

## Problems Faced by Street Children Towards Accessing Education in Rawalpindi City

Maria Yaqoob<sup>1</sup>, Anam Sohail<sup>2</sup>, and Afshan Sohail<sup>3</sup>

<b>Keywords:</b> Street Children, Education, Poverty, Parental Support, Rawalpindi, Socioeconomic Barriers	<b>ABSTRACT</b> <i>Education is a human right and one of the key channels through which intergenerational poverty cycles can be broken, but in most developing states, it has been very inaccessible to children in the streets. This paper focuses on the socioeconomic and institutional constraints that affect the access to education of street-going children in Rawalpindi, Pakistan. Information was gathered on 110 street-working children using a quantitative cross-sectional research design by the use of structured interviews. The relationships between parental education, schooling costs, parental encouragement, and children education involvement were analyzed using descriptive statistics and the chi-square tests. The results indicate that poverty, illiteracy by parents, lack of employment and perceived high school fees are important limits to school attendance and psychosocial problems serve to further support exclusion. The research, based on the Empowerment Theory, points to the structural deprivation as a limitation in children agency. The results emphasize the necessity to implement child-centered educational and social protection interventions.</i>
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### 1. Introduction

Street children are one of the most marginalized and socially excluded groups in low- and middle-income countries, especially in South Asia, which is still facing increased poverty due to dynamism in urbanization, economic disparity, and the presence of weak social protection systems. Children under the streets in Pakistan are progressively denied the opportunities to enjoy inalienable human rights, in particular, the right to education, health, and safety, and to social integration (Abro, 2012; Talha, Tayyab, & Sardar, 2023). The latest world evaluations confirm that education still is the most effective long-term tool that helps to break intergenerational poverty and social exclusion cycles, and millions of children working on the streets still lack access to formal education (AlSagri & Sohail, 2024; Biswas & Murai, 2024). Although the Constitution guarantees educational rights to everyone,

<sup>1</sup> Research Scholar, Department of Sociology, Pir Mehr Ali Shah Arid Agriculture University, Rawalpindi, Pakistan.  
✉ mariayaqoob8@gmail.com (Corresponding Author)

<sup>2</sup> Research Scholar, Department of Sociology, Pir Mehr Ali Shah Arid Agriculture University, Rawalpindi, Pakistan.  
✉ anamsohail08@gmail.com

<sup>3</sup> Research Scholar, Department of Sociology, Pir Mehr Ali Shah Arid Agriculture University, Rawalpindi, Pakistan.  
✉ afshansohail23@gmail.com

and Pakistan took a number of pledges under the Sustainable Development Goals, especially SDG 4 on inclusive and equitable quality education, educational exclusion among street children persists (UNICEF, 2024).

It is estimated that in Pakistan, over one million children live or work in streets, but the true number is probably much greater as not all cases are reported, all children who are connected to the streets may move freely, and a recent national census of children who are connected to the streets is still outstanding (Abekah-Carter, Boateng, & Dako-Gyeke, 2024; UNICEF, 2017). The city of Rawalpindi is one of the critical locations where economic practices, domestic migration, informal employment and poverty converge to entangle the children in the survival tactics of the streets. According to more recent evidence in South Asia, there has been an increasing involvement in precarious informal labor on the streets by urban street children as families face increased inflation, unemployment and food insecurity in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and economic shocks that followed (Organization, 2014; World Bank, 2020).

It is not the personal lack of desire to receive an education that causes the exclusion of street children, but rather a set of challenges that are reinforced by economic, familial, and institutional factors. The leading causes of child labor to enter the streets are still poverty and parental unemployment, where instant income is valued over investments in education in the future (Emerson, 2014; Jamiludin, Darnawati, Uke, & Irawaty, 2018). This is even complicated by increasing education expenses. Recent research demonstrates that even the nominal school fees, school uniforms, transport costs, and opportunity cost considerably deter school enrolment among children living in ultra-poor households (Antonelli & Civilini, 2024; Peer, 2024). These limitations are further amplified by the illiteracy of the parents, as those with little or low education do not know the benefits of schooling in the long run and do not believe that they can assist their children in their education. Empirical evidence shows that in Pakistan and other developing environments, there is a close relationship between the level of parental education and children participation in schools (Ali & Ali, 2015; Emerson, 2014; Khan, 2019).

Besides being economically deprived, the street children are confronted with significant psychosocial and institutional barriers, which hinder permanent educational involvement. The street life is linked to physical fatigue, malnutrition, long-term health issues, social stigma, and mental distress, all of which have adverse impacts on cognitive development and learning motivation (Sehra & Patnaik, 2017; UNICEF, 2024). The attitude of the society often uses street children as deviant or delinquent thus perpetrating discrimination and exclusion in learning institutions and the society. These challenges are further worsened by the institutional weaknesses. The state of Pakistan still faces issues of the overcrowded learning environment, the lack of proper teacher training, and insufficient resources, whereas the system of child protection is disconnected and weakly implemented (Shah, Korai, & Mahessar, 2024; Siddiqui, Mughal, Soomro, & Dool, 2021). Furthermore, recent policy review reports show that there is an urgent shortage of flexible and inclusive models of education, including mobile schools, bridge schools, or evening courses, that would be able to absorb working children (UNICEF, 2024).

Even though the state of street children in Pakistan has been previously recorded in literature, much of the materials are descriptive in nature, nationally based, or more and more focused in the largest metropolitan areas of Karachi and Lahore (Abro, 2012; Khan, 2019). Empirical data on the effects of localized socioeconomic processes on educational exclusion in Rawalpindi is also remarkably scarce in the recent and city-specific literature, although Rawalpindi is a location with a significant level of street-based child labor. Besides, current research tends to look at poverty, parental illiteracy, or institutional failure separately, but not much has been done regarding their mutual and supportive impacts. Notably, there is a gap in literature using a clear theoretical basis to describe how structural limits inhibit the agency and decision-making power of children.

To fill these gaps, this paper explores the socioeconomic and institutional inefficiencies that do not allow the street-working children in Rawalpindi to access education with references to Marris Hassan and Pirwadhai. This paper looks into the contributions of poverty, lack of jobs, parent illiteracy, perceived school expenses and parental support in the influence of children on education.

Based on the Empowerment Theory, the study designs education as a resource of transformation which increases the agency, self-efficacy, and social participation among children through increasing access to resources and opportunities (Kabeer, 2005; Zimmerman, 2000). The current body of development literature also tends to confirm this vision and state that educational inclusion is the key to child empowerment and sustainable urban development (Peters, 2004; UNICEF, 2024).

This study has both empirical and policy implications. Empirically, it adds recent and localized data to a small body of research on street children in Pakistan, which fills a gap in the city-level analysis. In theory, it enhances the use of the Empowerment Theory to the education of street children by associating structural deprivation with limited agency. In terms of the policy, the results provide evidence-based recommendations to designing specific interventions, such as fee waivers, parental literacy initiatives, mobile classrooms and combined child protection interventions. Finally, placing education as a pillar of empowerment and social justice, this research aims to educate sustainable solutions toward inclusive development of one of the most vulnerable groups of children in Pakistan.

## 2 Literature Review

Street children have been popularly known in the literature as being amongst the most vulnerable and socially marginalized in urban societies, especially in the developing nations where poverty, disparity, and poor institutional capacity come at an intersection. Street children is by and large a term used to denote children whose street is now a major source of their livelihoods, shelter, or socialization either in part or wholly out of touch with formal families and educational systems (UNICEF, 2014). It is estimated that over 150 million children in the world partake in the street-based activities with a significant percentage of those living in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa (Organization, 2014). In modern research, scholars stress that street involvement is not a life choice but it is a survival strategy, which is determined by structural deprivation, economic shocks and family-level vulnerabilities (UNICEF, 2017; World Bank, 2020).

One of the trendy topics in the literature is the poverty and economic deprivation as the main reason of children involvement in the life of the streets and subsequent exclusion of the school. Various studies show that children in families that live in chronic poverty, have no income, and face income insecurity are much more prone to child labor and income-related economic activities on the streets (Jamiludin et al., 2018; Pascoe, 1996; Ullah, Ahmad, & Jan, 2024). Inflation, informal employment, and lack of social safety nets are also increasing the household reliance on child income in Pakistan especially in the urban areas (Abro, 2012; World Bank, 2020). The current situation in the region indicates that in the post-pandemic economic turmoil, urban poor households have been disproportionately impacted, and school dropout rates among working children have grown due to this (Organization, 2014; UNICEF, 2024). Such results highlight the importance of economic need as an unavoidable force that prevails over the perceived long-term returns of education amidst families that have to address their fundamental needs.

Poverty is strongly connected with the place of parental illiteracy and family structures in the determination of the educational pathways of children. A significant amount of empirical studies suggests that parental education is a powerful indicator of school attendance, enrolment, and persistence of schoolchildren (Iqbal, 2008; Khan, 2019). Parents who are illiterate will not attach the importance of formal education, will have less ability to negotiate school systems and will be more willing to work in order to have immediate income generation than to schooling. Research in Pakistan has continually indicated that low parental literacy households have elevated rates of child labor and non-enrollment in school (Sehra & Patnaik, 2017; Ullah et al., 2024). More recent cross-country studies also affirm that parental human capital continues to be a decisive factor of the educational inclusivity of children, even in low-income urban settings (World Bank, 2020). Compounding factors have also been suggested as family instability, high number of children in the household, domestic conflict, and migration leading to the fact that children are pushed to the street life and their parents do not support their education (Haylı & Chung, 2024; Khan, 2019).

Another significant literature line is the institutional and structural barrier that inhibits access of the street children to education. Although education in Pakistan is free at the primary level, the indirect costs that include uniforms, books, transportation and examination fees are still a major impediment to poor families (Sehra & Patnaik, 2017; Ullah et al., 2024). Empirical work has found

that perceived high fees schooling systems, and covert schooling expenditures, diminish parental approaches to enroll and in particular among families reliant on child labor revenues (Jamiludin et al., 2018). Street children are also marginalized in the institutional education systems that have institutional weaknesses such as overcrowded state schools, poor teacher training and inadequate child-friendly facilities (Shah et al., 2024). In recent reviews of policies, the absence of flexibilized schooling models e.g. evening classes, mobile schools, or bridge programs is identified as a very critical gap in education systems serving working (UNICEF, 2024).

In addition to economic and institutional aspects, an emerging literature reveals the psychological, health, and social aspects of educational exclusion of street children. Malnutrition, physical illness, substance abuse, violence, and chronic stress are some of the most common issues among street-connected children that negatively influence cognitive development and learning potential (Sehra & Patnaik, 2017; UNICEF, 2017). The level of social stigma and discrimination also negatively impacts the self-esteem and motivation of children to attend school because street children are generally viewed as delinquents instead of victims of underdevelopment (Rafi et al., 2012). The latest studies of child development indicate that attention, memory, and emotional controls might be impaired by the long-term exposure to the unsafe urban environment, making educational reintegration activities less effective (UNICEF, 2024).

Despite the extensive literature on the street children in Pakistan and other third world countries, there are a number of gaps that are not taken care of. One, most of the current literature is descriptive and uses national/province-wide data, which does not provide much information on urban-specific processes and localized causes of school drop-out (Abekah-Carter et al., 2024; Abro, 2012). Rawalpindi, although a large urban center where the presence of street children can be observed, has not been studied extensively in comparison to such cities as Karachi and Lahore. Second, not much research has been done in the past to focus on the interaction of poverty, parental illiteracy, school expenses, or school institutional weaknesses in their effects on children studying. Third, there is a lack of empirical studies of parental encouragement in mediating between economic constraints and schooling achievement of the children, especially under the environment of high education costs.

In addition, there are limited studies that clearly use a theoretical framework to support why the structure of barriers limits the agency of children and their educational decision-making. The literature on recent developments is getting more and more focused on the relevance of empowerment-based policies, stating that the access to education contributes to the ability of children to make a choice, establish self-efficacy, and engage productively in society (Kabeer, 2005; UNICEF, 2024; Zimmerman, 2000). Nevertheless, the use of Empowerment Theory in the education of street children in Pakistan is still very little, especially at the urban level.

To address these gaps, this study concentrates on the children in the streets who are involved in street-working in Rawalpindi and specifically Marrir Hassan and Pirwadhahi which are regions where high levels of child labor are witnessed in the streets. Based on the available literature, the research question is aimed at answering three related questions: the author will explore the social barriers to education experienced by street children, the economic factors that restrict school attendance, and the impact of parental encouragement and support on the achievement of education. This research incorporates socioeconomic, institutional, and psychological aspects of an empowerment framework to provide localized and theoretically informed evidence to the literature and promote knowledge regarding the mechanisms of educational exclusion perpetuation and creation within street children in urban Pakistan.

### **3 Methods**

The given research paper was based on quantitative, cross-sectional research design in order to investigate the socioeconomic and institutional issues that limit access of street-working children to education in Rawalpindi city, Pakistan. Cross-sectional design is suitable to identify current conditions, views and connotations among critical variables in a specified population at one moment and is very popular in social studies with vulnerable populations (Mageda, Kulemba, Kapologwe, Katalambula, & Petrucka, 2023). The research was carried out in the urban localities of Marrir Hassan

and Pirwadhai, which are typified by high concentration of commercial activities and high concentration of children working on the streets practicing informal economic activities.

The population used in the study was those street-working children that spend most of their time in the streets earning some form of income like selling, begging, or other types of informal services regardless of whether they were in touch with their family. Since this population is hidden, mobile and vulnerable, probability sampling could not be used. Thus, purposive sampling was utilised, which is often applicable to the studies that pertain to populations that are difficult to reach and the sampling frames are not available (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). In this way, a total sample of 110 street-working children was chosen. The sample was deemed adequate to conduct descriptive analysis and inferential tests specifically chi-square test which is ideal in determining relationships among categorical variables during exploratory social research.

This was done using a structured interview schedule that was given in the form of face-to-face interviews. The interviews were the method of preference, as the literacy rates of the respondents were low, and appropriate interpretation of questions was assured. The interview tool was structured into four broad areas namely demographic features, social obstacles of education, financial limitations, and parental encouragement towards education. Majority of questions were close-ended to lead to quantitative analysis, but questions based on perceptions were added to get the perception of the respondents on the cost of schooling, parental support and schooling background. Before the actual survey, the instrument was tested on a limited number of respondents of similar population to determine the clarity, relevance and cultural appropriateness of the instrument. According to pilot testing, some minor adjustments were to be done to enhance wording and understanding. Cronbach alpha was applied to evaluate the internal consistency of the final instrument, and the result was a reliability coefficient of 0.82; this is sufficient to determine that the social science research has acceptable reliability (Ahmad, Alias, Hamat, & Mohamed, 2024).

Data analysis was made by using descriptive and inferential statistics. The summary of the demographic profiles and most important variables of the respondents in terms of the education and poverty and parental literacy was carried out by using descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages). Chi-square tests of independence were used in order to test the hypotheses of the study, to determine the relationships that exist between parental education and education involvement of children, and to test the relationships that exist between parental support toward education and the perceived school fees. Chi-square method is suitable to test relationships between categorical variables, and it has been involved in many earlier studies on the same subject which investigated child labor and access to education (Ullah et al., 2024). The level of statistical significance was determined to be 10 percent, which is the acceptable level of statistical significance in exploratory research, which requires working with vulnerable and hard-to-reach populations.

Considering the sensitivity of the research scenario, stringent ethical application was followed all through the research study. The involvement was completely voluntary and informed consent was informed verbally and each child had been explained the aim of the study in simple and age comprehensible language. Their verbal permission was also obtained where the parents or guardians were present. In order to guarantee the confidentiality and privacy of the respondents, no identifying information was noted. The interviews were held in secure and open environments that were in public places and the respondents were also made aware of their right to withdraw without penalty at any point. Psychological distress was avoided by all means, and the interview was discontinued in case a child seemed uncomfortable or tired. Such practices do not contradict ethical standards of conducting research with children and other vulnerable groups (UNICEF, 2017).

#### **4 Results and Discussion**

The results of this research offer a first-hand account of socioeconomic and institutional constraints to education of street-working children in Rawalpindi. Descriptive findings indicate that most of the respondents were in large households with illiteracy and unemployment of the parental profiles being the preeminent features. A significant percentage of children cited poverty as the main factor that made them go to the streets, with the necessity to provide money to feed their families coming as the next priority. These results correspond to the existing studies in the field of Pakistan and other developing nations, which recognize economic deprivation and household survival needs as

the main motivators in children to participate in street-based activities (Haylı & Chung, 2024; Ullah et al., 2024).

The gender ratio showed that the number of boys in the street-working children was more, which is a manifestation of the existing cultural norms which provide more freedom to boys in open spaces and restrain girls to the domestic settings. Gender patterns in street children have been observed to be similar in the South Asian literature on the subject (Khan, 2019; UNICEF, 2024). Notably, many of the respondents were in touch with their families and this implies that street work here is more of an economic survival mechanism and not a total collapse of the family bonds. This is in line with previous findings that indicate that a large number of street-working children are children on the street, not children of the street (UNICEF, 2017).

In order to study the dependence between parental education and the educational participation of children, chi-square of independence was used. Table 1 displays the results.

**Table 1: Association between Parental Education and Children’s Educational Involvement**

Children’s Educational Involvement	Literate Parents	Illiterate Parents	Total
Currently in Education	4	8	12
Studied in the Past	3	40	43
Never Studied	5	46	51

Chi-Square Test:  $\chi^2 = 7.447$ ,  $df = 3$ ,  $p = .059$

The outcomes show a marginal significant correlation between parent education and children education participation at 10 percent level of significance. The children of the illiterate parents had a higher chance of not having attended school or dropping out but the relationship indicates that there is a strong pattern or relationship and not a weak one. This observation is consistent with a wide range of literature that shows that parent literacy is critical in determining the educational participation of children by affecting parental attitudes, expectations, and ability to promote schooling (Iqbal, 2008; Ullah et al., 2024; World Bank, 2020). Parental illiteracy on the aspect of empowerment curtails interactional and intrapersonal empowerment where children that are illiterate have limited exposure to education decisions and long-term planning (Zimmerman, 2000).

The second hypothesis looked into the relationship between the high school fee arrangements and parental stimulation on education. Table 2 displays the findings of the chi-square test.

**Table 2: Association Between High School Fees and Parental Encouragement Toward Education**

High Fee Structure Discourages Education	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
Parents Strongly Encourage	15	17	2	34	1	69
Parents Encourage	8	18	1	2	0	29
Parents Neutral	2	2	1	1	0	6
Parents Discourage	1	5	0	0	0	6
Total	26	42	4	37	1	110

Chi-square:  $\chi^2 = 28.982$ ,  $df: 12$ ,  $p: .004$

The result shows that high school fees have a statistically significant correlation with parental support of education. Parents who felt that the school fees were too high were less likely to promote the enrollment or the continuation of their children in school. This finding is highly compatible with the current literature, which points to the reality that even in a situation where education is free in name only, indirect and hidden costs deter schooling among poor households to a significant degree

(Jamiludin et al., 2018; Sehra & Patnaik, 2017; UNICEF, 2024). Current evaluations on a global scale can simply prove that the cost of education is a significant obstacle to children who are in labor-intensive survival tactics, especially in poverty-stricken urban areas (ILO, 2024; World Bank, 2024).

In addition to the economic and parental factors, the qualitative data available in the interviews revealed the presence of psychological and health-based constraints, such as exhaustion caused by working in the streets, lack of self-respect, stigma, and poor health. These issues lower the motivation and capability of children to attend school, and they strengthen the exclusion deterrent despite the presence of opportunities to attend school. The same psychosocial limitations were reported by other researchers, highlighting that street children educational deprivation is not only financial but also highly social and psychological in nature (Khan, 2019; Sehra & Patnaik, 2017; UNICEF, 2024).

In general, the results show that the educational exclusion of street children is the result of interrelated structural factors such as poverty, illiteracy of parents, the cost of high school education and the psychosocial vulnerability in Rawalpindi. In line with Empowerment Theory, all these restrictions restrict the agency and ability by children to education as a form of social inclusion (Kabeer, 2005; Zimmerman, 2000). The findings highlight the necessity of combined measures that will help tackle poverty at the household level, lower the price of education, enhance parental education, and offer non-rigid, parent-focused systems of education.

## 5 Conclusion, Policy Implications, and Future Research Directions

This paper has shown that low accessibility of street-working children in Rawalpindi to education occurs through a complex combination of socioeconomic, family, and institutional factors instead of personal reluctance to attend schools. Poverty, parental illiteracy, unemployment and perceived high costs of schooling all limit access to formal schooling by children and the psychological reasons of fatigue, stigma and low self-esteem further hinder children sustaining their educational participation. The findings affirm that a significant number of working street children have a family connection which means that street life is a family survival mechanism and not the total abandonment of their families. The chi-square tests show a significant contribution of parental education and financial limitations to the educational involvement of children. The paper is based on the Empowerment Theory which demonstrates how structural deprivation constrains agency and decision-making capacity of children which strengthens marginalization cycles. Offering city-specific evidence in Rawalpindi, this research will add to the body of knowledge on street children in Pakistan and will further the development of knowledge on how the local socioeconomic context affects educational exclusion among vulnerable urban children.

According to the findings, the policy interventions should be based on an integrated and child-oriented approach that would concurrently tackle the issues of economic hardship, parental awareness, and institutional barriers. The government policies should emphasize on the waiver of fees, material assistance and flexible education systems like mobile schools and community learning centers to help working children. Literacy and livelihood programs should be provided to the parents in order to improve the household capacity to provide education and the coordination of education authorities, child protection agencies, and non-governmental organizations should be reinforced to improve the outreach and reintegration programs. Although the study does not lack its contributions, the design, purposive sampling and study of two urban localities are disadvantages of the study because they may limit generalizability. The studies of the future must adopt longitudinal studies, mixed-method designs, and comparative analysis of cities in order to capture the long-term educational pathways and psychosocial outcomes. More research can also be done on gender-specific obstacles and assess the impact of policy interventions that specifically target gender, which can empower street-connected children through education.

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