

Buried in bricks: Bonded labour in Afghanistan

Bonded labour of adults and children in brick kilns is one of the most prevalent, yet least known forms of hazardous labour in Afghanistan. A new ILO study on the phenomenon marks the first attempt to provide a better understanding of the dynamics of bonded labour in two provinces of the country. ILO Online spoke with Samuel Hall consulting, lead author of the study.

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Why do kilns use bonded labour?

Samuel Hall consulting: The arduous nature of brick making and low wages make it difficult for brick kilns to recruit and retain labour. Both child and adult labourers work over 70 hours a week performing repetitive tasks. Much of the moulding process is done from a crouching position, and workers are constantly exposed to sun, heat and blowing dust. By using a system of advances on future wage payments that bond labourers and their families, kiln owners are able to ensure a regular labour supply at low cost.

Throughout the south Asian brick industry, advances are commonly used to tie workers and their families to a kiln and keep wages low. It is extremely difficult for a bonded labourer to leave the vicious cycle of debt as the wages paid are too low to allow the advance to be fully paid off by the end of the season. What's more, there are few if any other local employment opportunities available.

Why are so many children employed in kilns – is it because they are cheaper?

Samuel Hall consulting: Child labourers are not used in kilns because they are cheaper or perceived to be better suited for the work. In fact, children are paid the same piece rate as adults, but kiln owners recognise that they are less productive and so earn lower wages. However, parents know that without the help of their children they will never be able to repay their debt fast enough, pushing them further in the debt trap.

However, there are still benefits to kiln owners. Households that work as brick makers are provided in-kind payments of shelter, water and electricity. This form of remuneration is the same whether two or ten household members are working. Children also help perform tasks that, while not always visible, make adults more productive. Children help carry water, sweep the workspace and roll the mud into balls for older relatives to mould. At home, they help with domestic activities to free up time for other household members to make bricks.

Why do people agree to enter into situations of debt bondage?

Samuel Hall consulting: Most households working in brick kilns in Afghanistan fell vulnerable to debt bondage when living in Pakistan as refugees or migrants. Nearly all (98 per cent) of the households surveyed had been in exile in Pakistan where they began working as low-skilled labourers in brick kilns. With large families to feed, limited skills and almost no access to credit, households returning to Afghanistan turned to brick kilns again because they are one of the few places where they can get jobs and receive advances as well as in-kind payments such as shelter and water. To entice them further, Afghan recruiters propose to pay for their one-way travel costs back to Afghanistan. Households average 8.8 people per family, and 83 per cent of household heads have had no form of education.

Do many women work in the kilns?

Samuel Hall consulting: The gender make-up of brick kiln labour represents a major difference between Afghan brick kilns and those found elsewhere in the region. Kiln workforces in Nepal and India are comprised largely of men, women and children of both sexes. Although households in Afghan kilns are suffering from extreme poverty, women and adolescent girls only work outside the home in the direst of circumstances. Even in neighbouring Pakistan, women can be found working in kilns, except amongst the households of Afghan refugees or migrants. The exclusion of women from the work force in Afghanistan results in a greater dependence on child labour, as only one parent is economically active.

Why do parents put their children to work?

Samuel Hall consulting: 56 per cent of brick makers in Afghan kilns are children, and a majority of these are 14 years old and under. Girls are mainly present in the 14 and under group of kiln workers, as cultural norms oblige girls to stay at home upon reaching puberty. This does not mean that their work ceases; it simply shifts from market work to family work, which is unpaid and often undercounted by child labour statistics. Faced with never ending debt, families feel they have to use all available labour, even if it is to their long-term detriment, to make daily ends meet. It is out of necessity and extreme poverty that households enlist their children from an early age to work in the kilns.

Are the expected political and economic changes in Afghanistan likely to worsen the situation of bonded labourers?

Samuel Hall consulting: While GDP growth currently remains strong, the Afghan economy will undergo a major transformation as donor funds are scaled back leading up to and following the 2014 transition. Current levels of economic growth (8.2 per cent in 2010) are in large part fuelled by aid and military spending; in 2010, aid to Afghanistan totalled 15.4 billion USD and military spending totalled more than 100 billion USD.

As donor spending is reduced, the Afghan economy will likely contract, particularly in those sectors most driven by aid and reconstruction spending, including construction, and increasing Afghanistan's reliance on agriculture. Already operating on razor-thin margins, many brick kiln owners will likely be forced to shut down or further cut their workers' wages in an effort to compete in price wars in the shrinking market for bricks.

What can the international community do to help bonded labourers in Afghanistan?

Samuel Hall consulting: Without education, training or transferable skills, adult and child bonded labourers are ill prepared to do anything besides making bricks. Thus, a change in livelihood strategy will be extremely difficult, and will require interventions that address the lack of skills, the lack of productive assets and household debt and bondage. Development actors need to provide both short-term humanitarian aid for immediate relief to bonded families and longer-term programmes, in order to help them make the transition to new, more sustainable livelihood strategies.

Humanitarian and development actors need to work together with the Afghan government and the social partners to develop a creative, coordinated strategy for breaking the interlocking cycles of debt, poverty and dependency. This strategy should emphasize the use of incentive-based policies to encourage individuals to change their economic activities, rather than command measures that attempt to restrict or prohibit certain

types of activities. It should address, amongst other things, access to credit and microfinance tools, land tenure issues, cross-border return migration and access to high quality education for children, so as to break the inter-generational cycle of bonded labour.