

## BLISS: From Exploitation to Entrepreneurship

Pakistan



Saba Gul



### Budget:

\$10,000 - \$50,000

### Website:

<http://www.bagsforbliss.org>

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### Project Summary

#### Elevator Pitch

#### **Concise Summary: Help us pitch this solution! Provide an explanation within 3-4 short sentences.**

BLISS is a social enterprise that empowers adolescent girls in rural Pakistan who must forego an education to work long hours and support their families. We couple education with entrepreneurial training, providing girls the tools to launch their own embroidered handcrafts micro-enterprise. The profits fund their schooling, thus retaining them in school as well as boosting their earning potential.

### About You

#### Organization:

BLISS: Business and Life Skills School

[Visit website](#)

#### Section 1: About You

##### First Name

Saba

##### Last Name

Gul

##### Website

<http://www.bagsforbliss.org>

##### Country

, MA

#### Section 2: About Your Organization

##### Is your initiative connected to an established organization?

Yes

##### Organization Name

BLISS: Business and Life Skills School

**Organization Phone**

650-576-1030

**Organization Address**

Cambridge MA 02139

**Organization Country**

, MA

**How long has this organization been operating?**

Less than a year

Your idea

**Country your work focuses on**

Innovation

**What makes your innovation unique?**

(1) Catering To Highly Neglected Population

Young laborers are the most neglected customer in the educational marketplace. While education-focused NGOs work to improve the quality and affordability of schools, none battle the opportunity cost of attendance for this bottom-of-the-pyramid population, for whom every hour in school means lost wages: drop out rates are soaring despite free schools. BLISS offers monetary incentives that compensate for wages lost, making it the most affordable education provider. Over time, the profits from their micro-enterprises provide this compensation.

Our focus is on adolescent refugee girls - a vulnerable, disadvantaged population whose exploitation has led to endless cycles of poverty, and whose empowerment can create lasting change for communities.

(2) Self-Sustaining Model

Sustainability is the new megatrend in business and BLISS has fully embraced it. The operational costs of BLISS are supported by the global sales of its unique products, making it highly scalable and sustainable.

(3) Giving Girls Ownership

BLISS aims to give ownership of the businesses to the enrolled girls, and make them self-reliant. We do not just connect the girls to markets - we teach them how to do market research, so they can find their own markets.

(4) Positive Feedback Cycle

Our focus on practical skills translates directly to higher lifetime earning potential, changing attitudes towards the utility of education, and increasing the demand for it. In our target community, parents decide whether to send their children to school by asking themselves: "Will schooling increase my child's wage potential?" The answer is almost always "no", because most well-paying jobs require higher education - a luxury families living below the poverty line cannot afford. BLISS changes this answer to "yes", by training students in marketable skills that improve job prospects without requiring a college degree.

**Do you have a patent for this idea?**

Impact

**Tell us about the social impact of your innovation. Please include both numbers and stories as evidence of this impact**

- From Exploitative Labor to Empowerment - BLISS rescues young female laborers from exploitative wages and deplorable work conditions. It lifts them to the status of micro entrepreneurs, training them in design, marketing and sales, and increasing their mobility, self-esteem and household income. BLISS disrupts the intergenerational transfer of poverty and illiteracy via practical, income-boosting skills training that makes the girls self-sufficient and able to move away from exploitative labor forever.

- Retaining Girls in School - The profits from the micro-enterprises enable access to education for working girls who otherwise would not be able to attend school. With BLISS, an adolescent girl is able to attend and stay in school longer, remain healthy, and gain useful skills. She will marry later, have fewer and healthier children, and earn an income that she will invest back into her family and community.

- Pilot Implementation and Community Responses - Our pilot project kicked off in October 2009, with 40 Afghan refugee girls aged 15 to 24, in Attock, Pakistan. These girls were previously hand-weaving carpets at looms for 14 hours a day to earn between \$1 and \$1.50. They now attend school where they are taught the school's regular math and science curriculum, as well as embroidery and business acumen, with the goal of producing and marketing high-quality, embroidered handbags. Until the handbags go on sale and start generating revenue to compensate for lost wages, BLISS gives the girls monetary incentives via our seed funding - the incentives are \$2 more than the wages they would earn if they were to skip school and work instead.

This pilot has been a tremendous validation of the success of our model. The community response has been overwhelmingly positive, and girls' attendance has been more regular than ever before. In the last 6 months, BLISS has gotten more than 100 requests for new enrollments from never-been-schooled girls - an average of 1 request every two days.

Fatima, 15, says: "I love to read and write, but it is very hard for my father to send me to school. BLISS has reduced the burden of my education on my family. I will spend the money I get from coming to school on books. I hope many people buy my work so I can stay in school."

BLISS has been strongly advocated by the families, as well as the village elder, Abdul Jabbar: "This is very good for our children", he told the rest of the men at our orientation meeting with the parents. "The carpet industry we work in is not doing well, and we are sick of the long hours. This is a way for our girls to learn a new skill, and also attend school."

**Problem: Describe the primary problem(s) that your innovation is addressing**

There are more than 200 million youth across the world employed in labor of some form - working in industries such as carpet weaving, sporting

goods, textile, and surgical instruments. Not only are these youth denied their basic right to education and stripped of any hope for a financially secure future, they work in inhumane conditions for long hours and on meager wages. Most make between 20 cents and \$1 a day for 12 to 15 hours of work, and a majority suffer from health problems caused by the physical exertion. They cannot attend school because their families depend on their wages. They are illiterate because they are poor, and they will stay poor because they are illiterate. BLISS is a solution to this poverty-illiteracy trap.

In Attock, our current focus, there is a grave reality on the ground - thousands of female laborers spend their days hunched over carpet looms that span the entire length and width of their houses, and get paid a meager amount per square meter of carpet weaved. Girls with beautiful faces, but with hands blackened and hardened by weaving for up to 14 hours every single day. Their families cannot survive without their wages, and there is not a single hour to spare to attend school.

There is a pressing, unmet need for educational programs that do not pose an opportunity cost to young laborers. There is also a need for these schemes to equip them with practical skills that improve their job prospects without the necessity of attending institutes of higher education. Currently no schemes sustainably cater to these needs of working youth.

**Actions: Describe the steps that you are taking to make your innovation a success. Include a description of the business model. What might prevent that success?**

(1) Pilot Project

Our pilot project in Pakistan is helping us learn more about the community and continuously refine our model to better fit local needs. We have actively engaged the elders of the community and incorporated their feedback into our model.

Our entrepreneurship curriculum is being developed via a partnership with ECDI (<http://www.ecdipakistan.org/>) - a leader in the field, with over 20 years of experience in providing entrepreneurial training to rural girls and women. We have actively engaged the community in the customization of this curriculum.

(2) Strong Partnerships

BLISS serves as a plug-in to existing school infrastructure and curriculum. We have partnered with Barakat (<http://www.barakatworld.org>), an NGO that has been operating in Attock for 20 years and runs the local schools in Attock. By working through them, we have gained the community's trust, as well as access to its pool of experienced employees.

(3) Handbags Design, Production and Marketing

We have, on ground in Pakistan, a team of professional textile and bag designers who train the girls in creating embroidery patterns for each handbag. Our business classes train the girls in the local marketing and sales of the handbags, leading to a complete community buy-in over time.

Initially, we will connect the girls to local and global markets, while simultaneously training them marketing and sales. Our customers are in Pakistan and the US, where the handbag market is worth over \$7 billion. We have extensively researched this market with the help of consultants and experienced bag producers. We have also conducted surveys and in-person discussions with potential customers and retailers to garner consumer feedback on our handbag samples. We have started taking pre-orders for bags and have received interest from as far as the Philippines. Our first line of 6 unique designs for the handbags (with 30 pieces for each design) will ship in August 2010.

The proceeds from the handbag sales will sustain the costs incurred by the enrolled girls, such as purchase of raw materials, and compensation for lost wages. Part of the proceeds will sustain BLISS operational and training costs.

We are cognizant of a few challenges that we will need to overcome for BLISS to be a success:

- Cultural attitudes resisting female education. We have sold education as a future investment to community elders, and used their support to get households on board.
- Competing for-profit enterprises can tempt youth away from us by paying them better. Our challenge is to make school fun and relevant, and sell it as a practical investment to parents, so they value their child's time in school as more than just the monetary incentives it brings.

**Results: Describe the expected results of these actions over the next three years. Please address each year separately, if possible**

YEAR 1:

We will continue to run our pilot project that is bringing 40 girls to school in Attock, Pakistan and providing them necessary schooling and entrepreneurship training. A large part of our first year will be spent in prototyping and design iterations, with shipment of our handbags to local and global markets starting mid to late 2010.

YEAR 2:

In our second year, we expect to reach break-even point through the sale of the embroidered handbags. We expect to train about 500 girls in Attock and neighboring communities, sell about 10,000 high-quality handbags and generate close to \$800,000 in sales revenue. We also expect to build sustainable partnerships with raw material suppliers, fair trade distribution channels, educational NGOs and schools in this time period.

YEAR 3:

By 2012, we aim to scale to 2000 girls in Attock, Lahore and Karachi, as well as start exploring expansion to other countries such as Bangladesh and India where large populations of young female laborers can benefit from our model. These countries will also serve as markets for our products. By year 3, we expect to generate close to \$3 million in revenue, most of which will go back directly to the micro-entrepreneurs, while some will be used to sustain our operating and training costs.

By year 5, BLISS plans to scale to about 5000 girls, and by year 10, to 20,000 girls, thus affecting about 10,000 families.

We have received very strong interest from local organizations and schools to partner, as well as provide funding/investment. Our actual scaling may be steeper than the projections.

**How many people will your project serve annually?**

More than 10,000

**What is the average monthly household income in your target community, in US Dollars?**

Less than \$50

**Does your innovation seek to have an impact on public policy?**

No

**If your innovation seeks to impact public policy, how?**

Does not seek to impact public policy at this stage.

## Sustainability

### What stage is your Social Enterprise in?

Operating for less than a year

### Does your organization have a board of directors or an advisory board?

Yes

### Does your organization have a non monetary partnerships with NGOs?

Yes

### Does your organization have a non monetary partnerships with businesses?

Yes

### Does your organization have a non monetary partnerships with government?

No

### Please tell us more about how partnerships could be critical to the success of your Social Enterprise

(1) With Educational Organizations/Schools - Since we are a plug-in to existing schools, partnering with these is crucial to our success. Currently we are working with Barakat Inc, which has provided education and health services to vulnerable populations in Afghanistan, Pakistan and India for over 15 years. Future budding partnerships include MEDA and ECDI, whose 'From Behind the Veil' program led to self-sufficiency and a 300% increase in income for over 6000 women micro-entrepreneurs.

(2) With Suppliers - We plan to work with large fabric producers and leather tanneries in Pakistan, and leverage the growing focus on CSR to receive pro-bono services such as free/subsidized bulk fabric and leather for the production of our handbags.

(3) With Designers - We have already partnered with well-established fabric and bag designers in Pakistan to ensure that our products are trendy and marketable. We are working with an existing exclusive handbag house in Pakistan called Zanbeel, and are using their infrastructure and resources to finish our first set of bags. We have also received requests for custom embroideries from them for use on their products. The owner of Zanbeel has successfully marketed handbags in Pakistan, Dubai and the UK, and is also advising our team on marketing strategy. We are also working with renowned designer, Mahin Hussain, who will do a collection for us.

(4) With Marketing Outlets/Retailers: To market our handbags, strong partnerships with established distribution channels are critical. Partnerships in place and under exploration include exclusive high-end boutiques in Pakistan, Dubai and the US.

### We would like to learn more about how your initiative is financially supported. Please explain your business plan/revenue model

BLISS is currently in the process of acquiring registration status as a 501 (c)(3). We have designed our model to be self-sustainable such that BLISS operating and training costs are funded by the sales of our products. The profits also allow enrolled girls to fund their schooling and contribute to their household incomes.

For the first year, when we have not reached break-even, we will rely on external funding sources. Currently we have funding from social venture competitions, incubators, foundations, and individual donations from philanthropists. We are exploring corporate sponsorships as well as investment capital.

## The Story

### What was the defining moment that led you to this innovation?

Azaada Khan is a girl who grew up as a boy under the conservative rule of the Taliban that did not allow girls to attend school. I first heard her story from Arti Pandey, Program Director of Barakat Inc, our partner NGO in Pakistan, and the organization that owns and runs the schools for our pilot project.

Arti met Azaada in July of 2008: "You thought I was boy, didn't you? Because I dress like boy and walk like boy - yes?" said Azaada. "I always dress like boy. People think I am boy, but I am girl. But I don't like to be girl."

Growing up as a boy for almost a decade, Azaada experienced the freedom boys in her community did. Her hair remained uncovered and she walked around fearlessly. Most importantly, she attended school.

I was moved enough by Azaada, and the reality that thousands of girls live with every day - that of never being able to get an education - that I decided to visit the communities in the city of Attock in northern Pakistan. In January 2009, I was faced with a grave reality - that of thousands of female laborers in the carpet-weaving refugee community of Attock. Girls with beautiful faces, but with hands that were blackened and hardened by weaving carpets for up to 14 hours every single day. Carpet looms that spanned the entire length and width of their houses. Wages paid by the square meter of carpet weaved. Not a single hour to spare to attend school. The vicious cycle of poverty and illiteracy that transcended generations. Everywhere I went it was the same story - the girls must stay home and weave carpets because their families cannot survive without their wages.

Upon returning from Pakistan, along with co-founder Eleni Orphanides, I set about creating a sustainable market-based model to give these girls the opportunity to attend school while still contributing to their household incomes, but in a much more ethical, responsible fashion and with the potential for long-term change.

### Tell us about the person—the social innovator—behind this idea.

Saba Gul, Co-Founder and Executive Director of BLISS, is a recent alumna of MIT, where she studied Computer Science and Economics. She was born and raised in Pakistan, and has a passion for international development, female education and entrepreneurship.

Previously, she has worked on grassroots development projects in post-tsunami Sri Lanka, taught entrepreneurial seminars in Ethiopia, and helped design curriculum for universities in China. Her travels and work in the developing world have given her exposure to the challenges of working closely with rural communities. As an undergraduate and later a graduate student at MIT, she had the honor of working alongside experts in international development such as Amy Smith, founder of the Development Lab at MIT.

Through college and as a young working professional, Saba has been a leader, and a do-er. She recently led the panel on Entrepreneurship at the Pakistan Conference at Harvard University. She volunteers her time to the Association for the Development of Pakistan, which invests capital in promising social ventures. Saba also serves on the board of the MIT Club of Minnesota as the K-12 Chair.

Having been born and raised in Pakistan, she understands the cultural underpinnings of the work BLISS is doing in rural communities, and is committed to using the resources at her disposal to bring lasting change in their lives.

**How did you first hear about Changemakers?**

College or university

**If through another source, please provide the information**

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