

**Social Determinants of Child Labor and Policy Responses in Pakistan's Industrial Belts****Nibras Hussain\*<sup>1</sup>, Sharoon Stiphenos<sup>2</sup>, Asia Soomro<sup>3</sup>**<sup>1</sup> NYU School of Global Public Health. Email: [nh2815@nyu.edu](mailto:nh2815@nyu.edu)<sup>2</sup> National Institute of Psychology, QAU Islamabad. Email: [25sharoon@gmail.com](mailto:25sharoon@gmail.com)<sup>3</sup> Department of Data Science, Mehran university of Engineering and Technology, Jamshoro  
Email: [asiasoomro21@yahoo.com](mailto:asiasoomro21@yahoo.com)DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70670/sra.v4i1.1893>**Abstract**

Child labor remains a persistent and deeply entrenched problem in Pakistan, with an estimated 13 million children engaged in economic activity, particularly in the industrial belts of Punjab and Sindh (Sialkot, Faisalabad, Karachi, Lahore). This review examines the principal social determinants driving child labor in these manufacturing hubs, including chronic household poverty, inadequate and low-quality education systems, large family sizes, cultural acceptance of early work, gender norms, rural-urban migration, and the structural demand for cheap, flexible labor in informal and export-oriented industries (surgical instruments, textiles, leather goods). The analysis highlights how weak enforcement of existing legislation (e.g., Employment of Children Act 1991, constitutional prohibitions), insufficient social protection coverage, and global value-chain pressures exacerbate the problem. Policy responses including the Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP), Ehsaas emergency cash transfers, compulsory education laws, provincial labor inspections, and international conventions (ILO C138, C182) are evaluated for effectiveness. Evidence indicates partial poverty alleviation and school enrollment gains from cash transfers, yet persistent gaps in coverage, implementation, monitoring, and addressing root structural causes limit impact. The review advocates for a multi-dimensional strategy combining expanded, conditional cash transfers, quality universal education, stricter supply-chain due diligence, community-based awareness, and targeted industrial regulation to progressively eliminate the worst forms of child labor and protect vulnerable children in Pakistan's industrial zones.

**Keywords:** Child Labor, Pakistan, Social Determinants, Industrial Belts, Poverty, Education Access, Cash Transfer Programs, BISP, Ehsaas, ILO Conventions, Informal Economy, Enforcement Gaps, Supply-Chain Accountability

**1. Introduction**

The persistence of child labor in Pakistan represents one of the most significant structural challenges to the nation's socio-economic development and human rights obligations (Yousaf et al., 2025). As of the 2024-2025 period, despite rigorous legislative efforts and international commitments, an estimated 13 million children remain trapped in various forms of economic exploitation (International Labour Organization, 2014). This phenomenon is not an isolated economic byproduct but is deeply rooted in a complex matrix of social determinants that include systemic poverty, a failing educational infrastructure, entrenched cultural norms, and the shifting dynamics of the informal industrial economy (Research Society of International Law, 2023). The industrial belts of Punjab and Sindh, specifically the manufacturing hubs of Sialkot, Faisalabad, Karachi,

and Lahore, serve as critical focal points for this crisis, where the demand for cheap, unregulated labor often outstrips the state's capacity for enforcement (Basu & Van, 1998; Ethical Trading Initiative, 2019). While the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) Target 8.7 aimed for the total elimination of child labor by 2025, current estimates suggest that Pakistan has missed this target, necessitating a profound re-evaluation of current policy responses (Younis, 2025).

## 2. Structural Economic Drivers and the Subsistence Trap

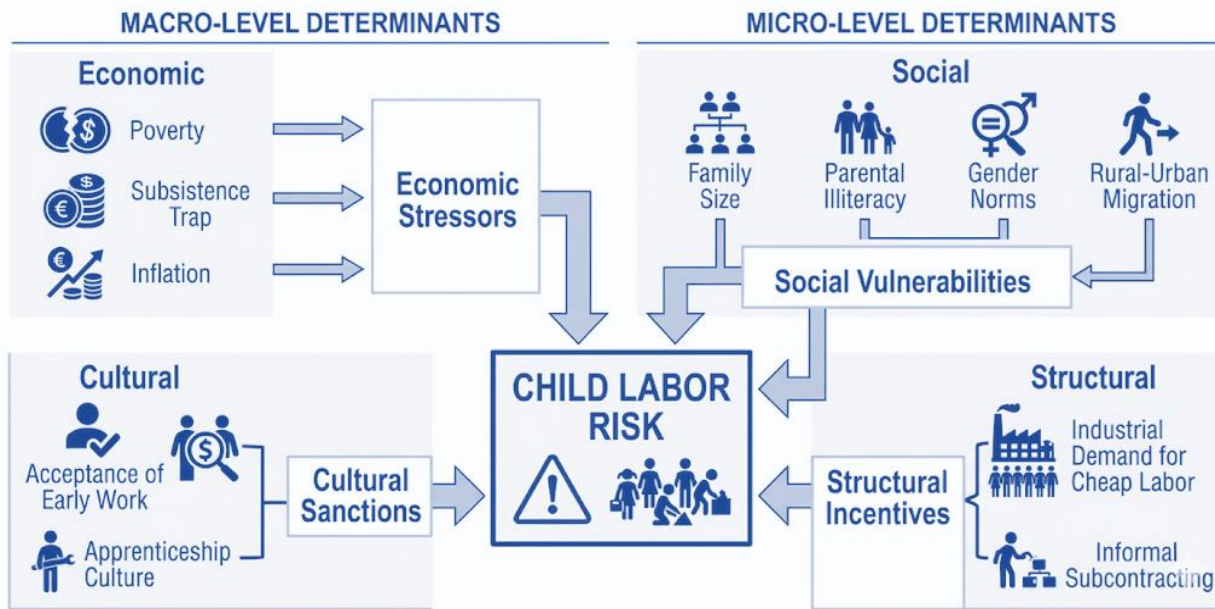
Poverty remains the primary catalyst for child labor in Pakistan, with empirical studies indicating that approximately 83% of working children are driven into the labor market by household financial distress (Gilani et al., 2022). The economic landscape between 2023 and 2025 has been particularly grueling for the lower socio-economic strata, as the country grappled with record-high hyperinflation and the lingering effects of the 2022 catastrophic floods (U.S. Department of Labor, 2024). By the 2023/24 fiscal year, the national poverty rate was projected to reach 25.3%, pushing an additional 13 million people below the poverty line (World Bank, 2025). This economic environment creates a "subsistence trap" where households are forced to prioritize immediate survival over long-term development (Awaworyi et al., 2021).

**Table 1. National Economic Indicators and Projections for 2024-2025**

Indicator	2020-2021	2024-2025
Working Age Population (10+)	159.8 million	179.6 million (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2025)
Total Labor Force	71.76 million	83.1 million (PBS, 2025)
Overall Unemployment Rate	6.3%	7.1% (PBS, 2025)
Average Monthly Wage (PKR)	Unavailable	39,042 (PBS, 2025)
Poverty Rate (Projection)	21.9%	25.3% (World Bank, 2025)

The relationship between economic growth and child labor in the South Asian context is notably non-linear. While sustained growth can theoretically raise household incomes, the early stages of industrial expansion in Pakistan's industrial belts often generate an increased demand for low-skilled, cheap labor (Akram et al., 2024). This duality means that even during periods of sectoral growth, such as in the textile or surgical instrument industries, the prevalence of child labor may remain stable as formal enterprises subcontract work to unregistered, informal workshops (Basu & Van, 1998). Child labor in Pakistan's industrial belts emerges from a complex interplay of economic, social, and cultural determinants, summarized in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Conceptual Framework: Social Determinants of Child Labor**



**3. Social and Cultural Determinants: The Micro-Level Dynamics**

Beyond the overarching pressure of poverty, child labor is mediated by social and cultural factors that shape household decision-making. Family structure is a significant determinant, with research suggesting that the joint family system, high fertility rates, and large family sizes increase the likelihood of child labor (Alam, 2023). In large households, high dependency ratios often force older children into the workforce to support younger siblings, creating a pattern where the first-born male child is particularly vulnerable (Mazhar, 2008).

**Table 2. Social Determinants of Labor Supply and Impact Mechanisms**

Social Determinant	Correlation	Impact Mechanism
Parental Illiteracy	High Positive	Lack of awareness regarding human capital returns (Akram et al., 2024; Asghar, 2025).
Family Size (>6 members)	High Positive	Increased subsistence requirements and dependency strain (Alam, 2023; Mazhar, 2008).
Joint Family System	Moderate Positive	Collective income pressure and traditional labor patterns (Asghar, 2025).
Rural-to-Urban Migration	High Positive	Economic shocks and loss of traditional support networks (Usman et al., 2021).
Female Headship	Mixed	Protective for boys; often increases labor for girls (Alam, 2023; World Bank, 2023).

Cultural attitudes toward education and work also play a role. In many industrial communities, formal education is perceived to have a low return on investment compared to immediate, tangible skills acquired through "apprenticeships" (UKFIET, 2025). Gender dynamics further complicate the situation; while boys are more likely to be involved in market-based labor, girls are often confined to "hidden" forms of labor, such as home-based subcontracting for the garment industry (Asghar, 2025).

**4. The Educational Crisis: Emergency and Inequity**

Pakistan is currently facing an "education emergency," with approximately 26 million children out of school. The failure of the educational system is both a cause and a consequence of child labor. For children in the

industrial belts, the lack of accessible, high-quality, and free public education makes work the only viable daily activity (Ahmad & Saeed, 2024). While Article 25-A of the Constitution guarantees free education, the reality is characterized by significant hidden costs, including uniforms and transportation (Jameel, 2026).

**Table 3. Educational Indicators for Children (Ages 10-14) by Gender**

Activity	Male (%)	Female (%)	Total (%)
Attending School	82.5	73.0	78.0 (USDOL, 2024)
Working and Attending School	1.1	0.4	0.8 (USDOL, 2024)
Literate Labor Force (Overall)	71.9	49.3	65.7 (PBS, 2025)
Illiterate Labor Force (Overall)	28.1	50.7	34.3 (PBS, 2025)

## 5. Sectoral Analysis: The Industrial Belts of Sialkot and Faisalabad

The industrial belts exhibit specialized patterns of child labor hidden within complex subcontracting chains. This informalization allows formal exporters to maintain compliance with international standards while benefiting from low costs in the lower tiers of the supply chain (Aked, 2021).

### 5.1 Sialkot: The Surgical Instruments Sector

Sialkot is a global hub for surgical instruments, but an estimated 95% of total production is outsourced to the informal sector. Children are involved in hazardous processes such as metal filing and grinding, leading to chronic respiratory illnesses (Hamrick & Bamber, 2019).

### 5.2 Faisalabad: The Textile and Garment Industry

The textile sector faces challenges with "hidden" subcontracting. The finishing stages such as thread-cutting are often outsourced to home-based workers, primarily women and their children. A 2024-2025 study revealed that child labor is significantly higher in these subcontracted units than in exporting factories (GoodWeave International, 2024).

## 6. The Brick Kiln Crisis: Bondage and Social Exclusion

The brick kiln industry represents the "worst form" of child labor in Pakistan, characterized by systemic debt bondage. Over one million people work in approximately 10,000 kilns in Punjab alone. The defining feature is the "Peshgi" system, an intergenerational debt mechanism (Banday et al., 2018).

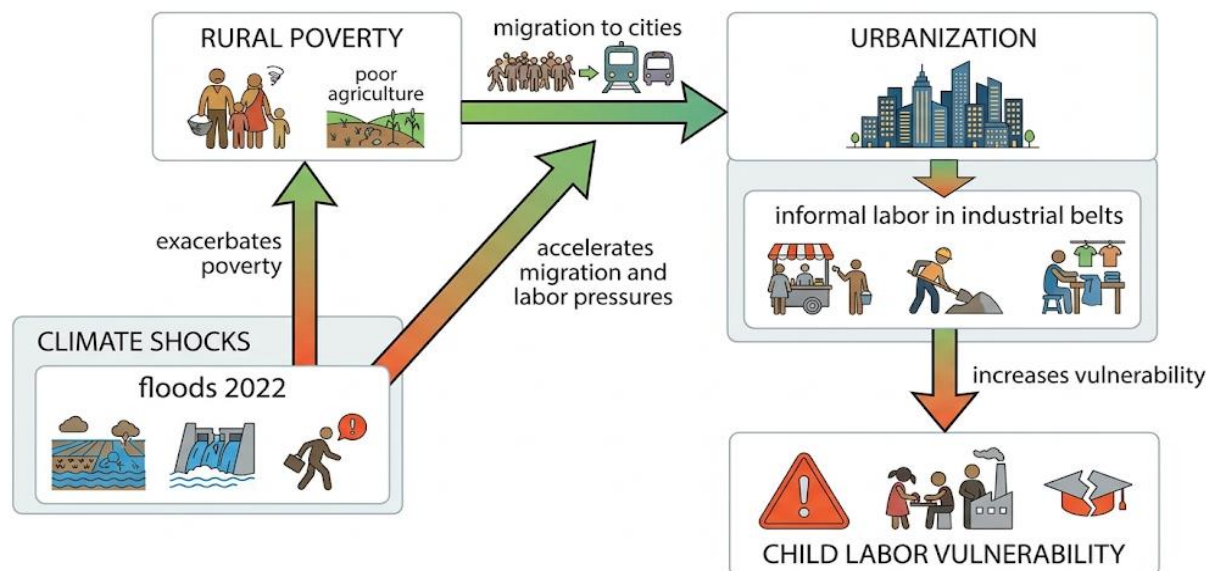
**Table 4. Brick Kiln Labor Statistics (Punjab/Sindh)**

Category	Value/Percentage
Estimated Workforce in Punjab Kilns	1.0 Million+ (NCHR, 2025)
Families with Working Children at Kilns	72% (APPG, 2024)
Children Never Enrolled in School	62% (NCHR, 2025)
Minority Percentage in Workforce	Up to 50% (APPG, 2024; NCHR, 2025)
Minimum Average Age of Child Worker	10 Years (NCHR, 2025)

## 7. Migration, Urbanization, and Climate Vulnerability

Internal migration is a significant determinant. Families move to cities like Faisalabad and Karachi due to rural poverty, only to be relegated to the informal economy. The 2022 floods devastated the agrarian economy, pushing millions into urban centers where child labor often becomes the only survival strategy (Usman et al., 2009). Urban migration and climate shocks intensify children's exposure to labor exploitation, summarized in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Migration, Urbanization, and Climate Shocks



### 8. Policy Responses: Cash Transfers and The Khidmat Card

Pakistan’s response has relied on social safety nets, most notably the Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP) and the Punjab Khidmat Card (Fatima, 2025).

Table 5. Policy Interventions and Observed Impacts on Child Labor

Policy Intervention	Mechanism	Observed Impact
BISP (UCT)	Consumption support	Minimal immediate effect on labor; improves nutrition (Jalal, 2023).
Waseela-e-Taleem (CCT)	Enrollment subsidy	10% enrollment increase; no short-term labor reduction (Awaworyi et al., 2021).
Punjab Khidmat Card	Sector-specific stipend	90,000 children enrolled; reduced kiln labor (Theirworld, 2016).

### 9. Legal and Institutional Framework: Devolution and Enforcement

The 18th Amendment (2010) devolved labor and education to the provinces. While provinces have enacted laws such as the Punjab Restriction on Employment of Children Act (2016) the framework is plagued by enforcement gaps. Labor inspectorates are chronically underfunded, and corruption remains a major barrier to justice (Shah & Unar, 2024).

### 10. Health and Human Rights: The Long-term Consequences

In sectors like surgical instrument manufacturing, children suffer from bone deformations and respiratory diseases (Shahab, 2021). Beyond physical hazards, child laborers are frequently subjected to abuse. The 2025 NCHR report highlighted that this environment destroys the possibility of normal development, fostering hopelessness (National Commission for Human Rights, 2025; Theirworld, 2016).

### 11. Synthesis and Strategic Outlook

Child labor in Pakistan's industrial belts is a systemic institutional failure. Integrated strategies are required that address root causes. This includes indexing social protection to inflation and expanding models like the

"Child Rights Action Hub" to strengthen human rights due diligence across supply chains (Jalal, 2023).

## Conclusion

Child labor in Pakistan's industrial belts is not merely an economic symptom but a complex social phenomenon rooted in intergenerational poverty, educational exclusion, cultural norms, and the structural reliance of low-cost manufacturing on underage workers. While legislative frameworks and social safety nets such as BISP and Ehsaas have achieved measurable poverty reduction and school enrollment gains, their coverage remains insufficient, conditionalities are inconsistently enforced, and they rarely address the demand-side drivers embedded in global value chains and informal production systems. The persistence of hazardous and exploitative child work particularly in export-oriented sectors undermines human capital formation, perpetuates inequality, and violates Pakistan's constitutional and international obligations. A decisive shift toward integrated, multi-sectoral interventions is essential: scaling high-quality, free, and compulsory education; expanding and improving the targeting of unconditional and conditional transfers; strengthening labor inspection and supply-chain transparency; engaging communities and employers in norm change; and aligning industrial policy with child-rights objectives. Without sustained political commitment and coordinated action across government, civil society, private sector, and international partners, child labor will continue to erode Pakistan's demographic dividend and long-term development prospects.

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