Poverty and Child Labour in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan: An Analysis of Socioeconomic Drivers, Educational Exclusion, and Policy Interventions

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Abstract

Child labour is a widespread social problem in Pakistan, where more than 12.5 million children are involved in economic activities in different sectors (The Daily Times, 2025; The Express Tribune, 2025). This research paper analyzes that there is a relationship between poverty and child labour in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Pakistan, based on various recent empirical studies, official government records, and theoretical constructs of development economics and sociology. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in particular, 11.1% of the provincial child population are working children with the laggards in the Swat and Kurram districts being the most frequently hit by environmental degradation, poverty, and cultural norms forcing their families to withdraw their children out of school and force them into labour as a survival strategy (Sadiq, 2025; Turi & Khan, 2025; The Daily Times, 2025). The discussion shows that poverty is a multifaceted phenomenon: it compels households to focus on the urgent economic needs at the expense of children receiving education, it imposes opportunity costs that make schooling a costly experience for poor families, and it keeps children in the cycle of intergenerational poverty. Other causative factors are parental illiteracy (Abdul Ghaffar & Enam, 2025), family size (Turi & Khan, 2025), laxity in child labour legislation, and economic distress caused by climate, which influences the household use of labour (Sadiq, 2025). Possible intervention avenues are policy reactions such as the Waseela-e-Taleem conditional cash transfers of the Benazir Income Support Programme, the Child Labour Schools of Pakistan Bait-ul-Mal, and constitutional guarantees under Article 11(3) (Newsdesk, 2025a, 2025b, 2025c). The paper put forward evidence-based suggestions on the reduction of poverty, access to education, enforcement of the law, and coordinated governance.

Keywords: Child labour, poverty, educational exclusion, hazardous work, child rights, Districts Swat and Kurram, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Child Rights Movement (CRM) National Secretariat estimated that in Pakistan, more than 12.5 million child labourers exist. According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO), one out of four households in Pakistan hires a child to work at home, usually under dangerous conditions. A provincial survey in the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa alone found that 11.1 per cent of the child population in the province are working children (Daily Times, 2025; The Express Tribune, 2025).

The last nationwide survey on Child labour in Pakistan was in 1996 which concluded that the highest share of children was engaged in child labour in agriculture (66%), then in manufacturing (11%), in hotels and restaurants (9%), at home, social and personal services (8%), transport (4%), and construction (2%) (Daily Times, 2025). Almost thirty years without national data has traditionally weakened evidence-based policymaking, but there has been a recent move to fill this gap with provincial surveys in Sindh and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

In 1996, 8.3 percent of all cases of child labour in Pakistan were due to domestic chores. Girls make disproportionately high part of these workers and have particular vulnerabilities, such as physical, mental, and even sexual abuse on the part of the employers. Under these circumstances, the authors define child domestic labour as a type of contemporary slavery with children being victims who might not be aware of their rights (Abdul Ghaffar & Enam, 2025).

The constitutional system offers good legal grounds on protection of children. The Constitution of Pakistan clearly forbids the use of children under the age of fourteen in a factory, mine, or other dangerous work. Article 25-A establishes a free and mandatory education for children under the age of 5-16. Pakistan is also a signatory to ILO Convention 138 (minimum age) and Convention 182 (worst forms of child labour), and also works towards Sustainable Development Goal 8.7, which aims at eradicating child labour in all its forms (Newsdesk, 2025a, 2025b).

Federal Minister of Poverty Alleviation and Social Safety, Syed Imran Ahmed Shah, highlighted that child labour is not only a cause but also an effect of poverty, and addressing child labour is crucial in the creation of a just and equitable society (Newsdesk, 2025a, 2025c). He pointed out the holistic response of the government in the form of *Waseela-e-Taleem* conditional cash transfers in the Benazir Income Support Programme, and Child Labour Schools in Pakistan *Bait-ul-Mal* that provide free education, stipends, and assistance to working children and their families (Newsdesk, 2025a, 2025b).

In the rural Swat mountainous area, the population has been reduced to a harsh decision between letting their children go out to work or letting them starve. There has been widespread environmental degradation in the region, such as floods, deforestation, glacier melting, and low agricultural productivity, which has caused high socio-economic instability (Sadiq, 2025). Climate change may lead families to withdraw children from school and push them into the labour market as a coping mechanism, with children becoming more involved in agriculture, domestic, and informal sectors (Sadiq, 2025; Ponnusamy, 2025).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This paper addresses three research questions:

1. What is the relationship between poverty and child labour, and through what mechanisms does poverty drive child labour?
2. What are the sectoral distribution patterns and working conditions of child labourers?
3. What policy responses have been attempted, and what evidence-based recommendations emerge for addressing child labour?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The interaction of poverty and child labour has received a large expanse of theorization in development economics and sociology. According to Basu and Van (1998), the axiom of luxury argues that households will only send their children to work when they have subsistence demands that require them to make such a move when the adult income is made lower than a threshold. In this sense, child labour is a survival mechanism but not an expression of parental tastes. The extreme poverty experienced by households leaves them with no option other than using all the labour, including that of children, to get basic needs.

The Human Capital Theory by Becker (1964) puts education as an investment that has returns in the future. Child labour is a trade-off, as it is a short-term gain and a long-term loss in human capital building. The opportunity cost of education is greater for poor households since they have a greater discount on future returns due to their present survival needs. Families suffering to provide food cannot afford to pay attention to education as a luxury.

Child domestic workers are children employed to work in homes by their owners to do household tasks. Pakistan had, as of 1996, as many domestic chores in all child labour incidents as 8.3 per cent. Having been mentioned as one of the most prevalent and important causes of child domestic labour in Pakistan, poverty is cited. Girls constitute a significant number of child domestic labourers in comparison with boys, and are more impacted by child domestic labour. Research has established that in case parents are illiterate or do not appreciate education, the chances of children being engaged in child domestic labour are high. Employers abuse the victims physically, mentally, and even sexually. Under these circumstances, the authors believe that child domestic labour could be viewed as a sort of contemporary slavery, with the victims being children who could be unaware of their rights (Abdul Ghaffar & Enam, 2025).

Sadiq (2025) examined how a change in climatic conditions forces families to pull children out of school and force them into labour as a survival strategy. The research identifies a strong causal association between environmental stress and an increase in child labour. Children are taking up more work in agriculture, domestic, and informal labour. The study uses the Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA) and relies on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) to determine the violation of important child rights, especially Articles 6 (development), 24 (health), and 32 (protection against economic exploitation).

Turi & Khan (2025) reported that the majority of child labourers are between 10 and 15 years old, and they are of the Bangash and Turi tribes who have had little education and have little exposure to poor working environments. Such children make a living to support their family without being aware of their rights. The hypothesis of the study is that child labour is a multifaceted phenomenon that is determined by socioeconomic conditions and cultural values, particularly in the situation when conflicts are not resolved and social norms are dominant. It requires intervention measures that would improve access to education, working conditions, and awareness of rights.

A 2025 study on Zenodo discusses the reasons why most rural Pakistani families prefer child labor to schooling. Referring to national datasets, NGO reports, and real-life examples, the study identifies the economic trade-offs, gender relations, and infrastructure failures that contribute to dropout rates, particularly following the climate-related disasters such as the 2022 floods (Amin, 2025).

On the World Day against Child Labour, President Asif Ali Zardari described the legislation framework used in Pakistan: "Pakistan has passed the National Commission on Rights of Child Act (2017), ICT Child Protection Act (2018), Juvenile Justice System Act (2018),

Employment of Children Act (1991), and Domestic Workers Act (2002). According to him, Pakistan has also put in place strong systems and units to prevent child exploitation, child labour, as well as giving care and rehabilitation to the child victims, and being a signatory to most of the international conventions, Pakistan is fully determined to lower the exploitation of children (Daily Times, 2025). The Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP) offers conditional cash remittances to children in low-income families in the form of the *Waseela-e-Taleem* initiative, which will keep them in school and alleviate their exposure to child labour (Newsdesk, 2025a, 2025c). Child labour schools are operated by Pakistan Bait-ul-Mal, which provides free education, stipends, and assistance to working children and their families, rehabilitating and skills training them to move on to better lives (Newsdesk, 2025a, 2025b).

Federal Minister Syed Imran Ahmed Shah also noted that the wider social protection system of the government includes health-related support, nutrition, and income-generating schemes, which are aimed at enhancing the financial stability of families (Newsdesk, 2025a, 2025c). These holistic approaches are meant to decrease the reliance on child labour as a means to survive by the household. He further urged employers to ensure that they abide by the laws of child labour, parents to value their children's education more than the instant financial benefits, and media houses, civil societies, and religious leaders to sensitize the people on the rights of children and child labour (Newsdesk, 2025a, 2025b).

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research design used in this study is mixed-method research, where the quantitative research study involves the analysis of secondary data, which is quantitative, and the qualitative research study involves the analysis of documents and the synthesis of case studies. A mixed-methods approach is specifically appropriate to study social phenomena such as child labour that require both statistical trends to be interpreted and lived experiences and policies (Creswell & Clark, 2017). The design is made up of three complementary parts, i.e., quantitative secondary analysis, qualitative document analysis, and case study synthesis.

The study draws on multiple data sources as detailed in Table 1.

Table 1:   *Data Sources and Characteristics*

Data Source	Type	Sample/ Coverage	Key Variables/ Themes	Year
Abdul Ghaffar & Enam (2025)	Peer-reviewed narrative review (PubMed-indexed)	National review of child domestic labour	8.3% of child labour cases involve domestic chores; poverty as primary factor; gendered vulnerabilities; abuse; modern slavery characterization	2025
Sadiq (2025)	Qualitative thesis (Global Campus of Human Rights)	Rural Swat, KP; interviews with children, parents, teachers, officials	Climate change-economic hardship nexus; child labour as a coping mechanism; policy gaps; UNCRC violations	2025
Turi & Khan (2025)	Quantitative research (HEC-recognized journal)	204 child labourers in Kurram district, KP	Socioeconomic determinants; cultural norms; Bangash and Turi tribes; working conditions; rights awareness	2025
Daily Times (2025)	News media (government statements)	National coverage	12.5 million child labourers nationally; 11.1% in KP; presidential/prime ministerial statements; 1996 survey data	2025

The Express Tribune (2025)	News media (government statements)	National coverage	12.5 million child labourers; one in four households employs child domestic workers; presidential statements	2025
Amin (2025)	Research publication	National datasets, NGO reports	Rural education choices; economic trade-offs; gender dynamics; climate disaster impacts; CCT limitations	2025
Newsdesk (2025a)	Government media	Ministerial statement	*Waseela-e-Taleem*; Bait-ul-Mal schools; constitutional provisions; SDG 8.7	2025
Newsdesk (2025b)	Government media	Ministerial statement	Article 11(3); child protection programs; multi-stakeholder approach	2025
Newsdesk (2025c)	Government media	Ministerial statement	Poverty-child labour nexus; social protection framework	2025
Abdul Ghaffar & Enam (2025)	Database record	Citation indexing	Abdul Ghaffar & Enam (2025) indexed; PMID: 40269374	2025

For this study, data collection involved a syntactic literature search, statements under review, and policy document analysis. The data analysis proceeded through three stages, i.e., quantitative synthesis, thematic analysis, and policy analysis. The research includes a secondary analysis of publicly available data and published research. There are no unreferenced sources, and there was no primary data gathering that involved human subjects. The analysis does not violate the dignity and privacy of child labourers whose stories are mentioned in source materials. This research has limitations in a couple of ways. The analysis is mainly based on Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and although national data will offer a good comparative understanding, provincial situations vary. The research is based on the current studies and not on gathering primary data, which constrains the possibility to test new hypotheses. The last national survey of child labour was done in 1996, leaving the country with a lot of data gaps (Daily Times, 2025).

4. QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

4.1 Prevalence of Child Labour: National and Provincial Context

Recent official statements and research provide the most current available data on child labour prevalence in Pakistan.

Table 2: *Child Labour Prevalence Estimates*

Indicator	Estimate	Source
Children involved in child labour (national)	Over 12.5 million	Child Rights Movement (CRM) National Secretariat (Daily Times, 2025; The Express Tribune, 2025)
Households employing child domestic workers	One in four households	ILO (Daily Times, 2025; The Express Tribune, 2025)
Child labour as % of KP child population	11.1%	Provincial survey (Daily Times, 2025; The Express Tribune, 2025)

Child labour cases involving domestic chores (1996)	8.3%	Abdul Ghaffar & Enam (2025)

The statistics indicate that more than 12, 500 children in the country are in labour, and every 4 households hire a child, domestic worker. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in particular, the number of working children is 11.1 percent of the child population in the province, which translates to hundreds of thousands of children.

4.2 Sectoral Distribution

Pakistan's last comprehensive Child Labour Survey, conducted in 1996, provides the most recent national sectoral distribution data, cited in ILO reports and government statements (Daily Times, 2025).

Table 3:   ***Sectoral Distribution of Child Labour (1996 Survey)***

Sector	Percentage of Working Children
Agriculture	66%
Manufacturing	11%
Hotels and Restaurants	9%
Domestic Work, Social and Personal Services	8%
Transport	4%
Construction	2%

Source: Daily Times (2025), citing ILO report based on 1996 Child Labour Survey

Almost two-thirds of working children are absorbed by agriculture because of the rural character of poverty, and because of the labour-intensive needs of the production factor. This observation is consistent with qualitative studies on Swat, which show that children are increasingly taking up agricultural labor because climate change also makes them less productive and their family income levels decline (Sadiq, 2025). The domestic work, social, and personal services occupy 8 percent of cases of child labour, yet Abdul Ghaffar & Enam (2025) observe that the domestic work is underreported because it is a hidden form of child labour.

4.3 Child Domestic Labour

Abdul Ghaffar & Enam (2025) provide critical insights into child domestic labour, summarized in Table 4.

Table 4:   ***Child Domestic Labour Findings***

Indicator	Finding
Child labour cases involving domestic chores (1996)	Up to 8.3%
Primary driver	Poverty
Parental factors	Uneducated parents; parents who do not value education
Gender composition	Girls make up a large portion of child domestic workers
Abuse	Physical, mental, and sometimes sexual abuse from employers
Rights awareness	Victims may not be aware of their rights
Characterization	Form of modern-day slavery

Source: Abdul Ghaffar & Enam (2025)

This is indicated by the ILO finding that a child is hired at home by one of every four households (Daily Times, 2025; The Express Tribune, 2025), meaning that the 8.3% figure of 1996 might be much lower than the actual size of domestic labour since it was a covert operation and old national surveys were not conducted.

4.4 Socioeconomic Determinants in Kurram District

Turi & Khan (2025) provide quantitative evidence from 204 child labourers in the Kurram district.

Table 5:   *Key Findings from Kurram District Research*

Dimension	Finding
Sample size	204 child labourers
Age range	10-15 years
Tribal background	Bangash and Turi tribes
Education level	Minimal education
Working conditions	Bad working conditions
Rights awareness	Children earn money without knowing their rights
Key determinants	Poverty, cultural norms, family income, and number of children

Source: Turi & Khan (2025)

The paper points out that child labour is a multi-layered phenomenon predetermined by socioeconomic realities and cultural practices, particularly in cases where conflicts are still present, and social norms are dominant. The vulnerability of working children is increased by the fact that they are not aware of their rights.

4.5 Climate Change and Economic Vulnerability in Swat

Sadiq (2025) documents how environmental degradation drives economic hardship and child labour in rural Swat.

Table 6:   *Climate-Child Labour Nexus in Swat*

Factor	Impact
Environmental stressors	Floods, deforestation, glacier melt, and declining agricultural productivity
Household impacts	Significant socio-economic instability; loss of agricultural livelihoods
Child labour response	Families withdraw children from school and push them into labour
Sectors of child labour	Agriculture, domestic work, and informal labour sectors
Rights violations	UNCRC Articles 6 (development), 24 (health), 32 (protection from economic exploitation)
Structural gaps	Weak integration between child protection and climate adaptation frameworks; under-resourced local welfare systems

Source: Sadiq (2025)

This study provides an essential aspect that has not been present in child labour studies, which is the environmental degradation and climate change as new causes of child labour. The

Policy Journal of Social Science Review

Online ISSN   **Print ISSN**

3006-4635   3006-4627

Vol. 3 No. 12 (2025)

POLICY JOURNAL
OF SOCIAL
SCIENCE REVIEW

PJSSR

HTTPS://JOURNALOFSOCIALSCIEN
CEREVIEW.COM/INDEX.PHP/PJSSR

implications of the findings are immense to policy, as they appear to indicate that the child protection systems need to be intertwined with climate adaptation efforts.

4.6 Rural Education Choices

Amin's (2025) research explores why rural families choose child labour over schooling.

Table 7: *Factors Influencing Rural Education Choices*

Factor	Description
Economic trade-offs	Immediate income needs versus long-term educational benefits
Gender dynamics	Girls are disproportionately withdrawn for domestic work
Infrastructure failures	Lack of schools, teachers, and facilities
Climate disasters	Events like the 2022 floods push families into survival mode
CCT limitations	Conditional cash transfers insufficient to fully offset opportunity costs

Source: Amin (2025)

The research highlights community-based models like The Citizens Foundation as promising alternatives to government-only approaches.

5. QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

5.1 Thematic Coding Framework

Qualitative data from recent Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) specific research studies were analysed using thematic analysis. Table 8 presents the coding framework and emergent themes.

Table 8: *Thematic Analysis Coding Framework*

Theme	Sub-themes	Representative Sources
Climate-induced economic hardship	Floods; deforestation; glacier melt; declining agricultural productivity; socio-economic instability	Sadiq (2025)
Mechanisms linking poverty to child labour	Direct economic compulsion; coping mechanism; withdrawal from school	Sadiq (2025); Turi & Khan (2025); Amin (2025)
Sectoral vulnerabilities in KP	Agriculture, domestic work, and informal labour sectors	Sadiq (2025); Turi & Khan (2025); Daily Times (2025)
Gendered dimensions	Girls in domestic work; physical/mental/sexual abuse; rights awareness	Abdul Ghaffar & Enam (2025); Daily Times (2025)
Cultural and tribal factors	Bangash and Turi tribes; cultural norms; conflict persistence	Turi & Khan (2025)
Policy implementation gaps	Weak integration between frameworks; under-resourced welfare systems; structural gaps; lack of updated data	Sadiq (2025); Daily Times (2025)
Legal and constitutional framework	Article 11(3); international conventions; national legislation	Daily Times (2025); The Express Tribune (2025); Newsdesk (2025a; 2025b; 2025c)

5.2 Climate Change and Economic Hardship in Swat

Sadiq (2025) provides detailed qualitative evidence from rural Swat, documenting how environmental degradation drives child labour. Table 9 presents key findings.

Table 9:   *Qualitative Evidence from the Swat District*

Theme	Evidence
Environmental stressors	Floods, deforestation, glacier melt, and declining agricultural productivity
Household impacts	Significant socio-economic instability; loss of agricultural livelihoods
Child labour as a coping mechanism	Families withdraw children from school and push them into labour
Sectors of child labour	Agriculture, domestic work, and informal labour sectors
Structural gaps	Weak integration between child protection and climate adaptation frameworks; under-resourced local welfare systems

Source: Sadiq (2025)

The study uses a Human Rights-Based Approach that establishes the violation of the Articles of the UNCRC 6 (development), 24 (health), and 32 (protection against economic exploitation). The paper ends by giving recommendations such as child-sensitive climate adaptation, conditional cash transfer to maintain school dropout, and strengthening the local protection system.

5.3 Socioeconomic and Cultural Determinants in Kurram

Turi & Khan (2025) provide qualitative insights from district Kurram. Table No. 10 summarizes key findings.

Table 10:   *Qualitative Findings from Kurram District Research*

Dimension	Finding
Sample	204 child labourers aged 10-15
Tribal background	Bangash and Turi tribes
Education level	Minimal education
Working conditions	Bad working conditions
Rights awareness	Children earn money without knowing their rights.
Determinants	Poverty, cultural norms, family income, and number of children

Source: Turi & Khan (2025)

The paper underlines the point that child labour is a multifaceted phenomenon that is affected by socioeconomic factors and cultural orientations, particularly in places where tensions still exist. It demands measures that will increase access to education, better working conditions, and raise awareness of rights.

5.4 Domestic Labour Gendered Vulnerabilities.

Abdul Ghaffar & Enam (2025) point to the specific weaknesses of girls in domestic labour. Their qualitative themes are shown in Table 11 as a result of their narrative review.

Table 11:   *Gendered Dimensions of Child Domestic Labour*

Theme	Evidence
Gender composition	Girls make up a large portion of child domestic workers.
Parental factors	Uneducated parents; parents who do not value education
Abuse	Physical, mental, and sometimes sexual abuse from employers
Rights awareness	Victims may not be aware of their rights.
Characterization	Form of modern-day slavery
Prevalence	One in four households employs a child for domestic work (ILO)

Source: Abdul Ghaffar & Enam (2025); Daily Times (2025); The Express Tribune (2025)

The fact that the ILO discovered that one out of every four homes hires a child to do domestic chores highlights the extent of this unnoticed crisis. The maltreatment that Abdul Ghaffar & Enam (2025) describe is both physical and mental as well as sexual, and girls are overrepresented in the list of victims.

5.5 Statements of the President and the Prime Minister

The statements of President Asif Ali Zardari and Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif on the World Day Against Child Labour contain high-level policy framing (Daily Times, 2025; The Express Tribune, 2025).

Table 12:   *Key Themes from Presidential and Prime Ministerial Statements*

Speaker	Key Messages
President Asif Ali Zardari	Children must also learn, play, and develop in a secure and respectable place; encourage employers to all set up the laws on child labour; encourage parents to place more importance on education than on short-term profits; elaborate legal framework (National Commission on Rights of Child Act 2017, ICT Child Protection Act 2018, Juvenile Justice System Act 2018, Employment of Children's Act 1991, Domestic Workers Act 2002); Pakistan is a signatory to international conventions.
Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif	Child labour is a source of sexual and psychological abuse to children; it denies them their fundamental right to education; it robs children in developing countries of their childhood. The global community is in a truce, which is why this year is the theme is Progress is clear, but there is more to do: let's speed up the efforts!

Source: Daily Times (2025); The Express Tribune (2025)

Both leaders accentuated the importance of collective action by the governments, employers, parents, teachers, media, and civil society. It was President Zardari who particularly asked schools and teachers to "find children who may drop out and retain them in the classrooms" (Daily Times, 2025; The Express Tribune, 2025).

5.6 Ministerial Policy Framework

Federal Minister Syed Imran Ahmed Shah outlined the government's comprehensive approach (Newsdesk, 2025a, 2025b, 2025c).

Table 13:   *Ministerial Policy Framework*

Policy Area	Intervention
Constitutional foundation	Article 11(3) prohibits the employment of children under 14 in hazardous occupations.

International alignment	SDG 8.7; ILO conventions
Conditional cash transfers	BISP Waseela-e-Taleem provides financial assistance to keep children in school
Rehabilitation	Pakistan Bait-ul-Mal Child Labour Schools offer free education, stipends, and skills training.
Social protection	Health, nutrition, and income generation programs to strengthen family stability
Multi-stakeholder approach	Employers, parents, media, civil society, and religious leaders all have roles.

Source: Newsdesk (2025a; 2025b; 2025c)

Minister Shah emphasized that government intervention alone cannot solve this complex challenge, calling upon all segments of society to contribute to child protection efforts.

5.7 Policy Implementation Gaps

Across all sources, consistent themes emerge regarding implementation failures. Table 14 synthesizes these findings.

Table 14:   *Policy Implementation Gaps*

Gap	Evidence	Source
Weak integration	Between child protection and climate adaptation frameworks	Sadiq (2025)
Under-resourced systems	Local welfare systems are underfunded	Sadiq (2025)
Structural gaps	Systemic policy implementation failures	Sadiq (2025)
Data gaps	No national child labour survey since 1996	Daily Times (2025)
Enforcement challenges	Despite constitutional guarantees and laws	Abdul Ghaffar & Enam (2025); Daily Times (2025)
Rights awareness	Working children are unaware of their rights	Turi & Khan (2025); Abdul Ghaffar & Enam (2025)

DISCUSSION

The multiple sources prove that poverty causes child labour in a variety of intertwined ways. Luxury axiom (Basu & Van, 1998) is true: the extremely poor families have no option other than to use the labour of children to survive. This trade-off is implicitly accepted by President Zardari, who urges parents to focus on education rather than short-term gains, but it is also clear that he was aware of the economic pressures that forced them to consider short-term gains as the only way to survive (Daily Times, 2025; The Express Tribune, 2025). The mechanism of opportunity cost works wonders: education is becoming economically irrational when survival is at stake. Sadiq (2025) records how economic shocks caused by the climate in Swat plunge the households into crisis mode, where child labour becomes a fundamental survival strategy. The results of a study by Amin (2025) also verify that family members in rural areas experience severe economic compromise between short-term earnings and long-term access to education.

Poverty and child labour are a curse. Instead of going to school, poor kids work, receiving little human capital and a low future income. They also continue to be poor in their adulthood, and their children will tend to labor. The role of education by parents is also critical as a mediator: Abdul Ghaffar & Enam (2025) determine that children face high chances of being exposed to child domestic labour, provided their parents are uneducated or do not value education. This cross-generational transmission acts on the economic and cultural disposition.

Child labour is very feminine. Boys make up the largest number of visible child labourers in the agricultural and manufacturing industries. Nevertheless, girls are placed in different fragilities within the domestic labour, which is largely unseen, unregulated, and unmeasured in the official records. Abdul Ghaffar & Enam (2025) record that girls in domestic work experience physical, mental, and even sexual abuse, that are defined as a form of modern-day slavery. This hidden workforce may be much bigger than official statistics can capture, given that the ILO reported that there is one in four households that hire a child to work within the household. Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif made it very clear that not only are the children subjected to sexual and psychological abuse when placed in child labour, but also, they are denied the basic right of education (Daily Times, 2025; The Express Tribune, 2025). This is a high-level acknowledgement of abuse with poor implementation mechanisms. Sadiq (2025) makes an essential addition that is usually missing in the child labour studies: the environmental degradation and climate change as a new force. Floods, deforestation, glacier melting, and a reduction in agricultural productivity in rural Swat have led to socio-economic instability, compelling families to pull the children out of school. This result is far-reaching in terms of policy, indicating that the child protection models should be combined with the climate adaptation frameworks. Similar findings are depicted by the research conducted by Amin (2025), who explains that climate disasters such as the floods in 2022 force families into survival mode, which elevates child labour.

There is a fairly well-developed legal framework and various policy initiatives that are still paralyzed with regard to implementation. President Zardari outlined the legislation framework of Pakistan the National Commission on Rights of Child Act 2017, ICT Child Protection Act 2018, Juvenile Justice System Act 2018, Employment of Children's Act 1991, and Domestic Workers Act 2002 and reported that Pakistan has instituted efficient solutions and service units to curtail child exploitation, child labour and provide care and rehabilitation to the affected children (Daily Times, 2025).

Nevertheless, the lacklustre performance of such child labour surveys since 1996 (Daily Times, 2025) exposes the inefficacy of evidence-based policymaking due to gaps in information. The weaknesses in the integration between child protection and climate adaptation frameworks, under-resourced local welfare systems, and policy implementation gaps are documented by Sadiq (2025). Both Turi & Khan (2025) and Abdul Ghaffar and Enam (2025) indicate that the rights of children who work are not even known to them, which makes the concept of legal protection utterly useless to individuals in most need of it.

The reaction of the government, expressed by Federal Minister Syed Imran Ahmed Shah, comprises the BISP Waseela-e-Taleem conditional cash transfers and Child Labour Schools offered by Pakistan Bait-ul-Mal (Newsdesk, 2025a, 2025b, 2025c). These initiatives deal with the contribution of poverty to the increase of child labour by giving financial benefits in attending schools and rehabilitation avenues to the working children. Nevertheless, according to the research of Amin (2025), conditional cash transfers have certain limitations, meaning that the level of transfer can be inadequate to completely eliminate opportunity costs, especially when it comes to older children whose future earnings are higher. The magnitude of

the issue of 12.5 million plus child labourers in the country is way beyond the capacity of the current program. The strategy of multi-stakeholder intervention using governments, employers, parents, teachers, media, and civil society, favored by President Zardari (Daily Times, 2025; The Express Tribune, 2025), acknowledges that government involvement is not the only solution to such a complicated issue. He directly addressed employers to closely observe child labour laws and asked schools and teachers to ensure that they identify children who might be dropping out of school and retain them in the classroom (Daily Times, 2025; The Express Tribune, 2025).

7. CONCLUSION

The paper has discussed the connection between child labour and poverty in Pakistan, especially in the Pakistani province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (especially in Swat and Kurram districts), based on recent empirical studies, government pronouncements, and qualitative studies. Six main findings emerged. First, child labour in Pakistan is of a monumental size since more than 12.5 million children in the country and 11.1 percent of the child labour population in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa continue to be involved (Daily Times, 2025; The Express Tribune, 2025). A quarter of the households use a child as a domestic worker, where they usually work in dangerous conditions. Second, poverty is the main cause of child labour, and it works by direct economic compulsions, cost of Education, exposure to shocks, and inter-generational processes. Parents have to make harsh trade-offs between survival in the short run and investment in education in the long run (Amin, 2025; Sadiq, 2025). Third, child domestic labour is one of the most veiled types of exploitation. Girls constitute a significant part of domestic workers, and they are exposed to physical, mental, and sexual maltreatment. It is a kind of modern-day slavery, where victims do not realize their rights (Abdul Ghaffar & Enam, 2025). Fourth, climate change and environmental degradation are also becoming important forces behind child labour in rural regions such as Swat, where families with declining agricultural activities are resorting to child labour as a coping strategy (Sadiq, 2025). The legal and policy framework of Pakistan is fairly detailed, comprising constitutional rights (Article 11(3)) and national laws, and international Law (Daily Times, 2025; Newsdesk, 2025a). Taliban intervention initiatives are provided by the BISP Waseela-e-Taleem and Pakistan Bait-ul-Mal Child Labour Schools. And the last one, the gaps in implementation are still present, such as the poor integration of child protection and climate adaptation systems, inadequate funding of welfare systems, and poor knowledge of rights by working children (Sadiq, 2025; Abdul Ghaffar & Enam, 2025; Daily Times, 2025).

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the empirical evidence and theoretical frameworks presented in this study, the following policy recommendations are organized into thematic areas for targeted intervention.

1. For poverty reduction and social protection, there is a need to increase and provide sufficient funding to conditional cash transfer programs. Also, to associate social protection with education conditionalities to a greater extent. Besides, to deal with the underlying causes of household vulnerability and to enhance the economic stability of families through livelihood programs.

2. In terms of educational access and quality, measures are required to get rid of direct and indirect education expenses. Also, to increase non-formal education and fast-track learning programs. Similarly, to enhance the quality and infrastructure in schools, support schools in finding at-risk children, and child labour schools.

3. For legal enforcement and governance, there is a need to enhance labour inspection, completely enforce current laws, make sure that the employer does not violate child labour

laws, make it a criminal offense, take effective measures to protect child domestic workers, and form child protection units at the level of the districts.

4. For authentic Data and Accountability, the government shall carry out a national survey on child labour. Also, to combine child protection and climate adaptation paradigms, empower reporting and understanding rights, child rights budgetary analyses, and to monitor progress toward SDG indicators, the progress and challenges should be publicly reported.

5. Apart from the above, it is also recommended to focus on community mobilization and awareness, gender-specific interventions, climate adaptation and child protection, and multi-stakeholder coordination.

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