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SOCIOECONOMIC DETERMINANTS OF CHILD-LABOUR IN AGRICULTURE

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the socioeconomic conditions, demographic factors, and key drivers of child labor in the agricultural sector of Kamber-Shahdadkot District (Warah and Nasirabad talukas) in rural Pakistan. High adult unemployment, overpopulation, low-income large families, parental illiteracy, and lack of education were identified as major contributors to child labor. Data was collected from 100 child laborers (aged 5-14) and their parents/guardians through structured interviews. Findings reveal that 86% of child laborers (mostly aged 10-14) were illiterate, with only 12% having primary education. A staggering 92% lacked technical agricultural training, and 78% worked due to financial constraints preventing school attendance. Families averaged 8.7 members, with 22.5% living in inadequate, muddy homes and lacking basic amenities. Low income hindered socioeconomic mobility, perpetuating child labor. To combat this issue, the study recommends expanding alternative employment opportunities for adults, strengthening government literacy programs, implementing policies to boost rural agro-based industries, enforcing child labor laws and targeting hazardous work conditions, and providing economic incentives to families to offset lost income when children attend school. A multi-stakeholder approach is essential to eliminate child labor and improve socioeconomic conditions in the region.

INTRODUCTION

According to the International Labor Organization (ILO, 2017), any work that is paid or unpaid is done by someone who is below the age of 15 is known as child labor. In Asia and Africa, approximately 200 million

children are engaged in various forms of child labor, with around 8 million of them exposed to hazardous working conditions (Abid et al., 2021). Many developing nations in South Asia, such as Bangladesh, Pakistan, and India, are deeply concerned about the increasing prevalence of child labor. It is ironic that despite the efforts of NGOs, extensive mass media campaigns, government legislation, and funding from UNICEF, child labor continues to rise in these developing countries, accounting for about half of the total child labor worldwide (Fyfe, 2004).

Pakistan is facing serious issues like both high poverty and inflation which ultimately promotes child labor in the country. An estimated 12 million children in Pakistan are engaged in child labor, with about 264,000 of these children working specifically as domestic workers across the country (Rehman, 2023). In Pakistan, the issue of child labor has historical roots dating back to the tenure of Zia Ul Haq. During this time, the encouragement of capitalism led to the establishment of new factories that required more labor. As the wage rate for children was lower, there was an increased demand for child labor (Iqbal et al., 2020). The factory owners, being capitalists, were primarily interested in maximizing output and profits. Consequently, they neglected the negative consequences of employing children and hired as many children as possible to increase their output and profits (Fatima, 2017).

UNICEF (2021) in their report mentioned that around 3.3 million children in Pakistan are involved in child labor where the majority of them belong to the age group of 10 to 14 years. According to Subhadarsani (2014 the main sectors that fascinate child labor are manufacturing, transportation, trade, agriculture, construction, and services. In rural areas, agriculture engages the most children, followed by the services sector whereas, in urban areas, the services sector dominates. Based on each province's culture, different factors affect child labor in the country (Ibupoto et al., 2019). Literature has shown that household societal and economic factors like poverty, lack of resources, and issues such as extended families make the parents unable to provide bread and butter for the entire family (Galdo et al., 2021), and they are forced to send their children to work from an early age (Yameen, 2018). The lack of knowledge about the importance of education among rural people is also the key factor causing the child labor cycle to continue despite its heinous effects on their future (Islam & Hoque, 2022). The research findings of Thelma (2023) revealed that children involved in domestic labor as child workers experienced significantly detrimental effects on their academic performance.

Child labor has a detrimental impact on children's right to education, leading to a lack of skills, diminished human capital, and reduced future earnings (Muhammad et al., 2024). According to the International Labor Organization (ILO), there are about 215 million child workers worldwide, many of whom are employed full-time. Most of these children do not attend school and have no time to socialize. Almost 20 million children of school going age are missing school, while approximately 10 million children are involved in different sectors where the majority is engaged in the agriculture sector (Ahmad et al., 2020).

Child labor in Pakistan hinders education by robbing children of the chance to develop intellectually, psychologically, and morally (Gilani et al., 2022; Shakir et al., 2020). About 12.5 million children are currently involved in labor, which is projected to increase to 16 million due to socioeconomic factors and limited access to education. Furthermore, currently, child labor has affected about 3.3 million children's education (Ishaque et al., 2024). Sindh is the second-largest province after Punjab and is considered the hub of economic activities. Many children under the age of 15 are currently working in brick kilns, auto repair shops, bangle shops, hotels, agriculture, and other sectors. About 4 million children in Sindh are engaged in child labor in various sectors of the province, of which 1.8 million are engaged in agriculture (Wagan et al., 2024).

The children are forced to work in cruel, indecent, and inhumane environments. They are subjected to high levels of violence, including emotional, physical, and sexual abuse where approximately 21 of children are experiencing emotional abuse and nine percent face sexual violence (Iqbal et al., 2021). Another study conducted by Iqbal et al. (2020) revealed that more than half, or 51.1 percent, of child laborers suffered from food insecurity. Additionally, a significant proportion, approximately 15.5 percent, experienced stunted growth, while about 30 percent suffered from wasting.

The available literature has indicated that most school-age children are engaged in various forms of child labor. However, there is no proper research that identifies the root causes and compelling factors that are forcing children and their parents to get involved in child labor. To fill this gap this study was proposed to investigate the situations and conditions for child labor in the agriculture sector, specifically in districts Kamber-Shahdadkot. The specific objectives to explore key demographic features of children working in

agriculture and factors compelling the children to work at such a tender age; and to investigate the socioeconomic conditions of the families of children working in farms in the study area.

Materials and methods

This section prescribes insights into the methodological approaches and analytical techniques used in this research. It includes sampling procedures, data collection, and data analysis methods.

Study area and sampling procedure

The data were collected during filed visits; where the information on age, sex, religion, origin, occupation, working hours, rest time, education, employer abuse, expenditure, working environment, were collected. Through direct observation, the environment of workplaces, ventilation and other workplaces was evaluated. In the first stage, the Kamber-Shahdadkot district was selected, in the second stage two Talukas Naseerabad and Warah were selected, which are considered as rural and agriculture dependent Talukas. In the later stage 50 respondents (child-laborers) from each Taluka were interviewed purposively. Thus, number of 100 respondents including their parents/ guardians were personally interviewed with the help of a comprehensive questionnaire.

Questionnaire development

For primary data collection, a detailed questionnaire was designed to have maximum information for the accomplishment of the objectives. The questionnaire was comprised of basic information about household income, health, education, consumption, expenditures, migration, assets, agriculture, effect on his/her resources, and causes of food insecurity. Within primary data the key informants (experts) were selected one from each category; government administration, researchers, social activists, journalists, and senior citizens. The main indicators for research are socioeconomic well-being, economic geography, population pressure, economic activities, physical infrastructure, communication system, available natural resources, basic amenities, choices, etc.

Analytical measures

Data analysis is an important step in transforming research data into significant and in adequate form. A tabulation plan was developed for the presentation of summarized data. Preliminary data analysis such as frequency distribution, descriptive statistics, and exploratory analysis was carried out to

finalize the tabulation plan with the help of Microsoft Excel.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The most important step in scientific research is analyzing and interpreting the data. Without these steps, the goal of scientific research cannot be generalized and predicted. The generalization and conclusion are based on the characteristics and attitudes of the respondents.

Socioeconomic conditions

Table-1: Descriptive statistics of the parents of the children working in agricultural fields

Particular		*Unit*	*Description*
Age		Year	42.5
Family size		Number	8.7
Male members		Number	5.4
Female Members		Number	3.3
Employed family members		Number	5.5
House type	Kacha	Percent	22.5
	Bamboo	Percent	66.5
	Others	Percent	11
Occupation	Agriculturist / farmers	Percent	76
	Livestock and fisheries workers	Percent	10
	Wage Laborer	Percent	06
	Shop keepers	Percent	04
	Tractor driver	Percent	04
Parent's education level	College	Percent	02
	High school	Percent	10
	Primary	Percent	12
	Illiterate	Percent	76

Above table shows that the average age of parents/guardians was 42.5 years, with the family size of about nine persons. As a result, the employed family members in the house were 5.5; on average 22.5 families were living in kacha/muddy homes. Agriculture was their main source of income with 72.2 percent followed by 7.3 percent from livestock and 20.5 percent from other sources. The findings reveal that the parents of the children in the study area were mainly depending on Agriculture. Therefore, livestock, wage labor, and small business were alternative sources of their income. Results revealed that agriculture was their primary sources of income with 76 percent of the

respondents engaged in Agriculture, followed by, livestock and fisheries, daily wages, etc. Majority of the parents had no formal education. Where only two percent of them studies up to college level.

Table-2. Demographic characteristics of children working in agriculture

Description		*Unit*	*Statistics*
Region	Rural	Percent	64
	Urban	Percent	36
Age groups	6-8	Year	03
	9-11	Year	18
	12-14	Year	79
Education level of Children	Primary	Percent	12
	High school	Percent	02
	Never went to school	Percent	86
Technical Skills	Proper trained	Percent	08
	No any training	Percent	92
Activities in which children were involved	Crop cultivation	Percent	78
	Livestock herding	Percent	18
	Fishing	Percent	04

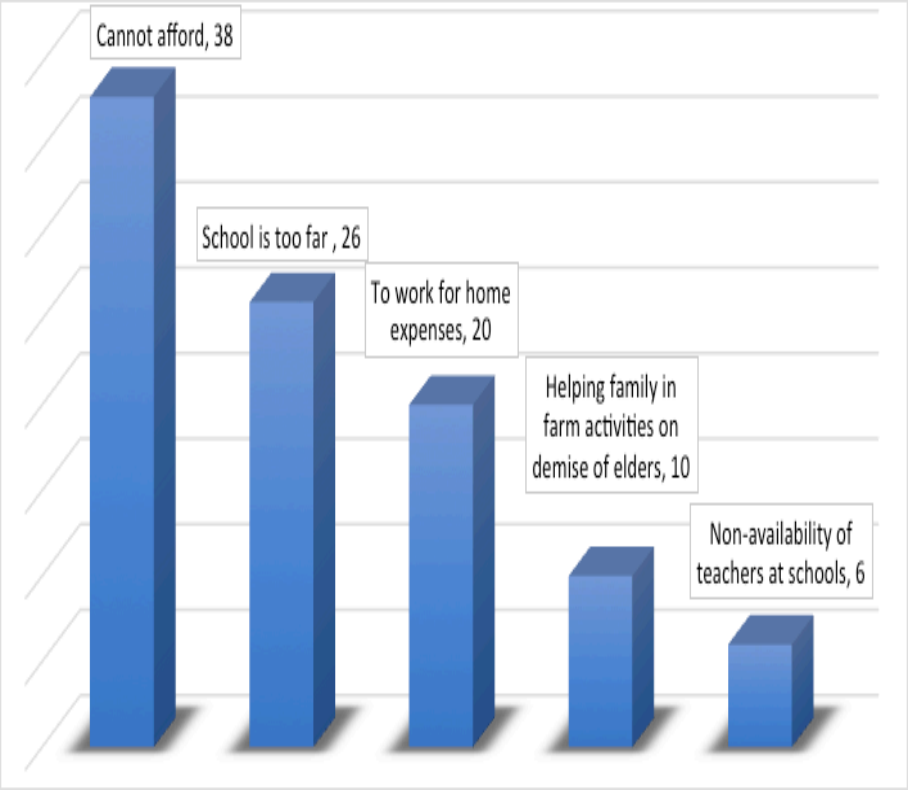
The Table-2 provides the demographic characteristics of the children working in the agriculture sector in the district of Kamber Shahdadkot. It shows the percentage of children in rural and urban areas engaged in this sector. Most children, about 64 percent of children in rural areas, are working in agriculture, while 36 percent are from urban areas. Due to the lack of alternate employment opportunities in rural areas, about 79 percent of children in Sindh are engaged in agriculture (Wagan et al., 2024). It could be seen that majority of the children belonged to the age group of 12 to 14 years, while only 18 percent fall under 09 to 11 years. In a study conducted by (Wagan et al., 2024) in Tando Allahyar about 77 percent of children aged between 11 to 14 years were engaged in agriculture whereas in Punjab about 47.2 percent of children of similar age were found working in agriculture (Ahmad et al., 2020).

Results further show that most of the children never went to school; while only 12 percent had completed primary education and only two percent were enrolled in high school. Similar results were found by (Wagan et al., 2024) where 80 percent of children were illiterate, 15 percent completed their primary level, and only five percent reached middle school. It was also

observed that majority of children were never training for their occupation, that how the work should be carried out at the farms. In most children were engaged in livestock herding, followed by crop cultivation and fishing.

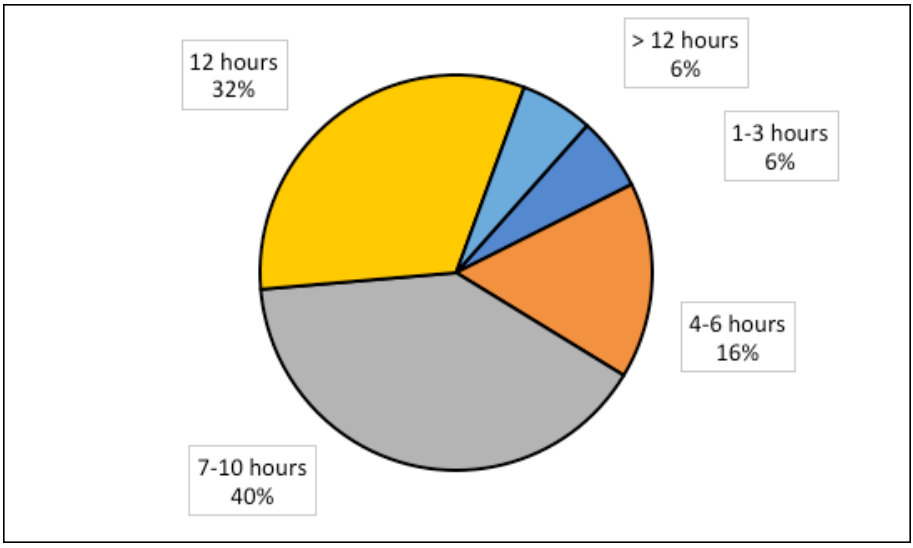
Factors compelling to the children

Figure-1: Reasons for leaving/not attending school by the children



The chart shows reasons for not attending or leaving schools in the study area. About 38 percent of child laborers did not go to schools because they couldn't afford them, 26 percent had schools out of reach, 20 percent had to work to feed their families, 10 percent helped families with farm work due to elders' deaths, and 6 percent faced non-availability of teachers at school. Ibupoto et al. (2019) in their study found that around 45.6 percent in Hyderabad did not attend school because their parents sent them for work, 27.3 percent expressed a lack of interest in going to school, 18.1 percent faced barriers to different schooling systems, and 8.8 percent missed their schooling because of the high cost of education.

Figure-2: Total working hours at workplace of children



The total time spent by these children at their respective workplaces is shown in the above chart. The majority of the children (40%) were found to work for 7-10 hours per day, followed by (32%) who work for the whole week, (16%) work for 4-6 hours, (6%) for more than 12 hours, and for 1-3 hours only, mostly on weekends and in homes. About 52 percent of children were found working for 7 to 10 hours in the Tando Allahyar district (Wagan et al., 20204).

Workplace environment

Table-3: Types of Punishment among child Laborers

Types of punishment		*Percentage*
Punishment at workplace	Yes: punished often	42
	No: not punished yet	58
Punishment type/level	Abusive language/ calling with different names	31
	Deduction of salary	29
	Beating physical/ slapping and mental torture	21
	Increase working hours	19

The table shows the percentage of punishment children forms in the field. 42 percent of children in the study reported that they were punished findings were mentioned by Wagan et al. (2024) in their study, where 39 percent of children reported being punished while working at farms. Further the results

show that about half of the children faced both physical and mental torture, which included verbal abuse and beating. Ahmad et al. (2020) in their study reported that respondents revealed that 13.9 percent of the participants reported experiencing mental torture. 30.5 percent of them stated that they had been subjected to verbal, mental, and physical abuse by the zamindars, landlords, and stewards.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study found that the average age of children's parents was 42.5 years, with an average family size of 8.7 members (5.7 males and 3.3 females). Most families relied on agriculture, with 5.5 employed members per household working as agricultural laborers. Housing conditions were typically basic (kacha/bamboo-made), and agriculture and livestock were the primary income sources (76%), followed by livestock/fisheries (10%), daily wage labor (6%), and small businesses or shop work (4%). Child labor was heavily influenced by socioeconomic factors, particularly parents' low education and unstable income. A significant 38% of child laborers could not afford education, while 26% had no nearby schools, 20% worked to support family expenses, 10% helped with farm work after elders' deaths, and 6% faced teacher shortages. Parental education played a key role—76% of fathers had no formal schooling, while only 2% had intermediate-level education. The lower the parents' education, the higher the child labor prevalence, highlighting the need for better education access and economic stability to reduce child labor.

To address the issue of child labor in the study area, it is crucial to improve literacy rates to combat illiteracy and reduce child labor. Comprehensive policies should be implemented to expand employment opportunities for rural communities, ensuring parents have viable income sources so they are not compelled to send their children to work. Additionally, non-formal education and job training programs should be provided to enhance parents' earning potential. A strong focus must be placed on eliminating the most severe forms of child labor, particularly those that endanger children's health and safety. Furthermore, child labor laws must be strictly enforced with robust monitoring mechanisms to ensure compliance and accountability. These measures, combined with community engagement, can help create a sustainable solution to eradicate child labor in the region.

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