic problems and a high crime rate are always a cause of embarrassment for the entire nation. Some of the criminal rings transport crime to foreign countries and earn a bad name for the whole nation. Trafficking of children outside the country to induct them into the dark world of child pornography and sex trade demolishes self-respect and national pride of the society. The poor, persecuted children of Pakistan paint a bleak picture of our society which is plunging into darkness with no end in sight. A country which cannot look after millions of children, which cannot save them from slipping into the world of crime, which cannot provide them with basic education, is not considered fit for living and investing money.

Outline point: [Way forward: (a) international and domestic laws]

Pakistani society is in dire need to address the problems faced by the children. In 1979, National Commission for Child Welfare and Development (NCCWD) was established by the government of Pakistan. It is now working under the ambit of the Ministry of Human Rights. The NCCWD is responsible to coordinate, monitor and facilitate the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and other national and international obligations. It has the responsibility of monitoring and evaluating that children receive their constitutional, legal and administrative rights. NCCWD has recommended a number of modifications and revisions to existing laws and policies, some of which have been accepted as a part of the Constitution and Pakistan Penal Code (PPC). However, implementation on the ground still leaves much to be desired. Both provincial and federal governments should give special training to officials to implement the relevant laws in letter and spirit.

Outline point: [Way forward: (b) National Plan of Action]

The National Plan of Action (NPA) for Child Protection provides guidelines to address child sexual abuse, exploitation, child pornography and prostitution, health, shelter, poverty, child labour, education and child mortality. Article 37(a) of the Convention states that: “no child shall be subjected to torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment”. However, the children are still not able to get any relief from NPA because of the complicity of the government officials responsible for child protection. The government institutions should ensure that all the demands of NPA in terms of implementation are fulfilled. There must be child protection units of international standards, observation homes, rehabilitation centres, and juvenile justice committees at the district level. There is also a dire need to raise public awareness of the importance and effectiveness of child protection institutions to increase the capacity of the relevant institutions and officers.

Outline point: [Way forward: (c) Child Protection Courts]

The Punjab Destitute and Neglected Children Act 2007 has established the provision of Child Protection Courts (CPC) which states that the Government may establish one or more such courts under this Act when needed. In Pakistan, the first child court was established in Lahore in December 2017, the second one in Peshawar in March 2019, and the third and fourth ones in Mardan and Abbottabad respectively in October 2019. The establishment of the same court is in process in Karachi, Quetta, Islamabad and district Mohmand. This is definitely a commendable step, but the number of child courts and the speed of disposing of the cases need to be increased as there are 10 to 12 cases of children being reported every day. The existing courts should decide the cases swiftly but carefully on humanitarian bases as the decisions themselves may affect the children badly.

Outline point: [Way forward: (e) special arrangements for juvenile offenders]

Similarly, if convicted, the juvenile delinquents should be sent to borstals instead of adult-jails. In Pakistan, there are just 2 juvenile jails, one in Faisalabad and one in Bahawalpur, which are insufficient for thousands of juvenile criminals in the country. According to research collected through media reports, around 70 per cent of all children who came under the juvenile justice system are abused. The government should strictly implement the Juvenile Justice System Ordinance, 2000 in letter and spirit and also establish more borstals in all the provinces and autonomous regions of Pakistan.

Outline point: [Way forward: (e) provision of free education]

To provide free education to over 23 million out-of-school children, the government should announce an education emergency involving a 0.5 per cent annual increase in the education budget for a period of five years. Additionally, a uniform syllabus should be designed to impart basic education to be covered only in a few months and the award of every university degree should be conditioned with the teaching of that syllabus to ten students in pursuance of the Sunnah of the Holy Prophet

(PBUH) who awarded freedom to the prisoners of war when each of them taught reading and writing to ten Muslims.

Outline point: [Conclusion]

A large number of Pakistani children live a miserable life sans basic necessities and basic human rights. Thousands of children are compelled to rummage garbage heaps to find their livelihood and food. Hundreds of thousands of children are deprived of basic education and thousands succumb to the anti-social elements. Those that get a further lease of life after victimisation in the world of crime themselves grow up to become criminals to add to the misery of their society. A large segment of the child population remains in the tight grip of disease for want of access to health facilities and, thus, the disease not only fills their life with pain but also curtails it. While such children remain a victim of the government's negligence and society's general apathy, they, in the later part of their life, also add to the socio-economic complications of society. Our media should highlight the issues of the children and draw the attention of all and sundry to understand their plight. A great responsibility behoves our government institutions to do the needful in this regard in the light of the principles laid down in the international frameworks and domestic laws. While taking such measures, it is important to collaborate with all stakeholders like parents, teachers, public health representatives and government officials.

=====