


Abdul Majid Khan¹, Junaid Zahir², Jawad Alam Khan², Fatima Awan³

1. Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, University of Swabi, Pakistan.
2. MPhil Scholar, Department of Sociology, Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan, Pakistan.
3. PhD Scholar, Department of Sociology, Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan, Pakistan.

Cite This Article: Khan, A. M., Zahir, J., Khan, J. A. & Awan, F. (2026). Exploring Gender Differences in Child Labour: A Qualitative Study in Informal Work in District Swabi. *Journal of Social Sciences Research & Policy*, 4 (02), 397-405.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.71327/jssrp.42.397.405>

ISSN: 3006-6557 (Online)

ISSN: 3006-6549 (Print)

Vol. 4, No. 2 (2026)

Pages: 397-405

Key Words:

Child Labor; Gender Differences; Informal Work Sector; Education Inequality; Working Conditions; Phenomenological Research; District Swabi

Corresponding Author:

Abdul Majid Khan

Email: abdulmajid@uoswabi.edu.pk

License:



Abstract: *This study explores gender differences in child labor within informal work settings in District Swabi using a qualitative research approach. The main objective of the study is to understand how boys and girls experience child labor differently in terms of type of work, access to education, working conditions, and future aspirations. A phenomenological research design was adopted to capture the lived experiences of child laborers. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with purposively selected participants, including working boys and girls engaged in informal sectors such as domestic work, workshops, and agriculture. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings reveal a clear gender-based division of labor, where boys are primarily involved in physically demanding and income-generating activities outside the home, while girls are largely confined to domestic and often invisible forms of work. The study also highlights significant gender disparities in education, with boys leaving school due to financial pressures and girls being denied education due to household responsibilities and cultural norms. Furthermore, the results indicate that boys face physical hardship and long working hours, whereas girls experience emotional stress, insecurity, and lack of recognition, particularly in domestic work environments. The study also identifies the critical role of parental decisions and societal expectations in shaping child labor practices. While poverty remains a key factor, deeply rooted cultural beliefs about gender roles further reinforce inequality. In terms of future aspirations, boys generally express a desire for better employment opportunities, whereas girls often have limited or uncertain expectations due to restricted opportunities. In conclusion, the study demonstrates that child labor in informal sectors is deeply gendered, requiring gender-sensitive policies and interventions. Addressing child labor effectively requires not only economic support for families but also efforts to challenge cultural norms and promote equal opportunities for both boys and girls.*

Introduction

Child labor remains one of the most persistent social, economic, and human rights challenges across the developing world. Despite global efforts to eliminate it, millions of children continue to engage in work

that deprives them of their childhood, education, and overall development. According to the International Labor Organization (ILO), child labor refers to work that is mentally, physically, socially, or morally dangerous and harmful to children and interferes with their schooling (ILO, 2021). While child labor exists in many forms, it is most prevalent in informal sectors where regulation and monitoring are weak. Globally, approximately 160 million children are engaged in child labor, with a significant proportion located in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa (UNICEF, 2020). In Pakistan, child labor is a widespread issue, particularly in rural and economically disadvantaged areas. Children are often found working in agriculture, workshops, domestic labor, hotels, and street-based occupations. These forms of labor are largely informal, unregulated, and invisible to formal institutional oversight.

The issue of child labour is deeply rooted in structural inequalities such as poverty, lack of access to education, and socio-cultural norms. However, an important yet often overlooked dimension of child labour is gender. Boys and girls experience child labour differently due to socially constructed gender roles, expectations, and opportunities. While boys are more visible in public workspaces such as markets and workshops, girls are often engaged in hidden forms of labour such as domestic work and home-based economic activities (Basu & Van, 1998; Edmonds, 2007). In the context of District Swabi, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the phenomenon of child labour reflects broader socio-economic realities. Swabi is characterized by a mix of rural and semi-urban populations where poverty, limited employment opportunities, and cultural practices influence household decisions regarding children's participation in labour. Understanding how gender shapes these experiences is crucial for designing effective interventions and policies.

Statement of the Problem

Although child labour has been widely studied, much of the existing research focuses on its economic causes and consequences, often neglecting the gendered nature of the issue. Boys and girls are not equally affected by child labour; rather, they experience different forms of work, levels of exploitation, and access to education. Girls, for instance, are more likely to be involved in unpaid domestic labour, which remains largely invisible and unrecognized, while boys are more likely to engage in physically demanding and hazardous occupations outside the home (Kabeer, 2005). In Pakistan, particularly in rural areas like District Swabi, gender norms play a significant role in shaping children's roles within the household and labour market. Cultural expectations often prioritize boys' economic contribution while assigning girls to caregiving and domestic responsibilities. As a result, girls' labour is frequently underreported and undervalued. Despite the importance of this issue, there is a lack of qualitative research that captures the lived experiences of boys and girls engaged in informal child labour. Quantitative studies provide statistical insights but fail to explore the depth and complexity of gendered experiences. Therefore, there is a need for a qualitative investigation that gives voice to children and explores how gender influences their work, education, and well-being.

Research Objectives

The main objectives of this study are:

1. To explore the experiences of boys and girls engaged in child labour in informal sectors.
2. To examine the gender-based differences in types of work, working conditions, and opportunities.
3. To understand how socio-cultural norms influence child labour practices in District Swabi.

Research Questions

1. What are the lived experiences of boys and girls engaged in child labour?
2. How do gender roles shape the nature of child labour in informal work settings?
3. What social and cultural factors contribute to gender differences in child labour?

Significance of the Study

This study is significant in several ways. First, it contributes to the existing body of knowledge by focusing on the gender dimensions of child labour, an area that has received limited attention in Pakistan. By adopting a qualitative approach, the study provides in-depth insights into the lived experiences of children, which are often overlooked in quantitative research. Second, the study is particularly relevant for policymakers, non-governmental organizations, and social workers working to eliminate child labour. Understanding gender differences can help design targeted interventions that address the specific needs of both boys and girls. Third, the study holds local significance for District Swabi. By focusing on a specific geographical area, the research provides context-specific findings that can inform local policies and community-based initiatives.

Scope of the Study

This study focuses on child labour in informal sectors within District Swabi. It specifically examines children engaged in occupations such as domestic work, workshops, agriculture, and small businesses. The study emphasizes gender differences between boys and girls and explores their experiences through qualitative methods such as interviews. However, the study does not cover formal employment sectors or provide quantitative generalizations. Instead, it aims to provide a detailed and contextual understanding of the issue.

Conceptual Understanding of Child Labour

Child labour is a multidimensional concept that encompasses various forms of work performed by children. According to the ILO (2021), not all work done by children is considered child labour. Activities that do not interfere with schooling and are not harmful to a child's development may be acceptable. However, when work becomes exploitative, hazardous, or prevents education, it is classified as child labour. Child labour is often linked to poverty, as families rely on children's income for survival. However, it is also influenced by other factors such as lack of education, social norms, and weak enforcement of labour laws (Bhalotra & Tzannatos, 2003).

Gender and Child Labour

Gender plays a crucial role in shaping the experiences of child labourers. Gender is a social construct that defines roles, responsibilities, and expectations for males and females (Connell, 2009). In many societies, boys are expected to be breadwinners, while girls are expected to take on domestic responsibilities. These gender norms influence the type of work children engage in. Boys are more likely to work in public spaces such as markets and workshops, while girls are often confined to domestic work within households. This division not only affects their working conditions but also their access to education and opportunities for personal development (Kabeer, 2005). Furthermore, girls' labour is often invisible and unpaid, making it difficult to measure and address. This invisibility contributes to the marginalization of girls and limits their chances of escaping poverty.

Informal Sector and Child Labour

The informal sector is characterized by unregulated and unprotected forms of employment. It includes small-scale businesses, family enterprises, and home-based work. In Pakistan, a large portion of the workforce is employed in the informal sector, where labour laws are rarely enforced. Children working in informal sectors are particularly vulnerable to exploitation, as they lack legal protection and are often subjected to long working hours, low wages, and hazardous conditions (ILO, 2017). The informal nature of this work also makes it difficult to monitor and regulate child labour practices.

Child Labour in Pakistan

Child labour remains a significant issue in Pakistan, with millions of children engaged in various forms of

work. According to national surveys, children are involved in agriculture, manufacturing, domestic work, and street-based activities. In rural areas, child labour is often considered a normal part of life, and children are expected to contribute to household income. Cultural norms and economic pressures reinforce this practice, making it difficult to eliminate child labour without addressing its root causes.

Child Labour in District Swabi

District Swabi presents a unique context for studying child labour. The district has a predominantly rural population with limited economic opportunities. Many families rely on agriculture and informal work for their livelihoods, which increases the likelihood of child labour. Gender norms in Swabi further shape the experiences of children. Boys are more visible in public workspaces, while girls' labour remains confined to homes. This gendered division of labour highlights the need for a focused study on gender differences.

Rationale of the Study

The rationale for this study lies in the need to understand the gendered nature of child labour in a specific local context. While existing studies provide general insights, they often fail to capture the nuanced experiences of boys and girls. By focusing on District Swabi and using a qualitative approach, this study aims to fill this gap and provide a deeper understanding of how gender influences child labour practices.

Literature Review

Child labour has been extensively studied across different socio-economic and cultural contexts, yet its gendered dimensions remain underexplored, particularly in developing countries such as Pakistan. Existing literature highlights that child labour is not a uniform phenomenon; rather, it is shaped by economic necessity, cultural norms, and institutional structures. This chapter reviews relevant studies on child labour with a specific focus on gender differences, informal work, and the Pakistani context.

Conceptualizing Child Labour

Child labour is generally defined as work that deprives children of their childhood, education, and potential, and is harmful to their physical and mental development. However, scholars argue that the concept of child labour is complex and context-dependent. According to Fatima (2017), child labour in Pakistan is influenced by both supply-side factors such as household poverty and demand-side factors such as low adult wages and informal labour market structures. Similarly, Nafees et al. (2012) emphasize that child labour is not merely an economic issue but also a social phenomenon shaped by family structures, migration, and urbanization. These studies suggest that understanding child labour requires a multidimensional approach that incorporates economic, social, and cultural perspectives.

Child Labour in the Informal Sector

The informal sector plays a significant role in the persistence of child labour. It is characterized by unregulated, low-paying, and often hazardous work environments. Research indicates that children are more likely to be employed in informal settings because these sectors do not require formal contracts or age verification. Studies conducted in Pakistan reveal that the majority of working children are employed in informal sectors such as domestic work, agriculture, and small-scale industries. A qualitative study by Iqbal (2022) found that informal work environments expose children to exploitation, long working hours, and limited access to education. Furthermore, the absence of legal protection in these sectors makes it difficult to monitor and regulate child labour practices. Another study highlights that informal employment structures often rely on cheap and flexible labour, making children an attractive workforce for employers (Ghaffar & Enam, 2025). This demand further reinforces the cycle of child labour, particularly among low-income families.

Gender Dimensions of Child Labour

Gender is a critical factor influencing the nature and extent of child labour. Research shows that boys and girls experience child labour differently due to socially constructed gender roles. Boys are typically engaged in visible, income-generating activities such as working in markets, workshops, and agriculture. In contrast, girls are more likely to be involved in domestic work, which is often unpaid and invisible. According to ILO-based studies, girls constitute a significant proportion of child domestic workers, often working in private households where their labour remains hidden and unregulated. This invisibility makes it difficult to measure the extent of girls' labour and increases their vulnerability to exploitation and abuse. Ghaffar and Enam (2025) further argue that girls in domestic labour are more likely to experience physical and emotional abuse compared to boys, highlighting the intersection of gender and vulnerability. These findings indicate that gender not only determines the type of work children perform but also affects their working conditions and well-being.

Socio-Cultural Factors Influencing Gendered Child Labor

Socio-cultural norms play a significant role in shaping gender differences in child labor. In many traditional societies, including Pakistan, gender roles are deeply embedded in cultural practices. Boys are often expected to contribute economically to the household, while girls are assigned domestic responsibilities. Studies suggest that these norms influence parental decisions regarding children's education and labor participation. For instance, girls are more likely to be withdrawn from school to assist with household chores, while boys may be sent to work to supplement family income. This gendered division of labor reinforces inequalities and limits opportunities for girls. Qualitative evidence from Pakistan indicates that parents often perceive girls' education as less important than boys', which contributes to higher rates of female child labour in domestic settings (Nafees et al., 2012). These cultural perceptions perpetuate the cycle of gender inequality and child labor.

Health and Psychological Impacts of Child Labor

Child labor has significant implications for children's physical and psychological well-being. Research shows that working children are exposed to various health risks, including injuries, respiratory problems, and mental stress. A qualitative study conducted in Karachi found that child laborers commonly suffer from illnesses such as fever, body pain, and respiratory infections due to poor working conditions. Additionally, children engaged in domestic work are at risk of abuse and exploitation, which can have long-term psychological effects. Gender differences are also evident in the health impacts of child labor. Girls working in domestic settings may experience emotional abuse and isolation, while boys working in physically demanding jobs are more likely to suffer from injuries. These differences highlight the need for gender-sensitive interventions.

Poverty and Household Dynamics

Poverty is widely recognized as the primary driver of child labour. Families with limited financial resources often rely on children's income for survival. However, poverty alone does not fully explain the phenomenon; household dynamics and decision-making processes also play a crucial role. Research indicates that parental education, family size, and employment status significantly influence children's participation in labour. Households with unemployed or low-income adults are more likely to send children to work (Fatima, 2017). Moreover, gender norms within households determine which child is more likely to work. In many cases, boys are prioritized for education, while girls are expected to contribute to household labour. This unequal distribution of responsibilities reinforces gender disparities and limits girls' access to education and economic opportunities.

Policy and Intervention Gaps

Despite various policies and programs aimed at eliminating child labour, significant gaps remain in their implementation. Studies suggest that weak enforcement of labour laws, lack of awareness, and limited resources hinder the effectiveness of these initiatives. The informal nature of child labour further complicates policy interventions, as many working children are not officially recorded. Additionally, existing policies often fail to address gender-specific issues, such as the invisibility of girls' labour and the risks associated with domestic work. ILO reports emphasize the need for integrated approaches that combine legal, educational, and social interventions to address child labour effectively. Such approaches should also consider gender differences to ensure that both boys and girls benefit equally.

Research Gap

While existing literature provides valuable insights into the causes and consequences of child labour, there is a lack of qualitative research focusing on gender differences, particularly in rural areas such as District Swabi. Most studies rely on quantitative data, which does not capture the lived experiences of children. Furthermore, the hidden nature of girls' labour in domestic settings remains underexplored. There is a need for in-depth qualitative studies that examine how gender shapes children's experiences in informal work environments.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore the gender differences in child labour within informal work settings in District Swabi. The research is based on a phenomenological approach, aiming to understand the lived experiences of boys and girls engaged in child labour. Data will be collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with purposively selected participants, including working children and, where relevant, their parents or guardians. A purposive sampling technique will be used to select respondents who are directly involved in informal labour sectors such as domestic work, workshops, and agriculture. The sample size will consist of approximately 6–10 participants, sufficient for thematic saturation in qualitative research. Data will be analyzed using thematic analysis, where responses will be transcribed, coded, and organized into key themes reflecting gender-based differences. Ethical considerations, including informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation, will be strictly maintained throughout the study.

Result and Discussion

Thematic Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, and six major themes emerged. Each theme is elaborated below with interpretation and supporting quotations.

Theme 1: Gender-Based Division of Labour

The findings reveal a clear gender-based segmentation of work in informal sectors. Labour roles are socially assigned rather than based on ability or choice.

Sub-theme 1.1: Boys in Public and Physical Work

Boys are primarily involved in physically demanding and income-generating activities outside the home. These include working in workshops, hotels, markets, and agriculture. Their labour is visible and socially accepted as part of their role as future providers.

"I work in a mechanic shop all day. It is hard work, but I have to support my family." (Male, 14 years)

"My father sent me to work in the market because I am the eldest son." (Male, 13 years)

This reflects how masculinity is associated with economic contribution and physical strength.

Sub-theme 1.2: Girls in Domestic and Hidden Work

Girls are mostly confined to household chores and caregiving responsibilities. Even when they engage in

paid work, it is often domestic work in other households, which remains informal and unregulated.

“I stay at home and help my mother with cooking and cleaning.” (Female, 12 years)

“No one calls it work, but I do all the house chores.” (Female, 13 years)

This highlights the invisibility and undervaluation of girls’ labour.

Theme 2: Education and School Dropout

Child labour significantly affects children’s educational opportunities, with notable gender differences.

Sub-theme 2.1: Boys Leaving School for Income

Boys often discontinue their education due to financial constraints and the expectation to contribute economically.

“I left school because my father could not earn enough.” (Male, 15 years)

This indicates how economic pressure forces boys into early labour participation.

Sub-theme 2.2: Girls Denied Education Due to Domestic Roles

Girls are more likely to be excluded from education due to cultural norms and household responsibilities rather than direct financial pressure alone.

“My brother goes to school, but I have to stay at home.” (Female, 11 years)

“My parents say girls do not need much education.” (Female, 14 years)

This reflects deep-rooted gender bias in educational access.

Theme 3: Working Conditions and Exploitation

Children face difficult working conditions, though experiences differ by gender.

Sub-theme 3.1: Physical Hardship Among Boys

Boys experience long working hours, physical exhaustion, and exposure to unsafe environments.

“I work from morning till night. Sometimes I get very tired.” (Male, 14 years)

These conditions reflect economic exploitation and lack of labour protection.

Sub-theme 3.2: Emotional and Social Vulnerability of Girls

Girls face emotional stress, lack of recognition, and vulnerability, particularly in domestic settings.

“Sometimes I feel very tired, but no one appreciates my work.” (Female, 12 years)

“I feel scared working in other people’s homes.” (Female, 13 years)

Their challenges are less visible but equally serious.

Theme 4: Parental and Societal Influence

Family decisions and cultural norms play a central role in shaping child labour practices.

Sub-theme 4.1: Economic Pressure on Families

Poverty forces families to rely on children’s labour for survival.

“We are poor, so my children have to work.” (Parent)

Economic necessity is a primary driver of child labour.

Sub-theme 4.2: Gender Norms and Expectations

Cultural beliefs define appropriate roles for boys and girls.

“Boys should earn, and girls should take care of the home.” (Parent)

Such norms normalize gender inequality in labour distribution.

Theme 5: Perceptions of Work and Future Aspirations

Children’s perceptions of their work and future vary by gender.

Sub-theme 5.1: Boys’ Aspirations for Better Jobs

Boys often see their work as temporary and aspire to improve their situation.

“I want to learn skills and get a better job.” (Male, 15 years)

They associate work with future economic mobility.

Sub-theme 5.2: Limited Aspirations Among Girls

Girls tend to have restricted aspirations due to limited exposure and opportunities.

“I don’t know about the future.” (Female, 13 years)

Their outlook is shaped by social constraints and lack of empowerment.

Theme 6: Invisible Nature of Girls’ Labour

Girls’ labour remains largely unrecognized despite its intensity and importance.

Girls’ work is often considered part of their duty rather than economic contribution, leading to its exclusion from formal recognition.

“People think I do nothing, but I work all day at home.” (Female, 12 years)

“My work is not counted as earning.” (Female, 14 years)

This invisibility reinforces gender inequality and limits policy attention.

Conclusion

This study explored the gender differences in child labour within informal work settings in District Swabi using a qualitative approach. The findings reveal that child labour is not only driven by poverty but is also deeply rooted in cultural norms, gender roles, and social expectations. The analysis shows a clear gender-based division of labour, where boys are engaged in visible, physically demanding, and income-generating activities outside the home, while girls are largely confined to domestic and often invisible forms of labour. This division reflects traditional beliefs that position boys as future breadwinners and girls as caregivers. As a result, girls’ work remains undervalued and unrecognized despite its significant contribution to household functioning. The study also highlights unequal access to education, with boys leaving school due to financial pressures and girls being denied education due to household responsibilities and cultural restrictions. This disparity limits future opportunities, particularly for girls, and perpetuates cycles of poverty and inequality. Furthermore, the findings indicate that both boys and girls face challenging working conditions, though in different forms. Boys experience physical hardship and long working hours, while girls face emotional stress, insecurity, and lack of recognition, especially in domestic work environments. These gendered experiences demonstrate that child labour is not a uniform phenomenon but varies significantly based on gender.

Parental decisions and societal norms play a crucial role in sustaining child labour practices. Many families view child labour as a necessity for survival, while cultural beliefs normalize gender-specific roles, further reinforcing inequality. Additionally, the study found that boys tend to have higher aspirations for future improvement, whereas girls often have limited or unclear future goals due to restricted opportunities and social expectations. Overall, the study concludes that child labour in informal sectors is deeply gendered, and any effort to address it must consider both economic and socio-cultural dimensions.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Promote Gender-Sensitive Education Policies

Government and educational institutions should implement policies that ensure equal access to education for both boys and girls. Special incentives, such as scholarships and stipends, should be provided to encourage families to send girls to school.

2. Poverty Alleviation Programs

Since poverty is a major driver of child labour, there is a need for economic support programs for low-income families, such as cash transfers, vocational training for parents, and employment opportunities, to reduce reliance on children’s labour.

3. Awareness Campaigns on Gender Equality

Community-based awareness programs should be conducted to challenge traditional gender norms that restrict girls to domestic roles and undervalue their contributions. These programs should emphasize the importance of education and equal opportunities for all children.

Regulation of Informal Work Sectors

Authorities should strengthen monitoring and regulation of informal sectors to ensure safe and fair working conditions for children. Special attention should be given to hidden forms of labour, particularly domestic work performed by girls.

5. Support Services for Working Children

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and social welfare departments should provide counseling, educational support, and skill development programs for working children to improve their well-being and future prospects.

6. Recognition of Girls' Labour

Policies and programs should acknowledge the invisible labour of girls, especially within households, and address their specific needs through targeted interventions.

7. Further Research

Future studies should explore child labor from different perspectives, such as psychological impacts, rural–urban comparisons, and long-term consequences, to develop more comprehensive solutions.

References

- Basu, K., & Van, P. H. (1998). The economics of child labor. *American Economic Review*, 88(3), 412–427.
- Betcherman, G. (2009). Child labour and policy responses.
- Bhalotra, S., & Tzannatos, Z. (2003). Child labor: What have we learnt? *World Bank Social Protection Discussion Paper*.
- Connell, R. (2009). *Gender: In World Perspective*. Polity Press.
- Edmonds, E. V. (2007). Child labor. *Handbook of Development Economics*, 4, 3607–3709.
- Edmonds, E. V. (2008). Child labor and schooling decisions.
- Emerson, P. M., & Souza, A. P. (2003). Is child labor harmful?
- Fatima, A. (2017). Child labour in Pakistan: Labour market dynamics.
- Ghaffar, R. S. A., & Enam, K. (2025). Child domestic labour in Pakistan: A narrative review.
- Grootaert, C., & Kanbur, R. (1995). Child labour: A review.
- ILO (2017). *Global Estimates of Child Labour*. International Labour Organization.
- ILO (2021). *Child Labour: Global Estimates 2020*. International Labour Organization.
- International Labour Organization (ILO). (2022). Child labour in domestic work in Pakistan.
- Iqbal, M. (2022). Child labour in domestic work in Pakistan: A scoping study.
- Kabeer, N. (2005). Gender equality and women's empowerment. *Gender & Development*, 13(1), 13–24.
- Nafees, A. A., Khan, K. S., Fatmi, Z., & Aslam, M. (2012). Situation analysis of child labour in Karachi, Pakistan.
- Ray, R. (2000). Child labor, child schooling, and their interaction.
- UNICEF (2020). *Child Labour Global Estimates Report*.