



Child Labor in Pakistan: Causes and Government Initiatives for Elimination

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Abstract

Child labour remains a critical challenge in developing countries, particularly in Pakistan, where poverty, limited educational access, and socio-economic disparities continue to drive its prevalence. This study, conducted in 2017, employed a mixed-methods approach to explore the underlying causes of child labour and assess the effectiveness of government initiatives aimed at its elimination. Quantitative data revealed a strong correlation between child labour, high poverty rates, and restricted access to education, while qualitative responses provided deeper insights into systemic issues such as weak law enforcement and inadequate welfare infrastructure. Despite policy efforts, poor implementation and unequal resource distribution—especially in rural areas—have hindered progress. The study recommends a comprehensive strategy that includes expanding access to quality education, strengthening legal enforcement, and fostering collaboration among government bodies, civil society, and the private sector. Addressing these root causes is essential to breaking the cycle of poverty and ensuring a better future for affected children.

Keywords: child labour; poverty; educational opportunities; mixed-methods strategy; Government initiatives

1. Introduction

Child labour remains a pressing social and economic issue in Pakistan, with millions of children still engaged in hazardous occupations to financially assist their families. Despite significant efforts by the government and international bodies to address this problem, the prevalence of child labour continues to escalate, highlighting persistent gaps in policy effectiveness and implementation. This research paper critically examines the primary factors contributing to the persistence and growth of child labour in Pakistan, including economic pressures, lack of educational access, and societal norms. Additionally, the study evaluates existing governmental initiatives aimed at eradicating child labour, analysing their strengths and limitations. Despite national and international efforts, child labour remains widespread in Pakistan. This paper investigates the socio-economic and educational factors contributing to its persistence and evaluates the effectiveness of government initiatives. The central research question is: To what extent have government policies addressed the root causes of child labour in Pakistan?

2. Literature Review

Child labour in Pakistan is a deeply entrenched issue shaped by a complex interplay of poverty, educational deficiencies, socio-economic pressures, and gender disparities. Despite decades of national and international efforts, its prevalence remains alarmingly high.

2.1 Poverty as the Central Driver

Poverty consistently emerges as the most significant factor contributing to child labour. Early studies (Hussain, 1986; Irfan, 1981; Khan, 1982; Levy, 1985) established a strong link between economic deprivation and child labour. More recent research by (Iqbal et al., 2019) confirmed that households below the poverty line are significantly more likely to engage children in labour. Similarly, (Ali & Ahmad, 2021) found that economic shocks, such as inflation and pandemic-related disruptions, have intensified child labour, particularly in urban slums. These findings reinforce the urgent need for robust social safety nets and poverty alleviation strategies.

2.2 Educational Deficiencies and Gender Inequality

Limited access to education and gender disparities further exacerbates child labour. Patrinos and Psacharopoulos (1995) demonstrated that higher maternal education correlates with lower child labour rates, highlighting the importance of female literacy. It is emphasized that boys are more likely to be involved in paid labour, while girls often face hidden forms of exploitation in domestic settings (Degraff et al., 1993; Fatima & Javed, 2020). These patterns suggest that educational interventions must be gender-sensitive and inclusive.

Socio-Economic and Demographic Pressures

Beyond poverty and education, other socio-economic factors such as unemployment, overpopulation, and family economic dependence play critical roles. Degraff et al. (1993) and Porter (1975) identified unemployment and income disparity as key contributors, while (Boyden, 1991; Ray, 1999) highlighted the impact of overpopulation and familial financial pressures. Shah and Yousaf (2022) confirmed that rising unemployment and inflation have pushed more children into informal sectors like agriculture and domestic work.

2.3 Methodological Approaches in Existing Research

Studies on child labour have employed diverse methodologies. Quantitative analyses, such as those (Grootaert & Kanbur, 1995) provide statistical evidence of poverty's impact, while qualitative research (Bequele & Boyden, 1988) explores socio-cultural dimensions. Mixed methods approach, like that of (Rauf et al., 2020), offer a more holistic understanding by combining household surveys with ethnographic interviews. This integrated approach is increasingly recognized as essential for capturing the complexity of child labour dynamics.

2.4 Policy and Governance Challenges

Despite the existence of legal frameworks, enforcement remains weak. International organizations such as the International Labour Organization (ILO) and UNICEF have played pivotal roles in policy development, yet local implementation is hindered by bureaucratic inefficiencies and limited funding (Donnelly & Petherick, 2004; UNICEF Pakistan, 2022). Ahmed and Rizvi (2021) advocate for decentralized governance and community-based monitoring to improve policy outcomes.

The literature underscores that child labour in Pakistan is not merely an economic issue but a multifaceted social challenge. Addressing it requires integrated strategies that combine poverty alleviation, educational reform, gender equity, and effective policy enforcement. Future research should prioritize longitudinal studies and participatory evaluations to inform sustainable interventions.

3. Methodology

A mixed-methods design was selected to capture both statistical trends and nuanced perspectives on child labour. Quantitative data were collected via structured online surveys, while qualitative insights were derived from open-ended responses, enabling triangulation and enhancing validity. The survey comprised predominantly close-ended questions, supplemented by a limited number of open-ended questions designed to elicit qualitative insights from participants. The study sample consisted of 57 educated participants, of whom 56.8% were female and 36.8% were male, with data collection completed in 2017.

Qualitative data from the open-ended questions were analysed thematically to capture nuanced perspectives, providing context to the quantitative findings. The mixed-method approach allowed for triangulation, enhancing the validity and reliability of the research results. This study adhered strictly to ethical standards outlined by the School of Law at the University of Lahore, Pakistan. Approval for conducting the research was formally obtained from the department head following a thorough ethical review meeting. All ethical guidelines set forth by the institution were rigorously observed throughout the research process. Informed consent was secured from each participant prior to their involvement in the study. Participants provided written consent, clearly informed about the purpose of the research, the confidentiality of their responses, and the use of collected data solely for academic purposes. The informed consent process complied fully with the ethical guidelines established by the University of Lahore, ensuring the protection of participant rights and privacy.

4. Findings and Results

Demographic characteristics: The demographic analysis showed a higher female participation rate (61%) compared to male (39%), reflecting a balanced gender perspective. A significant majority of respondents were Muslims (98%), with a minority from the Ahmadi community (2%), representing Pakistan's religious demographics.

Gender disparity in parental education: In addition, family background analysis indicated that while 57% of respondents' fathers had higher education, only 26% of mothers had higher education, compared to 57% of fathers, suggesting maternal education may influence child labour decisions. Most families were large (8–9 members), suggesting increased economic pressure contributing to child labour.

Sectoral distribution: Occupational and demographic insights revealed that respondents' families were primarily engaged in local business (46%) and agriculture (23%). A majority (85%) of respondents were from Punjab, predominantly from urban areas (68%), though rural perspectives (32%) were also represented. The employment patterns indicated child labour in shops (41%), domestic settings (20%), agriculture (20%), and hospitality sectors (18%), with the most vulnerable age group being 11–13 years (40%). Participants highlighted that these varied sectors expose children to different forms of exploitation, emphasizing the complexity of addressing child labour across multiple industries. Therefore, child labour is prevalent in shops (41%), agriculture (20%), and domestic work (20%), indicating widespread economic exploitation.

Table: 1 Occupational and demographic distribution

Families in business	46%
Families in agriculture	23%
Respondents from Punjab	85%
Respondents from cities	68%
Respondents from Rural Areas	32%
Working children in shops	41%
Working children in domestic work	20%
Working children in agriculture	20%
Working Children in Hotels and Restaurants	18%
Working Children Aged 11-13 Years	40%
Working Children Aged 13–14 Years	28%

Socio-economic drivers: Furthermore, Socio-economic analysis identified poverty (81%) and lack of education and awareness (63%) as primary drivers of child labour. Many respondents described poverty as not only economic deprivation but also as intertwined with cultural and educational deficits. Participants indicated that economic desperation often forces families to prioritize immediate income from child labour over long-term educational benefits. Historical analysis revealed a significant rise in child labour between 1997 and 2007 (26%), suggesting economic instability and inadequate policy enforcement during this period. Punjab (67%) was recognized for notable anti-child labour efforts, followed by Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (24%), highlighting regional disparities in policy implementation.

Participants opinions: Participant recommendations also emphasized providing free education (66%), economic support (20%), and increased school enrolment initiatives (14%) as vital measures. Participants strongly advocated for sustainable employment opportunities for parents (28%) and widespread literacy promotion (26%) to alleviate the root economic pressures leading to child labour. Additionally, respondents recommended greater involvement from government entities, NGOs, media, and educational institutions to enhance awareness, policy implementation, and societal attitudes towards child labour.

Table: 2 Opinion to eliminate child labour

Measure/Opinion	Percentage of respondents
Free education	66%
Economic support	20%
Enrolling children in educational institutions	14%
Sustainable job opportunities for parents	28%
Increasing literacy and promoting education	26%
Collaboration with all public and private sectors	Yes

Qualitative responses provided further depth, revealing widespread perceptions of child labour as a significant societal issue undermining Pakistan's development. Respondents expressed concern that current governmental measures, while positive in intention, lacked adequate enforcement and follow-up. Several participants pointed out the need for stronger community-based initiatives, more stringent legal enforcement, and targeted social protection programs for vulnerable families. Overall, these expanded findings underline the complex interplay of socio-economic, educational, and demographic factors influencing child labour, reinforcing the necessity for comprehensive, collaborative, and multi-sectoral strategies to effectively mitigate this critical issue in Pakistan.

5. Discussion

The findings from this mixed-methods research highlight critical insights into the multifaceted issue of child labour in Pakistan. The combination of quantitative and qualitative methodologies provided a robust understanding of not only the prevalence of child labour but also the underlying socio-economic, educational, and demographic factors driving it. The demographic analysis underscored the balanced participation of both genders, which enriched the study by providing diverse perspectives on the issue. The notable disparity in educational attainment between mothers and fathers suggests that maternal education significantly impacts family decisions regarding child labour, reinforcing the need to prioritize educational empowerment for women.

Economic pressures resulting from large family sizes and limited educational opportunities emerged as central contributors to child labour. The prevalence of child labour in diverse sectors such as shops, agriculture, domestic service, and hospitality indicates that economic hardships and lack of education are pervasive across various economic activities, necessitating sector-specific interventions. The study revealed regional variations in policy implementation effectiveness, particularly between Punjab and other provinces, underscoring the need for more equitable resource distribution and tailored regional strategies. The historical increase in child labour between 1997 and 2007 points to significant policy enforcement gaps during that period, indicating the importance of robust and consistent policy application.

Recommendations from participants emphasized the urgency of integrated socio-economic policies, particularly enhancing access to free education and economic support for families. Moreover, the importance of creating sustainable employment for adults emerged as a critical factor for reducing reliance on child labour. The qualitative findings stressed the necessity for a collaborative approach involving government, NGOs, educational institutions, and media to foster awareness, improve enforcement of existing laws, and shift societal norms and attitudes. In conclusion, addressing child labour in Pakistan demands a comprehensive, multi-sectoral approach, supported by effective policy enforcement, educational empowerment, economic initiatives, and collaborative societal engagement. The study underscores the urgent need for targeted interventions in sectors where child labour is most prevalent. Regional disparities in policy enforcement, particularly between Punjab and other provinces, highlight the necessity for localized strategies and equitable resource distribution.

6. Practical implications

The findings highlight the urgent need for targeted government interventions in sectors or areas where child labour is most prevalent. Regional disparities in policy enforcement, particularly between Punjab and other provinces, highlight the necessity for localized strategies and equitable resource distribution. Also, Practical implications include the development of community-based education programmes, improved access to social welfare services, and collaboration between local authorities and NGOs. These measures (educational initiatives, economic support and strong law enforcement) can help to reduce economic pressures on families, societal awareness and promote school attendance, ultimately contributing to long term socio-economic development.

7. Conclusion and recommendations

The study highlights inspiring elements by emphasizing the significant potential for positive change. It presents a hopeful vision of a future where targeted interventions can effectively eliminate child labour, ensuring that every child in Pakistan can thrive and positively contribute to society. This optimism underscores the transformative power of education, economic support, and collaborative societal efforts.

Child labour in Pakistan is a complex issue driven primarily by poverty, lack of education, and insufficient enforcement of child labour laws. Despite some progress, particularly in provinces like Punjab, significant challenges remain in effectively addressing this problem across the country. Comprehensive strategies involving economic support, educational initiatives, strict law enforcement, and societal awareness are essential to eliminating child labour and ensure the well-being and prospects of Pakistani children.

7.1 Recommendations

To effectively eliminate child labour in Pakistan, this study proposes a multi-dimensional strategy that addresses the root socio-economic and structural causes. The following recommendations are organized into five key areas:

1. Economic Support for Vulnerable Families

- Implement targeted cash transfer programs, food security initiatives, and subsidies to reduce the financial burden on low-income households.
- Promote sustainable employment opportunities for adults to reduce reliance on child labour as a source of family income.

2. Education Access and Incentives

- Increase investment in free and quality education, with a particular focus on female literacy and maternal education.
- Provide scholarships, school supplies, and school feeding programs to improve enrolment and retention rates.
- Expand vocational and technical training programs to offer alternative pathways for youth and reduce dependency on informal labour markets.

3. Legal Enforcement and Monitoring

- Strengthen enforcement of existing child labour laws through regular inspections and monitoring mechanisms across industries.
- Introduce stricter penalties for violations to deter employers from exploiting child labour.
- Establish community-based monitoring systems to ensure local accountability and responsiveness.

4. Awareness and Community Engagement

- Launch nationwide awareness campaigns using traditional and digital media to highlight the harms of child labour and promote the value of education.

- Engage religious leaders, educators, and local organizations to shift societal norms and attitudes.
- Promote literacy and education as tools for empowerment and long-term poverty reduction.

5. Regional and International Collaboration

- Develop province-specific strategies tailored to the unique socio-economic conditions of each region.
- Collaborate with international organizations and NGOs to leverage expertise, resources, and best practices.
- Use global platforms to raise awareness and secure international support for child labour eradication efforts.

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Tables

- Table: 1 Occupational and demographic distribution
- Table: 2 Opinion to Eliminate Child Labor