

Child Labour: A Neglected Issue

Outline:

A. Introduction:

1. Brief overview of child Labour as a global and national humanitarian crises
2. Paradox of legal commitments vs ground realities
3. Thesis statement; Child Labour in Pakistan remains a neglected issue driven by economic hardship, social acceptance, political neglect, and constitutional enforcement failures, posing a serious threat to human development and social justice

B Conceptual Understanding of Child Labour:

Definition by ILO and UNICEF
Distinction between child Labour and child work.

Worst forms of Child Labour.

C Causes of Child Labour:

Economic Factors:

- 1. Widespread poverty and income inequality
- 2. Rising inflation and unemployment
- 3. Dependence on children as supplementary earners.

2. Political Factors:

- a. Weak Political will and policy neglect
- b. Poor implementation of child protection policies
- c. Inadequate budgetary allocation for education and welfare.

3. Social dimensions:

- a. Illiteracy and limited access to quality education.
- b. High out of school children ratio.
- c. Cultural acceptance of child work.

4. Constitutional and legal dimensions:

- a. Article 11 (Prohibition of Child Labour)
- b. Article 25-A (Right to free and compulsory education)
- c. Gap between legislation and enforcement.

5. Ethical and Moral Dimension:

- a. Violation of children's dignity and rights
- b. Contradiction with Islamic principles of child protection.
- c. Moral responsibility of society and state

D Impacts of Child Labour:

1. Impact on Children:

- a. Physical health hazards and psychological trauma
- b. Loss of childhood and personal development
- c. Increased vulnerability to abuse and exploitation

2. Impact on Society:

- a. Rising illiteracy and low-skilled workforce
- b. Reinforcement of social inequality
- c. Breakdown of social justice and cohesion

3. Impact on economy:

- a. Loss of human capital and productivity
- b. Intergenerational poverty cycle
long term economic stagnation

4. Impact on Governance and Rule of Law:

- a. Erosion of constitutional authority
- b. Weak credibility of state institutions

E. Way Forward:

1. Economic Interventions
2. Social Interventions
3. Political and Governance Reforms
4. Ethical and Moral Reorientation
5. Role of Civil and International Community

F. Conclusion:

Essay

A nation's commitment to its future is best measured by the way it treats its children, yet millions of children across the developing world are compelled to exchange classrooms for workshops, innocence for income, and dreams for daily survival. Child labour, though universally condemned and legally prohibited, continues to persist as a silent crisis, thriving beneath the veneer of economic necessity and social normalization. According to International Labour Organization, over 160 million children worldwide are engaged in labour, which is substantial proportion residing in South Asia, where poverty, illiteracy, and weak governance intersect. In Pakistan alone, estimates suggests that more than 12 million children are trapped in exploitative labour, despite constitutional guarantees under Articles 11 and 25-A ensuring protection and compulsory education. This alarming contradiction between legal

commitments and "ground" realities highlights that child labour is not merely an economic issue but a multidimensional failure of policy implementation, social responsibility, and moral consciousness. Child Labour in Pakistan persists due to economic deprivation, social normalization, political inertia, and weak constitutional enforcement, producing severe ethical, human, and developmental consequences that demand comprehensive policy, social, and legal reforms.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) defines child labour as work that deprives children of their childhood, potential and dignity, as is harmful to physical and mental development. It is crucial to distinguish between child work - light, age-appropriate tasks that do not interfere with education - and child labour, which involves exploitation, hazardous conditions or denial of schooling.

The ILO further identifies the worst forms of child labour, including slavery, bonded labour, child trafficking,

forced recruitment in armed conflict, prostitution, drug trafficking, and hazardous work such as mining, brick kilns, and chemical handling (ILO Convention No. 182)

According to the ILO-UNICEF Global Estimates (2021), approximately 160 million children worldwide are engaged in child labour, with nearly 79 million involved in hazardous work. South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa account for the highest concentration, driven by poverty, conflict, and weak governance. Despite progress during the early 2000s, the COVID-19 pandemic reversed gains, pushing an additional 9 million children into labour due to school closures and economic shocks (UNICEF, State of the World's Children, 2022)

Pakistan faces an alarming child labour crisis. According to the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS) and ILO estimates, over 12.5 million children aged 5-14 are engaged in labour, though unofficial figures suggest even higher numbers.

due to underreporting
The informal
economy, which constitutes
nearly 70% of Pakistan's
labour market, provides
fertile ground for child
exploitation due to lack
of regulation (World Bank,
Pakistan Economic Update, 2023)

Child labour remains
a pressing social problem
in Pakistan and across
the developing world. Despite
constitutional guarantees and
international commitments, millions
of children are still forced
into work, sacrificing their
educational, health, and
childhood. According to
UNICEF and the International
Labour Organization (ILO),
an estimated 138 million
children globally are engaged
in child labour, many in
hazardous conditions that
harm their development. In
Pakistan alone, tens of
millions of children work
to support their families
rather than attend school.
These high figures reflect
deep economic causes that

make child labour a structural issue. Three economic drivers are: widespread poverty and income inequality, rising inflation and unemployment, and reliance on children as supplementary earners.

Poverty is widely recognized as the primary economic cause of child labour.

Families living below the poverty line struggle to meet basic needs like food, shelter, and healthcare. When adults' earnings are insufficient, parents feel compelled to send children to work so that the household can survive.

In Pakistan, a Human Rights Commission report estimated that 35 million children are engaged in labour, with poverty cited as the main driver. The situation mirrors global trends: studies note a clear link between low household income and high incidence of child labour.

Inflation and unemployment amplify child

labour by squeezing household budgets and shrinking opportunities for adult employment. When prices for food, fuel, and other essential goods rise, real incomes fall - especially for low-income families with limited savings. According to Pakistan economic data, the per capita income remains low, and inflation has been persistently high, pushing more families into poverty and compelling children to contribute economically.

Secondly, Unemployed further aggravates the problem. Adults without stable work cannot sustain their families so children become alternative income sources. This dynamic was highlighted in a detailed study on child labour in Dera Ismail Khan, which found that poor job prospects for adults are linked to increased child participation in

labour. Similar patterns appear in other countries. Research on child labour in South Asia shows that high adult unemployment correlates with increased child work rates, as parents attempt to diversify income sources. Therefore, by strengthening the economic resilience of families, children can be freed from labour and allowed to pursue the education and development that are their universal rights.

Beyond economic hardships, social factors play a crucial role in perpetuating child labour. Social attitudes, educational deprivation, and deeply rooted cultural norms normalize child work and resistance against it. In many developing societies, including Pakistan, child labour is not always perceived as exploitation but rather as a social necessity or even a moral obligation. According to UNESCO and UNICEF,

education deprivation and
social acceptance remain
among the strongest
predicators of child
labour worldwide. Thus
illiteracy, a high ratio
of out of school
children, and cultural
acceptance of child work
constitute the core social
dimensions sustaining this
issue.

Limited access to
quality education discourages
school attendance. In many
rural and undeveloped
areas, schools are either
unavailable or poorly
equipped, with overcrowded
classrooms, untrained teachers
and inadequate infrastructure.
As noted by UNESCO,
low quality education
systems push children
out of schools and
into labour markets,
especially where schooling
is perceived as irrelevant
to future employment.
Consequently, illiteracy
and weak education
systems create a

vicious cycle where lack of awareness and access reinforces child labour.

Although Pakistan's Constitution provides strong safeguards for children, the persistence of child labour exposes serious legal and constitutional gaps. In theory, child labour is prohibited and education is guaranteed; however, in practice, weak enforcement undermines those protections.

Article 11 of the Constitution of Pakistan explicitly prohibits slavery, forced labour, and the employment of children below the age of fourteen in factories, mines, and hazardous occupations.

However, despite this constitutional safeguard, child labour remains widespread, particularly in informal sectors such as agriculture, domestic work, and street vending.

Similarly, Article 25-A guarantees free

and compulsory education
for all children aged
5 to 16 years.

This provision aims
to remove children
from labour by
integrating them into
the educational system.

Nevertheless,
due to inadequate
school infrastructure
and poor implementation,
millions of children
remain out of school.

As a result, the
constitutional right
to education exists
on paper but fails to
translate into universal
schooling, indirectly
sustaining child labour.

Beyond economic,
social, and legal
failures, child labour
represents a profound
moral and ethical
crisis. It violates
basic human values,
undermines children's
dignity, and reflects
collective societal neglect.

Therefore, examining child labour through an ethical and moral lens reveals the deeper injustice embedded in this practice. This shows that eliminating child labour requires not only laws and policies but also a moral awakening grounded in human rights, religious values and social responsibility.

Child labour

inflicts severe physical, psychological, and emotional harm on children, depriving them of a healthy and dignified childhood.

Long working hours in hazardous environments expose children to injuries, malnutrition, chronic illnesses, and stunted physical growth. Simultaneously, constant stress, abuse and exploitation result in psychological trauma, anxiety and loss of self esteem. Moreover, child labour robs children

of education, a play,
and social interaction,
thereby hindering their
personal development
and creativity.

At the societal
level, child labour
contributes to rising
illiteracy and the
creation of a low
skilled workforce,
undermining social progress.
When children are kept
out of schools,
societies lose educated
citizens capable of
innovation and leadership.
Furthermore child labour
reinforces social inequality
as children from poor
families remain trapped
in unskilled labour
while privileged groups
access education and
opportunities.

Economically,
child labour causes
a loss of human capital
and long term productivity.
By replacing education
with unskilled work,

economies sacrifice a skilled labour force essential for sustainable growth. Moreover, child labour perpetuates the intergenerational cycle of poverty, as uneducated children grow into low-paid adults who are forced to send their own children to work. Consequently, national productivity remains stagnant, innovation declines, and economic growth slows. Thus, while child labour may offer short term economic relief to families, it results in long term economic stagnation for the state.

Eliminating child labour requires a coordinated and holistic approach combining economic, social, legal, and moral measures. Economic interventions such as poverty alleviation programs, conditional cash transfers linked to education, and livelihood support can reduce families' reliance on child income.

At the same time, social measures must ensure universal access to free and quality education, supported by school meals, transport facilities, and awareness campaigns led by communities, media, and religious leaders to discourage child work. Furthermore, political and governance reforms and legal enforcement must be strengthened through regular labour inspections, strict penalties, inter-provincial coordination, and judicial oversight to uphold constitutional guarantees. Finally, ethical re-orientation and collective action by civil society, NGOs and international organizations such as ILO and UNICEF can foster social intolerance toward child exploitation and help adapt

Successful global practices
ensuring sustainable
elimination of child
labour

In Conclusion,
child labour remains a
grave moral failure
and a serious obstacle
to sustainable development,
reflecting economic deprivation,
weak governance, and
social neglect. It robs
children of their rights
while undermining national
progress and social
justice. Therefore, urgent,
collective, and sustained
action by the state,
society and international
community is imperative
to eliminate child
labour and secure
a dignified future
for coming generations.