



Evaluating the impact of poverty on child labour and physical abuse: a study of Rawalpindi and Islamabad, Pakistan

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Abstract:

Children are the next generation of any society. Mentally and physically sound children can ensure a good future for a country. So, governments around the world prioritize their welfare programs for children, but the case in Pakistan is different. They are one of the few marginalised groups which are left at the mercy of cruel people. According to reports, there are 22.8 million children out of school and approximately 12.5 million working as labourers in the job market in Pakistan. Child labour is a sustained menace in a country that has a painful past and a dark future. It has multifaceted causes and implications. This research is undertaken to highlight the causes and implications of child labour and its subsequent impacts on the health of the children involved in the form of physical torture and abuse. The data was collected from key people, including owners of restaurants, workshops, and other such places. During the data collection process, it was revealed that most of the people responded that due to poverty factors, children are forced to join the labour market. They recommend that the government launch more poor-friendly projects, including the Benazir Income Support Program for the uplifting poor.

Keywords: Child labour, Poverty, Child legislation, Illiteracy, Out of school children, Physical abuse, Mentally sound children, Physically sound children, Child welfare.

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1. Introduction

Pakistan is a country with the highest number of youths, making up 64% of the total population (Ali, 2011). Among them, 13.7% of children under 10 to 14 works as a labourer. (ILO, 2024). Due to a sustained economic downturn, it is becoming increasingly difficult for families to feed their children and provide them with primary education. Millions of children are still out of school, and around 3.3 million are involved in labour (Tribune, 2022). According to the KP Child Labour Survey 2022, 10.9% of children aged 10-13 years and 5.3% aged 5-9 years are working children, of which 73.8 Percent children are working in hazardous conditions. Children working in harsh conditions face issues related to their health hazards, including physical, mental, and sexual abuse. The child rights issue has always been present, but the child labour problem remains a global concern (Lika, 2012). Child labour is discouraged because it is connected to the violation of the fundamental rights of children, and their health is jeopardized.

Not every work that children are involved in can be considered child labour (Khan, 2011; Lika et al., 2012). However, there is no specific definition of child labour as it varies from country to country. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), child labour refers to work that deprives children of their childhood, potential, and dignity and is harmful to their physical or mental development (ILO, 2016). Similarly, according to UNICEF (2014), child labour refers to work that exceeds the required hours, leading to harm to the child mentally, physically, morally, and socially. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) defines child labour as work performed by a child that is likely to interfere with his or her education or to be harmful to their health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral, or social development. Child labour, as defined by Alam (2023), is work that deprives children of their childhood and education and harms them emotionally, physically, socially, and morally.

The menace of child labour is a persistent problem that Pakistan has faced since its inception. The Pakistan Penal Code (PPC) 1860 does not specify a child's age as mentioned in the Constitution of Pakistan 1973, as well as at the provincial level (Ali, 2022). Many children working as labourers are in Asia, with the usual age being between 10-14 years, which is common in Pakistan. Pakistan has signed commitments in various international conventions concerning the rights of children and the eradication of child labour. Notably, Pakistan signed the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990; Article 32 of the Convention states that children must be protected from work and dangerous occupations that may harm them (UN, 1990). Additionally, Pakistan ratified the ILO Convention (1999, clause 182) related to the prohibition and eradication of child labour. The Minimum Age Convention 1973 (138) is about the recruitment of children for employment (Spark, 2019).

In Pakistan, there is a lack of effective enforcement of existing laws aimed at curbing the exploitation of child labour. Although preventive legislation has been enacted, its implementation is not as effective as it should be (Rehman, 2023). Due to a lack of awareness about existing laws among employers, they exploit children by employing them as cheap labour. Moreover, there is no legal intervention according to the changing dynamics of society (Gilani, 2022). The implementation and response of the legal framework at the federal and provincial levels are different. While various federal laws are implemented at the provincial level, they are not enforced uniformly across provinces. Additionally, different laws are enforced in the context of prohibiting child trafficking, the worst forms of child labour, and the commercial exploitation of children. Unfortunately, these laws do not apply consistently across

provinces (ILAB, 2019). In Pakistan, preventive legislation has been done, but there is no enforcement of the law to control child labour, especially in Sindh where many children still work as slaves (Mansur, 2006).

In Pakistan, the most worrisome aspect of child labour is child abuse. Whether working in agriculture, workshops, or other places, there is a possibility that children will be abused, and they often do not speak about it. Child abuse can occur during child labour in various forms, such as physical abuse, emotional abuse, and neglect (Sidebotham, 2006). This issue is particularly concerning for girls, who, in many cases, are physically abused because they provide financial support to their families. The most famous case was the Tayyaba physical torture case back in 2016 in Islamabad, Pakistan. (Kermani, 2018). There are approximately 19% of boys suffer from physical abuse, with a higher ratio of boys than girls in Sindh, Pakistan (Meesha Iqbal, 2021). Child labour harms children's childhood by affecting their social, physical, and mental well-being. Despite comprehensive efforts made by Pakistan, implementing existing laws is ineffective (Rehman, 2023).

Many children are forced to work in Pakistan and are subjected to the worst forms of child labour, including dangerous work, brick manufacturing, debt bondage, agriculture, and human trafficking. The phenomenon of domestic child labour is a hidden one that deprives children of their well-being. In domestic work, children are engaged in various daily tasks, such as working in the kitchen, cleaning the house, dishwashing, baby care, and ironing. These children face emotional, physical, and psychological abuse. They are forced to work from sunrise to sunset. Poverty is the primary factor that drives children to be involved in domestic or industrial work to support their families (Ebrahim, 2022; Detho, 2023).

This paper will highlight the socio-economic factors leading a child to join the labour market under worse hygiene conditions. It will also review the psychological aspects of children who undergo labour by interviewing their parents, relatives, or supervisors. Based on the primary data, this paper will review perceptions of people working in critical commercial activities where children are working in child labour. Their views will be discussed in detail. The paper is based on interviews.

1.1. Problem statement

The population growth rate in Pakistan is 1.9%, and it is not due to the available resources, including people's access to health, education, and other facilities. This demographic mismatch of population with the resources is ultimately putting pressure on vulnerable people, including poor families, in the form of their children working in unhygienic work environments. Children are one of the few vulnerable sections of society but are getting the least attention in terms of programs and policies aimed at improving their livelihood. These factors, coupled with others, including poverty, are pushing children to join the labour market, jeopardizing their right to health, education, and a decent life. The data shows an alarming 22.8 million children out of school and 13.7% of children aged 10-17 years are being engaged in child labour. Most of them are exposed to hazardous work.

2. Literature review

Child labour depicts the employment of children that compromises their physical, emotional, and mental strength. It hampers the cognitive and intellectual nourishment of the children;

therefore, signatories of International Labour Organizations (ILO) are bound to abide by Convention No. 138. There are more than 12 million children in Pakistan engaged in child labour, and a large number of them are working in urban areas, and the majority in Rawalpindi and Islamabad (ILO, 2018). The Convention states that the employment age should not be less than 15 for developed and 14 for developing countries (International Labour Organization, 2020). Moreover, UNICEF (2020) states that in the realm of child labour, boys have a higher ratio than girls, with 88 million boys and 64 million girls occupied globally in child labour. Specifically, around 70% are working in the agriculture sector, 12% are engaged in industry, and 17% are in the services sector.

Historically, the demand for child labour increased after the wave of industrialization in Europe. They needed workers to work in industries to boost production. Additionally, in the United States, the trend of child labour in rural areas is higher than in urban areas (Ortiz-Ospina & Roser, 2024). This trend highlights that child labour is a menace for the upcoming generation and can become a threat to nations in developing countries. (Shahid, 2020). Child labour is increasing day by day to overcome this serious issue unemployment insurance is a safety net in many developing countries to provide financial support to families with low income (East and Simon, 2020). Similarly, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted on November 20, 1989, by the United Nations General Assembly, comprises 54 articles. For instance, Article 27 asserts that the state should ensure adequate living standards for children's social, moral, and mental development. Likewise, according to Article 28, primary education should be compulsory and free. Furthermore, Article 32 implies that the state should take stringent measures to save children from economic exploitation (United Nations Human Rights, 1989).

Child labour is caused by several socioeconomic factors worldwide. Notably, South Asia is one of the most dominant in the developing world, where a significant proportion of children engage in child labour. (ILO, 2010). The cause of the increasing number of child labourers in South Asia is poverty; when parents don't have jobs, they force their children to work to support the household (Ali, 2022). Poverty affects street children as it is the root cause of their lack of education and forces them into child labour (Rehman, 2023). Children have been abused for a long time. Notably, Naeem et al. (2011) argue that child labour is a prevalent problem in developing countries where 250 million children are engaged in child employment. To illustrate, 61% of working children are in Asia, 32% in Africa, and 7% in Latin America. The underlying cause, in this case, of child labour in developing countries is extreme poverty. For example, in Ghana, child labour is an intrinsic part of the country's economic activity. Furthermore, a financial restructuring program was started in 1983 with the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) collaboration to liberalize trade and restructure economic activities to reduce the impact of economic recession, unemployment, and poverty. (Blunch & Verner, 2001).

In Latin America, child labourers are engaged in three sectors: agriculture, industry, and the informal economy. Specifically, in Chiapas and Mexico, 30% of child labourers under the age of 14 are engaged in the agriculture sector, working from morning to evening (McCrory, 2011). In addition, in the industry, 50% of labourers are children who are strictly prohibited from leaving until they complete their daily quota. Finally, in the informal economy, including selling gum and shoe polishing in the street, 5.7 million children are involved (Tauson, 2009).

In Pakistan, due to a lack of economic resources, street children perform several tasks ranging from begging, car washing, and pickpocketing to picking garbage and prostitution (Abdullah,

2014). Moreover, due to the lack of basic resources to fulfil their needs, children are forced to work in the streets instead of going to school. However, the skills they develop, such as technical skills, car washing, housekeeping and brick making, provide additional occupational choices and more guaranteed jobs. (Rana, 2011). Additionally, Human Rights Watch research (1996) reveals that many youngsters in Pakistan who work as children are exposed to physical and verbal abuse at the hands of their employers. This abuse, in turn, threatens their physical and mental health and further solidifies their social isolation.

Unfortunately, there are 22 million children out of school, which is 10% of Pakistan's total population (Baloch, 2020; Fehmi et al., 2024). Furthermore, twelve million of these children are involved in the labour market (HRCP, 2018; SPARC, 2018). Given this scenario, removing children from the labour market without providing an equivalent income is unreasonable since they earn daily wages. Thus, our government or UN/UNICEF cannot afford to fund all child labourers, as the total amount would be extensive. As a result, implementing such a policy presents challenges (A. Khan, 2011). Therefore, to uplift these children, an alternative plan is needed to address the root causes of child labour and provide sustainable solutions. According to the World Bank, in 2022, 712 million people were living in extreme poverty, and 40.1% of people were living below the poverty line in Pakistan. In the context of recent statistics, in 2018-19, the poverty rate at the national level increased to 21.5%. Provincially, Punjab's poverty rate was 16.3%, Sindh's 24.6%, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's 27%, and Baluchistan's 40.7% (PIDE, 2021). Additionally, poverty in rural areas is higher than in urban areas because of income climate shocks and lack of employment opportunities (Ahsan & Afzal, 2022).

In Pakistan, 72.5% of child labourers work for long hours, and most lack access to basic sanitary facilities, holidays, and training. As a result, these undesirable working circumstances frequently result in underdeveloped growth, dermatological diseases, and musculoskeletal pain (Hannan, A., 2021). According to the International Labour Organization, children work the longest hours and are the lowest paid of all workers (Bequele & Boyden, 1988). Moreover, the theoretical model that underpins most empirical research on the topic can be traced back to the fundamental publication on time allocation and its numerous expansions to family behavior. In this context, the family decides together how many children to have and how to divide household members' time between market jobs, domestic production, and schooling (ILO, 1997).

Furthermore, rural areas have different socioeconomic features and structures. This nature of rights highly impacts a child's schooling and is highly sensitive to the child's gender. This outcome can also be explained by the lack of female schools in remote areas, which makes them work in various environments (Hazarika, 2001). Moreover, many health hazards, such as lack of food, addiction to drugs, infectious diseases, and mental health problems, exist for street children in the deprived areas of Islamabad (Siddiqui & Khan, 2021). As a result, these children can be abused verbally, physically, or sexually. For instance, physical abuse of domestic child labourers can vary from a simple slap to a severe beating with tools (S. Zainab, 2016). Furthermore, a lot of domestic violence directed towards children is done so to punish them; it includes kicking, beating, burning, and poisoning (WHO, 2006).

Moreover, the child might be hesitant to tell their parents about the physical abuse they experience at their workplace or from their employer (Thulin, 2019). Consequently, many of these children are sent to labour as early as age five, depriving them of their right to primary education, health care, and nutrition (Hadi, 2008). In this context, the weak economic

foundation of the nation is the main cause of child labour in Pakistan (Gilani, S., 2022). Therefore, in Pakistan, child labour exists despite legislative and legal frameworks (Hadi, 2008). In Pakistan, 40.1% of people are living below the poverty line, and 30% of the total population is illiterate. As a result, they force children to work due to household dependency, and they have no choice but to work for the survival of their families. Consequently, the employment of children is preferred because they can be employed for lower wages, work longer hours, and are less likely to complain (Abdul Rehman, 2023).

Furthermore, Rana (2011) states that Pakistan lacks a Child Protection Bureau in all provinces except Punjab, which is a dedicated government department focused on the welfare of children. Although the child abuse protection law was passed in 2010, its implementation has remained weak due to political interference and corruption (SPARC, 2019). Moreover, children in urban centres in Pakistan are forced into child labour due to poverty, a lack of education, and the absence of effective child labour laws (Gilani, 2022). More than half of the working children in Pakistan (approximately 55%) work in agriculture, whereas 20% work in the services sector, 18% in the industrial sector, and 7% in other sectors. These children are involved in several tasks, including farming, brickmaking, domestic service, and street vending, and scavenging (Ahmad, 2010).

3. Theoretical framework

As has been discussed above, different factors that contribute to child labour have been discussed, including poverty, literacy, and social and societal norms. Other theoretical frameworks discuss all these factors. This paper will follow the Poverty Cycle Theory and Maslow's theory of Hierarchy of Needs. A single philosopher did not coin the first theory, and it evolved. Over the period, many scholars like Gunnar Myrdal and Oscar Lewis from diverse backgrounds refined and developed this theory. Ragnar Nurkse, an economist, introduced the vicious cycle of poverty in 1953. He believed that low incomes in developing countries lead to minimal savings because employment opportunities are scarce. As a result, we will be having low productivity. The leading factors for the poverty cycle are the lack of education and technical expertise, especially in rural areas, poor health and nutrition challenges, and infrastructure adversities for economic efficacy. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs was given by Abraham Maslow in 1943. He illustrated the needs of human beings in the form of a pyramid. The lowest tier of human needs is physiological needs, in which food, health, water, and shelter are the main ingredients for human survival. Safety needs keep the same importance in human life because everyone seeks safety and security. The self-esteem needs and self-actualization are the top tier of Maslow's hierarchy, which describes the self-apprehension of one's potential.

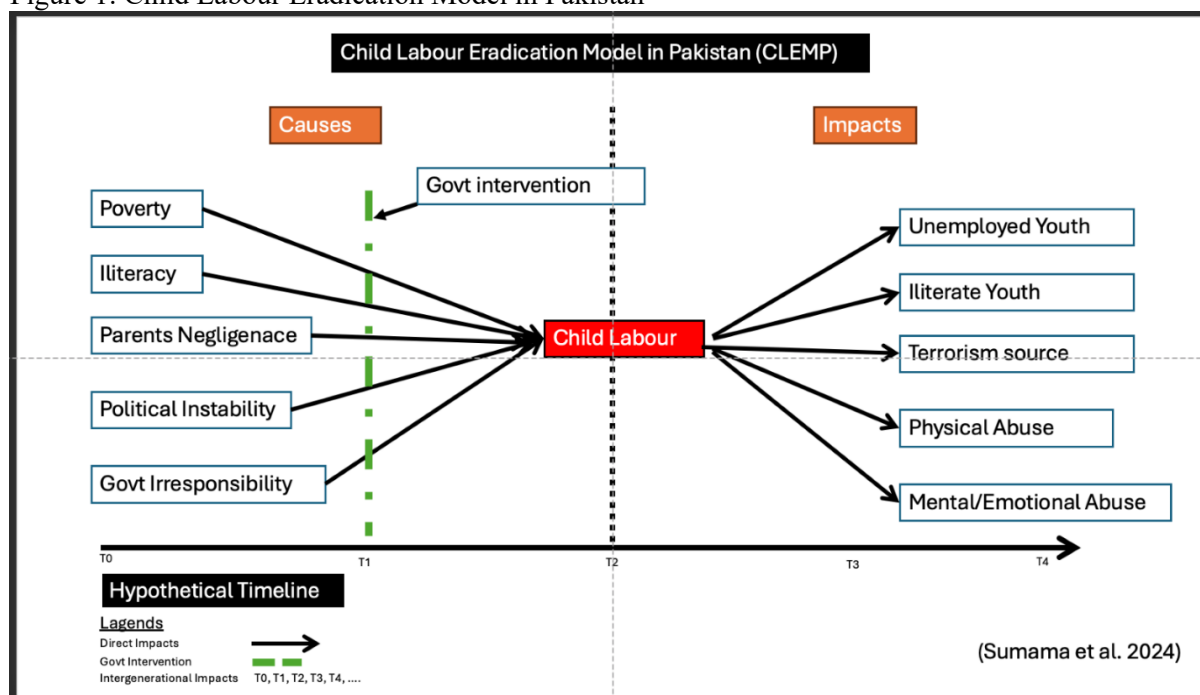
4. Methodology

Qualitative methodology is used for this research paper. The data was collected from different vital informants, including parents, master/ustad and adults who were child labourers in their childhood. The authors collected data through an in-depth interview of 15 critical informants comprised of Master/Ustad (n=03), parents (n=02), and Child Labourers (n=10). The sample size of this research paper is n=15. Purposive sampling techniques are used for this research paper. It is worth mentioning that those labourers who worked as labourers in their childhood are now over 20 years old. The interview was conducted through a semi-structured questionnaire. The in-depth interview was conducted in Urdu, and then it was translated into

English. Clarke & Braun, (2017) used six thematic analysis phases for this research study. After the translation and transcription, the data was read and reviewed in breadth and depth for familiarization. In the next phase, the coding of the transcript was concluded through Microsoft Excel, and themes were developed as an outcome of the coding. After naming and interpreting the theme, the final analysis is done, which is shown in the finding section below.

Figure 1 is a model called the Child Labour Eradication Model in Pakistan (CLEMP). This model was designed after reviewing relevant literature and primary data collected from key informants in the mentioned cities in Pakistan. Researchers came up with this model to present a sketch of the entire process. A hypothetical timeline is given from T0 to T4. On the left-hand side, factors that are causing child labour are mentioned, including poverty, illiteracy, parents’ negligence, political instability, government irresponsibility, and a few others. Similarly, on the right-hand side, the impact factors, including unemployed youth, illiterate youth, terrorism sources, physical abuse, and mental and emotional abuse, are mentioned. Based on the data collected, it is argued that for most of this socioeconomic issue, responsibility falls on the shoulders of the government for not launching proper poverty eradication programs at full capacity. For this reason, it is argued that if the government intervenes T1 (shown in Figure 1), there is less likelihood that this socioeconomic phenomenon will persist in society. If the intervention is done successfully at T1, the intergenerational problems prevailing at T2, T3, T4, and onward will be automatically stopped, and a new era of prosperous generation will emerge.

Figure 1: Child Labour Eradication Model in Pakistan



Source: Designed by authors based on the literature review and data collected.

5. Findings/data analysis

Child labour has negative consequences on the mental and physical health of children, and both have been neglected, especially in developing countries (Feeny et al. 2021). The World Health Organization (WHO, 1987) highlighted that isolation and conflict at the workplace, excessive workload, low wages, and lack of time for recreational activity and family affects the child's

psychological health. During an interview, in response to a question on the health and well-being of child labour, a participant responded:

Children working as labourers have immensely deteriorated physical health. When health is compromised, nobody is supposed to work and take action effectively. Child labour stagnates the intellectual growth of children and affects their intellectual integrity. In addition, it harms children's physical and emotional health (Personal communication, April 2024).

The economic factor is the leading determinant of increase in child labour in Pakistan. (Ali worked as a child labour back in 2011 said, that 86% of working children are illiterate due to economic factors such as the poor income of households and Edmonds (2005) low family income decided to employ children to improve their economic status. Sharing his view on the economic constituent, one respondent mentioned:

In Pakistan, we are compelled to work instead of getting an education for upbringing and family income support. I am an orphan; there is no breadwinner in my family, and that's why we don't bother our age. Instead of being concerned, we have to come over here to nourish my younger brother and mother; otherwise, we could not live in this cruel society (Personal communication, May 2024).

Similarly, during the interview session, in response to the same question about economic factors, a participant responded that:

He has been working for 7 years to support and to assist his family, thereby, he did not get the proper education. Inflation and unemployment in Pakistan compelled them to engage in market forces due to low income, instead of getting an education. They are willing to expand their educational level, but financial constraints are the biggest hindrance to getting it (Personal communication, July 2024).

Poverty is an important factor in influencing child labour. In Ecuador, monetary compensation to single mothers and heads of unemployed households was not impactful in mitigating poverty, but conditional cash transfer programs in Latin America successfully cater the child labour and poverty to some extent and showed positive outcomes (Vergara-Romero, Macas-Acosta, Márquez-Sánchez, and Arencibia-Montero, 2024). In comparison to such programs and their compatibility in Pakistan, a respondent, during an interview, in response to a question about how poverty influences child labour, stated that:

Poverty is the main factor that increases the incidence of child labour in Pakistan. In Pakistan, the Benazir Income Support Program successfully replicated the conditional cash transfer program, which has enough capacity to overcome. When you have poverty in a household, children move to the workplace to meet their financial needs. Most of the time, children get abused by their senior staff as well as managers. There is no doubt it is a significant factor that has great implications for child abuse. When poverty exists in any country ultimately, child labour increases (Personal communication, April 2024).

Chiodi and Escudero (2024) emphasized that Child labour can be eradicated through the awareness of education at the grassroots level and giving quality education respectively. Still, Pakistan has a lack of infrastructure and capacity issues to implement policies. Respondent mentioned his view and experience about access to education and opportunities as follows:

We can get away from child labour through proper education by getting subsidized education from the government or by ourselves. Unfortunately, 25 million children are out of school. They are engaged in labour activities when they have no educational opportunities or access to education. Lack of education in Punjab is the biggest factor in joining the labour market. The focus of the Punjab government is Lahore, and Punjab does not come into the ambit of Punjab. It is very difficult to get an education for the unprivileged class (Personal communication, July 2024).

During an interview, the respondent enthralled us with the educational constraint in Sindh province, leading to child labour. He mentioned that in his community, he belongs to Shawli village, where feudal lords don't want children to get an education. When they attain an education. They will not obey the instructions of the feudal and be accountable for their action and decisions; thereby, they are not in favour of getting an education, the case of the assassination of Dr Sawand late (Ahmed, 2023). Similarly, one of the author's roommates, Dr Zulfiqar Mangi, a medical surgeon who wanted to serve in his hometown in remote Sindh, was punished by the landlord as he was from a middle class. The surgeon committed suicide a few months after the incident. Media reports termed it assassination from the landlord (Daur, 2020).

Lack of enforcement perpetuates the cycle of child labour. According to the Employment of Children Act 1991 (Abdulrehman, 2023). The employment of children under 14 is strictly prohibited (Shahid, 2020), but from 10 to 14, they are engaged in the labour force, which is 8.2%, or 2.5 million children, due to poor regulatory measures. It mainly occurs when the government cannot provide necessities (Amon et al., 2012). During a conversation with the respondent on the role of government in stopping children from working as labourers, he mentioned:

The government is responsible for the crime of child labour. Social protection programs and access to education for every child can decrease child labour. They have made policies, but their implementation is poor due to capacity issues. The government needs to strengthen the enforcement of the law. We cannot stop children from the labour force until the government provides subsidized education from primary to tertiary level or employment opportunities to unemployed breadwinners of families (Personal communication, June 2024).

6. Conclusion and recommendation

Poverty is the main reason that led to child labour in Pakistan due to the economic downturn; it is tough for parents to feed their children and provide fundamental education. The youth population is around 64%, while 13.7% of children aged between 10-14 are engaged in child labour. Approximately 22.8 million students out of school are working in hazardous places. Children are among the few sections of society that receive the least attention regarding programs and policies' purpose to improve their lives.

Most of the time, the children are physically, mentally, and emotionally abused by their senior staff and manager as well. Child labour affects intellectual growth and integrity, while children are compelled to work to bring up and support their family income without bothering their age factor. The inflation and unemployment in Pakistan make children engage in the market and lack proper education. There are 25 million children who are out of school and cannot access education.

In Pakistan, policies are formulated, but their implementation needs to be done properly, and law enforcement needs to be strengthened. The government must provide subsidized quality education from primary to tertiary levels and employment opportunities to unemployed breadwinners of the families. Social protection programs can play an essential role in decreasing child labour and ensuring that every child can access education.

The study reveals several recommendations to address the issue of child labour in Pakistan. Most importantly, child labour laws should have strict enforcement and implementation. The government should take different courses of action to create more free educational opportunities and subsidized education for those who cannot provide fundamental education to their children. Collaborating with industries and meeting the standards of markets that strengthen the education system is crucial. Collaboration with industries plays an essential role in reducing financial pressure and boosting the skills and abilities of the students. The Government should establish institutes that ensure responsibility for the children.

Additionally, the government must provide freelancing programs, e-commerce, etc. so that students can earn money to support their families and contribute to the strength of the economy through foreign remittances. To provide more opportunities to students, the government has to offer paid internship programs, apprenticeships, and functional courses with monthly scholarships to cover their expenditures so that they cannot go to the market to work as child labourers. To reduce child labour in the market, the government must increase the wages of all employees. Parents must cover their household expenses. They could generate their income to reduce the economic pressure. Additionally, the role of society is vital; it must take responsibility to support those unable to attend school due to their financial issues.

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