**Where we stand on the rights of the child**

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This year marks the 30th anniversary of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The convention signifies the fact that respect for human rights begins with the way a community treats its children.

Children’s rights cannot be separated from human rights because children are the future generation. Taking care of the coming generation by protecting their dignity and providing them their needs is the most important thing for bringing up citizens best equipped to serve the community.

Pakistan has signed and ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Child but the state of children is the far from being satisfactory. It is a matter of grave concern that Pakistan has been placed at the low position of 154th out of 182 countries in the global ranking on child rights, lower than Iran (100), Bangladesh (113), India (120), Sri Lanka (129), Myanmar (130), and even Nepal (139). This global index is predominantly based on indicators relating to health, education and protection of children in these countries.

The current situation of children in Pakistan is not encouraging at all as 24 percent of the Pakistani population lives below the poverty line; this way, a large number of children ultimately become the first victims of poverty. According to a report, nearly 45 percent of children in Pakistan are malnourished, which results in the stunted growth of the brain, remain physically weak and are thus vulnerable in many ways.

Article 25-A of Pakistan’s constitution guarantees the right of every child to education whereas Article 25 (3) of the constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan recognizes the special right of protection for children due to their vulnerability.

Every person below the age of 18 years is considered a child under the UNCRC. Over 47 percent of the total population of Pakistan consists of children less than 18 years of age. The UNCRC made it obligatory for the states ratifying the convention to take all appropriate legislative, administrative and other measures for the implementation of the rights enshrined in the convention.

Over the past several decades, the position of children in society has changed with increasing recognition of children’s rights. International instruments like the CRC have imposed immeasurable responsibility on states to promote and protect the rights of the child. Pakistan being a party to this convention is bound to abide by the commitments made at the UN level to protect and promote the rights of the child.

Article 25-A of Pakistan’s constitution guarantees the right of every child to education. Out of a total of 51.53 million children between the age of five and 16, as many as 22.84 million – 44 percent – are out of school. More girls are out of school than boys. In the primary to higher secondary levels, 49 percent of the population of girls are out of school compared to 40p percent of the population of boys.

These numbers are embarrassing for Pakistan, which now sits at the second spot in Unicef rankings for having the most out-of-school children worldwide. Punjab is said to have the most out-of-school children worldwide.

The multiple school system classifies schools for elite children, the English-medium schools sprouting in streets catering to middle-class children and the public schools that cater to the low-income group. Only 71 percent of the children of Pakistan attend the primary school.

This means that 23 million children are deprived of education. The government only allocates 1.8 percent of its national budget to education, which is clearly insufficient considering the need. The difficulties of public education are numerous: economic constraints, dangerous buildings, lack of toilets, chairs, tables, desks, recurring humanitarian crises, and un-or-under-qualified teachers. It is not uncommon for children to leave school without knowing how to read or write. This is the case for almost 50 percent of school-going children, ages 6 to 16.

According to independent estimates, a large number of children still constitute a significant part of the labour force in Pakistan. Legislation relating to child employment is still not aligned with Article 25-A of the constitution which gives each child a right to education. The employment of children remains unaddressed, particularly in sectors like agriculture, factories, small car workshops, shops, hotels, cinemas, vending on the streets, the fishing industry, mining, brick kilns, weaving, bracelet making, bread cutting, packing, and construction etc.

A large number of these children are employed through an informal economy in the street, through private structures or through homes and parents, which also deprives them of any form of safety and recognition.

Denying children their fundamental right to be educated between the ages of five and 16 exposes them to health hazards, hampers their development and puts them at risk to other forms of violence, which may be physical, psychological and sexual.

The first and only survey of child labour in Pakistan was conducted in 1996 and found that approximately 3.3 million children aged 5–14 years were economically active and that nearly half of them worked more than 35 hours a week. Twenty-two years since the survey, no comprehensive information on child labour has been collected.

There are around 11 million children performing domestic tasks and working in agriculture, the textile industry, construction, motor garages, and fruit and vegetable markets.

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) suggests that poverty is the greatest single cause behind child labour. Pakistan has a per-capita income of approximately $1900; a middle-class person in Pakistan earns around $6 a day on average. The average Pakistani has to feed nine or ten people with their daily wage. There is also a high inflation rate that adds to misery of the poor.

Nearly 30 years after Pakistan ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), no integrated child protection case management and referral system – as aligned with international standards – has been established.

An education emergency must be implemented to put 22.8 million out-of-school children in school. The infrastructure of government schools must be improved and a training mechanism for government school teachers must be set up in order to raise the quality of education.

A concrete framework of action must be adopted to deal with issues such as malnutrition, infant mortality and preventable diseases in a sustainable way.

The state must ensure the right of each and every child to be registered; revise procedures to make sure that newborn children receive a birth certificate and that in particular children from marginalized and vulnerable groups have easy access to the registration procedures; and establish an effective and cost-free procedure that provides a birth certificate for all children up to age 18.

The provinces should undertake child labour surveys to assess the magnitude of underage employment in their territories. This can be instrumental in coming up with effective policies to counter child labour in Pakistan.

Public awareness campaigns must be carried out to provide information, parental guidance and counselling with a view to prevent child abuse and neglect; provide additional training to teachers, law-enforcement officials, social workers and prosecutors on how to receive, monitor, investigate and prosecute complaints about violence and neglect of children in a child-sensitive manner; and expand services which provide victims of abuse with counselling, recovery and therapy.

In addition, law enforcement officials, especially the police, must be provided special training to deal with cases of child sexual assault. And, finally, data should be collected – using standardized instruments – of homeless and street children, and subsequently shelter houses must be built countrywide across the country.

Recently, in a positive development, the federal cabinet has given the go-ahead to form the National Commission on the Rights of the Child. It is hoped that the commission will be allowed to function independently as envisioned in the National Commission on the Rights of the Child Act, 2017.

The writer is the former chairperson of the National Commission on Human Rights.