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**Child Labor: A comparative Study on Child Labor and related Law Practices in Pakistan****Syed Hassan Abbas**

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Child labor remains one of the most pressing socio-economic and human rights issues in Pakistan. This study conducts a comparative analysis of the determinants, psycho-social consequences, and legal framework of child labor with special focus on Punjab and Sindh provinces. Using a mixed-methods approach, the research employed a structured questionnaire with 200 respondents and conducted in-depth interviews along with Focus Group Discussions involving child laborers and NGO representatives in Sadiqabad and Lahore in 2021. The findings indicate that poverty is the primary cause of child labor (82.8%), compounded by large family size, costly and poor-quality education, rural-urban migration, cultural norms, and corruption. Although 87.7% of respondents strongly opposed child labor, it is still viewed as a "necessary evil" for survival among poor families. Children working mainly in agriculture and the automobile industry suffer severe psycho-social problems including physical and sexual abuse, drug exposure, lack of education, and emotional trauma. Despite a comprehensive legal framework comprising constitutional provisions (Articles 3, 11(3), 25(A), 37(e)) and provincial laws such as the Punjab Employment of Children Act 2016 and Sindh Children (Prohibition of Employment) Act 2017, weak implementation, lack of political will, corruption, and poor monitoring mechanisms continue to undermine its effectiveness. The study concludes that child labor is a multifaceted problem rooted in poverty and governance failures, and recommends integrated interventions focusing on poverty alleviation, quality education, strict law enforcement, and institutional strengthening.

Keywords: Child Labor, Poverty, Legal Framework, Pakistan, Punjab-Sindh Comparison

Introduction

Child labor has existed across different human cultures throughout history and remains a pervasive global concern in modern times. It affects both developed and developing countries alike, but poses particularly severe and multifaceted challenges for the latter. According to the International Labor Organization (ILO), 78 million children in Asia are engaged as child laborers. Scholars, media writers, policymakers, and various sectors of society have increasingly taken notice of this rising phenomenon, especially in the developing world. In countries like Pakistan, children often work to support their families economically due to widespread poverty and poor economic conditions, resulting in alarmingly high rates of child labor (Brown, Deardorff & Stern, 2002).

The situation in Pakistan is particularly alarming and deeply concerning. A longitudinal survey conducted in 1996 by the Federal Bureau of Statistics with ILO technical assistance revealed that 3.3 million children aged 5-14 were economically active out of 40 million adolescents in the country, with approximately 73% boys and 27% girls. Financial responsibility emerged as the

most convincing factor why parents or guardians engage their children in work, primarily to supplement household income. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan estimates that around 11 to 12 million Pakistani children are working, with at least half younger than 10 years of age (Ghosh, 2016). Conditions in rural areas are significantly worse, where impoverished families heavily depend on their children's earnings for the survival of the entire household. Many children support household businesses, sell newspapers or tobacco on the streets, or work in both formal and informal markets across different sectors. The problem is further compounded by cultural and provincial differences across Pakistan, with notable variations observed between provinces such as Punjab and Sindh (Ray, 1999).

Child labor severely impacts children's physical and psychological well-being in profound ways. According to studies, 7% of child laborers in Pakistan suffer frequent health conditions, 28% occasionally, and 33% rarely experience health problems. Poor sanitation, contaminated water, excessively long working hours, and hazardous conditions in sectors like manufacturing, construction, and welding expose children to serious safety risks. Mentally immature children face significant threats from heavy workloads and dangerous environments, leading to behavioral and emotional impairments in about 40% of cases. Lack of proper medical treatment exacerbates these issues, causing long-term developmental problems, physical injuries, chronic diseases, and in severe cases, even fatal outcomes. The ILO defines child labor as all activities performed by individuals under the age of 15, other than schooling or play, whether paid or unpaid (Ashraf, 2018). It distinguishes child labor from light permissible work and highlights hazardous labor that harms a child's physical, mental, moral, and social development or interferes with their education. Globally, over 8 million children are trapped in the worst forms of hazardous and abusive child labor, while more than 200 million children are engaged in child labor overall. In Pakistan, a significant percentage of children aged 5-14 participate in commercial activities that contribute greatly to household revenue, often at the enormous cost of their education, health, overall development, and future prospects (Chaturvedi & Saha, 2019).

Research Problem

Child labor has become a critical and pressing issue for the contemporary world, especially in developing countries like Pakistan. Despite the existence of various national laws, provincial legislation, constitutional provisions, and international commitments such as ILO conventions, the number of child laborers continues to rise persistently. Inadequate policymaking, poor implementation of existing strategies, lower levels of commitment by state institutions, weak enforcement mechanisms, and lack of effective monitoring have collectively failed to control this phenomenon effectively. Pakistan remains one of the unfortunate developing countries with an alarmingly high and increasing prevalence of child labor despite numerous efforts and legislative measures taken over the years. This persistent gap between well-intentioned laws on paper and their actual implementation on the ground, driven by deep-rooted socio-economic factors, poses a serious challenge to national development. This study attempts to reveal the underlying socio-economic causes of child labor in Pakistan, with particular focus on Punjab and Sindh provinces. It also highlights the psycho-social problems faced by child laborers and evaluates the effectiveness of legal frameworks. Addressing this wide gap between legislation and reality is essential for breaking the vicious cycle of poverty, exploitation, lost educational opportunities, and long-term human capital loss in the country.

Research Objectives

1. To explore the social and economic causes of child labor in Pakistan.
2. To investigate the psycho-social problems faced by child laborers in Pakistan.

3. To analyze the existing child labor laws and their effectiveness with a provincial comparison between Punjab and Sindh.

Research Questions

1. What are the main socio-economic causes of child labor in Pakistan?
2. What psycho-social problems do child laborers face in Pakistan?
3. How effective are the existing child labor laws and what are the gaps in their implementation, particularly in Punjab and Sindh?

Significance and Relevance of the Study

This study holds substantial theoretical and practical importance in understanding the complex and multifaceted phenomenon of child labor in Pakistan. By examining socio-economic determinants and conducting a comparative analysis of legal practices in Punjab and Sindh, it contributes meaningfully to the existing body of knowledge on child labor while highlighting important provincial cultural, economic, and demographic differences. The research strongly underscores the constitutional discourse on fundamental rights, particularly Articles 3, 11(3), 25(A), and 37(e) of the Constitution of Pakistan, which explicitly prohibit child labor, mandate free and compulsory education for children, and ensure special protection for women and children. Practically, the findings and recommendations can guide policymakers, government institutions, judicial bodies, and NGOs in designing more targeted and effective interventions for poverty alleviation, education reform, stricter law enforcement, and better monitoring mechanisms. Ultimately, this work aims to support national efforts toward sustainable human development, improved governance, constitutional compliance, and the gradual eradication of child labor, thereby contributing to Pakistan's broader goals of social justice, rule of law, and protection of vulnerable children (Siddique, 2013).

Literature Review

Child labor has been extensively examined in global academic literature through various theoretical lenses. Prominent economists and scholars have provided foundational frameworks for understanding its causes and consequences. Basu (1999) offered a comprehensive analysis of child labor, discussing its causes, consequences, and potential cures while emphasizing the role of international labor standards. Brown, Deardorff, and Stern (2003) in their work *Child Labor: Theory, Evidence, and Policy* presented detailed theoretical models and empirical evidence on the determinants of child labor. They highlighted how economic factors, household decision-making, and labor market conditions interact to perpetuate the practice. Similarly, Browne et al. (2004) critically examined the limitations of universal, one-size-fits-all child labor laws, arguing that such approaches often fail to account for contextual, cultural, and developmental differences across societies. Budhwani, Wee, and McLean (2004) approached the issue from a Human Resource Development (HRD) perspective, questioning whether child labor should be entirely eliminated and exploring its complex implications for workforce development. These global perspectives collectively stress that child labor is not merely an economic issue but is deeply intertwined with poverty, education access, and family survival strategies (Brown, Deardorff & Stern, 2002).

In the Pakistani context, several studies have identified poverty as the predominant driver of child labor. Researchers using data from Pakistan have consistently shown that households living below the poverty line are compelled to engage children in work to meet basic needs. Evidence drawn from studies in Ecuador and Pakistan demonstrates that child labor and schooling decisions are made concurrently, with poverty forcing families to prioritize immediate income over education. A detrimental correlation exists between children's literacy levels and their involvement in labor; parents sacrifice schooling when household resources are insufficient. The

Government of Pakistan responded with the Employment of Children Act 1991, which prohibits the employment of children under Section 14 and imposes penalties including imprisonment and fines. However, implementation remains weak. Studies further reveal that maternal education is a significant protective factor that reduces children's working hours across different cultural and regional settings in Pakistan. The probability of women's employment also influences children's labor participation, indicating that household labor dynamics are interconnected rather than isolated events (Brown et al., 2003).

Comparative analyses between provinces in Pakistan, particularly Sindh and Punjab, highlight important regional variations. Cultural and demographic differences mean that not all determinants of child labor operate uniformly across the four provinces. Factors distinguishing districts such as Sukkur (Sindh) and Multan (Punjab) play a central role in shaping child labor patterns. Many children contribute to daily household tasks, and parental decisions regarding schooling versus work are influenced by multiple variables, including economic pressure and cultural norms. Research comparing these two districts shows quantitative differences in how variables affect child labor participation. While poverty remains the primary cause, it is not the sole factor. Additional elements such as large family size, parental (especially maternal) education levels, exposure to better employment opportunities, access to re-entry into education systems, and ethnic or social discrimination also significantly influence outcomes. Data from various sources, including the 1991 Pakistan Integrated Household Survey for children aged 10-14 and the 1996-97 Labor Force Survey for girls, support these findings. Overall child labor levels tend to increase with rising rural population, female labor force participation, and fertility rates, while they decrease with higher GDP per capita, better public education, and improved life expectancy (Brown, Deardorff & Stern, 2003).

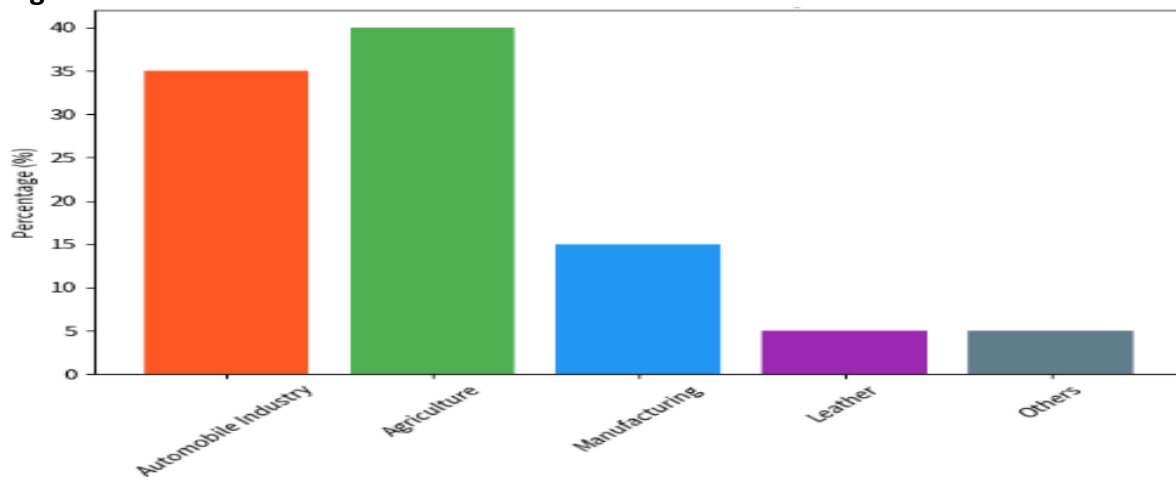
Despite growing research on child labor, significant gaps persist in the existing literature. Although many investigators have expanded studies on population growth, female work, and fertility in relation to child labor, systematic and comprehensive examinations of the underlying causes remain limited. Few studies have proposed integrated paradigms for understanding family-generation distribution of child labor or thoroughly explored opportunities such as education quality disparities and re-entry mechanisms. While some research has compared districts in Sindh and Punjab, broader inter-provincial comparative analyses that incorporate both quantitative econometric approaches and qualitative insights are still insufficient. Moreover, there is limited focus on the effectiveness of provincial laws post-18th Amendment and the actual implementation gaps between Punjab and Sindh. The complex interplay of psycho-social, organizational, environmental, biological, and technological factors also requires deeper investigation. Addressing these gaps is crucial for developing targeted, context-specific interventions that go beyond poverty alleviation to tackle structural and cultural barriers effectively.

Determinants of Child Labor in Pakistan

Poverty is not only a primary source of child labor but also contributes to various inequalities based on race, ethnicity, religion, and education. The problem becomes more severe in the absence of an effective social security system in Pakistan. In many cases, parents believe that their children should learn practical skills at home rather than attending schools that often suffer from poor sanitation and low-quality education. Many children live in poor environments and do not realize the long-term disadvantages of engaging in labor at an early age. Large family size significantly increases the likelihood of child labor, particularly in poor households where the head of the family struggles to meet basic needs as the sole earner (Diller & Levy, 1997). Cultural norms also play a vital role, as in some sub-cultures, working at a young age is viewed as a

tradition that helps children acquire skills for future livelihood. Parental education especially that of mothers, is a major protective factor that reduces children's working hours regardless of cultural and regional conditions. The education of mothers and their labor force participation are interconnected with child labor decisions. Additionally, rural-urban migration pushes poor families into urban slums, where children become vulnerable to various forms of exploitation. Corruption further worsens the situation, as it hinders socio-economic growth and diverts resources away from essential services like education and healthcare (Edmonds & Pavcnik, 2005).

Figure 1: Sectoral Prevalence of Child Labor



Economic pressures such as low adult wages, high unemployment, and the need to supplement household income are among the strongest drivers of child labor in Pakistan. Families living below the poverty line often have no choice but to send their children to work. Although legislation has been passed under the Constitution and by the Government of Pakistan, implementation remains weak. The 1934 Factory Act and the West Pakistan Shops and Establishments Ordinance exist alongside constitutional provisions, yet there is a serious lack of reliable data on compliance. Pakistan still lacks an efficient child labor management information system that can provide accurate statistics on working children. The Constitution of Pakistan addresses child labor through Articles 3, 11(1-3), 17(1), and 37(c). However, progress is undermined by power structures and institutions within society that hinder effective enforcement (Brown, Dearnorff & Stern, 2003).

Environmental conditions significantly exacerbate the risks associated with child labor. In a society where the rights and well-being of children are often undervalued, the issue of cheap child labor becomes more complicated. Children working in sectors such as automobile workshops often labor for 8-10 hours without safety precautions. A survey in Peshawar found that out of 150 children, 120 were working in car workshops under hazardous conditions. These children, mostly aged 8-14 years, suffer serious health issues due to prolonged exposure to unhealthy and toxic environments. Biologically, children are more fragile and vulnerable than adults when exposed to hazardous working conditions. They often perform different tasks than adults in the same workplace, resulting in different levels of exposure to dangerous agents (Ekka et al., n.d.). Factors such as silica dust, chemical inhalation, and pesticides have more severe impacts on children's developing bodies. In Lahore, 27% of workers in steel furnaces and manufacturing units were children who suffered from headaches, nasal inflammation, sore throat, and eye rashes. Children working in agriculture face the highest risks, with an estimated 100,000 annual farm injuries in Pakistan. Long working hours combined with exposure to chemicals, fiber dust, and heavy physical labor lead to muscular deformations, respiratory

infections, cancer risks, and stunted growth. Working environments that may not pose immediate threats to adults can seriously impair a child's physical and cognitive development (Fafchamps & Quisumbing, 2003).

Technological advancement has a dual impact on child labor in Pakistan. While new technologies such as sophisticated computers are replacing manual operations, they have also contributed to rising unemployment. Profit-oriented factory owners often prefer employing cheap child labor to remain competitive in a technology-driven economy. Although technological progress is valuable, children employed in such settings must be properly supervised and provided with safe working conditions. Political factors and governance failures further perpetuate child labor. Weak political will, lack of monitoring, and insufficient commitment from leadership have resulted in poor implementation of laws. Many political elites show little interest in eradicating child labor, and in some cases, influential figures are reportedly involved in sectors such as brick kilns that extensively use child labor. The absence of strong vigilance and effective governance mechanisms continues to undermine efforts to combat this issue (Green, 2001).

Legal Framework on Child Labor in Pakistan

The Constitution of Pakistan provides several important provisions for the protection of children and the elimination of child labor. Article 3 requires the state to ensure the elimination of all forms of exploitation. Article 11(3) explicitly states that no child below the age of 14 years shall be engaged in any factory, mine, or any other hazardous employment. Article 25(A) makes it mandatory for the state to provide free and compulsory education to all children aged five to sixteen years. Furthermore, Article 37(e) directs the state to secure just and humane conditions of work and ensure that women and children are not employed in vocations unsuited to their age or sex. Other relevant articles include 11(1-3), 17(1), and 37(c), which collectively form the constitutional basis for prohibiting child labor and protecting children's rights (Siddique, 2013).

Pakistan has enacted several national and provincial laws to combat child labor. The Employment of Children Act 1991 is a key national legislation that prohibits the employment of children under 14 years in certain occupations and processes. Provincial laws have been strengthened following the 18th Amendment, including the Punjab Employment of Children Act 2016 and the Sindh Children (Prohibition of Employment) Act 2017. Other important laws include the Brick Kilns Act 2016, the Factories Act 1934 (with provincial amendments), the West Pakistan Shops and Establishments Ordinance, the Mines Act, and various sector-specific regulations. The government has also introduced laws such as the Bonded Labor System (Abolition) Act 1992 and the Punjab Mandatory Education Act. These laws aim to regulate child employment, particularly in hazardous sectors like brick kilns, mines, and manufacturing units.

The minimum age for employment is generally 14 years, though variations exist across provinces. In some provinces like Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Sindh, the minimum age for hazardous work has been raised to 18 years. The Employment of Children Act 1991, along with provincial laws, lists numerous prohibited occupations and processes for children. These include work in railways, ports, deep quarries, handling of explosives and fireworks, manufacturing of pesticides, cement, glass, tobacco, surgical instruments, leather, carpet weaving, stone crushing, deep-sea fishing, and exposure to hazardous chemicals and silica dust. Regarding working conditions, children are not allowed to work more than seven hours a day, with mandatory rest intervals after three continuous hours. Night work between 7:00 p.m. and 8:00 a.m. is prohibited, and adolescents require medical fitness certificates before employment in factories. The Factories Act 1934 further regulates working hours, rest periods, and safety measures for young workers. Despite a comprehensive legal framework, enforcement remains weak. Penalties under the Employment of Children Act 1991 include imprisonment up to one year and fines, which have

been increased in provincial laws (e.g., minimum fine of 50,000 rupees in Punjab and Sindh for repeat offenses). However, the lack of effective monitoring, insufficient data collection systems, corruption among labor inspectors, and limited institutional capacity continue to undermine implementation. The judiciary has played a significant role in addressing these gaps. The Supreme Court under Article 184(3) and High Courts under Article 199 of the Constitution have taken *suo moto* actions and entertained public interest litigation to protect children's fundamental rights. These courts have issued directives for stricter enforcement of child labor laws and protection of vulnerable children.

There are notable differences in the implementation and coverage of child labor laws across provinces. While Punjab and Sindh have enacted relatively stronger provincial laws with higher penalties and raised minimum wages for hazardous work, other provinces like Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa show variations in enforcement mechanisms. The comparative analysis between Punjab and Sindh reveals differences in sectoral focus, monitoring systems, and cultural attitudes toward implementation. Overall, although Pakistan has made legislative progress, the gap between law and practice remains wide due to weak institutional mechanisms and socio-economic realities.

Methodology

This study adopted a mixed-methods approach to provide a comprehensive understanding of child labor in Pakistan. The research combined quantitative and qualitative techniques to explore the socio-economic causes, psycho-social impacts, and legal aspects of child labor, with a special focus on Punjab and Sindh provinces. The study was conducted in Sadiqabad (Rahim Yar Khan District, Punjab) from April to May 2021. Ethical approval was obtained from the Department of Sociology, University of the Punjab, Lahore, prior to data collection.

For the quantitative component, a structured questionnaire was administered to 200 respondents selected through systematic random sampling. The questionnaire included closed-ended questions on attitudes toward child labor, perceived causes (such as poverty, education, and low wages), sectoral prevalence, effectiveness of laws, and suggested solutions. Respondents were drawn from various segments of society, including parents, community members, and other stakeholders.

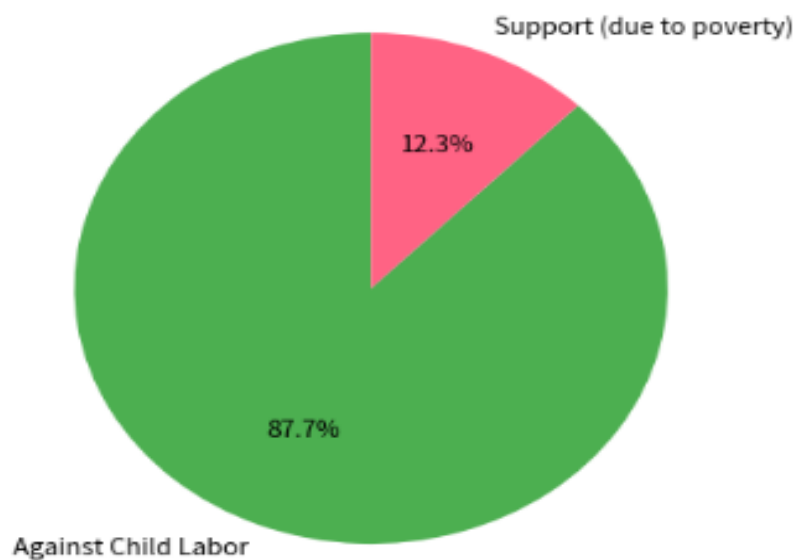
The qualitative component involved in-depth interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). In-depth interviews were conducted with resource persons from NGOs and organizations actively working on child labor issues. Organizations were selected purposively through literature review and snowball sampling, focusing on those involved in advocacy, legal support, research, and direct interventions. A semi-structured interview guide was used covering organizational activities, research findings, challenges in implementation of laws, and recommendations. Focus Group Discussions were held with children under 15 years of age who were engaged in child labor, including those at drop-in centers and those working in shops, offices, or on the streets. The FGDs explored reasons for working, health and psycho-social problems, experiences of abuse, and suggestions for interventions. All interviews and discussions were conducted in Urdu by trained researchers, with detailed notes taken during the sessions.

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify patterns and percentages of responses. Qualitative data underwent thematic analysis involving data reduction, coding, categorization into themes, and organization into matrices for interpretation. Conclusions were verified by revisiting the original data for plausibility. This mixed-methods design allowed for triangulation of findings, enhancing the validity and depth of the study on the determinants and legal framework of child labor in Pakistan.

Findings and Data Analysis

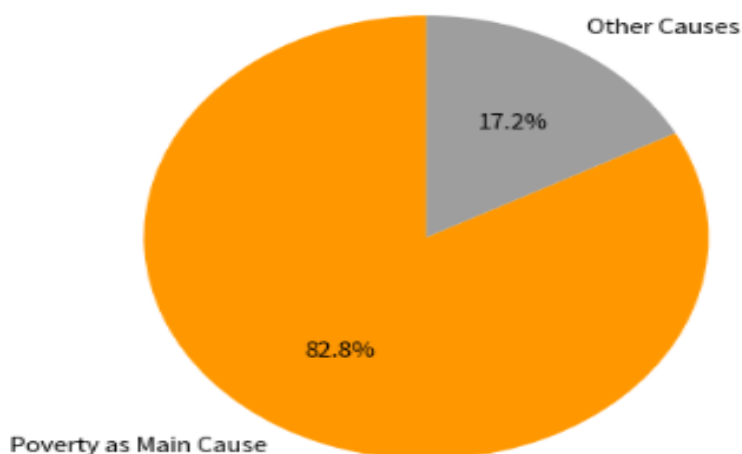
The study reveals strong public opposition to child labor, with 87.7% of the responses indicating that the masses are against the practice. Those who supported child labor were primarily individuals bound by poverty who saw it as a necessary means of survival. Poverty emerged as the dominant cause, with 82.8% of respondents identifying it as the main driver of child labor. The data strongly suggest that poverty should be the primary concern of the government, and comprehensive steps must be taken to reduce it. Children engaged in labor were found to be highly vulnerable to violence and sexual abuse, a deeply concerning issue that demands immediate attention from responsible institutions. Regarding parental supervision, 58.9% of responses indicated that working children had some level of parental monitoring, while 24.1% revealed that many children lacked proper supervision and were therefore more exposed to various social evils.

Figure 2: Public Opinion on Child Labor



Costly education and the failure of the education system were identified as major factors contributing to the rise in child labor cases. Respondents overwhelmingly believed that child labor has a severe negative effect on the national economy, as young workers are drained into meeting domestic expenses with minimal contribution to national development. A significant 56.1% of responses showed that child labor flourishes under poor economic conditions, which in turn elevates poverty levels and increases pressure on families. The automobile industry and agriculture were highlighted as the major sectors where child labor is most prevalent, and the government needs to introduce stricter regulations in these industries. The majority of respondents felt that if children do not work, their poor families would starve, and child laborers have little to no time for education due to its associated costs. There was a clear consensus that child labor should not be supported in Pakistan. Punjab and Sindh were identified as the provinces most severely affected by this issue.

Figure 3: Major Causes and Impacts of Child Labor



The analysis further indicates that while laws exist to protect children from bonded and other forms of labor, their implementation is largely ineffective. Low wages paid to children compared to adults, lack of resistance from children (as they are soft targets), and weak government efforts were cited as key reasons for the continuation and growth of child labor. Many respondents were unaware of NGOs working on this issue, raising serious questions about the visibility and credibility of such organizations. Respondents believed that improvements in science and technology, along with overall economic development, would eventually help reduce child labor. However, the data raised significant concerns about the efficiency of government institutions in addressing the problem. Child labor was also linked to rising crime rates, as exploited children often turn to criminal activities due to deprivation of basic rights. It was viewed as damaging Pakistan's international image and becoming a "necessary evil" for poor families. Financial aid from the government, aligned with Islamic principles and supported by the masses, was seen as an important measure that could help reduce child labor.

Qualitative Findings

The qualitative data from in-depth interviews and focus group discussions highlighted several interconnected socio-economic factors. Poverty remained the root cause, with parents making decisions about schooling and work based on immediate family survival needs. Large family size emerged as a critical contributing element, as poor households with many children struggle to meet basic requirements, often placing the economic burden on elder children. Gender differences were evident, with girls generally more exposed to child labor than boys. Family circumstances such as orphanhood or parental illness (e.g., T.B., HIV/AIDS) further pushed children into labor, with many street children being orphans.

Cultural factors play a significant role, as in certain sub-cultures working at a young age is considered a tradition that equips children with future livelihood skills. Corruption was identified as another important driver, as it perpetuates poverty, weakens public services, and enables corrupt labor inspectors to exploit underage children with low wages. Rural-urban migration was frequently mentioned, with poor families moving to cities and ending up in slums, where children become street vendors, domestic workers, or involved in more hazardous and illegal activities. Political factors revealed serious governance gaps. Although the Punjab government has attempted to provide free education, implementation remains inadequate in many areas. There is a notable lack of vigilance, monitoring, and political will. Many respondents pointed out that local and provincial political leadership shows little genuine interest in eradicating child labor, with some influential figures even owning brick kilns that employ children. Psycho-social problems faced by child laborers include increasing pressure from employers for speed and

longer hours, physical and verbal abuse by employers and parents, involvement in drug abuse due to peer and family influence, and feelings of humiliation that may lead to revenge and long-term negative consequences. Overall, the study portrays child labor as a significant unethical and antagonistic feature of society, driven by poverty, unemployment, parental unawareness, poor living standards, social issues, civic negligence, and weak governance.

Discussion

The findings of this study align closely with existing global and local literature on child labor. Poverty emerged as the predominant cause, with 82.8% of respondents identifying it as the primary driver. This supports the theoretical perspectives of Basu (1999) and Brown, Deardorff, and Stern (2003), who argue that child labor is largely a consequence of household poverty and survival strategies. The study's results also confirm the deprivation theory highlighted in the literature, where poor families sacrifice children's education for immediate income, leading to a detrimental correlation between literacy and child labor participation. The strong public opposition to child labor (87.7%) alongside the perception that it becomes a "necessary evil" for poor families further reflects the complex tension between moral ideals and economic realities discussed by Budhwani et al. (2004) and Browne et al. (2004).

Qualitative findings regarding large family size, low maternal education, cultural acceptance of early work, rural-urban migration, and corruption are consistent with previous Pakistan-specific studies. The identification of automobile industry and agriculture as major sectors employing child labor reinforces earlier observations in the thesis. Psycho-social problems such as physical and verbal abuse, drug exposure, lack of education, and feelings of humiliation among child laborers highlight the long-term developmental costs emphasized by various researchers. These outcomes support the view that child labor not only harms individual children but also undermines national human capital development.

A notable aspect of this study is the provincial comparison between Punjab and Sindh. Both provinces were identified by respondents as the most affected by child labor. While Punjab has introduced the Punjab Employment of Children Act 2016 and made some efforts toward free education, implementation remains weak in many areas. Similarly, Sindh's Children (Prohibition of Employment) Act 2017 exists on paper, but cultural, economic, and enforcement challenges persist in both provinces. Differences in cultural norms, demographic pressures, and local governance appear to influence the intensity and nature of child labor. For instance, rural-urban migration patterns and sectoral concentration (such as brick kilns in Punjab) show slight variations, yet the core determinants poverty, large families, and weak monitoring remain strikingly similar. This comparative lens reveals that while provincial legislation has progressed after the 18th Amendment, uniform challenges in implementation limit their effectiveness.

The study clearly demonstrates why child labor laws continue to fail in Pakistan. Despite a robust constitutional and legal framework including Articles 3, 11(3), 25(A), and 37(e) of the Constitution, the Employment of Children Act 1991, and various provincial laws implementation remains extremely weak. Key reasons include lack of political will, insufficient resources, poor monitoring mechanisms, corruption among labor inspectors, and absence of a reliable child labor management information system. Many respondents noted that political elites often lack genuine interest, with some even reportedly involved in exploitative sectors like brick kilns. These governance failures corroborate Siddique's (2013) critique of Pakistan's formal legal system and its disconnected from ground realities. The gap between legislation and enforcement perpetuates the cycle of child labor.

The broader implications of these findings are significant for human development, the national economy, and Pakistan's international image. Child labor deprives millions of children of

education and healthy development, resulting in a less skilled future workforce and diminished economic productivity. As noted by respondents, it drains young potential into low-value domestic work while increasing vulnerability to crime and social ills. The persistence of child labor also tarnishes Pakistan's global standing and hinders progress toward Sustainable Development Goals. The discussion affirms that while poverty remains the root cause, addressing child labor requires a multifaceted approach that tackles implementation gaps, strengthens political commitment, improves access to quality education, and provides direct support to vulnerable families. Without bridging the divide between law and practice, Pakistan's efforts toward inclusive growth and human development will continue to be undermined.

Conclusion

Child labor remains a growing menace that significantly hinders the social, economic, and human development of Pakistan. This study, through a mixed-methods approach, investigated the socio-economic causes, psycho-social consequences, and legal dimensions of child labor with a comparative focus on Punjab and Sindh. The findings clearly establish that poverty is the root cause of child labor, supported by 82.8% of survey respondents. Other major contributing factors include large family size, costly and poor-quality education, and rural-urban migration, cultural acceptance of early work, corruption, and weak political will.

The study reveals that while the majority of the public (87.7%) opposes child labor, it is still viewed as a "necessary evil" for poor families struggling for survival. Children engaged in labor suffer serious psycho-social problems including physical and verbal abuse, drug exposure, lack of education, and long-term emotional trauma. Although Pakistan has a comprehensive legal framework including constitutional provisions (Articles 3, 11(3), 25(A), 37(e)) and provincial laws such as the Punjab Employment of Children Act 2016 and Sindh Children (Prohibition of Employment) Act 2017 implementation remains highly ineffective due to poor monitoring, lack of resources, corruption, and insufficient political commitment. In essence, child labor in Pakistan is a multifaceted and complex issue deeply rooted in poverty and governance failures. It not only violates children's fundamental rights but also damages the national economy, increases crime rates, and tarnishes the country's international image. Without urgent and coordinated intervention, this vicious cycle will continue to deprive future generations of their potential.

Recommendations

To effectively curb child labor in Pakistan, the following multi-dimensional recommendations are proposed based on the study findings:

Economic Measures

- Launch large-scale poverty alleviation programs and provide direct financial support to poor families.
- Create employment opportunities for adults, particularly in rural areas, and ensure reasonable wages so that families do not depend on children's income.
- Introduce targeted cash transfer schemes for households with school-going children.

Educational Interventions

- Provide free, quality education up to secondary level with free books, uniforms, and scholarships.
- Improve the education system by addressing its high cost and poor quality.
- Establish special schools and skill development programs for working children and school dropouts.

Legal and Enforcement Reforms

- Ensure strict implementation of existing child labor laws with higher penalties.
- Strengthen monitoring mechanisms and eliminate corruption among labor inspectors.

- Establish a dedicated national and provincial child labor monitoring department with reliable data collection systems.

Social and Cultural Initiatives

- Run widespread awareness campaigns on the harmful effects of child labor.
- Promote small family norms and encourage community participation in protecting children's rights.
- Enhance collaboration between government institutions and NGOs working on child labor issues.

Institutional Support

- Develop robust orphan support programs and special protection mechanisms for vulnerable children.
- Increase political commitment and vigilance at local, provincial, and federal levels.

Long-term Strategies

- Focus on sustained economic growth and science & technology-driven job creation to reduce unemployment.
- Integrate child labor elimination goals into national development policies and link them with broader human development objectives.

The successful eradication of child labor requires a collective effort from the government, civil society, political leadership, and the general public. Only through simultaneous action on poverty, education, and law enforcement can Pakistan secure a better future for its children.

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