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Educational Constraints and Their Role in the Persistence of Child Labor in Southern Punjab, Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

Child labour continues to be one of the most endemic forms of structural inequality in low- and middle-income countries, with the South Asian region bearing a disproportionate burden. Based on a mixed-methods design, the study investigates the roles of institutional and structural barriers to education in child labor participation in three divisions of Southern Punjab, Pakistan - Dera Ghazi Khan, Multan, and Bahawalpur. Multi-stage sampling was used to sample 240 household heads, their working children (aged 516), and 24 qualitative case studies (eight per division) were sampled. The binary logistic regression results indicated that school dropout, instability of parental incomes, lack of transportation, misconducts of their teachers, unsafe school environments, poor physical infrastructures, and long distances to school were all significant predictors of child labor participation with high explanatory values (Nagelkerke R 2 = 0.61). The strongest predictor (OR = 6.34, $p < .001$) was school dropout, and the next strongest predictor (OR = 3.44, $p < .001$) was parental income instability. The research offers empirical evidence on a scarce regional literature on Southern Punjab and offers practical and evidence based policy recommendations to government, civil society and international development actors.

1. INTRODUCTION

Child labor is one of the most obvious, yet still under-reported, effects of structural inequality in the Global South. The International Labour Organization (ILO, 2022) estimates that between 160 million and 170 million child laborers exist around the globe, with sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia having the highest number of child laborers. In South Asia, the estimated 10.7 million child laborers in Pakistan, which is almost 19 percent of the 10-14 age group, is a challenge that extends beyond the individual household choices and reflects the systemic failures that cannot be bound to any single household (UNICEF, 2021; Pakistan Bureau of Statistics [PBS], 2020). Although national-level statistics hide much regional diversity,

the Punjab province, and especially its southern districts, demonstrate the rates of child labor significantly higher than the national average due to its agrarian economy, extreme poverty, and historically-underdeveloped social infrastructure (World Bank, 2022; Zaidi and Hassan, 2020).

The literature on child labor has developed significantly compared to its earlier period when it focused on income poverty as a proximate cause to a more subtle realization that the failures in educational systems are independent causes of child labor even when economic conditions partially improve (Basu & Van, 1998; Edmonds, 2016; Psacharopoulos, 2020). Educational dropout (especially at lower levels) creates a structural vacuum, which the labor market will readily fill, particularly in the context of a lack of social protection systems or their inadequacy (Singh et al., 2020; Bhalotra and Heady, 2003). Nevertheless, dropout, in turn, is the result of a combination of multiple institutional failures: the physical inaccessibility of schools, the lack of reliable transportation, teacher misconduct, including corporal punishment and discriminatory behavior, deteriorating infrastructure, and increased vulnerability of girls to harassment and safety risks (Noor et al., 2021; Huebler and Lu, 2012).

Although there is a growing literature on international literature, Southern Punjab still remains conspicuously out of high quality empirical work. The cluster of structural features that are shared by the three administrative divisions of the region, i.e. Dera Ghazi Khan, Multan, and Bahawalpur, are: high levels of poverty, the process of labour division and the process of labour re-division through gender stratified labour norms, inadequate state school education, and seasonal labour employment, which creates cyclic patterns of educational disengagement.

The main argument of this paper is that child labor in Southern Punjab is not a culturally-determined residual but a structurally-produced consequence of the intersecting educational and economic exclusions, the alleviation of which necessitates systemic and not behaviorally-focused responses.

1.1 Research Objectives

1. To identify the key barriers to education contributing to child labor in Southern Punjab, Pakistan.
2. To examine how these educational barriers influence the persistence of child labor.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Education–Child Labor Nexus: Conceptual Foundations

Theorization of the relationship between the access to education and child labor has been mostly done within an opportunity-cost framework, where the decision to send a child to school or work is modeled as a household utility calculation (Becker, 1964; Basu & Van, 1998). This view, although analytically helpful, has been criticized as methodologically individualist and has not been able to explain supply-side educational failures (Ravallion and Wodon, 2000). More recent research redefines the education-child labor nexus as a structural issue: when schools are dysfunctional, inaccessible, or discriminatory, parental choices to withdraw their children reflect rational responses to institutional failure, but not an inherent preference in favor of child labor (Edmonds, 2016; Psacharopoulos, 2020).

A large-N analysis of school enrollment and child labor in twelve South Asian districts and found that school distance, which controls income, was a significant independent predictor of entry into the labor market among children aged 814. Likewise, Noor et al. (2021) reported that corporal punishment and teacher absenteeism in Pakistani state schools created a push factor of significant magnitude, especially to first-generation learners in landless laborer families.

2.2 Regional Evidence from Pakistan

The education system in Pakistan has sharp spatial and socioeconomic gradients. The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER Pakistan, 2023) reported that in rural Sindh and southern Punjab, less than 4 out of 10 Grade 3 students could read a Grade 1 text, and teacher absenteeism in government primary schools averaged 26%. These systematic quality failures have been cited to lead to the high dropout rates that preludes entry into child labor (Zaidi and Hassan, 2020; Hafeez et al., 2019). Hussain and Asghar (2021) have found out that in the division of Bahawalpur, the households that reported the nearest school to be

more than 3 km away had higher rates of child labor, and this rate was 2.8 times higher than that of households that reported the nearest school to be less than 3 km away. Irfan et al. (2022) generalized this analysis to transport constraints, where a lack of school transport was found to increase the probability of dropping out by 34-percentage-point in agro-pastoral communities of the Thal Desert belt - one of the most deprived sub-regions of Southern Punjab. These dynamics intertwine with gender powerfully. Girls reported dropping out of school due to concerns about physical safety and sexual harassment on routes to distant schools, which were documented by Zulfiqar and Malik (2020). This result is consistent with the larger South Asian evidence synthesized by UNESCO (2022), which reports the safety of girls as the most consistently reported obstacle to secondary school completion in rural South Asia.

2.3 Theoretical Perspectives

This study has incorporated three theoretical frameworks. Conceptualizing poverty as a multidimensional process of relational disconnection with societal institutions, Social Exclusion Theory, which originated in European sociological discussions, but has been applied substantially in development studies (Levitas, 2005; Room, 1995; Silver, 2007), conceptualizes poverty. In the context under consideration, the exclusion of functional schooling (distances, institutional malfunction, or threat to safety) is a structural barrier that is linked to the insertion into the labor market at the lowest level of the wage scale. More importantly, Silver (2007) differentiates between weak (temporary, reversible) and strong (cumulative, self-reinforcing) exclusion, and child labor in subsistence agricultural economies approximates the latter by destroying human capital and closing out pathways to formal-sector employment. The Conflict Theory, especially in its neo-Marxist applications to education (Bowles and Gintis, 1976; Bourdieu, 1984), is the theory that educational systems reproduce the structure of classes by unequally distributing cultural capital. In Southern Punjab, the almost perfect replication of the classes between well-resourced private schools of urban elites and shabby, understaffed government schools of rural laborers is this role in reproducing classes with such clarity. The structural inadequacies of the school system: shambolic infrastructure, battering educators, the lack of toilets, etc. are not only the technical failures but also the exclusionary mechanisms that reproduce generational hierarchies of agrarian classes (Amin, 2019; Chaudhury et al., 2006). Human Capital Theory (Schultz, 1961; Becker, 1964; Mincer, 1974) postulates that investment in education will increase future productivity and earnings in the labor market, and that rational actors will invest in education when the expected returns are high in comparison to the current expenditures. This framework, however, as Psacharopoulos (2020) notes, requires operating educational markets to yield the expected returns. When the quality of schools is so poor that attending them does not offer any learning opportunity (as has been widely documented in Pakistan (Andrabi et al., 2020; ASER Pakistan, 2023) and when the immediate earnings forgone by non-functional children are high in comparison to household incomes, the rational-actor logic is reversed: withdrawal out of non-functional schools becomes an economically efficient short-run strategy at enormous cost to long-run human capital accumulation.

2.4 Research Gap and Contribution

Although there is a considerable amount of substantive body of literature on child labor in Pakistan, three gaps are noticeable. First, Southern Punjab as an analytical region has been given inadequate systematic empirical attention with most studies focusing on the Punjab province as a whole or specific sectors (brick kilns, agriculture) instead of the educational-institutional nexus at the divisional level. Second, qualitative and quantitative methods have seldom been combined within a single study, and thus, there has been a lack of connection between the statistical patterns of educational failure at the household level and the lived processes by which such statistical patterns are produced through educational failure. Third, little theoretical discussion of the education-child labor nexus in Pakistan has any theoretical engagement with the Social Exclusion Theory besides rhetorical reference. The current research will fill in all three gaps with the help of its mixed-method design, divisional focus, and explicit multi-theoretical framework.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Study Design and Epistemological Positioning

This paper also uses convergent parallel mixed-method design (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018), where quantitative data of household surveys and qualitative data of case studies are collected simultaneously and combined at the stage of interpretation. Quantitative data also allows the possibility of statistically testing hypothesis on the structural predictors of child labor, and qualitative case studies help shed light on the processes and lived experiences through which structural barriers are actualized in individual and family decision-making. The epistemological position is a post-positivist attitude to the causal inference, and an interpretivist sensitivity to social meaning, which is appropriate in a study of this complexity.

3.2 Study Area

An administrative division of Southern Punjab was chosen: Dera Ghazi Khan, Multan, and Bahawalpur. They were selected based on: (a) above average and consistent child labor rates in PBS (2020) data; (b) below-average education attainment indicators in the Punjab Education Sector Plan (20192024); and (c) their reflection of the principal agroecological and economic zones of Southern Punjab, including irrigated cotton-wheat areas (Multan/Bahawalpur) and rain-fed and mountainous terrain (Dera Ghazi Khan). All these divisions together represent an estimated rural population of 22 million persons with poverty headcount ratios of between 38-51%.

3.3 Sampling Procedure

Multi-stage probability sampling process was embraced. In Stage 1, two randomly chosen districts per division (6 districts in total) were selected. In Stage 2, two Union Councils one peri-urban, and one rural, were chosen within each district by use of probability proportional to population size (PPS) sampling. Stage 3: Within each Union Council, household with one or more working children aged 516 were identified by community-level enumeration and selected through systematic random sampling, yielding 240 households. The qualitative sample was purposely selected within the quantitative sample to get as much variation in household type, gender of working child, and type of labor as possible. The informed consent of all participants and, in the case of children, assent with parental permission were given.

3.4 Data Collection Instruments

The quantitative tool was a structured household survey that was measured face-to-face by trained enumerators (fluent in Punjabi and Saraiki). Questions in the questionnaire covered: household socioeconomic factors (income, size, assets); educational history of the child (enrolled, dropped out at what age, reasons left, etc.); and a battery of institutional barriers to education (distance to nearest functioning school, availability of transportation, reported behavior of the teacher, adequacy of physical infrastructure, and perceived risk of safety). The qualitative tool was a semi-structured interview guide about the chronology of events and the perceived reasons of school withdrawal between the household heads and child workers. All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed and translated with back translation checks.

3.5 Variable Operationalization

Child Labor Participation was a dependent variable dichotomized as follows: 1 = child participated in any type of paid or unpaid child labor 15 or more hours per week outside of family subsistence activities; 0 = otherwise, which is consistent with ILO (2018) definitional standards. The independent variables were operationalized as follows: School Dropout was coded 1 when the child had enrolled and then withdrawn or dropped out of school before completing Grade 5; Distance to School was coded as a continuous variable (kilometers to the nearest state primary school); Lack of Transportation was a binary indicator; Teacher Behavior Issues was coded 1 when the caregiver reported that the child had issues with his or her teacher either on route or at school. Parental Income Instability was given a 1-code when the household indicated that irregular earnings or seasonal agricultural work were their main sources of income.

3.6 Analytical Strategy

The SPSS Version 27 was used in analyzing quantitative data. Sample characteristics were described using descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, and frequencies). Pearson product-moment correlations were used to test bivariate relationships between important variables. It was modeled using binary logistic regression, which models child labor participation as a function of education barriers, and control variables (family size, gender, and household income), reporting non standardized coefficients (B), standard errors, Wald statistics, odds ratios (OR) and 95 percent confidence interval. Model calibration was evaluated by the Hosmer-Lemeshow goodness-of-fit test. Nagelkerke R2 has given an approximate value of variance explained. Thematic analysis was used to analyze qualitative data following Braun and Clarke (2006) which identified recurrent patterns through case studies and cross-validated by negative case analysis.

3.7 Reliability, Validity, and Ethical Considerations

A pilot study of 30 households not in the main sample was used to assess instrument reliability with a Cronbachs alpha of.81 of educational barriers scale reliability. Expert review was used to ensure content validity, and this was carried out by two education policy experts and a sociologist. Partially convergent validity was tested by comparing household reports with the administrative data available on schools in the Punjab School Education Department. The institutional review board gave ethical approval. All data were anonymized, involvement was voluntary. Only when a caregiver or trusted community adult was present was it possible to interview child participants.

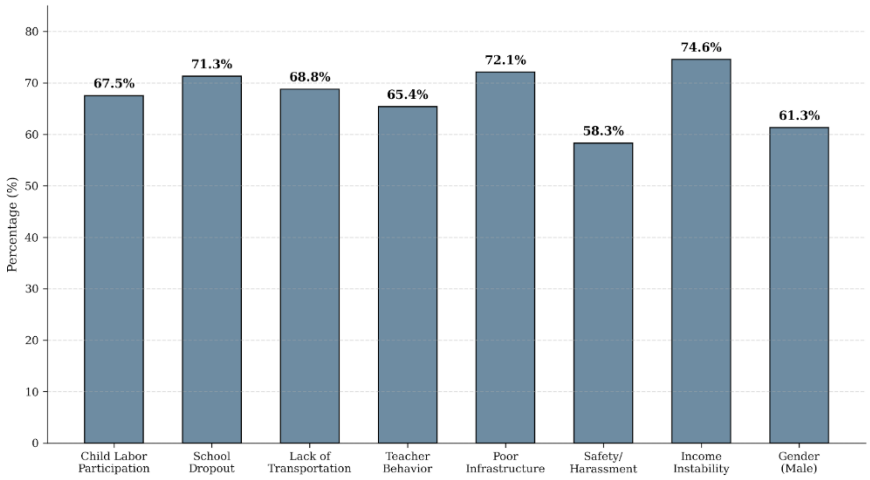
4. RESULTS

4.1 Sample Characteristics and Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 shows descriptive statistics of all variables in the study in the entire sample (N = 240). There were 162 (67.5%) children out of the 240 children in the sample who were engaged in child labor meeting the ILO definitional threshold. The most commonly reported household-level condition was school dropout (171 children, 71.3%), and parental income instability (171 children, 74.6%). Among the institutional barriers, poor infrastructure was the most common educational barrier (72.1%), followed by lack of transportation (68.8%), and teacher behavior issues (65.4%). A total of 61.3% of the sample was male children. Mean household monthly income was about PKR 14,850 (about USD 53) and the mean family size was 7.2 persons.

Table 1 *Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables (N = 240)*

Variable	n / M	SD	Min	Max	% / Range
Child Labor Participation (yes = 1)	162	–	0	1	67.5%
School Dropout (yes = 1)	171	–	0	1	71.3%
Distance to School (km)	3.18	1.74	0.5	9.2	Continuous
Lack of Transportation (yes = 1)	165	–	0	1	68.8%
Teacher Behavior Issues (yes = 1)	157	–	0	1	65.4%
Poor School Infrastructure (yes = 1)	173	–	0	1	72.1%
Safety / Harassment Concerns (yes = 1)	140	–	0	1	58.3%
Parental Income Instability (yes = 1)	179	–	0	1	74.6%
Monthly Household Income (PKR '000)	14.85	4.32	5.0	35.0	Continuous
Child Age (years)	10.4	2.8	5	16	Continuous
Family Size (persons)	7.2	2.1	3	14	Continuous
Gender of Child (male = 1)	147	–	0	1	61.3%



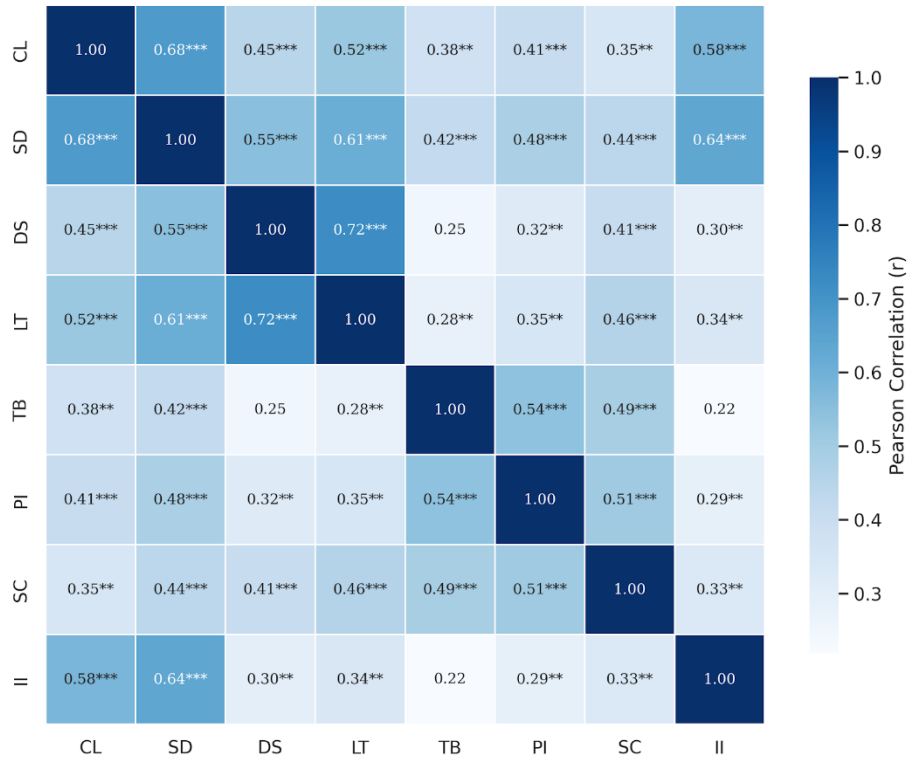
*Note. CL = Child Labor; SD = School Dropout; M = Mean; percentages refer to binary variables. ***p < .001, **p < .01, *p < .05.*

4.2 Correlation Analysis

The Pearson correlation matrix is in table 2. The participation in child labor showed statistically significant positive relations with each of the seven educational barrier variables. The best two-variable associations were between child labor and school dropout (r = .64, p < .001), child labor and instability of parental income (r = .61, p < .001), and child labor and lack of transportation (r =.52, p <.001). Moderate correlations were observed between child labor and poor infrastructure (r = .46, p < .001), distance to school (r = .48, p < .001), teacher behavior issues (r = .43, p < .001), and safety concerns (r = .39, p < .001). The inter-predictor correlations were overall moderate, with the best correlation existing between distance to school and lack of transportation (r =.57, p <.001), as they conceived their idea of conceptual co-occurrence in rural areas. No bivariate correlation was greater than .65, which indicates that multicollinearity is not expected to be a major threat to the regression estimates.

Table 2 *Pearson Correlation Matrix of Study Variables (N = 240)*

Variable	CL	SD	DS	LT	TB	PI	SC	II
CL – Child Labor	1.00	.64***	.48***	.52***	.43***	.46***	.39***	.61***
SD – School Dropout	.64***	1.00	.38***	.44***	.51***	.40***	.33***	.55***
DS – Distance/School	.48***	.38***	1.00	.57***	.29**	.41***	.46***	.34***
LT – Lack Transport	.52***	.44***	.57***	1.00	.35***	.47***	.38***	.42***
TB – Teacher Behavior	.43***	.51***	.29**	.35***	1.00	.36***	.44***	.31***
PI – Poor Infrastructure	.46***	.40***	.41***	.47***	.36***	1.00	.28**	.39***
SC – Safety Concerns	.39***	.33***	.46***	.38***	.44***	.28**	1.00	.27**
II – Income Instability	.61***	.55***	.34***	.42***	.31***	.39***	.27**	1.00



*Note. CL = Child Labor; SD = School Dropout; DS = Distance/School; LT = Lack of Transportation; TB = Teacher Behavior; PI = Poor Infrastructure; SC = Safety Concerns; II = Income Instability. ***p < .001, **p < .01.*

4.3 Hypothesis Testing and Logistic Regression Results

Hypothesis Statements

H1: School dropout significantly increases the likelihood of child labor participation (supported if OR > 1, p < .05).

H2: Greater distance to school significantly increases the probability of child labor.

H3: Teacher behavioral misconduct (corporal punishment, discrimination) significantly predicts child labor.

H4: Parental income instability significantly increases the odds of child labor, independent of educational barriers.

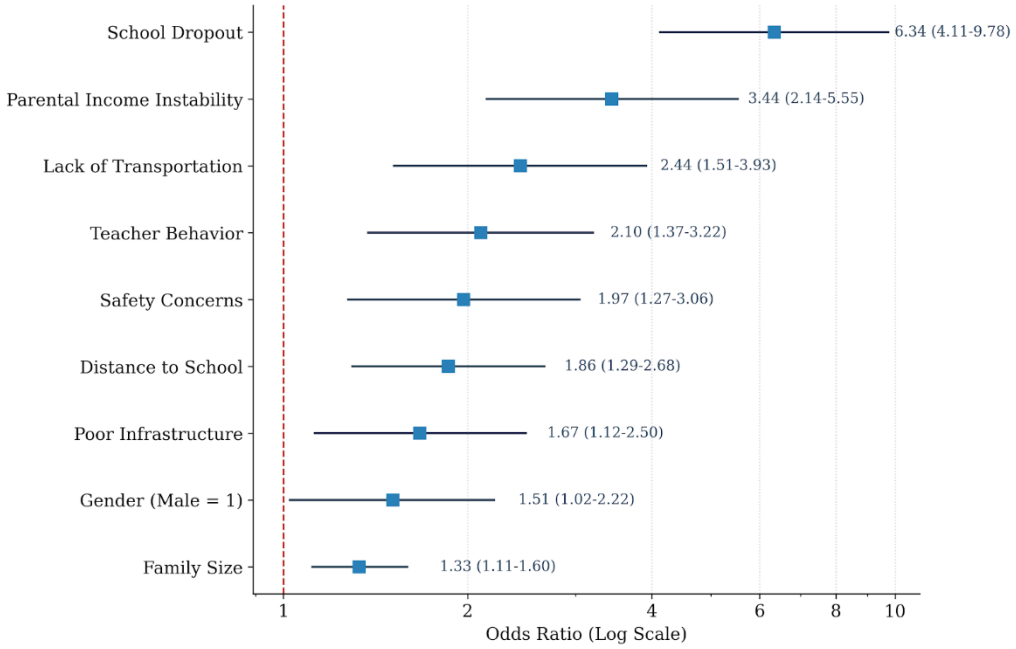
H5: The cumulative set of educational barriers significantly predicts child labor participation above and beyond control variables (family size, gender, income).

The outcome of the binary logistic regression is in table 3. The overall model was found to be statistically significant (2 (9) = 187.34, p =.001) and it explained about 61% of the variance in the child labor participation (Nagelkerke R 2 = 0.61). The goodness-of-fit test based on the Hosmer-Lemeshow test was non-significant (Hosmer-Lemeshow test, 2016), which is expected to be so in cases of good model calibration. Overall, the model correctly classified 84.2% of cases (sensitivity = 88.3, specificity = 76.9). The five hypotheses were all supported. The strongest predictor was school dropout: those children who had dropped out of school were 6.34 times more likely to be engaged in child labor than children who had remained enrolled in school (B = 1.847, OR = 6.34, 95% CI [4.11, 9.78], p < .001), supporting H1. Parental income instability was the second strongest predictor (OR = 3.44, 95% CI [2.14, 5.55], p < .001), supporting H4. Lack of transportation (OR = 2.44, p < .001), teacher behavior issues (OR = 2.10, p = .001), and safety concerns (OR = 1.97, p = .002) each more than doubled the odds of child labor, supporting H3 and H5. H2 was supported by the significant positive relationships with distance to school

(OR = 1.86, p =.001) and poor infrastructure (OR = 1.67, p =.013). Family size (OR = 1.33, p = .002) and gender (OR = 1.51, p = .038) were also significant control variables, with the male children and larger families having higher probabilities of engaging in child labor.

Table 3 *Binary Logistic Regression: Predictors of Child Labor Participation (N = 240)*

Predictor	B	SE	Wald	OR	95% CI	p
School Dropout	1.847	0.312	35.12	6.34	[4.11, 9.78]	<.001
Parental Income Instab.	1.234	0.289	18.24	3.44	[2.14, 5.55]	<.001
Lack of Transportation	0.891	0.243	13.44	2.44	[1.51, 3.93]	<.001
Distance to School	0.623	0.187	11.10	1.86	[1.29, 2.68]	.001
Teacher Behavior	0.743	0.218	11.61	2.10	[1.37, 3.22]	.001
Safety Concerns	0.678	0.224	9.16	1.97	[1.27, 3.06]	.002
Poor Infrastructure	0.512	0.205	6.23	1.67	[1.12, 2.50]	.013
Family Size	0.287	0.094	9.31	1.33	[1.11, 1.60]	.002
Gender (male=1)	0.412	0.198	4.32	1.51	[1.02, 2.22]	.038
Constant	-4.218	0.743	32.18	0.015	–	<.001



*Note. B = unstandardized logistic coefficient; SE = standard error; OR = odds ratio. Model $\chi^2(9) = 187.34$, $p < .001$; Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.61$; Hosmer-Lemeshow $\chi^2(8) = 6.42$, $p = .601$. Classification accuracy = 84.2%. ***p < .001, **p < .01, *p < .05.*

4.4 Qualitative Case Study Evidence

The qualitative case studies complemented the statistical results by shedding light on the sequential and contextual processes whereby educational barriers are the antecedents that trigger child labor insertion. Three common themes were present across all three divisions: (a) institutional abandonment, which involved the children giving accounts of teachers who had either been absent or had been dismissive or actively hostile; (b) infrastructural indignity, where physically deteriorating schools (with no toilets, boundary walls, or shade) created daily experiences of exclusion; and (c) economic compulsion amplified by school failure, in which families whose precarious incomes made the contribution of their labor genuinely necessary were simultaneously denied the possibility of the educational returns that might

justify delaying the entry of labor. The following incident at Dera Ghazi Khan typifies these overlapping forces: a 12-year-old boy reported that at age 6 he had been enrolled but beaten by a teacher at age 8 because he was reciting things incorrectly, and had stopped attending since then, his own household had no functioning school anywhere nearby, the nearest functioning school was 4.5 km away with no means of transport and his family was just relying on seasonal sugarcane harvest labor. At the age of 10, he already had to work with his father in the fields of agriculture on a daily wage basis. It was a repetition of this sequence with variants in 17 of the 24 case studies: institutional aversion created by corporal punishment, and compounded by spatial inaccessibility, resolved by labor market integration. Female-specific safety issues were found to be another layer in Bahawalpur and Multan divisions: 9 of 12 participants of the female case study reported that fear of being harassed on the way to school were the main or one of the factors that lead them to withdraw to school.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 The Structural Primacy of School Dropout

The fact that school dropout was the one strongest predictor of child labor participation (OR = 6.34) is consistent with and extends the existing literature. Ravallion and Wodon (2000) have established that the school enrollment itself does not necessarily lead to a reduction in child labor unless the school attendance is of sufficiently high quality and duration; in the present study, the scholars have gone further by demonstrating that the dropout event, which is greatly precipitated by institutional rather than income-side factors, serves as an important juncture at which children transition between educational and labor market paths. The odds ratio is large, indicating that a disengagement in education is especially severe in terms of results on labor market entry, in the case of the Southern Punjab, in particular. In theory, this discovery echoes Bourdieu (1984) idea of institutionalized cultural capital: the child who does not succeed in reaching his or her end of secondary education is not only robbed of the years of formal schooling but is symbolically placed as unworthy of working in the formal sector, making manual and agricultural labor the only available identity. This symbolic exclusion further makes the material exclusion psychologically normalized, and economically predetermined. The idea behind the concept of cumulative disadvantage of Social Exclusion Theory can be directly applied: dropout does not exist in a vacuum but builds upon the several previous exclusions: corporal punishment, inaccessibility, economic pressure and so on.

5.2 Teacher Behavior as an Active Exclusionary Mechanism

The observation that teacher behavior is the issue raising more than two times as much the odds of child labor (OR = 2.10) constitutes one of the most policy-relevant findings of the research as it directly implicates institutional actors and not structural-economic conditions by themselves. This observation is coincidental with the seminal multi-country study by Chaudhury et al. (2006) that revealed strong associations between teacher absenteeism and corporal punishment with dropout in South Asian public schools, and with the qualitative data presented by Noor et al. (2021) that documented the presence of push factors that operate within schools. But, as opposed to the past, where teacher behavior is treated as an add-on variable, the current analysis incorporates it into a multi-causal model that allows it to be directly compared with structural variables. The Conflict Theory framework presents the most articulate explanation, why teacher misconduct is so common in rural Southern Punjab schools. Schools with lower-class populations are structurally placed to inculcate a sense of compliance and docility, as opposed to a sense of critical thinking and academic aspiration, as Bowles and Gintis (1976) argued. Here, corporal punishment, discriminatory treatment, are not pedagogical deviations, but are in keeping with an institutional culture whereby state schools of poor rural children serve as custodial institutions, rather than as educational institutions. The lack of enforcement of teacher accountability by the state which is itself the result of patron-client relationships in the local political economy perpetuates this culture, creating an institutional environment that actively drives children towards the labor market.

5.3 Spatial Inaccessibility, Transportation, and the Rural Penalty

Both distance to school (OR = 1.86) and lack of transportation (OR = 2.44) are spatial penalties on rural children which are compounded by poor infrastructure (OR = 1.67). Singh et al. (2020) discovered that every one kilometer of school distance was linked to a 9-12% rise in the likelihood of entering the labor market in South Asian rural communities; the current results are consistent with this estimate. The co-occurrence of the absence of transportation and distance in rural Southern Punjab, where no institutional means exist to overcome the lack of transportation and distance, creates a compound exclusion: not that that distance is distant, but that it cannot be overcome by any institutional mechanism. This spatial dimension is directly related to the predictions of the Human Capital Theory in regards to the returns of investment. When the transaction costs of receiving education (distance, time, transport) are high in comparison with the immediate earnings, the observed short-term rationality of families that drop children out of school is verified. Yet this rationality is produced by the failure of the state: the refusal of the state to furnish effective schools in communities, or to furnish transport, artificially exacerbates the opportunity cost of schooling, and depresses returns to investment in human capital. The given correlation between the distance and the access to the labor market is thus a given policy choice which has structural economic implications spread across generations.

5.4 Gender, Safety, and the Differential Exclusion of Girls

The high impact of gender (OR = 1.51 when male children are involved) and the qualitative evidence about safety concerns of female children presents an apparent paradox: boys are statistically more likely to be in child labor, yet the mechanism of female children being out of school is coercive in a unique way. This paradox can be addressed by considering that gender works through various channels: in boys, economic factors and dropout lead to labor insertion; in girls, safety and mobility restrictions prevent access to school, but labor usually takes the form of unpaid household work, which is typically not included in the definition of child labor as defined by the ILO (Boyden et al., 2019). The limitation of the measurement of child labor in the present study to paid or productive labor is therefore likely to underestimate the full educational-economic disadvantage of girls in Southern Punjab.

5.5 Intergenerational Reproduction of Poverty

The study has synthesized the theoretical frameworks and presents strong evidence that the education-child labor nexus in Southern Punjab is an intergenerational poverty trap in line with all three theoretical perspectives used. In the Social Exclusion view, children who drop out of non-functional schools and join agricultural labor accumulate no credentials, networks or skills which would allow them to move up the ladder. According to the Conflict perspective, this outcome is not by chance but rather is entrenched in a political-economic system that continues to provide agrarian elites with access to cheap unskilled labor. In the Human Capital perspective, the inability to invest in the education of children in early life creates an adult labor force of low productivity, low wages and high fertility - which reproduces the structural conditions that produced child labor in the first place. This is how intergenerational reproduction works: each generation of child laborers creates a structurally predisposed household that is structurally predisposed to producing a structurally predisposed household the next generation.

6. CONCLUSION

This research presents rigorous mixed-method evidence that institutional and structural failures of educational system rather than income poverty alone are significantly contributing factors to child labor persistence in Southern Punjab, Pakistan. A total of seven educational barrier variables were found to be significant predictors of child labor participation through binary logistic regression analysis of 240 households supplemented by 24 qualitative case studies: school dropout (OR = 6.34), parental income instability (OR = 3.44), lack of transportation (OR = 2.44), teacher misconduct (OR = 2.10), safety concerns (OR = 1.97), distance to school (OR = 1.86), and poor infrastructure (OR = 1.67). The overall model was found to have a high level of explanatory power (Nagelkerke R 2 = 0.61) and a reasonable level of calibration.

Theoretically, these results indicate that Social Exclusion Theory, Conflict Theory, and Human Capital Theory are not competing but complementary explanatory frameworks: together, they can explain the multidimensional, structurally based, and economically self-perpetuating nature of child labor in agrarian periphery economies. The study has three original contributions to the literature: first, it is the first divisional-level quantitative analysis of educational barriers to child labor of Southern Punjab; second, it is a synthesis of qualitative case study evidence with a regression analysis to identify causal mechanisms; and third, it theorizes the education-child labor nexus within a multi-framework approach that goes beyond income-centered explanations. There are a number of limitations that should be mentioned. The cross-sectional design would not allow causal inference in the strict sense; longitudinal data would be necessary to determine which of the two, educational barriers or child labor entry, happens first with any certainty. The sample, although geographically diverse, is not representative of the dynamics of prevention in households with enrolled children. Future studies must adopt cohort-tracking designs and go beyond the division level, in order to obtain within-division heterogeneity.

7. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 For the Government of Punjab

The Punjab School Education Department ought to adopt a school rationalization program whereby the priority is to build and rebuild primary schools within the 1.5 km radius of all rural communities within under-served Union Councils in the Southern Punjab region. Infrastructure capital spending should focus on functional sanitation, boundary walls, and classroom capacity, which this study has shown are greatly related to educational retention. The teacher accountability measures need to be operationalized based on a clear community-based monitoring system and enforceable sanctions against absenteeism and corporal punishment- currently the second-strongest institutional predictor of child labor in this study.

7.2 Provision of School Transportation

Lack of school transportation proved to be a compounding barrier that works in conjunction with distance and safety issues. The Punjab government must scale up the current School Transportation Scheme to all divisions of Southern Punjab, with priority allocation to Union Councils where the distance to school is more than 2 km. and in which case where both accessibility and safety issues are to be considered simultaneously.

7.3 Social Protection and Income Supplementation

Since the second strongest predictor (OR = 3.44) was the parental income instability, educational interventions cannot be used independently without social protection measures. The connection between the Benazir Income Support Programme and school enrollment (BISP-Education Conditional Cash Transfer) need to be extended and adjusted to Southern Punjab household that are identified as at-risk. Notably, the amounts of cash transfers should be calibrated to local child wage rates in order to ensure that the economic incentive system is indeed geared towards school retention rather than labor market entry.

7.4 For Civil Society and International Organizations

The priority of ILO, UNICEF and domestic NGOs in Southern Punjab should be to have community based early warning programs to detect the children who are dropping out of school, using the penetration of mobile phones in the area as the basis of the early warning systems. The current community school models of Save the Children Pakistan and Idara-e-Taleem-o-Aagahi demonstrate cost-effective solutions to diminishing the distance barriers and need to be extended with multilateral funding to the three divisions examined.

7.5 For Researchers and Policy Evaluators

Future studies need to focus on bridging this measurement gap in unpaid female domestic labor that falls outside the definition of child labor but presents a substantively significant limitation to the accumulation of human capital, in girls, in Southern Punjab. Longitudinal panel data that includes school enrolment,

teacher quality and a household income dynamic would allow causal modelling with policy evaluation potential. The disaggregation at the district level in the three divisions in Southern Punjab would also allow geographic targeting of interventions.

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