

SOCIO-CULTURAL AND ECONOMIC DETERMINANTS OF CHILD LABOR IN SOUTHERN PUNJAB, PAKISTAN

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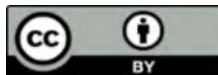
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ABSTRACT

Child labor remains one of the most persistent and deeply rooted challenges globally. International Labour Organization (ILO) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) (2021) estimated that approximately 160 million children, nearly 1 in 10 worldwide, are engaged in child labor, and of these, 79 million are involved in hazardous work that directly endangers their health, safety, or moral development. The objectives of the research were to examine the socio-cultural determinants of child labor in Southern Punjab and to analyze the economic factors contribution to child labor in Southern Punjab, Pakistan. The study was carried out in three divisions of Southern Punjab, Pakistan: (i) Dera Ghazi Khan, (ii) Multan, and (iii) Bahawalpur. The data were gathered from household heads whose children were between the ages of five and sixteen and did child labor. Before data collection, the enumerators asked the respondent for an acceptable time for data collection. It was found that majority of the respondents were agreed that the cultural dominancy, poverty, gendered attitude, occupational inheritance and future certainty were the reasons of child labor. The majority 55.8% of the respondents were agreed that changing traditional gender roles can help reduce child labor. The majority 53.3% of the respondents were disagreed that community attitudes support boys working but discourage girls from working outside the home. The majority 54.8% of the respondents were agreed that children working in family businesses or farms are common economic survival strategy. The majority 68.3% of the respondents were agreed that economic hardship makes it difficult for families to prioritize education over immediate income. The majority 48.5% of the respondents were disagreed that economic inequality in society contributes to the persistence of child labor. The majority 65.1% of the respondents were agreed that Government social support programs are insufficient to prevent families from sending children to work. The majority 64.0% of the respondents were agreed that children involved in child labor often face social exclusion in their communities. The majority 57.6% of the respondents were agreed that child labor limits children's opportunities to participate in social and cultural activities. It is recommended that to cut down on child labor, make sure that all children can go to good schools in poor areas. Start conditional cash transfer programs for poor families to stop kids from working and get them to go to school. Make sure that child labor laws are followed more strictly to stop abuse, especially in unregulated areas. Create flexible school systems for kids who work, like evening schools and non-formal education. Make people in the community more aware of the long-term bad effects of child labor and social exclusion.

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INTRODUCTION

Child labor remains one of the most persistent and deeply rooted challenges globally. International Labour Organization (ILO) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2021) estimated that approximately 160 million children, nearly 1 in 10 worldwide, were engaged in child labor, and of these, 79 million are involved in hazardous work that directly endangers their health, safety, or moral development. The highest prevalence is

Sub-Saharan Africa, where 24% of children are laborers, while Asia and the Pacific account for 62 million child workers. The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated the risk, potentially pushing an additional 8.9 million children into labor by the end of 2022 without urgent mitigation measures. Alarming, the majority of child laborers, 70% are employed in the agriculture sector, followed by services (20%) and industry (10%) (ILO & UNICEF, 2021). These statistics underscore the global scale and urgency of addressing child labor through comprehensive policy reform, social protection, and educational access.

Elimination of child labor is one of the targets of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) till 2030. The SDGs 1, 4, 5, 8, 10 (No Poverty, Quality Education, Gender Equality, Decent Work and economic growth and reduced inequalities) ensures the well-being of the children by eradicating the issues confronted by the exclusionary group of people. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2023), South Asia accounts for roughly 29% of the world's 160 million child laborers, with an estimated 49 million children aged 5 to 17 working in various forms of labor in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. Approximately 23 million are involved in hazardous labor tasks that expose them to bodily harm, poisonous conditions, and exploitation.

Pakistan is one of the countries with the highest rates of child labor. According to the Pakistan Labour Force Survey (2023), 12.5 million children aged 5 to 17 work in some capacity, accounting for roughly 16% of the whole child population, of them, 8.7 million work in rural regions, largely in agriculture, livestock, and the informal economy, while 3.8 million work in cities in industries such as manufacturing, domestic work, and street vending.

The situation in Southern Punjab is especially dire due to extreme poverty, feudal structures, and restricted access to education (Zulfiqar, Shabbir, & Ishfaq, 2020).

According to Punjab Bureau of Statistics (2022) around 1.5 million children in Southern Punjab work as child laborers. Nearly 68% of these adolescents work in agriculture and brick kilns, with 22% working in handicrafts, household labor, or small businesses. Furthermore, more than 70% of these working children come from low-income families that earn less than PKR 600 a day.

According to the UNICEF Pakistan (2023) study, almost 30% of households in South Punjab rely on children's income for survival, demonstrating the confluence of economic necessity and systematic

neglect. The failure to effectively execute child labor rules, minimal social safety, and inadequate rural education facilities all contribute to the perpetuation of this cycle. Chronic poverty in rural households is main cause of child labour that compel families to involve their children in the labor (Ashraf and Asghar, 2018, Qureshi and Ahmad, 2019; Zulfiqar, 2021).

This economic pressure is directly linked to educational deprivation, which acts as both a cause and a consequence of child labor (Shakir, Zulfiqar, Ishfaq, & Khan, 2020). In Southern Punjab, inadequate school infrastructure and soaring dropout rates plague working class children (Bashir, Yousaf, & Tariq, 2021). The associated costs both direct (fees, materials) and indirect (lost wages) render education unaffordable. For poor families, child labor is often prioritized as an immediate survival necessity over the delayed benefits of schooling. This educational disparity actively reinforces structural inequality and traps marginalized communities in a self-perpetuating cycle of poverty (Rehman et al., 2020).

Saeed and Zafar (2016) point out that the absence of effective labor inspection and poor coordination among local authorities result in virtually no accountability for employers who exploit child workers. Moreover, cultural norms are crucial in normalizing the practice in Southern Punjab (Khan & Javed, 2017). Malik and Habib (2022) stress that this intersection of gender and class devalues girls' labor and limits their access to education due to entrenched patriarchal structures, thereby deepening social exclusion (Zulfiqar, Ishfaq, & Pervez, 2021).

Bashir, Yousaf, and Tariq (2021), early entry into the labor market often prevents children from re-entering education, leading to lifelong economic marginalization. Abbas (2025) and Ashraf, A. et al., (2019) highlighted that household poverty, illiteracy of parents, unemployment and low salary were the most important economic factors that compelled children to work. Zulfiqar et al. (2019) mentioned that poverty, child labor, and school dropout were strongly correlated, and a consequently children face the education deprivation (Naz et al. 2019; 2024; Zahra et al., 2018; Zulfiqar, Shabbir, & Ishfaq, 2020). Research claims that families with a high number of dependents are under more economic pressure, which increases the chances of children being sent to work to help their families earn money (Ahmad, 2015; Akram et al., 2024). Shahzad (2025) mentioned that parents who had low or no formal education were also more prone to underestimating future payoffs of education and focus more on short-term economic gains of child labor (Naz et al., 2019).

Coverman (1983); Coltrane and Shih (2009) and Putnick and Bornstein, 2016) found that the parental gendered attitude play a critical role in determining the labor participation of children with domestic work being highly invisible when performed by girls. Such stereotypical trends can result in the long-term consequences of education levels and career preferences to continue gender disparities in the systemic level (Zapata, 2011). White and Brinkerhoff (1981) gendered labor expectation through socialization lead towards socio-economic inequalities in the labor market are perpetuated (Ray, 2000).

OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH

1. The objectives of the research were to examine the socio-cultural determinants of child labor in Southern Punjab.
2. To analyze the economic factors contribution to child labor in Southern Punjab, Pakistan.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The survey research design was used and the study was carried out in three divisions of Southern Punjab, Pakistan: (i) Dera Ghazi Khan, (ii) Multan, and (iii) Bahawalpur. The data was gathered from household heads whose children were between the ages of five and sixteen and involved in the child labor. Before data collection, the enumerators asked the household heads for an acceptable time for data collection. Total numbers of 450 parents of the child laborers was selected. After collection of the data, it was analyzed by using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 24. The researcher used the descriptive statistics which included percentage, frequency mean, standard deviation and inferential statistics.

DATA ANALYSIS

Table No. 1 Demographic Information of the Respondent

Age of the Respondent			Education of the Respondent		
Age	Frequency	%	Categories	Frequency	%
Up to 30 Years	160	35.6%	Illiterate	180	40.0%
31-35 Years	162	36.0%	Primary	165	36.7%
Above 35 Years	128	28.4%	Secondary	30	6.7%
Total	450	100.0	Other	75	16.6%
Type of the Residence of the respondent			Family Type of the Respondent		
Rural	313	69.6%	Nuclear Family	179	39.8%
Urban	137	30.4%			
Total	450	100.0			
Occupation of the respondent			Joint Family	271	60.2%
Agriculture	129	28.7%	Total	450	100.0
Brick Kiln	52	11.6%	Monthly Income of the Respondent		
Domestic	62	13.8%	Up to 8000	130	28.9%
Shop/Hotel	70	15.6%	8001-10000	180	40.0%
Factory/Workshop	75	16.7%	Above 10000	140	31.1%
Street vending	62	13.8%	Total	450	100.0

Table No.1 Show that 35.6 percent of the respondents belonged to the age of up to 30 years, 36.0 percent of the respondents belonged to the age of 30-35 years and 28.4 percent of the respondents belonged to the age of 35 years. The majority 36.0 of the respondents belonged to the age group of 30 to 35 years. There were 30.4 percent of the respondents were shows that they live in rural areas and 69.6 percent of the respondents were shows that they live in urban areas. There were 53.8 percent of the respondents have no education, 46.0 percent of the respondents have primary education and only 0.2 percent of the respondents have other education. There were 54 percent of the respondents live in nuclear family system and 23.6 percent of the respondents live in joint family system while 22.4 percent of the respondents live in extended family system. There were 12.7 percent of the respondents were belong to agriculture occupation, 11.6 percent of the respondents were worked at brick kiln, 13.8 percent of the respondents has run shop/hotel, 16.7 percent of the respondents worked at workshop/factory and 13.8 percent of the respondents belong to street vending occupation while 16 percent of the respondents belong to other occupation. There were 28.9 percent of the respondent’s monthly income is up to 8000 Rupees, 40 percent of the respondent’s monthly income is between 8001-10000 Rupees and 31.1 percent of the respondent’s monthly income is above 10000 rupees.

Table No.2. Correlations analysis for traditional norms and practice, gender role and child labor in Pakistan, economic causes and child labor, parental attitude towards child labor and child labor and social exclusion.

Variables	Mean ± SD	1	2	3	4	5
TNP	33.938±7.10	1				
GRCLP	52.000±12.12	.552**	1			
ECCL	49.960±11.95	.504**	.920**	1		
PATCL	34.473±7.41	.542**	.731**	.699**	1	
CLSE	51.287±12.48	.613**	.653**	.609**	.922**	1

Where TNP: Traditional norms and practice; GRCLP: Gender role and child labor in Pakistan; ECCL: Economic causes and child labor; PATCL: Parental attitude towards child labor and CLSE: Child labor and social exclusion.

The table 2 shows correlations analysis for traditional norms and practice, gender role and child labor in Pakistan, economic causes and child labor, parental attitude towards child labor and child labor and social exclusion. From the results it could be concluded that traditional norms and practice is significantly and positively correlated with gender role and child labor in Pakistan, economic causes and child labor,

parental attitude towards child labor and child labor and social exclusion. The gender role and child labor in Pakistan is significantly and positively correlated with economic causes and child labor, parental attitude towards child labor and child labor and social exclusion. Similarly, economic causes and child labor is significantly and positively correlated with parental attitude towards child labor and child labor and social exclusion. Furthermore, parental attitude towards child labor and child labor and social exclusion are significantly and positively correlated with each other.

Table No.3: Mediation analysis by using parental attitude towards child labor as mediator, while traditional norms and practice, gender role and child labor in Pakistan, economic causes and child labor as independent variable and child labor and social exclusion as outcome variables

Predictors	Path Coefficients				(95% CI)	R ²
	a	b	C	c'		
TNP	.300***	.121***	.436***	.400***	(.018, .057)	.485
GRCLP	.229***	.342***	.168***	.089***	(.050, .112)	.173
ECCL	.337***	.229***	.389***	.312***	(.053, .107)	.293

Where TNP: Traditional norms and practice; GRCLP: Gender role and child labor in Pakistan; ECCL: Economic causes and child labor.

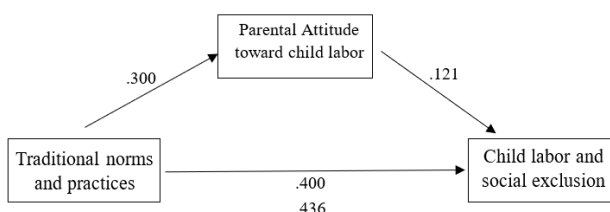


Figure 4.1. The mediation role of parental attitude in relationship between “traditional norms and practices” and “child labor and social exclusion”

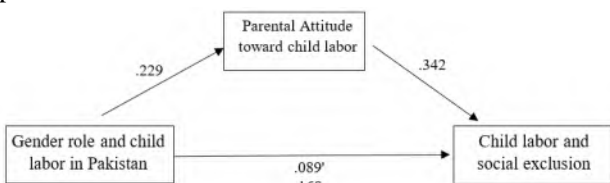


Figure 4.2. The mediation role of parental attitude in relationship between “gender role and child labor in Pakistan” and “child labor and social exclusion”

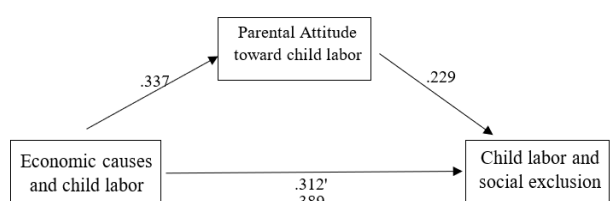


Figure 4.3. The mediation role of parental attitude in relationship between “economic causes and child labor” and “child labor and social exclusion”

Table 3, figures 1, 2 and 3 show the results of mediation analysis with parental attitude towards

child labor as mediator, while traditional norms and practice, gender role and child labor in Pakistan, economic causes and child labor as independent variable and child labor and social exclusion as outcome variables.

DISCUSSION

The study was carried out in three divisions of Southern Punjab, Pakistan: (i) Dera Ghazi Khan, (ii) Multan, and (iii) Bahawalpur. The objectives of the research were to examine the socio-cultural causes of child labor in Southern Punjab; to examine the economic causes of child labor in Southern Punjab. The data were gathered from household heads whose children were between the ages of five and sixteen and did child labor. Before data collection, the enumerators asked the respondent for an acceptable time for data collection. It was shown that most of the respondents enjoyed their childhood and resented working at a time when they should have been in school. The earlier investigations confirmed that children's participation in the workforce prevented them from receiving an education and maintaining good health. Children in developing nations were particularly affected by this worldwide problem (Donnell, 2005; Gunnarsson, 2006). According to UNICEF (2016), an estimated 152 million children were involved in child labor in 2016, of which about 60 million were between the ages of 5 and 11. Due to their affiliation with lower-class employment, the majority of respondents had fewer aspirations for the future and belonged to a lower social class. Additionally, the majority of respondents were found to be depressed and to have faded under the harsh grip of poverty that pervaded their families. According to earlier research, children were more likely to engage in child labor due to poverty and a lack of educational possibilities (Ibrahim, 2019).

It was found that traditional norms and practice is significantly and positively correlated with gender role and child labor in Pakistan, economic causes and child labor, parental attitude towards child labor and child labor and social exclusion. The gender role and child labor in Pakistan is significantly and positively correlated with economic causes and child labor, parental attitude towards child labor and child labor and social exclusion. Similarly, economic causes and child labor is significantly and positively correlated with parental attitude towards child labor and child labor and social exclusion. Furthermore, parental attitude towards child labor and child labor and social

exclusion are significantly and positively correlated with each other. It was also found that traditional norms and practice, gender role and child labor in Pakistan, economic causes and child labor were significantly and positively associated with child labor and social exclusion (from path a). Similarly, parental attitude towards child labor was significantly and positively associated with child labor and social exclusion (from path b). As for direct effect of traditional norms and practice, gender role and child labor in Pakistan, economic causes and child labor were significantly and positively associated with child labor and social exclusion (from path c). When parental attitude towards child labor was involved in the model as a mediator, the indirect pathway between “traditional norms and practice, gender role and child labor in Pakistan, economic causes and child labor” and child labor and social exclusion remained statistically significant (from path c’) which showed that parental attitude towards child labor partially mediates the relationship between “traditional norms and practice, gender role and child labor in Pakistan, economic causes and child labor” and child labor and social exclusion.

The results indicated that majority (36%) of the respondents age group was 30 to 35 years; majority of the respondents lived in rural areas.(53.8%); majority (69.6%) of the respondents belonged to rural background. It was found that majority (60.2%) of the respondents lived in joint family system. There were 28.7 percent of the respondents belonged to agriculture occupation; there were 40 percent of the respondent’s monthly income is between 8001-10000. From the results it could be concluded that traditional norms and practice is significantly and positively correlated with gender role and child labor in Pakistan, economic causes and child labor, parental attitude towards child labor and child labor and social exclusion. The gender role and child labor in Pakistan is significantly and positively correlated with economic causes and child labor, parental attitude towards child labor and child labor and social exclusion. Similarly, economic causes and child labor is significantly and positively correlated with parental attitude towards child labor and child labor and social exclusion. Furthermore, parental attitude towards child labor and child labor and social exclusion are significantly and positively correlated with each other.

It was found that traditional norms and practice, gender role and child labor in Pakistan, economic causes and child labor were significantly and

positively associated with child labor and social exclusion (from path a). Similarly, parental attitude towards child labor was significantly and positively associated with child labor and social exclusion (from path b). As for direct effect of traditional norms and practice, gender role and child labor in Pakistan, economic causes and child labor were significantly and positively associated with child labor and social exclusion (from path c). When parental attitude towards child labor was involved in the model as a mediator, the indirect pathway between “traditional norms and practice, gender role and child labor in Pakistan, economic causes and child labor” and child labor and social exclusion remained statistically significant (from path c’) which showed that parental attitude towards child labor partially mediates the relationship between “traditional norms and practice, gender role and child labor in Pakistan, economic causes and child labor” and child labor and social exclusion.

CONCLUSION

It could be concluded that the traditional norms and practice is significantly and positively correlated with gender role and child labor in Pakistan, economic causes and child labor, parental attitude towards child labor and child labor and social exclusion. The gender role and child labor in Pakistan is significantly and positively correlated with economic causes and child labor, parental attitude towards child labor and child labor and social exclusion. Similarly, economic causes and child labor is significantly and positively correlated with parental attitude towards child labor and child labor and social exclusion. Furthermore, parental attitude towards child labor and social exclusion are significantly and positively correlated with each other. It was also found that traditional norms and practice, gender role and child labor in Pakistan, economic causes and child labor were significantly and positively associated with child labor and social exclusion (from path a). Similarly, parental attitude towards child labor was significantly and positively associated with child labor and social exclusion (from path b). As for direct effect of traditional norms and practice, gender role and child labor in Pakistan, economic causes and child labor were significantly and positively associated with child labor and social exclusion.

It is suggested that government of Pakistan should have to implement the previously established rules and policies to counter the child labor for achieving

the national and international targets to enroll every child in the school. The Government of Pakistan should have to give skill based education to the children at union council and give the need based scholarship to the needy children to motivate the parents for the enrollment for their children in the schools instead of sending them for earning. Implementation of policies that combine vocational training and culturally considered skills could help to decrease the number of dropouts. The intervention should focus on both economic limitation and cultural mindset whereby there is creation of awareness programs on the long-term advantages of education and offering of financial assistance or incentives to the families to keep the children in school. To cut down on child labor, make sure that all children can go to good schools in poor areas. The Start conditional cash transfer programs for poor families to stop kids from working and get them to go to school.

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