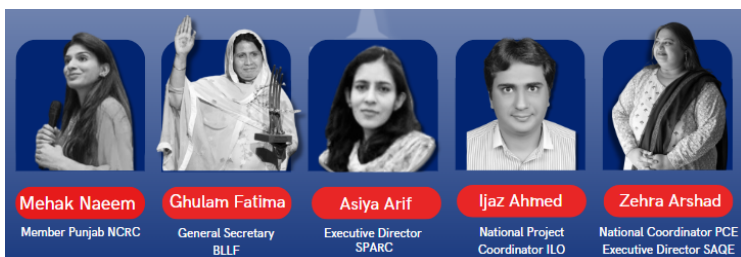


Executive Summary

The constitutional guarantee of free and compulsory education for every child between the ages of 5 to 16 remains largely unfulfilled as 26.2 million remain OOS[1]. On a similar note, child labor persists as a development and human rights issue and impedes the access to education. The first and only national level Child Labor Survey in Pakistan was conducted in 1996 and reported 3.3 million children trapped in child labor. Although, Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa conducted surveys to record child labor's status in 2020 and 2022 respectively; disparities in effective monitoring mechanisms hamper development of a clear picture. Data for children below the age of 10-14 years is unavailable, while a significant proportion of children under the age of 10 are trapped in child labor, especially bonded labor. The lack of recent statistics results in ineffective monitoring and prevention mechanisms for child labor. Moreover, widespread poverty is a major factor contributing to child labor and OOS children. Families in poverty prioritize immediate needs over education, which disproportionately impacts girls, pushing them into domestic labor, limiting access to learning and economic opportunities. This cycle of poverty, limited education, child labor, and GBV is hard to break, emphasizing the urgent need for comprehensive interventions that address child labor, gender disparity, and access to education holistically.



Key discussion points

- Ms Zehra Arshad, National Coordinator, Pakistan Coalition for Education (PCE) said that widespread poverty and decreasing public education financing exacerbate the dual challenge of child labor and OOS and is likely to worsen as inflationary pressures push more lower-economic households below poverty line. Parents will pull children OOS and into labor to make ends meet putting many children at risk of physical, sexual and psychological abuse.

- Ms Mehak Naeem, Member Punjab, National Commission on the Rights of Child (NCRC) said that inefficiencies in ensuring birth registration for every child causes data gaps and results in underreporting of issues such as child labor. Imparting skilled and technical education from early ages can increase employment possibilities and financial assistance can incentivize parents to retain children in schools. Prevention of child labor must be prioritized through legislative measures to protect children from hazardous risks, physical and sexual abuse
- Ms Asiya Arif, Executive Director, SPARC remarked that contradictions in definition of child in various legislations creates loopholes for issues like child labor to prevail which is augmented by weak law enforcement mechanisms in rural areas. child bonded labor is widespread in mining industries where children are physically and sexually abused without any repercussions.
- Syeda Ghulam Fatima, General Secretary, Bonded Labor Liberation Fund stressed that political will, policy continuity and strict monitoring of labor sectors by enhancing capacity and skills of labor inspectors is crucial for prevention of child labor. Policy continuity despite changes in governments is crucial to ensure that former child laborers are retained in schools and do not revert to their previous employments. Poverty is an underlying cause of the issue and nearly 20 million children are currently trapped in child labor. As poverty increases more children are at risk of being sold into child labor. In this regard, the provision of conditional financial assistance is also crucial to aid low-income families and reduce prevalence of child labor.
- Mr Ijaz Ahmed, National Project Coordinator for Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work in the Cotton Supply Chain – Rise for Impact, ILO Pakistan said that although conditional cash transfers provide essential relief, they often fail to create lasting behavior change among target communities and children revert to labor when the assistance stops. Effective prevention of child labor requires adoption of a holistic policies developed through comprehensive stakeholder consultations, community engagement and awareness regarding social protection initiatives for children and mothers in particular to retain children in schools.

Policy Recommendations

- **Skilled and technical education:** Implement programs introducing skilled and technical education from early age through public schools, particularly focusing on marginalized communities. Upskilling in schools can be a compelling incentive for parents to refrain from removing children from schools as it can pave a sustainable path for poverty graduation by increasing their employability after graduation.
- **Holistic approach for poverty alleviation:** Adopt a holistic and integrated approach for poverty alleviation by linking conditional cash transfers with skill-based education, providing market compatible technical skills for economic empowerment.
- **Education and reproductive awareness:** Integrate comprehensive reproductive health education in curriculum, emphasizing benefits of family planning and population control, particularly for youth and girls. This is crucial for instilling responsible decision-making and awareness, highlighting how family size and rapid population growth exacerbate social and environmental challenges, undermining access to basic needs.
- **Life skills and education:** Equip educational institutions, particularly in rural areas, to provide comprehensive training in basic life skills and fundamental rights awareness for both children and parents. This training should cover critical subjects such as sexual abuse and violence, as well as social and cultural biases. Empowering children to recognize and understand rights violations, structural biases, and injustices, can enable them to raise their voices, challenge detrimental behaviors and practices, and actively defend their rights.
- **Community engagement:** Increase comprehensive engagement with communities particularly in marginalized and rural areas focusing awareness on public social protection mechanisms and initiatives designed to provide quality education to children from lower economic backgrounds. This approach can ensure that these communities are informed and can fully benefit from available educational opportunities and support systems.
- **Birth Registration:** Enhance and rigorously enforce birth registration system across Pakistan to ensure comprehensive registration of all births. This initiative is essential for accurately assessing and monitoring the number of OOSC and instances of child labor, thereby facilitating implementation of effective and targeted interventions.
- **Standardization of Child Age Limits:** Standardize the definition of a child's age across all relevant legislations to eliminate loopholes and discrepancies that enable child labor and other forms of child abuse.



- **Data availability:** The government must prioritize completion of comprehensive Child Labor Survey across Pakistan to accurately ascertain current scale of the issue. It is essential to ensure that this data is regularly updated, consolidated and made accessible to public through government-owned data portals. Additionally, it should be mandatory for development partners, INGOs, and CSOs to submit their consolidated data, which should also be made publicly accessible.
- **Legislative prevention of child domestic labor:** Expedite approval and enactment of legislation unequivocally prohibiting employment of children in domestic labor. Strengthen enforcement mechanisms to ensure strict compliance with these laws and impose effective penalties on violators to safeguard the rights of children and ensuring their protection from exploitation and harmful labor practices.
- **Child labor reporting helpline:** The government should establish a national toll-free helpline dedicated to reporting cases of child labor in both domestic and industrial sectors to facilitate the immediate rescue and rehabilitation of victims, ensuring their protection and access to necessary support services.
- **Political will and Policy Continuity:** Establish mechanisms to ensure policy continuity and insulate initiatives addressing child labor from political changes and fluctuations in political will. This approach aims to institutionalize efforts against child labor, ensuring sustained protection and advocacy for children's rights irrespective of political circumstances.
- **Capacity building and training:** Address the shortage of human resources within labor inspection departments to enhance their effectiveness in combating child labor. Invest in comprehensive training and capacity building programs for officers to strengthen their skills in monitoring and preventing child labor practices effectively to ensure robust enforcement of labor laws and safeguard the rights of children across all sectors.