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WORKING CHILDHOODS AND SYSTEMIC NEGLECT: A CRITICAL SOCIAL WORK ANALYSIS OF CHILD LABOUR IN AUTOMOBILE WORKSHOPS

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Abstract

Child labour in informal economies remains a persistent child protection crisis in Pakistan, particularly within hazardous sectors such as automobile workshops. This article critically examines the protection issues faced by children working in automobile workshops in District Nowshera, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Using a qualitative and exploratory design, the study draws on in-depth interviews with sixteen working children aged 13–15 and nine key stakeholders, including social workers, child protection officials, and educators. The findings reveal that children are routinely exposed to physical dangers such as toxic chemicals, unsafe machinery, sharp tools, and excessive working hours, alongside pervasive psychosocial abuse, emotional neglect, and complete exclusion from formal education.

Beyond individual harm, the study highlights systemic institutional failures, including the absence of a functional Child Protection Unit in Nowshera, weak interdepartmental coordination, and largely reactive enforcement of child labour laws. Anchored in Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and a systems-based perspective on child protection, the article argues that hazardous child labour is sustained through the interaction of household poverty, cultural normalization of child work, informal labour practices, and governance deficits. The study reframes child labour not as an economic necessity but as a structural violation of children's rights, calling for integrated, preventive, and rights-based social work interventions that move beyond fragmented responses toward sustainable child protection.

1. INTRODUCTION

Child labour remains one of the most enduring manifestations of social inequality and governance failure in the Global South. Despite international conventions, constitutional guarantees, and national legislation, millions of children continue to engage in hazardous labour that compromises their health, development, and dignity. In Pakistan, child labour is deeply embedded within informal urban and peri-urban economies, where regulatory oversight is weak and social acceptance remains high. Automobile workshops represent a particularly dangerous yet socially normalized space of child labour, where children are exposed to occupational hazards under the guise of skill acquisition and economic contribution.

District Nowshera, located in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, offers a critical case for examining the intersection of poverty, cultural norms, and institutional fragility that sustains child labour. While provincial legislation such as the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Child Protection and Welfare Act (2010) provides a formal framework for safeguarding children, its implementation remains uneven and largely symbolic in districts lacking functional child protection units. In Nowshera, the absence of a dedicated Child Protection Unit, coupled with limited institutional coordination, has created an environment where child labour persists with minimal accountability. From a social work perspective, child labour in automobile workshops cannot be understood solely as an outcome of household poverty or parental neglect. Rather, it reflects a broader failure of child protection systems to translate legal commitments into lived protection. This article critically interrogates why existing child protection mechanisms remain ineffective in safeguarding children working in automobile workshops in District Nowshera. By foregrounding the voices of working children and institutional stakeholders, the study seeks to move beyond descriptive accounts and offers a structural critique of the socio-economic, cultural, and institutional conditions that reproduce hazardous child labour.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative and exploratory research design to examine child protection issues faced by children working in automobile workshops in District Nowshera. A qualitative approach was selected to capture the depth of lived experiences and to explore institutional dynamics surrounding child protection in an under-researched informal labour context. Purposive sampling was used to select twenty-five participants with direct relevance to the study: sixteen working children aged 13–15 and nine key stakeholders, including social workers, child protection officials, and educators. Data was collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, supported by non-participant observations of workshop environments to contextualize reported experiences. Ethical considerations, including informed consent, confidentiality, and child safeguarding, were strictly observed. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, enabling the identification of recurring patterns related to workplace hazards, psychosocial vulnerability, educational exclusion, and institutional failure. The analysis was iterative and theory-informed, allowing empirical findings to be interpreted through a critical social work lens.

Data Presentation, Analysis and Discussion:

The data revealed four interrelated thematic domains: hazardous working conditions, psychosocial vulnerability, educational exclusion, and institutional failure. Children described workshop environments characterized by constant exposure to physical danger. Tasks involving sharp tools, heavy machinery, toxic chemicals, and prolonged working hours were routine rather than exceptional. None of the children reported access to protective equipment or formal safety training. Injuries were normalized as part of learning, and illness was often ignored unless it became debilitating.

Beyond physical harm, the children's narratives highlighted pervasive psychosocial abuse. Verbal humiliation, shouting, and emotional neglect were common, often justified by employers as disciplinary methods. Fear, low self-esteem, and internalized helplessness emerged as recurring emotional states. Several children articulated a sense of inevitability about their situation, reflecting deep internalization of social hierarchies and limited future aspirations.

Educational exclusion was universal among the child participants. All were out of school, with many having dropped out at an early age due to poverty, migration, or perceived irrelevance of education. Work was presented by families as a practical alternative to schooling, reinforcing a cycle of limited opportunity and intergenerational vulnerability.

Institutional stakeholders acknowledged the prevalence of child labour in workshops but emphasized structural constraints. The absence of a Child Protection Unit in Nowshera, limited human and financial resources, and weak coordination among departments were identified as major barriers to effective intervention. Institutional responses were described as reactive, fragmented, and largely complaint-driven, leaving most child labour cases unaddressed.

The findings of this study underscore that child labour in automobile workshops is not merely a product of individual household poverty but the outcome of interacting systems of vulnerability. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory provides a useful framework for understanding how children's experiences are shaped by multiple, interconnected environments. At the microsystem level, family poverty and workplace exploitation directly expose children to harm. At the mesosystem level, weak linkages between families, schools, and protection institutions perpetuate educational exclusion. The ecosystem, represented by under-resourced social welfare and labour departments, indirectly but powerfully shapes children's lives through institutional absence. At the macrosystem level, cultural acceptance of child labour and weak enforcement of laws normalize exploitation.

Munro's systems-based perspective further illuminates how child protection failures arise from institutional design rather than individual incompetence. In Nowshera, child protection operates as a fragmented assemblage of offices without clear accountability or preventive orientation. The absence of a functional Child Protection Unit exemplifies how legal frameworks remain symbolic when institutional capacity is lacking. From a critical social work standpoint, these dynamics reveal a troubling disjuncture between rights discourse and practice. Children's labour is socially justified as skill development, masking systemic exploitation. Such normalization reflects what critical theorists describe as the moral accommodation of inequality, where structural violence is rendered invisible through cultural narratives of necessity.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that child protection failures in automobile workshops in District Nowshera are not accidental or isolated but structurally produced. The persistence of hazardous child labour reflects a convergence of poverty, cultural normalization, and institutional neglect that collectively undermines children's rights. Addressing this crisis requires moving beyond piecemeal enforcement toward a comprehensive reconfiguration of child protection systems.

The findings suggest that effective child protection must be preventive, integrated, and rights based. Establishing a functional Child Protection Unit in Nowshera is a necessary but insufficient step unless accompanied by strengthened interdepartmental coordination, community engagement, and social protection measures that reduce household dependence on child income. Social work practice must reclaim its critical mandate by challenging normalized exploitation and advocating for structural reforms that place children's dignity and development at the center of policy and practice. Ultimately, child labour in automobile workshops should be understood as a moral and political failure of governance rather than a private family matter. Reframing the issue in this way opens space for transformative social work interventions capable of disrupting cycles of exploitation and restoring childhood as a protected social category rather than an expendable economic resource.

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