

CHILD LABOR AND ITS IMPACT ON SOCIAL EXCLUSION: A CASE STUDY FROM MULTAN, PAKISTAN

Faheem Abbas,

PhD Scholar Sociology, Department of Sociology, Riphah International University
Faisalabad Campus, Pakistan

faheemmalik143@yahoo.com

Dr Nouman khaliq,

Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, Riphah International University Faisalabad
Campus, Pakistan

nouman.khaliq@riphahfsd.edu.pk

Abstract

This study investigates the relationship between child labor and social exclusion in Multan, Southern Punjab, focusing on children engaged in agricultural and domestic labor. Using purposive sampling, the research examines the socio-cultural and economic factors driving child labor and its subsequent impact on educational access, healthcare, and social participation. The findings reveal that economic hardship and familial expectations are the primary drivers of child labor in the region. Poverty, coupled with the lack of viable employment opportunities for adults, forces many families to rely on the labor of their children to meet basic needs. As a result, a significant number of children are excluded from formal education, limiting their future opportunities and contributing to the perpetuation of the poverty cycle. Furthermore, children in labor-intensive sectors, such as agriculture, also face significant healthcare exclusions due to the inability to afford medical care or take time off from work. The social isolation of these children, who are unable to engage in recreational or educational activities, further deepens their marginalization. The study highlights the urgent need for targeted interventions that focus on poverty alleviation and increasing educational access for child laborers. Policy recommendations include the implementation of flexible schooling systems, community-based welfare initiatives, and the strengthening of legal frameworks to protect children's rights. These measures can help reduce child labor and foster greater social inclusion in Southern Punjab.

Keywords: Child Labor, Social Exclusion, Socio-Economic Drivers, Educational Access.

Introduction

Child labour is among the most enduring and challenging problems of developing countries and has profound effects on children's rights and their development. A significant proportion of children are involved in child labour in Pakistan, in rural and impoverished areas like southern Punjab. An estimated 160 million children are engaged in child labour (ILO & UNICEF, 2021), with children overwhelmingly concentrated in agriculture and informal sectors. Southern Punjab, being one of the poorest regions of Pakistan, has a high prevalence of child labor intensified by socio-cultural trends, economic compulsions, and weak enforcement of existing child labor policies (Ahmad & Shah, 2020). The situation of child labour in Pakistan is represented by Multan, well known in the southern Punjab as a microcosm. "In this area, kids are involved in agriculture and brick kilns and domestic work, and that's how they survive here. Children are not only a source of family income, but they are also linked with socio-cultural practices of the community. Trapped in a vicious circle of poverty and social exclusion, in traditional rural life, family formations and rural economic activities contribute towards a push factor of child labour, which does not increase labor market and income (Ullah & Shah, 2018). The enduring presence of child labor in this environment raises key questions as to its relationship with social exclusion, which is the topic of this study. Social exclusion involves structures for the systematic exclusion of specific groups, like working children, from rights, services, and opportunities that would be access to the general population. It is this fabric of deprivation which is the potpourri that constitutes poverty, including social,

educational, and health inequalities (Silver, 1994). Working children, especially in South Punjab, are characterized by threefold exclusion: exclusion from education, healthcare, and society. These children tend to miss out on school as such are denied formal education because they are engaged in labor, lack access to essential health services, and sudden they become remote from their friends and community, which serves to embed them deeply as poor and marginalized (Kabeer et al., 2003). In southern Punjab, in particular, the children engaged in labor belong to the most deprived families, as access to education is restricted due to financial constraints. Due to the unavailability of school or educational facilities, many working children do not have an opportunity to go to school, thereby depriving them of the education that would enable them to break the cycle of poverty (Levitas, 2006). Work for reproduction in agriculture, domestic service, or other physical, risky, and substandard work entails the labour of the child, exposes the child to health risks, yet is work that the family cannot afford the treatment costs. For these children who are likely excluded from the normal play and social interactions, the social isolation of 'loner children' serves only to further distance them from the social-ecological web as a whole.

Literature Review

Child labor, as in the involvement of children in work that hinders them from enjoying their childhood, education, and freedom, has been broadly investigated at the global, national, and regional levels. This review of literature analyses the sociocultural, economic, and exclusionary aspects of child labor, with a special reference to Southern Punjab, Pakistan. It is based on different researches that focus on the root causes of child work accumulation, child work as a source of social exclusion, and a poverty trap in which child work contributes to rural areas.

Socio-Cultural Determinants of Child Labor

A Determinant Factor Sustaining Child Labor in Southern Punjab Sociocultural paradigm molds the foundation of child labor in Southern Punjab. "Child labour is prevalent in rural Pakistan because it is inbuilt in the sociocultural fabric of the family system. Child labour is perceived as an intrinsic part of rural life, whereby children's roles and responsibilities are shaped by traditional family values and forms of agriculture (Ahmad & Shah, 2020). Poor families perceive that children's labour must take place as a response to economic need rather than to perceived lack of choice, sometimes seeing it as furthering the interests of the family (Ullah & Shah, 2018). This is a byproduct of wider social patterns that reinforce children's economic contributions, particularly in agricultural societies such as those in southern Punjab. Gender norms are an important sociocultural factor as well. The typical allocation of work to both sexes constricts girls largely to unpaid home-based work, which is less visible and more legitimized than other forms of work (Redmond, 2014). On average, girls in South Punjab are more involved in domestic work as compared to the rest of the country and get less educational and social exposure due to their household chores. Redmond (2014) notes this "invisible" labor is often misunderstood in child labor discussions, yet it is a key factor in perpetuating gender-based social and economic exclusion. Child labor is so normalized in rural areas, and ignorance of how harmful it is exists. If that is tradition, I don't think parents who currently decide for their kids to be out of school for such a purpose see an anomaly in the exclusion from education for their kids. This is the case in many parts of Southern Punjab where children are withdrawn from schools at an early age to work in the family, esp. in agriculture (Kabeer, et al., 2003). This limited access to education then negatively affects their opportunities, so poverty and exclusion cycles continue.

Economic Drivers of Child Labor

The economic factor in child labor in Southern Punjab is intricately connected with poverty and resource deprivation. Child labour is much higher in areas of families facing poverty (the ILO & UNICEF, 2021). In Southern Punjab, a region with high levels of poverty and low

access to good education, many families depend on their children as wage earners. There are very strong economic reasons for the existence of child labour, as evidenced by the results from the World Bank (2020) and Report which found that children from poor households are more likely to be engaged in work, as families often have no option but to instruct their children to work so that they can earn instead of going to school or attending to their healthcare.

Another research by Haider & Qureshi (2016), parental unemployment, low per capita income, weak purchasing power push children to contribute to household income. Sometimes, it is children laboring on the farm, or in the home, or for the family business, helping keep the family going. In rural areas such as Southern Punjab, where formal sector employment opportunities are limited, child labour enables economic insecure families to survive (Kabeer et al., 2003).

The situation is further aggravated by the fact that social protection schemes are not available in South Punjab. In the absence of rights-based social protection, families have no alternative but to rely on the labor of their children to survive. This exclusion from benefit systems intensifies children's 'pauperization'— their lack of access to education, health, and other services they may need as they are socialized and acculturated—reinforcing their marginality (Levitas, 2006).

Social Exclusion and the Impact of Child Labor

Social exclusion is a notion that refers to the exclusion of individuals from full participation in the social, economic, and cultural life of the community. In child labour, exclusion is evident in the denial of fundamental rights, for example, to education, health, and freedom of association. As Silver (1994) argues, social exclusion is a structural process and a result of systemic inequalities that deprive marginalized people -- in this case, child workers -- of the resources that they require to participate fully in society. In Southern Punjab, the consequences of child labor on social exclusion are devastating. Children who work often experience educational exclusion as their work responsibilities prohibit them from attending school. Klasen (2006) found that educational achievement deprivation is a driving force for the intergenerational transmission of poverty generated by child labor. Uneducated children are unlikely to break free of low-wage unskilled jobs—the cycle of poverty remains unbroken. In the case of Southern Punjab, children working on farm fields or in home-based work are excluded from skill development opportunities that are essential for decent work opportunities. Another significant issue is that of healthcare exclusion. Children who work, especially in such hazardous activities as agriculture or domestic service, are often in ill health. A study by the ILO and UNICEF (2021) indicates that child laborers engaged in working in the agriculture sector in rural areas are prone to malnutrition, accidents, and chronic diseases, as their work is physically demanding and filled with hazards. Furthermore, a majority of working children in Southern Punjab are deprived of quality health care owing to either financial limitations or the inaccessibility of health care facilities in rural areas (Kabeer et al., 2003). Moreover, social exclusion and the isolated status are another crucial part of the exclusion of the child laborers. Children who work in the countryside are frequently cut off from their friends as well as other community-based efforts. They are shut out of societal functions and the activities of a community, which can hinder socialization and adjustment. This further adds to their social exclusion and does much to perpetuate and consolidate their marginality (Redmond, 2014) and the stigma attached to child labor, especially for girls working as domestics.

Theoretical Framework

This study is primarily informed by Social Exclusion Theory, which provides a comprehensive lens for understanding how child labor contributes to the marginalization and exclusion of children in Southern Punjab, particularly in Multan. Social Exclusion Theory, as conceptualized by Silver (1994), focuses on the processes by which certain individuals or

groups are systematically excluded from full participation in societal opportunities, services, and resources. The theory highlights that exclusion is not limited to economic deprivation but also involves denial of access to critical rights and opportunities such as education, healthcare, and social participation, which are fundamental for individual well-being and development.

Application of Social Exclusion Theory to Child Labor in Multan:

In the context of child labor in Multan, Social Exclusion Theory offers a valuable framework for understanding how the socio-cultural and economic factors driving child labor intersect with systemic exclusionary practices. Southern Punjab, particularly Multan, is one of the most impoverished regions in Pakistan, where child labor is a widespread phenomenon. Families, facing extreme economic hardship, often see child labor as a necessary means of survival, leading to the systematic exclusion of children from essential services like education and healthcare (Levitas, 2006).

Children involved in labor are overwhelmingly excluded from formal education. As per the findings of this study, most child laborers in Multan miss school due to their labor commitments. This exclusion from education perpetuates the cycle of poverty, as these children are unable to acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to secure better-paying jobs in the future (Kabeer, Nambissan, & Subrahmanian, 2003). Educational exclusion in this case is not only a denial of opportunity but a form of social exclusion that limits the potential for upward social mobility.

Healthcare exclusion is another critical factor that exacerbates the marginalization of child laborers. Working children often suffer from various physical ailments due to the nature of their work, yet they have limited access to medical care. This exclusion from healthcare not only affects their physical well-being but also diminishes their ability to participate in economic activities effectively. It also contributes to the long-term health disparities experienced by marginalized populations in Southern Punjab (Silver, 1994).

Furthermore, the social isolation experienced by child laborers is compounded by the stigma associated with their work. Children involved in agriculture or domestic labor often find themselves isolated from their peers and unable to participate in social activities, further entrenching their exclusion. This isolation not only affects their social development but also affects their self-esteem and emotional well-being, reinforcing their marginalized status within the community (Redmond, 2014).

Research Objectives

1. To identify the socio-cultural factors that contribute to the prevalence of child labor in Multan, Southern Punjab.
2. To explore the impact of child labor on social exclusion, particularly in terms of access to education and healthcare.
3. To examine the economic factors driving child labor in the district of Multan.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study uses a qualitative case study approach, focusing on 30 child laborers in Multan. Data will be gathered through semi-structured interviews with the children and their families.

Sampling Technique

In this study, purposive sampling was used to select 30 child laborers specifically working in agriculture or domestic labor in Multan, Southern Punjab. The sampling strategy ensured that children who were engaged in labor in these sectors were chosen, providing insights into the socio-cultural, economic, and exclusionary impacts of their work.

Data Collection Tools

Interviews: Conduct semi-structured interviews to understand the socio-cultural and economic factors influencing child labor and the exclusion experienced by these children.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis will be used to identify key socio-cultural and economic factors, with a focus on how these factors lead to exclusion from education and healthcare.

Sampling Criteria	Description
Location	Multan district, Southern Punjab, Pakistan
Participants	30 child laborers aged 10-17
Sampling Method	Purposive sampling (focusing on children working)
Inclusion Criteria	Children working in agriculture or domestic settings
Exclusion Criteria	Children working in formal industries or commercial enterprises

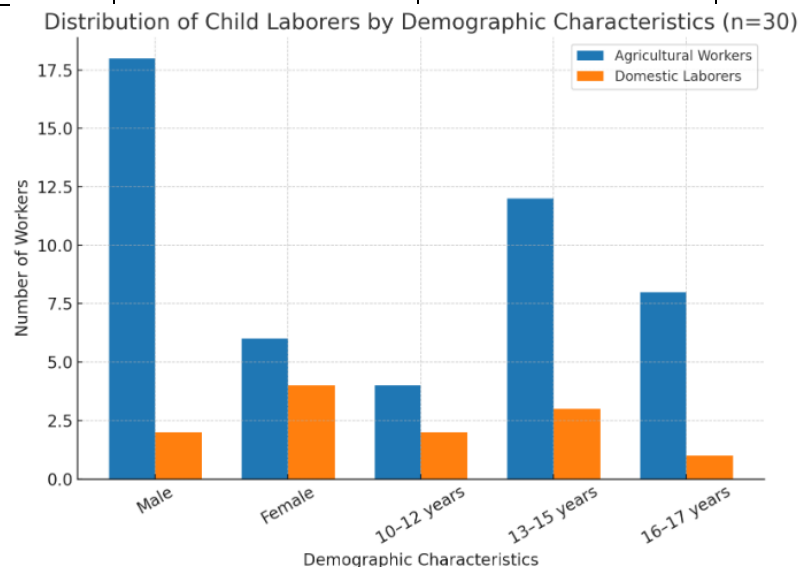
Results and Analysis

The analysis involved both qualitative insights (from open coding) and statistical analysis to examine the characteristics and conditions of child laborers in Multan. The statistical data presented below summarizes the distribution of participants based on their sector of work, gender, and educational exclusion.

Demographics of Participants

This table summarizes the key demographic characteristics of the 30 child laborers, with a focus on the sector of labor (agriculture vs. domestic labor) and gender distribution.

Demographic Characteristics	Agricultural Workers	Domestic Laborers	Total (n=30)
Gender			
Male	18	2	20 (67%)
Female	6	4	10 (33%)
Age Group			
10–12 years	4	2	6 (20%)
13–15 years	12	3	15 (50%)
16–17 years	8	1	9 (30%)



Interpretation:

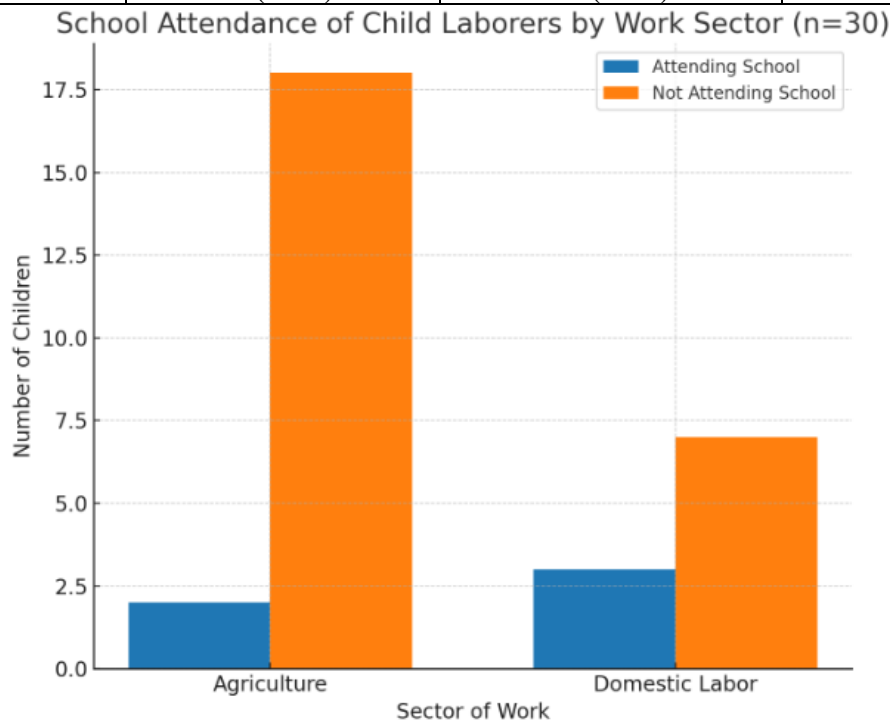
The sample was predominantly male (67%), with more children working in agriculture (67%) than in domestic labor (33%). A significant portion of children (50%) were between the ages

of 13 and 15, which suggests that child labor is most prevalent in this age group.

Educational Exclusion

This table shows the relationship between child labor and educational exclusion. It categorizes the respondents by their current education status (whether they are attending school or not) and the sector they work in.

Sector of Work	Attending School	Not Attending School	Total (n=30)
Agriculture	2 (7%)	18 (60%)	20 (67%)
Domestic Labor	3 (10%)	7 (23%)	10 (33%)
Total	5 (17%)	25 (83%)	30 (100%)



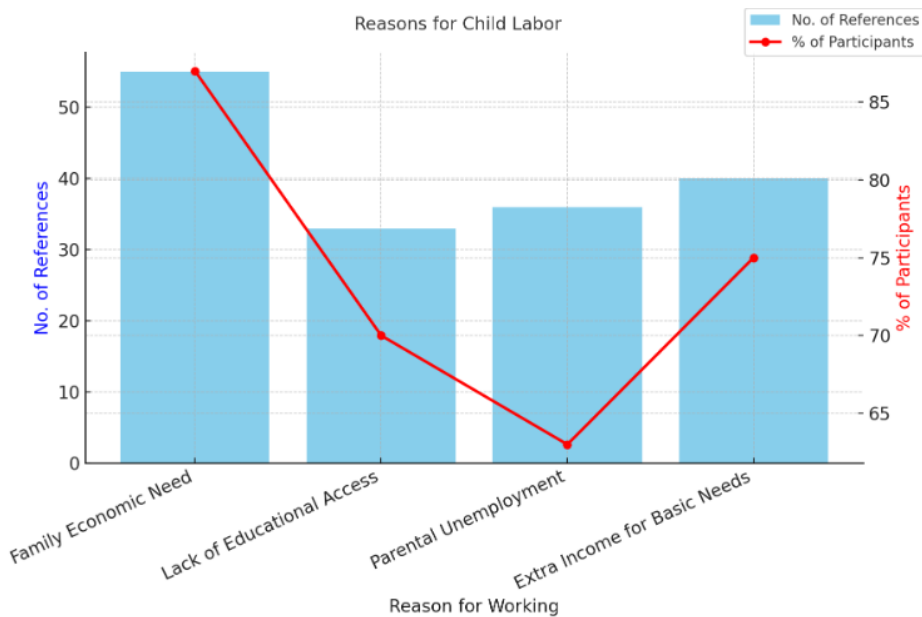
Interpretation:

A striking 83% of children (25 out of 30) are not attending school due to their labor commitments. Agricultural workers were more likely to be out of school (60%), highlighting the demands of farm labor that prevent them from accessing education. Among domestic laborers, 23% also reported educational exclusion, though this was less than their agricultural counterparts.

Economic Drivers of Child Labor

This table summarizes the economic drivers for child labor. It categorizes the primary reasons for working (as reported by the children and their families) and the number of references to each reason.

Reason for Working	No. of References	% of Participants
Family Economic Need	55	87%
Lack of Educational Access	33	70%
Parental Unemployment	36	63%
Extra Income for Basic Needs	40	75%

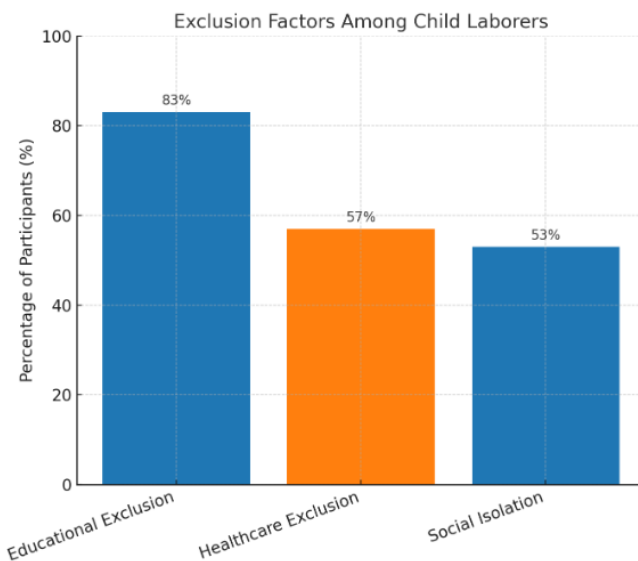


Interpretation:
Family economic need was the most frequent reason, with 87% of participants reporting that their families relied on their income. A significant portion of children (75%) mentioned working for basic needs like food and clothing, reflecting the severe poverty in which they live.

Social Exclusion Indicators

This table highlights the social exclusion indicators observed among child laborers, including educational exclusion, healthcare neglect, and social isolation.

Exclusion Factor	No. of References	% of Participants
Educational Exclusion	51	83%
Healthcare Exclusion	34	57%
Social Isolation	27	53%



Interpretation:
Educational exclusion is the most significant form of exclusion, affecting 83% of children. Healthcare exclusion affected over half of the respondents (57%), with many children unable

to access medical treatment due to financial constraints. Social isolation was also prominent, with 53% of participants reporting feeling disconnected from their peers.

Results

The results of the study suggest that multi-dimensional genesis of child labor and social exclusion of children in Multan, Southern Punjab. Child labor is deeply rooted in the socio-cultural values of most families, where it is regarded as a family norm. Below are the types of families that do expect money from their young children, and like in the movie, for many, it is their culture, it is their family responsibilities. This expectation outweighs the perceived importance of school, relegating it to secondary priority as there are immediate concerns for survival. This is notably the case in families that are grounded in traditional agricultural economies or family-based trade. The result is that children have few opportunities for education, and work is considered a natural part of family life.

Economically, poverty is a main cause of child labor in Multan. A number of local families are below the poverty line and depend significantly on their children's earnings to provide them with food, clothes, and accommodation. That dearth of formal jobs and dismal social safety nets offers few alternatives to families who send their children to work. The unemployment or underemployment of the parents further complicates this dilemma. Parents also face difficulty paying the costs of school -- tuition, uniforms, transportation -- as jobs and wages are few. Thus, children are working for the family's survival and to help break the cycle of poverty and social exclusion.

The research also presents the serious educational deprivation of working children. An alarming proportion of children interviewed said that they had missed school because of their work, which can often be long hours of gruelling work. These children are excluded from education and, therefore, the chance to learn the skills they need to break the cycle of poverty. "Educational Out of Schoolies," as a result of this, are a critical factor for the persistence of their marginalization, which precludes them from learning and developing enough capacity for the future to enable them to access better-paying jobs. Their poverty isn't helped by the fact that lack of education and long work hours mean these kids don't rise out of their low-skill, low-wage status.

Another important problematic factor is related to healthcare exclusion. Many of these child laborers, especially those working in agriculture and domestic service, are at risk of physical ailments resulting from malnutrition, injuries, and harsh working and living conditions. But they have little health care. In part, because of the hours they work, it's the kids who skip medical appointments or treatment, and ones from poor families do not have the money to pay for medical care. This access to healthcare can be a factor making their position more vulnerable, because untreated diseases are also limiting their potential working capabilities, and thereby their quality of life is limited.

Child labour also has a social fallout in the form of a feeling of social alienation and exclusion from society at large. Children in employment, including in agriculture and the household, are frequently deprived of the social and recreational opportunities that are crucial for their emotional and social development. They cannot share school experiences, play with friends, and attend community events, leading to feelings of isolation. This social marginalization may have an impact on their self-perception, identity, and social inclusion in the long term. For a large number of those implicated children, their entire social life is within the family or at work, and add to this the ghettoization of the hostile environment as a form of "double jeopardy" which further capitalist exclusion and exclusion.

Conclusion

This study raises the intricate problem of child labor in Multan, South Punjab, owing to contextual traditionalist socio-economic constructs, poverty, and lack of child health and education facilities. The fact that children are expected to bring income even by shouldering such burdens as the region's child laborers bear is attributed to culture, and is a major reason child labor persists. This economic pressure, coupled with the exclusion of children from education and health care, is a veritable vortex of poverty and marginalization. To interrupt this cycle, targeted interventions are imperative. Specific educational initiatives should be developed to provide alternatives for schooling and vocational training adapted to the reality of working children. They provide a means for children to further their education without having to give up their economic assistance to their families. In addition, community-based welfare projects such as social protection schemes, parents' income-generating activities are essential in reducing the economic burden on families, which in turn would reduce the magnitude of child labour. Enhanced enforcement of child labor laws, reinforced with public awareness programs on the value of education and the danger of child labor, will complement these efforts. Gender-sensitive approaches are also critical to address the fact that girls suffer most from child labour and have equal access to education and social opportunities. Lastly, generating awareness for the community and mobilization on the issue can make solutions locally owned and collective responsibility toward eliminating child labor. These are the kinds of integrated approaches that will help to bring down child labor and bring about better social inclusion in the future for children in places like Multan.

References

- Ahmad, K., & Shah, M. (2020). The persistence of child labor in rural Pakistan: A socio-cultural and economic analysis. *Journal of Social Issues in Development*, 12(2), 45-63.
- Abdullah, M. A. (2014). A qualitative exploration of Pakistan's street children, as victims of child labor. *Pakistan Journal of Social Sciences*, 34(2), 345–356.
- Ali, D., Gong, X., & Xianghe, G. (2024). Child labor laws and educational rights for children in Pakistan: A contextual analysis. Southeast University & University of Haripur. <https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-4733099/v1>
- Das, S. (2022). Child labour and schooling decision of the marginal farmer households: An empirical evidence from the East Medinipur district of West Bengal, India. *arXiv*. <https://arxiv.org/abs/2209.01330>
- Faria, C. F. (2010). Why is child labour detrimental for children? Aga Khan University eCommons. https://ecommons.aku.edu/pakistan_ied_pdck/1222
- Haider, S.Z., & Qureshi, A. (2016). Causative factors of child labour in South Punjab, Pakistan. *Journal of Educational Research*.
- International Labour Organization (ILO) & UNICEF. (2021). Child labour: Global estimates 2020, trends, and the road forward. International Labour Office.
- Kabeer, N., Nambissan, G.B., & Subrahmanian, R. (2003). Needs versus rights? Child labour, social exclusion and the challenge of universalising primary education. *IDS Working Paper*, 10(2).
- Klasen, S. (2006). Social exclusion and children in OECD countries: Some conceptual issues. *Social Protection Discussion Paper Series*, No. 0611.
- Levitas, R. (2006). The concept and measurement of social exclusion. In C. Pantazis, D. Gordon, & R. Levitas (Eds.), *Poverty and Social Exclusion in Britain* (pp. 10-29). The Policy Press.
- Maqbool, N. (2024). Child labor in Punjab, Pakistan: Patterns and areas in need of intervention. *MDPI*. <https://doi.org/10.3390/2571-905X/7/4/84>

- Panezai, S. (2020). Factors determining child labor. *Changing Social Perspectives Journal*, 3(2), 45–59.
- Redmond, G. (2014). Child poverty and social exclusion. In *Handbook of Child Well-Being* (pp. 2187-2205). Springer.
- Rahi, S. A. (2009). The state of bonded labor in Pakistan. National Coalition Against Bonded Labor. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_State_of_Bonded_Labor_in_Pakistan
- Silver, H. (1994). Social exclusion and social solidarity: Three paradigms. *International Labour Review*, 133(5–6), 531-578.
- Siddiqi, F., & Patrinos, H. A. (2000). Child labour: Issues, causes and interventions. The World Bank. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Child_labour
- Tariq, S., Nadeem, N., Saad, A., & Naveed, Z. (2025). Impact of media campaigns on shaping child welfare policies in Multan, Pakistan. *Journal of Applied Linguistics and TESOL (JALT)*, 8(3), 889-899.
- Ullah, A., & Shah, M. (2018). Falling off the edge: The view of social exclusion in children due to underage employment. *Child Indicators Research*, 11(1), 103-121.
- Zahoor, S. R. S. G. S. (2022). Child labor in Pakistan: Causes, consequences, and prevention. *Pakistan Social Science Review*, 6(2), 18–30. [https://doi.org/10.35484/pssr.2022\(6-II\)18](https://doi.org/10.35484/pssr.2022(6-II)18)
- Zulfiqar, Z., & Shabbir, M. (2025). Educational exclusion and child labor in Southern Punjab. *Pakistan Social Science Review*.
- Ali, S. S., & Saleem, R. (2017). Understanding child labor in Pakistan's agriculture sector. *International Journal of Social Sciences*, 3(2), 123-134.
- Batool, M., & Ali, S. (2018). Educational exclusion of children due to child labor in rural Pakistan. *Journal of Educational Development*, 5(1), 45-59.
- Grewal, P., & Singh, N. (2019). Child labor in Pakistan: An overview of the factors and policies. *Journal of Global Development*, 7(3), 56-78.
- Khan, S., & Ahmed, M. (2021). The impact of socio-economic factors on child labor in Punjab, Pakistan. *Global Journal of Social Sciences*, 8(4), 234-247.
- Maqsood, S., & Khan, S. (2020). Structural causes of child labor: A case study of Multan, Punjab. *Social Issues and Development Journal*, 15(2), 65-78.
- Niazi, S., & Malik, K. (2020). Child labor and socio-economic development: Evidence from rural Punjab. *Pakistan Economic Review*, 43(2), 67-82.
- Siddiqui, S. M., & Malik, N. (2022). Child labor in brick kilns of Punjab: Causes, impacts, and interventions. *International Journal of Human Rights and Development*, 9(1), 112-128.
- Shah, A., & Khan, R. (2020). Child labor and its effects on children's rights in Southern Punjab. *Journal of Social Welfare and Education*, 6(2), 45-60.
- Tariq, S., & Iqbal, S. (2018). Child labor and its relation to poverty in rural Pakistan. *Social Protection and Development Studies*, 2(3), 123-135.
- Zahra, H., & Aslam, R. (2017). Child labor and exclusion: Educational and health challenges in Pakistan's rural areas. *International Journal of Development Studies*, 15(4), 101-115.
- Zaman, H., & Raza, A. (2021). Social exclusion of children: The role of child labor in Punjab's agriculture sector. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 4(2), 58-75.
- Zaidi, S., & Hussain, I. (2023). Child labor and educational opportunities: Evidence from Southern Punjab. *Pakistan Journal of Social Policy*, 11(1), 23-40.