

## **Exploring Socio-Economic, Cultural, and Political Determinants of Child Labor in Pakistan: A Qualitative Study of Stakeholders' Perspectives in Lahore**

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### **Abstract**

In Pakistan, the serious challenge of child labor is continuously on the rise, adversely affecting the ability of children to grow, learn, and make their future better. Though educational programs and different laws are introduced by the government, the phenomenon continues due to the poor socio-economic state of the parents of children and their families. This study, in this regard, aims to explore the socio-economic, political, and cultural factors of child labor in Pakistan. This study is qualitative in nature, based on the Interpretivist school of thought. Semi-structured interviews of the lawyers, NGO workers, government officials, and community activists were conducted. The graphic universe was Lahore city. Thematic analysis of the study deduced that the cost of living, large family size, poverty, and unemployment were the main push factors behind engaging children in child labor. Moreover, the cultural belief that engaging children in work at an early age builds a more responsible personality was also another factor behind this practice. Poor enforcement of laws and malpractices in government departments make it difficult to protect children from this labor. The opportunity cost was another reason behind child labor, as parents compromise the education of the children, even though it is free for all, against the indirect costs required for family living. So, it is concluded that to eliminate child labor only laws alone are not enough. There is a dire need for a call to action on the part of all stakeholders. A collaborative action plan by the government and civil society can be helpful to raise children in a safe and bright environment free from economic burden.

**Key Words:** Qualitative Study, Lahore, Child Labor, Socio-Economic Factors, Cultural Determinants, Political Influences,

## **Background**

The progression and decline of a country are dependent on the youth and children who make the future of any nation. Only those states progress who have enlightened, educated, and well-socialized youth take the responsibility of the country. In early ages, if children are provided with proper nurturing and educational facilities, they grow as impactful youth who can lead a nation. However, in early ages, if children are forced into labor and earnings for the family, their growth is compromised, and they remain unable to positively contribute to society. Child labor refers to “the employment of children in work that deprives them of their basic rights — particularly the right to education — and harms their physical, mental, and social well-being” (Awan et al., 2011).

The future of children remains insecure in many developing countries having lower per capita income. They are not given the basic right of education and a normal childhood and are forced into the workforce in their childhood. As per the International Labor Organization (ILO), children aged five to fourteen are engaged in part-time and full-time work, and this counts for approximately 250 million. A majority of the around 120 million works in agriculture, industries, and domestic work. In some cases, multinational companies are also involved in engaging children in labor work (Bachman, 2000).

The issue of child labor can be traced back to the industrial revolution in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, where capitalists engaged a vast majority of the underage children in labor work in the industries at cheap rates. As the motif was profiting the generation so the education and welfare of the children were completely ignored. However, after the industrial revolution and later after World War II, the laws for the protection of children were passed, and the adoption of information technology reduced the burden of child work (Awan et al., 2011).

A clear understanding of Child labor has been provided by recent studies, particularly by the International Labor Organization (2024). The categorization of work by ILO has been

manifested in three types that include dangerous tasks and conditions associated with forced labor, indicating the most severe form, regular non-hazardous work, and light work.

In developing countries like Pakistan, overpopulation, poverty, lack of education, unemployment, and poor health care facilities are the key causes of child labor (Ahmad, 2012). The socio-economic pressures from the family are also the core factors behind engaging girls in the domestic workforce and male children in other types of work, like in industries and automobile shops. The ingrained socio-cultural norms and beliefs further add a caveat to it.

Child labor exists in both urban and rural settings in Pakistan. The main factors behind child labor can be recognized as low family income, illiteracy, and ignorance of parents as well as large family size in Punjab province (Mirza & Afzal, 2022). The central role of socio-economic status is recognized by another study in which it was found that parents who had hood household income and a higher level of education do not prefer to involve their children in work at early ages (Gul, Hasan, & Muhammad, 2024).

In this regard, global conventions and legislations through international organizations have also made a lot of effort. But in Pakistan, the issue is still there, as most of the population is illiterate and living below the poverty line. In this situation, parents prefer to send their children to work to cover the daily expenses of the house through their Labor. Without educating parents and children, it is a big challenge to reduce or eliminate child labor.

### **Problem Statement**

In lower-income nations of the world, child labor has been recognized as a critical issue that needs immediate attention. Pakistan is amongst the countries facing the issue of child labor for a long time, though awareness campaigns have been raised multiple times; however, poor policy-making process, low political will, and insufficient law enforcement are the factors of

the persistent issue of child labor. In this regard, this study aimed to investigate the fundamental socio-economic factors of child labor and to provide plausible guidelines to policymakers for preventing the issue.

### **Research Question**

- What are the socio-economic, political, and cultural factors behind child labor in Punjab province, Pakistan?
- How are decisions of families and community involvement resistant to the laws and legislation enforcement in the true sense?

### **Objectives**

1. To explore the factors of poverty, family size, and unemployment of parents as hidden factors behind child labor.
2. To discover the traditions and cultural beliefs behind the acceptance of child labor in society.
3. To explore the ways issues in law enforcement and corruption lead to child labor.

### **Significance of Study**

Healthy, strong, and educated children are the true strength of any nation. Education, health care, and a protected environment are the responsibilities of the state to provide for every child. The study is based on focusing on the importance of safeguarding children who are the future of Pakistan by emphasizing the push factors of child labor, i.e., socio-economic, cultural, and political. In order to provide a secure and prosperous future to upcoming generations, it is important to understand the root causes of child labor in Pakistan so that civil society and legislators can work together to improve education, reduce child labor, and improve the living standards.

## **Literature Review**

Ahmad and Khan (2023) observed that the COVID-19 pandemic along with ensuring economic instability raised the number of child laborers in Pakistan's informal sectors, especially in urban slums areas. The children, particularly boys, are forced into the waste-picking street vending for maintaining the bread and butter of households and to support their families. Another factor that added to the rising rate of child Labor, as stated by Save the Children (2023), is that the devastating floods adversely affected the Baluchistan and Sindh area. The magnitude of the flood was so vast that it had long-term effects on the families, leading to school drop-out of children and engaging them in daily earning to complete the necessities of life.

The rate of child labor can be reduced through the education of children and enhancing the engagement of parents in different family programs (UNICEF, 2024). The report proposed increasing social protection initiatives and cash transfer program for at risk families. The organization further cautioned that gender disparities inequalities, with girls especially vulnerable to domestic child labor.

According to the International Labor Organization (ILO) and the Government of Pakistan (2022), an estimated 3.4 million children aged 5–17 are involved in child labor, primarily in agriculture, domestic work, and small-scale industries. The report noted that legal framework has improved, weak law enforcement and largely informal nature of many workplaces obstruct the effective application of child protection measures.

Mirza et al. (2013) examined the longstanding issue of child labor in Pakistan since its independence. Their findings demonstrated that poverty and large family sizes continues to be significant factors compelling children to leave school and enter to work force. The study

further insisted that poor educational infrastructure and social inequalities contribute to the persistence of his problem.

Gulzar (2009), in his study of District Swabi, found that prompt population growth and scarce resource were main causes of child labor. Families with minimal earning members were compelled to have their children work to support household income. The study reported that 73% of working children were member of families with several dependents.

The financial burden of families was the main reason identified by the research as the crucial factor behind child Labor. Most of the families are poverty-ridden and can hardly meet their daily expenses, so in order to fulfill the basic needs, children are sent to the automobile shops as helpers, factories, or into domestic work. In this way, the cycle of intergenerational poverty goes on and exploitation of labor is also continued (Mahmood et al., 2005)

Cigno et al. (2002) contended that child labor majorly influenced by parental choice. Families with limited resources especially in rural areas with few and schools are few and distant school commonly cannot afford to educate their children. Consequently, many children end up working in agricultural labor, which contributing to high level of illiteracy rates among rural populations.

Ranjan (2001) determined that in areas with widespread access to education, child labor becomes economically inefficient. The prevalence of child labor is largely shaped by economic condition and income distribution. Similarly, Rogers and Swinnerton (2001) argued that unequal distribution of income exacerbates the problem; whereas, families with high income are able to educate their children, although the poor cannot.

Basu and Ray (2001) observed that parents make decision jointly reduces child labor decreases as household resources are allocated more efficiently. Rahatullah (2001), in his study of Mingora District Swat, determined poverty, large family size, low parental education, and limited earnings as considerable causes to child labor.

Basu and Van (2002) and the U.S. Department of Labor (2002) emphasized that poverty in family is the most major factor of child labor. Fallon and Tzannatos (1998) and Udoy (2003) also highlighted that reduction household income in household make it more likely for children to engage in child labor.

Magamma et al. (2025) highlighted that long standing socio-economic disparities — such as gaps in education, availability of healthcare, unemployment, and skewed foreign investment — are the major driving force for the persistence of child labor across South Asia.

Research by Kambhampati and Ranjan (2006), Tesfay (2003), and Kak (2004) indicate that economic development can assist to mitigate child labor. Tesfay identified that when per capita GDP exceeds \$1,000, child labor rates reduce. In the same way, Kak (2004) found that economic development plays a major role in decreasing child labor.

Lopez-Calva (2001) correlated social and cultural norms with child labor, noting that acceptance of child labor is tend to be greater in developing countries. He also proposed that globalization and education can lessen the social endorsement of child labor. Davies and Voy (2009) additionally reinforced the promotion of education as crucial strategy to combat child labor.

The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP, 2010; 2012) recognized poverty, big family size, and inadequate literacy rates as main reason of child labor. The 2012 HRCP highlighted that approximately one million children, comprising girls, are work as domestic servants—many of them experience ill treatment and oppression. The report called on government to enforce of labor laws, rebuild schools ruined by natural tragedies, and implant more stronger child protection mechanism.

Ahmed (1991) earlier emphasized that poverty, illiteracy, and migration are primary reasons of child labor in Pakistan, observing that weak implementation of education principals and scarce economic resources have permitted the problem to continues for decades.

## **Methodology**

The qualitative approach was used to explore the socio-economic causes of child labor in Pakistan. The research was conducted by following a scientifically and systematically to collect and analyze data. As Merton (1957) stated, “*Scientific methodology is a system of explicit rules and procedures on the basis of which research is carried out and claims of knowledge are evaluated and tested.*” The qualitative approach facilitated an in-depth exploration of perspectives, occurrence, and explanation lined to child labor.

## **Research Design**

The qualitative research design was employed to examine the social, economic, cultural, and political determinants contributing to child labor in Lahore, Pakistan. This approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of perspectives, encounter, and insight related to child labor.

An exploratory and descriptive research design was employed to understand the major reasons for the existence and persistence of child labor in Pakistan regardless of child labor laws and education programs. Semi-structured interview guide was used to collect the data with stakeholder like NGO workers, government officials, lawyers, and community activists.

Purposive sampling was employed to select participants who are actively working and possess direct practical knowledge and exposure regarding child labor. This approach enables me explore to necessary insight while also allowing the flexibility to explore new ideas that explore new ideas that arouse during the interviews. It is particularly suitable for thematic analysis as it facilitates a natural emergence of meaningful patterns, connections and themes from the participant's narrative.

## **Nature of Study**

Qualitative research approach was adopted to understand the complexity and sensitivity of the topic. This approach helped the researcher to comprehend the lived experiences, emotions, and social realities of individuals working to address child labor. The participants' perspectives and behaviors in a specific context and situation are well addressed in qualitative research (Creswell & Clark, 2011). In this vein, the researchers used the same approach to rigorously explore the in-depth analysis of the child Labor issue in Lahore city, specifically socio-economic, cultural, and political factors.

### **Nature of Data**

The qualitative research approach was used. In-depth interviews were conducted to comprehend the social issue of child labor. The rich data was conducted by the researcher. Data reflected the participants' opinions and narratives.

### **Geographical Setting of the Study**

Lahore, the capital city of province Punjab of Pakistan, was selected to the research. The main reason for selecting Lahore was that it represents distinct socio-economic conditions. It provides access to different occupational sectors where child labor is common like workshops, hotels, restaurants, street vending, and markets. It helped the researcher to collect the primary data that was based on lived experiences of the affected child labor. The lived experiences provided enriched and grounded data.

### **Instrument for Data Collection**

Semi-structured interview guide was used to collect data from the participants. The main reason for using semi structure interview guide was that it allowed both research and participants to answer and shared their lived experiences in more flexible manner. Face-to-face interviews were conducted to help us to understand the topic of child labor and the response of the participants helped the researcher to understand the issue in more detail.

## **Interview Guide**

Open-ended questions were added in an interview guide to maintain focus on the research objectives and allow the participants to express their lived experience freely.

## **Selection of Participants for Interviews**

Purposive sampling was used to select participation that is non-probability technique commonly used in qualitative research. In total 15 participants were interviewed to explore and comprehend the social issue of child labor.

The participants included:

1. Officials working in non-governmental organizations (NGOs) of child welfare and child rights.
2. Social Welfare Department representative.
3. Lawyers major in child protection and labor rights cases.
4. Social activists that are involved in advocacy against child labor.

Before collecting the data, all participants in the research were informed about the purpose of the study. Informed consents were shared with the participants. Interviews were held in an appropriate, comfortable and informal setting to help participants speak openly.

Participation of the research participants were purely volunteer. It was informed the participants that confidentiality will be observers. Ethical considerations were observed in current research.

## **Data Collection and Field Experience**

The research was conducted in two months of period. The interview time was 35 to 45 approximated. The following ethical considerations were carefully observed throughout study:

**Informed consent:** Participants were made aware that the research would be used solely for academic purpose and that they had the right to withdraw at any time.

**Empathy and respect:** The dignity and respect all the participants were upheld throughout the research process.

### **Method of Qualitative Data Analysis**

The nature of the research was exploratory. To analyze the data thematic (domain) analysis was used to interpret the received data. Neuman (2006) in his book stated that, “domain analysis involves identifying key themes and conceptual categories from participants’ narratives”.

The researcher cautiously transcribed the data. The researcher reviewed the transcribed data that made the major domains and coded the relevant phrases and ideas, and organized related to the socio-economic causes of child labor.

This systematic process allowed the researcher to capture the deeper meanings, patterns, and relationships shaping the persistence of child labor in Pakistan.

### **Results**

This study provides a qualitative analysis based on data gathered through in-depth interviews with participants, including officials from non-governmental organizations (NGOs), spokespersons from public organizations, and legal practitioners working on child welfare challenges in Pakistan. The major aim of this analysis is to examine and analyze the socio-economic, psycho-social, and political determinants contributing to child labor, as well as to find out how these factors influence the life experiences of children involved in labor.

The analysis was carried out by using a thematic approach. Main themes and subthemes were recognized by keenly reading and coding of interview transcripts. This technique supported to reveal ongoing patterns, common views, and fundamental knowledge within participants' life histories. The themes analyzed in this study embraces socio-economic factors, political determinants, and psycho-social problems tackled with child laborers.

### **Socio-Economic Factors**

The findings of this study indicate that child labor in Pakistan is a complexed reality deeply which is strongly embedded into the socio-economic disparities. Participants observed that determinants such as poverty, urban migration, cultural norms, large family size, volatile family structures, corruption, and urban migration interrelate intricate ways , perpetuating the issue.

### **Poverty as the Root Cause**

Poverty emerged as the most prominent theme across participants' accounts. Mostly explained that economic strain forces families to rely on their children's earnings for daily survival. Children are frequently regarded as economic contributors rather than dependent in families where adults are out of work or earn fluctuating incomes. As one NGO representative emphasized, *“When a family cannot meet basic needs, a child's income, no matter how small, becomes essential.”*

Participants also highlighted that education is often seen as a privilege beyond the reach of poor households. Even when schooling is free of cost, but it is associated with additional expenses —such as transportation, uniforms, and the possibility cost of lost income—restrain parents to send their children to school. Consequently, poverty not only motivates child labor but also reenforce an intergenerational cycle of illiteracy and insufficiency.

### **Family Size**

Large family size emerged as another considerable theme recognized in the data. Participants described that household with numerous dependents often struggle to meet basic needs such as food, shelter, and clothing. In these types of circumstances, children—particularly the older ones—are prompted or forced to work to ease the financial burden.

Gender disparities also become evident within this theme. It was noted that while girls may be restricted to unpaid domestic labor or informal home-based work whereas boys are mostly sent to earn income, while girls may be restricted to unpaid domestic labor or informal home-based work. This highlighted a gendered division of labor that upholds both economic obligations and cultural norms.

### **Family Circumstances**

Parental illness, death, or addiction, challenging family circumstances were also seen as contributing elements for child labor. Participants noted that those who have lost a parent or especially those who from broken families have lost a parent often take on adult responsibilities prematurely at an early age. Some participants emphasized that children working on the streets often orphans or belong to unstable households. But as a means of survival these children enter the labor not out by choice, but in the absence of family support.

### **Cultural Factors**

In order to normalize child labor cultural beliefs and traditions were frequently discussed as underlying determinates. Working at a young age is regarded positively seen as sign of maturity, responsibility, and skill development in most of the communities. Most of the families believe that early work experience equips children for adult life. One participant stated, *“In our culture, people think it is better for a child to learn a trade than to waste time in school.”*

This cultural acceptance perpetuates the practice and makes efforts to discourage child labor more difficult, as it is seen not as exploitation but as social learning.

## **Corruption**

Another major barrier to elimination child labor was corruption at institutional levels. Participants indicated that poor governance, weak monitoring, and bribery allow of exploitative labor practices to persist. In exchange for personal gain sometimes labor inspectors and government officials sometimes ignore infringements creating a culture of immunity. Such structural corruption not only sustains poverty by denying justice to marginalized families but also sabotages the enforcement of labor laws.

## **Urban Migration**

The phenomenon of rural-to-urban migration was also associated to the widespread incidence of child labor. Family units perusing better avenues in cities like Lahore turn out in informal setting with minimal reach to basic utilities. Many children work in workshops, restaurants, markets or as street vendors because their parents, lacking stable employment, reply on them to contribute to the household income in more vulnerable cases, some become engaged in risky or illegal activities due to absence of supervision and social support.

## **Summary of results**

The qualitative analysis depicts that child labor in Pakistan is a complicated social issue rooted in multiple interconnected determinants. The major causes are poverty, large family size, and lack of education, while cultural acceptance further perpetuates the issue. The study highlighted that any constructive approach in order to tackle child labor must address not only economic disadvantages but also social norms, political accountability, and organizational corruption.

## **Discussion**

In-depth data that was gathered in the research in qualitative research deepen the understanding of child labor through the exploration of social, economic, and cultural dimensions.

### **Socio-Economic and Cultural Factors**

The study major theme highlighted that poverty as the main root cause of child labor in Pakistan. In Pakistan decisions of children's education and work are generally made by parents. In lower class of Pakistan, children are often perceiving as contributors to family income for those families who are living below the poverty line. Education is considered as a luxury in lower class, and they cannot afford the expenses of the education. Therefore, alleviation poverty is essential to reducing child labor.

Large household size, where number of members are more than ten person who live in single room, is one of the most significant contributors to child labor. Parents with many dependents struggle to meet basic household needs in lower class. The current research also highlighted that children' gender is also major contributor. In Pakistan, generally preference is given to boys for education. On the other hand, while girls often engage in domestic or informal work, secondly elder siblings are more likely to contribute financially than younger ones.

The study also emphasized that children are at higher risk of entering labor markets who belong to broken or marginalized families, including orphans or those with sick or parents. Many street children fall into this category who are forces to work for their own survival.

Cultural traditions also help to sustain the issue. In some subcultures, child labor is socially accepted and viewed as a means of developing initial skills. Families often believe that started working at young age are better prepared equipped children to earn in the future.

Another significant finding is the impact of corruption, which erodes governance and the application of labor laws. As the result corruption destabilizes children's accessibility to

education, healthcare, and social protection, thereby prolonging cycles of poverty and victimization.

The study also found that rural-urban migration contributes the raise in child labor. When families move to cities often settle in slums without accessibility to basic necessities. As a result, their children regularly work as street vendors, domestic helpers, or employees in hotels, and in extreme cases, become dawn in illegal activities.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, it is observed that child labor is one of the major and critical issues of the country that reflects the socio-economic and political health of the country. This study identified the core causes of child labor in Pakistan by employing the qualitative approach. Lahore was selected for the current research. In total, 15 respondents were interviewed for qualitative research.

The findings indicate that child labor is a multifaceted social problem shaped by a range of social, economic, and cultural factors. Key causes identified in research included: Poverty and poor economic conditions of parents; Household size, large family size; Cultural acceptance; culture of Pakistan accept the child labor; Migration, people moving from rural to urban; Parental belief regarding education; Unemployment that is common among educated adults.

## **Limitations of the Research**

This study tried to understand the complex and multifaceted lived experiences of child labor through a qualitative approach. Current study tried to highlight the issues associated with child labor thoroughly but still there are limitations in the study but those have opened the future doors for the research. Following are the limitations of the current study:

1. Firstly, due to limitation of time and resources the research was able to collect the data from one province and city. A comparative analysis can be made if in future the study is conducted with other provided of the country that will allow the researcher to print the overall dynamics of child labor.
2. Secondly, the data has been conducted from limited stakeholders.
3. Thirdly, as qualitative research relies heavily on the researcher's interpretation of participants' narratives and lived experiences, a certain degree of subjectivity is inevitable. Despite rigorous effort to uphold reflexivity and ensure analytical

impartially, the researcher's perspective may have nonetheless exerted some influence on the finding.

4. At the Last, time and accessibility constraints curtailed the researcher's duration in the field. Prolonged engagement would likely have fostered greater trust with participants and yielded further nuanced insights and challenges.

## **Recommendations**

- Awareness programs should be developed at the community level to help parents and local leaders understand the long-term negative effects of child labor. These programs should encourage the importance of education and child welfare while respecting local cultural values.
- Socio-economic assistance may be provided to poor families and vulnerable communities so that their dependence on the income of a child may be ended, and the root cause of child labor may be eradicated.
- The educational programs, along with age-appropriate vocational training, may be proposed so that skills development can be included, so that safe and appropriate opportunities can be offered to the young children in the future.
- Free quality of education accessible to all children may be ensured by the government and local institutes. The second shift and weekend programs may be introduced in schools so that it becomes a welcoming space for the children with low-income backgrounds.
- For compliance with child labor laws, a collaboration between the civil society organizations and local authorities may be ensured. Moreover, through accountability measures, monitoring and evaluation programs, and transparent inspections, law enforcement may be implemented properly.

- A safe and dignified work environment may be ensured for those children who are continuing to work either due to socio-economic issues or poor law enforcement. The basic human rights, ensuring the safety and security of children, may be ensured.
- Child labor is not an issue of the family, it is an issue of the community, so all the stakeholders, i.e., parents, educators, community leaders, citizens, and policy makers, work together to combat the issue.
- The long-term changes may be ensured through social protection, fair wages, and equal opportunities to all the marginalized segments of society. Moreover, social justice may be ensured for all the segments of society.

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