



## Assessment of the status of out-of-school street children in Islamabad and Rawalpindi cities, Pakistan

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### Abstract:

The study aims to assess street children's challenges in getting a quality education and find strategies and policies for improving their formal education opportunities. Unfortunately, street children in Pakistan are unable to get an education, and even out-of-school street children do not have access to free education. Due to poverty, lack of awareness, and other significant conditions, they are unable to attend school. They have the right to get a formal education and play their role in society like other children. This study results show that most out-of-school street children undergo financial issues and other family problems, due to which they are unable to continue their education. Therefore, they become child labourers, beggars, car cleaners, etc. Sometimes, they forcefully work to meet their basic day-to-day needs. The research is based on qualitative and quantitative research methods collected through interviews with the primary respondents, including street children's parents, surveys, questionnaires and case studies; the paper will also identify the main factor contributing to the exclusion of street children getting a formal education. The findings show the importance of an inclusive approach combining education, civil society support, NGOs and community engagement to empower street children to get formal education.

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## 1. Introduction

Out-of-street children are a vulnerable and demoted group facing various challenges to gain access to formal quality education. This research paper aims to assess the formal education of these street children to understand the barriers they come upon and propose strategies to overcome these challenges and improve their educational opportunities. Street children are defined as “any young girl or boy who has not reached maturity, who is under the age of 16 for whom the street is their only source of shelter and to live there and survive who is not protected, supervised or directed by responsible adults” (SPARC Pakistan, 2012). A very well but badly planned strategy might increase the poverty that these working-class children face, possibly leading to hunger (IFPRI, 2020). In the twin cities of Rawalpindi-Islamabad, there is a big issue, street children live and work on streets due to several socio-economic issues. They have lack of access to quality and formal education. They face multiple challenges that are obstacles in their development. In 2021, data was collected from the first six months across Pakistan, which revealed a total number of 1,896 cases of child abuse were reported; out of these, 1,084 cases were of sexual abuse. The report shows that 60 percent of cases were reported in Punjab (Cruel Numbers, 2023).

The main reasons for the increasing numbers of street children are extreme poverty and economic instability in the country. These children face many problems and risks daily. Most of the children are exploited sexually and they are addicted to drugs. In Pakistan, it is roughly estimated that the child sexual abuse happens to around 30% of the population under the age of 18 years (Hyder & Malik, 2007). Moreover, according to NGOs that work to protect street children, around 90% of the children are sexually abused the very first night they sleep on the street (Dawn, 2011). In Pakistan, the general situation regarding child safety and protection is dismal, and child abuse has become the norm of the society. Pakistan is a highly populous country, with youths and adolescents making up about half of the total population. To improve the safety of and keep these young people protected, it is essential to ensure their safety. (Younus et al., 2018).

There are many government schools, and they are free of cost but still, street children do not go to schools. One of the main reasons behind this major issue is the lack of awareness among parents about education and its importance and how education influences a child physically and mentally. They do not consider the actual knowledge and awareness we gain through education. Evaluating street children who are out of school is a significant endeavour that tries to fully comprehend the various difficulties that this vulnerable population faces. As a result, these children do not have access to healthcare, education, and protection from exploitation. According to UNICEF, globally 150 million children are estimated to be homeless, experiencing extreme poverty, homelessness, and exclusion from formal education systems (UNICEF, 2020). Numerous socioeconomic variables, such as poverty, war, family breakups, and restricted access to educational opportunities, can leave these children in vulnerable situations regularly. Many NGOs are working and making efforts for the welfare of street

children and helping them to access formal education. Many children moved to the street to help their families financially. The percentage of adult unemployment in the home is correlated to child labour (Fatima, 2017).

Child labour is primarily caused by poverty. Around 81% of children are males and they are working 8-12 hours. The main reasons for the lack of education are extreme poverty, unawareness among parents, and lack of counselling for parents and children. The question arises as to how parents will be motivated and provide awareness so that they can send their children to schools and how the government and other actors of the state play their roles in street children's education. The twin cities are like other cities in Pakistan facing this problem, even though many groups try to help these children, there are still big gaps in understanding what these kids need and how to help them better. This study primarily focused on the access to education for street children under the age of 5-18 years old in Pakistan's twin cities Rawalpindi/Islamabad and also to close these gaps by talking directly to street children, their families and people who want to understand their lives, the reason they can't go to school and what can be done to make things better for them. By using the information to make better plans and policies that fit these children's needs. It also assesses the role of non-governmental organizations and other social workers' contributions toward street children's education. In Rawalpindi-Islamabad, the problem of out-of-school street children; showed by street and their parents a clear picture of challenges faced by many families in accessing education. This analysis is based on data collected from interviews with street children and their parents including demographic details, educational background, living conditions, health and well-being as well as aspirations and hopes for the future.

Pakistan is a developing country, and it hosts over 241.49 million people. Out of these 241.49 million people, there is a big chunk of around 212 million children aged under 18. These children are next-generation skilled labour that would run the entire country. Pakistan is also blessed with the highest number of youths in the country. Unfortunately, due to many inappropriate educational policies in the past two decades, the country could not properly utilize 60% of our youth in the future of our nation-building and economic progress. This research will investigate the question of why children between the ages of 5 to 16 do not want to go to school even as they are considered important for the future of a country; hence, the country has been neglecting human development. In the past 20 years, we have witnessed bloodshed that engulfed more than 100,000 people, and it cost our economy over \$125 billion (Swaminadhan, 2022). This research will evaluate all these aspects, causes, and impacts of children not going to school even if provided with free education. One of the serious challenges in Pakistan is to ensure all children attend, stay, and learn in school. It is very important to provide education to every child. Every child has the right to education. According to UNICEF, there are 22.8 million children are not going to school. Pakistan has the world's second-highest number of out-of-school children (Sheikh, 2023).

The objectives of this research are a) to identify the main cause of not availing free education

by street children in twin cities; b) to evaluate the impact of lack of education on street children's lives; and c) to demonstrate the contribution of different organizations, and how they encourage street children to attend school. Moreover, the questions of the study are: a) what are the key challenges inhibiting street children from gaining formal education? b) how do socio-economic factors affect the formal education of street children? and c) how do current policies provide a way forward to address the education of street children? The scope of this research is defined to consider street children in a specific domain considering them and evaluating how to overcome the hindrance in access to their formal education.

## **2. Literature review**

The problem of out-of-school street children is a global concern, and it is an important issue in Pakistan. Due to socio-economic factors, a large number of children are working in the streets. Understanding the factors contributing to this matter is important to form effective policies and strategies. In their daily lives, street children face various challenges; hunger, lack of proper housing, clothing, and other basic needs, as well as lack of (or inadequate) opportunities for education, health care, and other welfare services (Jamiludin et al., 2018). Several initiatives to give street children access to education, obstacles include discrimination, lack of documentation, and conflicting goals frequently preventing them from attending formal education (Khan & Ali, 2017).

### **2.1. Child labour**

Although most countries have laws against child labour, many children do work. They are open to abuse because of their vulnerable state. According to the International Labor Organization, children work the longest hours and are the lowest paid of all workers (Bequele & Boyden, 1988). UNICEF (2021) estimates that around 3.3 million children in Pakistan are engaged in various forms of labour that have serious consequences for their general physical well-being, educational attainment, and everyday experiences. In Pakistan, 72.5% of child labourers work for longer hours and most of them lack access to basic sanitary facilities, holidays, and training. These unwanted working circumstances frequently result in retarded growth, dermatological illnesses, and musculoskeletal pain (Hannan et al., 2021).

The theoretical model that underpins most of the empirical research on the topic can be traced back to the fundamental publication on time allocation and its numerous expansions to family behaviour. It also includes jobs that stop children from attending school or expose them to dangerous situations. Such liberals, on the other hand, are harmful to both children and their country. Many health hazards, such as lack of food, addiction to drugs, infectious diseases, and mental health problems, exist for street children in the deprived areas of Islamabad (Siddiqui & Khan, 2021). When the conditions are exploitative, education is the key to the child's future as well as the future of a nation (US DOS, 2021). The rural areas have distinct socio-economic features and structures. This nature of residency highly impacts the schooling of a child and is

highly sensitive to the child's gender. This outcome can also be explained by lack of female schools in remote areas. In Pakistan, child labour exists despite the existence of legislative and legal frameworks. This is particularly the case in rural areas where children are frequently compelled into labour due to poverty and limited access to education (Khan, 2019).

## **2.2. Poverty**

Poverty affects street children as it is the root cause of lack of education in street children (Street Children in Asia & Pacific, Poverty and Social Development, 2003). In Pakistan, due to a lack of economic resources, street children perform several tasks, from begging, car washing, and pickpocketing to picking garbage and prostitution. According to research, poverty is one of the main reasons for street children living in the streets in Islamabad (Ahmed & Raza, 2020). The rate of poverty in twin cities has increased, and Pakistan is facing the street children issue. The major reason for this increased number is the fast growth in the urban population and the inadequacy of urban centres to accommodate these people. Children who lack access to basic needs like food, shelter, and education are forced to live on the streets where they look for ways to survive. Furthermore, their vulnerability is increased by family dysfunction, which includes drug abuse, domestic violence, and parental abandonment, which makes them more likely to seek refuge on the streets for safety (Hussain & Khan, 2018).

Due to a lack of resources to fulfil their basic needs, children are forced to work in the streets instead of going to school. The skills provide additional occupational choices and more guaranteed jobs. Poverty is a violation of human dignity since it denies people options and chances. It means not being able to feed and clothe a family, not having credit facilities, and not having access to a school or clinic. It can also mean not having land to cultivate food. Individuals and communities face insecurity, powerlessness, and isolation (UN) The phenomenon of street children presents a wide range of societal challenges. Most of the time, the street children are the victims of poverty and the social and economic issues that are strongly related to it (Mathur, 2013).

## **2.3. Policy issues**

Education is a vital human right for children all around the world according to the United Nations Educational Policy (United Nations, 1948). The United Nations has established Rule 367 which states that governments and parents are responsible for providing basic education to all children (Oyetubo, 2011). The National Educational Policy (NEP) of Pakistan goal is to ensure formal education for all, including vulnerable groups of society like street children. However, NEP is facing various challenges in its implementation, such as low financial resources, weak governance and lack of coordination among federal and provincial governments (Asif et al., 2020). The legal framework is also important in highlighting the issues of street children. Pakistan has authorized international conventions such as UNCRC (United Nations Convention on the Rights of Child) and ILO Convention no 182 on the worst

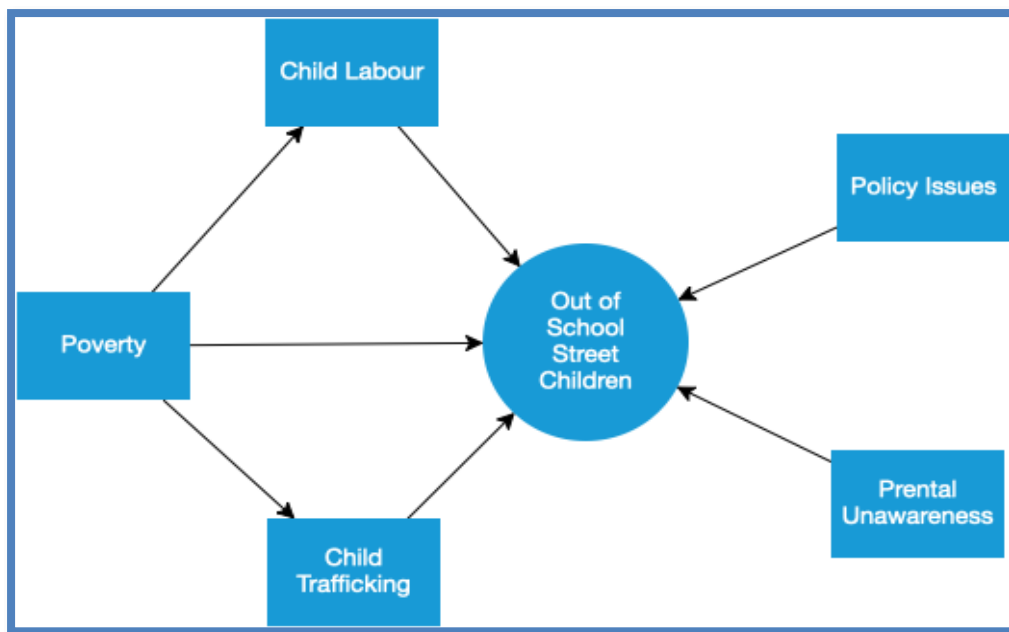
forms of child labour. However, creating effective policies and an efficient enforcement mechanism using these principles is a constant challenge (ILO, 2020). Many obstacles seriously affect the growth and well-being of street children in Islamabad's slum areas (Ali & Khan, 2019).

Every street child has the right to formal education which cannot be ignored. In Pakistan, educational policies are rigid to adopt. In schools, the English medium is more compulsory instead of Urdu and other local languages which makes it difficult for street children to get a basic education. The problem of infrastructure is also the main issue as there is a lack of funds for schools due to corruption. Most abuses committed against Pakistani street children are like those committed everywhere in the world, ranging from begging to robbery to sexual exploitation. Most of the children work all day to support their families. These children finally find permanent locations to be homeless because of their families' weaknesses. Additionally, various numbers of street children remain on the streets and have a limited understanding of their family situations. Education is a powerful tool for reducing child labour. Children who attend school are less likely to be exploited, and children who work can learn, on the other hand, are in a better position to change their condition (UNICEF, 2020).

## **2.5. Human trafficking**

Human trafficking in Pakistan includes slavery, selling children for prostitution, and unlawful compulsory labour. Poverty, gender discrimination, lack of education, and ignorance of legal rights are the main factors in Pakistan. There were around 6,937 child victims in 2020. Many children are forced bound by the mafias to work, and they don't let them go to school (Countercurrents.org, 2008). The reports from SAARC7 and UNICEF highlight the utilization of 4500 children for bonded work in a manner that exploits them, following their trafficking to Pakistan in addition, the authorities recognized more trafficking victims than in the previous reporting period, and eight investigations against the accused traffickers for Pakistani trafficking victims were discovered abroad. In addition, federal and provincial authorities continued to work on anti-trafficking initiatives with international partners and foreign governments. For human traffickers, street children are the most attractive segment, they are likely to motivate them to seek out better jobs that will give them hope for the future. In other instances, parents agree to send their children out of the region for better jobs to pay off debts or to make money because of the great poverty (US Department of State Report, 2014). The majority of children who work on Pakistan's streets are forced to beg for money. In Pakistan, there are 1.5 million homeless children, Children like these are frequently coerced into begging by organized crime gangs. Sometimes ringmasters force children to steal, and other times they disable children to make more money (Pak NGOs, Wajahat Malik). According to a 2013–14 UNODC report, the problem of human and child trafficking could not be resolved and drastically increased between 2007–2013 (World Drug Report, 2013). According to reports, children as young as 5 years old are bought, sold, rented, or kidnapped and used in prostitution and placed in organized begging rings, tiny stores, brick-making processes, etc. (UNODC Report, 2013-14).

Figure 1: Child trafficking



Source: Author's own work.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Research design

The study was based on investigating the relationship between various variables. Since the case study is of Twin Cities, the interviews were collected from key respondents. Key informants included street children who do not go to school, parents of street children, teachers teaching in street educational institutions, teachers teaching in government institutions, some policymakers, and teachers from other institutions. This is a cross-sectional study in which data was collected only once from the respondents. The data was listed along with the literature review in a thematic form. There were questions about poverty, child labour, and awareness among parents, key policy issues, human trafficking, and many more. There were face-to-face interviews with street children, and they were mostly in the commercial market, I/9 sector of Islamabad and some near the area of Faizabad. The interviews were taken while the children were in the streets.

#### 3.2. Instrument

The sample of 130 respondents was selected by a simple random sampling technique through a well-structured questionnaire. A questionnaire was designed which was used for unstructured and structured interviews with key informants. An online questionnaire on Google Forms was designed to serve as the main instrument of this study. The items in the questionnaire were formulated according to the objectives of this research and research questions stipulated in this study, supported by references from the literature review.

## 4. Data analysis

This study discussed independent variables namely poverty, child labour, lack of awareness of parents, policy issues, and human trafficking. There was a total of 130 respondents in this research study. The total 100 respondents were divided into different categories, out of them, 30 respondents were key respondents, and 20 respondents were the street children who were selected from Rawalpindi and Islamabad. The 10 respondents were teachers, NGO employees, and street educators. The other 70 respondents were the general public, and their opinions were collected through a questionnaire.

### 4.1. Demographic analysis

The data discloses that a significant number of children are out of school due to financial constraints. Many of these children mainly males around 10 years, are engaged in street work to contribute to their family's income. Their parents often mothers are employed in low-income jobs that hardly cover the necessities.

Table 1: The demographic compositions of the respondents

No.	Profile	Description	Responses	Percentage
1	Gender	Male	20	29%
		Female	50	71%
2	Age	20-29	59	87%
		30-39	7	10%
		40-49	4	3%
		50-59	-	-
3	Education	Matric	-	-
		Intermediate	7	10%
		Bachelors	34	48.6%
		Masters	26	37%
		Other	3	4.3%
4	Marital Status	Single	66	94%
		Married	4	6%
		Divorced/ Separated	-	-

### 4.2. Descriptive analysis

After the demographic, there were some general questions like the contribution of NGOs, government, and street educators. The other questions were about the main indicators: poverty, child labour, Parents' unawareness, and policy issues.

Figure 2: According to you what is the main cause of lack of education in street children?

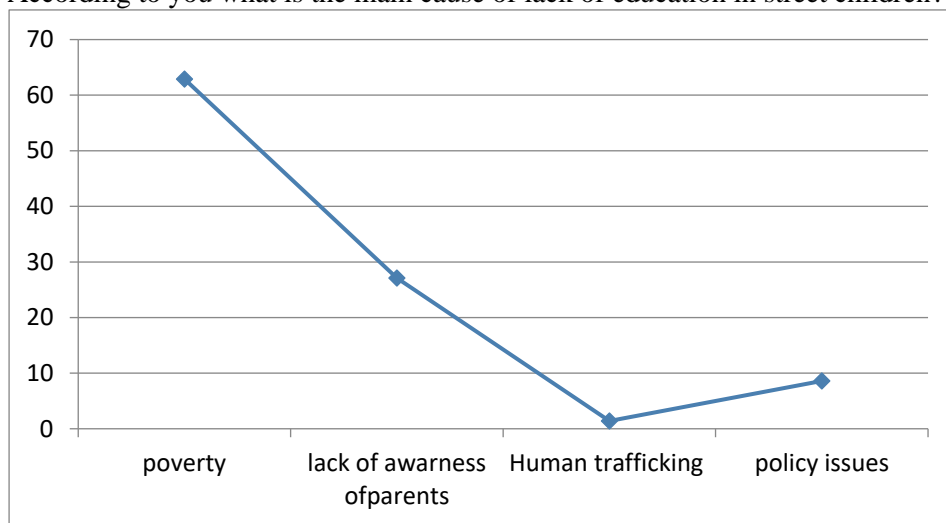
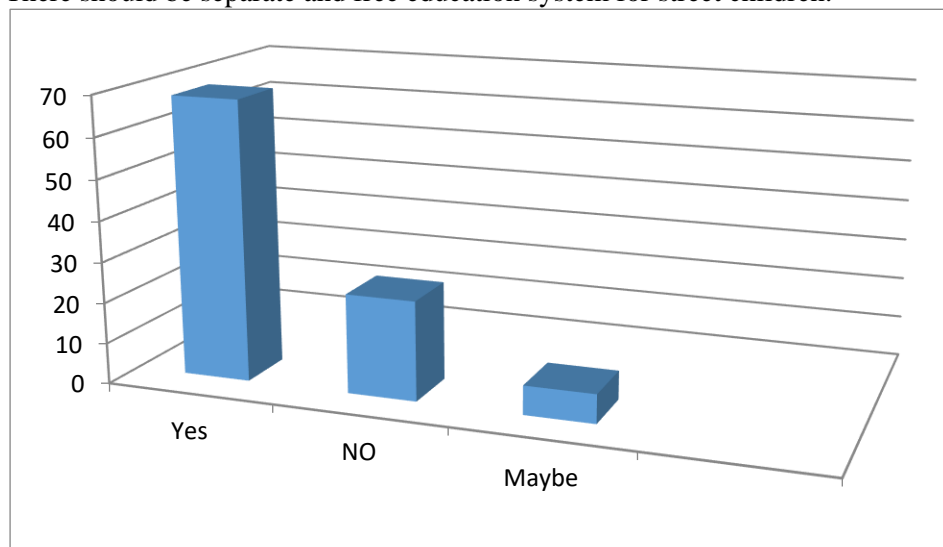


Figure 3: There should be separate and free education system for street children.



### 4.3. Poverty

Poverty is one of the major issues regarding the lack of education for street children. Most of the respondents (35) strongly agree that financial issues are one of the main causes of lack of education. Most of these children are school dropped out after completing primary education, due to their inability to afford school fees, books, and uniforms.

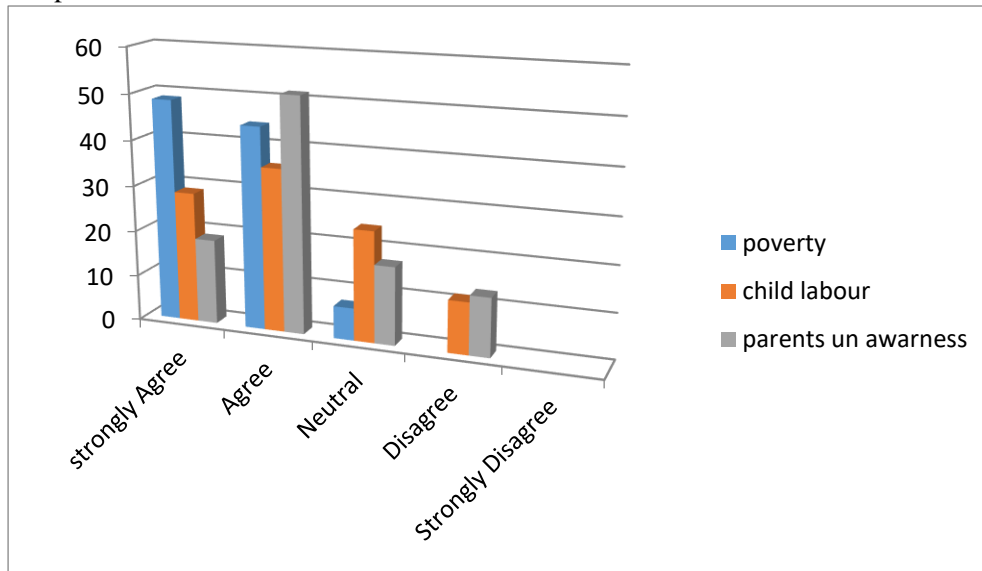
### 4.4. Child labour

There were two questions about child labour. Twenty-five respondents agree that child labour should be restricted to increase education, and twenty-one strongly agree. Another question was about street children who preferred to work on the street rather than going to school. A majority agree, and some respondents do not agree.

#### 4.5. Parents unawareness

Around 36 respondents out of 70 agree that parents' unawareness of education is the reason for the lack of education for street children.

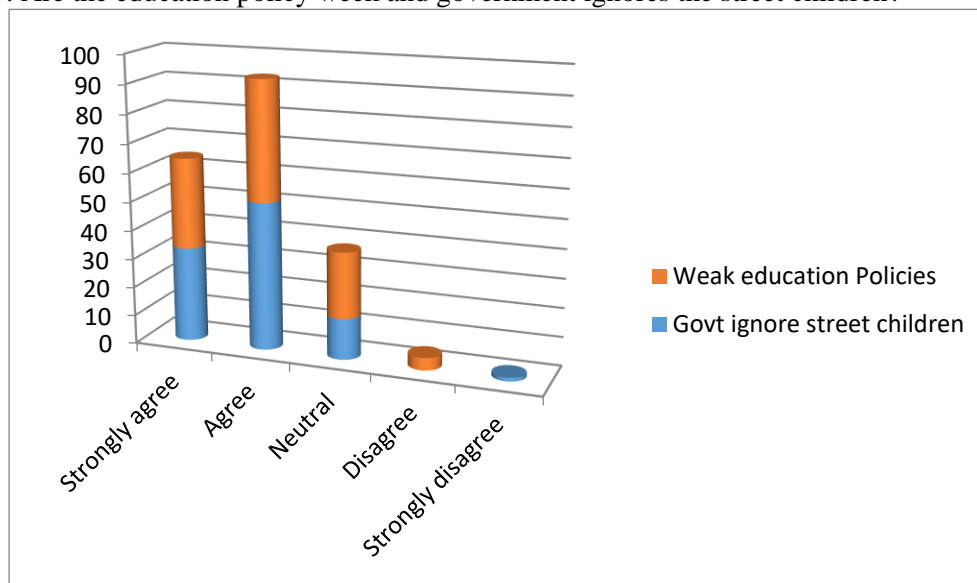
Figure 4: Is parent unawareness reason for lack of education of street children?



#### 4.6. Policy issues/government contribution

There were two questions about government contributions towards street children and one question about the education policy. 36 respondents are in favour of the government ignoring the street children, and around 28 people agree that the educational policies as a hurdle to lack of education.

Figure 5: Are the education policy weak and government ignores the street children?



#### **4.7. Reason for selection**

The universal right to education is based on international law and is a core part of the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which aims to ensure that no one is left behind. The majority of street children are orphaned or abused by their own families. The street children are compelled to be beggars, thieves, and drug addicts, and most of the girls' become prostitutes. They have no awareness of the consequences of such crimes. Street educators in Pakistan and other countries are finding different intoxicated young kids at the age of 12, helping them to escape hunger and poverty, and providing them the basic education. The education is a vital aspect that can help them to be aware of the good and bad to move towards a better life on the streets; providing education to street children can provide safe spaces and security for them.

### **5. Findings and discussion**

The key findings from this research are that most of the street children in Rawalpindi/Islamabad were not openly responding to the questions. They are unaware of the importance of education, most of them consider it a waste of time and one of them said that “schools only focus on theoretical things; they do not teach us what we are practically doing in the real world or our daily life”. Many of them are willing to go to school, but their parents and most family issues never allow them to attend school, and they do not even get the basic education, which is their basic right. Street children focus more on money, and they always try to earn more money because poverty is one of the main causes of their lack of education even if their parents allow them to go to school but there is a lack of money, and they are unable to fulfil their basic needs, even one-time food. It is the main reason that they prefer to become child labourers more than get an education. In addition to this, all other key respondents also shared their opinion and their work experience with street children like street educators and many other institutions that are also working for street children's education.

#### **5.1. How can we prevent street children and motivate them for free education, i.e. government schools, and other free educational institutions?**

This question received 45 responses. Many respondents said raising parents' awareness is most important, and others said that offering free education, uniforms, lunch, and transport facilities is also important.

- Gives the knowledge about free education and fulfils the basic needs of the children. It should be from an initial level of their upbringing.
- We have to inform their parents of the importance of education and realize that their children should go to school. Then, we should convince children to come to school once, whether they like it or not, and then show them something worth having, like poems or videos, and have soft attitudes towards them.

- We have to tackle poverty first. Abject poverty forces children to become street children. There is a need for social safety nets in Pakistan.
- By providing them easy access to education and inspiring them about the education.
- The parents should be provided incentives and the children's education should be free.
- Talk to them in a positive tone and inquire about their well-being. If the child looks distressed, then report to the local Child Welfare Committee or police.
- The government needs to make such policies that would encourage parents and children to get an education, it should be the priority of the government to provide free education to all citizens and especially street children.
- There should be restrictions on child labour by making special education policies for these children.
- We should offer them free education with all the facilities needed in school. We should provide them with their basic needs and those needs for which they stop getting an education and prefer going to work.

## **5.2. Any comments on street children's education**

This question received 38 responses; some of the comments are the following:

- It is sad to see how street children are being exploited. They don't see a bright future ahead of them because they lack education and awareness.
- More talent is hidden in those street children.
- We all need to take steps to admit in schools, so that their miseries of life will be mitigated.
- Government should take proper steps to educate street children by providing facilities like awareness sessions and educational requirements. There should be policies to strictly ban child labour and motivate street children to get education.
- Most of them are very intelligent minds. If we do not focus on their education, we will lose the great minds of our future.
- It should be emphasized, and children should be motivated to get education.
- Should be promoted by the media.
- Make better education policy.
- Education is a basic right for all, and street children are also a part of our society, so we should promote street children's education.
- Yeah, it's a wonderful act taken for the betterment and improvement of our education sector. I think we need more.
- We should engage our educated youth through which we can eradicate this issue.
- It is not only the duty of the government to overcome the street children. We should voluntarily do this to help them to educate and aware of their parents.
- Government should be focus on education.
- This is important for the development of the country.

- Child labour should be banned so that all children will be able to get educated.
- Education is the right of every child.
- They should be given an education and also given necessities so they can learn without any burden on their family.
- Street children do not get opportunities to get an education, they are not provided such facilities.
- It's a collective responsibility of the government, society, and parents to ensure that they get at least a basic education.
- A separate school system is established.
- It's very important for the country's development and the equal rights of every male and female. The government must provide these students with free educational opportunities and make special policies for them.

## **6. Conclusion and recommendations**

This study clarifies challenges that street children face to get a formal education. It highlights the necessity of a diversified strategy that incorporates informal education, outreach initiatives, skill development, and community engagement to enhance their chances of getting into school. The conclusions underline the significance of government measures and NGO programs in dealing with the problem and the possibilities for improving the lives of street children through education. We all want to develop our country, and we know that education is one of the key factors to success. Basic education is the right of everyone. Street children are one of the big challenges in many developing countries, the future of any country depends on its youth. It is very important to give more attention to street children. There are many NGOs and international organizations like the UN and street educators working on it, but still, it is a big challenge for our country to overcome child labour and help them to attend school.

The study recommends the measures to improve the education of out-of-school street children. Government should make policies that will make education mandatory for everyone and there should be more awareness about education. Increase funding for non-formal education programs and outreach initiatives targeting street children. The parents of street children need more awareness about education. There should be a proper channel to communicate with street children's parents, it is sorely needed. Street children, first and foremost, need a safe place to live. They are extremely susceptible to sexual abuse. So, a safe home is needed first. It's our responsibility to educate them by providing a platform for education. It should be the priority of the government to invest more in free education and its infrastructure to facilitate marginalized people, especially street children. The parents should be provided incentives and children's education should be free. The data emphasizes the serious need for intervention that addresses the financial problem preventing these children from accessing education. Initiatives should be focused on financial support, scholarships and the establishment of affordable and nearby schools. By implementing these steps, societies may help out-of-school Street children get the education they deserve and offer them a path to a firmer and hopeful future.

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