

## EXPLORING PSYCHOLOGICAL AND PHYSICAL ABUSE IN CHILDREN WORKING AS LABORERS IN MECHANIC WORKSHOPS IN PAKISTAN

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### Abstract

**Background.** Child labor in Pakistan's informal automobile mechanic workshops remains a critical human rights concern. This qualitative study examined the lived experiences of seven child laborers (ages 13-17) in Islamabad and Rawalpindi.

**Method.** Using a qualitative approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted and analyzed through reflexive thematic analysis. The study was guided by interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) grounded in constructivist epistemology and a rights-based approach.

**Results.** Five primary themes emerged: (1) economic compulsion as entry driver; (2) interrupted education and foreclosed futures; (3) physical hazards and absent safety protections; (4) psychological harm through systematic abuse; and (5) social isolation despite adaptive resilience. Children uniformly attributed labor entry to family economic collapse rather than choice, with injuries normalized and specific aspirations systematically foreclosed.

**Conclusion.** Findings demonstrate that child labor emerges from structural poverty and family disintegration, not individual deficiency. Effective intervention requires simultaneous, coordinated action across poverty reduction, education access, mental health support, and enforcement reform, combined with the amplification of children's own voices.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Child labor affects approximately 160 million children globally, with South Asia bearing a disproportionate burden (ILO & UNICEF, 2021). Pakistan ranks among the most affected nations: 13.7% of children aged 10-17 engage in child labor, with 5.4% in hazardous work (USDOL, 2023). Within Pakistan's informal economy, automobile mechanic workshops represent particularly hazardous environments where children (typically 8-17 years) encounter toxic chemicals, heavy machinery, noise, and extreme temperatures alongside systematic psychological abuse through humiliation and intimidation (Khan et al., 2020; ILO, 2022).

The ustad-apprentice system culturally normalized vocational training frequently operates as labor coercion wherein power imbalances render children susceptible to multidimensional abuse (Khan et al., 2020). Despite Pakistan's ratification of international child protection conventions and enactment of provincial legislation, implementation remains critically weak, particularly in the informal sector, due to limited enforcement resources, corruption, and pervasive poverty (USDOL, 2022, 2023).

Despite the prevalence of child labor in mechanic workshops, how children themselves

perceive and make meaning of abuse remains underexplored. Existing research employs primarily quantitative approaches, which, while documenting prevalence and health outcomes, provide limited insight into children's subjective worlds, emotions, interpretations, and resilience. This qualitative study addresses this gap by examining the lived experiences of child laborers in Islamabad and Rawalpindi, privileging children's voices to understand how they experience and interpret psychological and physical abuse within workshop contexts.

**Method Research Design**

This qualitative study employed interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), grounded in constructivist epistemology, recognizing that knowledge is co-constructed through researcher-participant interaction within specific social contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study was additionally guided by a rights-based approach

aligned with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), ensuring the research environment prioritized privacy, trust, trauma-informed practice, and ethical protection.

**Sample and Selection Criteria**

Fieldwork was conducted in automobile mechanic workshops across Islamabad and Rawalpindi. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling targeting information-rich cases. Inclusion criteria were: (a) age 8-17 years; (b) active engagement as laborer/apprentice in a mechanic workshop; (c) capacity for informed assent. Ten interviews were conducted; this report presents seven participants (ages 13-17,  $M=15.0$ ,  $SD=1.5$ ; work tenure 0.5-5 years,  $M=2.6$ ,  $SD=1.4$ ) exemplifying the full spectrum of experiences. All participants had experienced significant family disruption (death, imprisonment, absence of primary breadwinner).

**Table 1**  
**Demographic Characteristics of the Participants**

Name	Age	Origin	Years Working
UK	16	Mansehra	5
AR	17	Rahim Yar Khan	3
MZ	17	Rawalpindi	3
SI	13	Shikarpur	2.5
HK	16	Lucky Marwat	3
AA	14	Nowshera	0.5
UR	13	Jhelum	1.5

**Design and Procedure**

Semi-structured interviews (40-75 minutes) were conducted in participants' preferred language (Urdu/Pashto) in private settings. Interviews progressed from least to most sensitive topics following trauma-informed principles. Data management, transcription, and analysis followed rigorous procedural tracks:

**Transcription and Analysis:** All the interviews that were audio-recorded were transcribed word-for-word within 48 hours. The transcripts were first done in the language used during the

interview (Urdu or Pashto) and then translated into English by bilingual members of the research team. All transcripts were checked on quality by cross-reference of a randomly selected 20% by the original audio recordings. At this point, all transcripts were coded anonymously, and the names of participants were substituted with a coded identifier (CL-01 to CL-07). No names, name of workshop, or any other location information is identified none of this is found in any transcript or analytic record. **Data Analysis Strategy:** Analysis followed reflexive thematic

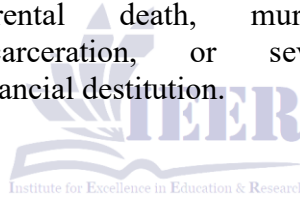
analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022): immersive familiarization, initial line-by-line coding, theme generation integrating inductive and deductive codes, theme review and refinement, and analytical narrative development supported by verbatim quotations.

**Trustworthiness:** The validity of the results was covered by the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability as defined by Lincoln and Guba (1985). The credibility was supported by the long-term involvement with the field during the data collection process; triangulation of the child participant dataset by reading the accounts of the age subgroups and work tenure time with the data;

and member-checking, where initial thematic summaries were presented to a child rights practitioner and a psychologist working with child laborers, whose feedback was provided to refine the analytical frame. This will be facilitated by providing a thick description (Geertz, 1973) of the research context, participants and setting so that the readers can determine the applicability of findings to other settings. The issue of dependability was taken care of by maintaining a detailed methodological audit trail. Confirmability so that the findings are the own meanings of the participants and not projected by the researcher was ensured by systematic reflexivity practices and by basing each theme on word-to-word participant quotations.

Table 2  
Codes, Subthemes and Themes Extracted from the Interviews

Code	Subtheme	Major Theme
<p><i>"Bas ghar ki majbooriyan thi. Chhota tha aur phir is field mein aana para... Abu mar gaye. Chhoti behnon ki zimmedari aa gayi"</i> (UK)</p> <p><i>"Yeh mere walid sahib ne mujhe yahan pe bhej diya tha kyunke woh meri parhai ki fees ada nahi kar sakte the... halaat bohat kharab hain."</i> (AR)</p> <p><i>"Baap qatl ho gaye the, akla beta hai... Ammi ko saara kharch bhejta hai."</i> (SI)</p> <p><i>"Mera abu thore nashe wagera karte the, sharab wagera bhi piya karte the... jab woh ghar aaya karte the to unka rawayya meri maa ke sath bhi theek nahi hota tha... maar peet bhi karte the... ghar se bhaag ke aaya."</i> (HK)</p> <p><i>"Meri wajah thi ghar ke halaat the... mere abbu ne qatl kiye the to jail mein</i></p>	<p>Forced entry into labor due to parental death, murder, incarceration, or severe financial destitution.</p>	<p>Economic Compulsion</p>



*chale gaye. Ab ghar ka kharch uthana tha."(AA)*  
*"Meri ammi jab main das saal ka tha to woh wafaat paa gayi thi... abbu ne doosri shaadi kar li thi... doosri ammi bilkul achi nahi thi... mere aur mere bhaion ko marti thi. Woh ghar ko sambhalna tha." (UR)*

*"Main ne school jaana chhor diya tha... Kis ka dil nahi karta ke woh school jaye, lekin paisay ne maar diya... Abhi bhi meri umar school wali hai." (Aspiration: Military Service/Army) (UK)*

*"School jaata tha, chhor diya... Main pehle parhta, engineering karta phir kisi achi company mein jaata... Bohat dil karta hai, lekin majboori hai." (Aspiration: Engineering) (AR)*

*"School kyun chhora aap ne? Maali halaat thore theek nahi thay... Main fauji banna chahta tha... Ab to nahi. Ab hum is kaam mein aa gaye hain." (Aspiration: Military Service) (MZ)*

*"Main satwin jamaat tak hi parh raha hoon, to school jab jaya karta tha to doston ke sath hota tha... mera bohat shoq tha ke main cricketer banoon, apni Pakistan team ke liye khelta." (Aspiration: Professional Cricket) (HK)*

*"Main paanchvi tak [parha]... mera hafiz asal mein reh gaya, main woh mukammal karunga... Mujhe khud bohat shoq tha." (Aspiration: Islamic)*

Foreclosed future possibilities (cricket, teaching, military service), early withdrawal from formal education (grades 5-8) and the tension between personal aspirations and structural constraints. Interrupted Education



*Education / Hifz completion)*

*(AA)*

*"Kyun nahi jaana chhunga,  
main to parhai mein bohat  
acha tha. Main chahta tha ke  
main teacher banoon aur  
baqiyon ko parhaaon."*

*(Aspiration: Teaching) (UR)*

*"Aaj bhi haath pe cut lag  
gaya tha engine kholte hue.  
Gloves ya helmet use karte  
ho? Nahi, yahan koi bhi use  
nahi karta... Kal raat garam  
mobile oil aankh mein gir  
gaya tha. Aap meri aankh  
dekhein, abhi bhi jali hui  
hai." (UK)*

*"Bike ka silencer garam hota  
hai, haath jal jaata hai.  
Gloves nahi hote. Sirf saada  
kapra dete hain saaf karne ke  
liye... Ek baar haath zakhmi  
ho gaya tha to paise nahi the  
tankay lagwane ke liye." (AR)*

*"Shuru shuru mein lagti thi.  
Ek dafa ungli kat gayi thi."  
(MZ)*

*"Ustad kaam ke beech  
mein... seedha maarne pe aa  
jaata hai, baat hi nahi karta,  
trak uthata hai, paana aur  
mere sir khole deta hai."(AA)*

*"Aksar baar jab bhi woh tyre  
mein hawa bhar raha hota  
hoon, tube mein, tab bhi woh  
bohat zyada tar phat jaati  
tube phat jaati... [nuqsan]  
haath pe... Gloves, helmet,  
glasses? Nahi, nahi, bilkul  
bhi nahi." (UR)*

*"Mera ustad mujhe galiyan  
bhi deta tha, izzat bhi nahi  
karta tha... Galiyan parti thi,  
kaam nahi aata tha, bohat*

Pervasive occupational Physical Hazards  
hazards, Normalization and  
minimization of physical  
injuries. Institutional  
disregard and absence of  
routine Personal Protective  
Equipment (PPE) use.



Verbal aggression, Physical Psychological Harm  
abuse within the family,  
humiliation by customers and  
mechanics, and harsh training  
practices that are accepted as

*afsoos hota tha apne aap par." normal despite causing  
(UK) significant psychological  
harm*

*"Is kaam mein bohat khuwari  
wala kaam hai bhai jaan,  
idhar koi tameez se baat hi  
nahi karta... Roz log bura  
bhala kehte the." (AR)*

*"Shuru mein ustad maara  
karte thay... galiyan bhi dete  
thay, kehte thay 'bewaqoof  
hai', 'kaam nahi aata'. Bohat  
bura lagta tha... darr laga ya  
rona aaya? Ji, shuru mein  
hota tha."(SI)*

*"Abu... mujhe to aur bhi  
zyada marte the, haath  
uthaya karte the... beizzati ki  
baatein karte the. Har baar  
main kamzor apne aap ko feel  
karta bha."(HK)*

*"Woh bohat gaaliyan deta  
hai, maa ki, behen ki, aur  
bohat zyada maarta hai,  
haan, chillata hai... seedha  
maarne pe aa jaata hai...(AA)*

*"Sauteli ammi... mere aur  
mere bhaion ko marti thi...  
Adde mein log beizzati kar  
dete hain zyada tar... Pehle  
ustad haath chalata tha,  
gaari galouch karta  
tha."(UR)*



*"Meri dihari hoti hai... chaar Underage workers exercise Wage Dependency  
chhoti behnein hain... un ki minimal financial autonomy;  
zimmedari aap ke upar hai? earnings either represent the  
Bilkul." (UK) household's primary liquid*

*"Abu ne ustad se baat ki hui income flow or are partially  
hai ke aadhe paise mujhe extracted by adult parental  
dete hain aur aadhe Abu ko... figures.*

*Abu kabhi kabhar ghar paise  
dete hain kabhi nahi dete.  
Ammi aur chhota bhai bhi  
hai."(AR)*

*"Mujhe tees hazaar rupay  
mahine ke milte hain. Yeh*

*paise tum rakhte ho ya ghar walay? Ji ghar walon ko de deta hoon."*(MZ)

*"Aath sau rupaye dehaari milti hai... Ammi ko saara kharch bhejta hai."*(SI)

*"Mere yahi koshish hoti hai ke main apni maa ko bhej sakoon, send kar loon yeh... mahine ke hisaab se leta hoon."*(HK)

*"Abhi to main seekh raha hoon to mujhe itna paisa milta hi nahi hai... main qarz leta tha... koshish karta hoon ke main doon."*(AA)

*"Mere neeche meri ek chhoti behen aur ek bhai the jinko main sambhalta tha... fees aap de rahe hain? Ji ji."*(UR)

*"Subah Fajr ki namaz parh ke chhay baje dukan pe aa jata hoon. Mera rehna bhi dukan pe hi hai... Bohat dafa beizzati ki customer ne... log izzat nahi karte."* (UK)

*"Subah jaata hoon, main khana bhi dukan pe ja ke khaata hoon subah ka... Ghar mein aap ki suni jaati? Agar suni jaati to mujhe dukan pe na bhejte."* (AR)

*"Dukan ke upar aap kamra dekh rahe hain, yeh upar kamra tumhara hai... [adde ke log] thora mujhe apne se neeche samajhte the ke yeh thora jahil sa banda hai, is ko kya itna importance deni."* (HK)

*"Main apna kharch nahi utha sakta to main isi dukan mein raat ko so jaata hoon aur subah isi ko main kholta hoon... Main pichhle chaar*

Physically confined to the Social Isolation boundaries of the auto workshop, which acts concurrently as their workplace, dining hall, and sleeping quarters.

*mahine se apne ghar gaya hi nahi hoon... jab se dukan pe hoon tab se to bilkul meri koi lala izzat nahi karta." (AA)*  
*"Rahaish kahan hoti hai? Hostel mein guzarta hoon zyada tar... [adde ke logon ka] rawayya theek nahi hai... beizzati kar dete hain zyada tar... jab bhi main koi baat bolta hoon to kisi ke ahmiyat nahi hoti." (UR)*

*"Main apne dil se poochunga ke kaash us waqt Abu ko hospital le jata. Woh keh rahe thay mere dil mein dard ho raha hai, lekin hum cricket khelne chale gaye. Hum ne un ko serious nahi liya. Bas yahi sab se bara dukh hai." (UK)*

*"Main dil se yeh poochunga ke Allah ne mujhe ghareeb ghar mein kyun paida kiya." (AR)*

*"Main poochta ke main parh kyun nahi saka." (MZ)*

*"Sawaal yahi poochhna chahunga lala ke mera aaba, abu jo hai mera, woh baqiyon ki tarah mehnat kyun nahi karta tha, ya ghar walon ka khayal kyun nahi rakh saka?" (HK)*

*"Main bas lala apne dil se poochhta ke yeh dushmaniyan na hoti na gaon mein, to hum bare khushhal the... [Ammi] to mujhe der der zyada zyada duaein deti hain ke tum aur kamyab bano aur hamara sahara banoge." (AA)*

*"Chhoti si umar mein ammi mar gayi thi, aur phir abbu ne hamara saath nahi diya*

Existential Mourning over deceased or absent parents, and complex feelings of guilt. Severe emotional pain is accompanied by profound psychological maturity and protective maternal/fraternal instincts



*tha... saari zimidari meri pe  
aa gayi. Chhote behen ki bhi  
aur aap ka chhota bhai...  
main hi khayal rakhta hoon...  
unka sahara aap ho." (UR)*

### Discussion

The results of this qualitative investigation reveal that child labor in mechanic workshops emerges from structural vulnerabilities, poverty, family disintegration, and weak social protection, not individual deficiency. The uniformity with which participants attributed entry to economic necessity aligns with broader literature establishing poverty as the primary driver (UNICEF, 2021; ILO, 2022). However, participants experienced poverty not as an abstract statistic but as a lived crisis manifest in specific family devastations (death, imprisonment, abandonment). Structural economic forces converged with intimate family traumas to position children as economic actors of last resort.

The articulation of foreclosed aspirations illuminates how child labor interrupts human development trajectories. Participants' aspirations were grounded, not fantastical. Their foreclosure represents not merely lost schooling but the truncation of imagined possible futures aligned with the capabilities approach (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2000), which emphasizes that human flourishing requires access to opportunities for capability development. Child labor deprives children of essential capabilities: educational, vocational, recreational, and developmental.

The normalization of injury represents institutional violence, rendering invisible systematic health threats through routinization. The absence of protective equipment and incident oversight creates conditions where injury is expected, not prevented. Psychologically, normalization teaches children that their bodily integrity is not valued. Psychological abuse, humiliation, ethnic discrimination, and physical punishment represent systematic degradation, establishing hierarchical status, and suppressing resistance. Yet critically, participants' deepest emotional preoccupations centered not on workshop abuses but on irrevocable

family losses preceding labor entry. This indicates that psychological deprivation extends beyond the workshop: children are deprived of family structures and security that never materialized, and this fundamental deprivation is their core grief. The workshop did not create vulnerability; it intensified pre-existing vulnerability.

The finding regarding the ustad's ambivalent role simultaneously punitive and providing has critical intervention implications. Simple removal from workshops without alternative protective relationships and material security may constitute harm. Meaningful intervention must simultaneously address both workshop hazards and home deprivations, preventing "rescue" that returns children to even more precarious circumstances.

### Implications and Recommendations

- Effective intervention requires coordinated action across multiple domains:
  - Poverty alleviation and conditional cash transfers.
  - Universal free quality education.
  - Mental health and bereavement support for families.
  - Strengthened enforcement with corruption elimination.
  - Amplification of children's own voices in intervention design

### Limitations

This study is geographically circumscribed to Islamabad and Rawalpindi; findings should not be extrapolated to other contexts. The sensitivity of the research topic suggests some experiences may remain undisclosed. Purposive sampling means that most severely controlled children may have been the least accessible, as single-time point data limit documentation of temporal variations. As qualitative research, findings represent co-constructions of participant experience and

interview context.

### Conclusion

This investigation reveals that child labor in Pakistan's mechanic workshops emerges from the intersection of structural poverty, family disintegration, cultural norms, and institutional failure. Children enter labor not through choice but compulsion rooted in economic desperation. Once in workshops, they encounter multidimensional hazards physical, psychological, economic compounded by social isolation despite adaptive resilience. Participants demonstrated remarkable adaptive capacity and agency within profoundly constrained circumstances. Yet their resilience is fragile, rooted in adaptation rather than genuine wellbeing, accompanied by deep internalized grief regarding losses preceding workshop entry. Their narratives demand movement beyond technical solutions toward systemic change addressing poverty, family instability, and institutional failure that render childhood labor inevitable.

### Declaration

Funding. For this study no funding was received.

Conflict of Interest. Authors of this study have no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgement. All participants who contributed to this study are acknowledged for their cooperation and contribution.

Ethical Approval. Ethical approval was obtained from the ethical review board prior to data collection and informed consent was taken from the participants before data collection.

Competing Interest. The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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