CHILD LABOUR PATTERNS IN PAKISTAN AND ITS REGIONS/AREAS (2016–2022): EVIDENCE FROM MICS AND CHILD LABOUR SURVEYS

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Abstract
This research analyses the prevalence of child labour across various regions/areas of Pakistan. Using the internationally accepted MICS indicator PR.3 (children aged 5–17 classified as child labour (CL), this research collation and maps the best available region/province/area estimates, rural and urban, and wealth gradients, along with triangulation of Child Labour Surveys (CLS), as available (Punjab, Sindh, Baluchistan, KP, AJ&K, and GB. The results demonstrate extensive sub-national heterogeneity and confirm that child labour prevalence has not meaningfully changed over the last decade, with 8-17 per cent range in Pakistan, but significant sub-national disparities. Child labour estimates under respective MICS suggest the highest prevalence in Pakistan (Punjab 13.4, Sindh 10.4, Baluchistan 9.1, AJ&K 8.2 and the lowest in KPK 6.4 against CLS incidence of CL in Punjab and AJ&K 16.9, Gilgit-Baltistan, 13.1 Sindh 10.3, KPK 9.0, and the lowest in Baluchistan 3.7 but these averages mask rural vulnerabilities. All regions/provinces, particularly AJ&K, including lower socioeconomic and rural households, have a higher burden of CL. The principal sectoral areas of high risk are: Agriculture, Hotel Work, Brick Kilns, Informal Manufacturing, and Domestic Work. Awareness of methodological issues emphasises the need for caution in reporting on survey timing, coverage, and informal or seasonal labour underreporting. The aspects discussed in this paper pertain to methodological comparability issues across different MICS and CL surveys and years. The policy recommendations are aimed at the removal of barriers to rural education, provision of conditional cash transfers as a form of payment for schooling, targeted restriction of dangerous industries/industries deemed as unsafe (such as the brick kiln, debt bondage and hotel work, as well as domestic work) and proper and effective labour inspection. The results emphasize the need for evidence-based province-level policies that are geared towards fulfilling box 8.7.1 of the SDG 8.7 goals of Pakistan to eliminate Child Labour.

Introduction
In Pakistan, child labour is a deeply entrenched developmental and human rights concern which continues to be influenced by an amalgam of both global and domestic factors. According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO, 2021a), children in the world of work number some 160 million, a good part of whom are located in Asia and

the Pacific region. There are some national estimates which report that approximately 3.3 million children, representing about 8% of children in Pakistan, are active in some form of work. UNICEF and national estimates underline these figures in order to demonstrate the child protection situation in the country (UNICEF, 2025). ILO and UNICEF also report many millions of children in child labour from the South Asia region. Indeed, South Asia is by far the most concentrated region in the world for child labour and child work of a hazardous nature, and while some headway has been made, no country has managed to eradicate the practice in South Asia (ILO and UNICEF, 2024).

The elimination of child labor, an intricate, stringent, and stubborn challenge, still possesses an immense complexity in the case of Pakistan, deeply entrenched since its independence in 1947, particularly in the sectors of agriculture, small-scale industries (informal manufacturing), services (domestics, laundry, hotels, bricklaying, handicrafts, mining, street vendor, carpet weaving, etc.), and informal trade (Kazmi, 2015; Anjum at al., 2015; Govt. Sindh & UNICEF, 2019; Anwar et al., 2019; Jalil and Alam, 2022; Rehman, 2023; Maqbool, 2024). Both National and International documents and reports describe the existence of child labour/work in its non-hazardous and hazardous forms, with the more frequent of the worst forms including forced or bonded labour, alongside the commercial sexual exploitation of children, domestic work, and brick manufacturing (Zarif and Aziz-Un-Nisa, 2013; Edmond, 2015; Geoghegan, 2017; Khan et al; 2018; Baqi and Yousaf; 2019; Anwar et al., 2019; Ram et al, 2019; Moayad, et al., 202l; Maqbool et al, 2024).

Pakistan, at the international level, is obligated to adhere to key such instruments as the ILO Minimum Age Convention, 1973 (C. 138) and the ILO Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (C. 182). According to the 1973 constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, "no child under the age of 14 shall be employed in hazardous jobs" (Ali, 2010, Khan and Lyon, 2015; Khan et al., 2018; Ram et al., 2019; Maqbool et al., 2024). Pakistan is also a partner to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 1989), which requires the state to protect children from economic exploitation.

The gaps between ratification and implementation continue, particularly within hot spots like brick kilns, carpet weaving, and bonded labour, where international observers have persistently identified gaps The 'Stolen Childhood 2017' report of Save the Children, 2017 ranked Pakistan 148th out of 172 countries) and Pakistan is 8th in the top ten countries which have the highest number of out-of-school (OOS) children (Haq, 2016; Geoghegan, 2017; Jalil and Alam, 2022; Kamzi et al., 2024 & 2025a).

Polices and legislative frameworks at the national level include the 1973 Constitution, the Employment of Children Act, 1991, the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1992, the Punjab Domestic Workers Act, 2019, and provincial child labour policies, which were crafted in the wake of the 18th Constitutional Amendment (2010) that devolves labour regulation to the provinces. These policies, however, suffer from irregular implementation, which stems from the absence of social protection, school participation, and socio-economic factors of poverty along with contextual social norms of protection and low-capacity governance (Iqbal, 2011; Ahmed, et al., 2012; Anjam, et al., 2015; Nawab and Malik, 2018; Anwar et al., 2019; Khan et at., 2018; Ram et al., 2019; Abid et al., 2020, Rehman, 2023; Maqbool et al., 2024).

Although child labour may be different in nature and prevalence in different regions, there is a stark contrast within and between the regions and sub-regions within the Federating Units of Pakistan. For instance, within the child labour-infested regions in Punjab and Sindh, there is more child labour prevalent in the urban manufacturing and household work, whereas Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and Baluchistan predominantly rest on agriculture and the informal child labour market. The condition of Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJ&K) and Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) is different, as there is a lack of schooling or schools with missing facilities, and more rural employment is a contributing factor to the weakness (Nawab and Malik, 2018; Ram et al., 2019; Abid et al., 2021; Kazmi et al., 2023a&b; Maqbool et al., 2024; Kazmi et al., 2024; Kazmi et

al., 2025a). Much of the credible sub-national comparisons stem from the UNICEF-supported Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) as well as provincial Child Labour Surveys (CLS) currently being carried out in the regions/areas with ILO and UNICEF technical help. These sets of information are still crucial in assessing the progress of the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 8.7 to eliminate child labour in all its forms by 2025 (ILO, 2017 and 2020a&b). However, most of the little work on child labour is area-specific and thus rarely encompasses any regional/area comparison using a globally recognised data-gathering initiative like MICS and CLS.

The research study bridges this gap and identifies the provincial/areas' status regarding child albour in the country. It takes stock of the MICS6 2016–2022 and CLS 2016–2022 reports and analyzes these to: a) Illustrate the extent of child labour at the provincial/territorial level in a comparative manner; b) Determine the relative position of Regions/areas in comparison to other regions; and c) Examines the potential root causes and provide the policy suggestions to stop the growing scourge of child labour using an aligned multi-tiered approach to international obligations, domestic laws, and local implementation capacities.

2. Literature Review

Child labour (CL) is a profound violation of fundamental rights and the freedom of a child. It is an emerging phenomenon in Pakistan and is gaining an alarming proportion (ILO, 2013; Khan et al. 2018, ILO, 2021a&b; Gul et al. 2023; Rehman, 2023). The underlying child labour determinants are the overall socio-economic conditions of the country. As pointed out in the studies, numerous factors are attributed to child labour including school dropout and poverty, inadequate schools with missing facilities, lack of interest in education, high unemployment, illiteracy, overpopulation, economic conditions, level of education of mother/parents, family income, occupation of the family, and the decisions made by the parents. In addition, the CL causes including the socio-economic issues of a country are also in the stratosphere of child labour (Mahmood et al., 2005; Mukherjee & Das 2008; Abrar and Arslan, 2010; Ali, 2010; Akarro and Nathan, 2011; Iqbal et al., 2011; Rasheed et al., 2012; Sidiqi, 2013; Zarif and Aziz-un-Nisa, 2013; Edmonds, 2015; Khan et al., 2018; Ram et al., 2019; Thevenon & Edmonds, 2019); Abid et al., 2021; Gul et al., 2023; Rehman, 2023; Maqbool et al., 2024; Kazmi et al, 2025a).

In Pakistan, the constituent units exhibit wide disparities at the regional/sub-national level, in the extent and nature of child labour, and in both the magnitude and character of child labour. These disparities depict distinct socio-economic structures, urban-rural divides, and the capacity for policy implementation. Research also indicates that children participate in both formal and informal employment in areas such as brick kilns, agricultural activities, mining, carpet weaving, small manufacturing, surgical & sports goods, and domestic help work (Ali, 2010; Ahmed, et al., 2012; Zarif and Aziz-nun-Nisa 2013; Siddiqi 2013; Anjam et al., 2015; ILO 2017; Khan, et al. 2018; Ram et al. 2019; Abid et al 2021; ILO 2021 a&b; Jalil and Alam 2022; Gul et al. 2023; Maqbool et al. 2024; Hussain and Jaffar, 2025). Punjab is the most populous and the industrial center of Pakistan and hence, claims a significant share of the child labour employed in the country. In terms of reforms, as in the case of Punjab, the Punjab Prohibition of Child Labour at Brick Kilns Act (2016) and the Punjab Domestic Workers Act (2019) are steps forward, but their application is not uniform (UNICEF, 2019). In the Punjab province, although school enrollment ratios are higher than average, there are still poverty-stricken regions that remain sources of child agricultural and bonded labour (factories, mills (processing units) and brick kilns), mainly due to generational Poverty, illiterate parents, soaring unemployment, large family sizes, debt, a feudal system, family income and flexible child labour laws, along with critical economic circumstances and weak Labour law enforcement (Mukherjee & Das, 2008; Iqbal et al., 2011; Siddiqi, 2013; Anjam, et al., 2015; Ahmad et al., 2020; HRCP 2020; Abid et al., 2021; Gul et al. 2023; Maqbool et al. 2024, Kazmi et al., 2025a). Child labour is particularly prevalent in the province of Sindh, especially in urban centers such as Karachi and Hyderabad, where children are employed as street vendors, in garment workshops,

and as domestic servants (Zarif and Aziz-un-Nisa, 2013; ILO 1017; Ram, et al., 2019; HRCP 2020; Maqbool et al., 2024). Research attributes the issues of large family size, poor educational systems, low socio-economic status, family size and family income, debt, and uneducated family heads as the issues that are most relevant in pushing children in Karachi under the age of 15, into employment. The role of child labour is comparatively more associated with the cultivation of cotton, sugarcane and rice which is pervasive in the rural Sindh region and operates under the label of bonded and exploitative labour relations (Ali, 2010; Ibrar and Arsalan, 2010; Zarif and Aziz-un-Nisa, 2013; ILO 2017; UNICEF 2019; Khan et al. 2018; Ram et al. 2019; Gul et al. 2023; Maqbool et al. 2024). In Pakistan's Constitution 1973 under Article 11(3), a child under the age of 14 is not allowed to work in a municipality. There is a legal standard available in the Sindh Prohibition of Employment of Children Act (2017), which is like other legal tools of the region, lacks effective implementation, especially in the rural areas and the informal sector of the cities. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, child labour is fueled by lack of education, poverty, low earnings, the type of work people do, the size of the family, ill health, family income, and the education level of the parents. Children born to boundary-crossing migrants, refugees, and war victims in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and their internally displaced offspring became children of exploited labour through no fault of their own. A whole lot of children at work were engaged in dangerous occupations, and boys predominated in mining and street vending, whereas girls predominated in domestic servitude (Ali, 2010; Ahmed et al., 2012; Khan and Lyon 2015; ILO, 2017; Haq, 2016; Khan et al., 2018; Jalil and Alam, 2022; ILO, 2022).

Baluchistan, a federal region/province of Pakistan, tends to be demographically and geographically more isolated as compared to Punjab and Sindh. Therefore, its child labour ratio is quite different from these two regions. Due to its low population density, relative institutional neglect, socio-economic hindrances, political factors, coastal strip and vast territory, child labour is especially concentrated in herding of livestock, undeveloped agriculture, fishing, and borderland mining (Rashid, et al., 2012; Anwar et al., 2019; UNICEF, 2019; HRCP, 2020; Hussain and Jaffar, 2025). Baluchistan is also an educationally backward region, and therefore, many children work for local households as paid domestic helpers, farm labourers, and in other low-skilled occupations, especially in the more remote rural areas. School dropout rates are unreasonably high. The children (particularly, girls) are primarily expected to work (domestic sphere) due to inefficient and unproductive school systems failing to meet basic educational needs of children like in other regions/areas (Rashid et al., 2012; Khan et al., 2018; Anwar et al., 2019; Ram et al. 2019; Baqi and Yousaf, 2019; Ram et al. 2019; Kazmi et al., 2024; Maqbool, 2024; Hussain and Jaffar, 2025; Kazmi et al., 2025a).

A combination of these provincial and territorial trends serves to highlight the heterogeneity of child labour in Pakistan and its regions as determined by local economies, local enforcement capacities and socio-cultural factors (Ali, 2010; Khan et al., 2018; Alam, 2022; Ram et al., 2019; Abid et al., 2021; Gul, 2023; Maqbool et al., 2024). Still, AJ&K and GB have been left behind on several fronts. The literature has neglected these regions/areas (AJ&K & GB), and territory-based studies like the one at hand are needed to complete the picture at the national level (Abbassi et al., 2020; Nawab & Malik, 2018; Kazmi et al., 2023a&b; Kazmi et al., 2024; Kazmi et al., 2025a). While AJ&K MICS 2008 & 2020-21 and GB CLS 2022 & AJ&K 2024 refer to Child Labour in these areas, there is a dearth of literature focused on child labour in AJ&K and GB.

3 Methodology
Data Sources
International comparable sources can be either primary or secondary sources. The main data source is the UNICEF-sponsored Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS), specifically, round 6, and the last round in Pakistan that covers regions of provinces/territories during the years 2016 to 2022. Child labour survey (CLS) also recently held in some regions/areas including GB and AJ&K. MICS and CLS employ standardized modules on child labour using the SDG Indicator 8.7.1 definitions and the ILO statistical Framework (ILO, 2017;

UNICEF, 2019). These facilitate international and regional comparability on the population of working and non-working children. The Children aged 5 to 17 years are also heavily engaged in domestic chores, as well as working in dangerous settings (Ram et al., 2019; Abid et al., 2021; Alam, 2022; Gul, 2023; Maqbool et al., 2024).

Data and Methods
This research relies on internationally comparable surveys as well as the provincial and territorial MICS and Child Labour surveys to assess the extent and scope of child labour in the country and in its sub-regions.

CHILD LABOUR: NATIONWIDE AND PROVINCIAL REPORTS (MICS & CLS):
Since 2016, between 2018 and 2024, UNICEF actively helped some provinces and territories with the MICS 6 and CLS surveys, in which Punjab and Sindh were completed MICS in 2018 and 2019 respectively , KP in 2021, and Baluchistan in 2022 and AJ&K 2020-21. Most of these regions also engaged in CLS with technical assistance from UNICEF and the ILO, including Gilgit 2018-2019 and Punjab in 2019, Sindh and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) in 2022 and Baluchistan in 2023. These surveys offer comprehensive information regarding the time and length of work done in hazardous industries and their subsequent division by demographics. When evidence is sparse and data scarce, the AJ&K MICS (2020-21) offers the first systematic indicators of child labor which falls under the jurisdiction of SDG 8.7 monitoring (UNICEF, 2020) for the territory. Much meaningful CLS is yet not available for AJ&K, albeit the MICS dataset serves as the main empirical rationale, which is supported by qualitative studies about the vulnerabilities and coping strategies of the households (Nawab and Malik, 2018; Kazmi et al 2023a&b; Kazmi et al., 2024 and 2025a).

The methodology consists of two main parts: conducting a Comparative Analysis of provincial/territorial data sets on the prevalence of child labour (ages 5 - 17) using MICS and CLS data sets and the differentiation between 'working children' and below the PR.3 threshold of child labour (ILO, 2017) based on age-specific working

hours and forms of dangerously hazardous work. Random disaggregation along the variables of gender, area of residence, household wealth quintiles, and mother/parental education is done to portray socio-economic inequalities. Furthermore, the analysis outlines the comparative position of AJ&K regarding the prevalence and socio-economic correlates of child labour. Where possible, findings are triangulated with the qualitative research on post-disaster vulnerabilities, rural livelihoods, and education barriers (Nawab and Malik, 2018; Abassi et al., 2020; Kazmi et al., 2023a&b; Kazmi et al., 2024; Kazmi et al., 2025a&b). The results are placed in the context of Pakistan's commitments to the ILO Conventions (C.138 and C.182), the UN CRC (1989), and the SDG 8.7 framework (ILO, 2020a). The disparities within regions (Punjab, Sindh, KP, Baluchistan, GB, and AJ&K) in the context of the ability to achieve national and international objectives of child labour elimination have also been emphasized.

The limitation of the study is the delay of a specific Child Labour Survey on AJ&K while MICS on GB (not covering CL), which greatly confines the region's analysis. The comparability of the data is further constrained by the differences regarding the timing and the coverage of the surveys conducted in the various provinces and/or territories. The informal, seasonal, and migratory types of work, particularly in Baluchistan, KP, GB, and AJ&K, are likely underestimated in the household surveys. The MICS, CLS, and the secondary literature, notwithstanding these limitations, offer the most comprehensive and comparable evidence of the sub-national analysis of child labour across the various regions in Pakistan.

4. Results
According to the National Snapshot (2010–2024), Pakistan continues to exhibit a high burden of child labour at the national level, due to a very slow decline of some of its indicators. As ILO-UNICEF (2021) global statistics suggest, almost 12.5% of children between 5-17 years of age in Pakistan were engaged in child labour in the mid-2010s, which translates into millions of children at work. Pakistan Social and Living Standards Measurement Survey (PSLM), and subsequent rounds of MICS and CLS

show that the rates of child labour in the country are within the range of 7 to 14 per cent and 3.7 to 16.9 per cent respectively, albeit with considerable variance over time and definitional scope (PBS, 2020). Child labour is overwhelmingly concentrated in the Agricultural sector, with the highest national level of child labour. Over half of child labourers work in agriculture, and in addition, there is child labour in street vending and domestic work, as well as transport and small-scale industry such as brick-making, carpet weaving, sports and surgical goods, and other related industries (Siddiqi, 2013; Khan at 2028; Ram, 2019; Jalil & Alam, 2022; Ram, Rehman, 2023; Maqbool, 2024; Hussain and Jaffar, 2025). The analysis also reveals the presence of both Wealth and Regional Inequality within Pakistan. The pattern of child labour is disproportionately distributed among the poorest households and rural regions of Pakistan (ILO, 2017; HRCP, 2020).

Based on national data and statistics, there has always been strong wealth gradients, and the highest share of child labour in the bottom quintile is more than 28 per cent, as opposed to less than 4.3 per cent in the top quintile (Figure 3.1). The findings also indicate that the prevalence of child labour in Pakistan in the South Asia region is more than that in Sri Lanka (2%) but less than that in Afghanistan (25%) (ILO, 2021a). This positioning places Pakistan in the mid-range South Asia profile, with considerable progress to be made in order to achieve the pledges on SDG 8.7.

Estimates for MICS and CLS for years 2016-17 to 2023-24 are the `best available for the regions/areas listed in Tables 4.1 and 4.2. The Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS6), along with the Child Labour Surveys (CLS) conducted during the last one decade (2016 – 2024), are the most comprehensive surveys that describe the dynamics of child labour in the various provinces and regions of Pakistan. Child labour estimates, especially at the sub-national level, reflect the socio-economic status of the regions/area, the estimation methodology, and the coverage of the surveys. The provincial/areas MICS6 estimates given in the Table 4.1 display important regional/areas' urban & rural and gendered patterns in CL across Pakistan except GB, which under MICS skipped this component. In the KP MICS 2021 and AJ&K MICS for the year 2020-2021, child labour was recorded in 6.4% and 8.2% respectively of children aged between 5 and 17, which is aged for class PR.3. These values are lower than many other regions/areas, however, the urban-rural and inter-division differences are significant (GoKP and UNICEF, 2021; GoAJ&K and UNICEF, 2020-21).

| Table 4.1: Child Labour Prevalence (5–17 years) by Province/Area MICS6					
Region/Area	**Total (%)**	**Urban (%)**	**Rural (%)**	**Boys (%)**	**Girls (%)**	**Gender Gap**
Punjab	13.4	6.5	17.5	16.6	10.1	**6.5%**
Sindh	10.4	5.5	15.1	10.3	10.6	**-0.3%**
KP	6.4	3.8	6.8	6.5	6.2	**0.3%**
Baluchistan	9.1	6.7	9.9	9.8	8.2	**1.6%**
AJ&K	8.2	5.1	8.9	8.6	7.9	**0.7**
Source: MICS6 (Punjab 2017-18, Sindh 2018-19, AJ&K 2020-21, KP 2021, and Baluchistan 2022),						

In the Punjab MICS6 for the year 2017-2018, child labour was recorded among 13.4% of the children. The total prevalence reported for the Sindh MICS 2018-19 is 10.4, which, contrary to the 26% recorded in the last rounds of MICS, has reportedly decreased by 15.6% percentage points but stands almost 1.0 per point higher than Pakistan's average score of 9.5%. The Baluchistan MICS 2019-20 SFR estimates offer the initial estimates. Although prevalence appears to moderate (9.1%) in comparison to Punjab, the small sample sizes and access issues indicate that it must be interpreted more carefully (GoPunjab and UNICIF, 2018; UNICEF, 2021; Go Balochistan and UNICIF, 2022). Moreover, the Child Labour incidence occurred unevenly across different regions/areas.

There is also some intra-provincial heterogeneity, masking the variance and intra-provincial gaps, especially in the agricultural zones in the hinterland and the informal domain of the city. These totals also disguise sharper contrasts when the regional/area data are split by place of residence and gender. A comparative bar chart in Figure 4.1 shows the national and provincial/area prevalence of child labour (2016–2022). The KP and AJ&K region is represented as a short bar (blue) and is in proximity to the high density of bars to highlight its position relative to the other areas.

The Child Labour Survey (CLS) also provides PR.3 estimates CL prevalence CLS data of provincial/areas in Table 4.2, demonstrating the occurrence of Child labour incidence unevenly among the regions/territories of Pakistan. Both Punjab and AJ&K CLS observed the highest incidence of child labour, 16.9% of children aged between 5-17, surpassing the other regions/areas of Pakistan with vital gender disparities (GoPunjab, ILO and UNICEF, 2021; GoAJ&K, ILO and UNICEF, 2024). AJ&K has also visualizing the extent of child labour like Punjab (16.9%) but the formal dissemination is still awaited.

Fig: 4.1 Child Labour Prevalence (5–17 years) by Province/Area MICS6
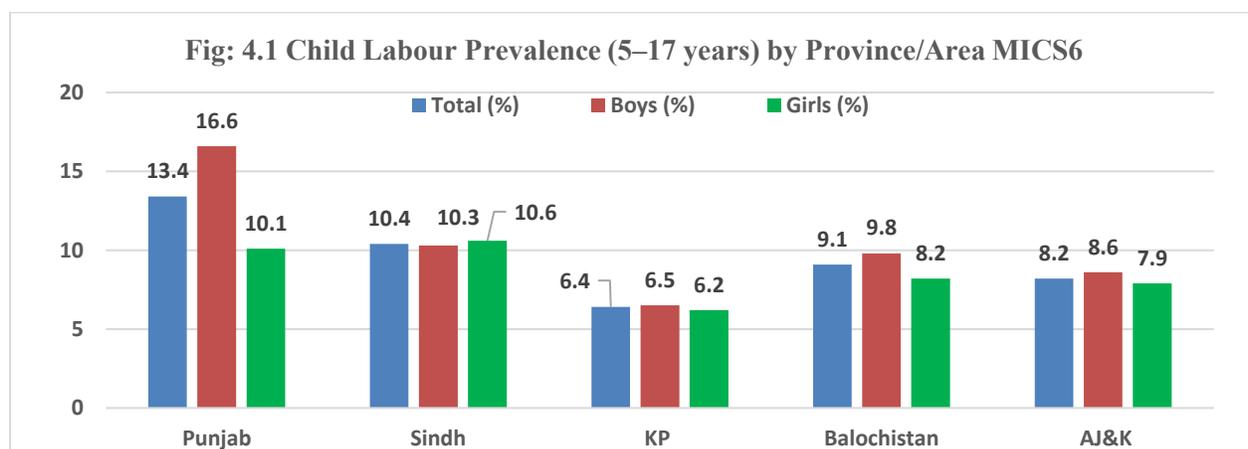
The GB CLS (2018-19) estimated the prevalence of CL at 13.1%, which is like in AJ&K overwhelmingly concentrated in rural areas, with the employment patterns being predominantly seasonal, linked to agriculture, livestock rearing, tourism and small trade (GoGilgit-Baltistan and UNICEF, 2022). The total incidence of child labour in Sindh under MICS is 10.4% while CLS 10.3%, indicating a uniformity in CL prevalence under both the surveys in the province (GoSindh and UNICEF, 2019; GoSindh and ILO, UNICEF, 2022). Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) Child Labour Survey (CLS) also provides PR.3 estimates CL prevalence at around 9.0% (GoKP, ILO & UNICEF 2022). The Baluchistan CLS estimates observe the initial score of 3.7% (GoBalochistan, ILO & UNICEF (2024)), indicating that the incidence of CL in Baluchistan is the lowest amongst the regions/areas, which may be emerging from small sample sizes and accessibility problems, stressing on interpret the Baluchistan CLS results as well AJ&K very carefully. Moreover, significant intra-regional differences among the provinces/areas disguise the variance and gaps within provinces, especially between rural agricultural areas and urban informal sectors (UNICEF, 2022).

Table 4.2: Child Labour (5–17 years) by Regions/Areas as Per CLS Data				
Region/Area	Total (%)	Boys (%)	Girls (%)	Gender Gap%
Punjab	16.9	21.8	11.5	10.3
Sindh	10.3	13.7	6.6	7.1
KP	9.0	11.7	5.9	5.8
Baluchistan	3.7	5.7	1.3	4.4
GB	13.1	13.6	12.5	1.1

AJ&K	16.9	21.0	12.6	8.4
Source: Child Labour Surveys of Punjab, Sindh, KP, Baluchistan, GB and AJ&K				

The bar chart Figure 4.2 compares child labour prevalence (%) across different regions/areas of Pakistan using two data sources: MICS (Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey) and CLS (Child Labour Survey). The percentages show how much child labour each survey recorded in each region, and the results differ noticeably across provinces/areas.

FIGURE 4.2 LABOUR IN REGIONS/ AREAS OF PAKISTAN AS PER MICS & CLS DATA
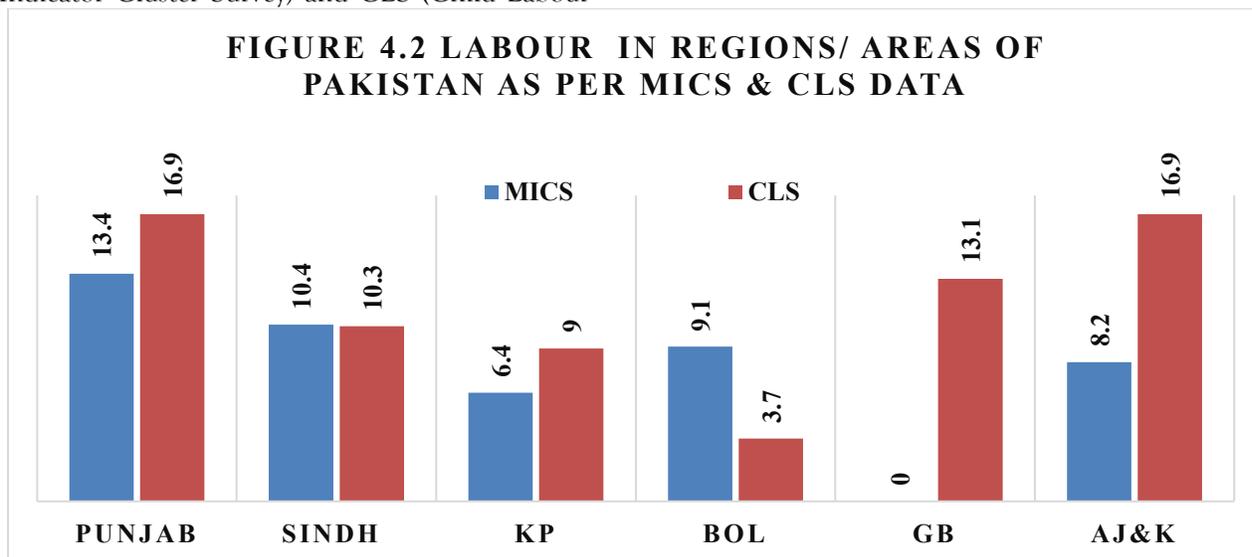
In Punjab, both surveys show relatively high child labour, with CLS (16.9%) reporting a higher rate than MICS (13.4%). Sindh under both datasets observe almost similar results (MICS 10.4% versus CLS 10.3%), indicating relatively stable estimates across surveys. KP (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) CLS reports a noticeably higher child labour rate of 9.0% than MICS 6.4%. Baluchistan witnesses the largest discrepancy in the dataset: MICS (9.1%) shows a much higher rate than CLS of 3.7%. Gilgit Baltistan (GB) skipping MICS relies on CLS, demonstrating a substantial 13.1% prevalence of child labour. Azad Jammu & Kashmir (AJ&K), CLS (16.9%) reports double the rate found in MICS (8.2%), again indicating major variation in estimates portrayed in the Figure 4.2. The difference in Baluchistan and AJ&K may arise from methodological issues, population coverage, accessibility or sampling approaches. The divergence between MICS6 and CLS estimates, especially in Balochistan, and AJ&K may arise from methodological issues, population coverage, accessibility or sampling approaches and also underscores the importance of methodological harmonization.

In an overall summary, Punjab, KP, GB, and AJ&K show higher child labour rates in CLS compared to MICS. Sindh is the only region where both surveys report nearly identical results. Boluchistan (Bol) is the opposite case—MICS shows much higher (> 2 folds) child labour than CLS. AJ&K is also observed a wide discrepancy in both surveys, as CLS shows much higher (>100%) child labour prevalence than MICS. These differences indicate that child labour estimates vary significantly depending on the survey source, likely due to methodological, sampling, or definition differences between MICS and CLS.

4.1. Stratification (Rural and Urban, Gender, and Socioeconomic Status (MICS)

The prevalence of child labour in rural areas, as reflected in Table 4.1 based on MICS6 data, is significantly higher, as exemplified by the rural child labour prevalence of Punjab in 2017 being 17.5% compared to the urban child labour prevalence of 6.5%, indicating an alarming gap of 11 percentage

points. In Sindh province, Child Labour also remains a significant and alarming concern, with the prevalence of CL rates differing sharply in its urban and rural vicinities. Rural areas account for 15.1% of the provincial CL share, while urban areas claim 5.5% of it, highlighting a substantial gap (9.6 percentage points) between the two areas. The Baluchistan and AJ&K regions are in a marginally better situation, reporting rural child labour prevalence rates of 9.9% and 8.9%, respectively,

against 6.7% and 5.1% CL rates in their urban areas, referring to 3.2 and 3.8, percentage point's urban-rural gap, respectively. KP shows the smallest rural–urban difference (3.0%), indicating a narrower divide between its urban (3.8%) and rural (6.8%) child labour prevalence in the province. It also observes the lowest incidence of child labour prevalence in regions/areas of Pakistan, which needs a careful interpretation due to sample size and accessibility in the merged districts.

Figure 4.3: Urban-Rural Child Labour Prevalence (5–17 years) by Province/Area MICS6
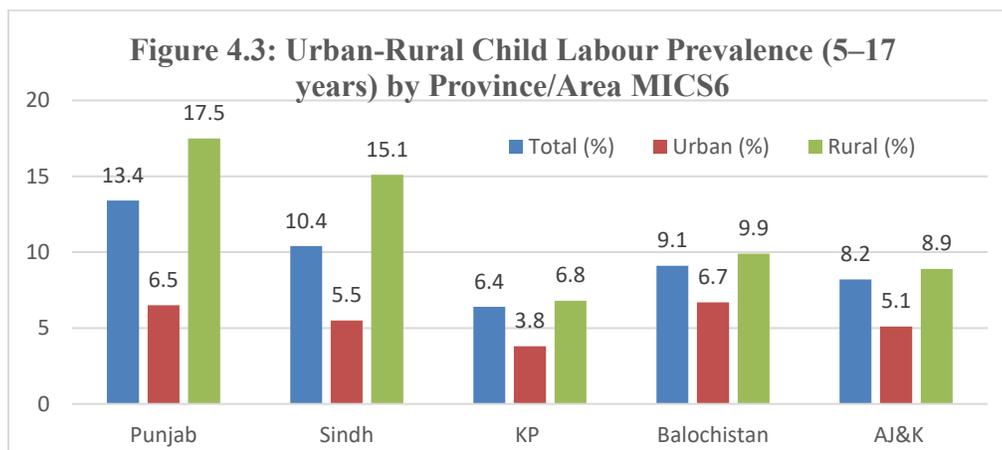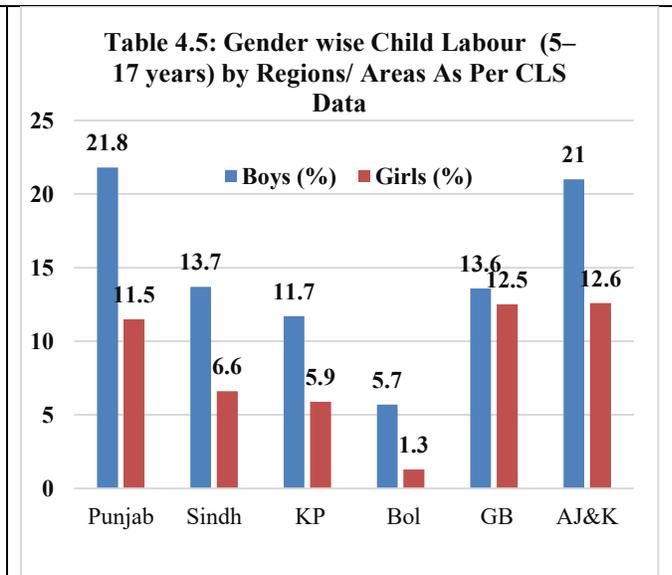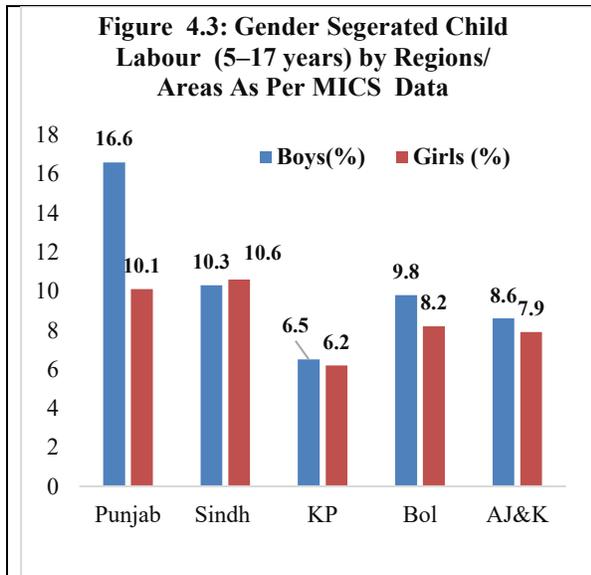
The Figure 4.3 compile from MICS data given in Table 4.1 also shows significant regional variation in the incidence of child labour across Pakistan, with a clear pattern in which rural areas consistently experience higher child labour rates than urban areas. With small bare, KP is the best performer in totality while AJ&K is next it to it. Punjab records one of the highest overall rates at driven largely by its rural incidence of 17.5% compared to only 6.4% in urban areas, exceptionally high rural child labour rate of 17.5% far exceeding the urban figure of 9.0%, making Punjab the province with the sharpest urban–rural divide.

Gender disaggregation for age-specific child labour activities shows that in most regions, there is a predominance of boys compared to Sindh, where the inverse holds true (Table 4.1 & Table 4.2 and Figure 4.4 & 4.5). The female participants in the economy are in the most undervalued forms, especially in household surveys where women's work is disproportionately classified as unpaid domestic work (ILO, 2017). At the national level, boys are more victims of child labour than girls, but

the magnitude of CL as per MICS6 varies by region/area. Punjab MICS6 demonstrates the widest gender gap of 6.5 percentage points with 16.6% CL for boys versus 10.1% CL for girls, which indicates a male-dominated participation, most probably in agricultural activities and manual work. Sindh in gender segregation is an exception where girls exceed the boys (10.6% versus 10.3%), observing a very small negative gap of 0.3 percentage points, which may refer to a higher incidence of domestic or home-based work for girls being recorded in the Sindh MICS6 survey. Baluchistan reports CL prevalence of 9.8% among boys against 8.2% for girls, while MICS6 AJ&K demonstrates CL for boys (8.6%) and for girls 7.9%. These two regions/areas therefore, exhibit relatively small male-biased gender gaps of 1.6 and 0.7 percentage points respectively. KP MICS 6 demonstrates Child Labour incidence rates of 6.5% among boys and 6.2% among girls, displaying the smallest gender gap of 0.3 percentage points in Pakistan, needing a carful interpretation due to sample size, likely

seasonal migration and accessibility issue in the province.

Figure 4.3: Gender Segerated Child Labour (5–17 years) by Regions/Areas As Per MICS Data

Table 4.5: Gender wise Child Labour (5–17 years) by Regions/ Areas As Per CLS Data

On the other hand, the CLS regional account portrays more clearly in Table 4.2 and Figure 4.5 with gender segregation in the regions/areas. Among regions/areas, Punjab observes the highest percentage of CL of 21.8% against 11.5% for girls, demonstrating the biggest male-preferring gender gap of 10.3% percentage points. Similarly AJ&K also gets the highest percentage of CL of 21.0 % against 12.6% for girls, demonstrating to the highest incidence of CL for girls and the 2nd biggest male-preferring gender gap of 8.4% percentage point. This indicates a male-dominated participation, most probably in agricultural activities, informal manufacturing and manual work. Sindh comes next with 13.7% CL for boys against 10.1% CL for girls, indicating a boys-favouring gender gap of 3.6 percentage points. It is followed by GB observing a CL of 13.6% for boys against 12.3% for girls, referring to 2nd highest incidence of CL for girls but the lowest male-preferring gender gap in the regions/areas of Pakistan. KP hosting CL for boys and girls, 11.7% and 5.9% respectively, demonstrating a 5.8 percentage point male-favouring gender gap. Baluchistan finds boys'

preferring gender gap in the prevalence of child labour for boys and girls, 5.7% and 1.3% respectively, exhibiting lowest incidence of the CL for girls in regions/areas of Pakistan but having 4.4 percentage points gender gap as shown in Table 4.2.

4.2 Gradients of Wealth

MICS6 provincial data reflected in the Figure 4.6 show a distinct wealth gradient within each of the regions with considerable differences among the wealth quintiles, especially between the poorest (highest 28.1% versus the lowest 9.3%) and the richest (the highest 4.3% against the lowest 1.6%), with an overall gap of 18.8% within the poorest segment and 2.7% among the richest inhabitants. The proportion of CL for the poorest quintile children is the highest in Punjab, 28.1% against 1.7% for the richest households, indicating a 26.4 percentage point (percentage points) gap. In Sindh, the 21.4% CL proportion for the poorest quintile households is in sharp contrast to 1.6%, the lowest in the regions/areas for children of the richest households, observing a gap of 19.8 percentage points.

Figure 4.6 Gradients of Wealth %
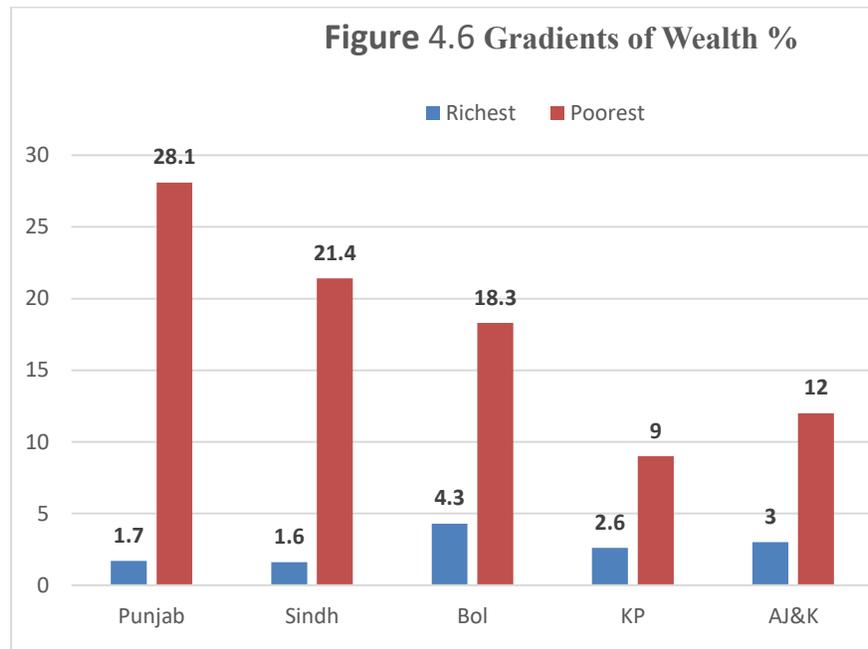
Baluchistan records the ratio of child labor among the poorest quintile children, 18.3% and that of the richest households, 4.3%. In AJ&JK, the ratio of child labour for the poorest and richest is 12% and 3% respectively. KP witnesses the ratio of child labour among the poorest quintile children, 9.0% (the lowest in the regions/areas) and that of the richest households, 2.6%, placing KP as the best achiever in the poorest quintiles, while Sindh province stands the best (1.6%) in the richest quintiles among the 5 regions/areas of Pakistan.

4.4 Gradients of Mother Education
The poorer regions of Pakistan report lower levels of educational attainment, which correlates with the lagging educational achievements of women at the provincial/area level that in turn correlates with the level at which children enter schooling and the incidence of child labour.

Table 4.3: Gradients of Education (Mother) from MICS6 (%)

Education	Punjab	Sindh	Baluchistan	KP	AJ&K
Pre-primary	19.9	13.4	9.5	7.1	10.4
Higher Secondary	1.9	1.6	5.2	1.4	5.3
Source: MICS6 (Punjab 2017-18, Sindh 2018-19, AJ&K 2020-21, KP 2021, Baluchistan, 2022)					

The participation of school-going children under 17 in CL at higher secondary levels sinks dramatically in all the provinces. 1.9% in Punjab, 1.6% Sindh and 1.4% KP are shadowed in comparatively dark waters of pure absence, while the soaring Baluchistan (5.2%) and AJ&K (5.3%) are basking in sunshine. The lack of progression to higher levels of education coincides with regions where mothers themselves are poorly educated.

Figure 4.7 : Gradients of Education (Mother) from MICS6 (%)
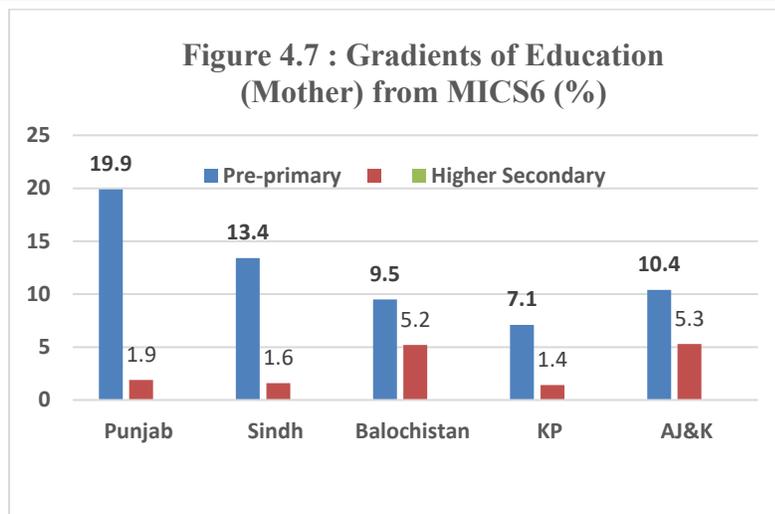
It is observed that when mothers are uneducated, the children, particularly boys, are more likely to abandon school to work and support the family, fueling the vicious cycle of child labour (Mukherjee & Das 2008). The information at hand unambiguously illustrates the association between low maternal education and the prominence of child labour. Inversely, the region where mothers are well educated has been found to invest significantly more in children's education and subsequently, in their active working age, less work is available. Education, particularly women's education, is thus highlighted as the main way to lower child labour and enhance education levels in Pakistan (Figure 4.7).

Sectoral concentration continues to show that in the rural areas, the predominant form of economic activity is agriculture, and in all the regions, the principal areas of precarious employment include brick kilns, informal manufacturing, street vending, surgical work, mining, and domestic work. The same applies to the mother's education, which constitutes a key factor in measuring the extent of child labour in the different regions. Studies show that among children aged 5-17, those whose mothers have no schooling or only attended the preschool level are far more likely to be engaged in child labour than those whose mothers have attained primary education and above (Khan et al., 2018; Anwar et al., 2019; Maqbool et al., 2024) This assessment suggests the presence of a strong inverse correlation between maternal education and the

prevalence of child labour — the higher the level of education of a mother is, the more she is likely to reduce child labour. This relationship is evidently captured in the figures shown in Table 4.3 and the corresponding graph (Figure 4.6).

5. Discussion
5.1 Cross-Province Differences.

When comparing different regions in Pakistan, there is a clear indication of a critical problem with child labour in the country. In the last decade, it was reported under MICS6 that the child labour rate in the country was around 8-14% (ILO, 2021; PBS, 2020). MICS-6 survey pinpoints the child labour rate in the province of Punjab at 13.4%, the highest reported incidence of CL followed by Baluchistan 9.1%, and AJ&K (8.2%). KP (6.4%) stands the lowest rates in the last reported rounds. Sindh is in the middle of this range at 10.4%, which is slightly lower than the reported mean for the country (UNICEF, 2019; UNICEF, 2020a &b; GoKP, ILO and UNICEF, 2022).

On the other hand, the CLS reports Punjab and AJ&K having the highest incidence of CL (16.9%) in both the regions/areas with a striking discrepancy of 3.5 and 8.3 percentage points respectively. Sindh is almost retaining its standing with 10.4% under MICS and 10.3% in CLS while KP and Baluchistan shows a vital discrepancy in both the surveys in the provinces.

The differences between provinces/regions result from the interplay of multiple structural factors.

Within the Socio-Economic setting, Punjab remains, the risk of child labour increases due to the increased prevalence of child labour in the province as a consequence of its high agricultural based economy as well as a high density of informal industrial labour (brick kilns, sports/surgical goods, textiles) (Siddiqi, 2013; Anjum et al., 2015; HRCP 2020; UNICEF, 2015). The child labour problem in Sindh is more pronounced in the rural (cotton, sugar cane) as well as the informal urban (domestic, petty trades) sectors (Zarif and Aziz-un-Nisa, 2013; Ram, et al., 2019; Maqbool, 2024). The economy of KP, along with its mountainous topography, predisposes its population to migration, together with the seasonal and gendered labour conditions (Ali, 2010; Ahmed et al., 2012; ILO, 2017; Khan et al., 2018; Jalil and Alam, 2022). The case of AJ&K is unique, given its relatively low figures (8.2%), which in part is due to the high inflows of migration and remittances that enhance household income and reduce child labour dependency (Nawab and Malik 2018). However, CLS is too high 16.9% as of Punjab, which may be due to the differences in the Surveys timing together with sampling, coverage, etc. It may also be as a result of low schooling completion, missing schooling facilities in schools, and direct targeted recurrent violence, such as firing on the LOC, along with floods and earthquakes wherein subsistence agriculture are the worst affected (Kazmi et al., 2024 and 2025a).

Based on the GB CLS report (GoGilgit-Baltistan, ILO and UNICEF, 2022) and field studies undertaken by the HRCP (2020), the main source estimates are the result of a modelling process and do not genuinely capture the ratio of children engaged in labour across various sectors. The modelling estimates the ratio of child labour in agriculture, mining, and home service to the total estimated child labour in all sectors. The ease of estimating child labour, in this case, is due to the overall lack of data. The estimates for GB region, the 'Great Baluchistan Polycentric Region', the Baluchistan province, and the province of KP are all relatively high, just reflecting the ease of estimating regionally rather than region-specific precisions, which primarily depend on field studies and modelling (Walker et al., 2020).

Completing the models rests on values which are extracted from available data. Consequently, if the data is scarce or inflexible, the values become estimates which are each region's weighted contribution to the total estimate. This is the case for child labour on a macro, even borderless level. The disparity is, for now, calculable at a region level. Baluchistan and GB are estimated to have 21 million children, and KP is estimated to have 10 million children, of which 30% or even 40% are thought to be child labourers (Khan et al., 2018; Jalil and Alam, 2022; Gul at al., 2023; Hussain and Jaffar, 2025). These estimates lean heavily on the postulation of minimal data, and do not reflect any regional, socio-demographic, or historical contexts, nor the observed data extrapolated by modelling and field work. Although such estimates are currently the best available approximations, yet the parameters set by the estimates are arguably too simplistic and border on reductionism. Nonetheless, even as approximations, these set the benchmark for the potential that remains in regionally collecting empirical evidence to driven data which, even in less concealed regions, remains relatively scarce.

With Regard to Wealth and Education Disparities:

Global trends have shown (ILO, 2021 a&b) poor families and rural populations sustains much higher incidence. For instance, in Table 4.1 (MICS6 provincial/area data) regarding Punjab in the poorest households' quintile, child labour was 28.1 percent and in the richest households was 1.7 percent. In Sindh, the poorest quintile households 21.4% children participated in child labour in comparison to 1.6% in the richest quintile. In Baluchistan, the poorest quintile of children that are active in child labour is 18.3% compared to 4.3% in the richest households. In AJ&K the poorest households have 12% of the child labour and in the richest quintile they have 3%. In KP, the poorest quintile have 9.3% child labour compared to the richest quintile of 2.6% children. These disparities suggest child labour in Pakistan is not a uniform phenomenon, rather it is province determined by the economies and the educational infrastructure and the coverage of social protection.

Moreover, the educational background of parents also has a pivotal influence on the prevalence of child labour within the 5-17 age group. By MICS6 results, child labour is more prevalent with illiterate mothers compared to mothers with advanced education, while much of child labour occurs with mothers lacking any form of education (pre-primary schooling or primary schooling).

6. Policy Implications

The collection of evidence suggests that the policy framework needs to be tailored to the specific context of the region while sustaining the broader international obligations that Pakistan has under the ILO Conventions C.138, C.182, the UN CRC of 1989, and SDG 8.7. Outreach programs aimed at lowering the cost of education and school, such as enhancing available educational resources, increase the effectiveness of child labour policy frameworks at the provincial and regional levels. MICS and CLS data suggest that there is a strong correlation between the risk of child labour and the prevalence of children who are school-aged and out of school. Interventions should priorities rural schooling access, livelihood support for families, and enforcement of child-labour regulations in rural economies. Punjab and Sindh warrant particular attention due to their high rural rates; Punjab additionally needs gender-sensitive responses to address the large boy-dominated prevalence, while Sindh's near-parity calls for interventions targeting both boys and girls (including recognition of hidden domestic work). KP's comparatively low and balanced figures indicate lessons in targeted programming and enforcement that might be studied and adapted elsewhere. AJ&K also need special interventions targeting both boys and girls to mitigate the incidence of child labour, universally harming both the boys and the girls

Equal access to school in the triggered regions, particularly in rural areas with lower service districts (Kazmi et al., 2024 and 2025 a&b), should be accompanied by a greater focus on improving accessibility to schooling - more teachers, better transport, lower cost uniforms, etc. Selected social protection with conditional cash transfers could be fundamental in alleviating the child problem in Pakistan and in the regions/areas within it (Kazmi

et al., 2025a). Cash transfers, for example, through the Waseela-e-Taleem programme of BISP (2017), can also help to reduce the reliance on child household labour by making school attendance a requirement. The expansion of such programming in high-prevalence provinces, particularly in Punjab, AJ&K and GB, can generate significant benefits. The formalization and sectoral enforcement are also critical in addressing the increasing child labour violations regionally and locally. Specific attention needs to be focused on the unchecked and unregulated hazardous work in brick kilns, mining, and domestic servitude. Greater attention needs to be paid to the enforcement of the Employment of Children Act (1991) and the corresponding provincial legislation. The formal pathways of family vocalization with some vulnerable families also need to be unblocked. It has also been recognised that the planning of child labour prevailing in the region and province/areas requires enhanced labour inspection with enforcement and data (Khan et al. 2018; Ram et al. 2019; Jalil and Alam, 2022; Gul, et al., 2023; Maqbool, et al., 2024; Hussain and Jaffar, 2025).

The results of the provincial/area MICS/CLS must be integrated systematically into the development planning of regions/areas so that planning and implementation may be based on evidence. Labour inspections are overly underfunded; there is a need for increased capacity as well as increased transparency (HRCP, 2020). Apart from the above, since AJ&K is less diffuse but has endemic weaknesses, it needs specific AJ&K strategies. The strategies which will be employed include the expansion of disaster-resilient rural livelihood school, rural disaster related, and covert domestic/agricultural labour surveillance (Kazmi et al. 2023a & b; Kazmi et al. 2024).

6. Conclusion

The objective of this paper has been to analyze child labour with respect to the provinces, territories of Pakistan, and harmonized MICS6, including Azad Jammu and Kashmir, as well as the latest Child Labour Surveys conducted in various areas. Three points can be highlighted. The first is that child labor in Pakistan and its able regions remains a significant and pervasive issue. Approximately 8 to

14 per cent of children aged 5 to 17 years are captured by MICS and 4 to 17 per cent by CLS using the PR.3 definition. The second is the considerable disparity in sub-national heterogeneity. The most recent estimates in the region are the highest in Punjab and Gilgit Baltistan, and Sindh and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa are in the lower middle tier except AJ&K having the most recent low as well as the highest prevalence estimates. The third is that child labour is highly socially and spatially patterned. Its high prevalence is invariably associated with rural areas, poverty, low parental education, and a cluster of activities in agriculture, brick kilns, informal manufacturing, street vending, and domestic service (Saddiqi, 2013; Anwar et al, 2019; Gul, et al., 201; Jalil and Alam, 2022; Rehaman, 2023; Maqbool, et al., 2024; Hussain and Jaffar, 2025).

The acute prevalence of remittance inflows, coupled with relatively high household incomes among certain subsections in the region, suggests a lower dependency on children to work. However, the level of overlooking the multitude of rural and disaster-risk areas, as noted by Kazmi et al. (2023 a&b), is disquieting. Further, the absence of the seasonal and informal, under-represented, as well as household surveys, casts no light on the territory, thereby creating a void of granularity. The echoes of the more generalized methodological discourse arising out of these warnings are the most salient. The differences in the timing of the surveys, along with the sampling, coverage and ranking on a strict basis on all the outlined units, is difficult to achieve. Although further investments in PR.3 use, along with standardized measures, strong documentation, and clarity in sample sizes, are all required in regards to the hard-to-reach areas, the PR.3 use is enhancing the comparability. There are clear consequences of public policy. The obligations of Pakistan with respect to the ILO Conventions C.138 and C.182, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the SDGs target 8.7 can only be satisfied by means of province-specific strategies. The pillars are increasing access to schooling in any one of the remote, rural, and underserved communities, addressing the missing facilities in schools, decreasing the relative price of schooling, and protecting the 'school-to-skills-and-work'

transitions of adolescents. Social protection in the form of conditional cash transfers and fee relief can break the nexus of poverty that compels children to work. The Protective Employment Policy, for example, in sensitive industries, needs to be sensitive to the level of regulation, the more resource-demanding the level of regulation, the more responsive the regulation, self-sustained inspections, and the more plausible the deterrence penalties. The associating formalisation of vulnerable value chains, such as brick kilns, with registration and other worker benefits. At the same time, the MICS and CLS evidence can improve the targeting and accountability of the levels of the interventions when used routinely in district level planning.

Moreover, there is a need for an active plan. AJ&K though has an independent Child Labour Survey but needs more comprehensive efforts to ascertain real burden of child labour (MICS 8.6% versus CLS 16.9%) in the state, which should include migration, domestic work, and the impact of disasters. Annually updated administrative dashboards that integrate labour inspection data, school attendance figures, and local poverty indicators would be valuable to all units. By measuring and enforcing protection alongside sectoral risks, Pakistan should be able to sustain the elimination of child labour through equitable, region-balanced, long-term policies.

In short, the Child labour has been and continues to be a monumental issue that Pakistan struggles to surmount. Addressing this issue requires comprehensive solutions such as strengthening the legislation, enforcing laws, ensuring high-quality education, better monitoring, engaging NGOs and international organisations and incorporating best practices from other countries. It also requires a proper understanding of the underlying socio-economic problems that the country and its regions/areas are facing that inevitably lead to child labour. By developing and implementing the aforementioned solutions, Pakistan can work towards eradicating child labour. Nevertheless, one must acknowledge the difficulty of implementing these solutions in the short-term future. Thus, Pakistan along with its regions/areas must work to develop a long-term strategy to curb child labour, as

it involves a variety of decisions to be made at different levels of the state bureaucracy.

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