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This Brief is based on data collected as part of Afghanistan Rights Monitor (ARM). The full report is available at <http://appro.org.af/publication/chronic-conflict-poverty-and-child-labor-evidence-from-kandahar-bamyan-herat-and-balkh/>

Chronic Conflict and Child Labor: Drivers and Possible Remedies

“Employers [should] treat us as their own children. Do not beat us. Give us our salaries properly. And teach us the work correctly because we work for them from morning till evening and they impose heavy duties on us. Nobody is there to question them, even our fathers. Whenever we tell our fathers about our problems in the workplace, [our fathers] say: ‘It does not matter, eventually you will learn.’ It is the same thing [that fathers] say about us being beaten at school, that it is okay, because teachers punish their students [so they learn].” - Child laborer from Mazar-e Sharif (Balkh)

Studies conducted in various countries around the world reveal that child labor has physical, social, and mental health consequences for children and major economic consequences for the country as a whole. There is higher prevalence of different health issues in working children compared to the rest of the population. Child labor is associated with higher prevalence of mental and behavioral disorders. School attendance, family income and status, daily working hours and likelihood of abuse, in its different forms, are associated with the mental health outcomes in working children. Malnutrition and poor growth are highly prevalent among working children, compounded with the negative physical and health impacts of labor on the children. Also, the likelihood of being sexually abused increases with increasing working hours.

Child labor has physical consequences such as skin diseases, short-term memory

loss, speech problems, organ defects, height reduction, and weight loss. Psychological consequences include a tendency of jealousy, instability, restlessness, depression, fear, pessimism and negativity while social consequences include exclusion from recreational activities and deprivation from nurture and family time.

All studies of child labor show, overwhelmingly, that poverty is a major driver of the problem. Children engaged in work are often deprived of education and therefore miss out on the life opportunities that formal education can bring. There are, in addition, societal impacts from widespread child labor, such as the emergence of whole generations of adults who have grown up deprived of basic life skills and development needs. This increases the likelihood of perpetuating the cycle of poverty and vulnerability that fuels child labor.

Conflict is another major driver of child labor. Conflict changes household livelihood and planning decisions by removing certainty and predictability and replacing them with immediate, day-to-day survival instincts. As such, conflict undermines longer-term economic development through weakening or destroying economic infrastructure, processes that generate human capital – particularly education – and certainty about future. Conflict also forces households to make decisions for the here and now and at the expense of planning for or investing in future, including educating their children.

Conflict and poverty can affect household decision making on child labor in two interrelated ways. First, conflict can render education for children as a risky investment, due to high opportunity costs (as opposed to working) and a high risk of mortality that would annul the investment. Second, a combination of conflict and poverty undermines the education system as a whole, adversely affecting infrastructure development, i.e., building schools, educational content quality, and professionalization of teachers. Also, in poverty-stricken conflict environments dropout rates tend to be high due to insecurity and/or rational economic decision making by families (see the previous point). In the Afghan context, there is the added risk of students, schools and teachers being targets in armed conflict – all of which tend to increase the opportunity cost of education.

Observations as part of Afghanistan Rights Monitor (ARM) show that child labor is on rise in all ten provinces being monitored. While the legal framework prohibiting exploitative child labor is reasonably well developed in Afghanistan, additional findings from ARM show that there is little awareness of the laws preventing child labor and insufficient appreciation of its negative consequences.

The research sought to examine the forms and perceived consequences of child labor as it is practiced in Afghanistan, including the physical, psychological and social growth implications for children.

Drivers of Child Labor

As with many other rights-related areas, laws and conventions concerning child labor in Afghanistan are widely ignored because of widespread poverty among families as well as weak systems of child protection and legal enforcement. According to UNICEF, neither the Afghan government nor its donors have given sufficient budget allocation for the social protection of vulnerable children, and only 1 percent of the national budget has been committed to such programs. Human rights monitoring by the

Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) has indicated that children’s earnings composes the only income for nearly a third of families.

Ongoing conflict in the country has fueled the continuing recruitment of underage children by both government and opposition groups, despite a Presidential decree criminalizing this practice. Increased internal displacement and forced return migration are also heightening the risk of child labor and early marriage among refugee families, who often left jobs in neighboring countries and have little savings to fall back on. According to findings from a recent survey by Save the Children, more than 70 percent of returnee parents and community leaders said that early marriage and child labor were major risks to their children who were currently not in school due to poverty, lack of documentation, and problems accessing schools. It is estimated that among the 600,000 families repatriated to Afghanistan in 2016 from neighboring countries there were 200,000 child laborers, adding to the estimates of over two million children between the ages of 8 and 14 who are already working in the country. These trends are expected to worsen in the subsequent years, with increasing instability and return migration leading to even greater numbers of out of school children who are at risk of child labor, recruitment by armed groups, trafficking and early marriage.

A limited body of research on family decision-making regarding child labor in Afghanistan – including comparison of poor families who do and do not send their children to work – shows that a number of factors beyond poverty influence family decisions on sending children to work. These are indebtedness, familial experiences with education, the strength of local social networks, and parental perceptions about the benefits of work to children. This research adds to what is known about how poverty intersects with other factors in contributing to prevalence of child labor.

I sent my son to work and bought him brushes for polishing shoes but he did not earn good money. I am alone and must cover all expenses. We do not have a good economic condition. After that, I sent him to sell ice cream. His revenue from each ice cream was just one Afghani. He was bringing 30 or 50 Afs daily but he was under extreme pressure and was coming home at 10pm everyday. He was feeling very tired because he is too young and he cannot overcome the pressure. - Female interviewee, Herat.

If we do not perform the job correctly they punish us. For instance, one day my brother who is an apprentice in a mechanic workshop fought with another apprentice while the employer was not present. When he returned, without asking about the real event or the causes, he punished my brother and did not give him lunch that day. When my brother came home and told the story to my father, my father told him that the employer did a great job. My father said he already told the employer that: 'My son's meat is from you and his bones are from me.' - Child laborer, Balkh.

A final consideration informing this case study is the religious dimension of child labor. Islam sets many guidelines for both children's development and work practices that are relevant to child labor, including restrictions for employers and employees. Children who are sufficiently mature are allowed to work, but Islam expressly forbids exploitative practices by employers, hazardous work by children, and children's work that does not contribute to their educational development. An empirical study of community attitudes toward child labor in an Islamic community in Ghana shows that despite good understanding of children's rights, there is a tendency to excuse child labor, under the presumption that work constituted training to prepare children to become responsible adults in future. Notably, it is not just the state that is considered responsible for addressing the problem of child labor in Islamic societies. Families and employers are also directed equally to "perform their duties" according to religious teaching.

Recommendations

The following recommendations may be made based on the findings from the wider literature on child labor:

Employers

- Employers should be more proactive in supporting families in need, creating a network to gain commitments from unions and factory owners to ensure the security, safety, and health of working children.
- Craftsmen unions should be held accountable in undertaking internal monitoring of members' workplaces.
- Business and factory owners should work with the government on incentives by the government, using tax deductions and other means, to create a foundation to collect and disperse funds to needy families and thereby reduce child labor.

Government

- Should implement the existing work-related laws and effect constitutional

provisions concerning child labor by creating better, implementable policies to prevent children from hard labor while ensuring that employers that deviate from regulatory requirements are punished.

- There is ambiguity about which government departments have authority over child labor and related issues, such as drug use in workplaces. Government should identify and publicize areas of work permissible and not harmful for children.
- Should do a better job of identifying and supporting children and families that are at particular risk of reliance on child labor, such as female-headed households, indebted families, and families with drug addicted parents.
- Should assist orphanages and juvenile homes in more consistently providing educational and vocational training to vulnerable children.
- Should make education mandatory up to a minimum level of 6th grade, for example.
- Should put in place mechanisms for the collection of accurate statistics about the incidence of child labor including the ways in which family economic conditions lead to child labor.

Mosques and Media

- Mosques and media should play major roles in raising awareness, and advocating, about the perils of child labor.

The following recommendations may be made based on the findings from the analysis of the primary data collected for this research:

Legislation and Child Labor

No amount of legislation alone is going to stop the exploitation of children in the labor market. Concurrent with legislation, there is need for a better understanding of the family and workplace dynamics that result in child labor. This will require dedicated assessment, research, and ongoing monitoring of the current conditions of working children, including

"Suitable" work situations such as apprenticeships were described as beneficial and educational for children. This type of work is viewed as especially appropriate for children who leave school and do not like formal education.

distinguishing between traditional apprenticeship arrangements for working children and exploitative child labor. In addition, parents, community leaders, and craftsmen unions could be engaged by government authorities to provide oversight of children's vocationally oriented employment. This oversight should be guided by concrete standards and prohibitions that are widely disseminated and understood.

Children's Rights in Apprenticeships

Working closely with employers and parents, government-led efforts should ensure that the rights of children working as apprentices in recognized and legitimate trades are recognized and respected by employers. These rights include access to formal and practical (on-the-job) training, protection in the workplace against heavy physical, physical injury, and sexual abuse, availability of mechanisms that could be used by children faced with physical and sexual harassment, and access to sufficient food and adequate sanitary provisions. These efforts should be aligned with trade-based vocational and apprenticeship programs supported by international donors.

Prevention of Illicit Child Labor

In unregulated and not fully legitimate occupations protecting children's rights is particularly difficult. However, much more could be done by the Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs, Martyred and the Disabled, for example, through surprise inspections and fining employers that exploit child labor in illegal work such as hard physical labor. This type of law enforcement, however, is likely to succeed only if it is backed up by the political will of the government and has the support of the parents and the community more broadly.

Child Labor and School Dropouts

Schools must assume a more dedicated role in tracking drop outs and their link to child labor, working closely with the parents and/or their associations, Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs, Martyred and the Disabled to devise ways in which drop outs could be better prevented and managed.

Legal Age in Employment

Many of the legal provisions governing child labor are age-based. While difficult and perhaps beyond the current financial capacity of the government, efforts should be made for the digitization of birth records as a means to verify the age of children being recruited into workplaces. Employers could then be compelled to prove the ages of the children working for them.

Children and Armed Conflict

To prevent the recruitment of children into armed conflict, especially by the police and the army, age verification guidelines must be implemented during recruitment. There must also be investigation and prosecution of cases of the recruitment and use of children by the national security forces in armed conflict. Donor agencies, especially military aid donors, must demand that security authorities crack down on the recruitment of children by the security sector. In the event of children being used as foot soldiers or used for sexual entertainment of security officials, every effort must be made to prosecute the perpetrators and denounce this practice based on teachings from Islam through ongoing nationwide awareness campaigns.

...child labor, which consists of a variety of employment settings and circumstances, creates a range of predictable impacts on children – some of which are potentially positive and constructive, but most of which are currently deleterious. Addressing the multi-faceted and complex problem of child labor will require a multi-prong approach including publicizing the immediate and longer term impacts of child labor, enforcing existing laws, extending existing law and policy, and creating alternatives to reliance on child labor for families with no choice in securing a steady income.