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Prevalence of Emotional Problems among Child Laborers: An Investigation of Child Laborers of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

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ABSTRACT

Child labor is a prevailing problem in modern day society. Child laborers are required to undergo extensive work despite low wages and other legal issues. Child labor is associated with psychological, behavioral, emotional and social impact. Current study aimed at finding the prevalence of emotional problems among child laborers. Child Behavior Checklist was administered for the purpose on 100 child laborers selected through snowball sampling. The results indicated that withdrawn syndrome is positively related to anxious/ depressed syndrome and attention problems, similarly anxious/ depressed is positively related to attention problems. Age of the participants was not related to withdrawn syndrome, anxious/ depressed syndrome and attention problems. Boys did not significantly differ from girls on withdrawn syndrome, anxious/ depressed syndrome and attention problems.

Key Words: Child Labor, Emotional Problems, Withdrawn Syndrome, Anxious/ Depressed Syndrome, Attention Problems

Introduction

Children are fundamental to society's progress, embodying the pure and delicate essence of humanity. They require compassionate care and protection, and a society's growth and prosperity depend on the health, strength, and happiness of its children. A nation's true wealth and advancement are not measured solely by its military or economic power or by the grandeur of its cities, but by the holistic development and welfare of its people, especially its children. In line with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), Article 6 affirms that every child has the inherent right to life, and it calls upon state parties to ensure each child's development (Nandy et al., 2017).

Child labor refers to the employment of children below the minimum legal age. Although "work" typically denotes legitimate full- or part-time employment to support oneself or one's family, child labor poses a serious threat to a young person's emotional, social, educational, physical and creative development. Any youth engaged in work to help support their family risks falling into the trap of "child labor" (Tuttle, 2021). According to Pakistani law, the term child labor is used for employed children in areas not limited to agriculture, industry, or services, the employment is not only hazardous to their health, but also impacts their safety

and morals. Child labor interferes with education and development of the child laborer (Haq et al., 2024).

Child labor deprives children of their fundamental rights and negatively affects their education, mental health, and social development. The International Labour Organization (ILO) reports that child labor disrupts normal childhood growth and leads to long-term adverse consequences (Gulzar et al., 2009). Furthermore, economic hardships and the absence of social safety nets often drive children into the workforce, where they are exposed to physical and emotional exploitation.

In 1996, Pakistan's Federal Bureau of Statistics, in collaboration with the ILO, conducted a nationwide survey on child labor. The survey revealed that out of approximately 40 million children aged 5–14 in the country, the estimated number of child laborers is 3.3 million (8.3%), with majority of the child laborers are boys (73%). Punjab shares the largest proportion that is (58.6%) of child laborers of Pakistan lived in Punjab province, with the rest scattered across other provinces. Child labor prevailed more in rural areas as compared to urban areas. Child labor in rural areas is eight time higher as compared to urban areas. On average, around 46% of child laborers worked 35 hours per week, and a significant portion worked as many as 56 hours per week, nearly the same hours as adult workers (Zarif et al., 2013).

Pakistan has long struggled with the persistent problem of child labor. The causes of this issue are varied and complex. Although child labor in Pakistan contributes significantly to household incomes and the national economy, it remains a troubling aspect of society, with millions of children engaged in paid, unpaid, or underpaid work. A multitude of factors deeply rooted in Pakistan's complex socio-economic, political, linguistic, and demographic challenges contribute to the prevalence of child labor (Hussain & Kashif, 2013).

Employment data from 2005–2006 show distinct gender-based patterns in child labor. In urban areas, working boys primarily worked in wholesale and retail (37%), followed by the service sector (22%) and manufacturing (22%). In rural areas, boys most commonly worked in wholesale and retail (11%) and in manufacturing (11%) (Ali et al., 2022). During the same period, most working girls in urban areas were employed in the service industry (48%) and in manufacturing (39%). In rural areas, 11% of working girls were in wholesale and retail jobs, and another 11% in manufacturing roles (Khan et al., 2025).

Harsh working conditions can severely harm children's physical, social, and psychological well-being. One study in the Samanabad Town area of Lahore examined the mental health of children aged 5 to 14 working in hazardous environments. The researchers found that children working in hazardous environments faced increased psychological problems and stress. Education played a buffering role in reducing the stress of the child laborers. Furthermore, it highlighted that family pressure and unsafe work settings exacerbate the mental health problems faced by these child workers (Yasmeen et al., 2022).

Radfar and colleagues (2018) argued that child labor has a detrimental effect on children's overall well-being. Child labor has adverse impact on physical, intellectual, and emotional development of the child laborers. Ibrahim et al. (2019) highlighted the negative impact of child labor on physical health. According to Ibrahim and colleagues, children are more subjected to injuries, chronic pain, and long-term health problems if they continued to work in such environments. Studies have linked child labor to numerous adverse health outcomes, such as stunted growth, malnutrition, greater susceptibility to infectious diseases and other illnesses, as well as behavioral and emotional disorders and reduced coping abilities.

Child labor also significantly harms children's mental health. The harsh, exploitative conditions that child workers endure often lead to intense stress, anxiety, and depression. Long working

hours, physical abuse, and social isolation further erode their emotional well-being. Moreover, being denied education and opportunities for personal development contributes to feelings of hopelessness and low self-esteem (Sturrock, 2016). Research suggests that individuals who worked during childhood are more likely to exhibit symptoms of depression in adulthood. One study that accounted for genetic and maternal family factors found evidence supporting the hypothesis that working as a child is associated with an increased risk of developing depression later in life (Meyer et al., 2020).

Honeyman (2016) studied the psychological impact of child labor. According to him child labor impacted children's psychological health in a profound manner. Due to demanding and exploitative nature of the work, child laborers experienced higher levels of stress, anxiety and depression. He further added that due to constant pressure to perform and meet difficult expectations, child laborer felt inadequate and reduced self-esteem. Moreover, exposure to dangerous or abusive situations in the workplace can lead to psychological trauma, including symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (. In younger children, early emotional, behavioral, and social relationship problems cause distress to both the children and their families, undermine the foundation of healthy emotional and behavioral development, and can lead to long-term negative outcomes (Shonkoff, 2012).

It is well documented that child labor disrupted children's normal development. Children who work may experience dropping out of school, feel excluded from plays, and social interaction. The stunted growth hinders social and emotional growth of the child laborers. It is further argued that child laborers find it difficult to form healthy relationships and adapt well to society. These children may struggle with basic communication skills, problem-solving, and emotional regulation (Grootaert & Kanbur, 2008). Moreover, children with emotional, behavioral, and social relationship problems (often referred to as "mental health problems") experience significant distress, as do their families. Such children frequently exhibit difficulties in many areas, including social interactions, parent-child relationships, personal safety, school readiness, academic performance, and even long-term physical health (Pagliaccio et al., 2012). Children and adolescents in these circumstances often have trouble paying attention and may be hyperactive. In addition, many develop conduct disorders, manifested by antisocial behaviors that severely impair their functioning at home, at school, and in the community (Landrum, 2017). Previous studies suggest that children engaged in labor often suffer from depression, exhibit aggressive behavior, and experience peer relationship problems, which can hinder their long-term integration into society (Ibrahim et al., 2019).

There is a lack of quantitative research on the emotional problems of child laborers in Pakistan. Some prior studies have reported that child labor is associated with depression and emotional instability. However, it is necessary to examine these issues with statistical rigor, particularly in Pakistan, where socio-economic conditions differ significantly.

Method

Objectives

1. To investigate the nature and prevalence of emotional problems among child laborers
2. To investigate the relationship among different emotional problems among child laborers
3. To investigate the gender differences in emotional problems among child laborers

Hypotheses

1. There will be positive relationship among emotional problems among child laborers
2. Age will be negatively related to emotional problems among child laborers
3. Girls will experience higher levels of emotional problems as compared to boys.

Operational Definition of Variable

Emotional Problems

Aro et al. (2022) defined emotional problems as internalizing problems manifested by maladjusted emotional reactions. Emotional problems are characterized as withdrawn, depressed, anxious and somatic complains. In current research the emotional problems are assessed using CBCL subscale of internalizing problems that is further divided into three subscales anxious/depressed, withdrawn and attention problems.

Sample

The sample of the current study was accessed using snowball sampling. 100 boy and girl child laborers were approached for the purpose, with a mean age of 12.36 and a standard deviation of 2.20. The permission was taken from the parents or the guardians of the children for children age 12 or younger, whereas the forms were filled by their parents.

Instruments

Children Behavior Checklist

Urdu translation of The Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL; Syed et al., 2009). The scale comprised of three syndrome scores and eight subscales' scores. The Child Behaviour Checklist (CBCL) has response categories ranging from 'Not True' to 'Very True or Often True,' with score ranges that vary by subscale, typically from 0 to 2. The Children Behavior Checklist is designed to tap behavioral and emotional problems in children and adolescents. The scale consisted of eight subscales namely withdrawn, anxious/depressed, somatic complaints, social problems, thought problems, attention problem, rule-breaking behavior, and aggressive behavior. The scale has a reliability of .92.

Procedure

The data were collected from 100 child laborers both boys and girls. The sample was accessed through snowball sampling and permission for data collection was obtained from the parents and guardians of the child laborers. They were assured of privacy and confidentiality of the data. The questionnaire was filled by parents/guardians of the children younger than 12. The participants were thanked for their valuable contribution.

Results

The data were analyzed using SPSS, and descriptive and inferential statistics were computed for the data. t-test, correlations were run to test the hypotheses of the study.

Table 1

	1	2	3	4	M	SD
1. W	-	.386***	.348***	-.034	8.38	3.06
2. A/D		-	.532***	.122	13.53	3.80
3. At			-	.159	12.59	4.34
4. Age				-	12.36	2.20

Correlation between Withdrawn Syndrome, Anxious/ Depressed Syndrome and Attention Problems among Child Laborers (N=100)

Note. W = Withdrawn; A/D = Anxious/ Depressed; At = Attention.

p > .05 ***p < .001.

The result in above table indicated that age has no relationship with any of the variables. Withdrawn syndrome is positively related to both Anxious/ Depressed syndrome and Attention syndrome. Anxious/ Depressed syndrome is positively related to Attention syndrome.

Table 2

Mean comparison of Boys and Girls Laborers on Withdrawn, Anxious/ Depressed and Attention Problems (N=100)

Variables	Boys (n=58)		Girls (n=42)		t (98)	p	Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD			
W	8.28	3.26	8.52	2.78	.398	.691	-
A/D	13.48	3.62	13.60	4.08	.145	.885	-
At	12.46	4.42	12.76	4.28	.335	.738	-

Note. W = Withdrawn; A/D = Anxious/ Depressed; At = Attention.

The results in above table indicated that boys and girls do not differ in withdrawn, anxious/ depressed and attention problems. Although girls scored higher as compared to boys.

Discussion

Current study examined the emotional problems among child laborers. Child labor has detrimental impact on emotional and behavioral health of the children. For the purpose Urdu translation of the Child Behaviour Check List (Syed et al., 2009) was administered on a sample of 100 child labourers. The sample was approached through snowball sampling and parents were asked to fill the questionnaire for the child aged under 12 years.

Results revealed that withdrawn syndrome is positively related to anxious/ depressed syndrome. Psychogiou et al. (2024) reported that there is positive relationship between withdrawn syndrome and anxious/ depressed syndrome.

Results revealed that withdrawn syndrome is positively related to attention problems. The results are in line with previous researches. As Knepley et al. (2019) observed that attention problems and withdrawn syndrome is interrelated. Najmu ssaqib and Mushtaq (2023) also reported that there is positive relationship between withdrawn syndrome and attention problems.

Results revealed that anxious/ depressed syndrome is positively related to attention problems. Zhu et al. (2021) conducted a study and found that anxious depressed syndrome is related to attention problems.

Results also revealed that age has a no significant relationship with the anxious/depressed, withdrawn and attention problems. However, previous literature indicated that there is a negative relationship among the variables. Hosseini et al. (2022) studied the relationship among age, anxious/ depressed, withdrawn and attention problems

Results revealed no significant gender-based differences in anxious/depressed syndrome. Crockett et al. (2020) found that girls show higher levels of anxious, withdrawn and attention problems Sanchis-Sanchis et al 2020.

Conclusion

It is concluded that child labor is associated with emotional problems. Withdrawn syndrome, anxious/ depressed syndrome and attention problems are positively related to each other. Age was not related to any of the study variable. No gender-based differences were found with respect to study variables.

Limitation and Suggestions

Despite these promising findings, some limitations must be acknowledged. First, the use of self-reported measures may introduce bias. Secondly, the parents were approached to assess the emotional problems, that could not truly represent the children's true emotional problems. Additionally, the geographical limitation may impact the generalizability of findings across other regions.

Implications

The findings carry important practical implications. Understanding how child laborer experiences certain emotional problems. It is better to take practical step to reduce child labor by enforcing laws that protect children. Secondly, the practitioners may design therapeutic interventions designed at addressing emotional problems of child laborers.

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