

# Traces of childhood exploitation: A comprehensive study on the forms of child labour in Iran

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## ABSTRACT

Using a qualitative method, this research studies these various forms and aspects of child labour in the city of Tehran. The study was conducted using grounded theory, and, for data collection, various forms of interviewing and observation techniques were used according to theoretical, snowballing, and purposive sampling methods. The study population consists of three groups of children, their employers and field experts. The findings indicate that working children in Tehran are exploited in various, including the worst, forms of work. These forms of work are divided into three categories: kinship, employer-based, and large organisations. The main settings for child labour include the development gap throughout the country, family poverty, the prevalent attitudes in some communities on children and child labour, the informal labour market, and some aspects of legal and law-enforcement settings. Also, work damages children's physical and mental health and disrupt their effective socialisation processes.

**Keywords:** Exploitation, The worst form of child labour, Child labour, Poverty, Characteristics of child labour forms, Child labour risks

## Introduction

There is an alarmingly high rate of child labour in the world, especially in developing countries. At the beginning of 2020, before the COVID-19 outbreak, 160 million children – 97 million boys and 63 million girls – were working; this means roughly one in ten children worldwide. This number was disproportionately distributed among the countries of the world. According to estimates, child labour in Iran, including domestic work, is performed by 15% of children aged 10 to 18, making the population of active children equal to 1.62 million [1]. UNICEF defines 'child labour' as 'work that exceeds a minimum number of hours, depending on the age of a child and on the type of work'. Such work is considered harmful to the child and

should therefore be eliminated [2]. In many parts of the world, child labour is seen as a violation of children's rights [3].

The expansion of the informal sector has exacerbated such problems as poverty, inequality and the over-exploitation of the poor, so that the weaker in terms of gender and age, carry out most of the jobs in the informal economy. Many jobs in the informal economy bear several physical and psychological consequences for children. Hidden child labour in closed environments, such as in the workshops, is also a type of high-risk occupation. Thus, it is necessary to identify the different forms of child labour and study their characteristics, such as their nature, conditions, and associated risks.

### *Literature review: Theoretical literature*

The International Labour Organization (the 'ILO') (undated a) defines the term 'child labour' as work that deprives children of their childhood, their potential, and their dignity, and that is harmful to physical and mental development. It refers to work that is mentally, physically, socially, or morally dangerous and harmful to children; and/or interferes with their schooling by depriving them of the opportunity to attend school; obliging them to leave school prematurely, or requiring them to attempt

### Access this article online

Website: [www.japer.in](http://www.japer.in)

E-ISSN: 2249-3379

**How to cite this article:** Ahmady K. Traces of childhood exploitation: A comprehensive study on the forms of child labour in Iran. *J Adv Pharm Educ Res.* 2023;13(4):57-64. <https://doi.org/10.51847/blnsUHGGhq>

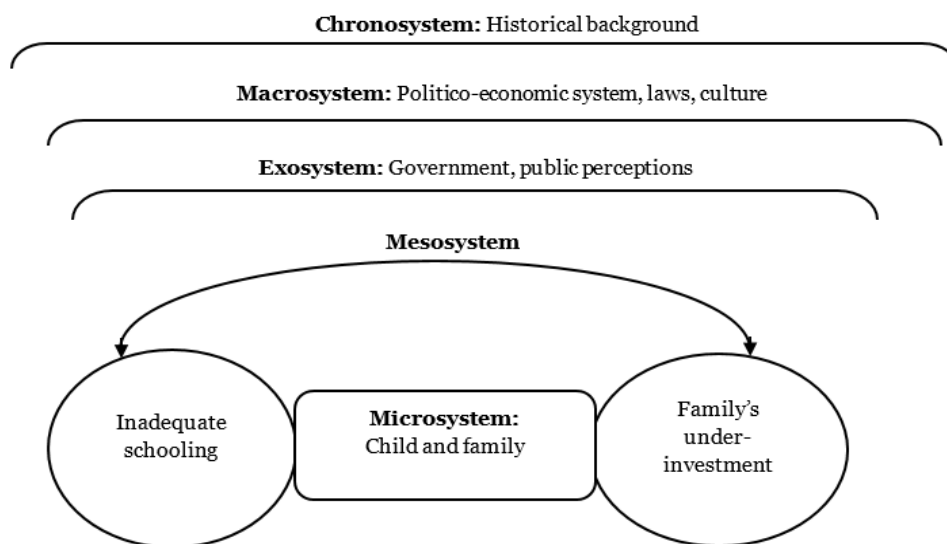
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to combine school attendance with excessively long and heavy work [4].

Some forms of child labour – the worst forms – cause children to be enslaved, separated from their families and exposed to a variety of risks and serious illnesses, or they cause children to be on the streets of metropolitan areas, especially at a young age.

Several theories and studies seek to explain child labour. The theory of Ecological Systems as developed by Bronfenbrenner

(1994) is used here to explain child labour, as it provides an integrated framework for understanding multilevel factors affecting child labour [5]. According to the proposed ecological framework, the underlying factors include chronosystem, macrosystem, exosystem, mesosystem and microsystem, which interact with each other. The upper layers cover the lower layers; hence the trickle-down effect that leads to the problem of child labour.



**Figure 1.** Contextual factors contributing to child labour, according to Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework (1994) adopted from Liao & Hong (2011, p. 568) [5, 6]

The chronosystem, according to Bronfenbrenner, is the passage of time that mediates the change or constancy over time in an individual's characteristics or the environment in which the individual is situated. In the field of child labour, this system refers to the changes and transformations of child labour over time.

The macrosystem is regarded as a cultural blueprint for the social structures and activities in the other system levels. The macrosystem level includes cultural beliefs, opportunity structures and hazards that shape microsystem conditions and processes. Factors at the macrosystem level that are relevant to child labour include the politico-economic system, child labour laws and cultural values. Inequality skews distribution among the strata of society and contributes to the poverty of the lower strata, where the families send their children into the work cycle to compensate for part of their expenses. According to Ranjan (2001), income inequality is positively related to child labour [7]. Since workers with lower productivity and, lower incomes are less able to invest in their educations [8]. Even if there are educational opportunities in the community, parents forbid their children from attending or continuing school [9]. Inequality also encourages rural-urban migration and contributes to urban poverty [10].

The exosystem is composed of relationships between two or more microsystems, but the individual is directly involved in one. For example, although government policies and public perceptions of children's rights do not directly affect children,

they can shape the family and school environments in which children are embedded. The lack of public recognition of child labour as a human-rights violation generates apathy and tolerance for child labour [6].

The mesosystem is composed of interrelationships between two or more microsystems that contain the individual. Interactions in one microsystem (e.g., the family) may affect interactions in another (e.g., school). Lack of access to adequate schooling is a factor that determines child labour. In this subsystem, the lack of involvement of parents affects the propagation of child labour. Parents' educational levels and their perceptions about the importance of education are the main determinants of children's school attendance [6].

The family environment is one of the main causes of child labour. For many poor households, their survival depends on the participation of all family members in meeting their needs. Child labour is rational behaviour as part of maintaining families' incomes. Parents in poor, rural areas cannot afford the school costs for their children, leaving few options for children other than to work [6].

Characteristics such as age, geographic location and gender can determine which children are more likely to be in the labour force. In a family with two or more children, older children are more likely to engage in labour, as they are perceived to be more marketable due to their physical abilities, social skills, or maturity levels [11]. Also, child labour is more common in rural

areas, and girls work more frequently in these areas than in urban areas [1].

### *Experimental literature*

Many global studies look at child labour as a result of family poverty, when parts and even all of the living expenses of the households are provided by child labour [10, 12-17]. Domestic research also identifies family poverty as an important driver of child labour [18-24]. Raisdana (2003) considers the policies of market orientation and extreme structural adjustment to be the causes of poverty and consequent child labour in some families. Also, the inability to pay for education triggers children to leave school and enter the professional job venue. Lack of citizenship documents, such as identity cards, makes children unable to attend school, and they are, therefore, left in the world of direct labour [18, 24]. Some studies also indicate that the impracticality of curricula causes families to drop their children out of school to enter the work cycle – because they believe such education will not lead to employment [25].

According to Sansoy Bahar (2016), the order of birth, gender, and educational success are important factors in determining whether a child begins labour [15]. Older children are more involved in work, and birth order affects children's educational prospects.

Internal and external migration, affected by inequality and conflict, have resulted in the settlement of a broad group of poorer people and war victims in metropolitan areas [12, 20, 22]. Cultural attitudes that child labour is a way to prepare children for future life is the other determining factor. These attitudes and their effects are different in different communities, such as Romani and villagers [24, 26].

On the demand side, studies show that children are inexpensive, obedient, undemanding, and unaware of their rights, so employers frequently prefer them to adult workers [25].

Many studies have focused on identifying the consequences of street children's work, such as long working hours, poor nutrition, starvation, extreme weather, car accidents, experiencing violence, being victims of crime, arrest and confiscation of goods, feelings of shame and humiliation, deprivation of protection from institutions such as family and school, contact with street gangsters, learning high-risk behaviours, such as addiction and delinquency, illness and diseases (internal, skeletal, and muscular; skin diseases like leishmania; and viral diseases like hepatitis), and being kidnapped, particularly girls [21, 22, 24].

Children who work in the agricultural sector are also at high risk of health problems, but these are difficult to address due to factors such as the large number of people working in this sector, the fact that children start to work at a young age, the dangerous nature of the work, the lack of regulations, the invisibility of the work, deprivation from schooling, the decisive role of poverty, and the deeply ingrained attitudes and perceptions about child labour in rural areas [27-30].

## Results and Discussion

### *Demographics and related findings*

Findings indicate that 84% of working children are boys and 16% are girls. Of those, 1.02% are in the age-range of three to seven years, 44.89% are in the age-range of eight to thirteen years, and 54.08% are in the age-range of 14 to 17 years.

Roughly 3% of working children are natives, 3% are Romani, 18% are internal immigrants, and some 6% are foreign immigrants. Of the foreign immigrants, 40% have entered the country legally, while 60% are illegal immigrants.

In terms of education, fathers and mothers are respectively 61% and 66% illiterate, while 19% and 17% have an elementary-level education, 12% and 9% have a middle-school education, 5% of each have a high-school diploma, 3% and 1% have a bachelor's degree, and 2% of mothers have Quranic literacy.

As for working hours, 18% of these children work four to eight hours per day, 55% work eight to twelve hours, 22% work 12 to 16 hours, and 5% work 16 or more hours.

The daily income for 36% is 100 to 500 thousand rials; for 14%, it is 500 thousand to 1 million rials; for 37%, it is 1 to 2 million rials; and for 13%, it is more than 2 million rials.

About 45% of these children have experienced physical abuse, 49% psychological abuse, and 6% some form of sexual abuse.

Some 16% stated that they cannot request time off or that they cannot temporarily leave work.

68% of children live with their immediate families or relatives, 23% live alone, and 9% settle in the workspace.

### *Forms of child labour*

The most common forms of child work are described in greater detail below.

#### *Work in workshops*

This type of labour encompasses a wide range of work, including jobs in small and medium-sized workshops making bags, shoes, and clothes, as well as sewing, mechanical tasks, welding and scrap-metal working, carpentry, flower production, etc. The oft-stated purpose of this type of labour is to learn more about the profession for future careers; however, income is attractive to children. One of the reasons families dispatch their children to these jobs is to learn skills, as they believe that the education system does not lead to employment or income.

Some children are also interested in learning technical skills such as car repair. In this line of work, most labour relationships are of the employer or kinship-based type. In many cases, employers subject working children to verbal and even physical violence to teach them some skills. According to some experts, child labour in workshops is far more difficult than street labour and has far more negative consequences due to the lack of supervision, the higher risk of injury and disability, employer unresponsiveness, low wages, abuse, exploitation, exposure to many forms of immoral behaviours by employers and their companions, such as

addiction, alcoholism, casual sex, and smuggling, which undermines children's self-confidence and their abilities to communicate with society and other people.

### *Agriculture*

The work of children in this sector is primarily determined by the working season. The majority of work is completed during the summer, followed by the autumn and the spring. During the working season, they frequently live in makeshift sheds in the fields, which lack many basic amenities and access to services, exposing them to physical harm. The most significant issues with this type of work include having to work every day of the week, working long hours during the day, doing hard and exhausting work, and working in hot weather.

### *Work in the streets*

Children on the street work in a variety of jobs, including floristry, begging, selling handicrafts, smoking fragrant materials, weighing, playing music, cleaning car windows, selling vegetables, fortune-telling, porting, etc. Children as young as four years old are entering this line of work. They first get a job through a family member or friend. The lived experience of street life teaches children to recognise potential customers and stimulate their emotions, and defend themselves against the hazards of work. These are the children subject to state organisation-and-control plans, many of whom have been arrested and detained. As children enter the work cycle at a young age, they must leave as soon as they can no longer elicit the pity and sentiment of citizens and cause them to donate.

### *Work in farmer's markets*

Children who work in farmer's markets are mostly domestic immigrants who work away from their families or together with a family member. Work in these markets is fully organised and supervised by the Tehran Municipality's Fruit and Vegetable Markets Organisation. They are formally required to work nine hours a day plus four extended hours for such tasks as emptying luggage at different intervals throughout the night. "The Vegetable market has no work hours," one child told the interviewer, implying that they must work long hours. Almost all children see this as a temporary job, though some may stay on to rent booths and sell fruit as they grow older.

### *Scavenging*

Garbage-collecting children are mostly Afghan immigrants, though some Iranian children of various ethnicities are also involved. Tehran Municipality hires special contractors to collect and sort dry waste. The contractor may manage garbage collection himself or delegate it to others, including Afghans [31]. These employers usually split scavenging into morning and night shifts to maximise profits. Some of these children even pay a monthly fee to the employer as "customs". Workers in this sector are typically issued activity cards, and their photos are

stored in the employer's "patrol" mobile phones to be monitored, ensuring that no one enters the field to work illegally.

### *Supermarket and grocery workers*

Children work in a variety of stores, including grocery stores, accessory stores, restaurants, butcheries, poultry shops, clothing stores, car washes, bakeries, and confectioneries. Children work in these jobs every day of the week and on holidays. In some cases, such as when working in a car wash, children are not paid, the employer only provides them with a place to sleep, and their income is derived from the tips and gratuities they receive from customers.

### *Brick kiln workers*

These kilns are largely located in the south and south-west of Tehran. Children have no control over their incomes and the employer pays the wages directly to the head of the household or their father. Children often have to wake up early in the morning and work near the furnace until late at night. These kilns are more active during summers, and workers return to their original residences for the rest of the year. Due to a lack of access to schools and NGOs in these areas, the majority of children drop out of school or go to nearby villages or towns to study; however, because of the costs and challenges, the number of these children is very small.

### *Glassware workshops*

According to national labour laws, children under the age of 15 are prohibited from working in glassware workshops, but many of these workshops are monitored by private CCTV cameras, and when labour inspectors visit, children exit through the back door. Children and even some women who are employed in this industry are not covered by insurance, and, in certain circumstances, employers refuse to pay, thus simply forcing them to quit.

### *Domestic work*

These are children who work at the houses of other people. They may include children who work at their own houses. Daily housekeeping duties, meal preparation, cleaning, laundry, caring for and accompanying children to school, caring for adults and the disabled, gardening, and assisting employers in small offices are among the responsibilities of these children.

Poor households are a major source of child labour. Recognised manifestations of poverty in households include low-income jobs, unemployment, illiteracy, and low-level education of parents; a large number of family members; illness or disability; the imprisonment or addiction of the father; the death of the head of the family; the abandonment of the family by the head or the father of the family; temporary jobs; indebtedness; escape from unhealthy family environments; and the high costs of education.

These are the most common situations in which families use their children's labour force to cover part of their expenses.

The following is a conversation between an interviewer and a child:

- What do you do with your money?
- We use it to rent a house; we do not waste our money; we spend it on necessities such as accommodation.
- Has it risen ever?
- They've now added some more. It used to be so insignificant. It used to be 800 [Toman, or 8 million Rials], but it has since been increased.
- What is the current price?
- I'm not sure.
- Do you provide money for your mother or father?
- We'll hand it over to father. The money is transferred to the owner by my brother.

The development of the informal economy also contributes to child labour. Workers in the informal economy are not protected under approved labour and social protection laws. Work in the

informal economy is often characterised by small or undefined workplaces, unsafe and unhealthy working conditions, low levels of skills and productivity, low or irregular income, long working hours, and a lack of access to information, markets, finances, education, and technologies (International Labour Organization Website, undated b). Immigration and the underground economy are inextricably linked. Child labour in Tehran is shaped and hardened by waves of migration from Afghanistan and Iran's deprived areas. The informal economy also requires low-cost labour, and immigrants, particularly minors, are the finest source of such labour forces. Children and skilled migrants without identification documents are both cheap labour forces who have little legal recourse if their labour rights are violated. In recent decades, the state's inability to regulate this industry has resulted in its growth and greater exploitation of vulnerable populations such as women, children, and illegal immigrants. Individual and arbitrary workplace policies have taken the place of standard and official rules. Children may be required to perform duties such as moving heavy hand carts, scavenging, working in industrial plants, working on the street and labouring in kilns.

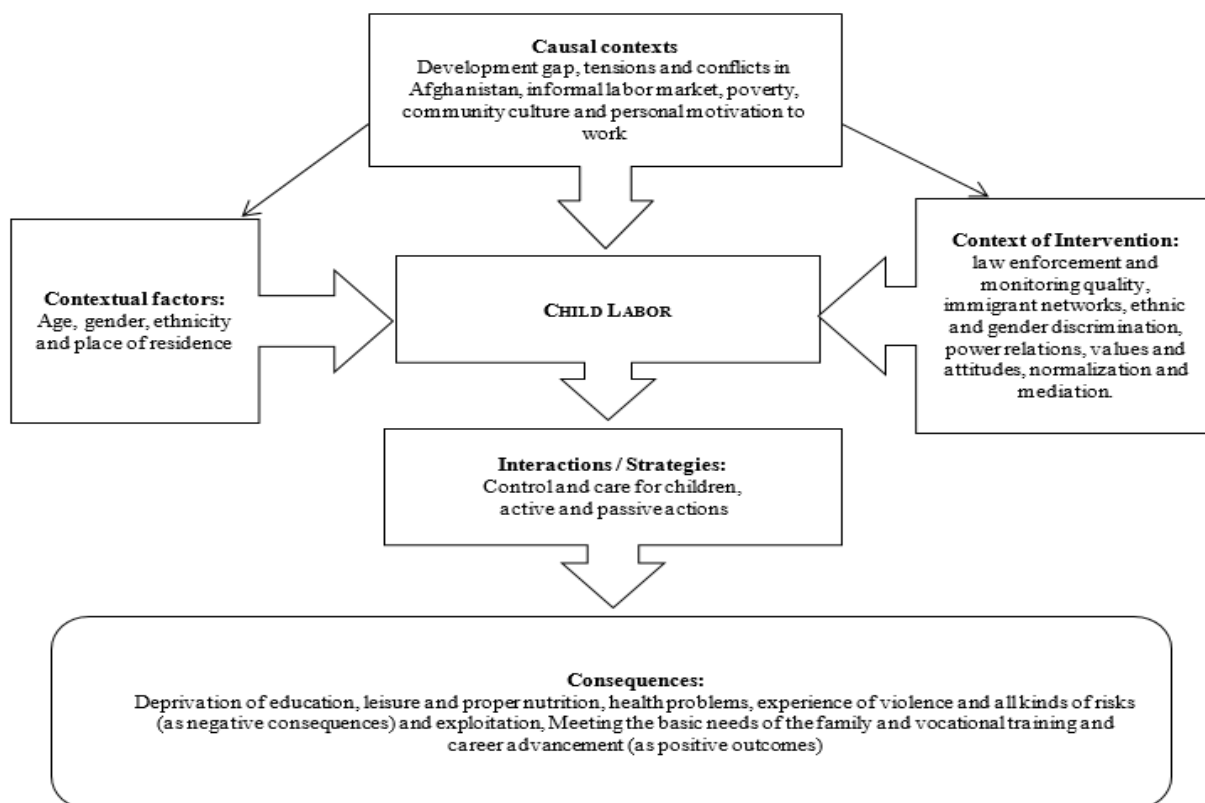


Figure 2. GT model of child labour in Iran [32]

Factors affecting child labour include how laws are enforced and monitored; the internal rules of immigrant networks; prevalent ethnic and gender discrimination; power relations, values, and attitudes; normalisation; and mediation. According to Iranian labour laws, child labour under the age of 15 is prohibited, but we observed that a high proportion of children under the age of 15 work. Many inspectors of the Ministry of Labour do not

oversee child labour, so employers circumvent the law and use children as labour forces.

Immigrant networks also provide opportunities for child labour by establishing connections between origins and destinations. As may be seen, children of similar ethnic backgrounds are grouped in specific jobs.

Ethnic and gender discrimination is another driving cause of child labour. Some ethnic groups in Iran suffer from institutional and structural discrimination. Women also suffer from these forms of structural discrimination. Limited access to opportunities is the outcome of institutional and structural discrimination, which naturally leads to more poverty.

Geographical location, age, gender, and ethnicity are also affecting factors in child labour and its various forms. For example, children who work in the Farahzad district in the northern areas of Tehran are more involved in mechanical work and street work in those same northern areas, while some children in the central areas of Tehran enter production workshops. Gender and ethnicity also play an important role in the form of labour. Girls are more likely to work in jobs such as housework, tailoring, and handicrafts, as many social traditions and norms oppose them undertaking other forms of work.

Workplace strategies are a series of actions and interactions used by children and their support networks to earn more money, promote their positions, avoid workplace dangers and violence, protect their rights, and address the challenges they may confront. All these strategies can be categorised into two general types: they are either active or passive. A passive strategy can be useful at times; for example, when a scavenging child does his or her job with the least amount of interaction and confrontation with other citizens, so as not to be disturbed, or when aggressive arguments with employers over pay – a very active strategy – do not lead to a positive result.

Depending on the type of work and its complexity, children's strategies for success at work, earning more money and advancing their careers can be listed as:

- exciting the sympathies and sentiments of other citizens through the use of such language as 'for God's sake, buy me one';
- performances such as writing homework while sitting on the pavement;
- defending their territory against competitors;
- changing workplaces or forms of work;
- typological analyses of citizens and the recognition of potential customers to approach (these strategies are more common in street work);
- working quietly and silently;
- allocating different streets (mostly in scavenging work);
- obedience to power;
- professionalism and gaining the trust of the employer in workshop environments;
- achieving customer satisfaction to earn more gratuities;
- learning skills and self-demonstration;
- bargaining with employers; and
- doing work as a contractor in such fields as harvesting crops.

The strategies and tactics of children and their support networks to deal with harassment, maintain their security, and combat exploitation led to such actions as asking the employer to pay them weekly, aggression and fighting after experiencing

violence, escaping from state and municipality agents, doing work in networks of kinship and friendship, asking for help from such support networks as the family and friends, and developing relationships with other people at work. Sometimes they may choose the most passive strategies and may not seek help from their support networks or even may accept violence and harassment.

Also, working affects children's education in a variety of ways. A child can go to school and work at the same time, but the combination of hard work and education puts them under additional strain. They may work for a few hours, then go to school and come back to work later.

Exploitation is the last problem that needs addressing. Exploitation has many forms and manifestations, including long working hours and unusual hours, harsh conditions, little or no wages, a lack of social support, deception of children, not paying for the days when the child is on leave, deduction of wages in case of injury or damaging work tools and products, making children pay for work through 'customs' when scavenging, making children pay commissions, asking them to pay for work clothes, taking a portion of their daily income in such works as floristry at intersections or from hand carriages, under-calculation of the price of a product or garbage, and not providing work equipment. Children are especially vulnerable to exploitation since they are inexperienced with the legal framework for defending their rights.

Even though child labour under the age of 15 is strictly prohibited by law, simple enforcement of this law has failed, and, as a result, there is no legal system in place to protect children from exploitation and other occupational hazards. Therefore, there are ready grounds for further child exploitation.

## Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrate how working children in Tehran perform various tasks in such jobs and industries as street work, scavenging, floristry, farm markets, brick kilns, glassware workshops, supermarkets and restaurants, domestic work, etc.

In terms of causal conditions, the economic problems of households and the need to provide for household expenses are the main causes of child labour. These families involve their children in various jobs in which they can earn money. In some jobs, such as those in industrial workshops, where children may learn a skill, the primary goal is for the child to learn skills. These families believe that education does not always result in skill acquisition or employment. Many other children who are not citizens do not have access to school or the education system. In other activities, such as scavenging, immigration and kinship networks are pivotal in the propagation of child labour.

According to labour law, children between the ages of 15 and 18 are legally permitted to work, but law enforcement has facilitated child labour by failing to enforce the law. Many children, even those under the age of 15, are frequently observed working in a variety of dangerous jobs in the absence of law enforcement.

The growth of the informal sector has played an important role in reinforcing this process, as it is largely outside the scope of monitoring. The majority of organisation plans are aimed at street children and focus solely on capturing them and are failing to achieve the desired outcome. In some cases, these plans have even caused some children to move from street work to more hazardous workshop environments.

Child labour results in a series of micro- and macro-problems that jeopardise children's health in various physical, psychological, social, and moral ways. If current trends continue, child labour will not be abolished, and the negative consequences of labour will inevitably remain with society.

### Policy recommendations

The following is a list of recommendations for the elimination of child labour.

1. Develop and implement sustainable development programmes in the country
2. Identifying and supporting working children and their families in a national plan
3. Provide education opportunities for children without identification cards
4. Development of legal frameworks for the actions of NGOs
5. Development of appropriate mechanisms to implement laws for the prohibition of child labour
6. Incorporate family control programs for low-income families
7. Provide free education, especially in disadvantaged areas, and education classes for children in working areas
8. Provision of vocational training for older children
9. Teach children's rights in schools
10. Cover informal labour markets
11. Provide infrastructure for cooperation between NGOs and other local institutions
12. Identify and research other forms of child labour

**Acknowledgments:** I would like to thank all the experts, parents, fieldwork team and participants who participated in the original study. Also, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to all colleagues in the original field study, including the interviewers and researchers, who participated in the conduct of the study and the preparation of the final manuscript.

**Conflict of interest:** None

**Financial support:** None

**Ethics statement:** None

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